

**BASIC**  
> **boy**  
a digital ghost story

CHRISTOPHER PETER

SAMPLE – FIRST  
THREE CHAPTERS

Text and cover copyright © 2013 Christopher Peter  
All Rights Reserved

ISBN-13: 978-1492955733

ISBN-10: 1492955736

Also available as Kindle edition

Cover and parts of text set in JLS Space Gothic and Data Gothic:

[www.thefontry.com](http://www.thefontry.com)

To find out about the author and other titles visit:

[www.christopher-peter.com](http://www.christopher-peter.com)

## Chapter 1 > Cal / 2014

I'm running away. I just don't know what from.

I try to blink away the heavy drizzle, to stop it poking tiny needles in my eyes. The street-lights are on now and the world is all glistening trees and concrete bathed in a sickly yellow light. It's not cold, it's not warm; it's one of those depressing grey January days that makes you want to stay in bed and pull the duvet over your head. Where was the sun? It just couldn't be bothered, that was it; knew it was on to a loser. Bit like me really.

The trainer on my right foot must have a hole, because I start to feel dampness on the underside of my sock; but I don't really care. Because when I go for a walk, the noise in my head dies down a bit. It's just easier. I don't have to make any decisions, apart from whether to turn left or right. I don't have to talk to anyone. Don't have to face up to anything. Don't have to answer any questions, or put up with anyone's stupid nagging. Don't have to do anything really, apart from just put one foot in front of the other. Even I can do that. I might not be good at much else, but I can do that.

I know I can't keep running for long. I'll have to go back soon ... but not yet. Back to what anyway? Every day my family invents new ways of doing my head in. Like this morning – my mum, whispering to one of her mates in the kitchen about me being fourteen, like it's some kind of embarrassing disease. Then they had both turned to look at me like I'd just crawled out from behind the toilet. And *then* Mum had a go at me for eavesdropping. I mean, whatever.

So I walk, as I've done so many times before. It doesn't matter where I go – just away will do. My walks don't take me anywhere much. That's not the point is it? And sooner or later, I always end up back where I started.

Except this time.

I realise I don't actually know where the hell I am. I'd turned off the

High Street to dodge a pack of girls from school who'd been lurking outside New Look, giggling and snorting at each other – and predictably, moronically, one of them said something that I was obviously meant to overhear. I'm not sure what it was, but who cares? So I'd escaped from that, that and all the other crap, down a side road. I remember walking past a shadowy park, then down a long empty street pressed in by dark old terraced houses. Finally I'd turned a corner and saw a tower block looming up in front of me, speckled by dots of yellow light. There's a faint whiff of smoke in the air, like someone has a bonfire. The houses here are different – squat, boxy semis, some with flat roofs. Not so old; built in the nineteen-sixties.

I don't know how I even know that.

It's here, in this street, that I first think there's something behind me. When I look round there's no-one there – in fact I haven't seen anyone else at all for what seems like ages. But I keep thinking there's something there anyway. And so I walk faster, nearly jogging, all the while telling myself I'm being stupid.

I don't know where I'm going. Until I stop in front of one of those squat houses. It doesn't look like a very nice place; Mum would call it a box. The front garden is crawling with half-dead weeds, and the white timber cladding on the front of the house, under the blank top windows, is scarred and peeling. But my feet take me up the garden path. I have to get inside, before ... I look back down the street. Nothing there; nothing I can see. Better get inside though.

*(my house)*

What? No. I've never seen this house before in my life and don't have a clue where I am. And yet, I feel my hand reach into my inside jacket pocket and pull out a key. I look at it dumbly, then up at the front door. There's a tall frosted glass window in the door with a thick crack cutting across the middle of it. A faint glow comes through the glass. Someone must be in. I have no idea who.

I watch my hand lift up the key, put it into the lock, turn and push,

just like I haven't done so many times before. I step into the warmth of the hallway, and a bitter stench of stale fag smoke stings the back of my throat. There's a swirly red carpet and pale blue wood-chip on the wall. After closing the front door behind me – with a weird feeling of relief – I glance around. In front is a closed door fringed by a rim of light – the sitting room? From the other side comes the faint sound of studio laughter. The TV is on and there must be people in there.

