

THE PEBBLE CHAMPION

Alan David Pritchard

OVERVIEW

After the devastating loss of his mother, a young teen deals with grief, his bewildering sexuality, and life with his estranged father in an unusual way – by skimming pebbles across the surface of the sea.

WINNER – Best Book, Miracle Makers International Film and Writers' Festival, 2021

FINALIST – IAN Best Book of the Year, Outstanding LGBTQ Category, 2021

FINALIST – Action of Film Megafest Film and Writers' Festival, 2021

FINALIST – Page Turner Book Awards, 2021

HONORARY MENTION – WriteMovies 2021 Screenwriting Contest, Books Category

WINNER – Finalist Award, Readers' Favorite International Book Awards, 2019

COMPELLING: *“Laced with vivid snatches of flashback and memory, this emotionally charged novel is raw and vulnerable, but also told with the confidence of a skilled storyteller. From self-healing and grieving to sexual awakening and emotional growth, this novel fearlessly tackles delicate subjects with tenderness and valuable insight.”* - **Self-Publishing Review**

BEAUTIFULLY AND SENSITIVELY WRITTEN: *“I very much enjoyed reading it. Author A.D. Pritchard really gets inside the minds and emotional states of his characters and conveys this to his readers perceptively and brilliantly. With believable characters, this is a well-structured story with lots of depth and pace, and I found it a page-turner from start to finish. An author and book you'll be glad you discovered.”* - **Hilary Hawkes, Readers' Favorite**

WOW. THIS IS A STUNNER OF A BOOK: *“The Pebble Champion is a grand and glorious debut offering that had me smiling as I read and rueing the inevitable end of the story. I loved getting to know Marmaduke, Chris's iconic and perceptive dad, and vicariously enjoyed every moment Chris spends out at the shore, including those suspense-filled moments as he competes in the Pebble Championships... The Pebble Champion is lyrical and beautifully written; Pritchard built a world that I just didn't want to leave -- not for one moment. His characters fairly leap from the page and involve you in their lives, and it's a grand thing to experience. Easily the best novel I've read in some time, The Pebble Champion is most highly recommended.”* - **Jack Magnus, Readers' Favorite**

A RADIANTLY IMPRESSIVE NOVEL: *“Gentle, sensitive, intelligent and extraordinarily well written, The Pebble Champion at last offers a role model for young gay youths to emulate. This author is one of the finest sculptors of the human spirit writing today. Very highly recommended.”* - **Grady Harp, Amazon**

THE PEBBLE CHAMPION

Alan David Pritchard

AUTHOR EDITION, 2021

ISBN: 9781691589234

Copyright © Alan David Pritchard
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

For Fareed and Daniel – and the real Aunty Wendy

MOTHER KILLED ON M25
Cause of crash 'unknown'

Police are investigating the cause of a crash that claimed the life of a 36-year-old mother from Richmond on the M25 motorway yesterday afternoon.

Sarah Allstrong-Elliot lost her life when her car veered off the road and crashed into the bridge pillar near the Junction 12 Slip Road for the M3. She was pronounced dead on the scene by medics who arrived shortly after.

She was travelling with her 15-year-old son, Christopher, who received serious concussion injuries and has been admitted to a nearby hospital.

Police have ruled out drunk driving as a possible cause and are still examining the area for clues as to the cause of the accident.

"It appears the vehicle just veered out of control," reported one of the investigating officers.

Part One

Letting Go

Thoughts vibrating

“And with the time at 2:45, good morning to those who have just joined us. I’m Mike, the Nightbird, here on London’s Heart 201, keeping it mellow, keeping it smooth and taking you through the early hours with the gentlest sounds around...”

The little red lights of the alarm clock pulsate and for a while I almost hear the ambulance sirens again. At three o’clock, I turn on the bedside lamp and squint at my reflection in the window. It’s raining hard outside.

I used to know the person staring back.

Then I do hear ambulance sirens, and I remember that this is my last night in the city. My last night here.

“Time,” says DJ Mike, “to take a few calls. Remember we’re talking about what gets you through the day, and on line one we have...”

My life is compressed into two bags, and they rest against each other as if for comfort. No, they don’t. I must get a grip. They lean against each other because I left them there that way.

Auntie Wendy is snoring in the room next door. She’s here because she’s worried about me being here alone after Mum’s death, and she wants to see me off tomorrow morning. *This* morning.

“I try,” says a radio phone-in caller, “to live each day as if it’s my last.”

DJ Mike likes the sound of that, and we blend into a commercial break.

I turn the radio off, and there’s a lull in Auntie Wendy’s snoring. Although I can still hear noises outside, the stillness inside suddenly seems louder.

It feels like I have a balloon inside me... a balloon expanding, full of tears, and it won’t pop: it’ll explode, and I’ll fall apart and won’t be able to control the sadness. I know I should release it; I know that it will be good for me, but I’m afraid of releasing *her* if I let go, and I can’t do that yet.

