Here’s Rose.

Most people say her eyes are too far apart. When she’s bored, like now, she wraps her legs (in the yellow leggings) round each other, one foot hooked around the other ankle. She does the same with her hands, twisting them so the wrists cross. She can feel the fingers on her left hand touch the skin on the wrist of her right.

‘What did one hat say to the other?’ she says. She’s eleven, but she often seems younger.

Aaron doesn’t notice. He’s eight, and is sitting on a low wall. His hair is thin and blond and clipped almost to baldness. He wears her old T-shirt. It says ‘Princess’ in purple glitter.

The two of them are outside the shop, and their mother is inside. Rose can feel the damp pavement through her sock. She switches feet, and, balancing, reaches her yellow leg out to prod Aaron with a toe.

‘What did one hat say to the other?’ she says again. Aaron’s face skews into a bony grin.

‘You wait here. I’ll go on a head,’ says Rose.

Aaron says, ‘Good one.’

They always say, ‘Good one.’

‘Your turn,’ says Rose.
Aaron’s eyes drift up in thought.

Rose peers through the glass. She likes the way her own reflection sits like a ghost over the people inside. She can see them moving past clothes, toasters, loose shoes in buckets, pick ’n’ mix. She shifts a little so her face floats over a woman in a bright blue dress.

‘Oh!’

Aaron half rises from his seat on the wall. His limbs lurch, puppet-like.

‘What did one butt cheek say to the other?’ he shouts.

‘I don’t know,’ says Rose.

‘If we stick together we can stop this shit!’

Aaron cackles, a high, raw, dizzy sound that spills out of his slight frame. He’s so skinny you can clearly see where the skull dips in at his temples.

‘Good one,’ says Rose. She smiles at him.

Aaron falls silent, a look of wonder at the brilliance of that joke still on his face.

Rose switches feet again. Through the window she can see glimpses of her mother, a heel, the edge of a red coat as she rounds an aisle. When she dresses up like this, she seems like a different person.

At home, they have a magazine. Rose reads it, every night. She always looks on the back cover first. The girl there is long limbed, red hooded. Beside her a wolf, sleek, pale eyed. Trees, fingerling the darkness, and a moon, a penny dropped on black velvet. She has a dream that feels like the picture, a dream of night as thick and rich as chocolate.

The shop door slams.

‘Rose!’
Her mother’s voice hisses in her ear. She feels thin fingers grip her cheek and then they press something in at her mouth. For a moment she smells the sour faggy musk of her mother’s unwashed hands, and then the sugar hits, a bright, glorious fizz of cola.

‘Now, quick.’

Aaron jumps up and runs off ahead. Rose hurries after him in her stockinged feet. Her mouth is filled with saliva. She feels light and dizzy. She thinks that there has never been a better taste in all the world.

‘Did you get them?’ she shouts back to her mother.

‘Yes!’

Rose runs faster, lighter, the balls of her feet aching.

That’s how it starts. It’s always the same. There are rules, and when you break them, somewhere out there in the forest the wolf pricks up his ears, and the story begins.
RAGS
Three years later.

Beyond the end of the estate is the bridge. Where the bridge crosses the river, the path passes under the arch. When spring comes, when they are fourteen, this is where Alisha teaches Dillon to smoke.

Dillon takes the cigarette from the packet. He holds it tentatively between his finger and thumb. His face is white and round, pasty pale and featureless with youth. His eyes are pale too, a soft grey under faded blond eyebrows.

Oni laughs. ‘It won’t bite,’ she says.

Oni’s face is also plump and young, but she is as black as he is white, a proper rich blue-black. Alisha is somewhere in between, dark with fake tan and foundation, her eyelashes heavy, false and beautiful.

Alisha takes the cigarette off him. She puts it between her shiny lips and lights it. Her cheeks suck in.

‘Here,’ she says.

The end of the cigarette is on fire. Dillon can see the smoke.

He takes it. He almost touches her fingers, bright with blue gel nails. He can feel the air between them. He lifts the cigarette to his mouth. He catches a sticky, enchanting hint of strawberry lip gloss on the filter.

He blushes, and inhales deeply.
After he’s finished coughing, he stays down, head between his knees. He spits. Sticks his tongue out.
‘Blah,’ he says. ‘That’s fucking rank.’
Alisha catches Oni’s eye. ‘Pass it,’ she says, reaching out. She draws, lets the smoke drift casually over her face. She passes it to Oni, who smokes it down then flicks the butt perfectly into the grass.

