

UNDISCOVERED VOICES

The seventh anthology of unpublished
children's fiction by SCBWI British Isles
and Europe members

published by

The Society of Children's Book
Writers and Illustrators British Isles

and

Working Partners Ltd



WP



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FROM CANDY GOURLAY

Honorary Chair

Dear Voices Soon-to-Be-Discovered,

Back in 2008, I was you.

I had spent years trying to get published – writing with a toddler under the kitchen table, writing in a freezing car while waiting for rugby or ballet to finish, writing in a state of constant interruption. I remember the frustration of it, the desperate need to get away and write my book. I remember the joy of watching a world of my own creation unfold, the exhilaration of learning how to write my first novel.

But I also remember the hurt when the rejection letters arrived: curt, unhelpful, dismissive. It was devastating to hear 'I do not feel passionate enough about your book' when it was passion that made me write it in the first place.

And then – like you – I won!

I got into the *Undiscovered Voices* anthology – the very first one in 2008. Suddenly people were paying attention. I was signed by an agent. Publishers began to read my manuscripts. I thought this was it. I'd made it. I was going to become a published author at last.

But it didn't happen and it didn't happen and it didn't happen. The story that made it into *UV2008*? Nobody wanted it. So I wrote another novel . . . but nobody wanted that either. Turns out, getting an agent didn't mean an end to rejection though there was a difference. The publishers were no longer rejecting me, they were rejecting my agent.

Which was GREAT!

I was no longer in a perpetual state of desperation, watching the market, looking for signs, analysing rejection letters. I was no longer dreading the thwack of a rejected manuscript flying through my letterbox. And I no longer needed to spend any time rebuilding my battered mojo. I could just . . . keep writing.

Not having to deal with the rollercoaster of submission, I lost myself in my next story.

When I give talks on writing, I like to discuss the Ordinary World – the first stage of the Hero’s Journey, as articulated by the mythologist Joseph Campbell. The Ordinary World is the world the hero leaves behind to have his adventure. It is the world that shapes him, that informs disgruntlements, his desires, his happiness or lack of it. Think about the great heroes of children’s fiction and you find their identities are strongly attached to their Ordinary Worlds. Luke Skywalker and Tatooine. Harry Potter and the cupboard under the stairs. Dorothy and Kansas.

The Ordinary World is more than just geography and back story. The Ordinary World is *context*. That context is what makes a reader care. You can’t enjoy Luke’s spaceship-flying and lightsaber-wielding unless you know how boring Luke’s life had been on his desert farm. You won’t feel joy for Harry Potter’s new magical friends and adventures without remembering that he had to sleep in that horrible cupboard under the stairs. And you won’t feel Dorothy’s desperate need to go home unless you’ve met the family she left behind in Kansas.

The Ordinary World especially resonates with me because I left my own Ordinary World in the Philippines thirty years ago when I came to live in London. Wealthy, entitled, calamity-less – London seemed another planet to me. I had grown up under a military dictatorship (complete with singing songs of praise for the dictator every morning while marching). My country’s most well-known attributes are its poverty, its overseas workers (eleven per cent of the population emigrate to work overseas) and its disasters. More than thirty typhoons slam into our islands every year. To make matters worse, our islands are perched on the Ring of Fire, a seismic belt of volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis.

I used to think that a character’s arc should take him far, far away from his Ordinary World. That a character’s journey would be so completely transforming that his old self would wither away so that the story ends with a completely new, unrecognisable character emerging, like a butterfly from its chrysalis.

I thought my own journey to publication would take me far, far away from that old life in the Philippines. But I found myself writing about my Ordinary World.

I wrote about separation, the pain of being left behind.

I wrote about leaving everything I knew.

I wrote about wondering who I was supposed to be.

I wrote about how a family's embrace can turn a strange place into home.

And to my surprise, it became the book that at last made me a published author.

Dear Voices of 2020, I rejoice with you. What an achievement!

This competition is not called *Undiscovered Voices* for nothing. If you've been in this trying-to-get-published game for a while, you will have heard agents say that what they're looking for is VOICE . . . Voice is what this anthology is all about.

But what is Voice?

I once heard the author William Fiennes discuss his creative-writing work with inner-city teenagers. At first, he said, his charges write thinly disguised imitations of *Twilight* or whatever the latest teen blockbuster is. Over time however, as the young writers grow in confidence, they learn to see themselves, to interrogate their experiences and find the words to tell their own stories. Their writing becomes honest, authentic . . . special. Their voices emerge.

William calls it the 'Unmistakeable I Am'.

I think I understand what he means. I think the Unmistakeable I Am is a little piece of Ordinary World that every storyteller carries around, like a pebble in her pocket. Sometimes you don't even know it's there. And it takes digging and honesty and courage to find it.

Whether you are agented or published or not, publishing is a waiting game. So after the toasts and the partying, once you've all returned to your garrets to resume the waiting – and the writing – have a rummage for your Unmistakeable I Am. And when you find it, hold on to it.

It will stand you in good stead for the next part of this journey.

May the best stories find you.

Candy Gourlay

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FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2020*, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' (SCBWI) seventh anthology of undiscovered writers. Congratulations to all the longlisted and shortlisted authors!

The SCBWI is a professional network for the exchange of knowledge and ideas amongst writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, agents, librarians, educators, booksellers and others involved with literature for children and young people. There are currently 22,000 members worldwide, in over seventy regions, making it the largest global children's writing organisation. Membership benefits include professional development and networking opportunities, marketing information, events, publications, online marketing, awards and grants.

SCBWI British Isles is proud to offer a myriad of professional development, networking and marketing opportunities to writers and illustrators, and a very welcoming, diverse and supportive community. Breaking into the children's book market amidst tough competition is often a Herculean feat. Sometimes, you just need a bit of a helping hand, a dash of luck and someone who believes in you. This is where *Undiscovered Voices'* track record speaks for itself:

Following the first six anthologies, 42 *Undiscovered Voices* alumni have received contracts for more than 260 books. These have been honoured with nominations and featured on prestigious literary lists, including the Blue Peter Book Award, the Barnes and Noble Top Teen book, the American Library Association Best Book for Young Readers, the Borders Book of the Month, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Crystal Kite Award and the Branford Boase Award.

Undiscovered Voices would simply not be possible without an incredibly hardworking, enthusiastic team of volunteers, editors and judges. Thank you! We are also extremely grateful to Working Partners for their enormously generous support and funding of this exciting project from the start.

In this anthology you will find original concepts and the high calibre of writing that has captured our judges' attention. So, quick – turn the page and be prepared to 'discover' something new and exciting!

Natascha Biebow and Kathy Evans

Co-Regional Advisors (Co-Chairs)

SCBWI, British Isles region

www.britishisles.scbwi.org

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FROM WORKING PARTNERS

Working Partners is extremely proud to continue to sponsor the *Undiscovered Voices* competition and this, the seventh anthology of wonderful new voices.

It's a real pleasure to see another group of writers come through the process and a thrill to imagine where their careers will go next. *Undiscovered Voices'* shortlisted and longlisted writers have found agents, publishers and lifelong friends through the anthology, with more than 260 books being published by *Undiscovered Voices'* writers and illustrators.

We're thrilled to be able to help the incredibly dedicated *Undiscovered Voices* team and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators bring more writers to the attention of the publishing industry. We hope that every agent and editor who reads this collection finds something to inspire them, and we wish the writers the very best for their future careers.

Congratulations to everyone – the team, the writers in the anthology, the longlist, and every writer who submitted their work to the competition. Putting yourself and your creative work out there can be a scary thing to do, but this anthology and its history show that it is worth it. We look forward to continuing to sponsor *Undiscovered Voices* and see its winners flourish for many years to come.

Chris Snowdon

Managing Director

Working Partners

www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk

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SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE CO-CREATORS

Welcome to the seventh *Undiscovered Voices* anthology!

Undiscovered Voices is one hundred per cent volunteer-driven – from the initial concept in 2006 through each of the seven anthologies that have resulted in more than 260 books, nominated for or winning more than 150 literary prizes.

This abundance of talent from the British Isles and Europe can be presented to you only because of a generous sponsor and a team of dedicated volunteers. It's a passion project for us all. And what's even more gratifying is the cascade of kindness that *Undiscovered Voices* has inspired. Previous *Undiscovered Voices* writers continue to help fellow writers on their paths to publication.

- Without hesitation, **Working Partners** came on board as the sole sponsor and have fully funded and supported the project since 2008. *Undiscovered Voices* would never have happened if not for their generosity. Continued thanks to **Chris Snowdon** and everyone at Working Partners for their support for writers – both published and soon-to-be-discovered. And a special thanks to the following Working Partners editors who helped us review the nearly 250 submissions: **Elizabeth Galloway**, **Clarissa Hutton** and **James Noble**.
- We are also excited to have **Candy Gourlay** as our honorary chair. She was featured in the very first *Undiscovered Voices* anthology. It has been a thrill to read her amazing books, watch her build a career and achieve so much! She is an inspiration and has been incredibly generous with her time, talent and wisdom – not only to *Undiscovered Voices* but for many, many years as an SCBWI volunteer. We wish her continued success!
- A huge thanks to our *Undiscovered Voices* planning committee, which has

spent thousands of hours planning and plotting with no compensation – except the satisfaction of helping fellow writers: **Rosie Best, Catherine Coe, Jenny Glencross, Simon James Green** and **Benjamin Scott**. You are truly an amazing team. We can't thank you enough for your dedication, creativity and professionalism. You are the unsung heroes of *Undiscovered Voices*.

- Thanks also to our SCBWI EU volunteers **Elizabeth Brahy, Sandra Nickel** and **Mina Witteman** for helping read submissions and supporting writers in the EU.
- This year we introduced a mentorship programme so that every writer in this anthology is paired with a writer from a previous anthology. Thanks to **Sophie Cameron, Katrina Charman, Katie Dale, Claire Fayers, Peta Freestone, Jane Hardstaff, Kathryn Kettle, Maureen Lynas, Shirley Anne McMillan, Nicola Penfold, Paula Rawsthorne** and **Imogen White** for paying it forward.
- Unending appreciation to **Natascha Biebow** and **Kathy Evans**, Co-Regional Advisors for SCBWI British Isles, for leading the region, supporting innovative projects and championing writers.
- The esteemed judging panel so graciously shared their experience and expertise – as well as an incredible passion for children's and teen fiction writing.

Helen Boyle, Literary and Illustration Agent at Pickled Ink
Annalie Grainger, Senior Commissioning Editor at Walker Books
Stephanie King, Commissioning Fiction Editor at Usborne Publishing
Polly Nolan, Literary Agent at Greenhouse Literary Agency
Alice Sutherland-Hawes, Children's Agent at Madeleine Milburn
Literary Agency
Clare Wallace, Literary Agent at Darley Anderson Children's
Book Agency

- And last but not least, thanks to our lovely designer Becky Chilcott who has been with us from the very beginning!

The entire *Undiscovered Voices* team couldn't be more proud of what we've accomplished together. We look forward to seeing what talented writers we will discover next.

Sara Grant and Sara O'Connor

Co-Creators of *Undiscovered Voices*

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GHOSTCLOUD

By Michael Mann

Chapter 1: The Visit

The darkness oozed like hot, black treacle. It ran thick in the air and slick down the walls. Even when the flames leapt high, their sparks never reached it. It was a mystery to Luke.

“Stop staring at the ceiling!” hissed Ravi, from behind. “You’re spilling the coal.”

“Sorry. I was thinking.”

“Well don’t, thank you. Less sleuthing, more shovelling.”

Luke Smith-Sharma lived beneath Battersea Power Station, a gloomy place of towering chimneys and blackened bricks. He kept the fuel coming in the great furnace room, feeding the fires till they glowed white-hot. Lines of children, one hundred kids long, snaked across the hall to the hungry flames, each shovelling coal dust to the child in front. They powered all of London: from Big Ben’s beep to the robot-horse carriages, from Buckingham Palace to London Zoo.

“They say she’s visiting today.” Ravi wiped his glasses. “She’s giving golden tickets to the hardest shovellers . . .”

“. . . and it’s our only way home. I know. I know.”

Luke tightened his grip on the rust-iron spade. He ignored the chafe of his coal-sack collar and the tickle of sweat on his pale neck and brow. He had to keep shovelling. Nobody ever stopped shovelling. Not unless they wanted to be fuel themselves.

Iron scraped on carbon. Lungs panted hot air. Dancing flames hissed and crackled. These were the sounds of the furnace room. The same

sounds he'd heard for over two years. But each week, on Sunday, he heard a different set of sounds. And you had to be ready.

A door creaked. A deliberate creak he knew well. It was followed by a hush that rolled up the line, silencing the guards and children alike. Then the echo of heels on a hot stone floor.

“Don't look back,” Ravi said. “Keep your eyes on the spade.”

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Black nails tapped, on a black clipboard. A black lab coat swished, over black leather boots. A black heart beat, closer each second.

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Luke tried to think happy thoughts: eating ice cream under a warm blue sky; flying kites with his sister Lizzy; his dad sifting through evidence on the kitchen table. Or the day – maybe today, if Ravi's intel was right – when they'd earn their ticket and walk out of this miserable place for good.

But the good thoughts wouldn't stick. Instead, he found himself looking up at the darkness. At the ceiling so high that the light never reached it. At the cloud of black above their grimy heads.

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

There was a squeal of pain down the line, then the sizzle of hot ash on naked skin. A solitary sob echoed through the hall.

“Never cry,” Luke muttered. “That's what she wants.”

Her name was Tabatha Margate. She ruled the plant. If you cried, she just blew smoke in your face. Or emptied the ash from her pipe on your hand. Or into your eye, if you didn't shut it in time. That's what she was like. She didn't care one bit about the children that worked there. For her, all that mattered was that they were cheaper than adults. They ate less food. She could fit more in. And most important of all, they were easier to kidnap.

The click of her heels started again. The pace of shovelling picked up at once. It always did, when she paid them a visit.

And that was when he saw it: the girl in front could no longer keep up. Her skinny arms began spilling and flinging the coal dust. Her breaths started coming in grunts and gasps.

She would mess it all up. If Tabatha saw, the whole line would be

punished. He had to do something – and do something quick – or his and Ravi’s chance of a golden ticket, and a way out of this place, would go down with her.

Chapter 2: The Mistake

Kids who couldn’t keep up fell into one of two categories: fainters and flappers. Fainters paled, gave up, then fell to the floor. Flappers fought on, admirably so, but ended up making an almighty mess of the coal dust. This girl was a flapper.

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

Tabatha was close, and flappers took time. You had to talk them down from the panic, then fix their technique. He felt dark hairs prickle up on the back of his neck. Calm under pressure, that’s what his dad would have said. It was the only way to crack the case.

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

“Ravi, quick, pass me a stone.”

“Now?” Ravi hissed.

“We’ve a flapper in front.”

Ravi was a trader, like his dad outside. Whether information or goods, he was always well stocked. He didn’t give things for free, even to friends like Luke, but this was an exception. If the line messed up, they could say goodbye to their golden ticket.

A pebble appeared in Luke’s scoop of coal dust. He snatched it and tucked it under his arm. He had to be patient. He had to wait for a moment when they’d all be distracted. Surely it was only a matter of time?

*Click. Tap. Swish. **Thwack!***

A child yelped. The smell of singed hair filled the air. A peal of laughter, like broken glass, echoed through the hall.

Luke seized his chance. He flung the pebble hard, with his strong shovelling arm, across to the other side of the hall. A second passed, then there was a clang of rock on metal, followed by shouts of protest from the guards and shovellers.

Tabatha’s laughter stopped. In the corner of his eye, he saw her turn towards the noise. The click of heels faded.

“You’ve two minutes, max, before she comes back,” Ravi said. “Whatever you’re planning, hurry!”

Luke did not believe in hurrying. To solve something properly, you observed first and acted second. To calm the girl, he had to first understand her.

He inspected her carefully. Method was key. She had short blonde hair that stuck up in places. The name ‘Jess’ was sewn on the back of her sackcloth. And her hands . . . they were different. They weren’t callused like his, but soft and sore. They weren’t pale from months spent underground, but tanned from the sun. *They were the hands of a new kid.*

And he knew what to do. New kids brought news. It was the perfect topic: it’d remind her of home and settle her nerves. And he could trade it for rations, when this was all over.

“Psst, Jess. What’s the news from the city?”

She looked up from her spade and gave a tentative smile. And just like that, her shovelling improved a little. New kids were often lonely, and even one kind word could make their day.

“Well, I’ve been kidnapped, which might be news?” she said hopefully.

It was not news. Kids were kidnapped all the time these days. It didn’t sell papers.

“Maybe . . .” Luke smiled warmly. “What about the war with Europe?”

“Still going, but quiet.” Her shoulders loosened. It helped the swing of her shovel. “Though there are rumours they’re reopening the Old Channel Tunnel.”

There were always rumours. The old tunnel entrance was deep in the ruins of London South. Haunted, toxic, out of bounds. Nobody knew what had happened: they just knew to avoid it.

“Oh, there is something,” she said, with growing enthusiasm. “These new, smog-proof riverboats. The Grand High Lord Mayor launched one the other day. They’ve shiny propellers to suck up the smog and glass domes to keep the fresh air in.”

Jess’s breaths were less shallow. Her smile had grown into a great, toothy grin, as she prattled on about smog and the mayor. There was something different about this girl, Luke thought. She was strangely cheery. Most new kids didn’t grin for weeks, if at all, and he’d never

heard a kid talk so freely in the furnace hall. It wasn't wise, yet for some reason, he found himself smiling.

Then the click of heels stopped.

"She's heading back," Ravi hissed. "She must have smelled a rat."

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

Luke looked at Jess. She'd stopped flapping, but her shovelling was still messy. "So, about your shovelling. Try relaxing your grip. Space out your hands. And keep your eyes on the spade."

Jess nodded and adjusted. "That's miles better!" she said, too loud.

Luke grimaced at the noise. At least it had worked. She was spilling less dust and almost shovelling in time.

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

A musky perfume punctured the sticky, coal-scented air. Tabatha was near. But he still had time for one more tip. If he got this right, he could be out by nightfall. "Now straighten your back, and push from your legs."

This was key. Legs were stronger than arms. His dad always said that if everyone lifted with their legs, then all backache and stooping would be gone overnight.

"Like this?" Jess said, her body rigid, as she catapulted a giant, stiff spadeful of coal dust into the air.

Luke's grey eyes widened. He watched the scoop of coal dust fly higher and higher, blending into the endless darkness above. Not only up, but back through the air. Back down the line.

He couldn't help but look. It flew fast and silent. A ball of black, straight towards Tabatha.

Tabatha couldn't have seen it coming. She was busy blowing ash on a young girl's neck. And when it hit her, it hit hard, with a WHOOSH to the side of her head.

Black crystals burst sparkling into the air. The click of heels stopped. The shovelling stopped. The breathing stopped. The hall went silent.

Tabatha turned around, transformed: hair matted, cheeks caked, stylish clothes covered in a blanket of black. Luke couldn't help but think she looked like a shadow. A furious, white-eyed, pipe-smoking shadow, who was quite ready to kill someone.

“Who did that?” Her voice was the crackle of gravel under car tyres.

“Who did that?” she said, louder this time, heels crushing carbon as she stepped down the line.

“WHO DID THAT?” she bellowed, smoke slipping from her lips, like from the mouth of the furnace itself.

Every kid’s head was down. Every single one of them was still holding their breath. They all knew how bad it would be if they were caught.

Well, almost all of them.

“I did, Ms Margate,” Jess piped up, her hand in the air. “I’m awfully sorry. I’m new. It was an accident.”

Luke’s heart sank. This Jess was a disaster. Messy. Noisy. Honest to boot. She wouldn’t last a week in the plant at this rate.

He was a valuable shoveller. Tabatha wouldn’t waste him. “It’s my fault too.” He put up his hand. “I distracted her.”

Jess nodded eagerly.

Ravi shook his head, despondent.

Tabatha smiled. “Handing out punishments is one of my favourite things. Handing out two – well, it’s my lucky day.”

Chapter 3: The East Wing

Luke was a ‘keep-your-head-down’ kind of boy: if there was a centre of attention, he tried to avoid it. But at that moment, in the hall, there was nowhere to hide. So he stood next to Jess, paler than usual, before a thousand gaunt faces, all waiting to hear what punishment Tabatha had in store.

Tabatha didn’t explain. That would have been putting them out of their misery, and misery was precisely what Tabatha loved. Instead, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her talkometer – a copper shell-shaped contraption with a wind-up handle. She turned the handle twice and whispered into it.

A moment later, Tabatha’s manservant Terence arrived. Nobody liked Terence. Not even Tabatha. He had the body of a tall man, but his head leant in low. He had a sharp, pointy face, but a dull look in his eyes. And he was extraordinarily greasy – from the tip of his ponytail, to the ends of his

shoes. Even Terence's teeth were greasy. Luke shuddered. This was a man who could do with a shower.

"Take them to the East Wing," said Tabatha.

"The East Wing?" Terence gulped.

Luke didn't know much about the East Wing, except that it was closed to the shovellers and always had been. He glanced around the hall. An ashen-faced Ravi mouthed 'good luck'. An oblivious Jess smiled on. The rest of the faces were universally grave.

Then he was sliding backwards, alongside Jess: Terence had them by their collars, and, muttering, dragged them towards the door. Luke squirmed. For a man covered in grease, he had a firm grip.

They soon hurried down a very long corridor, which stretched into the darkness. Lights flickered dimly, flakes of dark paint hung from the walls and black-and-white tiles zigged and zagged under their feet.

"I hate the East Wing," Terence harrumphed, then licked his teeth.

"I can see why." Jess nodded, squinting at the tiles.

Luke sniffed the air. A faint smell lingered, like rotten vegetables in an old wet towel. As they trudged down the corridor, the stink grew ever stronger. He tried to breathe through his mouth. The day couldn't get any worse. It literally stank.

Jess, however, was grinning again.

"Why are you smiling?" Luke asked. "This is terrible. This is worse than terrible."

"Every cloud has a silver lining." She shrugged. "I mean, at least we're not shovelling."

Luke's spirits slumped. He'd rescued an *optimist* – they were the worst! She'd soon learn. Shovelling was the only way out of this place.

Metal jangled as Terence retrieved some rusty keys from his bag. "You must have done something especially bad," he spat. "Entering the East Wing is normally forbidden. Strange things happen here."

Luke's ears pricked up. Forbidden meant secrets and mysteries to be solved. A surge of curiosity burned away his gloom. He scanned the room and sniffed. Amidst the stink and decay hung a series of photos, in gilded frames, in neat intervals along the endless corridor.

"What are those pictures, Terence?" Luke asked, holding his nose.

Terence bared his yellow teeth. “Stop snooping, you wart.”

In each photo, a smiling family stood beside the power station. Though the families changed, their features were similar. In the last photo, however, the father frowned. Instead of a wife by his side, there stood a little girl, all in black, whose amber eyes glared right back at Luke.

Luke looked at Terence again. It was worth a shot. “It’s just,” Luke added, “that they’re so expertly hung.”

A smile glimmered on Terence’s lips, and he stood a little straighter. “They’re family heirlooms,” he droned. “The Margates have owned this station for hundreds of years. When the War with Europe started, it was an easy target. This wing never recovered. But Tabatha has plans. It will all soon be as good as new.”

“Maybe she could buy some air fresheners first?” said Jess, clearly trying to be helpful.

She had a point, Luke thought. By halfway down the corridor, the unpleasant pong had turned into a gut-twisting stench. A mixture of fresh vomit, bad breath and rotting eggs.

“Don’t be impudent.” Terence prodded Jess’s shoulder. “If you think this is bad, just wait for your punishment. You’ll be in the sewers. There’ll be a lot more of this stink.”

Luke had never cleaned a toilet, let alone a sewer. He struggled to imagine how it could smell any worse.

“But, Mr. Terence, I think you’ll find,” Jess continued, “that this smell isn’t sewage. My dad’s a plumber – I used to help him on jobs – and sewage smells different. In fact, I don’t know what this smell is.”

Terence sniffed deeply and then trembled all over. He put his hand to his mouth, as if to stifle something. Then he raised one hand up and pointed ahead. His mouth dropped open, revealing the horror of his grease-covered teeth.

Luke’s eyes widened. What lay ahead was even more horrible.

It was a shivering, quivering, sickening mist. It was greyish-green, and glowed a little. It had grasping tendrils, like a hungry octopus, which cradled a pair of white double-locked doors. And one of the tendrils was creeping towards them.

“Open a window! Or a door, or something!” Terence cried.

Luke looked around, but there were no windows at this level of the building. And even if there had been, Tabatha would have bricked them up. She didn't like her workers ever to see sunshine.

So for a moment, he froze, unsure what to do.

And in that tiniest of moments, the miasma moved. Its eager tentacles were swiftly upon them. They snaked around Luke's feet and climbed up his leg. He scrambled backwards, but they moved too quick, slithering up his waist and surrounding his chest. Within seconds, they crawled up the skin of his neck and he gasped for air. The last thing he saw was Terence, pulling a gas mask from his bag, the stinking mist hovering above him.

Then it all went grey – to Luke's eyes at least – but his other senses immediately burst into life. The back of his mouth tasted old blood. A deep, retching odour of decay filled his nose . . . a dead rat in the garage, or something bigger. Then a howl sounded inside his skull, worming and morphing deeper with each wail, until it howled so loudly that he couldn't hear himself think. And in the howling, stinking, swirling grey, he saw something else, at the edge of the shadows. It made his heart sink. He wanted to cry. He saw his mother.

Ebony hair tied back. Eyes wet-black with tears. She looked at him: it was the first time she had.

And then it was over. The air cleared and all that was left was a loud whirring sound, and a thumping ache inside Luke's chest.

"I found the extractor vents!" Jess was jumping up and down by a grate in the wall, evidently pleased with herself. "They sucked that stink right out of the building. I repaired this stuff with my dad at weekends. Knew they'd be here – it's regulation – it's just some idiot had hung the pictures over them."

Terence pulled off his gas mask and scowled at Jess.

"What was that thing?" asked Luke, his voice thin.

"Some kind of smog." Jess shrugged. "Must have come in off the river."

"Smog? But it had tentacles . . ." Luke stopped himself. Jess was looking at him funny.

"Tentacles? It smelt bad, I'll grant you, but it just looked foggy to me. Did you breathe any in? It can mess with your head."

"Oh," Luke muttered. "Maybe that was it."

But it wasn't it. He knew it wasn't. He had seen the thing before he'd breathed anything in, though it was clear that Jess had seen something different. She wasn't shaken like him. And she certainly hadn't seen his mother. Smog couldn't do that. *Could it?*

"Hold your breath next time." Jess patted his shoulder. "That's what I did. The smog has gotten pretty bad these days."

Terence stood. He looked queasy. "Yes. Just your bog-standard smog." He nodded, a little too hard, extracting a thick brass key from his chain. He unlocked a pair of rusty, grey doors further ahead. "But enough talk for now. It's time for your punishment."

Chapter 4: The Voice

Luke peered through the door into a darkened room of metal pipes. Spindly thin pipes lined the furthest walls, medium-sized pipes criss-crossed the floor, and through the centre of the room, ran a gigantic, horizontal tube – so large that Luke could have stood up inside it. With its right angles, struts and fat metal bolts, the room exuded order and control – a welcome contrast to the horror of the East Wing.

Then the smell hit him: an overwhelming stink of uncleaned toilet.

Terence flicked a switch. Brass and glass lanterns flickered into life, evaporating the darkness, and revealing the source of the unpleasant smell: there was sewage everywhere.

"Shouldn't the sewage be *inside* the pipes?" Luke said, breathing through his mouth.

Jess tutted. "People always underestimate the importance of plumbers."

"You're lucky it's so low." Terence looked disappointed. "It flooded up to the ceiling earlier – we had to double-lock the doors."

Terence shoved them forward into the room. Brown-black sewage seeped over Luke's bare feet, then trickled through the gaps in his toes. A shiver of disgust rippled through him. At least it took his mind off what he'd seen in the smog. He turned to Terence. "What happened?"

"Tabatha got a new machine," he grunted. "It was meant to burn sewage, but it keeps leaking."

"Is that it?" Jess asked, taking a step towards a dark cast-iron

contraption at the end of the room. It looked like something between a giant oven and a diving bell. It had squat, black tubes going in one side, and silver cogs and funnels on the other. A polished copper plaque on it read: *L'Incinérateur Extraordinaire*.

Terence yanked Jess back. “Yes. Now leave it. You’ve got work to do.” He cleared his throat and spat some phlegm to the floor. “You’ll wipe this place sparkling, and there’ll be no food till it’s done. That’s if you don’t drown first in rising sewage.” He pointed to a pile of bones in the corner. “That’s what happened to the last pair that came here. Dehydration, or dysentery. I can’t quite remember. It doesn’t matter in the end.”

Luke wasn’t quite sure they were human bones, but he wasn’t taking any chances.

“I’ll check on you tomorrow, then each day after that, until the job – or you – are completely finished.”

Luke swallowed. It was impossible.

Terence was already lumbering back to the door. Luke wasn’t sure he’d ever seen him look so happy. With a smirk, then a thunk, he locked the door behind him.

The lantern light flickered. Luke sighed and turned to Jess. “Without food, we’ll last a couple of weeks. Without water, three days.”

“What if we need more time?”

He wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to that, so he forced a smile. “It’ll be fine, I’m sure. My dad always said it’s not over, till it’s over.”

