

Trash and Click

Noah flies along the pavement, weaving and dodging shoppers, pushchairs, and old women with walking frames. He's already nearly two hours late home, so he doesn't need the entire population of Brighton and every tourist in the universe getting in his way.

Trust his stepmother, Kate, to have gone off the grid all afternoon and not picked up the house phone or her mobile, either to him or to the school office.

'Snarky' Bannister, the sports teacher, who demands all the boys call him 'Sir', kept him back from school, yet again. Some kids are born athletic and some are not, and Noah with his lack of co-ordination is definitely a *not*. To make matters worse, he's scared of heights and his refusal to climb the ropes in the gym has become an issue between him and Snarky.

Today, he braved the climb halfway, panicked, and gave himself rope-burn of the inner thighs during his uncontrolled descent. As Noah sat there nursing his injuries and daring to shed a tear or two, Snarky said, 'It's time you manned yourself up, Padgett,' and rewarded him with an after-school detention for cowardice.

Still, Snarky seems a kitten compared to Kate, the sabre-toothed tigress who's sure to tear him to shreds when he gets home.

He takes a short cut across the rec. A couple of boys from his school are half-heartedly kicking a football about. Others are lounging on the ground, littering the grass with bottles, tins, chocolate bar wrappers, and crisp packets. They ignore Noah and he ignores them.

Boiled and near to throwing up, he rounds the corner to his house, hits the front drive at full-tilt, and skids to a halt on the gravel. No car. He punches the air and shouts, "Yes!" Kate is out. For a moment he's jubilant, until it strikes him that she's always threatening to get rid of his puppy. What if she has gone and done it, because he wasn't back in time to walk Bluebell?

His hand is shaking so much it takes several tries before he gets his key into the lock and opens the front door. Once inside, he slams the door shut behind him and slings his backpack on the hall floor. The grandfather clock strikes five o'clock. A long silence follows. The house stinks of puppy, but there's not a squeak out of her.

He legs it through to the utility room, hoping he'll find an angelic chocolate Labrador curled up snoozing in her pen, which is where Kate shuts her when no-one is at home, except this isn't where she is now.

Bluebell has chewed through the wooden bars and gone mountaineering over the kitchen table and trashed the kitchen. Noah clutches at his head and lets out a long groan. Helpless, he gawks at the smashed cereal bowls, a licked-clean butter dish, tipped over chairs, and the shredded remains of a cornflake packet. Kate must have been out on one of her all-day shopping trips, leaving Bluebell on her own all day.

From upstairs, come crashes and thumps similar to the ones Dad makes when he kicks off his work shoes in the evenings and hurls them at the wardrobe. Bluebell starts to bark and clatter against a distant door.

Noah scrambles up the stairs, his arms tangling with his legs and his head exploding with fear. He can see it already, his stepmother's dressing room: that shrine to shopping with its wall-to-wall wardrobes and a floor-to-ceiling shoe rack threatening to overbalance and crush Bluebell to death.

The door at the end of the landing has a ceramic nameplate on it. He often dreams of vandalising this nameplate. Today, when he arrives at it, he averts his eyes from the words 'Kate's Room' painted in fancy black letters surrounded by pink roses. Anybody would think the dressing room belonged to a six-year-old girl, rather than a regular Cruella de Ville.

He sweeps his sweat-soaked fringe back off his forehead, wipes his clammy hands on his school trousers, and takes a few deep breaths. Bluebell has stopped barking and other noises jump to the fore. The downstairs clock ticks. A tap drips. A twig scratches against the outside of a window. A buzzing insect collides with glass. Someone has a mower going. The girls next door are having a squawk, and for once he'd rather be out there with them.

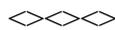
He counts down from ten to one and barges into the room before he loses his nerve. Bluebell greets him with multiple lickings and vertical take-offs. He stands there horror-struck, with his heart taking such a dive it almost drops out of him and lands at his feet with a splat.

The once brilliant-white carpet has had an argument with the colour yellow. The lemony patches are part of an alien landscape strewn with mangled strips of leather, rubber, plastic, velvet, tapestry fabric, pink fluff, buckles, buttons, and sequins. The lowest twenty slots of the shoe rack are accusing black voids. Noah visualises himself in disgrace and penniless misery for the rest of his childhood, as he fights to pay Kate back with money from a paper round. 'Oh, Bluebell, what have you done?' He wrestles her into his arms, frantic to escape the nightmare.

