

BRED LEMM

**CHRISTOPHER
BROOKMYRE**

LET THE GAMES BEGIN . . .

Quite Ugly One Morning
Country of the Blind
Not the End of the World
One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night
Boiling a Frog
A Big Boy Did It and Ran Away
The Sacred Art of Stealing
Be My Enemy
All Fun and Games Until Somebody Loses an Eye
A Tale Etched in Blood and Hard Black Pencil
Attack of the Unsinkable Rubber Ducks
A Snowball in Hell
Pandaemonium
Bedlam

BY CHRIS BROOKMYRE

Where the Bodies are Buried
When the Devil Drives

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For Jack

*Life is a whim of several billion
cells to be you for a while.*

Groucho Marx

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This is not the end of the world, Ross told himself.

He closed his eyes as a low hum began to sound around him, heralding the commencement of the scan. The effect was more white-out than black-out, the reflective tiles filling the room with greater light than the fine membranes of his eyelids could possibly block.

He should look upon all of it as a new start; several new starts, in fact. Yes: multiple, simultaneous, unforeseen, unwanted and utterly unappealing new beginnings. Welcome to your future.

As he lay on the slab he conducted a quick audit of all the things that had gone wrong in the couple of hours since he'd stepped off his morning bus into a squall of Scottish rain and a lungful of diesel fumes on his way to work. He concluded that it wasn't a brain scan he needed: it was a brain transplant. Nonetheless, as the scan-heads zipped and buzzed above him, for the briefest moment he enjoyed a sense of his mind being completely empty, an awareness of a fleeting disconnection from his thoughts, as though they were a vinyl record from which the needle had been temporarily raised.

'Hey Solderburn, are we clear?' he asked, keeping his eyes closed just in case.

There was no reply. Then he recalled the capricious ruler of the Research and Development Lab telling him to bang on the door if there was a problem, so he deduced there was no internal monitoring.

He opened his eyes and sat up. It was only a moment after he had done so that he realised the tracks and scan-heads were no longer there. He did a double-take, wondering if the whole framework had been automatically withdrawn into some hidden wall-recess: it was the kind of pointless feature Solderburn was known to spend weeks implementing, even though it was of no intrinsic value.

There was still no word from outside. Solderburn probably had a lot of switches to flip, so Ross was patient, and as he didn't have a watch on, he only had a rough idea how long he'd been sitting there. However, by the time the big hand on his mental clock had ticked from 'reasonable delay' through 'mild discourtesy' into 'utterly taking the piss', he'd decided it was time to remind the chief engineer that his latest configuration included a human component.

The bastard had better not have sloped off outdoors to have a fag. Seriously, was there any great incentive to stop smoking than having to do it in the doorway to this dump, looking out at the rest of the shitty Seventies industrial estate surrounding it?

Ross got to his feet and extended a fist, but before he could deliver the first of his intended thumps the door opened, though not the way he was expecting. Instead of swinging on its hinge, the entire thing withdrew outwards by a couple of inches, then slid laterally out of sight with the softest hiss of servos.

WTF?

Beyond it lay not the familiar chaos of the R&D lab, but merely a grey wall and the grungy dimness of a damp-smelling corridor.

So Solderburn was taking the piss, but not in the way Ross had previously believed. This was the kind of prank that explained why the guy had ended up working here in Stirling, rather than winning the Nobel Prize. He must have slid some kind of false wall into place outside the scanning room. Ross walked forward, stepping lightly because he suspected Solderburn's practical joke had some way to go before it reached the pay-off stage.

He looked left and right along the passageway.

All right, so maybe it was time to revise the practical joke hypothesis.

There was a dead end to the left, where the way was blocked by three huge pipes that emerged from the ceiling and descended through a floor constructed of metal grilles on top of concrete, into which sluice channels were etched in parallel. There was a regulator dial on the right-most tube, sitting above a wheel for controlling the flow. A sign next to it warned: 'DO NOT MESS WITH VALVE'.