*(mum and dad)*

No, what am I on about, it can't be Mum and Dad, this isn't my house. But anyway, I don't want to go in there. For some reason I want to go up the staircase I see on my left. And so I climb up slowly, feeling the boards creak under the worn carpet. I have no idea what I'm going to do when I get to the top.

On the landing there are four doors, all leading into dark rooms apart from one. This door is ajar and a faint blue-ish light bleeds around it.

*(my room)*

*No*, that's not my room. This isn't even my house. Am I losing it or something?

I push the door open. It's a poky little room and it looks like a small bomb has gone off at some point, scattering stuff everywhere – a teenager's room. In the middle of the hardly-visible carpet a figure is hunched over an oblong black object that looks a bit like a small laptop computer with funny big blocky keys; but instead of having a screen of its own it's connected, via a snaking black cable, to a little TV. The screen is the only light in the room.

For a moment I stand there in the doorway, not knowing what else to do. I'd better go before I'm noticed. But it's too late. The figure suddenly turns and looks up at me. It's a boy, about my age, face lit in profile by the ghostly glow. He looks a bit familiar but I can't quite think why. The face looks startled. Then it twists and crumples, a mask of horror, the mouth stretching open.

I can hear the scream but only very faintly, as if the boy is a long

way off.

I jerk back, staggering out the room. I have to run. But then I hear a door being opened downstairs, and the TV louder, and voices. Then feet on the stairs.

They're coming.

*(mum and dad)*

No, can't be, but someone is coming and they're going to find me here, inside their house where I've no right to be, and what will they do then? I look around in desperate slow motion. I dive into one of the other, darkened doorways, but of course it's pointless. They'll soon find me. They have to.

The new room is lit by a single candle on a bedside table, over by the window. The light throws trembling shadows onto the walls all around. This place looks different somehow – the ceiling is higher and, between the slightly-parted curtains, I can see one of those windows you push up to open like in old buildings. I find myself wondering if I'm even in the same house. Which is mental, but I don't have long to think about it, because then I notice that in the bed there's a shape hunched under the bedclothes.

The shape stirs and moans. The candle flickers, flaring brighter in a draught from the window. I watch, mesmerised, as one of the curtains sways over the candle, brushing the top of the orange flame. Once, twice, three times. The burnt plastic smell of singed polyester reaches me. I can see what's going to happen and I can't even move.

Now the flame is licking hungrily up the fabric, consuming with horrible speed. In ten seconds the whole curtain is ablaze, first one side and then the other. I feel searing heat on my face. I try to shout at the sleeping figure, to warn them, but I hear no sound come out of my mouth. And I know that it's already very nearly too late.

Suddenly the figure in the bed lurches bolt upright. It's another boy, his face ashen white even in the red reflection of the blazing fire, his hair a mane of orange light. His face is all confusion, then disbelief, and

finally rigid with shock and fear. He leaps from the bed and stumbles towards the door. I dodge out of the way and watch as he snatches at the door handle, twists and shakes it.

But the door won't open. Why won't it open? The boy hammers at the blistering timber. The door must be locked. The boy half turns his head and I see tears streaming down his face, and he's yelling words I can't hear. Then he's coughing, his thin frame heaving and writhing, pressed against the door, first on his feet and then on his knees. It's like a horror film with the sound turned down. I wish the picture could be turned off too. I can't even close my eyes. Churning black smoke closes in around us. I'm amazed I can still breathe, but I know the boy can't.

I'm watching him die.

Then the smoke parts and the boy's still there, but this time he's different. He's standing upright again, back against the door, facing towards me. Is he *looking* at me? He's not scared any more. His blank face glows with a dead light, and tiny fires dance in midnight eyes. He lifts one hand and points right at me. I want to run, but where? There's nowhere else. There's only that long white finger pointing at me while the distant fire rages all around us.

Like I've been chosen.

*(you)*

No, not me, it wasn't my fault. I shouldn't even *be* here.

*(I'm coming for you)*

What? No. You can't. Please ...

*(Cal...)*

How do you know my name?

