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# **Talk of the Town**

Written by Jacob Polley

Published by Picador

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**JACOB POLLEY**

**TALK OF THE TOWN**

**PICADOR**



First published in paperback 2009 by Picador

This edition published 2010 by Picador  
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, division of Macmillan Publishers Limited  
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR  
Basingstoke and Oxford  
Associated companies throughout the world  
[www.panmacmillan.com](http://www.panmacmillan.com)

ISBN 978-0-330-44545-0

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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Characters, events and place names  
are products of the author's imagination,  
or, if real, not portrayed with geographical  
and historical accuracy.

# ONE

Town stinks. If I woke up on a street in Carlisle and didn't know how I'd got there, what time it was or where, I'd tell yer by the smell what time it was at least. The afternoon if there was the smell of biscuits bakin, cus a shift comes on and the ovens fire up, two till six, at the bicky works. This mornin there's a sooty smell, I wouldn't know what from, but as if last night's dark had settled like smoke over town and I can still smell the last of it this mornin, before it's all blown away.

I never drink tea, but me mam doesn't like us ter have coffee. It meks yer twitchy, she says. I've med this one on the sly, with two spoons of coffee and three sugars, and smuggled it up from the kitchen, inter me bedroom. I've bin stirrin it madly, cus I didn't dare wait fer the kettle ter boil and just med it with hot watter outta the tap. But the watter wasn't hot enough ter melt the sugar, so now I'm scrapin the runny crystals up off the bottom of the mug with me spoon and then lettin em slip back off inter the black.

I've bin sippin me coffee but the smell of the smoke's got us thinkin about the nutters and where they might be. Yer see the nutters at the weekend in the city centre. One's a shouter and a swearer and can't stop himsel. Yer hear him comin down the street, fuckin and cuntin, and the people with their shoppin bags cross the road ter get outta his way, and he

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shouts directly at people standin at the bus stop, right inter their faces, and they just turn away, cus maybe they know he can't help it and there's nee arguin with someone who's got nee sense. Then there's the mutterin smiley man who walks with a dog on a string and a radio under his arm, always talkin ter himsel. Yer wouldn't know there was much wrong with him but fer his look if yer catch his eye.

I've bin wonderin what'd happen if they met up, the two of em. Would they both know they weren't right is what I wanna know, and if they didn't then how d'yer stop em, the one of em shoutin fuck this and fuck that, and the other on the turn, cus he'd be smilin but part of what meks him a nutter is that his smile wouldn't be fer owt and any minute it'd come off his face and summit worse'd tek its place. I wanna know whether if there was nee one there ter watch em they'd recognise the nutter in each other and pass on by. Cus if they didn't pass on by, the one liftin his manky old hat ter the other, then how would they get out from under each other, the one roarin *cunt cock twat*, and the other with his radio under his arm and his smile with its missin teeth? That'd seem dynamite ter me, trouble yer wouldn't wanna see, if they kem together, each with their own mad path through the world and neither able ter mek room in their mind fer the other.

Where I live, on Scalgate Road, they're buildin a new close over the way. From here at me bedroom winder I can see the slick of oil on the road outside where me dad parks his cab. At the road end there's a Spar where packs of lads hang about in the evenin with their furry hoods up and the

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blazin yellor winders mekkin em nowt but shadders – anyone. And anyone could be Carl ‘the Black’ Hole and his crew, so I never risk moochin ovver and gettin offered out and havin ter run. On the corner there’s a phonebox yer can bang till yer money comes out but yer credit stays in. The trick’s ter not dial up till yer’ve fed a fifty in and banged, fed then banged, fed then banged, so yer’ve got three or four pun credit in there and yer can ring who yer want. I ring me best mate Arthur or when Arthur was with us, before he ever got his name in the newspaper, we’d both ring America and speak ter anyone.

