'Andy Robb knows what it feels like to be an awkward boy and what it means to be a man. Jamie - drunk, lovesick, lost - will win your heart, break it, and mend it all over again. I laughed, I cried. And I cried some more. This is hard to read, but ultimately punch the air redemptive. A story that will stay with me for a long time.'

Jo Nadin



For the Bid,
the Boy, the Bride
and the Bean.

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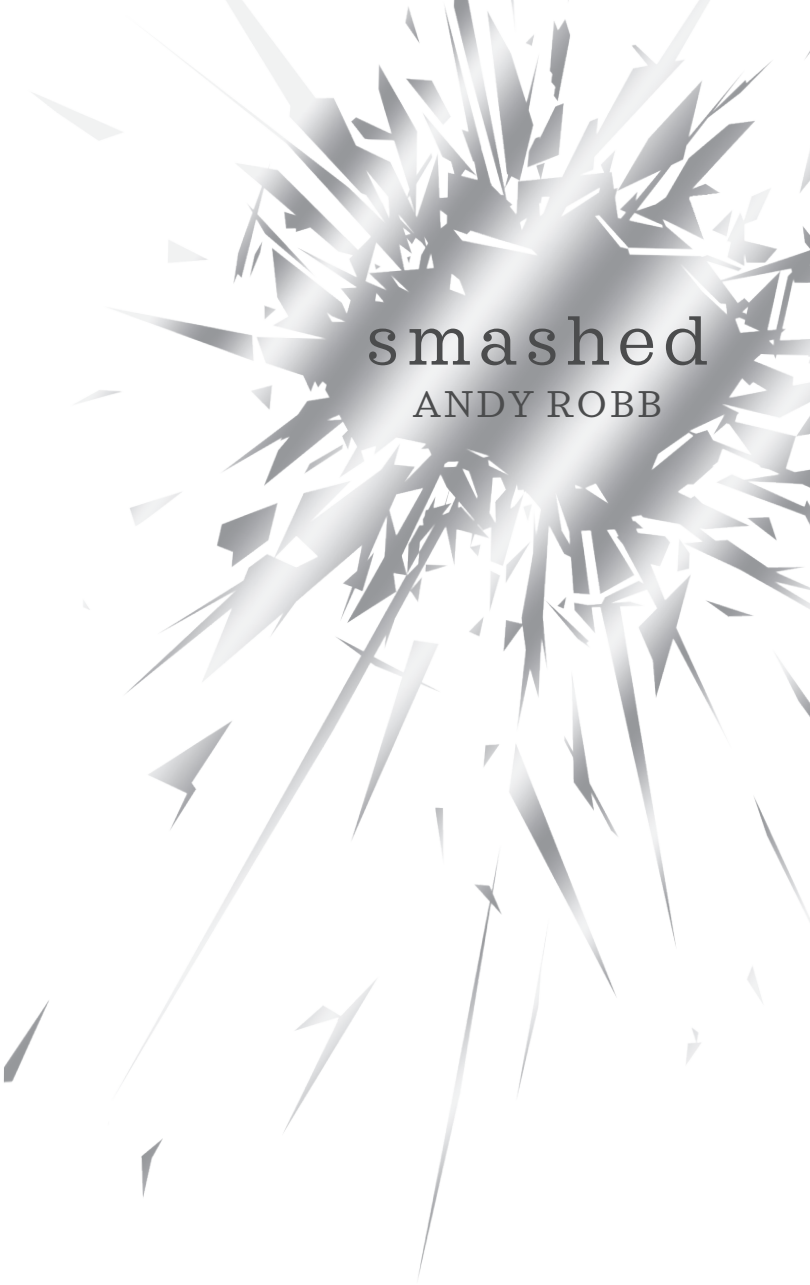
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One

Even My Bacteria are Clean

Shower: I need a shower.

The fact that I showered last night is neither here nor there. When I get home after school, I'll probably have another one.

It's the bad days when I'm at my cleanest. To be honest, on those days, I'm surprised I've got any skin left. I think my record is five showers in one day.

That took some explaining.

The bad days are the days when I can't stop replaying things in my head. Things I'd really rather weren't there.