*(I'm coming)*

No!

*Callum!*

## Chapter 2 > Rob / 1984

Robert Black's heart was bouncing around in his chest. Around him an unnatural hush had descended on the Third Year Maths class. The sort of silence that only happens in a classroom full of teenagers when something very good or very interesting is about to happen. Rob was hoping it would be both.

From his vantage point near the back of the room, he could see Mr Howard bent, bird-like, over the computer, pecking slowly at the keys like the thing was made of bone china. Normally this spectacle would provoke the boys (and some of the girls) into restlessness, shifting in their seats. After all, the stupid git was hogging the BBC Micro, four hundred quid's worth of lurid, fascinating *stuff*.

Al Henderson leant over, poked Rob in the ribs and whispered with breath full of cheese and onion crisps, 'What's up Rob?'

'You'll see,' Rob whispered back.

'Oh yeah? Just another poxy graph ain't it?'

'Not this time. You know what, I've played Defender on that. At the open evening. But here they just use it for flipping graphs and spreadsheets. Typical of school – they can even make computers boring.' Of course, since Rob had got his Spectrum at home he had his fix of games on that, but even so, it was the principle. It wasn't like his class got more than an hour a week even near the school computer. The posh types at the Grammar school had four of them, so he'd heard, but no such luck here in this hole of a Comprehensive.

Anyway, today at least would be a bit different, because Howard was going to get a big surprise. The program he was about to run on the hallowed school computer had been sabotaged. He thought it was going to draw one of those multi-coloured line graphs that look slightly impressive the first time you see them, play an annoying little jingle and flash up some text describing whatever breathlessly exciting equation was being shown. Instead of which it was going to do most of those

things but then what followed would be a massive improvement. Whether Howard saw things the same way was somewhat unlikely.

Al started to whisper something else, but Howard glanced round and frowned. Rob felt himself flush as the teacher's furtive little eyes brushed over and away from him. Bloody Al and his big mouth. The last thing Rob wanted was Howard's attention being drawn to him right then – not with what was about to happen.

Howard turned back to the computer and tapped another key, then waited, finger poised. Then he stood up and faced the class. 'BASIC,' he intoned. 'The programming language of the BBC Microcomputer. Who can tell me what BASIC stands for?'

Oh come *on*, thought Rob, this is kid's stuff. We're not that stupid. But his hand shot up – the sooner Howard was humoured, the quicker they could get on with it. 'Beginner's All-system Symbolic Instruction Code. Sir.'

'Thank you Black.' Mr Howard was the only teacher Rob knew who still called the kids by their surnames, like it was still the nineteen-fifties or something. And even though he couldn't be a day over thirty he seemed addicted to the crusty old fogey look with his neatly trimmed black moustache and spotless brown suit. Not only that, Rob had the disturbing impression that Howard thought his scarlet bow tie made him a bit of geezer, the daring touch to catch the ladies' eye. Of course everyone knew most male teachers had no dress sense, so you couldn't really hold that against him. And Howard was sort of OK really, basically human and usually fair. But he *was* a teacher, and a bit stuck up for his own good, and so fair game.

'You can do so much with BASIC. You can program the computer to do anything you like. I've got a very interesting program to show you today,' said Howard with evident pride. But of course it wasn't his work, was it? It was Mr Jones' – nerdy, bespectacled, the only teacher who really knew how to program the computer. And old Howard had no idea quite how interesting it was going to be. 'I'll run it now, and then I can

show you how it was done.’

Howard turned back to the computer; and then, agonisingly, took ages to type ‘Run’ (only three letters!), and – finally – with a flourish, hit the Enter key, and stood back with a wide smile. The whole class waited and watched, a herd of hormonal coiled springs.

The painful jingle began and the curvy coloured lines began to trace their way across the screen. An eternity passed. Then, large bright multi-coloured letters began to pop up, character by character:

$$x = y^2 / 2$$

$$x = y^3 / 3$$

Rob held his breath.

... MR HOWARD IS A TWAT IN A GAY BOW TIE.

