

## Chippy

Susan Priestly was fifteen. She had no friends, and only one enemy.

It was August, the middle of the summer holiday, and Susan was sitting on a wall beside the neighbourhood sweet shop, eating an ice cream.

"Hi, Susan." A boy from school was walking towards her, down the path, with his hands in his pockets. Susan was an attractive girl, and the boy was busy taking a picture of her with his eyes, developing the image in his head, pasting it in a scrap book of raggedy well-fingered pages. She was slim, fragile, with large untouchable breasts. All the boys in school took a keen interest in their development, watched their every move, watched them incessantly, imagined themselves grabbing them.

Susan knew the boy's face, but not his name. He was in her class, and sat somewhere near the back.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"Nothing."

The boy sat on the wall beside her. Susan ate her ice cream as if she were still alone.

"You waiting for somebody?" He knew she was not, but what else could he say? He was already racking his brains thinking of the next thing to say, and then the next after that.

"No."

What else could he say? He was stumped.

"I haven't seen you around this summer." It was normal. Susan was never seen around—no matter what the season.

No answer.

"Have you been away?"

"No," she said. It was a nice ice cream.

"My mam 'n' dad are supposed to take us to Scarborough for a week."

It certainly was a nice ice cream.

Words, words, words. The boy was looking out for words, though clearly words were not looking out for him. He glanced at her large breasts. Where were the words? He needed words.

"Are you doing anything today?"

"Why?"

"I'm going into town, in a bit. Do you want to come?"

"I can't. I have to go somewhere."

"Oh. I'll see you later then," he said, self-consciously, easing himself down from the wall. There was something not quite normal about Susan, and the boy, as he walked away, was trying to figure out what it was and where it came from.

Susan quickly finished her ice cream: it was late, the morning almost over, and she had a long walk ahead.

When Susan arrived home, a semidetached council house on the edge of town, her mother's nerves were on edge.

"Where've you been all day?"

"Just walking," Susan said.

"You're always just walking. I've been worried sick."

"It's the first time I've been out all week." It was true. Susan rarely disappeared, though when she did it was a lengthy affair, from early morning until early evening.

"It's only Friday," her mother answered.

"Sorry."

"You should have more consideration."

"I said sorry."

Her mother walked into the kitchen, leaving the apology hanging in the air.

"What's for tea?" Susan called.

"Fish. What do you think?"

Susan's father had run away when she was born, and from then on her mother—never absolutely sure of herself—pretended to have lost interest in men. She had turned to the Catholic Church and was happy playing martyr.

It was early evening. Susan was lying on her bed on her stomach, her head resting in cupped hands, looking at the empty wall—her mother thought pictures and posters were messy—in front. She was thinking about the boy, going into town, asking her along. She was trying to think of his name. And then she heard a movement downstairs, saw her mother sitting alone, snuggled up to her Bible, and banished all thoughts of the boy with no name.

On Sunday morning, they walked two miles to the Catholic church for the morning Mass. The congregation was skimpy and sat well away from each other, like tiny lost birds perched on rows of fallen logs.

During the afternoon Susan said, "I'm going to the sweet shop."

"You seem to be going to the sweet shop a lot these days."

"No more than normal," she answered, already on her way out.

Susan again sat on the wall beside the sweet shop, glancing around here and there. She had been there ten minutes when, realising her mother would be anxious, she stood and walked home.

Towards the end of the week, Susan disappeared again. All day long her mother's nerves twisted and turned, not so much in concern for Susan's safety, but in anger at being left alone. When Susan arrived home, at tea time, her mother was ready.

"I nearly called the police," she said.

"I told you this morning I was going."

"Going where though?"

"Nowhere. I just walk. I like to be on my own sometimes."

A warning bell rang in her mother's head: "Have you got a boyfriend?"

"I told you, I was on my own."

"You'd better not be starting that boyfriend malarkey. You're much too young. Do you hear me?"

"When I think of the sacrifices I've made," she shook her head. "It hasn't been easy you know, bringing you up all by myself."

"Sorry," Susan mumbled, ashamed, looking down at her feet.

Susan stayed home. For days on end, Susan stayed at home. She helped her mother about the house, went to Mass with her every evening, spoke politely and did as she was told. It was no great effort: it was the least she could do to show respect; and all her life, Susan had been respectful.