It was a redundant warning in Ross's case: he wasn't going near it. Even from a few yards away, he could feel the vibration of flow in the pipes, indicating that enormous volumes of fluid must be passing through the vessels. It sounded like enough to power a small hydroelectric station. Even Solderburn couldn't fake up something like that.

In the other direction, the corridor went on at least twice the length of the lab, condensation beading its walls. He could hear non-syncopated pounding, its low echo suggesting something powerful and resonant that was being dampened by thick walls. This thought prompted him to glance at the ceiling, which mostly comprised live rock, occasionally masked off by black panels insulating lines of thick cable.

He began to make his way along the corridor. Light was provided by strips running horizontally along the walls, roughly two feet above head height. Ross assumed them to be inset, but if so it was hell of a neat job. They looked like they could be peeled right off and stuck wherever they were required.

There was another light source further ahead, a dim blue-green glow coming from behind a glass panel set high in the wall on the left.

The corridor trembled following a particularly resonant boom from somewhere above. Ross could feel the metal grates rattle from it, the air disturbed by a pulse of movement. It felt warm, like the sudden gust of heat when somebody has just opened an oven door. There was still no rhythm, no pattern to the sounds, and yet Ross found something about them familiar.

As he approached the panel, he could see a play of coloured light behind the glass, constant but fluid as though there might be a team of welders on the other side of it. Please, he thought, *let* there be a team of welders on the other side: hairy-arsed welders with bottles of Irn-Bru and Monday-morning hangovers, toting oxyacetylene torches and forehead-slappingly obvious explanations for what was going on. Perhaps he had ended up at one of the factories on the estate, somehow?

The panel was high, so Ross had to stand close and stretch to get a look through the glass. As soon as he did, he caught a glimpse of someone on the other side and promptly threw himself back down low out of sight.

It wasn't a welder; or if it was, it was one who had utterly lost it at some point and started grafting stuff to his own face.

In his startlement and panicked attempt to hide, Ross tumbled backwards to the deck, a collapse that felt less painful but sounded altogether more clangingly metallic than he was expecting. If the hideous creature behind the wall hadn't seen him as he peered through the glass a moment ago, then he had surely heard him now.

He had to get moving, and hope there was more than one way out of this corridor. It might be prejudiced to assume that the man he had seen meant him any harm purely on the basis of his unfortunate appearance, but it was difficult to imagine anybody with a penchant for soldering things on his coupon being an entirely calm and balanced individual. Besides, Ross's alarm hadn't been inspired purely by the fact that the guy would have a bastard of a time getting his face through airport security: it was the look Ross had briefly glimpsed in that nightmarish visage's eyes: wild, frantic, unhinged.

and, most crucially, searching.

It was as he uncrumpled himself from a heap on the floor that he discovered any attempt at flight was futile, and for a reason far worse than that this mutilated horror might already have cut off his escape. His eye was drawn, for the first time since emerging from his cell, to his own person rather than his surroundings, and a glance at his limbs showed them no longer to be clad in what he remembered pulling on that morning. Gone were the soft-leather shoes, moleskin jeans and charcoal shirt, replaced by a one-piece ensemble of metal, glass and bare skin, all three surfaces scarred by scorch-marks and gouges.

He looked in terrified disgust at his forearm, where two light-pulsing cables were visible on the surface, feeding into his wrist at one end and plunging beneath an alloy sheath at the other. His legs were similarly metal-clad, apart from glass panels beneath which further fibre-optic wiring could be seen intermittently breaking the surface of skin that was a distressingly unhealthy pallor even for someone who had grown up in the west of Scotland.

His chest and stomach had armour plates grafted strategically to cover certain areas whilst retaining flexibility of movement by leaving other expanses of skin untouched, and there were further transparent sections revealing enough of his interior to suggest he wouldn't be needing a bag of chips and a can of cream soda any time soon.

