

SCAFFOLD Mark Hinckley



scaffold: 1. a temporary framework of platforms erected around a building, from which repairs, construction work, etc can be carried out

Each time I walked home from school, sometimes with my sister, other times with my friend Gavin (depending whether I had got detention after class), I would wander across a big cricket field to my back gate. From the field you could see the backs of peoples' houses and into some of the gardens. You could see particularly well into Mrs Brown's, which had no fence at all. Every day she would be on her hands and knees gardening. Once, she wasn't there so me and my sister thought she must have died, but the next day she was back again, slowly attending to her rhododendrons. The scenery never really changed much on that walk home. Sometimes there would be other boys playing in the field, or if we were lucky, a tractor left in the middle of the grass by the ground keeper.

One day I was walking home on my own and, as I entered the field, in the distance I saw two men in one of the gardens looking up at the back of a neighbours' house. I started to run to find out what was going on, but when I got up close to the garden I couldn't see what they were looking at. They were just standing there, staring up at the wall and one of them was writing things

down in a notebook. I couldn't see what they were so interested in, it looked like they were just staring up at the rotting brick.

The next day on the way home I was telling my sister what I had seen the day before. When we entered the field I expected the men to be there again, but there was nothing. My sister said I was a liar and mental for imagining things.

I was playing out the front of the house quite early on Saturday morning. I was ready to go inside when I heard the rumble of a big lorry or truck coming up the road. It was unusual for big vehicles to enter our street as it was a dead end. I stopped and watched a big lorry pass me. It had two men in the front and loads of big pipes and poles tied up in the open back. The lorry stopped six or seven houses down from mine. I ran inside my house and told my mum I was going to watch what was happening. She said I couldn't but I went anyway.

By the time I got down the road, the men had got out of the lorry and were pulling the big pipes out of the back which made a terrible noise from the metal surfaces scratching each other. One at a time, with a man at each end, they carried the pipes up the driveway and through the side gate of my neighbours' garden. I stood and watched for about ten minutes, and after a while the woman who lived there asked the men if they wanted a cup of tea and they went inside. My sister came down the road laughing at me because I was in trouble and had to go home.

For the rest of the weekend nothing much happened. My dad was angry about work and shouted at us before Sunday dinner. He made us eat in the kitchen because he said he didn't want to look at us. We never really minded when he did this because we could listen to the radio. On Sunday evenings there would be the chart countdown. We would put our thumbs up if we liked the song or down when we hated it. It was fun for us but my mum got upset and said my dad shouldn't say things like that to us because we were only children.

It rained at the beginning of the week and Gavin's mum came and picked us up from school in her car so we wouldn't get wet. Later in the week I had a football match for the school in which I scored four goals. My sister stayed behind to watch me, and on the way home we sang songs about the opposite

team living in dustbins and their parents not being able to afford good football boots, so that was why they lost. When we got to the field my sister started making a stupid screaming noise and ran off across the grass towards the houses, she was running towards the one where I had seen the men the week before. I chased after her and tripped her up so I could get to the house first. When I got there I was laughing with excitement at what had happened to the back of the neighbours house.

My sister caught me up and kicked me on the leg for decking her but I didn't hit her back because I was too amazed with what had happened to the house. It was covered in the big metal pipes that I saw the men unload from the lorry. You couldn't see most of the house because they had put a big green net over the front of the brick. My sister thought that aliens had taken over the house and covered the walls with a force shield, but I knew what had happened. I saw it from the start.

scaffold:

2.

**a raised platform, eg for performers, spectators, or executions;
a raised framework, eg for hunters, or among some primitive
peoples for disposal of the dead**

She told me on a Monday morning. I had taken the day off work to go to the clinic with her. To deaden the adult responsibility I had been drinking heavily the night before. I lay in the bath nursing my hangover, inhaling slowly and blowing imaginary cigarette smoke into the air, trying not to let my head explode. The lightbulb in the bathroom was treble its normal intensity. Sweat poured into my eyes from the heat of the bath water, making it only just possible for me to see her walk into the room, wipe her hand over the steamed up mirror and get her toothbrush out of the cabinet.

She turned around, looked me up and down then said, "You're not going to come with me are you?"

I just lay there staring at the Elvis mirror above the bath, watching pearls of water run down, cutting through the condensation on Elvis's white sequinned cape. I didn't know what to say, I didn't want to go with her. She knew that. I had told her early that morning. I stumbled home out of my face,

climbed into bed with her and told her I didn't love her any more and wanted life on my own.

I turned my head and tried to focus on her face. I could see tears building up, but I didn't know if they were mine or hers, or if it was just the sweat dripping off my forehead impairing my vision. Without thinking about her feelings I opened my mouth and asked, "What's the point in me going to the clinic! We're at the end of our relationship, we both agreed it was best for you to move out. What do you think I'm going to do?"

She just stood there looking at me. I remember the look as if she was in front of me now. I had never been looked at like that before, I had never seen so much hate in her big brown eyes. I felt scared and tried to focus back on the Elvis mirror to avoid how threatened her eyes made me feel, but I kept looking back to see if I had made a mistake and she was looking at me in some other way. The more I looked the more hate seemed to build up. Eyes as mad as Charles Manson's.

I quickly got out of the bath and reached for a towel to try and change the situation. It worked because she moved out of the bathroom, into the hallway.