There’s the picture of us, taken a year ago when I was 14. There’s me, skinny as ever (*Ol’ Tin Ribs*, she used to call me) with short, scruffy brown hair and brown eyes, and there she is... with her newly dyed hair and her smiling face. Mum kept that picture on her dresser, and I’ve put it on my desk. She looks so happy.

If I said she was the most beautiful woman in the world, you'd think I was just saying that because she's my mum and she's dead, and you'd be right, probably. She wasn't beautiful in the way that models are beautiful; she was beautiful like sunsets are. Beauty that makes you think of God and kindness and tomorrow.

That she's gone is a fact, I know that. Every single part of me knows that. So why is it I can't help but wish things were not so final?

Every single part of me wants my mother back.

"I'm leaving and I'm not coming back."

I'm nine, and Mum is at the doorway. She seems to be taking this very seriously indeed, which is good, because I'm determined not to give in. We've had these little showdowns before: I object to having to do some little chore – even at nine years old I know that if I put up a good fight, my mother will realise that it's a lot less drama just to do it herself – and after not getting my way, I usually threaten to leave.

It used to work, but this time she agrees.

"There's the door. Nobody's stopping you."

She even opens the door for me. There is a moment of silence as we outstare each other. Her eyebrows are raised. My arms are folded. Even though I really do sort of intend leaving, I'm thrown off guard by her willingness to let me go so easily.

"I must pack some things first," I say finally, and without looking at her, turn to walk to my room. Once there, I collect the essentials: a small plastic dolphin, a cushion to comfort me, a packet of sweets that I intend eating very slowly, and – out of spite – a photograph of Auntie Wendy. Mum watches me, expressionless.

"And just where do you think you're going to go?" she says as I brush past her on my way out.

"I'm going to explore the world," is what I would usually say, defiantly, and she would usually reply,

"Well, pack a clean pair of undies then. The world's a big place. And don't forget toilet paper. Nobody'll want to take in a boy whose trousers are soiled."

Then she would usually hug me despite my protests and tell me she would never let me go.

I've threatened to run away three times before. The first time I got as far as the front door; the second, as far as the elevator; and the third, I managed to get to the lobby of our building before turning back because I needed to pee.

"I'm going to find someone who loves me," I say this time. It has the desired effect. She flinches.

"You have no idea how much I love you," she says.

"Well, I don't love you."

If she's hurt by this remark, she doesn't show it.

"Fine," she says. "Off you go. I'm the worst mother in the world and I don't deserve you."

"Yes!"

"So go. I'm still young. I can still have other children who will love me more than you do."

"Fine," I say, digging in my heels.

"Fine," she says, adding, "other children who won't complain when asked to do something simple like empty the dustbin."

"I'm leaving now."

"Other children who won't moan every time they're asked to do something. Off you go then."

I want to say something more, but she suddenly closes the door, and I am left staring at number 87, unsure of what to do next. The corridor windows make the wind groan. The door is shut.

The elevator arrives too quickly. I know she can hear the doors open. I try not to look at the kitchen window to see if she is watching.

"I'm really going," I call out, loud enough for her to hear but not so loud that everyone on our floor knows my business.

The elevator doors slide together and I press G, trying to glimpse my reflection in the stainless steel panels. The trip down seems to take much longer than usual.

My friend John is in the lobby with his mum, and when the doors open, they greet me warmly.

"Look what I got," he says before I can tell them I won't be coming back. He holds up a box filled with cast-iron dinky cars. "What do you think?"

"There's a car-boot sale near the stadium," his mum says. "You should get your mum to take you."

"Wanna play?"

There is nothing I enjoy more than playing cars with John, and the offer is too tempting to refuse. He has been my friend for over a year. He is not as skinny as I am and already has muscles. His eyes are green, and he has blond hair. His mum calls him Surfer Boy. She sees my carrier bag and asks, "Where're you off to?"

I almost tell her, because I know she'll understand, but for some reason I decide not to.

"I was going to play in the park. Can John come with me?"

"Why don't you come to our place instead and I'll fix you both some lunch?" she asks.

We live on the same floor, and when the elevator door opens, my mum is standing there with a look of genuine relief on her face.

"Hello, Sarah. I've invited Chris over for lunch," John's mum says. And that's how I ended up staying. I was going to continue my expedition into independence after playing at John's place, but I felt tired and ashamed. I needed to know that Mum wasn't still angry with me. I needed one of her hugs, and I got one.

After that, we did the chores together.

Smiling, now, feels like a chore. Auntie Wendy has the sort of face that looks happy even when she's sad. She beams at me with a smile big enough to wrap your arms around.

"Here we go."

An abundance called breakfast is lowered onto my lap.

