

By the author of *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers*

TELETYPE NORMAL POSITION

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# SHY

a novel

max porter

By the author of *Grief Is the Thing With Feathers*

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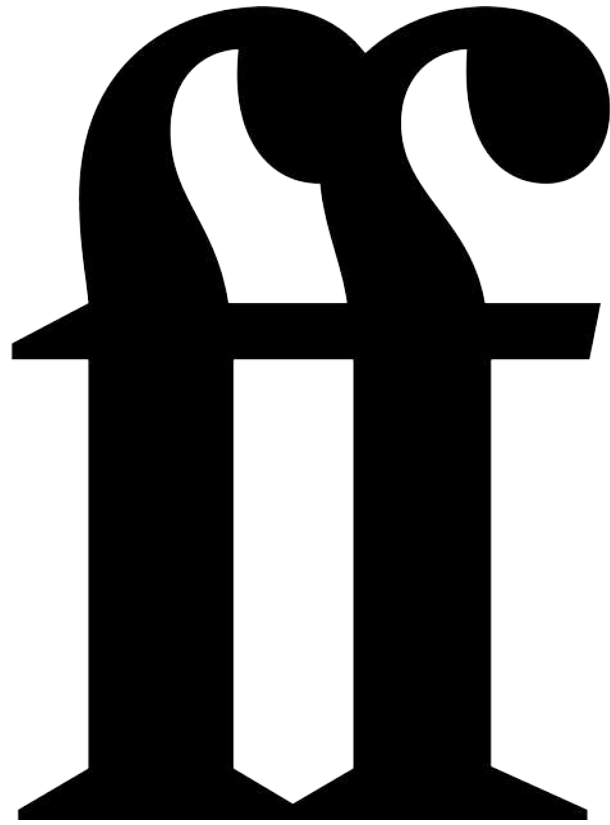
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MAX  
PORTER

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SHY

faber

For Lisa Baker

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***Up and at 'em, Shy.***



The rucksack is shockingly heavy.

The floorboards complain.

He checks again: the spliff is diagonal-snug in the empty Embassy box.

The daytime check is a half-dream away.

The room is molten soft. Tempting.

Jumpy.

The rucksack is shockingly heavy.

It's 3.13 a.m.

It's a full bag of rocks, of course it's heavy.

*The average flint is about 600 million years old, said Steve.*

Snapping point. Creaking straps.

Walkman ready.

Pandemonium *Andromeda Tour*, Plymouth 1994, Tape 1.

Randall back2back Kenny Ken.

*Express how you're feelin.*

Jungle.

The pinnacle.

The Amen.

Almighty.

A way of life.

*Big hot and heavy.*

600 million years, and we think we're tough lasting one hundred tops.  
He can't hold it still in his head.

Size.

Butterflies in his tummy.

Time.

Slightly needs a shite.

He leaves the room dark. Shy's room minus Shy. *Eve 1965* carved in the beam. A wonky heart carved in the beam. *1891* carved in the beam. *Shy 95*, fresh and badly scraped in the beam, with a jagged S like a Z.  
Couldn't even get that right.

***The future is here, Shy. It's yours.***

He stays in the middle of the carpet down the corridor to avoid the squeak.

Jamie never sleeps, but he'll have his headphones on. Steve, Amanda, Owen downstairs, Benny, Posh Cal, Paul, Riley, Ash.

The rucksack is shockingly heavy.

***Sneaky little dickhead.***

His shoulders are killing him.

One step then another.

Easy does it.

Smell the chilli con carne from earlier.

Armpits and food carpets farts.

***Your mum.***

Tex-Mex and old-damp stone.

He stops at the bottom and nibbles on his thumbskin.

*Shwooshtick-Shwooshtick*, the electric meter like a slowly rewind break.

Caught between times. In the fold. Escaping.

