

Read an excerpt from Peter Sutton's *A Tiding of Magpies*

ROADKILL

“One.”

There’s a pause of a few minutes.

“Two.”

I’m annoyed and curious.

“Wotcha doin?” I say

“Countin.”

“I can see that, wotcha countin?”

“Three.”

He gives me a sharp look. “Them.”

I follow where my little brother is pointing out the back window and see a red splash and what might be black feathers in a lump, disappearing behind us on the side of the road, lurid in the backlights.

“Ewww Gross! Mum he’s counting dead things.”

“Be nice to your brother, Mikey.” Rote words, said with no inflection, she’s not really thinking, she’s concentrating on the road.

I almost say “But Mum!” when I see her glance in the rear view mirror. Her eyes make me stop.

It’s not my fault the holiday was crap. Why did we go to the Isle of Wight anyway? Without Dad. Taking Granny. I cross my arms. What a crap idea. What a crap holiday.

“Four.”

“You’ve got to be kidding, there’s no way there have been four dead things.” I start, but he gives me ‘The Look’. It’s not right to be frightened of your little brother, is it? Although, if anyone ever said that to me, I’d punch their lights out. It’s a good job he likes me.

“Five.”

I look behind the car, I can't tell what it is but it's bloated and strange with legs sticking in the air like antennas. He looks at me smugly.

Granny is snoring in the front. She and Mum are the only ones, apart from me, that seem to be able to talk to him. Without him freaking out. That's why I call him, 'The Horror'.

“Six.”

“Seriously?” He gives me a look with his eyes almost rolling up into his head and makes a face. I know better than to argue.

“Why don't you boys try and get some sleep?” Mum says. So I close my eyes. All the better to ignore the little horror.

“Seven. That's a secret never to be told isn't it Mum?”

“Uh huh.”

“Isn't it Mikey?”

I turn my back and make sleepy noises.

“Never to be told.” He murmurs, quite close to my ear, I do my best to ignore him. The sound of the wheels on the tarmac lull me. I am comfortable. I drift off. The last thing I hear is “Eight.”

Later I wake, sweaty and confused. It is quiet.

“Why've we stopped?”

There is a lorry on the other side of the road with its full beams and hazards on, in front of it, lying down and apparently nonchalantly chewing the cud, is a cow.

“Why's there a cow on the road?”

“Shhh go back to sleep.”

“Need to go pee!”

“Mikey, take your brother to go to the toilet.”

I sigh and get out of the car. I walk all the way round the trailer, which holds all our camping stuff, and open the door. He is waiting. I take his hand and we walk over to the hedge.

“Not here, Granny can see.” I turn to look and sure enough Granny is looking out of the window, seemingly at us, although you never can tell what’s going on in Granny’s head, or if she’s looking now or into the past, or even the future. She’s not been the same since Dad.... well since it happened.

“Guh! Come on then.” I take him deeper into the bushes.

“Turn around.” We’ve played this game before. I know my part. I turn and look at the road and notice a set of headlights approaching fast. I see the lorry driver, or maybe it’s the farmer, standing in the middle of the road. He’s trying to flag down the car. It’s going too fast. It swerves to miss him and ploughs straight into our trailer. There is an almighty bang and I see the trailer disintegrating and our car go up on its front wheels then back down with another bang.

I leave ‘The Horror’ and run to the car. It’s a mess - if we’d been in the back we’d be dead. Granny has lost her teeth and is bent down in the foot well looking for them; Mum looks white as a sheet. I stare at the car that hit ours. It’s big, a Rover or a Mercedes or something. The guy staggers out. The car is skewed across the road partially blocking the light from the truck.

“Who the fuck decides to park on a fucking tiny country fucking road.” He babbles, slurring his words, like Dad used to when he got home late.

“Is everyone alright?” I decide he is the farmer. He looks like one. Mum is just getting out of the car, she looks at me “You’re all right.” It’s a statement, not a question. I look round for ‘The Horror’. He is stood just behind me, staring at the mess. Our stuff is all over the road.

“Nine.” I look at him without understanding then slowly turn to look at the road. The man’s car has smashed into ours then bounced off and hit the cow. He looks up at me “Nine is for hell.” He says. He looks over at the man, “And ten. Ten is for the Devil’s own self.” He takes my hand as the man slumps down on the

road pulling at his collar. Mum and the farmer are by the man's side. He's gone a funny colour, I can tell that even from where I'm standing, he's making small choking sounds that I can hear between my Mum saying "Are you OK? ... What's happening? ... it's just like Paul... can't you do something?"

Paul is my dad. Was. I mean, was my dad.

I look at my little brother and he is staring at the man, who is now lying down. My mum is shouting at the farmer "Do something! For God's sake, do something!" and crying. She used to cry a lot. When Dad came home all shouty and swears and had to teach her a lesson.

The man is not moving. My mum is crying. I am standing at the side of the road holding my brother's hand. He looks up at me and says "Never to be told".