He closed his eyes for a moment and pictured home. The houseboat rocking in the shade of the old Olympic Stadium. His sister and dad squabbling over burnt toast. Fishing on the bridge and looking up at the sky.

He felt a little stronger.

He tore off two shreds from his sackcloth overall and gave one to Jess. And without another word, they both began wiping.

GHOSTCLOUD by Michael Mann

SYNOPSIS

In Battersea Power Station, Luke shovels coal and keeps his head down. Unfortunately, others keep forcing it up. Like the new girl who almost collapses by the furnace. Or the ghost-girl trapped inside the incinerator. He has to help – he couldn't let them burn. But suddenly they need him: the ghosts, shovellers and the very skies over London. And if he keeps his head down, there may be nothing left when he looks up.

BIOGRAPHY

Teacher by day, novice dad by night, Michael mostly writes when he should be sleeping. He owes the idea for *Ghostcloud* to his nephew (and avid cloudspotter) Ryan. Michael has completed courses with Curtis Brown, City University and CityLit, and received commendations in Faber's FAB prize and WriteMentor's Children's Novel Award.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I was really drawn to the dark under-London world portrayed here, and the characters – both the "good" and the "bad" and the dynamics between them. It made for an intriguing opening and moved along at a cracking pace.'

'The setting of underneath Battersea Power Station felt so vivid I could almost taste the coal dust. Exciting opener, engaging characters with a good balance of characteristics between Luke and Jess. Tabatha Margate and her greasy henchman Terence are vivid villains!'

'I like the setting, the very evocative sense of place and threat inside the power station. I think Tabatha Margate is a great name for a villain, and Luke helping Jess is a clever way to reveal his character to readers.'

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THE AIR WE CANNOT BREATHE

By Urara Hiroeh

Prologue

Yuuri aged 18

Post-Infernum Year 443

Planet Neotera: Zone 33

The alien was surely just a boy. Maybe all aliens looked young, but Yuuri was certain he was no older than her, eighteen, nineteen, twenty at most. He had appeared out of nowhere, in the flat grassland that stretched to the horizon in every direction. Why did he suddenly show himself?

They had been briefed that aliens looked nothing like the monsters that were popularly portrayed, that they were actually very similar to humans. But the boy looked far too human. He wore clothing: a cape, the same light green as the grass around him. Even though her fighter was hovering ten metres above him, she recognised intelligence in his eyes.

‘Shoot that thing, Yuuri!’ Liisi, her pilot, shouted into Yuuri’s helmet from the front cockpit.

Yuuri’s hands were ready on the triggers. If she pressed either button, the anti-personnel missile would head straight for the boy. But she saw his beautiful dark curly hair, along with his cape and the tall grass around him, swimming wildly in the turbulence created by their fighter. He seemed to emit no hostility, just alertness. How could she kill someone like that, alien or not?

‘Yuuri! What are you waiting for? Shoot it before it kills us!’

‘But he hasn’t got a weapon!’ she yelled back, painfully aware that they had been trained and ordered to shoot unarmed aliens. Aliens did not need weapons; they had powerful psy. But there was no other way of expressing how wrong it felt, to kill someone so young, so human.

‘Are you kidding me? That thing’s psy could be even stronger than yours!’

‘Can’t you communicate with him?’ Yuuri asked. After all, it was Liisi who was the mind-worker; Yuuri was the matter-worker in their team.

‘I can’t communicate that far. You know my psy’s weak.’ Exasperation peaked in Liisi’s voice. ‘We’re not here to talk to them. We’re here to kill them, before they kill us! Remember?’

Yuuri looked at the boy, still quietly but keenly observing them. If he was in her home dome, she was sure no one would realise he was not human.

Even before the red light flashed on her console, Yuuri knew Liisi had taken over the weapons control. Instantly, she sensed the boy emit tremendous power. Following his energy, she felt the metal barrels on the belly of their fighter twist and bend. If a missile was launched now, it would get stuck and explode inside, killing them both. But when she used psy to fix the twisted metal, the boy simply redid them. She realised she had to stop Liisi pressing the trigger, when someone entered her mind. She sensed a deep voice warn, ‘Don’t shoot or you’ll die!’ Yuuri instantly knew this psychic sending did not come from the boy, so who else was around?

But before she could properly register that thought, Liisi screamed. ‘Oh god! They’re inside my mind!’

‘Liisi, don’t shoot! He’s telling the truth!’

But it was too late. Shrieking, ‘I can’t die!’ she pressed not just one, but both triggers at once. The missiles, armed and ready to explode, shot forward, catastrophically hitting the jam created by the boy.

Time slowed, where every second felt like minutes, as it always did when Yuuri maxed out on psy. She desperately tried to disarm the missile, but the bombs were designed to stop the aliens diffusing them. The warhead ignited and started to expand; Yuuri knew they were moments from death.

Just then, she saw a shimmering bubble form around the boy. Inside it, his hair, his cape and the grass stopped moving. Outside the bubble, the grass still waved wildly in their fighter’s downdraft.

Simultaneously, something held her rigid, making it impossible for her to move, then all the safety restraints fell away. She was not doing this; she had been concentrating on trying to stop the missiles. Was it the boy? Her cockpit disintegrated as another bubble formed around her. She was shunted away at high speed. A moment later, the fighter exploded and was engulfed in flames.

Yuuri felt herself involuntarily try to cry out, but she was held so tightly, she only managed a whimper. She watched in horrified helplessness as everything blasted into smithereens, like a gruesome firework. She saw the heat, the colours of flame, from silvery white to red, orange and yellow, the black smoke, but felt nothing and heard only a muffled bang, ensconced in the protective shield, not of her own making.

The bubble dissipated, and she found herself safely on the ground. Next to her was a recognisable piece of Liisi's helmet. The girl had drawn her favourite picture-book character on it, its bottom half still apparent through the soot.

Nausea overcame Yuuri, and she heaved. Liisi was dead. If her helmet was in pieces, she couldn't have survived. *You didn't even like her much*, a part of Yuuri's mind whispered guiltily, *you should've been nicer to her*. It was too late now.

Although sluggish from shock, Yuuri knew she had to ready herself to fight. Forcing her shaking legs into a crouch, she looked around. Visibility was terrible through all the smoke, and she could not see the boy.

Did that boy save her? If he did, why her and not Liisi?

Then she remembered that psychic voice, the warning. *That's got to mean he won't be alone*.

She fumbled for her gun, and realised her helmet was gone. Hope raised its head. If her helmet fell off, maybe Liisi's came off as well, and she was okay. Yuuri frantically searched for any sign of life among the wreckage. Then she saw something white, a dismembered arm.

Yuuri retched again, this time for a good minute, her guts violently spewing bitter bile. Liisi was only eighteen. How was it possible for someone so full of life to die, just like that?

But you're still alive, and you need to survive. For Miku. She swallowed back despair and tried again to find the alien boy, or anyone else. The smoke was

starting to clear, and she saw the cloudless blue sky stretching from horizon to horizon. It was strange seeing any sky without glass and metal frames getting in the way, even an alien sky.

That was when it hit home that she was outside for the first time in her life. She was not encased in glass or metal or plastic, surrounded beyond a protective shell by toxic unbreathable atmosphere. She was outside, inhaling air that wasn't filtered, that wasn't stagnant. She was outside and the air wasn't killing her, as it had killed Dad. She breathed in another lungful and felt more alive than she had ever done.

The wind blew. It caressed her hair and the grass around her, cool against her face. It was as if she had been cleansed of something that had mired her all her life. Unidentifiable emotions welled inside her; the scenery blurred as tears filled her eyes. Despite the guilt that Liisi was not there to share this, despite the fear of imminent death, she was glad she got to breathe outside air, at least this once before she died.

When she wiped away her tears, the alien boy was suddenly there again, less than five metres away. She jumped, her heart about to explode. But when she met his eyes, she found she was not afraid of him. This close, she saw his eyes were dark brown, like her own.

He gave off no enmity. If anything, he looked sad. Could she interpret aliens the same way as humans? Maybe she was reading him completely wrong. Maybe this was how they looked when they were elated from a kill, or worse, getting ready to kill again.

Then the alien boy said in very clear English, 'I'm Jago. And you're Yuuri Matheson. I'm sorry about your friend.'

Chapter 1

Yuuri aged 8

Post-Infernum Year 433

Planet Earth: Glasgow Dome

From all around the central auditorium in Glasgow Dome, Yuuri felt eyes on her and her little sister Miku. They'd been reserved a special place, right at the centre. Almost every one of the thousand or so residents was squeezed into the large room that dominated the ground floor of the

dome. Everyone knew everyone, and there was nowhere to hide. But the last thing she wanted was for anyone to see her cry. Yuuri faced forward, trying to look as expressionless as she could, but Miku had her face buried in Cora's soft belly.

'Poor things,' Yuuri heard her neighbour Cherilynne say behind them. 'I just don't get it. Why would they want these wee kids to watch their dad die in that . . .'

'Shh!' Cherilynne's mum hissed. 'Don't make 'em imagine all sorts now. It's bad enough when it happens. But what was Donal thinking, doing something like that, eh?'

Whatever they say Dad did, he never tried to kill anyone. He wasn't like that, Yuuri knew, desperately. But the more she heard about what he supposedly did, the more confused she became. Every night, she would go to sleep hoping she'd wake up to find Dad in their old quarter, reading like he used to, and it would've all been a nightmare. But it wasn't a dream; they were executing Dad very soon in the faraway domed city Cesares.

Danny Robertson, the mayor of their dome, had come to speak with Cora several days before. The man's bald head was gleaming with sweat and almost purple in colour.

'Sorry, Cora, I couldn't do anything about it. The Central, y'know, they kept saying it's the only respectful thing . . . towards the prisoners, y'know, to . . . eh . . . "witness their repentant deaths", they said.'

Yuuri had been eavesdropping from the next room. She wondered if she understood what respectful meant. They were going to kill her dad, that much she knew for certain. But she had no idea what killing people had to do with respecting them.

'Respectful, my arse!' Cora shouted, echoing Yuuri's thoughts. 'They're only eight and five and already motherless. Can't they cut a bit of slack?'

'Eh . . . they said his children must watch, especially.'

The old woman breathed out sharply through her nose. 'Especially . . . for crying out loud . . .'

'Aye . . . and eh . . .'

The mayor sighed painfully, then mopped his sweaty brow. 'So they're sending people all the way here . . . to . . . make sure . . . y'know . . .'

‘You’re kidding me?’

‘I wish I was, Cora. Couldn’t believe it myself.’

‘That’s just nuts . . .’

The mayor sighed again. ‘Well, it is the law, y’know. Everyone’s gotta watch executions, even babies. I’m really sorry.’

Seeing the mayor out, Cora grumbled, ‘Well, Yuuri could handle it, but Miku . . .’

It was true: if anyone described Miku, it was always ‘sensitive’ or ‘delicate’. No one ever said that about Yuuri. And she would’ve watched it for the both of them. Why wasn’t that enough?

Cherilynne speaking to Cora brought Yuuri back to the auditorium. ‘How many executions have Yuuri and Miku seen? This’ll be their first, no?’

‘Well, Yuuri’s been to one. But you know, too young to remember probably.’ Cora answered quietly so Yuuri and Miku wouldn’t hear.

But Yuuri heard. And even though she was only three at the time, she still vividly recalled the nightmares of men spewing blood and chasing her.

‘This one, though,’ Cora nodded at Miku, ‘this’ll be her first.’

‘First one being her dad, eh. That’s terrible.’ Cherilynne started to tear up. She cried at a drop of a hat; Yuuri had always liked that about her.

Fortunately, executions were rare, which was why Yuuri hadn’t given it much thought before. She was told that it only happened to really bad people. Well, she’d believed that until they told her Dad was being executed.

The official sent from Thorwood Dome, built over old London, had arrived earlier that morning. Ignoring Cora’s glares, she had gone on about being respectful and repentant for over an hour. Yuuri didn’t listen much, but she did notice that the stout middle-aged woman had cold green eyes. They were so cold that all her trying to be nice and gentle felt like needle pricks. At the end, the woman tried to hug Miku, and the poor girl shied away. After that, she didn’t even bother coming near Yuuri, and left in a hurry.

Now, in the auditorium, Yuuri’s heart sank when she saw the same official raking through the crowd towards them. The room was jam packed, and it took her a while.

‘It’s nearly time. Please make sure that child is facing forward.’ She huffed and puffed when she finally reached them. When Cora ignored her, she became even sharper. ‘Did you hear me? Please comply immediately.’

Cora still refused to answer, but after a moment, she leaned over to Miku and whispered something to her ear. Miku shook her head and pressed her face into Cora’s tummy. Cora whispered again, and the little girl showed no sign of budging.

The official gave the soldiers a stern look. The two men exchanged unhappy glances before the older one stepped forward.

‘I’ll hold her for you.’ He spoke in a southern accent and had kind grey eyes.

‘And that’ll make her feel a whole lot better, eh,’ Cora snapped. ‘Never you mind.’

Gently, she prised Miku’s hands from her skirt, one finger at a time. Miku put up very little resistance as Cora gingerly placed the girl’s arms around her neck and lifted her up. ‘Look at Yuuri, she’s being brave. I know you don’t want to see this. I know it’s scary. But let’s say bye to Daddy, now.’

Miku began to cry earnestly into Cora’s neck. The woman official started to say something impatiently, but just then, the big round holographic projector at the front of the room lit up. All news items started with an advert for the Inter-Galactic Battalion.

Booing and hissing issued from around the auditorium, as the holographic image of aliens attacking IGB troops started to play in 3D. The aliens were enormous, almost twice as big as any human soldier, and looked like a cross between a lizard and a hairy apeman. They wore some kind of rudimentary clothing, and mostly tried to attack using their formidable claws and jaws. They also had strong psy, and one alien lifted up a soldier just using its mind, before willing him to be thrown like a piece of stick.

The holo-images were life-size. Although Yuuri was now used to it, these IGB adverts used to scare her senseless when she was younger. Miku still hated them and was refusing to look. Everyone cheered as an alien, who had just tried to slice off one of the soldiers’ heads, was shot and downed. Then the image switched to a young man with a cheeky grin.

‘That’s our Fergus!’ Someone in the auditorium shouted, as the holo-image of the young man gave some spiel about how great things were in the IGB.

As soon as the young man faded away, the familiar news logo came on and spun a few times to music before shooting off to the right. Then a popular presenter walked into view.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he spoke, frowning. ‘I’m Jean-Charles Mardeaux, reporting from Cesares Dome. As every one of you will know, there was an attempted terrorist attack on this very dome almost exactly a year ago.’

To sad-sounding background music, a collage of images appeared: soldiers in gas suits running out of the dome; people panicking; commotion everywhere. Then it cut to three men sitting inside a courtroom. Dad, ashen with his hair and beard unkempt, looked neither angry nor forlorn, just very tired.

The announcer narrated over the images. ‘The perpetrators were caught immediately: Donal Matheson, Rupert Gardner and Huang Wu. Surprisingly, all three were respectable and well-liked citizens in their domes. Matheson and Wu even have children.’

All eyes were on Yuuri and Miku again. Yuuri looked anxiously at Miku, but her sister was peeking at the screen with her face half-hidden by Cora’s silver hair. Yuuri was desperate to talk to her telepathically, but Miku had not connected that way since the day the policeman came to tell them Dad was being executed. Frustratingly, Yuuri could do nothing about it, because of all the people she had ever met, only Miku could enter other people’s minds. But then, Yuuri herself was the only person she knew who could move things without touching them.

Meanwhile, the announcer kept talking. ‘They intended to destroy the capitol dome of Europa and murder the Cesares family. If you have been following the judicial process, you will have seen how the criminals have come to repent their actions. They agree that such a shocking act of terrorism cannot go unpunished. These men have accepted that the only way forward is to die.’

Did the man say that Dad agreed he should die? Yuuri wondered if her heart had started pumping pain instead of blood. Would he really do that, agree to leave Yuuri and Miku all alone, orphaned?

The image switched to the three men being taken out of adjoining cells. Yuuri heard Cherilynne's mum say, 'That'd be the death march, then.' Cherilynne started to cry again, making Yuuri want to hide somewhere so she could curl up and howl. But of course, she had to keep standing there, in front of everyone in the dome, looking . . . how was she supposed to look? She didn't know, so she just kept on being as deadpan as possible.

While the prisoners were wearing bright red bodysuits and nothing else, the twenty or so guards were in full gas gear. Yuuri shivered, because they looked like evil robots, rubbery black all over with silver visors where their faces should be. Dad and another prisoner were being dragged along, their arms and legs limp, their heads lolling about. They looked barely conscious. The third man was carried by four guards holding each limb, and it was plain to see that he was kicking and screaming. Despite all the commotion displayed in the hologram, it was eerily quiet. No sounds were transmitted.

Then the image switched back to the announcer at Cesares Dome's central arboretum. The man said gravely, 'The perpetrators are on their final march out of the dome into the toxic air outside. Once exposed, they're not expected to survive for more than a minute. It will be a quick and humane end.'

Yuuri hardly heard the announcer. Her mind was in turmoil with many unanswerable questions. That third man kicking and screaming; he clearly didn't want to die. What if none of them were okay about dying? Maybe Dad didn't want to leave her and Miku, but they were going to kill him anyway, against his will. She was not at all certain which was better, for him to die willingly or unwillingly.

'Alexander himself coming out for a chinwag, eh,' Cora said disgustingly as a man joined the announcer.

Alexander Cesares's shiny black hair flopped over one of his eyes, which made his pointed nose-bridge stand out even more. He looked steadily into the camera showing no emotion, as the announcer launched into a long introduction.

Yuuri looked towards Miku, and was surprised she was no longer hiding. Instead, she was staring fiercely at Alexander Cesares, as if he was the most hateful man she had ever seen.

'Citizens of the world.' When he finally started to speak, his voice was

pleasantly low. Yuuri could tell he was doing his soothing voice, like adults do, trying to calm people down.

‘I’m sorry to have to address you on such a sad occasion. In the past, our world had many incidents such as this, in which selfish people committed random acts of terror, bringing fear and anxiety upon everyone.’

You don’t even know Dad, Yuuri thought, *he’s not selfish, and he’s definitely not a murderer*. But people around her were nodding along to what Alexander was saying.

‘Since the final war and the following environmental disaster killed most of us and turned our atmosphere toxic, we’ve coped admirably, working towards a peaceful, cooperative society. It’s not been easy, but we did it, and we are still doing it!’

Everyone started to clap and cheer, but became quiet as he raised both arms. ‘That’s four hundred years of peace! I’m sure you’ll agree, that is something worth protecting!’

This time, he let everyone clap for some time. When he spoke again, he sounded elated. His pupils were like pinpoints, boring into the camera. Yuuri’s body quaked, frightened by his aggressive stare. ‘With these men’s deaths, let us put a swift end to such violence. Let us never have to experience such fear again. Let us continue our work towards building a peaceful world for everyone!’

Alexander Cesares smiled but his eyes remained sharp. The image switched to people in domes all over the world cheering wildly. Almost everyone in the Glasgow auditorium was also whooping and clapping. Yuuri realised they were all rejoicing that her dad was going to die. She thought she was going to be sick.

The view pulled back to include the announcer, applauding emphatically, then switched to a camera facing an open doorway into the dome. Again, no sound was transmitted. Only the announcer’s voice could be heard.

Dad was coming out of the dome. In the background, there were two yellow hills. It was difficult for her to comprehend what she was seeing, her dad outside the dome in just his red jumpsuit, no gas mask, no protection. And he was coughing frantically, as were the other two prisoners being dragged out behind him. She whispered, ‘They can’t breathe.’ Cora’s

warm hand rested on her shoulder. Cora's hand and not Dad's hand. That was the moment that it really hit her: Dad was going to die, and he was never coming back. He was never going to read another bedtime story. She was never going to see him again.

No one around Yuuri spoke, or even whispered, as the prisoners were lined up in front of the camera, barely able to stand, propped up by the soldiers in full protective gear. Then Dad and another prisoner started to cough up blood. Yuuri's heart was breaking. She felt a desperate pressure building inside her. Just when she thought she might burst, her dad resolutely, deliberately faced the camera. He started to shout between coughing fits, but of course no sound was transmitted.

Then Yuuri sensed him telepathically, 'The air, it's good!' It was a clear strong sending.

Until that moment she had no idea he could do telepathy. But she did not have time to register the strangeness of feeling him in her mind, as she felt another psychic shout in her mind, 'It's not the air!' She thought she heard someone nearby gasp.

Then Dad went limp, and Yuuri knew he was dead.

That instant, Miku started to scream telepathically. Her mouth was wide open, so were her eyes, and her back was arched, rigid. Yuuri was consumed by the most peculiar sensation of seeing someone screaming, and hearing that deafening scream inside her mind, but her ears registering nothing but silence.

THE AIR WE CANNOT BREATHE by Urara Hiroeh

SYNOPSIS

Five hundred years into the future, an environmental disaster has rendered Earth's atmosphere toxic. Survivors live within domed cities, and colonisation of the distant planet Neotera rests on the military's plan to exterminate its violent inhabitants. During a failed mission to Neotera, eighteen-year-old Yuuri, whose father was wrongly executed for terrorism, uncovers a shocking conspiracy. It will ultimately fall to her to decide if humans are too toxic to roam freely on any planet.

BIOGRAPHY

A lifelong fan of comics, sci-fi and fantasy, Urara had an international upbringing, moving from Japan, USA, England and finally to Scotland. After doing time as a scientist, she's now pursuing her lifelong dream of writing novels for teens. When she's free, she likes to walk the Highland hills.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A great premise – really interesting to set something after such drastic events in climate change – it's very topical and I thought the pitch was very strong.'

'There is something very compelling about the futuristic world – the Cesares family/organisation that feels very futuristic *Hunger Games*/President Snow – which I liked.'

'Interesting premise. Potential emotional impact of opening, both in terms of Yuuri having to shoot the alien and of her seeing her father's death.'

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THE GOOD CHILD SERUM

By Harriet Worrell

1: SALT IN THE SUGAR BOWL

“COME HERE, YOU LITTLE TOE RAG!”

That’s Nigel, yelling at me again.

He says those exact same words a lot.

“Like a stuck record,” says Marjorie. Except none of us know what a stuck record is.

Marjorie is the cook. She’s “five foot nothing” with a bosom that your face sinks into when she gives you her best big bear hug. Last time I swear I stopped breathing for one minute. I dread to think what her worst big bear hug is like – maybe you end up suffocating and have to go to actual hospital.

When I told Mikey and Jenny, Mikey said, “That’s nothing, I can hold my breath for two minutes.”

So, of course, he had to go and prove it. After taking some gulps of air, he blew up his cheeks like a pufferfish. He went pink after twenty seconds, and red after forty seconds. At fifty-one seconds, his face went as purple as a blueberry (yeah, I know, but they are kind of purple).

Jenny threw him backwards on the floor and gave him mouth-to-mouth.

Mikey gave her a black eye. He had to apologise and give up pudding for a week.

He still says that Jenny just wanted to kiss him.

I’m James. I’m nearly nine. I’m kind of small for my age but I make up for it with my big personality. Mikey is my best friend. He’s seven and a half with the orangiest hair you’ve ever seen and freckles that get frecklier in the

sun. Even though she's a girl, Jenny is my second best friend. She's eight and three quarters, tall for her age (everyone says so), and supports Stoke City. You'll have to ask her why. We live at Greenhouse, London Road. It's not green and it's not anywhere near London. But it is a house.

And it's huge.

We share it with some other kids. At the moment there are eleven of us. Plus Nigel the manager, Marjorie the cook who I already told you about, and Tina and Mark the residential workers. There's also Clare who comes once a week. She's a psychologist. Mikey calls her the Lady Cyclist. We play games with Clare, like Snap! or make Play-Doh splodges or draw pictures. Somehow this gives Clare "insight into our emotional well-being". She's nice and has the kindest softest voice I've ever heard.

So, anyway, Nigel was shouting, "COME HERE, YOU LITTLE TOE RAG!"

He was shouting because I'd put salt in the sugar bowl. You'd think he'd check by now because I do it every few weeks. He's the only one that sugars his coffee – Tina says she's sweet enough and Mark only drinks herbal tea that smells of moss.

I was hanging out on the patio at the back of the kitchen with a football, shooting some hoops and waiting for Nigel to brew up. (In actual fact, I was missing some hoops and chasing the ball down the garden.) As soon as I saw Nigel flick the kettle on, I dropped the ball, dribbled it towards his office and kicked off some keepy-uppies. (My football skills are better.) Nigel's office is at the corner of the house and has a big desk in front of the window. I gave him a wave and dropped the ball which was annoying because I was about to beat my personal best of four. (OK, so my football skills aren't that great.) Nigel gave me a little wave back, did that two-finger pointing at his eyes thing and then at me and sat down. He knew I was up to something and he should have guessed. I mean, you could say it was his fault. Anyway, next thing he took a big slurp from his mug.

He spat it out all over his shirt and desk. And yelled some bad words that I'm not supposed to hear and most definitely aren't allowed to write down.

It was as funny this time as it was the first time.

And worth a week without pudding. (I hardly ever get pudding. Which

is a shame because I really like pudding. Especially the ones Marjorie makes. But some things are worth sacrificing.)

I'm the badly behaved one. Clare says it's my "coping strategy" because it's her job to say positive things about me even when I've been causing trouble again. It's on account of my poor start in life.

Nigel has stopped calling me James, and now just calls me Toe Rag. When he's being nice, he calls me Mr Toe Rag. (I'll tell you now what he looks like, so you don't have to use your imagination. You'd get it wrong anyway, like when you hear a voice and it turns out they had long blond hair when you thought it would be dark and short. He's kind of podgy round the middle – on account of Marjorie's puddings. He always wears a shirt with a tie tucked under his jumper, jeans and trainers. His hair is brown and floppy and moves a lot when he shouts.)

Jenny says I'm mischievous (she likes big words). Mikey calls me Miss Cheevers when I've been up to my tricks again. He's not that good with big words which can be funny. It's probably on account of his poor start in life. Which if you think about it, makes the funny sad.

In case you're wondering, my parents stopped looking after me properly when I was two. Social services took me from them. I know this was the right thing to do because if you can't feed your child properly then it needs better parents. Ones that care and know how to use an oven and a washing machine. I don't know why Mikey or Jenny are here. They never talk about it.

"What am I going to do with you?" Nigel sighed.

This is what's called a rhetorical question, or according to Mikey, an oracle question. Anyway, it's a question that doesn't need an answer.

I was sitting on what Nigel calls the Contemplation Chair. It's made of shiny hard wood that cuts into the back of your knees and bruises your bum bone. If you don't sit bolt upright, you slide right off it onto the floor.

I shrugged and slipped on the chair seat.

"You're a clever lad. Why don't you put those brain cells to better use?"

I held onto the side of the chair and shrugged again.

Nigel picked up his coffee cup, then put it down quickly. "I want you to

sit there and think about your behaviour. It's getting worse, not better, and quite frankly you're getting too old for this nonsense . . .”

As Nigel talked my brain went walkabout inside my head. It does that quite a lot, especially at school, unless I'm really focused on a plan. While he talked, I quite frankly thought over my recent nonsense:

- Starting a water fight that short-circuited the fuse box and set off the fire alarm. It took a week for the carpets to dry out, and I had to write a letter of apology to the Fire Station.
- Emptying two bottles of washing-up liquid into the bath. Mikey dived into the foam mountain and hit a tap. He needed two stitches on his left eyebrow.
- Wrapping Melissa (one of the annoying girls we live with) in brown paper and lots of sticky tape and telling her I'd post her to Mr and Mrs Yeti in the North Pole. She didn't believe me until I stuck on actual stamps. She screamed so much she was sick.
- Having an egg-and-flour fight in the kitchen with Jenny when we were supposed to be baking cupcakes for Tina's birthday. Mark had to cut off Jenny's pigtails because the stuff turned to glue and wouldn't wash out. Luckily for me, Jenny saw the funny side.

“. . . you're a bad influence on the other kids, and your behaviour is becoming more disruptive . . .”

I could see Nigel was running out of steam.

“I want you to sit there and think about things. If you were a foster mum or dad, would you want you in your house?”

I did think about that, but I got lost with all the 'you's in the sentence. Instead I made a bet with myself about how many puddings I'd have to do without. I reckoned on two weeks. If I was right, I'd steal some biscuits from Marjorie's secret cupboard that everyone knows about. If I was wrong, I'd probably take them anyway but blame Melissa, and after that I wondered how long I'd need to wait before I put salt in the sugar bowl again.

“No pudding for three weeks . . .”

Three weeks?! Biscuits here I come.

“. . . and remember what I said about your potential for fostering.”

I think what Nigel was saying is that no one would want me because of my bad behaviour.

Turns out he was wrong.

2: MR & MRS COOPER

It all started after school on a Thursday. The day isn't really important. I just happen to remember it was Thursday. We were in the games room. Me and Mikey were playing table football. I was winning. (That's another thing I remember right. If Mikey tells you he was winning, he's lying.)

I forgot to tell you about that. Mikey's a liar. Don't get me wrong. I don't mind or anything. It's just a fact about Mikey. Here are some examples:

- His mum and dad are long-lost cousins of the Royal Family which makes him twenty-second in line to the throne and we'd better watch it because if all the royals die, he will be king. (In the olden days that would have been treason and he'd have had his head cut off and put on a post for people to throw rotten tomatoes at, or something.)
- His freckles aren't real. They were tattooed on by aliens and are actually a secret code that only the aliens can read.
- He can't eat peas because he's allergic to them and if one even touches his lips, he'll blow up like a balloon until his skin is so stretched and thin, he'll explode blood and guts everywhere.
- He once ate thirty-three doughnuts without licking his lips AND he didn't lick his lips for a whole week after.

