

From The Raw Material of Drastic Change

Chapter One

August 1976: Joseph

That summer had been the hottest he'd ever known and the town had rotted and festered. Rankness rose from dustbins and lounged on the soupy air. For three months Joseph felt as though he was trying to breathe through a plastic sheet. Flies hovered, lazy around the decaying streets. People's brains boiled inside their heads, saturated in a dangerous mix of cheap lager and hot blood.

Nearly every night fights broke out in town. Half-naked men, red and angry with veins standing out on their necks, faces thrust forward shouting at each other in the street. Women with stringy hair stuck to their faces and makeup sliding down their cheeks, adding to the noise as they picked sides. Often they were pushed away in the violence, or dragged off home. Joseph added his voice but not his fists, always trying to fade into the crowd, although his friends would be among the loudest, reddest ones there.

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Saturday, at the end of August came the bank holiday weekend. The fair was in town, set up on the common, and the smell of hot dogs and candyfloss was suffocating in the heat. They had woken in a house overlooking the back end of the caravans and rides. From the bathroom window was a view of the mechanical backside of the fair, patched with gaffer tape and rope.

Joseph splashed water onto his face and smoothed back his hair. His eyes felt loose inside his head. He hadn't slept, the night just got lighter, and he was left blinking in the daylight with a sense of losing the last few hours.

He did remember being on the bathroom floor, feeling the wormy texture of the bath mat under his fingers as he lay, palms down, squishing his hands into shallow pools of dank water. The floor was hard and supportive beneath his back. Someone had been banging on the door a while earlier but the sound hadn't made sense at the time. Moving to answer it was out of the question; drifting away, his mind jumping to the irregular beat of the thumping. It seemed as though a long time passed by.

Joseph opened the door and looked out into the hallway. The carpet was smudged with fag ash and muddy footprints. At the top of the stairs, just outside the bathroom door, was a large wet patch, and further down the hall a body, with a loud rasping coming from it, slumped against a closed door.

Downstairs, people were already awake and the smell of fags hit him as he went into the front room. A man, lying on the floor, sat up and scratched the back of his head; he picked up a half-empty bottle from the coffee table, sniffed the top of it and took a gulp. Joseph didn't recognise him.

Someone offered coffee but no one took any notice. There was a large shattered disco ball in front of the sofa and in the corner of the room were several pink balloons tied with silver ribbon, slouching down towards the floor. Through the window Joseph could see a table in the front garden, splintered and legless. He wondered if he'd had anything to do with it; a vague memory of falling onto something large and hard edged around his mind. His elbows felt sore.

By eleven o'clock they were walking over the road to the fair. He swigged whisky from a bottle taken from the house and passed it around. There were five of them, all bad skin and red eyes in grubby clothes. He'd known them since school, although they'd dropped out early but still hung around outside in the afternoons, having nothing else to do. They found him smoking alone outside the school gates one lunchtime.

'Give us a fag mate.' Craig shoved against Joseph's shoulder, nearly pushing him over as he leaned next against the bars of the fence around the school grounds.

'I only got this one.'

'Give us twos then.'

'What's in your bag?' Tommy took it from Joseph's shoulder as he handed his cigarette to Craig, nervous but not wanting them to leave.

'Give it back.'

'Hey look at this Laz, he's got a little pencil case an' all! Bless him.'

Craig smiled and at the time Joseph thought he looked scary and wise. He followed them up the road as they gradually emptied the contents of his school bag, chucking things to the ground as they went. When he finally got the bag back they were at Ron's house, where the afternoon grew soft as the smell of weed filled Ron's bedroom. They seemed like a gang then. People in his town knew who they were, they had a presence and he so much wanted to be part of something, to have that feeling of belonging somewhere.

They swaggered through the fair that was just getting going and coming alive with younger children. The sound of the big wheel could be heard across the stretch of the common. A small boy all in Superman blue ran past dragging a helium balloon in the shape of a dog and half-crashed into Joseph's leg. He put a hand gently, automatically, to the boy's shoulder to guide him and the boy ran on, the balloon bobbing all over the place.

