

ROSS BLANE AND THE SONS OF HORUS

BY

ERIC HARTLEY

TOTAL WORD COUNT: 67,000

**ERIC HARTLEY
2, NORWOOD GROVE
BEVERLEY
EAST YORKSHIRE
HU17 9HS**

TEL: 07971 662 336

eric@erichartley.com

CHAPTER 1

Everybody knows that you can't have a conversation with a potted plant.

People talk, dogs bark and cows moo. But plants remain silent. Mr Sanderson hadn't actually said that in biology, but he didn't have to, did he? Everyone in the class understood that it definitely wasn't normal for plants to talk.

But this wasn't a normal day.

Of course to everybody else it was just another Friday evening. The main road heading west out of Kingsport was clogged with rush hour traffic trying to get out of the city. It was worse than usual because of a broken down lorry in the middle lane just before the exit to Kingsport General Hospital. At the entrance to the hospital you could hear the angry car horns from the queue of frustrated motorists.

It was visiting time at the hospital and the lobby was busy with people staring at the wall of green and white signs, decorated with arrows indicating which way they should go to get to Radiology or Pathology or any other of the departments housed in the main building. It started to spit with rain, and a Jack Russell, tied to a post outside the main entrance, howled pitifully for its owner.

On Ward Fourteen, several of the patients had visitors standing or sitting next to their beds. In a bed at the corner of the ward, looking out over the motorway, Ross Blane sat on his own. Thirteen years old, he had mousy brown hair and his ears stuck out slightly, but other than that he wasn't bad looking. He did, however, have a tremendous scowl on his face. This wasn't because he was in pain (although he did have a dressing fastened with surgical tape to his left hand, and a bandage wound around the top of his head). It wasn't even because he didn't have any visitors. He could see the traffic outside and had guessed that his father would

be delayed getting there from the university (and knew better than to think that Cynthia, his stepmother, would be able to spare the time to come and visit him).

He was annoyed because the potted plant next to his bed was singing 'The sun has got his hat on'. Jauntily, and slightly out of tune.

Was he going mad?

It was a small plant in a perfectly normal looking brown plastic pot. It had a mass of jagged, dark green leaves surrounding bright red flowers the colour of a post box. Ordinary in every way, except for the fact that it was singing loudly, more and more enthusiastically as it went on.

'The sun has got its hat on and it's coming out today. Hey!' The plant began whistling the next verse.

Ross began to wonder if he was in a mental hospital.

'Where am I?' he muttered, to nobody in particular.

'Kingsport General Hospital, eleventh floor, Ward Fourteen. Happy to be of service,' said the plant, breaking off from his whistling. 'How are you feeling? I hear that was quite a knock you had.'

'What's happening? Where am I?' said Ross, this time a little more loudly, in the hope that a nurse would appear and drown out the voice in his head. He was going mad. This must be a mental hospital.

'Ward Fourteen, as I said,' continued the plant. 'Don't worry, you're just here for observation. Bit of a nasty accident on your bike they said, but they're confident everything's going to be fine. Nothing to be worried about.'

The plant had a cheery, almost bouncy way of talking which Ross would have found irritating if it had been a human speaking. In a plant, it was just frightening.

Plants do not talk, Ross repeated to himself in his head. PLANTS DO NOT TALK. So he must be going mad, surely?

Ross closed his eyes again and tried to ignore the plant, which had now moved on to whistling 'Put on a Happy Face'. His body felt heavy, and there was a dull ache on the left side of his head. For a moment he panicked that he was paralysed, but he wiggled his fingers and his toes and everything seemed to be moving as it should. He began to recall the events of earlier that day.