You get the idea, right?

I'd just scored my third goal (three-nil, eat that, Mikey) when Melissa came in and said that annoying thing that she says sometimes, "Hey, guess what?"

And then expects you to guess with no clues or anything.

Me and Mikey ignored her and carried on playing. I let Mikey score a goal. He ran around the room with his T-shirt over his face and banged

into Melissa. You should have seen the look on her face – like he was covered in poo or something.

“You’re such a loser,” Melissa seethed. Then she put her butter-wouldn’t-melt face on and said, “Guess what?” again.

“You’re finally toilet trained,” I said.

Mikey giggled.

“Idiot boy.” Melissa turned her back on me.

Then – this was really funny – Jenny came in and said, “Guess what? There’s some foster parents in with Nigel.”

You should have seen the look on Melissa’s face!

The thing about not having a family, is that you want one more than anything. Don’t get me wrong, Greenhouse is a great place to live. Jenny and Mikey are like brothers. I have my own room. It’s painted sun-yellow with blue skirting boards (“bright colours are mood-enhancing”, Clare told me once). I have my own stuff – you know books, Lego, a remote-control truck with “hours of off-road fun” and Little Ted that I’ve had since I was a baby (and the only thing I have from my before-family).

So, yeah, we all wish for parents when we blow out our birthday candles. Not that anyone would admit to it but if you were one of us, you’d wish the same too.

Most foster parents want good kids. Kids that are clever, polite, nice looking. As soon as Jenny said those words, we rushed out of the games room and upstairs. We argued in whispers at the bathroom doors (there are three bathrooms, in case you were wondering) about who was first to brush their teeth and wash their face. Then we grabbed a book, any book, from our bedrooms and sat at the kitchen table pretending to read. Marjorie rolled her eyes and tutted, but we were too busy pretending to read to care.

We were waiting so long that I’d actually started to read.

Eventually Nigel came in. There were two people with him. They had big smiles that showed off lots of white teeth.

“Kids, meet Mr and Mrs Cooper.”

We all smiled our nicest smiles and said, “Hello,” in our nicest voices.

Mr and Mrs Cooper looked like everyone’s dream foster parents. And I mean dream. Mrs Cooper had rosy cheeks, curly brown hair, smiley

eyes, and a dress all pretty and flowery. She seemed the sort of foster mum who would sing as she baked your favourite cake. Mr Cooper had a fat moustache that twitched when he smiled. I could see myself at the park with him, throwing a ball for our Jack Russell or Border terrier, my new best friend. I'd call him Sam . . .

Nigel went around the table, introducing us. “. . . Jenny, she's Stoke City's number one fan aren't you, Jenny? Mikey, he, um, thinks he's royalty . . .”

We all laughed, and Mikey went so red his ears glowed.

“. . . Mr T— er, James, he's the, er, practical joker . . .”

Afterwards, when Nigel was seeing the Coopers out, we all jostled at the kitchen door to listen. When I say jostled, I actually mean pushed and shoved. This is what I heard when my head wasn't in someone's armpit or underneath someone's bum.

“. . . they're all good kids . . .”

“. . . we're firm but fair at Greenh . . .”

“. . . just need a stable family life . . .”

“. . . two boys . . .”

“. . . of course . . .”

“. . . Saturday. That's most unusual. We normally suggest you get to know each other first . . .”

“. . . yes, I can arrange the paperwork . . .”

Then someone kneed me in the goolies and I had to crawl under the table until I could breathe again.

All day Friday I dreamed about my new mum and dad. And my new dog, Sam. It was the best daydream I'd ever had.

When I got in from school, I made Nigel a coffee. With three spoons of sugar, just how he likes it. “Good day?” I asked, handing him the mug.

“So-so.” He eyed me suspiciously.

“Mmm,” I said, wondering what so-so meant. “Would you like a biscuit?”

“No thanks, Mr Toe Rag. Don't you have homework?”

“No,” I said without thinking. And then remembered I was trying out my new good-kid attitude. “I mean yes. I'll do it now.”

(I know what you're thinking. And you're wrong. I actually did do it

right away. So there.)

After tea (no pudding for me – in case you’re wondering, it was pancakes with chocolate sauce), Nigel called me into his office. I tried to think what I’d done wrong. But I’d been good all day. Hadn’t I?

“Sit down, Mr Toe Rag.”

I sat down. Racking my brains.

“So . . .”

That word again.

“How do you feel about a new home?”

I jumped up and smacked the back of my knees on the edge of the Contemplation Chair. Somehow, it always catches me out one way or another. “Me?” I squeaked.

“I know, it’s as much a shock to me as it is to you. But then life can be full of surprises.”

“The Coopers want me?”

Nigel coughed. “It’s beyond me, but yes they do. Trial period of course . . .” I’d stopped listening. I could almost feel Sam’s lick on my face.

3: SOMETHING’S WRONG

Nigel doesn’t normally work Saturdays but when I came down for breakfast, he was there. I was kind of glad to see him because my insides were wobbly and he’s a “calming influence”.

“Morning, Mr Toe Rag. All set?”

I showed Nigel my SpongeBob SquarePants rucksack. Yeah, it’s embarrassing but, hey, I like the show. I’d packed undies, socks, toothbrush, PJs, T-shirts and jeans. And Little Ted, hidden at the bottom.

“Good lad. Now get some breakfast in you.” Nigel actually patted me on the shoulder. Weird. But I did feel less wobbly. What did I tell you?!

Mikey was standing on the kitchen table. Marjorie had her arms folded but she was laughing.

“And for today’s trick, Mikey Dunleavy will disappear in front of your very eyes!” He waved his arms about like a demented goose, threw a load of ripped-up newspaper in the air, jumped off the table and scrambled under it.

Melissa tutted so I gave her my evils. This involves narrowing my eyes

to tiny slits and making high-frequency dolphin clicks (they can't be heard by the human ear) that burrow into Melissa's head and fry some of her brain cells.

"Neat trick," I said when Mikey slid onto the chair beside me.

"Sssh, I'm not here," he whispered. Then, "What time is it?"

Mikey can't tell the time yet. Except the o'clocks. He's a bit behind on account of his slow start in life.

"Nearly quarter past eight," I said.

"When are they coming?"

I shrugged. The wobbles started again. But I was dead glad Mikey was coming too.

"I can't wait," Mikey shouted, spitting half-chewed cornflakes onto the table.

That was when Melissa left the kitchen, tutting loudly. Anyway, who cares about her miserable face. Today was mine and Mikey's day. We were going to the Coopers' house. Not goody-two-shoes-stuck-up Melissa. Me and Mikey. Today we were brothers and no one, I mean no one, could take that away from us.

Except I felt bad.

Jenny hadn't come down for breakfast. I don't think Mikey noticed. He was too busy telling everyone he was going to live in a castle with a real moat and ghostly knights in armour who had sword fights at full moon and dripped blood and gore everywhere.

I stared at Jenny's empty place. My wobbles got wobbles. I wanted my new home with the Coopers. I really did. Just not without Jenny. I had to go and see her.

She was in her room crying.

If you're a girl and reading this, you might not know there are some things boys don't like. The main ones are:

- Lettuce.
- Pink (anything pink).
- Baths.
- Kisses.
- Crying.

“Go away,” she said.

I had stuff to tell her, like how she was my second-best friend and my first-best non-girlfriend. How I was sorry about her hair. And I’d miss her. And she could have Little Ted to remember me by – no, maybe not that. And I’d write to her if she’d write to me.

But I said nothing because Jenny was crying, and I was feeling like I might cry too.

Then Nigel yelled that they were here, and I had to come downstairs immediately.

Mr Cooper was patting Mikey on the head, his moustache all twitchy like a dancing fat, hairy caterpillar.

“Ah, James,” he said. “Just the boy we were waiting for!”

Mrs Cooper was wearing another flowery dress and was all smiley and lovely. I could smell her sweet perfume when she kissed me on the cheek. (I might not like kisses but a kiss from her was OK because she was my new mum.)

“All set?” asked Nigel.

I didn’t know if he was talking to me and Mikey, or the Coopers.

“All set!” smiled Mrs Cooper, answering for us all.

Suddenly, I needed a wee. And my wobbles got really bad too. I was leaving my home. The place I had lived for longer than I hadn’t. With my own room. And ways I understood, like helping with the washing up when it was your turn on the rota, wiping toothpaste from the sink if a blob dropped off the brush, how to sneak up on Melissa when she was watching TV and drop a plastic spider on her knee, and knowing where Marjorie hides biscuits. Who knew what the rules would be at the Coopers? Or how I would get my fun. Or even if they had biscuits.

“Well, in that case,” said Mr Cooper’s moustache, “let’s go!”

“I’ll call tomorrow, see how they’re settling in,” Nigel said in a funny voice. He cleared his throat and turned to me and Mikey. “Now, boys, don’t show yourselves up.”

You see, Nigel might be here because he works here, but he cares about all of “his children” and only wants the best for us.

Mikey was too excited to catch all the emotion. Which was good for me

because my wobbles couldn't take much more. I pretended I had an itchy head and while I scratched at it, I wiped a tear from my eye. In that second, Mikey was out the door and skipping to the Coopers' car.

Yeah, he really actually was skipping.

Still, he was happy, and I was busy being happy mixed with sad, so I let it go.

The Coopers' car was a Volvo. I know a bit about cars. It's important to some boys to know stuff like that, like knowing about football even if you don't follow the game. Which I do, so that's not the best example. And Jenny is big into football and cars too.

Anyway, they had a silver Volvo V60. In my eyes a perfect family car, with plenty of space in the boot for waggy-tailed Sam, wellies and a picnic.

Mikey was in and belted up before I'd opened the door on the other side. It smelled of new car and trump inside. That was Mikey, not me. It's a sure sign he's excited. Or nervous.

"Can you believe it?" he whispered as I put my bag between my feet and reached for my belt. "They want us. You know, really, really want us. This is the best day ever."

Mikey has the biggest grin in the world. His whole face smiles when his mouth does. This time, even his freckles were smiling. He bounced up and down, kicking at the seat in front. I understood. He was excited, and all wriggly and squirmy inside, making him all wriggly and squirmy on the outside. You must know what I mean. There's probably a name for it. I was just about to ask Mikey what it might be when the door opened.

"Boy, quit that immediately," Mr Cooper hissed.

We both froze.

Then Mr Cooper, nicer than Marjorie's apple pie, gave a big friendly wave to everyone that had come out to see us off as Mrs Cooper got into the passenger seat.

"Any more of that, you'll be in the boot," Mrs Cooper said with a lovely smiley face. If anyone was watching but not listening they'd have thought she was saying kind foster-mummy things to us.

There was a little squeaky noise and then another bad smell. I could see Mrs Cooper wrinkle her nose. It was a bad smell, so I don't blame her, but real mums shouldn't mind. And then I realised we didn't know their first

names. It was kind of weird calling your new mum and dad Mr and Mrs Cooper. Don't you think?

“Understand, boy?” Mr Cooper said as he got in the car. His face smiled but his eyes were meaner than a shark's.

I could see how fidgety Mikey was – he was biting his bottom lip and shuffling his bum slightly. A sure sign he was concentrating. I was dead worried he'd wet himself, or worse.

And I was dead worried something was wrong.

THE GOOD CHILD SERUM by Harriet Worrell

SYNOPSIS

Mine and Mikey's new foster home was creepy and the people in it gave us the heebie-jeebies. I promised Mikey we'd escape but I got side-tracked by:

- A secret message – “don't eat the chocolate stars”.
- Being “programmed”.
- Finding a door covered with Keep Out signs.
- More children arriving.
- Mikey suddenly turning into a goody-two-shoes.

I knew something weird and wrong was happening in the house. It was up to me to find out what . . .

BIOGRAPHY

Harriet writes flash fiction, middle grade and young adult. Writing started as a form of therapy and is still an escape from the day! She lives in Cheshire with her daughter and too many animals!

JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘A great blend of heart and humour! I liked the tone of the storytelling and how it handles a trickier subject with some light.’

‘This extract has a great voice and a real sense of place. I loved the idea of the story too. Can really see how it could play out to be a thrilling read.’

‘James's voice feels child centred, funny and full of energy. I chuckled a fair bit reading this. I also think the concept and where the story is going to go potentially sound great.’

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HAGSTONE

By Helen MacKenzie

Chapter One

First sight's not impressive. First smell's not so great either.

I huff out through my nose as Dad kicks the door and it finally unsticks, releasing a wall of damp, dead air into the night.

'That's rank,' I say, waving my hand in front of my face. 'I thought they'd removed the body.'

Dad shoots me a look and I realise it wasn't the smartest of comments – the body in question belonged to his father. My granddad. Ex-granddad. Whatever. I've never met the man and I'm not going to now, that's for sure. Not unless I look in his coffin, come Thursday, and there's no way that's going to happen.

I follow Dad into the cottage, stumbling over the mat and crashing the suitcase into a shoe-rack just inside the door. Muddy wellies and ancient boots tumble everywhere. A walking stick clatters on top.

Dad doesn't look round.

'Pick 'em up, Sam,' he says and walks on, flicking light switches as he goes.

'Pick 'em up, Sam,' I mutter, and don't. I drop the suitcase in the hall and go back for the other one, beached like a whale on the path outside.

I still can't believe how dark it is. There are no street lights here, just trees and stars and moon, and there's something creepy about the silence too. It's so big, it's loud, wrapping round me till I feel like I've been dropped in space and I'm floating, miles from anywhere.

And in a sense, I am. I'm in the country. I'm up north at Dad's old home

in Achilcreag – and this is definitely not where I wanted to spend my holiday.

I grab the handle of the suitcase and drag it back towards the cottage, bumping over the cracked paving and the steps and the boots still lying in the hall. Then I push the door closed again. Or try to. It won't quite shut and I'm sure I'll break something if I throw my full weight against it. So I leave it for Dad to sort out. It's his house after all.

Rather him than me though. I clump through, exploring. What a place! How could anyone live here? How could Dad have lived here? I can see why he left.

Every inch of the house is grey, as if a Hoover exploded years before, shooting the dust into the walls and the lights and the not-quite curtains, not-quite closing over the tiny windows. Only the paintings on the walls look dust-free. Cared for. The rest of it looks tattered and torn.

The kitchen is the worst. It smells like no one has emptied the bins in a year. The floor's sticky, fingerprints mark every cupboard door and . . . oh yeuch! What is that on the counter? Mouse poo?

I make a face. Wipe it away as Dad comes in. He's tall and skinny, my dad, but there's something about him that can fill a room, especially when he's looking like that: all tight around the edges.

'He must have been ill for a long time, for it to get like this,' he says, shaking his head. 'I didn't know.'

Dad hadn't spoken to his father in, what, twenty years? So how could he have known? But I don't say anything: I keep my mouth shut and shrug. If I'm quiet and don't muck things up, then maybe he'll change his mind about staying here after all.

He shakes his head again and there's something in his eyes. Anger? Pain? 'He could have told me. I'd have done something if he'd told me.'

This time I nod, but Dad's still looking at me, all fierce-like, and I don't know what to do. I gaze down again, at all the mouse shit, and the pellets are so small and black that they remind me of cannonballs. They're tiny stretched-out cannonballs, begging to be fired, and I reach across and curve my fingers and flick one at the kettle.

Dad explodes.

'For Christ's sake, Sam, what are you doing?'

I whip my hand back.

‘Isn’t this place enough of a mess already?’

‘Sorry.’

‘You’re always sorry. Stop being sorry and start thinking. You’re fifteen, for crying out loud. Start acting like it.’

There’s no point in saying any more. I fold my arms, stare at my trainers and let him get on with it. ‘I’ve got enough to cope with, just being back here. I don’t need you acting up again . . .’

He stops. Has he stopped? I try to look at him without moving my head. He’s staring at me, brown eyes narrowed, lips pressed tight, and then he lets his shoulders fall.

‘I need a beer,’ he mutters. ‘Where’s that bloody bag?’

He stomps off into the hall, in search of the stuff he’d packed to bring with us, and I clench my fist and swipe a whole wodge of cannonballs onto the floor.

Way to go, Sam. Day two of October holiday contact time and you’ve fallen out with Dad a million times already.

‘Sam!’ Dad bellows from the hallway. ‘I thought I told you to clear away these boots?’

Ah, yes. My bad.

Let’s call that a million and one.

You have got to be kidding.

My bedroom is up the stairs, at the back, and is so piled with junk that I can hardly see the bed. There’s no way my case is getting in, so I leave it at the door and edge inside.

How am I supposed to sleep in here? There’s no room for the mice, let alone a fat git like me.

The floor is piled with newspapers, stacked precariously, walled in by boxes shoulder-high, some open, some closed, some spilling out onto the floor. There’s books as well, in a bookcase at the back, with more hiding under the bed. Those ones are bigger. They look like sketchbooks – like the ones I’ve got at home, but yellow with age.

The bed itself is covered with stuff: a mound of sheets and blankets and pillowcases, all piled up and draping down, as if someone’s thrown them in from the door. Coats. Cushions. Is that a pair of pants?

Oh, God, it is! Ancient Grandad pants, sitting on my bed.

I'm so hacked off that I push my way through the nearest piles of paper and reach for the window. I don't care about being cold, I just want clean. Clean air, without a musty tang and a taste of mould. But it's one of those windows that you have to shove up, and it takes me a moment to work it out. And then it's open and I stand, elbows on the sill, while a cool sweep of wind rushes past me and into the room.

I stay there for a moment, enjoying the freshness. The dark. Except it's not completely dark. A little way down the hill is a building with windows blazing brightly. It looks too small to be a house, but it must be because there's someone inside, his shadow moving on the lightened grass.

I stare at it, cos it's a bit strange. I thought we didn't have any neighbours up here. I'm sure Dad said that there's only the cottage and the converted outhouse where Grandad built his—

My whole body flashes cold.

'Dad,' I yell, turning from the window and weaving my way back towards the door. 'Dad! There's someone in Grandad's studio.'

I follow Dad out of the cottage and into the pitch-black garden. He's got a torch but won't switch it on – he says he wants to take the burglar by surprise. I don't. I don't even want to see the burglar. I mean, what if he's got a gun? What if there's more than one of them? What if there's a whole gang of burglars and they're going to rush out and kill us and leave our bodies on the grass?

I wish I'd never looked out of the window now. My heart's hammering the whole way down the garden steps, and it's not only cos there's a lot of them. Dad takes them easy, creeping like he's done this before, but I'm just puffing along, trying not to fall. Wait for me, Dad. I don't want to be out here on my own.

A moment later we're off the steps, level with the building, and we can see right through the windows. It's very bright. White walls. Lots of stuff piled up and – oh yes! Please, please, yes – I think the burglar's gone. I can't see anyone inside.

Dad stops creeping. He bombs it round the corner and by the time I get there the door's wide open and the light is spilling out. Dad's shadow

moves over it as he storms into the studio, fists clenched, shoulders square. I hang back a moment but it all seems clear. There's no shouting at least. So I edge my way forward and peek inside and . . . oh, wow. Just wow.

The studio is so different from the house.

It's bright and clean and it has that smell of paint that always buzzes in my brain. I can feel it now, fizzing, lifting the hair on the back of my neck as I step inside. There are canvases everywhere. Some are on the walls, and one or two on easels, but mostly they're stacked up on every side. And Grandad's stuff is good. I mean, it's not the way I would paint it – I'm more slapdash me, lines and impressions – but the detail in the oils and the shading of the pencil work . . . I'm open-mouthed, staring.

Dad's not. He's looking round, a crease in his brow, at the stuff on the tables at the end – sketchbooks open, all a-jumble – and one or two balancing on the edge of a shelf. There's quite a lot of mess, actually. Although it's clean and dust-free, there are brushes all tipped over and cupboard doors swung open and . . .

'Someone's been having a right good rummage,' says Dad.

My stomach tightens as I remember why we're there and suddenly the studio doesn't seem quite so welcoming after all. It feels open and exposed. Someone's been here and they've only just gone and maybe they're looking in at us right now.

I move away from the door.

'What do you think they were after?' I ask.

'The paintings? He did have quite a following.'

He did? Really? I can't believe Dad has never told me this before. 'Is . . . was Grandad famous?'

'Infamous, more like.' Dad walks away, back towards the door, and he locks it. 'And he didn't use a pseudonym, more's the pity.'

There's something weird in his voice and I want to know more, but Dad pulls out his phone.

'I'm going to call the police,' he says. 'Not that I'll be able to tell if anything's missing.'

I nod. Calling the police sounds good to me. I'll feel a whole lot better once they're here. I mean, I can see the cottage back up the hill – four small patches of light in a whole acre of darkness – but who knows what else is

out there, waiting. Or in the cottage. Oh, jeez! What if the burglar's in the cottage now?

I gulp and tell myself to be brave. But I'm not good at being brave and the most I can do is think about something else. But what? What?

I pull out my own phone, but the signal's so pathetic it's a waste of time. I take photos of the paintings instead.

The closest one is a bit weird: a flooded village, so full of water that only the tops of the houses are showing. And right in the corner Grandad has scrawled his name. It's such a squiggle that I can hardly read it, but I know what it says. Gives me a thrill to see it, actually.

'Connor Matheson.'

Connor Matheson, infamous artist.

I like the sound of that.

I smile and start to wander, checking the worktops at the back, pulling drawers open as I pass. There's a lot of stuff: a million brushes, tons of pencils and a few charcoal stubs. And over in the corner, calling me, is the most fantastic wooden paintbox. It's dark as chocolate and streaked and splodged with colour, years of colour, lumping and bumping under my fingers as I lift the lid.

Half-squeezed tubes of oil paint lie inside. I pick one up. Grandad held this, I think, and for the first time I wish that I'd actually met him. That I'd been able to ask him about all this. About art. About how to make it work.

'Don't get any ideas.' I spin and Dad's looking at me, phone still at his ear. 'You need a proper job when you grow up.'

Somehow it hurts worse, him saying it here, in the middle of this fantastic studio. I know I need to get a proper job. He's told me often enough. Except I'm not much good at anything except drawing and painting and he never seems to get that. He thinks it's all about trying harder, longer, and he can't see that some people are just thick. Not him, maybe, but . . .

'Grandad seems to have done OK.' The words burst out, and Dad frowns at me.

'Have you seen the house?' he snaps. 'I . . . oh, yes! Hello!' He turns away again and I'm left standing, blank with confusion.

What's he on about? Has he seen this studio?

I look at the paintbox. Put the tube back in place. And I wonder if there's any way that Dad will let me have it, when all of this is done. It's gorgeous, after all. Well-used but loved, and it's even got a second layer, hidden under the first.

I pick up the top tray and check out underneath, but it's just a jumble of brushes and scrapers and something odd – a stone. I can't figure out why there's a stone in a paintbox, so I pull it closer with my finger and pick it up. It's bigger than I thought, filling my palm almost completely. It's an unusual shape too: a wonky grey triangle, about as thick as my thumb, with a perfect round hole in the middle.

It feels solid in my hand. Almost warm. And I can't help but lift it to my eye and look through the hole.

Orange light. Little red flecks. It's hot, hot – scorching hot.

'Fire!' I yell and drop the stone, staring out across the room. Except there's nothing there. Just the walls and the worktop and the window to the side. I could have sworn . . .

'Sam! I'm on the phone!'

I look at Dad and he's stomping over and I don't understand. There was a fire. I saw it. Felt it, drying my eyeball with fingers of heat. So, where's it gone?

I shake my head. Look down. And there's the stone, pale and smooth on the floor, with the tiniest hint of orange glinting at its core.

Chapter Two

I hide the stone. I slide my feet together so that it nestles under my trainers and look Dad in the eye as he comes closer. He's still talking, nodding at the voice on the other end of the phone.

Maybe I'm going mad, or maybe it's the paint fumes, or maybe I did actually see something in the stone. But whatever the reason, I'm not going to mention it. Not until I've checked out it. Not until I've figured out how to tell Dad.

I'm not good at talking to Dad.

I'm not good at talking to anyone, really, but it seems to be worse with Dad. I guess it's cos I don't see that much of him. Not since Mum kicked

him out. It's been pretty awkward between us since then, and even though I've been to his new flat and I know that he's not living with Her, She and Mum sort of hang between us all the time.

So I stand like a lemon, listening in.

'No, we've only just come in . . . No, we didn't see anyone . . . No, we haven't touched anything . . .'

I make a face as Dad lifts his brows at me, checking, and he rolls his eyes so that I know that I've mucked it up again. But how was I to know not to touch anything? He didn't say. And I didn't touch much: just a few drawers and the paintbox and the stone. What difference does it make if I've touched a stone?

'My mistake,' says Dad. 'You might find my son's fingerprints on a few things . . . Yes, that's fine, I'll make sure he's here . . . An hour?' Dad nods. 'OK. We'll see you then.'

An hour? There's no way I can stand on top of the stone for that long. I need to get Dad away so I can grab it. Except he shows no sign of shifting. Quite the reverse. I keep my face still as Dad puts the phone away and stares at me.

'Fire? Really? What was that about?'

'I . . . er . . . yeah, sorry. I was just thinking about . . . about . . . making up the fire in the living room? It's so cold in here and in the cottage . . .'

It's the best I can come up with, but his face wrinkles in surprise and he actually seems to think about it. I'm so pleased that I don't care when he frowns. 'Not tonight, Sam. I don't think we should move things in the house until the police have been. They might need to check the rest of the place out.'

'Won't they just be coming down here?'

'I don't know. We'll have to wait and see.' He looks at me and I know we're both thinking the same thing – that it would be good if the police didn't have to see the inside of the cottage. It is pretty horrible, after all. But then he sighs. 'Anyway, we can't hang about here – it's a crime scene. So you go up and put the kettle on. I'll be with you in a minute.'

Out there? With the burglar? I look at the vast blackness through the window and my insides clench with fear.

'I'll be right behind you, Sam. I just want to check something.' Dad

looks at the paintbox, off to my side, and suddenly I know what he has in mind. I open my mouth and—

‘Sam. What did I say? Beat it.’

Ohhh! ‘OK – I’m going.’

He turns and I swoop and I’ve got the stone in my hand . . . in my pocket . . . and there’s no way I’m going to tell him about it now. I stalk to the door and turn the key and then I’m out, wading through the darkness, listening. But there’s only the thud of my heart and the scrape of my feet on the path, and when I put the stone to my eye again, there’s nothing to see but dark night and the sharp bright blocks of the windows up ahead.

There’s no Wi-Fi. And the signal’s even worse up here.

I chuck my phone on the kitchen table and trudge to the sink to fill the kettle. The water shrieks out, shuddering the pipes in the cupboard below till I think they’re about to explode.

It would suit me if they did. I mean, how am I expected to stay in a house without Wi-Fi? Especially when I need to find out about Grandad. I’d like to know why he’s infamous. What did he do? Kill someone?

I snort and click the kettle on. Look round for some mugs. There’s one further down the counter, but it’s obviously been there for ever. It’s grey with mould and I feel sick just looking at it. I try the cupboards instead.

The doors are stiff, warped with damp and jammed together and I have to tug hard to open them . . . harder . . . harder still . . . and suddenly there’s a splintering sound and the door handle pulls right off. It’s there in my hand, screws still attached, and there are two big holes in the cupboard door. My stomach curdles as I stare at it; as I slowly lay the handle on the counter and back away.

Perhaps Dad won’t notice? If I stand in front of the cupboard then maybe . . .

‘For God’s sake, Sam,’ yells Dad, a second later. ‘Can’t you do anything right?’

Arggh! All I did was try to find some mugs. ‘Don’t blame me if this place is falling apart,’ I yell back. ‘Just look at it. It’s awful.’

‘You think I don’t know that?’ Dad’s voice is so loud, so angry, that it

shocks the house. He closes his eyes. ‘I just . . . I can’t . . . Go to your room, Sam,’ he says. ‘Give me a minute, will you?’

My pleasure. I’d give him for blimming ever, if I could.

I thump away up the stairs, fuming. I mean, it’s not like I try to annoy him: it just happens. So I don’t know why I’m surprised that he’s yelling. Or sad. I knew it was going to be like this. Well, I didn’t know it was going to be like *this*, obviously: in this shitty bedroom in this stinking house, with papers all around and the bed piled high.

I stare round at it, wondering what I’m supposed to do now. I can’t even play on my phone, cos I’ve left it downstairs.

I slap my hand to my pocket to check again and it’s definitely not there. I can feel the stone though: flat and hard, pushing down into the flab of my thigh. I shuffle back a bit, creating space so my fingers can pull it out.

That was weird, wasn’t it, what happened in the studio? Although it was probably just me, imagining things again. I mean, how could I possibly see something through a hole in a stone?

I look down at it, turning it in my fingers. It’s nice to hold – smooth to the touch. I stick my finger right through the hole and spin it round. It’s quite heavy and doesn’t turn far, so I pull it off and hold it to my eye again. I close the other one. Swivel round.

Nothing happens. Just like on the walk back up the steps, I see straight through the stone. I see the boxes and the far wall right behind, then the corner, with the bookcase and the newspaper stacks, then the bed with . . . with . . . *a girl?*

I’m so freaked out, I nearly yell, *There’s a girl in my room!*

Except there’s not. I open my other eye, without the stone, and she’s not there. But when I close it, looking through the hole, there she is. *A girl!* She’s sitting on my bed: a properly made-up bed, without the mound of stuff upon it. And there’s different curtains at the window and – honestly, my hands are shaking – an actual girl on my bed.

