Exchange

Paul Magrs

Chapter one

They started laughing as soon as they saw him. Simon could hear them from miles away, and he knew he would have to walk past. He would have to brave it out as they laughed their heads off. They'd be jeering and pointing at the tartan shopping bag he was pulling along behind him. It was on wheels and it belonged to his gran.

Why had he let her talk him into taking her shopping bag? Why hadn't he just used normal carrier bags from the supermarket? Everyone else did. Only old pensioners used shopping bags on wheels to fetch their groceries from the shops. Not sixteen-year-old lads. Not unless they were freaks. Freaks who let their grans talk them into using pensioners' bags and who got laughed at in the street by all the other kids.

Kids who don't even know me, he thought. I've only been in this town a couple of months. They don't know anything about me. What gives them the right to go yelling at me?

He knew, though. He knew what it was that gave them the right.

I'm an easy target, he thought.

There he was: down the cheap supermarket, after school, making himself useful and picking up a few bits and bobs for his gran. And then pulling them home in his gran's old tartan shopping bag. The little wheels were trundling away behind him on the wet pavement. He was all buttoned up and mortified in his anorak. He looked like a daft lad, he knew. Soft in the head. And that's how all the kids hanging around the town marketplace saw him.

He sighed and steeled himself to trundle right past them. He tried keeping his head down. If he'd had a snorkel hood he'd have pulled it up.

What did they know? They didn't know anything about him. They didn't know anything at all. Nothing beyond this tiny, run-down place they lived in.

Look at them, he thought. Thinking they were dead cool. There was about six of them. Kids from his year group at school. He recognised a face or two, but didn't want to stare back at them for long. That would only aggravate them. The oldest boy had already left school. He was the hardest one of the lot: wolfish and lean. He swaggered about with a bravado that Simon couldn't help noticing. It really rankled with him, the way that older boy was free to hang around the town centre all day long, if he wanted. He sat on walls, with the others when they skived school, swigging the very cheapest, tartest cider straight from two-litre bottles. He would smoke cigarette after cigarette, fixing Simon with a penetrating, mocking stare whenever Simon passed by.

Rough lads, his mum would have called them. Rough lads and nasty girls. Don't take any notice of them. So Simon tried not to.

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His mum had always been relieved that he'd shown no signs of running off and joining the likes of them. Simon was amazed that anyone would ever want to. What was so great about hanging around on the streets? Especially on damp, mizzly November nights like this, when you couldn't even tell whether night had fallen. The mist had settled so thickly on the town. The kids shouting at him seemed trapped in their cone of sickly yellow street light.

And what was so great about hanging around the phone box? That was the saddest thing. There was nothing for that lot to do round here, so they got their kicks hanging around the only phone box in town, in the corner of the market square. It was trashed, of course. Someone had smashed the phone, leaving only the leads dangling. So they couldn't even amuse themselves making hoax calls to the fire brigade or the police or just random numbers. The kids simply sat on the wall beside the box. They smoked and scowled, bitched and slurped at their cider. Then they waited for the likes of Simon to come by so they could shout at him.

Tonight they made a meal of it, because of his gran's tartan shopping trolley. The wheels made a terrible racket on the slick paving stones and he cringed.

Soft lad. Daft lad. Weirdo. Creep.

Maybe these were just the kinds of things they always called new kids. He had only been in this town, living with his grandparents, for about half a term. Seven weeks or something. Hardly any time at all. It was all new and he was still a stranger to the kids in his school. This town was small: stuck up on its hill in the middle of the countryside. Maybe they weren't really used to anyone new coming in. This was just how they reacted. Suspicious. Even slightly hostile. At least, for a while. But that would wear off, wouldn't it?

Fat get. Tosser.

Gradually, he thought, they would get to know him. Slowly but surely, they would come to accept him and he would belong.

Snigger. Snigger. One of the girls - fearsome-looking, skinny, hair in a scrunchy - popped gum in his face as he went by. He flinched and plodded on, determined not to seem as if he was hurrying. Don't let them see that you're rattled: that's what his dad would have said. That would be his advice. Be brave. Show them that you're just as good as they are.

