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Slam

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Extract

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So things were ticking along quite nicely. In fact, I'd say that good stuff had been happening pretty solidly for about six months.

– For example: Mum got rid of Steve, her rubbish boyfriend.

– For example: Mrs Gillett, my art and design teacher, took me to one side after a lesson and asked whether I'd thought of doing art at college.

– For example: I'd learned two new skating tricks, suddenly, after weeks of making an idiot of myself in public. (I'm guessing that not all of you are skaters, so I should say something straight away, just so there are no terrible misunderstandings. Skating = skateboarding. We never say skateboarding, usually, so this is the only time I'll use the word in this whole story. And if you keep thinking of me messing around on ice, then it's your own stupid fault.)

All that, and I'd met Alicia too.

I was going to say that maybe you should know something about me before I go off on one about my mum and Alicia and all that. If you knew something about me, you might actually care about some of those things. But then,

looking at what I just wrote, you know quite a lot already, or at least you could have guessed a lot of it. You could have guessed that my mum and dad don't live together, for a start, unless you thought that my dad was the sort of person who wouldn't mind his wife having boyfriends. Well, he's not. You could have guessed that I skate, and you could have guessed that my best subject at school was art and design, unless you thought I might be the sort of person who's always being taken to one side and told to apply for college by all the teachers in every subject. You know, and the teachers actually fight over me. 'No, Sam! Forget art! Do physics!' 'Forget physics! It would be a tragedy for the human race if you gave up French!' And then they all start punching each other.

Yeah, well. That sort of thing really, really doesn't happen to me. I can promise you, I have never ever caused a fight between teachers.

And you don't need to be Sherlock Holmes or whatever to work out that Alicia was a girl who meant something to me. I'm glad there are things you don't know and can't guess, weird things, things that have only ever happened to me in the whole history of the world, as far as I know. If you were able to guess it all from that first little paragraph, I'd start to worry that I wasn't an incredibly complicated and interesting person, ha ha.

This was a couple of years ago – this time when things were ticking along OK – so I was fifteen, nearly sixteen. And I don't want to sound pathetic, and I really don't want you to feel sorry for me, but this feeling that my life was OK was new to me. I'd never had the feeling before, and I haven't really had it since. I don't mean to say that

I'd been unhappy. It was more that there had always been something wrong before, somewhere – something to worry about. (And, as you'll see, there's been a fair bit to worry about since, but we'll get to that.) For instance, my parents were getting divorced, and they were fighting. Or they'd finished getting divorced, but they were still fighting anyway, because they carried on fighting long after they got divorced. Or maths wasn't going very well – I hate maths – or I wanted to go out with someone who didn't want to go out with me . . . All of this had just sort of cleared up, suddenly, without me noticing, really, the way the weather does sometimes. And that summer there seemed to be more money around. My mum was working, and my dad wasn't as angry with her, which meant he was giving us what he ought to have been giving us all the time. So, you know. That helped.

If I'm going to tell this story properly, without trying to hide anything, then there's something I should own up to, because it's important. Here's the thing. I know it sounds stupid, and I'm not this sort of person usually, honest. I mean, I don't believe in, you know, ghosts or reincarnation or any weird stuff at all. But this, it was just something that started happening, and . . . Anyway. I'll just say it, and you can think what you want.

I talk to Tony Hawk, and Tony Hawk talks back.

Some of you, probably the same people who thought I spend my time twirling around on ice-skates, won't have heard of Tony Hawk. Well, I'll tell you, but I have to say that you should know already. Not knowing Tony Hawk is like not knowing Robbie Williams, or maybe even Tony Blair. It's worse than that, if you think about it. Because

there are loads of politicians, and loads of singers, hundreds of TV programmes. George Bush is probably even more famous than Tony Blair, and Britney Spears or Kylie are as famous as Robbie Williams. But there's only one skater, really, and his name's Tony Hawk. Well, there's not only one. But he's definitely the Big One. He's the J. K. Rowling of skaters, the Big Mac, the iPod, the X-box. The only excuse I'll accept for not knowing TH is that you're not interested in skating.