Little Shy at thirteen o'clock with the last of his skunk and his favourite tape. Boy on the stairs, stepping through. *Tom's Midnight Garden*. That's what it feels like, fuckinell that's exactly it. He hasn't thought about that book for years.

'This is Shy. He's usually to be found here, in the snug, with his headphones on, chatting to himself.  
He's asked not to be filmed. But say hello, will you, Shy?'

If the straps go then it's game over, a hundred flints clattering on the flagstones at the foot of the stairs. Listed stairs, listed floor, listed history, pissed-off teachers.

Shitty Reebok rucksack he's had forever.

Lynx Africa.

His heart is bomp-bomp-bumping like he's scared.

Idiot drama with no audience. Overthinking overlapping voiceovers.

***We made such good progress today, Shy. I'm really delighted.***

He's sprayed, snorted, smoked, sworn, stolen, cut, punched, run, jumped, crashed an Escort, smashed up a shop, trashed a house, broken a nose, stabbed his stepdad's finger, but it's been a while since he's crept. Stressful work.

'Psychologically disturbed juveniles requiring special educational treatment, or a bunch of teenage criminals on a taxpayer-funded countryside retreat?'

He's through to the conservatory, carpet-quiet nine careful steps to the tall window behind the skanky floral curtain. This'll be some posh twat's kitchen next year. The old windows don't open. The newer windows, sixties upgrades, open nice and silent. He steps out of the musty house and puts his hood up.

[The camera pans across the lawn.] 'An ordinary bunch of teenagers kicking a ball about, or some of the most disturbed and violent young offenders in the country?'

Here at the unconventional Last Chance school, it's reiterated time and time again:  
they can be both.'

He could jog, to be out of view faster, but the stones would be noisy, so he keeps on creeping. He peers back at the house and thinks of them all in there. Tucked up. Owen and the overnight staff and the boys. Out for the count til alarm, guffing and breathing and dreaming of whatever stressed or violent or sweet and easy shit they dream of. Everyone always says they sleep mad deeply here. New kids talk about their fucked-up dreams and then the ghost stories do the rounds (Mrs Nash who watches over you while you're sleeping and sips your nightbreath; the skinny old man in the nightie who walks up and down the back stairs dripping piss) and the true story of Sir Henry Radcliffe who murdered a servant in the top locked bedroom and that's why everyone hears a scream when they first move in, dead of night, a single scream, a welcome to the house from its own traumatised past. Everyone's heard it, and if they haven't they pretend.

*For such a clever boy, you really are intent on crashing your own train, aren't you?*

The night is huge and it hurts.

*Chippy little twat all of a sudden, aren't you? Thought you were depressed?*

He turns his back and wanders into the blue. Moving shadow.

\*

Last year, still at home, still at normal school, when he went to Becky's at lunch and he was fiddling around trying to get the smelly greasy-thick condom on, useless knob like a dumpling, numb, Becky being sweet and too helpful, gently caressing, flopping it side to side and squeezing, trying an awkward semi-blowy, pity smile, looking at it like it was hurt, poor sad willy, which made it worse, so he got dressed, didn't say anything, wasn't nice, stormed off red and untucked, Becky asked him to stay, to chill, skin up, relax, not make it into a big deal, but he thumped downstairs embarrassed and tearful, left Becky's house ashamed, stormed back to school and thought if

