

'68

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Also by Nicholas Royle

NOVELS

Counterparts
Saxophone Dreams
The Matter of the Heart
The Director's Cut
Antwerp

STORIES

Mortality

AS EDITOR

Darklands
Darklands 2
A Book of Two Halves
The Tiger Garden: A Book of Writers' Dreams
The Time Out Book of New York Short Stories
The Agony and the Ecstasy
The Ex Files
Neonlit: Time Out Book of New Writing
The Time Out Book of Paris Short Stories
Neonlit: Time Out Book of New Writing Volume 2
The Time Out Book of London Short Stories Volume 2
Dreams Never End

'68

New Stories from
CHILDREN OF THE
REVOLUTION

Edited by **Nicholas Royle**



CAMBRIDGE

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In memory of
Anna Kavan
1901–1968

&

Cornell Woolrich
1903–1968

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NICHOLAS ROYLE

Introduction

GEORGINA HAMMICK WROTE an essay, 'In Defence of the Short Story', which appeared in *New Writing 3* edited by Andrew Motion and Candice Rodd. 'For although our history in the story is as distinguished as any,' she wrote, 'and while the story continues to flourish in the United States and Canada, in South America, in Eire and in other places besides, it must be true to say that notwithstanding a small band of supporters and enthusiasts in all corners of the book trade, the literary short form is no longer paid much (or serious) attention here.' *New Writing 3* was published in 1994 and the unavoidable observation to be made is that the situation, in general terms, far from improving over the next decade and a bit, almost certainly got worse. Of those authors looked after by the bigger publishers, only the most well established get to publish collections of their own short stories on a regular basis,

assuming they still write enough to fill them, and then only if the deal includes the next novel as well. Authors languishing in what used to be called the midlist, and now has no name because it doesn't exist any more, can forget it. And if single-author collections are now fewer and further between, sightings of multi-author short story anthologies have become even rarer. Magazines have struggled, too, and in the wake of recent Arts Council cuts some have gone to the wall, while others are finding life even harder than they did before.

There are, however, recent signs that things may be improving.

While the conglomerates have, for the most part, had their backs turned, certain smaller publishers have been doing excellent work to support the short story. Serpent's Tail, for many years a strong supporter of the form, have continued to publish collections and anthologies. Comma Press, a small independent founded in 2002 and based in the north-west of England, has published an excellent series of anthologies named after punctuation marks—*Comma*, *Hyphen*, *Bracket* and *Parenthesis*—as well as other anthologies and author collections. The origins of Salt Publishing lie in poetry, but their commitment to the short story has been made abundantly clear from the number of fine collections they, too, have published and from the fact that their logo nestles on the spine of the present volume.

The news these days is increasingly good, as it happens. They started small, but Norwich's Elastic Press have now published dozens of story collections and anthologies, concentrating on slipstream fiction, neither quite genre, nor

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mainstream. Bigger, but still an independent, Faber are not afraid to launch a new writer with a short story collection. Other publishers are still either springing up or hanging in there and doing short stories, among them Social Disease, Crowswing Books, Night Shade Books, Gray Friar Press, Toby Press, Dedalus.

Even mainstream imprints have started putting out the odd anthology again, if the editor is someone like a Zadie Smith or a Nick Hornby, both of whom, fortunately for the short story, seem to have a genuine commitment to the form. Smith's *The Book of Other People* contained three or four brilliant short stories that might otherwise never have seen the light of day. If I were editing a new incarnation of Giles Gordon and David Hughes' annual reprint anthology *Best Short Stories* (Heinemann, 1986–94), as I often fantasise about doing, a couple of these would have walked straight into it.

When Gareth Evans told me that he and Verena Stackelberg were planning a season of talks, screenings and exhibitions, *All Power to the Imagination: 1968 and its Legacies*, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the events of 1968—the election of Alexander Dubček in Czechoslovakia and subsequent Prague Spring, widespread demonstrations in the US against the Vietnam War, strikes and student protests in Paris that almost brought down the government, worldwide resistance to the established order—I immediately thought we should do an anthology of new stories by writers born in '68. I started making a list, and pretty soon the list included names of authors born in '69, because I

thought if you want the spirit of '68, maybe you want writers who were conceived in '68. Of course, you could have been conceived and born in '68, but I suppose by '68 we generally mean May '68, so anyone born in February '69 might well have been conceived while the paving stones were being ripped up in Paris, but then you start to wonder about babies born early and babies born late. If you include anyone born in '69, they could well have been conceived not in '68 at all but in '69.

