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Opening extract from

Blood Donors

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Anger Management Issues

Monday mornin' first lesson a bedbug crawls right outta my ear and down my neck.

I'm already sore at my boy Mustaph 'cos he don't ever do nothin' but sleep, see? I think he sufferin' from bein' sad, 'cos he spend half his life in bed, and it all wrong 'cos we be fifteen which is the primetime, yeah? We be hittin' on girls and playin' our beats and footie and crazy stuff on computer, but only if ol' Mustaph can drag his dozy head out from under his duvet – that boy win Olympic Gold for sleepin'.

Nine o'clock I call at his on my way out of the block. We live on different floors on The Finger. The Finger is one big tower block, only one for miles around. Where most of my boys live, and my mum and my aunties and their boyfriends. Anyone who anyone to anyone, all livin' in The Finger. As if they scoop up the flats from a normal estate and pile them up high like a game of Jenga, all wobbly and jagged. Somehow The Finger stay up, all twenty floors of it. Mum says it's all us in The Finger, stickin' up against the rest of the world.

Anyways, Mustaph's place is a few floors below

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mine and I always knock on my way down. If he's awake we hang together.

Monday mornin', this boy ain't risin' for nobody, so first lesson he be marked absent and I'm sittin' next to this fool Ashley, who thinkin' he my friend on account of bein' into hip hop stuff I was into when I was still in Year 5, get me? I'm cool with it, but Ashley be always in my face.

Monday mornin' ain't no exception. So what happen? Borin' old Subo the maths teacher is dronin' on about hippopotamus triangles and Ashley turn to me, pullin' some dumb face and a bedbug crawls right outta my ear and down my neck.

Earlier that mornin', I'd woken up itchin' like a bitch.

Mum yells me out for usin' language, yeah, but I tell no lie. I was itchin' like a bitch. I counted the bumps on my leg. Just countin' on my left leg for sure, but them badassed bumps coverin' every inch of my skin. I counted up to twenty-eight and then I submitted. Them li'l bugs must have sucked three pints of blood. How thirsty is that? I'm thinkin' I'm gettin' paler and paler every day. Any day now I wake up, find I turned into the ghost of myself.

I cussed out loud and threw the duvet off of me and squinted down at the bed sheet. I was seein' about a dozen of them bugs scatterin' like a gang after a slumpin'. Only it's me, Marshall O'Connor the First, that'd been slumped, and I wasn't standin' for

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it. I slipped into my boxers and bust into the kitchen. Mum's sittin' there readin' a letter and I blatted it outta her hands and start cussin' straight away.

Not the perfect start to the week, I admit. But these bedbugs been gettin' worse and worse as we sweatin' through blazin' hot summer. Heatwave showin' no sign of coolin' even now, second week back at school.

Mum tried to play it down first off, callin' them creepy-crawlies as if I'm still in little school like my bro Connor – that's Connor O'Connor the First, yeah, don't ask – and we on some infant visit to the zoo. But it ain't no zoo, it's mine and Connor's room, and it ain't right. It proper nasty.

Oh, look, it's one of them creepy-crawlies. She flick it away like it was a ant or a ladybird or a incy wincy spider crawled up the spout.

After a while, I'm sayin' *Hey, Mum, there's another bug.*

Bugs I started callin' 'em, 'cos bugs is what they are.

When I blatted the letter out her hand, Mum leap to her feet, snatch up the letter, shove it in her pocket, and shoot me her look. Her look is fierce. I'm bigger than her but she must have invisible muscles in her eyeballs 'cos she feed me the look and it's like I been slapped round the face. She cussed me out, sayin' how she told me about usin' language like that and if I wanna use them kind of words she'd give me proper reason to cuss big time.

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Then she surprised me by turnin' her back. I hate it when she does that. Like I disgust her, she can't bear the sight of me. With her back to me she tell me I'm already late and I make her shamed. Nex' thing I know I'm outta the door only half dressed and stuffin' books into my school backpack like I am a unprepared fool. *Aren't things bad enough?* she cries. *See how you make things worse!* Door slams shut and I'm guessin' that's me on the way to school. Nice start, yeah?