But after he has turned to leave, he suffers an overpowering urge to look behind him. It feels as though some crazed scientist has messed with reality and stuffed sixty seconds into two, so a couple of time-strands become one.

A Saluki dog dressed in hot pants, sequin top, and stiletto heels is standing upright on her long back legs in the middle of the dressing room. The flaxen-haired, black-snouted beauty waves at Noah with a paw-hand, her claws painted with pink-glitter nail polish. 'Hi there,' she says, before vanishing into the full-length wardrobe mirror.

When time returns to normal, Bluebell wriggles free and rushes to the mirror, pressing her nose to it and steaming up the glass. She wags her tail and woofs at her own reflection, as if she's inviting the dog-girl to return for a further game of 'let's trash Kate's shrine'.



After an agonised wait, Noah hears the slow crunch of the Range Rover's tyres on the driveway. Hiding in his bedroom with Bluebell, he does not realise Kate has let herself in the house until she passes his door with a rustle of shopping bags.

The familiar routine, he thinks, but today it has a scarier scenario. If this was a computer game, he would choose this moment to beam up to another planet in another solar system on the other side of the galaxy, taking Bluebell with him.

Kate's dressing room door creaks open. Stunned silence. The thud-thud-thud-thud of shopping bags slipping from her hands on to the carpet. A scream, shrill enough to break every window in the road. A wailing. 'No, my shoes—my beautiful shoes.' And the chilling words. 'I'm going to kill that puppy. Throttle her with my bare hands. Feed her to the crows.'

Noah seeks refuge with Bluebell under his duvet, fighting the desire to throw up. He can taste sour chocolate from the snack he ate while rushing home from school in a stress. Kate hurtles back along the landing, letting out dramatic sobs, and crashes through his bedroom door, nearly knocking it off its hinges. She stands there, white-faced, and rakes her fingernails through her short dark hair, her red lipstick mouth drawn tight across her teeth.

She reminds Noah of a wild animal grooming itself before battle. There is not a genuine tear in sight to soften her hard, black eyes. Just dry rage.

Hugging Bluebell close to him, Noah snatches up his water pistol from his bedside table and squirts it at Kate's face, straight into her eyes. She rubs furiously at her eyelids, smudging her mascara and streaking her face with green slime. Only then does he remember the pistol contains stagnant water taken from a vase of dead flowers. He had put it there a couple of weeks ago, when he and his friend George were fooling about with some old kiddie toys. Even though he hates his stepmother, Noah wouldn't want to blind her. He's in a real panic now, but there's no way he will say sorry to her, ever.

Kate glares at him out of streaming red eyes, with her arms drawn down to her sides. She clenches, unclenches, and re-clenches her hands. They are tense and bony—almost bird claws. 'The puppy goes tomorrow—first thing, no argument.'

'Goes where?'

'I don't care. The vets, the breeder, the Battersea Dog's Home, wherever, as long as it's a million miles from me.'

'B-b-but you can't just get rid of her. She has feelings.'

Kate curls her lips in a sneer. 'I have feelings too, which your father's chosen to ignore. He knows I can't stand dogs, yet he gives you a nasty, messy, puppy for your birthday. This is as much his fault as yours.'

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At ten minutes to nine, Dad returns from London. 'I'm starving,' he tells an empty hall.

No reply.

He tries again. 'Is anyone at home?'

Noah hears him walking around, talking to himself, trying doors to various rooms until finally he finds Kate. She's in the telly room directly beneath Noah's bedroom, doubtless stationed there so he won't miss any of what she has to say to Dad. Her slights such as 'your son this', 'evil puppy that', and 'useless husband other' sound set to go on into infinity.

Normally, Noah would drown out one of his stepmother's rants by playing some heavy metal on his iPod, but he needs to listen out for Bluebell, whom Kate has banished to the conservatory.

At five minutes past ten, Dad manages to escape to Noah's room. He dumps a bottle of cola on the bedside table, along with a large bag of crisps and a couple of doughnuts 'Wouldn't want you starving to death, mate.'

Dad helps himself to a doughnut and collapses down onto the end of Noah's bed. He looks shattered after a day of trading on the stock market. His hair is all dishevelled, his face pinched and pale, and he seems thinner than usual. He's still wearing his tie, although it's loosened and crooked, and his shirt has a couple of missing buttons. There are also some fresh scratch marks just beneath his neck, which Noah guesses are Kate's doing.