Trembling with shock and incredulity, he hauled himself upright, finding his new wardrobe to be impossibly light. His movement was free and fluid too, feeling as natural as had he still been wearing what he'd turned up to work in.

Was it some kind of illusion, then?

No. Of course. He had fallen asleep during the scan. It was a dream.

Except that normally the awareness of dreaming was enough to dispel it and bring him to.

Ross looked himself up and down again. There was no swirling transition of thoughts and images bringing him to the surface, no dream-logic progress linking one bizarre moment to the next.

He approached the glass again. He could see two vertical shafts of energy, one blue and one green seemingly unchannelled through any vessel, but perfectly linear, independent and self-contained nonetheless. Reluctantly, he pulled his focus back from what was behind the glass to the reflecting surface itself.

Arse cakes.

He looked like he had faceplanted the clearance sale at Radio Shack. It was still recognisably his own features underneath there somewhere: even that little scar on his cheek from when he'd fallen off a spider-web roundabout when he was nine. He recalled what a fuss his mum had made when he'd needed stitches. Everything's relative, eh Mammy?

Another muffled boom sounded, moments before another shudder rippled the air. He could hear the lesser percussions too, like it was bonfire night and he was indoors, half a mile from the display. It was hardly an enticement to proceed down the corridor, but what choice did he have?

He strode forward on his augmented legs, surprised to discover his gait felt no different, his tread lighter than the accompanying metal-on-metal thumps suggested. There was absolutely nothing about this that wasn't absolutely perplexing, not least the aspects that felt normal. For instance, as he followed the passageway around a bend to a T-junction leading off either side of an elevator, he was disturbed to find that he seemed instinctively to know where he was going. Was there something in all this circuitry that was doing part of his thinking for him? He wasn't aware of it if so; though the fact that he probably wouldn't be aware of such a process was not reassuring.

He stepped on to the open platform of the elevator and pressed his palm to the activation panel.

light traced around his atrophied fingers at the speed of an EKG and the platform began to rise.

He looked again at the leathery grey of his hand. It gave a new meaning to the term dead skin. He thought of all the times Carol had ticked him off for biting his nails, of her rubbing moisturiser on his cracks and chaps in wintertime.

Carol. No. Not yet.

He put her from his mind as the elevator reached the top of the shaft, where his faith in instinctive knowing where he was going was put to the test by his arriving somewhere he was dangerous and conspicuous. No narrow passageway this time: he had reached some kind of muster point or staging area, and was rising up into the centre of it like it was his turn on *Camberwick Green*.

He got there just in time to see a group of figures – each of them similarly dressed by the Motorola menswear department – march out through a wide doorway. They moved briskly and with purpose, the two halves of the automatic door closing diagonally behind them as the elevator platform came to a stop, flush with the floor.

The booms were louder here. The smaller ones sounded like muffled explosions somewhere beyond the walls, but the big ones seemed to pulse through the very fabric of whatever this place was. He could tell when one was coming, as though the entire structure was breathing in just before it; could sense something surge through all those pipes lining the walls. It was like being inside a nose that was about to sneeze.

He was absolutely sure of which way to head next, but it wasn't to do with any weird instinct or control by some exterior force. It was simply a matter of having observed in which direction the platoon of zombie-troopers had shipped out and of proceeding in precisely the opposite.

They'd had their backs to him so he couldn't get a clear view of what they were all carrying, but the objects had been metal and cylindrical, and he considered it unlikely they were some kind of cyborg brass section that had just been given its cue to hit the stage. Given how little sense everything else was making right then, it was always possible that the latter was the case and they were about to strike up 'In the Mood', but Ross strongly suspected that the only thing they were in the mood for was shooting anybody who got in their way.