Two weeks ago there was a tramp set on fire in Bitts Park, squirted in lighter fluid and his big coat lit, so he went up like rubbish, like the swept-up leaves. The talk’s bin of nowt else, on the telly and pinned ter the boards outside the papershops, all the whys and what-fors and what-must-be-dones, and this last week, every time me dad’s driven off, the black slick under his car’s looked more and more like the outline of a body left scorched inter the road. I wouldn’t know where the nutters live, whether they live under the Eden Bridge, in the city, or in one of the parks affter the gates have bin locked and the parkies have thrown everyone else out, whether they hide in a bush with their carrier bags, then sleep in the parky’s shed. But I can’t stop thinkin about the man with the gappy smile, smilin at his radio in a shedful of rakes and signs. Cus ter burn someone where they lie in a heap isn’t a nutter’s work. It teks more than one ter gang up and decide what’s rubbish and deserves ter gan, and I’m thinkin of the lads like shadders outside Spar, all ganged up ter agree ter owt.

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I tek another slug of cold coffee. It tastes black and reminds us of everythin else black, like the plastic of the phone handle and the black soles of me new school shoes, stowed in their box. I grab the old stubby bullet off me windersill and hod it till it warms in me hand. I shudder, and then I have ter turn from me winder and start gan back and forth from me wardrobe ter me Lamborghini poster on the opposite wall. Five steps it is between the wardrobe door and the Lamborghini, four and a bit if I tek big steps.

Chris! What yer doin up there? me mam shouts.

Nothin! I shout down, though I stop stompin.

It doesn't sound like nothin!

What can yer say ter that? I spose that now she won't be able ter hear owt she'll think I *was* doin summit that I'm not now I've stopped. I'm stood totally still, the half-drunk coffee in me hand. I'm guessin that she won't come up ter check if she can just shout from the bottom of the stairs, but I'm totally still anyhow, and knowin exactly where I'll stash the mug if I hear her start up the first few steps.

Seconds gan by.

Mebbe if I'm too quiet she'll start up, cus if yer gan too quiet it's almost as bad as when yer were mekkin noise, as if yer hidin summit in yer quietness.

I tek a coupla strides.

I pull oppen me wardrobe door and rattle the hangers hangin there, ter mek it sound as if I'm on with summit useful, like tidyin up.

I stand and listen.

I reckon I'm probly listenin ter me mam standin and lis-



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tenin, but she could still come upstairs outta pure spite, just cus I was yawnin before when she was showin me and me sister our baby photos.

Yer can't be tired, she said, on the sofa. Why're yer so tired?

I'm not. I'm just yawnin.

Well stop it. Nobody wants ter see what yer had fer breakfast.

Me sister giggled. Me mam turned back ter the album on her knees.

Do we have ter do this?

Do what, Christopher? Keep yer mother happy? Yer don't have to, she said, and flopped over another big slippery page. If yer too tired ter do a little thing like this, I'm sure yer sister'll sit with her mother, won't yer, Fiona?

I'm not too tired, chirped me sister, and I just got up off the sofa without sayin owt and stomped up here ter me room, which is why me mam's probly stood at the bottom of the stairs now, gettin ready ter come up and catch us at summit.

But me mam's right. I'm knackered, knackered and twitchy, cus I'm thinkin about the city tomorrer, when I have ter gan back ter school, and how different it'll be ter the quiet Sunday city I've bin watchin outta me bedroom winder, though the streets'll be the same and the houses'll be in the same order. Tomorrer there'll be kids in their uniforms, and buses and cars on the move, and people all stridin along. And I'm thinkin about how it'll all gan on, like a pure silver wheel gettin spun, even if Arthur still hasn't turned up.

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I shut me wardrobe door loudly and shuffle round in a circle. Then I stop and listen.

Nowt.

I put the mug ter me lips and tip the last of the coffee inter me gob, keepin the mug tipped right up till the warm unmelted sugar's slid from the bottom and onter me tongue. I run me finger round the inside of the mug and suck the sweet grit off it, then I get down on me hands and knees and push the empty mug under me bed, behind the new shoebox. I look at the hand I'm leant on, at the skin ruckin over me knuckles and me fingernails pressed white. I tilt me head and listen, all the while thinkin of me other hand like a live thing, separate from us and cowerin on its own in the fluff under me bed. I'm whisperin ter mesel, Yer have ter look, yer have ter look. Me heart's pulled through itsel like a slipknot and before I know what I'm doin me blind hand's found the newspaper and I'm draggin it out inter the light, unfoldin it and smoothin it flat with me fist. I lift the first sheet oppen slowly, so it hardly crackles, and me eyes gan straightaway ter the black words.