life was this much stress, this much pressure, it's too much, it's too fucking much, the whole thing is hassle, how does anyone deal with it, Becky being sweet, shame into anger, tethered to the last mistake, everyone waiting for the next one, never be sat in a tidy clean room with a nice person listening, thinking of something they want to hear, occasional stretches of fine, sat inside time's strict channel, just being alright, pissing about, sometimes fun then back in a hole, all the damage, then the inescapable atmosphere of having fucked up, tilted back to square one, rigged, Becky's sad face looking at his little beige dick shrinking, foreskin bunched like a mole rat, like a traitor, after all that raging horn, all the nice snogging, learning to lick her, boners galore, sticky boxers and chapped lips and god he wants to curl up and sob, all the handjob in the rec, all the *waiting til we're ready*, such a typical let-down, he always imagines how things will be and gets upset when they don't work out exactly like that, now he's got double chemistry, of all the lessons, bad mood aggravator, the smell of the lab, Mrs Fryn getting on his tits, wishing he could go back, rewind operator, back to the brag, the excitement, the tingles, the school is taunting him, endless stairs, long corridors, missed the bell, still got his V-plates, barged into the science wing, threw his bag on the floor of the chemistry lab and started chatting shit to Noddy, and Mrs Fryn said *I don't think I like your attitude* and he said *I don't think I like your face* and she told him to leave and see the head immediately and he said *Actually fuck you* and as he walked out he dragged an arm along and brought one, two, three, four, five whole chemistry kits smashing down, glass flasks and pots of acid and metal clamps and Bunsen burners, and there was nothing but gasps and giggles from his lab-coated classmates and he walked straight out of school, lit a fag on his way across the playground, guessed today was probably the final straw as far as the school was concerned and knew he'd

have to sit and listen to his mum's snotty repetitive questions all evening, *But why, but what possessed you, are you hearing me, what's going on with you, why are you doing this to me, speak to me, to us*, his stepdad leaning in the door giving him judge-eyes, fucking self-important twat, so he headed for Gill and Michael's house, they left a key under the mat for him and if things ever got too much he was allowed to sit in their smart kitchen and decompress, friends of his mum and stepdad, never had kids of their own, maybe Gill's his godmother, he can't remember, he lets himself in, paces around their kitchen for a bit muttering, eats a load of custard creams, looks at their stuff, Gill and Michael in Paris, Gill and Michael in Corfu, a framed poster saying *99% CHANCE OF WINE*, a calendar with garden birds, he opens their drinks cabinet and has a swig of Gordon's, then he smokes a fag on their patio, pacing, wishes he still had that whizz from Fantazia, then he has a glass of vodders, then he finds some cans of Kronenbourg in the fridge and glugs one down, then he has some more vodka and lies on the sofa in the conservatory, then he has another can of beer and smokes a fag, then he hears the front door open so he slams the door to the kitchen shut, wonders what to do, hears Gill make a scared little *oh* sound, picks up a chair, smashes the glass cabinet with all the fancy wine glasses in, hears Gill shriek, hears the front door slam, starts on the photos, punching glass, Gill and Michael at Avebury hugging a stone, Young Gill on a balcony looking sunburnt, punches the whole wall of pictures fast and hard like the game at the fair whacking pop-up heads, knuckles bleeding, one deep cut with a tiny cube of glass embedded, smashes the wine poster, yanks the microwave out of the socket and chucks it on the floor, smashes the bottle of vodka against the wall, wallops the conservatory door with the chair but it's reinforced glass so the leg of the chair just breaks, he screams once, a loud crackled yelp, drops the broken chair, sits on the sofa and starts crying,

hiccuping, shit, grrrrr, fuck, starts to feel a little bit better and by the time the sirens come he's feeling calm, and sort of sorry.

\*

He stops on the edge of the lawn, where Jamie kicked Nick Fulshaw's head in last term and the police kept asking why nobody saw him lying there bleeding and everyone said again and again *Because of the ha-ha*.

Shy's mum phoned and said they were worried about him and he should be careful, smoking so much, perhaps it's stunting his growth, can't be good staying indoors all day, sitting around listening to his drums and bass, and he told her he loved drum n bass much more than he'd ever loved her and then he hung up.

The memory is camouflaged with other shitty things.

He called her back.

Nice chat, you fucking whiny old bint. Don't bother next time. Just leave me alone. Tell Iain Piss off from me.

He hung up again, leaving the sound of her sob in the handset.

He looks back and the house is like a fuzzy old photo with all the colours drained. He half expects to see a pale face at the window.

Good riddance, boys.

Peace out, ghosts.