"Can't beat brekkies in bed." She kisses me on the forehead, on the scar left by the accident, and pulls up a chair. "Tuck in."

Her invitation is generous and combined with the aroma of porridge, eggs, bacon, toast and freshly squeezed orange juice, is impossible to decline.

"This is a feast," I say.

"Well, there's more, so get cracking."

"Nobody makes porridge the way you do," I say.

"Hmm," she replies, biting into her toast, "that isn't necessarily a compliment."

"I'm going to miss your porridge."

"Hmm," she says, "that neither." She knows I haven't understood. "As in you want to give it a miss?"

She searches my face for signs of comprehension, and gives up.

"You're grieving. I understand. How's your head?"

When I looked at my reflection earlier I saw that, although the pain had receded, I had a scar and a giant bruise. I lift my hand to feel the swelling.

"It's fine. I mean I'd rather stay with you," I say suddenly, and can feel the burning sensation behind my eyes.

The smile fades, and she puts her spoon down.

"I'm going to miss you..."

"As in...?"

The smile reappears.

"I really am going to miss you, my little big man."

She's always called me her little big man, even though I am short for my age.

“I’m not a big man,” I say.

“Oh yes you are. I was in here before you woke up.”

My jaw drops. For a while I search her face for signs that she’s joking, but her smile seems forced, as if glued on.

“Gotcha,” she says, and laughs. “Anyway...” she sips her tea, “you know that won’t be possible.” Her voice is sad. “You know I’d love to have you.”

I can feel the balloon inside begin to inflate again. I have to breathe in deeply. Mum said in her will that, in the event of her passing away, I was, if at all possible, to stay with my father, whom I haven’t seen since I was five, and who, for all intents and purposes, is a complete stranger.

That Mum didn’t ask for me to stay with Auntie Wendy is a mystery, and I’m not sure how my Auntie is coping with that. She seems to be fine, but I’m sure she finds it as puzzling as I do. She wanted to accompany me down to the Isle of Wight, but I told her that I’d be okay (Mum would want me to be strong), that I was a young man now.

“Anyway, the sea air will do you good. You’ll like it down there. Nothing here but smog and traffic now.”

“You’re here.”

“Yes, but you’re young. You’ll enjoy living by the coast. It’s right near the shore, your father’s place – two minutes’ walk from the beach. Think of all the young ladies in bikinis. A feast!”

She says *feast* with genuine enthusiasm, as if she really thinks I will enjoy living with the man who ran out on my mum and me.

I don’t like thinking like this. A part of me is angry with her for not contesting Mum’s decision; but I know she means well, and I know I’m not thinking right these days. Instead, I say,

“How are you going to cope without me? You won’t last five minutes.”

Auntie Wendy has always included me in her life – ever since I can remember. She’s treated me as if I was her confidant, her best mate – the one who understood all her secrets. She’s even called at two in the morning to spill all the juicy beans absorbed in an evening’s socialising. She’s invited me to clubs, but I’m too young, and more or less look it.

“We’ll write each other regularly, believe me, and you’ll only be a call away, so don’t think you’re escaping from me that easily.”

My aunt, while being wholly conventional in the sense that she does not draw attention to herself while in public, has a fluffy way of looking at life, which is appealing and uncompromisingly cheerful. Nothing gets her down, because for her there is a calm and rational explanation to everything; even the unexplained, or phenomenal. Everything happens for a perfectly good reason, and if we can’t comprehend right away, life will whisper its truths later when we have learned how to grapple with its lies, or something like that.

Odd how you can be listening to someone while not really hearing them at all.

Auntie Wendy likes philosophy, but she doesn’t burn incense or smoke weed or anything like that. She doesn’t wear bangles and hippie clothes. She looks like a secretary, actually. Why am I describing my aunt to imaginary people when I should be listening to her right now? I’m not going to see her for a while. This is like quality time, or something.

“... running stark naked down the lobby...”

My expression has obviously changed. Hold on.

She grins.

“Where have you been little fella?”

“It was *big* little fella earlier. And what are you doing running around naked in the lobby? When was this? You didn’t tell me about this.”

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said, have you?”

“I heard the naked bit.”

“Just checking. Oh, I’ve just realised. I won’t be around to interrogate any of your future girlfriends...”

Remind me to tell you about that.

“Or take you jogging early mornings or... or make you do chores on a Saturday afternoon.”

“I know what you’re doing,” I tell her firmly, “and it’s not working.”

“Well, you’ll find plenty of reasons not to miss me once you get there.”

And Mum? How will I stop missing her? Why would I want to?

My aunt has beautiful eyes. Her hair is short, spiky, dyed caramel, and totally unlike mine, which is mousy brown and which Mum let me grow long-ish. I tell you this only because my thoughts have been weird lately. I looked at Mum’s photograph for hours this morning and now I can’t remember her face.

