

McMurder

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They poison the public, Carrie said, so why not poison the poisoners themselves? Mac can't stop thinking about Carrie's idea. So true. Carrie's so wise.

Mac hauls his boy off the toxic McDonald's astroturf and shoulders the poisonous door open, leaving the poisonous playground behind his back. Their mouths hang open as they stare at him. Their mummies tell their kids to say Buh-bye, Ashton. They wave, blow kisses at Ashton. Ashton is a plug yanked out of the wall, disconnected without warning, loose. His mouth spits sparks. His long eyelashes smudge and begin dribbling. He wriggles and kicks. There are chemicals in the PVC and polyurethane of the jungle gym which have leaked into Ashton's brain and caused a dependency. Mac sees the dependency now. Sitting in his inbox is a link from Carrie to a study proving that sugar is as addictive as cocaine. She's warned him to keep his son away from the Evil Clown. Underlining each of Ashton's Happy Meals is an undiagnosed addiction to sugar, salt and fat. Those milkshakes are ground hoof gelatine. You can taste it, if you concentrate hard enough.

If he wasn't undercover, Mac wouldn't have even bought the fucking Happy Meal. Carrie's hand had squeezed into a fist when she'd ordered him to go deep under. She broke his eardrum, one time. Carrie hits hard.

Ashton doesn't moan about being taken out of McDonald's till his dad straps him in and cranks the ignition. Ashton's reaction is simply withdrawal. Carrie is right: McDonald's is scarily addictive. It's not a plug yanked out of

the wall, Mac was wrong about that. It's a dirty needle yanked out of Ashton's arm.

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In a room full of pillows lies the Community's committee. The committee are near the front of the room, but they don't dress any differently to the other Neighbours. Palm trees in boxes line the walls. They're potted in dirt which leaks and smells fresh. The carpet has little burnt spots. Everyone smokes. Pretty much the whole movement is within this room. Nineteen people, skinny guys at the back, staunch girls at the front. Parish sits wherever Carrie sits. He rubs her back often.

'How long d'you intend to keep the Community waiting?' Carrie says.

'My bad, I wasn't... never mind.' There are twenty pairs of lips in the room chewing at him, and then there is Carrie, and she's scarier than twenty Neighbours—that's what they call themselves, in the Community. They're Neighbours.

'Are you going to just stand there or are you going to say something significant? Your report, please.'

He knows his feet are too close together, he feels like a tripod with one invisible broken leg. He has taken photos on his phone of Schindler's List, that's what they call the McDonald's menu: a little bit of good writing by a villain. It doesn't reveal what the menu items are really made of, the enslaving chemicals which make people reach for more fistfuls of fries, the desire for sodium, for additives, and you can't spell *addictive* without *additive*, can you. He's deep into presenting the photos before he knows he's doing it. He's synced with the projector (that he paid for) and can he's scrolling through the pictures for the audience of

Neighbours with their dyed hair and togas. The projector stamps pictures on a white bedsheet pinned to the wall.

Mac would talk about Bundesliga if he could, or Lionel Messi, or the fantasy football league he hasn't been allowed to attend for the last six weeks, but he's not allowed. He must report.

'...and apple pie appears to be glazed purely with, like, sugar,' he says. 'I'd say it's an example of subtle imperialism, sorta.'

'Apple pie on the windowsill?' Carrie says. 'Johnny Appleseed? Yeah, most of us've figured that out. But thanks for trying. Could you make your point a little more precise please? Ta, 'preciate it.' Parish tries to help Carrie to her feet; she nearly pulls him down. She's not the starving introvert she used to be. She's a blob of angry fat and resentment, now. Mac thinks she'd be less angry if she had never had a child with him. 'Give me your notes if you want, I'll finish for you.'

Carrie yells at everyone to redouble their war effort, beginning tomorrow. 'Thank you for your report, soldier.' Mac plops into a beanbag. It swallows him and he feels light. He feels like Patrick Swayze in that ghost movie where it's hard to touch things.

