



IN PIECES

TRINITY COMPREHENSIVE WRITERS



I N P I E C E S

by

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agus Scileanna
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JCSP
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Project



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Supporting Literacy and Learning in Irish Schools*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marc Duff is 14 and likes to play football with his friends.

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Aaron Geoghegan is 14, likes chess and loves history.

Warren Greene is 14 and supports Arsenal.

Stuart O'Reilly is 13 and supports Liverpool.

David Redmond is 14 and loves to play the piano.

Demetrius Sheekey is 15 and likes to play rugby.

Martin Steers is 14 and his favourite subjects are music and P.E.

Kevin Mc Dermott writes novels.

MY ALAN

That's him there, standing by the lockers, my Alan. He's lovely, isn't he? Well, I'd say that, of course, wouldn't I? I mean, if your mam doesn't think you're gorgeous, you're in trouble. But even if I wasn't his mam, I'd say he's lovely. That's his friend, Mary, with him. I like Mary, she's real nice and she's not too pushy, not like some young ones I could mention. Mary helped Alan when he needed it, when his dad couldn't, but that's another story.

Look, he's smiling. There hasn't been too much smiling lately but today he looks happy. That's good. I think he likes Mary more than he's letting on. But he's really, really shy. Sometimes his teachers mistake his shyness for rudeness. Alan hates when a teacher singles him out. He's a mad blusher. From the top of his head to his toes, he goes scarlet. I tease him about it – well, I used to tease him about it, before, you know, what happened.

Ah no, look! Here comes trouble. Stephanie Stapleton with her thug of a twin brother, Andrew, and his two henchmen. What do they call them? Midge and Scorpion? Where do they get the names? The three amigos, more like it. Mary's spotted them – she's trying to warn him.

“Andrew Stapleton is behind you. Don't look.” Mary looks scared. I can't see Alan's face but I know he's nervous. A mother knows that kind of thing. Just act natural, son, even if you're shaking inside. Good boy, that's it. Just act normal. Turn around. Don't meet their eyes. Put your book in your bag and move away. Don't say a word. Just step around them. Go on.

Why is there no other way out of that locker room? Why does he have to pass them? And there's not a teacher in sight.

O my God! Andrew Stapleton has kicked the bag out of Alan's reach, just as he was bending down to pick it up. Look, they've pushed him onto the ground.

He's going to have an attack. I know he will. When he gets really upset or nervous, or really scared or frightened, he can't get his breath. He's starting to hyperventilate. See. He needs his inhaler.

Why are they just standing there? Do something, for God's sake! Mary knows, she knows what's happening. He needs his inhaler. It's in his bag, Mary. Get it, please.

I don't believe it. They're stopping her getting Alan's inhaler. Look! They're just standing in front of her, kicking the bag out of reach. They're animals. And now they've pushed her to the ground, too. They're just laughing at them, jeering them.

"Look at the two love birds on the ground."

"Two dirt birds."

I'd break their necks if I could. I swear. If Alan's dad gets his hands on any of them, they'll pay, so they will. My poor Alan, my love.

A GOOD DAD

He's locked himself in his room, so he has. That's where he goes when he's upset. It used to be that I couldn't see him, didn't know what he was doing in there. Knock, knock, open wide, Alan, on the other side. "Alan, are you all right, love?"

No answer. Me standing like an eejit with my ear pressed to the door. "Will I bring you your dinner, love?" No answer. Nothing from the world beyond. It used to drive me mad, being locked out of his life like that. Robbie would tell me to relax, that Alan needed his space. Now I can see him, no matter where he goes in the house, though he can't see me. But I'm not comfortable watching him. Do you know what I mean? It doesn't feel right. Not that there's much to see, just Alan sitting on his bed, with that bloody PlayStation and his headphones.

I never liked those games – just reading the box it's all killing and killing and more killing. That can't be good for you. I told his dad to sort

it out, to tell him he couldn't play war games anymore. And what happened? His dad got addicted to them! The two of them sitting there for ages, playing. I had to laugh in the end. That's Robbie for you – he's like a big kid. Sometimes it was like having two sons. Don't get me wrong. Robbie is a good dad, really. He had his ups and downs with the drink, but then he got his act together. He was always there for me and for Alan. Always. And he will be again, when he gets over things, when he gets over me not being there.

It's really hard seeing the two of them locked in their own little worlds. They need each other and they can't talk to each other. I know Alan wants to tell his dad what happened in school. And Robbie would sort it out for him. But just look at the state of him now. He looks like someone living rough – he hasn't shaved in days. He hasn't changed his clothes. He's sleeping in his clothes. And look at the state of the house! It hasn't been cleaned properly in months. Alan does his best and young Mary helps out when she comes over. But really.

I try to put thoughts in Robbie's head. Talk to him like they do in films, when someone dies and

they talk to their loved ones and the people who are still alive can hear the voices. Well, I know now that's a load of crap. Because I'm blue in the face talking to the pair of them, and nothing is getting through.

Or maybe I haven't got the knack yet.

MR NASH

You know that adorable little kid in *The Sixth Sense*? “I want to tell you my secret now. I see dead people.”

Well, I see them, too, only they’re not the people I was expecting to see. Not Nanny or Grandad, or my Auntie Mable or my Uncle Chris. No, just randomers. Mr Nash is my neighbour in the graveyard. He says I haven’t really passed over yet, and that’s because I’m too attached to the world of the living, because of Alan and Robbie, and I’ll have to let them go before I really belong in the world of the dead. I don’t know if this is true. I’ve never been dead before.

