

Escape Routes

FOR MOST OF THAT YEAR, you are obsessed with slipways and secret ways through Zork. Not cheats, which suddenly give you the treasures without your having to earn them – they're something else entirely. What you mean – what Christopher calls them – is wormholes. Places where it looks like you're stuck and then squirm through to safety, whisked through space and time. The first, and best, is in the Altar Room:

In one corner

it says,

is a small black hole which leads to darkness.

You haven't a prayer of getting the coffin down there.

For weeks, you've tried to find another way back, discarding all of your hard-won items as you go: the nasty knife, the garlic, the bottle of water, even the jewelled egg, because the voice keeps on saying that you're carrying too much. You've

run through all the verbs you know, and have looked up others. Push coffin! Squeeze coffin! Shrink! Dismantle! Coerce! But none of them works. Then one night Christopher tells you the wormhole is 'Pray'. You blink at him.

Type it, he says, stringing his hair behind his ears. Go on. Type 'pray'.

You type it, and then next thing you're back in the forest, coffin and all.

You see? he says, and when you say, How did you know? he just shrugs and smiles.

Christopher's not like the other babysitters. They like to get you and your brother off to bed as soon as possible so they can eat their pizza and watch TV and phone their friends. You listen in, sometimes, on the extension in your parents' room, the handset tilted away from your face, the mouthpiece muffled. Their conversations follow the same, set patterns, over and over and on and on, and mostly you get bored before they finish. But it's never boring with Christopher. He brings over floppy disks of games, Kix and Deathstar, Repton, Bonecruncher, Labyrinth and Snapper, a different selection each time, and he sits on the floor with you beside the BBC computer and tells you when to duck and where to turn and what to avoid, and when the Deathstar's coming, he takes over while you hide your eyes. Zork, which is your best game, he gave to you for your tenth birthday, for you to play whenever you want. He tells your parents it's a series of verbal reasoning and logistical puzzles and because of this they let you play it almost as

much as you want, instead of limiting it to twenty minutes after your homework and piano practice is done.

By the entrance to Hades and the Desolation, where the voices lament and the evil spirits jeer – the next place you get stuck – you try Christopher's wormhole again.

>Pray

you command.

If you pray hard enough, your prayers might be answered.

Your heart leaps.

>Pray hard

you try.

I don't know the word 'hard'.

So again you try 'pray', and 'pray', and 'pray pray pray', and 'pray the Lord's Prayer' and 'pray with all my heart'. But it doesn't work this time. Then you try typing 'pray' repeatedly, over forty-one times, you count, until your fingers are in spasms and the screen no longer seems to be moving. But the wormhole is closed, and even the thesaurus – Adjure! Beseech! Implore! Solicit! – is no good. The

next time you see him, you tell Christopher about this, and he says suddenly, Do you believe in prayer?

You don't know what he means, and he says, In life?

We pray in school, you say. At the end of Assembly, the Lord's Prayer, every morning.

Do you believe in it? he says. In God?

No, you say. I don't know. Maybe. Your mum and dad are atheists, which is unusual, and he knows this, and this is why he asked. You've been to church four times that you remember: for Brown Owl's wedding and for carols at Christmas. Christopher is intrigued by this. He's writing an essay, he tells you, on faith and whether it's acquired or innate. He tells you of children raised by wolves, then found by humans; he talks about men making paintings with red clay and sticks on the walls of hidden caves. You don't understand what he's saying, but you listen, or pretend to, because you like Christopher, and he doesn't normally talk so much.

Christopher is studying Philosophy at Queen's, plays guitar and likes Japanese girls, or so he says, though his on-off girlfriend Kathryn has a round reddish face and limp blonde hair and isn't even remotely Japanese. You don't like Kathryn. Sometimes when Christopher is babysitting she comes too, and she sits on the sofa with her magazine and expects him to sit beside her and huffs loud sighs if you ask him to help with a tricky level. She's always asking him to cut his hair, too, and he never does, and she gets cross about it. He's got long hair, longer than yours, which he wears centre-parted and tucked behind his ears, tied into a

ponytail at the neck, and she says it's disgusting on a man. She says to him, Even your own mother says the same, for goodness' sake. But your mum says, Good on him, he's unafraid to be an individual instead of following the herd.

As Christopher talks, blinking and wagging his hands, you wonder what it would be like to kiss him, like Kathryn does, mouths and lips. The thought of it used to gross you out. But recently it's been making you jittery, a hollow feeling in your stomach that you don't quite understand.

The summer Christopher goes missing, you only see him twice.

While things are uncertain, during the summer months, your parents rarely go out. The second-last time, his mother and yours get stuck across town – a funeral, and then some kind of scare, the bridges closed – and he takes you and your brother back to his. He's looking after a puppy for a friend, and his mum is worried it'll have the utility room destroyed if it's left alone too long – your mothers were only supposed to be gone for a couple of hours.

The puppy is mostly miniature Schnauzer with maybe a dash of something else: it has whiskers and a fringe and a face like a little old man. At six months old, it's still too small for its paws. When you get there, it's whimpering and crying, pressing into the gap between the tumble-drier and the wall. It takes ten minutes and a trail of doggy chocolate buttons to entice it out, while Christopher mixes bleach in a pail and mops up its puddles. Once it's out, you pet and cuddle it like a baby, and eventually it starts to get bolder,

yipping and nipping at your fingers, and then the three of you take it out into the garden for a game of chase.

After a while, you need the toilet and go inside. The house is a bungalow, with the bedrooms and guest bathroom off one long corridor. On your way back, you pause at the door of Christopher's room. It's slightly ajar, and you tell yourself that you're not spying because the door was open anyway, and before you know it you've slipped inside and you're standing in his bedroom.

