Fin & Rye & Fireflies

HARRY COOK

INK ROAD

First published in 2020 by Ink Road
INK ROAD is an imprint and trademark
of Black & White Publishing Ltd

Black & White Publishing Ltd
Nautical House, 104 Commercial Street
Edinburgh, EH6 6NF

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 20 21 22 23

ISBN: 978 1 78530 247 3

Copyright © Harry Cook 2020

The right of Harry Cook to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and
incidents portrayed in it are of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Iolaire Typesetting, Newtonmore
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Here's to all of the LGBTQI+ love stories that
I wish I had read as a young gay kid.

1

Fin

We arrive in Lochport on a Friday. A crappy day, a few days before my otherwise favourite holiday of the year, Halloween. We've been driving for about eight hours, which in teenage years equates to about a week. As we exit the highway and drift across Kettle Bridge, my first glimpse of our new home below reminds me of the It's a Small World ride at Disneyland.

Old rust-coloured barns and maple trees line the street. The house, a two-storey monstrosity with a red double door and high arched windows (windows that I have an intense feeling I'll want to throw myself out of before the day is over), sits leering at us.

"Fin, take your headphones out when I'm speaking to you," Dad says, his forehead narrowing into his regular furrowed criss-cross. Mum shuffles in her seat and looks across at him, the air suddenly immensely stuffy and uncomfortable.

"Sorry," I mumble, fumbling with my earbuds and stuffing them into the backpack at my feet.

"I asked you to go and open the door for your mother," Dad almost barks. "Manners maketh the man, Fin."

Not quite sure what the hell he's talking about, but also not surprised by the cold tone in his voice, I get out of the car and greedily gulp in the fresh sea air from the harbour nearby. I wander around to Mum's side, opening the door for her and standing back. She looks up at me sheepishly, a brush of embarrassment lingering in her smile as she steps out. I smile back, retrieving a stick of sour grape gum from my jeans pocket as Dad joins us.

"So, what do we think?" he asks, his eyes switching between Mum and me, as if he's a carnival clown and we're about to throw a hoop at him to win an inflammable soft toy as a prize.

"It's … the – it's nice. H-homely." Mum sounds like she's trying to convince herself more than Dad.

I give a thumbs-up, popping the piece of gum in my mouth before I turn to head inside.

So, I guess now is probably a good a time as any to explain how the hell I found myself upheaved to a brand-new town and into a creepy old house that resembles the set of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Well … It started with a kiss … as most love stories often do.

2

Fin

Jesse Andrews worked at the Retro, a bowling alley in the centre of Pittford, and he had the arms of a Greek god. He was a senior, eighteen months and four days older than me (I know, I counted), and was a leading light of the track team. My best friend Emily and I spent most Friday nights bowling (poorly) and watching him like the besotted superfans of a boyband, as we sat scoffing extra-large milkshakes and chilli cheese fries.

The night of our kiss fell on a Friday. I left Mr Glasson's science class the second the bell rang and wandered over to the school car park to wait for Emily. Emily's car, a 1963 VW Bug, was always open as the lock was broken, so I sat among the various knick-knacks, pretzel wrappers and old car-fresheners until she finally arrived.

"Mrs Wilton has about as much sense as a can of tuna."

"Nice to see you too," I said, avoiding her backpack which came hurtling at my feet, landing with a flump as a pack of cigarettes and a deodorant stick rolled out across the rubber car mats.

"Ew. Seriously, Em, you smoking again?"

"Absolutely not," she said as she leaned over, grabbing one and lighting it quickly. Her purple-nail-varnished fingers held her cigarette like Audrey Hepburn while her wild mane of dusty blonde hair gave her a Courtney Love vibe. Who knows why Em hung out with me; not only is she seventeen, a year older than me, but she's one of the coolest people I've ever met. Effortlessly cool. Like those vintage Polaroids you see of sixties' rock stars who look like they've just rolled out of bed. I'm not complaining, though. I'm so happy to know her. My life would be a lonely place without her.

"Wilton gave me an F on my history report and I just – Fin. Are you even listening to me?"

I'd zoned out as we pulled into the bowling alley car park. I couldn't avert my eyes from Jesse who was leaning into the bonnet of his car, checking something out in the engine.

"Fin, you are about as helpful to my current situation as a dog-shit bag with a hole in it," came Emily's voice, knocking me out of my inappropriate fantasies.

