Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

The Rope Ladder

written by

Nigel Richardson

published by

Oxford University Press

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter 1

I stood in front of the wolf enclosure and a wolf soon appeared, following the line of the fence. It looked ungainly at first. It had its head down and its thin white legs moved stiffly and awkwardly. But that was deceptive. A wolf only shows about five per cent of what it is capable of. The rest is hidden until it needs it. Soon this wolf showed more interest. As it came near me it lifted its head and speeded up into a springy, elastic trot. Its fur was thick and swirling in shades of white and brown, like the froth on cappuccino.

It looked as if it was smiling. It was panting with its mouth open and its tongue was furled like a slice of ham between the daggers of its lower teeth. But it wasn't smiling. Wolves don't smile at humans. Normally they don't even bother looking at us, because humans are boring to a wolf. There are too many of us, we all look the same, and we do the same things, such as stop and stare at them, and click our fingers, and make growling noises. Then we walk off, back to our human lives that can never be remotely enviable to a wolf.

But I didn't do those things. I stood dead still and concentrated, trying to talk to it with my mind. And

the wolf looked at me. Admittedly it showed no more interest in me than I would show in a sweet wrapper I saw on the pavement. But still, for a fraction of a second it did look at me. Its smoky yellow eyes glowed as if there was a fire burning behind them, a fire in the centre of the wolf's head. Those eyes communicated things. I couldn't tell you exactly what things because they were wolf-thoughts, and they don't translate brilliantly into human thoughts, but I felt them.

Sometimes the wolf-thoughts calmed me down and sometimes they wound me up. That day, they calmed me down. I needed calming down. Ten minutes before, I'd beaten a kid up really badly and the feel of him was still buzzing on my fists. I didn't beat him up on my own, mind. I don't just mean that my mates, Vernon Crottall and Barry Lunc, were involved too. I mean there was something inside me that took over and made me do it even though I didn't want to. It had never happened to me before and it was scary.

Mum got to know about it, but at the same time she didn't know about it at all. She saw my swollen face, and the dried blood I didn't realize was hanging out of one nostril, and jumped to the wrong conclusion: that I'd been the victim of a random, unprovoked attack by one of the hundreds of lip-ringed nutters she reckoned roamed the Lock area. She may even have been pleased in a funny way, because it was an added reason to move out of London.

'We can't leave soon enough, if you ask me,' she said. 'You'll love it in the country, love, I promise.

We'll get away from all this madness.' She didn't know that the madness was *me*.

Regent's Canal towpath, between Camden Lock and Regent's Park, an afternoon in July. Vern, Barry, and I had gone down there with some cans of cider. It's true, you get a lot of weirdos shuffling past—bag-ladies with tangerine hair, paedos with Stanley knives in their back pockets—but we could handle it, we were Camden. We were sitting on the bench where the narrowboats tie up. The boat directly in front of us, called *Bilbo Baggins*, was twee as you like with flowers painted round the windows. Its curtains were closed except for one window where there was a tiny gap that you could probably have seen through if you went right up to the boat and knelt down. Vern said that maybe there was a woman in the boat getting undressed. He dared me to go and have a look but I wouldn't. We carried on watching people walking by on the towpath and laughing at the divvy ones. For instance, a bar code went by—that's a balding bloke who tries to disguise it by brushing thin strands of hair over the bald patch—followed by a gaggle of what Vern called cancer slags: fat women in too-tight leggings, smoking snouts.

And I was thinking to myself how sound Barry and Vern were. When we met we used to do this thing of interlocking our arms and fingers and squeezing really hard while banging our foreheads together and frowning. We'd got it from a new goal celebration that the Arsenal players had started doing.

This is how weird Mum could be: she didn't like Barry but she thought Vern was OK. Dad once had a go at her about it. It was after she'd said she didn't want me going to a party at Barry's house because his mum wasn't going to be there, it was just his elder brother in charge of all these twelve-year-old boys.

Dad said, 'Be honest, Clare, you're just finding excuses. You don't like the lad and that's what it's about.'

'I don't *not* like him,' Mum said. 'I just don't trust his brother to act responsibly.'

'Why not?' said Dad. 'How old is he, kidder?' (Kidder was what Dad called me, when he wasn't using my real name. That's a lot better than Mong, which is what Vern and some others called me sometimes, or Slimehead, on account of my lack of earlobes.)

