

**THE FEAR**  
**TALKING**



CHRIS WESTOBY

# THE FEAR

# TALKING

THE TRUE  
STORY OF A  
YOUNG MAN  
AND ANXIETY



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## About the Author



This is a true story. You'll learn a lot about Chris and the life-long anxiety he fought to keep secret.

Born and raised in Barton, on the Lincolnshire side of the Humber, a bus took him to college in Scunthorpe. He earned money on a paper round and making windows. But leaving home triggered unceasing visions of shame, distress, illness. It became unbearable to go anywhere, and impossible to explain why.

He has written the book he wishes he could've read back then, to help understand what was happening and know he wasn't alone.

He hopes it might get into the hands of others who need it.

Chris Westoby obtained his Creative Writing PhD at the University of Hull, where he is now Programme Director of the Hull Online Creative Writing MA. He lectures in Creative Writing, guest lectures in subjects of mental health, teaches reflective writing to Mental Health Nursing Students, and runs cross-faculty writing workshops. He works in research, collecting the stories of others.

He still makes windows.

The sequels are being lived; they're being written. His condition is a never-ending story.

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*Mum & Dad*





## Orlando

There's a massive *crack* in the sky and some of the bystanders shriek. The space shuttle *Discovery* appears through the highest clouds; the last echoes of its sonic boom roll around the lake.

Another vicious, hot day. It's summer 2006 and we're in Florida, stood in a layby near the outskirts of Kennedy Space Center. My family and me. Our Grand Voyager's tyres are powdered white by the chalky ground, its doors wide open to stop the heat building inside.

Other groups are staggered about, all beside their cars, all looking up. They chat happily now and raise their cameras. What a picture. A *shuttle* coming down from *space*, over the busy carriageway, above the pristine lake. Right before our eyes. And I've heard this might be the end of the last mission it ever takes. That's pretty damn cool, surely. But I can't focus.

My left hand holds the empty Coke beaker I've carried around since our first morning here, when we waited for that downpour to stop before a big stunt show and I thought I was going to be sick. The idea is: if I'm ill, maybe I can, like, put my mouth in this beaker and look as though I'm drinking and people won't know I'm throwing up. At least it won't go on the floor.

Unless the vomit fills the beaker up and it overflows.

I should carry two.

My right hand taps the little pocket on the hip of my shorts. Two bumps under the cotton. Yes, the Imodium tablets are still in there.

That's what matters.

Beaker and tablets. They're with me. It'll be alright.

I've counted every minute of the drive from the apartment to this layby, watched the speed limits of different roads and whether Dad obeys them, how long we've idled at each red light, how busy the roads are and whether that's slowed us down. Because every minute we travel means the journey back is another minute longer.

God, we're miles away.

I'm sweating, swallowing into a dry throat.

‘You getting a picture, Chris?’ Mum twists round to me, shielding her eyes from the sun.

‘It’s too far away.’

We watch *Discovery* come all the way down to the tree line across the lake, and I wonder if that’s its nose still glowing or glare from the sun. A woman in salmon shorts and black shoes starts to clap, then lowers her hands when no one joins her.

My head rests in my hands as our people-carrier enters traffic again. Kennedy Space Center is meant to be an hour and a half from our apartment in Lake Buena Vista, but it’s been longer than that. I knew it would be. Dad either underestimates or lies when it comes to journey times.

In the Center’s garden of old rockets, shuttles and satellites, I squint up at a marble wall with names chipped into it, shuffle after my family, up some steps and into a decommissioned shuttle with tin foil for wallpaper.

Behind her back, Mum squeezes one hand inside the other. Her mouth is nipped closed. It’s me she’s pissed off with.

We file into a theatre and join the small crowd finding their seats in the dark. A short film about the heroism of space travel plays, with CGI aerial shots of the moon and astronauts who bounce along in slow motion.

An invisible door opens beside the screen and a portly man steps in from the sunlight. Whilst talking to the audience he tips forward on his toes, backwards on his heels, and gently smacks his closed fist into his palm. He explains the **day ahead of us**, that there are **three** parts to the tour on different parts of the massive grounds, and a **bus** will take us from area to area.

