

# Close Encoonter

by Craig Aitchison

Cam's the last tae arrive. Bean swigs frae a can o skoosh then slides doon aff the waw he's been sat on. Mark pretends tae look at a watch. They baith turn roond an lift their backpacks frae the waw.

'What time d'ye caw this?' Mark says.

Cam looks at his phone. He isnae that late.

It's juist, it took a wee while tae get away frae the hoose. Mum said that Ant an Dec were back on the telly an she wantit them tae watch it thegither even though Cam had telt her he was campin wi his pals. He didnae want tae watch it onywey. It's rubbish. Like a kids programme for owergrown bairns.

He's shair that Mum disnae really care about Ant an Dec bein on the telly. It's juist anither attempt tae pauchle 'quality time thegither'. Aye right. She'd sit next tae him drinkin wine, laughin in that false wey, then likely burstin oot greetin at some daft wee thing like someone winnin a prize, or losin a holiday or whatever. Then she'd try tae cuddle him. Like he wis a bairn. Like he wis juist there tae mak her feel better. As if he could.

How can ye fix sumbdy else when you're broke yersel? She's meant tae be the adult; she's meant tae look efter him.

Anyway, Cam disnae watch the telly. He watches TikTok. His favourite the now's a guy in America that posts videos about UFOs. He likes that kindae thing, things he isnae shair he believes in but wants tae. There's a bit o him howps they see somethin the nicht away frae the streetlichts' glow. He disnae think he will, juist has a tottie wee glimmer o howp, like his mum clutchin her lottery ticket, so she can 'get him onythin he wantit'.

Bean faws in alangside, Cam drops ontae the road an walks along in the dry sheuch for a wee bit up the hill tawear the wuds. As they turn the corner they juist aboot stummle richt intae Ms Herbert. They aw jeel tae the spot, gawpin at her. Although she's a pudgie wee wummin, shorter as Bean, shorter as Mark tae, mibbe even Cam, an though she hasnae taucht them for near three year noo, the wey she keeks at them ower her glesses, like she's tryin tae jaloose whae flung a rubber across the cless, hasnae chynged.

'Hello boys,' she says.

'Hi Miss,' Cam says. Bean murmurs. Mark keeps schtum, lookin doon at his scufft trainers.

'And where are you off to?' She smiles at them the wey she aye yaist tae, like a polis off the telly aboot tae pull oot a bit o incriminatin evidence.

‘Campin,’ Cam says. The other twae arenae gonnae answer so he hustae.

She looks up tae the dreich sky then back tae them. ‘Have fun,’ she says, makin it soond like a warnin.

‘Thanks,’ says Cam. They walk on.

They walk up the hill, past the hooses. In yin gairden, a wee lassie sits at the bottom o a chute. She sticks oot her tongue as they pass. Mark sticks oot his back at her; she gien him a scowl. Sin there are nae hooses, a wud on the left an a fauld on the right wi yowes grazin.

The boys blether about Ms Herbert. She had a temper, parteecularly when Mark was aroond. When she lost it awthegither they cawed it Herbies Goes Bananas. Cam thocht o that, efter an auld film he’d watched wi his faither. While his faither was still aboot, they yaist tae have film nights. They took it in turn tae choose. Dad wud choose frae his muckle collection o DVDs. The classics his faither cawed them. ET, Ghostbusters, Star Wars o course. They’d get popcorn an sweets, fizzy juice, a pizza. His mum hud chucked oot aw the DVDs. Waste o space, she said.

Bean pits a haund on the airms o each of his pals, shakin his heid an sayin, ‘Can you all juist sit doon,’ tryin tae mimic her accent but gigglin til he snirtles.

‘You dae it Cam,’ says Mark.

‘Nah.’ Cam walks on.

‘Gaun on. Ye’re the best at it. Ye’re juist like her.’

‘I’ve no done it in ages.’

‘Gaun on.’

Cam stops. He brushes his fringe forrit, grits his teeth an looks at the grund. Then he tichtens til the muscles in his neck staund oot. He lifts his heid slawly an annunciates each word, yin at a time, ‘Would. You. Please,’ gettin gradually looder til he’s bawlin, ‘Be. Quiet!’

Mark an Bean burst oot laughin. ‘Class,’ Bean says.

Mark claps Cam on the back. ‘Still got it.’

Cam’s aye been able tae mimic folk, their accents, expressions, an tics. He gets laughs frae imitatin folk off the telly, teachers, other kids in his cless. It’s a survival technique whiles, makin amends for bein wee an ower studious, for no bein tough or guid at fitba. Sometimes, mind, he worries it gans deeper as that. He tries on personalities like new shoes, tryin tae find yins that fit an when he does, he wears them richt oot the shop, tuckin his auld yins away. He feels like he’s biggit hissel oot o bits o ither folk.