He had finished school and hung about outside the gates talking to some of his friends. Ross was in Year Eight at Flintonbridge High School and, like a lot of his friends, cycled to school on the days that it wasn't raining. Tim had suggested that they go back to his house and play table tennis, so the two of them had jumped on their bikes and started cycling up Garfield Road. The traffic was moving slowly, so Tim had weaved between two cars, and raced through a gap in the oncoming traffic, narrowly missing a lorry as he mounted the pavement on the other side of the road. Ross could see the red face of the lorry driver, who waved an arm in frustration as he was forced to brake in order to avoid hitting Tim. Ross could see the lorry driver's tattoos on his forearms. His mouth was wide open as if he were yelling something rude at them, which in the circumstances he probably was.

Ross mouthed 'sorry' as the lorry driver's eyes met his, and then slowly followed Tim's route in front of the now stationary lorry.

Ross noticed the motor bike approaching him in the corner of his eye as he began to pedal, but by then it was too late to stop. Coming down the middle of the road between the cars and lorries, the motor bike wasn't going that fast. But before Ross could do anything it had pushed him over onto the road. He couldn't remember anything else after that.

Lying in the hospital bed a few hours later, Ross decided that being knocked out by a motor bike was excitement enough for one day, and that he didn't really feel like striking up a conversation with a potted plant. And anyway, it wasn't the plant talking, because plants don't talk. Ever.

'Will somebody turn off that whistling sound?' Ross called. 'That tune is driving me crazy. Is this some kind of joke?'

A nurse approached his bed, picked up his notes and cast a worried glance at Ross. A few seconds later a doctor appeared by his side.

'He woke a few minutes ago, doctor,' said the nurse.

The nurse lowered his voice. 'I think he may be delirious. He was making a strange clicking sound just now.'

The doctor was carrying a large clipboard and began to write something down with an intent expression on her face.

'I wasn't making a clicking sound,' said Ross with an irritated tone. 'I was trying to rest, but that plant kept on whistling. Is it some kind of stupid joke?'

The doctor stopped writing and looked up. 'There are no jokes here, young man,' she said sternly. 'What did you say you heard? A whistling sound?'

'Yes, the plant,' said Ross. 'Didn't you hear it? Has it got some sort of hidden speaker in it? Whose idea is it?'

The doctor and the nurse glanced at each other. 'Another F9, I think, nurse,' said the doctor.

'I'll be back straight away,' said the nurse, drawing a curtain around Ross's bed before hurrying away.

'So, Mr...er...Blane, isn't it? Ross. Tell me about the plant.' The doctor had lowered her voice and she placed her hand on his arm which made Ross feel uncomfortable. The plant had stopped whistling.

'I wouldn't say anything, if I were you,' said the plant.

'What?' said Ross.

'What's wrong?' said the doctor.

'I said I wouldn't say anything,' the plant repeated. 'About our conversation, you know.'

'Is this a joke?' repeated Ross to the doctor. 'Because if it is, it isn't very funny. Where's my Dad? Is he coming to get me?'

'You needn't worry about that,' said the doctor. 'He'll be here soon. Somebody called him earlier and he's on his way. Perhaps we should be concerning ourselves more with whistling plants at the moment, don't you think?'

'I'd change the subject if I were you,' said the plant.

'Now then,' continued the doctor, 'what did the...er...plant say to you?'

'He, I mean it...' began Ross.

'I SAID DON'T TELL HER!' yelled the plant.

'Why not?' said Ross, turning to the plant.

'Well obviously because she'll think you're mad, stupid,' replied the plant. 'I mean duh. When did you last have a conversation with somebody you can't see? I'd keep my mouth shut if I were you.'

The nurse reappeared at the bedside, carrying a syringe and a small bottle. Ross started in fright.

'I think he's delirious,' said the doctor, taking Ross's arm as if she were going to check his pulse. 'He's making that clicking noise you told me about.'

'No, I'm not,' said Ross. 'I'm a bit tired and my head aches, but apart from that I feel fine. What's in that bottle?'

'Twenty milligrams, nurse,' said the doctor.

Ross tried to get up, but the nurse had already moved around to the other side of the bed, so that within seconds his arms were being held down by the doctor on one side and the nurse on the other.

'I did tell you not to say anything,' said the potted plant. 'I gave some good advice, for free, but oh no, you couldn't listen to me, could you?'