She shrieks up the stairs. 'Get down here this minute, Craig, or you can sleep in the garden shed tonight. Your son's a disgrace.'

Dad drags himself up off the bed. He has white sugar on his cheek and a bit of jam on his upper lip like a toddler. 'Don't worry,' he says, with a sad but guilty look to his face. 'I'll keep an eye out for Bluebell and do my best to sweeten up your mother.'

'She isn't my mother, so don't call her that.' He really wishes Dad would get the message and stop trying to play happy families.

As World War Three breaks out downstairs, all Noah can think of is poor Bluebell stuck there in the conservatory on her own, quivering and whimpering in a corner, not understanding what's going on.

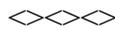
At a quarter-to-eleven, after Kate has finished breaking every piece of china downstairs, she stomps upstairs. Noah flicks off his light, tosses a sweatshirt over his computer monitor, and holds his breath. Kate marches past his room, rattling the door in its frame, tutting and huffing to herself. Dad trudges along the landing after her, muttering swear words.

Kate shouts at him from the en-suite bathroom: all her usual stuff about his not bothering hanging up his clothes and leaving shaving bristles in the hand basin, as well as her making vicious digs about his rough upbringing on a London council estate. Never mind that he's smart and has done well for himself.

Noah knows he has taken after Dad and is smart too, although he can't find the motivation to work hard these days. However well he does, his stepmother will find nothing good to say about him. His sole crime is his close resemblance to his real mum, and the only way he could change this would be to dye his blond hair purple, grows his fringe down to his chin to cover up his hazel eyes, and eat mountains of junk food to turn him from skinny to fat. Not one week passes without Kate accusing Dad of loving 'that rough Peckham girl' more than her. How stupid being jealous of a dead person.

Her words now reach Noah's ears in fits and starts. It sounds as if she's brushing her teeth and shouting through thick foam. Perhaps she will swallow too much fluoride and poison herself.

At last she runs out of steam and silence reigns over the house.



It is twenty minutes to midnight. Noah peers out from behind the kitchen door into the empty hall. The white-light of a full moon shines through the frosted glass of the stair-window and the house vibrates from Dad's monstrous snores. Noah bets Kate is lying there next to Dad wide-awake, fuming.

He carries Bluebell upstairs, doing his best to walk on tiptoe at the same time. He's determined she'll spend her last night in his company. On the landing, she starts wriggling and squeaking. He makes a dash for it, with one hand clamping her jaw shut. Once inside his room, he sits on the bed stroking her, hoping to calm them both. Random thoughts tumble about in his mind—all of them bad—but at least Bluebell can enjoy her remaining time with him, in happy ignorance of her future. She crashes out on her back, fast asleep with her two front paws around her nose.

Seeking a diversion from misery, Noah creeps across the room to his computer, only to find it has gone into hibernation. He attempts to reboot the stupid machine but the following error message comes up on the screen:

- System restart has been paused:**
- Continue with system restart.**
- Delete restoration data and proceed to system boot menu.**

He bangs his fist down on the desk in frustration, waking Bluebell, who rushes across the room, keen for a bit of excitement. Scooping her off the floor onto his lap without paying her proper attention, he tries to decide what to do next. As his finger hovers over the mouse-button, Bluebell wags her tail and nibbles at the sleeve of his T-shirt.

'Naughty puppy, let me concentrate.' He keeps his eyes fixed on the monitor. But Bluebell seems determined to have a game with him, and nips him on the thigh just below the hem of his boxer shorts. This distracts him for a few seconds as he checks for broken skin. During this time, Bluebell strikes the keyboard with her paw.

The error message disappears and the screen starts to fill with angry black clouds. These clouds have a ravenous appearance to them and look ready to devour every file and programme on the computer, including schoolwork and saved games.

Noah's pulse runs out of control and his armpits draw instant sweat. Even Bluebell raises her hackles in alarm. The clouds pile on top of each other in a relentless forward march, but instead of Noah's computer crashing as he expects, the clouds suddenly go into mind-blowing reversal on the screen, drawing him with them.

His brain feels as though it's disappearing down a plughole, with reality fighting to retrieve him before he disappears out of reach around the bend in the pipe.

Bluebell cranes her neck forward and her brown nose touches the screen.

The clouds part to reveal the words...

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(Double click on the above link for further information)

Labrador in a Red-checked Shirt

The hall clock strikes midnight. Noah counts its chimes from one to twelve. He tells himself the ravenous clouds are just a preview to a fantasy game: that there's no harm in checking things out.

