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opening extract from

# The Boy Who Fell Down Exit 43

written by

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# 1.
# Joyride

If he was lucky he'd have about fifty minutes.

And if he wasn't – well, if he wasn't then he'd be in about the biggest trouble imaginable.

It wouldn't actually be a joyride. Not exactly. After all, it was his mum's car, not some total stranger's – and he wasn't out to break the speed limit or try anything too clever.

All he wanted was to get away. Just for a bit. Finn Oliver, twelve years old tomorrow, in command of an old banger for fifty fantastic minutes.

It would be his birthday present to himself. In fact it would probably be his only birthday present. No one else was likely to remember.

Finn glanced out of the window.

If only the rain would stop.

It had been like that for weeks now. Sheet upon sheet of it, tipping down from an angry black sky, day in, day out. There'd been thunder, lightning, flooding – the lot. And still it kept on coming.

The road conditions would be terrible. But at least in the car he'd have time to himself. Almost an hour of not having to think about anyone else. No tiptoeing round the house. No tiptoeing round Mum's complicated feelings.

It was two forty-five. Afternoon rest time. Surely she'd be asleep by now.

He opened the fridge door. Half a carton of milk. Probably a bit off, but it'd have to do. And there was a mug set out by the kettle all ready for him to take up with her pills when he got back. By the time she'd swallowed a couple of those she would've forgotten all about him skiving off school again. They always seemed to calm her down.

Finn reached for the car keys in the fruit bowl and crushed them into the palm of his hand, picturing the exact marks they were making in his flesh.

He would count to twenty. And if it was still silent upstairs when he'd finished counting – if it was completely, utterly quiet – then ... well, then maybe he'd do it.



Mr Henry Glenridding, Watchman at Exit 43 of the Underworld, was not having a good day.

It looked like he'd been landed with a right bunch of oddballs this afternoon.

As if he didn't have enough to think about, what with the rain battering the Other Side and the dividing membrane growing weaker by the day.

He glanced round the antechamber, its walls glistening with bundles of phosphorescent green algae, and then down the queue of wafting spirits.

If they'd all just keep still for a minute, it'd be a start.

But that was the trouble with ghosts.

Always flitting around as if they had nothing better to do.

Not that you could blame them. Floating was pretty good fun after all. And he was as bad as the rest of them.

"I suppose you think you're being funny, do you?" he snapped, peering through his little round spectacles at a thin man at the head of the queue. "How you can even stay *upright* in that ridiculous footwear is completely beyond me."

"Thought they looked rather smart myself – genuine eleventh century, you know. Got them off a suit of armour down in the Museum of Artefacts."

Glenridding folded his arms across his shimmering burgundy doublet.

"Really! Not exactly twenty-first century fashion, are they? And in any case you're not supposed to borrow stuff from the Museum. Not unless you've checked with me first."

He pointed to a stack of boots and cloaks lying on a low flat rock beside him.

"You need to book the dark stuff if you want to visit the Other Side. Probably an umbrella too, given the weather conditions above ground at the moment. You've got to look *normal*, right? They'd spot you a mile off in that outfit. Exit Ascent Request rejected!"

"But I need to get up to the graveyard and find out when my wife's joining me!"

"Sorry," replied Glenridding, his expression softening. "You'll have to reapply another day. Have a word with Lady Fortescue. She'll advise you on the right sort of disguise."

"But I want to know *now*," persisted the man.

"Your wife will join you down here when her time's up," said Glenridding. "When she's done her Inbetween Time. When she's been dead the full hundred and fifty years. Simple as that. It's the same for all of us, sir. Well, almost all of us..."

A hush descended upon the little antechamber.

The thin man sighed.

"You're talking about those Inflammati whatsits,

I suppose?" he said. "Well, it's all right for some, isn't it? Instant transformation into a heavenly body for the chosen ones, hey? None of this Underworld business for *them* – and none of this absurd Inbetween Time either. You call that fair, do you?"

There was a chorus of sympathetic grunts behind him.

"And just when we think we've heard all the bad news, we're told the Dead have *responsibilities*," the man went on. "Fifty years down the mines when I'm alive and kicking and what's my reward? A stinking pile of duties to the Living, that's what. Not to mention an exam in modern expressions before we're allowed up to the Other Side. I mean, what kind of place *is* this Underworld? A police state? I tell you, it makes me sick."

"You'll soon get used to it," laughed a woman hovering nearby. "Being down here has its plus sides, you know. At least you're finally out of your grave and having a bit of a float-around."

"*You call that a plus side?* Look at us all, for heaven's sake! Nothing but a miserable collection of transparent light particles."

"Pretty nifty light particles, though, aren't we?" said the woman. "After all, we can do exactly what we want ... waft through other spirits ... treat our friends to a good old-fashioned hug ... even pick up

solid objects if we like. The world's our oyster!"

