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Opening extract from

The Wall

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We sprint for the ball, shoulder to shoulder, our backpacks thumping from side to side. I get in front, but David grabs my schoolbag and pulls me back, like a rider stopping a horse.

'Oi!' I shout. 'That's a foul!'

'There's no such thing.'

'Yes there is!'

'Not when there's no ref.'

David gets to the ball first and shields it with his body. 'Watch this,' he says, and jumps on the spot with a jerk of his heels, trying to flick the ball over his head. It dribbles out sideways and rolls into the gutter. David thinks he's a good footballer, even though he's so uncoordinated he only knows where his feet are when he's looking at them.

I wedge the ball between my ankles and leap, with a sharp knee-bend, then swivel. The sphere of leather sits up in the air perfectly, as if it's waiting for my foot, and I execute what can only be described as an incredible volley, right on the sweet spot. The ball flies away, faster and further than I could ever have hoped.

Life, as you probably know, is full of ups and downs. There is always a price to pay for perfection.

At exactly the moment my trainer whacks into the

football, the empty road where we're playing stops being empty. The security car comes round the corner, but my ball is already in the air, and there's nothing I can do to get it back again.

The driver can't be looking very carefully, because he only slams on the brakes after the ball thumps into his windscreen. David runs for it. I sprint for the ball, getting to it just as the security guard climbs out of his car.

'Was that you?' he shouts.

'No,' I say, as I'm picking up the ball.

'Do you think I'm stupid?'

I'm very, very close to saying 'yes'. If I did, I think it might be the funniest thing I've ever said, especially since he probably is a bit stupid. Imagine just driving round and round all day, patrolling streets where nothing ever happens. Even if you were clever when you started, your brain would eventually turn to mush. He's got a gun, but you can't shoot someone just for calling you stupid.

I keep my mouth shut and run off with the ball, to where David's waiting for me, half hiding behind a parked car. I tell him what I almost said and he finds it so funny he punches me on the arm, which is actually quite annoying, so I punch him back, then he shoves me so I grab him round the waist and we begin to wrestle.

When the security car drives past us, David's sitting on my head, and I see the driver tutting at us as if he thinks we're idiots, but I know it's him that's the idiot.

We go back to football tricks after that, until David tries to copy my volley and the ball sails up, across the street, above the bus stop, and over the hoardings around a building site. This isn't one of the normal building sites around the edge of town, either; this is the strange one opposite the

medical centre, where nothing ever gets built, and you never see a single person go in or out.

'I don't believe it,' he says, which is what I knew he was going to say.

'That's a new ball!'

'It bobbled,' he says. I knew he was going to say that, too.

He's trying not to look at me, and I can see him thinking about walking away, so I step in front of him and block his path. 'You'll have to go over and get it,' I say.

We look up at the hoarding. It's more like a wall: solid wood, with nowhere to see in, and more than twice my height. It was originally painted blue, but over the years it's faded to a dish-water grey, with the paint bubbling up in cracked oval blisters. This building site is pretty much the only place in Amarias that's not spanking new. The rest of the town feels like it's just been unwrapped from cellophane.

One section of the fence is a hinged opening, wide enough for a truck, but it's locked shut with a thick chain which is rusted dark as chocolate. Thinking about my ball, lost over the hoarding, it occurs to me for the first time how strange it is that everyone calls this place a building site, when no one ever builds anything there.

'You have to climb in and get it,' I repeat.

'We can't go in there,' he snaps.

'I didn't say we, I said you.'

'There's no way in.'

'You'll have to climb over. It's a new ball. It was a present.'

'There's no way I'm going in there.'

'So you'll get me a new ball?'

'I don't know. I have to go.'

'You have to get me a ball, or go in there and get that one back.'

David looks at me with heavy, reluctant eyes. I can see on his face that he's given up on the ball, and now he just wants to get away from my nagging. 'I'm late,' he says. 'My uncle's visiting.'

'You have to help me get the ball back.'

'I'm late. It's just a ball.'

'It's the only one I've got.'

