



LERNERT ENGELBERTS

Real Bad People

'Skip this article and start reading immediately!'

Real Bad People is the refreshing collection of stories from VPRO filmmaker Lernert Engelberts.

Engelberts has written satirical scenarios and produced absurdist television programmes, the influence of which can be clearly felt in the film-like character of his stories.

Lernert Engelberts is currently working on his novel *The Man Who Disappeared Slowly*.

De Standaard, August 15 2008:

'Superior comic literature. We suggest you skip this article and start reading immediately. (...) It makes you think some of the characters walked out of a book by American David Sedaris. (...) A big, edgy talent: don't miss it.'

NRC Handelsblad, June 4 2008

'From soap to literature and back. Sharp, realistic, with hilarious dialogue.'

De Groene Amsterdammer, June 12 2008

'A highly original collection of short stories on contemporary life.'

Vrij Nederland, May 17 2008

'Engelberts has a finely tuned ear for how people talk. In one story various characters comment, in just a few lines, on the life of a girl. His description of their thoughts is masterly. He doesn't just write down how they should talk, but evokes their actual voices. (...) His insights are simple, but sharply significant. (...) There is much more to this. Go, Lernert!'

De Volkskrant, May 16 2008

'Refreshing. Engelbert's characters will haunt you long after you've read *Real Bad People*.'

Noordhollands Dagblad, May 10 2008

'Accurate sketches of 21st century life.'

Club Propaganda, June 24 2008

'Engelberts knows how to tell a good story. (...) He writes with obvious pleasure and has no fear of experimenting with literary styles. (...) A writer to watch.'

Longlisted for the Libris Prize for Literature 2008

Shortlisted for the Gouden Uil Award 2008

Nominated for the Selexyz First Book Award 2009

echte slechte
mensen
lernert
engelberts



Rights enquiries:

De Harmonie Stand 8.0 - C 926

P.O. Box 3547

NL-1001 AH Amsterdam

The Netherlands

tel. :(+31)-(0)20 624 51 81

fax: (+31)-(0)20 623 06 72

info@deharmonie.nl

www.deharmonie.nl

The Surfboard

I promise this isn't going to be a story about me feeling sorry for myself because I'm being picked on by a gang of boys in my class. Even before my family moved to this shitty little seaside town, I knew that one of us was going to get all of the hassle. See, my brother Kevin's just like me – keeps himself to himself, a bit of a dreamer. His teachers are always catching him daydreaming out of the window and telling him to pay attention. But he's four years older than me and he gets respect from people out on the football pitch with his broad shoulders and his hairy legs, which Mum says is the only inheritance from her Jewish-Italian parents. Kevin would give someone a smack in the face if they looked like trouble. And as for my sister Claire, she's too easy a target. She always makes people come over all soft and mushy, just like a baby. I mean, no person with Down's Syndrome has ever been born with the ability to piss people off as much as I did that bunch at school.

It all began when I found a plank in the back garden. We'd only been living in Dorwood for a few months, so I didn't have a clue about the garden and what it might be hiding. The redbrick house that Dad had bought was tiny but incredibly old, and it had a proper country garden, which no one else in the family was particularly bothered about. It was loads better than that nasty, damp flat in Aberdeen, where a mouse would come scampering out of the cupboard every time you fetched a glass.

Our move had come as a complete surprise. Dad appeared in our bedrooms one morning and told us to pack everything as quickly as we could. It was as though we were on the run. We just left behind anything that didn't fit into Dad's van, which was a real pain, because the old sofa in the living room was great for lying on, even though the leather stuck to your bum whenever you were watching an exciting film.

My brother complained because we had to share a room in the new house. He said I'd keep him awake with my thunderous farts. Well, that was a total lie, because he was the one who farted all the time. Dad said we'd have to be patient for a while and that we were going to move to a bigger place soon where everyone could have their own room. But he didn't ever explain exactly how that was going to happen. It was a bit like an illusionist doing a disappearing trick right before your eyes and then coming out with that routine about not being able to reveal how he pulled it off, because the mystery was how he made his living. My arse.

I had plenty of patience though. Nothing happened here anyway. On the first day of the summer holiday I walked down the garden path behind the house, through the tall grass, which came up to my hips. I was so used to getting into my school uniform every morning that I'd been daft enough to pull on my boring school shorts and my maroon school jumper, even though we were of course allowed to decide for ourselves what we wanted to wear in the holidays. I was heading for the building that we called the barn, but which was in fact an old Catholic school building. It was four, maybe five, times the size of our house and when the sun was shining the red bricks glowed so brightly that it hurt your eyes.

The school headmaster used to live in our house. At break time, he would stand in his study and keep an eye on the children. He'd attached a mirror to the window frame so that he could spy on them without being seen and the mirror was still there, on the window frame of what was now our bedroom, so I could lie in bed at night and watch the bright red dot of my dad's cigarette out in the garden, because that was the only place he was allowed to smoke.

We'd got the school building thrown in for free when we bought the house. It was some kind of monument. My sister always used to pronounce it as 'moment', and Mum and Dad would go all gooey because they thought she was soooo cute

when she got her words wrong. I'm telling you, a Mongol can't do a thing wrong. It was a bit of a bummer, but it's not as if it was her fault. To be honest, I'd take complete advantage of something like that too if it worked in my favour.

We weren't allowed to go anywhere near the school building or even to touch it. When Kevin and I were kicking a ball against the wall one evening and making a point of keeping as far away from the little stained-glass windows as we could, Dad came storming out of the house with a red face and yelled at us, 'Clear off out of there, you two!'

What was even more annoying was the busloads of rich people that would suddenly appear on Saturday afternoons and stand around in our garden, accompanied by someone from the local council. They'd come all the way from another town to have a look at that ugly school and its architectural features, because it was a very old and unusual building, or something like that. It wasn't just because it was built by some famous architect whose name I've forgotten, but also because it was made of very unusual bricks.

I want to be rich when I'm older too, but you won't catch me wearing those dull trousers and hanging around with some old bag with scary grey helmet hair, wasting my Saturdays on boring trips.

Dad had left really early in the morning to do a job in Aberdeen, which is a really long way, at least two hours by car. I'd have loved to go with him because I had the day off school anyway and I could have seen my friend Chris again.