Although you've been to the house many times, you've never been inside this room. It smells musty and herbal, forbidden. The curtains are closed, even though it's daytime, but there's enough light leaking through for you to see: the rumpled unmade bed, the guitars propped up against the far wall, the balled-up socks and the shed skins of T-shirts.

You take a tiny step inside, and another. Glued to the walls, and the wardrobe doors, and even covering most of the inside wardrobe mirror, are pictures of bands, and one band in particular, a band you know Christopher loves: the Manic Street Preachers. The biggest picture is ripped from a newspaper, and it shows a man with letters carved into his arm: actually carved, with angry rough slashes of a knife. You trace them out: 4 REAL they say. There's a fluttery feeling in your stomach, a giddy, hot-sick feeling, and you are slightly breathless as you squint at the newsprint reporting that Richey Edwards went missing on the day—

A noise outside makes you jump, and you realise it's the back door slamming: the others coming in. You slip from

the room, taking care to leave the door exactly as it was, and go back to meet them in the kitchen, your heart opening and closing in your chest like a fist.

Two weeks later, the last time you see him, Christopher promises not to tell when he finds you and Alison McKeag from down the road smoking ripped-up sachets of bouquet garni wrapped in loo roll out of the bathroom window. He just laughs and says so long as you stick to smoking herbs you're fine, it's tobacco that's evil, and tobacco companies. Then he says, God it really stinks in here you know, but before you panic about your parents, he helps to push the window open past its paint-stiff hinge and wash the flakes down the sink, and he gets a can of Lynx from his bag to spray to hide the smell. You just say it was me, he says, if they say anything. Say I was meeting Kathryn afterwards and wanted to freshen up.

Are you? you ask, a bit cheekily, emboldened by the presence of Alison McKeag. He looks at you. No, he says. We broke up last week.

Sorry, you say, not knowing what to say, and Alison titters. Was it you dumped her? she says, flicking a glance at you sideways, Or did she dump you?

Christopher unhooks his wire-rimmed glasses and rubs them on the corner of his tartan shirt. Then he puts them back on and looks at you, steadily, as he answers. Dump is an ugly word, he says, because it presumes that people are garbage, worthless. I don't think it's right to ever talk about dumping people.

Beside you, Alison is pretending to be struggling not to giggle. You can already hear her, down the bus-stop by the shops, tomorrow or the following afternoon, the way she'll make his voice high-pitched and pompous and imitate the ponytail and the glasses. Already you know too that you'll go along with it, because you'll have to.

I'm going to put the pizza on, Christopher says, after a pause that stretches too long. Do you two want any?

No, says Alison, and then she links your arm and says, Us two are away to talk about girly things, aren't we?

Yeah, you say, and you try to make your eyes say sorry, but Christopher just smiles and says, Fair play.

Later, when Alison's gone, you find him sitting on the sofa, just sitting, the TV not even on. Your brother's oblivious, playing Deathstar next door, squealing and yelping along with the beeps.

Do you want to play Zork? you say. I've got to a new bit I'm stuck on.

Once you've booted your brother off the two of you play for more than an hour. Christopher tells you the trick is not just to take the sceptre but to wave it: 'wave sceptre'. Not a wormhole, exactly, but something you'd never have thought of – and suddenly the rainbow is solid. Not now, but later, he says, you'll need to walk over it. For the moment, he says, look around, and you 'look around', and there, where there wasn't before, is a pot of gold.

Hey!, you say, but he just says, South-west now, and all the way back to Canyon View. Then north-west to the Clearing and west back to the Window and into the

Kitchen and west again back to the Living Room to put your treasures into the case.

Why are you telling me this? you ask, because normally – unless you're about to be killed – he lets you work it out for yourself. There's three more parts, he says, and this is only Part I, although it's taken you months to work out how to make it this far.

How do you know all this anyway? you say then, annoyed. He just shrugs, and plucks at the rubber band keeping back his hair. Are you sad about Kathryn? you suddenly say, looking away from him back at the screen and feeling your face rush hot.

Am I sad about Kathryn? he says in a way that sounds like a no but could be a yes, and you don't know how to ask again. Maybe you'll meet someone Japanese next time, you think of saying, but there are no Japanese people in Belfast. So you say nothing and just make your way through the forest again as he watches.

You finish Part I and diligently play a week's worth of Part II, wanting to surprise him with how far you've got, drowning again and again in the maintenance room of the dam until you work out not to push the blue button, just the yellow. In the end, though, you never get further than this, because that's when he goes missing.

Your parents tell you, calmly. He'll turn up, they say. He's probably with friends in Glasgow, that's what Kathryn's suggested, and he's got a schoolfriend in Manchester too, so they're checking that out next. It's only been a week.

MULTITUDES

He's old enough to look after himself. He'll surely turn up soon.

They don't know that you've listened to his mother on the other end of the phone, picking up the extension more carefully than you've ever done before and hardly daring to breathe, your palm damp over the mouthpiece. You've heard her gulps and sobs as your mother tries to comfort her. You know he didn't leave a note, but you know he didn't take anything either: not the jar of fifty-pence pieces on his shelf, not his beloved guitar, not his Discman, not even – so far as they can tell – a change of clothes or underwear. You want to speak up and ask her if maybe he's in Tokyo, but of course you can't do that, and, anyway, you don't really believe it yourself.

One night you have a nightmare that he's trapped in Zork and after that you find you can no longer play it because the voice that instructs and responds, making wise-cracks and not understanding, suddenly sounds too much like his. The thought that he's in there, trying to talk to you, makes your skin tighten and crawl, and you take out the disk and shove it back in its sleeve and bury it right at the back of the box. You think of the pictures on his wardrobe, and you think that the whole year of Zork was a training in the secret messages that people are trying to tell you, that are there to be read, if only you know how. And you know then, you just know, that he's never coming back.