Fuck me, I thought this was it. I thought we’d seen and done Kennedy already and were heading back soon.

I pick at the edge of my beaker and follow the group outside to queue for a bus. We’re shepherded into a maze of railings, which from above must look like a diagram of small intestines – doubling back again and again. Big metal fans blow down on us and make no difference. I study the tour leaflet and try to draw comfort that once

we're in Area 2 there's an optional bus that runs straight back to the reception. Pat my pocket. Tablets are there. Try to swallow, feeling really sick. I think I'm getting something. I'm so hot.

Of course you're hot – it's Florida.

No, it's like I'm getting sick.

Everything's sticky. The floor sucks at my feet.

I can't just make us leave. There are five of us; it would take too long to convince them all. They'll say I'm being stupid. And I can't drive the rent-a-car or run away. I'm not free. Even if I get us to go, my family can see me all that way home in the car. Close enough to knock knees, to smell each other's breath. I can't vanish.

Our bus stops in the middle of the concrete expanse between Area 1 and 2.

**The bus has stopped.**

Panic, like cold water, trickles under the skin of my chest, down my limbs.

Maybe our halt is part of the routine and we'll be moving again soon. It must be part of the tour. Nothing's wrong. Surely we're about to set off again.

To stay busy, I calculate the travel times from one Area station to the next, using my fingers as rulers on the little pamphlet map. I estimate the travel time from here, back to the entrance, to the car, down the 528 to the apartment. My palm sweat dampens the pamphlet; flecks of blue and white print stick to my skin.

Is there somewhere to hide out there? Foliage to take cover in or walls to climb over? It's a baking emptiness.

We're still not moving.

Have we broken down?

The driver announces that the *Discovery* shuttle is being taxied past us.

'This is an amazing lucky chance,' she says. 'We'll be sitting tight for about twenny, twenny-five minutes. But please remain in your seats.'

Forty-odd people jump up and fight for a view out the right-hand side where I'm sat, cramming into each other, cresting over me.

The gigantic shuttle comes along, surrounded by machines that flash amber lights. A convoy of black cars and SUVs follow. Officials walk either side of the congregation.

‘Please, sit *down!*’ our driver says.

I am!

I rest an elbow on either thigh, fingers pinching the plastic cup, head hanging off my shoulders, ready to be sick. The herd of tourists around me dissolves into a rush of images behind my eyes.<sup>1</sup>

‘Is anyone getting a picture? Chris?’ Mum says.

My older brother James takes the camera and snaps *Discovery’s* crawling approach. The shuttle and its convoy are barely twenty metres from us before it turns towards a hidden part of the complex.

Our bus driver, sick of our shit, wastes no time getting us to Area 2.

‘I think I need to go back. I reckon I’m gonna be sick,’ I say aside to Mum under a grid shadow on the concrete, opening the half-disintegrated map. ‘There’s a bus that goes straight from here back to the entrance, look.’

‘For God’s sake. We’ve come all this way, Chris. You’re completely ruining it. Moping round and saying you’re sick. “Woe is me.” The whole trip, you’ve done nothing but sulk. If you didn’t want to come today, you should’ve stayed at the bloody apartment.’

I *wanted* to stay at the apartment. I pleaded but they wouldn’t go without me. I’m not sulking; I’m sick. I don’t want to ruin their holiday. Just hide me.

She digs some paracetamols from her purse and tells me to take a couple.

‘I’m not in pain.’

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<sup>1</sup> I picture the vomit falling out my mouth: a quiet descends on the bus; passengers retreat away from me like I’m a live grenade; their remarks of disgust spread through the crowd with the smell. Do I hear laughter? Sympathy? Word reaches the front. The driver announces over the tannoy that, ‘We’ll get cleaned up at the next station.’ Vomit down my front. My t-shirt, shorts and boxers stick to me. Vomit down my legs, in my shoes. We get back to the car and Mum puts a towel over the seat before I sit down. All the windows are rolled down for two hours. Maybe I’m sick again.

'It can take the edge off,' she says.

That doesn't make sense but fuck it. I pop them from their foil and swallow them down. And despite knowing she's desperately throwing placebos at me, it works.