I pull the stone away and I’m breathing funny. Cough a little. I try again, slower this time, looking round the room with the stone at my eye and . . . yep, she’s still there. Not moving though. It’s like she’s in a picture or frozen in time or something. But she seems to be smiling. Smiling and

looking at someone in the doorway. I can't see who it is, but I think . . . no, I *know*, that it's me!

I start to sweat, cos it doesn't make sense. How can I see through a stone? How can I know what she's looking at? And the way she's smiling . . .

Does she like me?

I think she likes me.

I think I've finally lost my mind.

HAGSTONE by Helen MacKenzie

SYNOPSIS

Fifteen-year-old Sam can see the future. He's just inherited the scrying stone of the Brahan Seer and secrets and lottery numbers are now his for the taking. It's not all good news, though: the stone also says that he's going to be murdered. Sam's only hope is to use the stone to catch his killer, before his killer catches him. But can he and new friend Jenny piece the clues together in time?

BIOGRAPHY

Helen MacKenzie is a copywriter living near Edinburgh. In 2017 she received a Scottish Book Trust New Writers' Award. She has also been shortlisted for the Kelpies Prize and the Mslexia Children's Novel Competition and longlisted in the Bath Children's Novel Award. She loves walking and cycling, coffee and cake.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'There was a lot to like about this extract. The writing here was smooth and compelling, the relationship between Sam and his father brilliantly shown, and the descriptions of the house vividly described.'

'Strong, compelling opening and a well-drawn (difficult!) relationship between Sam and his father. The reader feels immediate empathy for Sam and intrigue about his father and his father's relationship with *his* father (Sam's grandfather). A great sense of mystery set up from the outset too!'

'I really like the voice – Sam feels very real – and the gradual exposition about his father and grandfather really pulled me in. Grandad is drawn really well through his home and studio – no mean feat. We get to the secret of the Hagstone very quickly and I want to read on.'

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THE SEA LORD'S CURSE

by Angela Murray

Chapter One

Glasgow 1870

The tower clock struck nine as Lad and Gal ran out of the darkened alley and onto the cobblestone street of the Trongate. Everything was going to plan or at least it was until they passed the Britannia Music Hall and Lad thumped to a halt.

‘The late show’s just started.’

‘No,’ said Gal. ‘We don’t have time.’

‘Just ten minutes,’ pleaded Lad as he gave his most charming smile. ‘Please?’

Gal remained unmoved. ‘You know that doesn’t work with me.’

‘True,’ nodded Lad and with that he ran inside.

‘I don’t sell tickets tae kids,’ grunted the ticket-booth man without even looking up from his newspaper.

‘Good,’ said Lad, ‘cause I’m not giving you any money.’

The ticket-booth man raised his eyes to the short, skinny boy standing before him. ‘Get out of here before ye get a skelp.’

Lad checked there was no one else about then pulled back his jacket to reveal a black horse tattoo on his shoulder. It was the Black Kelpie, a mark worn by anyone who worked for the Captain.

The ticket-booth man’s eyes widened in horror. ‘I didn’t realise. Is he here?’ He pulled out a bunch of tickets. ‘There ye go. Compliments of the establishment.’

‘How kind,’ responded Lad just as Gal joined them. ‘Free tickets,’ he told her as he handed one over and sprinted upstairs towards the theatre.

By the time Gal caught up with Lad he was already near the back under the balconies, his black, curly hair showing glints of red in the gaslight. On stage a woman dressed as a small child was singing a song to her stuffed dog. Gal found the song silly but she knew Lad wouldn’t care. He loved the theatre. He loved the sights and the sounds though possibly not the smells. No one could really love the Britannia’s special mix of cigarettes, sweat and urine. On stage the woman finished and was replaced by a comedian.

‘Fancy some food?’ said Lad as he eyed the bag of whelks in the hands of a man nearby. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘You’re always hungry,’ said Gal.

‘How about the Wallet Thief flim-flam?’

‘No,’ she groaned. ‘Just steal some money and buy something.’

Lad peered at her. ‘Where would be the fun in that?’

Just as she was about to argue further, Gal noticed a man walking towards the exit. It was Hexenmester, the ship’s magic master. The crew were heading back. They needed to hurry.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘But we’re out of here as soon as it’s done.’ With that she slipped into the crowd. Lad put on his cap as he gave Gal a few minutes to do her part then sauntered over to a large brute of a man.

‘Begging your pardon, Sir,’ said Lad, perfectly playing the role of a polite and respectable young boy.

The Brute stared down at the short yet strangely confident boy. ‘What?’

‘He just stole your wallet, Sir,’ said Lad as he pointed to the man eating his whelks. ‘I saw it with my own eyes.’

The Brute peered suspiciously at Lad as he searched his pockets to confirm that his wallet was indeed gone. He marched to the Whelk Man who froze in horror as the Brute loomed over him.

‘That boy says you stole ma wallet.’

‘What?’ spluttered the wide-eyed Whelk Man. ‘No I didn’t. He’s a wee liar! Look at him. He probably nicked it himself.’

The surrounding crowd looked back to Lad. This was better than the entertainment on stage.

‘I’ve nothing to hide,’ said Lad as he turned out his pockets and did

his most innocent face. 'I swear on my dear dead mother's grave.'

A few women nearby sighed for the poor, sad-eyed boy with no mother. The Brute turned back to the Whelk Man.

'Now you,' he grunted.

'This is ridiculous,' said the Whelk Man as he emptied his pockets 'I didn't . . .'

He got no further as to his surprise and horror he pulled out the Brute's wallet. Before the Whelk Man could say another word the Brute landed a mighty punch. The Whelk Man toppled back and his bag of whelks fell to the floor. In the scuffle that followed Lad sneaked over, swooped up the bag unnoticed and scurried off towards the exit.

'Want one?' asked Lad as the pair sauntered down the stairs.

'No thank you,' said Gal.

From up in the theatre came the sounds of a full-scale fight breaking out.

'You were really good,' mused Lad between mouthfuls of whelks. 'Nobody even noticed you.'

Gal shrugged. She was a pale, brown-haired, average-looking girl and as such was all but invisible to most folk most of the time. Sometimes that had its advantages. Added to that of course was the fact that she was a truly outstanding pickpocket.

As they stepped into the foyer the children saw that the ticket booth was empty. A smile crept over Gal's face.

'It would be a waste not to,' she said, pulling out her tools.

'Waste not want not,' said Lad, stepping back to let Gal at the ticket booth.

Gal and Lad picked locks with the same ease that other children picked their noses. The door was opened in seconds. The money box followed shortly after. Gal's eyes lit up as the coins tumbled into her pouch. She loved money almost as much as Lad loved food.

With the theft complete, they ran out of the theatre and up towards the disused Tontine Hotel where their real task awaited them.

Chapter Two

A thick, yellow fog sat on Glasgow that night as down at the docks of the Broomielaw a barge waited in the dark, murky waters of the River

Clyde. Up on the bow of the barge, bent over and clinging to the railings as though his life depended on it, was the well-known Glasgow figure of Bob Dragon.

A weasel of a man, he nevertheless dressed like the gentleman he believed himself to be. Only the best of everything was good enough for Bob. His suits and hats came from London, his gold-tipped walking stick had once belonged to a famous old Tobacco Lord and he refused to wear anything but the finest silk neckties. Today's tie was an elegant sky blue though such a sky was seldom seen over Glasgow. As Bob clung to the railings two sailors joined him at the bow.

'Any sign of them?' asked Muckle, who was quite possibly the largest man in Scotland.

'No point asking him,' said Dreich, a dreary figure whose grey face was set in a permanent sigh. 'He's too feart to even look.'

Bob Dragon was indeed full of fear. He was terrified of ships or rather he was terrified of falling off them. For as long as anyone could remember Bob had predicted that he would die in the sea. When asked why he believed this he always gave the same short answer. The Curse.

'Perhaps I could wait on the dock,' stuttered Bob, his knuckles white as he gripped the railings.

'Ye're not going anywhere 'til the Captain gets what's promised him,' said Muckle as he rested a beefy hand on Bob Dragon's head.

'That's really very unfair,' whined Bob as he tried unsuccessfully to wriggle free from Muckle's hand. 'I've entirely filled my part of the deal. I've provided the information. Very valuable information I might add. If the Captain chooses to entrust this information to a pair of children then it is hardly my responsibility if they prove to be unreliable.'

'He's got a point ye know,' said Dreich.

'Are ye questioning the Captain?' said Muckle, whose loyalty to his boss was unsurpassed.

'Of course not but ye know what those two are like,' sighed Dreich. Like most of the crew he had never been happy about having children on board. 'They've always been trouble.'

'They'll get it done,' said Muckle as he looked to the shore. 'They know what the Captain will do if they fail.'



'I'm a mash-nosed goblin with snot for brains and I'm gonna eat ye for ma dinner!'

In the darkness of the Tontine Hotel, Lad was putting on a show as he mimicked the various stone head grotesques lined up on the table before him.

'I'm not listening,' said Gal, trying to discourage him as she unpacked her tools.

'I might just be a head but I could still fight the lot of ye!' continued Lad, moving to the next one. He had spent his life pretending to be other people. It was a skill that often came in handy when you worked for the Captain. This evening's job however, was pretty simple. Right now Lad didn't need to be anyone but himself but why would he do that? Who wanted to be a twelve-year-old nobody?

'Look at that one,' he said, pointing to a particularly grumpy-looking head. 'I hav'nae poo'd for years and now am really angrrrry!'

Gal tried her best to remain focused but couldn't help but laugh as Lad contorted his face to match the scrunched-up expression of the stone head. Unlike him she was no good at being other people although she often wished she could. Apart from Lad not many folk really liked her.

'Shh,' she whispered between sniggers. 'Someone will hear us.'

'Come on,' he grinned. 'Your turn.'

'We need to find the Map,' said Gal, composing herself. She had no desire to face one of the Captain's punishments if they failed.

'The barge leaves at ten,' he had told the children earlier that day. 'Do not be late.'

Gal was never late. She always factored in plenty of time for the inevitable delays (often caused by Lad) that arose in the jobs the Captain set. This one had so far gone smoothly so perhaps she could allow herself a moment of fun.

'I . . .' she finally said. 'Am very . . . stony!'

Lad guffawed. Gal wasn't famed for her wit but that had never stopped the pair having a laugh.

'Come on,' she said, picking up her tools. 'We need to get this done.'

Having spent the last century attached to the pillars outside, the hotel's famous heads had been sold and were now inside awaiting collection. This was the best opportunity the children would get to search for the Map. While Lad continued to mess about, Gal chipped open three heads all without luck before beginning work on the fourth.

'Ha look,' said Lad as he pointed to a head with its nose knocked off. 'This one's just like Mither.'

He lifted up the head and adopted the snarling voice of the ship's unfortunate cook.

'Lassies should'nae be on a ship. They're bad luck. Look at me. I had a nose 'til that one came aboard!'

As Lad attempted to shuffle forward with the noseless head it slipped through his hands and smashed to pieces on the ground. 'Oops.'

The shock on Lad's face turned to a smile as he bent down and from the broken stone pulled out a heavy wooden tube covered in elaborate markings.

'Found it!' Lad grinned as he took the tube and stowed it inside his jacket.

Gal sighed. That was typical Lad. All luck and no work.

A few minutes later the pair ran out onto the dark streets, weaving their way past the drunks and the night merchants. The job had gone as well as possible or so they thought until they neared the docks of the *Broomielaw* and heard the distinctive clacking of police rattles.

Chapter Three

Smoke belched out of the barge's chimney as it pulled away from the dock. Poor old Bob Dragon could not believe his bad luck.

'Stop. Let me off!' he gasped as he clutched the railings.

'Ye hear those rattles?' said Driech. 'D'ye want the police to find ye here? D'ye know what they do to those that consort with the likes of us?'

In the old days there'd been no problem for the crew in Glasgow. Even as the most wanted man in the north the Captain could swan in and out of town as he pleased. The small police force had been easy to bribe. But not now, not since McCall had taken over as Chief Constable. Going into Glasgow these days was too risky and no map, however special, was worth the hangman's noose.

'This is awful,' whined Bob, lifting his hands to his neck. 'Are they following us? Oh my luck, my terrible luck.'

'Be quiet,' said Muckle as the rattles faded. 'They're no after us.'

This was true. The police had passed the docks and were heading up into the town.

'Wait, are they for him?' Bob's eyes lit up. 'Is he dealt with?'

Bob Dragon owed money everywhere but his worst debt was with a notoriously violent money-lender.

'The Captain always keeps his word,' said Muckle as the barge sailed into the fog.

The two children hid in a dark, narrow alley watching the barge leave.

'Told you we didn't have time for the theatre,' said Gal.

'But you've got a plan, right?' asked Lad. Gal always had a plan.

'Meadowside Yard,' replied Gal through clenched teeth. 'Big Rachel's on watch. The fog will slow the barge but we'll need to take the boneshakers.'

Before Lad could respond, a shaky voice spoke from the shadows.

'Give me yer money or I'll . . . I'll stab ye. With ma knife.'

They turned to see the owner of the voice. It was a red-headed boy, not much older than them. He wagged something small and pointy.

'I have a knife, see?' said the robber, his hand trembling. 'So ye have to give me yer money. Please.'

Lad and Gal laughed. They'd grown up on a ship of hardened thieves and murderers. This well-mannered robber was no threat.

'I don't think so,' said Lad, pulling out his own, much bigger knife.

The would-be robber's eyes widened in horror as he lowered his weapon.

'We need to go,' said Gal as she put her arm round Lad and whispered in his ear. 'Now.'

Lad nodded but kept his eyes on the would-be robber. Pale and skinny, with deep shadows under his eyes, he didn't look like he'd last much longer on the streets.

'Let's give him some of the theatre money,' said Lad. He turned to Gal only to find that she was already halfway down the alley.

'I'm no beggar,' snapped the robber.

'My apologies, of course not,' said Lad as he took off a dirty key that

hung round his neck. 'But you are without question a very bad thief. Give me your knife.'

The robber handed it over without protest.

'And in return you get this,' said Lad, holding out the key. 'Number sixty-one Saltmarket. It's warm. There's food and a bit of money. Don't stay more than a few nights or you might find yourself with unwanted company. Leave the key when you go.'

The boy looked unsure of his luck as he took the filthy key.

'Do not clean the key,' said Lad. 'It won't work if you do. Also there's no keyhole. You just have to imagine it.'

The boy's face fell into the fixed smile people adopt when talking to a crazy person. 'I will certainly do that. Thank you,' he nodded, edging backwards. 'Goodbye then.' And with that he sprinted into the shadows.

Lad looked at the knife. What stories had it seen? Rolling the very ordinary looking object in his hand he suspected it hadn't seen many. Well, it was certainly going to see some now that it was with him, Lad the . . . Knifeman? No, wait. Lad the Stabber? No. He grimaced as he tried to come up with a good name.

Being the only male child on the ship the crew had simply called him Lad and it had stuck. Lad however planned to be great one day and great people needed a great name. He'd been trying to come up with one for years but nothing seemed to fit.

Lad snapped out of his daydreaming and bent down to hide the knife in his boot. It might not be anything special but if he'd learnt one thing growing up with the Captain, it never did any harm to have a spare knife.

It was as he stood back up that Lad noticed his jacket was open. His face dropped as he felt about inside his pockets and made a terrible discovery. The Map was gone.

Chapter Four

Lad's mind raced as his boneshaker of a bike rattled down the roads. Who had taken the Map? Gal seemed most likely but what if the rubbish thief had simply been playing an act? The Captain was going to kill him. No, that would be too easy. It was sure to be much worse.

His lungs were ready to burst as he reached the Meadowside Shipyards down where the River Kelvin flowed into the Clyde. Gal was already on board the rowing boat beside the mighty figure of Big Rachel.

‘Lad!’ bellowed Rachel. ‘Late as always!’

‘Does no harm to keep the ladies waiting a little,’ said Lad as he joined them. ‘Helps maintain their interest.’

Gal rolled her eyes as Rachel gave a booming laugh and began to row. By day Rachel was one of the strongest labourers at Meadowside. By night she was Master of the Riverwatch.

With Rachel’s rowing they were in position just in time to see the barge emerge from the fog. There may well have been magic that could have helped them get on board but sometimes it was easier to just jump. Especially if you had someone like Rachel to give you a heave.

‘You have it, right?’ Lad whispered to Gal as she climbed onto Rachel’s clasped hands.

‘Have what?’ replied Gal, her eyes firmly on the barge.

‘The Map!’ snapped Lad.

‘I hope you’re joking.’

‘Ready!’ shouted Rachel and before Lad could say anything else she heaved her hands up and sent Gal flying over towards the barge. Not the best of acrobats, Gal failed to reach the deck. Lad winced as he watched her thump against the side of the boat, grabbing at the railings just in time.

‘Good grief, gentlemen, look at this!’ Hexenmester’s German voice boomed out across the water as Gal clambered over to join the crew. ‘We have caught for ourselves a great big fish!’

Lad listened to the crew roar with laughter and knew what he had to do. He was about to get into trouble and when you were in trouble it sometimes helped to have the crew on your side. The best way to do that was to entertain them.

‘Good evening, gentlemen!’ he shouted to the barge which was now halfway past. ‘Prepare to be amazed!’

Lad whispered to Rachel who let out another booming laugh and with a swift one-two sent him flying up into the air at least twice as high as Gal. Lad then performed a somersault as he flew across to the barge to land

with a thump on the cabin roof. Ever the showman, he took a bow from his perch as the crew cheered.

‘Thank you, gentlemen, and now for my next trick . . .’

‘Get down.’

The deep voice that spoke was quiet but filled with such authority that even passing seagulls fell silent as the dark figure of the Captain walked out of the cabin. Lad did not need to hear the instruction twice. Without a word he hopped off the roof to land in front of his boss. A solid man of average height with a neatly snipped beard, the Captain’s clothes were simple and his manner calm. He looked more like a pastor than a criminal apart perhaps from the angry silver streak that shot through his jet-black hair.

‘This is a boat not a circus.’

‘Sorry, Captain,’ said Lad.

‘Do you have the Map?’

‘Well you see we had it . . .’

‘Had it?’ repeated the Captain.

Lad looked to Gal. She must have it, he thought. She was annoyed about missing the boat and this was her way of getting her own back. Gal however, just stood there, arms folded.

‘Are you saying,’ said the Captain, ‘that you do not have the Map?’

‘That might be what I’m saying,’ said Lad, trying to appear calm as his heart did its best to thump its way out of his chest.

‘You understand the price of failure?’

Lad opened his mouth but he had nothing. No witty comeback, no smart excuse. He was in big trouble.

‘Oh wait, I’m sorry, did you mean THIS map?’

Everyone turned to see Gal with the tube in her hand and a sly grin on her face.

‘I knew she had it,’ said Lad.

‘Course you did,’ nodded Gal. There was nothing as sweet as revenge on Lad.

The Captain glared at Gal but said nothing as he grabbed the rune-covered tube and turned to Bob Dragon.

‘Is this it?’

'It is,' said Bob as he edged way from the tube. 'I would be obliged if I could take my payment and go.'

'Only a fool would trust your word. You'll get nothing until we've tested it.' The Captain nodded to the children as he grabbed Bob and dragged him towards the cabin. 'The pair of you come too. I have waited an exceptionally long time for this day and I do not respond well to disappointment. For all your sakes you'd better hope this really is the Sea Lord's Map.'

THE SEA LORD'S CURSE by Angela Murray

SYNOPSIS

Glasgow 1870: When notorious criminal the Captain announces a deadly treasure hunt to decide his heir, orphans Lad and Gal (12) are catapulted into a danger-filled quest to find enchanted items shown on the Sea Lord's Map. As they compete to survive, the children discover startling information about their origins. Will the once inseparable duo stay loyal or end up betraying each other? A fast-paced, magical adventure filled with real historical figures.

BIOGRAPHY

Angela Murray is from Glasgow but now lives in Hamburg. She studied film and went on to work as a camera assistant before making her own short films. These won many prizes at children's film festivals around the world.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A strong pitch and a truly interesting historic world. I loved the setting and the atmosphere, as well as the two main characters and the promise of magic to come. There's a great energy between the two main protagonists here, I cared about them very quickly, and already feared for the challenges they were going to face.'

'Catchy, compelling opening chapters full of elements that will appeal to, and engage, the reader. Lovely energy and fun to the writing too. Interesting characterisation set up from the start . . . and all of this with a dusting of intriguing magic.'

'I like the setting, the Glaswegian hints in the dialogue, and the hints of magic – the key to Number 61 Saltmarket totally whet my appetite. The set-up feels like a very classic adventure story and it could be very commercial.'

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SEAN & THE FRANKEN-BOGEY

By Anna Brooke

BOOK WARNING

Dear (insert your name here),

Don't tell grown-ups about this book. They'll think it's so ghastly, they'll be sick in their socks. For inside is a terrifying tale about revolting things like:

- bogey towers
- squelchy monsters
- slug goo
- slimy moats

and

- snot trails.

And at the end . . . well, at the end, there's an enormous . . . Hang on. I'm not telling you about the end. You can start at Chapter 1 just like everyone else!

Honestly!

CHAPTER 1: THE BIG STORM

Have you ever picked your nose?

Don't lie now.

I bet you have. I haven't, of course. I would never do anything revolting like that.

But I bet *you* have. And that's okay, because if you have, you can be friends with Sean.

Here he is, a short, freckly boy with spiky red hair and his finger up his nozzle.

His full name is Sean Montgomery Pinkerty Davis, but for the sake of this story, we'll just call him Sean.

Sean lived on the edge of Plopperty Village in his ancestral home, Snozzlehill House, a spooky-looking mansion with a rickety bell tower, a gloopy green moat and cross-eyed gargoyles with dribbling chops.

It sounds grand, but it wasn't.

His mum and dad couldn't afford to live in the whole building, so the family squeezed into two tiny bedrooms, a teensy lounge with a teeny kitchen, and a tiddly bathroom with a toilet that did a little burp when it flushed. *Bruupp!* The rest of the house lay empty, except for cobwebs, and spiders that tap-danced and sang cabaret at night.

So, as I was saying, Sean was a nose-picker, though he never ate his bogeys (for that would be really disgusting). Instead he rolled them into little balls and saved them in his pocket until he got home from school. Then, when no one was looking, he emptied them into his secret bogey cupboard in his bedroom.

Not even his mum or dad knew about the cupboard, and over time, Sean had piled up so many bogeys, he had a big bogey tower . . .

75 centimetres . . .

81 centimetres . . .

97 centimetres . . .

Sean was aiming for a metre.

This is Tiffany, Sean's best friend. She has springy Afro hair and sticky-outy ears.

Tiffany was the only other person in the entire world to know about the tower and the cupboard. But she didn't collect bogeys, she collected slugs and carried four pet ones around with her in a jar.

Here they are: Sammy, Violet, Peach and Slim.

Every day after school the friends played together in Sean's bedroom until tea-time, letting the slugs slide up and down the walls, leaving a lovely

trail of slug goo, perfect for holding the bogey tower together. It was funny, but the bigger the tower, the more it looked like a little man.

Now, on the evening this story began, there was a . . . oh, hang on. Have you got your wellies on?

No? Well, go and get them. And grab an umbrella too, because on the evening this story began, there was a thunderstorm. And not just any thunderstorm. A thunderstorm so huge that the wind howled WOOOOO down the chimney pots like an off-key opera singer and the thunder rumbled so loudly that even Sean's deaf neighbour, Mrs Horn, knew something fishy was going on (though she mistook it for a burp and said, "Pardon me.").

And the rain. Oh, the rain. How it hammered, how it poured. Even the drooling gargoyles on Snozzlehill House had to take shelter inside the bell tower, and Lucy Longlegs, the star of the spiders' cabaret, sang *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head* from underneath a bucket.

You get the picture, it was a BIG storm.

But worst of all, the rainwater battered holes into Snozzlehill House's roof, and droplets started to fall through the rafters and the cobwebs and into Sean's bogey cupboard.

"QUICK!" Sean screamed, as he rushed over to drag his tower away from the drips. Tiffany joined him and together they heave-hoed it into the middle of the room to safety. Sean took a closer look, checking every inch for water damage.

"Golly," he frowned, "the top's all squelchy."

"It looks like it's got a spiky hairdo," said Tiffany. She was right. Where the drops had landed, little points had risen. The slugs slinked over for a better look.

"What are you going to do?" Tiffany asked.

"Use this for a start." Sean pulled a hairdryer out from under a pile of dirty clothes and started blow-drying the wet bits. BZZZZZZZZ. Then, when he was satisfied that the rain had done no lasting harm, he cried, "Now I need to hide it. And super mega fast."

"But WHERE?" said Tiffany.

Sean shrugged his shoulders.

The tower was too tall to hide under his bed, too wide to fit into his

wardrobe and too heavy to lift into his wash basket. And he couldn't leave it in the middle of the room or Mum and Dad would find it, and then he'd be in trouble, and then he wouldn't be allowed to pick his nose ever again, and THAT wouldn't do at all.

Suddenly, thunder ROARED outside, the lights flickered on and off and Mum's voice floated down the corridor.

"CHILDREN!" she shouted.

Sean and Tiffany jumped.

They could hear her footsteps in the hallway. "We've got to find somewhere to hide it. NOW!" Sean said.

Tiffany hopped from one foot to the other. "But where, but where?" she cried.

Sean jumped up and down and twizzled. "I don't know, I don't know."

The friends stopped jumping and hopping and twizzling and looked around them.

Then, what happened next, happened very quickly:

WHOOSH

Did you get that?

No?

Here it is again.

WHOOSH

Still too fast? Okay, I'll slow it down.

Sean spotted his unmade bed and whipped off the sheet. Next, he told Tiffany to rush over and close the secret bogey cupboard. As Mum knocked on the bedroom door – RAT-A-TAT-TAT – Sean threw the sheet over the tower and felt his heart do a little somersault, leap into his mouth and bounce on his tongue – BOING, BOING, BOING.

"Boo-a-woo," he spluttered, which isn't a word at all.

"Ah, playing ghosts are you?" Mum smiled, looking at the sheet and mistaking the "boo-a-woo" for a spooky "WOOOOOOOO".

Sean and Tiffany nodded. They couldn't believe their luck.

"WOOOOOOOO," added Sean, just to make sure.

"Well, can you tear yourselves away? Rain's coming through the kitchen ceiling and I need you to help me and Dad put some buckets under the drips," she said.

Sean nodded again, his heart finally calming to a normal rhythm.

“Come on then or we’ll have a flood in the oven,” said Mum.

And at that, Sean and Tiffany had no choice but to step out of the bedroom and into the dimly lit hallway. Sean glanced back at his tower one last time, then closed the door carefully behind him.

“Don’t worry, it’s hidden for *now*,” Tiffany whispered reassuringly.

“Yeah, but we’ll have to find somewhere better once we’ve finished in the kitchen,” Sean whispered back.

“I’ll help you. And the slugs will keep an eye on it while we’re gone.” Tiffany winked.

And for a moment Sean felt sure that she was right. That soon, once the storm was over, his tower would indeed be safe and back in the cupboard, and that life in Snozzlehill House would plod on as usual. Plopperty Village was one of those “plod on as usual” sort of places.

But alas, dear nose-pickers . . . I mean readers . . . no, I mean nose-pickers, Sean couldn’t have been more wrong, for something terrifying was about to happen, and life in Plopperty Village would NEVER, EVER, EVER, EVER be normal again. EVER.

CHAPTER 2: FRAZZLE, SIZZLE, CRACK

Are you scared yet? You should be. I told you something terrifying was about to happen and it’s here in this chapter that it does. If I were you, I’d have an extra pair of underpants on standby, because as Sean, Tiffany, Mum and Dad were placing buckets under the drips in the kitchen, the storm took a turn for the worse. The grey, five o’clock sky turned as black as night and thick, eerie clouds swirled overhead with lightning forking out like flaming veins, striking the ground with ear-piercing CRACKLES.

All across Plopperty Village, strange things started to happen.

Deaf old Mrs Horn saw the wind blow Pinky, her Siamese cat, past the window. Kwame Jones the postman watched his bag of letters fly up a tree, bounce off a magpie and drop into a squirrel’s nest. And Betty Blotlybottom, the nastiest mayor Plopperty Village had ever known, was whacked in the head by a bag of sprouts that fell out of her chimney.

“Argh!” she screamed and toppled over her armchair, uttering all sorts of naughty words I can’t possibly mention here.

What? You want to hear them?

Really?

Okay, but don’t tell anyone I told you.

Words like “sausage”, “whole milk” and “orange juice”.

Wait, that’s my shopping list! Sorry.

Words like S..... P..... B..... D.....

Drat, I dribbled my tea here. You’d better just read on.

But, where was I?

Oh, yes.

I was about to take you to Sean’s room, where things were getting really strange:

While everyone was still in the kitchen, the wind suddenly blew Sean’s bedroom window open – WHOOSH – and the rain and leaves and some of Sean’s dirty socks went whirling around the bogey tower.

When a second gust rushed in it was the slugs’ turn for trouble, and Sammy, Violet, Peach and Slim found themselves sucked into a tiny whirlwind that spiralled towards the bed at breakneck speed.

“Form a ring,” squeaked Slim, as they spun like marbles. It was hard – a leaf had stuck to Peach’s eye tentacles – but the brave gastropods managed to link up, head-to-tail, and freefall to the bed-knob, where they landed like a hoop on a skittle.