It was hard, though. Especially once he'd gone by them and he could no longer see them, sitting there on their wall. He couldn't be sure if they weren't coming after him, creeping up, ready to set upon him, once he'd turned off from the market square and down the alleyway that led to the street where his grandparents' bungalow was.

Simon gritted his teeth and kept on trundling. He resisted the temptation to look round behind him. The rumbling of the shopping bag's wheels seemed to fill his whole head.

How did I end up here? he groaned. This lousy place. This rotten town.

Every single thing about his life had changed, these past two months. And none of it for the good.

His mum and dad were dead.

There. He let the words reverberate inside his mind.

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The words didn't hurt. They didn't make him flinch or choke up. He could listen to that cold statement inside his mind and know that it was true. Six months after the fact, and did that mean he was accepting it? That he was getting over it?

No. It didn't mean that. That fact was too huge, too weird to take in. Even now. It was still too soon.

But Simon knew that nothing else could hurt him. Not really. Not beside the massive, irreversible fact of his mum and dad being dead. All of his life could crash in flames around him, and still nothing would hurt him or have any impact.

So really, he didn't care what the kids round here did to him. They could yell at him and follow him around down these back streets if they wanted. Even if they beat him up, it didn't really touch him. It was like there was some strange barrier between him and all these new people and this new place. A solid but transparent barrier. OK, so they didn't want him and wouldn't accept him into their school or their town. They thought he was weird and different to them. Well, he was. Simon felt like he wasn't even in the same species as them. As anyone else.

He felt like he was in a different species even to his grandparents. He had moved in with them, lived in their bungalow and, by rights, he belonged to them now. But they weren't quite real to him, even so.

This was his life now. He tried to grasp hold of it. To know where he was. In this shabby, misty town, Friday teatime, pulling along a tartan shopping bag containing corned beef, full fat milk, sliced white bread, cream cakes. The last was his gran's suggestion, so they could share a proper Friday night treat together.

'Is that you, Simon...?' His gran was calling from her kitchenette. She knew it had to be him. There was only him and her and Grandad who had keys to the place. She'd have heard the scraping of his Yale in the porch lock. Grandad would still be down his pub, the Legion, having a couple of pints with his cronies before supper.

Their pattern was set in stone. That was something Simon had learned about his gran and grandad. They didn't half like their routines. Maybe all old people were like that. Wanting to know exactly when every little thing was going to happen. Never any surprises. That's what old people preferred. No shocks, he thought. Weak hearts. They couldn't go round getting shocks and surprises: jolting their poor old hearts.

Living here was like being in a trance. Or being brainwashed. Simon was being forced into the shape of their lives. The repetitious, endless, downward slope of their lives. It was just like the days themselves, growing shorter and darker and less eventful: sliding remorselessly into winter.

He pulled the awkward shopping bag over the doorstep, through the porch, dropping slimy dead leaves behind him.

Inside the bungalow it was too stuffy and warm. His gran liked the heating to be turned up full blast, now the bad weather had started. Hang the expense, she said. Nothing was worse than feeling that misty cold creeping into your bones.

She was standing there in the kitchen doorway, rubbing her hands on a tea towel. She was smiling at him uncertainly. A hesitant, hen-shaped woman in a black knitted pullover. Her hair had been freshly set and rinsed lilac by Rini in the town centre. There were two pink spots on her face from the kitchen heat.

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'There you are. There's not every lad who'd go and fetch things from the shop for his gran. Your grandad would never do it. He doesn't even know where the supermarket is.'

'Hm,' said Simon, hefting the shopping bag across the living room and round the coffee table, careful not to let the wet wheels touch the thick pile of the carpet. 'I wish I'd never taken this thing with me. I looked a right idiot. Pulling it along after me...'

'Oh,' chuckled his gran. 'It's better than them plastic bags. They can split and you can strain your back heaving them about. Who's going to see you, anyway? This time of night. Who's going to be looking at you?'