I tell this to Auntie Wendy as we wait at Victoria Coach Station, and she hugs me, real tight, real genuine, real *her*, and she tells me that this is normal. “Time,” she says, and gives the whole spiel about it being a healer. I know that she is right, but for some reason I don’t want to hear it. It’s not enough; it doesn’t ease the pain; it won’t bring Mum back to life.

Time seems to bend and snap back, to pass by without lingering, then to shoot forward, so that the present becomes the past, despite holding on to it as hard as I can.

Now the bus is turning at the traffic lights and Auntie Wendy is half a mile away. Now she’s gone. Now I’m treating our parting as a memory, as though it happened a long time ago. Now I think I see John, standing on the corner where we used to buy comics. Or rather, I don’t see John; I think I’m John seeing me at the window of the bus; I try to imagine what I look like to him and whether he sees through my smile. I don’t know why I think this way: John and I rarely speak these days. And the only person on the corner is a homeless person scratching in a bin. Now even this is a memory, a snapshot of goodbye.

Auntie Wendy’s jumper smells of porridge and sunshine. John liked to wear a yellow cap, like the colour of the car in the photograph of Mum and me on holiday when I was 14, a year ago – the one I forgot to pack and which, no doubt, Auntie Wendy will keep, or post on to me.

Images of London city life blur past.

Shop windows and favourite stores bring back memories. So many things we did together.

There’s the hat shop in Wandsworth.

I can remember her being embarrassed when, in the hat shop one Friday, she picked up a ludicrous example covered in plastic fruit and, placing it in her head, began to laugh at how it looked on her.

“Isn’t it simply awful? It’s so tacky!”

An elderly, dear sweet old soul tapped Mum on her shoulder to ask for her hat back. Apparently, she had put it down to try on something new.

I remember how we laughed.

Why can’t I remember your face?

That has been happening a lot, lately. As soon as I grasp at any memory of her, her face disappears. Sometimes I feel that all this is not really happening to me. I get a sense of seeing myself from a distance, as if this were a movie, and the camera catches the bus and pans with its movement, capturing both the sudden splurge of green as a backdrop, and my face at the window looking out.

Funny, that.

Funny? I’ll show you funny.

We were at my grandmother’s funeral (his side of the family), and Mum was recounting an

anecdote about her. I remember her saying the words; I don't remember the anecdote. Something to do with a wig and a fancy dress party, but that's about all. Or maybe Grandmother arrived at a party thinking it was a fancy dress ball. Funny how, even though we were not close, I can remember her face clearly. I also remember that *he* wasn't there. Even though he and Mum had separated, Mum and Auntie Wendy stayed quite close to my grandmother because, as Auntie Wendy put it, "she's a nutter, that one."

"Shit, dammit – trust the old bat to croak now."

Mum was at Auntie Wendy's, trying to find something black. This was silly really, because even I knew Auntie didn't have any black clothes. It created negative energy, she said, although I think it was more because she thought she didn't look sexy in black. Odd, you'd think sisters as close as that would know the quirky details of each other's lives. They don't, did not, look alike. Mum was fair, Auntie Wendy is dark. Mum had blonde, almost white hair, and you know what Auntie Wendy's looks like. Yet, there are, were, traces of each other in each other. They had the same soft, inviting look; their frowns were similar. I almost have an image of her, like something clear and blurred at the same time; fragments of torn photographs... frustrating because I can almost see her, can almost remember features. Mum found a violent red outfit, and they convulsed in giggles, like the girls in my class. Auntie Wendy went for a fluorescent lime-green ensemble with a matching hat adorned with gaudy imitation fruit.

"Oh, Tallulah!" Mum was bent double with laughter. The hat reminded her of the incident in the shop, and she recounted the story to Auntie Wendy. I remember we all laughed like we had never done before. I can clearly see the fabrics of that afternoon; I think I can almost smell the fragrances. But Mum is a blur.

For the first time in little under a week, I feel strangely happy. It's a mild, muted sort of happy, like when you laugh through tears; except, I'm not crying. I haven't cried. Not yet. Not now. I almost did, at Mum's funeral, but something held me back. Maybe it was the pain? It hurt to cry. I will not let the balloon explode. Am I happy because I can remember? But remembering inflates the balloon, doesn't it? I'm smiling because details are coming back. Because I haven't lost it.

In the church – now don't get me wrong, we bore no animosity towards Grandmother – the outfits were worn not because we wished to mock or insult her memory, it was just that, the way Auntie Wendy looked at it, Grandmother always regarded them as bright, silly characters anyway.

"Funerals are for remembering the laughter and celebrating life. Shithellfirebrimstonecrap, she's gone to begin the next phase of her life, why not send her off with a celebration?"

Everyone else wore black. There were sniggers.

"God bless them," Mum said.

