

Slade House: A Novel

By David Mitchell

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The *New York Times* bestseller by the author of *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas* | Named One of the Best Books of the Year by *San Francisco Chronicle,* NPR, *Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, The Telegraph, National Post, BookPage,* and *Kirkus Reviews*

Keep your eyes peeled for a small black iron door.

Down the road from a working-class British pub, along the brick wall of a narrow alley, if the conditions are exactly right, you'll find the entrance to Slade House. A stranger will greet you by name and invite you inside. At first, you won't want to leave. Later, you'll find that you can't. Every nine years, the house's residents—an odd brother and sister—extend a unique invitation to someone who's different or lonely: a precocious teenager, a recently divorced policeman, a shy college student. But what really goes on inside Slade House? For those who find out, it's already too late. . . .

Spanning five decades, from the last days of the 1970s to the present, leaping genres, and barreling toward an astonishing conclusion, this intricately woven novel will pull you into a reality-warping new vision of the haunted house story—as only David Mitchell could imagine it.

Praise for *Slade House*

"A fiendish delight . . . Mitchell is something of a magician."***—The Washington Post***

"Entertainingly eerie . . . We turn to [Mitchell] for brain-tickling puzzle palaces, for character studies and for language."***—Chicago Tribune***

"A ripping yarn . . . Like Shirley Jackson's Hill House or the Overlook Hotel from Stephen King's *The Shining,* [Slade House] is a thin sliver of hell designed to entrap the unwary. . . . As the Mitchellverse grows ever more expansive and connected, this short but powerful novel hints at still more marvels to come."***—San Francisco Chronicle***

"Like Stephen King in a fever . . . manically ingenious."***—The Guardian* (U.K.)**

“A haunted house story that savors of Dickens, Stephen King, J. K. Rowling and H. P. Lovecraft, but possesses more psychic voltage than any of them.”***—Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***

“Tightly crafted and suspenseful yet warmly human . . . the ultimate spooky nursery tale for adults.”***—The Huffington Post***

“Diabolically entertaining . . . dark, thrilling, and fun . . . a thoroughly entertaining ride full of mind games, unexpected twists, and even a few laughs.”***—The Daily Beast***

“Plants died, milk curdled, and my children went slightly feral as I succumbed to the creepy magic of David Mitchell’s *Slade House*. It’s a wildly inventive, chilling, and—for all its otherworldliness—wonderfully human haunted house story. I plan to return to its clutches quite often.”**—Gillian Flynn, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Gone Girl* and *The Grownup***

“I gulped down this novel in a single evening. Painstakingly imagined and crackling with narrative velocity, it’s a *Dracula* for the new millennium, a reminder of how much fun fiction can be.”**—Anthony Doerr, author of *All the Light We Cannot See,* winner of the Pulitzer Prize**

“David Mitchell doesn’t break rules so much as he proves them to be inhibitors to lively intelligent fiction.”**—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Dean Koontz**

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review
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“*Slade House*, the tricky new confection by David Mitchell, is a haunted house story that savors of Dickens, Stephen King, J. K. Rowling and H. P. Lovecraft, but possesses more psychic voltage than any of them.”***—Pittsburgh Post-Gazette***

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“The joy in *Slade House* is in the discovery. It’s in seeing different people make the same mistakes over and over again. . . . It’s in thinking that *you’d* be smarter, of course. That *you’d* see through all this B-movie schlock (like creepy portraits, sad ghosts and stairways that go nowhere), find the secret door, and escape. Only to find that you’re already trapped.”**—NPR**

“Diabolically entertaining . . . dark, thrilling, and fun . . . One needn’t have read any of Mitchell’s past books to enjoy *Slade House*. Those who do crack it open will find inside a thoroughly entertaining ride full of mind games, unexpected twists, and even a few laughs.”***—The Daily Beast***

“A smart, spooky thrill ride . . . If you haven’t yet read Mitchell, choosing this novel just might make a believer of you.”***—Milwaukee Journal Sentinel***

“Mitchell is one of the best writers going these days, and *Slade House* will haunt you for days—and nights.”***—San Antonio Express-News***

