

Stories about life at 16 and 17

Winners' collection

The
Children's
Society

No child
should feel
alone

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Mud

Rebekah Fellows

16 to 25 category

There is a new family at church. For such a small town, this is a rarity. Judith has watched the back of their heads for the whole service. One of the boys has a shaved head so that he is almost bald. His head is shaped like a capital D, with the back of his head almost flat. Her mum told her once that children who are abused by their parents are left alone in their cots or their buggies for so long that it changes the shape of their skull. Judith wonders if perhaps this boy has been abused. Probably not. She knows that just because they go to church doesn't make them good people, but she's aware that recently she assumes the worst of people. She needs to start assuming the best.

Judith kneels during communion and pretends to pray. Whilst she is pretending to pray she watches as people receive the bread and the wine. This is her favourite part of mass. She likes to see what everyone is wearing and who is married to who and which children look like their parents. Quite often the olive skinned, languid children have lumpy, fat parents and the parents who have aged in a sophisticated manner, with stylish coats and boots, have pimply, doughy children. She wonders if this is God's way of making sure that everyone has to love

someone who's ugly. She's on the unfortunate end of this. Her mum is beautiful and slim and spends a lot of time grooming parts of her body. Judith knows she is not beautiful, nor blonde and will never care about whether she's shaped her eyebrows. Frida Kahlo didn't give a shit, so why should she.

She notes who takes the bread and drinks the wine and who only takes the bread. The Polish family are wearing large jumpers with jeans, dark coats and muddy trainers and Judith wonders if the mud on their trainers is mud from Poland or mud from England. The boy with the flat head is older than he looks from the back. Instead of laying out their palms to receive the host they all open their mouths so the priest can place it on their tongues. Judith wonders if the priest can see their fillings or smell their breath. All of them take both the bread and the wine. At the end of the service Father Richard extends his arm towards the new family, his palm faced out flat, and asks the congregation to 'welcome our friends from Poland.' Everyone claps, as if they had known they were coming.

On the way home from church they drive through spiralling country lanes, whilst the rain beats against the windscreen. Her mum says, to no one in particular, 'we must invite that Polish family to dinner.'

Judith's Dad grunts what is probably a yes and then says, 'maybe check they can speak English first.'

The windscreen wipers squeak as they wipe the rain away from the glass.

'Well, if they don't, we'll have to play charades,' says Judith's mother, and they both laugh, as if they've spent many an evening playing charades with Polish people who don't understand what they're saying.

The next day, in Judith's maths class, the flat-headed boy enters the classroom ten minutes late. He walks to the front and gives Mr Unsworth a piece of paper. Mr Unsworth nods and then looks at him before pointing at a desk at the front of the

classroom. The boy hooks his rucksack off his shoulder and slams it on the desk. Mr Unsworth coughs.

'Everyone, this is Rafal. He'll be joining our class from now on, right up until exams in the summer.'

There is a silence as Rafal pulls out his chair and sits back in it, as if he is watching television. He taps the heel of his foot on the ground continuously, as if he is pumping up a tiny, invisible blow up mattress.

'Rafal has just come over Poland. How very exciting,' Mr Unsworth's moustache twitches as he smiles. Someone sniggers.

'Right then, everyone get back to the warm up. Rafal, please turn to page 232 of the text book, exercise 1a. You can share with Darrel.'

Judith is four equations through the six equations that they have been given as the 'warm up.' Ellen, the girl who sits next to Judith and who sometimes shares her copy of Cosmo with her under the table, has completed none. Today Ellen is not in a sharing mood. She is sitting so that her back is turned to Judith, sniggering and writing notes to Bella, who sits on the other side. When Judith thinks about what the notes might say she feels hot and sick. She imagines the food in her stomach spinning round and round as if it is in a washing machine. The waistband on her skirt is too tight and when she asked her mum if she would buy her a new one she'd said,

'That will only encourage you to put on weight, darling.'

It is true that she has put on weight. The two rolls of fat underneath the wire of her bra have only gotten bigger. When she leans forward it feels as if these swells of skin are as large as her breasts themselves. Still, her mum says she has a pretty face.

'Better a pretty face than skinny and ugly. Promise.'

