

Chapter One Extract



Mathew & Son Ltd

Chapter One

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You walk, in no particular hurry, taking in the streets as you go. Evening is approaching and, under the last light of the sun, commuters drag ever-lengthening shadows behind them.

You turn a corner to find yourself in Harley Street, which you stroll along, glancing up at the windows of the consultants and medical specialists. The slow-moving flow of cars is constantly brought to a halt as black cabs pull up outside the Georgian terraces. The sick and the elderly alight from them and pay the drivers, seemingly oblivious to the car horns fretting behind in the queue.

As these people are helped to their appointments, you notice that there are many large cars in the bays along the street, condensation dripping from their exhausts as chauffeurs keep their engines ticking over. But even the bright chrome and highly polished bodies of these expensive vehicles can do nothing to dispel the winter gloom. And there's a hush over the place, as if the street is holding its breath with respect for the unwell, many of whom are only postponing the inevitable.

There's sadness and futility here. You begin to quicken your pace.

Then you glimpse something, a sliver of normality, and you grasp it with your eyes.

A boy and his parents are walking from the opposite direction. The boy is young, perhaps not yet in his teens. His

school uniform is grey, as grey as the sky at that moment, but you notice the triple bands of pink around the neck of his pullover and the similarly coloured stripes on his tie. These bright points of colour are unexpected, like a cluster of tiny flowers in a slush of traffic-stained ice.

The boy is being borne along by his mother and father as they support him under the arms. At any moment you half expect them to hoist him up – ‘One, two, whoop!’ – accompanied by delighted laughter as he meets the pavement again.

But then you notice his parents are both staring straight ahead, their expressions far from joyful. This isn’t an outing to treat their son to a toy from Hamleys or see a show at the theatre. This is something different, serious.

And as they come closer, the man speaks to his wife, indicating one of the buildings. They head towards it.

The boy, whose face has been lowered until now, raises it. He catches you looking at him and turns in your direction.

You try not to gasp.

You see that his head is misshapen. His mouse-brown hair is raised and uneven on the right-hand side. Because there is something large under it. And on his forehead there is a protuberance, a skin-covered egg. You also notice the corner of his mouth is hitched up, as though it’s badly swollen.

This isn’t the result of some incident in the playground. There’s no sign of broken skin or scarring. Something malignant is growing inside him.

And although his body is slight and frail, you realise that he’s older than you first thought. Possibly even as old as fifteen, although it’s difficult to tell.

As he hangs back from his parents, his eyes are still on

yours. Eyes that can tell precisely what’s going through your mind. Eyes that know only too well that his disfigurement has made you uncomfortable. Shocked you.

And he’s right.

You feel a wash of guilt and of embarrassment. More than anything, you want to avert your gaze, look away, down, anywhere, but that would be an admission.

So you don’t.

And, for what feels like several lifetimes, yours and the boy’s eyes remain locked together.

There’s a glimmer of a smile on his face.

You see beyond his deformities. He’s only a child. The injustice makes your throat tighten.

‘Sam,’ the mother prompts in a soft voice, she and her husband intent only on the doorway at the top of the steps. You know his name now. Sam’s eyes are finally parted from yours as he’s led up into the building with its freshly painted door. You know you will never see him again. But you can’t help but stare unfocusedly at the illuminated windows of the consulting rooms.

You wonder what his life must be like, and how one so young could possibly deal with it.

‘Sam,’ you repeat to yourself, moving quickly down the street, no longer taking any notice of your surroundings.