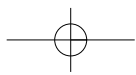
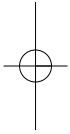


1984

FALCON INVESTIGATIONS



I

Crime was out there. Undetected, unseen. She hoped she wouldn't be too late. The bus driver was keeping the bus at a steady 15 m.p.h., braking at every approaching green light until it turned red. She closed her eyes and continued the journey in her head as slowly as she could. She opened them, but still the bus lagged far behind her worst projection. Pedestrians overtook them, the driver whistled.

She looked at the other passengers and tried to deduce their activities for the day. Most were pensioners and she counted four instances of the same huge, blue checked shopping bag. She made a note of the occurrence in her pad; she knew better than to believe in coincidences.

She read the adverts on the bus. Most were adverts for adverts: 'If you're reading this, then so could your customers.' She wondered if any of the passengers ever took out advertising space on the bus, and what they would advertise if they did.

'Come and enjoy my big, blue, checked shopping bag, it is filled with catfood.'

'I will talk to anyone about anything. I also eat biscuits.'

'Mr and Mrs Roberts, officially recognized brewers of the world's strongest tea. "We squeeze the bag."'

'I smell strange, but not unpleasantly.'

Kate thought she would like to take out an advert for the agency. The image would be a silhouette of her and

Mickey within the lens of a magnifying glass. Below, it would say:

FALCON INVESTIGATIONS
*Clues found. Suspects trailed.
Crimes detected.
Visit our office equipped with
the latest surveillance equipment.*

She made another note in her pad of the phone number on the advert, to be rung at some later date when the office was fully operational.

Eventually the bus reached the landscaped lawns and forlorn, fluttering flags of the light industrial estates that surrounded the newly opened Green Oaks Shopping Centre. She paid particular attention to unit 15 on the Langsdale Estate, where she had once witnessed what seemed to be an argument between two men. One man had a large moustache, the other wore sunglasses and no jacket on what had been a cold day – she'd thought they both looked of criminal character. After some deliberation and subsequent sightings of a large white van outside the unit, she had come to the conclusion that the two men were trafficking diamonds. Today all was quiet at the unit.

She opened her pad at a page with 'Unit 15 Surveillance' written at the top. Next to that day's date she wrote in the slightly jerky bus writing that dominated the page: 'No sighting. Collecting another shipment from Holland?'

Fifteen minutes later Kate was walking through the processed air of the Market Place of Green Oaks. Market Place wasn't a market place. It was the subterranean part of the shopping centre, next to the bus terminals, reserved for the non-prestige, low-end stores: fancy goods stores, cheap chemists, fake perfume sellers, stinking butchers, flammable-clothes vendors. Their smells mingled with the

smell of burnt dust from the over-door heaters and made her feel sick. This was as far as most of Kate's fellow passengers ventured into the centre. It was the closest approximation of the tatty old High Street, which had suffered a rapid decline since the centre had opened. Now when the bus drove up the High Street no one liked to look at the reproachful boarded up doorways filled with fast-food debris and leaves.

She realized that it was Wednesday and that she'd forgotten to buy that week's copy of the *Beano* from her usual newsagent. She had no choice but to go to the dingy kiosk in the centre to get it. Afterwards she stood and looked again at the *True Detective* magazines on the shelf. The woman on the front didn't look like a detective. She was wearing a trilby and raincoat . . . but nothing else. She looked like someone from a *Two Ronnies* sketch. Kate didn't like it.

She rode the escalator up to the ground floor, where the proper shops, the fountains and plastic palms began. It was the school holidays, but too early to be busy. None of her classmates was allowed to go to the centre without their parents. Sometimes she'd bump into a family group with one of her peers in tow and would exchange awkward greetings. She had picked up a sense that adults tended to be uncomfortable with her solo trips out and about, so now whenever questioned by shop assistant, security guard or parent she would always imply that an unspecified adult relative was just off in another store. Largely, though, no one questioned her, in fact no one ever really seemed to see her at all. Sometimes Kate thought she was invisible.