When I got into skating, my mum bought me a Tony Hawk poster off the Internet. It's the coolest present I've ever had, and it wasn't even the most expensive. And it went straight up on to my bedroom wall, and I just got into the habit of telling it things. At first, I only told Tony about skating – I'd talk about the problems I was having, or the tricks I'd pulled off. I pretty much ran to my room to tell him about the first rock 'n' roll I managed, because I knew it would mean much more to a picture of Tony Hawk than it would to a real-life Mum. I'm not dissing my mum, but she hasn't got a clue, really. So when I told her about things like that, she'd try to look all enthusiastic, but there was nothing really going on in her eyes. She was all, Oh, that's great. But if I'd asked her what a rock 'n' roll was, she wouldn't have been able to tell me. So what was the point? Tony knew, though. Maybe that was why my mum bought me the poster, so that I'd have somebody else to talk to.

The talking back started soon after I'd read his book, *Hawk – Occupation: Skateboarder*. I sort of knew what he sounded like then, and some of the things he'd say. To be honest, I sort of knew *all* of the things he'd say when

he talked to me, because they came out of his book. I'd read it forty or fifty times when we started taking, and I've read it a few more times since. In my opinion it's the best book ever written, and not just if you're a skater. Everyone should read it, because even if you don't like skating there's something in there that could teach you something. Tony Hawk has been up, and down, and gone through things, just like any politician or musician or soap star. Anyway, because I'd read it forty or fifty times, I could remember pretty much all of it off by heart. So for example, when I told him about the rock 'n' rolls, he said, 'They aren't too hard. But they're a foundation for learning balance and control of your board on a ramp. Well done, man!'

The 'Well done, man!' part was actual conversation, if you see what I mean. That was new. I made that up. But the rest, those were words he'd used before, more or less. OK, not more or less. Exactly. I wished in a way that I didn't know the book so well, because then I could have left out the bit where he says 'They aren't too hard'. I didn't need to hear that when I'd spent like six months trying to get them right. I wished he'd just said, you know, 'Hey! They're a foundation for learning balance and control of your board!' But leaving out 'They aren't too hard' wouldn't have been honest. When you think of Tony Hawk talking about rock 'n' rolls, you hear him say, 'They aren't too hard.' I do, anyway. That's just how it is. You can't rewrite history, or leave bits of it out just because it suits you.

After a while, I started talking to Tony Hawk about other things – about school, Mum, Alicia, whatever, and I found that he had something to say about those things too. His words still came from his book, but the book is

about his life, not just skating, so not everything he says is about sacktaps and shoveits.

For example, if I told him about how I'd lost my temper with Mum for no reason, he'd say, 'I was ridiculous. I can't believe my parents didn't duct tape me up, stuff a sock in my mouth and throw me in a corner.' And when I told him about some big fight at school, he said, 'I didn't get into any trouble, because I was happy with Cindy.' Cindy was his girlfriend of the time. Not everything Tony Hawk said was that helpful, to tell you the truth, but it wasn't his fault. If there was nothing in the book that was exactly right, then I had to make some of the sentences fit as best I could. And the amazing thing was that, once you made them fit, then they always made sense if you thought about what he said hard enough.

From now on, by the way, Tony Hawk is TH, which is what I call him. Most people call him The Birdman, what with him being a Hawk and everything, but that sounds a bit American to me. And also, people round my way are like sheep and they think that Thierry Henry is the only sportsman whose initials are TH. Well, he's not, and I like winding them up. The letters TH feel like my personal secret code.