One afternoon, while her mother took a nap, Susan went outside. There was an old wooden shed in the back garden, painted green, with a small window and a black weather-worn roof. She reached up, taking a brown key from a narrow shelf above the door. Nervously—Susan was not allowed in the shed—she opened the rusty lock. It was nice inside,

with the door closed and the sunlight streaming through the small square window, through the dusty air. There was an old table with blankets underneath, where she had secretly played house as a small child; empty buckets; boxes of nails and screws; a fishing rod that had never been used—at least to Susan's knowledge; and a double-barrelled shotgun, strangely out of place, leaning in the far corner, with a plastic container of cartridges on a shelf above. Susan took the gun and cradled it in her arms. It felt friendly and familiar. She blew down one of the barrels, as if it were a flute, making it sing a single note, a low, breathy, comfortable note. Susan put the gun back exactly in its place; and then she crawled under the table, sat cross-legged on a blanket, rocked gently back and forth, almost as if she could hear music.

The next morning, with absolutely nothing else to do, Susan rummaged through her old toy cupboard and found a packet of plaster of Paris. She added some water and squished it into something that resembled a face. It resembled the face of a boy whose name was on the tip of her tongue. She took the face into the garden, setting it in the sun to dry, sitting on the front doorstep to wait. She sat, waiting, watching the out-of-reach world going distantly by.

The face was ready. She sat on the doorstep and painted the lips and the eyes and the hair. Her mother hummed a happy song: she liked to see Susan playing like that. She painted tears trickling down the cheeks. It was a good face. And then the sunlight seemed too light, and the face looked too real, and she smashed it on the path and went back to her bedroom.

On Sunday morning, they walked two miles to the Catholic

church for the morning Mass.

And then, one day, the need to disappear was overpowering. She made sandwiches, hurriedly, afraid her mother would walk into the kitchen at any moment, packed them in a duffle-bag with a carton of juice, and sneaked out of the house.

The way took Susan beside an old people's residence. It was a large well kept house, with a large well kept garden, though not exactly a home. Empty faces peered through large windows, watching a world they could not touch. Susan walked past, averting her eyes, afraid to see the glass faces.

Susan was fast approaching the end of the town. Across the street, an old farmhouse with an attached barn had been converted into an Off Licence. The door opened and a boy walked out.

"Hi Susan." It was the boy with no name. Inexplicably, her heart began to race.

"Hi Alan." She had remembered his name. Alan Morton. He hurried across the road to join her.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Where you off?"

"Just down the road," she lied, "for a walk."

"Mind if I came along? I just bought a bottle of cider."

"Is that a bribe?"

"If that's what it takes," he smiled.

"All right then. Give me it, I'll put it in my bag."

This time, not only did Alan find his words, but Susan found her answers as well.

Meanwhile, Susan's mother had discovered her gone, and her nerves were being used in a tug of war.

With every step Susan took, it seemed more certain that the decision had decided for itself. She would take him and show him. It would be all right for some-one else to know. There would be no harm done. They would have fun. And yet, somehow, it sounded like a lie. But, then again, the decision had really decided. It had nothing to do with her. They walked on, and Susan felt like a criminal, as if she had stolen—from herself.

A few minutes later they passed the final row of houses. Now it was too late to turn back. She would take him there and show him and drink cider and have fun. A narrow beck—home to three old tires and a family of broken prams—was the barrier separating houses from fields. They jumped across the beck.

"Where are we going?" They walked along side the gurgling beck that held the houses at bay, following the edge of the field, where the wheat was young and green, and moved in fluid waves in the light breeze.

"There's a place I know, up this way." They came to a thick hedgerow, cutting in front, changed directions and followed a parallel path, up the far side of the field.

"What kind of place?"

"It's just a place I go to when I want to be alone. It's up by the quarry."

"You want to go to the quarry?" There was a barely concealed note of astonishment in his voice.

"Yes, why? Scared of Chippy or something?"

"No," he breathed a laugh. "It's a bit far, that's all."

Chippy was one part man, and nine parts myth. He lived in one of the old houses beside the abandoned quarry. He wandered about, a shot gun tucked under his arm, keeping children away. No-one knew if it was his job or his

passion. Several children claimed to have been chased by Chippy, and some even said he had shot at them.

"Do you believe in him?"

"Don't be daft," Alan said.

"What about Rex?"

"Who the hell's Rex when he's at home?"

"The dog next door to me."

"Oh, that three legged one."

"Yeah. What about him?"

"What do you mean?"

"It was Chippy who did that."

"Sure," he said, stretching the word slightly, feigning disbelief.

"You don't know the story, then?"

"No—but I'm sure you'll tell me." He smiled and she smiled back.

"All right, I will.

"A few years ago some kids took him for a walk. They came up here and he ran off somewhere. He always liked to go off—when he had all his legs. So, any way, they were scared he'd get lost and started to shout for him; but he didn't come back. Then they heard this gunshot from up by the quarry. They were all too scared to go look, but after a while they saw him come limping along. His leg was all bloody."

"So that's what happened."

