

Pearl

KAI CAME IN from college droning away to himself. From his earphones, Pearl could hear a dense battery of bass.

"You'll damage your hearing," she said loudly but Kai didn't hear.

He headed for the fridge and began to rummage around inside.

Pearl said louder, "You'll spoil your tea."

Obviously, Kai couldn't hear her.

She yelled, "KAI!" and he jumped, poor boy. He pulled out his earphones and asked, "What Nan?" As an afterthought, he flipped his hood off.

"I said you'll spoil your tea," Pearl said more quietly. "I'm making a nice casserole."

Kai said, "Sorry, I won't be here for tea, I'm going right out again."

He helped himself to the cheese and shut the fridge with theatrical care.

"You might have told me," Pearl said limply.

"Sorry," Kai said again. He set about making a baggy cheese and pickle sandwich directly on the kitchen table. Pearl considered saying, "Get a plate" but she couldn't be bothered.

Kai hadn't turned off his music which continued to thud

away from the earphones slung around his neck. To Pearl's ear, it barely sounded like music at all.

She gestured at the earphones. "What *is* that you're listening to?"

Kai suppressed a smile. "Nothing you'd have heard of."

"Yes but what *is* it?" Pearl persisted. "It sounds like someone digging up the road."

Kai grinned. "It's a weird American band. Death metal."

"Death metal?" Pearl repeated in horror. "What does that even mean?"

"It's kind of like heavy metal," Kai explained, "but more extreme."

Looking pleased with himself, he set about eating his enormous sandwich. The barrage of bass from the earphones still hanging round his neck suddenly stopped and gave way to a shrill squawking.

Pearl raised her eyebrows.

Kai laughed. Through a mouthful, he said, "It's a parrot."

"A *parrot*?"

"Yes, it's their thing. Their singer's a parrot. They're called Hatebeak."

Pearl felt the nasty knot of tension, which kept her shoulders permanently ratcheted up to the base of her neck, suddenly relax. The name of a band; why hadn't she thought of that? All those nights she had spent worrying what Kai was up to on the computer, what sort of trouble he might be getting himself into – it was all just *music*. Since the night, two or three months back, she had heard him ask somebody, "So d'you like Hatebeak then?" a range of nightmare possibilities had tormented her. Crime was the first thing you

thought of if you were bringing up a boy on the estates. But she had also imagined a cult, some sort of nasty underground group or other which, while not exactly criminal, was not anything you would want any boy of yours mixed up in. Of course, above all, she dreaded drugs, drugs which had destroyed Tracy and which had threatened to destroy Kai before he was even born. She was so glad that Hatebeak was just a daft band that she laughed out loud.

Kai grinned back. She could tell he was pleased he had made her laugh. He took advantage of her good mood to stand up and swig directly from the milk carton in the fridge instead of pouring himself a glass.

Pearl murmured, "Kai," but she let it go.

Since he had started at the college, Kai had been so much happier and easier to get along with, she tried to turn a blind eye to the small stuff. He was always in and out now, no more lying around in bed, he seemed to have made new friends there too, he was always texting someone or other. At night, he slept. Pearl supposed that her own loneliness was a small price to pay for Kai's future.

Still, she could not resist asking, "Will you be home one night this week, d'you suppose? I really ought to do another recording for the group."

"Should be," Kai said, swallowing the last of his sandwich and standing up. "What's it gonna be about this time?"

Pearl thought. "My first memories, I suppose, the end of the War, VE Day, what little I remember of it, then just London after the War, us kids playing on the bomb sites, rationing, the winter of '47, chilblains, junior school, whooping cough, family stuff."

Kai paused. "It's not fair," he said, to her astonishment. "People your age got all the best stories. People my age, our life stories will be just rubbish." Before Pearl could come up with a decent answer, tell him just how grim her early years had been, he had left.

Since Renée had stopped coming, Pearl wasn't much enjoying the life story class. Somehow or other, Renée had felt like a friend. Without her, the group was just a bunch of odds and sods where Pearl felt hopelessly out of place. But she had paid for all three terms in one go because it was cheaper that way – whatever had got into her? – and now she was stuck. She kept hoping that Renée might come back although privately she thought it unlikely. She was convinced it was something in her recording which had made poor Renée go as white as a sheet and then run away – although what it might have been she hadn't a clue.

No one else agreed with her when she suggested this to the group. Sabine still thought it was low blood pressure, Esther thought maybe it was something she had eaten. But then none of them seemed to care what had become of Renée the way Pearl did. Dorothy worried aloud about her numbers; with Renée's departure, the group was down to six and the rule at the Second Chance Centre was that a class with fewer than six members got closed. Dorothy kept reminding them of this as January wore on and Renée didn't come back. Pearl thought that was quite wrong; pressuring people to stay on for Dorothy's sake. She did think about jacking it in – in spite of the money which she knew she wouldn't get back – but she had always set store by doing the right thing and staying on was obviously the right thing.

Besides there was always the faint hope that Renée might come back.

A few weeks into the new term, she stopped at the reception desk on her way out after class and asked for Renée Thorpe's phone number.

The girl told her, "Can't give out contact details I'm afraid. Data protection."

Pearl felt stupid for not having swapped numbers with Renée when she had the chance. Most probably she would never find her now.

When she and Kai finished their second recording, he seemed all fired up and wanted to ask her loads more questions. Pearl had given him the money to buy a better recorder. His phone wasn't really up to the job and besides, now he was at college, he needed it every minute of the day. He couldn't lend it to Pearl for a Thursday afternoon. He made a great fuss of positioning both Pearl and the recorder in the best possible place. He started the session by switching on the device and loudly going, "Testing, testing, testing one, two, three." Before she began, he announced, "The life story of Pearl Barter, part two. Sound recordist, Kai Barter."

Pearl didn't think she had said anything out of the ordinary. What she had talked about were any London child's memories of the late Forties. She was too young to remember the actual war, she could just about recall the celebrations on VE day but, apart from that, what she mainly remembered was hardship but that hardship seemed, somehow or other, thrilling to Kai.

"You got all the best stories," he repeated rancorously. "You had a war and stuff. All we got is shit."

“But Kai,” Pearl protested, “you’ve got *opportunities*. We didn’t have any opportunities. We just left school at sixteen and we had to do whatever rubbish jobs we could find. People like us didn’t go to college back then. Things are *much* better for young people now. You just don’t realize.”

Kai frowned with the effort of formulating something extremely complex. “I’m not talking about food and stuff,” he said. “Like I know it’s better to have McDonald’s and pizza and everything than rationing. But nothing *means* anything anymore, like there’s no point? When you were my age, Nan, people didn’t know yet the world was fucked, did they?”

Pearl said, “Pardon?” Although she swore a fair bit herself, she didn’t like to hear Kai do it.

Kai said, “Like we’re all going to die?”

Pearl considered her grandson. For the life of her, she couldn’t see what he was on about. The idea that anyone should envy her childhood, let alone Kai, studying for his music practitioner diploma and saving for a holiday in Ibiza with his mates, made no sense at all to her. She shook her head. “I think you’ll find that people live much better lives now Kai.”

He said gloomily, “You don’t get it.”

“No,” Pearl said, “I don’t.”

They glowered at each other. Then Pearl said something she regretted right away. “Well, next time you’ll hear all about my stepdad,” she said bitterly. “Just be thankful you never had to live with anyone like that.”

It seemed they both winced. For neither one of them was allowed to mention Tracy but Pearl had just come perilously close.