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opening extract from

Firestarter

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published by

Egmont

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Monday

It feels weird, watching Dad drive Mum off. She's hanging out the front passenger window waving with both arms until she disappears. Yelling her head off, 'Beee goood!' No seat belt. She'd string me up for doing that, specially with Annie watching. *Terrible example to your sister*. Seeing Mum behave so unlike herself that she breaks the law, I should sense this could be a strange week.

Not that there's time to brood on how different things suddenly feel with Mum gone. I'm on duty now. Clocked on. In at the deep end. First job: keeping grip of Annie while she jackknifes to escape my arms and chase Dad's car all the way to the station.

‘Muuuuummeeeeee!’

Loud enough to burst both my eardrums and blow the top of my head off, she’s bawling.

‘Shhhh, she’ll be back soon,’ I whisper into Annie’s hair, coorying her close. Pinching Mum’s trick in a situation like this. Harder to pull off than Mum makes it look, especially with a pair of flower-painted Doc Marten heels drumming holes in your pelvis. It gets me nowhere.

‘Mummmeee! Want mummmeee,’ Annie howls even louder, whacking her flying fists at my eye sockets.

For a three-year-old, she packs a mean punch, does Annie, and the shock of her attack brings tears to my eyes. Can you believe that? Bubbling? I mean, I’m turned sixteen: OK. Just. And I know I don’t look it – small for my age, as thoughtful adults keep reminding me – but I’m officially old enough to mind Annie this week while Mum does some course in Leeds. Don’t ask me what. Children and social justice blah-de-blah. Open University summer

snore-a-thon . . . Whatever it is, Mum has to do it, else she'll never get to retrain as a social worker when Annie starts school.

'And you know that's the only reason I'm going away,' Mum said when all the details of her course arrived and it first dawned on her that I'd be better than anyone at childminding Annie. My dad, as per usual, had too many convenient problems at work to take a week off, and my gran with her bad legs wasn't fit. Mum was up to high-doh about hiring a nanny until it twigged that her own built-in Mary Poppins, aka yours truly, had been spit-spotting under her nose all along. Was Mum chuffed!

'I can relax knowing you're looking after Annie instead of some stranger. You're so good with her, Keith. I'd worry myself sick leaving Annie with anyone else, but I know I can trust you,' Mum tried to soft-soap me when I seemed a bit doubtful; *my* summer hols after all. Who wants to play mummies? Then my mummy promised, 'Of course, I'll pay you the going rate,' which kind of clinched things, since

I'm always skint. Mum buttered me up too, in case I changed my mind.

'You'll have an easy week, Keith. You're Annie's hero.'

Aye right, Mum! I'd need to be Annie's flipping Superhero, zooming from the clouds in spangly lycra and a magic cape, to stop the full-blown tantrum she's throwing now Mum's completely out of sight. Fists and sobs and tears and feet. *Just please don't puke*, I'm begging into myself, wrestling Annie towards the house before the neighbours see us and think it's me skelping her.

Funny thing is – and I'd better set the record straight, because I've not created a very good impression so far – 99.999 per cent of the time Annie's well decent. For a fem-sprog. Cute as get-out for starters. Boingy black hair everywhere like a tumbledown Afro. Dimples. Plus these teeny hands that are always smacking my leg for attention. Annie's precious too. Let's just say I've had baby

sisters that never made it out the delivery room they were born in. Molly. Orla. A brother, too. Mum let me hold him and choose his name. I went for Beau. Something different, so I'd never forget. As if. The nurses took photos of us. He'd have been five this year.

So now you know why Annie's precious. Mum and Dad are always saying they're so lucky she's here. And she's so smart. So bright. Talking non-stop. 'Teef,' she calls me because she can't pronounce the 'K' or the 'th' of my name, and it cracks me up. Very first word she said – not that I'm blowing my trumpet or anything – before 'mum' or 'dad' or 'no': 'Teef.'

Now that is smart, yeah?