'Look,' said Ross, 'I...'

'We'll talk later,' interrupted the plant. 'Until then, I'd advise you to...'

The room started to move around. The doctor was floating in front of Ross's face, and it felt as if the bed were lowering itself down through the floor into the ward below. His hand started to go cold, then his arm and then he was unconscious. He never heard what the plant was going to tell him.

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It was dark when Ross awoke. There was low level lighting between the beds and a stronger light coming from the office at the end of the ward. Ross could hear a deep, man's voice muttering in his sleep, and further down the ward somebody was coughing: a rasping, rattling cough punctuated with short, high pitched wheezes.

'Are you awake?' a voice whispered to him.

Ross almost leapt out of the bed in surprise.

'I'll take that as a yes,' the voice continued.

'What?' said Ross in a louder voice.

'Sssh,' said the voice again. 'You've got to whisper or they'll hear us. Do you want them drugging you again?'

Ross heard footsteps approaching his end of the ward.

'Close your eyes,' the voice whispered. 'Close your eyes. Now!'

Ross heard the footsteps getting closer. Then they stopped. He closed his eyes tight shut. He tried to breathe in and out regularly in the hope that he seemed to be sleeping.

'Keep them closed,' said the voice. 'The nurse is still there. She's looking at your notes. Stay calm.'

Ross could feel his heart beating so quickly that he was sure anybody near the bed would be able to hear it. He tried to concentrate on breathing in. And out. In. And out. Then there was a squeak of the nurse's shoes as she turned on the polished floor, and the footsteps slowly faded into the distance.

'All clear,' said the voice. 'You can open your eyes now.'

Ross opened his eyes, but there was nobody near him.

'Who is it?' asked Ross.

'It's Bob,' said the voice. 'I'm in the plant on your bedside table.'

'Yeah, right,' said Ross, his voice getting louder.

'Sssh,' said Bob. 'Do you want her checking up on you again? Really, you've got to start listening to me.'

'Am I dreaming?' said Ross.

'No, you're not,' replied Bob. 'Just listen. You had an accident, yesterday, didn't you?'

'Err, yes,' Ross hesitated. 'I came off my bike. But I feel fine now.'

'Yes, sure you do,' said Bob in a reassuring tone. 'You'll be back to normal in a day or two. But there's something different, isn't there? You can hear me, can't you?'

'I don't know who you are but go away,' Ross hissed. 'I want my Dad.'

'He came earlier but they sent him away and told him to come back tomorrow. He sat here for a while but you were out cold. Held your hand and looked worried for a bit, then the nurse told him there was nothing he could do. If you ask me, I just think they wanted him out of the way.'

'I didn't ask you.'

Ross pulled himself up in bed and in the dim light carefully picked up the plant and put it in his lap. There didn't seem to be any wires connected to it. He moved the leaves around a bit to see if there was a speaker or microphone hidden in the soil.

A small black beetle crawled up to the top of one of the leaves.

'Hey, be gentle, will you,' said Bob, a little louder than earlier. 'This is my home, you know.'

The voice definitely seemed to be coming from within the plant itself. Surely that wasn't possible?

'Look, please just tell me – is this a joke, or what?' sighed Ross. 'I'm tired and I'd like to go back to sleep. Plants don't talk.'

'Of course plants don't talk,' said Bob. 'Are you stupid or something? It's me. The beetle.'

Ross examined the plant. The beetle waved one of its front legs in the air.

Bob tutted. 'I'll say this once more, and perhaps you can try to remember it this time. I'm Bob. Bob the Beetle. Your friendly hospital insect. Here to keep you amused, here to help you in a time of need. You knocked your head, remember. Feel that bump just above your left ear?'

Ross put his hand to his head. He winced as he touched the bandage above his ear.

'It's quite simple, see,' Bob continued. 'You knock your head, you can talk to me. I can't tell you why. I'm not a brain surgeon and I don't understand the actual mechanics of it. All I know is that, every now and again, either because of a bump on the head, or a bad case of the flu, or even something funny that you eat, you lot find that you can hear us.'