'Kids were,' he said. 'From my year at school. And older ones. They think I'm daft or something.'

'You needn't listen to that lot.' His gran was bending stiffly, emptying the basket onto the kitchen bench. 'They wouldn't help anyone. They'll come to nothing. Was it the ones round the phone box?'

'Hm.'

'Bad ends, they'll come to,' she sighed, examining his groceries, peering over her glasses. 'And their language is blummin' awful, too. Oh! You got the expensive kind of corned beef, did you? And what's this? Help! Luxury cream cakes, eh?'

'You told me to buy them...'

'Two apple turnovers and a cream horn. Why, you'll bankrupt us. You'll have us in the poorhouse, our Simon.'

He stared at her and realised that she was having him on. She had caught him out.

'You daft thing,' he said.

She laughed. 'Ee, it's good to see you smile at last. It's been ages. I didn't think we'd see that grin of yours again.' She turned to get out some side plates for the squashy cakes. 'Tell you what. Let's have ours now, shall we? Before your grandad gets back from the Legion.'

If she'd looked at Simon then, she'd have seen the smile frozen on his face. She'd made him self-conscious about it. He felt instantly guilty. What was he doing, buying cream cakes? Talking nonsense and laughing with his gran? What was he doing, fretting about those kids laughing at him? What did any of that matter?

His mum and dad were dead and nothing was real besides that. There was nothing left of them, and yet they were the realest people in his life. Not a single piece of them had been recovered from the wreckage. They were under the sea somewhere, if anywhere. They had fallen out of the sky and disappeared for ever.

These brutal, unsayable facts were all that mattered. Simon found himself dwelling on them and interrupting the flow of every other thought by returning to them. He went over the thought of his mum and dad, under that sea, far away from here, about a million times a day.

'You are grieving, lad,' his gran had told him. Her scratchy old hands on his face. This had been during their only proper conversation about it. It was weeks ago. She'd said: 'You've got to let grief run through its course. It's a terrible thing. You'll get over it. It's the worst thing. But

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you'll put it behind you. We all will. You've got a new life now. With me and your grandad. You've got to settle into it. And the sooner the better.'

She'd squinted up at him. Her pale eyes were watery and blue. Back then, all Simon could think was: she has lost her daughter. My mum. How can she be so measured and calm about it? How can she tell me to feel, and be so calm herself? There's something either very wrong with her, or with me. I don't think either of us are reacting correctly to this. We don't really know how to deal with it at all.

Simon was used to the smells of his grandparents' house. They had been familiar to him, even before the disaster and his moving in. He'd known them from visits here, from spending afternoons, occasional evenings. Now they had become the smells of home: the fierce, vinegary smell of the gas fire in the living room; gravy and stewed greens; the particular face cream his gran used; the sour scent of beer around his grandad.

And this stale, nearly damp smell in the back bedroom. It was a room his grandparents had never used much. It was narrow, with a candlewick bedspread laid out on the single divan. They hardly ever had guests, so there was an unlived-in air. Now it was Simon's room and even after a few weeks of occupation it hadn't lost that clammy feel. He didn't want to say anything to them about it. Didn't want them to feel he was picking fault.

The room was draughty and clammy because there was a second door, leading into the garage. Really, Simon's room was a short passageway.

He didn't have much room for stuff. Now he realised how spoiled he'd been in his old home, where he could spread out and luxuriate in a proper-sized place. He'd let all his belongings clutter up the whole house and his mum and dad had never minded. Here, he felt chivvied and confined. He found that he didn't want to take up much space. He wanted to feel like he could pack up his few belongings at any given moment, and flee.

So many of his old belongings he'd given away to charity, when he'd left his parents' house. He found that he wasn't that bothered about the bulk of them, anyway. All those dog-eared childhood toys, all those clothes he'd grown out of. What was the point of hanging on to stuff like that? He spent one whole last day in the old house, stuffing things into black plastic bags. He waited for the charity van to come and take them away. He stood out on the driveway with his own belongings strewn about, mixed in with his mum and dad's. All the stuff no one would be needing.

