



**SPREAD  
THE WORD**



Shortlisted 2017:

*Scab*  
by  
Kathy Hoyle

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## Scab

### Durham collieries - 1984

'Howay, ya big ninny!'

It's so steep. Black shards threaten against a steel grey sky as I look down the slag heap toward the voices. I poke my tongue at the iron-tinged scab on my lip, a remnant of yesterday, and squint with fear. I can see Tracey at the bottom, two thumbs up, her face rosy warm against the sharp cold air. My sister, dark hair flapping in the wind, rolls her eyes. She tries to swipe the hair from her face but is hindered by her new bionic arm. The plaster blends against the alabaster sky, as she gestures furiously.

'Come the fuck on, young un, its freezin!'

I have to go. If I don't, I can't come anymore. Too little. Pain in the arse. Can't do owt. She slows us up. I'll have to stay in the back kitchen with me Mam. No way.

I focus on my grey plimsolls, once white and never really mine. Handed down like the Ra-Ra skirt and the blue cardi with the hole where I chew 'like a baby'. The bruise just below my knee is a glorious deep purple and the scabs still burn when I push down with my thumb. They remind me that if I fall off the buggy again, the sting will take my breath away. But it won't hurt as much as the sting in my belly, when the others turn their backs.

I tug hard on the rope; blue nylon cuts into my grubby palm but holds fast. The brakes work. I press a plimsoll down on the wooden slat and it gives to the right, I try the other and it gives to the left, steering's good. I peer over and check the dolls pram wheels, all good. I suck in a gasp of air and push

forward to the very edge of the heap, my heart drum- beating in my throat.  
and then.... I tip.

The low squeal is like a kettle left too long on the gas. It hums through my gritted teeth as I bounce and rumble down the heap, the craggy landscape whizzing past in a blur. Blue nylon bites into my palm as I pull furiously. Nothing happens. I close my eyes and my stomach clenches as I pick up speed, hurtling like an angry asteroid toward the others.

'Shift!' shouts a voice as I skid past, one plimsoll crashing down hard on the wood to turn. A long plait whips my eye as I spin across the glassy flint and the air blows out of me as I'm thrown across the ground into a tumble of teeth- rattling pain. Then steel sky above. I look up into its coldness and smile, triumphant. I pant for breath as the small crowd of faces block out the light. Tracey is grinning.

'Nice one, young un'.'

She holds out a hand to pull me up and I pull down my skirt ignoring the red welts. I passed. I came down the heap...on my own. I'm a big girl now. I have never been happier.

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We drag our carts behind as we make our way past orange- bricked terraces leaning wearily together, their windows marred by coal dust and muck.

'Ta-ra!' I shout to the others as they skitter off into cobbled alleys, always going the back way, never through the front. Then there's only us three.

'Carry this kidda,' my sister says, handing me her jumper. And I stuff it under one arm while I drag the buggy with the other.

You can't say no. That would mean a hard clip on the side of the head. And that hurts even , now it has the heavy weight of plaster behind it.

'Give it here.' Says Tracey kindly and she takes the buggy from me with a smile.

I hand it over, grateful. She's only a year bigger than me but she always looks after me.

As we go down the alley and through Tracey's dark green gate at the back of her house, I can hear noise. Noise like a grown up party. Looking through the back window, I see my Mam, head thrown back laughing, her brown curls tumbling down her back.

Tracey throws the buggy against the outhouse and we truck in through the door to the back room. Her Mam is smiling by the sink, rubbing her Christmas glasses with a tea -towel and the old radio's blasting out from the windowsill. My Dad and Uncle Gary are grinning wildly, Gary patting my dad on the back as they open cans of beer.

'Hurry up Linda, man!' shouts Uncle Gary.

I watch in confusion as Tracey's mam hands a glass to mine. My mam is giggling as wine is poured and my sister bellows through the heady atmosphere.

'Oi, what's goin' on here, like?'

'Tell the bairns, Jackie' my Mam giggles, motioning for us to come and sit at the kitchen table. I plonk myself down and move the paper aside, happy to ignore the headlines for once. I smile up at my Dad. I've never seen him

like this before. He looks so happy, not grey and tired like usual. It's like he's full of happy bubbles that spill out around the peeling gloom of Tracey's back kitchen.

'I got a job!' he shouts, waving two triumphant fists in the air. Uncle Gary ruffles his hair and my Mam claps her hands together.

'No more mines.' he says.

I think we should be happy, but I look at Auntie Linda and her pinched face says not. She turns her back to wash more glasses. I scoot into my dad's outstretched arms and he swings me around, almost toppling the cans off the table.

'Whooaaaa!' shout my Mam and Gary together, collapsing in a fit of giggles.

Later, Tracey and I sit under the table, sipping warm beer from the cans. I wrinkle my nose and my sister gives me a kick and snatches it from my hand.