“Plants died, milk curdled, and my children went slightly feral as I succumbed to the creepy magic of David Mitchell’s *Slade House*. It’s a wildly inventive, chilling, and—for all its otherworldliness—wonderfully human haunted house story. I plan to return to its clutches quite often.”**—Gillian Flynn, #1** ***New York Times*** **bestselling author of** ***Gone Girl*** **and** ***The Grownup***

“I gulped down this novel in a single evening. Intricately connected to David Mitchell’s previous books, this compact fantasy burns with classic Mitchellian energy. Painstakingly imagined and crackling with narrative velocity, it’s a *Dracula* for the new millennium, a *Hansel and Gretel* for grownups, a reminder of how much fun fiction can be.”**—Anthony Doerr, author of** ***All the Light We Cannot See,*** **winner of the Pulitzer Prize**

“David Mitchell doesn’t break rules so much as prove them inhibitors to lively, intelligent fiction. *Slade House* is a fractal offshoot of his remarkable *The Bone Clocks*, an eerie haunted-house tale that takes as much from quantum mechanics as from traditional supernatural lore, a spellbinding chiller about an unnatural greed for life and the arrogance of power.”**—Dean Koontz, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author**

“What can’t David Mitchell do? *Slade House* is a page-burning, read-in-one-sitting, at times terrifying novel that does for the haunted-house story what Henry James did for the ghost story in *The Turn of the Screw*. It has all the intelligence and linguistic dazzle one expects from a David Mitchell novel, but it will also creep the pants off you. Just as *Slade House* won’t let go of its unsuspecting guests, you won’t be able to put this book down. Welcome to *Slade House*: Step inside.”**—Adam Johnson, author of *Fortune Smiles* and *The Orphan Master’s Son,* winner of the Pulitzer Prize**

“*Slade House* is a deranged garden of forking paths, where all the flowers are poisonous and every escape is choked with thorns. David Mitchell has long been acknowledged as one of the finest—if not *the* finest—literary minds of his generation, but he’s also one of the most suspenseful, and he proves it in every gripping, vertiginous setpiece. In some ways, this book reads as if Wes Craven hired Umberto Eco to reinvent *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Yet that doesn’t quite do justice to its white-hot intensity: I think that five minutes inside *Slade House* would leave Freddy Krueger trembling and crying for Mama. I read in a constant state of terror and joy and could not turn the pages fast enough.”**—Joe Hill, *New York Times* bestselling author of *NOS4A2* and *Horns***

“Sharp, fast, flat-out spooky, *Slade House* is such a hypnotic read that you are likely to miss your subway stop in order to keep reading. And by you, I mean me.”**—Daniel Handler, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Lemony Snicket series**

“The ultimate haunted house story . . . both fresh and consistently spooky . . . a work that almost demands to be read in a single sitting. Just be sure to leave the lights on when you do.”**—*BookPage***

“Another triumph of David Mitchell’s voracious imagination.”**—*The Daily Telegraph* (U.K.)**

“Irresistible.”**—*Mail on Sunday* (U.K.)**

“So dazzling it seems to defy its own gravitational rules.”**—*Metro* (U.K.)**

“A ripping little Victorian gothic yarn, and one of which @edgarallanpoe would have been proud . . . *Slade House* plunges us into full psycho-mystic fantasy-horror—and it’s a hoot.”**—*Esquire* (U.K.)**

“Prepare to be dazzled.”**—*Tatler* (U.K.)**

“[A] triumph . . . Mitchell’s most pleasurable book to date, which also features some of his finest writing.”**—*Literary Review* (U.K.)**

“David Mitchell turned all the firepower of his formidable gifts on the lures, and the perils, of immortality. . . . Yet, as ever, Mitchell grounds his fantasy in high-definition, close-up scenes of daily experience. . . . Mitchell’s zestful, joyous recreation of the minutiae of everyday life has a redemptive role. Against the accursed privilege of the immortals, he helps us love the time that dooms us.”**—*The Independent* (U.K.)**

“[Mitchell is] a master of genre verisimilitude.”***—The National* (A.E.)**

“A complex, twisty little gem that fans of the author will absolutely devour . . . *Slade House* reinforces the notion that there really is no one out there like David Mitchell.”***—Shelf Awareness***

