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Opening extract from

The Traitor Game

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ONE

It made sense that it happened on that particular day. Michael could see there was a kind of sick logic to it. Like someone had developed a sense of humour. If it was going to happen, then, well, obviously it would be on that day. Not that there was anything special about the date – just, it was one of those mornings when you actually feel pleased to be alive and up and going somewhere. You know, one of those morning-has-broken mornings, a God's-in-his-heaven morning. Not that he believed any of that stuff, of course, but he could see what they were on about. It was the end of October, a month or so into term, blazing low sun and leaves everywhere like yellow paper. That morning as he walked to school he felt sort of better about everything – sort of good, actually. St Anselm's was always pretty – that's what you paid for, red-brick buildings and striped lawns – but that morning it took his breath away. There was a blue sky overhead and no one around. Michael was whistling as he went through the school gates. He looked at the drifts of leaves at the base of the wall and thought about

kicking them up into the air, because it wasn't like there was anyone around to laugh at him, but in the end he didn't. You got hedgehogs hibernating in piles of leaves, and it wouldn't be fair to disturb one.

He turned left, the way he always did, past the music block, on to the playing fields, and down towards the belt of trees. For a moment, looking into the glare of sunlight, he thought Francis hadn't got there yet. Then he saw him, leaning against a tree in his shirtsleeves, his jacket hung on a branch. Francis was the only person he knew who took off his jacket when he smoked. Michael grinned and jogged across the field, the bag over his shoulder bouncing.

'Hey.'

'Good morning.' Francis reached automatically into his pocket and offered the cigarette packet. Michael took one. It was a rule. You had to have a cigarette before school, just like you had to bunk off early on Friday afternoons. He used to feel queasy smoking first thing in the morning but now it was luxurious, taking deep lungfuls of thin smoke and autumn air, standing in silence. He leant against a tree a little way off from Francis's and closed his eyes against the light.

'How was the wedding? On Saturday?'

Francis laughed. 'Really awful.' He took a last drag on his cigarette and stamped it into the mud. 'All those people. Having that many relations is just scary. And they all look the same.'

'Like you, you mean?'

'Exactly. It's horrible.'

Michael squinted at him sideways, smiling. 'I can see that.'

'Yeah, shut up. The whole experience is just purgatory. Seriously. Even getting there's like some kind of medieval torture. You wouldn't believe how long it takes just to get everyone in the car. And then when you get there it's all, haven't you grown and aren't your little brothers and sisters lovely and do *you* have a girlfriend, Francis?' He laughed again, but briefly. 'I mean, Jesus, they can *see* my little brothers and sisters and they're clearly *not* lovely. What's that about?'

'Compared to you, maybe.'

Casually Francis flicked two fingers up at him. 'And of course they all say, how nice that you still want to come to these family things, how nice that you don't have anything better to do. And I want to say, actually, Mum made me come, I *do* have better things to do. Frankly I'm seriously pissed off that I have to be here at all.' He shook the cigarette packet pensively, then got another cigarette out and lighted it. 'But that should be it for a bit. I mean, Saturdays as normal from now on. Thank God.' He smiled and flicked ash at a pile of leaves.

Michael nodded and breathed out smoke. 'Good.'

'Which reminds me –' Francis crouched suddenly, his cigarette between his lips, and dug in his bag. After a few seconds he surfaced, and held an A4 envelope out to Michael. 'Here.'

'What? Oh – thanks.' Michael held it for a moment, wanting to say, *No, not here, give it to me later . . .* But that was silly, paranoid. Francis would think he was crazy. It'd be fine. Just because they'd never given each other stuff at school before. What could happen? It wasn't like anyone was going to go through his bag. Anyway, Christ, it was just an envelope, just a

plain brown envelope.

It was like Francis read his mind. 'It's not hardcore porn, you know. Unless my mother switched the envelopes.'

He forced himself to smile. 'Yeah, right.'

'I guess it could have waited till Saturday.'

