

## Butterfly Clips

By Oskar Leonard

Life was so f\*cking boring, until I saw him. I remember the place, too - not the date. What do you think I am, some sort of nerd? The place, though, that's important. A quiet corridor, the corridor leading to that stupid counsellor's office. Counselling was useless, but I still went every week. Don't know why. It was all 'feelings' this and 'emotions' that and 'why do *you* think you punched that kid in the face?'. I knew why I did it. I was bored.

But then, I saw him. Never saw his eyes, like, because they were covered in that blond mess of curls and butterfly clips. Barely saw his body, too, drowning in an oversized blazer. Emo black, just like all the rest of them, littered with a couple of shiny badges. My first thought should've been 'swot', or 'nerd', or whatever. It wasn't, though.

As he nearly flew out of the way, giving me room in an already wide corridor, I felt a little... is sad the right word? It wasn't pity. I knew he had to be there for a reason, but it wasn't that either, no sort of weird empathy that my counsellor would've pounced on and diagnosed as 'progress'. I just... saw him, and wished that he stopped.

I didn't see him again for a while, even though I looked - sort of. I checked around all the 'alleyways', the strange gaps between buildings that builders must've forgotten about, and I sometimes scanned the canteen for that hair, falling into an unknown face. I didn't want to make it obvious, even though no one was watching. It didn't seem right.

My brain told me to stop, obviously. *What's Jayden f\*cking Foxcroft doing searching for a kid*, it asked? To be honest, I still don't know the answer. But I looked. When my eyes would've usually been studying the crappy school carpet, they were up. Ready to find that first sign. I even listened to some dumb kids' conversations, trying to work out a name. If everything had worked out differently, I might've looked back and called myself insane. Hunting for a ghost, who was either casually elusive, or clearly not wanting to be found.

I didn't mention him, at the next counselling session. Didn't see the point. She went on and on, prompting and guiding me through a painfully slow hour of 'talking'. Her talking, me nodding, staring out of the window. Some kids were smoking a cig end they'd found, taking turns. When a teacher caught them, my eyes moved to a potted plant on the desk, the counsellor's desk. Plastic, I decided, or in incredibly good health.

Once she finally let me go, I almost stumbled out into the corridor, glad of the 'fresh' air. She never opened her window, but I'd never asked her to. He was almost gone from my mind, replaced with positive mantras that meant nothing and a slightly amused memory of the scene outside her window.

But then, there he was.

The sight sent shocks to my stomach, like butterflies on acid. There. The stupid kid I'd been looking for all week, with no idea why. He'd tip-toed into my dreams, crazy at the best of times, nearly a shadow. The sight... it made me sick.

So I walked past, without a word. Same jump to the side, but this time it came with a murmured apology, a squeak of a word. I forget exactly which word, probably 'sorry', maybe a nonsense sound, but it was euphoric. It was honey, seeping through my ears. It was sparks in my fingertips.

It was enough to make me need a cig, after all that excitement. Back in my spot, *my* alleyway, between the Art and Music buildings. Pack out, cig out, lighter out. Scuffed school shoes touching one wall, my back against the other. Not a window or teacher in sight - just the way I liked it. I breathed in poison, and breathed out a daydream of the blond with the sweetest voice I'd ever heard.

Sweet. That was what caught me. Another drag, and there was my brain again. *He's a dude. He's a dude. He's a dude.* Again and again and again. *Jayden f\*cking Foxcroft does not think guys' voices are 'sweet' or 'honey' or 'exciting'.* *He's a ratty little kid, it spat, forget about him. He's a dude. Forget.*

I couldn't forget. He was in the face of every confused kid when I didn't shove them into a locker, or try to kick them down the stairs for stepping on my laces. He was in every-stupid-dream, a shy smile on tattered lips, trembling. He was the face, the face I'd invented because my imagination had got that desperate, flashing in front of writhing, naked women when I needed a release.

I couldn't get rid of him. It made no sense. A sharp, punishing drag followed that thought - no, it couldn't be a thought, I couldn't even think properly. He was behind every idle daydream, a devil dressed as a fluffy haired angel... no. Fluffy. I'd never touched it, but I could imagine the silk pouring through my fingers, golden.

I'd never seen his face, but I knew it. I'd created it. Soft, a few spots spoiling complete perfection; a cute little nose; round, doe eyes. Stereotypical. Every guy's dream - at least, to see on a girl. With every thought about him, every second of description, came punishment, until my throat was burning, eyes swimming with salty tears. This wasn't right.

But it felt so innocent, so pure. Stamping out the cig end - no puddle for a satisfying hiss today, after the unusually dry weather - I looked up at the crumbling bricks, some stained with marker scrawl, and tried to make sense of anything. By the time the bell rang, faint to my ears, I still hadn't worked out a damn thing.