'We're not dealing with sugar today, Mac, we're dealing with meat. Sorry everyone, Mac did the best he could but let's get professional here. Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis or Mad Cow Disease as the pro-Zionist media would have you believe it's called is associated with the region of France from which McDonald's sources its meat—a region until as recently as sixty years ago known as Vichy. VICHY MEANS NAZI. NAAAA-ZIIIII.' She tacks a poster to the wall. Pink curly filaments of beef, up close, are indistinguishable from the *E. coli* virus. *E. coli*, friends. Gutrot. Vichy. Nazi. Her crotch is at the level of his

head. The shape of Carrie's—how can he say it—*girly bits* stands out. Mac wonders who else is noticing her fat...lady-area. He'd never realised *that* area could get fat. She used to be all muscle, her hips used to stick out like handles. She could crawl up a traffic light and fix a black flag to the top. She could outrun cops. She's gained power and each pound of fat is part of that power. She's got that Parish wimp working for her now. Mac knows what it's like to be pulled into Carrie's orbit. Carrie was always right about everything. Ignoring her would be like ignoring the first intelligent life from outer space to land on earth.

Without a slideshow or lectern or megaphone, Carrie shouts about destroying McDonald's until her lips are white and sticky. Her huge breasts shake with rage under her hoodie. She is sobbing and shouting at the same time. If you cry, you've been hurt. If you've been hurt, you're in the right, and the one who hurt you must be punished. Her cheeks look sunburned, slapped, scorched. There is weight, might, muscle and aggression inside her black top and that black skirt which shows two puffs of white flesh bulging behind her knee.

'PROGRESS BY THE MONTH'S END! BY THE MONTH'S END, NEIGHBOURS.'

Parish hands Carrie some leaflets. They're sweaty from his nervous, bony fingers. He's from some African country with a war going on. The gentle position of his shoulders says he's never been in a fight. He's all brains and words mumbled in Carrie's pierced, stretched ear. The low number of times Carrie screams at him and thumps him tells Mac that Parish is probably her new toyboy—'cept, unlike Mac, Parish probably won't get her pregnant. Unlike Mac, Parish won't be losing a tug-of-war with an umbilical cord as the rope and a tiny boy named Ashton liable to be ripped apart if

Mac resists. Mac lets Carrie pull him where she wants; Ashton is safe and unharmed.

The Gathering of Neighbours has been going on for fucking ages. People are listening with their eyes closed, arms folded. Carrie smacks the leaflets on the projector to wake everyone up, shaking the projected picture of Indonesian cattle. Palm oil is extracted to be mixed into the vinaigrette to be squirted on each McCaesar salad. Palm oil requires that old growth Javanese jungle be destroyed with slash-and-burn tactics. That jungle is then replaced with *Criolius mariscopus* palm trees, which are the opposite of sustainable: their wood is useless for either structure or cladding. It has an overabundance of leachable sulphides. Each palm heart produces just 400 ml of palm oil, and displaces 1200 organisms with the sulphide it squirts into the soil. All of this is charted on a spreadsheet. Carrie would have a spreadsheet in there, wouldn't she. She's a qualified accountant. Not many people know that. All people see is a general.

When she was still on the sexy side of dangerous instead of the scary side, President Carrie—well, she wasn't Prez back then—*Carrie*-Carrie used to let him make love to her. Sometimes she let down the passenger seat of the car and got him to dig inside her with *his* thing in the parking lot of some place they were staking out at two in the morning, usually a factory where chickens got their beaks snipped off. She kicked in the door of this flat where he was playing Dungeons & Dragons, once. She said he was part of the Community and the Community needed him more than his friends.

Mac hunkers low in his beanbag, pulls his hood over so his eyes are shaded, and thinks about the common-law wife who's always been more of a man than he could ever be. Mac rolls five cigarettes, right there in the Community meeting, thinking Carrie might rant for another 40 minutes.

His tobacco pouch covers the erection he's created, thinking about classic Carrie, old-school Carrie, approachable Carrie. He won't smoke all the ciggies immediately, but his fingers belong in tobacco. Tobacco keeps him from eating. Mac used to have man-boobs and a flange of fat which hung over his hips. He was pulled into the Community from the People's Action Network. He got into an argument with somebody. He couldn't come up with any excuses as to why five corporations have larger economies than fifty countries. He had this habit, he would always touch his chest when he was nervous, affronted, his ankles would cross—

'Up,' she's going, 'Parish? I need you.' Parish produces a list of everyone's role in the dismantling of McDonald's Corporation. She projects it. Neighbours elbow each other and wake up and stretch. No one's allowed to leave the Gathering until they've signed one of the written contracts Parish hands out. Everyone has to promise to do their bit to destroy the Evil Clown, or the General will destroy them.

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She drops him off on main street, around the corner, a little discreet, a little James Bond. Technically she's in the passenger seat and Mac is driving. Carrie can drive, but she's too important. She says she's the Heart. Hearts are the most important part of any body. Brains must be protected from injury and exhaustion.