He clicks on the link.

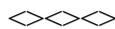
The screen shimmers, liquefies, and starts to drag Bluebell through into a chemical soup spiced with lead and mercury. Noah grabs hold of her shoulders to haul her back, his whole body torn by panic. But the liquid tide snatches him, too, and spits him out into a vast wind tunnel, which sucks him and Bluebell up with the force of a tornado. Stretched out thin, his ears popping, Noah gasps for breath and squeezes his eyes shut against the stinging air.

He lands with a splash in cold water, loses his hold on Bluebell, and sinks. Pondweed wraps around his neck. He thrashes his arms around, convinced he's drowning. Forcing his eyes open to get his bearings, he discovers he's sitting on the bottom of what looks like a pond.

As Bluebell doggy-paddles away from him at speed, caught up with the joy of finding her swimming legs, Noah wills her to pick up his distress signals. He knows she's strong enough to rescue him, despite her small size; only a few days ago, she dragged a heavy hose-reel by her teeth all the way up the garden path at the side of the house, plus, she's impossible to beat at tug-of-war.

His lungs burn as he draws the last drop of air from them. Fireworks explode in his head. He needs to breathe ... needs, needs, needs to breathe.

Water tumbles into his lungs. It is a billion times worse than choking on cola. He's drowning in his computer while his puppy swims in the opposite direction. His chest is on the point of exploding and his spine snapping. Then an odd tranquillity comes over him. He sees the smiling face of his real mum, Shelley, floating before him. She's a beacon lighting his way to the afterlife.



'Thing, wake up,' says a deep, barking voice. Noah wonders if it's the voice of God calling to him down a tunnel.

Next, he feels a mouth with loads of teeth over his mouth. It blows air into him, with a breath smelling so gross, even the water in his lungs wants to escape from it. He changes his mind about it being God.

Someone hauls him up from behind into a sitting position. He coughs, splutters, and pukes in the long grass. When he has finished puking, he says, 'Ouch, your nails are digging into me.'

His rescuer lets out a chuckle of sorts. 'How about a little bit of gratitude?'

'Yeah, th...' Noah's voice trails off. His brain feels disconnected from his body, as if he has left his head floating behind him in the water.

He squints across the huge lake into a low, deep-orange sun. There's nothing to measure his direction by, so it's impossible to know if he has arrived in early morning or early evening. The ducks are going a dabbling, tails up in the weeds; a gentle breeze ripples the lake.

Noah turns to face his rescuer for the first time, intending to ask after Bluebell but instead finding himself gaping in astonishment. A dog-man sits there, upright as a human. He has the butch face of an elderly black Labrador—grey muzzle, yellow teeth, kind brown eyes, ears alert, expression questioning—but he wears a red-checked shirt, old corduroy tan trousers, and thigh-high green wading wellies.

The Labrador-man takes a packet of tobacco out of his shirt pocket and packs some of it into a briar pipe, using his super-elongated pads, opposable thumbs, and flattened claws. He delves into his left trouser pocket and extracts one item after another, chucking each of them on the ground. These include a couple of brightly coloured fishing floats, a dirty old handkerchief, a bunch of keys, and some boiled sweets in wrappers. At last, he finds what he is looking for. ‘Got you—dry as a bone. What a mercy and oh so sweet. A dog without a light for his pipe is a very sore dog indeed.’

Now I know I’m dead, thinks Noah. He wonders if Mum had the same experience after her car flew off a bridge and she drowned.



It is night. Noah awakens to find himself lying on a makeshift bed, although he has no memory of having fallen asleep. Propping himself up on one elbow, he sees a moon has risen over the lake and thrown a shimmering cloak over its surface. The reflection of its face shifts about, reminding Noah of a huge version of the white opal pendant his mum used to wear and the way it swayed when she leant forward to tie his shoelaces before he could tie them himself. Night crickets chirrup. An owl shrieks nearby. Another owl answers with a gentle woo-woo from further off. The water of the lake laps against the low bank of its shoreline.

A smell of cooking fish reaches him. He drags himself up off his bed and stumbles over to join Labrador-man by a campfire. They are in the middle of a glade, well away from the water’s edge. Labrador-man has skewered three whole fish on a long spike and is cooking them over the fire. Beyond him, lies a log cabin. Beyond this, the trees of a forest stand straight as guards, their uppermost branches silvered by the moonlight into polished spiked helmets.