'No it isn't.'

'The only leather one.'

'Don't be such a baby.'

'I'm not being a baby.'

'Baby.'

'*You're* being a baby.'

'Baby.'

'Saying "baby baby baby" over and over makes you a baby, not me,' I say. I'm embarrassed to be even having this conversation, but with David there's sometimes no way out. He drags people down to his level.

'Then why can't you stop whining about the ball?'

'Because I want it back.'

'*Because I want it back*,' he says, in a baby voice.

I'm not the kind of guy who hits people, but if I were, this is when I'd do it. Smack on the nose.

His backpack is dangling off one shoulder. If I grab his bag and toss it over the fence, he'll have to climb in. I lunge for it, but he's too quick. Not that David is ever quick, but I'm just too slow. He's read my thoughts, and in a second he's running away, laughing a fake laugh.

David is my best friend in Amarias, even though he's extremely annoying. Amarias is a strange place. If I were living somewhere normal, I don't think David would be my friend at all.

'You owe me a ball!' I shout after him.

'*You owe me a ball!*' he says, slowing to a walk, knowing he's out of reach.

I watch him go. Even the way he walks is irritating, lolloping from leg to leg as if his shoes are made of lead. He thinks he's going to be a fighter pilot; I think he's too clumsy to control any machine more complicated than a bicycle pump.

The most frustrating thing of all is that I know in a day or two I'll have to forget about the ball and make friends again. I used to have lots of people to choose from, but out here, there's only David. The other boys in Amarias don't like me, and I don't like them. They think I'm a weirdo and I think they're weirdos. In this town, weird is normal and normal is weird.

I look up at the fence. It's unclimbable. I walk alongside it, blackening my fingertips against the rough wood, bursting a couple of paint blisters with my thumb, until I get to a corner and turn into an alley. I pause to examine the neat ovals of filth at the end of each finger, then place them back on the wooden surface and head down the narrow corridor of cool, shady air. Soon, I come up against a metal dumpster. It's higher than my hand stretched above my head, but if I can climb on to its lid, it might work as a step that could get me over. If I want my ball back, this is the way.

I take off my schoolbag, hide it in the gap between the dumpster and the fence, then take a few steps back. A short run-up and a good leap is enough to get a decent grip on the hinge. With a swing and a kick, I hook a leg on to the lid, and after an awkward wriggle, which rubs more of me against the bin than I'd really like, I'm up. A tricky manoeuvre, perfectly executed. Climbing isn't a proper sport, but if it were, it would be the sport I'm best at. I can't explain why, but whenever I look at a high thing, I want to go up it.

There's a man who climbs skyscrapers. He just turns up and does it, and by the time he's off the ground, no one can stop him. When he gets to the top he always gets arrested, but he doesn't care. I bet that even the policemen doing the arrest secretly wish they were his friend. Sometimes, when I'm bored, I look at things and figure out where the best handholds and footholds would be. The best climbers can lift their whole body weight with one finger.

I look around from the top of the dumpster. There isn't anything to see – only the alley – but just viewing the world from double my normal height feels good. Sour, fishy wafts are coming up from under my feet. The lid sags under my weight, bending inwards with each step. If it breaks, I can picture how I'd look. I've seen it in cartoons a hundred times. The angry face smeared in red and brown goo, a fried egg on one shoulder, a fish skeleton on the other, spaghetti on top of the head. There's always spaghetti. If you add in the stink and imagine it actually happening, it isn't funny any more.

From the lid of the bin I can't see over the fence, but I can now see that the site goes right up to The Wall. If this place does have a secret purpose, this position has to be the key. I pull myself up on to the splintery top of the fence, and with one leg dangling on either side, look down into the site for the first time. There is a house. Just a house and a garden, but I've never seen anything like it in my life.