I never got on with my grandmother much. She was too loud all the time and insisted on kissing me at every opportunity. But even I knew she would want a livelier send off. The service was austere. The hymns were dismal.

I remember now. Auntie Wendy sat in front of us and for no reason at all, and never having had any association whatsoever with happy-clappy, evangelical-type churches, proceeded to proclaim a healthy, "Amen, Brother! Praise Jesus!" after every mild statement made by the withering old minister.

"Ethel Elliot was a respected member of our church community..."

I can smell mothballs and old people.

"Praise Jesus, Alleluia, Lord have mercy!"

All coughing and fidgeting stopped.

"We remember her as a kind person, rich in generosity..."

"He's my salvation! Praise Jesus!"

Her hands were in the air while the fruit on her hat bobbed like it was on the back of a South American lorry on bumpy terrain. It was perhaps this image that started me off. I can't remember exactly, but I began to get the giggles, and ever since my voice broke, these giggling fits have become harder to suppress or keep under control. I covered my face with both hands, pressing my nostrils closed with my thumbs. I hoped it would look as if I was crying, especially when my body began shuddering with suppressed laughter. Mum also found giggling difficult to control, and after shooting severe looks at me, her lips began to purse, and I saw, from between my fingers, that she had covered her mouth with her hand, while her eyes –

I can see you, sort of.

– her eyes betrayed her. One peek at the bobbing apples and her body began to shake.

“Praise Jesus! Amen. Let's hold hands.”

The rest of the congregation, who admittedly consisted mainly of Ethel's friends from the home, almost simultaneously let out an audible gasp, and looked confused. Theirs was not the sort of church in which handholding was encouraged.

“Ethel can see us now,” Auntie Wendy continued. “She wants us to hold hands. Let's sing.”

The minister wore a forced smile. There was another moment of sheer silence. Until I snorted, and unable to hold it in any longer, both Mum and I erupted.

Maybe Mum died because we were laughing during grandmother's funeral?

The bus pulls up at a petrol station. Looking at my watch, I see that it is twelve thirty. I've been on the bus for an hour. Did I fall asleep? *Which is the dream?*

Until now the seat next to me has been empty. I say this because a boy, probably my age – I can't tell – gets on the bus. He has scruffy brown hair and bright blue eyes, a slim build and a confident smile. He reminds me a bit of John. Except John has freckles, and blond hair. And John rarely smiles at me these days.

The boy checks his ticket, and then glances at the seat next to mine. He is wearing shorts and a T-shirt. His legs are tanned and only slightly hairy. I turn to look at the people entering the garage shop while he stores his bag and sits down. A pregnant woman struggles to get on the bus. Auntie Wendy and John are two hours away; everything else, a million miles. This is real, being here. We wait for the pregnant lady and a few latecomers, and then the bus moves off.

I wonder if he can tell just by looking at me what has happened in my life. Why do I wonder what he thinks of me? That's been happening a lot lately too. Whenever I meet people, it's never on my terms: I always worry about whether or not they accept me.

He looks at my bruised forehead and says, “Ouch. What happened?”

What happened?

When I wake up, I see Auntie Wendy standing by my bed. She does not have to tell me I'm in a hospital. Her eyes are incredibly sad; I see through the smile. John is at the doorway with his mother. Both are crying. I expect John to say, “This is another fine mess you got us into, Stanley,” but he does not.

The boy next to me opens a tube of Smarties. He offers. I shake my head.

“Go on,” he says. “They make you clever.”

“No thanks,” I say, hoping I don't sound too rude.

“So what happened to your head?”

I am about to tell him but then say, “Fell at the swimming pool.”

“Looks damn nasty. Here, have a sweet.”

I shake my head again.

“So where're you going?” he asks.

“Isle of Wight.”

“Is the correct answer! You have won today’s star prize.” He grabs my hand and pours sweets into it. “Well done, old bean!”

I think I frown.

“No,” he says, “you don’t understand. Well done!” Then he fishes a cracked and faded sweet from my palm and holds it up. “Old bean,” he says, showing it to me.

I think I smile.

“Ah,” he says. “You can. I was wondering how long it would take before I got you to smile. It’s this thing I do. My name’s Darryl. You have a nice smile. Oh, it’s gone now. Damn, I’m going to have to try harder. To make you smile, that is. Don’t look at me like that. I’m not mad. Who are you? What are you doing here? Speak.”

He’s the kind of person Auntie Wendy would adore. The kind of person who I would... never mind.

“My name’s Chris,” I say. “Thanks for the sweets.”

His smile has a cheeky, mischievous quality to it.

“You earned them. Well, actually – you haven’t. Well, maybe you have, seeing as you’re wounded and all. Besides, I’m just being nice. Character flaw of mine. So why are you off to the island? Do you live there? I have a mate who lives in Shanklin.”

Should I tell him? He’d probably think I was looking for sympathy.