So, '68 it was. Also, it's tempting to think that there was something in the air in '68. Maybe some of these '68 babies were born and took their first breath and swallowed along with it a waft of revolutionary idealism. I deliberately didn't ask contributors to tell me in what month they were born. I didn't want some to seem more '68 than others (by being born in May, for example). In the end you just have to make a decision and stick with it. And then, late in the day, when contributors start dropping out for one reason or another, and writers born in '67 or '69 get in touch and you eye their excellent credentials with something approaching desperation, you wonder if you should jettison your ideals and let them in. But then you remember that ideals were part of '68 and that you'd have excluded other writers unfairly if you allowed these ones in at this late stage.

And so began a hunt for a couple more writers. It was of vital importance to me not only that they be born in '68, but that they be good writers, good short story writers in particular, and that their work should appeal to me personally. Out of more than 250 stories I've been fortunate

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enough to be able to help into print as editor, in anthologies and magazines, there's not a single one I didn't like. I'm not interested in publishing stuff just because it corresponds to notions of what is 'good'. I've got to like it as well. One story I liked a lot, in an anthology for *Time Out*, was 'Spaces' by Cath Skinner, born in 1968, but short of hiring a private investigator, I couldn't work out how to track her down, once I'd exhausted the phone book and the internet, to get her to write a new one.

The word goes out, however, and people pop up. The gaps were filled. It was always going to be a short anthology and it was always going to be turned around very quickly (no other publisher could have been so flexible or such an enormous pleasure to work with). My invitation to the writers was deliberately vague. I wanted them to address the subjects of revolution and change, but to have the freedom to do it however they wanted. I didn't want them to feel tied to 1968 but nevertheless to produce a story with something to say about the legacies of '68, about the nature of revolution or rebellion, about utopias or dystopias, about dreams, change, potential.

Toby Litt's 'History!' reads like a creepy cross between *Desperate Housewives* and Michael Haneke's terrifying *Funny Games*. Justina Robson and Tricia Sullivan both show that science fiction is as good at ideas as it is at action; their future societies have both been formed through change, one violent, one less so. The violence in Marc Villemain's story is internalised; 'This Was My Flesh' is the French author's first work to be translated into English. The setting of Frank I Swannack's 'The Lovesick Womb' may pre-

date '68 by four centuries but change remains the same. Christopher Kenworthy writes about the revolt against the natural and James Flint explores a pairing that one suspects will always be around: students and drugs. Paris and its *banlieues* make an apt appearance in Rhonda Carrier's 'Nine Cubed' and Marc Werner gets stuck into the quintessential '68 film *If. . .*, while Kerry Watson, an Australian author, confronts her country's shame over its treatment of its Indigenous population.

Sharp-eyed readers will have noticed that the book is dedicated to the memory of two writers who lived almost exactly contemporaneous lives, Anna Kavan and Cornell Woolrich. Kavan was two years Woolrich's senior; they were both outsiders, both excellent writers and both produced a powerful body of work, including many short stories; they both died in 1968. It may be slightly fanciful to suggest that something of their talent or spirit was reborn in these ten writers the same year, but I'm going to suggest it all the same.

MANCHESTER, MARCH 2008

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TOBY LITT

History!

THEY MET IN the thickest part of the woods; also, the furthest from the edge. To get there, they had to hack through thick brambles, use compasses, check their synchronised watches and remember the routes of their country girlhoods. Radio silence was maintained, however. It was twilight, clement because late summer. This den within a copse had been their place of recourse, when the adults had made it plain they were becoming too alive to be tolerated—too alive meaning too fast, too loud, too vivid in thought and question.

All of them, all three, had had both original parents to respond to; since then, all three had lost one or the other. Later, it was speculated that this might have had something to do with their actions. Information was initially hard to come by, and what there was seemed contradictory.