The noises from the night it all happened – The Night Everything

Went Weird. The ragged voices and the dull thud as mum hit the floor.

The next morning, the day of my mock-English exam, when I woke up to find her sobbing in a shuddering, crumpled heap on the end of my bed and dad crashed on the sofa.

The silence that swallowed everything, except for Bex's delight when she saw mum's black eye and thought it was make-up.

"Mummy, you've got a Rainbow Eye!" Her voice full of innocence and wonder and blissful, six-year-old ignorance.

The Rainbow Eye . . . Just thinking of Bex saying those words is enough for the recently installed radiator in my throat to get hot and my eyes to blur with the sting of salty tears.

Like a safe-cracker in danger of being discovered, I spin the dials on the shower, setting the exact temperature in milliseconds. The exact temperature is probably close to boiling. The fact that I'll feel like a newly cooked lobster for the next thirty minutes isn't important.

I must be the cleanest nearly-sixteen-year-old in the world. Two showers a day for the last three and a half weeks; even my bacteria are clean. I feel good in here: the shushing hiss of the water and the drum of a hundred peashooters against my skin dulls the sad chatter inside my head.

Usually, this works; I get ten minutes of shushing inside and out. Ten minutes of voluntary numbness.

Not today.

Today, just as I've finally put The Night Everything Went

Weird to one side for ten quiet minutes, Nadia decides to pay me a visit.

Not literally, not in the shower – although God knows how many times I've entertained that scenario and watched the fruits of my labours disappear down the plughole.

Don't get me wrong. If there's anyone on planet Earth who ought to be grateful they've got a girlfriend, it's me. And, for the first month of our courtship, I was *so* grateful. Prayers-of-thanks grateful. Let's be honest: beyond the obvious appendage, there's very little to recommend me as a man. There's not even the slightest hint of stubble, as though my face decided to spare me what my dad calls the Weight of Manhood. So the fact that Nadia even looked my way was something of a miracle. But something's changed between us and I don't know what it is.

For starters, Nadia is beautiful. I have absolutely no right to complain to management on that account. Hair the colour of midnight, eyes the colour of space and skin that smells like springtime, all year round.

Those things that once seemed cute and sexy like the way she laughs too long at my jokes; the flickering flames of my ego can only be fanned so much. No one's *that* funny. And the way she grabs my hand as soon as it's in grabbing distance? Two long months ago, it was like the touch of an angel. Now, it feels like some sort of restraining device.

Maybe it's me.

I've got to end it.

For the millionth time, rehearsals begin in the shower.

"Look, Nadia, I think we need to have a chat . . ."

"Hey, Nads, there's something I need to tell you . . ."

"It's not you, it's me . . ."

"Things between you and me; they're just not working . . ."

Part of me even wonders if I should tell her about what's going on between mum and dad.

No. I can't. I couldn't. That would involve tears. I don't do tears. Not with other people, anyway.

Plus, the timing's all wrong. With my birthday looming on Sunday, she's probably got me a present of some sort.

What kind of monster would I be to dump her just before my birthday?

It'll have to be next week. Monday. I'll do it Monday, after school. Honest.

Sigh. I know what I'm really doing. I'm putting it off because I haven't got the balls.

There's a bang-bang-bang on the bathroom door.

"Jay-ay-mee! Hurry up! I need the toilet!"

Becky.

For Christ's sake: can't I even plan how I'm going to ruin my life in peace?

Scrabbling at the shower controls, I reach for a towel, wrap it around my less-than-ripped waist and unbolt the door.

My little sister runs in and, pulling her knickers down, climbs onto the toilet. She's a mass of brown curls and absent teeth, something like a cross between a piano and a poodle.

"Hello, Jamie!" she announces, bright as a button. "How are you?"

I blink twice, before smearing on the smile I rehearsed in the mirror.

"Oh, you know me, Becky," I nod. "I'm fine."



Two

Thank You, Arse.

"Toast's on the table!"

