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**Opening Extract from...**

# Alice and the Fly

Written by James Rice

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# ALICE and the FLY

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For my parents, who are not the parents in this book – you are amazing and you raised me well.

Also for Nat, who is my favourite human being.

# I

**13/11**

The bus was late tonight. It was raining, that icy winter rain, the kind that stings. Even under the shelter on Green Avenue I got soaked because the wind kept lifting the rain onto me. By the time the bus arrived I was dripping, so numb I couldn't feel myself climbing on board.

It was the older driver again, the one with the moustache. He gave me that smile of his. A hint of a frown. An I-know-all-about-you nod. I dropped the fare into the bowl and he told me I'd be better off buying a weekly pass, cheaper that way. I just tore off my ticket, kept my head down.

The bus was full of the usual uniforms. Yellow visibility jackets, Waitrose name badges. A cleaner slept with her Marigolds on. No one who works in Skipdale actually lives here, they all get the bus back to the Pitt. I hurried up the aisle to my usual seat, a couple of rows from the back. For a few minutes we waited, listening to the click-clack of the indicator. I watched the wet blur of rain on the window – the reflection of the lights, flashing in the puddles on the

pavement. Then the engine trembled back to life and the bus pulled off through Skipdale.

I got a little shivery today, between those first couple of stops. Thinking now about all those passengers on the bus, it makes me wonder how I do it every night. It's not people so much that bother me. It's **Them**. I heard once that a person is never more than three metres away from one of **Them** at any time, and since then I can't help feeling that the more people there are around, the more there's a chance that one of **Them**'ll be around too. I know that's stupid.

We soon reached the Prancing Horse. Even through the rain I could make out the small crowd huddled under the shelter. The doors hissed open and Man With Ear Hair stumbled through, shaking his umbrella, handing over his change. He took the disabled seat at the front and made full use of its legroom. Woman Who Sneezes was next, squeezing beside a Waitrose employee, her bulk spilling over into the aisle. A couple of old ladies showed their passes, riding back from their day out in the crime-free capital of England. 'It's such a nice town,' they told the driver. 'It's such a nice pub, it was such nice fish.' Their sagging faces were so expressionless I could have reached out and given them a wobble.

And then there was you, all red curls and smiles, stepping up to buy your ticket, and the warmth rose through me like helium to my brain.

You were wet today. Shivering. You smelt of disinfectant, stronger than any other work-smell on the bus. Is it legal for you to work there? The landlord probably doesn't realise how young you are. You look older. You're not the prettiest girl in school, conventionally speaking. There's a gap in your teeth and your hair's kind of a mess with your roots coming through, and you always wear those thick black sunglasses, which is kind of weird. You have an amazing smile, though. Once I walked right past you and you smiled, right at me, as if we knew each other. It was only a slight smile, your cheeks bunching at the corners just the right amount, but it made me want to reach out and stroke them, brush them with the backs of my knuckles, like Nan used to with mine. I know that's sad but it's true.

You took your seat, on the front row. Working after school must tire you out because you always drift off as soon as you sit, sunglasses clinking the window with each back-and-forth roll of your head. We pulled off through the square, past Hampton's Butcher's. I couldn't help thinking of your dad and the others, shivering with all that slippery meat while I was on the bus with you.

Then we turned onto the dual carriageway and sped out to the Pitt.

I wonder what it's like, living in the Pitt. Do you tell anyone? I can't think of a single kid who'd admit to living in the Pitt.

It's odd you have Skipdale friends, very few Pitt kids get into Skipdale High and even then they tend to stick to their own. Their families are always trying to set up in Skipdale but it does its best to keep them out. We have a Pitt neighbour: Artie Sampson. I've lost count of the number of times Mum's peered out of the dining-room window and complained about him. She tells Sarah and me to keep away. 'He's trying to climb too high in the property market. He'll fall and he'll break his neck.'

There's a physical descent into the Pitt, ear-popping and stomach-churning at the speeds the bus reaches, which might be why you choose to sleep through it. My father calls it the 'Social De-cline'. I remember when I was little I'd play a game along the Social De-cline where I'd try and count how many houses were boarded up, how many were burnt out. Sometimes I'd find a house that was boarded up and burnt out. It was hard because Mum always drove the Social De-cline so fast, even faster than the bus does. It was as if the very air could rust the BMW.

Of course, you slept right through. Every pothole, every bend, every sudden break at traffic lights that threw us from our seats. The bus jerked and rattled so much it felt as if it might come apart, but you just slumped there, face pressed to the window. We stopped by the retail park and Old Man BO got on and sat right beside you but even then you didn't

wake up, didn't even squirm from the stink of him. You stayed slumped, lolling like a rag doll, completely at the mercy of the rhythm of the bus. I watched you in the mirror for as long as I could, only looking away when the driver caught my eye.