Mr Nash is dead nice. (No pun intended.) He was an attendant in the Natural History Museum. We always called it the Dead Zoo. When I asked him why he hadn’t passed over, he said it was because he could never say goodbye to his animals and there’s no one here that means more to him than them.

“But they’re not real,” I said. “They’re stuffed!” And he just laughed and said, “O, they’re real all right. I know.” He made it sound very mysterious.

Mr Nash is like my guide. We chat and he’s helping me to adjust. It’s not very different. I can see my body and I can feel things. And I walk like normal. But lots of things feel really weird. Alan once got a remote-controlled helicopter for his birthday. It bashed into everything before he learned to control it. I feel a bit like that, trying to figure out how things work in this place, trying to control things. But it’s hard. I just find myself in places and I’ve no idea how I got there. Then, when I’m there, say back home or in Alan’s school, I think people should be able to see me and hear me. But they can’t. Though sometimes I think they can feel something because they suddenly look at me or seem to be listening for something and I’m there shouting, “Yeah, it’s me, I’m right here, in front of you.” And I can see a puzzled look on their faces but then it passes and they get on with whatever they are doing.

Yesterday, I was with Robbie in the kitchen. He was standing there in a daze, rooted to the

spot, unable to move. “I know it’s really hard, love,” I said to him, “I really do.” And I wanted to give him a big hug and I wanted him to know I was there with him. But no matter how much I tried, I couldn’t let him know I was there. So, it’s lonely being here, and hard. And my heart breaks when I see Alan. He’s the light of my life.

Sometimes I think that the only ones who hear me and take notice of me, apart from Mr Nash, are the crows. I never thought much about crows, who does? But in the cemetery you can’t ignore them. They’re flippin’ everywhere. There’s one I’ve nicknamed ‘Paddy’ and he comes and we have these little chats – I rabbit on and he caws back. Still and all, you know things are really bad when a crow named Paddy is your new best friend. And I’m not sure if Paddy is alive or dead.

”Dead.” That’s a scary word. It’s been four months since I died, four months since the brain haemorrhage, though time means nothing on this side.

C L A S S S U G G E S T I O N S

There's a buzz of conversation in the classroom. Mr K is talking. He tells the form class he has a surprise for them. Before Christmas, they're going to go on a class outing. Mr K says it's a reward for the great effort everyone has put in in the first term. He is very proud of them, he says. He asks the class for suggestions.

Alan is sitting quietly. Ever since the incident at the lockers he is on guard whenever he is in the company of Stephanie and Andrew. He's thinking of a few places he'd like to put them – places from which they wouldn't be leaving in a hurry. He looks over and smiles at Mary. She pretends not to see him. He tunes back in to what is happening in class.

"Sorry, Craig, I didn't hear you, say it again," Mr K says. "The circus, sir, you know the American Three Ring Circus. It's only down the road. They have this blaster, this big cannon that fires a person out and you see them flying through the air and

then they're there on the ground before you know it. It's deadly, sir!"

"Thanks, Craig, that's definitely a possibility. Anyone else? Okay, Demetri."

"The Viking Splash Tour, sir. It's absolutely amazing, deadly. We were on it, sir, and when we were going into the water, the back of the boat started flooding because the driver hadn't put up the barrier properly. We all thought we were going to die. It was lethal."

"Maybe too lethal. I'm not sure your parents would fancy the idea of you drowning on a school trip. What about you, Andrew, any suggestions?"

"Funderland, sir. It has this wall. You're strapped in and it spins down and around. You swear you are going to die. Whopper."

"I'd say that's fairly expensive, Andrew, is it?"

"Twenty-two euro for three hours, sir."

"I'm afraid not. I don't think we could stretch to that."

"The Aquarium in Bray, sir."

"That might work, yeah. Thank you, David. Any more ideas; we have to make a decision today."

"Tayto Park, sir. They give you free crisps at the end."

"King crisps?"

"No, Tayto, you dope."

"Thank you for that, Martin."

"The zoo, sir,"

"That's boring."

"The reptiles aren't boring. The tarantula is freaky."

"The Dead Zoo, sir."

"The Dead Zoo? That's a good suggestion, Alan. That's really good. What made you think of that?"

"I don't know, sir. It just popped into my head."

"That's a great suggestion, actually. It's easy to get to. It's free. It's fascinating. And we might even go to McDonald's, afterwards. Very good."

"Ah, sir, that's crap."

GETTING THROUGH

Did you see that? Alan is in his form class with Mr K, so you'd think he'd be all right. And to be fair to him, Mr K seems grand, but he doesn't see half of what is going on. My Alan has to sit in the same room as Andrew Stapleton and that sister of his, Stephanie, not to mention those two other eejits. Don't get me wrong. There're lots of lovely kids in that class – David, Demitri, Martin, Craig, Warren, Richie, Stuart, Marc, Carol, Aaron and Mary – but those Stapletons, they're something else.

Right under the teacher's nose, that Stapleton fellow leans over and starts teasing Alan, calling him 'Walshie' and saying he'd shit himself if he went to Funderland. That's no way to be talking to another student, and certainly not to my son. That's bullying, that's what that is.

Robbie will have to go down to the school and get things sorted. There's no two ways about it. Or go around to their house to see the parents,

if he has to. I know they have a reputation, and the da thinks he's some big shot who can push people around. So you can imagine the reception Robbie will get if he calls to their door. But Robbie can take care of himself and, more to the point, he can take care of Alan. You have to stand up for your kids. You can't let the likes of Andrew Stapleton get away with what he did to Alan and Mary. No way. Anyway, enough of those Stapletons – it's putting me in bad form thinking about them.