*Bm-psh – bm-psh*

*bm-psh – bm-psh*

his spitty internal beatbox,

walking in time,  
step by darkstep nod and step,  
one, two, *gumf, click,*  
palate snare,  
throat kick,        sneaking away from the Last Chance.

[Amanda, senior live-in staff member, comes from a background in social care and thrives on the challenges of this progressive educational environment]  
'Imagine a stage, a few badly paid backstage staff, and a troupe of highly unreliable and volatile actors. Young male actors with very complex backstories. Tragic stories, in some cases. It's a ruddy cosmic miracle we ever get through a single night. A magnificent fluke. So yes, they can sell this old place to the highest bidder but it won't undo the work we've done here.'

They talk a lot. More than any of them ever have before. Sometimes with the teachers, unpacking what they've been through, what they've done, just chatting in lessons, or in little groups, sudden moments of honesty. Jamie told them about when he got his diagnosis aged thirteen and all his mates stopped talking to him. His best friend started calling him a retard. *I won't ever forgive that*, said Jamie. Everyone agreed, that's unforgivable. *Not as long as I live*, said Jamie. Benny talked about his dad dying in prison. He almost cried and everyone was silent while he got his shit together because Benny is the toughest and nobody ever sees him cry. Paul talked about what he'd done and his time in borstal and how he'd lost his virginity when he was eleven and they didn't feel easy making sex jokes around Paul after that, but Paul mostly stays in his room playing his SNES. They tell stories. Some bragging, some regret, some baffled grinning shrugs and ripples of easy laughter. They talk about how wrong school was for them. They try and figure each other out, because there's fuck-all else to do. They each carry a private inner



register of who is genuinely not OK, who is liable to go psycho, who is hard, who is a pussy, who is actually alright, and friendship seeps into the gaps of these false registers in unexpected ways, just as hatred does, just as terrible loneliness does.

His mum has written down: *Like a person being devoured / animal that's in him / skin ? on him / trapping him / Shy's inside, but the skin is also him, so angry, so true. I'm almost envious.* And Jenny says *Gosh. This is so interesting. Thank you.*

And Jenny says *Shy? Anything you want to share? Just a doodle today, is it?*

And Jenny says *Sorry, I'd hoped this would be a helpful thing.*

And Jenny says *It's alright, sometimes you can say nothing.*

And Jenny says *Shy?*

If someone looked out of the window he'd only be a head. *Because of the ha-ha.*

He waits by the hedge and nibbles his fingers and thumbs for a minute, chewing through burning memories, spitting chunks of skin and nail into the dark.

\*

He sits up from deep sleep into the blood-orange dimness of his childhood room, lit by the landing light outside, and sees a red-dark featureless animal crawling slowly across the bedroom floor towards him, dragging something lifeless and lumpen behind it, sniffing, creaking and snuffling, bringing him a dead thing, coming in, a nightmare-hungry dog or half-

man killer, but the room is real and he feels his duvet cover to check, touches his face, scratches his hair, and then with a resigned grinding of mental gears his fear turns to disappointment as his eyes and mind align and help him understand that this nocturnal beast is Iain, it's Christmas Eve, this is his stocking being very carefully left at the foot of his bed, this is crinkling packaging noise mixed with Iain's heavy breath and clicking joints and those pointed ears emerging at the foot of his bed are the Batman mask he asked for, poking out from the top of the tightly stuffed giant sock, and of course he has heard the playground rumours and he has had his doubts for a while, but he is wondering why it makes him so sad to have it finally confirmed – he still gets the same presents, after all – but he is surprised Iain is making so much noise, that he is so unsubtle, spoiling the magic of Christmas, so Shy lies crossly back down and waits for Iain to leave, but Iain starts cussing in a posh girly voice so Shy sits up again and dimly perceives that Iain is the girl dressed in old-fashioned clothes, her again, the girl in the knitted jumper, and she's unpacking his stocking and throwing his presents across the room, taking swigs from a bottle of clear spirits, and the room is huge, his posters are gone and his bed is against a different wall, and he starts to smile because this keeps happening, this one dream un-waking into another dream, he's ten years older and fucking fast asleep and dreaming in the Last Chance, this is the girl who mutters in the walls between his room and Paul's, and the girl is furious, unpacking all his toys because she doesn't want a six-year-old's rubbish, baffling crap from the future, she's stamping on cars and action figures, making a hell of a noise, doesn't want his Skywalker toothbrush, doesn't want his pack of Asda socks or his Ninja Turtle Pez machine, she is flinging things as hard as she can across the room, she chucks his satsuma on the floor and stamps it splat as the light shocks on and Shy's mum and