We turned at the lights, past Ahmed's Boutique. As always you woke the moment we passed the church, Nan's church, just in time to miss the large black letters spanned over its sign:

LIFE: THE TIME GOD GIVES YOU
TO DECIDE HOW TO SPEND ETERNITY

You rang the bell. The bus pulled up at the council houses behind the Rat and Dog. You stood and thanked the driver, hurried down the steps with your coat over your head. I wiped the mist from the window and watched you blur into the rain. I felt that pull in my stomach, like someone clutching my guts. I wished you had an umbrella.

The trip back was even harder. I got shivery again, goose-pimpled. There were a lot of gangs out tonight, mounting bikes on street corners, cigarettes curling smoke from under their hoods. I nearly fell out of my seat when one of them threw a bottle up at the window. I wasn't too bothered about people any more, though – all I could think about was **Them**. I lifted my feet up onto the seat. I knew they were everywhere I wasn't

looking. I had to keep turning my head, brushing any tickles of web on my neck, checking the ceiling and floor. They're sneaky.

We ascended the Social In-cline. The houses grew and separated. Potted plants congregated in front gardens. The rain eased. Eventually we came back through the square and the bus hissed to a stop at Green Avenue. As I stepped down the driver gave me that smile again. The smile he always gives me when I get off at Green Avenue. The smile that knows it's the same stop I got on at just half an hour ago.

**17/11**

Miss Hayes has a new theory. She thinks my condition's caused by some traumatic incident from my past I keep deep-rooted in my mind. As soon as I come clean I'll flood out all these tears and it'll all be OK and I won't be scared of **Them** any more. I'll be able to do P.E. and won't have any more episodes. Maybe I'll even talk – and talk properly, with proper 'S's. The truth is I can't think of any single traumatic childhood incident to tell her about. I mean, there are plenty of bad memories – Herb's death, or the time I bit the hole in my tongue, or Finners Island, out on the boat with Sarah – but none of these caused the phobia. I've always had it. It's **Them**. I'm just scared of **Them**. It's that simple.

I thought I was in trouble the first time Miss Hayes told me to stay after class. She'd asked a question about *An Inspector Calls* and the representation of the lower classes and nobody had answered and so she'd asked me because she'd known I knew the answer because I'd just written an essay all about *An Inspector Calls* and the representation of the lower classes

and I'd wanted to tell her the answer but the rest of the class had hung their heads over their shoulders and set their frowning eyes upon me so I'd had to just sit there with my head down, not saying anything.

Some of them started to giggle, which is a thing they like to do when I'm expected to speak and don't. Some of them whispered. Carly Meadows said the word 'psycho', which is a word they like to use. Then the bell rang and everyone grabbed their things and ran for the door and Miss Hayes asked me to stay behind and I just sat there, waiting for a telling-off.

Miss Hayes perched on the edge of my desk (which worried me at the time, it still being wobbly after Ian and Goose's wrestling). She crossed one leg over the other and then crossed one arm over the other and said she'd given me an A- for that *An Inspector Calls* essay. She said I was a natural at English. I wish I'd said something clever like, 'Well, I've lived in England all my life,' but I can never think of these things at the time so I just nodded. She said she'd spoken to the school nurse about me and about **Them** and about my condition and she wanted to know if I'd come with her to her office for a little chat. I didn't know what to say to that either. I just nodded again.

Since then I've been waiting behind every Tuesday for a little chat in Miss Hayes' office. We never chat, though. We tend to just sit in silence. I pick the dry skin from my hands

while she twists that ring on her finger, like I'm an old-fashioned TV set and she's trying to turn up the volume knob. It doesn't bother me, silence. People talk too much. They make awkward talk every five minutes about school or my parents or how my sister's dancing's going. It's nice to sit in silence for an hour in the same room as Miss Hayes, just knowing we're both there experiencing that silence together. It gives me a bit of a warmth.

Miss Hayes doesn't think silence is very progressive. A couple of weeks ago she gave me this little leather book and said writing stuff down might help me express myself. I asked her what I should write. She said, 'This isn't an assignment, just write down your thoughts. Your feelings.'

Tonight she asked if I'd written down any of my thoughts or feelings and I said I'd written one thing, last week, but it wasn't much, only a few pages. I didn't know what to write so I ended up writing about a bus ride I took.

'It's OK to write about a bus ride,' she said. 'You can write about anything.'

I told her it's hard writing to myself because I already know everything I have to say. I said that last time I pretended to be writing to someone else and that helped. She said that's OK too. I don't have to write to myself. Her diary's called Deirdre and she finds Deirdre very easy to write to. I asked her who Deirdre was and she just swallowed and said, 'Nobody.'