'What, beetles?'

'No,' said Bob, 'everything.'

'What do you mean 'everything'?'

'If it breathes you can talk to it. Birds, bees, beetles...'

'Does it have to begin with a letter 'B'?'

Bob sighed. 'Are you always this slow? I was just being poetic. If it's a member of the animal kingdom then you can talk to it. Whether or not it begins with B.'

'I'm thirteen years old and I'm going mad. What have I done to deserve this?'

'Don't worry, son,' said Bob, a little less irritably. 'You're not going mad. You've just got to see things slightly differently from now on.' He chuckled.

'Do you think this is funny?'

'Well you've got to admit it's a bit amusing,' said Bob. 'One minute you're worrying about your homework or whether girls fancy you; the next thing you know, you're talking to a beetle. You've got to see the funny side.'

'Hilarious. I'm in stitches,' said Ross. 'And can you talk to everything as well, then?'

'No,' said Bob. 'I can only talk to other beetles, which is a bit limiting round here, I grant you. I can hear the noises that other animals, insects and all the rest of them make, but it just doesn't make any sense to me. But I can talk to humans like you. Strange that. I've met a couple of you lot. Sounds like a lot of fun, don't you think?'

'Not exactly. So what do I do now?'

'I'm not sure you're supposed to 'do' anything. You just...enjoy it, I suppose. But you've got to remember one thing, above everything else.'

'What?'

'Well,' said Bob, 'it doesn't pay to go telling anybody else about this. You saw what happened with the doctor – they won't believe you, you know. They'll think you're mad. Of course, you may be. The thing is, don't say more than you have to say to anyone.'

'Is this permanent? Will I always talk to beetles?' asked Ross.

'Well, I suppose that depends on whether you get on with insects or not. As for how long, I can't say. You'll just have to wait and see. Some people stay in this ward longer than they'd want to. There's an old bloke who's been here for months. My suggestion to you is to get a good night's sleep, keep your mouth tight shut in the morning, and tomorrow evening you'll be back home with your parents. You do have parents, don't you?'

Ross smiled for the first time. 'Yes,' he said, 'Sort of. They're not always on the same planet as me, if you know what I mean. Sometimes I wonder if they even notice I'm there.'

'Well, I hope things turn out all right for you,' said Bob. 'You've taken it pretty well. I've heard of some going completely stark staring mad when they find out what's happened. Well done for being so calm about it.'

'I don't feel calm at all.'

'Well,' said Bob, 'that's as may be, but remember one thing before we go back to sleep: don't say a word. Not to anyone.'

CHAPTER 2

Ross lay awake for ages thinking about what Bob had said. Half of him wanted to get up and test to see if what the beetle had said was true. Perhaps there would be a fish tank somewhere in the hospital whose occupants would want to talk to him. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to hold his head under water for long enough to have much of a conversation, and the nurses would probably start asking him how he got his hair wet. But the other half of him wanted everything to go away, so that he could just go to sleep and wake up when everything was normal again. The two halves fought with each other in his head until he fell, mentally exhausted, into a troubled sleep.

He was woken by the clatter of plates as breakfast was served to the ward. There was a curtain around his bed so that he couldn't see what was going on around him. The ward had a nasty smell - a mixture of disinfectant and illness which made Ross want to open a window so that he could stick his head out and take a gasp of the fresh air outside. Ross could hear the clatter of crockery on trays and the chink of knives and forks getting closer to his bed.

He looked to his right, but the plant was no longer there on the bedside table. Had it ever been there? Had he imagined it? Had the accident made him hallucinate, or had it all just been a particularly strange dream? There were so many questions to which he didn't have the answers. There was an unpleasant taste in his mouth, and he reached out to take a drink from the plastic beaker on the table.

He remembered the beetle telling him that he shouldn't mention their conversation to anyone, and now, in the cold light of day, even if it had been a dream, that seemed like a sensible course of action. What would he have thought if one of his friends had told him that he had had a conversation with a beetle living in a potted plant? He must have imagined it.