'Out of the question,' my dad had said the evening before. He saw me putting on a disappointed face to try and change his mind, but he wasn't going to fall for that. He just said, 'Go and take your grumpy old-lady face somewhere else. Write Chris a letter and I'll take it with me.'

So I started writing. First I said sorry for not having written sooner even though I was really missing him and then I told him that the town was full of dickheads. If Chris and his family didn't have any holiday plans yet, he might be able to come and stay with me. Dad had to go to Aberdeen sometimes anyway and he could just as easily give Chris a lift.

I wrote all of that in my letter and, as I was writing, I wondered where he would sleep, because the room I shared with Kevin was too small and Claire had a room to herself and no one else could just go and sleep in there with her, because the psychologist had said that it was very important for her development that she had her own space. But we'd come up with somewhere for Chris to sleep, maybe just in a tent in the back garden.

If he was there, I'd dare to walk into town and go to the beach and if we saw Craig Hewelt and his gang they wouldn't have a chance, because Chris and I have been friends for so long that we're the perfect team. We'd teach them a lesson, even though Chris isn't supposed to get too excited, because of his asthma, which Mum think is psychosomatic anyway. So there. But of course I didn't mention that in the letter and when it was finally finished I put it on the kitchen table.

It was still there the next morning. Dad had forgotten it! And there was no sign of Kevin either. I couldn't put the letter in the post, because I knew the address vaguely, but not the postcode. Would a letter get there if you just wrote Derwalt Butcher's Shop, some-number-or-other, High Street, Aberdeen, on the envelope? In any case, I thought it was really stupid of Dad. He'd been the one who'd suggested I write the letter, hadn't he?

I walked down to the old school building with the letter in my hands, wading through the tall, dew-covered grass. My legs were drenched. The early sun was already burning my shoulders. I tried the door of the school, but it was locked of

course, so I came up with the idea of kicking a tree root that was sticking up out of the ground by the door, mainly because I was peeved about the letter still being there, but also because I was already dead bored and it was only ten minutes into the holidays.

Then I spotted something purple sticking up out of the ground where I'd been bashing away with my foot. I kicked it a few more times and exposed more of the purple. I didn't think I'd dug up some kind of treasure or anything, but I had nothing else to do anyway, so I knelt down with the letter between my teeth and I dug and dug until a wooden plank appeared. One end of the plank had a kind of fin on it that was stuck really deep in the ground.

'What on earth's that?' Mum spun around, clearly not expecting me to turn up behind her in the kitchen holding something that size.

'Where did you get that from?'

'Dug it up in the garden. What is it?'

'That, my dear,' she said, examining the object, 'is a surfboard.' She came closer and gave it a rap with her knuckles. 'Top notch.'

'Top notch?'

'Excellent.'

So, it was a surfboard. 'I thought it was something like that,' I bluffed. 'Can I keep it?'

'Why not? I think you'll have to do it up a bit first though.'

I just looked at Mum.

'You know, clean it, sand it down, give it a new coat of paint.'

'How do you know what to do with it?'

'I grew up in Cornwall. All of my brothers used to surf.'

'Have you got any stamps, Mum?'

'Must have somewhere.'

I gave her the letter.

'Can't you take it to the post-box yourself?'

'I'm too busy with my surfboard now. It's a lot of work, you know.'

Mum looked at the address I'd written on the envelope.

'Do you think I should write "for the consideration of Chris Derwalt" on the envelope?'

'For the attention of.'

'Yes, attention. Or do you think it'll get there like that?'

'I'm sure it'll be fine.' She sent me out of the kitchen when the mud from the surfboard started to drop off onto the kitchen floor.

I didn't know a thing about surfing. As I washed down the board with the garden hose, all I could think was that it was too heavy and that it was going to sink as soon as I put it in the water. The mud wouldn't come off and I had to get really close to the board, so it all splashed up onto my school uniform, which didn't matter, because I didn't have to stay clean and tidy.

Claire came to see what I was up to and told me that she thought surfing was stupid. I don't think she even knew what surfing was, but she was just acting superior because she'd recently started going around with a gang of popular girls at school who thought everything was stupid and kept saying 'whatever!' all the time, which I'd never say because it sounded like something out of one of those annoying American TV series.

Claire said I had to go and wash my hands and get changed. She and Mum had booked an appointment at the hairdresser's and I had to go with them. As we

were going to be at the hairdresser's anyway, she said, they'd be able to chop off some of my hair too and then she grabbed hold of a chunk of my hair and pulled a face. I dropped the hose onto the ground. The water spurted in Claire's direction and she started squealing because she's such a girly now, even though we always used to go climbing trees together and she'd just jump straight into the stream in her trousers and shoes and everything if we lost the ball in there, so I don't know why she was making such a fuss about a few drops of tap water. And it made no sense at all that I wasn't allowed to stay at home by myself. Even when there was someone at home, I was actually alone, because we all got on with doing our own thing really. That's just the way we were. And no one was going to cut a single hair from my head.

I hadn't told anyone else yet, but I was growing my hair. It just hung down over my ears and face and looked dead boring, but Mum always said it was really sweet like that. Anyway, I was going to let it grow just a bit longer over the holidays and then I'd get it shaved like a punk at the beginning of the new school year. I was going to keep a tuft on top and then use soap and gel to make it stick up, so I'd look all angry and tough. Then, if I had to, I could just use my Mohican to stab anyone who was bothering me. That was the plan. I was going to be twelve soon, so I didn't see why I couldn't decide what to do with my own hair. And if anyone started making clever remarks, like saying that kind of hairstyle was really old-fashioned and no one looked like that anymore, that was all the more reason to do it.

'Do I really have to come?' I asked Mum.

'Yes, I think you do.'

'Well, I'm going just like I am and I'm not having my hair cut.'

Claire had decided that she was going to be blonde and whenever my sister set her mind on something, it happened. Like that time she'd asked for a jacket for her

birthday. A really expensive one that she'd seen in a magazine. But when she unwrapped her actual birthday present, it turned out to be a nice red rucksack, which she needed much more than a stupid jacket with a fur collar and zips all over it, because she'd completely ruined her school bag by refusing to pick it up and dragging it everywhere behind her like a dog on a lead, and so of course she was going to end up with holes in it.