'No, it's fine.' Michael started to kneel down and caught himself before he got mud all over his trousers. He crouched carefully and pushed the envelope into his bag, between two books to keep it flat. As he leant forward he felt the key round his neck swing coldly against his skin, like a talisman. 'What's in it?'

Francis winked. 'Wait and see.' He stamped on the butt of his cigarette and added, 'Nothing world-shattering. Don't get too excited.'

'No fear.' They grinned at each other.

They heard the sound of the five-minute warning bell carry across the playing field, clear and shrill. Francis sighed and picked up his bag. 'God, I hate Mondays.'

Michael shrugged, agreeing. They walked back towards the main building, away from the sun. There were more people around, now. Michael could hear shouts from somewhere, pre-pubescent shrieks that sounded like they were coming from the music-block roof, and the scuffle of a game of football from further away. Francis kicked genially at a pebble. It skittered forward and Michael chased it and kicked it back. When they turned the corner he wasn't even looking where he was going. He only knew something was wrong because Francis stopped dead and grabbed his arm. He turned round to look, stumbling. A little kid – a second-year, maybe, skinny and miserable –

stood unhappily on the grass, surrounded by a straggling circle of older boys.

Someone said, '*Bent dick?* Is that really your name?'

But the voice would have stopped Michael in his tracks, wherever he was. It was sly, malicious, *gentle*, so that you answered back, so you made things worse for yourself. He felt a sort of disbelief rise up in the back of his throat, outrage like nausea. *Not here, not now, it can't be.* He stared at the group in front of him, hardly noticing Francis's grip on his arm. The kid in the middle was small and thin and scruffy. You wouldn't have looked twice, except for the expression on his face. Michael stared and then wanted to turn and run. That expression. He felt the muscles on his own face tense, like he was trying to mimic it.

The voice said, 'Is that because your dick is bent? Or is it because you're a dick and you're bent? Was that why your parents called you *bent dick*?' He was leaning against the wall, smoking, like he wasn't paying much attention. Tall, dark, with hair that was just too long. Dominic Shitley. Shipley, really, but they called him Shitley because he was a shit.

Francis said quietly, 'Old Condom Shitley. He can talk.' Michael wanted to smile but he couldn't. He wanted to turn round and walk away but he couldn't. No one had seen them. They could just turn round and go the other way, round past the cricket pavilion. No one would know. But he didn't move.

Shitley said, 'So, Bent Dick, which do you think it is?'

The kid knew the drill. His eyes flickered to Shitley's face, then down. Answering would only

make it worse. Michael knew he was thinking, *Just get it over.* But he wished the kid would say something, anything, just to fill the pause.

Shitley stepped forward, peeling himself away from the wall like something reptilian. He moved in a semi-circle so the kid had to turn to face him. He flicked his cigarette ash casually towards the kid's face. 'Personally, I'd guess you're bent.' He gestured, like a teacher giving a lesson. 'You know. A poofter. A faggot. A *pansy*, if you like . . .' And for a moment the imitation of Father Markham was so good Michael almost smiled, like it was all a big joke. They'd got it wrong, it was just a kind of game . . . But when the other fifth-formers laughed the kid flinched. Shitley waited until they'd finished. He took a drag of his cigarette and leant towards the kid, blowing the smoke straight into his face. 'That's right, isn't it, bender-boy?'

Michael felt Francis step forward. He grabbed his arm, wrenching him back by the sleeve of his jacket. He felt the tension in the fabric as Francis tried to pull away, and then the material relaxed under his fingers. Francis turned to stare at him. 'For God's *sake*, Michael!'

'Leave it. Please. Just leave it.'

Francis frowned. '*Leave* it?'

Michael shrugged helplessly. He still had Francis's sleeve in his hand. He held on to it, like he was anchoring himself, like if he gripped hard enough this wouldn't be happening. He swallowed frantically. 'It won't help. Whatever you say. It won't help.' His voice sounded small and pathetic, and he hated himself.

Francis narrowed his eyes. Then he looked away, pointedly. He could do that, he could turn his head away so that you felt *dismissed*, shutting you out like you just weren't there any more. Michael had seen him do it to other people. It made him feel cold. He looked away himself, scared of what his face was doing.