'Give it here, baby,' she smirks, gulping it down. I lean forward and peep out at the grown-ups; Dad is leaning groggily against the table, the newspaper spread across his lap. Uncle Gary whips it away and drops it down on the floor, inches from me. I stare at the faces in the photograph, etched with fury, fists against policemen's shields, like flies against a windscreen. I trace my finger across the headline and silently mouth 'scab'.

'You don't have to worry about that shite anymore, Jackie.' Uncle Gary says and a song comes on the radio.

'Oh, I love this one.' My Mam sways to the rhythm, her hips tight against her blue skirt. Auntie Linda throws back a whole glass of wine as

Uncle Gary says 'me too!' and grabs my Mam. They spin around the kitchen in each other's arms giggling to the song, tunelessly joining in.

'Together we are beautiful...we are so beautiful.' My Dad laughs but Auntie Linda's scowl creases her face and I retreat back to the darkness.

'Howay, young un.' says Tracey. 'You can stay at ours if you like. Will I read you a story?'

We leave my sister sipping the can, picking at the plaster on her bionic arm.

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It's so clean and white. The tang of fresh paint catches in the back of my throat as I stand there flushing crystal clear water down the bright, stain-free porcelain. The handle is on the actual toilet, not a rusty chain hanging down. No more outhouse, no more night-bucket.

'Come n see.'

My sister drags me onto the landing, our bare feet bouncing in the spongy new carpet.

'We've got a garage.' she says.

'But we haven't got a car?'

'Dad says we're getting one.'

And I wonder if that means we can go back. The bus takes too long, says Mam. But if we have a car, we can see Tracey. I cheer at this news and smile behind my sister as she shows me the long garden with dew-soaked grass and freshly dug soil. But the clumps remind me of the graveyard in St. Marys, where fresh bodies are poured in. I feel uneasy in this crisp, fresh

place. My sister skips down a weed-less stone path and into the garage. I leave her and push through a small wooden gate, the varnish still slick on the wood and out, into a gravelled road, lined with more brightly coloured garage doors. A girl throws two balls against one of them, rattling a rhythm as she frowns in concentration. I kick a stone with my plimsoll and it spins and bounces off her shiny patents. The ball drops and bounces my way. Smiling shyly I pick it up and hand it to her. She scowls as she takes it.

‘I can play if you like? I say ‘Do shareseys?’

She puffs out her plump cheeks and glares at me with bright blue eyes. Looking slowly down from my face to my plimsolls, she peels the skin from my body and I smart at her hatred.

‘Fuck off, ya scruffy bastard.’

I wander back through the gate, jamming at the tears with my palm. I’m not a baby. Mam and Dad are in the new kitchen and Mam is sweeping her hand across the counter.

‘It’s gorgeous.’ she says and Dad’s smile is as bright as the brilliant walls. We all spin around at a knock at the door.

My Mam answers. She looks uncertain as a woman in a Crimson, tasselled waistcoat and clashing pink lipstick announces that she is Claire. Two doors down. She does Tupperware parties. The pink lips purse when my Mam says she just uses the old biscuit tin. The woman laughs but not in a laughing way and my Mam calls her a silly cow after she closes the front door. Dad hugs her and says things are different now. I go back upstairs to flush away the day.

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My sister and I have filled an old bucket with spawn from the stream we found behind the garages. We've hidden it in the garage behind the green Ford escort that my Dad polishes every Sunday. We are hoping for frogs. She rubs the pale skin on her arm below the elbow; the bit where the sun didn't catch and I ask her if it hurts.

'Not much now.' She says

'Are you glad the cast's off?'

'Makes no difference, does it? We can't go buggyin' anyway.'

I poke at the green sludge in the bucket with a stick. I want to jab and stab and sulk.

Eventually, the smell of pastry and gravy entices us out of the garage. Peering through the glass of the back door, my heart leaps at the sight of Uncle Gary drinking tea at the kitchen table.

I barge through the door, butterflies in my tummy.

'Is Tracey here?'

But he shakes his head.

'Sorry, young un.'

'I thought you two would be gone ages,' scowls my Mam, 'it's a beautiful day you should be out playin'.'

She cuts into a steaming pie and the smell makes my stomach grumble. She places a slice into the Tupperware box on the counter.

As she walks across to Uncle Gary my cheeks flush and I try to catch her eye and let her know... but it's too late. She leans forward and places the box on the table where Gary is sitting; her curls tumble forward, mercifully covering the open buttons and the flash of white lace bra.

My sister has her hands across her mouth stifling a smirk and I feel sorry for my Mam. She'd be so embarrassed if she knew. Thank goodness Uncle Gary stands to go.

'Will you bring Tracey next time?' I ask

'Aye, next time young un'. He smiles and my mam sees him into the passage, closing the door behind them.