Why I'm mentioning my TH conversations here, though, is because I remember telling him that things were ticking along nicely. It was sunny, and I'd spent most of the day down at Grind City, which as you may or may not know is a skate park a short bus ride from my house. I mean, you probably wouldn't know that it's a short bus ride from my house, because you don't know where I live, but you might have heard of the skate park, if you're cool, or if

you know somebody who's cool. Anyway, Alicia and I went to the cinema that evening, and it was maybe the third or fourth time we'd been out, and I was really, really into her. And when I came in, Mum was watching a DVD with her friend Paula, and she seemed happy to me, although maybe that was in my imagination. Maybe I was the happy one, because she was watching a DVD with Paula and not with Steve the rubbish boyfriend.

'How was the film?' Mum asked me.

'Yeah, good,' I said.

'Did you watch any of it?' said Paula, and I just went to my room, because I didn't want that sort of conversation with her. And I sat down on the bed, and I looked at TH, and I said, 'Things really aren't so bad.'

And he said, 'Life is good. We moved into a new, larger house on a lagoon, close to the beach and, more importantly, with a gate.'

Like I said, not everything that TH comes up with is exactly right. It's not his fault. It's just that his book isn't long enough. I wish it were a million pages long, a) because then I probably wouldn't have finished it yet, and b) because then he'd have something to tell me about everything.

And I told him about the day at Grind City, and the tricks I'd been working on, and then I told him about stuff I don't normally bother with in my talks with TH. I told him a little bit about Alicia, and about what was going on with Mum, and how Paula was sitting where Steve used to sit. He didn't have so much to say about that, but for some reason I got the impression that he was interested.

Does this sound mad to you? It probably does, but I

don't care, really. Who doesn't talk to someone in their heads? Who doesn't talk to God, or a pet, or someone they love who has died, or maybe just to themselves? TH . . . He wasn't me. But he was who I wanted to be, so that makes him the best version of myself, and that can't be a bad thing, to have the best version of yourself standing there on a bedroom wall and watching you. It makes you feel as though you mustn't let yourself down.

Anyway, all I'm saying is that there was this time – maybe it was a day, maybe a few days, I can't remember now – when everything seemed to have come together. And so obviously it was time to go and screw it all up.

2

A couple of other things, before we go on. First of all, my mum was thirty-two years old at the time I'm talking about. She's three years older than David Beckham, a year older than Robbie Williams, four years younger than Jennifer Aniston. She knows all the dates. If you want, she can supply a much longer list. The list hasn't got any really young people on it, though. She never says, 'I'm fourteen years older than Joss Stone,' or anything like that. She only knows about people round about her age who look good.

For a while, it didn't really register that she wasn't old enough to be the mother of a fifteen-year-old boy, but this last year especially, it's started to seem a little bit weird. First of all, I grew about ten centimetres, so more and more people think she's my aunt, or even my sister. And on top of that . . . There isn't a good way of saying this. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll repeat a conversation I had with Rabbit, who's this guy I know from skating. He's like two years older than me, and he goes to Grind City too, and we meet from time to time at the bus stop with our boards, or at the Bowl, which is the other place we skate at when we can't be bothered to go to Grind City. It's not really a bowl. It's a kind of concrete pond thing

that was supposed to cheer up the flats round the corner, but it hasn't got any water in it any more, because they started to worry about kids drowning. They should have worried about kids drinking it, if you ask me, because people used to piss in it on the way back from the pub and all sorts. It's dry now, so if you're looking for somewhere to skate when you've only got half an hour or so, then it's perfect. There are three of us who use it all the time – me, Rabbit and Rubbish, who can't really skate, which is why he's called Rubbish, but who at least talks sense. If you want to learn something about skating, watch Rabbit. If you want a conversation that isn't completely insane, talk to Rubbish. In a perfect world, there'd be somebody who had Rabbit's skills and Rubbish's brain, but, as you know, we don't live in a perfect world.

So this one evening, I was messing around down at the Bowl, and Rabbit was there, and . . . Like I said, Rabbit isn't the most incredible brainbox, but even so. This is what he said.

'Yo, Sam,' he said.

Did I tell you that my name is Sam? Well, now you know.

'All right?'

'How's it going, man?'

'OK.'