'Dove you, Teef,' Annie likes to say. Which proves she's not only smart, but a tot with taste.

'Dove you, Annie,' I say back.

OK, so now I've given away my deep dark secret: I'm a sammy when it comes to Annie. But I can't help it. It's not as if I'm unique. All my mates think

she's quality, crowding her like flies on a cow-pat if Mum ever brings her up to school. Stewball and Stevie, my best mates (six foot plus and black belts at karate the pair of them), are dotey about her. Love her to bits. Couldn't be my mates if they didn't.

'You're dead lucky,' they're always moaning whenever I mention Annie in conversation. They crack up at everything she says and swear they'd trade in all their brothers easy for one of her. Straight swap.

In fact, Stevie went all teary-eyed when he came round last night to say cheerie before he jetted off to Portugal with his folks. Poor old him!

'Can't be assed going,' he mumped. 'Better fun chillin' here. Oh, *lovely* cake, Annie.' Stevie's top half was inside Annie's Wendy house as he grumbled all this. He wasn't even talking to me: his mate! I was left with his legs and butt for company, thinking, *Better fun chillin' here with Annie, you really mean, Stevie. You want to spend the next week pushing her swing, building her tents, being dressed up daft and bossed around*

until she gets bored with you and orders: 'Do home now, Tevie.'

To tell the truth, last night, once Stevie had blown Annie the hundredth kiss and split, I'd been secretly pleased that he and Stewball (already on holiday: a Minnie Mouse postcard from Florida arrived for Annie this morning: WISH YOU WERE HERE, ANNIE. LOVE STEWBALL XXXXXXXXX – not one mention of yours truly!) weren't going to be around, fighting amongst themselves for shots of Annie.

'Just you and me,' I crept into her room and whispered after Mum sang her to sleep last night. 'We'll get on like a house on fire, won't we?'

Ten minutes into my new job and I'm wishing good old Stevie and Stewball were here after all. *Bale me out, guys*.

Annie's going ape, nearly bashing the glass out our sitting-room window frames with the flat of those cute hands I told you about.

'I want my muummee.'

What she needs, of course, is something to take

her mind off the gaping hole Mum has left behind for me to fill. But for once, nothing distracting is on hand. Mum's blitzed the carpet of toys, and even Raggy, the scaffy mophead doll Annie drags everywhere, is AWOL. Normally one glimpse of Raggy's enough to make Annie put a sock – or rather, a thumb – in it. Even if she's throwing a mega-wobbly. Like magic, the fingers of Annie's non-thumb-sucking hand will reach out and ripple until Raggy's mophead is tangled among them. Annie's eyes glaze over at the touch. Then – ahhhh blissto! – it's peace and quiet all round . . .

Alas. No chance of that for me without Raggy.

'Nightmare,' I hear myself puff, sounding the spit of Mum whenever Annie gives it laldy. I'm sweating from the effort of pinning Annie's legs together to stop her kicking the glass. At the same time I'm looking round for something to catch Annie's eye, but everything in the room looks dull without the presence of my mum to light the house up like a twenty-four-hour sparkler.

Then something makes Annie stop crying. Instantly. Makes her rear up stiff. Give one huge gulp, then freeze.

That something is coming out of a taxi.

It has matted blue hair, all spiked up and red at the tips. Like the flames on a match-head.

'Whoa,' I say, as the blue head spins to shut the taxi door.

'Funny,' giggles Annie, splatting herself against the window to get a better look. Then she whimpers, her hand groping for mine. She buries her face in my neck.

She's been spotted by the new arrival, and a red clown-mouth is grinning at her from a face painted half black, half white. One liner-ringed eye is winking and winking at her above a cheek so thick with make-up, it's criss-crossed with peeling cracks, like a china doll that's been dropped on its head. *Gross*, I'm thinking, wondering at the same time exactly *why* this clown's skipping up our path waving two hands at Annie.