'About twenny,' I said.

'Sounds plenny old enough to me,' he said, 'to keep ten pre-pubescent toerags in check.'

'Cheers for that,' I said. It was good fun being insulted by Dad.

'What's he doing living at home at twenty-odd?' Mum said.

'Cos he can't afford the bloody rents in this high-stakes metropolis of ours,' said Dad.

'Because he's signing on and taking drugs,' said Mum. 'And teaching the youngsters dangerous tricks on their mountain bikes. What's he doing mucking about on bikes at his age?'

Mum is quite right-wing, by the way.

'Oh, and what about Barry's mum while we're about it?' Dad said.

'What about her?' said Mum.

'The truth is, Clare, you like Vernon Crottall because his mum is a GP in Highgate and his dad's on the news, and you don't like Barry whatsisame—'

'Lunc,' I said.

'Lunc because he hasn't got a live-in dad and his mum is—what is she, kidder?'

'An out-reach worker for Camden Council.'

I almost said something, except I didn't want to sneak on my friends. But the point was, if Mum only knew what a nutter Vern was, with his quack mother and his foreign-correspondent-on-the-telly-in-a-flak-jacket dad. It was Vern who got me to lick a beer can that had been in the freezer. It was Vern who nicked a McDonald's cup full of coins from a tramp with a baseball bat outside Chalk Farm tube. It was Vern who smoked drugs at thirteen and nicked money out of his mum's purse and condoms out of his dad's laptop bag and tried to persuade Barry and me to go with him to pick up a prostitute behind King's Cross station. And it was Vern who decided it would be a brilliant idea to roll that kid who came past as we sat on the bench by the canal that afternoon, drinking cider, and I was staring into space thinking what a sound couple of mates I had, and how I was going to miss them when we moved out of London.

I knew the kid. He was a bit mental, used to hang out around Camden Lock, just standing there nodding his head most of the time although sometimes he was paid about 5p a day to hand out leaflets advertising a tattoo and piercing studio called Evil from the Needle.

I remembered him because a couple of weeks before he'd gobbed on my trainer. Deliberately. I was waiting at a foodstall to get a cardboard plate of fish balls and noodles and, bam, out it came, a horrible stringy one that stayed in the air so my trainer and his mouth were joined for a second by a suspension bridge of yellow gob. He was looking at it, nodding at it, then he said, 'Posh twat,' and walked off.

I wasn't at a posh school. It was a comprehensive, although not the same comprehensive as the Gobber. In our school quite a lot of kids' parents were like mine: OK off but not ra-ra rich. Ra-ra rich was having a daddy who wore a suit and drove a Bentley and sent you to a boarding school where they wore uniforms that hadn't changed for about three hundred years. Ra-ra dads didn't wear a leather waistcoat and crêpe-soled George Cox leopardskin creepers, bought from the Doc Marten shop round the corner from Camden tube. My parents just happened to be quite cool, or Dad was anyway. But the Gobber still hated me, or people who looked like me. And I hated the Gobber, not just because he gobbed on my trainer (my mum had to put it in the washing machine, and then it was bleached out so she had to put the other one in too to even them up) but because he made me be too much of a coward to do anything back to him.

I admit I was probably a tiny bit pissed; I'd almost finished my can of Strongbow. But anyway, I saw this bloke coming along the towpath from Camden Lock direction. His head was down, he was walking in tiny little steps that made him look like a mong. I nudged

Vern so we could laugh at him. Then I realized who it was: the Gobber. I put my hands out, one on Vern's arm, the other on Barry's so they'd know something was up and I wanted them to be quiet. And we watched as the Gobber walked past us. Then I made the mong noise, the grunting, chimp/cow/pig noise you make to mean someone's mental: *nur, nur, nuuurrrrr*. I thought it was going to be OK. The Gobber just carried on walking. Vern said, 'Who's that then?' and I said, 'Tell you later.'

But then the Gobber stopped. He didn't turn round at first, he stopped walking but carried on facing ahead, towards the park, his head nodding slightly. I thought, Oh shit. Then I thought, But I'll be OK. I've got Vern and Barry with me. Oh yeah?