They hung out by a burger stall, laughing with the boy serving. He looked about fifteen and seemed nervous but eager to please. They took fags from the packet in his shirt pocket, and gave him slugs of whisky. The boy was travelling with family including two sisters, both older, but they were busy, washing clothes with their mother. Larry tried to make him go and bring them over but he managed to resist, good-natured and solid. They lost interest in the boy and finished the whisky themselves still standing by the burger van, cutting him out of the conversation.

A wave of nausea flooded Joseph's body. It caught him off guard, making his head spin. The night before had been long and during the day they'd spent a lot of time drinking in the sun. He had lain on his back in the lake behind the fair, to try and cool off, and Larry had jumped on him. As he sank down beneath the surface he gasped, his mouth filling up with water. He hung suspended in the lake feeling the peacefulness of it before someone grabbed his arm and dragged him back up.

Joseph's tongue now felt dry and swollen, his throat was coated in a

poisonous-tasting gunk. The whisky wasn't helping. A dull ache began on one side of his head and spread across the front of his skull, pushing his brow down over his eyes. He had a sudden craving for salt and bought a cone of chips from the van but was sick after eating only a few. The others laughed, punching and jostling his arms about. He wiped his mouth and tried a small smile, stretching dry, cracked lips.

Joseph's stomach settled as they walked away from the fairground. Bass sounds from the Waltzers and the jingles of the side stalls faded into the background as they headed to the town centre. It was quiet for a Saturday, everyone either getting ready for the fair or hiding from the heat in their houses. The ground was dusty and dirty beneath their feet. The streets hadn't been swept for days and litter and discarded food curled by the sides of the pavement.

They passed an old building, ruined and disused. As kids they'd thrown stones through the windows and taunted each other to climb inside. No one they knew had ever been brave enough, although Craig boasted he had done it years ago with his brother. He wouldn't tell them what was in there, just said it was the darkest thing he'd ever seen. They didn't really believe him but dared not question it. Someone had recently sprayed the word 'Neverland' onto the front door, in rough black letters inside a cloud shape.

They went to several pubs during lunchtime opening. The White Horse, The Queen's Head, The Silver Cup – except they didn't have a drink in that one. The barman recognised Craig as soon as they walked in the door from an incident a few weeks ago when he'd shat all over the floor in the women's toilets. Joseph had been the mug who'd stayed to help clear it up, when the pub manager had handed him a bucket and mop without saying a word. He'd slopped the soggy mess all around the floor, really only making it worse with all the extra water he tipped from the bucket. Craig never mentioned it and Joseph hoped he didn't remember.

It was a town full of pubs, all stretching along the High Street between the common to the west and the road out of town into fields and wasteland to the east. Just before the fields began stood a great old house marking the town's exit, recently made into a hotel and named Kennel House after the family who used to own it. They'd tried the hotel bar several times that summer but were never allowed in, the doormen citing dress code and turn-

ing them out onto the street while they shouted and made empty threats.

The Cross Keys was their favourite because it tolerated the most from them. It stood midway on the High Street, between a tobacconist and a bookshop. It was dingy inside as they stepped down off the hot street through an old wooden door. The windows were small and framed by red velvet curtains. The dark wooden bar was split in two by an extra wall just to the side of the room, creating a closed-in feeling. There were always a couple of older men sitting on stools, drinking their pints in silence.

A flashback came from the previous night. The lights in the pub were low and Tommy and Ron had danced with girls they'd just met, among other dancers behind Joseph as he sat at the bar. It could have been some sort of disco the pub had put on. He didn't remember leaving the pub.

'Afternoon boys.' The barman poured them all pints of pale golden lager and set them in a line on the bar. 'No tabs today please.'

'Ha! No problem.' Ron slapped a note down. Ron had paid for all their drinks so far that day and Joseph wondered where the money had come from. They'd all been skint by the end of last night and there weren't any banks open on a Saturday.

They took their drinks to the corner table. He felt a tipping sensation as he sat down, a sliding sense and a loss of control, of not having a grip on what was happening around him. He felt as though he had sat down awkwardly on the stool. The sense of time passing began to play tricks on him. Had they only just entered the pub? Looking up, the faces of his friends were turned towards him, grinning and huge. Tommy patted his shoulder and shoved a cigarette in his mouth.