She tries not to look at her naked body in the mirror anymore because, when she does, the flesh she sees she doesn't recognise as her own.

It is halfway through the lesson that Judith thinks, fuck it.

These days she thinks 'fuck it' quite a lot and has to stop herself from doing stupid things, like swearing at other children when they say something ignorant in class, or at her mum when she says something ignorant during dinner. A few months ago she found a book under her brother's bed called *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*. She was surprised, because her brother always looks like he gives a fuck. He knows, though, that to have the freedom to not give a fuck in the outside world, he must always seem like he gives a fuck on the inside world – to their parents.

When she asked him about it, without getting angry that she was looking under his bed, he lent her the book and said, 'it's great, Jude. Just don't tell Mum and Dad I gave it to you if they find it.' He is away at university in Birmingham for most of the year, so it doesn't matter anymore anyway. They only live a half an hour train ride away, but his visits are short and sparse and usually on a Sunday when he is hungover. Judith can't wait until she can use a hangover as an excuse for laziness.

After reading the book she decided that she would apply for art school, instead of for English or Theology like her parents wanted her to. They had told her that she was more intellectual than art school. She supposes she should feel sorry for them. They don't understand that art can sometimes be the pinnacle of intellectuality and that, if executed correctly, it can cradle it in the very palm of its hand. But she still has a year before she can even begin to apply. So now she is just waiting, waiting. She often presses her forehead against the steamed up glass of the school bus and thinks about all the friends she will make who will think the same as her. Or perhaps no one will think the same as each other, and that will be the beauty of it.

As Judith thinks 'fuck it', she raises her hand. It's moments like this where she considers whether her hand is even attached to her own body.

'Yes, Judith?'

'I have a music lesson, Sir.'

'Oh, okay. No problem. Off you go then.'

Judith gathers her things, sliding Ellen's copy of Cosmo that has fallen to the floor, into her rucksack. She walks to the door, the room is silent. She glances back as she grips the door handle. No one is looking, no one cares. Apart from Rafal. He has dark eyes and acne pocked cheeks. He is staring at her, his foot still tap, tap, tapping on the floor.

She finds the disabled toilet on the second floor of the art block unlocked, as usual. She walks around the edge of the stairway, her skirt sliding against the wall, to avoid the CCTV camera. Once inside, she turns the lock and pulls out sheets of paper towels. She makes a small succinct square on the floor and sits down, her knees drawing up to her chin. She reads Cosmo, she plays on her phone, she picks a scab on her knee. She thinks about her art school portfolio, mentally drawing an image of the images she'll create, in her mind. The bell rings and Judith waits until she can hear voices in the corridor before she lets herself out and escapes into the milling crowd of other people.

The next day Rafal is standing outside the same classroom she has for History. He stares at her and she stares at him. Judith notes that it's a stare and not a glance because it lasts for more than two and a half seconds.

In the classroom he sits at the front again. Mrs Atkinson raises her hand before saying,

'Everyone, if you haven't met him yet, this is Rafal. He joins us from Poland.'

Rafal stays stoic and the rest of the class stay silent.

Judith waits for ten minutes before she raises her hand. It is almost reluctantly, because they are looking at the cholera outbreaks in London in the 1800s, and there is a sufficient amount of death to make it interesting.

'Yes, Judith?'

'I have a music lesson.'

She knows it is risky to do it twice in two days. She never normally would. But today she needs it. She just needs it. She's also worked out that Rafal is the only other student in the class

who was in maths with her yesterday. No one will know, and Rafal is too new to do anything about it anyway. How can he be sure she doesn't play two instruments?

Judith looks out the window of the toilet. The bell has rung. The playground starts to fill with moving children migrating to their next lesson. They look like tiny ants. She lets herself out of the toilet and begins to descend the stairs. She feels someone fall in line with her steps and sees Rafal next to her, his muddy trainers falling in line with her scruffy doc martens.

'How was your music lesson?'

At first she doesn't know what to say. His accent is thick, his smile playful. Perhaps he is making fun of her.

'It was fine. How was the rest of History?'

'It was fine.'

'People were saying that you couldn't speak English,' she says. She says it because she wants him to know how dumb people are here. As a warning, perhaps an explanation.