Suddenly the heat in the room intensified and my head began to spin. I thought I was going to be sick. It was a bit like being in the headmaster's room as a child. Like I was watching myself on a surveillance video: I couldn't hear the water gurgling down the plug hole but I could see it happen, everything moving in a strange staggered slow motion. I couldn't judge distance properly and my heart was racing. I had to wrap the towel around my waist and move out into the hall to escape certain death.

Once out of the bathroom, I had to take a few deep breaths. I leant against the wall which left a wet butterfly print. When things returned to real-time I heard a voice. She was on the phone. My immediate thought was she was cancelling her appointment at the clinic. Luckily she wasn't. I worked out from the way she was talking it was her mother. She soon put the phone down and came over to me, she stood the closest that she had been to me in weeks. At that moment it felt like I had just met her in an alleyway, wielding a knife. She spoke in a very strange voice and told me that her mother was going to go with her to the clinic, that I could stay at home wallowing in my hangover and self pity.

Everything flashed black and white. I must have fainted, because suddenly I was having an out of body experience. I could see my life like the pages in a book. Not a very thick book, a small pamphlet with more pictures than words. As I flicked through it I could see the past three years in illustration and photographic print, pictures of holidays and happy times with my girlfriend. Then as I got about three quarters of the way through, it started showing things that I never remember photographing. Arguments and fights started appearing on the pages and under the photographs, instead of dates and whereabouts, were monologues of things I had shouted at her. I saw all the cruelty I had put her through over the last few months. I wanted to shut the book but I couldn't. The pages started turning on their own. Images flashed by, faster and faster, then it suddenly stopped on a picture of me as a child. I was smiling so wide I could hardly recognise myself. I looked at the picture for a moment, trying to work out what I was thinking when the photograph was taken. I felt a terrible regret at what I had done to the boy that used to be me. I wished that I could say sorry for all the mistakes I had made.

All these thoughts must have happened in a second because when I came round she was standing in the same place, waiting for me to speak. I sobered up suddenly and decided I had to somehow make all the bad feelings and the Manson stares alright. If I didn't go with her to the clinic she might never forgive me and that was the last thing I wanted. I had got her pregnant and it was my responsibility as much as hers. My body wasn't the one with something growing inside it, I wasn't the one who was going to have an abortion.

"I want to come with you," I said.

Her face looked a little shocked but still held contempt. "No way," she said.

"Please, I'm going to come if you like it or not, I promise I'll behave. I'll listen to the counsellor. Please, I want to come."

To my surprise she looked furious, I thought what I said would make things a little better but she looked horrified.

"I want to go with my mother, I need support and that's not something you can give me. You would just sit there laughing at the advice the counsellor would offer. You think you know everything, but you know nothing about me."

"Please," I said again, "please, I really want to."

She still looked horrified. Then she said something that would begin the biggest change of my life. She looked at me and the hate had returned to her eyes but this time I could sense hysteria and fear as well. She looked at me and said: "Don't make me tell you."

"Tell me what?" I said after a few seconds.

She just stood there as if she'd said something she shouldn't have.

"Tell me what? What won't you tell me?"

Then she said it again. "Don't make me tell you."

"Tell me what?" I said a little more frantically. The mood in the hallway was intensifying, it was like the temperature had suddenly shot up from freezing cold to boiling point.

"Look, don't make me tell you."

She turned to go into the bedroom, but I tried to stop her. I was afraid of what she was talking about, like she had infinite knowledge that she wouldn't let me have. The game we were playing was changing, it seemed like neither of us was in control of what was going on.

"I'm definitely coming with you. You can't stop me," I said with one last-gasp effort.

But she could stop me and I was about to find out how.

"No, you're not coming. Don't make me tell you," she said.

"Tell me!" I grabbed her arm.

She looked at me frowning and I let go, she stepped away from me and said, "I've been having an affair."

It was like being shot. I didn't know how or who or why, but I didn't need to.

I lay on the carpet with the bath towel round me and sobbed like a hysterical child. She just stood there, looking at me. When I stopped I asked her all the questions you shouldn't ask, like 'Who was he?', 'Did she love him?', 'Is he better in bed than me?' and the question that really disturbed me, 'Was the child going to be his?' Then I did the, 'How could you?' and 'I would never have dreamt of hurting you like this', just to finish myself off.

She said she had to go to the clinic and her mother was waiting at the station. I heard the front door shut and I was alone for the first time in my life. I had nowhere to go, no one to phone, I just felt I didn't exist, like that book of

myself had been thrown on a fire. I tried to sit perfectly still and think about how I was going to sort this mess out, but I felt sick at the thought she might have had sex with him here in the flat. So I got dressed and left.

I didn't know where I was going, I didn't realise I was walking at all, it was just instinct, one foot after another. I eventually reached the busy main street and realised I was cold in the damp January air. I went into a cafe and bought a coffee to make sure that I still existed. I continued to walk, this time heading towards the park. It began to rain and I stamped through puddles in a kamikaze kind of way. Like the puddles were mines and I was stamping my feet onto them, wanting them to go off.

Soon the rain became heavy and I looked for shelter. There were a few doorways I could have stood in. One of the houses was being renovated. It had scaffolding erected at the front. I ran over and stood underneath it. For about ten minutes I just watched the rain fall down, just in front of my face. The strangest thing entered my head as I stood there hiding my tears in the raindrops. I thought about the photograph of me as a child that I saw in my blackout in the hallway. I suddenly remembered when it was taken and why I looked so happy in it. It was a photo of me in the field at the back of my old house. I had asked my Mum to take it especially, because in the background, just over my right shoulder, was the neighbour's house with the scaffolding on it.

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