Mum does a reasonable job of making it sound as though nothing in our family, at no point, has gone mental in any way, shape or form. That everything's completely as it should be. That three and a half weeks ago, our father didn't hit her. That the pink, waxy skin around her left eye is as Nature intended it to be and that the fact that we're a man down at the breakfast table isn't anything to worry about. Becky appears to have bought into it, wholesale, smiling a sticky, strawberry smile at me. Mum boils the kettle with focussed nonchalance.

"Morning, love."

"Morning, mum. Good sleep?"

"Not too bad," she says, smiling a bit too brightly. "How about you? Were you up late? I thought I heard you."

"No," I lie, through a fake smile. "I was out like a light."

It's like me and mum are both wearing the exact same, gaily coloured masks, but we're both wearing them for the benefit of the same little person, no matter how uncomfortable. "And what about you, Bex? Did you sleep well?"

"She had a bad dream, didn't you, love?" Mum answers for her.

Becky nods forlornly; a huge, exaggerated nod, as if her neck is weakening with the strain of having to support her jam-encrusted head.

"Oh, dear," I reply, secretly envious that she's actually managed to get some sleep, even if it was plagued by nightmares. "Another one? What was it about?" I suddenly need to focus on something practical; something that'll stop me from being swamped by feelings. So, while I give Becky half my attention, I give the other half a mission: to spread the butter on my toast as carefully and as perfectly as I can. I leave half an inch around the perimeter, to prevent finger contact. My knife moves like it belongs to Van Gogh, spreading oils across a canvas.

Not the one that he cut his own ear off with. Although that might provide me with the level of distraction I need.

"Weeeellllll," she begins, obviously having told this story of woe to mum while I was busy boiling myself alive in the shower, "I had a bad dream that woke me up, but mummy was there and that made me go back to sleep."

"And what happened in the dream?" I ask, going for the jam.

"Weeeellllll, I had a dream that I was in a forest and it was very dark and I was scared, and I was shouting "Daddy, daddy!" but he wasn't there, but I could hear him, and he was far away, and he was trying to find me, but he couldn't, and it was scary, and I didn't like it."

I throw a look at mum. She catches it with a tight nod and springs into action as casually as she can.

"I explained to Becky that sometimes we dream about things that are worrying us and the best thing we can do is tell people who love us about those worries." There's an appeal in mum's voice; a call for back-up.

"That's right," I nod.

Judging by the look on her face, mum was expecting the cavalry at this point. I appear to have supplied her with little more than a pantomime horse. Smiling a quick apology, I try and dig out something more useful. Something a stand-in father figure would say.

"Are you worried about anything, Bex?"

Instead of looking at me, my little sister focusses on the toast she last took a bite from, her brow and mouth tightening a little bit.

"I miss daddy," she says, and two fat tears tumble down her soft cheeks.

Nice work, pantomime horse. That's everyone's morning ruined. What next?

Out of the corner of my eye, I see mum flinch. She puts her tea down and leaves the kitchen.

"Just going to the loo," she croaks, on her way out. I get up and go and sit on the bench, sister side, and put a clumsy arm around her: C3PO putting a leaden, metallic arm around R2D2. All it needs is an accompanying, metallic clang and the whole scenario would be complete. Just as I'm wishing I was better at this, my tone becomes thicker and clumsier, as three-week-old wounds threaten to open up.

"And daddy misses you, too."

"Mummy says he's got to do a lot of work."

So, that's the headline from today's issue of the *Family Times*. As an ace reporter for that very publication, I'm duty-bound to provide a supporting editorial piece.

"That's right and once he's finished all that work, we'll see him."

"But I wish he was here now." She buries her head in my armpit and shudders. Six years' worth of noisy, demanding child becomes suddenly small and mouse-like. I need to change this up; turn it into something else. Bring out the funnies.

A fart would be good right now. Farts are great levellers; you either snigger like you've never heard one before or you recoil in horror. I know which camp my sister belongs to and it's not the one my girlfriend's a member of.

As I quickly strain my ab-less abdomen for a residual pocket

of gas, I wonder if this is the tactic I ought to employ to let Nadia go. Let her go by letting one go.

But I know my bowels like no one else; there's nothing worthy of release.

"Do you know what I worry about?" I manage, gritting my teeth for another pointless push.