'We moved from Bournemouth. We've been in the UK for two years,' he says, shrugging.

'Oh.'

'See you at church then,' he says. It is a goodbye. He hops two steps and weaves through the crowd on the stairs before disappearing round the corner of the stairwell. Judith watches him go. She fights the urge to run after him.

That night, at dinner, she says to her mum,

'That family can speak English. I spoke to one of their sons at school today.'

'Oh, really.'

'They moved here from Bournemouth. We should invite them to dinner.'

Her mum's eyes glass over. Her dad keeps eating, lifting his fork to his mouth. There is a low, scraping silence.

My Name Is Connor Mayhew And I Am A Man

Jamie Moody

16 to 25 category

It was 11:49.

His tongue darted out over his lips, wetting chapped lips and taking in the saltiness of the half-dried blood that ran from his nose. A dull throb lingered around his right eye and he knew there'd be a bruise in the morning. Inside, the initial terror and pain had surpassed the point where it overwhelmed him. Now, it hung around his mind like the flood pools left by a tsunami. A soft static that clouded everything but pure logic.

He had to go.

But where to?

The options were laid out in front of him.

1. His mates.

While this would be the obvious choice for some, it wasn't really much of a change from his current environment, considering...

'What the hell are you doing?'

Connor spun round and locked eyes with his father. Normally, he'd clutch onto the soft fabric of the dress or skirt he was wearing to soothe his anxiety. But now his arms seemed paralysed: suspended in the air, unable to seek any comfort at a time where he desperately needed it.

His mouth opened, but all that came out were stuttered vowel sounds.

'Well?!'

The sudden bark from his father reverberated in his chest and he found his feet stumbling back, his heart burning up his chest. He finally regained control of his hands and they immediately clutched at his stomach in an attempt to hold in its contents.

His father stalked towards him until Connor's back hit the wall, their faces inches apart. The man's voice lowered to a growl. 'Downstairs. Now. Don't change.'

Yeah, option 1 would be tantamount to walking into the changing rooms in full drag.

2. A shelter.

This also seemed fairly obvious, but a few moments of thought and the argument fell apart. There were a few domestic violence and homeless shelters in the area, but only one offered shelter for men and almost certainly wouldn't accept...

'...a fucking fairy!'

'Martin, I'm sure it's just a little phase,'

'No, it fucking isn't!! We should've noticed the day he smeared your lipstick all over his face and nipped it in the bud!'

'He was three, we couldn't've known!'

The thundering whirlwind of arguments came at Connor from both sides, pounding on his temples almost rhythmically. Each line thrust his brain back and forth against the walls of his skull. His

fingers trembled and drummed out an impossibly fast rhythm on his knees.

'Connor!'

The sudden shout rippled through him and his fingers faltered. This was it. Interrogation time.

'Would you care to explain why your father found you like this?' His mother spoke through gritted teeth, punctuating each syllable with both frustration and fury.

Words failed him.

No. He couldn't have a repeat of tonight ever again. The stress might kill him. So option 2 was also useless.

3. Relatives.

The word hung in his head, the implications and possibilities still echoing in recent memory. He traced back to those conversations, the remarks and jokes at the expense of random strangers who were just holding hands. The various scenarios he'd run over in his head. Scared of his own flesh and...

Blood.

So much blood.

He'd always had chronic nosebleeds as a child, but the force of the punch had clearly dealt extra damage. All he seemed to be able to do was catch it in his cupped hands and look up at his father with abject horror.

This was planned.

Mum was out.

Libby was sound asleep.

No one was coming.

Connor covered his mouth and cried.

Tears spilled from his eyes and sealed the gap between his face and hand. Each choked breath thudded softly in the back of his mouth, hot puffs of air escaping between his fingers.

The dark returned.

The anxiety and hopelessness crawled up his back like a vine, encasing his torso and coiling around his throat. Each sob choked

him. Every muscle twitched and trembled.

And the voices.

The voices.

Echoing in his skull. Flooding his stomach. Burning his chest.

Friends. Family. Teachers. Strangers. Everyone.

'What exactly are you trying to prove?'

I'm not...

'Fucking fairy!'

No, I...