The music died and profound silence fell. Howard’s face froze, mouth dropped comically open. ‘But it was supposed to say y equals x squared divided by two ...’ A girl at the back giggled. Howard snapped upright and spun round to face his tormentors.

‘How? ... who? ... I want to know who did this! This ... this is school property, it’s an expensive piece of equipment! It’s not a toy! When I find out ...’ He swung back to the computer and began to bang at the keys, apparently forgetting it was an expensive piece of equipment. As if looking at the program would reveal who the culprit was, like they were going to leave their name or something.

Five minutes later Rob was floating away from the classroom, buoyed by the breathless admiration of his classmates. Al pronounced it the funniest thing he’d ever seen. It was a brilliant feeling, and all the better because he’d got away with it.

Lisa Clarke was predictably less impressed. ‘That was so immature,’ she informed Rob as they finally tore themselves away from the buzzing throng. ‘All the little boys enjoyed it though. What did Al call you? *BASIC Boy*? Honestly, like you’re some kind of superhero. Bit pathetic if you ask me.’

‘Oh get lost,’ said Rob. ‘I saw you laughing behind your hand. Anyway, you helped, distracting that prefect so I could get in the classroom in break time. Did you say you’d go out with him?’

‘Simon Parfitt? I don’t think so somehow.’

‘I thought he fancied you?’

‘Get lost! Was it really your idea anyway, sabotaging the computer?’

‘Yeah, it was as it happens.’

‘Mike Leeves didn’t put you up to it then?’

Rob felt his bubble burst. He didn’t like to be reminded of Mike, an ex-sort-of-mate who had caused him a good deal of aggro in the fairly recent past. ‘No way. He’s not even in Howard’s class is he? What’s he got to do with it?’

Lisa smiled maddeningly. ‘Well I just thought you used to do anything he said.’

‘Did not! Don’t know why you keep going on about him anyway. Do you fancy him or something?’

Lisa’s smile vanished. ‘Anyway, I felt sorry for Mr Howard.’

‘Oh yeah, I reckon.’

‘Well I did a bit. Did you see his face? He didn’t know what’d hit him.’

‘Yeah,’ said Rob. ‘But you know what? I thought he’d be angrier. He was more like – I dunno – flustered or something. I haven’t seen him like that before.’

‘I know why.’

‘Why?’

‘Oh don’t you know?’

‘Yeah, that’s why I’m asking isn’t it? Silly cow.’

‘Dickhead. Well I’ll tell you anyway. Jones and Howard don’t get on.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Oh, *everyone* knows. They can’t stand each other. Not sure why though.’

‘So? Oh what ... you don’t mean Howard might have thought *Jones* had nobbled the program like that? Called him a twat?’

‘Well why not? It would explain why he didn’t blow his top too much at us. He may not have thought any of us really did it.’

Rob laughed. ‘Brilliant! That’s classic that is.’

‘But I wonder why they don’t like each other? I wish I knew,’ said Lisa.

‘I know why.’ The voice was unfamiliar. Rob turned round to see a little ginger kid who they hadn’t noticed behind them. The kid had a thin freckled face, luminous white against his black parka.

‘Do you usually eavesdrop?’ said Lisa, narrowing her eyes.

‘Don’t worry, I know why Jones doesn’t like Howard,’ said the kid.

‘Oh yeah, I reckon,’ said Lisa. ‘Who are you anyway?’

‘My name’s Jason.’ His voice, though pre-teen high pitched, had a curious gravelly quality. He sounded a bit like Rob’s Aunt Beverly with her smoker’s cough. Or a tiny bit like a young dalek.

‘What year are you?’ asked Lisa.

‘Second.’

‘Oh. Little Second Year. We’re Third Year. We don’t hang around with the little kids.’ Lisa’s voice was dripping with disgust, like Jason was something she’d found on the bottom of her shoe. Rob glanced at her; he’d noticed before that she tended to make up her mind very quickly about people – and if she took a dislike to someone she didn’t bother to hide it.

‘I bet you don’t really know,’ said Rob to Jason. ‘Why would you?’

‘Yes I do. I know lots of secrets.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yes.’ Jason paused, looking straight at Rob, who stared back. The kid had round green eyes, the same dark oozy green as the slime in a stagnant pond. ‘You got a computer at home?’