It was 9.30 a.m. She retrieved her laboriously type-written agenda from her back pocket:

09.30–10.45	Tandy: research walkie talkies and microphones
10.45–12.00	general centre surveillance
12.00–12.45	lunch at Vanezi's
12.45–13.30	Midland Educational: look at ink pads for fingerprinting
13.30–15.30	surveillance by banks
15.30	bus home

Kate hurried on to Tandy.

She was flustered to arrive at Vanezi's restaurant a good twenty minutes past noon. This was not the way a professional operated. This was sloppy. She waited by the door to be seated, though she could see her table was still free. The same lady as usual took her to the same table as usual and Kate slid into the orange plastic booth which offered a view out over the main atrium of the centre.

'Do you need to see the menu today?' asked the waitress.

'No thanks. Can I have the Children's Special please with a banana float? And can I not have any cucumber on the beefburger, please?'

'It's not cucumber, it's gherkin, love.'

Kate made a note of this in her pad: 'Gherkins/cucumbers – not same thing: research difference.' She'd hate to blow her cover on a Stateside mission with a stupid error like that.

Kate looked at the big plastic tomato-shaped tomato-sauce dispenser on her table. They were one of her favourite things – they made total sense.

At school last term, Paul Roberts had read out his essay, 'The best birthday ever', which culminated in his grandparents and parents taking him out to Vanezi's for dinner. He spoke of eating spaghetti with meatballs, which for some reason he and everyone else in the class had found

funny. He was still excited as he rushed through his story of drinking ice-cream floats and ordering a Knickerbocker Glory. He said it was brilliant.

Kate couldn't understand why he didn't just take himself there on a Saturday lunchtime if he liked it so much. She could even take him the first time and tell him the best place to sit. She could show him the little panel on the wall that you could slide back to reveal all the dirty plates passing by on a conveyor belt. She could tell him how one day she hoped to place some kind of auto-shutter action camera on the belt, which could travel around the entire restaurant taking surveillance shots unseen, before returning to Kate. She could point out the washing-up man who she thought might be murderous, and perhaps Paul could help her stake him out. She could maybe invite him to join the agency (if Mickey approved). But she didn't say anything. She just wondered.

She glanced around to check that no one could see, then she reached into her bag and pulled out Mickey. She sat him next to her by the window, so that the waitress wouldn't notice, and where he had a good view of the people below. She was training Mickey up to be her partner in the agency. Generally Mickey just did surveillance work. He was small enough to be unobtrusive despite his rather outlandish get-up. Kate liked Mickey's outfit even though it meant he didn't blend in as well as he might. He wore a pin-striped gangster suit with spats. The spats slightly spoiled the Sam Spade effect, but Kate liked them anyway; in fact she wanted a pair herself.

Mickey had been made from a craft kit called 'Sew your own Charlie Chimp the Gangster' given to Kate by an auntie. Charlie had languished along with all of Kate's other soft toys throughout most of her childhood, but when she'd started up the detective agency last year she thought he looked the part. Charlie Chimp was no good though.

Instead he became Mickey the Monkey. Kate would run through their agenda with him each morning and he always travelled with her in the canvas army surplus bag.

The waitress brought the order. Kate ate the burger and perused the first *Beano* of the new year, while Mickey kept a steady eye on some suspicious teenagers below.

2

Kate lived a bus journey away from Green Oaks. Her home was in the only Victorian block of houses left in the area, a red-brick three-storey outcrop which looked uncomfortable amidst the grey and white council-built cuboids. Kate's house was sandwiched between a newsagent's shop on one side, and a butcher and greengrocer on the other. Her house had clearly also been a shop once, but now a net curtain hung across the front window and what had been the shop was a sitting room where Kate's grandmother spent her long afternoons watching quiz shows.

