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Opening extract from
In Bloom

Written by
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Here's a test:

Leukaemia

Look at the word quickly then look away.
Now, close your eyes and try to spell it.
Bet you couldn't?

Neither could I.

Before

My first memory was of Kurt Cobain's death. I was four. Chris was thirteen. For three days all you could hear in our house was 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' and the sound of my brother howling in his bedroom.

'Sweetheart, I know it's difficult but life goes on,' Mum said.

'Not if you're dead.'

'For God's sake, Christopher, just get up.'

'No.'

'I'll pay you.'

'CAPITALIST!'

Mum was trying her hardest, but after he'd missed a whole week of school she just gave up. Within a year Chris had grown his hair long and announced to anyone who would listen that he was gay. This was Tyne and Wear. In 1994. People listened.

Like I said, that was my first memory. By the time I was fifteen, Chris was twenty-four. He lived not far from us, and came round at least twice a week with a new mix CD for me and an empty carrier bag, which he stuffed full of the contents of our fridge. Mum kicked off every time he did it, but I knew that whenever she was in Marks she bought double so that he wouldn't go hungry. She was nice like that, though Chris wouldn't admit it.

Also Dad didn't live with us any more. He didn't *not* live there – he just went away and didn't come back for really long stretches. The longest was the time he managed to miss both Chris's eighteenth *and* twenty-first birthdays. That was a low even by his standards.

Mum loved us in her own way. She loved Emma, my twin sister, too. People used to say just how like Mum Em looked. This was a compliment. Mum was beautiful. She was a model in London when she was my age. Apparently a journalist said that she had the next 'look'. Chris pretended it was embarrassing but I knew he showed old photos of her to his friends when he was drunk. He also told them how she could have been really famous, and how we could have grown up in London and been Bohemians, only one photographer asked her to go topless and when Grandma found out she got the first train to London and dragged Mum back, kicking and screaming. Mum didn't really talk about it any more. Grandma did. Every time she heard the *EastEnders* theme tune she reminded us of how a cockney tried to destroy her family's honour, and how over her dead body would he have got away with it, and how she was charged over a pound for a cup of tea at King's Cross . . .

Either way, Mum was beautiful and so was Emma. All children are supposed to be beautiful; they're not, though. Emma was beautiful, that was just the way it went. It was her thing.

One afternoon not long after she died, I remember sitting downstairs with Chris. Mum had been in bed for two days and we'd only had toast for tea and I asked him whether we were going to be taken into care.

'Mum still loves you. Just . . . from a distance.' Chris clocked my gormless expression and went on, 'When something bad happens you have to make sure you're more careful. She just

needs to be a bit tougher now so nothing can hurt her the same way again. Once bitten and all that.'

This made more sense to me. I used to love dogs until Rebecca Speckman's Alsatian chased me through the back cut and sank its teeth into my left leg; ever since then just passing a dog on the street was enough to provoke a minor breakdown in me.

I put this to Chris and he nodded slowly, trying not to laugh.

'I suppose you're right, kidder,' he said, and carried on smoking out of the window.

Mum always used to make a point of telling Emma and me what a lovely surprise we were. Chris (who at the time was going through a phase of listening to loud music and being a total shit) translated this for me.

'It means you were accidents,' he said, tugging on the sleeves of his Marilyn Manson hoodie and scanning me for a reaction.

He must have felt bad about it, though, because once he'd cheered up and gone back to listening to happy music by skinny boys with model girlfriends he made sure he corrected himself.

'Look, I didn't mean it,' he said. 'You weren't planned, is all. But it worked out OK . . . you were sort of like the fiver you find in your jeans after they've been through the wash.'

At this stage I was still on fifty pence a week pocket money. By the end of the year inflation would push me way over the pound mark. Regardless, the thought of being the equivalent of a whole fiver made me feel like the most special boy in the whole world.

Chris was tougher than me and had more of an accent. This was because when he was born Dad had just started working and Mum was still running her business from the back bedroom. They were pretty young, I suppose, by the standards of most

parents. They lived on a street where they seemed to film quite a lot of *Crimestoppers*, two bus stops away from the house we later moved to. Chris went to the local comp. By the time I came along they had moved. Dad had his job and Mum had a proper office. They didn't send me to the comp, they sent me to a school where no one really had an accent. Chris moved schools too, for a little while, but for some reason he told his friends that he was at his old school all the way through.

Chris worked as a graphic designer. He stayed late at his office to make a magazine that nobody read, about bands that nobody listened to. I could say that and know I was not being cruel. Firstly because it was true, secondly because Chris said it first – I was simply repeating it.

After summer – when we returned to school for our final year – everything seemed different. Everybody was less certain. Every conversation involved change. Involved whatever would come next. Out of nowhere we had choice – whether we wanted to stay; whether we wanted to go; which subjects suited our interests. School became an option, and an exciting one at that. For those of us who were staying, parts of the building that never had been before would become accessible; the classes would become smaller; attendance would be up to us. We would even get to choose what we wore.

Those leaving would no longer be shut up within those same four walls. They would have to make new friends, see new people every day, unlearn the old rules and get to grips with the new ones. Nobody knew exactly what they were doing next. But everyone knew that they would be doing *something*. And even if that something was to choose to do nothing then the choice would be theirs, where it never had been before. Something was

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ending. And something was beginning. Nobody quite knew what was coming, but we knew it would be huge. Nothing seemed certain any more, nothing seemed static or un-doable; it felt like a reward, like after fifteen years life was finally opening up for us.