"It might be yours," grumbled the man, "but it sure as heck doesn't feel like mine. I don't *enjoy* floating about like some half-demented angel. And nor do I think much of everyone passing through me just when it takes their fancy. It's not on."

"Have you quite finished?" said Glenridding, his right eye twitching behind his spectacles. "Because I've got a job to do here."

The thin man turned his back on the row of assembled ghosts and flounced out of the antechamber into the labyrinth of passageways beyond.

"And what about you?" exclaimed Glenridding, squinting down at a hunched and hairy object now at the front of the queue. "You can't go loping around the Other Side like some Neanderthal caveman, you know."

The hunched and hairy object glared back at the Watchman and grunted.

"Oh, I *see*!" said Glenridding. "You *are* a Neanderthal caveman. Should've guessed. Fourth one I've had to deal with this week. Why don't you do us all a favour and book yourself into a beginners' language class? You'll find it'll help no end. Might even stand a chance of getting past me in a few centuries' time."

A ripple of laughter passed down the line of

spirits and then faded away as Glenridding turned on the little gathering.

"No more time-wasters!" he growled. "I'll have you remember this is *not* a Freak Show. And neither is it a Fancy Dress Party! An Ascent to the Other Side is a very serious business indeed. So pull yourselves together! I've room for only twenty on the ladders!"

He shook his head and sighed to himself.

Sometimes organizing the Dead was enough to try the patience of a saint.



It had all been easy in the end. No one had given the boy at the wheel a second glance.

True, Finn had bundled himself up in a huge old navy anorak that had belonged to his dad. And he'd pulled his beanie right down over his forehead. Not much of a disguise by anyone's standards. But it seemed to have been enough.

Now, with The Rose and Eagle on his right and the supermarket coming up on his left, Finn flicked the wipers up to maximum and nudged the accelerator.

He was beginning to trust the car. The protective hug of his dad's anorak filled him with courage. Just a year since the crash and it still smelled of him.

Finn swallowed against the rising tide of tightness gripping his throat. It always crept up on him when he was least expecting it.

*Don't think about it. Don't think about Dad. Don't even go there...*

But it was hard not to. Dad had always been there for him. He'd taught him everything he knew: how to ride a bike, how to swim, even how to rock-climb... That had been brilliant. All that business with the ropes and harnesses and the discipline of working as a team, relying on nobody but each other. Of course it had terrified him senseless at first. But with Dad there, spurring him on, he'd managed higher and trickier climbs than he had ever imagined possible. With Dad at his side he reckoned he could have taken on the whole world.

But best of all was the driving. All those stolen Sundays spent practising on the disused Battersea industrial estate. All those secret afternoons when Mum thought they'd been holed up in some nasty pizza place along with all the other embarrassed kids and their newly-divorced dads.

Well, it hadn't been like that with them. *His* dad had listened. Really listened. Right up until that last, terrible Sunday, he'd gone along with whatever Finn had said he wanted to do.

Which included learning how to drive.

Because when he was driving, Finn could blot out all the bad stuff and concentrate instead on reversing and turning and checking in the back mirror. The thrill of moving up the gears, feeling in tune with the engine ... nothing fast, mind. It had been about control. About knowing your vehicle. About looking ahead. About seeing the dangers in good time.

Of course it had made the accident all the more impossible to understand. If his dad had been a great driver, then he had been an especially great pilot. He'd won every amateur light-aircraft award going. Finn had even been up with him once. Huddled together in the cockpit, chasing the clouds.

And then one clear April day – just a year ago tomorrow, and his own eleventh birthday – his dad's plane had simply fallen out of the sky during some dumb practice flight, and Finn had been summoned out of maths and into the headmaster's office.

It had been the end of life as he knew it.

He'd never even said goodbye. Their Sunday meeting just before his birthday had ended in an argument.

Not their usual way of doing things.

But life could be difficult and messy when it wanted.

And that week it had timed it to perfection.

So Finn had added a broken heart to his broken home and found himself heading three hundred miles north to a new house and a new school and a new life.

No more father. Not even on Sundays.

No more father and no more London.

Sometimes he hardly knew which was worse.

* * *

If a ghost could quake in its boots, then that was exactly what Jessie Sherratt was doing right now.

Nineteen people already through to the Exit Tunnel and only one place left on the ladders.

She didn't really fancy her chances.

At least not with Mr Glenridding in his current mood.

But somehow she *had* to get through this inspection and over on to the Other Side.

She missed her family like mad.

And how she was going to cope hanging around down here on her own while they finished off this stupid Inbetween Time, she had no idea.

OK, so the Dead had to absorb enough heat before they could emerge into the Underworld as fully fledged spirits.

But did it really have to take a hundred and fifty years?

It was a dumb system in her opinion – but then who ever said dying was fair?

Still, if she got up the ladders this afternoon, she could at least make a start. Check out the graveyard and find out how long a wait she actually had. Memorize a few dates and then hold out for the Descent. She could work out the maths later.