Get what I deserve.

I shoulda risen early like my kid brother, and bypassed the battlin' business. Connor got this obsession with arrivin' at his school before anybody else, so he can stand all alone in the playground and pretend he in a movie where it's the end of the world and he's the only human left alive. My brother a bit weird.

I never seen Mum this bad before. We always used to have a blast, me and her and li'l Con-Con rollin' roun' havin' hysterics playin' chase and catch with my mutt Sabretooth.

All the time I was walkin' I was scratchin' my itches, thinkin' Just imagine how it'd be, if word got out about this at school. Man, I'd be dead meat.

So here we are, in class, surrounded by all my boys, a handful of enemies and way too many girls to have a humiliation heap itself on top of me. It's like I got predicative skills like Derren Brown. I predic' big bad bug trouble.

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Moment that bedbug crawl outta my ear gonna last for ever in my life. I see Ashley's jaw drop in disgust same time as I feel that bug's legs ticklin' against my skin. I slap my neck and squish it dead. Its blood – my blood – is smeared across my palm. Me and Ashley are just starin' at it, and Ashley mutters *Whoa, man, you infested!* What am I supposed to do?

I bunch my fist and I smash his face. Blood squirts outta his nose same as my blood squirted outta the bug. He topple over his chair and nex' thing I know I'm on top of him, poundin' the life outta him. Subo got his arms tucked under my pits, tryin' to drag me off and he's yellin *O'Connor! O'Connor!* and callin' one of the other kids to go get help. Ashley is a bloody mess. Subo pulls me up and I'm yellin' *You filthy, filthy, you dirty, nasty, filth* and I'm pointin' at him and lookin' at the rest of the class as if it be Ashley had the bug crawlin' outta his ear and needs disinfectin' and nobody oughta go near him in case they gonna get his germs. I'm cussin' his filth as other teachers come in and drag me out.

It all Mustaph's fault, 'cos if he wasn't no sleepy bones it's him would be sittin' next to me in class and I wouldn't have to bash that fool Ashley, would I?

All I can think is It's not fair, it's not fair as I'm dragged to the Head, and I've got a suspension. Again. They say I got anger management issues. My mum says I got it off of my dad.

Mum. She gonna go ape.

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Biff

I trudge home thinkin' how Mum goin' to think I let us down again. *See how you make things worse* she'd said. But none of it would have happened if it hadn't been for the bug crawlin' out my ear. And it's on account of the bugs we battled each other before I went to school. Now we goin' to battle some more.

Sun is shinin' but it feel like rain is fallin'.

I walk up the stairs to our place on the tenth floor, a condemned man steppin' up to the judge. *Mum?* I say when I come through the door. *Mum?*

I forgot. She's out, doin' her cleanin' job. So I got to stress all the rest of the day, waitin' to face my sentencin'.

I whistle my dog. Least he's pleased to see me, jumpin' up, lickin' my face, whinin' and waggin' his tail like a helicopter-dog. Sabretooth is cross-breed, a mongrel like me. I was watchin' this programme on TV with a vet sayin' how cross-breeds are the fittest dogs 'cos they got all the best bits of different breeds, but none of the worst bits. I'm thinkin' that's me. I got Irish and I got Jamaican

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and Mum say I even got a little Canadian too, which make me fitter and healthier than every other boy. Connor's dad was Italian. That means I gotta be fitter than him. Mum says no, it's all the same mix, if we was a PIE chart we'd be sliced up the same, but with different nationalities. I'm tougher than Con-Con but he's a few years younger than me yet. I wonder if my dad ever faced up to Connor's dad, which would win in a scrap?

But we ain't never seen Connor's dad, and mine I ain't seen since back in the day. Way back. Whatever, my dad would bash Connor's dad – easy.

Talking like that Mum says, *is why you're always in trouble at school.*

Even when she's not home, I got her voice condemnin' my ears.

