Gil poked a finger deep into his breakfast porridge and immediately whipped it out again. The porridge was even hotter than usual, which meant there was almost no chance of beating the record he’d set yesterday. Still, he ought to give it a go. He watched the kitchen clock, waiting for the second hand to flick round to twelve.

*Ten. Nine. Eight …*

‘You’ve got money for lunch, have you?’ said Mum from behind him.

‘Yeah,’ said Gil, hunched over his porridge bowl with the spoon in his hand, concentrating. *Six. Five.* Crap. ‘Yeah’ was the wrong answer. He’d have to find a way to get round Mum later. *Three. Two. One …*

Lift off. Gil started to shovel porridge into his mouth as fast as he could. It burnt his lips and skinned the roof of his mouth, and the gloopy stuff in the bowl glistened and oozed like pale lava.

*Come on, come on,* thought Gil, jiggling the hot porridge between his teeth, trying to cool it down.

He watched the seconds steadily flicking away. The quicker he finished his porridge, the more time there was for ... well, for what, exactly? That was the problem. It just left more time for the argument that was always sitting quietly in the spaces between him and Mum and Dad these days, waiting for them to come too close to each other. Then it would suddenly blaze up from nowhere, like the crackle of static electricity.
'Slow down,' said Mum. ‘What’s the hurry? You’ll burn yourself.’

She hadn’t even looked round, as far as Gil could tell. How did she know he was eating too fast? He swallowed the last lump of porridge and noted the time. Two minutes twenty-four. Disappointing. Nowhere near his personal best. And it would drag his average down, too.

Dad swept into the kitchen and grabbed his phone from the top of the fridge.

‘I’m off,’ he said. ‘Gil, your job when you come home from school is to tidy your room, please. It’s a complete tip.’

‘You went in my room?’ said Gil.

‘The door was open,’ said Dad.

‘So? It’s my room. I decide who’s allowed in.’

‘Oh, really,’ said Dad. ‘Is that so? Well, it doesn’t alter the fact that your room is a mess and needs tidying.’

Gil looked up properly and saw Dad – Dad in his smart-but-casual work gear, always black trousers and a blue jumper, with his phone in one hand and his laptop in the other, and that look of invincible rightness on his face – and felt the zap of electricity jolt him into a reply.

‘Is that so?’ he said, slowly. ‘Well, sorry Dad, but I’ve got plans for after school.’

‘Your plans for after school,’ said Dad, ‘are to come straight home and sort out your room.’

‘But I’m going into town,’ said Gil.

‘Are you?’ said Mum. ‘Who with? Louis?’

Gil ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth, feeling the shiny raw patches where he’d blistered it with the hot porridge.
‘Actually,’ he said casually, ‘I thought I might go on my own, for once.’

There was a moment of silence while Mum and Dad looked at each other and Gil felt the feeling hit him again. It was a new feeling, and he hadn’t got used to it yet. It was like the moment in a dream where you are running, and suddenly you can’t feel your feet on the pavement any longer and you realise you are running in the air. It made Gil feel dizzy, as if he couldn’t breathe, as if he wanted to stop but couldn’t stop, and it scared him. But it was exciting too.

‘That is completely out of the question,’ said Dad, and at the same time Mum said, ‘Oh but Gil, you know we don’t really want you to go into town on your own.’

‘So you keep telling me,’ said Gil. ‘I still don’t get it, though.’

‘I could meet you when school finishes and we could go together,’ said Mum.

‘Mum. I’m nearly fourteen. You can’t pick me up from school any more, you really can’t.’

‘In any case, Rachel,’ said Dad, ‘you’re forgetting that I’ve just told Gil he’s to come home and tidy his room. End of story.’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ said Mum. ‘Well, maybe you could go on Monday instead, with Louis.’

‘I don’t want to go with Louis.’

‘Oh dear, have you fallen out?’

‘Mum, for God’s sake! I just want to do something by myself for once. What’s the big deal?’

‘You are not going into town on your own,’ said Dad. He had put down the laptop, and now he shoved his phone in his pocket so he could fold his arms.
‘Perhaps I could meet you in town one afternoon,’ said Mum. ‘So you wouldn’t have to be seen with me at school.’

Gil looked down into his empty bowl. He’d reached the point where he had to be careful not to meet Mum’s eyes, because if he did he would start to feel sorry for her, and then it would make him angry. He knew there would be a look in her eyes like a puppy that has no idea if it’s going to be punished or rewarded.

‘You do know that all the boys in my year are allowed into town on their own now?’ he said, staring at the scraps of porridge that were slowly beginning to harden into glue.

