

**THE LOST BOYS'
APPRECIATION SOCIETY**

There was no premonition, no hint of danger round the corner. Death waited expectantly, hunched in shadows.

Lisa Cain was on the way home from a pleasant afternoon spent in the company of Marie, an old schoolfriend. She was driving sensibly as usual, over-cautiously according to the driver of the racing-green Rover that had been impatiently tailgating her for the five minutes before the crash.

'But it had been raining heavily,' he told police later, maybe that explained it.

She did speed up, moments before the crash, most probably intimidated by the closeness of the Rover. She did it against her own better judgement, but she did it. She pressed her foot down on the accelerator.

Coming in the opposite direction, Steve Parsons was also on his way home from a day with friends. He'd been drinking, he admitted that, but he could hold his alcohol. Everybody said that about Steve. He didn't like to boast but he had been known to put ten pints away and still drive home safely. Lisa Cain knew nothing about Steve Parsons until he entered her life at 4:17 p.m. that winter's afternoon, coming round the bend on the wrong side of the road. He was doing seventy but, Hell, he was a good driver!

Lisa's stomach clenched in horror. She braked hard, but the Rover behind was too close. It clipped the back of her car sending her into a deadly spin. Almost simultaneously striking the wing of Steve Parsons' Toyota, Lisa Cain careered through a hedge. The steering wheel was jolted from her hands. Her car bumped through a gate and into a field. The last thing she saw was the tree trunk. Lisa Cain's breath burst from her as her car slammed into the sturdy oak. Her life ended there.

It started with a phone call. Quite how long it had been ringing before I heard it I'm not sure. The house was

bedlam that afternoon, all Gary's fault of course. He had just been flicking cold baked beans at me and skipped out of reach as I took a swipe at him.

Dr-ing.

I jerked to attention. I seemed to understand right away that the call was urgent. I went to get up from the table but Gary started calling me names so I took another swipe at him.

Dr-ing.

Somehow the tone seemed more insistent, almost shrill.

'Give over,' I said. 'Can't you hear the phone ringing?'

Gary could hear all right but he didn't care. That's the way it is with Gary, he never knows when to stop. He thinks he's Jack the lad, a real funny guy. The truth is, he's training to be the world's greatest pillock. In fact, it's the only thing he puts any effort into, his pillockness. He flicked another cold, congealed lump of beany gunge in my direction, spattering my new Ellesse top. It had been flawlessly cream and cool until Gary got to work on it. That did it. I finally flipped and sprang at him. I was coming round the corner of the table when I met resistance. My legs suddenly stiffened and stopped working. Before I could do a thing about it I stumbled, pitched forward and fell flat on my face. Gary had tied my shoelaces together without me noticing! How does he do that? I didn't feel a thing.

'How old *are* you?' I yelled as I rolled over onto my back. 'That's a stupid kid's trick.'

Dr-ing!

The prolonged ringing was beginning to worry me. Whoever was on the other end wasn't giving up. They

were determined to get an answer. Desperate – and in my mind desperation equals importance.

‘Gary, will you get that!’

He just laughed. The spectacle of me rolling about like an upturned beetle was clearly far more entertaining than something as mundane as answering the phone. I was still trying to unknot my laces when Dad came stamping downstairs. I heard him pick up the handset.

‘Didn’t either of you hear it?’ he grumbled. ‘I was up in the loft trying to find your mum’s sewing machine before she gets home. You’d think you could do one little thing for me.’

‘I heard it,’ I snapped, ‘but El Divvo here tied my shoelaces together.’

Dad was still barking at us when somebody spoke at the other end.

‘You behave yourself, Gary,’ said Dad. ‘No arguments.’

Gary tried to come back with a smart riposte. He has an answer for everything, our Gary. But Dad wasn’t in the mood.

‘Just shut it!’ he yelled.

The caller must have objected at that point because Dad immediately said, ‘No, not you.’

There was a moment’s hesitation, then a sound like something bursting, imploding, but far away, as though somebody had pulled the plug on the day. I finally undid my laces and walked to the door. It was for all the world as if the air had been completely sucked out of the hallway. Something was wrong. The anger-flash had drained out of Dad’s face, replaced by a blank pallor.

Like disbelief—

Like horror—