‘Yeah, got a Spectrum ...’ Rob caught Lisa’s eye. ‘Er – what’s it to you?’

‘Want to swap some games?’

‘No.’ Rob stuffed hands in pockets and tried to look bored. That was better than looking uncomfortable, which is how this little kid was starting to make him feel. For one thing, he didn’t ever seem to blink.

‘I do know why Howard doesn’t like Jones. Honest. Shall I tell you?’

‘Not bothered.’

‘I’ll tell you if you like. Not here though. It’s a secret. No-one else knows – not kids anyway.’

‘Why do you want to tell *us* then?’ Lisa sneered.

Jason was still eyeing Rob, acting like Lisa wasn’t even there. ‘Do you know Micro Zone?’

‘Yeah, course I do. Why?’ Micro Zone was Rob’s favourite shop. He often popped in there on his walk home from school – it was just a slight detour – to lust over the computers, peripherals and, most of all, the massed ranks of games.

‘I’m going there after school. Want to come? I’ll tell you there.’

Rob shrugged. ‘No. Might do.’

‘OK then. See you later.’ And then Jason was gone, absorbed back into the passing crowd of kids as suddenly as he had appeared.

‘Weird little squirt,’ said Lisa with a sniff. ‘You’re not really going to meet up with him are you? Who does he think he is? I bet he doesn’t know anything.’

‘Well I’m not bothered. I was going to Micro Zone anyway.’ Howard’s behaviour had been odd enough to convince Rob that something was really up. Teachers were almost always so sickeningly *nice* to each other, at least in front of the kids. Just occasionally you caught a hint of something else, something in the body language or in an exchange so icily polite it froze the air. But he would no more have betrayed his interest to that little kid than he would have poked himself in the eye with a pencil.

The bell for the next period rang as Rob and Lisa reached the covered walkway that linked the school’s two main blocks. Rob turned

to join the sweating jam of kids inching their way into the old block. ‘Seeya,’ he said to Lisa, whose next lesson was in the opposite direction.

‘Seeya. Wait – I thought you were in Almond’s next?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Why are you going that way then? It’s quicker to go round the side.’

‘Oh ... yeah.’ Rob shrugged, disengaged himself from the queue and joined the quieter path that ran between the two blocks and past the car park to the main school entrance. It was indeed quicker to get to Miss Almond’s classroom that way, but Rob had tended to avoid that path recently, for reasons he didn’t want to fully admit to himself let alone Lisa.

He could no longer see it without feeling a stab of shame and fear, a poisonous mixture seething deep in his guts. He deliberately looked the other way as he passed it, but he couldn’t avoid catching a fleeting impression in the corner of his eye. The little sapling, devoid of leaves, standing skeletal black in a sea of scuffed grass.

The tree, the memorial to the kid who died.

## Chapter 3 > Cal / 2014

‘Callum!’

He swam up through the dark ocean of sleep. There was light above but he couldn’t open his eyes.

‘Callum! Get up! Half the day’s gone for goodness sake.’

Cal propped himself up on one elbow and blinked blearily at the bedside clock, waiting for the green LED numbers to stop swaying around and tell him the time. His head felt like it was full of hot cotton wool. He realised he didn’t actually remember coming to bed the night before. His last memory was of being on the laptop down in the study. Must have dozed off. And that nightmare – what was *that* all about? He frowned as he tried to recall the gory details – something about being followed, ending up in a strange house, and a boy in a fire – but even as he grabbed at the memories they began to fall apart in his head. Which was no bad thing really. He shivered despite the sweaty heat of his bed.

The LED clock numbers swam into focus at last, and bore the grim news that it was 12.03pm. But then it was Sunday, and what was there to get up for? There had been an especially volcanic row with Mum on another Sunday a few weeks earlier when they had been due to visit Aunty Pat in Brighton for the day. He had dragged himself out of bed at 10.30, which had so obviously been doing his mum a massive favour; but Mum, who had apparently held the demented hope of leaving the house a whole hour earlier (9.30!), had been unbelievably grumpy about the whole thing. At times, Cal reflected, she could be totally unreasonable. Surely she couldn’t deny he needed his rest?