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My Dad points at the hills of coloured fruit.

'Get some of those, Paula.' He instructs my Mam and she prods and sniffs before adding to the cart. I have never seen so much food.

I have the honour of pushing the trolley. It's getting heavy and I'm struggling to keep it straight. My arms strain as I wheel it behind them, fed up with the job I fought so earnestly for when we arrived. My sister skips ahead but makes sure she turns to smirk in my direction at the top of every aisle.

Eventually, my Dad takes pity.

'Here pet, let Daddy do it,' he says and he pushes it with ease to the till.

I help to pack like a good girl while my sister sits on a plastic shelf by the window, kicking her heels off a yellow, plastic Labrador. My dad lets me put coins in its head as we leave, then we all head back to the car and fill the boot with a million bags.

I am so excited I can barely sit still. I bounce up and down on the back seat, watching as the town fades into the background and the familiar fields spread like a beautiful green and golden quilt at the knee of the Sparkling

North Sea. We drive along the coast road and I wind the window down and let the salt rest on my tongue. Soon we slow and I can see the rows of terraces up ahead. Dad shakes his head as we pass the grey spiked railings and looming black tower. There are still men there with placards and angry voices.

The car has barely stopped when I fly out and bang on Tracey's door. It's weird being at the front, not just going straight in the back but we can't park in the alley. I hop from foot to foot while Mam and Dad unload the bags and place them outside the house. The curtain twitches, then... finally!

Auntie Linda opens the front door and I alternate between grinning fiercely at her and looking through her legs for Tracey.

'Hiya bairn.' she says.

Her voice is thin and tired like when you've been awake with tummy ache all night and her face doesn't seem like hers. It looks like all the colour has been washed from it. I wait for her to say come in but she doesn't and a bad feeling creeps from my stomach and settles in my throat. I try and gulp it down.

'Is Tracey here?' I ask, using my best happy voice.

Auntie Linda scowls above my head. My Dad is laying the last of the bags by the step.

'Hiya Lin,' he smiles, 'Alreet, Pet?'

He leans forward and brushes her cheek with a kiss but Aunty Linda looks like she's been stung by a wasp.

'What's all this?' She says. Dad steps back from her sharpness and puts an arm around my shoulders.

'We brought you some stuff, shopping like. You know, to see you through.'

Auntie Linda has tears sliding down her pale cheeks as she clings to the door frame.

'Thanks Jackie,' she says softly. Her mouth moves to make more words but nothing comes out.

'My sister climbs from the back of the car and wanders over.

'Is Tracey here?' She asks and picks up a carrier bag and hands it to Auntie Linda.

'No she's out buggying.' says Auntie Linda taking the bag and placing it behind her into the passage, like it's a secret.

'Do you want a hand bringing these in?' says Dad but Linda looks past him at my Mam who is leaning against the car, smiling thinly at Eileen down the road.

Then suddenly colour roars into Linda's cheek, like someone has taken a red felt tip to her face. She snatches at the bags and throws them into the hallway and my sister and I scurry behind my Dad.

'Gary isn't here!' she shouts, glaring at my Mam. 'Tracey isn't here!' she looks so angry I feel like she might set on fire.

'So you may as well go.' She flings the last of the bags into the dark passageway.

The door slams. We are left staring at the paint peeling around the letter box.

I slide into the back seat next to my sister and my Mam and Dad get in the front.

‘She gone mental.’ my sister says. ‘That happened to Julie’s mam, remember? When her nerves got lost and she would only talk to people through the cat.’

My Dad’s face is grim as he starts the engine and the radio pops into life. I love this song mutters my Mam. Then we all jump with fright as a missile hits the windscreen with such force that a small crack appears.

‘Jesus Christ!’ shouts my dad, pushing open the car door and hurrying out.

He returns with an object and I look out of the window and see Auntie Linda’s door slam shut once more. Dad’s brow is furrowed as he stares intently at the plastic Tupperware box. My Mam has her head down. Her cheeks glow and her pink-lipsticked mouth is pursed as she fiddles with tassels on her new Crimson waistcoat. On the radio her favourite song is playing.

‘Together we are beautiful.....we are so beautiful.’

## About the Author

Kathy Hoyle is a mature student at the Open University, currently studying for a degree in Creative Writing. She hopes to graduate next year. She loves to write short, poignant stories and this year she has been long-listed for the Sunderland short story award and short-listed for the Bedford international writing competition. Her work has appeared, in audio, on the Brum radio 'Tall Tales' programme and published in the Firefly literary magazine. She is currently working on a fantasy novella for Young Adults and a short story collection. She can often be found procrastinating on Twitter @kathyhoyle1 or blogging at [kathyhoyleblog.wordpress.com](http://kathyhoyleblog.wordpress.com)