At the same moment, the sheet covering the bogey tower shot up into the air and caught on the light fitting where it bellowed like a creepy flag, sending eerie shadows over the bogey tower’s bobbly surface.

If you’d been in the room, you’d have sworn it looked like a stubby, green goblin. It was a good job you weren’t: a moment later, a fork of lightning hurtled through the window and struck the tower full on.

FRAZZLE

SIZZLE

CRACK

All went quiet for a second, then a strange snorting noise sounded by the tower. No, hang on. It wasn’t *by* the tower, it *was* the tower. And then, through the flickering darkness, two bright eyes appeared, followed by two

arms and two legs. And THEN, as the thunder shook the heavens outside – CRASH, BANG, BOOM – the bogey tower started to move.

One step . . .

Two steps . . .

It lurched forward with outstretched arms crying, “GOO-GOO-GOOEY.”

It was ALIVE!

CHAPTER 2½: JUST CHECKING IN

Are you all right?

Did you have to change your undies?

No?

I did – just after the tower started snorting and then again when it said *goo-goo-gooey*.

I'd love to tell you that the creepy parts are over and that the rest of this book is all about birds and flowers, but I'd be telling you a lie, for things are about to get worse. Much worse.

If you want my advice, buy yourself a chocolate bar to nibble on during the scary bits. Don't get Tomlinson's Extra Dark. I've heard it's made with mouse droppings. But something nice from your local newsagents: Pippin's Peanut Parcels are good, as are Rocko's Raspberry Swirls. And if you like bananas, Babushka's Balls are really quite moreish.

You have been warned.

CHAPTER 3: BROWN-GREEN JELLY

Now, have you ever travelled back in time?

No?

Well, touch this black dot and see what happens.



Sorry, wrong one. Try this one instead.



Congratulations! You have just whizzed back fifty-three seconds to the moment when the lightning struck – only this time you’re in the kitchen with Sean.

“Whoa!” Sean cried, as the bang shook Snozzlehill House to its very core. Even the spiders in the rafters had to cling to their webs.

As the floor trembled in the kitchen, water sloshed out of the buckets to form puddles around the legs of the chairs and table. Dad was about to tell everyone to be careful, when he slipped on a wet patch and hurtled towards the fridge. Unfortunately for him, Mum had just opened the door and he flew head-first into a bowl of leftover mashed potato. SQUELCH!

Any other day, Sean and Tiffany would have giggled like hyenas. Today they stared at each other with worry in their eyes. There was a smell of trouble in the air (cherries mixed with doggy bum-gas) and both knew the bang had come from Sean’s bedroom and that any second now, Mum and Dad – who knew it too – would want to investigate.

“We’ve got to get there first,” Sean whispered to Tiffany. If they could buy themselves some time, even just a few seconds, they might just stop Mum and Dad from finding the tower.

Sean pulled open the kitchen door and beckoned to Tiffany to follow.

“Where are you going?” said Mum.

“My bedroom,” Sean replied, trying to sound as normal as possible.

“Not on your own. That bang sounded dangerous,” mumbled Dad from behind a towel. He still had mashed potato on his eyelashes.

His words fell on deaf ears. Actually, they fell on NO ears, for Sean and Tiffany had already sprinted off down the hallway and were standing in front of the bedroom door.

WHOOSH went the wind as Sean pushed the door open. Leaves and socks blew into their faces.

COUGH, COUGH

SPLUTTER, SPLUTTER

For a second they couldn’t see anything, then as the debris fell to the floor, their jaws dropped.

There by the window stood the bogey tower, only it wasn’t a tower any more, it was a two-legged, two-armed BOGEY MONSTER.

Sean nodded again, but something (namely the living, breathing bogey monster that had just jumped out of his window) told him Dad wasn't quite right.

Questions swirled around his brain:

How had the bogey tower come alive?

Where had it gone?

Should they look for it?

He desperately needed to talk to Tiffany. And from the look on Tiffany's face she needed to talk to him.

But alas, dear nose-pickers, it wasn't to be:

DING DONG!

Tiffany's dad was at the door. It was time for her to go home.

"Don't do anything until I come round tomorrow," Tiffany whispered with a wobble in her voice. "It might be dangerous."

"I won't," Sean mouthed back.

But as they waved goodbye on the front step, Sean squinted through the rain for any sign of the bogey monster and knew he couldn't wait for tomorrow. He was going to have to look for the monster tonight, while Mum and Dad were asleep. Even if that meant doing it all on his OWN.

CHAPTER 4: A FAMILIAR BOGEY CLUSTER

"Night," shouted Sean as he wiggled into his pyjamas.

He felt nervous, but he was doing everything as normal, so that Mum and Dad wouldn't suspect anything.

Climbing under his duvet, he crossed his fingers that his parents would go to bed soon too.

Unfortunately, they didn't.

Before they went to bed they had to:

- Move the kitchen furniture out of the puddles.
- Mop the kitchen floor.
- Drag the kitchen furniture back again.
- Attach blue sheets to the kitchen ceiling to stop any more water getting through.

cats and dolphins). But Sean didn't know that and he trembled so much that he slipped in a big, squelchy pile of mud.

“OH NO!”

He was caked in it! His torch too. He couldn't see a thing.

He patted himself all over to find a dry bit of clothing. There was one mud-free spot on the hem of his coat, which he used to wipe the torch.

RUB-A-DUB-DUB

Then, suddenly, as the light bobbed up and down over the ground, he saw something.

Something green and gloopy on a nearby rock.

Could it be . . . ?

Nope. False alarm. It was moat slime.

But wait.

What was that next to it?

Something more textured, something familiar.

GOOLIEMALOOLIE, it was a cluster of his own bogeys! What's more, it formed a handprint.

Sean's heart began to race. He shone the torch all around to look for more.

He found some. Over by Mum's favourite garden gnome and then again by the veggie patch. The monster had left a trail of snot!

“It must be recent,” Sean whispered to himself, “the rain hasn't washed it away.”

The discovery spurred him on. He followed bogey blobs all around the back garden – through the broken greenhouse, over the crumbly fountain, past the overgrown orchard – to the abandoned East Wing.

And then he saw it:

Another bogey handprint, only this time on a door handle.

Sean leapt for joy.

Then froze in fear.

It was the door to Snuzzlehill House's spooky coal cellar. And he wasn't allowed down there.

Now, if you ever have to choose between going down into a forbidden coal cellar and going home to scoff Jammy Dodgers in bed, choose the biscuits. You'll wake up with crumbs in your ears, but at least you won't

have to breathe fusty air filled with mushroom spores, and slide down a metal chute onto piles of century-old coal that bruise your bum.

Sean, of course, didn't have that choice. He didn't have any Jammy Dodgers. Plus, he was sure the monster was somewhere down there in the dark. He'd come this far. He couldn't turn back now.

He gathered his courage. Then, trembling in his muddy clothes like chocolate blancmange, he moved the DANGER, KEEP OUT sign and pulled open the small, rusty door.

GROAN

CREAK

"Here goes," he whispered, sitting on the coal chute and shining the torch down.

WHEEEEEEEEEEE!

BUMP!

"OW."

He landed in a sea of lumpy coal.

Rubbing his bottom, he stood up and shone the torch around.

The dingy cellar had stone ceilings covered in cobwebs and mould. Bags and bags of coal spread out into the distance. The cellar was HUGE. Much bigger than Sean could ever have imagined. He saw that the ceiling was held up by stone pillars and that the walls were dotted with old torch holders like the ones Sean had seen in history books about dungeons.

Suddenly, something caught his eye by one of the pillars.

He crept towards it, chills running down his spine.

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH

What was that?

CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH

There it was again.

He froze.

The noise stopped.

BANG!!!

Something knocked him over.

"AHHHHHHHHH," he screamed.

He was on his back.

He stared up into the darkness. “DON’T HURT ME!” he blabbered.
“What are you doing here?” came a voice.
But it wasn’t the bogey monster.
It was TIFFANY.

SEAN & THE FRANKEN-BOGEY by Anna Brooke

SYNOPSIS

Ten-year-old Sean loves bogeys, but he really shouldn't have left his bogey tower out in a storm. When it gets struck by lightning, it turns into a bogey monster called Frank and escapes. It's down to Sean and his best friend Tiffany to find Frank before evil mayor Betty Blotbottom gets to him. She wants the booger wiped off the face of the earth – and has hired a team of Hankie Handlers to do it.

BIOGRAPHY

Anna lives in Paris where she's simultaneously a freelance travel writer for the *Sunday Times*, a voice actor, a scriptwriter and a mum. She has worked on her stories with Curtis Brown Creative. When she's not reading or writing, she's composing songs. Anna never picks her nose.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

“Don't tell grown-ups about this book,” is a brilliant opening line. The voice and humour immediately come through and the reader immediately knows this book is going to be a lot of fun.’

‘I think the tone is pitch-perfect for the age-group. The “Book Warning” is a brilliant way to open the story and I really like the authorial voice. The writing is very child-friendly and I especially like the descriptions of the parents' house and Sean's friendship with Tiffany.’

‘A funny anarchic story about bogeys! Can see ten year olds everywhere loving it while their parents cringe in disgust.’

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THE GENIUS MACHINE

By Dr Adam Connors

CHAPTER 1

You can spot my dad a mile off. He's the one with the sticky-up hair and holes in his sweater. The one standing at the school gates with his hands in his pockets. He's a scientist. Or at least he used to be. Now he fixes washing machines for a living.

The others hadn't seen him yet. They were too busy talking about the science fair Mrs Ellwood had announced in assembly last week.

"I'm going to build a rocket," Nellie said.

"A flying car!" Joe sniggered.

"A death ray," Jonas announced.

It wasn't fair. None of them had cared a jot about science until last week, not like me. They didn't happen to know, for example, that low earth orbit starts at around two hundred miles above sea level and it takes over five hundred thousand gallons of fuel to get there. Or that Henry Ford actually built a prototype flying car in 1926! Or that Nikola Tesla claimed to have invented a death ray in 1930.

But none of that matters once you've failed your Clever Person exam and everybody thinks you're a loser. Speaking of losers, I thought bitterly, what was that thing on the ground Dad had just stooped down to pick up?

Jonas stopped suddenly. "Wait, isn't that your dad?"

He said it casually, but I could hear the meanness in his voice. "I don't think so . . ." I said. I made a show of squinting into the distance. "My dad's hair is darker."

Jonas smirked. “Nope, that’s definitely him. What a dork.” Nellie glared at Jonas but he didn’t seem to care. “Doesn’t he have anything better to do?”

I felt my face starting to turn red. *Not really*, I wanted to answer. Given that all he does all day is hide in his garage and tinker with his washing machines. I just hoped Jonas hadn’t seen him slip whatever it was he’d found on the ground into his pocket.

“What’s the big deal?” I said instead. “Your dad picks you up sometimes.”

“My dad owns an Audi R8,” Jonas replied curtly.

He had me there. My dad owns a Toyota which is emerald green, except for the front left wing which is blue, and we have to keep a beer mat in the glovebox to jam down the side of the dashboard for when it squeaks on the motorway.

I turned to Nellie. “I better go.”

“Wait . . .” Nellie called after me. “You didn’t tell us what you were going to enter into the science fair.”

I was already running and I didn’t look back. It was the one question I didn’t want to answer and my best hope was to get away as soon as possible.

“Dad!” I called. “Dad, I’m here, let’s go.”

“Hi, Gilbert.” Dad smiled.

“Come on, we need to go.”

“Oh, right. Okay.”

I tugged at Dad’s arm but he didn’t seem to be in any particular rush. He’s never in any particular rush when my friends are watching.

He reached into his jacket pocket. “Look. I found a millipede.”

I stared at the creature squirming in his hand. It was actually a centipede, because it only had one pair of legs per body segment, but it was an easy mistake to make.

“Oh . . . er . . . Wow,” I said.

“Don’t you want to look at it?”

“It’s brilliant, Dad. Really.”

“You used to like millipedes.”

I jostled him towards our car. “I thought you were meant to be working.”

“I was working,” Dad said. “My experiment wasn’t.”

I hate it when Dad talks like he’s still a scientist. “You mean your washing machine?”

Dad ruffled my hair. “Besides, I need your help. Mr Smedley’s going to meet us at home. He’s got another consignment.”

My heart sank. Every two weeks Mr Smedley parks his white van outside our house and unloads a garage worth of beat-up old washing machines for Dad to fix. He used to come on Saturdays, which wasn’t so bad, but lately he’s been coming during the week which means pretty much the entire school gets to walk past and witness the whole affair.

We were just about to get in the car when I heard Nellie’s voice behind us.

“Gilbert!” she called. “Hey! Gilbert!”

“Hiya, Nellie,” Dad said.

“Hiya, Dr Hughes!” Nellie said. She turned to me. “Gilbert, I’ve been trying to catch up with you.”

I drew a long, steadying breath. Nellie’s been my best friend since for ever. My first memory of her is of the time she was sick into my mouth, which Mum tells me happened when we were three. But, the thing about Nellie is, she’s terrible at keeping secrets. And, for that matter, at noticing when other people are trying to keep a secret. Which I was.

“Come on,” Nellie said. “Spill it. I bet you’ve got something brilliant planned.”

“A brilliant plan?” Dad asked.

I shook my head desperately and made that throat-cutting signal which pretty much everyone else in the world knows means: *stop talking right now!*

“I can understand you not wanting to blab in front of Jonas,” Nellie continued. “But you don’t think you can keep it a secret from me do you?”

“Keep what a secret?” Dad asked.

I made another frantic throat-slashing motion which Nellie seemed not to notice.

“There’s a science fair at school,” she said, watching my wild gesturing with an inquisitive look. “We’ve got until the end of term to invent whatever we like.”

“A science fair?” Dad said.

His eyes actually widened with excitement like he was in a cartoon.

“All the kids are entering,” Nellie said. “It’s going to be epic!”

Dad looked at me. “Why didn’t you mention the science fair?”

“I-I um . . . I didn’t . . .? I was going to . . .”

“And the winners get to go to Genius School for the summer,” Nellie continued.

“Wow! That sounds amazing,” Dad said.

He meant it too. He wasn’t just being polite like most grown-ups would be. I could tell already his head was filled with whirling machines and flashing lights.

“I thought I might build a water-bottle rocket,” Nellie said.

Dad was ecstatic. “Oh, yes, that’s a fine idea!”

They turned to me. “What are you going to build, Gilbert?”

I looked at the sky. Not many people know it, but about twenty-five million meteors enter the Earth’s atmosphere every day, so it seems to me there’s always a chance one of them is going to blow me to pieces and save me the trouble of whatever is coming next.

“I’m not going to enter,” I said.

There was a long pause. No meteor, sadly. Dad’s expression didn’t change, but his skin turned a shade more grey like somebody had turned out the light inside his skull. Nellie’s mouth dropped open like somebody had just switched her off at the mains.

“Not entering?” Dad said.

“But it’s your *thing*,” Nellie said. “All you ever wanted was to be an inventor.”

I shrugged and tried to ignore the looks on their faces. Nellie’s expression made me wonder if Dad’s centipede had found its way into her mouth.

“Is it because of Marcus?” Nellie said.

Fresh panic gripped me. I hadn’t wanted Dad to find out about the science fair because I knew he’d give me a hard time for not entering. But having him find out about Marcus as well was a whole other level of pain.

“What’s this?” Dad asked.

“Marcus Longchester organised the fair,” Nellie said. “I thought maybe Gilbert didn’t want to enter because he knows you don’t like talking about . . . Oh. Sorry.”

Nellie flashed me an apologetic look. Marcus Longchester was the CEO of Grapesoft, which is the largest, most successful, most advanced technology company in the world. He also happens to be Dad’s former

boss, and the man who sacked him ten years ago, right before Grapesoft made it big.

“Marcus? It’s not like him to sponsor a science fair,” Dad said.

Nellie shrugged. “He says a child is just a scientist waiting to happen.”

“Well, sure, but . . .” Dad said.

“They just need . . .”

“A great education?” Dad suggested.

“. . . a shove,” Nellie finished.

Dad chewed his lip. “A shove? What do you suppose he means by that?”

Nellie shrugged again. Dad’s face was dark. I could tell he was rattled. The mention of Marcus always brings back unpleasant memories for Dad, but this was different. I felt a sinking feeling inside me, because Dad being rattled only ever means one thing: an especially long washing-machine-fixing session later.

“Well . . . anyway,” Nellie said, a little weakly. “I better go.”

Nellie flashed me another apologetic look and I did my best to glare back at her.

Dad blinked like he was coming out of a dream. “Let me know if you need any help with that rocket.”

“I will!” Nellie called back, already beating a hasty exit.

Dad looked down at me and opened his mouth to say something. Then he closed it again. He reached out and patted my shoulder in that way he does when he can’t think of the right thing to say.

“A shove?” he said to himself.

He glanced at the sky, and I’m pretty sure he, too, was hoping for a passing meteor.

CHAPTER 2

Mr Smedley was already sitting at the back of his van reading his newspaper by the time we arrived home.

“Ah! Dr Hughes! The maestro himself!” he said.

He leapt up and grabbed Dad’s hand in both of his and pumped it up and down like he was trying to shake loose a piece of chewing gum that was stuck to his sleeve.

“Maestro’s a bit strong,” Dad said, clearly loving it.

“Not at all, not at all,” Mr Smedley said. “What other word for a man who can work such magic on machines that other people would only throw away?”

Dad beamed. “What ingenious puzzles do you have for me this time, Mr Smedley?”

There were already three washing machines in the drive which Mr Smedley had unloaded before he got bored and decided to read his newspaper instead. Further along the street I watched the first group of children approach, three girls from year nine who lived on the next cul-de-sac along.

“Um . . . so . . . Shall we get these inside?” I asked.

Mr Smedley clapped his hands delightedly. “That’s what I like to see. A bit of enthusiasm from the youth of today. It’d take a flying car to drag most of them from their mobile phones. Am I right?”

Dad wasn’t listening. He was inspecting one of the machines Mr Smedley had deposited in our drive. He knelt down and thrust his head inside. “Where did you find a Ferguson-Williams?” he called, his voice echoing inside the drum. “Now, don’t tell me . . . It’s a . . . 1994, am I right?”

“I believe it is,” Mr Smedley said.

Dad reappeared. “I knew it! Classics. Beautiful machines.”

“Jacob Wheeler who runs the laundrette has twenty of ’em need sorting out if you think you can get this one back on its feet,” Mr Smedley said.

Dad’s eyes blazed with excitement. “They used a separate agitator in this model instead of an outer barrel.” He gestured towards the machine. “Come and take a look.”

“I’m okay,” I said.

I could live without another Ferguson-Williams tour.

“They mounted it *horizontally*, do you see?” Dad continued, lost in his own world. “It’s quite a neat design, I don’t know why they never took off.”

The year-nine girls passed in a tight huddle, laughing amongst themselves.

“Shouldn’t we do this inside?” I said, starting to feel desperate.

“Good idea,” Dad replied. “We wouldn’t want them to get caught in the rain.”

We started to manhandle the old machines towards the garage. They

were big, white, rusted things, ugly in every way. Mr Smedley wheeled them down the ramp from his van on a little two-wheeled trolley, and then Dad and I used another trolley to push them up the slight slope to the garage. But almost every time, Dad spotted some new exciting detail and insisted on inspecting the machine from every angle. He clambered on top of a grey Excelerator 3000 and thrust his arm deep inside its workings like a vet helping a cow give birth. Then he lay, crablike on his back to read the serial number on the side of an Ungulator 20. While all the time more and more children trooped past, and pointed and smirked.

When we were finally done, I closed the garage door behind me and breathed a sigh of relief. “You know Mr Smedley’s taking advantage of you don’t you?”

“Mr Smedley? Taking advantage of me?” Dad grinned. “If you call bringing a van full of wonderful puzzles to my door every week ‘taking advantage’ then I guess he must be.”

“But he’s making a lot of money out of you—”

“I can’t believe he hasn’t tried to charge me for the service yet.”

I bit my lip and smothered a cry of frustration. Dad knew what I meant. He’s not stupid. He’s just incredibly irritating sometimes. He dotted from machine to machine like a child at Christmas, uncertain which one to start tinkering with first.

“It’s embarrassing,” I said, sitting grumpily on the disembowelled carcass of a Massey-Manchester. “Why did you leave Grapesoft anyway? Surely it was better than this.”

Dad looked thoughtful for a moment. “It was . . . different.”

“Doesn’t Mum mind you spending all your time hiding in the garage like this?”

“This is the modern world, Gilbert,” Dad said. “Your mother and I share the responsibilities of taking care of you and your brother.” He opened the door of the nearest washing machine and thrust his head inside. “And I’m *not* hiding,” he said, his voice muffled from inside. “I like my work.”

“But you could work anywhere,” I said, aware that I was pushing too hard but not caring today for some reason. “I don’t understand why you’d rather be fixing washing machines than working as a real scientist.”

Dad was twisting at something inside the machine with more force than

it really needed. “What *I* don’t . . . understand . . .” he said, between grunts of effort as he leaned his weight into the washing machine. “Is why you’d try and keep . . . the . . . science fair . . . a secret— *Ouch!*” He slipped and there was a hollow *thump* as he banged his head on the inside of the frame. He leaned out and looked at me with pain in his eyes. “Well?”

I shrugged. “I thought you’d be upset with me for not entering.”

“Well it does sound like a lot of fun.”

“I just don’t want to, okay?”

Dad stopped working. He wiped the grease from his hands and came and sat next to me. “Is it about the exam?”

I didn’t say anything. When you’re little, people tell you you can be anything you want. Then you get older and all of a sudden they change their minds. Now you can be anything you want but only if you pass the right exams, and go to the right school, and then pass more exams, and probably wear a green hat and ride a unicycle for all I know (it’s just that nobody’s admitted that part to me yet).

“That exam doesn’t mean anything,” Dad said.

“It means Nellie gets to go to Clever Person School and I don’t,” I said.

“Clearwater School,” Dad corrected me.

Dad’s wrong, everybody calls it Clever Person School.

“And I get sent to the Other School instead,” I said.

“Otheram School,” Dad corrected.

Wrong again. It’s called Other School, because that’s how it works. If you’re clever, like Nellie, you go to Clever Person School and become a scientist or an engineer. If your parents have lots of money, like Jonas, you go to Posh Person School (Passionford High, a grown-up would say) and become an investment banker or a politician. And everyone else goes to . . . the Other School.

“It means I’ll never be a great inventor or anything.”

Dad looked shocked. “Rubbish! How does it mean that?”

“How can I expect to become a great inventor when I can’t even get into Clever Person School?”

“Clearwater School,” Dad said again.

I’d been having this conversation with Dad on and off since we got the results. It never went well. “I’m not going to learn anything. I’m just going

to spend the rest of my school life getting my head flushed down the toilet.”

“That’s just a rumour,” Dad said.

“It’s not!” I shouted.

“I should never have let you take that stupid exam,” Dad growled.

“Well you did and it’s too late now,” I answered sulkily.

Dad looked hard at me. “One day that brain of yours is going to change the world, you know that don’t you?” Dad has been telling me this for as long as I remember. “People seem to think you need to know all the answers to be a scientist. But it’s not true. The secret to being a great scientist is not *knowing*. It’s *asking*. Being curious. That’s all it takes. I know I’ve said this before, but—”

“Dad, no, not this again, please,” I groaned.

“A scientist never gives up, never stops thinking, never stops asking questions,” Dad continued obliviously. “Have I told you this story before?”

“About a bazillion times.”

“Imagine what the world would look like if Albert Einstein had looked at the inconsistencies between Newton’s laws of motion and Keplar’s planetary orbits and thought, *Oh, well, that’s a bit confusing, I better go make a cup of tea . . .*”

“Dad . . . You’ve told me this story.”

“It’s a good story.”

I stared at the tools hanging from the beams in the ceiling in dismay.

“What would have happened if Frank Whittle had given up the very first time his newly invented jet engine had set fire to his workshop?” Dad said.

“His insurance premiums would have gone down?”

“You’re not taking this seriously,” Dad chided me.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “We’d still be flying propeller planes.”

“Right! What would have happened if Marie Curie had seen radium glowing in her test tube and thought, *Ooo, that’s a bit scary, I better leave that alone.*”

“Dad, I get it, okay.”

“A scientist’s mind is just a mind that’s packed full of curiosity,” Dad said.

“Yeah, well, maybe I’m not a scientist then,” I snapped.

Dad stopped and I could see the disappointment in his face. I wanted to

say something to make things better but I was too angry. I looked around at Dad's garage, crammed with rusting washing machines, their innards spilled out like some kind of massacre had taken place. It smelled of grease and sweat and burnt plastic and suddenly I hated it.

"And neither are you," I added spitefully.

CHAPTER 3

There was no getting away from it, the whole school had gone science-fair crazy. I gritted my teeth and tried my best to ignore the whole thing, but I should have known Nellie wouldn't let me get away with it. She cornered me after lunch, just as I was returning my tray to the kitchen. I knew I was in trouble. Her face was as grey as an Imperial battlecruiser caught in a meteor storm.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

"What do you mean you're not going to enter the science fair?"

I glanced hopefully at the patch of meteor-free sky visible through the window. "Do you want to have this conversation outside?"

"No. I want to have it right here."

Nellie pointed at the ground between her feet. There were children jostling past, trying to put back their trays, and there was an unpleasant smell of boiling vegetables coming from the kitchen. Nellie glared at the passing children until they silently diverted around us. For a moment I thought she was going to glare at the cook and make him stop boiling vegetables.

I sighed. "Okay. Fine. Whatever. I'm not entering. Get over it."

"*Everyone's entering.*"

"Not me."

"But it makes no sense. If *anyone* should be entering it should be you. All you've ever talked about since you were little was being an inventor."

"That's just it. I'm not little any more."

Nellie looked shocked. "You've been building contraptions as long as I've known you."

"I need to face facts," I said. "If I can't even pass the stupid Clever Person exam, I'm obviously never going to be a real inventor."

“So you’re giving up?”

“Yep,” I said.

“You’re not even going to try?”

“Why should I? I tried with the Clever Person exam and look how that turned out.”

“But this is different,” Nellie insisted. “This is your *thing*.”

Tears stung my eyes. I blinked them back. The last thing I needed was to start crying in the school canteen.

“Have you even looked at the leaflet?” Nellie said.

She held out the leaflet for me. I could see photos of the Genius School you went to if you won. A boy with piercing blue eyes grinned at the camera, holding up a tube of brightly coloured liquid. A girl with long, straight hair that reached down to her waist peered intently at a mass of wires.

“It looks amazing,” Nellie said.

“Great. Send me a postcard,” I answered.

“Everybody knows only the brightest children get in, and everybody knows that anybody who’s been there just has to be *way* smarter than everybody else.”

“Okay, yes, I get it,” I said testily.

Nellie was holding in a smile like there was a secret she wasn’t telling me.

“So if you won,” she said carefully. “Clever Person School would be sure to offer you a place in their crummy school, test or no test . . . wouldn’t they?”

I looked at Nellie. Was that really possible? It was an interesting thought.

“Do you really think?” I said.

Nellie shrugged hopefully. “It’s worth a try.”

I looked at the leaflet. Across the top, in large gold letters, it read:

Be Inspired!

And beneath, it read:

A summer of invention and adventure.

It did look kind of cool. But there was a dark feeling hanging over me. I’d felt like this ever since the exam. I’d forget, and then the feeling

would come back, slow and inescapable, like the shadow of the mothership drawing across the White House in *Independence Day*. I shook my head.

“Thanks, but . . . I don’t think so.”

“*Come on*, Gilbert,” Nellie said. “I’ve got a good feeling about this.”

“I can’t.”

“Everyone else is entering,” Nellie said.

“So?”

“Well, none of them fell out of a tree when they were seven, trying to prove Galileo’s theorem of falling objects, did they?” I conceded that this was probably true. “None of them scorched their eyebrows clean off and had to walk around looking like a Vulcan when they were nine because they were trying to disprove the first law of thermodynamics?”

“It was the second law, actually,” I said.

She thrust the leaflet towards me and gave me a hopeful look. When I started to reach for it she whipped it away and held it over her head. She grinned mischievously.

“Ohh, so you *are* getting curious now, are you?” she taunted me.

“Nellie, come on . . .”

Nellie jangled the leaflet enticingly over her head. “Maybe you’d like to take just a *teeny tiny little* peek . . .”

“Nellie, seriously . . .” I said, getting irritated.

She thrust the leaflet into my hand and gave me a stern look. “Okay, fine. Just keep hold of it, okay? Tell me you don’t get at least one good idea.”

THE GENIUS MACHINE by Dr Adam Connors

SYNOPSIS

Gilbert thinks all his dreams have come true when he wins a place at Marcus Longchester's (computer billionaire inventor) Genius School. But when Gilbert discovers that the school is really part of Marcus's plot to steal children's ideas and rob the world of inspiration, he is plunged into a terrifying adventure in which he must destroy the Genius Machine and save science.

BIOGRAPHY

Adam is a former physicist and former child who now manages teams of engineers and research scientists for a large tech company which isn't called Grapesoft. He has an MA in Creative Writing from City University and is working on *The Genius Machine* as part of the Golden Egg Academy.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Good title, good voice, interesting family dynamic set-up. Like the science/STEM link-up. And intriguing hints in the synopsis of the genius school and evil plan to be foiled.'

'Excellent child-centred story and voice. We dive straight into the story with dialogue and main characters and motivations are clearly outlined. I left the submission caring about the characters. Strong synopsis as far as I can see. Lovely characterisation, strong STEM champion.'