The whole place has been flattened. Squashed. Pushed over. One wall is still intact, at a forty-five-degree angle, and the rest has just shattered and crumbled underneath it, into not much more than a heap of rubble. Sticking out from the mound of stones and mortar, I can see half a faded pink dressing table; blocks of splayed and crinkled paper, still

bound together, but no longer really books; a telephone with no receiver, trailing a wire that snakes away as if it is still expecting a call; a toy pram; a yellow dress hanging halfway out of a collapsed window frame; a DVD player bent in half; a toilet seat with an embroidered cover.

Two voices spark up in my head. One of them is excited, telling me this is the best adventure playground, the best climbing frame, the best secret hideout I've ever seen. It wants me to jump straight down and explore the ruin. The other one holds me back. This voice is quieter – it doesn't even seem to have any words – but it's more powerful and keeps me motionless on top of the fence. It's a feeling I can't quite understand, something to do with the stuff spilling out of the demolished house, something to do with the obvious suddenness with which this place was transformed from a home into a heap of junk. An eerie chill seems to be rising up from the rubble. It's as if an aftertaste of violence is hanging in the air, like a bad smell.

All the houses in Amarias are the same. You see new ones going up all the time: first the concrete, sprouting metal bars like a dodgy haircut, then the red roof and the windows, and finally the cladding of stone slapped on like a paint job. This one's different. There's no concrete. Just proper lumps of solid stone.

I want to jump in and romp around and climb to the top, and at the same time I have an urge to run away and forget what I've seen. I sense that just for looking over this fence, just for knowing what the so-called building site contains, I'm in trouble.

Holding tight to the top of the fence, I look more closely over the site. Though the garden has mostly gone wild, or disappeared under rubble, from up high I can make out a

pattern of paths and beds. A huge rose bush has covered a toppled wall in crimson blooms. In the corner are six old-looking fruit trees, planted in a perfect circle, forming what would once have been a shady grove. The trees are dead, with a scattering of dried-up leaves still clinging to the branches, but they surround a metal swing seat which looks as if it might work, as if it might be the only thing untouched by the carnage all around. Beyond the fruit trees, the ground is bare, flat, grooved with neat rows of bulldozer tracks, right up to The Wall.

My mouth is suddenly dry and sticky. I feel as if I've accidentally glimpsed one of my friends' mothers, naked. It seems almost shameful to be sitting here, staring at this smashed-up home that is the absolute opposite of everything my town is supposed to be. But I can't look away.

I know it's wrong to climb over these ruins, in the same way it would be wrong to play football in a graveyard, but I can't just turn and leave. I need to know more. I need to touch and feel this place, walk around in it, look for clues as to what happened. And I still want my ball.

I glance down, between my knees. The inside of the hoarding is slatted, much easier to climb than the smooth exterior. I can go in and out as quickly as I want. No one needs to know what I've done, except maybe David. He probably won't believe me, but I decide my mission can be to find a souvenir that will prove I really jumped in and explored. It won't be difficult to pick out something good. Even from up here, I can see that the possessions spilling out of the house never belonged to people like us. This was the home of people from the other side. The mystery isn't what happened to them, it's how they found themselves on

the wrong side of The Wall in the first place, and why the site hasn't been cleared and built on.

I climb down the slats, and turn to face the demolished house. Inside the site, behind the hoardings, there's an eerie silence. I could scamper up the toppled wall in a few seconds if I wanted to, but the graveyard feeling is even stronger in here, shielded from the outside world.

I shuffle along the fence, heading towards the back of the building, pulled by a strange urge to sit on the swing seat, see if it still works, hear what noise it makes. A pair of old-fashioned patio doors comes into view, a white-painted wooden frame and lots of small square panes of glass, one in each corner tinted blue. The nearer door is crushed and shattered; the other is untouched, still upright, half filling a doorway from nothing to nothing.

I find a garden path made of red tiles, which leads me in a smooth arc to the swing seat. It's furry with rust, like a sunken ship. I give it a gentle push, expecting it to squeak, but instead I hear a bang from the far side of the garden which makes me jump backwards.

A flash of movement around the side of the house catches my eye, and I see a small cloud of dust rising from the earth. As the dust clears, a square sheet of metal becomes visible.

I crouch motionless behind the swing seat, ready to run and hide if anyone appears.