First to arrive at the meeting point was Margaret—her usual distinguishing feature, an aureole of chestnut ringlets, now squashed beneath a black balaclava. Her eyes, if one had been able to see them, were underlined with brown semi-circles. Margaret had given birth five years previously to triplet boys, two of whom were hyper-active; the third was given to feigning death behind the sofa for no apparent reason. Margaret, who of course herself dies before the night is out, left behind a written statement saying she did what she did for them. The consensus among the villagers was, she was a bad mother, knew it, and took the coward's way out.

'Hello,' said a low voice from the cover immediately behind Margaret. 'I wondered whether I'd be able to sneak up on you.'

Margaret had at first given a real jump; the voice interrupted thoughts of whether she could trust the teenage babysitter with John, Jack and James. Her husband had funny business at the Lodge.

'Well, then, you succeeded,' said Margaret.

Out from behind the thick trunk of a tree stepped Beatrice known as Bee, who also dies. 'It doesn't matter,' she said, 'No-one else is going to be out here.'

'This isn't a game.'

'To be entirely serious is to play into their hands,' said Bee, who was theoretically minded in her opposition. 'I am maintaining an element of joy.'

Margaret smiled a sad smile, almost as if she knew they were going to die. 'It's good to see you,' she said, and the two women hugged. Both were aware of the crackling

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sounds of the woods around them—were they being crept up on?

‘How are the boys?’ asked Bee.

‘They are very well,’ said Margaret, willing herself not to cry. ‘It’s still all battles in our house, though. War-war-war.’

‘Any sign of Liz?’

‘Not yet,’ replied Margaret.

The two women sat on the loamy earth of the woods. It was nice for once not to have to worry about dirt—tonight was a time for being deliberately dirty. ‘She’s late,’ said Bee, who had turned thirty the week before.

‘She’ll be here,’ said Margaret.

‘What if she doesn’t come?’

‘She’ll come.’

There was a moment.

‘I like your hair like that,’ said Margaret.

‘Thank you,’ said Bee.

Bee’s hair was usually done in a neat black bob, but she had shaved this off earlier in the evening—down to a Number 1. Some have taken this as a sign that she was all along intending martyrdom. She had been anorexic for years, which was also taken as explanation—hatred of the self and of the world. But although she did not know it, at the time of her death she was three weeks’ pregnant. Despite widespread DNA testing, the father will never be found.

‘Do we go ahead anyway, if she doesn’t come?’ Bee asked.

‘I think I hear her now,’ said Margaret. If she heard

something, it wasn't Liz; perhaps a fox or a badger. After this, though, they waited in a listening silence.

Eventually, quarter of an hour later, Liz crashed out of the undergrowth and fell against them. It took her two minutes to regain her breath—during which time, both the others wanted to tell her to keep quiet but didn't feel it possible.

'I was followed,' was the first thing she said that they understood.

'Calm down,' said Margaret, who wasn't the leader—they didn't have a leader; hierarchies being part of what they wanted to destroy—but who often was first to introduce ideas into their circle: she had suggested tonight; the others had not been slow to agree. 'Tell us whenever you're ready.'

Liz—who dies—sat with her head between her legs, gasping less and less. At twenty-nine, she was the youngest of them. (Margaret was thirty one, Bee—as mentioned before—thirty.) 'I'm sorry I'm late,' she said.

'We have plenty of time,' said Margaret, but checked her watch anyway.

'Who followed you?' asked Bee.

'A policeman,' Liz said, her breath a little more even. 'He was dressed in civilian clothes, but I could still tell he was a policeman.'

'How?' asked Margaret.

'Because I hated him so much,' Liz said, then sniggered. 'And he walked as if he'd been taught how to march—you know what I mean.'

'Do you think they know anything?' Bee asked.

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‘No,’ said Margaret. ‘How could they?’

‘I’m not so sure,’ said Liz. ‘He seemed to want to follow me—for no reason.’

‘You managed to lose him, didn’t you?’ asked Margaret.

‘Of course,’ said Liz, sitting up straight. ‘Or else I wouldn’t be here.’