'Like the relationship between the dad and Gilbert. His dad is a good character – love his passion for washing machines and science.'

Contact: adamconnors@gmail.com

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PUPIL K

By Sharon Boyle

Chapter 1

The first feeling is wetness – drops splattering my face, soaked clothes against my skin. The first sound is screaming – many screams, all around me. The first smell is a heavy earthiness. My back is flat against a hard expanse. My fingers splay and explore. *Grass*. I am lying on the ground? In the rain?

I lift my head. Shadows. Movement. Everything is clouded in a half-light. Leaning onto my hands, I look around and slowly stretch myself onto my feet. In front of me, a short distance away, people are emerging from . . . *trees*. Yes, trees. I turn around and see a building, its outline looming, its many windows winking in the moonlight. A thin, glitzy line cracks the black sky open and in the flash of fierce light I spot a figure in one of the windows: a lone silhouette. Another streak slashes the sky and this time it is accompanied by a low rumbling that makes my skin prickle.

A running figure buffets me as they pass and I fall awkwardly onto my knees. I struggle again to a standing position, the wildness of the wind ballooning up my skirt and whipping hair into my eyes.

The runner shouts back, ‘Get inside quick! Rain is dangerous!’

Rain is dangerous? A vague notion taps my memory as figures bolt towards huge double doors illuminated by an overhead light. One or two other figures, however, move slowly and in silence, their arms hanging by their sides.

A shrill voice emanates from behind the doors. ‘This is disorderly behaviour.’

Another voice, lower, but equally strident: 'Rain will not kill you, you idiots!'

Nobody heeds these voices. Everyone continues to skitter and pile through the doors. I walk steadily, feeling no urge to rush. Patches of light thrown out by the windows show people in different stages of speeding, slipping and stumbling. I do not understand why people appear to be troubled. Or, indeed, what it must feel like to be troubled.

There, to my left, is a strange structure. This structure is a . . . *fountain*. It is not the fountain itself that makes me stare but the three figures around it. Two of them move against one other. Fighting? Tussling? Another scissor-slice of lightning gives the sky a bleached hue, enough for me to make out that one of the tusslers is a girl. She looks up and catches sight of me. Our eyes lock. Even though it is too dark to distinguish the colour of her eyes, I know from a fleeting memory, almost like a mental blitz of lightning, that they are lilac.

The person she struggles with attempts to dart away and she breaks eye contact to grab him or her and force their head down into the fountain's large bowl. I squint. Lilac-eyes uses her weight to keep the head submerged. She is much stronger than the struggling figure whose hands claw and clutch at her. All this time, the third person stands near but apart, watching but not participating.

I do not know the three people at the fountain or what this place is or even who I am. Something tugs at my memory as if to say, *Yes, you should know them, you should know this place and you should know who you are.*

The arms that belong to the head stop thrashing. The girl steps back and stands next to the other figure.

The sky flashes again. The air spikes. My mind fizzles. An unnatural energy floods through me. I gasp. Covering my sodden hair with my hands I walk, then jog, then race towards the double doors.

'Someone,' I cry, 'someone is dead!'

Chapter 2

They stare at me – a group of young people and two older ones. *Teachers.*

The female teacher, a sharp-faced woman with dark eyes and short hair shaped like a helmet, peers at me. 'No one is dead, stupid girl.' She turns

to the others – *pupils* – and addresses them. ‘The rain will not kill anyone. Now quieten down and file along to the gymnasium.’

A pair of hands manoeuvres me into line. When the person in front of me walks forwards I am shoved firmly from behind. I shuffle along, listening to our wet shoes squeak on the wooden floor. This place and these people are puzzling but I sense it is correct to follow what the others do.

We troop along a corridor and round a corner, arriving at a set of doors that swing open into a large room. Memory tells me I have been in this room before but I do not recollect what I did here. I remember only the strong, musty odour. On the left wall hang ropes and wooden ladders and on the right side are rolled-up mats and balls stashed in baskets. We stand, quiet and shivering, our dripping clothes making puddles. This is the feeling of . . . *coldness*. Have I experienced cold before?

The male teacher parades up and down in front of us, his tracksuit damp and his sparse hair lying in strings across his head.

‘Why do you believe this utter nonsense about rain harming you?’ he shouts, his voice echoing off the walls and alarming my ears. ‘Who is spreading this rubbish? Well?’ His nostrils look as if they are breathing hard. He points to someone. ‘You. Why do you think lightning can hurt you?’

Whomever Tracksuit Teacher is speaking to does not reply and I am disappointed for I too would like to know the answer. Tracksuit Teacher sighs and speaks to the female teacher. Their voices hiss together, too quiet for me to hear, but what I can hear are the whispers from the pupils:

‘. . . zip around our heads.’

‘. . . zapping clean everything.’

‘. . . reducing us to the level of a washing machine.’

The boy-pupil next to me nudges my shoulder and curves open his lips to show straight, white teeth. Unlike some of the others he is not agitated by the storm which is still bouldering above us. ‘I do believe you’ve just become Aware,’ he says softly.

I gaze at him, blinking once, twice. I know the words but not the meaning.

He curves his lips again. *Smile*. ‘The storm probably set you off. Often an event like that will trigger Awareness.’

‘Awareness?’

‘Instead of walking around like you’re in a coma you’re now Aware, alive and awake.’

‘I have been in a coma?’

‘Sort of. Your movements will smooth out and your speech will improve. You know all the words already. You just need to learn to use them naturally.’

I think back to before the storm and realise I cannot recall much – a jumble of confusing images; flashes of places and faces; piecemeal dialogue. The boy is talking words but not sense, so I stop listening and let my eyes glide in the direction of Tracksuit Teacher. He taps his foot and looks at his watch.

‘My name is Jack,’ says the boy, dragging my attention back. He holds out a hand.

I mimic his gesture.

He shakes his head. ‘Other one.’

I offer my other hand which he grasps and shakes twice.

‘Who am I?’ I ask.

‘You’re Pupil K. But now you’re Aware you can give yourself a proper name.’

A girl-pupil on Jack’s other side ducks out and hisses, ‘I’m Isobel. Welcome to the world of the Aware and imprisoned. It’s about time you woke up. You’re one of the last. Must be a bit slow.’

Last? At what? And slow? In my movements?

‘Somebody died,’ I say. ‘I saw it happen.’

Jack whispers from the side of his mouth. ‘We live in a part of the world that is damp and cold for many months of the year. The storm probably rusted his or her brains.’

‘Our brains can rust?’ This is interesting. ‘I do not think the person at the fountain rusted. I think he or she was drowned. After a struggle.’

Jack shakes his head. ‘No. If anything, the pupil fell into the fountain.’

‘He did not fall.’

‘Remember,’ Jack’s voice grows firmer, ‘you have just become Aware. Things can seem confusing. Did you see the entire event?’

No. I did not. I shake my head.

A man with vivid bushy eyebrows enters and the pupils immediately stop whispering. He shakes raindrops from his coat and crosses to the

teachers. He thinks he is being unheard but his bent head and turned-away body are overcome by his loud voice.

‘One of the pupils has been found dead in the fountain,’ he tells the teachers. ‘The guards are clearing up the mess.’

The female teacher glances my way and gives a muted response. The new man turns, his eyebrows raised.

He points at me. ‘You are Pupil K, are you not?’

This is unexpected attention but I manage to say, ‘Yes,’ my voice sounding tinny to my ears.

‘Pupil K, I am the dean of this school, Dean Kincaid. I see the storm has awakened you.’ He crooks his finger. When I do not move he says, ‘This gesture means I want you to come here.’

My legs twitch to attention and I walk forward in measured steps till I am half my body length in front of him.

‘I’ve just been told,’ says Dean Kincaid, ‘that you came charging into the hall insisting someone was dead? Did you see someone at the fountain, Pupil K?’

I like his voice but not his eyes. They are glassy and unblinking and remind me of the windows during the storm. I do not want to make conversation with him but am certain I must.

‘Yes, Dean Kincaid.’

‘Was there more than one person by the fountain?’

‘Yes.’

‘How many?’

‘Three.’ I hear my heart thumping and wonder if he can too.

I jolt as Dean Kincaid takes me by the shoulders and swings me round so I face the line of pupils. The pupils stand straight, staring ahead.

‘Were any of these pupils at the fountain? I know you are only just aware, but do you recognise anyone?’

All the pupils wear black tops and either a grey skirt or trousers, but there is a variety of heights and colours in their bodywork. My eyes go to Isobel and Jack and pass over them, working from the beginning of the line, looking from one pupil to the next. Blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes and . . . Lilac-eyes. I register these eyes and track along to the end until I have seen everyone. I return to the lilac-eyed girl. She is the only bearer

of this eye colour. Yes, this girl was at the fountain. I am satisfied she is the pupil Dean Kincaid wants and am about to point to her when the girl's eyes switch to me and for a fraction of a second she shakes her head. The movement is so slight I almost don't notice.

'Well?' asks Dean Kincaid, squeezing my shoulders.

I know a head shake is a negative gesture but what does it mean in this context? Is she saying she didn't push the pupil's head in the fountain?

'Well, Pupil K?' prompts Dean Kincaid.

I hesitate.

Dean Kincaid takes a slow in-breath and releases tight-sounding words. 'Did you or did you not see the other two people who were at the fountain?'

'I did not,' I say. This is true. I can be sure of only one person at the fountain – Lilac-eyes – not two. I did not properly see the other standing person. It is a half-truth. Which means it must be a half-lie.

Dean Kincaid pushes me roughly towards the line of pupils and my heart pitter-patters as if to say, *Half-truth, half-lie*.

'She mustn't have been fully Aware,' I hear the female teacher say. 'Perhaps the others at the fountain were trying to help.'

'So how, then, do we have a defunct pupil?' Dean Kincaid's voice hardens.

'The storm would've scared him. Perhaps he lost control and hit his head off the stone rim.'

'Whatever happened, it is a damned waste. The school cannot afford this loss.' Dean Kincaid swivels round to us. 'Pupil I, you are class monitor, can you explain what happened to Pupil B?'

'No, Dean Kincaid,' says Isobel. 'All I know is that Pupil B didn't enter the school with us.'

'I know that,' Dean Kincaid grunts. 'He was found with his head fully immersed in water. As class monitor, I expect more of you. It is your duty to ensure all pupils are present and if they are not, you must inform a superior at once. Why did you not advise one of the teachers?'

'I'm sorry Dean Kincaid.' Isobel's voice wavers. 'I didn't see what happened to Pupil B.'

'Who was at the fountain?' Dean Kincaid directs his question to everyone. Nobody speaks.

‘Defiance!’ screams Dean Kincaid, making me jump. ‘Get back to your dormitories and out of my sight. There will be no tea or recreation this evening. Early bed for everyone.’

We step briskly from the room, and I am grateful to be away from the noise that Dean Kincaid creates. We pass through the area I ran into from outside. *Grand Hall*, my mind informs me. My mind, I realise, is equipped with a map of the house. I know, for example, that there are two doors at the end of the passageway that lead into two dormitories, one for the girls, the other for the boys.

The girls’ dormitory is smaller than the gymnasium and contains two rows of six beds facing one another. Each bed has a waist-height cabinet next to it. At the end of the room are twelve tall cabinets and next to them is a door through which I can make out a separate room containing bowls . . . no . . . *sinks*.

I stand in the aisle between the beds. There is familiarity in the peeling paint on the walls and brown spots on the ceiling. *I know this room. I have been here, have slept here.* The memory wisps away.

‘Your bed is here, beside mine.’ Isobel grabs my hand, giving me heart-jumps. ‘Your nightdress is under the pillow. You can brush your teeth in the washroom at the end there, then it’s bedtime. Ridiculously early, I know.’ She studies me. ‘Don’t worry, not every evening is as exciting as tonight.’

‘What if I take a long time to wake up? You said I was slow.’

Isobel laughs. ‘What a rust brain you are.’ She is laughing even though not long ago Dean Kincaid shouted at her.

‘Are you not scared of Dean Kincaid?’ I ask. ‘He is as frightening as the storm.’

‘Nah, his bark is worse than his bite,’ she shrugs.

I blink. ‘He bites?’

She makes a strange noise through her nose. ‘I was the first pupil to become Aware and I forget what you slowcoaches are like.’ She starts to undress. ‘No, Dean Kincaid doesn’t bite, or bark. Don’t start that rumour.’

I undress, looking round and noticing a pupil with a missing tooth and a bruised cheek helping another get ready for bed.

‘One day you’ll be Aware too,’ the pupil is saying. She has large hands. Larger than is proportional, I think.

‘Yes, I would like that,’ replies the unAware pupil softly, slipping under the bedcovers and closing her eyes.

As I follow Isobel to the washroom, it strikes me that up until today I would have acted like the unAware pupil.

‘Don’t eat the toothpaste like you usually do,’ Isobel laughs. ‘Brush, like this.’

She puts toothpaste on her brush and scrubs against her teeth. I do the same. The sensation is strange and yet the tingling taste recognisable. I brush, spit and rinse out my mouth before heading to bed and climbing under the covers.

I think about my half-lie. Perhaps I should tell Dean Kincaid that I do know one of the pupils who was at the fountain. Maybe half-lies are not allowed. Maybe Dean Kincaid would shout again.

I touch my neck – the hairs have lifted fractionally. Lilac-eyes is staring at me from a bed opposite and two along. She draws a finger across her neck. I do not know what this gesture means but from the look on her face it cannot be friendly. This is someone with whom I would not like to shake hands.

Isobel switches off the lights. The pupils settle down, muttering about the early bedtime and the drowned boy, and the fact the storm has calmed. They yawn and rustle, the sounds making my eyes heavy.

My eyes flip open.

My neck hairs prickle. Someone is breathing in my ear. I turn my head, slowly. Right next to me, in the gloom, are two glinting eyes set in a shadowy face.

‘You,’ a soft voice croons, ‘keep your mouth shut. Never speak about what you saw at the fountain, otherwise there will be another dead pupil.’

The glints vanish and footsteps pad away. Creaking springs tell me the owner of the voice is back in bed.

Sleep takes a long time to come.

Chapter 3

I am in sitting in my first class. I am Aware. I am confused.

We are studying a story. Every pupil has a copy of the book and take turns to read aloud. There are so many challenging words that I wonder if it is a foreign language that has not been input into my brain, or Word Bank as Isobel calls it. Perhaps this Shakespeare cannot write well. I scout round to see if other pupils are struggling. No, every pupil that is Aware is scanning the page, their eyes following the words. What will happen when it comes to my turn to read? Will I stutter and stall?

Our teacher, who introduced himself as Mr Finlay, gives two stretching yawns. For some reason I feel the need to join in but midway through comes a ringing sound. My mouth snaps shut. Where did it come from? The other pupils lift their heads and close their books.

‘All right, pupils,’ says Mr Finlay, ‘we shall discuss what Shakey is on about tomorrow morning. Sorry to subject you to him but the guys in white coats want to know how you cope with quirks in language, so alas, alack, sometimes I must adhere to the teaching programme.’ He laughs for no reason I can see. ‘Class, I understand you were in the middle of a cross-country exercise, or should I say cross-garden exercise, when the storm broke out last night and wow-wee, what a storm it was but now it’s over you are to clear up the aftermath.’

The pupils stand in line by the door. I scuttle into the space between Jack and Pupil L. No one speaks as we leave the classroom and cross diagonally to the Grand Hall. In daylight I see the hall is a sparse, white room with a bare stone fireplace and four rows of pegs on which hang a collection of blue rain jackets. There are holes in the plaster of the walls and some of the floor slabs are chipped. There is nothing grand about this hall.

Someone helps me find my jacket and once everyone is ready we march down the ten stone steps that lead to the garden. The air is still and the sky low and grey. On my left-hand side are some jagged branches sticking out of the soil and on my right, a gravelled area and the fountain. An odd feeling floods through me. The events of last night are still unclear. As Shakespeare would say, my mind is all hurly-burly. I look for Lilac-eyes and am startled to find she is glaring at me. She glares and yet I did not expose her. I have guessed she is the one who spoke to me last night. Her actions are as confusing as Shakespeare.

Isobel organises us into groups. She points to pupils, telling them what

to do. ‘. . . and you five pick up any branches or twigs that have fallen from the trees and lay them in a heap for burning. You three, clear the lawns and you,’ she points to me, ‘stay here and tidy the roses.’

She heads for the trees with three other pupils while Jack and Lilac-eyes disappear into a different area of the woods.

I study the jagged branches which I now know are roses. What does Isobel mean by tidying them?

‘What do I do?’ I call to a boy-pupil who is stamping on some grass patches. Perhaps it is not right to ask questions but I do not want to stand and do nothing. I am now Aware and should behave accordingly.

He shrugs. ‘Tidy them.’

‘How?’ I wave my hand over the roses which are more branch than flower.

‘Pick up any bits broken off by the storm and if there aren’t any just stand there and don’t make a nuisance of yourself. You are still incapable of rational thought. Look at the others who are not yet Aware.’ He points to a group of five pupils: three girls and two boys walking in small circles on the lawn. ‘Those are Pupils U, V, X, Y and Z. You are Pupil K which means you were the eleventh pupil to be made and so really, your brain has been sluggish.’

I touch my face. It feels warm for some reason. The feeling passes and I relax.

‘Day by day,’ continues the boy, ‘you will become more conscious of yourself until you are almost Wholly Human.’

‘Wholly Human?’

‘The humans without chips, like scientists, teachers and those that live on the outside.’

‘Outside?’

‘This place, Brogue Hall, is the inside. It’s in the middle of a garden surrounded by the Woods, which in turn is enclosed by a huge wall.’ He stamps on a patch of disturbed grass. He is trying to flatten it to the same level as the rest of the lawn.

‘What are chips?’ I ask, picking up three leaves flitting by my feet.

The boy stops jumping. ‘Our brains are mostly human but not quite. We have a tiny computer, a chip, inserted into our brain. This chip is the source of our knowledge.’

Ah, it is the chip who has been telling me words like *Grand Hall* and *fountain*. It is good to know I have a guide.

‘What is the lilac-eyed girl called?’ I ask.

‘Pupil E? Her name is Eve.’ He looks at me over his shoulder. ‘I’m Pupil A. Amadeus. I was slow too, coming to only fifteen days ago. I heard loud radio music which prompted my brain into rousing. Eve was the third to awake.’

I shiver. The finished storm has left a damp feeling inside me. It may be an idea to move in order to heat myself. Has this idea come from Chip?

‘I will take these three leaves,’ I say, ‘to the heap I see the others making.’

I head for the debris heap, detouring by the fountain. It looks different in daytime – smaller and not frightening. In fact, I think it is . . . *shabby*. Yes, Chip, it is a shabby fountain.

A carved man with a tail is perched on a mound of stones in the centre holding an open-mouthed fish. I suspect if the water was flowing it would be flowing from this open mouth. But this is a fountain that does not flow. This fountain is dead.

Dead? Chip corrects me. *No, the fountain is not dead, the fountain is not operating. The pupil from last night is dead.*

PUPIL K by Sharon Boyle

SYNOPSIS

Pupil K is a YA thriller about a fourteen-year-old girl's quest to survive Brogue Hall, a place that masquerades as a school but is in reality a factory creating laboratory-made humans. She and her fellow classmates are destined for jobs too disgusting, dangerous or deadly for a Wholly Human. With the help of her cynical and pedantic mind-chip she must work out who she can trust and how to escape.

BIOGRAPHY

Sharon has been a serious spare-time writer for ten years, writing short stories, flash fiction, the occasional poem and two YA novels. She has had several first-placed stories published in *Writers' Forum* magazine and has won the HISSAC and the Exeter Writers short story competitions.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A really intriguing opening paragraph! I immediately wanted to read more and find out what's going on. The voice is great and the whole premise is intriguing. I really want to know what's going to happen!'

'Interesting concept – I like the school-style setting and I'm interested to see where it goes having read the synopsis at the end of the excerpt. The lilac-eyed girl is nicely intriguing and menacing in equal measure.'

'Great premise. A little bit *Never Let You Go* about it. Opening chapters are really atmospheric, giving the reader a really interesting glimpse of this world. I thought the world was set up well, with the information nicely teased through so not too overwhelming.'

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TULIP FINOLA BARNACLE

By Yvonne Banham

1.

It started with one frog. Now they were everywhere. The neighbours were asking questions and Mrs Plitch at number nine had rung the vicar to report a plague of biblical proportions. The vicar thought it unlikely that the tiny Lakes village of Far Nettle had been singled out for a miracle, so he contacted the BBC (Natural History Department) instead. A film crew and a wildlife expert were bent over the Barnacles' garden pond, their every move scrutinised by Horace Barnacle, parrot and dedicated family guardian. Between pointing and counting, they hinted at cups of tea, possibly with a biscuit, thank you.

Tulip Finola Barnacle, the orchestrator of the frog invasion, flinched as her mother Zinnia slammed the kitchen window and filled the kettle. She dropped it with great drama onto the hotplate of the range and turned to face her middle child. Tulip pulled her woolly hat further down over her mix of red and gold curls. A storm was coming and it was mother-shaped.

"What have I told you?" Zinnia hissed, "I mean, frogs, Tulip? Really? You do know that's a film crew out there, don't you? From the BBC, no less?"

"I know. Just for frogs. Amazing," Tulip grinned.

"No! Not in the least bit amazing. Mrs Plitch thought the world was coming to an end when she found that blue one and its family moving into her pantry! You know what she's like, always sniffing around, on the lookout for anything that confirms that little niggle at the back of her interfering brain. Well, nice work, Tulip, you just put us a step closer to the spotlight."

Tulip groaned. Mrs Plitch at number 9 was a constant thorn in the side of fun, and one of a million reasons why the Barnacle family lived their lives undercover.

Zinnia slammed her hand down on the counter-top and the leaning tower of teacups jumped in fright, spitting out a small white chip of porcelain. Archie and Daisy Barnacle, brother and sister of the guilty Frog Summoner, were sitting in grim silence at the kitchen table. Tulip saw Archie fidget in his seat, his anxiety rising as the cups leaned ever closer to the toppling point. Tulip raised her finger to intervene but Daisy beat her to it, whispering a spell under her breath. The teacup tower straightened and Daisy smiled at her mother for approval.

“Why can’t you be more like them?” Zinnia shouted. “What is it with you? Am I not giving you enough attention? Archie’s ten, Tulip! Ten! And a whole other level of responsible to you!”

Archie squirmed in his seat. “Eleven, actually,” he muttered, “birthday was last week.”

Tulip rolled her eyes, “Oh yes please, let’s all be steady and dull like Archie.”

“No, Tulip, not dull! Smart! Discreet!” Zinnia hissed. “And Daisy? A full four years older, four years of chances to be in more trouble than you. Guess what? Nowhere near!”

Tulip knew she should keep quiet but she couldn’t stop herself.

“Well, there was that time she gave Angus and Liberty Plug the Purple Rott.”

Daisy closed a huge black leather-bound volume of *Witching and Bewitching in the Modern Era*.

“Cheers for that, Tulip. Mum’s just trying to keep us safe, you know.”

“Suck up! Anyway, they deserved it and everyone knows it.” Tulip winked at Daisy. “Plus it was funny.”

Daisy kicked Archie under the table and nodded towards the door. “Come on, little brother, let’s leave them to it.”

Archie mouthed *good luck* at Tulip as they got up and left.

“Well?” said Zinnia. “I’m waiting!” She crossed her arms.

Tulip watched her mother’s hands. While they were tucked away, it was probably safe. Zinnia Barnacle never intentionally used magic

against her children, but sometimes it just leaked out when she was too angry to stay focused.

“It was a simple multiplier spell, I was just a bit off target!” said Tulip.

“There is no such thing as a simple spell, you know *that* much at least. What on earth has Grandad been teaching you all this time?”

“It’s not Grandad’s fault!” Tulip yelled. “At least he actually tries to teach me stuff.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be *using* it. Not on your own, not yet, and most definitely not out in the open!”

“What’s the point then? What’s the point of being in this stupid family if I can’t even use the magic I somehow seem to have inherited from YOU!” Tulip jabbed her finger at her mother’s face.

“Put that finger down, young lady, and don’t you ever dare point it at me again.” Zinnia’s voice was reduced to a shaking, angry whisper and Tulip was finding the situation unpredictable. It was time to try reason.

“I just wanted to make more lily pads for Albert.”

“Why on earth would Albert need more lily pads? He’s perfectly happy swimming in the pond. He’s a frog!”

“He was bored!”

“You were bored more like!”

“There was no one around, Mum. Nobody saw what I was doing so the family secret’s still safe. No leaks, no strange whiffs of magic. Nothing.”

Zinnia clenched her jaw. “Nothing? *Nothing?* Just how are we supposed to explain away an absolute deluge of frogs to a leading television naturalist and his team? And they’re not just any old frogs, are they? Oh no. I am reliably informed we have Amazon milk frogs, African dwarf frogs, plus a fuchsia pink one, complete with a golden ball and the ability to sing!”

“Don’t forget the blue ones in Mrs Plitch’s pantry,” Tulip smirked. “Think they might be poisonous. Fingers crossed.”

It was the last straw.

“Get out of my sight or I swear *you’ll* be the next strange creature the BBC are investigating.”

“You wouldn’t dare! Grandma would go berserk if you used magic on me and you know it.”

Determined to say no more in her own defence, Tulip squeezed her

lips together and took deep, snorting breaths through her nose. The smell of violets, lavender and burnt candyfloss seeped into the air. Witch-scent! All fully manifested witches had one and every scent was unique. Zinnia always smelled of violets but the burnt candyfloss was a sign of danger, a warning her mother was about to strike. One whiff was enough to triple your heartbeat in a second. Tulip took three steps back as her mother's delicate white dress began to blow lightly around her. Tulip opened her mouth to protest but she was too late.

“Get out while I set this mess STRAIGHT!” Zinnia punctuated the last word with a stamp of her foot and a cookbook flew from the shelf. Tulip ducked but the book swooped low, turned, and hit her hard on the shoulder.

“Tulip! I'm sorry!” Zinnia whispered.

Tulip kicked the book across the tiled floor and stormed out through the kitchen door. She marched through the sea of frogs and the film crew, grabbed her bike and pedalled furiously towards Grandma and Grandad Bustle's house.

2.

George and Tansy Bustle lived on the edge of the nearby wood with Bandit, a scruffy white terrier with black eye-patches. They regularly provided sanctuary for witches in trouble, namely their granddaughter, Tulip. Bog-Bean Cottage was a confusing mixture of oddly shaped rooms, where walls met at peculiar angles and carpets were only distant neighbours to the skirting boards. It was hundreds of years old, with creaking floors and the occasional bat in the chimney. Every chair Tulip's grandparents owned was different, but there was always one to fit any shape, size and number of visitors. Tall ones with high backs, big squishy ones swamped in cushions and tiny three-legged stools, all appearing from impossibly deep cupboards and returning on command. The ancient roof rose in tall peaks and was covered with small red tiles that became a hazard in high winds, no matter how many times Grandad tried to tame them with his hammer and nails. A golden weathervane sat over an attic filled with treasures, a cosy space where Tulip spent hours not really paying attention to Grandad's lessons on magic, witches and life in general.

Now she was twelve, Tulip was allowed to cycle there on her own. It took seventeen minutes if she pedalled at top speed through the woods and didn't have to swerve for pedestrians or dogs. Nineteen minutes on a slow day.

Tulip arrived with a dramatic screech of her brakes and flung herself down on the wooden deck, next to Grandad. It was their favourite spot, warm and peaceful, facing the sunset and the woods. She insisted she wasn't crying but Bandit licked away her tears anyway.

Grandma kissed Tulip on the top of her head and winked at Grandad. "Think I'll pop inside. Few crosswords to catch up on." She tucked Bandit under her arm and was gone in a blink, leaving behind the faint aroma of oranges, spice and calming vetiver.

Grandad put his arm around Tulip and gave her a squeeze.

"So, what did you do this time?" he asked.

Tulip picked at a thread in her jeans, working away at a new hole where her blue-white knee poked through.

"You know Albert?"

"Of course! How is he these days?"

Tulip told Grandad most of the story, but kept the enormity of the situation, including the film crew, to herself.

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad!" Grandad breathed a sigh of relief.

"I know, right? Mum's furious though. No pleasing some people."

He gave her another squeeze. "Maybe you should stick to weather magic. You know it's more your thing, *our* thing."

"Is it my thing though? I *really* like the other magic." Tulip pictured the frogs again and grinned.

"Leave all that fairy-tale stuff to the ones that specialise in those particular skills. We're Weather Witches, Enchanters, it's a different skill set. Everything is shaped by the weather and we have a big part to play in that."

Tulip shrugged. "Just don't want to end up like my super-dull mother."

"Your mother worries. People don't believe in magic any more so they don't notice it, but we still have to be careful. Fear and ignorance are dangerous and you must never forget what they used to do to witches. It wouldn't take much to bring it all back."

"Well it's not like I ran around in the street with a pointy, black hat

flinging hexes at everyone! Mum just needs to get over it.” Tulip flushed a little. “She’s so annoying.”

Grandad smiled and looked up at the clear sky. “Whatever the reason, it’s good you’re here. There’s a big storm coming.”

Tulip nodded and wiped her face on her sleeve. She shaded her eyes from the low sun and looked out over the tops of the trees that marked the end of the garden and the start of the woods. She couldn’t see anything yet, but a sudden drop in temperature told her Grandad was right.