He proceeded towards his intended exit at what he realised was an incongruously girly trot: hastened by his eagerness to get away but slowed short of a run in case it should be conspicuous that he was making a break for it. His head spun with awful possibilities, trying to piece together what could have happened. It had to have been the scan, he deduced. Whether intentionally or not, it had left him in a state of suspended animation and his body had been stored until the advent of the technology that was currently adorned and possibly controlled him.

Neurosphere. Those amoral corporate sociopaths. This was their doing. There was probably a clause in his employment contract that covered this shit, and as he'd never bothered to read the pages and pages of legalese, he'd had no real idea what he was signing. Now he could be working for them forever, part of a manufactured army. But in that case, why hadn't they erased or at least restrained his memory? Why was he not a compliant drone like the others he'd seen? Perhaps something had gone wrong with the process and he was the lucky one – retaining his memory and his sense of self and thus able to testify to Neurosphere's monstrous crime. Or perhaps he was the really *unlucky* one, trapped in this condition but not anaesthetised by merciful oblivion, and unlike the others he'd be conscious of every horror he was about to witness, or even effect.

He had no idea what year it was, or even what century. Chances were everyone he ever knew was gone. There might be nothing in the world he would recognise.

The big doorway opened obligingly as he approached, its two halves sliding diagonally apart

reveal another corridor, brighter than he'd seen before. Light appeared to be flashing and shimmering beyond a curve up ahead, and with nobody to observe him, he ran towards it.

'Oh,' he said.

The source of the flashing and shimmering on the far side of the passageway turned out to be a huge window opposite, easily twelve feet high by twenty feet wide, through which Ross could see what was outside this building. He hadn't thought he could ever look into another pane of glass and see a more unsettling sight than the one that had met him only a few minutes ago when he glimpsed his own reflection. Clearly it was not a day to be making assumptions.

The first thing he noticed was the sky, which was a shade of purple that he found disturbing, wasn't so much that there was anything aesthetically displeasing about the colour itself; it was, to be fair, a quite regally luxuriant purple: deep, textured and vibrant. It was more to do with his knowledge of astronomy and subsequent awareness that, normally, the sky he looked up at owed its colour to the shorter wavelengths and greater proportion of blue photons in the type of light emitted by the planet's primary energy source. What was disturbing about this particular hue was not merely that it could not be any sky on Earth, but that it could not be any sky beneath its sun.

Worse, its predominantly purple colouration wasn't even the most distressing thing about the view through the window: that distinction went to the fact that it was full of burning aircraft. There were dozens of them up there, possibly hundreds, stretching out all the way to the horizon. It looked to be some kind of massive extraterrestrial expeditionary landing force, and its efforts were proving successful in so far as landing was defined as reaching terra firma: all of the craft were certainly managing that much. However, controlled descents executed without conflagration and completed by vessels comprising fewer than a thousand flaming pieces were, quite literally, a lot thinner on the ground.

Ross felt that inrush again, that sense of energy being channelled very specifically to one source, then heard the great boom once more, and this time he could see its source. It was a colossal artillery weapon, sited at least a mile away, but evidently powered by the facility in which he was standing. Its twin muzzles were each the size of an oil tanker, jutting from a dome bigger than St Paul's Cathedral, and its effect on the invasion force was comparable to a howitzer trained on a flock of geese. Each mighty blast devastated another host of unfortunate landing craft, sending debris spinning and hurtling towards the surface.

He had no sense of how long he had been standing there: it could have been thirty seconds and could have been ten times that. The spectacle was horrifyingly mesmerizing, but the car-crash fascination was not purely vicarious. Everything Ross saw had unthinkable consequences for himself. Instead of being merely lost in time, he now had no idea which planet he was even on.

He could see buildings in the distance, only visible because they were so large. The architecture was unquestionably alien, as was the very idea of building vast, isolated towers in an otherwise empty desert landscape. And still something inside him felt like he belonged here, or at least that his environment was not as alien as it should have been.

'It's an awe-inspiring sight, isn't it?'

When Ross heard the voice speak softly from only a few feet behind him, he deduced rather depressingly that he must no longer have a digestive system, as this could be the only explanation for why he didn't shit himself.