On the bright side, did you hear that? Did you? Did you hear where Alan suggested the class should go? The Dead Zoo. Do you see what that means? I've been telling Alan all about Mr Nash and the Dead Zoo and the animals. And Alan says, "It just popped into my head." But it didn't just "pop" into his head. I put the idea there. It was me. And that means I must be getting through to him. And that is just fantastic! The Dead Zoo. Brilliant!

W H O C A R E S ?

Sometimes I want to stuff my ears. I don't want to be listening to Alan's private conversations. It's eavesdropping, that's what it is. And I don't mean to or want to, really. But then you find yourself right there and it's like seeing your favourite bar of chocolate, say a Mint Aero, and you're supposed to be on a diet and before you know it, you're eating it and it's lovely and you make a deal with yourself that you will only eat two pieces, and then they're gone and you say 'four pieces', and before you know it, you've eaten the whole bar. And then you feel rotten. So, to cheer yourself up, you get another one and eat that, too. Anyway, I'm right there with Alan and Mary. They're off the bus and heading to the Dead Zoo.

"I like Mr K, I really do," Alan says.

"Why, what's so great about him?"

"Do you not like him?"

"He's all right."

"I think he's brilliant."

"But why?"

"Cause."

"Cause what?"

"Cause he cares."

Mary snorts. "I care."

"I know that."

"And your da cares."

"Look, just because I say he cares doesn't mean you have to give me a list of people and say, 'He cares, she cares'."

"There's no need to bite me nose off."

"'Bite me nose off.' That's a really stupid saying, isn't it? As if I wanted a snot dinner."

"That's disgusting."

Alan laughs. "I know." In spite of herself, Mary laughs, too.

"Is this place any good, where we're going, the Natural whatever Museum?"

"I don't know."

"But you suggested it."

"It just popped into my head."

"Have you not been here before?"

"I'm not sure. I think I was!"

"You think you were?"

"Yeah."

"You're weird, sometimes, do you know that, Alan? Weird in a nice way." She smiles at him, a big, open affectionate smile. He can feel his face getting hot.

I know I should be here going, "Ah, that's sweet," except the 'snot' bit, of course, which is disgusting. I didn't bring him up to say things like that. But it is nice the way he and Mary get on – she's a real little mammy to him and a sweetheart. And he's sweet on her. You can tell. But that's not what's on my mind. What really upsets me is that he didn't mention me at all. He didn't say, "My mam cares for me." And Mary didn't mention me either. It's all Mr K this and Mr K that. I know he's really nice and he's kind and Alan always speaks well about him, but that's not the point. The point is that Alan has a father who loves him and cares for him. And Alan has a

mother, too, just in case you might have forgotten.

I don't like this. I need to get on to Robbie. I need Robbie to step up for Alan. He'll have to pull himself together. No messing. So you know what? Much as I'd like to follow Alan and Mary into the Dead Zoo, I'm heading off home to find Robbie. If I got through to Alan, I can get through to Robbie. Alan needs him now. I have to make him see that.

THE DEAD ZOO

"Hey, Scorpion, look at that?"

"What?"

"The gorilla's mickey!"

"It's tiny!"

"It's bigger than yours!"

"Give it over, Andrew."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, having a small willy."

"Piss off!"

"Scorpion, keep your voice down."

"Sorry, sir."

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing, sir. We were just saying that the gorilla is huge."

"Really? It didn't sound like that, Andrew. Keep the noise down, lads, and behave yourselves, do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir. No problem, sir."

"Sir, sir, look at this. It's brilliant."

"What is it, Martin?"

"It's called a leopard cat, sir."

"A leopard cat? It's amazing. I've never seen anything like that before, have you?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see the zebra foal, sir?"

"Where is that, David?"

"It's just down here, sir. Do you want to see it?"

"Sure. O my goodness, it's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It looks alive, sir, doesn't it?"

"You're right, it does look alive."

"Sir, why don't the animals rot?"

"They treat the skin so that it stays soft.

And then they stuff them."

"Stuff them? With what, sir?"

"I'm not sure, David. Straw, I suppose."

"So they're all just straw?"

"I think so."

"That's mental, sir."

"Sir, did you see the skeletons of the half horse and the half man? Whopper, sir."

"Half a horse and half a man? Show me where they are."

"Hi Alan. So, what's your favourite animal so far?"

"The polar bear, sir."

"I like him, too."

"It's not a him, sir, it's a her."

"I stand corrected, Mary. And what's your favourite?"

"I like the wolf, sir, but I think the armadillo is cute. Did you see it, sir?"

"No."

"Come on, I'll show you."

"After I see the skeletons. Are you all right, there, Aaron?"

"Yes, sir. It's deadly. Did you see the kangaroo, sir? It's really funny."

"So, you're enjoying it?"

"It's deadly, sir."

"Sir, when are we going to McDonald's?"

"In about half an hour. Are you getting hungry, Midge?"

"Sir, he's always hungry."

In the shop at the front of the museum there's a toy armadillo for sale. It's made of plastic and looks real. Alan wants to buy it as a gift for Mary.

He checks the price. It's twelve euro. He doesn't have that much. He doesn't even have five. He holds it and looks at it, longingly. He doesn't hear Andrew Stapleton come up behind him. Andrew barges into him.

"Hey Mister," Andrew shouts at the attendant, knocking the armadillo out of Alan's hands, "He's trying to rob that."