“I do now,” I mutter, and look out of the window. Wide green fields and small hills burdened by clouds. We have just passed Basingstoke.

Mum met a guy who had a farm, and we went there one Sunday afternoon. I think his name was Anton. He had two sons, and he teased them by showing them a twenty-pound note, offering to give them half, and then tearing the note in two.

“You?”

“No, I’m going to visit my girlfriend,” he says. “I’m getting off at the next stop. I wish I lived on the island, though. The sea’s beautiful. Do you know I can’t swim? Can you?”

I nod.

The water is icy cold; the indoor heating has packed up. Outside it is hailing. Mum has taken up knitting, and she smiles at me from the side. I’m convinced I’m turning blue. The other boys are bigger than I am. I wonder why they don’t feel the cold. My teeth are chattering. All I want is to go home. I don’t want to learn how to swim, and I don’t care how important it is, and I want to cry because the water stabs my skin and I’d rather have a bath. Mum sends encouraging glances and totally ignores my plaintive expressions. Surely she can see the agony I’m in? She has wrapped a towel around a hot-water bottle, and it lures me until it is the only thing I can think of, and I surrender to tears, which makes the other boys laugh.

“One day,” Darryl says, “I’ll have my own swimming pool. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to swim naked underwater in the moonlight. Have you?” His remark catches me by surprise.

“Have I wondered about it, or have I actually done it?” I ask, unsure where this is going.

“Both.”

“Swimming naked is nice,” I say.

“Really?” He looks genuinely interested, impressed even. I know I’m lying. I can swim, but I have always worn swimming trunks. Up until now, the thought of swimming naked has never crossed my mind. “I’ve often dreamed of being stranded on an island with a lagoon full of

dolphins,” he continues, moving on to another subject, tilting more sweets into his mouth, and says, while chewing, “That would be so cool. I wonder if they have dolphins at the aquarium on the island? You should try to find out. Be cool if they do. I love dolphins. They’re my favourite animals. Fish. Are fishes animals? One day I would like to swim with them. Dolphins. They’re the most incredible creatures. I wish I were a dolphin. Dolphins don’t have to do homework and chores.”

“Or have to clean up their rooms.”

“Precisely.”

“At least dolphins can swim,” I say.

“Hey? Watch it.” He grins and leans back. “Or a bird. I’d like to be a bird. Imagine flying. Soaring. I’d shit on Jason Grant’s head. He’s this cretin at school. Do you smoke?”

For some reason, I like the way he looks at me. “No.”

“Good. He does. I hope he dies. God, I hate him.”

“Sometimes I hate you.”

“You’ll get over it,” Mum says.

“Do you have people like that at your school?” he asks.

“I’m starting at a new school soon. We had our fair share of shitheads back at the last one.” I add, “But they never bothered me.” *Liar, liar, liar.*

There are three boys chasing me, calling me names. After a while I try to drown out their words – such cruel words – and I pretend I am a spy escaping from the Nazis, like in that film Mum and I saw on telly... but I cannot pretend that John is not one of them.

I’m aware that I’m being defensive and I’ve no reason to be so. He is very open about his life, or so it seems, and friendly enough, sincerely so. I’m pleased he is doing most of the talking, but I’d rather remain mysterious; the way most other boys appear to me when I first meet them, mysterious in the sense that their lives seem to embody secret forays into adulthood; lives that I haven’t yet lived – the world that Auntie Wendy talked about. I know what it is. I want him to think that I’m enigmatic. Can a short guy with big ears and a small nose be enigmatic? I told you my thoughts are weird these days. Here I go again. Wondering what people think of me.

“How old are you?” I ask, although I don’t know why.

“15. You?”

I tell him my age, he nods, and we start a conversation about nothing in particular. He’s very pleasant company: easy to talk to, funny, a good listener. Conversation is fluent; there are no awkward gaps of silence. I think it’s because he’s interested in everything he talks about. While he talks, I get the impression he can cope with anything. Like Auntie Wendy, he seems to possess the ability to take things in his stride. He’s very likeable, enviously so. When he stands to collect his bag and say goodbye, I find myself – his grin and handshake are genuine – hoping he’d stay.

Nobody else gets on at his stop, and we wave goodbye as the bus pulls off. There are sweets on the floor.

Now this is a memory, and while I’m pleased for the company, the emptiness that remains when he gets off is amplified by my circumstances. His seat is empty. I’m alone again. I think I miss his company because it took my mind off things, but now I have to deal with his absence as well as everything else. To my shame, I conclude that it would have been better not to have met him at all.