He turned around and found himself staring at another brutally haphazard melange of flesh and metal, one he decided was definitely the estate model. The newcomer was a foot taller at least, and more heavily armoured, particularly around the head, leaving his face looking like a lost little

afterthought. He looked so imposingly heavy, Ross could imagine him simply crashing through anything less than a reinforced floor, and couldn't picture walls proving much of an impediment either. Wherever he wanted to be, he was getting there, and whatever he wanted, Ross was giving him it.

'Yes,' Ross agreed meekly, amazed to hear his own voice still issuing from whatever he had become.

'You could lose yourself in it,' the big guy went on. His tone was surprisingly soft, perhaps one used to being listened to without the need to raise it, but not as surprising as his accent, which was a precision if rather theatrical received pronunciation. Clearly, as well as advanced technology, this planet also had some very posh schools.

'Perhaps even forget what you were supposed to be doing. Such as joining up with your unit and getting on with fighting off the invasion, what with there being a war on and all.'

His voice remained quiet but Ross could hear the sternest of warnings in his register. There was control there too, no expectation of needing to ask twice. Very bizarrely, Ross was warming to him. Maybe it was the programming, same as whatever was making him feel this place was familiar.

'Yes, sorry, absolutely ... er ... sir,' he remembered to add. 'My unit, that's right. Have to join up. On my way now, sir.'

'That's "Lieutenant Kamnor, sir",' he instructed.

'Yes, sir, Lieutenant Kamnor, sir,' Ross barked, eyes scanning either way along the corridor as he weighed his options regarding which direction Kamnor expected him to walk in.

He turned and made to return to the staging area. Kamnor stopped him by placing a frighteningly heavy hand on his shoulder.

'Are you all right, soldier?' he asked, sounding genuinely concerned. 'You seem a little disoriented. Do you know where your unit even is?'

Ross decided he had nothing to lose.

'I have no idea where *I* even am, sir. I don't know how I got here. I have no memory of it. I'm not a soldier. I'm a scientific researcher in Stirling. That's Scotland, er, planet Earth, and this morning, that being an early twenty-first-century morning, I had a neuro-scan as part of my work. I was still totally biodegradable; I mean, an entirely organic being. When I stepped out of the scanning cell, I found myself here, looking like this.'

Kamnor's face altered, concern changing to something between alarm and awe, and everything that it conveyed seemed amplified by being the only recognisable piece of humanity amidst so much machine.

'Blood of the fathers,' he said, his voice falling to a gasp. 'You're telling me you were a different form, in another world?'

'Yes sir, lieutenant, sir.'

'Blood of the fathers. Then it truly is the prophecy.'

Kamnor beheld him with an entirely new regard, readable even in his alloy-armoured body language. 'The prophecy?' Ross enquired.

'That one would come from a different world: a being who once took another form, but who would be reborn here as one of us, to become the leader who rose in our time of need. That time is at hand,' he added, gesturing to the astonishing scene through the huge window, 'for our world is under attack and lo, you have been delivered to us this day.'

Ross half turned to once again take in the sky-shattering conflict in which he had just been told he was destined to play a legendary role. A host of confused emotions vied for primacy in dictating how he should feel. Sick proved the winner. He recalled hearing the line: 'Some men are born great, others

have greatness thrust upon them.’ He wondered if that also applied to heroism. He had no combat training, no military strategy and tended to fold badly in even just verbal confrontations.

He was about to ask ‘Are you sure?’ but swallowed it back on the grounds that it wasn’t the most leaderly way to greet the hand of destiny when it was extended to him. He settled for staring blank like a tit, something he was getting pretty adept at.

Then Kamnor’s face broke from solemnity into barking, aggressive laughter.

‘Just messing with you. Of course there’s no bloody prophecy. You’ve been hit by the virus, that’s all. Been finding chaps in your condition for days.’