"Yeah. The kids carried him back. The vet said he'd been shot with a shotgun."

"It could've been a farmer."

"Why would a farmer shoot a dog? It's only corn up here."

"Why would Chippy shoot a dog?"

"Same reason he shoots at kids."

They reached the top end of the field and scrambled up the loose stones of a railway embankment. They paused for breath at the top, looking about them, at the fields on both sides, the houses beyond the beck, and two distant smokestacks in the direction of the quarry. No more trains passed by that way: the tracks had long since been removed, and the raised causeway was now a path from the past, going nowhere. Butterflies fluttered by, birds tweetled and insects rattled in the long grass. They walked on, feet crunching on the black cinders.

"You come up her often?"

"Now and then," Susan answered.

"You ever see Chippy?"

"No. Have you?"

"No. But I remember once when I was younger, I went up to the quarry to catch frogs with some of my mates. We put one kid on guard, you know, to watch out for him, and after a few minutes he came down and shouted, 'Chippy.' We all scarpered, back to the embankment. We looked back, but there was no sign of him."

"We're almost there."

They clambered down the opposite side of the embankment, and soon were standing beside a small lake. They looked into the clear water.

"It's ages since I've been up here," Alan said. He looked up and saw the two smokestacks, rising up, on the other side of the lake, from behind a wall of trees.

"It's over there," she pointed.

"What, passed the chimneys?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think we should."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't think we should."

"Not scared are you?"

"I told you: no."

"Come on then," she said.

The decision had already decided. It had nothing to do with her.

Susan led the way. It was a wild unexplored place, and they stayed close to the water's edge, where the vegetation was less dense. And it was mysterious as well. It was like being inside a church, after the service, with all the candles still burning, when the congregation was home breaking the commandments, and the priest was out, watching young boys in the park.

They reached the other side of the lake, climbed a slight incline, away from the water, up towards the trees, along a narrow trail towards the smokestacks beyond. There was an intangible presence in the air, swirling about them like wavering heat, holding still their tongues. They reached the end of the trail.

"I don't think we should go there," Alan said. They could see the old abandoned buildings, their windows unbroken and black with dirt. Secretive. And still she walked in front, still led the way.

They approached a low long building between the two smokestacks. The door was unlocked. Susan pushed it open, and they walked inside. The long room was empty. It was not only empty, but seemed always to have been empty. There were no bits and pieces on the floor, no crooked shelves on the wall, nothing to suggest that the room had ever been used.

"I wonder what they used this place for?" Alan whispered. They walked back outside, leaving the door open, hanging to

death on its rusty hinges. They crossed a large square of cracked concrete, riddled with dandelion clocks busy telling lies about the time, over towards a second building. Here the door was locked with a large rusty padlock. Susan pushed the door reluctantly, half heartedly, and the lock clanked solidly. Alan tried to show off, shoving it ineffectually with his shoulder.

"Let's look in the window," he said. But the windows, on the inside, were thick with dust.

"I can't see a thing," he said.

Susan was looking away, over towards the last building. It was a small house with a crooked chimney.

"That must be Chippy's house," Alan said, following her gaze. "I don't think we should go." But it was too late now. The decision had decided. Susan walked across the ill-timed square; Alan followed close behind.

The door was unlocked: Susan twisted the handle and it opened. They looked inside from where they stood, inside at the old sideboard with its collection of knick-knacks; the old couch, worn and weary; a wooden table surrounded by four wooden chairs; a threadbare carpet, robbed of its colour by age.

"It reminds me of The Three Bears," Alan whispered.

"Which three bears?"

"You know, in the story. It looks like someone's just slipped out to let the porridge cool."

"Oh," she said.

Susan stepped into the room.

"We shouldn't. He might be in," he whispered.

"Don't be daft. No-one's been here for ages."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell," she said, walking into the kitchen. She

washed the perspiration from her face, opened a cupboard beside the sink and took out a towel to dry herself.

"That's better," she said.

"Have you been here before?"

"No, why?"

"How did you know there was a towel in there?"

"What? I didn't. Let's go look upstairs." She walked back into the living room and up the bare wooden stairs.

"It's dark up here." There were no windows on the landing, and all the bedroom doors were closed. Susan realised Alan was still downstairs, and called to him.

"You coming up?"

He was looking at something: "In a minute."

When he finally arrived, Susan was in the main bedroom, spread out on the bed with her eyes closed.

"Look what I found," Alan said, suddenly uninterested in what he had found. Susan opened her eyes. It was a photograph. Her heart jumped. It was a photograph, faded and out of focus, of an old man standing beside a young girl.

"It must be Chippy," he said. Susan pretended to look.

"I wonder who the girl is? She looks like you—when you were younger."