By the time we're heading to Area 3, I'm fine. Fine! Does it matter whether it's in my head? Paracetamol just thins the blood, my chemistry-proficient friend once told me. Maybe my blood is too thick, that's why I always feel sick. And this is actually helping.

I take dozens of pictures throughout the rest of the day: my younger brother Jordan standing under the disassembled rocket, the moon buggy, a turtle that floats up from the murk of a pond to snap at a bug caught in the thick surface tension.

We drive into a storm. The streetlights wake and Dad has the wipers on full chat. I spot the three steel hotel tower skeletons and know we're about to arrive at the resort. A short dash from the car to our apartment block soaks us through. Puddles have formed on the turquoise floor of the open corridors. James unlocks the apartment door and icy air conditioning touches my wet skin.

I've made it.

Mum goes into her bedroom and shuts the door.

Behind the counter, Dad pats a new filter into the coffee machine and Jordan takes a slimy donut from the box. Me and James sit on the wicker sofa, flicking through today's photos on the camera screen. I was behind the lens in most, but in the few where you see me, I look perfectly calm – cocky, even – both before and after the moment the paracetamols took effect. You'd never guess what it was really like.

\* \* \*

Swampy woods go by on our way to more theme parks. I follow my family around as though on a lead, take pictures, wait whilst they queue for rides. Daydream about going home. In strange

moments, like waking up mid-sleepwalk, I find myself stroking the soft feathers of an exotic bird, ploughing into the splash pool at the bottom of a massive water slide, tasting a tart raspberry smoothie and crunching the blended ice. A screen is lifted, and the world is loud and sharp.

In the evenings, any plans my parents make for the following day torment me until I fall asleep. In the mornings, I wake hoping they might have forgotten, and try to suggest we hang out by the pool.

One night, when the lights are off, I recall that scene in *Return of the King*: Sam has the half-dead Frodo in his arms, whose spirits he attempts to rekindle by reciting the quaint details of their home. I imagine that longing West Country voice listing off the arrangement of my own bedroom in England. Even in the privacy of my head, the thought embarrasses me. Sixteen years old, and I can't be abroad for a fortnight without being homesick.

But then, is it homesickness? Home isn't what I'm pining for. Just a way out of this nightmare, that's all.

Over and over, I work out the days left until we go home. Count, count, add, subtract. To the hour of departure, hour of landing in Manchester, hour of arrival in Barton. But Mum and Dad have worked themselves to the bone for this holiday. They must see me having fun.

Don't ruin it.

We get as far as the dock and join the queues for a ferry. Above the tourists' heads I see the black moat and Magic Kingdom's iconic castle lit up in neon pinks and purples.

One boat recedes to the far shore and another approaches us, unzipping the island's reflection. Having to take a boat to this supposed place of dreams to watch the fireworks – it's all I've thought about today. And the panic that threatened to peak as we arrived in the car park tonight now boils over.

'I need to go back,' I say to Mum, hoping James and Jordan don't hear me. 'I need to leave.'

Anger lowers her eyebrows, but she doesn't refuse outright like at Kennedy.

'What's going on?' Dad says.

'Chris wants to leave.'

'Oh, right. What's wrong?'

'I don't feel good,' I say.

'Right.' Dad looks at the ferry, now halting by the dock and opening its little gate to let the people from Magic Kingdom get off. Our queue starts filing on. 'We'd better go then.'

'What's happening?' James says.

'We're off. Chris doesn't feel well,' says Dad.

'What's wrong?' Jordan asks me.

I don't answer and march to the shuttle that takes us back to the car, hoping my family will follow suit. The prickling sickness builds in me and I'm petrified I'll shit myself. On the shuttle, warm air flaps my hair and the man on the intercom hopes we've had a magical day. We get off and walk to the car. My family move so fucking slow. We should be sprinting.

The car's musty, foreign smell fills my head. Its acceleration lurches my insides. I put my head in my hands and send my desperate prayer.