She just refused to accept it. She threw the red bag at Mum, with all of my aunts and uncles and Grandma watching, and then she locked herself up in her bedroom for hours. And then, a few days later, Dad came home with the jacket, because my sister was inconsolable and the atmosphere at home had become unbearable.

My parents totally overindulge her, because they want to make her seem as normal as possible. She decided she didn't like her specially adapted bike anymore so they went out and swapped it for a proper ladies' bike, which I knew would be the death of her one of these days, because she wobbled about all over the road on it, and she didn't do that at all when she had the stabilisers.

Mum cycled beside my sister on the way to the small shopping centre and we had to keep stopping every five minutes to rest because my sister is in such bad shape. It's because she eats so many sweets in secret, which everyone knows about really.

Claire and Mum went inside while I hung around outside in the doorway. The hairdresser's stank of chemical dye and shampoo and when it was all mixed together it smelled just like shit, and I wasn't in the mood for the hairdresser anyway. Mum said he batted for the other side and I didn't want him to start making comments about my hair and saying that he had a great idea for a new style for me.

The sun shone down on my face and people with big shopping bags walked by. They all looked happy and summery and every one of them stared at my mucky clothes and face.

'Good morning, Mrs Banks,' the greengrocer called from his shop as a woman, apparently Mrs Banks, walked by. The fruit that was on display in the crates outside his shop was better polished than Mum's cutlery at home and it sparkled like crazy in the sun.

'Good morning, Mrs Boland,' came another cry from the greengrocer's as a Mrs Boland walked past with a bunch of flowers. I thought it was all a bit over the top, saying hello to everyone. So when Mrs Boland came past, I called out in my most cheerful voice, 'Good morning, Mrs Boland! Have a wonderful day!'

Inside the hairdresser's, I could see that the hairdresser had started rubbing some gloop or other onto my sister's head.

'Good morning, Mrs Hewelt,' I heard the greengrocer say and I was so shocked that I stepped backwards, which made the automatic doorbell ring and all of the customers in the hairdresser's looked at me.

A redheaded woman walked past outside, carrying a white parasol. It reminded me of one of those costume dramas with women with powdery faces prancing around with parasols. This woman was carrying a wicker basket full of shopping and her skin was covered with freckles.

I called out again in a cheerful voice, 'Hello, Mrs Hewelt, have a nice day,' but I hid behind the doorpost as I said it. She turned around. With that red hair and nasty pug nose, she and Craig were like two peas in a pod. Only he didn't walk around all day with a parasol of course.

Mrs Hewelt came closer, wished me a nice day too and asked whose I was, which I didn't understand, so I said 'I beg your pardon', because that sounded better

than 'you what?' and because I'd seen it in a book once where they were all talking with those old-fashioned words, which I think is really cool.

'What's your surname?' she asked. I pointed at Mum, who was done up just like Claire and she was sitting under a hairdryer hood now too, so I could see why Mrs Hewelt didn't recognise her.

'My name's Ralph Woods and we've been living here since the spring. If I'm not very much mistaken, you must be Craig's mum. I'm in the same class as him, Mr Garland's.'

'That's right,' she said, with a friendly smile.

She must have had all the boys in town after her when she was younger. She was so exquisite and she simply glowed with her white skin and the dimples in her cheeks. She looked just like the sugar angel that Mum put on the Christmas tree every year, but always told us to keep our fingers off because it was for decoration. Bugger that.

'How are you liking it here in Dorwood? Have you made lots of friends?' she asked me.

'Well, actually, no, I haven't. It's nice of you to ask though,' I said. 'You see, it's a bit of a troublesome situation.'

And then Mrs Hewelt laughed, which a lot of people do when they hear me talk, because they think that the way I speak is a bit odd for an eleven-year-old. I just talk the way I want to talk, and I use phrases such as 'I beg your pardon' and I also intended to start making use of the new expression I'd learned that day: Top notch.

'I don't make friends very easily. I'm rather choosy when it comes to friends, I can tell you. I'll show you something Craig gave me though if you're interested.'

I pulled up my grubby school jumper and showed her two fresh bruises. Her son had thumped me just above my ribcage with the words: Have a nice holiday. I

told her that and I also told her about the schoolbooks in the stream and the hair-pulling. I could see that Mrs Hewelt didn't enjoy hearing such things about her dear son. She put her basket down between her feet. Her shoulders slumped and a look of concern came over her face. 'And he also keeps saying that my sister's a retard and her fanny smells.' That last point wasn't true, but it seemed like a good thing to add.

'That's terrible,' she sighed. I knew she was already mentally giving Craig what for. 'Don't you worry about it,' she said, and she wished me a good holiday. She picked up her basket, swung the white parasol over her head and dashed off down the street, as though she were in a hurry.

The ladies were still under the dryer. I asked for some money for an apple and sandpaper, which I thought I'd be able to buy on the other side of the street, from the man who'd been sweeping the pavement in front of the ironmonger's for the last half hour, even though I didn't think there was anything to sweep. Mum didn't want to give me any money for an apple, because we had so many at home. She gave me two quid for the sandpaper and asked me why that woman with the white parasol had been looking under my jumper. I pretended that she was collecting for some skin cancer thing and had asked me for a small donation. I said that I'd have been able to give her something if I actually got any pocket money. I quickly came up with the story that I'd shown her a birthmark on my tummy, just to be on the safe side, because birthmarks can sometimes be cancerous, but the woman from the cancer thingy had assured me that there was nothing wrong. Mum was already familiar with the kind of stories I come out with, so she said, 'You're just like your father.'

At the ironmonger's I asked whether the sandpaper on the rolls behind the counter was suitable for sanding down a surfboard. The man started talking, but he

had a cigar stub in the corner of his mouth, so I couldn't understand a word he was saying.

'You know, perhaps you shouldn't try to talk with a cigar in your gob,' I said. Maybe saying 'gob' wasn't such a bright idea, because he called me a 'rude little boy' and said he wasn't going to sell me anything at all. So I told him I was sorry and said that everyone always said 'gob' instead of 'mouth' where I came from, and that I didn't mean any offence. Then everything was all right and he gave me almost the whole roll of sandpaper for my two pounds.