She switches off the radio. Ashton is sleeping in his seat. 'In the animal kingdom, male seahorses carry the young in a pouch,' Carrie says, out of nowhere. 'Male wolf spiders lug the young on their backs. When are you booking in? You've been fucking around for months.'

'Booking what in?'

'YOUR VASECTOMY, YOU DUMB PATSY.'

‘I’m sorry,’ Mac says quietly. ‘It’s not that I haven’t been planning the Overthrow, because I have, honest—’

‘You’re avoiding it. You haven’t done the booking. You’re too soft.’

‘To be honest,’ he sighs, ‘Yeah. Just makes me a bit... squelchy. Like, yaaaark. They open up your...*Johnson* and snip. Youch. Sorry to let you down...’

‘You’ve always been selfish.’

‘Like, sorry to dither, it’s just, vasectomies are easier said than done...’

‘Have it done. Work overtime if you can’t afford it, jeez. I’m not your accountant. If you don’t care, you can just leave. Simple as that. Out of the Community. I’ll text everyone.’ Carrie is pulling her phone out of her pocket and unlocking it. ‘Sthat what you want?’

From the back seat comes Ashton’s voice.

‘Fuck’d he say? Sounded like “cheese burger”?’

‘Probly “please booger”. You got a booger, sweetie pie?’

‘Don’t call him pie. I don’t want him eating those apple pies the Evil Clown tries to push on everyone.’

Mac twists around and smiles at the boy. Carrie glares at Ashton in the rear-view mirror. It is Ashton’s fault that she has streaks of cellulite in her belly and that her breasts have gone up two sizes. She hasn’t been in a pants-suits for three years, now. Once, a member of the Community, a nice white lady in her 50s, a new recruit, Rhonda she was called, visited Carrie at work, during the day, explaining to the receptionist that Carrie was the president of the Community Action Party and that she would like an appointment with her. Nice Rhonda was excommunicated that night, soon as Carrie finished work.

‘Make the world a better place,’ Carrie says, reaching across Mac and opening his door.

As soon as he enters McDonald's Family Restaurant, Ashton starts kicking and wriggling and Mac's arms hurt and he has to wipe his glasses anyway so he dumps his li'l bubba in the playground and the boy sprints and squeals and runs the wrong way up the yellow slide. A small Asian child is coming down and they collide and run their separate ways and then agree on some interesting bas-relief in the plastic. An engraving of one of those Emlings, those mascots stolen from Pixar which look like Happy Meal boxes. The small Asian child has a small Asian mother. Mac can tell she belongs here, as a corporate slave, that she's domesticated by what she's eating, those addictive additives. She came to this country, she sipped on a shake, and something changed inside her DNA. The first hit is just \$1.99, then you're hooked. Sulphide. Leachate. Gluten. All addictive, all carcinogenic, all-consuming.

The mother smiles at Mac. The gluten and starch has softened her brain into a form of retardation leading her to believe she is happy in here. The posters on the walls—snowy soft serve ice creams in crispy waffle cones, sweaty Big Macs with steam and melted cheese, sesame seeds you wanna eat right off the poster, fudgey sundaes with swirls of hallucinogenic blue food colouring squirted through them, and a spoon cleaned inside the mouth of a blond blue-eyed boy straight out of Hitler Youth—

Mac pushes the cuff of his shirt back and pinches himself. Ashton is too young to know better, but Mac has a mission. His time inside the Evil Clown's lair is short. If he fucks up, he might be excommunicated, and he'll definitely never get to third base with Carrie again.

The mission, in order, goes like this:

1. Infiltrate, using child as excuse for entering enemy base
2. Capture data on restaurant layout, staffing, exits, number of fire extinguishers and smoke alarms

3. Take discreet photographic evidence
4. Capture evidence of potential harm to children to pass onto appropriate authorities
5. If time permits: warn the innocent.

First target: a playground, all astroturf and coloured plastics, false, fake, manufactured, like the consent of the customers is manufactured. The grade of plastic of which McDonald's slides are composed of is known as CRM, for Composite Reparticulate Mold. That means plastic reclaimed from a dump, shredded, washed with acid strong enough to turn any bits of metal into gas, melted at precisely 248 degrees then reconstituted, which locks methane particles into microbubbles. Microbubbles are small enough that they live in plastic dust pop open all the time and the contents are inhaled, injecting methane into the bloodstream.