'What are you, a pussy?'

I just...

'God, you sound like a girl!'

But...

'Wuss!'

Stop...

'Baby!'

Please...

'Boys don't cry.'

By now, his face was covered in a sheen of tears. A thick coating of pain, fear and humiliation. He couldn't respond.

'Boys don't cry.'

Mascara and eyeshadow mixed, leaving some of the channels on his hands glittering in the light or stained with an inky black.

'Boys don't cry.'

Was he even a boy?

The makeup and clothes spoke for themselves. Boys didn't play dress up like this. Boys didn't get all mushy over A Streetcar Named Desire. Boys didn't try to grow their hair out. They just... didn't.

Did this make him a girl? Was there a little pink person inside him like all those artists said there was online? He didn't want boobs; his body was fine. He never felt weird about being called Connor.

So, what was he?

A buzz came from his phone, causing his heart to jump and smack into his ribcage. He looked down at the device. He froze.

4. Robin.

'Damn, I wish I could pull off yellow like that.'

Connor's head snapped around to face the speaker. They were fairly short, but their voice sounded fairly post-pubescent. Their vibrant hair and dark clothes gave off a slightly punk-rock vibe, but there wasn't enough of anything to box them.

Their face fell a little when he didn't respond. 'S-sorry was that too forward?'

He flushed. 'Oh no! I just...People normally don't say that when they see a guy buying women's clothes.' His eyes darted around a little with anxiety.

They grinned. 'You mean dresses and skirts. Cuz there's no written law saying that they belong exclusively to the female gender.'

Connor opened his mouth to argue that that wasn't what he meant. That social norms dictated that he couldn't wear these. That everybody else assumed these were for his non-existent girlfriend or just called him a fag. But no. This person had simply complimented him and regarded gender roles as a little fairy tale. No reason to try and discredit that.

'Thank you.'

'No problem.'

Before they could leave, Connor spat out a 'Wait!'

They turned back to face him. 'Yeah?'

His fists clenched, then relaxed. Just say it. No secrets. Just say it. 'Could... Could I talk to you? About,' he held up the skirt 'this?'

The talk that ensued was simultaneously the most relieving and overwhelming of his life. Despite the noise of the coffee shop, every word he spoke echoed in his chest as he relived it all; the sleepless nights, the fear, the confusion, the secrets, the tears. And Robin just sat there. Listening quietly.

When he finally finished, the torrent in his chest calmed and he looked up at them.

'Toxic masculinity's a bitch, huh?'

Connor felt a slight grin come across his face. 'Yeah.'

There was a pause, and he felt his hands go tense. He'd said too much. He'd unloaded his issues on a stranger. He was stupid. He was pathetic! He was...

'How do you think your parents would react to this?'

He thought for a moment. 'Badly. I don't really know mum too well and dad's about as macho as it gets.'

Another pause. 'Can I give you my number?'

'Sure.' He handed over his phone and watched them type it into his contacts before passing it back.

'If you wanna talk again just call. And I live alone so... if things get hairy at home then you can stay over.' Their voice was kind, sincere. It wasn't an empty promise.

He smiled. 'Thanks.'

Robin grinned back and took a sip of their hot chocolate. 'So, what do you think of D&D?'

He hit accept.

'Hey Connor! I know it's late but I just wanted to see if you were doing okay. Just, that talk we had was pretty intense and I wanted to know if you need anything.'

Words failed.

'Connor?'

He felt the surge in his chest and the wave broke. Fresh tears sprouted and he trembled as Robin continued, their voice frantic and concerned.

'Connor, what happened? Are you hurt? Do they know? Please, talk to me.'

Connor felt a smile break over his face and his breathing steadied. 'I...I'm sorry, I'm sorry...'

'No no, don't be. It's fine.'

For a brief moment, he said nothing. He simply sat there and felt the relief embrace him.

'Connor?'

'Ah, sorry. Well, to answer your questions...Dad walked in on me in a dress, yes, and yes.'

Another pause. 'You wanna come over?'

'Y-yeah.'

'Indefinitely?'

The relief swelled. 'That's an option?'

'Of course! I mean, unless you wanna go elsewhere...'

The last twenty minutes had said enough. 'Not really, no.'