My mum and my sister cycled along, with their new hairdos blowing in the breeze, giggling away like a couple of girlies. All the way back home, they just kept exchanging compliments and saying how lovely the other one looked. I rode some way behind them and all I could smell was the scent of singed hair.

When we were home, I got straight down to sanding the board. The paint turned into powder beneath the sandpaper and floated up into the air, but some of it ended up in my nose too, which kept making me sneeze. I'd tied my jumper around my face, so I looked like a football hooligan. It reminded me of that time Dad had taken us to a football match between Aberdeen and Liverpool, and one of the Liverpool fans had smuggled in a bottle of beer and thrown it from the stands and it had hit one of our team on the head. The hooligan had been wearing a football shirt over his face so that he wouldn't be recognised, and he looked really hard. In the car on the way home, Dad had said that you weren't allowed to throw beer bottles at someone's head, but it had still brought the game to an end. And that meant that Aberdeen had won the match, so it all worked out okay, and that was a bit confusing, because there was lots of blood coming from the head of the player who got hit.

The sun was hanging low behind the school building. Mum came out with a jug of ice tea that had been steeping in the sun all day, and right then we must have

looked like one of those perfect families from a toothpaste advert. But that was far from the truth. I had really bad teeth. They were all higgledy-piggledy and Mum always said I had a mouth like a Jewish cemetery, but I've never been to one so I don't know what they look like. And my parents aren't married either, even though they've been together for fifteen years. Dad didn't see the importance, or what he called the 'added value', of marriage. Mum and I had once stood looking at the dresses in a bridal shop in the shopping centre in Aberdeen. And after a while she'd just muttered, 'Oh, they're pretty hideous things really.'

'Where's Kevin?' I asked Mum, as she poured me another glass of ice tea. She didn't answer and it began to dawn on me that Dad had given my brother preferential treatment for the umpteenth time. I pretended that I didn't mind that he'd been allowed to go with Dad to Aberdeen and I just carried on sanding, but with a lump in my throat. I could feel the tears prickling my eyes. My sister was skipping barefoot through the garden, singing a Britney Spears song with words she'd made up because she couldn't ever remember the lyrics.

You never know when a huge insect is suddenly going to appear and so I didn't put the surfboard anywhere near a bush, but on the grass by the apple tree. I lay down on it for just a few moments, even though I never usually get tired in the daytime. It must have been all that sanding.

It was getting dark by the time I opened my eyes again. I could see bats flying against a backdrop of bright purple sky and darting under the eaves of the old school, which seemed like quite a nasty place to live, so gloomy and dreary. I looked down again and saw my brother and Dad, who were standing in front of the school, whispering to each other. They were carrying two long, heavy-looking machines inside, which looked like those high-pressure spray things that they use to clean

trains when someone's jumped in front of them. I know that because it's the reason Mr Adair from my old school in Aberdeen didn't come back after the holidays. Mum called from the kitchen to say that dinner was ready. Dad shut the school door and gave Kevin a pat on the shoulder.

At the dinner table, Dad didn't say anything about what they'd brought from Aberdeen. And I didn't try to find out either and so we all sat there eating our soup in silence.

Last year everyone in my class had to do a talk about their dad's job. James Greene talked about his dad's petrol station and how the oil was pumped from the sea and finally ended up in our town, which, when you stopped to think about it, was not only miraculous, but also extremely dangerous. And Ben Clover told the class about his dad, who's a postman and has the longest beard in town and he dyes it green for Saint Patrick's Day, which is an Irish tradition, so I've no idea why he does it in Scotland. I knew that Dad left the house every morning in his van and came back in the evening, but I didn't know any details and so I asked him about it. He was a bit grumpy with me and he just said, 'Stone and stuff.' When I asked him what sort of stone, he told me to stop bothering him. If I asked him what they'd been doing today, he might get all grouchy again and not want to show me how to paint the surfboard.

So I told him all about my afternoon's excavations instead. I was really enthusiastic and Dad's eyes started to sparkle too, because he loved that kind of thing. He said to me, 'You just keep on digging away.'

As we were talking, my sister's face went bright red and she pushed her bowl away. The soup went all over the tablecloth. 'Dickheads!' she yelled.

It was completely unexpected, and she made Mum drop her spoon on the floor, so I couldn't help but laugh, even though I knew it was a really big deal for Claire. Kevin gave me a kick under the table because he thought I shouldn't have

laughed. Claire stomped off upstairs and slammed her bedroom door. She banged it so hard that the ironing board leaning against the kitchen wall fell over. Dad was going to follow her, but Mum said, 'Just leave her for a while. We went to the hairdresser's today and she was waiting for you to say something about it.'

Dad did indeed feel like a bit of a dickhead and he quickly said that Mum looked really nice. I just hoped that didn't mean they'd be at it all night. The house really was too small for all the resulting noise.

The phone rang and my brother shot up from the table, probably because he thought it was Charlotte Murphy, who'd started phoning him all the time. Kevin said there was nothing going on between the two of them, but he usually stayed on the phone to her for an hour, laughing the whole time at the things she said and winding the telephone cord around his finger and everything, in this sappy, false way that didn't suit him at all, until finally Dad couldn't listen anymore and said that it was time to hang up.

'It's for you,' said Kevin, looking disappointed as he handed the phone over to me. 'It's Craig Hewelt.'

I was so tense that it felt as though my throat was actually seizing up, just like that time Mr Garland surprised me with a question in class when we were checking our homework and everyone laughed at my made-up answer. I held my hand over the mouthpiece and tried to get as far away from my parents as the cord would allow.

'Hello. Ralph speaking,' I said in a friendly voice. I wondered to what I owed the honour.

'Hello, Ralph. This is Craig, you know...' He was silent for a moment and I could hear Mrs Hewelt whispering to him in the background in a 'do-as-I-tell-you-and-don't-argue-back' voice. 'I just wanted to say that I'm sorry and everything... for being so mean to you... I hope that...' He went silent again for a moment. 'I'm sorry about

the other day in the playground. About thumping you, I mean. I hope it didn't hurt too much.'

'Oh, you know,' I said. I didn't believe a single word he said.