Methane lowers the brain's resistance to glycotropin, the drugs which seep out of sugars. These manipulate the frontal cortex, triggering the release of endorphins, triggering a desire for more glycotropin. Poisonous playgrounds make McDonald's customers junkies for McDonald's sugar, and the Community can prove it—and they will.

Mac smells coffee and syrup, sweet sickly steam wriggling out of the top of a cardboard cup. The mother of the child Ashton's playing with is ingesting demon drink. Probably it's loaded with addictive sugar. 'They have a range of devices which instill a false sense of "happiness" in the custo—*victims*—who get stuck in its web,' he whispers, not looking at her, just leaning, tilted, tipping his words gently through her black hair and into her ear like a pleasant breeze. 'It's all down to chemicals, ma'am. Just thought you should know. P-o-i-s-o-n, if you catch my drift.'

She turns and quickly squints, takes a sip of her coffee, then puts it on the far side of her. 'How do you—JAYDEN! BE GOOD!'

He gives her a pamphlet then stands up and says, 'Our blog address is on there. Come join. Fight the new slavery. Or—you don't have to, if you don't want.'

He crosses the cool tiles, approaching the counter, trying not to get freaked out by the industrial milkshake machines and slaves wearing logoed hats and Emlings promotions everywhere, so many goddamn Emlings. People with less resistance must be tugged, pulled along scent-lines of salt and grease and gelatine and sugar, like Pepe le Pew in those old Warner Brothers cartoons.

He orders a cross-section of the menu: milkshakes, fries, burgers, hash browns, apple pies and ice creams.

He pulls Ashton out of the pit of poison-plastic and the boy tries to wriggle back in again. The slave-mum has her glasses on. She's holding the page of densely printed information he slipped to her right up close against her glasses. She'll spit her coffee out once she's done reading. How could she not?

He barely knows where to begin ripping this poisonous, manipulative food apart. Food presented like little gift-wrapped present? That doesn't fool Mac. He slides each tray of little shiny, greasy red and white boxes and dewy drink containers to one side, too sickened to sample anything but a couple of fries and the apple pie, and of course the thickshake, but only to wash the vile garbage down. He's about to question the Coke when he notices that this branch only serves Coke Zero which has no calories. That is fascinating. That requires further study.

He pulls out the reconnaissance checklist secreted in his underwear and fills it out. Everybody is pretending not to notice him. He's going to engineer their destruction, be it by

bomb, by litigation or by hand: Mac is going to get this branch closed, and he's going to make Carrie proud.

He checks on Ashton. Slave-Mum is forcing her child and Ashton to do high-fives. Ashton is giggling. The other child is smiling, docile as a zombie. Perhaps there are tendrils of glycotropin choking his brain already.

The next check-sheet is one on which Mac reports on the McDonald's staff, their resilience, their honesty, integrity, openness, their lack of shame about what they do. He is in awe of a pygmy-type woman, squat, small, who manages to dissolve a clot of customers, never rushing, simply arranging their burgers and cups and packets of fries at an even pace and handing out change for every \$20 note. She's been trained to appear unfazed and content—happy, even. Mac notes these things on his form, taking mental snapshots each time he glances over his shoulder.

He leaves his booth, packs away his menu samples in his briefcase, takes a deep breath and plunges back into the play area. Ashton has disappeared into a tunnel. The boy has his mum's chocolate-chip eyes. On Carrie, those eyes are beads, all cornea, which pull in light and radiate nothing. When Ashton grins, the flesh bubbles and bunches on his cheeks. His teeth are pure white. Those eyes must be frightened. Those teeth must be open in alarm.

'ASHTON! ARE YOU TRAPPED? HELLOO? ENABLE EVACUATION PROTOCOL? Yes or no? Ashton?'

'He fine,' says the zombified mother.

'He's *not* fine. He's suffered exposure, he's—'

Mac's back cramps and twists as he wiggles inside the slide and tries to find his son. Ashton is nowhere to be found. Mac falls backwards into a puddle of balls and realises he is laughing. It's impossible to stand! The bad guys have won!

Ashton emerges from the ballpit with a handful of coins and hair ties. He comes over and tugs his daddy's hand.

'Don't cry, Macca.'

Mac has always felt like more of a bigger brother than a daddy. Carrie never uses the word 'father' because it's a patriarchal, domineering term. Mac is authorised to refer to himself as 'The Male Parent'. Mac's existence is useful to Carrie, he knows. She gets a weekly dole payout as an unsupported mum. Mac's name is on the government computer. She made him sign the acknowledgement that he's not supporting her so she could get her payout. He cried as he signed it. He said he wanted to support her. She said if he fucked with her \$121 a week, she'd choke him.