The house was the only one in the block not to function as a business (aside from Kate's putative agency operation), and it was also the only one used as a home. None of her shopkeeper neighbours lived above their shops; at around six o'clock each evening they would shut up and depart for their semis in the suburbs, leaving silence and emptiness on all sides of Kate's room.

Kate knew and liked the shopkeepers well. The greengrocer's was run by Eric and his wife Mavis. They had no children, but they were always kind to Kate and bought her a surprisingly well-judged Christmas present each year. Last year it had been a Spirograph, which Kate had used to make a professional-looking logo on her business cards. Now her time was taken up with the agency and constant surveillance activity, Kate had less time to visit the couple, but still once a week she would pop in for a cup of tea and, swinging her legs from the stool behind the

counter, she would listen to Radio 2 and watch the customers buy vast quantities of potatoes.

Next to Eric and Mavis was Mr Watkin the butcher. Mr Watkin was an old man, Kate estimated probably seventy-eight. He was a nice man with a nice wife, but very few people bought their meat from him any more. Kate thought this possibly had something to do with the way Mr Watkin stood in his shop window swatting flies against the sides of meat with a large palette knife. It was also perhaps a self-perpetuating situation, in that the fewer customers Mr Watkin had, the less meat he stocked, and the less meat he had, the less he looked like a butcher, and the more he looked like a crazy old man who collected and displayed bits of flesh in his front window. The previous week Kate had passed the window to see it contained only a single rabbit (and Kate was sure the only person alive who still ate rabbit was in fact Mr Watkin himself), some kidneys, a chicken, a side of pork and a string of sausages. This in itself was nothing too remarkable for Mr Watkin, but what caused Kate to stop and stare was an apparent new marketing initiative by the butcher. Evidently he had become a little embarrassed by the minimal nature of his window displays and so perhaps in order to make them seem less odd (and this is where Kate felt he'd really miscalculated), he had arranged the items in a jaunty tableau. Thus it appeared that the chicken was taking the rabbit for a walk by its lead of sausages, over a hillock of pork under a dark red kidney sun. Kate looked up from the grisly scene to see Mr Watkin nodding at her in amazement from inside the shop, thumbs aloft, as if taken aback by his own flair.

On the other side of Kate's house was Mr Palmer the newsagent. Mr Palmer worked alongside his son Adrian, who was the closest Kate had to a best friend, and was also the first and so far only client of Falcon Investigations.

Adrian was twenty-two and had been to university. Mr Palmer had wanted Adrian to get a 'proper career' after graduation, but Adrian had no such ambitions, and was happy to spend his days reading behind the counter and helping to run the small business. The Palmer family lived in a modern semi on the outskirts of town, but the mother and sister rarely visited the shop – sweet selling was left to the men of the family. Adrian treated Kate like an adult, but then Adrian treated everyone the same. He wasn't capable of putting on a different face for different customers as his father did. Mr Palmer could switch from an avuncular 'Now then, young man', to an utterly sincere 'Such a shocking headline, isn't it, Mrs Stevens?' in seconds.

But, whatever Adrian's enthusiasms were, he tended to assume they were shared by all, or at least would be if he spread the word. He spent his afternoons buried in the *NME* or reading books about musicians. He would earnestly recommend albums to his customers, seemingly blind to the improbability of Mrs Docherty suddenly switching from Foster and Allen to the MC5, or Debbie Casey and her giggling teenage pals ever finding much of significance in Leonard Cohen. As soon as Mr Palmer left him alone in the shop, Jimmy Young's radio show would be switched off and Adrian would slip a tape into the tinny radio cassette player. He thought that the reason no one ever asked him what was playing was because they were a little shy, so he would always put a scrawled sign on the counter: 'Now Playing: Captain Beefheart, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*. For more information just ask a member of staff'.

With Kate, though, Adrian liked to talk about crime detection, about classic detective movies, about which customers might be killers, about where they might have hidden their victims' bodies. Adrian would always come up with the most inventive body dumps. Sometimes Kate

would go with Adrian to the wholesalers, advising him on what sweets to buy, and they would look at the burly warehousemen and assess which of them had criminal records.