It was a brief visit back to his old life, and his old town. It was only about forty miles from his grandparents' place, but it felt like a different country now.

'Are you sure you want to get rid of so many of your things?' his gran had asked softly. 'Look at this jumper. It's brand new.' He turned to see her rummaging in the bags.

He was keeping a bare minimum, he decided. School clothes (all in the wrong colours for his new school, of course), favourite jeans, a bunch of shirts. There was one shirt he had to hunt out to preserve - a soft, blue denim one with fraying cuffs. Ages ago it had belonged to his dad, and his mum had adopted it to wear around the house, even though it was way too big for her.

Simon took a box load of old photos. He tossed them in loose and then sealed the top with packing tape. He didn't want to go through them yet. It was like these family snaps were pictures of other people, a different family, leading an unfamiliar life.

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'You might regret not bringing many of your things,' his gran said. 'You might regret getting rid of all your old life. You can't get these things back, you know, once they're gone.'

He gritted his teeth, almost angrily, and went back to chucking stuff out. Ignoring her. What choice did he have? The room he was moving to was tiny. His grandparents' bungalow was cramped enough as it was. It was big enough for just them two. What else could he do but get rid of most of his belongings?

One thing - his gran wouldn't let him throw away his books. She put her foot down about that. Soon as she saw that he'd filled six huge cardboard boxes with all his battered old paperbacks, she'd grabbed his arm and said: 'You're not chucking these out, are you? All your books...'

He'd already made up his mind. They had to go.

'But you can't!' she gasped. She was scandalised. 'You've always been a proper bookworm. You've been collecting all your books since you were tiny...' She opened the flaps of the box closest to her. She scrabbled through the tidily piled books avidly, almost greedily. 'And some of these...they're presents from people. Presents from your mum and dad and me and your grandad and oh, Simon...You can't just get shot of them...' She flipped to the front pages of the top few books, finding the dedications in neat writing on fly-leaves: the Happy Birthdays, the Merry Christmases, the hope-you-love-this-like-I-do's.

'And...there's books here that belonged to your mum and dad. Books that go back years...' she said, more quietly. 'It's one thing, chucking out their clothes and all the stuff that's useless now. But...their books! That they loved, Simon. That you all loved...' She shook her head. 'Well, that's like getting rid of them themselves. Their actual memories. All the stories that they ever read...'

Simon's face was scalding over like a pan of milk. He found himself snapping at his gran. 'We have to get rid, don't we? There's no point in keeping anything to do with them...'

She flinched at his words. 'Ah, don't say that.'

They went quiet for a bit. Simon could have kicked himself, upsetting her like that. She'd sounded disgusted with him. It wasn't just his loss. He shouldn't lash out. Not at her.

'Look,' she said. 'We've got plenty of room. Your grandad won't mind. Look how many books I've got around the place! He won't even notice a few more. Come on. Bring them. Bring them with you.'

'All of them?'

She nodded determinedly, pursing her lips. 'Yes. It seems wrong, somehow, to get rid of books. You need them. They'll remind you of who you are. And where you've been. And you'll need them even more, when everything is changing...'

It was true that the bungalow was already quite full with his gran's own books. There were bookcases in each of the rooms, even the kitchen, and the paperbacks were stacked two deep. Some of the shelves were so tightly packed it was hard to prise particular volumes out.

There was a passageway in the middle of the bungalow, and his gran had built piles of books against the walls. Even in the few weeks Simon had been there, those piles of books had started to grow. They were creeping up the magnolia walls towards the ceiling.

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It seemed that his gran brought books home every single day. Every time she left the house, she returned with a brown paper parcel. More books, rescued from charity shops, mixed in with the day's groceries. To Simon it seemed like she was smuggling them indoors and adding them to the growing heaps, hoping they were unobtrusive. They were like orphans or lost pets she'd found out in the world, and she was hiding them from Grandad - who, Simon knew, thought the bungalow was full enough.