'Right. Hey, Sam. I know what I was gonna ask you. You know your mum?'

See what I mean about Rabbit being thick? Yes, I told him. I knew my mum.

'Is she going out with anyone at the moment?'

'My mum?'

'Yeah.'

'Why do you want to know whether my mum's going out with anyone at the moment?' I asked him.

'Mind your own business,' he said. And he was blushing.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Rabbit wanted to go out with my mum! I suddenly had this picture of coming into the flat and seeing the two of them curled up on the sofa, watching a DVD, and I couldn't help but smile. My mum wasn't the best judge of boyfriends, but she wasn't that stupid.

'What's funny?' said Rabbit.

'No, no, nothing. But . . . How old do you think my mum is?'

'How old? I don't know.'

'Guess.'

He looked into space, as if he were trying to see her up there.

'Twenty-three? Twenty-four?'

This time I didn't laugh. Rabbit was such a moron that it sort of went beyond laughing.

'Well,' I said. 'I'll give you a hand. How old am I?'

'You?'

He couldn't see the connection.

'Yeah, me.'

'I dunno.'

'OK. I'm fifteen.'

'Right. So what?'

'So. Say she was twenty when she had me.' I wasn't going to say how old she really was. It might not have been old enough to put him off.

'Yeah.' Suddenly he got it. 'Oh, man. She's your mum. I never twigged. I mean, I knew she was your mum, but I never did, like, the sums . . . Shit. Listen, don't tell her I was asking, OK?'

'Why not? She'd be flattered.'

'Yeah, but, you know. Thirty-five. She's probably a bit desperate. And I don't want a thirty-five-year-old girlfriend.'

I shrugged. 'If you're sure.'

And that was it. But you can see what I'm saying, can't you? Rabbit's not the only one. My other friends would never say anything, but I can tell from how they talk to her that they think she's OK. I can't see it, but then you never can if someone's related to you, can you? It doesn't matter what I think, though. The point is that I've got a thirty-two year-old mother that people – *people of my age* – fancy.

Here's the other thing I wanted to say. The story of my family, as far as I can tell, is always the same story, over and over again. Someone – my mum, my dad, my grandad – starts off thinking that they're going to do well in school, and then go to college, maybe, and then make pots of money. But instead they do something stupid, and they spend the rest of their lives trying to make up for the mistake they made. Sometimes it can seem as though kids always do better than their parents. You know – someone's dad was a coal-miner, or whatever, but his son goes on to play for a Premiership team, or wins *Pop Idol*, or invents the Internet. Those stories make you feel as though the whole world is on its way up. But in our family people always slip up on the first step. In fact, most of the time they don't even find the stairs.

There are no prizes for guessing the mistake my thirty-two-year-old mother made, and the same goes for my thirty-three-year-old father. My mum's dad made the mistake of thinking he was going to be a footballer. That was how he was going to make pots of money. He was offered a youth team place at Queen's Park Rangers, back in the days when Rangers were good. So he packed up school and signed on, and he lasted a couple of years. Nowadays they make kids do exams, he says, so that they've got something to fall back on if they don't make it. They didn't make him do anything, and at eighteen he was out, with no skills, and no training. My mum reckons she could have gone to university, but instead she was married just before her seventeenth birthday.

Everyone thought I was going to do something stupid with skating, and I kept trying to tell them there wasn't anything stupid I could do. Tony Hawk turned pro when he was fourteen, but even in California he couldn't make any money out of it for a while. How was I going to turn pro in Islington? Who was going to pay me? And why? So they stopped worrying about that and started worrying about school instead. I knew how much it meant to them. It meant a lot to me too. I wanted to be the first person in the history of our family to get a qualification in something while they were still at school. (My mum got a qualification after she'd left but that's because she messed up school by having me.) I'd be the one to break the pattern. Mrs Gillett asking me whether I'd thought of doing art and design at college . . . That was a big thing. I went straight home and told Mum. I wish I'd kept it to myself now.