*Dear God, please help me. Don't let me be ill right now. Even if I have to be massively sick when we get back to the flat, just let it be then. Please. Just not now. Not now. I'm begging. I know there's a time someone has to ask for help and they get, like, one wish. If this is my one wish, I'm spending it. Let me get back before I'm sick. I won't ask for this again.*

It's a while before I dare look up from my hands and recognise the streetlights that file by above me, their glow panning through the car.

*Thank you, thank you, thank you.*





# Part 1



# 1

In my dreams I'm still there, swirling through the undercurrent. I wake up and see the blinds in my bedroom, the neighbour's security light shining through, casting pale stripes on the wall, and remember I'm home. It's September, and this is England.

The Humber is a broad, silt and shit-stained estuary yawning into the North Sea, and Barton grows on its banks. You know you're nearly here when you see the Humber Bridge's towers on the horizon, looking over us. I've never lived anywhere else. Nor really gone anywhere else, unless my parents drive me. Since one brave trip to see *Pirates of the Caribbean* three years ago, I've avoided buses entirely, and made countless wincing excuses why I can't join my friends when they travel outside of Barton.

That's got to change now. School's behind us and John Leggott in Scunthorpe is the closest college. It's barely twenty miles away, but the bus route sticks to the back roads and threads through every village. An hour's ride, twice a day. I think about it all the time, whether the bus might be too much for me, but compared to America this should be nothing. And think about the big Tesco a couple of miles from Leggott: surely, if it comes to it, I can walk there. I'll hide in a toilet cubicle until Mum or Dad picks me up. If they can leave work. There's all the tablets I keep in the side pocket of my bag. And I've downloaded a few episodes of *Scrubs* onto my iPod, in case things get so bad that I need a happy distraction. Things are fine. Well, maybe.

Stepping aboard on the first cool morning wakes the nerves, when the doors close behind me and the next stop isn't until Ferriby. Not that getting off there would do me any good.

Nearly everyone in our friendship group from school got a pass for the main bus, the 350. But me, Boris, George, Emma and Sebastian are on the decrepit double-decker 360, which teems like an ant nest with people we don't know. Down the aisle, up the stairs, down the upstairs aisle, we're packed in until the driver's forced to

plough straight past the village bus stops and give the outraged folk waiting there a wide-armed shrug.

There's a slight weakness in my legs as we arrive at Leggott. Home feels *really* far away. If not by distance then accessibility, what it'd take to get back, like a drawbridge has risen between us. My fingertips find the bumps in the mini pocket of my jeans and just touch them for a second.

Two Imodium tablets. Here for me.

We cross the main road at lunchtime to lie on one of the sport fields. I pinch the crispy, cut grass from the alive grass, roll it into an owl pellet ball and throw it at Boris, who catches it in his mouth. Little wisps of smoke rise from the knots of students lying about in the warmth. Boys get up to play footy. A Nerf ball arcs over us, between two parties taking it in turns to throw. A guy runs around his friends with a screaming girl over his shoulder, who reaches down to fish for his pants and yanks them halfway up his back. A queue forms in front of an ice cream truck that's mounted the kerb and parked on the grass. There are thousands here, all my age. I've heard that some people get frightened by the crowds.

Emma puts make-up on next to me as we clatter past Scunthorpe's foreign shops.

'She's off to see Tommy. And she really can't be bothered,' George says, who's turned round from the seat in front, her arm draped over the back.

'Why not? What's wrong with him?' I say.

'Dumping him,' George mouths.

Emma's got a spot just below the tip of her nose. She brings a tissue to her face as though to sneeze, but I know what she's really doing, and I pretend to look forward. When she brings the tissue down the spot's deflated and nearly invisible. She holds up a pocket mirror to check. A little drop of honey-coloured liquid collects where the spot was and jiggles with the movement of the bus until she wipes it again.

George turns back round and talks to Boris about transferring to the 350. Boris starts singing 'In The Morning' by The Coral,

which makes me picture the song's stop-motion music video and feel uncomfortable.

Me and Emma flick through the erotic book she's reading and point out funny lines in a chapter where the main character gets fucked against an underground statue.

Emma reminisces about school, despite us only leaving three months ago.

'You always avoided me,' she says in her London accent, joking but with an "admit it!" kind of tone.