'Maybe we can make friends, hang out one of these days,' said Craig. He was having real difficulty getting the words out of his mouth. I almost felt sorry for him. Even though his mum looked like such a nice woman with her parasol and her freckles and that, I could tell that she'd given him absolute hell. Mum had a really gentle nature too, but she could chuck her shoe at you just like that, like that time Kevin had asked her for some money for new school stuff, but had come home with a pile of comics and hidden them underneath his pillow, which really wasn't the best of places, so it was his own fault. Anyway, because he's an athletic type and good at ball games, he saw the shoe coming for miles and calmly stepped out of the way, with the result that I, who was standing right behind him, was floored by a flying shoe just a second later. I still have the scar on my forehead. 'See what happens!' Mum screamed at Kevin as they stood over me and she gave him a good shaking. 'See what you've done?'

'Well, of course I'd like to thank you very much for your kind offer, Craig,' I said to him over the phone. 'That's very nice of you. I'd be happy to accept, but I'm far too busy with my surfboard at the moment, so I haven't really got time for a friend. Say hello to your mum from me.' My heart was in my mouth. Usually I only realised what I should have said in situations like that when I was lying in bed later, but this time I'd done it when it really mattered.

'That wasn't very friendly,' said Mum when I hung up.

Dad promised that he'd help me sand down the surfboard the next day, but he'd also promised to take the letter for Chris, so I thought I'd just wait and see. In bed that night I asked Kevin if they'd seen Chris and he told me they hadn't been to

Aberdeen at all and said I shouldn't keep on asking questions because he'd promised not to utter a sound about it, except for this – and then he did a fart that I could smell even under the covers and a few minutes later I was fast asleep.

Dorwood was a quiet little town. If a bird crashed into the church, everyone heard it hit the ground. On Monday morning everyone was woken up by the tuneless whistling of Ron Tayle, the dustbin man, who had made himself so unpopular that it wouldn't have surprised me if the locals put pieces of glass into the rubbish bags on purpose so that he'd cut himself.

Around our flat in Aberdeen there was always some kind of noise. You wouldn't even have noticed Ron's whistling. The fire brigade turning up, early-morning rows between the woman next door and her husband, who had just hauled her out of another man's bed again, and the howling wind chasing a line of roller-skating children outside the flats. You might think I was happy to be living in such a sleepy little place now, but sometimes I really missed the hustle and bustle.

The whole house was shaking. I was lying on my stomach on the mattress, with my face buried deep in the pillow, and the vibrations were going right through me. Claire was sitting downstairs in her pyjamas at the kitchen table, with a long face. The cups were dancing up and down in the cupboard and the kitchen drawers had slid open. Maybe she was still angry from the night before, but it probably had something to do with the constant din. Claire can be quite a formidable enemy if you disturb her when she's asleep.

Mum was hanging out the washing in the garden, which really was the most disgusting job, because it meant she had to touch my brother's underpants and I'd advise anyone against that. He sometimes wore his pants and socks for a whole week in a row, even though there were clean ones in the drawer. Mum never sighs

when she's doing anything. She always hums and whistles, not tunelessly like Ron Tayle, but very nicely indeed. It was really calming to see Mum at work like that and I felt like running over to her and throwing my arms around her legs – but you don't do that kind of thing when you're eleven.

'Where are those vibrations coming from?' I asked her, and she pointed at the orange extension cable coming out of the kitchen window and leading towards the old school. I followed the cable. The vibrations got stronger with every step. I was almost scared that my fillings were going to jump out of my teeth.

The old school bell that still hung on the building was ringing quietly. I pressed my nose against the glass in the door and it just popped open. I could see a light shining up the stairs at the end of the long, wide corridor, which was where the din seemed to be coming from.

I'm no fan of dark, abandoned spaces like that, because, with every step you take, you expect to see some scrawny cat leaping out and hissing at you, or even worse, a gang of rats. I mean, hello? Not my idea of a good time.

'Hold it straight,' I heard my dad say. The glass in the classroom windows was shaking. Damp had driven out all of the normal school smells and replaced them with a sort of mushroomy pong. If there's one thing I hate, it's mushrooms, especially mushroom soup. Mum had made some recently, because everyone else in the family likes it. I stirred my spoon around the bowl for a while so that she wouldn't feel too upset and I looked at the rest of them gulping it down. They actually seemed to be enjoying the disgusting stuff. Mum pulled a long, dark hair out of hers with her spoon. I was the only one to notice. This was before she'd gone to get her hair dyed blonde with my sister, and it was clearly one of Mum's brown hairs that had ended up in the pot. I stared down at my bowl so that I wouldn't have to look at her, but I still saw her

putting the spoon in her mouth, complete with the hair, and swallowing it all down, so that we wouldn't notice it, instead of using her finger to fish the hair out of the soup.

The closer I got to the stairs at the end of the hallway, the stronger the smell became. I pinched my nostrils, so I wouldn't have to breathe it in.

'You could go a bit deeper there,' Dad yelled, trying to make himself heard above the noise. Clouds of dust from the floor below came billowing up out of the stairwell.

'Dad?' I called and I repeated it a few times before heading down the stairs, still following the orange extension cable. In the middle of the cellar was a trapdoor that opened onto an even lower section. A square of light was shining up out of it. I didn't know exactly what they were doing down there, but it looked very much as though my dad and my brother were making holes in the concrete with two big drilling machines.

'A bit higher, just above that crack.' They were up to their ankles in brown water and looked like a couple of madmen. My brother's tongue was hanging out of his mouth and Dad's eyes were the size of saucers.

'Hey!' I called out a few times. They didn't hear me. I kicked a loose stone into the crawlspace. Dad looked up. The drilling stopped.

'What are you up to?'

'Hey there, mate... It's a bit of a technical problem. Be sorted soon. Nothing to worry about.'

Dad looked as though my visit had startled him. Kevin had a sheen of sweat on his forehead and he was doing his best not to look at me. I suspected he was trying not to burst out laughing.

'What sort of technical problem? And why do you two have to fix it?' I asked.

'Yeah, the world's a funny old place, isn't it?'

'Do you need any help?'

'We'll manage. Just run along outside. It's not safe in here.'