Alan goes red. How did Stapleton know he was thinking about sticking the armadillo in his bag? The attendant shouts at him and Alan runs back into the museum and races down its length until he pushes through the big, wooden doors and finds himself at the foot of a staircase. He races up to the first floor. A door to his left is open and he ducks into the small lecture theatre and hides under a desk on the podium, his heart beating twice as fast as normal. He stays there for a long time. When his heart stops racing and his nerves are settled, he gets up and makes his way out into the museum. It is deathly silent. There's no one else around. He walks quickly to the exit. The door leading into the entrance hallway is locked. He tries it three or four times. He knocks on the door. "Hello? Is anyone there? Hello?"

But no one answers. He shouts and knocks on the door even harder. "Hello. Hello. Hello."

M I S S I N G

"Right so, is everyone out?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr K does a head count.

"Wait a minute. We're missing someone."

No one reacts. He raises his voice.

"Hello! Ground Control to Major Tom. Is there anyone there?" He has their attention now.

"I said we're missing someone."

"Alan's not here, sir," Mary says, in a little voice. Mr K does a quick scan.

"Has anyone seen Alan Walsh?" No answer. Mr K is getting a little irritated. He raises his voice even more and speaks very slowly and deliberately.

"Did anyone see Alan Walsh?"

"He left about half an hour ago, sir," Andrew volunteers.

"What do you mean, he left?"

Andrew shrugs.

"He left. And he had a big face on him. He probably had a row with his girlfriend."

"His cow friend, you mean." Midge and Scorpion laugh.

Mr K gives Stephanie one of his 'grow up' looks. "Did you see him go, Mary?"

"No."

"And he didn't say anything to you?"

"No."

Mr K sighs. He takes out his mobile.

"Do you have his number, Mary?"

"His battery's dead, sir."

"And so is his ma."

Stephanie speaks just low enough so that you can't say she said it out loud, and just loud enough so that you half hear it.

Mr K shakes his head.

"I wouldn't worry, sir. He's gone home in a huff.

He's just a loser,"

Andrew adds, sneering over at Mary.

"Did anyone else see him go?"

"He was caught trying to rob stuff in the shop and did a legger, sir. That's what happened," Andrew says. Mr K looks at him doubtfully.

"Alan?"

"We all saw it, sir," Stephanie says, and no one contradicts her.

"I know you think he's real nice, but he's not, he's real sly."

"Thank you for that opinion, Stephanie."

Mr K checks his watch.

"Right, come on, I'll deal with this when we get back to school."

"Are we not going to McDonald's, sir?"

"We're going now, Craig. And we need to get a move on, if we're to get back to school in time."

ANIMAL SOUNDS

He curls up in a ball in the corner. Through the metal railings and the metal grid in the floor he can look down onto the ground floor of the museum. He wishes he'd never suggested coming here. It's freaky. In the semi-darkness the animals look weird, frightening, even. He tries not to look at them but no matter which way he turns he catches glimpses of fur or feathers, wings, bones, skeletons. He pulls his hoodie over his head and closes his eyes. He searches in his pocket and finds his inhaler. He grips it tightly. He concentrates on breathing, reciting, "I am breathing in, I am breathing out" like he has been told to do when he feels a panic attack coming on. He tries to think of happy thoughts. His mam comes into his mind. His lovely mam. But she left him, and his dad is falling apart and he's stuck in this loony bin. "Why did you die, Mam?" he says out loud and all the anger and sorrow and upset he's been holding in bursts out, and big uncontrollable sobs

shake him. He slides further down till he is lying on the floor. He feels exhausted and the heat in the old building and the tiredness combine to make him drowsy. He nods off.

He wakes with a start. At first he can't figure out where he is. Then it comes to him and he doesn't feel good about being here. There it is again – the banging, like someone striking a hammer on a metal bar. That's what woke him. The building seems to creak and shake. He uses his inhaler. "Keep calm," he says to himself. "Don't act like a little kid." In one part of his mind, he knows that the noises are probably made by the heating system – it's just water and air in the pipes. In the other part, he thinks that someone must be making this racket. He is locked in a building with a lunatic. He stays as still as he can. When he catches a movement with the corner of his eyes, he tells himself he is imagining things. But there it is again. He turns his head slowly. There's no mistaking it. Behind the glass in a large case on the other side of the balcony, the birds – hens and roosters, pheasants, peacocks, guinea fowl – are moving: stretching their wings, shaking their heads, arranging and cleaning their feathers.

He is not afraid. It's weird and fascinating and unexpected, but not frightening. There's no panic in the birds and no fighting. Then the sounds begin, not loud, but loud enough that he can hear – cackles, clucks, hisses, screams, screeches. Every bird behind the glass is coming to life. And it's happening in other display cases, too. The animals are waking up.

Alan is standing up now, looking over the balcony. In every case the animals are stirring. From beyond the glass he can hear animal sounds. Snorts, grunts, low growls. Moans, chirps, booms. Bleats, hisses, hums. Squeaks, snarls, barks and yaps. It's mad. He's beginning to enjoy it until he thinks to himself, "What if they get out? What if the animals get out of the display cases? If the animals get out, what will I do?" He's asking himself but he has no answers.

And he needs an answer because the animals are moving about. He looks down and sees a hippo waddling across the floor, opening his great mouth and yawning. Alan moves back against the wall. He thinks about dashing down the stairs and locking himself in the toilets. But then he hears a great roar and a snarl. He creeps

back and looks over the railings. The tiger is moving along the floor showing his teeth to any animal who looks in his direction. Alan is petrified with fear. It's one thing seeing some birds flap their wings in a glass case. It's quite another to see a tiger walking around on the floor below you. Whatever idea he had of going down there vanishes. And then, as if on cue, the monkeys fill the whole building with their sounds: chattering, chirping, screeching, screaming, howling, hooting, wailing and grunting. Alan's mouth is getting dry. He starts to sweat. He edges back to the wall and slides down to the floor. He tries to make himself as small as possible. He tries to make himself invisible. He wants to disappear. And now a monkey has climbed up onto the balcony and sees him. The monkey screams and makes a racket and jumps up and down on the railings. Soon two more monkeys have joined him and all three are jumping up and down on the balcony and screaming the place down. From under his hoodie Alan peeks out. It's then he sees it: the golden eagle, his wings outstretched, his talons extended, his beak open, hurtling towards him. He screams for all he is worth. "O my God," he thinks, "I am going to die!"