Shitley said, 'Is that what you get off on? Working away at that little bent dick of yours?'

The kid raised his eyes and looked at Shitley. His face was rigid, blank. Michael felt the force of his hatred as though it was inside him: the hatred that ate you out, that froze your face into stone. It was dangerous, because it made you want to fight back. You had to brace yourself against it, like a wave.

Shitley shook his head slowly, smiling. 'Looks like I've touched a nerve.' He laughed. 'Oh, yeah, baby . . . Bet you're turned on now, just thinking about it.' He stood there, still, daring the kid to hit him, to retaliate, and Michael knew, with a spasm of shame that knotted his stomach, that the kid wouldn't do it. He wouldn't be able to. He couldn't even stare him out. Shitley said, 'Or would you like to . . .?' His hand went to his flies. *No.* No. *Oh God, he can't.* Disgust hit the back of Michael's throat like a finger.

Francis hissed, 'Jesus *Christ*,' and stepped forward. He started to say something, loud and clear, 'Hey, Shitley,' but before he'd finished – maybe even before he'd started – Shitley had stepped towards the kid. Michael heard the kid's sob of revulsion, then saw him force himself to stay still, not to flinch, to keep his clenched fists at his sides. Shitley brought his cigarette up to his mouth and took a long drag. Then he

brought the glowing end of it down on the back of the kid's hand, grinding it down into the pale space above the wrist. The kid cried out and stumbled backwards.

'Stop it! Piss off, Shitley, leave him alone –' Francis ran towards them. But underneath his shout you could hear the noise the kid was making, the dry hoarse sobbing that you can't control, like your body's trying to shake the pain out of you, like it's trying to break it down into manageable bits. Almost like laughter. Sometimes they thought you really were laughing, and that made it worse; or if you were crying, properly, with tears, that made it worse as well. But now all Michael could think was, *Thank God, thank God it's over, thank God that's all.* He felt relief push up warm from his gut and despised himself.

Shitley swung round towards Francis, leaving the kid to drop on to the ground. His henchmen followed his gaze. 'Mind your own business, Harris.'

'You sadistic bastard, Shitley, what the hell d'you think you're doing?'

Shitley blinked, twice. 'What did you call me, Harris?'

'A sadistic bastard.' Francis held his look, cold, challenging. Michael looked round at Shitley's mates and wondered if they'd fight another fifth-former. Surely not. It wouldn't be worth it.

Shitley shook his head slowly. 'Before that.'

'What?' For a second Francis looked genuinely confused. Then he said, 'Oh. Shitley. It suits you better than Shipley, don't you think?'

Shitley looked at him consideringly. Then he flicked his cigarette butt away. 'You'd better watch yourself, Harris. Don't mess with me.'

'What, is that a *threat*?'

Shitley shrugged. Like, it wasn't that he didn't know what to say, only that he couldn't be bothered to say it. He glanced down towards the kid, who was hunched over, knotted into himself, cradling his hand, still gasping. Then he started to walk towards the main building. He looked Michael briefly up and down as he passed. Michael met his gaze. It wasn't like Shitley could see inside his head. After he'd gone past Michael was pleased he hadn't flinched, hadn't given anything away.

The henchmen followed, giving Francis dirty looks. He stared them out. Michael wished he could do that: keep his cool, gaze back at them flatly until they looked away. But it wasn't courage. Not really. It was only not knowing how things could be.

The kid pushed himself up with one hand. He was still breathing heavily, with a kind of catch in his voice on every in-breath. Francis said, 'You OK?' When the kid didn't answer he said, 'You should go to the medical room. Get that looked at.'

'I'm all right.' He wasn't.

'Want one of us to come with you?'

'No. Thank you.' The words came out tight with misery. He'd hunched his shoulders like he could curl completely into himself. Michael knew he didn't want them there.

'Look – I'll skip Prayers, make sure you're OK –'

Michael said, 'No.'

Francis looked up at him sharply, like he was surprised he had the gall to speak at all. 'I wasn't talking to you.'

'He doesn't want your help.'