Police are becoming increasingly concerned about the whereabouts of Arthur William Grieve of Edenton, near Carlisle. The 14-year-old has not been seen since Thursday

Me eyes slip down the page like spit down a winderpane.

William

I didn't even know till yesterday that Arthur had a middle name, and now I'm readin without readin, cus every word's

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the same as the words that were squirming through me skull  
as I lay on me bed in the dark last night, not sleepin.

brown hair brown eyes medium height black  
jacket quilted lining contact the city police on  
Carlisle two eight one nine one

There's nee mugshot, but I've got one already, me own movin  
clip of Arthur reachin down ter give us a hand up off the  
deck, the sun comin out from behind his head, dazzlin away  
his face. I whip the paper shut and shove it back under me  
bed, further back than the empty mug, behind the shoebox.  
I get ter me feet, wipin the sweat off me palms on me jeans.  
There's nowt else fer it. I reckon I have ter gan and see Gill  
Ross, cus it's her who might know where Arthur is, cus of  
what fat Booby said yesterday on the Arches.

I shut me bedroom door softly affter us. Before I gan  
downstairs I peep through the banisters. I can hear me mam  
sprayin her hair in the mirror on the mantle. She was probly  
never standin and listenin at the bottom of the stairs, and I  
was stood so still and listenin fer nowt. The hairspray gans  
*Shhhhh Shhhhh*, cus me mam gets her hair rock-hard in the  
mornin. I tread quietly. I can hear the radio burblin from  
the kitchen as I avoid the creaky stair. I cross the hall, grab-  
bin me jacket off its hook, and gan straight outta the front  
door inter the day.

## TWO

I knew Arthur'd be in the Saturday late edition, so yesterday I stood on the doormat and waited ter nick it. I was wound so tight I'd jumped when it kem pokin through the letterbox, but then I'd pulled it gently through.

Is that the paper? me dad had yelled from the livin room as I started up the stairs.

No, I shouted. Just me.

I heard his chair tek a breath as he stood up out of it. I climbed faster.

I've told yer, he was sayin, his voice gettin louder as he moved inter the hall. What've I told yer?

I was safely at the top though, lookin down ovver the banisters at his black hair, me eyebrows lifted and me face emptied out, the paper behind me back.

What? I said.

How many bloody times? Keep yer fingers outta that letterbox.

The blue shadder of me dad's beard was runnin from his upturned face down the front of his neck. He pushed his fingers through his hair. I looked down and he looked up.

Okay, I said, and he looked harder and then turned away. I watched his bright black hair as the top of his head disappeared under us.

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I knew he'd be in the afternoon paper cus I'd bin out on Saturday mornin, yer see, and rang Arthur's house.

His mam told us he hadn't bin home fer two days.

But he's got ter be back at school, I told Mrs Grieve from the phonebox.

There was a silence when I could just hear Mrs Grieve's ragged breathin.

I know, Christopher. I know he has to go to school, she said at last, her voice wobblin and risin higher, as if it was only just balanced on her lip and might fall and gan ter pieces any second.

Well, is he alright? I asked, cus I reckoned Mrs Grieve'd have ter know whether Arthur was alright or not.

There was a sound like a held-back sneeze.

In me mind I had a flash of Arthur, sniffin in the dark, and of the fields around the village where me and him had lost oursels that night he cut his hand.

He's fine, Christopher. We've reported it, but we're sure he's absolutely fine, she said. Okay?

Okay, I said as the phone went dead at me ear.

So I'd stood on the doormat yesterday and waited fer the paper, and as soon as I'd got it up ter me room, I'd oppened it and found Arthur's name.