Noah’s mind is still in shock, much of it a blank.

‘Is people-person feeling better for his sleep?’ asks Labrador-man.

‘I’m called Noah Padgett,’ he says, relieved to remember his own name.

‘I’m Graham Labrador.’

‘That’s cool.’

‘What do you call your little four-paw walker friend?’ asks Graham. ‘Every time I speak to her, she woofs at me.’

Jolted out of his partial amnesia, Noah leaps to his feet. ‘She’s alive? You’ve spoken to her?’

‘Sure, although such an awkward way of walking about, I never did see.’

Noah lurches about the glade, shouting in every direction. ‘Bluebell ... Bluebell ... Bluebell.’ His puppy zooms out through the open door of the cabin to him. She leaps about, squeaking, licking, chewing, rolling on her back and wetting herself. Noah has never felt so overjoyed to see anyone in his life.

Graham finishes cooking the fish, pulls them off the skewers one at a time, and puts them on three tin plates with a serving each of chopped vegetables and herbs dressed in oil. When the Labrador-man passes one of the plates to Bluebell, Noah snatches it away and does his best to fillet the fish. Once he has removed the majority of bones, Bluebell launches herself at her food and polishes it off in a blink.

With his head on one side and ears raised, Graham appears unimpressed.

‘What’s bugging you?’ Noah asks.

‘Well, I’m all for allowing pups a certain amount of self-expression, but they do need a bit of discipline, too.’

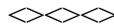
Noah hugs Bluebell close and scowls at Graham.

The dog-man shrugs his shoulders. ‘Never mind. Eat up your food before it gets cold.’

Noah decides fish and vegetables taste far more delicious eaten out in the fresh air than at the kitchen table or in the dining room back home. No indigestion either, from having to suffer Dad and Kate having one of their arguments while he tries to enjoy his meal.

Graham hums to himself as he discards the fish bones from their meal into the fire. He takes the dirty dishes and cutlery down to the lakeside to wash them. Bluebell wriggles out of Noah’s arms to follow him. She wades about in the shallows, lapping at the water.

The moon is high above the lake and white as Wensleydale cheese. It has no darkened areas to its surface to show meteorite damage, as on the Earth’s moon, nor cloud formations to suggest a protective atmosphere. Whichever way he looks at it, Noah reckons it a scientific puzzle.



Bluebell sits on her haunches, howling up at the sky. The orange sun of yesterday seems to have turned into a candy-pink one: either this, or there are twin suns with slightly different rising and setting times. Noah rubs at his eyes, to make sure he isn’t imagining things, but the pink sun stays put.

He lets out a loud yawn and Bluebell comes bounding over. They go to the lakeside to see Graham, who’s wading in its shallows with a fishing rod in his hands.

‘Good afternoon, young people-person,’ says Labrador-man.

Noah wonders if, other than Graham, there are other strangely evolved creatures in this twin-sun world. The birds, squirrels, and fish seem normal enough. Noah wants to ask Graham outright if he’s a freak of nature, but manages to come up with a more tactful question. ‘Are there any others people-persons like me round here?’

‘Nope.’

‘Not in towns?’

‘Nope.’

‘How about zoos?’

‘Nope.’



Bluebell wanders off a short distance, on the trail of a scent. When she reaches the edge of the glade, she sniffs about in some rough grass. Beyond her, sunlight dances amongst the forest’s trees. It’s a peaceful and idyllic scene, thinks Noah, suspecting it won’t last. And his pessimism is well founded.

From close by, a shrill whistle sounds, followed by the clop-crunch of heavy boots running along, crushing twigs underfoot. Noah leaps to attention a second before a grey wolf-man—wearing an old-fashioned military red coat—dashes between the trees.

A blackbird lets out a sharp warning call. A squirrel darts up an oak tree and stays there, tucked into a high up crook with its nose poking out. Bluebell rolls on her back to chew a stick.

Noah walks towards her, trying to look relaxed, but his legs are shaking. She stays on her back, watching him out of one eye. When he’s within two arms’ lengths of her, she jumps up onto all fours and invites him to play tug-of-war. As he reaches out his hand, intending to grab the stick and pull Bluebell away to safety, a butterfly flutters in front of

her eyes. It darts off deep amongst the trees, with Bluebell in speedy pursuit, heading straight towards where Noah saw the wolf-man. There are other dog-soldiers running between the trees now, but dressed in dull greens and browns. The sunlight glints upon their weapons.