'Are you okay?'

The voices fell silent. 'Yeah...Thanks.'

'Okay. I'm on Huntingdon street. Number 2, flat 4.'

'I'll pack...Thank you Robin, thank you so much.'

'Hey, no worries. Stay awesome.'

The line disconnected and his smile broadened.

Suck it dad.

Connor pulled his suitcase out from under the bed. Most of his more feminine items were kept there so all he really needed to grab were his shoes.

For the first time, he felt like he could breathe.

'Connor?'

He looked up. Libby.

His little sister stood in the doorway and rubbed her eyes. She looked at the dried blood on his face with horror and started to hyperventilate. 'Bubby. Bubby!'

Connor shot across the room and covered her mouth. 'Sh sh, it's okay, I'm alright!'

She winced through his hand and he searched for the right response. He lowered his voice. 'We can't wake mum and dad. So, I need you to be really quiet. Okay?'

She nodded and he took his hand away.

Libby sniffed. 'Y-you're h-hurt.'

'It's alright Libby, I promise. Just...'

'I didn't raise a fag!'

'An accident.'

The seven-year-old looked over at the suitcase. 'Are we going on holiday?'

Crap.

He sighed. 'No...Libby?'

'Uh huh?'

'I'm...Going to a friend's house. And I need you to keep it a secret.'

'Why?'

Goddammit Libs.

'Just...Promise you won't tell anyone. Not even Grace and Mimi.'

She gave a firm nod. 'Promise. But when are you coming back?'

Connor stared back at Libby.

'Gonna make you a princess bubby!'

He smiled as she smeared the cheap make up across his face.

'Wash it off! Libby, use one of your dolls in the future.'

She came to him later when dad was watching telly. 'Don't listen. I think you were really pretty!'

'Conny?'

He sighed. 'I don't know.'

Her face fell and she hugged him, clinging to him like she was trying to keep him there. 'Why?'

'It's...I don't know. But Libby,' He pried her off him and they locked eyes. 'Remember: I love you. No matter what.'

She sniffed again and nodded.

Connor turned and zipped up the case. Despite the incredible joy of getting out, seeing Libby had just made this night even worse.

'You look really pretty.'

He turned back and smiled. 'Thanks Libs.' He kissed her forehead. 'C'mon, back to bed.'

She turned and crept back to her room.

Connor carried the suitcase as quietly as he could through the house and out the door. For a moment, he considered leaving a note but

No. I said goodbye to Libby. They don't deserve the courtesy.

The silence of the night was only broken by the sound of plastic wheels on tarmac as he made his way across the city. When he reached No. 2 Huntingdon street, the glow of amber streetlights was broken by a neon smiley face hanging above the door.

Robin was waiting. Upon seeing him, they flung their arms around him and bombarded him with questions.

It was 01:35.

My name is Connor Mayhew and I am a man.

Night Call

Jess Holliday

26+ category

I swear it's Della's turn. The landline phone on the table between our beds is pinging again but she's right under the covers, creases of blue light threading through her grubby Nirvana duvet cover. I know she's awake. On Instagram.

'Della,' I say. 'Mum's pinging the phone.'

She doesn't answer, but the halo of light in Kurt Cobain's eyes goes out as she clicks off her mobile.

Ping, ping. Pause. 'Emmie!' Mum calls from downstairs. 'I need a pee. Come and help.' Her voice is her three-in-the-morning voice, sort of cracked and thin and so different from her old everyday voice that she's got to be milking it, right?

And why do I always have to be the good twin?

'Della!' I get out of bed and pull the duvet off my sister, who's still wearing her clip-in extensions and one of my Eylure eyelashes. Her skinny winter-white body, the mirror of my own, scrunches up like a bug under a rock. She swears at me and buries her head under her pillow. I hop from the cold floorboards to the rag rug and then to the door, which I bang shut behind me.

Mum's shouting now, and I take the stairs two at a time. My hand slides down the banister to the broken spindle at the

bottom, which hangs like a sharp tooth since my dad visited one time and he and Mum had an argument. Della thinks that was the same day that he poured a bottle of milk over Mum's head, but she's wrong. The milk thing was later, when Mum was already getting ill. I remember her down on her knees scrubbing the carpet and how she couldn't get herself up from the floor. A rank smell of milk hung around the house for months.