Adrian knew about Falcon Investigations, though not about Mickey. Mickey was top secret. Mr Palmer had been getting increasingly irate about schoolkid sweet pilfering and so Adrian contracted Falcon Investigations to carry out a security assessment of the store. Kate told him that her rate was £1 a day plus expenses. She said she expected the assessment to take half a day at the most and no expenses would be incurred as she lived next door, and so she prepared an invoice for 50p. Kate was indescribably elated at this 'proper' commission. She even went out and bought a real invoice pad with duplicate sheets, which at 75p put the P&L in deficit, but she was building for the future. Kate asked Adrian to act as he normally would do when working in the shop and she played the part of a shoplifter. She said this was essential for her to pinpoint weak spots. After twenty minutes Kate left the shop and returned to the office to write up the report. She presented it to Adrian a couple of hours later, along with 37p worth of sweets she had managed to lift. The report was in two parts, the first detailing her time in the shop, the second making recommendations to 'stamp out crime'. These involved a rearrangement of some of the loose pocket-money sweets, a complete overhaul of the crisp display rack and the positioning of two mirrors at strategic points.

Adrian treated the report with the seriousness in which it had been compiled and carried out the recommendations to the letter. Mr Palmer was delighted with the results and pilfering was brought to a virtual standstill. Kate asked Mr Palmer if he would write down any positive comments he had about the service, as she had seen other businesses use such personal testimonials on promotional material.

She imagined her advert on the bus garlanded with sincere plaudits:

'We received a rapid, professional service at very reasonable rates.'

'Our agent was confidential, tactful and most of all EFFECTIVE.'

'Crime rates have plummeted since we called in Falcon Investigations.'

She was then slightly disappointed to receive instead from Mr Palmer: 'Good girl, Kate! You're a little treasure!!'

3

Each time she visited Green Oaks, Kate always paid a visit to Midland Educational, the large stationery store. Today's ostensible reason had been to examine their range of ink pads, but Kate always found some excuse to spend time in the store. Hours flew by.

Although Sam Spade is not seen at any point during *The Maltese Falcon* shopping for stationery, Kate knew how important premium office supplies were to an effective investigator. In fact stationery was something of a growing problem for Kate. At the start of last term, she had been taken for the first time into the stationery cupboard at school. Mrs Finnegan told Kate that she would be Stationery Monitor and gave her a thorough run-through of her forthcoming duties and responsibilities. She was puzzled as to why the always attentive Kate seemed lost in a world of her own.

Mrs Finnegan: It is vital that for every new exercise book given out you must collect the signed corner snipping from the old, filled exercise book. These must be collected in this Tupperware container and at the end of the week the number in the container must correspond exactly with the decrease in the number of exercise books you record in the Audit Register. Does that all make sense, Kate?

Kate: . . .

Mrs Finnegan: Kate?

Kate had not been prepared for the level of riches in the

stationery cupboard. First, it was not a cupboard, it was a room. Secondly, it was evident that the full range of stationery she and her classmates had ever used were but tiny and very dull drops in the vast ocean of the cupboard. The room contained luxury items like multi-coloured Biro's, metal pencil sharpeners, entire packets of felt-tips alongside serious, high-end items like concertina files and jumbo staplers. Kate didn't hear a word Mrs Finnegan said because she was in a state of actual, physical shock.

Since that afternoon the cupboard had played on her mind. She knew it was important for an investigator to get inside the criminal mind, but she suspected the motives of her brain's endless inventiveness in how to run rings around the audit register. She feared she was being pulled towards corruption.

Today in Midland Educational she had spent thirty minutes looking at ink stamps, trying to think of a reason for needing one but failing. Now Kate was doing her usual stint outside the banks and building societies. She had been watching them for over an hour. Two banks and three building societies were all situated next to each other on level 2 of the centre next to the children's play area. Between them was an oasis of imitation plant life surrounded by orange plastic seats. Kate sat with Mickey poking discreetly out of the bag by her side.