stepdad are standing in the doorway asking *What the hell*, and Shy is blinking, can't see a thing, can only hear them, *What in the ever-loving fuck are you doing, boy, Oh god poppet why would you do this, You bloody spoilt little monster*, and Amanda is knocking on the door which is suddenly right by his head, saying *Is everything OK in there, Shy? I'm coming in, Shy, I'm coming in on the count of three, ready, one, two, three*, and Shy is keeping his eyes closed, waiting, trying desperately to be gone before Iain comes in, yearning to be asleep, because if he wakes up he's spoilt everything, if he wakes up he'll have to start answering.

\*

*Camera-shy. Haha, well exactly, not so Shy after all. He'll need a new nickname. He's really found his feet in the group. It's a shame he doesn't want to be in the programme. He'll change his mind, I bet. Once Cal or Benny get involved.*

His cousin Shaun hasn't picked up when he's called him recently. It's been ages. Maybe he's got a new number or he's not living in the same place. He's called him twenty, thirty times. He sits in the phone room, stewing, imagining reasons.

They went to London for the day, him and Shaun. To Black Market Records. Shaun who got him into jungle. Shaun who lent him magazines and let him use his decks. Shaun who drove him to the car park behind the rec every Saturday and shared little lines of coke on the dashboard while they listened to mixtapes. Shaun whose *hee-haw* smoker's laugh Shy's been trying on for size. Shaun in the busy commuter train to London being bouncy and loud *Big up all small-town lads, Shauny and Junior Shy on the rampage, am I right am I fucking riiiiight bidder bang bidder bang bidder bang, hold tight the man big up the plan*. On a pilgrimage to the city. Overexcited. Jumped

the barriers on the Tube. Nicky Blackmarket was behind the counter in the shop. They asked for extra plastic bags. Hall of fame. *These are the days*. Remember the days.

It feels ridiculous to be stood in the garden in the dark with this stupid rucksack yanking his shoulders off. Like a twatting Cub Scout.

Shy said It's our music, coming out of our shit towns, it's not from Staten Island or Seattle or Detroit, it's from Walsall and Watford.

Shaun and his mate Andy burst out laughing and Andy did a squeaky voice and said *Fwom Wycombe and Weading and ... Wochdale* and Shy said Fuck off Andy, and Shaun said *Argh man, learn to take a joke, yeah?*

*Failed 11+. Expelled from two schools. First caution in 1992 aged thirteen. First arrest aged fifteen. Is this you? The whole of you? You've got to work your arse off to lose this piece of paper. I won't have any of you lads defined by what you've done in the past, but you'll have to put the bloody work in. There's no magic switch we can flick. Are you hearing me?*

He does his breathing exercise on his fingers, one-two-three. Come on, you pussy.

He walks through the gap in the hedge and into the bottom garden. He's trespassing through a freeze-frame. It's colder down here. Paused, threatening.

He thinks of the time in Year 8 when he was walking home from school across the rec and he had his head down, scuffing the grass, talking to himself, unselfconscious, interviewing himself about why he'd like to play the part of Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and two older girls, chain-smoking sixth-formers, fully grown women, were suddenly next to him, ripping the piss, slumped