"Don't be daft."

"I think we should go," he said, uneasily.

"Where?"

"To the place you know. Where ever we're going."

"This is the place."

"This is the place?" He was astonished. "You were bringing me here?"

"Yes."

"So you have been here before."

Silence.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you pretend we were going somewhere else?"

"I don't know. I thought you wouldn't come—if you knew. Sit on the bed, I've got some sandwiches and juice in the bag."

"Is that you in the picture?"

"Me?" she breathed a laugh. "How could it be? Oh, and we've got your cider as well."

Susan took the things from the bag.

"Let's start on the cider," Alan said with a grin, finally realising he was sitting on a bed in an empty house with Susan Priestly and her breasts. He took a long swig and passed the bottle. He watched as she closed her eyes to drink, and the bottle touched her lips, and she gulped and swallowed, and her chest heaved. He moved closer on the bed, ostensibly to get his hands on a sandwich.

"What kind are they."

"Tongue."

"Tongue? Yak."

"Don't you like tongue?"

"Well, I suppose it depends on who's it is." He smiled and she smiled back. The decision had decided. He took one of the anonymous tongue sandwiches and they ate in silence, passing the bottle of cider from one to the other.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"A bit."

"A bit lot?"

"Not really. My mother doesn't like me going out much."

"Not anywhere?"

"Not really."

"How often are you allowed out?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me. Once a week?"

"Well . . ."

"Once a week's reasonable."

"My mother doesn't have anything to do with reason. She has faith, instead."

"Who do you come with, normally?"

"Myself." She changed position, pushing her foot against his leg.

"All alone?"

She moved again. He took a gulp of cider and passed the bottle.

"Yes."

There was a moments' silence, and then Alan asked, "How come you never talk to anyone at school?"

"Why should I?"

"To have friends."

"I don't need friends."

"What about Chippy?"

"What?" she looked up.

"Did you ever see him?"

"Why do you keep asking? Never." She was thinking of Chippy: the old gentle man with his white Father Christmas hair and beard. It was years since he had died; but she could still see his face and still feel his touch.

She put the bottle to her lips; felt the decision decide. Her heart began to race as the liquid slipped down her throat, her mind twisting and turning under the effects of alcohol. He was watching and she knew he was watching.

"Come here," she said without preamble, putting the bottle on the floor beside the bed. Alan moved up, closer; Susan lifted her head and kissed him. His lips, his young

lips, felt strange. And then his hands moved to her breasts, squeezing, pushing and pulling, inside her shirt, inside her bra.

Soon their clothes were off. Susan was on her back, her legs apart; Alan was on top, clumsily trying to find the right place to penetrate. And then he was inside, thrusting, pushing into her, panting. All of a sudden it was over, like the fizzle of a dud firework.

Susan, naked, troubled, knew the secret was out. The secret was exposed. She had exposed it herself. Soon, everyone would know about everything. Chippy would be mad. His world would be invaded by an army of teenagers, going where they had no business going, touching things they had no business touching. They would destroy it all. Sooner or later they would destroy it all.

Susan closed the door behind them. They walked away from the quarry, through the fields, over the beck, up the streets in silence.

Back in the house, her mother was crying real tears. At least, they were really wet.

The following week, as Susan walked up the trail, everything seemed normal, silent, undisturbed. And then, as she reached the top, Susan stopped in her tracks. The building with the permanently locked door was gone—replaced by the building with the permanently opened door. The padlock sat on the ground beside, broken. She stepped forward to look into the shadowy interior, but changed her mind and stopped again. She had never known what was inside, and decided she should never know. Instead, she walked towards the house. The door was closed, but it seemed, in some strange inexplicable way, to be not

properly closed, not closed the way it was supposed to be closed. With a sense of misgiving, Susan pushed it open.

Standing straight ahead, facing her, was Chippy, his grey hair and beard gone wild, sticky and out of place. He looked like a man gone mad with shame.

"Chippy," she said, but no sound came from her lips. Chippy was holding a double barrelled shot gun. He raised it slowly, pointing it at Susan, closing one eye and staring down the barrel with the other.

"Chippy," she could not say.

"You shouldn't have," he mumbled. "You never shouldn't have."

Suddenly her vision seemed to telescope, the space between the two barrels becoming a long straight valley, barren and empty. She stared down the desolate valley, swallowing hard, trying to bring words to her mouth, to plead, to say it was not her fault, swallowing hard.

"You shouldn't have," he mumbled again. "You never shouldn't have."

Down the empty valley her eyes crawled, slowly and painfully and silently. And then, in the distance, she saw the sun, a dark eye of a sun, hanging in a red bloodshot sky; a dark eye of a setting sun.