‘Hallelujah. Fell out of bed did you?’ said Mum as Cal trudged yawning into the kitchen a few minutes later. ‘Lunch’ll be ready in half an hour. There’s tea in the pot. What time did you get to bed last night? What were you doing on the laptop all that time? Can you lay the table please?’ As usual Cal was unsure in what order to field the barrage of Mum’s questions, and so (again, as usual) he answered them all with a

single non-specific grunt. He was fairly sure that no real response was needed anyway – most of Mum’s enquiries were more like statements that happened to be followed by question marks.

He did however, after pouring himself a mug of milky tea with two sugars, start to lay cutlery on the table. He had no doubt that his mother was truly thankful for having such a helpful son, even if she was amazingly good at concealing her gratitude most of the time.

‘We need four places today,’ said Mum, after Cal had put out three. ‘Oh, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten. Neil’s coming for lunch, remember? Oh Callum, you’ve got a head like a sieve at times. Is that phone surgically attached to your hand?’

‘What?’

‘You know, you could do things a lot quicker if you used *both* hands. I said, your friend’s coming to lunch? Maybe if you took your eyes off that damn phone sometimes you might be slightly more on the ball.’

‘Neil? Oh yeah ...’

‘Oh yeah. Rob’s gone to pick him up, like we said? Well done for remembering.’

‘All right, all right, stop stressing. I was just checking if he’d texted me. Stop being sarky anyway. You’re as bad as Ellie.’ Ellie was Cal’s step-sister, Rob’s daughter. She was kind of OK, even though she had a habit of playing the sensible big sister – despite being a year younger, for God’s sake – and looking down on him. She could also wield sarcasm like a machete, especially when she thought her precious dad was being slagged off. Anyway she lived with her mum so Cal didn’t have to put up with her too much.

Cal tossed the last spoon down. ‘Done it. Can I go on the laptop?’

‘No, I don’t need any more help, but thank you so much for asking.’

‘Can I go on the laptop?’

Sharp sigh. ‘You’ll have to ask Rob.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s his laptop, remember? Anyway you already spend

hours on that thing. Last night ...’

‘He gave it to us didn’t he?’

‘It’s still his, really. You should ask him. You know that.’

‘Don’t see why I can’t just use it anyway. All my friends have got computers they can use any time they like. I should have my own. It’ll harm my education, not having one in my room.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Anyway you had that old computer till it broke. I still don’t know what you did to it.’

‘Wasn’t my fault. It was a lame old thing anyway. I practically had to wind it up to use it.’

‘Well we’re not made of money Cal. We don’t need another computer. You can use the laptop when you need it for homework.’

‘Rowan’s got a tablet.’

‘Lucky him. Has it made him feel better?’

‘Can I have a tablet for my birthday?’

‘Your birthday’s in October. It’s only January for crying out loud.’

‘Whatever. Laptops are so lame these days. Totally outdated. Everyone else is getting tablets now.’

‘Everyone?’

Cal rolled his eyes. ‘Can we get one please?’

‘We’ve got one haven’t we?’

‘What, that crappy fifty quid thing from Tesco’s that doesn’t even work any more since Rob dropped it? We should get an iPad4.’

‘An iPad4! Cal, they cost an arm and a leg.’

‘No they don’t. And anyway, you can get cheaper ones. Like the iPad Mini, or the Galaxy.’

‘Sounds tasty. I love a bar of Galaxy.’

‘You’re not funny Mum. When are we getting one?’

The front doorbell chimed. Mum looked almost manically relieved. ‘Saved by the bell. Get the door will you? You can ask Rob about the laptop.’

Cal was halfway down the hallway before he realised that getting

the door was pointless because of course Rob had a key. (Neil must have rung the bell for some stupid reason.) Why didn't parents ever give you a straight answer? Always winding you up.

'Alright Neil? Um, D – Rob?' Cal felt his cheeks flush. Usually Rob was Rob but sometimes he was Dad. It had got to the stage when both and neither sounded quite right.

