

PEBBLES

I always loved school. Literacy, numeracy, the occasional science lesson – all that stuff. Once the day ended, like any other, getting home really trumped it. Mum would go to work as I came back, so I'd end up being alone, but I'd learnt to really love that. I could do as I pleased, and what kid didn't thrive when there's no rules?! I even knew how to play Monopoly on my own (Cluedo too), and God did I have fun doing so! There was fun to be found in everything. Dinner was rarely made for me, so I'd have to make my own. It was never anything exciting, nor anything too varied each day, but my capabilities were limited. An ASDA Spaghetti Bolognese went in, and I'd just wait, watching it turn in the microwave with that familiar buzz. To be honest, the ASDA ready meals didn't even taste that nice, the Morrison's ones were better. I think it was the sauce and meat – well – lack of meat would be a better way to put it. I stood with the same eagerness as the days that came before, regardless. It was ready. I sloshed it about the tray, sprinkled in some cheese, and plopped it on a plate – never out of its tray though. I'd never spoil a clean plate. Washing up wasn't something I would be doing, so every move would be meticulously done. Once prepared, the TV would go on and it wouldn't be a kid's channel or anything someone my age would watch. There was a new game show with Bradley Walsh – The Chase. General knowledge and pointless facts were always something I was fond of. In school, every Friday I'd bring a random fact for everyone to guess whether it was true or false. It was my own little game show! I was Bradley Walsh for a couple minutes every single Friday. The show played, the dogs slept soundly, and I ate, slurping every last strand of pasta as if a Michelin chef had prepared it, so blissfully neutral about everything.

My sister should be home soon enough, around sixish. Mum was a cleaner at my school, and they'd sometimes show up together like a lovely little happy accident. My sister didn't really have much time for me these days, what with her GCSE's, her mates, and trying out new looks to impress them with. She had about four Playboy jackets; I didn't like any of them, but that didn't really matter to her and to be fair, I was still in my phase of not being able to wear jeans because they made my skin feel funny, so who was I to judge. She never really cared for what I had to say. For the most part, I was her annoying little brother, and that was a role I'd become quite complacent with playing. Mum came back first, my sister likely not far behind. My dog-sitting duties ended, and The Chase had just finished, so I could go out. I really wanted to hang with the girls, Lacey specifically, but I never had the chance. She had a party today and it was girls ONLY. Surely one boy wouldn't have made a difference, right? I didn't need to go anyway because I knew I could just hang with the boys. So, once mum had changed, chatted to me about my day and done all those nice little motherly things she'd always do, I'd ask to head on out. Who're you going out with, she'd ask – almost every time without fail. She continued; I saw Lacey on the way home all dressed up. Knowing she was definitely going to the party, and I could definitely not hang out with her did do some damage. Despite it all, I still had the boys, and at my age hanging with them was the right thing for a boy like me to be doing. To have boy mates was just like winning The Chase – it was pretty damn cool! I wanted to hang with the girls and mum expected me to do that too, but I stuck with the boys. I hope mum noticed... I do have boy mates, boy best mates even. She'd nod when I told her, clearly thinking something about it, but I'd continuously assure her. I like hanging with the boys, mum, they're awesome, they're proper lad lads. I'm just like 'em! In the end, I was never sure who I was trying to convince. If I'd learnt anything just from

observation, it was that the boys will stick with their own, and as would the girls. This was just how life was.

Everyone was usually quite jealous that I had a park on my doorstep. It had a simple, little swing set, a slim, rusted slide and a climbing frame shaped like a helicopter. I don't think it was much, but every other kid (the boys especially) loved it. I barely stepped foot in it; I spent a lot of my time making hours of fun with random games about whatever show I was currently obsessed with. For the most part, my own mind was the one of the best friends I could have. Regardless of my thoughts on it, the ground around the park continued to be scorched with footprints and the paintwork of every installation flaked like dead skin from the constant contact. Hours passed by for every kid, so I'd probably be able to make that happen for me too, right? I wanted to play a game of 'Raven' – my latest obsession. I knew the boys would like anything that involved competition. In 'Raven,' you'd perform challenges to win gold rings, and if you failed then you'd lose a life. You also got represented by an emblem and colour! I was always the wave because blue was the best. They laughed at the suggestion. I shrugged it off, willing to do whatever the three lads wanted to instead. I wondered how the party was going.

They decided to race across the road before cars came because that was a fun game to play apparently. I didn't want to do that, but they were having so much fun, so I imagined I would if I gave it a go. A guy in a Nissan Micra stuck ones up at me, and the boys laughed so hard. Was it at me again, or just the situation? I wasn't sure. Being told off or scalded was my worst fear. I already knew that I'd remember this for years to come, yet the boys didn't care enough about me to know. Their next game was pebble throwing, I just didn't expect things

to end up as badly as they did. At first it was quite *fun*. My street had a proper bus shelter, a nice bench, windows all round, and a big sign out front (the only one in the area to do so). To be fair, it was usually smashed up or at least decimated by graffiti, so it seemed like a waste of council money anyway. It was never in good condition, but then again, on a council estate, what was?

