

**Nick Hornby**  
**“About a Boy”**

► I’m a single father. I have a two-year-old boy. I’m a single father. I have a two-year-old boy. I’m a single father. I have a two-year-old boy. However many times Will told himself this, he could always **find some reason that prevented him from believing it**; in his own head – not the place that counted the most, but important nevertheless – he didn’t feel like a parent. He was too young, too old, too stupid, too smart, too **groovy**, too impatient, too selfish, too careless, too careful (whatever the contraceptive circumstances of the woman he was seeing, he always, always used a Durex, even in the days before you had to), he didn’t know enough about kids, he went out too often, he drank too much, he took too many drugs. When he looked in the mirror, he didn’t, couldn’t, see a dad, especially a single dad. ◀

He was trying to see a single dad in the mirror because he had **run out of** single mums to sleep with; in fact, Angie had so far proved to be both the beginning and the end of his supply. It was all very well deciding that single mums were the future, that there were millions of sad, Julie Christie-like waifs just **dying for** his call, but **the frustrating truth** was that he didn’t have any of their phone numbers. Where did they hang out?

**It took him longer than it should have done to realize that**, by definition, single mothers had children, and children, famously, prevented one from hanging out anywhere. He had made a few gentle, half-hearted enquiries of friends and acquaintances, but had so far failed **to make any real headway**; the people he knew either didn’t know any single mothers, or were unwillingly to effect the necessary introductions due to Will’s legendarily **poor romantic track record**. But now he had found **the ideal solution to this unexpected dearth of prey**. He had invented a two-year-old son called Ned and had joined a single parents’ group.

Most people would not have bothered to go to these lengths **to indulge a whim**, but Will quite often **bothered to do things that most people wouldn’t bother to do**, simply because he had the time to bother. Doing nothing all day gave him endless opportunities **to dream and scheme** and pretend to be something he wasn’t. He had, after **a fit of remorse** following a weekend of **extreme self-indulgence**, volunteered to work in a soup kitchen, and even though he never actually reported for duty, the phone call had allowed him to pretend, for a couple of days, that he was a kind of guy who might. And he had thought about VSO and filled in the forms, and he had cut out an advert in the local paper about teaching slow learners to read, and he had contacted estate agents about opening a restaurant and then a bookshop...

**The point was that** if you had a history of pretending, then joining a single parent group when you were not a single parent was neither problematic nor particularly scary. If it didn’t **work out**, then he’d just have to try something else. **It was not a big deal.**

# Fight Club By Chuck Polahniuck

The Parker-Morris Building won't be here in nine minutes. You take enough blasting gelatin and wrap the foundation columns of anything, you can topple any building in the world. You have to tamp it good and tight with sandbags so the blast goes against the column and not out into the parking garage around the column.

This how-to stuff isn't in any history book.

The three ways to make napalm: One, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate. Two, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and diet cola. Three, you can dissolve crumbled cat litter in gasoline until the mixture is thick.

Ask me how to make nerve gas. Oh, all those crazy car bombs.

Nine minutes.

The Parker-Morris Building will go over, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, slow as a tree falling in the forest. Timber. You can topple anything. It's weird to think the place where we're standing will only be a point in the sky.

Tyler and meat the edge of the roof, the gun in my mouth, I'm wondering how clean this gun is.

We just totally forget about Tyler's whole murder-suicide thing while we watch another file cabinet slip out the side of the building and the drawers roll open midair, reams of white paper caught in the updraft and carried off on the wind.

Eight minutes.

Then the smoke, smoke starts out of the broken windows. The demolition team will hit the primary charge in maybe eight minutes. The primary charge will blow the base charge, the foundation columns will crumble, and the photo series of the Parker-Morris Building will go into all the history books.

The five-picture time-lapse series. Here, the building's standing. Second picture, the building will be at an eighty-degree angle. Then a seventy-degree angle. The building's at a forty-five-degree angle in the fourth picture when the skeleton starts to give and the tower gets a slight arch to it. The last shot, the tower, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, will slam down on the national museum which is Tyler's real target.

"This is our world, now, our world," Tyler says, "and those ancient people are dead."

If I knew how this would all turn out, I'd be more than happy to be dead and in Heaven right now.

Seven minutes.

Up on top of the Parker-Morris Building with Tyler's gun in my mouth. While desks and filing cabinets and computers meteor down on the crowd around the building and smoke funnels up from the broken windows and three blocks down the street the demolition team watches the clock, I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer.

Six minutes.

We have sort of a triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me.

I don't want Marla, and Tyler doesn't want me around, not anymore. This isn't about love as in caring. This is about property as in ownership.

Without Marla, Tyler would have nothing.

Five minutes.

Maybe we would become a legend, maybe not. No, I say, but wait.

Where would Jesus be if no one had written the gospels?

Four minutes.

I tongue the gun barrel into my cheek and say, you want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I'll make you a legend. I've been here from the beginning.

I remember everything.

Three minutes.

**Julia Darling**  
**“The Taxi Driver’s Daughter”**

Caris begins to hurl decorations at the tree, bunging things any place where there’s a gap, all the time imagining her mother wandering through the fine-smelling floors of Fenwick’s, surrounded by forests of tempting shoes, their toes pointing at her, their soles arched, their high heels posturing. She sees her with a furtive, criminal expression on her face, eyes darting about, a glistening layer of sweat on her forehead. But it doesn’t fit in. The last time Caris saw her mother she was hovering the bathroom wearing a pair of bedroom slippers. Caris had noticed how old the skin on her hands looked, even though the rest of her looked so young. Now Caris feels as if she hardly knows her at all.