‘You’re not just any old boy, though, are you?’ said Mum.

‘Look, I’m not four, all right? I’m not a baby.’

‘You’re only thirteen,’ said Dad.

‘So, basically, you don’t think I’m old enough,’ said Gil. ‘You don’t trust me.’

‘Don’t put words in my mouth, please,’ said Dad. He hadn’t moved.

‘If you trusted me you’d let me have a front door key.’

‘You don’t need a key,’ said Dad. ‘There’s always someone here to let you in.’

‘So, according to you, I’m not even old enough to be home alone,’ said Gil. When Dad didn’t respond, he went on. ‘So when will I be old enough?’

‘We’re not prepared to discuss it right now,’ said Dad.

‘No, Dad, I want to know. How old do I have to be? Fourteen? Fifteen? Eighteen? Forty-eight, for God’s sake?’

‘I said we are not prepared to discuss it,’ said Dad. ‘This is not the time.’
‘What the hell do you think is going to happen to me?’

Gil saw Mum’s eyes widen slightly. It was a stupid question. He knew exactly what she thought would happen to him. The bus might crash, or he might be abducted, or he could choke on a piece of chewing gum as he walked down the High Street, or he might be mugged at knifepoint in that little alley behind HMV. He could see it all running through her mind in a big fast jumble, like a violent film trailer.

Gil felt himself begin to buzz quietly. He should stop now, he knew that, before he slammed into the wall ahead of him. But the wave carried him, his legs carried him, running over thin air.

‘Mum, listen,’ he said. ‘You know I’d be careful.’

‘Drop it,’ said Dad.

‘We’ll think about it another time,’ Mum said, getting up. ‘I promise.’

‘Yeah, right. Like I really believe that,’ said Gil. He saw Mum’s shoulders twitch and half-regretted the comment. It was becoming too easy to hurt Mum. ‘Look, if you’d let me have a phone I could text you every five minutes to say I was OK,’ he went on.

‘You are not having a mobile phone,’ said Dad.

‘Why not? Everyone else has had one since they started secondary school. Even the really sad people at school have got a phone.’

‘You know perfectly well why we don’t want you to have a phone yet,’ said Dad. ‘We’ve been through this before. There are no scientific studies on mobile phone use which have fully explored the long-term effects, and the government advice is still that children should be discouraged from using mobile phones.'
And quite apart from that, the evidence shows they increase your chances of being mugged and bullied.’

‘Oh yeah! Scientific studies. Government advice. I completely forgot,’ Gil said, with as much sarcasm as he could manage.

Mum had moved into the farthest corner of the kitchen, as if trying to move out of range of the argument. Gil wondered why she didn’t just leave the room.

‘Science is the best tool we have for understanding the world, Gil,’ Dad said. ‘We have to take it seriously.’

‘I hate your stupid science.’

‘That’s a bit short-sighted of you,’ said Dad. ‘Without science there would be no mobile phones, for example.’

‘If science proved your brain was in your bum you’d believe it.’

‘I’d certainly consider it,’ said Dad. ‘If the evidence was convincing.’

He was always right. Always, always, always. Evidence, logic, facts. There was never any way through it or round it or under it or over it. It was beginning to drive Gil crazy. He stared at Dad and Dad stared back, with the kind of smile that made Gil start to rock his chair backwards and forwards, smashing the chair legs on the hard kitchen floor.

‘So if phones might give you brain cancer, how come you and Mum have both got them?’

‘We use them carefully,’ said Dad.

‘And you don’t think I would?’

‘Gil, when you are older you will understand what a responsibility it is being a parent,’ said Dad. ‘We have a duty to look after you, even if you don’t yet see that it’s for your own good.’
'Blah blah blah blah blah,' Gil said. ‘You talk such a lot of crap. I hate you.’ He shoved his chair back quickly and stood up.

‘Gil,’ said Mum. ‘Please.’

‘Please what? It’s not me that’s the problem. It’s him.’

‘Get in the car,’ said Dad. ‘Now.’ He took a step forwards and Gil automatically stepped away. He wondered if Dad was going to try to pin him against the wall. He’d never done it before, but it would really freak Mum out.

‘I can’t go to school like this,’ said Gil, bouncing on his toes in case he needed to run. ‘I haven’t even cleaned my teeth.’

‘I don’t give a damn,’ said Dad. ‘You’re coming with me.’

His hand shot out to grab Gil’s arm. Gil dodged him and ran round the table.

‘You shouldn’t be driving to work anyway,’ Gil said. ‘You’re destroying the planet.’