‘How?’ asked Bee.

‘Well . . .’ said Liz, and took a long breath.

It turned out she had gone to the house of a sympathetic female friend, knocked on the door, been invited inside and then, after a brief explanation (seedy man loitering, fear of rape), had climbed over the back fence and into the concreted area behind the cricket pavilion. From here, she had been able to make her way to the woods without breaking cover more than once—to cross the main road near the stables.

All three women kept horses there, and this was later the cause of much speculation. Perhaps it was a sign of sexual frustration—unhappiness in marriage. The husbands of Margaret and Liz denied this as libel. Singleton Bee was discovered (by the tabloids) to have been gratifyingly promiscuous. In the end, more than seven men came forward to testify to her total lack of frigidity. ‘She was very intense,’ one of them said. ‘Almost too intense. I didn’t like it.’ Nymphomania became the favoured diagnosis.

Margaret coughed quietly. ‘All set?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Liz.

‘Ready,’ said Bee.

They started walking, in single file. All of them were quite fit—Bee did yoga, Margaret did Pilates and Liz did

a weekly salsa class—so they made very rapid progress. It took them half an hour to reach their destination: a gamekeeper's cottage in a small clearing, surrounded by a neatly kept garden—lawn, rockery, fruit trees. By this time, it was starting to get dark. The lights were on inside the cottage, the now infamous 'Bower of Bliss'; the flowery curtains of the sitting room had not been drawn. A Mercedes saloon and a Renault Clio were parked on the drive, which had long-ago been done in crazy paving.

The three women made a quick check of their equipment, particularly their radios. These were small and made of black plastic; across the top of them, the words *Action Man* were written in bright orange.

'Fine,' said Margaret. 'We follow the plan.'

She and Bee proceeded to the front door. Liz, keeping low, made her way to the kitchen door—around the other side. She could hear the sound of the television. It was the theme tune to the *Antiques Roadshow*. They were bang on eight o'clock.

From her rucksack, Liz took out two rolls of camouflage-patterned tape and a chunky pair of childsafe scissors.

Bee radioed to check Liz was in position.

'All present and correct,' said Liz, a phrase of her father's.

Margaret pushed the front doorbell with the middle finger of her left hand; in her right was a toy gun belonging to one of her sons. It was very realistic, as long as one didn't get too good a look—which was why she had chosen to use it.

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A man answered the door—fifty eight, fat, dressed in a green tweedy suit but with leather slippers on. This was Colin Richardson, Mayor of the village, publican of the Queen's Head, left-arm orthodox spin.

'Margaret,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

She pointed the toy gun close up to his forehead, where it would be out of focus.

'Do exactly what we say,' she replied.

'Is that real?' Colin asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'And if you don't get inside, I will demonstrate how real.'

Colin turned and walked back into the house.

'Hold your hands up where I can see them,' said Margaret. 'I know you keep a shotgun.'

'Not any more, alas,' said Colin. 'I had to hand it in—sop to the council lefties.'

'I think you're lying,' said Margaret, as they passed out of the hall and into the TV-loud living room.

'Numfon,' said Colin. 'Be calm. There's nothing to worry about.'

A Thai woman in her mid thirties was sitting on the left of the sofa, holding a glass of Australian riesling in her hand. The glass was made of cut crystal. Her fingernails were long and had paste jewels on them.

'Sit down,' said Margaret. 'Not next to her.'

'Hello, Numfon,' said Bee.

'Bee,' said Numfon.

'Please come with me, quickly, and fetch Roger,' said Bee.

The two of them went off through an adjoining door.

The name ROGER was spelt out on it with a rhino, an ostrich, a giraffe, an emu and another rhino.

‘What’s this about?’ asked Colin. ‘It’s clearly not the usual parish council business. Is it planning permission?’

‘It’s about everything,’ said Margaret. ‘You’ll find out soon enough. Now, please be quiet.’

She radioed Liz.

‘Building secured. You may enter.’

Liz tried the back door. It was unlocked. A moment later, she had joined Margaret in the living room.

‘You, too?’ asked Colin.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Liz.

On the television, they were valuing a wig that was said to have belonged to Samuel Johnson.