Ross touched his head where the bump was. It was still there, but it didn't really hurt very much, and for the first time since the accident he began to feel hungry.

As if on cue, a head poked around the curtains.

'Do you want some breakfast, dearie?' said a woman with a large, red face and a large bun of hair piled so high on her head that it looked like a dog turd. 'Scrambled egg and bacon today.'

Ross sat up in bed immediately. The sudden movement made his head ache slightly.

'Oh, yes please,' he said eagerly.

'Shall we pull this curtain back?' said the woman, giving it a yank without asking for a reply.

Ross was keen to see who else was in the ward, so he didn't object. Although he was only thirteen, this was the first time he realised that it wasn't a children's ward he was in at all. Probably the result of a shortage of beds or something. Ross could see another boy who looked a bit older than him in the bed opposite, but all the other beds were occupied by men old enough to be his father or, in some cases, his grandfather. In the bed next to the boy opposite there was an old man in blue and white striped pyjamas, already sitting up and eating his breakfast. His silvery hair was sticking out in all directions and he had a sheen of grey stubble over his face. He picked up a mug and slurped noisily from it at the same time as chewing on a piece of toast. He was muttering to himself, but Ross couldn't make out what he was saying.

The old man noticed Ross looking at him, and raised his voice a little. 'Why do I want to know?' he said to nobody in particular.

Ross exchanged looks with the boy opposite, who smiled, rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and tapped the side of his head with his index finger.

The scrambled egg wasn't the nicest Ross had ever eaten – it was lukewarm, sitting in a small pool of liquid, and the bacon required a lot more chewing than the bacon his father made. The toast looked and tasted like it had been made the night before and been kept warm until the morning. But with the return of his appetite Ross didn't complain, so that in hardly any time at all his plate was cleared.

Just as he was chewing on his last mouthful of toast, the boy opposite got out of his bed and came over to Ross. He had dark brown, straight hair almost down to his shoulders and his skin was unnaturally pale. He was wearing a white hospital gown.

'You eating yours, are you?' said the boy, with a broad Kingsport accent. 'You must be hungry. Didn't touch mine, tastes nasty.'

'Well, it's not bad,' replied Ross. 'I was so hungry I'd have eaten anything.'

'What you in here for then? Came in last night, didn't you?'

'Fell off my bike,' said Ross. 'I feel fine actually.'

'Well, I expect you'll be out by this afternoon, they'll be wanting the bed.'

'What about you?' said Ross.

'Operation on my hand.' The boy showed Ross his right hand, which was taped up with gauze. 'I get these extra bones growing and they have to cut them out. This is my fourth. Got the scars to prove it.' He showed Ross his other hand, which had three long scars on the back.

He lowered his voice and nodded his head in the direction of the old man. "Ere, did you hear him during the night? Old bloke in the bed next to mine. Talking to himself he was, all night. Kept me awake half the time. Don't know what he was saying – sounded like he was on the phone to somebody or something, but I couldn't see one, and anyhow you're not allowed to switch a mobile on in here. Mucks around with the electrics I suppose and we all end getting fried. Then he started making this weird clicking sound.'

Ross looked over at the old man, who was staring back at him.

'You was clicking a lot in your sleep as well,' continued the boy. 'Who's Bob?'

Ross jerked backwards.

'What do you mean?' he asked, a little more sharply than he'd intended.

'Oh, just wondered. You were talking about 'Bob' in your sleep, that's all. Muttering away you were.'

Ross didn't like the way this conversation was going. Don't tell anybody, that's what he had been warned. 'I don't remember anything,' he said. 'I...'

He was saved any further questioning by the appearance of the same doctor who he had seen the previous evening. She was doing her rounds with a group of junior doctors and nurses in tow. They stopped in front of one of the beds further down the ward.