'Like he wanted Shitley to stub a fag out on him, you mean? Like he wanted us to leave him to be tortured by those creeps? Like he wanted us to *leave him*?' Francis didn't expect him to answer.

'We can't *do* anything to help,' Michael said, trying to sound as though he was talking about something academic, something that really had nothing to do with him. 'He wants us to go away and leave him alone.'

The kid walked past him without looking up, as though he wasn't there. He disappeared round the corner, holding his hand up to his chest, across where his heart was.

Francis followed him for a few more seconds, but he stopped when he got to the corner. Then he turned on Michael. 'What the hell is *with* you? You selfish, arrogant, *cowardly* bastard. What the hell would you know about what he wants?'

Michael wanted to hit him. He wanted to smash his head against the wall. He wanted to tell him, for God's sake, he *did* know, better than anyone, how the kid felt. He wanted to hit Francis over and over again, until he gave up trying to fight and just took it. He wanted to knee him so hard he made the same sound as the kid had. He wanted to make Francis understand – wanted him to know himself how it felt, the shame of it, the way you wanted never to talk to anyone again. And the humiliation of knowing someone had *seen* – how that, sometimes, was the worst thing of all. He swallowed, turned away, and said nothing.

'You're not scared of Shitley?' A pause. Michael felt Francis look at him. 'Are you?'

'No.' And in a way it was true. Not Shitley, not

personally. Not of being beaten up, or burnt, or whatever else they did to people. Not that.

'What then?' Francis's voice had changed. He wasn't having a go, any more. He really wanted to know. That was worse.

'Nothing.' Michael thought, *Please let it go. Please.* He couldn't talk about it, he couldn't bear it. He looked down, away, anywhere but at Francis. A pause that stretched out like string, so taut it might break. Then Francis swung his bag back on to his shoulder and started to walk down the path. Michael followed him. His throat ached.

Francis said, over his shoulder, 'His name's Benedick. Benedick Townsend. He's in the third year – Luke's class.'

'Benedick. His parents really should have known better.'

'Yes. Although if it wasn't his name, it'd be something else.'

'Yeah, I guess.' For Michael it had been being clever. Not that he was, especially, except that at the comp anyone who could spell their own name was clever. Or even pronounce it properly. That was him. Clever Boy. Even when he started to fail tests, stopped reading, couldn't think at all any more. Even then, they'd made him 'explain' Pythagoras' Theorem before they started on him, mimicking his accent. He remembered thinking, that day, *At least they didn't kick me in the hypotenuse* . . . laughing weakly all the way home, because if he cried someone might notice.

They walked past the hall. Prayers had started. Everyone was on their knees. They went round the long way, so as not to walk past the windows, and up

the stairs to the fifth-form corridor. Michael tried to think of something to say, to explain, so Francis wouldn't think he was cowardly or cruel. But his mind stayed blank. Francis was first to the top of the stairs; he stopped right in front of Michael, and said, 'You should be in Prayers.' It took Michael a second to realise he wasn't talking to him.

Luke was standing at the lockers, his uniform already dishevelled, even though it was only ten to nine. He stepped aside for Francis to get past. He said, 'I was late.'

Francis had his head in his locker. 'Well, if you get reported and Mum goes ballistic and blames me, you're going to regret it.' His voice was muffled.

Michael went to his own locker and started to get out his books. Luke was still standing there, rolling his tie up and down his finger. He wore it short, like a flag, the way they all did. Trying to fit in, trying to be cool. Luke said, 'Will you take me paintballing on Saturday?'

Francis straightened up and cracked his head on the ceiling of his locker. He pulled his head out and stared at Luke, rubbing a hand over his hair. 'No, I will not.' He shoved a couple of textbooks into his bag. 'Why are you asking now, anyway?'

'Mum won't let me go unless you come with me.'

'Tough. I wouldn't touch a paintball with a barge-pole.' Francis caught Michael's eye and gave him a quick ironic grimace.

'Why not?'

'It's puerile. Anyway, I have better stuff to do on Saturdays.'