'Cal, mate. How's it going Stubbsy?' With his untameable, sticky-up hair and constant twitchiness, Neil Turner was a bit like an adolescent mad professor after very recent electric shock therapy. Mum called him a blur in human form. 'When's lunch? I'm starving.'

'Dunno. Soon I guess.'

'Smart.'

'R – Dad, can I go on the laptop please? Mum said I could.'

'Well *if* she said you could, then yes you can. Don't forget to plug it in though – battery goes flat as soon as you look at it ... and Cal? ...' Rob's words dried up as Cal was already halfway back up the hallway on his way to the little study where the laptop lived. Rob had a lame and pointless rule that it had to stay right there at all times. Cal plonked himself in the frayed fake leather desk chair, flipped up the screen and sat fidgeting while Windows, with much whirring and some bleeping, spluttered into life. What a piece of junk, he thought. The sooner they got a tablet the better. And as for those stupid parental controls Rob had put on – just such a total pain.

'What's going on?' Neil had appeared behind him.

'Dunno. Facebook. If this lame junk ever gets its act together, that is. Speed of a flipping snail. Belongs in a museum.'

'Yeah, it is a bit slow. Memory? Two gig?'

'I wish. One.'

'Hell. Won't your folks cough up for a new one?'

'You're joking aren't you? Oh, about bloody time.' The laptop had at long last roused itself into life. Not much on Facebook – just one post from Omar.

Neil leant forward. ‘Hang about. What’s that? What’s that fool Rashid written about me?’

‘Oh – nothing – stop looking anyway, it’s private?’

‘Whaddya mean? Callum Stubbs, how many more times, there’s nowt private about Facebook. My name’s being taken in vain. Show me or else.’

‘Might be another Neil.’

‘Who?’

‘Neil Granger?’

‘Is it?’

‘No. Look ... just about Alice Buxtall fancying you, that’s all.’ Cal grinned slyly. Alice Buxtall was by common consent the hottest girl in Year Ten. Cal sometimes gazed at her from afar, but of course Year Nine boys like him – or Neil – were invisible to girls like her.

‘Oh ha bloody ha. Comic legends, you two. We’re just friends OK?’

‘You what?’

‘She had some bother with her iPad. I said I’d take a look. Probably how the rumour started.’

‘No way! You’re full of crap, Turner.’

‘Takes one to know one, my boy.’

‘When did this happen – supposedly? You never told me.’

‘Oh just the other day ...’

‘Neil! Cal! Lunch!’ came Mum’s distant call.

‘Wicked!’ Cal spun round to close down the laptop, before something on the desktop caught his eye. It was an icon: *ZX Addict*. He frowned. Had he seen that before? Last night ...? He double-clicked on it. *ZX Spectrum Simulator* declared the window in giant blocky text.

‘What’s that? What’s a ZX Spectrum?’ said Neil.

‘Dunno.’ Cal clicked aimlessly on the screen. ‘Says something about games. Might be worth checking out.’

‘Drinks, you two?’ Rob had joined them in the study. ‘Ah, you’ve found the Spectrum thing I see. Brilliant thing that.’

‘What’s a Spectrum Rob?’ Neil asked.

‘Sinclair ZX Spectrum. It’s the computer I had when I was your age.’

‘You had computers at home that long ago?’

‘Yes, thank you Neil. I’m not quite that old you know. We had computers. Nothing like we’ve got today, mind you, but we had loads of fun on them.’

‘They even had electricity, apparently,’ added Cal.

‘Hello, what’s that you’ve brought up?’ Rob leant over the laptop. ‘Looks like I’ve got a message.’ The screen had turned black, and there in the middle were rows and rows of strange looking text. The figures were wide and blocky, and the rows were numbered in tens. Cal scanned the first few lines, which read:

```
10  REM *** IMPORTANT  
MESSAGE ***  
  
20  PLOT (5,5) 'Please'  
  
30  BEEP (3,5)
```

‘What the heck’s this?’ said Cal. ‘Looks really weird?’

Rob was smiling. ‘Well, well, that’s something I haven’t seen for many a long year. It’s a BASIC program.’