'I wasn't avoiding you.'

'You did. Just because you were the popular boy at school—'

'No way.'

'—with all the popular girlfriends.'

'No way.'

'With the Corner Crew. Hanging out with Sophia and all them lot. I was at The Wall. Like, the *lesser* place.'

'Me, Ryan and Ben *started* The Corner, matter of fact.'

'Oh yeah?'

'We just liked pissing about on those yellow bars. We didn't know half the year group would end up there. You could've come. It wasn't members-only. In fact, you *did* hang out with us last year.'

'Only because I'm with Tommy and sort of tagged along. You never spoke to me anyway.'

'Because you're a nobody.'

Emma gasps and prods my ribs, repeating it back half a dozen times in answer to nearly everything I say for the next half hour.

'Oh, because I'm a nobody!'

Her giggle's really shrill; sometimes she just can't stop laughing. She goes on about being "hypo". A lot of my friends think she's annoying.

As we pick up speed towards Ferriby, she puts a leg over mine. I can't decide whether I like it.

Literature, Language, Media and Fine Art are the butt of smirking jokes for Ryan and Ben, both high-scoring scientists, but that's what I study.

Twice a week, I even get to go home early. The bus from college to Barton only runs at the start and end of the day, so on the first “early day”, me and Ben walk into Scunthorpe’s town centre to catch one from the station. We rifle through the albums in HMV, grab some cheap Arabian Coke from Home Bargains, and wait for the “Paragon Hull” bus that takes us through Roxby, Winterton, Winteringham and Ferriby. All the windows are open and warm air billows through the carriage. Ben’s on the seat facing me. His eyes are closed, his earphones in. I know he’s listening to Radiohead, like me. The wind makes his gigantic afro-like hair lash about.

\* \* \*

My uncle Harvey gets in touch: he’s fitting replacement windows near college and asks if I want to help out in the afternoons I don’t have lessons. Two hundred metres *further* than college. But the house we’re working at is slightly closer to the big Tesco. And I could use the money. My weekly paper round – fast becoming something to be ashamed of – fetches less than it used to. I head out Leggott’s main gate, past the tennis courts and footy fields, down a steep hill to find the house Harvey’s van is parked in front of. Dead leaves float out from the woods beside me; the path’s carpeted with them, all flattened down to mush, giving off the sweet autumnal smell of rot.

Harvey spends the afternoon sawing through a massive roll of tissue paper, and I can’t figure why this is necessary.

He drives me back in the van, through the lowlands of the Ancholme Valley’s shallow slopes.

Harvey’s a middle-aged bachelor living with my grandparents, with a perfect egg-shaped bald patch atop his thick hair. Shouldered from one family business he co-created and failing to make it with

the second one he started alone, Harvey gets work where he can. He can drive with his knee (so there's something going for him), his packed lunch on his lap, his hands free to peel three tangerines.

The nights are pulling in.

We stop at a bungalow in the middle of nowhere and a blinding security light comes on. A woman in pyjamas comes into the spotlight on the brick drive. She trades flirty insults with my uncle as we unload scrap wood from our job into her garage. Harvey has an arrangement with her, so he says once we're back on the road: he brings her scrap wood, and something is given in return. Whatever that means.

I think about how much wood was already in her garage.

The trees that flutter by in the dark: not ideal, but an effective place to hide. I could make my uncle pull over, jump out whilst the van's moving if I have to, hop this low wall – careful of the bramble growing over it – and keep running. Maybe crouch down in the undergrowth. Or even lie on my side and put up with the bed of wet leaves soaking into my clothes. Would Harvey understand well enough to leave me there?

Probably not.

But it's an emergency plan I've mentally rehearsed all day. And all yesterday. Now we're nearly home, a safe fifteen minutes to go, it seems so stupid: worrying that I was off to fit windows.

I shake my head.

Worried that I was off to fit windows!

'You want a tangie?' my uncle says. The pack-up box balances on his lap; it tilts like a boat as he steers with his knees whilst his hands peel away at the fruit.

We stop for the railway crossing and I feel sleepy.