Alicia didn't go to my school. I liked that. I've been out with people from school before, and sometimes it seems childish. They write you notes, and even if they're not in your class, you bump into them like fifty times a day. You get sick of them before you've even been anywhere, just about. Alicia went to St Mary and St Michael, and I liked hearing about teachers I didn't know and kids I would never meet. There seemed more to talk about. You get bored, being with someone who knows every zit on Darren Holmes's face.

Alicia's mum knew my mum from the council. My mum works for the council, and Alicia's mum is a councillor, which is like being the prime minister, except you don't rule over the whole country. You just rule over a tiny bit of Islington. Or Hackney, or wherever. It's a bit of a waste of time, to be honest. It's not like you get to drop bombs on Osama Bin Laden or anything like that. You just talk about how to get more teenagers to use the libraries, which is how Mum met Alicia's mum.

Anyway, it was Alicia's mum's birthday, and she was having a party, and she asked my mum. And she also asked my mum to bring me along. According to my mum, Alicia had said she'd like to meet me. I didn't believe it. Who says stuff like that? Not me. And now I know Alicia, not her either. I'd like to meet TH, and Alicia would like to meet, I don't know, Kate Moss or Kate Winslet or any famous girl who has nice clothes. But you don't go round saying you'd like to meet the son of somebody your mum knows from council meetings. Alicia's mum was trying to find some friends for her, if you ask me. Or at least she was trying to find some friends, maybe even a boyfriend,

that she approved of. Well, that all went wrong, didn't it?

I don't really know why I went, thinking about it. Actually, that's not quite true. I went because I said to my mum that I didn't want to go, and I didn't want to meet any girl that she liked. And my mum said, 'Believe me, you do.'

And she was dead serious when she said it, which surprised me. I looked at her.

'How do you know?'

'Because I've met her.'

'And you think she's someone I'd like?'

'As far as I can tell, she's someone every boy likes.'

'You mean she's a slag?'

'Sam!'

'Sorry. But that's what it sounds like.'

'That's exactly what I didn't say. I was very careful. I said every boy likes her. I didn't say she likes every boy. Do you see the difference?'

Mum always thinks I'm being sexist, so I try to be careful – not only with her, but with everyone. It seems to make a difference to some girls. If you say something that isn't sexist to the right sort of girl, she likes you more. Say one of your mates is going on about how girls are stupid, and you say, 'Not *all* girls are stupid,' then it can make you look good. There have to be girls listening, though, obviously. Otherwise it's a waste of time.

Mum was right, though. She hadn't said that Alicia was a slag. She'd just said that Alicia was hot, and it is different, isn't it? I hate it when she catches me out like that. Anyway, it got me interested. Mum describing someone as hot . . .

It sort of made it official, somehow. I really wanted to see what someone who was officially hot looked like, I suppose. That still didn't mean I wanted to talk to her. But I did want to look.

I wasn't interested in a girlfriend, I didn't think. I hadn't been out with anyone for longer than seven weeks, and about three of those seven didn't count, because we didn't really see each other. I wanted to dump her, and she wanted to dump me, so we avoided each other. That way, we stayed undumped. Otherwise, it's just been a couple of weeks here and three weeks there. I knew that later on I'd have to try harder than that, but I thought I was happier skating with Rabbit than sitting in McDonald's not saying anything to somebody I didn't know very well.

My mum got dressed up for the party, and she looked OK. She was wearing a black dress and a bit of make-up, and you could tell she was making an effort.

'What do you think?' she said.

'Yeah. All right.'

'Is that all right in a good way, or all right in an OK way?'

'A bit better than OK. Not as good as actually good.'

But she could tell I was joking, so she just kind of swiped me round the ear.

'Appropriate?'

I knew what that meant, but I made a face like she's just said something in Japanese, and she sighed.

'It's a fiftieth birthday party,' she said. 'Do you think I'll look right? Or out of place?'

'Fiftieth?'

'Yes.'

'She's fifty?'

'Yes.'