Terror binds Noah to the spot. The glade is too big, and he a powerless dot in its centre. The trees seem to have grown faces. He snatches a desperate look back at Graham, who appears to be fast asleep in his tree-hammock, with a battered old felt hat covering his eyes and snout.

Noah calls quietly, fighting to keep fear from his voice. 'Bluebell, Bluebell.'

She stops and stares at him, and wags her tail.

Noah pats the ground with his hand. 'Come on, girl. Come Bluebell, come.'

She sits down on her haunches and shuffles backwards, flicking the tip of her tail and letting out small barks. As a last resort, Noah flops over on his back and plays dead, which does the trick. She runs straight to him and starts licking his face.

Grasping her, before she can escape again, he clammers to his feet and bombs over to Graham. With a squirming Bluebell tucked under one arm, he shakes the dog-man, pinches him, knocks his hat off, lifts his earflap, and yells in his lughole to wake up, but Graham just lets out an extra loud snore and carries on sleeping.

Noah hates leaving him, but protecting Bluebell is more important. He locks her in his arms and runs for the nearest shelter: an outdoor loo built of concrete with a solid wooden door and a five-lever lock. Some very large spiders live inside the loo, their larder well stocked with fly carcasses. Noah sees them as the least of his worries.

He shuts the door behind him and engages the lock, throwing himself into a false twilight. Clambering up onto the loo seat, he fights the spiders' dust-filled webs to look out of the small, high up window. Bluebell stands with her front paws on the seat, whining, and wagging her tail. When he ignores her, she takes advantage of his shoeless state by chewing at what is left of his socks.

The window is filthy. He spits at the glass and rubs off some dirt to make a spy hole, but still cannot see much. There isn't a lot to hear either, with the window jammed shut and its latch rusted solid.

If this was a fantasy scenario, thinks Noah, he would have a selection of magical weapons to use. Or perhaps it really is a fantasy scenario but in a nightmare caused by an overdose of computer games. He mutters under his breath. 'Please don't let this be real. Please let me wake up in my bed at home.'

But no awakening comes. Just fear prickling his whole body.

A creature scrabbles and claws against the outside of the loo door. The knob rattles. Someone whispers; another replies.

Noah clenches his jaw and his breath comes out in shallow pants. Bluebell starts to whine again, louder than before, her tail thumping. She looks up at him out of questioning eyes.

More whispering ... short silence ... then an almighty thudding from some sort of battering ram. The door shakes in its frame and releases a few tiny splinters. Noah takes a sharp intake of breath at the sound of each blow. Further splinters: the air smells of stale pee; his eyes sting and his head swims.

He finds it hard to believe the door can hold firm under such an assault. Surely, any minute it will cave in, or split in two? He counts the blows. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven—still it stands. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen—despite a cracking, rending noise, it refuses to fall apart.

A heated swearing match starts up outside. One of the voices is harsh as a machine gun and the other sounds as if the owner's throat is full of gravel. They are arguing about whose

fault it is the chosen log was not strong enough. In the end, they agree neither of them is to blame; the log is rotten inside, but not so rotten they can't use the broken pieces to beat up their subordinates and show them who's still in charge.

Tortured howls and yelps fill the air. When the assault comes to an abrupt halt, Noah tightens in dread and forgets to breathe, convinced it will be his and Bluebell's turn next.

After a few seconds of nothing happening, Gravel-voice lets out a gritty laugh. His companions join in, their laughter sounding forced and most likely a case of them having to see the joke or risk further beatings.

After their laughter has dried up, the deranged troop marches away, singing a rude song in two-time.

Noah slumps down on the loo seat and lifts Bluebell onto his lap. He trembles from head to foot. A deep silence descends upon the forest, almost quiet enough to hear the spiders weave their webs. No bird-song. No wind in the trees. No buzz of insects. Bluebell quivers beneath his hands, her little heart pitter-pattering against her ribcage as fast as summer rain on an iron roof. He strokes her, while listening out for the enemy's return.

Nothing happens for such an age, Noah wonders if it's safe to go outside. In answer to his thought, a rock smashes through the window and lands on his head. Stars explode behind his eyes. Thick, pungent smoke starts to fill the confined space. Bluebell leaps off his lap and jumps about, barking at the smoke.

Noah's head seems to disconnect from his neck and his brain suffers a violent shaking. Overwhelmed with giddiness, he tips off the loo seat and smashes the side of his forehead into the concrete wall.