It has become quite overcast. Dirty-ashtray clouds threaten more rain. I try leaning my head against the window, but it's like having a pneumatic drill as a pillow. I imagine my thoughts vibrating, getting confused and muddled. I wish I were a cow. There are a few in the fields. All they do is stand and chew. They are not bound by the emotions that life inflicts upon us. They are just cows. They'll be slaughtered for their meat. Actually, I don't want to be a cow. I want to be a dolphin – I think of Darryl – curious that he should talk about swimming naked, but I know what he means. It's the feeling you get underwater, where your mind allows you to be anything free. That's what I want to be – anything other than me. Don't get me wrong. I'm not filled with self-loathing. Put yourself in my shoes. I'm going to meet a man who is supposed to be my father. I do this only because it is what Mum wants... wanted... wants. This will be the second time I've met him in ten years. The first was at the funeral. I'll tell you about that later. Right now, I don't really want to think about him – or what to expect when I get there. I don't really want to think about anything actually, because thinking inevitably leads back to the awful truth.

I cannot accept that Mum is dead. A part of me believes this is all a dream.

Before, if I had a headache, Mum would bring me an aspirin. If I had toothache, she'd take me to the dentist. Immediate relief was always at hand. But there are no tablets for this. No instant remedy. Nothing can ease this pain. I'll use it to keep me from collapsing.

"Irreconcilable differences," was the term I remember Mum using when I asked her why my father left. "It means we no longer got on. You know how sometimes you and John fight, and then you make up and are friends again? Well, your father and I weren't able to be friends anymore."

"But why? I don't understand."

"You will one day."

But I wanted to know then. One day is too far to wait for answers to childhood questions – like why adults cry. I hardly ever saw Mum weep, and when I did, she'd say in her kindest voice, "I'm learning to let go." When she first said this, I looked for something in her hands, trying to find what she was letting go of – but there was nothing. "You'll understand one day," she'd say, pulling me closer to engulf me in one of her special hugs.

Surely, if you're hanging on, letting go means falling?

Time to sleep.

There is a scream from the back of the bus. No. Shouting. People are shouting. Someone's in pain. I can hear her cries. I sit up sharply and turn to look. A man rushes down the aisle calling for the driver to stop.

"Driver, are we close to a hospital? There's a woman in labour back there. We need a doctor!" He turns to the rest of the bus. "We need a doctor!"

The pregnant woman is groaning.

"This hurts!" she exclaims between gasps and deep breaths.

Four or five passengers crowd around her, but I can't see her face because the backrests are too high. The bus slows down and another woman – she has a large black afro – shouts, "Don't stop, you fool. Get us to a hospital!"

"If this is a prank..." the driver warns.

The pregnant lady's distress cries are sufficient to convince him. I can see her now. They have moved her to the aisle. She's about 20, I suppose. I don't know.

"But I don't want to be late," someone says.

"Stand back, give her some air." The Afro lady has taken charge. "Driver – step on it!" To the others: "Stay in your seats." To the pregnant woman: "Just breathe deeply, my love, keep breathing deeply."

“The nearest hospital’s about 40 minutes away,” I hear the driver announce. Then everyone begins shouting directions, and people are telling people to get back, and a little girl starts crying. After 38 minutes, we have still not arrived.

“Christ, I don’t think this baby can wait. Jesus, we’re going to need some water and towels, or a blanket... anything. Don’t worry my dear – I’ve given birth six times...”

“I have towels!” I call, reaching for my bags. I have two towels. They have my name on them. For some reason I find that useful, as if I expect to get them back. Soon they are passed along, along with bottles of water (sparkling and still) and an old jacket.

“We’re almost there now,” the driver shouts.

“But I am going to be late,” someone says.

“Oh, shut it,” somebody else replies.

“Deep breaths, you can do it.”

“It hurts! Jesus-God-Almighty it hurts!”

“Deep breaths, come on.”

Everyone is demonstrating the technique to her; they look as if they all are giving birth. There is a lot of heavy breathing going on. I catch a glimpse of the woman - her eyes are screwed shut. She grits her teeth and groans. Then she screams at the top of her voice – a piercing, chilling wail. It sounds as if she is gradually being torn apart and there is nothing any of us can do. Well, the Afro lady seems to know what she’s doing.

It’s a remarkable sound, the cry of a new-born baby, and when it comes there is a loud cheer. Even I’m cheering. The woman has tears of joy now, and she cradles the bundle with extraordinary tenderness. Her pain is a memory. It’s a boy I hear.

He can keep the towels.

The day I met John, he was wearing a towel pretending to be a caped superhero. I met him at a scrapyard behind a service station near the park next to our block of flats. School had finished early that day, a Thursday – something about a bomb scare I think, and Mum could not get away from work. Auntie Wendy came to fetch me, and on the way home I asked if I could play in the park. It was a devious scheme. We had just recently moved. Mum was panicky about letting me play anywhere unobserved. I knew Auntie Wendy wanted to watch something on television, so I stood a reasonable chance of being let out alone.