'Bloody hell. So how old's her daughter, then? Like, thirty or something? Why would I want to hang out with a thirty-year-old?'

'Sixteen. I told you. That's normal. You have a baby when you're thirty-four, which is what I should have done, and then when she's sixteen you're fifty.'

'So she was older than you are now when she had this girl.'

'Alicia. Yes. And, like I said, it's not weird. It's normal.'

'I'm glad you're not fifty.'

'Why? What difference does it make to you?'

She was right, really. It didn't make an awful lot of difference to me.

'I'll be thirty-three at your fiftieth.'

'So?'

'I'll be able to get drunk. And you won't be able to say anything.'

'That's the best argument I've ever heard for having a kid at sixteen. In fact, it's the only argument I've ever heard for having a kid at sixteen.'

I didn't like it when she said things like that. It always felt like it was my fault, somehow. Like I'd persuaded her I wanted to come out eighteen years early. That's the thing about being an unwanted baby, which is what I was, let's face it. You've always got to remind yourself it was their idea, not yours.

They lived in one of those big old houses off of Highbury New Park. I'd never been in one before. Mum knows people who live in places like that, because of work, and

her book group, but I don't. We only lived about half a mile from her, but I never used to have any reason to go up Alicia's way until I met her. Everything about her place was different from ours. Hers was big, and we lived in a flat. Hers was old, and ours was new. Hers was untidy and a bit dusty, and ours was tidy and clean. And they had books everywhere. It's not that we didn't have books at home. But it was more like Mum had a hundred and I had thirty. They had about ten thousand each, or that's what it looked like. There was a bookcase in the hallway, and more going up the stairs, and the bookcases all had books shoved on top of them. And ours were all new, and theirs were all old. I liked everything about our place better, apart from I wished we had more than two bedrooms. When I thought about the future, and what it was going to be like, that's what I saw for myself: a house with loads of bedrooms. I didn't know what I was going to do with them, because I wanted to live on my own, like one of the skaters I saw on MTV once. He had this ginormous house with a swimming pool, and a pool table, and a miniature indoor skate park with padded walls and a vert ramp and a half-pipe. And he had no girlfriend living there, no parents, nothing. I wanted some of that. I didn't know how I was going to get it, but that didn't matter. I had a goal.

Mum said hello to Andrea, Alicia's mum, and then Andrea made me walk over to where Alicia was sitting to say hello. Alicia didn't look like she wanted to say hello. She was sprawled out on a sofa looking at a magazine, even though it was a party, and when her mum and I came up to her she acted like the most boring evening of her life just took a turn for the worse.

I don't know about you, but when parents do that pairing off thing to me, I decide on the spot that the person I'm being set up with is the biggest jerk in Britain. It wouldn't matter if she looked like Britney Spears used to look and thought that *Hawk – Occupation: Skateboarder* was the best book ever written. If it was my mum's idea, then I wasn't interested. The whole point of friends is that you choose them yourself. It's bad enough being told who your relations are, your aunts and uncles and cousins and all that. If I wasn't allowed to choose my friends either, I'd never speak to another person again, probably. I'd rather live on a desert island on my own, as long as it was made of concrete, and I had a board with me. A desert traffic island, ha ha.

Anyway. It was all right if I didn't want to speak to someone, but who did she think she was, sitting there pouting and looking the other way? She'd probably never even heard of Tony Hawk, or Green Day, or anything cool, so what gave her the right?

I thought about outsulking her. She was sitting on the sofa, sunk down low, her legs stretched out, and looking away from me towards the food table on the wall opposite. I sunk down in the same way, stretched my legs out and stared at the bookshelf by my side. We were so carefully arranged that we must have looked like plastic models, the sort of thing you can get in a Happy Meal.