Dad made a noise that was probably meant to be a laugh. ‘Oh yes, I’m destroying it single-handedly, I know. Global warming is all my fault.’

It was a mistake, Gil realised, running round the table. He’d got himself trapped in a corner and the kitchen had turned into a cage. His hands ached, and looking down he saw that his fingers had made themselves into fists, even though he didn’t remember telling them to. It was an effort to find something he could spit back at Dad.

‘Well, Dad, it’s your generation who’ve well and truly screwed it up. You’ve just behaved like a bunch of selfish gits and left the mess for us kids to clear up.’

‘That is enough. You are coming with me now.’
‘If you come any closer,’ said Gil, ‘you’ll get this over your head.’ He grabbed his porridge bowl off the kitchen table and waved it wildly in Dad’s direction.

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ screamed Mum suddenly, dropping something with a crash into the sink. ‘Just stop it! Stop it!’

Dad froze in mid-step, his eyes full of astonishment, and for a moment even Gil was thrown. Mum never lost it. She never got more than mildly irritated, never screamed at anyone.

‘Rachel?’ said Dad. ‘I’m sorry – is it all getting too —’ With his last shred of energy Gil hurled the porridge bowl at Dad. He heard Mum cry out at exactly the moment that he saw Dad catch the bowl neatly, just like a frisbee, and then he ran from the kitchen.

He took the stairs two at a time, slamming the bedroom door behind him, and immediately started to build the barricade the way he had before. He dragged his homework desk across the door and put the chair on top of the desk, weighing it down with as many heavy objects as he could put his hands on. And then he lay on the bed and waited. Next time I’ll throw the kettle, he thought. Or one of Mum’s teapots with the tea still in it. He won’t be able to catch that. He tried to laugh but it made his lungs hurt.

Dad took a while to come. In the end, though, Gil heard Dad’s footsteps plod up the stairs and stop outside his door. The handle rattled.

‘Come out of there, Gil.’

‘You can’t make me. You can’t force me to do anything.’

‘Oh? Really?’

There was a thump on the door and Gil saw it move. He could almost feel Dad’s whole weight pressed against it. The desk tilted slightly, and the chair slipped a centimetre.
‘So you’re going to break the door down, are you, Dad?’ Gil said. ‘That’s very mature of you.’

The door relaxed again. There was silence for a while, and Gil gazed through the bedroom window, thinking about the fire drill that Dad made him practise from time to time. *Unlock the middle window. The key’s above the curtain rail. Step out on to the conservatory roof – the joists, Gil, the wooden beams, not the glass, or you’ll go straight through. Edge across to the wall, crawl down backwards, hang at full stretch off the end of the wall, drop into the back garden. Safe.* The fire drill had seemed like a huge adventure when he was little, and now it felt like just another of Dad’s pointless rules. But it might come in useful as an escape route if Dad decided to lay siege to his bedroom.

‘Gil, listen. You’re not an adult yet. We have to do what we think is right.’

‘I don’t care,’ shouted Gil. ‘I’m not listening.’

‘Look, I’m sorry if I made you angry. But you must believe that the things we do are in your best interests.’

‘I don’t believe it. I don’t believe anything you say.’

‘Gil, I’ve got to go to work now.’

‘Why don’t you just sod off to work, then? Your precious, wonderful work. It’s so *important*, Dad, isn’t it?’

‘Is this how you speak to your teachers? Honestly, Gil, I don’t understand what’s got into you recently.’

*YOU have, you loser,* thought Gil, but he didn’t say it aloud.

‘You can’t go on like this,’ Dad said through the door. ‘For your mother’s sake, please try to sort yourself out.’

That meant Mum was upset, but Gil made himself not think about it, in the same way that he was making himself not think about the way she’d screamed at him and Dad.
‘Have a good day at school, Gil.’
‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Gil. ‘Whatever.’

There was silence, and then Dad’s footsteps went away down the stairs, and Gil heard him talking quietly to Mum below. After a while the front door clicked shut and the car engine started.

All at once Gil felt exhausted. The wave that had carried him this far had smashed itself to pieces and he looked at the day that lay ahead of him with something like desperation. *Have a good day at school?* What kind of crap was that? Every day was a clone of the day before. Each day was exactly the same, from the moment he got up until the moment he went to bed. Identical clothes, identical meals, identical arguments.

Nothing ever changed, nothing moved on, nothing was sorted out. You could fiddle around with a few of the details – swap the porridge for cornflakes, or wear a new pair of trainers – but it made no real difference. Everywhere he turned Dad was there, blocking his way, breathing down his neck. He was stuck in an endless loop.

He had to find a way out, before he completely lost his mind.