She had always thought if any significant crime was going to happen at the centre it would have to be here. She was sure of it. The security guards were all too busy watching shoplifters and truants, but Kate had her eye on the big picture and one day the hours she put in would pay off. Sometimes she allowed herself to think about the kind of civic reception she'd get when she foiled her first major robbery. In the *Beano*, good deeds were rewarded with a 'slap-up meal' invariably consisting of a mountain of mashed potato with sausages poking out. Kate hoped for

something more like a medal or badge and maybe an ongoing role working alongside adult detectives.

Radio Green Oaks chattered in the background as she watched the blank faces of the people gliding in and out of the banks. She watched people draw hundreds of pounds out, as if in a daze. A young couple each with five or six carrier bags from the fashion stores floated over, withdrew £100 each and then drifted back towards the shops. Their glassiness was part of a wider unreal feeling in the centre. No one appeared to have a purpose; they would drift into Kate's path and then block her way, seeming to just walk on the spot. Sometimes it scared her. She thought she might be the only living thing in Green Oaks. Other times she thought that perhaps she was a ghost haunting the lanes and escalators.

She knew that one day she would see someone by the banks with a different look on their face. Anxiety, or cunning, or hate, or desire, and she would know that they were a suspect. So she scanned the faces for any flicker of deviance. Her eyes moved over the play area where there were some children her own age looking unimpressed with the facilities. They were too old for the jungle fantasy and the ball pool, but unlike Kate they didn't seem to realize that the whole centre was an enormous playground. She felt the dull ache of loneliness in her stomach, but her brain didn't register it. It was old news.

Kate's favourite book, *How to be a Detective* (part of the Junior Factfinder series), was quite explicit about the sore feet and boredom necessary to crack crime. You had to put the hours in all day, every day:

The best detectives are always prepared – day or night. They can be called upon at any time to investigate crimes or follow suspects. Crooks are cunning and love the cover of darkness.

It was classified top-secret information, but Kate had spent a night at Green Oaks. She'd typed a note home about a fabricated school trip away and had set off with Mickey, a flask and her notebook. She got to the centre just before it closed and hid in the little plastic house in the middle of the children's play area. She waited there, until the shop-workers went home and the muzak was turned off. She'd tried to stay awake all night, watching the banks from inside the house, getting out every now and then to take a closer look and stretch her legs. She must have fallen asleep just before dawn; when she woke up the banks were open and the first customers were already there. Luckily Mickey, professional as ever, had remained alert, so nothing had been missed. She was disappointed with her lack of stamina though. She was determined to try again and next time to stay awake all night.

The man sitting two seats away got up and walked away and Kate realized with annoyance that he had been sitting there for a long time, but that she hadn't seen his face. Maybe he was casing Lloyds, maybe his face showed a concentrated expression. She got up to follow him, but changed her mind when she realized she should be getting home. She put an entry for her surveillance shift into her notebook, stuffed Mickey's head back into her bag and headed for the bus.

4

TOP SECRET. DETECTIVE NOTEBOOK.
PROPERTY OF AGENT KATE MEANEY.

Thursday 19th April

Man with the suntan and checked sports jacket in Vanezi's again. He has new steel-rimmed dark glasses. Think he is American, looks like bad men in *Columbo*. Suspect he is a hired assassin staking out a subject. Beginning to think this could be the waitress with no neck. He stared at her a lot. Have yet to discover motive for her murder, but will attempt to engage her in casual conversation tomorrow and if necessary I will warn her, but need more evidence on 'Mr Tan' first.

When leaving he dropped a lighter as he passed my table, think it was an attempt to view my notes. I quickly slid the book under my menu and he disguised his frustration. He is perhaps beginning to realize I am a worthy opponent.