‘A what?’

‘BASIC. It was the programming language we used on the Spectrum – and other home computers around that time – in the 1980s. What did it stand for now? Beginners’ ... All System Symbolic Instruction ... er ... Code, that’s it. We used it to program the computers.’

‘You programmed computers?’ Cal found himself slightly impressed. ‘I never knew you were a geek.’

‘I wasn’t. But it was dead easy really, and we all used it. Me and my mates.’

‘But what sort of things did you use it for?’ asked Neil.

‘Oh, all sorts. Games. Silly little things, like messages, making text

dance around the screen, sounds, that type of thing. At school they used it for boring things like drawing graphs. At home I used to spend hours on it. I once spent days on a version of Pac Man. It wasn't great – it was too slow for a start – but I was proud of it.'

'Pac Man? What's that?'

'It's a really old game, Cal,' said Neil with an air of authority. 'I've got an app for it. It's got a little round yellow man being chased around a maze by ghosts. It's hilarious, like so retro.'

'Just like you, Rob,' said Cal.

'Shut it, you.' Rob was peering closer at the screen. 'I can't ... seems like lots of words jumbled up. I can't make out ... hang on, I wonder ...' He typed something on the keyboard. Then he grinned, and his face, touched by the light from the screen, suddenly looked a lot younger.

'Hold on to your hats, kids!' Rob stabbed the Enter key. 'I'm running the program.'

The lines of text winked out and for a few seconds the screen was completely blank. Then, just as Cal thought that Rob had crashed the laptop, it began to make an uncanny guttural beeping and clicking noise, like a rattlesnake that had swallowed a synthesiser. Brightly coloured words began to slide jerkily around the screen, passing and bumping into each other, until they jostled into position and spelled out an utterly bizarre message:

Rob  
Please  
Help  
Me  
Hes  
Coming

'What's that?' asked Cal.

'Haven't got a clue,' said Rob. 'I only downloaded this thing

yesterday. Haven't sent any messages yet, and this is the first one I've received.'

They were interrupted by Mum's loud rap on the study door. 'Come on you lot. Lunch! Rob, I thought you were getting drinks?'

Neil jumped up. 'Smart! Food here I come.' Cal moved to follow him out the room, but looked back to see Rob still gazing at the screen.

'Rob – that message – do you know who it's from?'

Rob was slowly shaking his head. 'Bonkers. You know what Cal ... I've got a really bad feeling ...'

'What?'

'I can't really explain – I just ... you know what, I really don't like January.'

'Huh?'

'No. Definitely my least favourite month of the year. So dark and bleak. Christmas already a distant memory and spring still feels a million years away. And when I think of it, some of the worst times in my life ... I split up with Ellie's mum one January. And when I was your age, I did something terrible...'

'What?'

Rob half-turned to him, and Cal caught a flicker of confusion on a face bleached white by the screen's ghostly glow. 'That's the awful thing, Cal. I can't really remember.'

To be continued ...

That's the end of this free sample. I hope you liked it and you want to read more. You can find the complete version of *BASIC Boy* on Amazon, available in Kindle and paperback editions:

UK:

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/BASIC-Boy-Digital-Ghost-Story-ebook/dp/B00FLNLUYG/ref=tmm\\_kin\\_title\\_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1387391270&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/BASIC-Boy-Digital-Ghost-Story-ebook/dp/B00FLNLUYG/ref=tmm_kin_title_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1387391270&sr=8-1)

US:

[http://www.amazon.com/BASIC-Boy-Digital-Ghost-Story-ebook/dp/B00FLNLUYG/ref=tmm\\_kin\\_swatch\\_0?encoding=UTF8&sr=8-6&qid=1387578488](http://www.amazon.com/BASIC-Boy-Digital-Ghost-Story-ebook/dp/B00FLNLUYG/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&sr=8-6&qid=1387578488)

It's also available on all other national Amazon sites.

You can find out more about me and my writing by visiting my website:  
[www.christopher-peter.com](http://www.christopher-peter.com)

Or find me on Bookreads.com:

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6887127.Christopher\\_Peter](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/6887127.Christopher_Peter)