“Deliciously inventive and hard to put down.”***—Library Journal***

*“Superb . . . Mitchell offers his most accessible book yet—a haunted-house story in the vein of such classics as The Turn of the Screw and The Haunting of Hill House. . . . Suggest to fans of Audrey Niffenegger, Karen Russell, and Steven Millhauser, and expect it to be read as a Halloween staple for years to come.”****—Booklist***

*“Mitchell serves up a story that wouldn’t be out of place alongside The Turn of the Screw. Ingenious, scary, and downright weird . . . [a] delicious ghost story.”****—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)***

About the Author
DAVID MITCHELL is the award-winning and bestselling author of *The Bone Clocks*, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, *Black Swan Green*, *Cloud Atlas*, *Number9Dream* and *Ghostwritten*. Twice shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, Mitchell was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *TIME* magazine in 2007 ("The most consistently interesting novelist of his generation," *TIME*). With KA Yoshida, Mitchell co-translated from the Japanese the international bestselling memoir, *The Reason I Jump*. He lives in Ireland with his wife and two children.

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The Right Sort
1979

Whatever Mum’s saying’s drowned out by the grimy roar of the bus pulling away, revealing a pub called The Fox and Hounds. The sign shows three beagles cornering a fox. They’re about to pounce and rip it apart. A street sign underneath says westwood road. Lords and ladies are supposed to be rich, so I was expecting swimming pools and Lamborghinis, but Westwood Road looks pretty normal to me. Normal brick houses, detached or semidetached, with little front gardens and normal cars. The damp sky’s the color of old hankies. Seven magpies fly by. Seven’s good. Mum’s face is inches away from mine, though I’m not sure if that’s an angry face or a worried one.

“Nathan? Are you even listening?” Mum’s wearing makeup today. That shade of lipstick’s called Morning Lilac but it smells more like Pritt Stick than lilacs. Mum’s face hasn’t gone away, so I say, “What?”

“It’s ‘Pardon’ or ‘Excuse me.’ Not ‘What?’?”

“Okay,” I say, which often does the trick.

Not today. “Did you hear what I told you?”

“?‘It’s “Pardon” or “Excuse me.” Not “What?”?’?”

“Before that! I said, if anyone at Lady Grayer’s asks how we came here, you’re to tell them we arrived by taxi.”

“I thought lying was wrong.”

“There’s lying,” says Mum, fishing out the envelope she wrote the directions on from her handbag, “which *is* wrong, and there’s creating the right impression, which is necessary. If your father paid what he’s supposed to pay, we really would have arrived by taxi. Now .?.?.” Mum squints at her writing. “Slade Alley leads off Westwood Road, about halfway down .?.?.” She checks her watch.

“Right, it’s ten to three, and we’re due at three. Chop-chop. Don’t dawdle.” Off Mum walks.
I follow, not stepping on any of the cracks. Sometimes I have to guess where the cracks are because the pavement’s mushy with fallen leaves. At one point I had to step out of the way of a man with huge fists jogging by in a black and orange tracksuit. Wolverhampton Wanderers play in black and orange. Shining berries hang from a mountain ash. I’d like to count them, but the *clip-clop-clip-clop* of Mum’s heels pulls me on. She bought the shoes at John Lewis’s sale with the last of the money the Royal College of Music paid her, even though British Telecom sent a final reminder to pay the telephone bill. She’s wearing her dark blue concert outfit and her hair up with the silver fox-head hairpin. Her dad brought it back from Hong Kong after World War Two. When Mum’s teaching a student and I have to make myself scarce, I sometimes go to Mum’s dressing table and get the fox out. He’s got jade eyes and on some days he smiles, on others he doesn’t. I don’t feel well knitted today, but the Valium should kick in soon. Valium’s great. I took two pills. I’ll have to miss a few next week so Mum won’t notice her supply’s going down. My tweed jacket’s scratchy. Mum got it from Oxfam specially for today, and the bow tie’s from Oxfam, too. Mum volunteers there on Mondays so she can get the best of the stuff people bring in on Saturdays. If Gaz Ingram or anyone in his gang sees me in this bow tie, I’ll find a poo in my locker, guaranteed. Mum says I have to learn how to Blend In more, but there aren’t any classes for Blending In, not even on the town library notice board. There’s a Dungeons & Dragons club advertised there, and I always want to go, but Mum says I can’t because Dungeons & Dragons is playing with dark forces. Through one front window I see horse racing. That’s *Grandstand* on BBC1. The next three windows have net curtains, but then I see a TV with wrestling on it. That’s Giant Haystacks the hairy baddie fighting Big Daddy the bald goodie on ITV. Eight houses later I see *Godzilla* on BBC2. He knocks down a pylon just by blundering into it and a Japanese fireman with a sweaty face is shouting into a radio. Now Godzilla’s picked up a train, which makes no sense because amphibians don’t have thumbs. Maybe Godzilla’s thumb’s like a panda’s so-called thumb, which is really an evolved claw. Maybe—