Numfon reentered the room, carrying Roger, a five-year-old boy, half-Caucasian, half-Asian. He was still groggy.

‘Sit down,’ said Margaret. ‘If you can keep him quiet, we won’t need to gag him.’

‘Margaret,’ said Colin, ‘the nearest house is half a mile away—half a mile of thick woodland. You could shoot the lot of us, and no-one would hear.’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret. ‘We could. I just don’t want to have any whining bloody kids around. I get enough of that at home.’

‘So, what can I do for you?’ asked Colin.

‘You can call the police,’ said Margaret. ‘Tell them you’ve been taken hostage. Tell them we’re serious. And that, when they get here, we can discuss terms.’

‘Anything you say, Margaret.’

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Margaret slapped Colin's face, with her non-gun hand. 'Don't be such a smarmy cunt, Colin. You can die painlessly or very painfully indeed.'

'Yes,' he said, his hair disarranged.

'Dial 999,' said Margaret. 'Tell them to get here as soon as they can. Tell them we'd like a helicopter.'

'What, to escape with?'

'No, just to fly around overhead, so we feel important.'

Colin picked up the receiver and dialled.

It took him five minutes to get through to the right person.

'Yes, they're very serious indeed, it seems,' Colin said. 'No, I don't know what they want.'

'Tell them we'll only speak to an officer specially trained in hostage situations.'

'Did you hear that?' Colin asked the policeman. Then, to Margaret, 'He heard, he says that might take some time to arrange.'

'Tell him we will shoot your wife in one hour,' said Margaret.

Colin soberly repeated the words.

'Now give me the phone,' she said.

Colin obeyed.

Margaret took the receiver from him. 'You can be quick when you want to be,' she said into it, then hung up.

'Back in there,' Margaret said, and shoved Colin into the living room. She was really enjoying this—more than she had expected.

On the sofa, Numfon was cowering and Roger was crying.

‘Gag them,’ she said. ‘The police are on their way.’

Colin slumped into the armchair and sent a brave smile towards Numfon. ‘Don’t worry, darling,’ he said. ‘We’ll be alright.’

‘No, you won’t,’ said Bee. ‘You’ll never be alright.’

‘You deserve this,’ said Margaret.

Liz handed over one of the rolls of tape to Bee, who started on Numfon. ‘Lift your hair out of the way,’ Bee said.

‘What does that matter?’ Liz asked.

‘Don’t hurt my mummy,’ wailed Roger, just before Liz sealed his mouth. Snot immediately began to run down the slick surface of the tape. Roger’s eyes were no longer those of a five-year old.

Bee taped up Numfon’s hands and feet. Liz left Roger’s hands free, so that he could put them round his mother.

Then Margaret taped Colin’s feet together, and his hands behind his back. His mouth, she left alone.

‘Tea, anyone?’ asked Liz.

‘Yes, please,’ said Margaret. ‘And see if you can find some biscuits. I’m sure they keep some nice ones.’

On television, they were valuing a Queen Anne table with very fine cabriolet legs.

Margaret sat down on the sofa with the toy gun in her lap. Bee took the armchair on the left-hand side, after removing the antimacassar. She crumpled it up and threw it into the fireplace, where imitation coals sat ready to be gassed.

Apart from Roger’s sniffles, everyone was quiet until Liz returned with the tea. There were mugs for the three hostage-takers, nothing for the family.

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‘So, Colin,’ said Bee, ‘why did you call your son “Roger”?’
It’s such a stupid name.’

‘We like it,’ said Colin.

‘Which only proves how stupid it is,’ said Margaret.
‘Almost as bad as Colin. Who wants to be five and be called
“Roger”?’

Bee turned to the boy. ‘Let’s ask Roger. Roger, do you
like your name?’

Roger looked at his mother.

Margaret leaned across and pulled the tape off Roger’s
mouth.

‘Do you like your name?’ asked Liz, with a gentle tone.
Roger shook his head.

‘Does that mean you like it or you don’t like it?’ asked
Margaret.

‘Don’t like it,’ the boy said.

The three hostage-takers all laughed.

‘You see,’ said Bee. ‘Even he hates it.’