The Gobber turned round and walked back till he was in front of the bench. He still had his head down, as if he was looking for something tiny he'd dropped in the mud (his brain, for instance). He didn't make eye contact but he said, from under his hair, 'Who made that noise?' In other circumstances this would have been funny, because his voice was very similar to the chimp/cow/pig noise he was complaining of. But I wasn't laughing and neither was Vern or Barry. In fact, what Vern and Barry were doing was sliding away from me along the bench so it was just me left on my own in the middle. And it was obvious who made the noise.

I wanted to slide left or right too, so I wasn't sitting on my own. I felt stupid and exposed sitting there, not saying anything, with the Gobber standing right in

front of me, also not saying anything, and not looking at me either, but just nodding his head as if he'd got a screw loose in his neck. It was an embarrassing and stupid moment that was soon stretching into loads of embarrassing and stupid moments and I knew already that Vern and Barry were going to give me a hard time about it afterwards, for starting something I couldn't finish, for making the mong noise and not knowing where to go with it.

I noticed the Gobber's trainers and they made me feel sad because they were cardboard-looking and I knew they sold them in bins outside shoe shops in the high street for about seven quid. Somebody walked past behind the Gobber on the towpath. I wanted it to be a bossy adult who'd intervene and tell us all to get lost, and Vern, Barry, and I could scoot off to the park and stand outside the wolf enclosure looking for movement, looking for a flash of their yellow eyes that reminded me of the old-fashioned marbles you could buy at the Lock. But the person walked on and left us to it.

And then the Gobber did what he did best. Bam. He didn't need to look or take aim, he just lifted his chin and out spurted this horror-movie flame of stringy, yellowy gob. He may have been a nutter but he was a world-class gobber. It didn't land on my trainer this time. If only. It only landed on my head, that's all. But I didn't react. Inside my brain I was running round in circles with my arse on fire and a blue flashing light strapped to my head, yelling 'Gross' and 'Bastard' and 'Aaagghh'. But outside: nothing.

The Gobber had turned and was walking off towards the park. Maybe he'd already forgotten what had just happened. Maybe his brain was incredibly slow-working, like a dinosaur's, which was why he took so long to stop and come back to me after I made the noise I now really wished I hadn't made, because I was in a no-win situation and I knew Vern and Monster weren't going to let me forget this for a long time. Maybe for ever.

Barry produced a blubbery laugh, meaning he couldn't believe what he'd just seen. I felt the gob sliding down my hair and for a split-second I thought I might puke. I found some old toilet paper in my pocket and tried to wipe the gob off casually so my mates didn't see. But Vern did see. He said, 'Don't put that near me, he's probably HIV positive.' Then he shoved my arm and said, 'Go on then.'

'What?'

'Do him. He's getting away. Batter him. Push him in the canal. Whatever.'

'Nah. He's not worth it.'

Vern looked really angry. 'You're joking,' he said.

Barry said, 'Leave it out, Vern. If that's what he wants . . . '

'*I'll* do him then,' said Vern. And he stood up. 'D'you want me to do him, yeah?'

'No. Listen,' I said, 'let's just forget it, yeah? The guy's a mong. He doesn't know what he's doing.'

'He's getting away,' said Vern. He pointed down the towpath where, in the distance, the figure of the Gobber was still visible as he walked under a bridge.

Vern was angry. 'Course he knows what he's doing. He didn't just like *accidentally* happen to gob on your head, did he? The bloke needs sorting out.'

'Let's go back to the Lock,' I said. 'Chill. Look at some CDs. I'll buy you a CD. Or vintage vinyl. You've got a record deck, haven't you?'

The story might have ended here, with three sound mates drifting back to the Lock to blow money on music. But, then, Vern made the comment and raised the subject that changed everything.

He said, 'Is it cos of your dad?'

Dad had died in the depth of winter. It had been nearly five months and Vern and Barry had never mentioned it, not since the day after it happened. 'What are you talking about?' I said. I wasn't angry, not immediately. It was more a feeling of numbness.

Vern wouldn't let it go. He said: 'Is it cos of your dad dying that you're wimping out? Is it cos of your dad dying that I'm not recognizing you as the sort of mate I would hang out with, who gets into heavy situations and can't handle it cos they've suddenly turned into a mong, you slime'ead mong?'