Through lesson after boring, monotonous lesson, he was on my mind. The hair, haphazardly pinned with pink and yellow butterflies. The blazer, sleeves flopping over hidden hands. The voice. God, the voice.

It was driving me crazy. No, *he* was driving me crazy. Unlike most unwelcome thoughts, nicotine wouldn't get rid of him - it made the images more vivid, the feelings more confusing. I was searching one minute, and sullenly looking away from everyone the next. If he walked past me, I could've fled or punched him. That week was torture.

I almost didn't go to my counselling session. Not just because of him, I tried to tell myself, but because counselling was stupid and took up some of my lunchtime. My brain agreed with me on that one, for once. But... well, you can imagine that I ended up sat in that room, nodding at the potted plant. Calls and letters home were not my idea of a good night, and probably weren't my dad's either.

This time, there was a whole 'drawing exercise' thing - a piece of paper and a pencil. I never even picked up the pencil. She just said it was fine, and kept scribbling in her notes. I looked at them, sometimes. Most of the time they weren't about me. I reckoned that she tried to be polite for all her other kids, tiny children crying about things, so that by the time my session rolled around she had a backlog of notes to get done before lunch was over.

I didn't exactly want to leave, but I didn't tell her that. I never really told her anything. Just nodded, like always, grunted instead of saying goodbye, took some time with my bag. It had to be checked, unzipped just a little, nodded at, zipped up again. All that knocked the pencil off the desk, the most it had moved since I arrived, so that had to be picked up, put back... stalling. Most of me didn't want to face him. The other part of me was terrified of what would happen when I did.

Hand on the door, fingers curled around the handle. A goodbye through gritted teeth - I'd never said goodbye to her before. Ugh, what was wrong with me? Pull, step, the cold rush of a corridor without radiators hitting me head on. This was it.

The stupid kid wasn't there. Empty corridor. No one in sight. No one waiting at the doors at the end. *Empty.*

*F\*ck. This. Sh\*t.* That was all I could think, red bleeding through my brain. *Kick*, it demanded, as the double doors flew open, my foot burning with the pain. Some stupid girl screamed. *Shove.* The metallic clang of locker doors; the beeping of walkie talkies, followed by static; the reprimands of tired teachers, not fooled by my lack of detentions in the past weeks. Jayden f\*cking Foxcroft was back.

Back in afterschool detention, anyway. Some random teacher frog-marched me there after last lesson, some old dude in a stupid tweed jacket, like I was going to put in the effort needed to run away. Ha. Funny. I don't think I'd ever ran, not since the first year of high school. Maybe even once I hit ten, or nine. Some stupidly young age, when I realised life wasn't fun anymore. It was tests and rules and idiots. No need for running in a world that didn't matter, that couldn't excite me. Nothing was worth running for.

Afterschool detention meant a call home, but an expected call. Instead of some traumatic 'emotional talk' between me and my dad, it would be 'you f\*cking idiot', with a sigh, and maybe a half-assed attempt to send me to my room. I'd just leave, and he wouldn't say anything. I could deal with that. Feelings and the past, all the supposed 'bad situations' and 'things you couldn't have changed', they could go out the window, and never come back. The only part of afterschool detentions that I hated was a boring hour in room thirteen - more cliché, I guess. That one's on the school, not me. They couldn't be more stereotypical if they tried.

I knew the faces, vaguely. A few girls lathered up in fake tan, who refused to take their eyelashes off, or some wild stuff like that which made absolutely no sense. The usual brickheads from my year, caught selling anything from cigs to energy drinks. Some little kids were giggling in the front row, probably caught 'fighting' each other. And then, there was me, just another face in the half-full room of delinquents.

My seat was in the back row, right hand side, next to the window. Radiator for warmth, windowsill to lean my elbow on and some rubbish trees and nature to look at, instead of the cheap plastic clock counting down to four o' clock.

Trying not to kick peoples' bags or tables - this wasn't a room I particularly wanted to make enemies in, especially not from my year - I made my way to the back, eyes down, until I got to my row. Eyes up, across...

*no way.*

Sat there, with his elbow on my windowsill, his eyes looking out at my rubbish trees and nature, his leg against my stupid, gurgling radiator, was the kid.

He'd swept his butterfly-clipped fringe out of the way, and there was the face I'd been desperately looking for. Eyes, smaller than I'd thought, a quiet green, pale. Lips just as worn and patchy as I'd seen them before, curled into the ghost of a satisfied smile. The little button nose, the freckled cheeks, the long, flickering eyelashes...

if he wasn't sat in *my* place, then I would've been a whole lot happier with this discovery.

Still annoyed, and abandoned by a stunned-silent brain, I dragged out the chair from the desk next to him, slumping into the seat. For the whole hour, he did not move. It was like he was in a dreamy trance, almost like my old detention daydreams. Mine were probably better. Nah, that's not fair - mine were probably more violent. A little kid like that couldn't have much on his mind... but then, why the hell was he in there with me?