There was hardly any purple paint left on the surfboard, just the thick layer on the top that I couldn't get off no matter how hard I rubbed. If I sanded too hard, my fingers went straight through the sandpaper. They were really sore and they were covered in blood, so I looked pretty tough, like a boxer after a fight, but it wasn't much fun. Mum had chased me round to the front of the house, where there wasn't any sun now, because she didn't want the dust to end up on her washing.

A seaside town always attracts people who think that it's great fun there. But I'd never seen Hell's Angels in town before. I don't even know whether they actually were real Hell's Angels. It wasn't written on their leather jackets, so they might just as easily have been some other group that looked exactly the same. That seemed about as lame as drinking cola that was any other brand than Coca Cola, like the stuff Chris's mum always used to give us.

Anyway, thirty bikers rode past on those low-slung motorbikes with handlebars that go all the way up to the sky. They were wearing leather trousers that looked pretty warm. They had fur tails hanging from their saddles. That'd look really great on my surfboard too, but the fur would get all wet and then it'd be no good.

I shouted out 'Good morning!' as they went past, as loud as I could, and then added a little more quietly 'bunch of bum bandits', because I thought they couldn't hear me above the roar of their exhaust pipes. The last one in the line must have heard something though, because he slammed on his brakes and stopped right in front of the house, with his bike between his legs, and just stayed there for a while, giving me this creepy stare. All I managed to get out was another 'good morning', and then I gave him a feeble wave, and he rode off.

I dashed round to the back garden. Dad was standing in front of the school, inspecting the wall with a little hammer. His jeans were soaked through right up to the knees. He looked like a miner who'd been working underground for a week. The building was still vibrating, so Kevin was probably down there all by himself in the dark cellar with the drilling machine.

Claire wanted to come into town with me. That really was a miracle, because she never wanted to do anything when she was in one of her bad moods. I'd had enough of sanding and thought it was about time to start painting the board.

'Buy just one pot to start with,' said Mum, 'and we'll see how you get on.' I didn't know how much paint I was going to need.

'I'll only go into town with you if we can have an ice cream,' Claire said. 'We have to go for an ice cream or I'm not coming.'

She had dietary rules that she was supposed to follow, but she just ignored them. She always found someone to give her sweets or other sugary things. I thought it was a bit too risky to have an ice cream and then get the paint, because I didn't know if I'd have enough money left from the five pounds that Mum had given me, but that's what Claire wanted.

Don't go thinking that our town's anything special. It was actually more like one long street, and the closer you got to the sea, the more the houses clumped together. There wasn't a CD shop in the centre, for example, just one shelf in Costcutters with CDs by pop singers that I for one had never heard of. If you wanted an ice cream, you had to go down to the boulevard, where there was an Italian ice-cream van when the weather was good.

We chained our bikes to a tree where someone had just been sick. You could still see the lumps of fish and chips in it, and Claire was furious with me for leaving

the bikes there of all places. That's what I mean when I say that she can sometimes be totally unreasonable, because there was nowhere else to leave the bikes as far as I could see.

The mile-long concrete strip that they call the boulevard just suddenly stops at both ends. You have to find your own way from there. There was a bunch of out-of-towners lying on the beach, frying themselves, all with their feet pointing south. I know for a fact that they were out-of-towners, because no one from Dorwood would dream of hanging around in the smoke from the sugar factory to the north of town. It wasn't a nuclear power plant like in Springfield, in *The Simpsons*, but the pipes from the factory still emptied into the sea. Sugar in packets like the ones you get at the supermarket hardly smells at all. That's because they take out all of the stink and dump it on our beach.

Claire went and joined the queue for ice cream, but I wanted to walk down the boulevard toward the sugar factory first because I knew a secret beach down there by an outcrop of rocks. It seemed like a good place to launch my surfboard for the first time. I could bring the board down there tomorrow and no one would see me making a mess of it there.

It was quite a climb from the end of the tarmac road. Claire was sweating away and complaining that if she'd known we were going mountaineering, she wouldn't have worn her flip-flops. From the top of the bare, grey cliff you could see that the waves were wilder here. I don't claim to be an expert on the sea, but it might have been the strip of rocks sticking out into the water that made the difference.

Claire was happy to have found a bench on top of the cliff where she could sit and rest, but when she realised that the person who had been sick by our bikes had first left behind a pile of vomit here, she immediately started heading back down. That was one of those moments when I missed the old Claire, who did things like climbing

trees or jumping into the stream after a ball, the Claire who didn't start whining at the slightest thing. I took her by the arm and kissed her on the cheek and told her she was the sweetest sister in the whole wide world. She pushed me away and said, 'And now we're going for ice cream or I'm off home.'

Everyone and his dog was standing in the queue for ice cream. Sometimes I think that people will join a queue just to find out what everyone else is waiting for. Claire panted her way up the steep dune behind me. Two boys from Kevin's football team, whose names I didn't know, rode their bikes down to the beach, towing a trailer with two surfboards on. They stripped down to their swimming gear and asked a fat woman sitting on a towel for a cigarette, but she could tell they were only fifteen, even though they had broad shoulders and muscles from all the surfing. It turned out that they had half a cigarette anyway, and they stood there next to her, puffing away like real tough guys, taking it in turns to have a drag, and then they ran into the water with their surfboards.

The ice-cream man was ancient and his hands shook as he scooped up the ice cream. And, on top of that, he also started a conversation with everyone about how nice it was that it had turned out to be a good summer after all, he'd only just been saying to his wife that the weather wasn't going to be so great this year, and of course the sun meant good business for him, because no one buys ice cream when the sun's not shining, and last year a pitbull belonging to one of the visitors had attacked an Arabian thoroughbred in the dunes and the horse had run down the boulevard with the dog still hanging from its neck and it had dropped down dead in front of the ice-cream van, just like that, and that's why dogs weren't allowed to run free on the beach anymore, and that he was sorry but he wouldn't be there next week with his van, even if the weather turned out to be as boiling hot as it was now,

because he had to go into hospital for an exploratory operation on his – well, who gives a toss anyway? – and quarter of an hour later it was finally my turn.

