

MATT GOODFELLOW

THE FINAL YEAR

Illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton



Otter-Barry

BOOKS

*This is a book about family and love and life.
It is dedicated to my family, who have helped,
supported and nurtured me on my journey.
Love and light to my dad, Bob, Jane, Gaz, Leo,
Clement, Ignatius, and, of course, my children,
Will and Daisy. Big love to you all x – M.G.*

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 and in the USA in 2024 by
Otter-Barry Books, Little Orchard, Burley Gate, Herefordshire, HR1 3QS
www.otterbarrybooks.com

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
Designed by Arianna Osti

ISBN 978-1-915659-04-0

Illustrated digitally

Set in Sabon and Minute

Printed in Great Britain

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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PART 1

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Ya need to be able to pin
this down

so ya can see it in ya mind as it plays out –
picture where it's happenin.

Imagine it's summer.
A hot one.

Leave the suburban semis to their leaf-dreams
and head for the city,
straight into the streets that surround the centre.

See how things are different?

It's tighter 'ere.
Can ya feel it?

See the take-aways and neon-washed litter?
The disfigured pigeons
huddled under railway bridges and flyovers?
Taxis buses pizza-boxes vape shops?

This is not a place of labradors and lattes
and electric Audis
this is a place of staffies and cider
and exhaust-pipe smoke,

a place of one foot in front of the other brother
cos what else ya gonna do?

See that tall, skinny kid with the ball in his hand
sayin, *see ya later* to his mate?

That's me:

Nathan Wilder

Nate.

10 years old

and a week away from the end of Year 5.



One more thing

The woman over there pushin the buggy,
hair scraped up in a top-knot,
headin to the shop for milk and cider,

a little kid
dressed as Spiderman
trailin behind her,

that's Mum.

The kid is Dylan
my nearly-four-year-old-nuisance-of-a-littlest
brother.

Always up to no good,
straight out any open door.

The bigger kid further back,
kickin stones along the road, ignorin Mum's shouts
to *GET A MOVE ON*,

that's Jaxon or Jax as everyone calls him:
my other brother

8 years old

he's alright.

Nearly forgot

The school ya can see right next to the park

in the middle of the estate,

the one with the fancy new claddin
the council are puttin on top of all the
crumblin bricks and callin it
'regeneration',

the one with the main road right next to it
rattlin the claddin back off
and the corner shop opposite the main gates
where Mum's headin to,

that's Poppy Field Primary.

My school.

These are my streets

these are my people

this is my story.



PART 2

**SOME STUFF YA NEED TO
KNOW: THE FAMILY**

Me (gonna do mine in rhyme)

Tall thin
like to win

on-point hair
long-distance stare

love football laughs
not down with maths

read everythin
make words sing

write don't fight
not a coward though right?

(Just swear I'm scared I'll lose control
of The Beast that sleeps within my soul.)

Mum

is bonkers

says it herself
not in a 'needs lockin up' kind of way
though she has been before

she's just damaged
I s'pose.

Ran away at 15
been runnin ever since,
won't ever say why
or what happened to make her leave,
but it was summat bad.

Had me at 17.

Always tryna fix someone,
people at the door with a broken wing.

Loads a lipstick

goes to Bingo round the corner
most days
laughs a lot loud proper head back snortin.

Cries too,
when she thinks we're asleep.

The story of the three wheres

No. 1: Nick – my dad

The reason I'm tall.

Mum keeps a picture of 'em together
dun't know I know it's in her top drawer.

Looked like Jesus
she says
and I see what she means
long black hair
little beard
graceful.

He was young
too young
like Mum.

Was gonna save her
help her escape the past
right up to the point she got pregnant with me.

Got cross got scared
got gone

went walkabout in the wilderness
never came back.

Could be dead
could be out there
still walkin

depends what ya believe.

I'm past it.

Mum'd deny it
but

she's always been lookin
for Jesus

it's just that now she only sees his face
at the bottom of a bottle
or the back of a Bingo card.

No. 2: Brandon — Jaxon's dad

Big bald bear

body-builder biceps

bouncer

bully

beer

beer

beer

banks balaclavas bullets

behind bars

bye bye baby.

No. 3: The question mark — Dylan's dad

A lottery

many tickets sold

no winner's yet come forward
to claim the prize.

Jaxon

Jax
my little bro
two years below me
but nearly as big already.

Cool
clever
fast
brave
funny
lucky
good lookin
mint at football
everyone loves him.

Am I jealous?

Hell, yeah!



Dylan

my littlest bro
calls me Natey
we call him
Turbo Terror

always movin
always sweatin
even in his sleep

thinks he's 'Spideyman'.

I feel sorry for Jax
havin to share a room with him.

Red cheeks
red hair
(big clue for the ticket-holder there)

makes Mum turn the air
blue

joinin the crew at Poppy Field
in September.

Reception won't know what's hit 'em.
We still don't.

Oh, so ya wanna know about The Beast, right?

OK so it first happened in Year 2
though Mum says I was always throwin tantrums
when I was proper little
but on this day summat happened to spark it
to release it
can't even remember what it was
someone nicked my pencil maybe
or a push in the line
on the way back from assembly.

All I remember is from
somewhere really deep down in me
I feel a darkness risin but like a hot darkness
like fire and smoke all mixed together
and my fists are flames
and the next thing I know I'm curled up in
The Sunshine Room cryin and cold
and, man, I'm tired so tired
and my teacher Miss Nolan's rubbin my back and
the whole room's in bits the whole world is.