Well, Miss Hayes may write to nobody, but I think writing to nobody's pretty stupid. That's why I've decided to keep writing to you. I hope you don't mind, you just seem like a good way of getting the words on the page. I know you don't know me, but nobody knows me, and by knowing that you now kind of know me better than anyone.

My name's Greg, by the way.

**20/11**

We live in one of the avenue's corner houses with a total of ten rooms and every couple of months my father gives Mum his credit card and she goes to work on one. New style, new theme, new colour scheme. Sometimes she gets walls knocked down or fireplaces installed. Last summer she had little lights set into the dining-room wall like stars, but they looked too tacky so she had them ripped out and the foundations gave and I spent weeks with my head under my pillow while hairy Pitt people hammered and plastered and swore in loud voices.

At the minute Mum's re-envisioning the lounge. Everything's hospital-white, from the carpet to the curtains to the candlesticks. There are piles of catalogues under the coffee table and Mum spends most of the day flipping through them, making phone calls. She's still waiting for the Italian leather couch. She's designed the room around it. It's the most expensive item of furniture she's ever encountered. My father said it costs more than the rest of the room combined, including the decorators' wages. He's had to take on three new clients to

afford the initial deposit. The last time we saw my father was Sunday. Mum told me not to tell anyone this. I don't know who she thinks I'm going to tell.

Today's decorators were a father-and-son plastering firm, smoothing over the cracks in the lounge ceiling. (My sister's room is above the lounge. My sister dances.) By the time I was dressed and packed up for school they'd stopped for a coffee break. They were sitting on the dining-room window seat, the cafetière steaming between them. Both plasterers wore grey vests and khaki camouflage trousers. The father's belly was slipping out of the bottom of his vest. He had a lot of moles.

I sat at the top of the stairs and waited for them to get back to work. I wanted to slip down for breakfast unnoticed. Decorators make me nervous. They scratch their armpits and sniff their fingers. They speak loudly as if they don't care who hears them. Sometimes they say stuff to me or try and joke with me and I don't know how to reply. I always feel bad for not giving them a hand.

They make Mum nervous too. If she saw one shopping in Waitrose she'd tut and give them her sour-face but when they're in her home she's all smiles and 'Can I get you some more coffee?' This morning she came to collect their empty coffee mugs and noticed the dustsheets they'd laid down were old bed sheets and joked, 'Are you going to have to wash these

before bedtime tonight?' grinning like she was advertising toothpaste. They were pretty good-natured about it. They laughed along. Then they watched Mum's legs as she stepped back out into the hall. The son spotted me at the top of the stairs and winked. I left without eating breakfast.

The rest of the morning was pretty normal. I guess I don't lead a very crazy life. If Ian Connor was writing this then he'd have all kinds of stories to tell you but all I did this morning was go to my lessons. First lesson was P.E. This month they're doing football. I sat in the sports hall and watched them out on the field, breathing white and shivering. They still laughed, though. To be honest I'd be fine out on the field, but I don't think Mr McKenzie wants me to join in with P.E. any more. Not after last time. He doesn't even ask me for a note now, he just says, 'You sitting out again, Greg, yeah?' at the start of each class and I just nod and head for the sports hall.

Second lesson was Chemistry. We sterilised the desks. We covered them in alcohol and set them alight, watched a blue tide of flames spread over the wood. I guess that's exciting enough to write down.

Third lesson was History with Mr Finch. We did nothing in History exciting enough to write down.

Right now I'm sitting in the library. I come here every lunchtime. It's quiet. I can hear my pen scratching the paper. There's just the murmur of the crowds out on the playground, the tick

of the clock, the steady waves of Miss Eleanor's ultra-loud breathing: in and out, in and out. Sometimes she stops on an in and I hold my own breath waiting for the out. It always comes, eventually.

I saw you a few minutes ago. You were sneaking across the field with Angela Hargrove. I stepped over to the window, as quietly as possible to avoid waking Miss Eleanor. You were wearing that coat again, the one with the red fur trim. You were wearing your sunglasses. You were laughing at some sort of impression Angela was doing, waving her hands about her head. When you laugh you always cover your teeth, try and hide the gap, which is stupid because the gap is the most unique and amazing part of your smile. That's the third day in a row you two have snuck out through the gap in the hedge. Only sixth-formers are allowed to leave the grounds during school-time. I guess you know that.