WOLF AND BEAR

But he doesn't die. Mr Nash runs up the stairs and the eagle pulls out of his dive and whirls towards the glass dome in the roof and circles around before landing on the railings of the balcony.

"What's this, what's this?" Mr Nash is saying as the monkeys scream and chatter and enjoy the best show they've seen in decades.

"What are you doing here, boy? The museum is closed. You've no right ..." And then Mr Nash stops.

"Are you alive?"

"Alive? What do you mean am I alive?"

"You're not a ghost?" Mr Nash asks.

"No."

"But you can see me and the animals?" Alan laughs.

"Of course, I can see you."

"This is very odd," Mr Nash says as much to himself as to Alan.

Alan is now sitting up looking around him.

In Mr Nash's company he doesn't feel afraid.

"Is it like this every night, here in the museum?"
Mr Nash looks around. "Like what?"

"The animals wandering around."

"O yes," Mr Nash says cheerfully.

"Would you like to meet some of them?"

"Is it safe?" Alan whispers.

Mr Nash considers the question. "If you are with me, it's safe." He holds out his hand to Alan. It's cold to the touch. Alan takes it and Mr Nash pulls him to his feet.

"I'm Mr Nash."

"I'm Alan Walsh."

"Pleased to meet you, Alan Walsh. Now let's go and inspect the animals." Alan follows behind as they go down the stairs onto the floor of the museum. The animals are stretching out, flexing their muscles, having a good scratch or lying down. Mr Nash leads the way. He speaks to the animals as he goes among them. Some come to him and he rubs their heads or scratches behind their ears. He hunkers down by the zebra foal and pets her.

"Why doesn't the mother look after her?" Alan asks, looking at the zebra standing a little further down the museum.

"Because that's not her mother. Her mother is somewhere in Africa. She's all alone, though Bear looks out for her."

As if she hears what they are saying, the polar bear pads softly up to the foal and pushes her gently with her great paw. Alan is nervous being so close to the huge bear.

"Why does Bear look after her?"

"I think she left her own cub behind when she was shot and taken here."

"When was that?"

"1861, I think."

"But that's more than a hundred and fifty years ago."

"One hundred and fifty-two."

"And she's been here all that time?"

"That's about the size of it. One hundred and fifty-two years away from the Arctic and she hasn't seen or felt icy water or snow in all that time. And she hasn't seen another polar bear."

"Who shot her?"

"A man by the name of McClintock, who's buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. And he's not a very nice man, either."

"Do you know him?"

"I do."

The light is slowly going on in Alan's head. He picks his words carefully, "Mr Nash, are you a ghost?"

Mr Nash looks at Alan with a kindly expression on his face.

"Would you be upset if I said 'Yes'?"

"I don't think so," Alan replies, a little uncertain.

"Well then, yes, I am what people call a ghost."

"I see," Alan says, though, in fairness, he doesn't really see. But strangely he doesn't find the idea frightening.

"Do you live in Glasnevin, too," Alan asks though he knows that "lives" is not exactly the right word in the circumstances.

"Yes," Mr Nash answers absent-mindedly, his attention focused on the animals. Alan looks at Bear.

"No wonder you look lonely," Alan says, and Bear turns her great head and looks at him with her sad eyes. And then, as if to say, "Don't forget about me. I haven't howled at the moon or run through the forest with the pack, or had mock fights with my brothers and sisters, for over a hundred years," the wolf comes and pushes his big head forward for Alan to scratch.

"He likes you," Mr Nash says.

"He's beautiful," Alan says and suddenly he feels a great sense of happiness flowing through him.

"Mr Nash, can I bring her out?"

"Who?"

"Bear."

"Bear?"

"Yeah." And then Alan looks at the wolf, at his big green eyes and his intelligent face.

"And Wolf, too."

"Out?" Mr Nash is alarmed at the idea.

"Yeah. Out to see the river and maybe we'd go out to see my mam."

"See your mother?"

"Well, her grave," Alan says, quietly.

"She's buried out in Glasnevin."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Alan."

"I think she'd like to see them, Mr Nash."

"I'm sure she would. But what if they decide not to come back? I'd get into trouble!"

"How? Who'd know? Anyway, this is their home. Of course they'll come back. And maybe Bear could say hello to McClintock, the man who shot her. You said he was buried out there. I wonder how he'd feel meeting her without his gun? I bet he wouldn't feel so brave."

Mr Nash smiles at the idea.

“No, I don’t think he would feel so brave if he saw her! What do you say, Bear?” He scratches the bear’s head. She groans and pushes her head against his hand, wanting him to scratch her again. And then with a brightening smile, Mr Nash says, “Why not? It would do this old girl good to get out and stretch her legs.” He laughs with a giddy joy.

“And what will I do if anyone stops us?” Alan asks, suddenly worried and less certain about his plan.

“And who will stop you?”

“I don’t know? The Guards? Somebody, anyone who sees me walking along with a polar bear and a wolf.”

“But nobody will see them. They don’t exist in the world of the living. The only ones who will see them are the dead and they won’t bother you, believe me.”

