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opening extract from

Ostrich Boys

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One

Our best friend was ash in a jar. Ross was dead. Kenny, Sim and I were learning to live with it. And this was all Sim's idea. It was just that Kenny and I weren't convinced exactly how great an idea it was. We'd had to wait for it to get dark, which at this time of year wasn't until after half-ten. We'd given it until eleven. Now we were crouched whispering in the shadow of some scraggy fir trees in the front garden of the history teacher's house. We had branches jabbing at us, needles in our hair and down the backs of our collars. But no matter how much we shuffled and hunkered, the shadow wasn't quite big enough. We were still wearing our dark funeral clothes, and that helped. The problem was Kenny, who kept squirming, shoving bits of me and Sim out into the glare of the streetlights. All it would take was one eagle eye to look our way and we'd be seen for sure.

A car sped by and we ducked our heads. It wasn't just the warm June night making me sweat.

'This is for Ross, remember,' Sim whispered. 'We can't flake out now – we all agreed. You agreed too, Kenny. Don't say you didn't.' Kenny made a noise – not quite yes, not quite no. 'Can't we just put a note through his door or something?
I'm telling you: if we get caught—' Sim looked disgusted. 'Christ-on-a-bike, Kenny! You want to write a poem in a card too? A card with love hearts and rabbits wearing hats on the front?' He shook his head, popped the lid off the can of spraypaint he was clutching. 'No. It's got to be *big*.'

Kenny opened his mouth to argue but I nudged his arm, hushing him. Mr Fowler's house was a corner terrace with a small square of scrappy garden on Brereton Ave – a busy enough road within walking distance of the pubs and clubs along the sea front. It was Friday night in Cleethorpes and for most people the only place to be were those pubs and clubs. We could hear giggling and chatter from a group of girls clacking along the pavement in their heels. We huddled down even further under the fir trees, ignoring another showering of needles. One of the girls wanted to get a taxi, her feet were killing her – but her friends said it wasn't worth it, they were nearly there now. We waited for them to decide. I stared hard at the ground, hoping they wouldn't look at us if we didn't look at them.

At last they walked on and I whispered, 'Either we do it or we don't, okay? We can't stay here all night arguing about it.' I didn't care how edgy I sounded. More edgy than nervous. Of course I was worried about being seen, but more than that I still wasn't convinced this was the right thing to do. For Ross, I mean. I didn't give a damn about Mr Fowler. Two, three cars swept by. 'I don't want to do it,' Kenny said. 'We shouldn't do it.' 'I'm gonna do it,' Sim said. 'Well, yeah,' Kenny agreed. 'It's your idea, so you should do it.' Sim looked to me. 'Blake?' 'You're gonna do it whatever I say.' He grinned. 'I know.' Kenny felt brave enough to poke his head out from under the low branches, looking towards the house's dark front windows. 'D'you think he's in?' Sim shrugged. 'Maybe, maybe not.' 'There're no lights on,' I said. And then, just like that, one went on behind the front-room curtains. I ducked my head and swore. 'He's in! He's in!' Kenny hissed. He scrabbled as far back under the fir trees as he could get, pushing me and Sim out into the open again. I had to elbow my way back into hiding. We kept our eyes on the glow of light behind those curtains. What was Mr Fowler doing in there? Watching TV? Reading a book? Eating takeaway pizza? How come he still could but our best friend was dead? He'd been hit by a car, knocked off his bike. At the funeral the vicar had called it an 'accident'. But

somehow the word wasn't enough. It wasn't big enough, powerful enough – didn't *mean* enough. He hadn't spilled a cup of tea, he hadn't tripped over his own feet. He'd had his life smashed out of him. It felt like there should be a whole new word invented just to describe it.

Sim didn't seem in the least bit worried that the teacher being home might make his plan riskier. Although I didn't think I'd ever seen Sim get nervous about anything much. He was more comfortable being angry. He had these dark brown eyes that hardened like snooker balls whenever he got mad. And he'd always had short hair but only yesterday he'd had it shorn to within a millimetre of its life, leaving his freshly exposed scalp much too pale compared to the rest of him. In his funeral get-up he looked like a fifteen-year-old version of the bouncers who guarded the doors to the rowdy clubs along the sea front.

'We should've brought disguises,' Kenny whispered. Sim rolled his eyes. Kenny ignored him. 'I'm telling you: even balaclavas or something. You two are all right, you could be anybody. But I'm so obviously me.' I wasn't sure what he was trying to say, unless he was talking about the fact that he was the shortest, blondest kid in our year. He had a furry mop of hair and an almost perfectly round baby-face, making him look more like twelve than fifteen. His biggest hates in life were sitting still and keeping quiet. He was like one of those little dogs that scurried around your legs, nipping at your ankles, yapping all the time. I said, 'Whatever happens, everybody'll know it's us three anyway.' Sim nodded. 'Yeah, exactly. I don't even see why we're hiding.' He stood up in full view of the house and the street, brushed pine needles off his shoulders and out of his Velcro hair. Kenny panicked. 'God, Sim. Get *down*, you idiot!' Sim pulled the collar of his jacket high up around his face. 'Just run when I tell you to.' Kenny was quick to get on-your-marks, like a sprinter. 'Maybe you'd better get a head-start,' he said to me. Which confused me at first. Then, when it clicked, I punched him. I've always been touchy about my size, my weight. I'd fight anybody who called me fat. And I've had the thesaurus thrown at me: portly, rotund, stout . . . I prefer to think of myself as *heavy*. And Kenny wasn't meaning to be spiteful; he wasn't the nasty type. Just sometimes his honesty deserved a punch.

Sim turned his back and lowered his face as a taxi drove by. He waited for it to get far enough away down the road. 'Don't go without me,' he warned. Then he was running across the patch of lawn to the front door. He drew the can of spray-paint like a gunslinger. He fired and the spitting hiss of it sounded so loud. Kenny and I watched him, watched the window, watched the road, watched the window. And begged inside our heads that Mr Fowler wouldn't suddenly appear. We had a few nice enough, decent enough teachers at our school. There were a couple who even looked like they enjoyed being teachers and were willing to have a laugh now and again during lessons. Mr Fowler wasn't one of them. He was still quite youngish for a teacher, yet he already had a shiny saucer of baldness at the back of his head and a beergut that arrived in a classroom several seconds before the rest of him. We knew this was his house because Sim biked by it every day on his way to school. And once upon a time Sim used to say 'Hello' or 'Good morning' – he was in Mr Fowler's history class after all. But he'd stopped as soon as he'd realized his teacher was always going to pretend he hadn't heard and was never going to reply. Mr Fowler preferred to believe his pupils didn't exist outside of school time. He was the reason Kenny and I had dropped history the first chance we got. Ross and Sim hadn't been quite so quick off the mark. And over the past couple of weeks the man had made the last of Ross's life a genuine nightmare. So this was payback – Sim-style. This

was revenge. Pure and simple. It felt like it took him an age to do it, but it could only have been thirty seconds at most. Then he was back across the garden and shoving through the fir trees out onto Brereton Ave. Kenny and I leaped up after him. But before I turned to run, I looked at what he'd sprayed in hasty, spiky, harsh black letters that bled down the history teacher's door:
Haunted by Ross Fell