I stop at the doorway of the living room which is now Mum's room, my hand resting on the sticky door frame, over the pencil line that marks how tall we were when we were ten. The air in the room smells stale since we moved Mum down here, pushing the lounge furniture against the walls, and shoehorning her single bed in where it sticks out into the middle of the room.

The back of the sofa where the three of us used to curl up to watch Strictly has slouched in a way that Bruno Tonioli would hate, and the desk in the bay window, where we sat last year making Sharpie-colour mind maps for geography, me and Della riffing off each other revising Bristol for our GCSE, is now a black-and-white range of hard-edged shadows. Fluorescent streetlight pushes through the gaps in the curtains onto packs of syringes, Mum's old CD player with its big buttons that her hands can still press and the cracked plastic hospital jug with its broken lid. A sweet taint of medicine reaches for the back of my throat.

'Alright, Mum?' I say.

'Bring me the bedpan, quickly,' Mum says. Her voice is like the pings of the phone extension now, sharp and urgent. I lift the metal pan off the T.V. stand and put it on the side of the bed. It needs a good going over with some bleach. Bloody Della can do it before college tomorrow.

'Ready?' I say. I pull the duvet down to the end of the bed. Under the smell of talc and the musty flannel we wash her with, there is still the familiar Mum-smell from when I was a kid. Her legs have gone soft, like sacks of empty skin, but she is bigger and heavier since they started her on the steroids, and I can't lift her on my own. We've worked on a new system the past few weeks,

since things got worse. We call it the Auntie Chris for the times when me and Della were tiny and Mum and her sister would swing us up in the air between them. I grab fistfuls of her nightie at the shoulders and the hips and I start to rock her back and forth, building momentum while Mum counts me in.

'One, two, three – ' I rock, rock, rock – and maybe it's because it should be Della doing this, or maybe I'm just a bitch, but when I push, I push too hard and she rolls faster than she should. She rolls and she's gone, right over the edge of the bed past the ruffled waterfall of the valance sheet Della found at Oxfam.

Mum doesn't scream. There is no sound but the thud of her body hitting the floor. In that moment I just stand there, paralysed. I'm not thinking anything. I don't understand what's happened, but a voice in my head says, is she dead? A bird starts singing outside. It'll soon be dawn. Daylight will creep into the room and shine its golden dust-mote slivers on the little girl photos on the mantelpiece.

Is it over?

'Mum?' I tell my frozen feet to move, to walk around the bed, to take me to where I can see her. 'Mummy?'

Mum whimpers and I move round the end of the bed to where she's lying face down with her arms and clawed-up hands trapped under her. One wasted leg is bent at the knee, the other has landed flat on the carpet. She's shaking.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Are you okay? Are you hurt? Mum?' I lean over her and drag the duvet down from the bed. 'What shall I do?' She's shivering hard, her shoulders juddering up and down. Maybe she's having a fit. No-one's told us, can that happen with MS? I put the duvet over her body, and push the grey strands of hair back from her face to see. We're not going to be able to move her, not even me and Della together.

Mum lets out a loud screech. I jump back. She gasps, 'It's -'

'Shhh, Mum. Don't try and talk. Just nod or shake your head, okay? Are you hurt anywhere? Can you feel anything?'

Mum shakes her head, and she looks at me and there are tears running down her face. She snorts and I see that she's laughing.

She's lying there on the pink carpet, laughing her head off.

'Bloody hell, Mum,' I stand up. 'You nearly gave me a heart attack.'

She can't speak she's laughing so hard. She manages to catch tiny gasping breaths between the shudders. Then she farts and I'm smiling, then I'm laughing too and I can't stop. My face is creased and it hurts and I'm bent over, holding my stomach.

'You'll have to phone 999,' Mum manages to say. I look at her and try to straighten my mouth but instead a screech of laughter bubbles out, just like hers.

'I'm desperate, Emmie. Get the bedpan down here.'