I'd been carried out the classroom with a chunk of
some poor kid's ponytail in my hand.

It happened again a week later so they
got Mum in and she had to come to meetings at
school to talk about my issues and then I had
to go see this woman every week, Miss Hough,
a counsellor, to talk and draw
and find a way to keep The Beast at bay.

Two years it took us. Two years of talkin
and drawin and learnin to breathe in a way that let
me control that beast, rather than it controllin me.

So if ya see me startin to breathe
in a strange way right, I in't crazy or nothin.

I'm self-regulatin, innit.

Missin dad sketch me and Jax do:

Me, pickin Real Madrid on Fifa:
How's yer dad, Jax?

Jax goes for Barcelona:
No Idea. He's a muppet. Don't need him.
How's yer dad, Nate?

Me: *No Idea. He's a muppet, Jax. Don't need him.*

Together: *We have each other, brother!*

We're hopin Dylan'll get involved
when he can talk better
and he's stopped pretendin
to cover everythin with his
'Spideywebs'.



Our house

for now

is a tiny terraced
jammed in the middle of a thousand more the same.

Landlord's a muppet
never fixes nothin
always says the rent's goin up
says he's sellin

stresses Mum out.

Gutters leak
smells damp,

back yard full of fadin plastic toys Dylan's smashed up.

Patch of grass over the road
NO BALL GAMES sign lyin on its side
covered in ball marks
upside-down shoppin trolley next to it.

Come in
through the front door into the livin room
which doubles as my bedroom

mind the buggy and bike
big TV propped up against the wall it fell from
sofa/bed – that's my duvet and pillow
stuffed behind it.
My pile of books.

Battered old kitchen at the back.

Upstairs is Mum's room
clothes everywhere
grotty little bathroom.

The boys' room
stuff everywhere, man.

If yer lookin for peace
go somewhere else.

Auntie San

lives next door
her house is even worse than ours.

Mum's best mate
no blood relation
but family, y'know?

Always round 'ere
at the kitchen table
or on the front step with Mum.

Heart of gold

front tooth of one
too.

Used to be a nurse
now she dun't do much
other than smoke
drink tea and cider
and talk rubbish with Mum

they call 'emselves

dole mates.

PS

that lad I was sayin
see ya later to
back at the start
with the bright blue eyes
that's Parker Smith,

my best mate since I nicked his biscuit
at nursery.

He's family
too.

PART 3

END OF YEAR 5

All through Year 5 they've
been tellin us

that next year will be tough
that we'd better be prepared for it
that it's a steppin stone to high school
that it's time to show what we can do
that it's SATS
that it's boosters and revision
that it's a fishbowl, everyone looks at the Year 6s
that it's time to knuckle down and focus
that it's all worth it in the end
that it's THE most important year of our lives so far
and we need to act like it
that it's all gonna change after this year, so we need
to enjoy it while we can
that we're gonna make ourselves proud
that it's time for us to step up and become top of the
school
that it's the final year.

Yeah, well, maybe, but

right now all I care about
is transition mornin tomorrow,

which kids I'll be with
next year,

cos we're a two-form entry
and they like to mix it up.

But me and PS have
always been lucky.

Oh

and who
the teacher'll
be.

Mum's out cold still

the mornin after Bingo
so I get the boys ready
like I've done a thousand times before.
Off-brand cocoa-pops
the dregs of milk and juice,
Dylan bangin spillin
Jax a wordless spoon-scrapin zombie
still lookin cool though.

Add the bowls to the twisted towers
sprawled by the sink,
Give Dylan a kiss throw Jax a wink,
Sit on Mum's bed yer a good un, Natey.

I open her curtains she blinks at the son,

Love ya, Nate. Love ya, Mum.

After registers

Miss Barton reads out two separate lists of names.

One'll be the new 6G with Mrs Griffin,
who's been at Poppy Field
as long as anyone can remember
and seems like she'd rather be anywhere else,

the other'll be 6J
with a new teacher
Mr Joshua.

We go quiet
as
Miss
slowly
reads
out
each
name

asks	us
to	make
two	lines
ready	to
file	into
our	new
classrooms	for
the	mornin.

I only hear two names

Nate

Parker

the

end.

He nods at me

as his line shuffles off
to their new room.

Miss is in a rush
to get rid of us,

so she can get
her new Year 5s in.

Says she dun't wanna
talk about it,

to the kids
moanin as their

best mates go
out the door.

Says it wasn't her
decision,

she's busy
we'll get used to it.

I put my head down
and follow my line.

PS

I'll miss ya.

Mr Joshua

waits by the door to greet us.
I can hear him sayin, *Hi*, to the kids
at the front.

*Sit where you want for this morning
but make a sensible choice.*

I'm
dead
last.

Hi, he says,
I'm Mr Joshua.
Welcome.

Tall I'm guessin the same sort of age as Mum
but looks way younger
designer glasses footballer's skin fade
neat beard
big smile circles his thumbs as he talks.

I do my best impression of a smile

slide past him

slump in a seat and the smoke is risin
breathe Nate breathe

and I can feel the heat and the darkness and
The Beast withdraw return to the deep

and Mr Joshua's watchin me.

You OK fella?
Need a minute somewhere to chill?

I swallow it down.

No thanks I'm fine.

