

# Pink

by C.J.F

Dusty tarmac slides under the turquoise frame of my new BMX and I smile at how my pink t-shirt compliments it casually, like it's an accident they were put together. Behind me Dad's chatting.

"I just wish you wouldn't be so rude to her, Lanks. You could at least pretend to listen."

I nod, turning the handlebars and braking so the wheels of my bike skid from side to side. Standing on the pedals I push my newly trained feet down hard, red brick breezing past on either side of me, Dad's voice drifting away.

At the top of Silver Hill I circle, waiting for him.

"She should have let me have the party," I say, pushing off again, timing it so he's too out of breath to answer. I weave back and forth, between the lines of parallel parked cars, laughing at Dad's gears crunching as he tries to do the same.

"Remember to turn right at the bottom," he shouts after me, "we don't want to end up on Pear Tree Street..."

My t-shirt flaps in the wind and I think of Alex Stiles saying only real men wear pink, striding through school with his studded belt and highlights. Dad still thinks pink's for gays. Air pushes through my hair, forcing it back off my face and I wonder if it's finally long enough to twitch out of my eyes when older girls say hello.

"Lanks!" Dad shouts and I let out a hoot of victory as he fails to catch up, pedal so I'm whizzing down the hill, past the stubby lime trees of Co-op Street, veering left at the bottom.

Dad catches up with me, trying not to show he's out of breath.

"We're going *right*, Malank. It's not that much longer."

Shaking my head I turn my bike round.

Sweat's starting to run from my armpits round towards my back, making my t-shirt damp. The air's cooling as darkness comes, just getting here at ten o'clock.

I can hear him wheezing behind me, gears clicking, throat ruined from all those rollies and I slow down, reminding myself that he paid for my bike, but he starts chatting again and I can't take it.

"A real man treats his mother with respect..."

Alex Stiles' dad ran off with the babysitter and now Alex won't talk to him. I try to imagine my dad doing that but turning to look at him, smiling as he struggles to keep up with me, I know he never would. He's not unattractive either; he looks a bit like me.

A car revving behind us makes me slow down and stick to the left of the road tight so my pedals nearly touch the curb. A black car speeds towards us and I pull over to wait for Dad. The car changes up through its gears noisily and I move my bike onto the pavement nervous it'll clip the paintwork. It's close enough that I can tell it's a BMW, close enough that it should be slowing down and before I can think about it I'm yelling back to Dad to get out the way.

The BMW veers towards him as he tries to pull over to the side of the road and he bumps up the curb, just managing to jump off Mum's bike and pull it out the way as the car speeds past him, towards me. Blood throbs in my ears and I'm shivering, pink t-shirt bright in the headlights.

The car revs again and Dad shouts me at the same time as it tears up the curb, crashing into my back wheel. I jolt over the handle bars, watch the dusty tarmac lay itself out to meet me and then Dad's there trying to pull me up. The noise of the car's engine fades out and I hold my dad's hand, take time to breathe, the smell of iron and petrol in my nostrils.

Then I see it: just across the road, parked halfway up the pavement. Headlights glaring as human shapes get out of every door, black surrounded by yellow like the Batman searchlight.

I see the spanner just before it connects with Dad's head, feel the jolt of it through his arms as he tries to lift me off the floor. His body is pulled backwards by two of the shapes and I realise they're not much older than me, about the same age as Alex Stiles. They could go to my school. Dad winces as they drag him away, shouting for me

to run, to call the police, to get help, then there's the sound of metal against flesh and two shapes are closing in on me.

As the first kick digs into my back I think of Mum singing happy birthday, about how easy it would have been to just clap along and say thank you. A scuffed Reebok Classic knocks the wind out of me and I wonder if my silence sounds like bravery to Dad.

I can hear him yelling and whimpering over the kicks of boys nearer my age than his.

"He's only fourteen..." he shouts over the noise of so many bodies moving in different ways. The end of his shout gets swallowed like he's been pulled underwater and I clamp my hands tight round my head. I think of Mum singing to me all out of tune with her earrings twinkling and I concentrate on breathing, trying not to hear the sounds of my Dad crying as I pray to whatever that we don't die in the road tonight.

"It's his birthday..." Dad shouts, his voice wet with spit or blood or tears and as the boy kicking my stomach tells him to shut the fuck up I'm ashamed to be thinking the same thing.

White trainers skip across tarmac to bounce down on my dad's head and I close my eyes, curl up tighter, then with a final kick they rush back to the BMW, pushing each other to hurry up, panting, our blood glistening on their trainers.

"Happy birthday!" one of them shouts before the last door slams then the engine revs, exhaust rattles, tyres screech away.

And it's quiet. Pavement warm beneath my cheek, eyes shut, pink t-shirt torn.

The midsummer sky is black above us when I hear Dad say my name, quiet like I've never heard before. I let my hands drop away from my face and crawl towards him.