‘So,’ asked Liz, ‘what would you like to be called?’

Roger looked down into his chest.

‘Optimus Prime,’ he said.

‘Right,’ said Margaret. ‘From now on, you’re Optimus
Prime. Which is going to sound pretty silly in twenty years’
time—but I don’t think there’s much reason to worry
about that.’

‘Would you like some juice, Optimus Prime?’ asked Liz.
He said, ‘Yes, please.’

‘Very polite,’ said Margaret. ‘That’s good.’

Liz went and got him a beaker full of orange. He drank
it very quickly.

‘Do you still wear a nappy, Optimus Prime?’ Margaret asked.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m a big boy.’

‘Then you must tell us if you need to go wee-wee,’ said Margaret. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Okay,’ said Optimus Prime.

‘Look,’ said Colin. ‘What is it exactly that you want? Perhaps we can sort it all out before the police get here?’

‘What we want,’ said Margaret, ‘is for the police to get here. Now, please, don’t speak again.’

They watched the television for a while.

‘Do you like this programme, Optimus Prime?’ asked Margaret.

‘No,’ he said, becoming more confident. ‘It’s boring.’

‘What would you like?’ Bee asked.

‘Cartoons,’ he said.

Margaret passed him the remote, which had been sitting on Colin’s arm of the sofa.

‘Choose something,’ she said.

Optimus Prime skipped through the channels until he came to a programme called *Robotboy*.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Margaret.

They watched it for ten minutes. Then Bee said, ‘Optimus Prime, do you have any guns?’

Optimus nodded.

‘If we undo your legs, will you go with me and fetch them?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

Liz came across and cut through the tape with the chunky scissors.

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Bee took Optimus's hand and led him into the bedroom.

A few minutes later, they came back, arms full of imitation pistols, lasers and machine guns.

'Which is your favourite?' asked Margaret.

Optimus picked out a red and black laser.

'You keep that one, then.'

'And I'll have this one,' said Liz, choosing an old-fashioned-looking revolver. It had cowboys on the handle and a wagon train running along the barrel.

'And can I have this one?' asked Bee, picking up a business-like automatic in black plastic.

'Yes,' said Optimus. 'As long as I can have them back.'

'Of course you can have them back,' said Margaret.

They sat down to watch the TV—all much happier, now they were armed.

Colin had been looking at Margaret's gun. 'That one's not real either, is it? You came in here and held us up with a toy!'

'Shut up or we tape your mouth up,' Margaret said.

'What do you think about that, Optimus Prime?'

The boy looked surly.

'Then he won't be able to tell you to go to bed,' said Liz.

'Or tell you to do anything at all,' said Bee.

Optimus Prime said, 'I do anything I want all the time.'

'I bet you do,' said Margaret, and laughed. 'But, shall we tape up your daddy's mouth? Just for a game.'

'Okay,' said Optimus Prime, with a sideways glance to see the effect of his words.

'Roger!' Colin shouted.

He struggled as Liz and Bee wound the camouflaged tape around his head. His face was pink by the time they finished. It became even more pink when Bee pinched his nostrils for half a minute, to check his mouth really *was* sealed. When she let go, he snorted raggedly.

‘I need a wee,’ said Optimus Prime.

The hostage-takers looked at one another.

‘I’ll take him,’ said Margaret. She went and picked him up from the sofa. He put his arms around her neck. Colin flinched at this.

Margaret carried Optimus Prime through the kitchen and into the toilet; she knew where it was. She pulled the boy’s pyjama bottoms down until they were around his knees, then lifted him onto the seat.

He put his finger on his willy, to point it down, then peed almost immediately. They both listened to the small gush until it went quiet.

‘Finished?’ asked Margaret.

Optimus Prime nodded.

‘You don’t want a poo?’

‘No,’ the boy said.

‘Come on, then.’

Margaret dried Optimus Prime’s willy with a sheet of toilet paper, then hiked his pyjamas up.

‘All done,’ she said, carrying him back into the living room.

Just then, sirens came into earshot. They became louder quite gradually. And then blue lights flashed across the stripy wallpaper.

‘At last,’ said Margaret.