Friday 20th April

No Mr Tan today, but instead a woman with a suspiciously bad wig. Are they connected??? She was extremely collected, and showed no signs of anxiety as she ate her Black Forest Gateau.

No-neck waitress nowhere to be seen – asked the waitress who served me about her and was told it was her 'day off'. Interesting.

Saturday 21st April

Back to Vanezi's today. Mr Tan as ever back in his corner seat. Mrs Wig also present but now have no suspicions of any connection with Tan. Saw her take many pills from various bottles – could be wig is for medical rather than criminal reasons.

Woman in blue raincoat spotted once more on bench outside Mothercare. Today she had a pushchair, but still no child.

Tuesday 24th April

Nothing to report today. Man seen eating orange peel from brown paper bag. Followed him for 40 minutes but no further deviance observed.

Spent two hours outside banks – no one looked wrong.

Wednesday 25th April

Middle-aged man in tatty coat lost something in one of the bins. Saw him put his arm in and pull stuff out. Thought security guards were coming to help him, but instead they just led him off the premises. Noticed he had got confused and put an old hamburger that someone had thrown away in his pocket.

Decided against continuing search myself.

Thursday 26th April

Tall white male seen today hiding in tropical shrubbery area in central atrium. Appeared to be talking to a leaf. No criminal motive apparent and so Mickey and I moved away quickly.

Friday 27th April

Whilst observing the banks a lone male marched past me and burst into Barclays. Had no doubt that this was a raid. Followed him in with my camera, only to find him

shouting at the cashier about bank charges. He used a lot of bad language but was unarmed and seemed uninterested in holding up the bank. A useful drill, though – he caught us sleeping.

5

Mrs Finnegan had implemented a ground-breaking seating regime with Junior Three. It was not alphabetical as with Mr Gibbs; it was not the 'blue table, red table . . .' method favoured by Mrs Cress; and it was not of course the dreamt of 'sit by your friend' favoured by every child (Mrs Cress had described this suggestion as 'outlandish').

It was instead a method which sought to attain complete equilibrium. The sum of intelligence, naughtiness, smelliness, noisiness in each two-desk-pairing would, as near as possible, be equal across the class. A noisy child would be teamed with a silent child, a naughty child teamed with a telltale.

Mrs Finnegan doubtless hoped to engender mistrust and despair: a class of informers and infighters. For the bulk of the class, however, her system had allowed them to sit next to their mates. The happy majority had no distinguishing features or traits and thus had to be paired with similarly unremarkable pupils, or perilous dominance and disequilibrium would occur.

For those few at the margins of the class, however, the system was punitive. Kate was deemed bright, well behaved, quiet and clean, and her reward for this was to be sat next to Teresa Stanton.

On their first day together Teresa had turned to Kate, said: 'Look!' and then promptly swallowed a 5p before opening her mouth and extending her tongue to prove it

had gone. Kate yelped and buried her head in her workbook, but Teresa then proceeded to emit a series of disgusting inverted burp sounds, before a particularly violent one resulted in the sp being expelled at force from some unspeakable wet cavity straight onto Kate's work.

Teresa had joined the class at the start of spring term, allegedly after being expelled from her last school, and her arrival had upset the accepted hierarchies and relationships that had been established in the class back in Infant One. Previously there had been an acknowledged naughtiest girl in the class and ahead of her was the naughtiest boy in the class. There was also a dirtiest boy and girl, and the oddest boy and girl . . . Whatever the distinction – naughtiest, loudest, most violent – the boys always fielded the most extreme candidate.

Now these former medal-winners looked on from the sidelines, confused and disorientated, as Teresa Stanton strolled past them to the finishing post in all events. Definitions had to be redrawn. A class of thirty children had grown up since the age of five believing Eamon Morgan's behaviour was the naughtiest behaviour possible. Once, when the universally feared Mrs Finnegan had left the room to get something from the stationery cupboard, Eamon had taken her place at the front of the classroom, performed a not terribly accurate but unbelievably daring impersonation of her, and then to the gasps and yelps of twenty-nine children, had written 'Bitch' in chalk on the blackboard. Kate had thought she might faint with fear when Mrs Finnegan had re-entered the room. No one in the class would forget that long afternoon of terror, cross-examination and threat, ending with Eamon finally owning up to save the rest of the class, and Mrs Finnegan's terrible smile when he did.