They’re near at the top o the hill noo, at the 30 signs.

Cam tells hissel it's guid to be wi his pals. They're still, he thinks, his best pals. Fair enough, they dinnae see each other as often. They get the bus tae school an back thegither but then they gan their separate weys. Mark's in different clesses. Mum wud say he isnae academic. Mark wud say he's thick. At break an denner time, Mark hings about roond the back o the gym hall, wi his ither pals. Bean's aye at clubs. He plays rugby cause he's tall, though Cam hears his teammates slaggin him about droppin the baw. Haunds like feet, they say. Cam eats his denner in the canteen wi ither boys frae his class. Gregor, frae Chemistry, whae spends hauf his time doodlin characters frae games on his folder but still seems tae tak it aw in.

But Cam's aye kent Mark an Bean. They've been through Primary school thegither, ridden their bikes, been tae each ither's birthday pairties. They'll be freends forever. As much as onythin's forever.

The reach the wuds where they built dens when they were wee, defendin their fort against imaignary enemies yaisin sticks an pinecones. *Peeries* his faither had cawed them. This evenin they walked past the wuds. Mark climbs ower the gate wi ease but Bean stands afore it, lookin fashed, wechted doon by his bigger rucksack, awkward.

Cam lifts the sneck an swings the yett open so they can baith walk through.

They walk ootower the field. There's nae kye in this field. It's steep an scattert wi bauds o whins they had tae walk roond. They keep gaun taewart the wee rectangle o concrete near the heid o the hill.

Cam's dad brocht him tae the nuclear observation bunker years ago. He minds his mum fashin aboot them gaun doon the ladder intae the derk bunker ablow.

A few weeks afore, when they were plottin things tae dae in the holidays, Cam telt his friends aboot it. A plan stertit tae form.

As they get closer, Bean breaks intae a run. 'Last one there's a -' The last word's lost in a fit o giggles. They aw run like wee laddies, runnin for the dafferie rither than the race or the destination, juist aboot cowpin ower cause o the wecht on their backs. Mark races past Cam an gets tae the bunker afore the ithers, leanin against it an laughin as the ithers crash intae him.

They sit on the gress wi their bags atween their legs. Cam zips open a side pocket, throwin a chocolate bar tae each o his pals.

Bean fummles it, then sterts scrammlin in the gress. Mark cleeks his, unwrappin it an pushin the hale thing in his mooth. 'Cheers.'

They sit, bletherin aboot the schuil an fitba, lassies an music. Bean's made a playlist. Bangers, he says. But he hasnae mindit tae charge his wee

speaker. Cam's chuffed. Some o Bean's tunes are guid but he disnae feel like listenin tae them the nicht. He'd rither juist blether.

As the sun sets, a still settles on them. Bean tries tae brek it by launchin an empty Irn-Bru can at Cam but it misses. Cam listens tae the soond o pigeons in the wuds. Funny how, up here, in the mirk, they soond oorrie but yaisually ye juist ignore them or dinnae even notice them. They're juist there.

They agreed aforehand they wudnae gan intae the bunker afore derk. When Cam suggestit it, he thocht the ither pair wud say he was daft, but they agreed. An it was grand tae sit oot, the village a faint glimmer ablow, away frae the claustrophobia an grief that fillt his hoose.

Aw that above, aw that mirk an licht, aw that derk maitter an energy, aw they galaxies sae faur away an sae lang ago, make it feel possible, even likely that there's somethin else oot there, some ither intelligence, wunnerin an reachin oot.

Cam looks for lichts fleein across the sky.

'Wud ye like tae see UFOs? Aliens?'

'Here he goes,' says Mark.

'Naw, A mean it. There's hunners o stories - folk seein things an gettin taen away, time they cannae accoont for...'

‘Wee green men.’

‘Actually, they’re...’

‘Grey,’ Bean an Marks say thegither.

‘There’s real stories though.’ Cam sits up.

‘Glaikit Americans,’ Bean says.

‘An daft folk,’ Mark says. ‘Ma grannie yaist tae say she saw fairies when she wis a lassie. Noo she’s awy wi the fairies.’

Cam wants tae stick up for Mark’s grannie. She’s got dementia noo but she wis aye guid tae Mark an tae his freends. Her scones were magic. But he has tae defend hissel. ‘Here an aw though. In Scotland. Falkirk an that.’

‘No here though. Nithin happens here.’