“But I see them and I’m not dead.”

“And that, Alan Walsh, is one of the great mysteries. You must have a special gift.”

A G H O S T L Y W A L K

It is almost first light when Mr Nash shows Alan how to open the doors of the museum and slip out without setting off the alarm. Then Alan climbs over the gate, hoping that the Garda on duty at the entrance to Leinster House will not spot him. Bear and Wolf glide through the railings and wait for him. He drops to the path. No one calls out. He is safe. And so here they are, in the early morning, in the silent city, heading for the river – a boy, a polar bear and a wolf. Alan doubts if he has ever felt happier. At the river, Bear sniffs the air, stands on her hind legs and shakes herself all over. She makes her way down the stone steps and dips her snout into the dark, cold water. Alan feels cold just looking at her. And then Bear slips into the water. She paddles like a big white dog with her front paws and uses her back legs to keep herself straight. Alan runs across the nearest bridge, with Wolf at his heels, watching Bear's progress. She keeps her eyes open and her head

steady just above the water. And then she is out, climbing up the steps on the far side and shaking the water from her fur. She nods her head repeatedly as if to say, "O that was good, so very good." And now they are off again.

They speed through the sleeping city and Alan lets out a yelp of happiness that he imagines is somewhere between a wolf's howl and a polar bear's growl. Going through Phibsboro, passing a large red-brick house, a yappy dog comes flying down the path. He is all snarls and teeth and Alan takes a sharp intake of breath. He hates small dogs. Wolf positions himself between Alan and the approaching terrier. He lowers his head and begins to growl very softly in the back of his throat. And then he bares his teeth and looks at the terrier with his fierce, green eyes. Alan does not know if the terrier can see Wolf but he definitely senses he is there, for the little dog stops in his tracks, makes little pleading whimpers, and then turns and runs back to the safety of the porch, his tail between his legs. Alan laughs and pats Wolf on the head.

At the cemetery, there are more railings to be climbed before Alan brings his new friends to the

spot where his mam is buried. "Mam," he says. "I think you can hear me. I brought Bear and Wolf to see you." But even as he says the words he knows his mam is not there. He fights back his tears. In a nearby tree, a crow is cawing at a great rate.

"Hello young Mr Walsh," a voice says.

"Is this your mother's grave?"

Alan turns and sees Mr Nash.

"I thought you were in the museum."

"I was but I am here now. Is this your mother's grave?" he asks again.

Alan nods his head.

"My word. Do you know", Mr Nash says in a very important-sounding voice, "that your mother is a lady that I am pleased to call a friend and neighbour."

"You know my mam?"

"I most certainly do. And she has told me all about you, young man. Wait till I tell her that we met in the museum."

"But she's not here now, is she?"

"No. She told me she wanted to spend time with you and your father. I suspect she is at your family home at this very moment."

Alan hangs his head in disappointment.

“She will be back soon enough, mark my words. Anyway, I think we have an appointment with a certain Mr McClintock. Isn’t that right, Bear?” In spite of himself Alan laughs.

“Come on,” Mr Nash says, “and while we’re going to find him, I’ll show you some of the sights of the cemetery.”

ONE SWIPE OF HER PAW

Mr Nash leads the way and it is the most remarkable procession that any of the cemetery ghosts have ever seen – a ghost dressed in what appears to be the uniform of a zookeeper, followed by a living boy, followed, in turn, by a ghostly polar bear, with a ghostly wolf trotting alongside. The procession gathers a number of curious onlookers and the crow that Alan saw earlier is keeping them company.

Mr Nash is in his element. He points out the great tower, where the Liberator is buried; the rows of sacred yew trees which line the central avenues; the graves which were disturbed by grave robbers. He points out stone angels, Egyptian obelisks and Roman columns. He stops to greet the ghost of a small boy, playing by his grave. Carved on the tombstone is an animal that looks like an armadillo. Alan tells himself that he must bring Mary and show her. One large headstone bears the names of dozens of members

of the Royal Irish Constabulary. A few ghosts, dressed in their police uniforms, watch the procession.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Mr Nash says, "have you seen our friend, Mr McClintock?"

"Now Mr Nash," one of the policemen answers, "you know as well as I do that Mr McClintock will never be a friend to the likes of us. He only has time for the great and the good and the well-to-do. We are far too poor to be of interest to the high and mighty Mr Hubert McClintock, Esquire."

Before Mr Nash can answer, Bear stands on her hind legs and makes a great swipe at the air in front of her. She hisses and growls. Beside her, Wolf gets agitated and starts to rock from side to side. Alan is not sure what is happening. And then Bear is off, running on all fours, growling and hissing, with Wolf loping alongside, his teeth bared ready to pounce. Alan runs after them, trying to keep up. He is too far away to see the blow that Bear lands on the tall man with one swipe of her paw. He does see the white-haired man with a beard, dressed in a long, black coat, travel through the air from the force of the blow, as if he were a rag doll. He also sees Wolf throw

himself upon the man, biting for all he is worth. The man manages to scramble to his feet and lock himself behind the iron gate that leads to his family vault. When Alan arrives, McClintock is inside the barred gate looking out, like a prisoner. The grey pillars of the monument and the tall obelisk that rises above the vault give the tomb the appearance of an elaborate prison cell.

“And stay there, you good-for-nothing murderer,” Mr Nash shouts. And Bear stands on her hind legs and lets out a pitiful cry of sorrow and anger. Without thinking what he is doing, Alan runs up to her and throws his arms around her middle and hugs her tightly. She places her paws gently around his back and gives back the hug. When Bear releases him Alan realises they are standing at the point where the four yew-lined avenues meet. The shade of the trees makes each avenue dark and shadowy. The avenues are thronged with the dead, three or four abreast, watching the curious and entertaining events of the morning. There are so many dead gathered here that Alan feels scared. He does not want to walk through the crowd of ghosts. Sensing his hesitation and fear, Wolf leads the way. The dead part to let him through.

