“Wouldn’t it be so brilliant?” said Katie, “We could get some chips and some drinks and just hang out for a while. What do you think?” she said, swinging her whole body to face him; her trombone case swinging with her, banged against as it had countless times on the walk home from school, as it does every day. She stared directly into his face, her eyes pleading and cajoling. “Come on, it’ll be brilliant,” she said.

“Be careful, will you, that hurts,” he said. But he knew it wouldn’t matter. Katie was a ball of energy; her backpack weighed a ton and the trombone case was pretty heavy - she’d shown him the calluses on her palms from carrying it; yet she bounced around like a puppy, eager and excited.

“Come on, Alec, it’s on our way home. We just have to go down the back lane and in through the back door. Everyone does it. Everyone. It’ll be so brilliant.”

“I don’t know, Katie. What if we get caught? That’s trespassing. We’d be in big trouble, and my Mom’ll kill me. And stop using the word brilliant, will you?”

“You are such a chicken,” she said, this time staring straight ahead and picking up her pace, leaving Alec behind. “If you’re not going to, I’ll go on my own. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!”

“Ah, Jesus, Katie. You’re nuts,” he said, slowing down to let the gap grow, then he followed; driven in part by concern for Katie, and part by the desire to witness her backing out of the dare; her words had stung, and he wanted to throw them back at her.

Across Park St. then Elm, then Morton; the usual route home. Alec stayed a constant distance, about a block, behind Katie, and she didn’t looked back once. Then, between Morton and Maple, instead of continuing straight onto their own street, she turned left down a back lane.

“Ah, Katie, you idiot!” said Alec. Hi picked up his pace, breaking into a slow jog, his backpack bouncing, its zippers rattling and the last inch of water sloshing in the bottle in its side pocket.

He reached the back lane, turned in, walked a few paces and stopped. Just a few yards away was a well-lit street, just a block away were busy stores, shoppers and early rush-hour traffic; but here, it was dark and quiet, and, a little bit creepy. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, the houses were mostly dark, most people were still at work, and the street lamps on neighbouring streets painted a few, weak orange stripes across the lane.

He couldn’t see Katie, and he wasn’t sure which house she was headed for. He walked slowly, stepping carefully, almost silent. He didn’t want her to know he’d followed her.

Then a movement, a couple of houses further on, caught his eye; that must be her, he thought, as he crept closer. An old gate squealed and the shape moved again, this time into a yard; he recognized the sound as the trombone case as it banged against the gate.