It had been a long spring day and warm sunshine had helped tiny bugs hatch and dance around in the clear bright air. Tulip took a deep breath and noticed a familiar smell, like the afterburn of fireworks, and the tiny hairs inside her nostrils tickled with anticipation. She knew that the storm was coming, even before the sky darkened. Grandad eased himself up from the deck, leaning on his silver-topped walking stick. He grunted as he straightened himself, almost to the height he was ten years ago.

“Do I get to do something this time?” Tulip asked.

“Maybe. This storm I’ve been waiting for’s a big one and it’s coming right at us. Not sure the cottage would stand another direct hit. It’s good you’ll see how to bend them, it might save you one day, or someone you love. Think of it as protection.”

“Yeah, but that’s *your* job!” Tulip jabbed her finger at him and smiled.

“For now.”

Grandad looked away and knelt down to start the spell. “Draw a five-pointed star, big enough to stand in. Blue chalk works best for weather magic, but any will do in a pinch. See? Now, pass me the book.”

The faded silk threads on the book’s cover gave no clue to what was inside. It fitted perfectly in Tulip’s hand, like it had been made for her. She ran her fingers along the rough-toothed edges of the paper. Some of it was thick, some thin. The writing was different on most pages and whilst the book felt slim, the pages were beyond counting. New spells had been added as it passed from generation to generation, the shapes of the letters altering through time. Her little finger jumped nervously to the section at the back, the non-weather stuff, plants and animals and insects. Grandad saw her and tutted.

“Come on, Tulip! We haven’t got all night!”

As she passed the book to Grandad, her ears prickled. A long howl echoed in the near distance, singular at first, then joined by other scattered voices, slowly coming together, blending in a sorrowful chorus.

“The wolves! They’re back?” Her eyes widened as she looked towards the trees.

“Never left, far as I can tell. Just laying low, don’t want to be put back in that ridiculous enclosure,” said Grandad. “Still, keeps people out of the forest. Barely a soul to be seen.”

“And that’s how we like it, right?” grinned Tulip.

“Indeed it is,” said Grandad, blowing away the excess chalk dust from the star.

There was a singular sorrowful howl.

“That sounds so sad,” said Tulip.

“They’re mourning. A small female was shot a couple of days ago.”

Tulip looked out towards the trees and shivered. “Who’d do something so horrible?”

Grandad sighed. “A lost boy all grown up. His name’s Jonah. He’s not fond of witches, even though his mother was one. Enough of this, hand me that box, would you?”

“But if his mother’s a witch, why doesn’t he like us?”

“*Was* a witch. Pass me the box, would you?”

“But . . .”

“NOW!”

Tulip jumped.

“I’m sorry, Tulip. We all have our stories. Not all people are good and . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, not all *witches* are good either. I remember the lesson.”

He smiled and held out his hand. Tulip handed over the box.

Grandad took out some frankincense, a silver compass and a shallow copper dish with its own stand that unfolded with a flick; the whole thing assembled could be held in a child’s hand. He put the frankincense in the dish and lit the candle under it. The book was placed in the centre of the star.

“So, we hold the compass over the book and focus on what we want, correct?” he asked.

Tulip scratched her head.

“What?” Grandad’s left eyebrow arched as he looked sideways at his granddaughter. “It’s one of the basics, Tulip. Book for spell, compass for accuracy.”

“But you can use just the book, right?”

“Well, yes, you can, but the compass keeps things neat and tidy. Stops the edges of the magic misbehaving.”

Tulip slouched. Then a twinkle appeared in her eye and the left corner of her mouth turned up, dimpling her cheek. “But I can do magic without either of them.”

“That’s true, and it really is a gift, but how’s that been working for you so far?”

Tulip frowned.

“Thought so. You’re not fully formed yet so stick to the rules. Storm bending has consequences, so do it properly.” He straightened his back and turned his attention to the spell. “You might want to hang on to your hat.”

“Yeah, very funny, Grandad,” said Tulip, but she pulled her woolly hat a little further down to be sure. The hat edged back up an inch as her hair fought back.

The pages of the book flipped of their own accord, then stopped as the book levitated and slammed itself onto the deck. Tulip watched the dark clouds swirling and rushing towards them. The birds stopped singing and the insects fell silent, coming in to land and take shelter. An army of beetles and dragonflies marched solemnly to the back of the deck and down through the cracks between the wood to the cool earth below.

The silence held its ground for a few moments but the wind gave a final thrust and crashed through the trees. It whisked the treetops into a swirling whirlpool and cracked them with whips of thunder and lightning. The storm galloped through the forest towards them, forcing the sweet, pungent zing of ozone into their nostrils. It rampaged onto the deck, baring its icy teeth, and spat needle-sharp rain into Tulip’s face. The wind tried to force her down but she lowered her head and leaned into it. Grandad’s grey hair whisked upwards and the wind pulled and tugged at his long, stripy shirt. He let the compass slip from his hand. It fell without a sound, next to the book and vibrated, gently. He ground what was left of the chalk into a powder with the end of his stick, picked it up and threw it into the wind.

The storm was enraged and bristled around them. Grandad pushed his way forward, to the centre of the star. He swung his stick around his head, then thrust it towards the storm, shouting, “Away from my home! To the mountains! To the sea! Be gone! Be gone! BE GONE!”

The storm hurled a bolt of lightning at the old man but he held tightly to his stick and the silver cap reflected the searing light back towards the heart of the storm, taking the blue dust with it. The storm whipped the dust into a swirling tornado and pulled it towards its centre. Everything paused just long enough for Tulip to see a delicate spiral of sparkling blue forming at the storm’s centre, before the magical treasure was greedily carried away. The air around them fell still and filled with an earthy smell, where the rain had agitated the garden and its precious plant oils. Tulip staggered forward, breathless, her ears buzzing. She knelt next to the copper dish and wondered how such a tiny flame had stayed alight through it all. A whisper of her breath snuffed it out.

“Wow, Grandad, that was a big one!” she laughed.

He didn’t answer. His eyes were fixed on the trees that faced the house. Two wolves walked from the shadows, moving in perfect rhythm towards the deck. One had dense muscles and dark hairs over his back, mingled with silver to form a collar over his shoulders. White patches on his throat blended into a pale grey muzzle and dark triangles of fur sat under his eyes. The second was slender, lighter, with honeyed colours mixing with silver-grey and white while densely packed fur cocooned her finer, elegant head. Their paws glanced the wooden steps as they reached the deck and the returning evening light illuminated the tips of their pelts.

“Don’t move, Tulip,” Grandad whispered.

He put his foot on the compass and kicked the burner over. The book was on the ground next to him. The female walked over to Tulip. Her thick fur shimmered and rippled, her feet made a soft, padding sound. Tulip inhaled the wolf-scent. The smell was comforting, edged with musky angelica root, sweet and pungent, as familiar as the protection spells that Grandma hung over doors and fireplaces. Tulip reached out to touch her. The wolf flicked her head away and sat a breath from her face. She placed her muzzle against Tulip’s cheek. The way to Grandad was blocked and the comforting effect of the scent vanished. Clanging iron butterflies

bounced around Tulip's stomach and she felt a spark, a sense that she could fight back, but she stayed rooted to the spot.

The she-wolf moved her muzzle away and sniffed Tulip's skin, leaving a trace of scent behind. Tulip smeared the scent across her face and under her nose, savouring it. She looked past the female's shoulder, desperate to watch her grandad and the bigger wolf.

"Can I help you?" asked Grandad.

The wolf continued to pace, sniffing the edge of the star. It reared up, raised its front paws and slammed them onto the deck. The book flipped, spun in the air and landed face down. Grandad stooped to pick it up and looked at the open page.

Bring Winter and Darkness

The wolf sat in front of him, unblinking.

"I won't do it," said Grandad, "so you might as well leave us." He looked at the wolf more closely. The evening breeze was building and had parted its fur to expose a vivid pink scar, the size of a fist, on the edge of its right shoulder.

"Was it Jonah?" Grandad asked. "I know what he did to your sweet girl and I understand why you are so angry, but this? I can't do it. It might save *you* from Jonah, but what about the rest of the forest? You'll have to find another way."

The male wolf curled his lips and snarled. The female tensed as the air around them built to a swirling cloud of agitation. Then there was a scream so cutting that the hairs on Tulip's arms stood rigid and spiky.

Grandma came hurtling onto the deck with her dressing gown flapping behind her. Bandit ran around her ankles, threatening to trip her, yapping and growling at the intruders. "Back off," screeched Grandma. "Back off now or I'll singe your sorry butts, I swear I *will* do it so don't you dare test me!"

She was swinging two flaming torches in circles in front of her and around her head, and *she* was snarling, teeth bared, at the slightly bemused animals. They calmly stood, turned and walked away. The female looked over her shoulder and Tulip swore she saw her smile.

Tulip looked open-mouthed at Grandad. For the first time, she noticed the sagging around his eyes, the deep frown lines on his brow and how he hunched forward. She turned away.

“What on earth was that all about, George?” asked Grandma, putting her hand on Grandad’s shoulder.

“I think they might have some use for the book. It landed on winter so I’m assuming that’s what they want.” He looked at the book more closely. “Bring Winter and Darkness All Year Round. That would level the playing field. They’re designed for winter, born to it, he isn’t.”

“You mean Jonah? Oh, George, they must be desperate to risk approaching us like that,” Grandma whispered.

Grandad nodded as they watched the wolves fade back into the forest. “They’re getting ready to fight.”

Tulip wandered over and put her arms around her grandfather’s waist.

“How can you talk to them, Grandad?”

“You have to tune in a little with animals. You’ll get it in time. Most of our family do. I should have been more careful though, with the magic.”

“You didn’t know they were watching, Grandad.”

“Does that change anything?” He closed the book and ran his hand over the cover. “This will be yours one day. It fits you so beautifully. Always keep it safe but never with the compass. If one is lost or taken, use the other to find it.”

“Sure,” she shrugged.

“You have to promise me, Tulip. There are worse things to fear in our world than wolves.”

She slipped her hand in his.

“I promise.”

3.

Two days later, there was a phone call. Tulip’s mother was crying, small weeping noises forcing their way through huge, throaty gulps, unable to catch her breath. Tulip hid behind the hallway door, but each of her mother’s sobs chiselled a dark, empty space in her chest, newly carved, with sharp edges. Something had gone from her life, something vital. Tulip opened the door and her mother turned to face her. She mouthed one word at Tulip, “Grandad . . .”

TULIP FINOLA BARNACLE by Yvonne Banham

SYNOPSIS

Impetuous Weather Witch Tulip Finola Barnacle is devastated by her grandfather's death and her failure to protect a precious grimoire from thieving wolves. She must get the grimoire back before they find out how to use it or it falls into the wrong hands. With a bitter enemy, a not-so-humble parrot, and a well-meaning but disaster-prone brother standing between her and success, is she witch enough to save everything and everyone she loves?

BIOGRAPHY

Yvonne lives in Edinburgh, working to the soundtrack of a snoring Beagle. She studied illustration but loves writing more (though she is still fond of a scribble). When she's not writing or gazing lovingly at her to-be-read pile, she's running in the Pentland Hills, falling once a year on average.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I felt the writer drew the difficult relationship between Tulip and her mother well, how Tulip is so frustrated by her mother's seemingly controlling behaviour. Also the way in which she rails slightly against her grandfather too. It feels real, especially for a girl of Tulip's age.'

'I really liked this one! The tone was engaging and sweet. I loved the idea of a family of weather witches and I really liked the contrast between the everyday and the magic.'

'The relationship between Grandpa and Tulip has real depth and warmth. It's very inventive – I especially love the idea that fully manifested witches all have their own scent – a lovely detail rich in possibilities. There are some delightful bits of writing and turns of phrases'

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THE SHAPE OF A GIRL

By Clare Harlow

Chapter One

You've been gone for six months and five days when Steve takes over.

"There's no pressure." He hunches deeper into his leather jacket. "But it might be good. New year, new start, and all that."

I turn into the wind, let it blast me right in the face. From here, there's nothing but sea and sky, two strips of blue-grey zooming out to meet at the horizon as the gulls shriek and circle overhead. Steve's hand finds my wrist.

"Come away from the edge, Hel."

"I'm not going to chuck myself off." I step back. "Sorry."

"Did you look at the website?"

"I did."

"And?"

"Looks more like a hotel than a school." I'm guessing – I did not, in fact, look at the website – but Steve's snort says I'm on the money.

"Yeah, it's something." He slides a glance at his phone. "Time to go, or we'll be late for your appointment. Helen."

"Coming." But I stay there for a second, imagining: a moment of flight, then the water, rising to meet me like a wall of glass.

That's not how it works. Your voice cuts through my mind. *It's complicated, actually, calculating the impact of a falling object.*

You don't need to tell me.

We drive down into town and along the front, past the flaking paintwork of shuttered kiosks and the fierce jangle of machines in the empty arcade.

It's the heart of the low season. No one's around, save the dog walkers and a couple of kids skimming stones. Doctor Nadin's surgery is just up the hill from the harbour. When I'm done, Steve takes me for egg and chips. He waits till I'm smearing the last of the ketchup round my plate before he tries again.

"So, what do you reckon?"

I slurp my Coke, which by this point is basically just an icy brown slush of spit and sugar.

"You didn't look at it, did you?"

"I did."

"Bollocks."

Steve never lets the responsibilities of unclehood interfere with his language, does he? A woman at the next table frowns at him, then squints the way people always do when they can't tell where they recognise him from.

Steve ignores her. "Listen, no one is going to make you go if you don't want to. It's your choice."

He holds out his phone. A white caption runs across a dark blue banner at the top of the screen: "Hartwood Hall – for the brightest and the best". Below, photographed against an immaculate summer's day, is a building: mellow red brick and about a hundred winking windows, capped by a copper-domed clock tower, the metal corroded to an undersea green. The structure has a pleasing crookedness to it, a promise of uneven floors and secret passages. Above the arch of the main doorway, a small rectangle appears, framing a single word. *Enter*.

I push my plate away. The woman is still staring. "That time-travel thing on Channel 4," I tell her. "Or maybe the travel insurance advert with the llama."

Steve scowls. He does not appreciate references to the llama. Fortunately, it's the time-travel thing. The woman's mouth widens into a huge O of recognition, and Steve fields her questions as he poses for a selfie. Yes, he'd hoped there might be a third series too. No, he isn't acting any more. Teaching, actually. Surrey. Yes, it is nice. Very.

He says the last part to me.

Choice. The concept is alien. My life has been prescribed for so long.

*

Steve's not a big man, but he always looks caged at our house. The homestead, he calls it, his voice too loud and bright, as if it's some ranch surrounded by acres of open prairie instead of a thin-walled semi on the shabby side of town. We're barely through the door and he's jangling with tension, like something's fizzing under his skin.

I pocket my keys. "Mum? Dad?"

No answer. A familiar knot tightens in my chest. The TV's on loud in the lounge and the silence pouring under the closed kitchen door is louder still.

"Oh, lovely," Mum says when we go through. You'd think we were unexpected visitors, not her own daughter and brother returning from somewhere she knew we were going at almost the exact time we said we would. "I'll put the kettle on." She peels off her rubber gloves. "If you want to smoke, Steve, you'd better go outside."

Steve glances out back. The weather has turned. Rain tips down in sheets, hammering the bins. "I quit."

"You didn't," I say. "You vape."

"That strawberry stuff." Mum wrinkles her nose, shooing me aside so she can get to the teabags. "That's almost worse."

"It's not strawberry." Steve's smile is brittle. "You can get all kinds of it – the type I use doesn't have a scent. And I'm fine. Thank you."

I want to say I'd happily take smoke or synthetic strawberry over the stink of disinfectant and last night's pasta bake, but the politeness has already stretched thin enough to snap. I squeeze round to the fridge and fetch the milk, then squeeze back and leave it by Mum's elbow. She starts when she sees it, as if it's been transported by some friendly poltergeist.

"Sorry." I edge away, bumping up against the doorframe, right where our height chart is etched into the paintwork. Blue biro for me. Green for you. *You'll never catch me, Hel.* A GIF from another lifetime, looping round in my brain. But I've outstripped all the marks now, blue and green alike.

Mum's worrying at an invisible smear on the worktop, so I do the tea. Black for Steve, milk for the rest of us. "I'll take Dad's through, shall I? Mum?"

She keeps wiping. "No sugar."

I'm not the only one whose choices are rationed. Not that Dad'll mind. Dusk is closing in; his thoughts will have moved to things stronger than tea.

"Hel?" Steve says.

I turn towards the hall. A future unfurls ahead of me along the narrow strip of carpet. Dad drowning his pain in noise, breath souring in the glare of the flat screen. Mum scrubbing and scouring, as if she can bleach her heart clean. Endless dinners where no one eats and there are more blanks than there could ever be words to fill them.

Turning back to Steve, I nod, just once. *Yes*.

I shut the door behind me, but their conversation filters under it.

"I've told you, there's nothing to settle. The flat comes with the job, the fees are sorted. And things here . . ." A blast from the tap smothers the end of the sentence. In the lounge, the television laughter peaks and falls away.

"If it's what Helen wants," Mum says, but her relief is plain. "Is the art department good?"

I swallow round the pebble that's lodged itself in my throat. And the next morning, when Steve slings his overnight bag into the boot, I heave two suitcases, a rucksack and my portfolio in after it.

"How much further?"

"The junction after next. Assuming we get that far." Steve shakes his head at the stagnant traffic. He's not bothered though. The heating's on the blink and the car is Arctic cold, but his shoulders lower another millimetre with every mile we put behind us.

Me, I'm the opposite. Still, no going back now. I cloud the window with my breath, then unbutton the tip of one mitten and doodle on the glass. On we crawl, brake lights glittering like rubies as darkness presses in. By the time we reach our exit, I'm shivering under my coat, no longer able to feel my feet. Steve's phone battery dies and I'm out of data, so we switch from podcasts to regular radio. The roads shrink down, from three lanes to two to one, to an unlit lane caged by a tunnel of trees, branches crisscrossing above us like outstretched arms. To the left, our headlights pick out a high stone wall, interrupted by a pair of padlocked gates.

“That’s the main entrance,” Steve says. “But it’s only us, the caretaker and a couple of other staff on site till Monday. This next turning’s ours. The flat’s in the old stable block.”

We judder down a pockmarked track, white as moon rock and banked by tall hedges. Then the engine’s off, a security light blinking awake as we heft the cases across a cobbled courtyard and up a narrow spiral of wrought-iron stairs to a door marked “private”.

“What’s below us?” I ask.

Steve, rummaging in his bag, curses as the light goes off again. “Classrooms; a couple of music practice rooms. You got a torch on your phone?”

“Here. Music practice? That must be delightful.”

“It can be.” Keys successfully located, Steve straightens, breathing deeply. The air tastes wrong to me, thick with cold earth and a drift of woodsmoke, as if someone’s been bonfiring. “Now, there’s a trick to this door, so you know – you have to lift and then give it a good hard push, like so.” He reaches inside and flips a switch. A large open-plan space is illuminated – then plunged into darkness again. Steve groans. “Bloody fuse keeps tripping. Wait here a sec. The box is downstairs.”

“You want my phone?”

“No need. There’s a torch down there. Text your mum – if you have enough reception. Let her know we’ve arrived in one piece.” He clatters off down the spiral, leaving me on the little platform at the top. The security light makes another attempt at usefulness but quickly decides it’s not worth the trouble.

Cold nips my fingers as I unbutton both mittens so I can type.

Hi Mum. We’re here.

Everything’s fine

I add three kisses. Delete one, then all of them. Then the whole message.

Arrived safely

Will she be up, wondering, or will she have gone to bed? Beyond the courtyard wall, the hulk of the main building floats on an ocean of blue-

black grass, an echo of its sunshine self from the website. The silence sticks to me like sand. I hadn't considered quite how isolated this place would be. What will I do without the traffic hum, without the sea whispering its secrets in my ear?

I add the kisses again, but I've left it too late and the signal's gone.

"Not to worry," Steve tells me when he clatters back up. "I told her it might be a problem. There's a landline. We can call first thing." He rubs a hand over his face – a gesture of pure exhaustion. "You hungry?"

"I'm wiped. Reckon I'd just like to go to bed."

He gives me a look. "I'm making you some toast."

"Is there Marmite?" As you know, Steve has strong thoughts on Marmite, and they are not positive.

"Yes, there's Marmite."

Which means he bought it for me. I feel a little stab of shame. It isn't kind, testing him. I bet Mum told him that I don't always remember to eat – that my appetite's erratic, with the latest pills.

"Toast would be great," I say. "Thank you. Where's the bathroom?"

"End of the hall. Next to your room. Why don't you take your things through, settle in a bit? I'll bring the toast."

He brings me a cup of tea and a glass of water too.

"Suitcase explode, did it?"

"Pretty much." I packed badly, in a kind of fugitive rush, and I can't find my pyjamas or my washbag. I have, however, managed to chuck assorted belongings all over the floor. "Sorry about the mess."

Steve shakes his head, picking his way across tiny islands of bare carpet to set the tray down on the desk. "It's your space. Do what you like. I hope . . ." He hesitates, looking around. "Well, it's not exactly homey, but—"

"It's great." Blank walls suit me fine.

"There's a lamp by the bed so you can read. And the light's good in here in the day – for your drawing." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "Listen, Hel, this doesn't have to be permanent. Any time you're not – any time you think you'd do better at home, you just—"

"It's perfect. Really." I smile to show I mean it. My mouth feels creaky and out of practice, but Steve's shoulders unwind another notch.

“Good. And your mum says you take your meds in the morning.”

“Yes.”

She watches me. Do you think she told him that?

When he’s gone, I wolf down the toast, then search out a thicker jumper from the pile of clothes: a sloppy hand-me-down – or it was. Now, the sleeves barely reach my wrists. I’m like a weed: blink, and I’ve grown some more. This does have to be permanent. I can’t go back to the limbo house where every corner’s crammed with spoons and pens and piano keys touched by hands that will never touch them again.

I take my tea to the window. The curtains are made of something rough and thick. I step up to the glass and pull them behind me, peering into the black-on-black outside. Stars sugar the sky. Against them, the main building is more absence than presence, as if a vast rectangle has been punched clean through the night, creating a portal to whatever deeper dark lies beyond.

My new world. Night and silence. It’s as if I’m the last person alive at the end of the universe.

Someone else is awake though. Like a huge yellow eye fluttering open, light fills one of the upper-storey windows. Seconds later, a figure appears, just where the pupil would be, their shape silhouetted by the glow. The caretaker, I suppose. Strange for them to make their rounds so late, to bother with the lights when they must have a torch.

Almost like they want to be seen. The thought shudders through me. *Easy, H, you would say. They don’t know you’re there. How could they?* I have no answer to that. I just feel it, sure as a touch.

The light snaps off and I jump half out of my skin. You would remind me that it’s possible there’s a switch by the window, or that the caretaker has a buddy with them, or that the stable-block isn’t the only building here with dodgy wiring. If that didn’t work, you would tuck me up in my bed, even though I am far too old for tucking in, or maybe even let me sleep in yours. You would let me press my cold feet to the warmth of your calves.

But you are not here. I stay cloaked in the curtains, long after my tea has cooled, staring into the inky quiet. Unable to shake the certainty that the figure is still out there, looking back.

Chapter Two

It's ridiculous, of course, in the toast-smelling morning with watery sunlight trickling through the windows and some country singer Steve likes warbling from a speaker by the fridge.

"Yeah, that must've been George doing his rounds," Steve says when I tell him.

"George being the caretaker?" I'm itchy with tiredness, struggling to keep up. "And his flat's in the gatehouse, which is near the art block. Which is where I need to be at nine to meet Miss . . ."

"Weaver. Susie."

"Susie, right." It's all first names here, apparently. "And then we're going to the shops?"

"I'm going." Steve pushes his chair aside, takes our plates to the sink. "You don't have to come."

"Might as well. I've never seen the bright lights of Guildford. I can wash up, if you like." I want to prove my usefulness, but he waves me away.

"You're all right. Just don't forget your pills – and dry your hair. You'll catch your death if you go out with it wet down your back like that."

He's probably right, though it's a mission tackling my mane with the little gerbil-fart hairdryer he's left out on the laundry basket. I give up three-quarters of the way through, tug the semi-damp strands into my customary plait, coil the plait into a bun and shove a bobble hat over the top.

Outside, the air snips like scissors and the cobbles in the courtyard are treacherous with frost. I skate across them, my portfolio wedged under one arm. Steve has given me directions. Up the track until I spot the gap in the hedge, then cut diagonally across the lawn, keeping the cedar tree with the broken branch on my left so that I join the main driveway just in time to see the footpath which will take me to the art block. It seemed simple – so simple that I declined his offer to run me round in the car. Now, though, everything is veiled in swathes of woolly mist. Is that the gap in the hedge? No – too small, surely. But my phone says it's already eight fifty-three, so I squeeze on through only to find myself knee-deep in something prickly in the flower bed beyond.

By the time I hit the grass, my pulse is skittering with nerves. Sports aren't a big deal at Hartwood. The arts have more currency. The Fine Art

A-level course is at capacity, and Susie is giving up part of her Saturday to see me. Being late is not an option. I take the lawn at a sprint, the cold sawing my lungs. The mist has thickened to milk, the cedar rearing out of the whiteness so suddenly I almost slam into it. Smaller trees stud the edges of the driveway. I duck between them, crunching over gravel. Mercifully, the mist is thinner here; the footpath is easy to locate, though slippery as an ice rink. I cling to the metal railing with my free hand, trying to stay upright as I slide towards the cluster of buildings ahead.

Eight fifty-nine. Which one is the art block?

“Hey!” The word is lobbed from my right, where skeletal trees make a sad procession along the boundary wall. “Hey, over here! Yes, you in the hat, carrying the big rectangle thing. I know you can hear me.” A girl’s voice, bright as a bell, edged with just a touch of panic.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about memory, about the tricks it plays. Some moments are stamped on my mind as clearly as footprints in fresh snow or typewriter ink on a clean white page. Others are like fish, slippery and elusive, gliding close then darting down into the weeds. There’s a third type too, the type that ambush me, igniting with detail, so that one instant I’m brushing my teeth or opening a drawer and the next I’m somewhere else entirely. Blowing out birthday candles. Untangling kite strings. Turning mutinous in the back of the car. The only constant in these ambushes is you, helping, fixing, soothing and smoothing every little injustice. Those were your candles I blew out. It was my impatience that got the kite stuck in the tree. On that journey, you gave me the last of your sweets.

And as it is my fault your kindness is now lost to the world, I have been trying to make up for it with some of my own. So I turn, sure of two things. Susie wouldn’t refer to the portfolio as a “big rectangle thing”. And I’m definitely going to be late.

The girl is on top of the wall, so it’s her boots I see first: red Doc Martens, dangling berry bright against the weather-beaten stone. Then, long jean-clad legs; a charcoal pea coat; deep brown skin; the kind of asymmetric haircut I couldn’t pull off in a thousand years – and sunglasses.

“What are you doing up there?” I ask.

“A more pressing question,” says the girl, “is how am I going to get down? But I think I can manage if you catch my bag.” She lifts a strap over her

head, holding out an aubergine-coloured satchel. “Your timing’s excellent. I was worried about my laptop. You’ll have to come a bit closer though.” Her mouth curves into a smile. “What? I’m not here to rob the place.”

I check my phone. Nine o’ clock exactly.

“You might be. You could have a crowbar in there.” But I lean my portfolio against a post and duck under the railing onto the frozen earth. “Look, I’m late. Do you know where the art block is?”

“I do. Catch my bag and I’ll tell you.”

I take five paces towards her, then stop and fold my arms. “Tell me and *then* I’ll catch it.”

Her laugh takes me by surprise: a bolt of green, the colour of ferns and springtime shoots. “You drive a hard bargain, Mittens. All right. It’s the barn at the very end of the path, but given how you were slipping and sliding around just now it’ll probably be quicker for you to go round the back of the library – which is that one there – and past the dining hall.” She points. “I know this because I’m a student. Not a burglar. I had to come back early, and I didn’t know the gate would be locked. Good enough?”

“Good enough.” I step forward. “Throw me the bag.”

The satchel is heavier than I expect; my breath comes out in an oomph. Twisting round, the girl swings her legs out and drops so that she’s hanging by her hands, then lets go. There’s still at least a metre between her Doc Martens and the ground, but she lands with practised grace and a deep bend of her knees, grinning as she turns to face me.

“Check if you like. For the crowbar.” Her smile is Hollywood perfect, an electric shock of white.

“You’re all right. Hope the laptop’s okay.” I hold out the satchel, and she slings it across her body.

“Sure it will be. So, meet here in an hour and you can help me boost my swag back over the wall?” She laughs her springtime laugh again. “I’m joking, Mittens. I solemnly swear I’m not a burglar. You can ask anyone – although I’d appreciate it if you didn’t, seeing as I’m technically not supposed to be here till Monday.”

“That’s exactly the kind of thing a burglar would say. And I can’t ask anyone about you because you haven’t told me your name.”

“It’s Leia.”

“Leia, like Princess Leia?”

“Like General Leia Organa. And aren’t you meant to be in some kind of hurry?”

Yes. Time is tugging at me, urging me away, but about a thousand questions clamour in my head, like why she’s arrived so early and how she climbed the wall in the first place and why she’s wearing sunglasses and what her eyes might look like behind them. And I haven’t talked to anyone my own age for months. Not like this, to someone who hasn’t made up their mind about me already.

“I’m Helen,” I say. “Not Mittens.”