Stroke Sabre. My dog ain't never met my dad. If he did I'm sure he'd lick his face. Sabre lick every face. He that kind of dog, everybody's pal. My social worker says he's a calming influence. True. Sabretooth my mutt, what Mum got me for my eleventh and is now my closest and most trusted.

Even when I get you a puppy, you still come home with another boy's blood on your shirt.

Irritatin', like a ancient ringtone, shoulda been updated way back.

I pick up Sabre's favourite ball and his lead, which we never really need on account of him bein' so close and loyal, which is what make him as good a friend

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as Mustapha – he even sleep about the same as that boy – and we race up a couple of floors and drop in on Sis, see if she's wantin' to go stroll.

Share with her, about the bugs, and all.

I ain't stressed about showin' my face to Sis. Sis is my best friend next to Mustapha and Sabre, 'cept she older than me, don' go to school no more. Permanently excluded, yeah? Sixteen and not really my sis by blood, like Connor is my brother by blood, my half-brother. Sis is a mate, and though my social worker might not agree, my mum and everybody else praise her as a calming influence on me too. If she was my real sis I couldn't have done better. She never be sore and cussin' or punchin' nor nothin'. She jus' got a wicked smile, like seein' the joke in everythin'. Personally, I don' know what so funny.

Sis is the only person I know who ever got sent outta school for laughin'. She jus' used to sit in lessons and laugh at dates and figures and poems until it drove them teachers nuts. In the end they kicked her right out. She laughed all the way through them school gates. Sometimes, when I'm with her and idiots make me ready to explode she jus' look at me and grins and all my red rage lifts and I can't help but grin back. Nex' thing we know, it's twenty minutes later and I ain't hit nobody. Truly, I got the bes' things in the world to stop me blowin' my lid: Sis smilin' at me, Sabreboy lickin' my face, and ol' sleepyhead Mustaph, whose only real exercise is

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yawnin' his big hippo mouth.

I got the worst too. How comes we the only family in the whole block got bedbugs declarin' squatters' rights in our livin' room? How'm I gonna deal with them? Mum certainly ain't liftin' no finger. Con-Con too young. Won't be long now before word breaks out, spreads round The Finger. Nex' thing we know we be treated like we got Plague at our door. Ain't nobody goin' to want to know us.

Ain't nothin' for it. I got to spill it all to Sis. She is safe.

Sis can see I'm in a state, fixes me nice cool juice. We drink it standin' at her balcony lookin' down on the surroundin' estates. People roun' these parts say The Finger is where the council puts all what they call antisociable families. Sure, we got enough music bangin' out here and there, but Sis says that be a party somewhere to go to, and it don' cost no money for travel up West End and drinks and stuff. Course, me and Con-Con ain't invited to no grown-up parties. But we pals with this family in the flat under ours and they got the maddest widescreen you ever seen, and Sis know someone can get the latest movies and Mum make gigantic pots of popcorn. We draw the curtains with about a dozen of us all squashed in and we see brand-new films and we ain't spent a penny. So what's antisociable about that?

Bugs. Bugs is antisociable. Me and Con ain't goin' to get invited to no more popcorn parties if we

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smuggle in stinkin' gate-crashers.

Me and Sis look down at all the other estates. We got the baddest view and we all look out for each other and the magic is, you can see when people come visitin' that we don't want visitin', 'cos they park down there and word gets up – bailiffs, benefits inspectors, all of them.

We standin' there twelve storeys up, and Sabretooth has his paws up, poking his nose over the edge at grey clouds, heavy with attitude. Maybe the hot weather finally goin' to break. Sis clamber up onto the top of the wall and stand tall, stretchin' her arms out into the breeze, like she Queen of the City. Her hair blowin' and her smile beamin' sunshine. She's hundreds of feet up and she rules.

You're crazy I'm sayin'.

This the best feelin' ever she grins. *Y'oughta try it, Marsh.*

Sure, when I ain't got no reason for livin' no more. Then maybe I'll go for a dive. Right now, I'm good and safe down here.