Within five minutes, his own bed was surrounded by a sea of white coats, the junior doctors' faces switching every few seconds between patient and doctor as if they were following a ball in a tennis match as it flew from one end of the court to the other. Ross hadn't really looked at the doctor before. She had short blonde hair, cut so short that from the back she could have been a man. Her lips were a gash of bright red lipstick and her eyes a steely blue which Ross could almost feel boring into him as she stood at the end of the bed.

'Now, then, young man,' said the doctor, her eyes flickering between him and the clipboard in front of her. 'How are you feeling this morning?'

Ross looked around at the expectant faces. 'Er...fine, thank you doctor.'

'Did you sleep well?'

'Er...yes, thank you.'

'Apart from those dreams,' came a voice from behind the white coats.

'I'm sorry?' said the doctor.

'He was muttering away, he was,' continued the boy.

'Did anyone ask for your opinion?'

'No, I was only trying to help.'

'I don't remember a thing about any dreams,' Ross cut in. 'I slept like a log, honest.'

'You can't remember anything at all?' The doctor stared at Ross and didn't take her eyes off him. He noticed that she didn't seem to blink at all. 'No more strange voices or anything?'

'Pardon?'

'Strange voices. Whistling, that sort of thing. No urge to make clicking sounds? I think you know what I mean.'

Ross hesitated. 'No, I don't. I mean, no, I didn't hear anything. Er...no, no, nothing at all. What do you mean?'

'I think it's better if I concentrate on the questions. That's how the medical profession works. We ask the questions and you answer them. We find it works wonderfully.' The doctor smiled and looked around at the others, who all beamed back at her.

'Well, young man, I suppose it's probably okay for you to go home today. Assuming there isn't any whistling.' She paused, as if waiting for him to respond, but Ross kept his mouth tightly shut.

'All we need to do is a bit of paperwork,' she continued. 'You'll find, ladies and gentlemen, that there is always far, far, too much paperwork...' Everyone smiled knowingly, but the doctor's voice trailed off as the old man in the bed opposite started calling over to them.

'What are you lot doing here?' he started shouting. 'Leave us alone, will you?' The doctor and her juniors moved across to the old man's bed at the same time as two nurses appeared from the other end of the ward, bustling down the centre aisle.

'They said they'd do this, you know. They said you'd do it,' yelled the old man. 'Just leave us alone, why don't you? Meddlers, the lot of you. They told me to keep my mouth shut. Let me out of here! Let me out!'

There was a struggle as two of the junior doctors assisted by the nurses held him down on the bed. All this time, the doctor was scribbling frantically on her clipboard.

'Sister,' she finally said, 'the secure unit for this one, please. At once.'

The Ward Sister nodded and motioned to the nurses to bring a trolley.

'Let's get you out of this bed and take you somewhere more comfortable,' she said to the old man. 'Can you get up, or shall we lift you?'

'Leave me alone,' the old man cried, pulling his arm away from the Ward Sister.

'We'll lift him,' the Ward Sister ordered the two nurses, who stood around the old man, blocking him from Ross's view.

'One, two, three, lift,' said the Sister.

The old man was lifted onto the trolley, and the junior doctors stood back to allow it room to manoeuvre. The old man, who was being held down by one of the nurses, struggled to sit up and look at Ross, his bloodshot eyes staring out of his pale, heavily lined faced.

'They've got Bob!' he started crying. 'They've got Bob!'

Ross almost leapt out of the bed in fright when he heard this. He caught the eye of the boy in the bed opposite who was staring at him intently.

'Hurry up, please,' said the doctor, impatiently. 'He's disturbing the other patients.'

'Sorry, doctor,' said one of the nurses as they pushed the bed out of the ward. The old man disappeared through the swing doors, but everyone could hear him screaming, his voice echoing in the corridor as he was wheeled away.

'They've got Bob,' he kept on crying. 'They've got Bob.'