“Nathan!” Mum’s got my wrist. “What did I say about dawdling?”

I check back. “?‘Chop-chop!’; ‘Don’t dawdle.’?”

“So what are you doing now?”

“Thinking about Godzilla’s thumbs.”

Mum shuts her eyes. “Lady Grayer has invited me—us—to a musical gathering. A soirée. There’ll be people who care about music there. People from the Arts Council, people who award jobs, grants.” Mum’s eyes have tiny red veins like rivers photographed from very high up. “I’d rather you were at home playing with your Battle of the Boers landscape too, but Lady Grayer insisted you come along, so .?.?. you *have* to act normal. Can you do that? Please? Think of the most normal boy in your class, and do what he’d do.”

Acting Normal’s like Blending In. “I’ll try. But it’s not the Battle of the Boers, it’s the Boer War. Your ring’s digging into my wrist.”

Mum lets go of my wrist. That’s better.

I don’t know what her face is saying.

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Slade Alley’s the narrowest alley I’ve ever seen. It slices between two houses, then vanishes left after thirty paces or so. I can imagine a tramp living there in a cardboard box, but not a lord and lady.

“No doubt there’ll be a proper entrance on the far side,” says Mum. “Slade House is only the Grayers’ town residence. Their proper home’s in Cambridgeshire.”

If I had 50p for every time Mum’s told me that, I’d now have £3.50. It’s cold and clammy in the alley like White Scar Cave in the Yorkshire Dales. Dad took me when I was ten. I find a dead cat lying on the ground at the first corner. It’s gray like dust on the moon. I know it’s dead because it’s as still as a dropped bag, and because big flies are drinking from its eyes. How did it die? There’s no bullet wound or fang marks, though its head’s at a slumped angle so maybe it was strangled by a cat-strangler. It goes straight into the Top Five of the Most Beautiful Things I’ve Ever Seen. Maybe there’s a tribe in Papua New Guinea who think the droning of flies is music. Maybe I’d fit in with them. “Come along, Nathan.” Mum’s tugging my sleeve.
I ask, “Shouldn’t it have a funeral? Like Gran did?”

“No. Cats aren’t human beings. Come along.”

“Shouldn’t we tell its owner it won’t be coming home?”

“How? Pick it up and go along Westwood Road knocking on all the doors saying, ‘Excuse me, is this your cat?’?”

Mum sometimes has good ideas. “It’d take a bit of time, but—”

“*Forget* it, Nathan—we’re due at Lady Grayer’s right now.”

“But if we don’t bury it, crows’ll peck out its eyes.”

“We don’t have a spade or a garden round here.”

“Lady Grayer should have a spade and a garden.”

Mum closes her eyes again. Maybe she’s got a headache. “This conversation is over.” She pulls me away and we go down the middle section of Slade Alley. It’s about five houses long, I’d guess, but hemmed in by brick walls so high you can’t see anything. Just sky. “Keep your eyes peeled for a small black iron door,” says Mum, “set into the right-hand wall.” But we walk all the way to the next corner, and it’s ninety-six paces exactly, and thistles and dandelions grow out of cracks, but there’s no door. After the right turn we go another twenty paces until we’re out on the street parallel to Westwood Road. A sign says cranbury avenue. Parked opposite’s a St. John ambulance.

Someone’s written clean me in the dirt above the back wheel. The driver’s got a broken nose and he’s speaking into a radio. A mod drives past on a scooter like off *Quadrophenia*, riding without a helmet.
“Riding without a helmet’s against the law,” I say.