"Hmm? What? Right. Mrs Wilton. Gotcha. That's so annoying."

"Wow, Fin, so convincing," Emily said, clocking on to what I was looking at – Jesse's buns, to be frank – and butting out her cigarette in the pull-out ashtray.

We got out of the Bug and wandered over to Jesse, my stomach fluttering like the propellers of a helicopter as he leaned back and smiled at us, pleased to remove himself from whatever issue was going on with his old Holden.

"My two favourite Friday-night patrons are here at last," he said, generating a mock cheer with his fists.

"I was just telling Fin about Mrs Wilton's vendetta against me, but he was more interested in checking out your …"

I shot Emily a look that read, *I'll key your car if you say another word*, and she stopped herself.

"…your car," she finished.

"No way," Jesse said, turning his caramel-coloured eyes to me and sending his dimples upwards into a grin. "I didn't know you liked cars."

Neither did I.

"Uhhh, yeah. I love them. Total petrolhead. Huge fan. Especially the … Well, the engines and … Yeah, sure, mostly the engines I guess."

What in the fresh hell was I talking about?

"Well, maybe you could come back to my place tonight after my shift? I think it's a spark plug issue but I'm not sure. It'd be awesome if you could take a look at it for me?"

I forced my face into a smile that must have made me seem like I was pumped full of Botox and gave Emily the best glare I could without Jesse noticing.

"Sure … Yeah. Sure," I said, nodding like a bobble-head as Emily led me inside, down past the bowling lanes to the diner section, finding a booth near one of the vintage jukebox machines.

The walls lining the booth were covered in retro signs that read "5c Soda Pop" and "Chocolate Sundae just 59c!" with pictures of cartoon teenagers eating and laughing next to their colourful fifties cars. The light was dim and shadows bounced around the room, giving it a slightly sleazy downtown bar vibe.

Emily saddled into the booth and opened a menu, taking her chewing gum from her mouth and sticking it behind her ear like a savage.

"I'm starving, are you?"

"Not anymore."

"What, why?"

"Because you *destroyed* me back there."

"I *destroyed* you? Jesus, Fin. Could you be any more dramatic?"

"No seriously, what was that about? You might as well have told Jesse I wanted to mount him right there in the street!"

The waiter, a girl with short purple hair and a tattoo of Jack Skeleton on her upper arm, arrived at our table, holding her notepad and forcing her face into her idea of a welcoming smile.

"I'll get a burger and a large banana milkshake. I'm talking really large."

"Gotcha," came our waiter's reply who, on further inspection, I saw was named Tina. The badge on her regulation cotton shirt was coloured in with black and purple permanent markers: her one act of rebellion against working in such a retro utopia as this.

"No, I'm talking like enormous. I need so much banana milkshake in me I want to walk out of here looking like a banana. Ya get me? Like a bucket of banana mil–"

"She gets it, Em," I said, my rescue attempt for poor Tina a success as I made my order of cheese fries and a medium cream soda.

Before long, our food was devoured and dessert was served in the form of Jesse, who was now doing a thorough job of polishing the bowling balls behind the counter. I couldn't take my eyes off him as I speared a leftover cheese fry with my fork, pushing it around my plate with no intention of eating it at all.

"You should be careful of Jesse, you know," came Emily's voice over the sound my sad fry was making on the plate.

"And you, Queen of Nicotine, should quit smoking."

"No, I'm serious, Fin. He's a douche canoe. Both him and Jake

Mathers make the juniors' lives a living hell at school and I don't trust him as far as I can throw him."

"First of all, Jake Mathers is a douche, yes, but Jesse has been nothing but nice to me. Secondly, you won bronze at the inter-school athletics meet at pole vaulting, so I'm guessing you've the upper body strength to throw him relatively far. Hence your argument is invalid."

"Did you just say hence?"

"Alas, yes I did."

"Alas? My *god*, you're like a librarian."

"But with great eyebrows."

"True." She clinked her frothy milkshake glass against mine and winked.

"In all seriousness though, Em, I need you to help me get out of going to his place after here tonight. I have no idea what I'm talking about when it comes to cars. I don't even know how to drive manual. Obvs, given I've not got my licence."

She waved at the air, brushing my worries aside as if they were a mosquito.

"It's easy. Look at the engine, pretend to fiddle with it and then say, 'Oooh, yeah, looks like you might need a professional.' Play cool, you know?"