They step out from under the arch and head on up the path. After the bridge, the trees gather round the river. The path muddies, and roots curl across its surface. Everything is worn. The trunks by the path are etched with names and dates, the weeds rich with urine. Cider bottles gather in pockets at the base of wide-branched trees.

There are witches hiding here, if you look.

When Dillon was six, he saw them from the bridge. He peered over with his mother into the twilight, and the shadows cackled with laughter under wreaths of cigarette smoke. Witches and beasts and love and lost children.

Every town has a wood like this. Maybe the trees are street-lamps, or goalposts, or concrete pillars wrapped in chicken wire, but there is always a place like this, where teenagers step out, alone, into adulthood, finding out the rules for themselves.

The girls lead the way. Dillon watches. His mouth tastes awful, but the day is high and bright. The girls wear the same clothes. Jeans, trainers, puffy bomber jackets with huge furred hoods. He thinks they look amazing. It’s hard to say what makes them so amazing, but they are. They know things he can’t dream of.
When they talk to each other it makes no sense.
'She said she was a sket.'
'Well she is a fucking sket. I don’t even care if it’s blue.'
'I just think she should know herself.'
'What’s your name? Barbara?'
Then they laugh, long and hard, doubling up theatrically.
Sometimes they talk to Dillon.
'Who have you kissed?'
'Have you kissed Ceri?'
'He’s never kissed Ceri!'
'Have you kissed Rose?'
'Don’t be fucking disgusting!'
Alisha frowns at him. ‘You haven’t kissed Rose, have you?’
‘No,’ he says, affronted.
'What’s wrong with Rose?’ says Oni, eyes sparkling.
'Shit up,’ says Alisha. ‘You can smell her period.’
Oni roars with delight.
At a turn in the path they find some glass bottles and break them. Dillon throws some stones. He jumps to catch a low branch and pulls himself upside down. They laugh again.
Oni looks him in the eye and says, ‘Do you want to kiss me?’
He can’t stop himself looking to Alisha. She grins, her eyes wide and expressionless.
He kisses Oni. He moves towards her face, and he thinks he’s about to kiss her, and he imagines that he’s about to kiss her, and then he is, and it takes him by surprise that it’s happening there, on his face, with his lips and her lips, wet and strange, and not just in his head after all.
Her mouth moves open and closed, and his does too, and
her tongue slips inside, so his does too, and he feels like he is balancing on something.

They stop. Alisha claps.

One day they go farther. Dillon, and Oni, and Alisha. They walk beyond the well-worn paths, and take the turning that climbs higher up the sides of the valley. There is less rubbish here. The weeds seem cleaner. The path winds around the trees, rather than pushing a straight line through them. Alisha sings a song. It’s one that they hear on the radio. Her voice is in tune, heartfelt. Dillon listens, astonished.

Oni holds Dillon’s hand. They have kissed three times now. She might be his girlfriend. Her face is round, plump, black. It might also be beautiful. It’s so hard to tell these things. If he was black too, he might be able to tell.

The woods are dirty, and he is alone, and scared. The woods are beautiful, and he’s in love.

There is magic, and there is none.

His shoes thicken in the mud.

Alisha showers, uses the products her mum bought her. She dries her hair, stands in front of the mirror. She moves her head carefully, one side to another. She smiles, frowns. Widens her eyes to look at their pink corners. Leans close to look for spots. Draws a careful line around an eye and feels a lift, giddy and slight and sweet, like a step into a well-fitting dress, like someone laughing at one of her jokes.

At breakfast her mum circles her warily.

‘What are you having?’

‘Juice.’
‘Just juice?’
‘Yes just juice. Why?’
‘No reason.’
‘Stop it.’
‘Stop what?’
‘Stop having a go.’
‘How did I have a go?’
They pause.
‘Are you allowed jeans?’
‘If they’re black,’ she lies.
‘What’s on today, then?’
‘School.’
‘Alisha.’
‘What? It’s the same every day.’

