



## The White Elephant

by Stuart Carruthers

Bank Holiday Monday.

Catherine Burns had a bad case of acne. The girls were due to arrive in an hour and she wasn't prepared. Downstairs her dad was slumped in front of the television.

Neither heard the doorbell.

Ashling didn't want to go. She had no interest in Jason or his mates. The hot summer weather had finally returned and everyone was gathering at his house for his birthday. Jack Collins was making good money. He didn't really care that some of his customers could barely pronounce the names of the drinks they wanted. It was all about the money as far as he was concerned.

Emerging into the hot afternoon sun, Catherine questioned why they hadn't bothered ringing the bell. As their squeals of laughter rang out the girls were in party mood. While her friends talked frantically about who was going and who wasn't, Ashling hoped the boy with the oversized jacket would make an appearance. Despite not talking on the previous few occasions they had been in the same room, she felt comfortable in his often distant company.

At the top of the park next to the broken football goals, Pete and Simon were stretched out on the grass bank with not a care in the world. It was Simon who noticed them first. Leaning forward Pete spotted the girl with the black hair from across the estate.

He wasn't interested in his friend's pointless conversation about not being invited to the party. Overhead the cries of a lost buzzard momentarily distracted their attention and in that split second the girls had disappeared. Pete leaned back on the warm grass and exhaled loudly.

All week Catherine hadn't stopped talking about the party. A free-house. It was going to be amazing.

Ashling made small talk with the boys from her year, who were pretty drunk on cheap wine, while her friends danced to the music she detested. The boy in the oversized jacket played the music she liked.

Time passed very slowly that hot summer's day.

It was early evening by the time the boys decided to move on. Cycling down to the arcade, they bumped into Simon's older brother outside Grady's fish and chip shop. The place was dead. Most of the shops hadn't opened due to the bank holiday, so they had the place to themselves. No one was in a rush to go home.

By seven o'clock Ashling wanted to leave. This party had definitely been overhyped by her friends. Making her excuses she walked down the side alleyway and before anyone could change her mind she was gone.

The park was crowded yet no one paid any attention to the young black haired girl walking slowly along the pathway towards the shops.

Simon had momentarily left Pete alone in the arcade. In that brief period, Ashling walked down the steps.