Holding two banana ice creams, I went over to where I'd left Claire, but she wasn't there. I climbed the dune so that I could look out over the whole beach, but she was nowhere to be seen. As I licked away like crazy at the melting ice creams, I went into a complete panic.

None of the people walking along the boulevard had seen a little girl in a red T-shirt. Of course I didn't actually say, 'Have you seen a Mongol in a red T-shirt?', because I thought that wouldn't be very nice for Claire, even though it would have saved a lot of time, but if you had a brother who was a hunchback and you asked someone if they'd seen him, then I'm sure you had to think pretty carefully about how you were going to describe him too.

My heart was thumping away in my chest and everything was starting to go fuzzy at the edges. I had a sort of premonition that Claire might end up in real danger some day, because she never suspects anything bad, so when I spotted that gang of biking bum bandits in the distance, I got into a real flap. They were riding slowly down the road, with everyone getting out of their way. I kept my mouth firmly closed and stared down at my shoes, as the melted ice cream dripped down onto them. The first bikers rode on past me. I really hoped that the guy who'd stopped in front of the house wasn't going to recognise me. I didn't look up until I heard a high-pitched squeal, 'There he is!' I nearly dropped what was left of the ice creams. Claire was sitting on the back of one of the bikes, behind a man with a beard as long as Father Christmas's. He stopped and the others rode on.

'Don't you think Phil's tattoos are beautiful?' Claire shouted, grabbing hold of the biker's huge upper arm. This Phil person laughed out loud and I didn't know what he thought there was to laugh about, because we really should have gone straight to

the police. How did he think he could get away with just taking my sister for a ride on the back of his bike like that?

His tattoo was a coloured thing twisting around his upper arm. You had to make a real effort to recognise it as anything. It made me think of one of our most fun activities at school last year, when Mr Garland had asked us to draw a realistic animal, not fantasy creatures with three eyes or multi-coloured fur or anything like that. We all started sketching away at our desks.

'What are you doing? Why are you still at your desks? I said realistic animals, didn't I? Come on, let's go outside,' said Mr Garland and he told us to look in the area around the school for an animal that we could draw. Almost everyone went to examine a cat sitting in a window and another group stood around a goat in a field. I chose a squashed pigeon by the side of the road, which was lying nice and still, so it was much easier to draw. But that's not the point. What I wanted to say is that when we were finished, Mr Garland showed us a drawing by Rembrandt, of a lion, and it was rubbish. Mr Garland told us that in the seventeenth century they didn't have zoos all over the place full of exotic animals or DVDs of *The Lion King* to show them what a lion looked like, so Rembrandt had to make it up off the top of his head. Then Mr Garland showed us a drawing that Rembrandt had done years later of another lion, some time after a lion had visited Amsterdam and Rembrandt had seen for the first time what its claws and paws really looked like and where the tail was attached to its bum – and all I want to say is that the man who put that tattoo on Phil's arm had never seen a real snake in his entire life, because what Phil had winding around his arm looked more like an overgrown worm.

Claire got off the motorbike and took her ice cream, but there was no ice cream left in the cone and she looked as though she was about to throw a temper tantrum.

'I can't buy you another ice cream, because this money's for the paint,' I sighed. Phil just laughed again. He reached for his back pocket and pulled out a leather wallet on a chain.

'Your sister asked if she could come for a quick spin on the back,' said Phil.

'Is that right?' I answered.

He took out a ten-pound note and gave it to Claire.

'Take good care of your sister. She's one in a million,' he said and rode off. As if I didn't already know she was one in a million. It was none of his bloody business anyway.

Claire threw her empty cone away, walked over to the ice-cream van, where there was no queue now, and asked for two new banana ice creams. At the ironmonger's we bought four pots of paint and on the way home she just kept going on about Phil's tattoo as if it was something amazing.

'Do you think I could get a tattoo with the money that's left over?' she said.

When we got back, Dad and Kevin were sitting on two kitchen chairs in the back garden, stripped down to their underpants. Dad had a wet handkerchief knotted around his head. He said that was the best way to cope with the sweltering sun. Their faces were covered with dust. Claire gave Dad a kiss and asked him how much he'd paid for his tattoo. He nearly choked on his beer.

'My tattoo? God, it's such a long time ago. I don't remember.' Dad rubbed his hand over the black letter A adorning his bare chest. The A stood for Uncle Antonio, who had disappeared without a trace one day. Dad had loved him so much that he decided to get a tattoo so that he would always be with him. Uncle Antonio only remained without a trace for nine years and then he suddenly turned up with a moustache and a blonde girlfriend in tow. No one said a word about where he'd been

because everyone apparently knew that he'd had to go into hiding somewhere. Everyone had plenty to say about his moustache though, so that disappeared pretty quickly.

The sun had gone down and we were lying in our bedroom. The heat of the day lay around us like a punishment.

'Is Dad giving you anything for all that work you're doing for him?' I asked Kevin, but he was so tired that he fell asleep halfway through his answer. I looked in the headmaster's mirror and could see my parents still sitting out in the garden. Every so often I heard Dad's hand squish a mosquito that had landed on him. They were talking quietly, but I could understand what they were saying because they'd had the same conversation so many times. Mum was offering to go and get a job again, because we didn't have much money left. Just to be on the safe side, she said. Dad went from whispering to a sort of restrained scream and he hissed that no wife of his was going to work, not while he was alive. Everything would be fine soon enough. She just had to be patient.

'Have faith in me,' he said and Mum gave a deep sigh. 'I've already got a buyer for the bricks. Fifty pence a piece from a contractor who's working on a museum. Those are exactly the kind of bricks he needs. This is going to be the big one. That old barn is going to make us some money. They'll have to let me demolish the bloody thing if it's about to collapse.'

Mum took hold of his hand and said that she didn't approve, but that she would support him, which I thought was kind of the same thing. But what do I know?

'We have to make sure that Claire and Ralph are playing in front of it when the people from the council come next week. It's a real danger, you know. The building could actually collapse.'

The vibrations began again early the next morning. Kevin was still asleep when Dad appeared beside his bed and pulled the sheets off him.

‘Come on. We need to keep going.’

Kevin groaned and hid his head under the pillow.

‘My shoulder hurts.’

‘All you have to do is hold the light. Come on.’