Dillon looks in the mirror too. He clenches his jaw and frowns at himself. He lowers his brows farther, until he’s squinting. He curls his lip. Then his face clears. There isn’t much for a boy to do, other than hope. He hopes his smooth pink cheeks will darken with stubble, or harden into an angular jawline. He hopes he might get chest hair, or grow taller and more muscular. He imagines it happening, like in ‘Beauty and the Beast’.

He frowns again, as if he’s in pain. That’s part of it. You have to be hurt into manliness. Sometimes he dreams of being beaten up. On the corners of his exercise books he draws thickset faces, bald headed, broken nosed.

He checks his pubes.

Maybe a girl will touch him one day. He can’t quite imagine it, though.
Another day, they are coming back down towards the bridge. The path runs into a dense block of shadow under the stone arch. As they get closer, the light from the other side picks out the legs of two figures standing in the darkness.

A faint wisp of smoke curls out from under the arch. Alisha and Oni walk quickly on. Dillon follows, slower.

One of the figures is Aaron. No one else has trousers that flap around stick-thin legs like that. No one else stands as if interrupted mid-turn. His wonky limbs have a frozen grace to them, like crooked branches.

Next to him, feet planted wide, is a boy who is everything Aaron is not. Where Aaron’s features are delicate, but disturbingly ugly, this boy has a rough, thuggish beauty. Aaron looks like he might snap in a high wind, but the boy next to him is iron-hard, solid as the arch above them.

He smokes like he knows how.

‘Can I get a tab?’ asks Oni. Her eyes catch the low light under the arch; bright and eager against the shadowed stone.

The boy holds one out. He offers the packet to Alisha as well. Not to Dillon.

Alisha and Oni draw a cigarette each. They light them. Dillon waits. He doesn’t want one, but he doesn’t want to be the person not smoking one. The boy draws on his cigarette, then opens his mouth to let the smoke coil out gently. Wiry cords of adult muscle knot his shoulders.

His nose is broken.

‘You’re new, aren’t you?’ asks Alisha. ‘Your name’s Jack, isn’t it?’ He nods.

The girls are ignoring Dillon. He looks at Aaron. Aaron’s smoking too, even though he’s only eleven, but he does it
in a different way. He holds his hand by his mouth at all times, and when he draws, his cheeks grow deep hollows. In that moment, you can see that the skull underneath is not symmetrical. His cheekbones are huge, but they are not the same, and his jaw moves in a way that is somehow not right.

Dillon shivers.

'Easy, mate.'

Jack's voice has a rasping, mocking quality. It isn't a question, but it needs an answer. Dillon shrugs, his face carefully blank apart from a slightly pained frown. Jack laughs. When he laughs, he throws his head back, opens his mouth wide. His body moves too. The arms swing, the feet plant themselves restlessly, over and over, in the same spot.

'Which one's your girlfriend?'

Dillon goes white. He shrugs again.

'He's just our friend,' says Alisha.

They walk back into town together. Dillon walks beside Aaron, Jack in front with the girls.

Dillon watches Alisha. Aaron watches Jack.

A week later, on the way back from visiting his mum at the hospital, Dillon gets off the bus at the bridge. He stands above where the path passes beneath. He can smell the grain of cigarette smoke. As his eyes adjust he can see someone in the shadow below. Two figures, one kneeling. Then a bright dot glows, smoke is drawn in, and he sees Jack's wicked face looking up at him while Oni fumbles at his crotch.

Dillon steps back. The river curves away towards the forest. The sun is low, the light red.
This town is stone, mostly. Rows of stone terraces nestled in a valley. A market street, a town hall, shops with the names painted on stone lintels. If you follow the river down, you’re soon in the forest. But stick to the road, and you enter the twenty-first century. Over the bridge, past the old stone warehouse, beyond the sharp grey rows of new houses, sits the industrial estate with its hangar-like supermarket and tile and carpet merchants, grouped around double roundabouts and unmarked roads.

But go farther still, and you’re out. The land rises, the valley deepens, the tops beckon. Floating on the long crests of purple moor are islands of stone, like blunt-headed breaching whales, circled by the thick runnels of peat-cut tracks. Up there, you can sit in the nook of a rock and see nothing but sky.