I rolled my eyes so far back in my head I felt they would detach and plop out of my face.

"Ah yes, *cool*. The trait I am best known for."

I put two toothpicks under my upper lip like fangs and crossed my eyes, sending Emily into a snort-laugh that scared the child in the booth across from us so much that he started to cry.

"Thaaaat's my cue to leave," Emily said, tucking a peroxide blonde curl behind her ear and licking ketchup from her index finger.

She ruffled my hair and slapped a twenty-dollar bill down on to the bill dish, throwing a casual "see you tomorrow" over her shoulder as she strode off, leaving me alone in the booth waiting for Jesse. He mouthed the words "won't be long" and gave me a wink that sent sparks through my heart and set my skin tingling.

"S-sure. Yeah," I murmured, suddenly feeling extremely self-conscious. (No way would I have chosen to wear a holey, moth-eaten sweater for a trip to Jesse's.)

I gulped the last bit of cream soda from my glass and ambled over to the arcade near the exit; race car simulators and dinosaur adventure games lined a small room. One of the neon lights overhead was broken and flickering in an attempt to give everybody in the arcade a chronic migraine.

Jesse's voice appeared from behind me as smooth as chocolate syrup on an ice-cream sundae.

"So! Sorry it took me a while to leave. All set?"

3

Fin

The ongoing screech from the car bonnet filled the awkward silence like a dolphin from hell.

Jesse's house wasn't far from the Retro and we didn't say a word to one another for the entire drive. His parents were apparently out of town until the following morning, which was perhaps why he felt no need to throw his cigarette away as we pulled into his garage. He got out and walked to the front of the car, clicking open and swinging up the bonnet, which creaked like the timbers of a sinking ship.

He looked up at me and smiled, a smile that had a hint of nervousness across its edges.

"So, I've been trying to figure out why it's making that ridiculous noise for about a week now. Any help and I will love you for ever."

I felt my knees pop and I steadied myself against the car door. *I will love you for ever.* Good god, can I get that in writing?

I slowly made my way to face the giant chunk of hot machinery below the bonnet.

"Uhh …"

What was I thinking, you ask? No idea. There was no way I was going to be able to stay cool, calm and collected.

"It … um … looks like you uhh …"

I realised Jesse was right next to me. I could smell his cologne and fresh sweat mingling with the smell of the greasy engine. His eyes were burning into the side of my face as I swallowed to avoid choking on my own tongue.

"It looks like you … Could probably use a professional's opinion. I … I would have to say that it –"

"You're not great with cars, are you?" came Jesse's voice, soft as velvet. "Not such a petrolhead after all …"

I glanced up to see him place a mint on his tongue. He was smiling at me with a look that said, *It's all good, relax.*

I shook my head, stifling a giggle as I felt my face burn red.

"Nope."

We both started laughing, but my heart was pounding like I'd just done the loop-the-loop on the Demon rollercoaster at the fair that pitched up in town every summer.

"Well … I am."

"You're what?" I asked, wiping the sweat from my upper lip as nonchalantly as I could.

"I am good with cars. But I … I guess I wanted you to come and hang out with me."

It was as if, in that moment, the concrete floor beneath my feet turned to quicksand. As I struggled to keep myself upright, I took a breath, slowly letting my eyes focus on his.

"You … You did?"

He took a step towards me.

"I like you, Fin," he murmured. He was close enough that I

could smell the mint on his breath, mixed with the ashy remnants of his last cigarette.

Without thinking, without even daring to second guess myself, I leaned in and kissed him, hard on the lips. As I pulled away, I stared into his eyes as if looking for pennies at the bottom of a well. Terrified, yet ridiculously elated about the feel of my lips on those of this man-babe before me, I stood motionless; each second that ticked by felt like an hour.

It was right at that moment, when my body thrummed with alive-ness, the moment when I felt the universe click into place, when everything felt like it finally made sense, that the world broke apart and the words I've since tried to forget, pierced the silence of that dark garage:

"What the *fuck?*"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there stood Jake Mathers. His scrawny body and ratty face were hunched in horror; he looked stunned, like he'd just witnessed a murder. In one hand he held a can wrapped in a brown paper bag (I presumed it was beer), and his left sock didn't match his right one – it's amazing the things you notice in times of such incomprehensible weirdness.