Becky shakes her head in my armpit. I can feel her tears, hot through my shirt. A fart would be so very welcome.

Whatever I'm about to say next had better be as funny as anything my anus could come up with; it needs to be fart-worthy. My uneaten, pristinely painted breakfast catches my eye. I have an idea.

"Jam!" I announce.

Becky pulls herself out from under my arm and looks up, wet-eyed, but ready for a new idea.

"Jam? You worry about jam?" Her brow crinkles with confusion, but her mouth is beginning the upward journey towards a smile.

"All the time," I nod, enthusiastically, picking up a slice from my plate and ramming it into my mouth.

"But why?"

My answer is delayed as I crunch down the toast as fast as humanly possible and swill it down with gulps of trachea-torching tea.

"Watch a minute. Hang on."

Becky's head comes away from my armpit and she watches, fascinated, as I finish the first slice and then cram the second into my mouth, necking tea whenever breathing becomes unnecessary. Once the second one's gone, I pillage her plate for another slice and sluice it down with another painful glug. As my gastric geology changes, my stomach distends and the tea-sodden, tectonic plates of toast boil and roil together.

Something bubbles.

Something dark.

Something inhuman.

"Jam," I grunt, through another molten mouthful of tea, "makes you fart."

Becky laughs and then looks suspiciously at the remaining toast on her plate, as though she's just been handed a card by a magician and told it's 'completely ordinary'.

"No, it doesn't." She doesn't sound too sure.

"Oh, it does," I mutter, forcing a bubble of air that wanted to be born as a burp lower, into the more odorous recesses of my body. "Ready?"

"No!" Becky gasps, but there's a 'yes' fighting to get out.

"Get ready . . ." I concentrate my efforts into the downstairs region and feel another tentative bubble from within. Another swig of tea just might shift it.

"No!"

"Here it comes . . ."

Don't let me down, methane-filled organs.

My bowels release their gaseous payload in glorious bass tones, reverberating along the wooden bench with thunderous resonance. If you want to make your private pleasure a public joy, wood is the surface to aim for.

"There!" I announce, just in case anyone's in any doubt.

The scream of laughter that leaves Becky's lungs is almost enough to make my ear drums willingly self-detonate. It's good to hear, even if it's just to confirm that I have a gift for anal comedy – and there's not many who can make that claim.

As Becky's hysteria rises in volume, mum walks back in and I spot the tell-tale signs that she's been crying. She's trying to make it look like she wasn't.

"What are you two laughing at?" she asks, relief relaxing every line on her face.

"Nothing!" I fire a well-practiced, pointed look at my convulsing little sister.

"Jamie did a HUGE fart!" Becky howls.

"Did he?" It's hard to tell mum's fake-shock from her real-shock; by nature, I am not a casual trumper. The ones Nadia has been party to were entirely accidental.

However, in the right company and under the right circumstances, a quick toot on the trouser trumpet is a welcome addition to any emotionally charged conversation. Thank you,

ladies and gentlemen, you've been a great crowd. My work is done here.

But not according to Becky.

"What are your bad dreams about?"

"Jam," I reply, scrabbling for a thread of logic to knit with. "Jam makes you fart and – you know – global warming. I have dreams where I melt ice caps with my bum. Terrible."

"What's this about jam?" Mum mock-frowns, joining the game and putting a newly brewed cuppa on the table. "Becky, you'll have to tell me all about this when Jamie's gone to school!" Her tone changes, hits Business Mode and I'm temporarily absolved from having to carry the Weight of Manhood. I'm demoted back to Teenage Son. "You'd better go, Jamie. You don't want to be late."

I glance at the clock. Yeah, I'm walking the line. If I walk it briskly, I might just pull it off.

"Give us a cuddle," mum smiles as I stand up.

We hug. There's an extra squeeze in there and a whispered 'thank you'.

I nod my understanding, grab my bag and put on my school jacket, giving the pocket a quick pat, just to be sure my phone's in there.

"See you later," I head for the door. "Try not to eat any jam, today!"

"Jam does NOT make you fart!" Becky shouts.

For once, I am blessed with a final, parting retort, which rings loud and proud in my wake.

Thank you, arse.