"Looks like you've got the disguise right!" came a voice from behind her. "Nice simple cloak and boots. Just what I like to see. And of course black's all the rage nowadays. I expect he'll pass you, no problem."

Jessie wheeled round.

It was Lady Fortescue, wafting towards her in a rush of emerald green skirts.

"Much the safest colour, dear. Always goes down a storm with Henry. Wonderful chap, Mr Glenridding. Real gentleman."

She blushed.

"Do make sure you keep that cloak wrapped round you really snug, though," she went on, adjusting the clasp under Jessie's chin. "We don't want anyone seeing that lovely blue crinoline of yours underneath, do we? And besides, if it's done up properly it'll help keep out the cold once you've transformed. Nasty side effect of turning solid, I'm afraid.

"And such beautiful long hair you've got! So dark

and glossy. Sets off your complexion a treat. Pretty little locket, too. Much nicer than the nonsense people wear these days."

"Nonsense?" echoed Jessie.

"I was up there only the other week. Horrible artificial jewellery. Rings in their noses, some of them."

Jessie's green eyes widened. It certainly didn't sound like the Other Side she had left behind.

"You're a Novice, aren't you?" said Lady Fortescue sympathetically. "When did you emerge?"

"Only a few weeks ago."

"Beaten your mum and dad down here, then..."

Jessie nodded.

"It's why I need to get on to the ladders this afternoon. I want to find out how much longer I've got to wait for them."

Lady Fortescue sighed.

"I know, dear. It's hard. Very hard. I still remember waiting for my beloved sister to join me. Felt like I was holding out for ever."

She gave Jessie's hand an encouraging pat.

"But look on the bright side. You've got through the Exit Exam in record time. Bit of a whizz-kid, I shouldn't wonder."

"It wasn't so difficult," said Jessie, reddening. "Just had to answer a few questions on how they talk

these days. Remember some expressions..."

"Very clever, I'm sure!" came a voice behind them. "Now move out of the way, New Girl. I think you'll find that last place on the ladders has got my name on it."

Jessie started as a spirit-boy with long red hair and a bronze helmet swooped past her and began to make for the passageway leading into the Exit Tunnel, his crimson robes flying.

"Oh no, you don't!" said Lady Fortescue, hauling the boy back by the scruff of his neck. "I've told you before, young Morgan Bloodaxe. There'll be no pushing and shoving in Mr Glenridding's queue. *Whoever's* son you might happen to be."

The redhead eyeballed Lady Fortescue.

"*Mr Glenridding's* queue now, is it?" he sneered. "I'll pass that little piece of information on to my father. I'm sure he'll find it very interesting."

"I expect he will," replied Lady Fortescue coolly. "Along with the information you've been queue-jumping again."

The boy turned pale.

"Won't be any need for that," he muttered. "I'll get out of your way, if that's what you want."

"It is," said Lady Fortescue. "Now would you kindly leave this young lady alone so she can make her first Ascent in peace?"

"I guess," said the boy, his dark eyes resting lazily on Jessie. "See you around, New Girl. Enjoy the ride!"

And he floated out of the antechamber, whistling softly to himself.

"Sorry about that," said Lady Fortescue. "I take it you hadn't met before? Very difficult child, that one. Thinks he can get away with murder just because his father's Head of Exit. Causes us no end of bother."

She beamed at Jessie.

"Best of luck then, dear," she said. "Not that you'll need it, I'm sure. You're the perfect candidate for an Ascent."

Jessie smiled back anxiously.

"I wish I felt so confident," she said. "There's loads I don't know."

"You'll pick it all up in a jiffy!" reassured Lady Fortescue. "But do keep your dress well covered up. A lot can happen in a hundred and fifty years – and the crinoline's most definitely *out*."

She glided away, patting her bun into position and smoothing her green skirts.

Jessie looked herself over.

Perhaps she'd be lucky after all.

Perhaps she really did stand a chance of getting up to the Other Side.

It didn't seem so very long ago that she'd been

living there. Hard to believe it had actually been a full century and a half, what with the Inbetween Time and everything. But of course she couldn't remember anything about that.

She remembered the accident, though. Clear as day. The heart-stopping fall and the sudden pain and the roaring blackness pouring towards her. And then nothing.

Nothing till all this.



Finn could hear an odd whining sound coming from somewhere inside the engine.

He'd driven past the primary school and the bus station. Now the parish church was coming up on his left. An old lady, hunched against the rain under a cherry-red umbrella, was letting herself through the lychgate into the churchyard, a small dog at her heels.

The village was behind him at last. Only the moor lay ahead, a vast bleakness whipped up by the weather into a watercolour of grey-green flecks and swirls.

He'd trade it in for London any day.

Finn wound down the window a fraction and listened to the whining noise against the drumming of the rain.

*Don't like the sound of that. Don't like the sound of that at all.*