'The whole place stinks of old paper,' he grumbled. He wasn't exactly overjoyed when the transit van arrived from Simon's old home, bringing the six boxes of novels his gran had convinced him to keep. 'There's that nasty, smoky, woody, dirty smell,' his grandad complained. 'You can catch lice from old paper, you know. Yellow fever. Scarlet fever. Diptheria. Oh, they're dirty old things, books.'

He was sitting in his favourite chair, squinting at them as they unpacked Simon's books in the living room. Gran was tutting and cooing over titles, absorbed in flicking through pages. Simon didn't know if his skinny, sulking grandad was just teasing, or whether he was really annoyed with them. Sometimes it was hard to know how to take the old man. Simon was used to him being a quiet, mildly ironic presence. Living with him, he was seeing a harsher side to his grandad. He had a temper Simon had never seen before. He flew into moods and he could get quite irritated with Simon's gran who, to Simon's surprise, didn't shout back.

That night he erupted all of a sudden when Gran asked him if maybe they could store some of Simon's books in the garage.

'Well, why not?' she asked, keeping her voice steady. 'You're always saying there's too many smelly old books in the house. That garage of yours is standing mostly empty...'

Grandad rattled his newspaper crossly, warningly. 'You can't put them in there, because the garage is mine, do you hear, woman? That's the only space I've got. In this whole world. After nearly seventy years in this life, and that garage is the only place I've got to myself. My only privacy...' He coughed explosively and glared at them.

Simon could see his point. The garage was Grandad's den. There was hardly anything in it. Just an old armchair and a bit of carpet. Ancient oil stains on the concrete floor. But it was his grandad's own separate world.

Gran had fallen quiet. 'God knows what he does in there,' she whispered to Simon, later that evening. 'I dread to think. But I do think it's mean of him, not to let us use the space...'

In the event, Simon emptied the crates of books into his own narrow bedroom. It turned out there was just enough room if he stacked them against the wall to about shoulder height. He had to devise an expert way of piling them up. He layered them like bricks, like a master builder. He tried different ways - the books collapsing and avalanching onto his bed - until he got it right.

He felt like he was walling himself in. Insulating himself against the world, like a Pharaoh in a gilded tomb, embalmed with all his treasure. The pages of the paperbacks started to crinkle with the damp in the air, seeping through the plaster of the walls. But still Simon felt reassuringly insulated and separated from the world.

It felt good to be back in that narrow room, having returned from his grocery trip, changing out of his school clothes, into his jeans and that favourite soft blue shirt. He left the shirt untucked and over his jeans, like he had to nowadays. He'd started putting on some weight recently, from eating his gran's dinners. Her steamed puddings and extra helpings of mash; the doughnuts and biscuits she pressed on him. He was really starting to thicken round the middle and he should do something about it, he supposed.

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He felt like the little boy in the fairy tale. Kept captive by the witch in the cottage made of gingerbread. She was feeding him up for the cooking pot. She was blind, the old witch, and, when she pinched his arm to check how succulent he was, she couldn't see he was poking an old chicken bone through the bars. He was deceiving her. No, I'm still skinny. Still skinny as this. It isn't time to eat me yet.

Well. She would expect him back in the kitchen soon. Friday night. She'd be doing her corned beef hash. In about an hour they'd be eating at the kitchen table, shovelling up the delicious, steamy stodge. Drinking hot, milky tea out of mugs. He could hear her now, through the thin walls, clashing the pans about with her usual gusto, and warbling along to some cheesy radio station.

He had maybe an hour to read before they'd want to know where he was. He picked up the next book from the stack closest to his bed. He didn't even look to see what it was. A satisfyingly fat, soft-covered book, the spine bending easily, but not cracking under his fingers. He lay down on the bed, propping himself up on all three pillows. It was a collection of ghost stories he was reading. Just right for the weather, the time of year. From the 1930s. Vintage, twee, gently spooky, and just alarming enough.

He let himself sink into the first few pages, getting his bearings. Slowly but surely, drawn into the tale.

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