Alan can see the brightness at the end of the avenue. He focuses on it. And then the light is partly obscured. There's someone standing there. He closes his eyes and opens them again. He is not mistaken. There is someone standing there and he knows who it is. There is someone standing there with her arms outstretched, waiting for him. His heart beats faster and faster. His feet carry him along. When he reaches the end of the avenue, he closes his eyes and falls into his mother's arms.

FACING FACTS

The more I think about it, the more worried I become. I'm determined to rouse Robbie from his self-pitying slump. I love him but he needs a good kick in the backside. This isn't about him or me; it is about our Alan. It's about Robbie stepping up, becoming a dad and a mam to our son. I'm going home to tell him what he needs to do. And then I get there and I see how heartbroken he is and I can't be angry. I just sit in the armchair opposite him and I cry.

And then Robbie lets out a big sigh and goes to our bedroom and lays down on the bed and he starts talking to me, telling me how much he misses me, how he didn't tell me enough that he loved me when I was alive and how he wants to be a good dad to Alan but he's finding it so hard to do anything, even to get up in the morning.

O God, I'm an emotional wreck listening to him. I wonder do they have counselling services for ghosts, because I need something. And then I start

answering him, but he can't hear me and he gets all disheartened because he is saying all these things, all these lovely, sad things, and he thinks it is too late because I cannot hear him. But I can.

"I can hear you, Love. I'm listening. I know you love me. But right now, Alan needs your love more than I do." I say this over and over again, as loudly as I can, as softly as I can, as sincerely as I can, as insistently as I can. "Right now, Alan needs your love more than I do." And there's something in the way Robbie lifts his head and looks around that makes me think that I'm getting through to him. He gets off the bed and goes to Alan's room. He knocks on the door.

"Alan, Alan are you all right?" There's no answer. "Alan?" He opens the door. The room is empty. Robbie checks his watch. It's two o'clock in the morning. He goes downstairs. He checks in the front room. It's empty and dark. He goes to the kitchen and turns on the light. I think he is shocked by the mess. Alan is not there.

"Jesus," Robbie says. He checks every corner of the house. He is getting panicky. I'm getting panicky. He phones the Garda station. "Hello, my son, Alan Walsh, is missing."

I am in a spin. Where is he? I imagine all kinds of horrible things. I wonder might Andrew Stapleton have something to do with this. Keep calm, I tell myself. Maybe he stayed over with one of his friends after the school trip. My mind is going nineteen to the dozen and so I'm only half-listening to what Robbie is saying to the Guards. But in that half-listening, I can hear how strong and determined Robbie sounds.

“We have to find him,” he is saying. “He’s my son; he’s all I have.” God, those words are so hard to hear. Be careful what you wish for. I want Robbie to step up and I know he will now because he’s facing up to the fact that I won’t be back. And I know, in my heart of hearts, that I have to face up to that fact, too.

THANK YOU, GOD

Robbie spent the night searching for Alan. When he didn't find him, he went home, took a shower, shaved himself and got dressed. His hair was still long, but now it was clean and combed. He headed down to the school to see if Alan had spent the night with any of his friends. He met the principal and I knew by the way he spoke that he was back to himself, to his best self, to his sober, responsible self. This is what I wanted. Still, I felt sad because he wasn't crying for me. And I knew, too, call it mother's intuition, that Alan was all right now, that he was safe, and that Robbie would sort everything out.

So I think they're going to be okay. And that's good. But what am I supposed to do now? I don't really belong here, do I? And if I don't belong here, where do I belong? In the cemetery? Is that my home now? How cheerful a thought is that? But that's where I'm going now because I don't know where else to go, or what else to do. I hope

Mr Nash will advise me. Maybe I'm ready to move on? Is that what's happening? I think it might be.

Janey Mac, it's like a madhouse in here. There's a big commotion down the avenues. There must be thousands of people! I've never seen as many before in the cemetery. Or maybe all these people have been here all the time, only I didn't see them? Is that a possibility? But no, that can't be right. There's too many. It's like a music festival. It's like the time Robbie and me went to Oxegen. We camped in a field and were washed away by the rain. It wasn't even funny. Anyway, that's what it's like here. I'd love to know who the star attraction is. "Excuse me, excuse me."

Ah, it's no use. I can't see a bloody thing. There are too many in the way. Look, our celebrity must be heading this way because the crowd is parting. It's like the story in the Bible, where Moses parts the Red Sea. That's gas. It must be someone very important and famous. I might get a look now. Yikes, there's a feckin' polar bear and a wolf heading this way. No wonder they're making way for them.

O my God. O my God! Thank you, God. Thank
you. Thank you! It's Alan. It's my Alan.

“Mam. Mam. It's me.”

“O thank you, God.”

AN ENCOUNTER

Alan holds his mam and she holds him and for ten whole seconds it is as if she never died. It's magic. But all too soon, it's over. He opens his eyes and she's gone. Everything is gone – the crowds, Mr Nash, Wolf and Bear. He is standing at the end of an avenue in Glasnevin Cemetery. The sun is shining, though the air is cool. He looks all around him. There is no one else in sight. He retraces his steps and finds the grave of the small child, with the carving of the armadillo on the headstone. He finds the McClintock vault, with its columns and obelisk, and the barred gate. He goes to his mam's grave. The crow is there, in the tree, calling. Try as he might, Alan cannot feel his mam's presence. He cries. He is a cold and hungry boy in an empty graveyard and he is missing his mam.

