

# THE LITTLE BOTHER

Peter Bunzl

Ryan had read half his book, listened to all his music, eaten two packets of biscuits and an apple, played seventy-two games of *Donkey Kong*, completing all the levels, and counted every Italian sports car they'd passed in the last hundred miles. Twenty four hours of groggy sticky travel, twenty-four hours stuck in this overheated tin can on wheels, and he finally knew what it was like to be utterly and unendingly bored. He propped an elbow on the car window frame and stuck his arm out of the opening. Combing his hand through the slipstream, he let the cool air tickle his fingers as he watched the countryside stream past.

He was thinking about the many ways he could make the Little Bother's life a misery. The plethora of pain experiments he could conduct. Tortures. Two-handed Chinese burns. Forcing fingernails, or real nails, into flabby flesh. Perhaps pushing the Little Bother's fat thumbs back

to the knuckles and twisting them to see what happened. Or punching his bothersome face with a fist. And after that, the aftermath – the little wails and tear-stained blubs. The bubbles of spit on the blood-soaked teeth. Soon as they stopped, soon as the Grows had their backs turned, he knew he'd do it. Do it just to see the look of surprise on the Little Bother's face.

'Not long now,' Mum told them. 'I think I've found where we are.'

Dad tapped the steering wheel. 'That's what you said when we turned off the motorway. We're not lost again, are we?' His rough bearded face, framed in the side mirror, had taken on a look of resigned frustration. Under the shadowy brim of his sunhat his gaze flicked between Mum and the road.

Mum pretended not to hear him and instead went back to studying the map. With one finger she traced the spaghetti tangle of Italian back roads, searching the folds for a recognizable landmark.

The Little Bother picked at a scab on his knee and looked up from the comic he was reading. 'You know when you jump on a girder,' he said to no one in particular, 'and there's another girder on the other end that goes flying?'

'You mean like in Mario, or something?' Ryan asked, not bothering to look round.

The Little Bother swung his sandalled feet back and forth, kicking his heels against the car seat as he considered this. 'I'm not talking about Super Mary-o-land, stupid. I'm talking about Superman.'

'It's *Super Mario Land*,' Ryan told the Little Bother. 'And, no, I don't know. I don't know what the fuck you're talking about.'

'Language!' Mum gave him a dose of the evil eye in the rear view mirror. 'Both of you, I want no more of your bickering today, OK?'

Ryan nodded but when she was no longer watching he reached out and punched the Little Bother in the arm.

The Little Bother made a face like a sad cherub and rubbed his shoulder. 'You do know about the girders,' he whispered. 'You know because I told you.' And with that he slumped sideways, letting his head fall against the window.

Behind his halo of blond curls a column of poplars marched towards a tumble-down village; rows of leafy vines lolloped along the verge of the road; a dusty road sign whizzed past.

'This is it!' Mum said suddenly. 'This is our turning!'

Dad stamped on the brakes and yanked the wheel, shifting them on to a narrow gravel track.

'How about a little warning next time?'

'I can only tell you what's on the map.'

Mum gripped her door frame while the car bucked down a steep slope and into the bowl of the valley.

As they turned a corner and came out from behind a line of trees, Ryan caught a glimpse of the tiled roof of their new home nestled deep in the hillside and peeping out from behind a weeping willow.

'Here we are.' Dad tapped the brakes and brought the car coasting to a stop. Ryan and the Little Bother leaned forward and stared out of the insect encrusted windscreen.

A few feet in front of the car the track petered out and an earth path took over. Crossing a brown field littered with rocks and thistles, it headed towards a squat farmhouse whose rough stone walls stood shadowed against the early evening sky.

'Is that it?' Ryan asked.

Mum undid her seat belt. 'That's it, sweetheart.'

'It comes with twenty acres,' Dad said as he switched off the engine. 'We can grow our own vegetables.'

'Looks like a dump.'