Now the anger kicked in. 'Piss off, Vern,' I said, and started running. Partly I was running so he and Barry couldn't see I was crying. Partly I was running because suddenly, more than anything, I wanted to see the wolves in Regent's Park zoo. Which meant I was running towards the park. Which meant I was running after the Gobber. You could tell I wasn't thinking straight.

Vern and Barry came after me. Vern caught up with me first and slapped me on the back as we ran. 'Go

for it, yeah?' he said. He didn't understand what I was doing, why I was running. I had no intention of battering the Gobber. Except now I did. I had to, even though it wasn't what I wanted to do. How weird is life, that often you end up doing the last thing in the world you meant to do. Like moving to a deadsville village in the middle of the countryside, or attacking a poor kid with a dinosaur brain from behind.

I couldn't believe it but the Gobber didn't turn round when he heard our footsteps on the muddy tow-path. All I could see was his back, a black bomber jacket stretched across it, and I was wondering what to do to it. Left and right, Vern and Barry were like a motorbike escort. But it was me, the politician in the middle, who had to do the business.

Even when I got right up behind the Gobber, so I could reach out and touch his shoulder, even then I didn't know what I was going to do. Then I saw his head move, his shoulder start to swing round, and I just did it, this stupid thing that must have looked pathetic if a CCTV camera had caught it, for instance—which was a possibility that freaked me for weeks afterwards. I sort of ran into the back of him with my elbows up but I didn't catch him clean because his body was just starting to turn. My elbows slid off him and I half tripped but managed to stay on my feet. The Gobber went down as I'd intended, but not for long. I hopped up and down as if I was skipping with an invisible rope as I watched him rolling in the mud. Then he bounced back up.

He didn't look at me, or not with his eyes anyway, but he knew where I was. He rushed me and I had nowhere to go. I wasn't going to run—even I wasn't that much of a wimp, at least if Vern and Barry were around—but I didn't know how to stop him. He was a dinosaur on go-faster pills.

I put my hands up to protect my face but he wasn't coming for me with his fists. He'd got one arm out and as he ran into my chest he swung the arm round my neck and brought my head down into a tight lock under his armpit. And in a flash I was sunk in this alien, armpit-and-bomber-jacket world, scratchily black and smelling of unwashed pits and washing that's been left too long in the washing machine. The upper half of my body was immobilized. I could hardly breathe never mind speak. Snot was coming out of my nose and I felt my eyes bulging. A sort of silent humming sounded in my covered ears.

Then the Gobber hit me in the face with his free fist. Bam bam.Twice. Intense heat on my nose, pain radiating out to my ears. I twisted and turned, pushed up, pulled back. I hardly moved a centimetre. My entire head felt on fire. My ears were like barbs on a fish hook. The more I moved to free myself, the more they stuck in the lock of the Gobber's arms. Imagine if I'd had proper earlobes like everyone else (except Mum—that's who I got mine off). I'd still be down there, in the Gobber's armpit.

But the Eighth Armoured Division was on its way. There was a scuffle above and below me, arms thrashing about and feet losing their grip in the mud, and

suddenly my ears were free. It was like coming up to the surface of a swimming pool. I could hear, I could make sense.

Vern and Barry were either side of the Gobber and they were pulling him off me. They were making noises that weren't quite words, like 'Oi, yuss now, watch it, fu—, shoot, jeez, ayee, ayee,' and then my whole body was free. A head that felt over-inflated. Ears stinging, eyes watering, and in my blurred vision, the Gobber. Vern and Barry were clamped on to either arm. He was standing there right in front of me with his head down, a captured dinosaur. We were all breathing heavily. Vern said, 'Go on then.'

'Wha—?' My mouth was so dry I couldn't speak properly.

'Do him. Knee him. Chop him. Whatever. But get on with it, for Christ's sake, we can't hold him all day.'

I looked to left and right. No one around. I looked back at the Gobber. And at that moment, inside me, something snapped.

Let's not go into detail, but I did what Vern said. I battered the Gobber. I battered him so badly that Vern and Barry shouted at me to stop. But I didn't stop, and they grabbed hold of me to try to make me. Then a woman in a house on the far side of the canal shouted that she was calling the police and, finally, I did stop. And we scattered. Or Vern, Barry, and I did. I'm not sure how well the Gobber could walk after what I did to him.