What the heck . . . ? I hear myself gulp, wondering if one of Annie's punches has concussed me and I'm hallucinating, because I don't like what I'm seeing. I mean – and I don't think I'm out on a limb here – even in a circus, clowns are freaky. I've always thought that, long before Stewball made me watch *It*, that sickoid Steven King horror about the psycho clown, and I had to sleep with my light on for weeks. Nothing funny about clowns, no matter how many times they trip each other up. Good? Evil? You never know what's going on behind the face paint. I've always thought that, so you do *not* want them anywhere near your house. Especially when they're taller, wider, beefier than you are, and dressed from head to toe in

shredded black clothes,

a studded leather collar,

steel-tipped Docs (not a flower in sight),

draped in chains.

And your kick-boxing mum's on a train halfway to Leeds and your dad's thirty miles

away buried in work . . .

'It's OK, Annie,' I lie into my sister's ear, though I doubt she hears me. The blue-haired clown is rapping our window with the base of a hinged thumb-ring.

'Hel-lo,' the clown sing-songs from the other side of the glass, hunkering down to catch Annie's eye. The voice is light and friendly, but when Annie digs her head deeper into my neck, the clown face glares at me instead.

'Gonna let us in?' it says. More of a threat than a request. Accent a mix of Scottish and English.

I can't move. Can't take my eyes from the flaking face pressed up to my window. I can see zits through the patches of skin where the white make-up has crackled and flaked like old paint. This is a young guy. What's his game?

Backing off from the window with Annie constricting me tighter than Choke, Stewball's five-foot python, I can hardly think straight. I'm trying to figure if I'd be quicker phoning my dad at work or

dialling the cops. As I hesitate, the clown presses his face against the window, knocking a whole knuckleful of rings against the glass.

'Oi, cloth-ears. Let us in, I said.'

Annie starts wailing. 'It's OK,' I whisper, burying my face in her hair and keeping it there. 'Daddy's coming.'

When I dare to glance back at the window, the clown's gone, only the downturned stain of his red lips and the fading imprint of his hands on the glass proving that he'd ever been there.

I still see him though. Mrs Duff's bustling him down our path and into her house next door.

That explains a lot.

'What's all this about clowns now?' Dad wants to know, his voice croaky from singing alonga every tune in the Disney songbook. If I wasn't so hungry I'd feel sorry for him. Everything he's tried to do on 'Dad's List of Instructions' since he came home from work's been a complete disaster, from carbonizing the

macaroni cheese Mum left in the freezer for Annie, to forcing her to eat it so she barfed pasta all over the bath. Dad looks completely shell-shocked when he flumps downstairs to cook his own dinner. And mine. Annie's bedtime routine is usually a joint effort with Mum. By that I mean Dad pops in for five minutes just before Annie drops off and then tickles her till she's hiccupping and hyperventilating. While Mum scrapes her down off the ceiling, my dad sneaks off to catch the news before his meal's served up to him on a tray.

Tonight there's no dinner till Dad cooks it.

'Annie was hysterical up there, raving about faces looking in the windows. Spooking *me* out!' Dad sighs, garnishing my plate with a charred pineapple ring he was meant to serve cold. 'Have you been telling her horror stories today, Keith? She been watching your DVDs?'

I shake my head, grateful for any excuse to stop chewing my leathery gammon steak. Can your dad's cooking be cruelty to children?

‘This freaky-looking guy turned up,’ I tell Dad, using the diversion of Mrs Duff’s new arrival to wheech my dinner into the bin. ‘Came up our path when he saw Annie. Must’ve thought our house was hers.’

My dad sighs a weary whistle through his teeth, then tuts. ‘Thought Mrs Duff’d stopped fostering those nutters now she’s on her own,’ he says, drawing his hands over his face. ‘Now I’ll have to get you and Annie over to Gran’s for the rest of the week. Can’t leave you here, and I can’t get time off myself with everyone on holiday –’

‘What? Gran’s? No way!’ I explode, and it’s not to diss my gran, who’s great really. Except she’s got no telly, or biscuits, or space. Only an ancient fat dog called Sandy who stinks her flat out with silent-but-deadlies and growls every time Annie or I make a sudden move.