Arthur William Grieve.

I couldn't breathe. Suddenly I wanted outta the house, away from me sister, and me dad as he killed time in his chair before startin out on his shift. I was wantin out under the

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open sky, well away from the neat black print that med Arthur's goin missin so true it choked us.

I rolled the paper up and shoved it under me bed. Then I snuck downstairs. I heard me dad clear his throat from the sittin room, but I was away through the door before he could yell. I pelted down our road and kept runnin, gan left under the narrer, riveted railway bridge and joggin down the potholed lane that leads over the wasteground. The high purple flowers left white fluff wisped onter me kegs. There were nee birds singin, not even seagulls meowin over the rooftops. The river was unravellin and brown. I slowed down ter foller it, then climbed the steps onter North Rise and crossed the roadbridge. I walked up past the pie factory, beside the main road, where the houses got further from the kerb and the streetlights stood taller and more lonely with the grass beginnin to stretch behind em on a summer's early evenin. There's usually someone on the scrub, either ridin on the dirt track so many bikes have worn outta the grass, or just havin a smoke where the trees stand, so I struck out across the green, twards the hill that climbs the Arches.

They haven't fallen down. It's more like the ground's risen ter cover em up. Yer can still see the red bricks and mek out the Arches themselves, but there're scrubby trees and bare earth grown over em. They and the ground, like a big park with nowt in it, separate our estate and the North Rise. I could have walked over the flat, but all the empty grass would've med us feel like I was bein watched from far away with a telescope or binoculars, caught out between either estate.

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There was the whine of a scooter from outta sight and I could see a man follerin a black dog across the park. Booby Grove was at the toppa the rise, an aerosol in his hand.

Alright, Chris.

Alright, Booby. What's doin?

Nowt's doin, man, apart from what's already fuckin done. His face folded up, silent-like and laffin, tears squeezin out of his creased-up eyes. The smell of petrol was hangin on him, and he had a glassy look ter him and a red mouth from sniffin. Yer can call it sniffin, but I reckon he'd had his mouth over the mouth of a petrol tank, givin it lungfuls of fumes.

Who's on the bop? I asked, cus I could see someone bouncin over the rough ground on a moped, then topplin over, as if they'd keeled off a chair, and the machine lyn screamin on its side, its throttle stuck wide oppen in the earth.

Oh fuck. He can't fuckin walk straight, said Booby. Tek out the key! he shouted down. Don't fuckin pick it up, yer dense twat!

But whoever it was was flappin about, and then lifted the screamin bop upright by the handlebars so it flew out from under him, jerkin him runnin along with it till he let go and flopped onto his face. The bop wobbled on a few feet then pitched over. Booby watched this and his big body shook. He'd got his meaty hand on me shoulder and he could hardly stand up fer laffin, though he med nee sound, as if all the laffter was muffled in his belly. Whoever was on his face in the grass was still on his face and I was beginnin ter feel the weight of Booby bearin down on me ankles.

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Some people can hod yer with what they say and others it's the pure size of em that keeps yer drawn up ter them. Booby's one of them. He swaggers with his weight and yer interested in him cus he does, cus his body's all his, like a king's, and there's nowt embarrassed about him and his size. He weighs more than most people, and knows it and uses it, lookin down at yer ovver his big tits and belly, weighin himsel against yer, and winnin. He was shoutin.

Cmon! Git the fuck up! Right, Chris lad, he said, looks like we're on a stroll down ter that sillyarse with his mouth fulla grass. And we started down the bank, me behind Booby as he took it slow down the steep side, firmin each foot on the slope before he'd put his full weight on it. Me, I dotted down, wonderin what it'd be like ter have Booby's body when I get ter his age, what it'd be like ter sleep with that weight on yer, or ter climb inter the bath and have the watter ride so far up the sides. But yer can never get inside anybody else. Yer yersel and all yer can do is change what yer've got, and yer can't even easily do that.

We'd lost the bop and the rider, outta sight now we were down off the toppa the Arches and were in the green dip.