On Teresa's first day in class, evidently bored of Mrs Finnegan's lecture on the Principality of Wales, she yawned

loudly and extensively and, apparently oblivious to all eyes in the class fixed on her, noisily threw her books in her desk, let the lid slam and simply walked out of the room. The class was thrown into chaos. Like a small tribal culture whose cosmology is suddenly torn apart by the arrival of a box of cornflakes, the class could not begin to assimilate this action into the world they knew. Walking out of school? They were taken to school in the morning, they were picked up in the evening, they sought permission to go to the toilet, they played in prescribed parts of the playground, they queued in a particular direction, they always walked on the left. The school was an intricate web of invisible force fields and boundaries; how could she cross a boundary that no one else had been able to see? In the days that followed, Teresa bombarded Junior Three with one unimaginable shock after another, perhaps the greatest of which was her utter obliviousness to Mrs Finnegan's rage.

On her first day in Mrs Finnegan's class, Kate had made the extremely difficult decision to wet herself rather than ask Mrs Finnegan if she could go to the toilet. Five years of hearing the screaming fury of Mrs Finnegan echo down corridors had helped Kate make this decision. And nothing she had seen of Mrs Finnegan's psychotic temper since joining her class had changed her mind. It was hard for the class to comprehend, but Mrs Finnegan really did seem to despise them all. Everything she said was soaked in a dark, acid sarcasm. Every day Mrs Finnegan said, 'Good morning, children,' and managed to imbue this simple greeting with so many layers of meaning, taunt and bitterness that it could make Kate feel sick.

Cruel humour was what the class expected and hoped for most days, because the alternative was when Mrs Finnegan lost her temper. The volume alone was enough to make their stomachs disappear, the viciousness was of a

kind rarely heard outside the home, and often there was violence too. When his new skinhead haircut prevented Mrs Finnegan from pulling John Fitzpatrick's hair, she simply punched him instead.

But Teresa was unmoved by all this. This was not the bravado of Noel Brennan, who tried to smirk when Mrs Finnegan slapped him in the face; this was genuine indifference. It was as if Mrs Finnegan and indeed the rest of the class were simply not in Teresa's eyeline. As Mrs Finnegan screamed at Teresa and poked her to emphasize each syllable, Teresa stared blankly ahead as if watching an old cartoon with the sound down.

And then one day Mrs Finnegan finally found the volume control. Teresa was looking out of the window while Mrs Finnegan bellowed at her for having drawn monstrous faces on every page of her exercise book. At the end of this stream of invective, Mrs Finnegan, uncharacteristically seeming to concede defeat, said: 'Soon you will find yourself expelled again and next time, no school will take you, and then you will stay at home all day long and -'

Before she could finish, Teresa gave Mrs Finnegan her full attention for the first time. Her eyes filled with tears and then she sobbed uncontrollably for half an hour. Mrs Finnegan looked on in amazement, along with the rest of the class.

At breaktime everyone talked about Teresa's capitulation and the old deposed naughty boys tried to win back some credibility by claiming that being forced to stay at home would make them laugh, not cry. And it was true, this had seemed a most ineffectual threat by Mrs Finnegan, as ill-advised a strategy as the oft-attempted 'Eat your crusts or your hair won't go curly'.

From her seat next to Teresa, however, Kate understood. She saw bruises and burns on Teresa's legs and

arms like she'd never seen before and she knew why Teresa wanted to be in school. Sometimes in the afternoons Teresa would stare out of the window and Kate would slip into a trance, staring at the edges of the bluey-black clouds that peeped out from beneath Teresa's sleeves.