There’s lichts blinkin high above. A plane, gaun far awy. Tae Europe or America mibbe, tae Canada where Cam’s Uncle Phil bides. No anither planet or anither galaxy, but far enough.

‘You ken whae A’d like tae take me awy?’ says Bean.

‘Jenna!’ Mark beats Cam tae it.

‘Aye, A’d happily flee tae Mars wi her.’

‘A think it’s time tae gaun doon,’ Cam says.

They gaiter up their stuff an climb doon the ledder, Mark first wi his heid torch bobbin aboot, then Bean. There's licht-heartit grummlin frae ablow, Bean gaun doon ower fast, juist aboot steppin on Mark's fingers. Cam waits til they're baith off the ledder afore he descends.

At the bottom, Cam hauds his phone wi the licht on.

It's the same as he minds when he came wi his dad. A cramped chaumer wi a few discardit lager tins an some graffiti. *Sex Pistols*. An Anarchy symbol. *Cara 4 Tam. Hibeas!* The white waws are aw blistert. Crummet, roustie tins sit on shelves an the grund. Derk, charred heaps aboot, where there's been fires.

Bean stots his shin off a bit o rubble on the flair. Mark's straight intae the back room where there's wires hingin oot the wa.

'Tell us what this place was for again Cam'.

Cam kens aboot this. He's googled it.

'It was for folk observin bombers carryin nuclear bombs. They'd radio it in so fighters could intercept them. But really by the time they spotted them, it was awready ower late.

'So, they're radioin in when they see planes but likely the bombs'll get dropped onywey?'

'Aye, A suppose.'

‘So, why did they bother then?’

‘It was their job. If A kent there were nuclear bombs gettin dropped  
A wudnae be hidin away up here wi youse pair.’

‘What wud ye be daein? Chappin on Jenna’s windae?’

‘Aye, mibbe.’

They aw laugh.

‘Magine though. Makin yer observations, then clamberin back doon  
here, listenin tae the radio, wunnerin if awthin was aboot tae get blawun up.  
Mental.’

They’re quiet again, thinkin.

Cam’s interestit in the Cauld War, the wey it seems that far away, an  
yet it’s no really, it wis happenin when his mum an dad were bairns.

He lifts his phone oot o his pocket an takes a keek at it. Nae seegnal.  
He thinks o the observers, magines them sittin doon here efter they radioed  
in a sichtin, waitin, wunnerin what was gaun on oot there. He thinks they’d  
have tae be best pals.

Damp an stoor fill his nostrils.

‘Mind what A said aboot aliens?’ Cam says.

‘No again,’ says Mark. Bean flings a wee stane at him, hittin him oan the airm.

‘Naw, A juist wantit tae say, A dinnae.’

‘Dinnae what?’ Mark says, shinin his torch richt at Cam.

‘Dinnae want tae see them. It wud spile it. Kennin.’

He’s expectin pelters. Dug’s abuse. But Mark juist nods at him an Bean says, ‘A think it’s bedtime’ an unrolls his sleepin bag.

‘A’m gan for a pee,’ Cam says.

‘Need the torch?’ Mark asks.

‘Na. A’m fine.’

Mark looks at him. He kens where Cam’s gaun, but juist says, ‘Don’t pee long’ an smiles.

Nae flyin saucers, juist the sky glisterin an glentin.

When Cam gets oot in the fresh air, he shivers. He’s left his jaiKET in the bunker. It disnae maitter. He sterts walkin back the wey they came. He walks tae stert wi, then he sterts runnin, lettin the slope speed him up, feelin the judder it sends up his legs. He scammles ower the yett, runs doon past the wuds, the sheep in the fields, doon past the hoose wi the gairden where the lassie was playin. She’ll be fast asleep, tucked up wi a

bedtime story. He keeps runnin doon the hill past Herbie's hoose, past the shop an along the road. As he gets closer tae his ain hoose, he looks up, howpin for a licht in a windae.

There's a wee glimmer, that he howps isnae juist frae his mum leavin the hall licht on.

He unlocks the front door an yanks off his shoes but gauns up the stair wi his jaike still on. As he turns the stair, his mum comes oot her room, lookin bedragglet an sair vext.

'Cameron? Are you -'

Cam disnae say onythin. He juist gies her a hug. There's a pause, then he feels her airms tichten roon his back. He hauds her an feels her chitter wi the cauld he's broucht in an feels tears in his een that he blinks away, an still haudin her looks oot the windae.

He cannae see a single star, juist the dark waw o next door's hoose, an in the neebor's windae, the faint reflection o the licht frae his ain hoose, whaur he still staunds, haudin his mum close.