‘Virus?’ Ross asked, his relief at no longer having a planet’s fate thrust into his hands quickly diminished as he belatedly appreciated how preferable it was to the role of cannon fodder.

‘Yes, sneaky buggers these Gaians. They hit us with a very nasty piece of malware in advance of their invasion force: part binary code and part psychological warfare. Devilishly clever. It gives the infected hosts all kinds of memories that aren’t really theirs. Makes you think you’re actually one of them: a human, from Gaia, or as they call it, Earth. It uploads all kinds of vivid memories covering right up until what seems like last night or even this morning. Like, for instance, that you’re a scientist from, where was it?’

‘Stirling,’ Ross said, his voice all but failing him.

‘See? It’s really detailed. Convinces you that you just arrived here, plucked from another life on *their* planet. But don’t worry, it wears off. It’s full of holes, so it breaks down: I mean, hell of a coincidence they all speak the same language as us and even sound like us, eh? The virus automatically translates what they’re saying. Don’t worry, you’ll be right as rain soon enough. We find that shooting a few of the bastards helps blow away the mist. So how about you catch up to your unit and help them spread the spank?’

Ross ... was his name even Ross? He now knew officially nothing for sure.

This couldn’t be true. These memories were his. They weren’t just vivid and detailed, they were the only ones he had. Surely there would be some conflict going on in there if what Kamnor was saying was right. Yet as he stood before this terrifyingly powerful mechanised warrior, it occurred to him to wonder why the lieutenant would be so patient and understanding even as war raged on the other side of the hyper-reinforced window. Furthermore, there was that disarming sense of the familiar, even positive associations, ever-present since he’d arrived here. For the moment, he’d just have to run with it, see if the mists really did blow away.

‘I don’t know what unit I’m with, lieutenant sir,’ he admitted.

Kamnor reached out a huge, steel-fingered hand and tapped the metal cladding that Ross used to think of as his upper arm. There was a symbol etched there, a long thin sword.

‘You’re with Rapier squad. Mopping-up detail, under Sergeant Gortoss.’ He gestured along the corridor in the opposite direction from where Ross had just come.

‘Turn left at the first pile of flaming debris and look for the most homicidally deranged bastard you can find. Ordinarily he’d be in a maximum-security prison, but when there’s a war on, he’s just the kind of chap you want inside the tent pissing out.’

‘Yes sir,’ said Ross, by which he meant: ‘Holy mother of fuck.’

‘You remember how to fire a weapon, don’t you?’

‘I’m sure it’ll come back,’ he replied, making to leave.

Kamnor stopped him again.

‘Well, before you go I would suggest you take a quick refresher on how to salute a superior officer.’

Kamnor saluted by way of example, sending his arm out straight, angled up thirty degrees from the

horizontal, his metal fist clenched tight.

Ross was inundated with unaccustomed feelings of gratitude, loyalty and pride, driving determination to serve and please this man. He had read about leaders whom soldiers would follow into battle, kill for, even die for, but never understood such emotions until now.

He sent out his right arm as shown, his shoulder barely level with Kamnor's breastplate, clenching his fist once it was fully extended. As he brought his fingers tightly together, a long metal spike emerged at high speed from somewhere above his wrist, shooting up into Kamnor's mouth, through his palate and into his brain.

It was a tight call as to who was the more shocked, but Kamnor probably edged it, aided by the visual impact of blood and an unidentified yellow-green fluid spurting in pulsatile gushes from his mouth. He bucked and squirmed but was too paralysed to do anything else in response.

'Oh Christ, I'm so sorry,' Ross spluttered, trying to work out how to withdraw the spike back into his wrist. 'I didn't mean it, I just ...'

But Kamnor was way past listening. He fell to the floor, pulling Ross over with him, his arm still linked to Kamnor's head by the rogue shaft of steel. The blood subsided but the yellow-green fluid continued to hose, while one of Kamnor's great feet twitched spastically, clanking and scraping on the metal grate lining the floor.