‘Why do we have to start at six in the morning? It’s the holidays. I’m going to stay in bed for a bit. I’ll be down soon.’ Somehow I hoped that Dad would ask me to go with him now that Kevin was on the skive, but that didn’t happen of course. He thought I was too young. I could imagine him down there on his own, standing in the chocolate-brown water in the creepy crawlspace, swearing his head off.

When the first vibrations started, the old illustration on the wall above my bed fell off its nail. It was a cross-section of a starfish that I’d found in a box in our house. It had probably hung on one of the classroom walls in the old school, where it had taught generations of schoolchildren what the inside of a starfish looks like. I can tell you: it looks gross, all purple tubes and slime. I had no idea why children needed to know about that sort of thing.

I slipped into my shorts and jumper from the day before and noticed in the bathroom mirror that some of my hair had clumped together. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be the paint that I’d plastered onto the surfboard yesterday. I must have been waving the brush around a bit too enthusiastically. I could probably have got it out with some of the stuff that Mum kept under the sink, but I was too impatient for that, so I snipped the paint out with Dad’s nose-hair trimmers instead, losing a good chunk of my hair in the process. I’d have to wait and see whether I could still manage a Mohican.

For the first time in my life, there was an envelope on the doormat addressed to Ralph Woods. I knew immediately that it was a letter from Chris. The bugger had written back to me! I raced upstairs, waving the letter around, and triumphantly wiggled my way into Mum's bedroom. She raised her sleepy head from the pillow and mumbled, 'What's going on?'

'It's a letter from Chris. Look! My letter got there even without a postcode!' I sat down on the edge of the bed and started to open the envelope. Fiddling about with it was taking too long, so I just started ripping at it instead. Mum told me to go easy or I'd tear the letter as well.

The first thing I pulled out of the envelope was my own letter to Chris, which was a bit odd, and then a much smaller piece of paper, really small, no bigger than a postcard, so he hadn't really been trying very hard. I'd managed to fill four pages!

I didn't recognise the handwriting. I could see that it wasn't Chris's writing though. I'd sat beside him at school for three years and copied the answers to dozens of tests from him.

'Dear Ralph,' I read out loud to my mum, and I looked down to the bottom of the letter, where I saw the name Lucy Derwalt. His mother wrote to say that Chris wasn't in Aberdeen, but had gone to computer camp in Glentown for a month. He was there with all of his new friends and they were learning to write computer programs, so he wasn't going to be able to read my letter himself. She was writing on Chris's behalf, she said, because she'd decided that it would be better if he never got to read my letter. Like everyone else in my old class, he'd been really upset when my family suddenly disappeared without any explanation. She said she knew that it wasn't my fault, and she didn't want to punish me for it, but she had to protect her own son, just as she thought every mother should. When I read that bit out, Mum muttered 'stupid cow'. She'd never said that in front of me before, so she must have

been really angry. Mrs Derwalt asked me not to write again, because if only half of what she'd heard from her customers in the shop was true, she didn't want her son to be around those kind of people. Once again, she said that she knew it wasn't my fault and it wasn't as if she thought I wasn't a nice boy, but what Dad had done was completely unacceptable and that's all there was to it, and then she ended the letter by wishing me all the best.

'What a bloody cow,' whispered Mum and I had to agree with her. I'd never thought Mrs Derwalt was a nice woman actually, because she didn't even allow you to keep your shoes on in their house and she made Chris go to the toilet whenever he wanted to fart. Have you ever heard anything like it? He wasn't allowed to fart in the house or anywhere else for that matter, because it was bad manners.

'I'm so sorry,' said Mum, and I could see that she really was. She took the letter from me and read it again. I didn't want anything more to do with it, so I ran out of the bedroom. Computer camp in Glentown. If there was one thing Chris hated, it was computers. I felt really bad for him.

I didn't know exactly how to check whether the paint on a surfboard was dry, but my finger didn't stick to it, so I thought it must be okay. I picked up the board from the two trestles where it had been drying and followed the orange extension cable.

I took a deep breath so I'd have enough oxygen to last me all the way to the end of the corridor. That's how much I hate mushrooms. They're so disgusting. With every step, I got angrier with Mrs Derwalt and her nasty letter. Dad wasn't perfect, you didn't need to tell me that, but Mrs Derwalt was acting as though she'd never taken a piece of meat that she'd dropped on the floor and put it in the shop window to be sold. And she had. Because I'd bloody well seen her do it.

Oh, I completely forgot to say what I finally ended up doing for my talk about Dad's job that time when he didn't want to tell me anything about it. You should have

seen the other kids' faces! I told them he was a cameraman for those shark documentaries and that he went out exploring the ocean floor in one of those little glass submarines. I got a B-plus for the talk. It was the highest mark I'd ever got. I knew a load of stuff about sharks and about how cameramen protect themselves underwater, because shark documentaries were my favourite thing on TV.

Dad wasn't drilling by the open trapdoor now, but was working in the corner of the crawlspace. He'd jammed his big torch between his chin and shoulder to give him some light for drilling the foundations and he looked really uncomfortable.

The trapdoor wasn't very big, so I had to put the surfboard upright to get it through the hole. The board dropped into the knee-high water with a splash, went under for a second and then came bobbing back up. I stuck my head through the hole and saw Dad looking in surprise at the surfboard.

'What are you doing here? I told you it's not...'

'I've come to test my surfboard. If you like, I can hold the torch for you.'

I jumped into the water. I hadn't expected it to be so freezing, but I didn't let on. I lay down on my tummy on the surfboard and paddled through the brown water over to Dad. I took the big torch from him and shone it at where he was working. The drill bit was as big as my hand.

He stabbed the drill into the concrete a few times and then shifted it a little way and started drilling again. I swear to you, I could hear the school creaking and sighing and I was a bit scared that we might end up buried underneath it at any moment. Dad pointed at another concrete pillar and then waded through the water. I paddled over to him. And that's what we did for the next few hours. He pointed. I shone the light. I didn't know what he'd been up to in Aberdeen and what other schemes he was cooking up, but I didn't need to know.

The drilling, Dad's silence, my legs getting colder and colder, the metallic smell of the water, which wrinkled up like an old lady's skin with every vibration: it was the best summer ever and it had only just begun.