Nothing moves. Minutes pass, and everything remains still and silent. If anyone was here when I arrived, they've now gone. I see my ball, nestled in a dusty channel between two clumps of stone, sitting on a mouldering scrap of red cloth that looks like the remains of a cushion cover.

I wait a little longer, until I'm sure that I'm alone, then I

fetch my ball and slowly approach the metal sheet. It has a greasy, ridged surface, which I kneel and touch. My hand jumps back at me. The metal is hot, glinting in the bright sunlight.

There are footprints in the dust around me, leading towards and away from where I'm squatting. Along the path of these footprints, I see something odd: something not dusty or old or broken. It's small, but new, and still working. A dim gleam, barely visible in the daylight, is coming from one end. It's a torch. A working torch, still on.

I pick it up. I switch it off and switch it on. It can't have been there long; the batteries are still fresh. I turn and look again at the metal sheet. The bang; the footprints; the torch – these three things connect. There's something under that metal.

I scour the wasteland around me, checking I'm still alone. I wonder for a moment if I should get help. Tell an adult, maybe. But what would I say, and why on earth would they believe me or be interested? I found a torch that works. Something moved and went bang. In fact, what were the chances of me even getting to the interesting part of the story before being told off and punished for climbing into the building site? Besides, even if they did believe me, and I had uncovered something important, would I be allowed to see it? Would I ever be told the truth about what was discovered? Probably not.

If I want to find out what's under there, I have to do it myself, and I have to do it straight away.

I bend my knees and heave at the metal, revealing a glimpse of a dark hole. I push again, the hot, sharp edge digging into my skin, but with a firm shove, it slides aside. I drop the sheet, and immediately realise this hole is no ordinary hole. There's a rope tied to a metal pin that has been

hammered into the soil just under the surface. The rope is knotted at regular intervals, each gap the length of my forearm. I can make out four knots, then nothing: just a black void. The hole is the size of a manhole, but an irregularity to the shape gives the feeling it has been dug without machines. This is the entrance to something.

I kneel at the edge and shine the torch downwards, with my arm stretched out as far as it will go. In the weak, thin beam, I trace the rope to where it ends in a tangled white blob, sitting on a dark surface that looks like soil. But it's hard to be sure.

I can't look at a high thing without wanting to go up it. Now I'm staring down this hole – a hole like nothing I've ever seen before – and the same voice is piping up, telling me I have to go down, I have to take a look, I have to know what it's for and where it goes.

I have a hunch as to what this might be, and I know how dangerous it is to get involved with anything like it, but on the other hand, stumbling across this mystery, in the middle of my boring, boring town with nothing to do and nowhere to go, is like finding buried treasure. I can't just leave it there and walk away.

Maybe I ought to work out the risks, remind myself of everything I've been warned about, take stock of what I have to lose. I know that's what David would do if he was here with me, but that's not the kind of person I am, and it's not who I want to be, either. Mysteries are for solving, walls are for climbing, secret hideouts are for exploring. That's just how things are.

I pocket the torch and slide myself into the hole. The first knot is just beyond the reach of my feet, so I squeeze the rope with my knees and edge myself downwards, hand over

hand, until I have a knot to stand on. After that it's easy to shunt myself lower, knot by knot, to the bottom. I'm just beginning to enjoy the climb when I hit the soil, and find myself wishing the hole was deeper.

The earth at the bottom is softer and darker than on the surface, cool against the palm of my hand. There's a musty smell, like a bag of football kit you've forgotten about for a few days. I switch on the torch and immediately see that my suspicion was correct. The hole is more than a hole. It's a tunnel, held up with props of rough wood and thin planks that look like they've come from packing crates. Mostly, though, it's just a thin but seemingly endless tube of soil, disappearing ahead into darkness, in the direction of The Wall.

Now I have a choice. I can go back up, collect my football, and head home; or I can go through. I know what I ought to do. I know what every other boy in Amarias would do. But as I see it, those are the two best reasons there could possibly be for doing the opposite.