CHAPTER 3

Ross's father picked him up from the hospital a few hours later. Professor Blane worked in the Department of Medieval History at the University of Kingsport. He was a world authority on medieval farming methods, and often travelled to conferences around the world to present his latest research. He often had an absent minded air about him, as if he was thinking about something which happened a long time ago. Sometimes he would be in the middle of a sentence and just stop talking because something interesting had occurred to him, which he needed to write down as soon as possible before he forgot it. Most evenings and weekends he would shut himself up in his study with the excuse that he had a difficult problem which he needed to resolve.

'How are you feeling?' he asked Ross as he sat on the end of the bed watching a nurse remove the bandage from Ross's head. 'That's a nasty looking bump.'

'I feel fine, Dad, really,' said Ross. 'Where's Cynthia?'

Professor Blane put his hand up to scratch the growing patch of baldness at the top of his head, something which Ross had noticed he always did when he was uncomfortable.

Cynthia was Professor Blane's second wife. Ross's own mother had died when he was seven years old. Apart from a few photographs, Ross couldn't remember much about his mother. He remembered being small and slipping into his parent's bed early on a Saturday morning and cuddling his mother until she woke up. But mostly he remembered his Dad being sad after she died and the time they spent at his grandmother's, who was very strict and who never allowed Ross to eat biscuits two hours either side of mealtimes.

Cynthia was altogether a different woman from his mother. She worked for Barker Whitehouse, the investment bank, and commuted every day to Leeds. During the week Ross barely saw her, as most mornings she left for work before he was down for breakfast and

often didn't return until late in the evening. When she was at home, she was usually looking at her Blackberry, catching up on the emails which she hadn't had time to read during the day, or having long conversations with the New York office.

Professor Blane shrugged his shoulders.

'She had to go down to London yesterday and stay overnight. She should be back later.'

'Did you tell her I was in hospital?'

Ross's father winced. 'I didn't want to worry her,' he said apologetically. 'The meeting seemed very important.'

'They always are, Dad.'

Ross's father laughed. 'Yes, they do seem to be, don't they?'

Ross packed his bag whilst Professor Blane signed some forms, then they headed down to the ground floor. The weather had been steadily getting worse all morning, and by early afternoon the sky was a dark, menacing grey. The wind was whistling around the hospital buildings and buffeting against the window panes. Outside the hospital, underneath the porticoed entrance, there was a huddle of people sheltering from the wind and the rain; a couple of bored looking men in overcoats were leaning against the wall.

There was a small stand selling newspapers and magazines. There were two 'Evening Press' headline boards which were creaking in the wind, one with the words 'Egyptian statue stolen in Kingsport', and the second 'Kingsport relegation after 2-0 defeat', which didn't surprise Ross after the team's recent run of poor performances.

Ross and his father ran across the car park trying to avoid the puddles. It was strange, but apart from the sound of the raindrops bouncing on the car bonnets and the wind in the trees which surrounded the hospital car park, Ross could hear a low pitched murmuring

sound. He couldn't make out where it was coming from – it seemed to be all around him, not like the sound of a plane in the sky or a distant lorry on the main road; just everywhere.

Professor Blane drove an old Volvo with a diesel engine which rattled and growled so loudly that, once inside the car, Ross couldn't hear any other noises at all. He dismissed the murmuring sound as a trick of the wind.

'I'll just call Cynthia to see what time she's getting back,' Ross's father said as he scabbled in the door well for his bluetooth headset.

'Let me dial,' said Ross, reaching for the phone. 'I don't want to be in another accident.'

Ross dialled Cynthia's number and he could hear the phone ringing in his father's earpiece.

'Hello darling,' said Professor Blane. 'I was just wondering....oh...yes, that sounds difficult...this evening?...oh well, we'll eat together and I'll keep something for you in the fridge....Yes, have a good journey...bye.'

'Just the two of us again?'

Cynthia often missed dinner, so that Ross and his father had spent many evenings sitting silently together eating one of Professor Blane's meals. Fortunately he was a very good cook. Some evenings they would eat at the kitchen table, but most nights they would opt for eating off trays in front of the television. Whatever they watched it was always 'educational' in some way – a history documentary or a wildlife programme – as Ross's father frowned on what he called 'popular entertainment', and refused point blank to watch any sport.

