

CROSSING THE LINE



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*To the real Erik – and all the others like him.
One day you will feel safe again.*

A question for you:

do you feel *safe*?

Safe.

Like opening your front door
& just walking out,
like not sniffing the air for danger,
checking
 left-right left-right
 left-right left-right,
cautious as a little kid
 crossing the road.

Safe.

Like the map of your city
 isn't riddled with holes
 of black scorched
 no-go postcodes
where your life's
 worth less than paper.

Safe.

Like waving Mum goodbye
 & not thinking
 the next time she sees you
you might be on a slab.

You know.
That kind of safe.

It's been so long

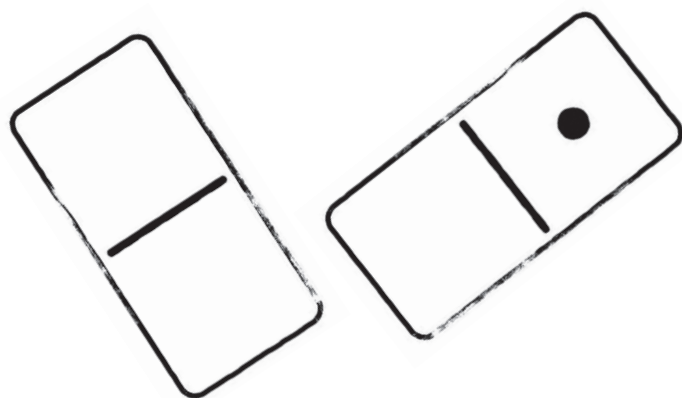
since I wasn't afraid;
it's been years
 since I wasn't always looking
 over my shoulder.

I'm so *tired*.

I reckon the last time I felt
 really
 really
 really
 safe

was the first day of . . .

HOLLAND ROAD SECONDARY



Click!

Picture this.

I'm standing on our doorstep
in a brand-new too-big blazer,
with a nervous too-wide smile.

I'm eleven.

Happy.

Got no idea of what's about to
hit me.

I'm squinting into the September sun,
at Dad's enormous
grin of pride.

Dad's face . . .

It rips my heart
when I think of it now.

I'm hopping from
foot to shiny new-shoed foot,
embarrassed & giggling
but still *gagging* to start at
Holland Road Secondary.

Honestly, I was *pathetic*.

Min kjekke viking,

Dad says, click-click-clicking away.

I was his *handsome Viking*.

Yuck.

Is that Swedish? Close. Norwegian.

I always thought it sounded
such a stupid language.

Still do.

Never learned,
 & it's too late now.

For goodness sake, Andreas!

That's Mum,
grabbing the camera
 from Dad's hands.

You'll make Erik late!

I hate the stupid way
 my parents spelled my name.

I hate a lot of things these days.

Why didn't anybody warn me?

I'll never understand.

No one said a word,
 right through primary,
No one even mentioned it.
It just wasn't a *thing*.

How could they have let me
 simply *stroll*
 into secondary school,
holding my head up
 like I had nothing to hide,
 nothing to be ashamed of?

That first morning,

Ravi & me
stream out of assembly
& slip into a torrent of children
tumbling past.

Ravi? He's my best mate from primary.
He's a bit different too –
but in a different way.

We hold on to each other
to keep afloat:
a couple of Year Seven
insignificant twiglets
swept into an adolescent flood.

Somehow, we make it.

Somehow, we beach ourselves
the right way up,
outside the right room,
at the right time,
& queue up
with the rest of 7M.

I don't know it yet, but
I'm about to get rinsed,
big time.

Oy!

Someone bumps me
deliberately hard & I cannon into Ravi.

Whoops!

the someone says,
laughing in my face.

He's maybe Year Nine?
Skinny, tall,
a flop of black hair,
a wispy moustache.

The boy beside him stops too.
He's shorter & square-shaped,
his pitted skin
rough as an avocado.

Avocado Face looks me
up & down
& I guess what he sees
amuses him.

Slap the ginger!

he shouts to his mate

& I don't even get time to
du—
before
I get a ringer
round my head.

OW!

What was that for?

My attackers swagger off, cracking up
like I'm the funniest thing
they've seen in years.

Wanker!

It's a mutter under my breath
but Avocado Face
 must have supersonic hearing.

His head whips round.
WHAT. DID. YOU. SAY?
A broken voice that rumbles
 with the menace
 of thunder.