“Makes no sense,” says Mum, staring at the envelope.

“Unless you’re a Sikh with a turban. Then the police’ll—”

“?‘A small black iron door’: I mean .?.?. how did we miss it?”

I know. For me, Valium’s like Asterix’s magic potion, but it makes Mum dopey. She called me Frank yesterday—Dad’s name—and didn’t notice. She gets two prescriptions for Valium from two doctors because one’s not enough, but—

—a dog barks just inches away and I’ve shouted and jumped back in panic and peed myself a bit, but it’s okay, it’s okay, there’s a fence, and it’s only a small yappy dog, it’s not a bull mastiff, it’s not *that* bull mastiff, and it was only a bit of pee. Still, my heart’s hammering like mad and I feel like I might puke. Mum’s gone out into Cranbury Avenue to look for big gates to a big house, and hasn’t even noticed the yappy dog. A bald man in overalls walks up, carrying a bucket and a pair of stepladders over his shoulder. He’s whistling “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing (in Perfect Harmony).”

Mum cuts in. “Excuse me, do you know Slade House?”

The whistling and the man stop. “Do I know What House?”

“Slade House. It’s Lady Norah Grayer’s residence.”

“No idea, but if you find Her Ladyship, tell her I fancy a ?bit o’ posh if she fancies a bit o’ rough.” He tells me, “Love the dickie bow, son,” and turns into Slade Alley, picking up his whistling where he left off. Mum looks at his back, muttering, “Thanks a heap for bloody nothing.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to say ‘bloody’—”

“Don’t start, Nathan. Just—don’t.”

I think that’s Mum’s angry face. “Okay.”

The dog’s stopped yapping to lick its willy. “We’ll backtrack,” Mum decides. “Maybe Lady Grayer meant the next alley along.” She goes back into Slade Alley and I follow. We reach the middle section in time to see the stepladder man vanish around the corner of the far end, where the moon-gray cat’s still lying dead. “If someone killed you down here,” I remark, “nobody’d see.”

Mum ignores me. Maybe it wasn’t very Normal. We’re halfway down the middle bit when Mum stops: “I’ll be *jiggered*!” There’s a small black iron door, set into the brick wall. It’s small all right. I’m four feet eleven inches, and it’s only up to my eyes. A fat person’d need to squeeze hard to get through. It has no handle, keyhole, or gaps around the edges. It’s black, nothing-black, like the gaps between stars. “How on earth did we miss that?” says Mum. “Some Boy Scout *you* are.”

“I’m not in the Scouts anymore,” I remind her. Mr. Moody our scoutmaster told me to get lost, so I did, and it took the Snowdonia mountain rescue service two days to find my shelter. I’d been on the local news and everything. Everyone was angry, but I was only following orders.

Mum pushes the door, but it stays shut. “How on earth does the bally thing open? Perhaps we ought to knock.”

The door pulls my palm up against it. It’s warm.

And as it swings inwards, the hinges shriek like brakes .?.?.

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.?.?. and we’re looking into a garden; a buzzing, still-summery garden. The garden’s got roses, toothy sunflowers, spatters of poppies, clumps of foxgloves, and lots of flowers I can’t name. There’s a rockery, a pond, bees grazing and butterflies. It’s epic. “Cop a load of *that*,” says Mum. Slade House is up at the top, old, blocky, stern and gray and half smothered by fiery ivy, and not at all like the houses on Westwood Road and Cranbury Avenue. If it was owned by the National Trust they’d charge you £2 to get in, or 75p for children under sixteen. Mum and I have already stepped in through the small black iron door, which the wind closed like an unseen butler, and currents are pulling us up the garden, around by the wall. “The Grayers must have a full-time gardener,” says Mum, “or even several of them.” At last, I feel my Valium kicking in. Reds are glossier, blues glassier, greens steamier and whites see-through like one layer of a two-ply tissue. I’m about to ask Mum how such a big house and its garden can possibly fit in the space between Slade Alley and Cranbury Avenue, but my question falls down a deep well with no bottom, and I forget what I’ve forgotten.