I soon tired of the swings and seesaw in the park and decided to have one last slide before going home. I saw the hole in the fence as I slid down. It led to a small gully filled with beer cans and rubbish, and then up a slope to the scrapyard. There the wrecks of cars were piled upon each other – Minis, Volkswagens, Renaults, Fiats, and BMWs – a menagerie of mangled metal.

I had seen our car from the bathroom window that morning. It had been dumped on top of three Toyotas. I cannot begin to describe how I felt. But I did not cry.

The reporters are here.

I have a hard time holding them back. They surge forward, almost toppling me over.

“Mr. Elliot! Mr. Elliot! Is there any truth in the rumour that you intend going through the fence sometime today?”

“Has this ever been done before?” A woman-reporter with red hair forces the microphone to my lips.

“Do you realise the risk you’re taking?”

“No-one has ever gone through and come back to tell the tale,” somebody says.

I smile contempt at them. Don’t they realise?

My agents force the media back to behind the swings. I breathe deeply. This is not going to be

easy. Sure, others have tried – and failed – but I’m not like the others. Stay in the zone, I tell myself. Stay in the zone.

“Oh, my God!” someone shouts. “He’s going to do it!”

I can feel the blood surging through my veins; adrenaline builds up. I have to leopard-crawl through the hole and then stay low to avoid being seen. Easier said than done, though. The hole is just a few feet ahead; I can feel the dust at the back of my throat. Coughing would give me away completely.

“You can do it! Go on!”

“Yes, I can see him now, Paul – he’s almost at the fence... no, no – he’s made it to the fence... he’s stopped... I’m not sure what’s happening... it looks like he’s moving backwards... no, no – he’s going forward now... I don’t believe it... he’s going through... almost... yes, he’s made it!”

The trench is littered with old bomb shells and bits of debris. I remember the words of my commanding officer – “For God’s sake, don’t step on the shells with the red stripe!” – just in time to lift my foot away from the striped landmine. Suddenly, I understand what the expression ‘walking through a minefield’ means.

This looks impossible. I knew I would have to jump across, rolling to the right of the water pipe (rigged with explosives; they couldn’t fool me), but the jump would leave me exposed for at least two seconds, which was too long to be exposed to enemy fire.

“Of course he knew this would be a problem long before he set out. If only he had someone to cover him.”

“You know Chris Elliot always works alone.”

I remember the jump in slow motion, the thud as I roll past the pipe, missing it by millimetres; the heavy pounding of my heart when I realise I’ve made it. There are three tanks just behind the hill: secure cover if I’m fast enough. No time to think.

Move move move.

“He’s made it to the shelter of the tank on the far right. Of course, he’ll have to destroy anyone inside before moving to the control tower. He can’t risk enemy fire on the way back.”

“Wait a minute – there’s someone else there too!”

“Where?”

“Behind the lorry on the other side of the camp. It looks as if he’s armed. Can’t be much of a superhero if he’s armed. What’ll Chris do now?”

I’ll tell you what Chris will do – he’ll stay low, that’s what. As far as I know, I haven’t been seen. My mind races for a strategy. Surrender is never an option. I check to see if my handgun is loaded, and then do that sliding motion I’ve seen in movies.

I edge forward to have another look. He’s still there, but looking the other way. This is going to be easy. Quickly, I fit the telescopic lens onto the barrel of my gun and drop to my haunches. Soon I have him in sight. He’s about my age, I reckon. Tragic waste of young life. I watch him for a while. Poor fool. Amateur. My finger rests on the trigger. Wait – is that a white handkerchief he’s waving? Have I been seen? No, he’s just blowing his nose. Now’s the perfect time. He looks at me just as I pull the trigger. I will always remember the look of alarm on his face. I know it will haunt me the rest of my days.

He clutches his heart, struggles with his footing and falls over backwards. The One-Shot-Wonder does it again. Actually, falling over backwards is a neat trick, unless he just slipped because I gave him a fright – in which case it means he’s probably hurt himself and it’s my fault. Is he going to stand up? No. For the first time in my nine years on this planet, I say the grown-up word *shit*.

I run to where he has fallen only to find no one there. I saw him fall with my own eyes. This is supposed to be *Rambo*, not *The Twilight Zone*. Maybe I only injured him, and he’s rolled somewhere

to die?

“Drop your weapon!”

For the second time in my life, I say the grown-up word *shit*. My enemy’s eyes widen. “That’s a swear word,” he says, screwing up his face.

“I’m a US Marine. I’m allowed to talk like that.”

“Well I’m Special Agent John Hunter, and you’re under arrest.”

“And I,” said a voice behind us, “am Commissioner Wendy Allstrong. You’re both coming with me.”

And that’s how I met John, aged nine.

It is raining. The bus has finally reached Portsmouth Harbour. Time to meet my father, aged I don’t really know.

End of Chapter One

Thank you for reading.

If you would like to continue Chris’ journey, please consider purchasing a copy of the novel on [Amazon](#).