I haven't always hidden away in the library. I used to sit out at lunch, on the wall over by the Lipton Building. I didn't care that I was on my own because there was this family of magpies that nested just the other side of the fence and I liked to watch them, leaping out over the crowds, snatching things for their nest in the trees. Then one day a gang of Pitt kids noticed me there. One of them was your brother. (This was a couple of years back, when he was still in school.) They crowded round me and began to say things, the usual things, about my

condition and my lisp and how weird I was and how pathetic it was that I was sitting out there on my own, etc. etc., but the magpies were out that day so I wasn't really paying attention, I was too busy watching them, too busy listening to that little cackle they have, that miniature machine-gun squawk. Then your brother hunched down to eye level and demanded I 'say something'. I didn't know what to say. I was straining over his shoulder to see the magpies, picking through the bin. It made me smile because it was as if they knew exactly what they were looking for. Then one of the other Pitt kids bent down alongside your brother and reminded me that your brother had asked me to say something and told me I'd better 'say something quick, or else', only one of the magpies had caught something small and wriggling in its beak and I was too busy trying to make out what it was. Next thing I knew the whole gang was screaming 'Say something!' right in my face and they were over-pronouncing their 'S's and a crowd had gathered including Carly Meadows and a couple of other Vultures from my year and some people in the crowd were calling me a psycho and chanting, 'Say "psycho", say "psycho",' because they knew 'psycho' was a word I couldn't say properly. It was at this point I realised I was scratching at my arm, which is something I do when I'm nervous. I lost sight of the magpies when one of the Pitt kids reached forward and poured a can of Tango over my head. Everyone stopped shouting then, started

laughing instead, staring at me and laughing as Tango trickled down my neck, soaking into my collar. A few of them pointed, which was kind of stupid because everyone knew what they were laughing at. I breathed as slowly as I could, counting each drip from my fringe as it hit the pavement. After a minute they stopped laughing and just stared. It was then that I realised there were other drips hitting the pavement, red droplets of something thicker, something that splattered as it landed. The arm of my shirt was spotted red. Some of the Vultures said I was disgusting and a few made that wrinkle-face but most just stared. Then they left. I think that was the only time I ever saw your brother in uniform.

That afternoon I kept my blazer on. I had Maths and my hair went all hard and sticky from the Tango but nobody noticed.

**TRANSCRIPT**

Extract of interview between Detective Sergeant Terrence Mansell (TM) and Gregory Hall's classmate, Ian Connor (IC).

TM: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me.
IC: S'all right.
TM: As you probably know, we're here to discuss Greg.
IC: Um . . . well, yeah.
TM: How well do you know Greg?
IC: Well, he's in my class.
TM: You sit next to him.
IC: In a few lessons, yeah. English. A few others.
TM: Would you consider him a friend?
[IC laughs.]
IC: God, no.
TM: So, what do you think of him?

IC: Same as everyone else.

TM: Which is?

IC: He's nuts.

TM: Can you elaborate?

IC: He's psycho nuts.

TM: What makes you say that?

[IC laughs nervously.]

IC: Erm . . . ?

TM: I mean aside from the events of the past few days. I mean, what gave Greg this reputation?

IC: It's just how he is.

TM: 'Is'?

IC: The way he walks. The way he . . . watches. And there's the scratching. The mumbling. He's on meds, too. Did you know that? We found them, me and Goose. 'Anti-psychotic'.

TM: Right.

IC: And then there's the way he is with girls. He's always, like, looking at the girls in class. You know? Like, staring at them.

TM: You never look at girls?

IC: Not in that way. Not, like, creepy, like he does.

TM: Are you aware you feature in his journal?

IC: Me?

TM: You.

IC: What's he say about me?

TM: He alludes to your . . . involvement . . . with certain girls from your year.

IC: Really?

TM: And girls from younger years.

IC: Younger?

TM: Angela Hargrove?

IC: I had nothing to do with that.

TM: With what?

IC: New Year's. I know she was saying stuff when the police showed up. Stuff about Goose and Darren. That had nothing to do with me. I was passed out.

TM: This is the party at Wallaby Drive? The Lamberts'?

IC: Goose's, yeah.

TM: Did you see Greg that night?

IC: Not that I remember.

TM: But he was at the party?

IC: He might have been. I didn't notice.

TM: You didn't notice?

IC: He's very unnoticeable. That's part of his

creepiness too. His psycho-nuttiness. And, as I said, I was out of it that night.

TM: We're getting off topic here. I'm just trying to get a feel for Greg. What he's like as a person. You've sat next to him for, what, three years? Isn't there anything you can tell me?

IC: Only what I've told you already. He's a creep.

TM: Nothing else?

IC: It's the way he looks at you. That's it, it's the eyes. It's all in the eyes.

TM: The eyes?

IC: Exactly. Just look into those eyes. Everything you need to know's right there. In the eyes.

TM: That's all you've got to say?

IC: Sorry. I'm not trying to waste your time or anything. It's just, I don't really know the guy. I don't remember ever even having a conversation with him.

TM: Well, who does know him?

[Pause.]

IC: I don't know. He didn't have any friends, as far as I know. I guess nobody knows him.

That's the thing. You could interview the whole class and you wouldn't find a single person that knows him. Not really. I guess that's what makes him creepy. I guess that's what makes him psycho, really. How alone he is.

TM: Right.

IC: That and the eyes.

TM: Thanks.