I was making fun of her, and she knew it, but instead of sulking harder, which would have been one way to go, she decided to laugh instead. And when she laughed, I could feel some part of me flip over. All of a sudden, I was desperate to make this girl like me. And as you can

probably tell, my mum was right. She was officially gorgeous. She could have got a certificate for gorgeousness from Islington Council, if she wanted, and she wouldn't even have had to get her mum to pull strings. She had – still has – these enormous grey eyes that have caused me actual physical pain once or twice, somewhere between the throat and the chest. And she's got this amazing straw-coloured hair that always looks messy and cool at the same time, and she's tall, but she's not skinny and flat-chested, like a lot of tall girls, and she's not taller than me, and then there's her skin, which is whatever, like the skin of a peach and all that . . . I'm hopeless at describing people. All I can say is that, when I saw her, I was angry with Mum for not grabbing me by the throat and shouting at me. OK, she gave me a tip-off. But it should have been much more than that. It should have been, like, 'If you don't come, you'll regret it every single minute for the rest of your life, you moron.'

'You're not supposed to be looking,' I said to Alicia.

'Who said I was laughing at what you were doing?'

'Either you were laughing at what I was doing or you're off your head. There's nothing else here to laugh at.'

That wasn't strictly true. She could have been laughing at the sight of her dad dancing, for a start. And there were loads of trousers and shirts that were pretty funny.

'Maybe I was laughing at something I remembered,' she said.

'Like?'

'I dunno. Loads of funny things happen, don't they?'

'So you were laughing at all of them, all at once?'

And we went on like that for a bit, messing around. I was starting to relax. I'd got her talking, and once I've got

a girl talking, then she is doomed, and there can be no escape for her. But then she stopped talking.

'What's the matter?'

'You think you're getting somewhere, don't you?'

'How can you tell that?' I was shocked. That was exactly what I thought.

She laughed. 'When you started talking to me there wasn't a single muscle in you that was relaxed. Now you're all . . .' And she threw out her arms and legs, as if she was doing an impression of someone watching TV on the sofa at home. 'Well, it's not like that,' she said. 'Not yet. And it might not ever be.'

'OK,' I said. 'Thanks.' I felt about three years old.

'I didn't mean it like that,' she said. 'I just meant, you know, you've got to keep trying.'

'I might not want to keep trying.'

'I know that's not true.'

I turned to look at her then, to see how serious she was, and I could tell she was half-teasing, so I could just about forgive her for saying it. She seemed older than me, which I decided was because she spent a lot of time dealing with boys who fell in love with her in two seconds flat.

'Where would you rather be right now?' she asked me.

I wasn't sure what to say. I knew the answer. The answer was there wasn't anywhere I'd rather be. But if I told her, I'd be dead.

'I dunno. Skating, probably.'

'You skate?'

'Yeah. Not ice-skating. Skateboarding.' I know I said I'd never use that word again, but sometimes I need it. Not everyone is as cool as me.

'I know what skating is, thank you.'

She was scoring too many points. Soon I'd need a calculator to add them all up. I didn't want to talk about skating, though, until I knew what she thought of it.

'How about you? Where would you rather be?'

She hesitated, as if she was about to say something embarrassing.

'Actually, I'd like to be here, on this sofa.'

For the second time, it was as though she knew what I was thinking, except this time it was even better. She had worked out the answer I had wanted to give, and she was passing it off as her own. Her points score was about to go into the billions.

'Right here. But with nobody else in the room.'

'Oh.' I could feel myself start to blush, and I didn't know what to say. She looked at me and laughed.

'Nobody else,' she said. 'That includes you.'

Deduct the billions. Yes, she could see what I was thinking. But she wanted to use her superpowers for evil, not for good.

'Sorry if that sounded rude. But I hate it when my parents have parties. They make me want to watch TV on my own. I'm boring, aren't I?'

'No. Course you're not.'

Some people would say that she was. She could have gone anywhere in the world for those few seconds, and she chose her own home so that she could watch *Pop Idol* without anyone bothering her. These people, though, wouldn't have understood why she said what she said. She said it to wind me up. She knew I'd think, just for a second, that she was going to say something romantic. She knew