‘Mum’d worry sick about Annie,’ I implore Dad. ‘Gran wouldn’t keep Sandy locked up for the rest of the week –’

'I wouldn't tell Mum till she was back, Keith. She'd just chuck in her course and come home,' my dad interrupts. Yawning, he pushes his chair back from the table and reaches for the phone. 'Better get some stuff together. Wake madam up. I'll need to drop you round at Gran's tonight. I'm in London first thing tomorrow –'

Now it's my turn to interrupt. Worse than the prospect of five nights in a sleeping bag at Gran's with Sandy on the prowl, lumpy porridge for breakfast and no Sky music channels is the thought of all that dosh I won't be paid for childminding. I make sure my voice is full of confidence.

'Don't send us to Gran's, Dad. Annie's asleep now. It'll be mental getting her up and you know if Mum wanted Gran to look after us she'd have asked her in the first place. We'll be fine here. Honest. Anyway, it'll be better if our house isn't left empty during the day –'

I've put a mug of tea in front of my dad, filling Annie's beaker with juice to save him doing it later.

And I'm washing the dishes although that's another job on Dad's list this week. He follows me with heavy eyes for a long time before I realise I've won.

'Well, Keith, if you are staying here you know the drill,' Dad says. He lowers his eyes, nodding towards the Duffs' house. The way he taught me ages ago. 'Head down.'

Mum and Dad were always warning me about the Duffs' boys.

'All these lads have criminal records, juvenile or not. Remember that, Keith. And never mind how friendly or innocent they seem helping Mr Duff with the garden.'

Yawn, yawn. It's not as if any of the Duffs' boys would have been interested in palling up with me or Annie. None of them were ever here long enough to get to know. Two, three weeks at the most, living as part of a family before they were . . . well, 'Set free into the big bad world, God help us,' as Mum liked to say.

I'd only ever Mum's word for how friendly or innocent the Duffs' boys seemed, because over the years, I'd be at school when Mr Duff brought one back from whatever children's home had released him. 'New inmate,' I'd get in that warning tone when I came home myself, Mum describing how Mrs Duff was standing at her gate to greet her new housemate, wiping floury hands on her pinny, ready to take his bag. 'Big hearts the pair of them, taking on what they do,' Mum always said.

I'd rarely see the new arrival. Might hear him. Shouting in his room. Or at Mrs Duff. Her shouting back. Fit for him. I'd catch banging. Maybe whistling. Mr Duff's booming voice. His laugh. Sometimes, if I was in the garden, I'd hear a football driven again and again at the fence Mum and Dad put up after one of the Duffs' boys skipped the hedge we used to have and broke into our hut one night. Used Mum's secateurs on our kitchen window. Stole her handbag. Broke into Dad's car. Drove it off and crashed it.

Twelve feet high. That's a fence, yeah? And you can't see through it. It's double thick. Mr Duff complained to Dad about it when it went up, saying it denied his right to light, leaving his flower beds in shadow. Sue me then, Dad told him, well wound-up, telling Mr Duff he wouldn't have a legal leg to stand on given the carry-on we'd had over the years with his foster-yobs. Before anyone took the business to court, Mr Duff had his heart attack and pegged it. Nobody gardened in the Duffs' house any more. Our fence stayed put and the first time Mrs Duff met Dad after the funeral she told him he'd have nothing to complain about any more. She'd given up fostering now Bill was gone.

'Given up combing her hair and changing her clothes, too, by the state of her. She looks terrible,' I remember Dad telling Mum.

So this blue-haired clown is the first Duff boy I've seen for ages, let alone clocked up close.

‘No worries though, Annie, we won’t see him again,’ I whisper when I look in on her after my first day playing mum. I lay Raggy on Annie’s pillow so she’ll wake up in a good mood for me tomorrow.