The smell of citrus rind splitting from the flesh mixes with the van's heaters.

Amber lights glow behind the dashboard dials.

Static frays a quiet voice on the half tuned-in radio.

'Nah, thanks,' I say.

I take paracetamol before breakfast to keep a sickness away. The next dose is on my way to Language, as I cross the courtyard lawns and keep a distance from some batty kid who launches a juggling diabolo higher than the science block. His eyes scrunch in the sunlight as he watches it fly and his gum-chewing pauses until it lands back on the string with a cheer from his mates. Outside the mobile classrooms, a guy's having a fit on the path; his friend has put a coat under his jerking head and now sits cross-legged nearby reading a book. 'It's alright, he's fine,' she says. I remember the third paracetamol dose halfway through the final lesson. By now the sickness has hollowed.

Boris finds me and we leave through the main entrance. The low sun's in our eyes. Leggott's towering headmaster stands on the paving that leads down to the gates and the queue of rumbling buses beyond. He's waving and says bye to people as they go past like he knows them all.

'Bye, Chris!' he says to me when I catch his eyes.

'See you,' I say, then snap round to Boris and murmur, 'How the fuck does he know my name?'

We climb the hill to Glover Road, where our lowly 360 waits. 'Have you heard about Maccy D's getting shut down?' Boris says. 'Fucking jizz burgers. A guy was spaffing in all the burgers. And he had herpes. Some girl caught it and they traced it back or some bollocks. I'm not really sure. It might not be true.'

'So it was someone who was making the burgers that jizzed in them?'

'Yeah.'

'Which Maccy's?'

'The one near big Tesco's.'

'How didn't anyone notice him wanking into the burgers? Did he cook them and arrange all the lettuce and sauce with one hand, with his dick in the other hand wanking away? Or did he just sneak round the pre-made Big Macs and, you know, slip each one a quick



*whoop?* The more I act out the McDonald's man, the more Boris is laughing.

'I don't know!' he shouts, getting worked up. 'He just had a little jar and smeared a tiny bit on each one, maybe. Not enough to notice. He just went *shhhhh*—' Boris strokes a finger down my cheek '—on each bap, and left his seed.'

'And his herpes.'

Emma and George emerge from the snicket.

'Oh hello,' George says. 'Where'd you come from?'

'Walked round front.'

'David Linell knew Chris's name,' Boris says.

'He's got an eidetic memory,' Emma says.

'"Ee's got an eeditic mimury",' Boris squeaks and kicks Emma in the leg.

'Fuck's sake, Boris. Piss off.' She brushes dusty mud off her thigh.

Boris gets out his pebble-shaped MP3 player, puts one earphone in and sings along to Christina Aguilera.

Chavs from Lindsey are sat at the back of the top deck, throwing abuse and exercise books at everyone in front. The girls pass make-up discs to the boys, who hurl them like skimming stones down the carriage, bursting into dust on the backs of the heads that try to keep their eyes forward and ignore it all. Someone withdraws to tell the driver. I gather shards of the make-up from the floor and throw them back. George starts giving the chavs a weird telling off that makes me feel like a wuss.

When it's my stop I go down and say to the driver, 'Thanks for sorting that lot upstairs out for us. That felt like a really safe journey.'

'What am I supposed to do? Throw them off?' he shouts, arms tensed above that big steering wheel, fingers splayed.

'Yes!' I say from the pavement.

He twats a button and the doors close.

'You're probably kicked off the bus now,' a stranger says beside me.

'Maybe.'

The bus disappears down Ferriby road, George still upstairs.

I hope she finds out what I said to the driver.

### 3

The sickness doesn't go. It's the first feeling I'm aware of when I wake up: an invisible thumb gently pressing the base of my throat. I imagine what concoction swirls around in my stomach as I walk from lesson to lesson, or stagnates like a swamp as I sit still in class and try to think of anything else, even when my stomach is empty, which is most mornings. I avoid the concrete steps in the courtyard that juggle my insides. And if stairs can't be avoided, I keep my climb smooth and slow. The bumpy roads and the bus's deep idle rattle shake it all up. But then I get home, go to the gym, and the feeling's gone.