He makes his way to the back of the cemetery. There's a shortcut that will bring him near his school and his house. He doesn't fancy the idea

of going to school. He wants to go home and go to bed and stay there till he feels better, whenever that will be.

“Look at the face on Walshie. Did you have a row with your girlfriend?”

Inwardly Alan sighs. Of all the people to run into, it had to be Andrew Stapleton.

“Did she not like the present you robbed for her?”

“Shut up, Stapleton, will you?”

“Or what? Are you going to make me?”

“Just shut up.”

Stapleton steps towards Alan and slaps him hard across the face. The blow stings him. He is tired and upset and he doesn't want any trouble. He ignores the slap and keeps on walking.

“Yeah, that's right. Run home to your mammy, Walshie. O I forgot, you don't have a mammy, do you? She's dead.”

Alan stops. He hears Stapleton laughing. He feels a rage rising inside him. He turns. As Andrew Stapleton watches, Alan's eyes turn pale green, wolf green. He begins to snarl. He bares his teeth. From the back of his throat comes a blood-curdling howl. And then he launches himself at Andrew Stapleton. The attack is so

furious that Stapleton thinks he will die. He begs for mercy. Alan stands back and takes one final swipe at him. "Don't you ever come near me again. Don't ever say anything about my ma. Don't ever say a word to Mary or about Mary, do you hear me?"

"All right, yeah."

"Now get lost or I'll tear your throat out."

EXPLAINING THINGS

He meets Mary on her way to school.

"What happened yesterday? You disappeared. I was worried sick about you."

The sound of her voice cheers him up.

"You wouldn't believe it, if I told you."

"Well, it better be good 'cause I saw your da heading down to the school a few minutes ago, and Mr K was going on like the Special Branch yesterday, after you disappeared. And Andrew Stapleton said you were caught robbing from the shop in the museum." Alan looks around him. He doesn't know where to start or even if he himself now believes what happened to him.

"Will you come with me to my ma's grave?"

"Now? Bunk off school?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"'Cause. Just come and I'll try to explain." Mary shakes her head.

"It better be good, this explanation of yours."

Alan smiles.

“You mightn’t believe it.”

They start to walk and Alan tells Mary his story. She gives him a few odd looks but she doesn’t say “That’s a load of crap” or anything like that. When he shows her the armadillo on the child’s headstone and McClintock’s tomb, she goes really quiet.

“This is a bit weird, Alan.”

“I know. Weird but brilliant, too.”

They walk towards his mam’s grave. As they approach, they see a huge bird perched on it. Alan says it looks like an eagle. Mary thinks it’s a hawk. They stand still and watch. They are mesmerised. The great bird lets out a cry and takes flight. It circles above them before heading off, higher and higher into the air. They follow it until it becomes a dot in the far sky and then disappears from sight. Alan and Mary exchange glances. Alan is crying. He knows what it means and Mary knows, too. She takes his hand.

“Your ma was lovely.”

“I know.”

“Will we head back to school now?”

“Yeah.”

School is fine. He has to see Mr K and the principal but everyone is really nice. They let his dad know he is safe and well. He hopes his da is all right. Before he leaves school, at the end of the day, Mr K reminds him about the Awards Night. Alan makes a face. Mr K says he has to come.

"Why, sir?"

"Because", Mr K says, "you won't go home empty-handed."

"What do you mean?"

"Come tonight and find out."

Mary walks home with him.

"Will I see you later in school?"

"Yeah."

"Don't sound so enthusiastic."

He shrugs.

"I'll be there, all right."

"Good, see you later."

Alan hesitates before opening his front door. He takes a deep breath. Stepping inside he knows that something is different. The house smells fresher, cleaner. He hears a sound he hasn't heard in a while – the sound of the Hoover. He calls out, "Da."

He goes into the kitchen. Everywhere is clean. The floor is clean. The worktops are clean. The sink is empty. There are no unwashed dishes anywhere. He takes everything in. The table is set and he can smell the meat roasting in the oven. He smiles. "Da," he calls louder. But his dad is busy hoovering the bedrooms and cannot hear him. Alan laughs and runs up the stairs. "Da," he is shouting. "Are you coming to the awards ceremony tonight in school?"

GETTING ON WITH LIFE

Alan and Mary are standing by the lockers. Andrew Stapleton comes down the corridor with Midge and Scorpion. He hesitates when he sees Alan. He considers going back the way he came but he doesn't want to look like a coward in front of the others. Just at that moment, Alan turns. He sees Andrew and the others. His eyes flicker over them and then he turns back to Mary. Andrew comes in quietly. "Can I get by there?" Alan looks at him and says nothing. "I need to get to my locker," Andrew explains. He then adds, "Please."

Alan stands back and lets him pass.

"Thanks."

Alan doesn't bother to answer. He's too interested in what Mary is saying. He is too busy thinking about his next visit to the Dead Zoo. He is too busy planning his search for Mr Nash's grave. He is too busy getting on with his life.

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IN PIECES

For some journeys you need special friends.



Things seem to be going to pieces for Alan since his mam died. His friend Mary is there to help but she cannot protect him from the unwelcome attention of Andrew Stapleton.

And his dad is too sad and lost to stand up for his son.

But his mam isn't as far away as he thinks.

And when Alan discovers he has a special gift, he sets out on a ghostly adventure that will change his life forever.

In Pieces is a novel written by second year students in JCSP Library Trinity Comprehensive School Ballymun in collaboration with Kevin Mc Dermott.

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