The pebble throwing continued. I only wound up throwing a couple, and both of them missed. I think I did it on purpose; I just needed to make them think I was taking part, but I was never that sort of child. The sort who found satisfaction in damaging things or causing a scene in public just wasn't who I was. My teachers always wanted a 'class full of' me. The girls wouldn't be doing this; they'll be eating cake, laughing, and having the absolute best time right now. Ben tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to go and stand in the shelter. Why? What game are we playing now? He giggled snidely as all three of them hunched together like a group of witches plotting something sinister. Even still, I did as he asked. The pebble throwing started up again, but the target had changed. I began feeling the breeze of some of them. One hit my jogging bottoms, leaving a right mark on them. I knew instantly that mum would be annoyed: she'd only just washed them. I laughed, but nothing about this was funny. I shouted quite calmly for them to stop, but it was like I was taunting them instead, so they moved in closer and tightened their aim.

They got me on the head. Tears came almost instantly. The pain was unbearably immense. Their laughter dissipated, but never stopped. Why didn't it stop? Lacey would've stopped. What am I saying? She wouldn't have done it in the first place! Nobody would've! She'd have laughed with me, not at me, about whatever clip from 'The Catherine Tate Show' we

watched on YouTube the night before. I ran home, hand to my head. Luckily, it was only a few doors down. Mum could've even seen, but then again, I told her not to worry... I never wanted to see her worrying.

In the house, the tears instantly got a reaction. My sister raced down the stairs in a frenzy, and mum dropped the washing she was about to take up. What the hell happened?! They both yelled, both angry, both in shock. I didn't know what to say because to protect the boys would mean I'd have to make up some big elaborate lie, and to tell the truth would mean losing the boys because they'd hate me after grassing on them. They knew though. Words didn't even need to be said. My sister took me into the living room where even the dogs seemed curiously concerned. Was it an accident or was it on purpose she asked. So, so calm. This was the first time in a while I'd seen her care quite so deeply. That struck me even harder. I didn't even know. They didn't mean to hit me on the head, but they were throwing pebbles and stones at me, so that makes it an accident right, but it was done on purpose. I didn't know! She stormed out furiously with a fire in her voice unlike anything I'd heard before. What the hell do you think you were doing?! Have you seen his head?! LOOK AT IT! The laughing had stopped now. Everything was a bit of a blur – if only I was at the party instead.

Night-time came round, and the bump had settled. A good dollop of butter had smothered it, but the swelling never shifted. It was like a planet sat above my brow, a good centimetre or so off my head, and a good inch wide. I could never go out again!

Dad came round after hearing what happened, which was nice, because I hadn't seen him or my step-mum in a good few weeks. He rubbed the bump and shook his head. Why do you hang with them lot? He'd ask so tenderly. I liked them... I liked hanging with the boys... Mum must've been worried because she let Dad in too, and they conversed with more than just the usual pleasantries. Nothing like a whopper of an injury to bring mum and dad back together.

Do you want me to go speak to the lad's mum? He asked her.

It's up to him really she said back, but I wish she'd just answered for me.

We went round to Ben's house as it was his shot that got me, and I'm pretty sure it was his idea to begin with. As we walked up the street, the blinds were open, and I caught a glimpse into his life. He was sat with a Scooby-Doo shirt and his boxers on curled up to his mum on the sofa. They read together, so harmlessly, as if butter wouldn't melt. I stopped my dad because it wasn't worth it to me. I had time to think this over and I just didn't see the benefit of stirring the pot further. Dad didn't mind, but I knew he wanted to knock on that door. He put me first, so we left.

It was the holidays, so I had a couple of weeks without school. I didn't have the boys anymore so all I had was two weeks to spend with the girls... Finally. I knew that was what I wanted, but I just didn't think it was what anyone wanted for me. How did I even know that? Nobody said it, nobody hinted it and nobody really cared about what I chose to do. I just wanted to be this typical Yorkshire-born, council estate son, but we were such an atypical family, so what was I expecting? I enjoyed being with Lacey more than the boys. I didn't need them. Lacey was great. Even to this day. Mum used to ask how she was, and I'd shrug as if I didn't know, but we both know I knew everything about her life. I couldn't truly hide anything, no matter

how hard I tried. That one pebble seemed to change everything. From that moment on, I never talked to the boys again. I always felt it took that first tear, my sister's wrath and seeing my parents talk properly again to know... They just wanted me to be happy, and in that moment, I was the saddest I'd ever been. How did I miss that?

Now, several obsessions later, tonnes of games played alone, and so much Spaghetti Bolognese eaten that even the Italians would want me trying something different, I'm hanging with the girls, playing my games of 'Raven' and happily taking some quiz question from The Chase to them. No concerns, no qualms, just confidence and joy. I couldn't feel better.