Paracetamol's a must. Four-hour intervals, every day. I keep stocked up at the Spar we walk to at the end of college's road.

Getting on the bus is harder. The journey length plays on my mind. Its unstoppable route. To step on board is to commit myself to an hour rammed in tight between passengers without hiding places if I get ill. I could barely squeeze myself through the throng to the entrance if I needed to jump off, let alone convince the driver to pull over unless there's a stop. And if there's a stop, the people hanging around it will see me.

And what if it's that driver I upset? Why would *he* let me off if I asked?

The destination is hardly better: two thousand students I should be composed in front of, not a puking mess. Many have camera phones that could take a picture of me. A picture to pass around. To spread. Classrooms are silent with a neutral smell: a blank canvas that any sickness episode would soil.

Maybe it's because of the wireless routers they've got here. People complain that the signals give them headaches. Why not nausea too?

The clammy Media Studies classroom at the top of all those stairs – it's always dark and close. The windows are locked behind glowing blinds. Computer towers, desperate to cool down, suck in hot air and radiate hotter air. Whenever someone speaks, their voice seems

to come from right by my ear. The air is thick, like trying to inhale aspic; it clogs behind my eyes. I can taste it: the room, maybe, the people, the situation, being up here.

Lunch ends on an October afternoon. We're sat around one of the circular tables in the Maggy May, Leggott's huge canteen that tries to be a club with its purple walls, chrome railings lining the upper floor and big speakers at the mercy of student DJs. Now it's getting cold outside, we spend nearly all our free periods in here.

Our round of Bullshit is cut short; my friends chuck their cards down and depart to their different lessons, but I don't move.

The thought of that Media classroom, where I'm meant to be heading now – I can't do it. I feel sick.

And if I'm too sick to go to Media, I can't go into town to get a bus home either.

I'm stranded.

My eyes start darting around all the faces in here.

'Have you got a free, Chris?' Webster asks, noticing I haven't got up.

'Yeah,' I lie.

'We're off home. There's a seat left, if you want a lift back,' he offers, pointing over his shoulder with his car keys.

I'll escape, just this once.

Five of us pile into Webster's 90s Golf. He takes the winding Pheasant Way, then turns onto Racer's Lane and rags his Golf until it's juddering at a hundred and ten miles per hour. I'm in the middle back seat with a limp belt over my waist. We go up a hump in the road and as it crests we float from our seats for a moment and my bladder tingles. We overtake a Honda. Scale another blind hump. A crawling tractor appears right in our face and an oncoming car blocks us from overtaking it. Webster mashes the brakes, cuts into a tiny pull-in and the car goes *bang* over the stones and the back end swerves away. The tyres find grip and we bump back onto the road, ahead of the tractor. The Golf wiggles back into a straight line.

A moment passes and Webster goes, 'Ha ha ha ha.' He turns round to us all. 'Fuck *that*.'

That would've killed us, just then, if that pull-in wasn't in that exact place.

'Nice,' I say, and hope this rescue might happen again. What would I have done without it?

But by the weekend, Webster writes his car off in a crash.

## 4

'It's just another day in the office for him, Christopher.'  
I 'What do I say?' I laugh and put my head on my crossed arms at the kitchen table.

'You don't need a script. He'll just say, "Now, Mr. Westoby, what seems to be the problem?" and away you go.' Mum pushes in the dishwasher tray, shuts its door and hits "go". She throws the dish sponge in front of me. 'You can give the table a wipe whilst you're sitting there looking pretty.'

'He'll just say I'm being stupid or it's in my head.' I wipe each placemat, stack them up and wipe the table.

'You're not going to know until you go see.'

The rotund doctor has a pepper beard and magnified eyes behind rectangular glasses. He gets me to lie on a thin leather bed with my shirt pulled up and my trousers undone. He presses on my stomach here and there with big cold fingers.

'Do you actually vomit?'

'So far, no. But it feels like I'm about to.'

'Any diarrhoea?'

'No, no.'

How does he say such a word so openly?

'Hmm. Okay.' He signals for me to button up and join him back at the desk.

I get a prescription for a drug called Stemetil.