Mac wanders out of McDonald's slowly, crouched, holding his little boy's hand, feeling eyes on his back. He straps Ashton into Carrie's hovering car. He blends into civilians.

'Your pocket's leaking crumbs. Get in. Where's your report? What did you learn? What's their weakness? Speak UP.'

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Around the dinner table he reveals what he's found to the Community of Neighbours. Ten senior Community members have assembled, and the report he lays down makes them gasp and squint and whistle. Carrie yells at them all to shut up and remember there's a disciplinary issue at hand if Mac's report is found to be inaccurate.

The staff of this particular McDonald's are on two dollars an hour more than minimum wage, the document reveals. Carrie is going to hit him, when she sees this evidence on paper. Carrie wanted dirt. She did not want to hear that the pay is okay. Carrie screeches and thumps the

table. A piece of curried potato flies off her tooth. Need Carrie remind everyone of the list of criteria under which a Neighbour may be excommunicated from the party? Must she exert herself once again? There's undermining the executive board; there's holding membership in another party; there's upholding the status quo. If ANY of these transgressions is found to have been committed by Mac...

Failing a mission's on the list. Being found to be A GODDAMN SPY FOR MCFUCKINGDONALDS is on the list.

She kicks Mac in the shin. Tell them what you *really* discovered, she says. He wobbles as he gets to his feet and begins his report. He tries to NOT say the thing about how the wages are okay. He's been bewitched, that must be it, what he found in the dumpster must have been a plant, some Neighbours suggest, it could have been a decoy to convince investigators that McDonald's isn't conducting slavery.

Carrie slaps the table and everyone stops discussing it. 'Mac: you need to step out of this party meeting. Parish will be in touch regarding further training—or *other* consequence. Thank you for your presentation.'

Mac is made to wait outside the dining room on a hard wooden chair which slopes forward. He waits three hours; Carrie yells most of the time, thumping the table, frightening the cutlery. The entire manifesto is read to him. There's been acid slipped into his dhal. He babbles and slips through portals and his tongue escapes from his mouth, twists, circles and licks his guts out.

They whip Mac with plaited flax to keep him awake. As he comes back from Siberia, he feels like everything is leaden. It's hard to raise his fingers. They make him memorise the plan. He will not be fooled by dumpster decoys next time. Stop believing they're angels when they're really devils. There is dirt on McDonald's. Unless the

Community of Neighbours is restrained by trespass notices, they will march on in there and squirt lighter fluid across the walls. As it dribbles down over the Ronald's white face, they will pull their Zippos from their pockets. Click. Whoomph. And if that's not doable?

'Poison the bastards,' Carrie screeches, sorting through a washing basket of insecticides and slug bait and rat poison.

Parish politely asks Mac to clutch his ankles while Parish ties the hands to the ankles with a long, thin belt. Parish apologises while he places headphones on Mac's ears and presses Play on the iPod. The recorded manifesto begins playing. It's a 13-hour file. Much of the manifesto is recited as slam poetry by Carrie. It's loud. Mac's brain turns a different colour. They let him go at lunch the next day. There's a pharmacy on the way home. He rubs antibiotics on his weeping eardrums.

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Carrie waits in the car, safely tucked around some corner, smoking weed and eating curry with the radio on, spitting out the window while Mac's inside each identical franchise, hiding pamphlets between the trays and in the toilets and in the ballpit. Mac's fingers hurt from papercuts from folding each pamphlet, pressing a neat crease. 70 hours have been spent, way past midnight, crouched beside Parish, folding over and over while Carrie sits on her computer. Often the literature is still warm from the photocopier. Often his ears sting from the manifesto played into his ear drums. There are pus stains on his left shoulder, beneath his red ear, from the infection.

He dips into the playground and plops Ashton just above the floor, careful Ashton doesn't plunge a hand into the pocket containing the rat poison tablets. The boy's legs

kick into life and he says ‘Yee’ and marches around, touching surfaces. The way Ashton’s feet scurry as they touch the astroturf, it’s as if contact with the fake grass sparks some accelerant. Ashton squeals and Mac winces and put his hands over his ears, dropping more of his print-outs. It hurts to see Ashton loving the enemy, it hurts to use Ashton as—Mac has to face it—as an operative in a guerrilla campaign. Pamphlets flutter, land on their backs, message-up. A mother—Mac decides this one is Lebanese, maybe, and probably exploited and brainwashed—picks one up and asks Mac to translate it. He pretends he’s distracted, goes and buys a meal—‘McChicken, please, uh, a burger... combo’—and he’s intimidated by the male serving him, a Brazilian man whose eyes don’t reveal a hint of brainwashing, but it’s in there, it has to be in there, it’s not possible to be happy here.