“Mrs. Bishop and son, I presume,” says an invisible boy. Mum jumps, a bit like me with the yappy dog, but now my Valium’s acting like a shock absorber. “Up here,” says the voice. Mum and me look up. Sitting on the wall, about fifteen feet up I’d say, is a boy who looks my age. He’s got wavy hair, pouty lips, milky skin, blue jeans, pumps but no socks and a white T-shirt. Not an inch of tweed, and no bow tie. Mum never said anything about other boys at Lady Grayer’s musical soirée. Other boys mean questions have to get settled. Who’s coolest? Who’s hardest? Who’s brainiest? Normal boys care about this stuff and kids ?like Gaz Ingram fight about it. Mum’s saying, “Yes, hello, I’m Mrs. Bishop and this is Nathan—look, that wall’s jolly high, you know. Don’t you think you ought to come down?”

“Good to meet you, Nathan,” says the boy.

“Why?” I ask the soles of the boy’s pumps.

Mum’s hissing something about manners and the boy says, “Just because. I’m Jonah, by the way. Your welcoming committee.”

I don’t know any Jonahs. It’s a maroon-colored name.

Mum asks, “And is Lady Norah your mother, Jonah?”

Jonah considers this. “Let’s say she is, yes.”

“Right,” says Mum, “that’s, um, I see. Do—”

“Oh, splendid, Rita, you’ve found us!” A woman walks out from a lattice-frame tunnel thing. The tunnel’s smothered with bunches of dangly white and purple flowers. The woman’s around Mum’s age, but she’s slim and less worn down ?and dresses like her garden looks. “After I hung up last night, I rather got the collywobbles that I’d horribly confused you ?by giving you directions to the Slade Alley door—really, I should’ve sent you round the front. But I did so want your first sight of Slade House to be across the garden in its full splendor.”

“Lady Grayer!” Mum sounds like an imitation of a posh person. “Good afternoon. No no no, your directions were—”

“Call me Norah, Rita, *do*—the whole ‘Lady’ thing’s a frightful bore when I’m off duty. You’ve met Jonah, I see: our resident Spider-Man.” Lady Grayer has Jonah’s black hair and X-ray vision eyes that I prefer to look away from. “*This* young man must be Nathan.” She shakes my hand. Her hand’s pudgy but its grip’s strong. “Your mother’s told me all about you.”

“Pleased to meet you, Norah,” I say, like a grown-up from a film.

“Nathan!” says Mum, too loud. “Lady Grayer didn’t mean *you* can call her by her Christian name.”
“It’s fine,” says Norah Grayer. “Really, he’s welcome to.”

The bright afternoon sways a bit. “Your dress matches the garden,” I say.

“What an elegant compliment,” says Lady Grayer. “Thank you. And you look very smart, too. Bow ties are terribly distinguished.”

I extract my hand. “Did you own a moon-gray cat, Norah?”

“?‘Did’ I own a cat? Do you mean recently, or in my girlhood?”

“Today. It’s in the alley.” I point in the right direction. “At the first corner. It’s dead.”

“Nathan can be rather direct sometimes.” Mum’s voice is odd and hurried. “Norah, if the cat is yours, I’m terribly—”

“Don’t worry, Slade House has been catless for some years. I’ll telephone our odd-job man and ask him to give the poor creature a decent burial pronto. That’s most thoughtful of you, Nathan. Like your mother. Have you inherited her musical gift, too?”

“Nathan doesn’t practice enough,” says Mum.

“I practice an hour a day,” I say.

“Ought to be two,” says Mum, crisply.

“I’ve got homework to do too,” I point out.

“Well, ‘Genius *is* nine parts perspiration,’?” says Jonah, standing right behind us, on the ground—Mum gasps with surprise, but I’m impressed. I ask, “How did you get down so quickly?”
He taps his temple. “Cranially implanted teleport circuitry.”

I know he jumped really, but I like his answer better. Jonah’s taller than me, but most kids are. Last week Gaz Ingram changed my official nickname from Gaylord Baconface to Poison Dwarf.
“An incurable show-off,” sighs Norah Grayer. “Now, Rita, I do hope you won’t mind, but Yehudi Menuhin’s dropped by and I told him about your Debussy recital. He’s positively bursting to meet you.”