Professor Blane put great store by meal times and insisted that Ross sit down with him at the same time. But apart from meal times, Ross spent much of his time at home alone. His father rarely went out, instead retreating to his study after dinner, with the unspoken understanding that he was not to be disturbed. On the occasions that Ross did knock on the

study door, usually because he wanted some help with his homework, he would find Professor Blane poring over books and manuscripts strewn around the floor of the study, or sitting in a large leather armchair with his nose buried in a history book.

Most of Ross's friends lived in Flintonbridge, within walking distance of the High School, although some, like him, lived in one of the many villages which surrounded the town. Ross often wished that he lived somewhere a little less boring than Runlington. His father said what a pretty village it was and how lucky they were to live there, but to Ross it just seemed to be a place where nothing happened.

Leaving Kingsport, the traffic soon thinned out. The weather was getting worse, and by the time they had come off the Flintonbridge bypass and were on the quiet country road towards Runlington there was only them and one other car going in the same direction.

The windows of the car were steaming up as the dampness of their coats reacted with the stuffy warmth from the Volvo's ancient heating system. The windscreen wipers were scarcely able to keep up with the increasingly large droplets of rain, and Ross was glad when they pulled into the drive of The Old Rectory.

The Old Rectory was by far the largest of only about two dozen houses dotted around the church. The majority of the house was over three hundred years old. It was far too big for only the three of them: it had seven bedrooms, most of which were scarcely ever entered (let alone slept in), except on the occasions when Cynthia had invited friends or colleagues from her investment bank to what she called a 'house party'. Ross tended to make himself scarce at these times, either hiding in his bedroom or, if the weather was fine, cycling around the quiet country lanes which surrounded the village and then returning home as late as possible.

The house was surrounded by trees which were almost as old, if not older, than the building itself. As they drove slowly up the gravel drive, Ross could see the trees bending and

tossing in the wind, their red and yellowing leaves ripping off and whirling around in the sky as the wind did its job and rid them of their summer foliage. When they finally came to a halt, the second that Ross opened the car door he once again noticed the sound which he had heard in the hospital car park. But instead of the faint, low pitched murmur of before, it was now almost a roar of muttering voices, some high pitched, some low, all saying something different.

'What's that?' said Ross, holding on to the car door for support.

'What's what?' asked his father.

If Ross concentrated, beyond the sound of the wind and the rain, he could hear what he thought were individual voices: 'wind and rain, wind and rain,' said one. 'It's going to be a bad one,' said another.

A shiver ran down Ross's spine, and he looked at his father who was staring back at him with an alarmed look on his face. He imagined Bob sitting on his lap in the dark hospital ward, whispering: 'Don't tell anyone.'

'Are you okay, son? You've gone very pale all of a sudden.'

Ross checked himself. 'Fine, Dad,' he said, avoiding his father's eye. 'Just tired after the journey I think. The car was stuffy. Shall we go in?'

As Professor Blane turned the key in the lock, there was the scratching sound of claws skidding on the polished wooden floor of the hall. Ross had barely stepped through the door when Sam launched himself at Ross like a long jumper at the Olympics. Sam was a brown and white King Charles Spaniel with a never-ending supply of energy which just had to be released through jumping, scampering, barking or whatever excited him at that particular moment. Hearing a sound, his nose would immediately be raised in the air and his long chestnut brown ears would shiver with anticipation; at the slightest provocation or

disturbance, he was prone to running around the house barking and yelping, but this was never in anger. In the middle of the night, when Sam heard what he mistook for an intruder whilst the rest of the house was trying to sleep, this could be a little irritating; but Ross loved him all the same.

In one leap Sam was able to land squarely on Ross's chest, almost knocking the wind out of him and sending him flying to the floor.

'Whoa, easy now,' laughed Ross, 'it's good to see you too!'

'Where have you been, where have you been?' barked Sam. 'What's up, what's up? I missed you, I missed you. Where have you been, where have you been?'