Buy the burgers and nuggets, sneak the poison pellets in, leave the bait in the playground. Take out the next generation of zombie-slave-addicts. A few deaths could kill off the whole company, like what News of the World did to Murdoch. Pretty straightforward, Carrie said, but Carrie’s never the one in here.

He orders piles of long, crispy, soft, mashable fries, burgers with real weight in their centre, chicken McNuggets to pop into his gob, a salad with a packet of delicious honey glaze. It’s fun to mash and squirt. What would it be like to eat poison, too? Would you clutch your stomach and foam at the mouth? Would you die happily, tasting only salt and fried potato skin? He scoffs some bun and burger, wonders how the lettuce contributes to a flavour that’s not that bad at all, tries to figure out the synthesis in it all. Sodium, that magical elixir, sodium glutamate, the Spanish fly of fast food.

He checks his pocket. He re-checks his pocket. Can rat poison seep through into his skin?

He's hypnotised, watching Ashton pulling his pants up as he climbs three tiny steps—one pink, one yellow, one white. Ashton sees him and begins howling. Daddy, he might be thinking, Daddy—why can't I call you daddy? Why did the Community eradicate patriarchal language? Why are you such a pussy, Daddy? Why did you choose her as your queen? Why did she choose you as her servant?

Go in there, Mac. Go in amongst the purple tubes and blue steps. Hold your breath so the poisonous vapours don't rise from the plastic surfaces and dissolve your chest and melt your lungs. More parents, now. One behind him. He can feel her breath on his neck. A man, too, a youngster, basketball shoes, big lips and eyes and a baseball cap, black stubble, his child stomping in pink shoes. Do they care he's here to destroy it all? They have to care. They must.

'We're outta here,' he says, and lunges at Ashton. The child disappears inside a tube winding upward toward the ceiling. He tries to follow, puts his 60kgs of body inside the structure, hears a groan, sees a washer pop loose from a bolt, sees a nut roll down the slide, feels the plastic tube sag, so he swings out and takes a seat beside the Filipino mama, and some other interesting parents. He uses some nice long words, hard-to-spell words. He mentions a lot of years. 'In 1976, Phil McDonald reached 1000 franchised restaurants. They each pay 40% turnover in premiums. You weren't aware of that, Saraya. Vaila, you're getting this? Here's a pen. Scribble it on the back there. Yes, that's our Facebook page. Like us. There's links to Carrie's blog. She's the Premier, that's like a President. She's the Premier Neighbour, yessir. Here—some more for your friends. Scan them and email them around. Here's my—

'Here's... Excuse me. I have a mission to complete.'

Mac trudges up to the counter, stands in line, gets served by one of Them: a purchase of all the burgers he hasn't tried

yet. Carrie said she'd try and identify the ingredient with the most toxic additives, but it was essential to sample nine burgers to determine that.

He takes his four pouches of takeaway burgers (with fries, and cups for the drinks) and shuffles away and leans his head against the glass of the playground. Carrie will eat the food, then she will bully him. When is he going to stop being such a loser? Now? Really? After all these years?

He leaves Ashton in there for a second—just for a second—and then goes into the playground and sits and opens one burger after another.

His arms are heavy as he leads the screaming Ashton out of his addiction fun zone and along the street towards Carrie's parked car. I will not have my son eating poison, nor playing in poison. There's another place for poison.

Mac drives and Carrie bitches at him, for a lot of things. Where to start? He took forever, the burgers Carrie's scoffing are half-cold, has leftover pamphlets indicating he hasn't circulated them 100%, he hasn't dived back into the dumpster for dirty docs, he hasn't left any bombs or broken glass in the playground...

He's not listening, just watching her mouth as she licks and chews and crams and swallows. No foam on her lips, yet, but she keeps touching her gut.

'The Community needs another report and formal presentation from you tomorrow,' she's going, cramming meat and bread and eRATicate into her jaws. She tugs the hood of her hoodie over her head. There's something self-conscious about her when she eats.

'Ee-yugh,' she says after her third burger, rubbing her stomach and wincing. *'Tastes like poison.'*