Luke put his head on one side and stared past

Francis at Michael. There was real hostility in his eyes; Michael felt it register somewhere inside him, like something cold. 'Going round to Michael's, like you *always* do. Are you two gay or what?'

Francis said, 'Get stuffed, Luke.'

'I just –' Luke changed tactic. Michael could have told him he'd blown it, but you had to give him marks for trying. 'Please, Francis. You'd like it. And I'll do your chores for two weeks.'

Francis finished putting his stuff back into his locker. There was a silence, and he looked up at Luke, like he was surprised to see him. 'Are you still here?'

'Michael wouldn't mind. It's only one Saturday.'

Michael said, 'How do you know Michael wouldn't mind?'

Luke looked at him – that expression again, like Michael was the scum of the earth – and didn't answer. He turned ostentatiously towards Francis. 'Francis, please. Please please please. All my mates are going.'

'In that case, *definitely* not. I told you, *no*. My Saturdays are mine. Ask Dad to take you.'

'He won't. You know what he's like.'

'Then you'll have to find someone else.' Francis slammed his locker shut and turned the key in the door. 'Piss off, squirt.'

'I hate you.'

'It's entirely mutual. Go on. I said fuck off.'

'I'll tell Mum you said that.'

'I look forward to it.' Francis raised his eyebrows at Michael. 'See you at break?'

'Yeah.' Michael watched Francis stride off. When he turned back to his locker Luke was still glaring at

him. *Stop looking at me like that. It's not my fault.* Although possibly it was, possibly Francis knew how much the Saturdays meant to him, how desperate he got if they had to miss one. It was pathetic, really, how dependent you could get. But Luke didn't know that – did he? He said, 'What?'

Luke watched him in silence for a moment, until Michael started to feel uncomfortable. Then he turned and went down the stairs, without saying anything.

Michael left it thirty seconds, then shouldered his bag and trudged to double French. He sat down in the sunlight next to the window, the desk where he always sat, far enough back to piss around but not *too* far back, not where Father Peters always looked for troublemakers. Not that he felt much like pissing around today. He looked at the trees outside. Benedick. Bent dick. He was in Luke's class, Francis said. That made it worse, somehow, although why should it? After all, Luke was an annoying little git . . .

And Shitley. What would he do? *If anything*, Michael thought sternly to himself. He might not do anything. Anyway, he'd been OK here so far. It was just a one-off. It wasn't like the comp. It *wasn't*. It couldn't be. He pushed away the dread, the voice that said: *Feeling* safe, *Michael . . . how stupid can you get?* He was being paranoid. No need to worry. He settled back and tried to concentrate on the lesson.

When the bell went for break he felt better. He fought his way back upstairs – get textbooks, then coffee – and made his way to his locker, pushing first-years out of the way on the stairs. There was music coming from the common room. He stooped to push

books into his locker, cramming them in precariously, but there were too many, and the bottom ones started to slide towards him. He grabbed them and tried to steady the pile.

There was a folded bit of A4 paper wedged into the bottom of the locker, as though someone had pushed it under the door. It said, *MICHAEL THOMPSON.* It wasn't handwriting he knew. Michael slid it out, bracing the books against his chest, and flipped it open.

It said, *I KNOW WHERE ARCASTER IS.*

That was when the bottom dropped out of everything.

Two

Judas floors don't exist in the real world. At least, if they did, Michael had never heard of them, and he definitely hadn't seen anyone fall through one. But for a second he thought he knew how it would feel: the black, sick terror of falling, knowing that the best you could hope for at the bottom was cold stone, and the worst . . . well, if you were lucky you didn't have time to think about the worst. In his imagination he'd made people dance pavanes and galliards on the great Judas floor at Calston, but it was only now that he really understood the horror of it. One moment you were there, in the middle of your galliard, hopping around as gracefully as you could, and then –

He remembered, irrelevantly, that there was a net underneath the floor at Calston to break your fall, so for a second you'd almost think it was some twisted practical joke. Until you saw the vipers nesting in the ropes near your face . . .

He shut his eyes as tightly as he could and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes the note would be gone. Or rather (that was too much to ask) it