

Baxter: 5.24 a.m.

*Baxter had stood there, angrily
swishing a favourite stick*

It was like a clock going slowly tick ... tick ... tick ... tick ... tick ... Baxter could hear it now and he could feel it ticking not just in his head but somehow too inside his stomach as he lay in the grey light of dawn, hot and sleepless in the narrow tousled bench bed at the back of the cramped caravan.

No, that wasn't it.

It was more like when you turned a key slowly in a clockwork toy and you could feel it getting tighter and tighter and you knew that if you kept turning it around it would break but you still did it anyway and it made you feel as if at any moment something really bad was going to happen. It was like that and the clock thing both together and it was a nervous sick thing in your stomach as if you were empty and sick both at the same time.

The ticking had started inside him and the empty sick feeling had begun as soon she said it.

‘It will be good, you’ll see, Baxter,’ she’d said, sitting in the sunshine on the low step of the caravan one afternoon.

She was peeling potatoes, sending them plopping one by one into a saucepan of water. From the caravan had come the muffled sound of the radio; Buddy Holly gave way to Ray Charles.

‘Oh, this is one of my favourites,’ she said with a small distant smile.

♪ *Take these chains from my heart and set me free . . .*

He had wanted her to look up at him, not think about music. But when finally she did look he had twisted away.

‘Just you and your dad together for the day,’ she said to reassure him. ‘You’ve never done that before, have you? It’ll be fun, you’ll see.’

And the ticking had started and the sickness and the clockwork key thing had turned tighter. Like that time, Baxter thought, that time with the stupid tin soldier with the stupid drum and the key turned so tight it wouldn’t work any more and *he*, he had yelled at him and Megan had cried even though she was nine and then he had gone slamming out through the door and it wasn’t Baxter’s fault. Not really.

He always yelled.

‘Just boys together, you and your dad,’ she said, gouging an ugly black bruise from a potato, sending it tumbling into the pan.

‘But, Mummy . . .’ Baxter started to say.

But it was no good; she wouldn’t listen.

‘It’ll be good,’ she said quickly. ‘Go down to Brighton for

the day, go to the house, pick up things we need. Clothes, more books, games. He'll buy you an ice cream, probably.'

Again she had smiled, but it was a funny smile as if she didn't believe it. Not really.

Baxter had stood there, angrily swishing a favourite stick backwards and forwards through the long grass. As he scythed at the grass, he could see their small white terrace house in Brighton on the road that ran so steeply, so narrowly, down to the sea and he was back in his room with his train set spread out on the floor and downstairs his mother was singing along to Helen Shapiro or Brenda Lee on the radio and Megan was laughing. But even though they seemed all happy and everything, he knew that really they were just waiting for the sound of the front gate. Waiting for that click of the gate.

It was always the same. Whatever else was happening in the house, whatever game they were playing or song they were singing, he knew that it was all just a kind of pretend. What was really happening was that they were waiting and listening.

And sometimes it was all right. Sometimes when his father came through the door he had presents for them and everything *was* happy. For a while.

But most times it wasn't like that. Most times.

Baxter stopped swishing, took the stick in both hands and bent it until it snapped.

It was days ago that she had said about boys together and the clock and the stomach-ache sick thing had been going ever since and the key had turned inside him almost until it was breaking. And it wasn't fair and now in only a few hours his father would be there.

Just him and his father.

As he lay listening to the faraway call of a wood pigeon, Baxter writhed with the injustice of it all. Irritably, hotly, he kicked the crumpled sheet from his legs. He didn't want to go, he wasn't going. His father could take Megan instead, she was nine, she was the oldest by a whole year. He should take her: she was the favourite anyway.

He wasn't going. They couldn't make him. And when his mother and Megan and the baby were up and dressed, he would tell her that he had been thinking about it for a long time and he had decided something.

'Mummy . . . ' he would say with a serious face, although he would be a bit happy and laughing inside. 'I've been thinking that I won't go to Brighton today after all.'

'Why's that, my best boy?' his mother would say softly, with her eyes big.

'I just don't think it's fair on Megan,' he would say, and he would probably say this bit really slowly to make it sound even more serious, as if he really had been thinking about it very hard for a very long time.

'She's the oldest,' he would say. 'It's only fair that she should go instead of me.'

'Why, Baxter,' his mother would say with a big smile. 'That's very thoughtful of you.'

'Dad could buy her an ice cream,' he would say. 'Probably.'

And if that didn't work he would say he was sick and couldn't go. And, if they still tried to make him, he would just run away into the woods and hide there all day with Soldier and they would build a camp together.

Christie: 5.37 a.m.

That was what she had wanted for Baxter

With a mother's unbreakable habit, Christie listened to the children's breathing: Megan in her deep untroubled sleep, the baby mercifully quiet in the carry-cot on the floor next to her, Baxter awake and sighing, restlessly kicking the sheets from his legs.

Baxter, poor Baxter.

Lying on her cramped makeshift bed, Christie propped herself up on her elbows and whispered to him.

'Is everything OK, Baxter?'

He sighed again; but said nothing.

Taking care not to knock the baby's cot, Christie swung her legs from her bed and negotiated on tiptoes the few feet of the confined space of the caravan. She bent over, put her head close to his. 'It's all right,' she said, straightening his blanket, smoothing his sheet.

'There's nothing to worry about . . . I've decided that you

don't have to go with your dad after all. Go back to sleep now ...'

She bent again and felt the warmth of his forehead on her lips as she kissed him.

Making her way back to her bed, she listened once more. The sighing had stopped. All the children were sleeping now.

It had been a stupid idea anyway; another fantasy.

Somehow Christie had managed to convince herself that what Baxter and his father needed was to spend time together, just the two of them; to really get to know each other.

For too long they had been locked in this unbearable cycle of anger and tears. Truman had no patience with the boy, he was a storm always waiting to erupt; and Baxter was so clumsy and tongue-tied whenever he was with him. The more anxious he became, the more that seemed to fuel Truman's rage. And that, of course, made Baxter more desperate still.

It had never been quite the same with Megan. With her, Truman's anger would soon subside and he would scoop her into his arms and make her laugh even as she cried. Sometimes Christie could see in Baxter's eyes that all he wanted was for his father to pick him up and hold *him* close. What *he* wanted to hear was his father's voice making *him* laugh. What he needed to feel was his father's arms about *him*. Instead what he so often heard were more harsh words and what he felt was the weight of his father's hand: a bruising wallop across the legs or the backside or a stinging cuff around the ear.

Christie drew some small comfort that at least it had never been more than that. She was certain that Truman would never, *could* never really hurt his own son. He wasn't

capable of it. And she, more than anyone, should know just what he was and wasn't capable of. But it was too much to bear to see Baxter so unhappy.

Since they had been at the caravan, Baxter had taken to disappearing into the woods or hiding in the long grass as soon as he heard his father's car approaching. It couldn't go on like this and the more Christie had thought about it, the more she had convinced herself that all they needed, father and son, was some time together. She was sure they would then grow close.

She had this picture in her mind of herself as a child of about Baxter's age, standing next to her own father. She was looking on as he worked in the musty warmth of the potting shed, with the rich honeyed smell of his pipe tobacco wrapping itself around them. There was not a word spoken between them, it was enough just to be there.

That was what she had wanted for Baxter. A child needed a father, she had told herself, a son especially so. But it had all been another of her fantasies, another fairy story where everything would somehow come right in the end. Instead of a happy ending, all she had succeeded in doing was to give Baxter days of torment. She had seen it in his face, in the anger and the hurt in his eyes.