The chattering line hushes.
Ravi puts his hand on my arm.
Leave it! he whispers,
& I know I should,
 but I can't.

I'm just not made that way.

You heard me! I say
wishing *fear* wasn't
strangling my words
 to a squeak.

You heard me!
Tall boy bleats.

Don't we talk all nice?
Avocado Face moves
 back towards me.
You say that again, Ginger,
 & I'll bang your face!

Ravi steps away – fast.
Who can blame him?
I'm in for a beating.

Seems like bad decisions

stack like dominoes.

When one topples, they all go.

Clackety-

clackety-

clackety-

clackety-

clackety-

clackety-

clackety-

clackety-

CLACK,

all the way down.

Looking back,

maybe this was

the first domino to topple?

The misstep

that kicked off

the run.

I think this must be a record!

The head teacher's lips

crinkle tight

like the drawstring of a shoe bag.

He narrows his eyes.

Shouts drift up

from the field

& bounce off the window.

It's break time already.
I've spent the whole first period
sitting like an idiot
outside Mr Nelson's office.

*It's the first time
ANYONE has EVER
been sent to see me
for fighting
on their very first day!*
he says.

I bet it isn't.

Outside, a group of
boys weave a tight knot
in the far corner of the field.
Smoke curls a wispy signal.

*Actually –
the head teacher
checks his watch
for effect –
in their very first hour.*

I run my tongue around my
mashed-up mouth
but Mr Nelson doesn't invite me
to open it
in self-defence.

When the head teacher finally

lets me go,
I spend ages looking for
 the geography room
where I'm supposed to have
 period three.

All the corridors
 look the same,
ghost-town empty of
 their teenage traffic.

When I finally
 locate Room G3,
I tap on the door
 as quietly as I can.

A tall, bearded teacher
 is standing by the board.
He nods curtly at me
 to enter.

He makes me sit alone
 on a table at the front
while he talks about
 archipelagos.

I'm marooned
 on this island
in a sea full of stares.

I can feel my ears burning,
 red as my hair.

Having red hair is *not* OK!

We should've
died it,
shaved it,
waxed or wigged it –
made up some excuse,
said I was having chemo or something.

No one should've
allowed me to believe
there was nothing
wrong with me.

Why didn't someone tell me
having red hair is not okay?

My best friend looks

embarrassed
as we file into lunch.

Sorry, he says,
picking up a small plastic tray
spattered with
someone else's gravy.
Sorry I didn't help back there.

S'okay, I say, fishing out my fob
& wondering what I'm supposed
to do with it.
*You're not exactly
a fighter . . .*

*How about, says Ravi,
pointing to the veggie option
& smiling at the dinner lady,
next time
you keep your big gob shut
instead?*

Erik, there was actual blood!

I should have known
Mum'd get a call:
as soon as I walk in
she's on at me –

She's so shocked
she doesn't even ask
about my day.

But, Mum . . .
I start –
but she won't let me finish.

I want to say
I can still taste my fear,
the push of his arm pressed
across my neck,
my heartbeat thud-thudding in my ears.

Pinned to the wall
by painful rabbit punches,
I couldn't breathe,
I couldn't *breathe* –

Of course I bit him.
It was self-defence.

I'm called

Erik the Viking, of course,
but mostly it's

Oy! Gingernut!
Copper-knob!
Hey, ging-ga!

Yeah, you! *Fanta-pants* *Posh Boy*.

Shut up, copper-bollox!

Carrot-top! *It's GINGER NINJA!*

Such a beautiful shade of auburn:
like a maple leaf in autumn,
Mum says.

She has absolutely
no idea.

At the back

of every
form room, the
lockers are like a wall
of upright coffins: such a
dumb idea because they're
just tall enough for
a Year Seven boy to
be squashed into, but
only if he bends both
his knees a bit, just a tiny
(agonising) five degrees
or so. They are in fact
so thin that a boy my
size can only just
expand his ribs
enough to suck
thin sips of air
& maybe it's
a design fault
they should
really have
considered:
that lockers
are only *un*
locked from
the outside:
& then only
if somebody cares
you're still there.

I'm a target.

At school I can't hide:
I stand out
like a **bullseye**.

At least
in lockdown
I can make myself
invisible.

It's okay, really –

you don't have to
feel sorry for me
about this.

It's all such a
long time ago

& there's so much else
to be sorry for
now.