The silence that followed seeped into my body through my very pores as we all stood waiting for someone, anyone, to say something.

"You're a …" Jake was searching his foggy, useless head for a word like an explorer searches a map. "A *fag*."

I felt the word leave Jake's mouth, travel through the air and slap me hard across the face. What came next was the back-hander that followed the initial wallop.

Jesse turned to me with a grin on his face like someone who'd just pulled the lever on one of those water-dunking games at a

carnival. Jake came over and the two of them did a stupid hand-fist bump thing, which looked more like two people attempting to shake hands in the dark while drunk, and it all became crystal clear: I'd been set up. These two jokers were on a mission to uncover the Homosexual of Pittford High.

"My my *my*. Fin the fag," came Jake's whiny voice. "It kinda has a ring to it, huh?"

I stared into Jesse's eyes, desperate to see what I was sure had to be in there somewhere. A hint of compassion. A dash of decency. But there was nothing. Just malice. Just darkness.

And that was when I left that car, that garage and those two twisted jerks still celebrating their evening's sport.

4
Fin

"Mr and Mrs Whittle. We regret to inform you of your son's unnatural tendencies."

Muffled laughter.

"We have evidence that you are raising a pervert …"

By the time I got home less than half an hour later, that was the message that some "worried parents" had left on our home phone.

Mum and Dad weren't entirely convinced by Jesse and Jake's acting skills, but still they asked me if I was "really a queer" to which I responded "yes".

This simple, honest answer made my mum cry and my dad's face turn the colour of the beetroot salad we were having for dinner. After which, their fits of outrage escalated throughout the evening. It's true that both my parents were raised by stalwarts of the Irish Catholic community; however, in my opinion, all this catastrophising seemed dramatic and extremely unnecessary. More to the point, I knew they weren't as concerned about religious principles so much as they were worried about their

friends finding out they had a gay son – a son who, in their eyes, is no longer "normal".

After pacing the house for a solid twenty-four hours without sleep, they packed me off on a clapped-out old bus to stay with Aunt Carla out in the middle of nowhere while they arranged the "relocation" to Lochport. One that they assured me they were "forced into", thanks to *moi*. Bad news for *moi* that my dad's job as an engineering adjuster means he can pull off this kind of move.

Who knows what – if anything – they told my older brother Elliot about the commotion. He's been backpacking his way around the world for the past few months. I miss him, but can't face trying to contact him. No headspace. Elliot's always been the "normal" one of the Whittle brothers. And, being "normal" – whatever that actually means – is incredibly important to my parents.

Which brings us to the fun-filled here and now.

*

This upheaval to Lochport is my parents' idea of giving me a "fresh start" and "removing" me from any "distractions" that I might succumb to back in our old town. If only I'd known I was living in such a gay mecca I could've set my sights higher than kissing that weasel Jesse.

I take a breath and collect our bags from the car before trudging my way back up into our new abode. The house itself is bigger than any other house I've ever set foot in before. I have no idea how we can afford it; however, my one good guess is that it's one of those murder houses that make their way onto the market

cheap after some horrendous crime. The floors are solid oak and the light fixtures are crystal. My room, I've decided, is the loft on the third floor. It's one of the smallest in the entire house, but it's perfect. One giant window seat as comfy as my bed sits atop an inbuilt bookcase; the view above of nothing but our new garden and the woods beyond.

Dad spared no time or expense in packing us up as quickly as possible, and so all our furniture arrived the day before yesterday. My parents hired movers, notified schools, arranged work stuff with lightning speed, citing a "family emergency", all before collecting me from Aunt Carla's on their way along the highway. The fact I survived even a day at Aunt Carla's is a total miracle. I can't stand cats, so when Dad told me I would be temporarily living with her (a woman who's homed not one, not two, but *eight* ex-stray felines), I was certain it was an assassination attempt.

With my bed neatly fitted in the corner of my new room, various boxes labelled "School", "Books", "Clothes", "Toiletries" sit squashed together near the wardrobe, but the mere thought of unpacking it all really does make me want to throw myself out of my third-storey window. Instead, I collapse onto the window seat, and stare morosely out at the view. I get the feeling this new town isn't going to be any more welcoming than our old one. Emily was my only real friend back in Pittford and she was different. One in a million. To top it off, "fresh start" or not, I know my parents definitely won't like my sexuality here any more than they did in Pittford.

Great stuff.