She let free a sigh of satisfaction and take a deep intake of high-rise air. No traffic fumes up here, yeah? *This is my mountaintop* she says.

You keep a secret, Sis?

No she says, dead sarcastic. *I'll tweet it, Facebook it and text everybody I know.* She waggles her fingers together, hops off the wall onto the balcony. *Gimme gimme.*

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So back inside I tell her I been suspended again. She laugh long and loud and say I'm gonna end up jus' like her.

Tell her about the bugs, I'm thinkin', tell her about the bugs.

Mum is goin' to hit the roof I say.

Sis shrugs. *She'll bounce back down, land on the carpet, nice and soft, soon enough.*

Tell her about the bugs.

No time at all Sis continue, *she'll be makin' you fresh popcorn.*

Yeah, make me feel really guilty.

Sis puts up her fists like a boxer. *You rather have a mum who slap you roun' the face?*

It'd be simpler I frown. *She settin' me all these good examples, I still come home suspended, batter some boy.*

Why don't I tell her about the bugs? I can't. I jus' can't. She gonna think I'm filth. Who I gonna have left then? Mustaph and Sabretooth. Woo hoo.

A year ago, Mum call in council pest control and a crew in boilersuits and gas masks with canisters on their backs and tubes attached to rubber pipin', like they was extras in *Dr Who*, yeah – came and fumigated the whole place. Like we was full of germs, needed sterilization. Connor and Sabe was following them fumigators roun' like it was the best thing since canned sandwiches, but me and Mum was lookin' down from our balcony, seein' the van parked

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beneath with PEST CONTROL tagged on the side in big pink letters. We knew everybody else in The Finger'd be peerin' down also. Everybody gonna know that it be us, the O'Connors, in need of emergency fumigation.

Mum must have figured it was worth the shame, to be free of the bugs crawlin' all over our walls, suckin' our arms and legs while we slept.

But no. They came back, didn't they? Came back with a vengeance. So now it so bad Mum turnin' her back on me, she so stressed and shamed.

Sis chuck me some crisps, which I'm sharin' with my mutt. And I spot one of them bugs crawlin' up her livin' room wall. Sabretooth must've scratched it off of his belly. Here it is creepin' its way straight towards a photo pinned on the wall. Plannin' on movin' in. It been usin' my dog as a Bug Bus. It goin' to hide behind the picture, wait until nightfall. Bitin' time.

That's what they do, see? Durin' daytime they hide and sleep off their feasts. I used to have this big poster of Ashley Young. One day me and Con-Con was havin' a row about our space, 'cos we each got a bed against opposite walls, meanin' the middle bit is shared territory. Little bruv who ain't no Man United fan was makin' big stress about my Ashley Young, pride of place, middle of the middle bit. So I goes to move it. I pull out the drawin' pins, pull the poster away from the wall and there's a riot of bugs all

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runnin' for cover, and in the corners there's dozens of little black full stops – which is bug poo – all over it. I screwed up my poster 'cos it was ruined. I was so mad I went over to Con-Con's poster of Iron Man and I rub my hands all over it, hard as I can, squish all of them bugs behind it. I could feel 'em splattin'. *I'm gonna execute you!* Con yelled, and he punched me between my legs, which hurt worse than any other way you can be hurt. I had to put him in a bear hug till he calmed down. When we peeled the poster off the wall, it was blood carnage, squished bedbugs all over.

So here comes another, plannin' on makin' a meal of Sis. I'm wantin' to squish it, but I'm stressin' about Sis seein' and knowin' what we bringin' into her home. I dunno where to look, or what to do.

I'm a rat, carryin' disease from neighbour to neighbour.

Biff. Sis squashes it flat with her bare hands. *Bye bye, little fella* she sings, wipin' her hand on her jeans. She sniffs her hand. *Poo, those things stink.*

I'm sittin' frozen, not knowin' what to say.

Sorry 'bout that she says. *These've been gettin' worse and worse for months. D'you get 'em in your place too?*

It feel like a cool rain a-fallin', after months of blisterin' heat.

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