Caris might explode with curiosity. She stands by the sitting-room curtains, looking out hungrily into the street, biting the edge of her little fingernail until it bleeds. She can picture her father saying, “Why, Louise, why? Don’t I work night and day to buy you anything you want? Didn’t I recently get you a new saucepan set?”

*My mother is a robber, thinks Caris. The robber mother. Other people’s mothers get things like depression and have hysterectomies, but my mother is a thief.*

It’s late when Mac finally returns home. Caris runs to the door and stands there framed in light, her chin jutting out, her hands on her hips. Mac climbs out of the car and walks round to the passenger door, opening it to reveal Caris’s mother.

Louise looks diminished; huddled in her raincoat, her girlish hair undone and falling either side of her face, staring straight ahead, then turning to blink up at Mac, her face shuttered.

The couple walk slowly to the door.

“Hallo, Caris,” says Louise. Caris can sense Stella, standing behind her on the stairs.

“So,” says Caris loudly, “did you do it?”

“That’s enough,” says Mac, pushing past her. Louise makes a run for the stairs, slithering past Stella.

“Tea’s ready,” says Stella in a prim voice. She walks into the kitchen and begins to drag the dried-up casserole out of the oven.

Caris follows Mac into the sitting-room.

“She’s not herself,” says he finally. “She didn’t know what she was doing.” He looks helpless. “Monthlies,” he murmurs, and picks up a newspaper.

“Have they charged her, or what?” asks Caris.

“Yes. Let’s not talk about it now, pet,” he says. “Let’s watch the news.”

Caris can hardly contain herself. She stamps up to her room, ignoring weak calls of “Tea!”

Her mother’s door is closed. Caris sits on her bed and considers things and how much they cost. She wonders if a stolen thing looks different to something you’ve bought. She wonders if any of the birthday presents her mother gave her were stolen. *Perhaps she stole me*, she thinks.

## Sue Townsend 'Queen and I'

The street sign at the entrance to the Close had lost five black metal letters. HELL CLOSE it now said, illuminated by the light of a flickering street lamp.

The Queen thought, "Yes, it *is* Hell, it must be, because I've never seen anything like it in the whole of my waking life."

She had visited many council estates – had opened community centres, had driven through the bunting and the cheering crowds, alighted from the car, walked on red carpets, been given a posy by a two-year-old in a "Mothercare" party frock, been greeted by tongue-tied dignitaries, pulled a cord (дергала за шнур), revealed a plaque (показывала именные дощечки), signed the visitors' book. Then, carpet, car, drive to helicopter and up, up and away. She'd seen the odd documentary on BBC2 about urban poverty, heard unattractive poor people talk in broken sentences about their dreadful lives, but she'd regarded such programmes as sociological curiosities, on a par with watching the circumcision ceremonies of Amazonian Indians, so far away that it didn't really matter.

It stank. Somebody in the Close was burning car tyres. The acrid smoke drifted sluggishly over a rooftop. Not one house in the Close had its full complement of windows. Fences were broken, or gone. Gardens were full of rubbish, black plastic bags had been split by ravenous dogs, televisions flickered and blared. A police car drove into the Close and stopped. A policeman pulled a youth off the pavement, threw him into the back of the car and sped away with the youth struggling in the back. A man lay under a wreck of a car which was jacked up on bricks. Other men squatted close by, aiming torches and watching, men with outdated haircuts and tattoos, their cigarettes cupped in their hands. A woman in white stilettos ran down the road after a boy toddler, naked apart from his vest. She yanked the child by his fat little arm back into the house.

"Now gerrin' and stay in," she screamed. "Oo left the bleedin' door open?" she demanded of other, unseen children.

The Queen was reminded of the stories that Crawfie would tell in the nursery at teatime. Of goblins and witches, of strange lands populated by sinister people. The Queen would beg her governess to stop, but she never would.

"Och awa' wi' you," she'd laugh. "You're far too soft." Crawfie never spoke or laughed like that in Mama's presence.

The Queen thought, Crawfie knew. She knew. She was preparing me for Hell Close.

William and Harry ran up and down the Close, excited by the novelty of the journey, taking advantage of Nanny's absence. Ma and Pa were at the front door of a dirty old house, trying to get a key in the lock. William said, "What are you doing, Pa?"

"Trying to get inside."

"Why?"

"Because we're going to live here."

William and Harry laughed loudly. It wasn't often Pa made a joke. He sometimes put on a silly voice and said things about the Goons and stuff, but mostly he was dead serious. Frowning and giving lectures.

Mama said, "This is our new house."

William said, "How can it be new when it's old?"

Again the boys laughed. William lost control and needed support, he leaned against the creosoted fence dividing their house from its neighbour. The tired fence gave way under his fragile weight and collapsed. Seeing him there, fallen and shrieking amongst splintered wood, Diana automatically looked for Nanny, who always knew what to do, but Nanny wasn't there. She bent down and lifted her son from the wreckage. Harry whimpered and clung to the hem of her denim jacket. Charles booted furiously at the front door, which opened, releasing a stench of neglect and damp and ghostly chip fat. He switched on the hall light and beckoned his wife and children inside.