Mum makes a face like an astonished kid from *Peanuts:* “*The* Yehudi Menuhin? He’s here? This afternoon?”

Lady Grayer nods like it's no big deal. "Yes, he had a 'gig' at the Royal Festival Hall last night, and Slade House has become his London bolt-hole-cum-pied-à-terre, as it were. Say you don't mind?"
"Mind?" says Mum. "Meeting Sir Yehudi? Of course I don't mind, I just .?.?. can't quite believe I'm awake."

*"Bra*viss*ima."* Lady Grayer takes Mum by the arm and steers her towards the big house. "Don't be shy—-Yehudi's a teddy bear. Why don't you chaps"—she turns to Jonah and me—"amuse yourselves in this glorious sunshine for a little while? Mrs. Polanski's making coffee éclairs, so be sure to work up an appetite."

·??

"Eat a damson, Nathan," says Jonah, handing me a fruit from the tree. He sits down at the base of one tree, so I sit down against its neighbor.

"Thanks." Its warm slushy flesh tastes of early August mornings. "Is Yehudi Menuhin really visiting?"

Jonah gives me a look I don't understand. "Why on earth would Norah lie?"

I've never met a boy who calls his mum by her Christian name. Dad'd call it "very modern." "I didn't say she *is* lying. It's just that he's an incredibly famous virtuoso violinist."

Jonah spits his damson stone into tall pink daisies. "Even incredibly famous virtuoso violinists need friends. So how old are you, Nathan? Thirteen?"

"Bang on." I spit my stone farther. "You?"

"Same," he says. "My birthday's in October."

"February." I'm older, if shorter. "What school do you go to?"

"School and I never saw eye to eye," says Jonah. "So to speak."

I don't understand. "You're a kid. You have to go. It's the law."

"The law and I never got on, either. 'Nother damson?"

"Thanks. But what about the truancy officer?"

Jonah's face may mean he's puzzled. Mrs. Marconi and me have been working on "puzzled." "The what officer?"

I don't get it. He must know. "Are you taking the piss?"

Jonah says, "I wouldn't dream of taking your piss. What would I do with it?" That's kind of witty, but if I ever used it on Gaz Ingram he'd crucify me on the rugby posts. "Seriously, I'm taught at home."

"That must be *ace*. Who teaches you? Your mum?"

Jonah says, “Our master,” and looks at me.

His eyes hurt, so I look away. Master’s like a posh word for “teacher.” “What’s he like?”

Jonah says, not like he’s trying to boast, “A true genius.”

“I’m dead jealous,” I admit. “I hate my school. *Hate* it.”

“If you don’t fit into the system, the system makes life hell. Is your father a pianist too, like your mother?”

I like talking about Dad as much as I hate talking about school. “No. Dad lives in Salisbury but Salisbury in Rhodesia, not Wiltshire. Dad’s from there, from Rhodesia, and he works as a trainer for the Rhodesian Army. Lots of kids tell fibs about their dads, but I’m not. My dad’s an ace marksman. He can put a bullet between a man’s eyes at a hundred meters. He let me watch him once.”

“He let you watch him put a bullet between a man’s eyes?”

“It was a shop dummy at a rifle range near Aldershot. It had a rainbow wig and an Adolf Hitler mustache.”

Doves or pigeons coo in the damson trees. No one’s ever very sure if doves and pigeons are the same bird or not.

“Must be tough,” says Jonah, “your father being so far away.”

I shrug. Mum told me to keep shtum about the divorce.

“Have you ever visited Africa?” asks Jonah.

“No, but Dad promised I can visit next Christmas. I was meant to go last Christmas, but Dad suddenly had lots of soldiers to train. When it’s winter here, it’s summer there.” I’m about to tell Jonah about the safari Dad’s going to take me on, but Mrs. Marconi says talking’s like ping-pong: you take turns. “What job does your dad do?”

I’m expecting Jonah to tell me his father’s an admiral or a judge or something lordly, but no. “Father died. Shot. It was an accident on a pheasant shoot. It all happened a long, long time ago.”
Can’t be that *long ago*, I think, but I just say, “Right.”

The purple foxgloves sway like something’s there .?.?.

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