Ross heard a hiss of pistons and saw the double door at the end of the corridor begin to separate.

'Oh buggering arse flakes.'

Through the widening gap he could see six pairs of metal-clad legs making their way towards the passage. In about one second they were going to spot this, and it wasn't going to look good.

How did you get this bloody thing out?

A clench of his fist had extended it, he reasoned, but so far merely unclenching wasn't having the corresponding effect.

He opened his hand instead, stretching out his fingers. This prompted an instant response. He felt something twang at the end of the spike, like the spokes of an umbrella, then felt a sense of rotation and heard a soft, muffled whir.

The incoming troop made it through the doorway as the spike withdrew, liquidising Kamnor's face and spraying Ross with the resulting soup as though he had lobbed the poor guy's head through a turbine propeller.

He turned to face them, the end-piece of the spike still spinning and sending blood, flesh and other matter arcing about the corridor.

'It's not what it looks like,' he offered.

The doors slid closed with a hydraulic hiss as Ross stepped aboard out of the blustery Stirling rain and headed for his seat, shuffling laboriously along the aisle. He was barely awake. Safe mode: on loading the minimum components required to carry out the very basic tasks involved in getting from his bed to his desk. The bus jostled him pleasantly as it moved off, the feeling of warmth and the lulling rock of motion doing very little to encourage him into a sharper waking state. This was less down to fatigue than reluctance. Never a good sign.

Setting ‘Autopilot’ = TRUE

A sound file played in his head:

‘*Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system ...*’

It was the opening of *Half-Life*, a woman’s soft voice over the PA of a futuristic subterranean monorail taking the physicist Gordon Freeman to work on what would prove to be a cataclysmical fateful day.

Also not a good sign. Human memory wasn’t random-access. What the subconscious chose to retrieve seemingly unprompted was seldom anything of the sort. If you looked deeply and honestly enough, you could usually trace the connection, and it would tell you plenty about your true state of mind. This voice from the past was telling Ross something inescapably accurate about the present.

The reason it was not a good sign was that this echo from *Half-Life* hadn’t been prompted by reminiscence of playing the game. He was reminiscing about sitting on another bus fifteen years ago, running the same soundtrack in his head as he imagined being on his way into the Black Mesa complex instead of towards St Gerard’s Secondary. That childhood bus had been a buffering period, eight minutes to retreat into fantasy before reluctantly engaging with the indignities, torpor and soul-stomping banality of another day in school. He never wanted to get off, wished the journey was a hundred miles. He couldn’t wait to get out of St Gerard’s. He was planning to go off to uni to study medicine, and once he’d qualified he would look forward to every day’s work as both a challenge and an opportunity.

Yeah, that worked out well.

The bus was busy. Ross was squeezed in between a young mum with a toddler on her lap and an old man in an ancient raincoat that was the only thing on the bus smelling worse – considerably worse than the scrawny hound that accompanied him. Maybe it was for this reason that the mutt decided to position itself at Ross’s feet rather than its master’s. It sat eye-level with his crotch, at which point it proceeded to stare longingly and with unbroken concentration, as though breakfast hadn’t quite hit the spot and it was thinking Ross’s balls would be just the thing to fill a hole before elevenses.

On the other side, the young mum was so consumed by the text exchange she was carrying out with impressive one-handed dexterity that she failed to notice that her daughter’s face appeared to be melting, presumably as an unforeseen chemical reaction to the toxic-looking cheese string she had given her to eat. Liquid appeared to be seeping from a multiplicity of orifices, mucus bubbling liberally over her top lip on its way to replenishing the layer she had smeared across both cheeks; the southern reaches of her face were swimming in a yellow-tinged paste made up of two parts drool and one part semi-masticated cheddar; and there was something seeping out of one of her ears that Ross really didn’t want to think about. Both of her little hands were awash with a combination of the

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