Have a blast, lad, said Booby, hoddin the aerosol out ter us as we walked. Give it a squirt inter yer sleeve, then getta good deep breath off the spot. It'll be chilly, like.

I was imaginin Booby on the scooter, like a gorilla on a trike, not easily believin he'd ever get on it. I was thinkin he'd be more likely ter pick the whole machine up and drink the petrol tank dry.



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Nah. Yer alright, I said.

No?

Yer alright.

Booby shrugged. There was a khaki stillness as we walked, with the blue night stood just a little way off from the sky. Across the park the pink streetlights of North Rise were poppin on, one by one.

Talkin of chilly, Chris lad, what's this I hear about yer mate Arthur and Gillian Ross?

I could see Booby's face from the corner of me eye, his little eyes sizin us up.

Yer what? I said.

Aye man, Arthur and Gill in the cemetery, givin it a wee bit chilly on the stones.

Booby took a few big gulps of air. He face was bulgin, bloody-cheeked, like a slab of cling-filmed beef.

Not a place yer'd have thought popular with the ladies, but yer man Arthur's got ideas of his own, asn't he? And whatever cranks his handle. If he can shag Gill Ross on a gravestone, and it isn't me own Nana's fuckin stone, then good luck ter him. But if I've heard it then Carl's sure ter have wind of it.

Booby paused and looked across the grass.

I felt like I was fallin ten floors through meself, but I kept me face gormless-lookin.

What d'yer reckon, Chris? Never an easy rider at the best of times, our Carl, and there's bad enough blood between the pair of em. It's no wonder yer man's tekkan hisel off, said

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Booby, and silently creased up again, hoddin his sides just like yer read about people hoddin their sides in books, but never see it.

I swallered, me throat thick as an old sock. Who's on the bop, Booby?

Aw, cmon Chris, said Booby. Don't be a ballsack. And I knew then that it was Carl lyin on his face in the grass – Carl Hole, the Black Hole – who Arthur'd crossed already. And Booby had got us held in his huge gravity, so if I turned heel I'd be admittin summit, like I was scared or I knew about Arthur and Gill, and I didn't wanna know about Arthur and Gill and have the Black Hole look us in the eye and see Arthur, cus me and him knocked about so closely that we'd be nigh on the same person ter Carl. We walked on, Booby and me.

Yer a bit quiet, Chris lad, he said.

But we were climbin the next rise and Booby was too outta breath ter carry on raggin us, and I was racin through what might happen, how far I'd have ter run ter get safely away or how I could cover me face and head if the Black Hole caught up with us and I found mesel on the deck, on the end of his shoe. Booby had stopped on the rise and was starin across the grass. The Black Hole was crouched over the wee red scooter, a thread of smoke risin from his hands. It took us a minute ter work out what he was doin, I was so fulla runnin and the thought of Arthur in the graveyard and tryin not ter know it in me eyes when the Black Hole looked inter em. But then I realised Carl wasn't smokin a fag or just sittin firin dry grass. He had an almost invisible flame – just a patch

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of heat shiverin in the air – on the end of a rag. He'd got the seat of the bop lifted, where the petrol tank was, and he was feedin the rag inter the hole. Booby was swearin under his breath.

It's no easy thing ter get a petrol tank lit, but the Black Hole was intent on it, the bop layin on its side so some fuel must've spilled out, and him coaxin the flame ter scurry inter the tank. Then suddenly he sprang back on his haunches and the whole bike shivered with heat and he was laffin and stampin one smokin foot where a flame had caught.

Shite, said Booby, and I knew this wasn't part of Booby's grand plan, and I thanked fuck when he set off towards Carl across the grass, his big strollin body pushed out in front of him, leavin us free ter stand fer a second lookin affter him before I turned and walked quickly back through the green dip and overver the Arches, me back all the while feelin as wide and bare as the park itsel. And I was hatin Arthur fer not tellin us he'd done what he'd done, so that I was walkin the town, half-blind and stupid. But Booby had given us a clue ter Arthur's disappearance, a clue that hardly let us sleep a wink last night.