I push the duvet off and wedge the bedpan next to her bum, the sting of cold metal against my fingers sobering me up. I grunt as I take hold of her leg and her shoulder, and pull her over onto it. My phone's on charge upstairs, so I sit on the bed, my feet dangling over Mum, and pick up the receiver of the old green landline she keeps perched in easy reach by the pillow.

'What am I going to say?'

'Just tell them what's happened, and that you're only sixteen. That should bring them out a bit quicker.' Mum's pee hits the metal pan in a loud, rattling stream.

As I press the black pegs on the phone to get a dial tone, I hear the ping upstairs, and my sister shouts, 'I'm asleep. Go away.' I pull the nine-hole on the front of the phone round three times. Against my ear, the phone starts ringing somewhere away from this London street, this little house, this room with its smell and its girl and its mother lying on the floor beside the bed.

'Hello, emergency. Which service do you require?' The woman's voice is brisk with a rusty smoker's-edge. I explain that I need help to lift my mum back onto her bed. As the switchboard operator is putting me through to the ambulance service, Mum lifts the curve of her hand to the scars that line my thighs, like rows of horizontal corduroy; some old, some new. We look at each other.

'You've been cutting again,' Mum says. I turn away from her and speak to the paramedic who's come on the line. It's easy to

cry, telling him what's happened.

'It'll be about –' I hear him tapping on a computer. 'Roughly three hours until an ambulance gets out to you, love,' the man says. 'It's a busy night, I'm afraid. Try to keep your mum warm. Make a cuppa, and both of you try and get some sleep if you can.' After he hangs up, I keep the phone cradled against my ear for a moment, listening to the white noise of the dial tone.

'Emmie,' Mum's voice is quiet. 'You can talk to me, sweetheart. I'm always here for you.'

I put the receiver back on its cradle. 'So you are,' I say, and she laughs again. The birds are in full dawn chorus outside, kicking up a racket as I ease Mum off the bedpan and carry it held out in front of me like a crown. When I get to the landing upstairs, Della calls out from the bedroom.

'Alright?'

'All good,' I say, and pick my way over the islands of damp towels and dirty underwear on the bathroom floor. I empty the pan into the loo. 'Go to sleep, Dell. I've got it.'

I run down the stairs two at a time, back to my mum.

'D'you want a cup of tea?'

'No, you're alright. Why don't you go up to bed, Emmie? You've got college first thing.'

I move Mum's pillow off the bed to where she's lying. 'It's only life drawing,' I say, lifting her head and putting the pillow under it. 'I can do it with my eyes closed.' I smooth the hair away from her face and kiss her forehead.

'Shall we have some music to keep us company?' Mum says.

'My phone's upstairs.'

'Just get the CD player down.'

I lift the CD player and hold it in front of her so that she can turn it on. Robert Smith's voice sings into the room with us, discordant but beautiful. 'I love this one,' Mum says. 'It makes me think of the trees, and that dappled light through the beech leaves – you know, when we used to go for walks in the Ashdown Forest.'

I lie down next to her and tuck the duvet around us both. I put my cold feet against her legs. We lie for a while in silence, looking

up at the ceiling and listening to The Cure and the blackbirds outside on the street. I imagine a canopy of leaves above us, green skeletons alive with light.

'There's not going to be a happy ending you know, Emmie.' Mum says. 'But there's always this.'

'I know, Mum.' I reach for her hand that can't draw anymore, or write or hold a fork. I can smell the medicine she takes, and feel the tickle of her leg hair against my toes.

'Love you, Mum,' I say and turn my head to look at her. Her chest is rising and falling and her eyes are closed. She's asleep.

The Seriously Awkward campaign fights to improve life for vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds. Our creative writing competition in partnership with Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House, invited aspiring authors to pen stories about this awkward age.

Rebekah Fellows, who has an MA in Creative Writing Fiction, wrote about a girl intrigued by the sudden arrival of a new family in the area.

Inspired by their personal struggles with gender identity, 16 year old Jamie Moody's story is about a boy who wears dresses considering his future after an argument with his father.

Jess Holliday penned a story about a girl caring for her bedridden mother, based upon an experience she shared with her mum many years ago.

This collection of the winning trio shows how life can be seriously awkward at 16 and 17.

Find out more about the campaign at childrenssociety.org.uk/seriouslyawkward