The beach is an hour away in the other direction. The first time Rose and Aaron are taken there, they arrive late, as the sun is setting over the wide bay. They stand watching everything carefully. Then something catches Aaron and he runs, arms at his sides, hands in his pockets, his skinny torso wobbling and his head down against the wind and the sand, his coat flapping against a body that almost isn’t there.
Rose stays back, watching her brother. Her foot is twisted round her ankle, her wrists interlock. The sea is big. Aaron is small against it. It’s flatter than she thought it would be.

She imagines she is a rubber band, twisted tight. She tenses, then releases, flinging herself wide into a sudden, gawky pirouette. She staggers a little, then spins again.

Graeme watches too. He is heavy, greying and still, carrying a weariness with him even here.

Jack doesn’t care about the beach. He’s been living with them for a month. The sea isn’t new to him. On the way to the caravan, he promised them all it would be shit. Since they arrived, he’s stood beside Graeme, poking the sand with his foot.

But he raises his head now and watches Rose. They’re the same age. He watches, then shouts, a huge, incoherent roar. He runs at her. Rose turns sharply. He pounds into her, a full-body tackle, and the two fall. Rose shrieks.

’Jack!’ shouts Graeme.

Aaron is a few hundred yards away. He comes running back, twisting and flapping. Jack and Rose roll on the ground. Graeme gets to them first, pulls at Jack’s hoody. The two of them are flailing, sandy. Rose flings her head back, and Graeme sees with a shock her wild grin of delight just as Aaron hurtles up and flings himself onto Jack. Jack rolls, Graeme stumbles, and they all go down.

’Stop!’ roars Graeme.

And they do.

They are on the sand, damp seeping into their clothes. The sea is wide, the sky wider. They half lie, half sit, in a heap. Jack’s leg rests across Rose, Aaron is leaning against Graeme.
Graeme can hear their breathing.
‘OK,’ he says.
They wait.
‘OK,’ he says again.

Later, in the caravan, Graeme tells them a new joke.
‘Why do seagulls fly over the sea?’
‘I don’t know,’ says Aaron.
‘Because if they flew over the bay, they’d be bagels.’
Aaron cackles. He picks Graeme’s phone up.

Rose has three magazines spread out on the pull-out bed in front of her – *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Take a Break*. Caz, the social worker, brings them every time she visits. She’s large, like Graeme. Maybe fat. She and Rose sit, side by side, carefully turning the pages. When she leaves, Rose cuts the pictures they were looking at out of the magazines and puts them up in her room. She cuts out adverts for perfume and clothes and shots from red-carpet photocalls and feature interviews with beautiful people and adverts for furniture and kitchenware and limited-edition figurines of shepherdesses. The pictures cover the whole wall now.

In the caravan, Rose turns the pages slowly. Faces smile back. Her brows draw in, an expression of faint puzzlement on her face. Page after page, slick and mysterious.

Jack is outside. The football makes a steady thunk on the wall. Every time it hits, the caravan shudders.

Aaron puts Graeme’s phone down on the table and clambers over to sit on the bed by Rose. He looks over her shoulder.

Thunk.
‘Jack!’
Thunk.

Graeme stands up and goes to the door. ‘Ball,’ he says.
Jack hands him the ball. He follows Graeme back into the caravan. He stands in the middle of the main room, kicking his toe gently against the edge of the kitchen cabinet. Then he goes to Rose.

He climbs onto the bed with care on the other side of Rose. Aaron, Rose, Jack. Their shoulders touching, their feet stretched out. The magazine on Rose’s lap.

Graeme watches from the table.
‘Do you think they’re all rich?’ asks Jack.
They look intently at the page.
‘Yes,’ says Rose, after a moment. Her voice is quiet and firm.

In the morning, they have breakfast on the picnic table outside. The sun is out, but thin. Rose has a dense bruise spreading down her upper arm.
‘Is that from yesterday?’ asks Graeme.
She smiles. She rests her fingers against it. He can see her press in, the hint of a flinch in the line of her mouth.

She is thin, he thinks, but she is growing. When Caz first brought her round, her pockets were full of food – lint-flecked apple slices, brown and soft, raisins, nuggets of chocolate. They walked in like spiders, her and Aaron, swaying on stick-legs. Wherever she got the food from, it wasn’t home.

They play minigolf. Jack wins. They sit on the dunes, then they run down them. Jack chases Aaron. Jack punches Aaron until Graeme tells him to stop. Aaron goads Jack into punching him again and looks at him with hysterical, hopeless adoration.