Bell went, chairs scraped, I grabbed my bag. Disillusioned with any ideas I'd ever had about that stupid kid, not even caring about the countless questions about him that had piled up in my head, I made to leave, not giving him a second glance.

His touch was tentative, trembling. Just like I'd thought. Fingers pattering against the back of my blazer, torn in so many places that his fingernails probably fell into one of the rips, or picked at a half-hearted stitch. Terror surged through my veins, adrenaline clawing at my blood, tearing my insides to shreds, as my pulse pounded like a panic alarm. He was touching me. *He's a dude. Shut up. He's a dude. Shut up. He's a dude. Shut-*

"Hey, I- I, uh, I saw, I saw you, a couple times, at the- y'know, at- y'know."

I had to turn around. I had to. It wasn't politeness; I was as far from polite as you could get. 'Thank you' and 'excuse me' felt wrong on my tongue, bitter. I wouldn't look anyone in the eyes, unless I hated their guts and wanted to let them know. Didn't speak when spoken to, didn't

smile when people used to try and be friendly, didn't agree to plans, didn't ask nice questions about weekends and holidays and- what was I doing? Why was he bringing out the worst in me?

Nah, I wasn't kidding anyone. The worst in me had been dragged out a *long* time ago.

"Yeah." It was all I could say, and even that one word had to be forced through my throat. He smiled, though, gently.

"Do you wanna, maybe, hang out, out of here?"

A nod, a nod that came from some unknown part of my body that certainly wasn't my now-apparently-dead brain, and I was following this tiny kid out of school, around the side of the dark green fence, stained by rumours of kids climbing up and impaling themselves on it that no teacher would confirm or deny, and... back inside? Through a gap in the likely-haunted fence, seemingly bent by superhuman hands, down an alleyway or two, but none that I'd ever known about, until we broke out of the claustrophobia-inducing walls and into some sort of courtyard. Criss-crossed with weed-filled (not even the good kind) flowerbeds, the square ones in most primary schools, which circled a single bench in the middle of it all: it was hardly an astounding sight.

But it was interesting. It was some spark of excitement, in the dull routine of high school, hidden within copy-cat classrooms, all the same except for the posters on the walls. And he was there, sitting first, letting me choose to keep a little cautionary space between us. The bench was one of those war memorial ones, the back wrought into the shape of a soldier holding a rifle at his side, emo black, with a crimson poppy- no, there I went again. 'Crimson'. Jayden f\*cking Foxcroft... ugh. What was the point? I could say over and over again that I 'didn't say words like sweet and crimson', but here I was, saying them. There was no point. Without my brain to back up the insults, they held no weight. Everything melded into a careful silence, as my eyes tried to pick themselves up from the cracked flagstones and focus on the kid.

"I like seeing you." His cheeks blushed a deep red, easily visible through the mess of hair, as soon as the words left those small lips... adorable. I could finally use that word, just like any other. "I don't know why. I know who you are."

"S- say my name." Biting my lip at the stupid stutter, I watched him sweep the fringe away, startled eyes searching mine. This wasn't me. It couldn't be me, talking like this, to a- I wasn't talking like that anymore. No more stupid thoughts, stupid ideas about who I was. *This* was who I was, wasn't it? "If you know it, say it."

"Jayden." There... there was my honey, sweeter than any words anyone could ever say. He'd leaned forwards, just a little, just enough so that those eyes, the pupils sliding wider, became a little larger, a little closer. "I tried to find you. Everyone in our year talks about you, but I couldn't find you." He was in 'our' year? How... how was that possible? "Everything's been a, it's been a nightmare, a whirlwind of- ever since I came here, I've been trying to find something constant, something I can hold onto."

“You’re new.” Not a question. It didn’t have to be. Everything was falling into place, interlocking like- like the delicate fingers, gingerly moving to touch mine, falling between them, his smaller hand fitting there so perfectly. “I’ve never felt like this- it’s sh- I mean, crap, ah-” flustered, of course I had to be flustered, but I couldn’t just spew rubbish, not in a moment as beautiful as this. I could feel the heat rising to my cheeks, even as the sun dipped behind a cloud, darkening the world around us. “I don’t know what I’m feeling.”

“It doesn’t need a name.” And now his nose was so close to mine, so close that they could almost touch, and those eyes were taking me by the hand, leading me down a spiral into a high better than any drug could give me. “It doesn’t need to be official.” Further and further down, until we were anywhere but high school, anywhere but Earth, floating through an atmosphere of soft sensations and tentative words. “There is a word, if you want one. Ludus.”

“Ludus.” As the pretty word left my tongue, those gentle lips edged forwards, blossoming into my... my first kiss.