“Helen.” Leia draws out the sounds as if she’s weighing them on her tongue. “Classic. Well, thank you, Helen. And for what it’s worth, I like the mittens.”

THE SHAPE OF A GIRL by Clare Harlow

SYNOPSIS

The Five rule the school. New girl Helen would do anything to impress them, even brave the “haunted” East Wing. But the ghost supposedly harms those with guilty souls, and Helen is hiding far more than her struggle with depression. As a series of pranks against her escalates, her paranoia threatens to destroy her burgeoning friendships. Is the ghost real, or is someone else responsible? Helen must uncover the truth – or pay with her life.

BIOGRAPHY

Clare Harlow has no first-hand experience of ghosts, but she did attend several super-creepy boarding schools. She then studied English at Cambridge University and spent over a decade working as an actress, before returning to her childhood love of writing.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘I thought the synopsis was really intriguing and full of potential. I also felt the author had a strong voice and I was interested in the relationship that starts to develop in the opening pages between the two girls.’

‘It’s intriguing – I quite liked the voice and was interested to know why this girl was leaving, what her relationship with her uncle was like and what appeared to be weighing her down as she’s clearly not telling us something.’

‘The writing is strong and the first-person narrative is credible: in other words, the teenage protagonist sounds genuinely teenage.’

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THE INVENTION OF NIGHT

By Annaliese Avery

One: Destiny Calling

Destiny was calling Paisley Fitzwilliam. She held its summons clutched in her hand as she walked away from the aero-dock station, her father's old dragonhide satchel crossing her body, her flame-touched curls twisting out from under her woollen cap.

A chill north wind had descended on the Empire of Albion, but Paisley paid it little attention as she walked the frost-covered streets of Lower London.

There were more important things at hand than the frozen Thames; this was the day that she had been waiting fourteen long years for. Today she would find out what the stars had in store for her.

Paisley smiled as she crossed Old Broad Street and made her way towards the Mechanist Chapel. She was as sure of her future as she was that the Sun was made of dragon fire and the Earth of clockwork.

The summons had arrived three days ago, the mechanised Old Celtic type crisp and black against the white of the paper beckoning her to find out what the Chief Designer had planned.

Deep in the cogs of her being, Paisley knew that she was going to be just like her father, follow the same track he had, and that one day she would find him again.

She passed a news-smith as he bellowed out the headline from the *King's Herald*, 'Killer Comet Signals the Beginning of the End. Lady scientist insists it's not a dragon.'

Paisley stopped dead. She snapped her head towards the news-smith and reached out for a paper.

‘Oi, this ain’t no library, if you wanna read it, you’ll have to buy it,’ the gruff young man said.

Paisley reached inside the folds of her thick woollen coat. As she handed over a silver sixpence she saw the man look at her left wrist; her sleeve had risen to show her thick dragonhide bracelet. Paisley blushed as she tried to ignore the narrowing of the man’s eyes and the way he thrust her change at her. After today she would never have to wear the bracelet again; her stars would shine brightly for all to see.

She walked slowly as she read, her mother’s name leaping out at her.

‘Celestial Physicist Professor Violetta Fitzwilliam, the first and only woman to hold tenure on the floating borough of Greenwich Overhead, has been credited with finding a fast-moving comet that is set to light up the skies over our glorious Empire and the savage nations in the next few days.

‘The Guild of Mechanists are reassuring concerned citizens that if the lady scientist’s claims are true then the comet will be part of the Chief Designer’s plan.

‘However, there are those who believe that all is not well in the Celestial Mechanism. Concern is growing that this so-called comet is none other than Malgol – the Great Dragon prophesied by the Dragon Walkers.

‘Given the Professor’s record for bad luck along her track, there may be some truth to this. Readers may remember that Professor Fitzwilliam is the wife of the late Knight Sir Edmund Fitzwilliam who went missing in the Empires to the East when on a political envoy for the George. She is also mother to a crippled son and an older teenage daughter who is reported to be trackless.

‘The professor is hosting a lecture this evening on her discovery which the *Herald* will report on tomorrow. For those wishing to know more about the prophecy, turn to page eight.’

Paisley pouted as she folded the newspaper. Great Dragons indeed. Mother had been tracking the comet for weeks, measuring its progress as it moved along its unseen track in the mechanism. The idea that it could be a Great Dragon was utterly unscientific!

She hurried up Wormwood Street; the Mechanist Chapel dominated the road with its domed roof and twisting corner spires.

Paisley reached out for the central cog on the chapel’s ornately decorated door and paused.

What if her stars weren't to her liking?

Paisley took a deep breath, the air filling her lungs with little icy stabs. She held it for a moment then let it out in one go, her hot breath steaming like a dragon's.

She'd had fourteen years of dreaming and hoping. Of working out for herself what her track held. And of deciding what she wanted to put in it. She had plans for her future. Plans that *she* had drawn up, not the Chief Designer.

Now that she was about to be told her path in life, a cold doubt crept over her.

What if the Chief Designer had something in store for her that she didn't want?

Paisley lowered her hand and chewed her lip.

She'd kept the summons a secret from Mother and Dax. She could go home and no one would know. She took a step back and turned to leave then stopped.

Looking down at the summons letter, she unfolded the envelope and tipped out the small copper disc inside. Not for the first time she ran her fingers over the grooves in the edge of the disc and the scratches that crisscrossed its surface.

She clenched it in her hand and pushed open the chapel doors.

Paisley's boots clipped the stone floor and her eyes followed the twisting pillars of cogs as they slowly rotated up to an inky black ceiling. The ceiling shone with the light of a thousand false stars, each one a replica of a true star, each one turning in the heavens in the exact position of its counterpart.

She focused on one small bright star and a flicker of hope burst up inside her. Maybe her stars would be aligned with what she wanted after all, otherwise, why would the Chief Designer allow her to want it if it wasn't in her track?

The schematica was waiting for her on the dais. Her left wrist tingled in anticipation.

Like most mechanist machines it was simple and elegant in its design. The slot at the top was just the right size for the copper disc and the circular hole on the front was just the right size for her hand.

Paisley could feel the rise and fall of her chest now.

This was it.

Fate had already turned for her and she was about to know what had been cast.

She held her breath as she placed her hand into the mechanism palm up and then placed the disc in the slot. For a moment, nothing happened and then the machine closed around Paisley's forearm, trapping her hand and wrist inside.

Her breathing quickened, she felt a clamminess come over her.

Paisley's wrist began to burn. She bit her lip and tears sprang down her cheek. But the pain subsided in a moment. The schematica opened and Paisley tentatively pulled her hand out.

She held her arm up to the light, studying the splattering of golden stars on her wrist.

She smiled. She finally had her track. She was just like everyone else in the Empire. But there was something strange about her stars. In all the charts she had ever seen the golden dots were scattered over a circle, defining its circumference, filling its surface. But her stars were only scattered in the one semicircle, as if the Chief Designer had forgotten that the circle had two halves.

Out of the bottom of the schematica came a long piece of parchment, it had Paisley's name typed on it in Old Celtic.

Below her name was a drawing identical to the stars on her wrist.

Paisley looked beyond this at the series of symbols and detailed explanations, she translated each one quickly, they told her what type of person she was and how her cogs would turn.

She smiled broadly, reassured at the strange grouping of her stars as everything she read about herself rang true. Then she paused.

Her mouth was dry as she translated the last section of her chart again.

You will be brave. You will try your hardest. You will have far to go, but you will not have long to travel. Your stars say that you will fail. Your stars say, Paisley Fitzwilliam, that before the end of your fourteenth turning your cog will cease, your track will end, and you will die.'

Two: Here be Dragons

Paisley did not linger in the chapel. The air had become thick and putrid.

She needed to be outside. If she could just breathe fresh cool air she was sure that the spinning in her head would stop.

If she had stayed to contemplate her fate she may have seen the sullen teenage boy skulking in the shadows of the chapel.

But she didn't notice him there or as he followed her through the streets.

She walked without direction, wandering in a daze, the parchment still in her hand, the air cool against her cheek, turning her tears icy cold.

A short time ago she had been as sure of her future as she was of the turning of the mechanism. Now she felt as if her cog was dislodged, spinning in ever slowing circles that made her catch her breath.

What was she going to tell Mother and Dax?

She decided that she would tell them nothing, she would cover her stars and pretend they didn't exist. Her mind spun like a tightly wound spring as she sank deeper into the darkness of her destiny.

She was blind to the world around her, unaware of the commotion ahead or the danger behind until the boy knocked into her, stealthily snatching the parchment as he jolted her into the here and now.

She stopped still and blinked, not realising what she had lost as she looked around to see that the road in front of her was blocked. The electrica wagons of the Men of the Yard were parked across the street, their red and black insignia covering the sides of the vehicles as they surrounded the front of a department store.

Paisley slipped to the front of the gathered crowd, awareness creeping back to her.

'What's going on?' a man behind her asked.

A lady to the side of Paisley answered him in a loud whisper, 'One of the shop girls is touched.'

Paisley felt every hair on her body stand on end.

'No! The filthy half-breed.' The man spat on the ground, the lady did the same, warding off the touch.

'At least it ain't a boy, what with this dragon comet an' all,' another man said, and the other two muttered in agitated agreement.

Paisley felt the small coiled spring of fear that lived inside her begin to twist tighter.

The door to the shop banged opened and two Men of the Yard in their

red and black uniforms strode into the street, dragging the shop girl out.

Her hands were cuffed behind her back and around her neck was a night-silver collar. One of the Yardmen tugged at the chain that led from it and Paisley felt her blood boil.

The girl yelped as she stumbled forward. That was when Paisley realised that the sleeves on the girl's dress had been ripped off.

Paisley shuddered, not at the thought of the biting cold on the young girl's arms but at the sight of her flesh. From the elbow up, her arms were covered in vivid red scales.

Dragon Touch.

The crowd around Paisley were jeering and calling.

'Half-breed.'

'Kill the dragon.'

'Lance her.'

The girl's terrified face scanned the crowd, her wide eyes red-rimmed, her cheeks tear-stained. Paisley realised that she was about the same age as her and felt a burst of fire run hot inside her, she took a step forward, not quite sure what she was going to do but she had to make her stars count for something.

Just then the young woman opened her mouth wide, much wider than Paisley thought was possible. Her jaw seemed to dislocate and protrude. Then, from deep in her throat, came a roar.

A roar that filled the street, filled the world even. It flooded into Paisley's ears and she clasped her hands over them.

She knew that Dragon Touch manifested in different ways, giving each of the touched different attributes – but it was so rare and so varied, Paisley had never seen or heard of anything like this before.

She watched the girl in awe, as the sound dug into her brain, making her knees weak and her stomach churn. She closed her eyes tight and doubled over as her ears, her head, her whole body, vibrated.

Paisley woke to find herself lying on the cold hard cobbles, the crowd splayed out around her.

Standing shakily, she stumbled across the barricaded area, searching for the dragon girl, but she was gone. All that remained was a set of keys along with the empty collar and handcuffs.

Paisley smiled.

The Men of the Yard were coming around as Paisley slipped into the crowd on the other side. Most people were still unconscious or in various states of confusion.

‘Which way did she go?’ the Captain shouted.

One of the younger Yardmen threw up on the pavement, as his commanding officer bellowed at him, ‘Find the filthy dragon. Or it’ll be you we hang in her place.’

As Paisley moved away she hoped that the young woman could make it to safety. Maybe she’d reach the floating boroughs above London; maybe the Dragon Walkers would save her?

Paisley hoped that it was in the young woman’s stars to survive, and not for the first time wondered if the mechanism applied to the Dragon Touched the way it did to everyone else.

As Paisley began to think more clearly and set her course homeward the boy who had stolen her fate began to sink deeper towards what he knew was his own destiny.

He moved through the backstreets of the city, in the places that only the rats and wrongdoers dwelled.

He paused for a moment to look at Paisley’s chart, lifting his own star-covered wrist to the parchment. His stars were scattered across the circle in small groups and pairings, he had never seen stars like the ones on the chart. He guessed that this was why Paisley was so important to his mistress, he certainly hadn’t seen anything else about her that marked her as special.

He scanned the Old Celtic script, he had never really learnt the old language and only a few words made sense to him.

He rolled the parchment and placed it in his inside coat pocket then pulled out his electrica torch, before making his way down into the sewer tunnels.

He walked towards the heart of the city, his neckerchief pulled up over his nose, the sloshing of water around him slowly fading as he turned away from the channels that led to the frozen Thames.

The opening was hard to see in the gloom from the torch, but he knew

where the keyhole was and the right way to turn it.

The tunnels beyond became wider, the air cleaner and the brickwork more elaborate. After a while a series of electric lights told him he was close, he pocketed his torch and walked into a wide, cavernous space.

The eight ornately laid walls of the subterranean hall all met in a point, which hovered above its centre. The twisting pillars and brickwork converged to then push down and form the head of a dragon, open-mouthed and expectant.

Raised up on an octagonal platform, below the gaping jaws, was a throne made from the teeth of a Great Dragon. On it sat a young girl, she looked no older than ten but he knew she was as old as the teeth she sat on. She was dressed in a midnight taffeta coat and dragonhide trousers. Her hair was as long and flowing as the dark waters of the tunnels.

‘Do you have it, Roach?’ she called to him, her voice bouncing off the walls.

Roach pulled Paisley’s destiny from his jacket pocket and walked towards the throne. He clenched his jaw as he bowed his head and handed over the rolled-up parchment.

The little girl reached out and snatched it from him.

‘Did she see you?’

Roach shook his head. ‘I don’t think so.’

The hit came from nowhere, his head pushed to the side, his lip bleeding. He didn’t know if she had kicked him, punched him or swiped him with her tail. All he knew was the Dark Dragon was not to be underestimated. She might look like a sweet little girl but she was anything but.

‘You don’t think so!’

Roach narrowed his eyes and rubbed his aching jaw. ‘No, she didn’t – I’m sure of it.’

‘Good.’

The Dark Dragon sat back on her throne and unrolled Paisley’s Scroll. She greedily read the Old Celtic script.

Roach watched as her small shoulders relaxed and her lips curled into a cruel smile.

‘Excellent,’ she said. ‘The stars are in my favour.’

Three: Touch

As Paisley pushed open the front door, the comforting smell of gingerbread hit her and she felt her hollowness turn to hunger.

‘Ah, there you are, miss.’ Mrs Keen bustled through the large hallway from the steps under the grand staircase that led from the kitchen. She made straight for the library carrying a tray full of gingerbread cogs, each one iced in yellow.

Paisley followed, removing her coat and unwinding her scarf, dropping them and her satchel onto the nearest armchair.

There were four long windows in the library flanking the fireplace, and two doors, one behind her and one to the right that led to Mother’s study.

The rest of the walls were covered in books.

Dax was sitting at a large table examining an array of maps through a pair of magnifying glasses.

He didn’t look up when Mrs Keen put the tray down or when she left the room, but as the door closed he shot out a hand and grabbed a biscuit.

Paisley smiled as Dax brushed crumbs from the maps onto the floor.

She took a step closer and Dax startled as he saw her. ‘Goodness, Paisley, you almost stopped my cog,’ he said with a giggle.

Paisley felt her breath catch.

‘What’s wrong?’ He looked at her, his messy golden curls sticking up from his head like faulty springs, his eyes small and distant through the many lenses of his magnifying glasses. ‘Have you been crying?’ he asked softly.

‘No, not at all – it’s just so cold out there,’ she lied as she crossed to the fireplace and began rubbing her hands.

‘Well, I’m glad you’re back. I’ve been bored.’

‘I can see that,’ she said, nodding at the maps. ‘Ah, the Empires to the East.’

‘Yes, they’re fascinating. Did you know that in the East there are great seas made of sand?’

‘Yes, I knew that.’

‘I thought that you would,’ he said, smoothing his hand over a vast expanse of yellow.

‘There’s a book about the tribes that live there,’ he added, hopping off the chair with a clank and grabbing his walking stick. ‘They move about in big groups called caravans,’ he told her as he made his way to the bookshelf near the reading chairs, his brass leg brace over the top of his grey trousers shining in the flickering light from the fire. It clinked with every second step he took, his face wincing a little with each strike.

‘I thought Mother told you not to wear that old leg brace any more,’ Paisley said.

‘Well, Mother isn’t here and the new one rubs.’

‘But that one’s too small,’ Paisley told him.

‘It’s fine,’ he said, reaching for a book. ‘I’ll change it before Uncle Hector turns up to take us to Mother’s lecture.’

Paisley reached for her satchel as she remembered Mother’s lecture was mentioned in the newspaper article. She smoothed out the front page then turned to page eight.

‘The Rise of the Dark Dragon’ the headline said.

She knew what it would say, she knew the prophecy better than almost anyone. All the hatred and fear for the Dragon Touched came from it, it was what had gathered the crowd to the shop that morning and had made the Men of the Yard so aggressive to the girl.

Paisley remembered every tug on the chain, every harsh word from the crowd. *‘At least it ain’t a boy,’* one of them had said.

To be a boy with Dragon Touch was to be as good as dead.

Dax dropped his book and cried out.

‘Is it your leg?’ Paisley asked, moving towards him.

Dax gripped the edge of the armchair and nodded.

Paisley eased him into it then knelt next to him, working fast to undo the buckles and straps of the brass brace that held Dax’s leg out and straightened it.

As soon as the tension was released his leg rotated outwards.

‘Aargh!’ Dax groaned again, clenching his fists.

‘Where’s your ointment?’ Paisley asked.

‘Pocket. Blazer.’

Paisley found the small glass tub of translucent ointment in the inside pocket along with a piece of string, a knight token and a small set

of screwdrivers in a dragonhide pouch that she had been hunting for for weeks.

‘Hurry, Paisley,’ Dax whimpered.

He had taken off his shoe and sock and pulled his trouser leg right up to the top of his thigh. Paisley caught herself before she started staring.

Although the top of Dax’s leg was pale and straight his thigh twisted outwards and was covered in blackened green scales all the way down.

His dragon leg spasmed, his clawed foot jumping.

‘See, you should have worn your new brace,’ Paisley said gently as she knelt again and opened the pot of ointment.

The scent of lavender and patchouli filled the room, accompanied by another scent, deep and powerful, that Paisley had never been able to identify.

She smeared the cream all over Dax’s scaly leg, beginning at his ankle before rubbing up over his calf and shin, to a little past his knee where the skin began to match the rest of his body, covering the scales in a glistening film.

Then she massaged all the way back down again and over his twisted foot.

‘You know you can’t use this to get out of Mother’s lecture,’ Paisley said with a grin.

Dax wasn’t smiling back at her – he was staring down at his leg.

‘It really is frightful,’ he said. Paisley realised he was still wearing the glasses and that they must be making every scale on his leg look even bigger and darker.

She gently pushed the magnifiers onto the top of his head and pulled the handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket to wipe away his tears.

‘I don’t think it’s frightful at all,’ she told him. ‘I think you and your leg are magnificent.’

It was true; Paisley thought of the shop girl, of her ability. She remembered the way she had been treated and hated it, it wasn’t fair or right. No one should live in fear of being who they were, especially not her little brother.

‘I’m not magnificent, Paisley, I’m cursed.’

Paisley cupped his cheeks in her hands and saw her stars glint out at her beneath her dragon-hide bracelet.

‘We’re all cursed, Dax. We’re all trapped in our tracks. But you know what, I refuse to be ruled by mine or to let you be stuck in yours. I’m going to prove that the whole mechanism, and everyone in it, is wrong, that we can choose our own tracks. I don’t know how, but I promise you, Dax, if it can be done we will do it.’

THE INVENTION OF NIGHT by Annaliese Avery

SYNOPSIS

When Paisley Fitzwilliam finds out that her destiny is to die, the race is on to ensure that her younger brother Dax is safe from the curse upon him. In a fated clockwork world, where science rules and dragons fear to tread, Paisley must believe in herself, trust her instincts, and forge new friendships to help her find a way to set her brother free while she still can.

BIOGRAPHY

Annaliese Avery spends her days surrounded by stories both at work as a library manager and when at home writing them. She recently completed an MA in Creative Writing and has been training with Imogen Cooper to become a Golden Egg Editor and programme leader for Scotland.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘This London with its floating borough and the Guild of Mechanists is a great set-up and the idea of Dragon Touch was intriguing.’

‘This is inventive, with some lovely set pieces. There is a lot of emotion packed into the first pages too – for instance the Dragon Touched girl being dragged away, followed by her dramatic escape. It’s intriguing too, which is great.’

‘I’m really taken by the setting, the world building with the Empire of Albion, the dragon underclass and Paisley’s destiny. The author’s descriptions of the Dragon Touched characters are especially vivid and exciting. I loved these. I’m intrigued by the world and I want to read more.’

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THE GREAT PRIME MINISTER SWAP

By Laura Warminger

Chapter One

“When you say maybe, that really means no.” I press my forehead to the dirty glass of the bus window, desperate to catch some of the cool air that is coming in as we drive along.

“For heaven’s sake, Katie, no means no. Maybe means I’m thinking about saying no.” Mum pulls Benji up onto her lap in an effort to get him to sit still.

One day when I am a superstar vlogger, we won’t have to get the bus home from school. I hate the bus; it smells of sweat and cheese and onion crisps. “Everyone else is going. I will be the only one who isn’t.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. Sit still, Benji, almost home.” Mum starts whistling softly. Benji likes this. He always holds her face and looks in her mouth to try to figure out where the sound comes from.

“Please, Mum, I really want to go. Mrs Osbourne said that we will get to go climbing and rafting. There are going to be these yurk things to sleep in and we can have a camp fire at night.” I try to see Mum’s face past Benji’s head as he tries to pull her mouth open to find where the whistle came from. “You’re not listening, Mum!”

“It’s yurt not yurk. I am listening. Get ready to press the bell, we are almost at our stop.” Mum starts scooping up her bag whilst Benji continues to hold on to her face.

“Mum, we could ask Dad if he would give us some money so I could

go. You could ring him tonight.” My voice is a little too loud now but I want to be sure Mum really is listening.

“Your dad’s under a bit of a black cloud at the moment. I don’t think now’s a good time to be asking him anything. Press the bell now. Come on, Benji, down you get or we’ll miss our stop.” Benji starts to cry, he doesn’t like walking up the bus when it is moving.

“Mum, PLEASE. If you don’t go you have to spend the week in Year 5! LISTEN, Mum!”

“Bell, Katie, press the bell!!” Mum tries to carry Benji and the bags but nearly falls into the lap of the man in the seat opposite as the bus lurches to a stop. “I’m so sorry.” Mum sets off up the aisle, trying not to hit anybody with the bag on her shoulder.

I have pressed the bell because I really like pressing the bell, but I stay on the seat. I don’t want to get off the bus until Mum says that I can go. If she is going to say no then I want to stay on it until it takes me somewhere else. Somewhere far, far away. Where people sleep in yurks.

Mum stands beside the driver and shoots me a glare. “Katie Anne Ramble, let’s get off this bus. I’d rather not sell tickets to one of your performances thank you!”

Nearly everyone on the whole bus turns to look at me. Even the driver, who looks only slightly less cross than Mum. Under the weight of the stares I stomp my way slowly up the aisle. Benji is really crying, even more now we are off the bus.

“Shush now, we will cross the road and then you can put the cartoons on,” Mum coos, trying hard not to look at me.

This means she is really cross and I know it but I can’t stop myself from asking again. “Please, Mum. Please will you ring Dad tonight? The form has to be in by Friday!” Mum is already halfway across the road and looking for our flat key in her pocket.

“NO, KATIE! And if you remember, NO means NO.”

Now I am crying too, almost as loudly as Benji. Mum looks as though she might cry as well, which makes me stop crying and wipe my nose on my sleeve. “Sorry, Mum, I just really want to go.”

Mum crouches down beside me and gives me a hug. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, it’s been a long day. I know you want to go and I wish you

could go, but sometimes things just aren't possible. There will be other trips." Benji wants a hug too and butts his hard head between us until we let him in.

"Not like this one. I want to sleep in a yurk." I sniff. Even though I'm not sure exactly what it is.

"Yurt, Katie, it's a posh tent thing." Mum giggles. "When I am Prime Minister everyone will sleep in yurts and go climbing. Mrs Osbourne will take every child in the country on holiday every year, and nobody will have to go to Year 5."

This makes me laugh. Mum is always saying that. "Hear, hear." Benji and I have to shout this when Mum says things like that. It's what people do to agree in Parliament when someone says something clever. At least that's what Mum says.

A car beeps its horn and makes us all jump. Terry from the upstairs flat is waiting to pull into the parking space where we are all standing. We move so that he can swing the car round to park. He winds down the window. "Hello, you lovely lot! What are you all laughing about?"

"Just putting the world to rights." Mum smiles.

"Well who better than you, Becky, to put it right." Terry is doing that drippy look at Mum which makes me feel SICK! He gets out of the car and Benji dives into the seat so that he can hold the wheel.

"Out of there, Benji," Mum calls.

"He's all right. Think you've got a future rally driver on your hands there." Terry laughs. "I haven't got any more students today so it's no trouble. Perhaps I could give you that driving lesson some time when you are free?" Terry runs Bumper Car Driving School and is always asking Mum if she would like a driving lesson. I would LOVE IT if Mum had a car but I HATE the idea of Terry teaching her.

Mum says we can't afford a car anyway. Just like we can't afford school trips to stay in yurts. I am deciding that I will try to ring Dad myself. Superstar vloggers don't like Year 5.

I have just finished recording my amazingly funny vlog. I like to record it in my brain whilst sitting on the floor, wedged between Mum's bed and mine. I have written down all my funny lines in my llama notebook, but I have

to record it in my brain because we don't have a computer, or Wi-Fi or an iPhone. Mum says dinner ladies can't afford iPhones but I don't think this is actually true. I have seen Mrs McNulty looking at hers when she should be scraping the leftover food off the plates at lunchtime.

In my hilarious vlog today, I have been discussing why all children should be allowed to live in yurts and go climbing with Mrs Osbourne. I have started a campaign to make yurts free and done a very funny marshmallow-eating challenge to raise awareness. Mum would not let me eat any real marshmallows as we haven't got any, and besides, I have just had six fish fingers, two waffles and beans for my tea.

"Katie, come and see this." Superstar vloggers do not get interrupted by their mums when they are in the middle of recording fun material. They probably get to go in yurts all the time and they have chicken goujons instead of fish fingers for tea.

There is hardly any space between our beds so it takes me several tries before I can get up off the floor. Mum is sitting on the sofa in the living room with Benji asleep on her lap watching TV.

"Look at this! The prime minister has been visiting the pound shop on the high street. It's on the national news. Fancy that! Sophie Raworth has been interviewing her and has actually stood on the pavement next to that graffiti on the wall saying 'Hayley woz ere!' Look! Can you see it behind her?" Mum is very excited about Sophie Raworth who is a BBC reporter who does important news.

"Do you think she ever interviews exciting and very funny vloggers?" Mum is shushing me and turning up the sound.

"Prime Minister, this is your seventh day touring the country and meeting members of the public, what issues do you think people are most anxious to talk to you about?" Sophie is asking the question whilst holding a microphone. I really wish that I had a microphone.

"Well, Sophie, it's really important to me to meet face-to-face with everyday people and find out the things that are important to them and how we as a government can address those concerns." The prime minister does lots of serious nodding.

"Prime Minister, I hope you will forgive me for bringing this up, but after your interview in the *Sunday Times* you have been accused of not

understanding how normal people live.” The prime minister is doing a face that says she is not forgiving Sophie for bringing this up. “Especially the part where you suggested that tinned salmon was not acceptable for serving to politicians at the annual party dinner at Downing Street, and it was right that the annual spend on smoked salmon was five thousand pounds last year.”

Mum makes a loud snorting noise that wakes Benji up.

“Sophie, I really feel that this comment was totally misunderstood. Tinned salmon is a perfectly nutritious alternative for everyday people.”

“Honestly, that woman doesn’t have a clue. Touring the pound shops!” Mum is ranting about tinned salmon but I can see a car out of our living room window that has stopped outside on the road. It’s a big black car that is not like any car I would see around our estate normally. The windows are all blacked out so you can’t see in properly but I can just make out that there is a person sitting at the back. The driver gets out to lift up the bonnet of the car and lots of smoke comes out.

“Mum?” I can see the window that is all blacked out slowly coming down.

“Standing there preaching about tinned salmon whilst everyone is struggling. I would like to give that woman a piece of my mind.”

“Mum? Come and look outside. MUM?” I shout it now because Mum is too busy talking about how she would like to give the prime minister a telling off. I think this might be much easier than she thinks.

“MUM!!”

“WHAT, KATIE?”

Mum is not liking me interrupting her when she is furious about tinned salmon. I can see the person sitting in the back of the big car now. She looks very cross and is talking to the driver who is shaking his head. When I look back at the TV, she is also looking cross whilst talking to Sophie.

“The prime minister is outside! Come here and look!” Mum rolls her eyes as she thinks I am being silly.

“I am going to run Benji a bath.” Mum shakes her head.

“NO! LOOK! LOOK! LOOK!” I am very excited now. I wonder if the prime minister has her own microphone in the car and if I ask her nicely would she give it to me.

“Katie, stop shouting! What are you getting so . . .” Mum is looking

now and her face has gone all funny. “Oh, my goodness!!” Mum is looking a bit like a goldfish. I once had a goldfish called Bubbles, he was going to be my vlog mascot, but he ate too much goldfish food and went to fish heaven.

“Now you can tell her about tinned salmon and making yurks free!!” I am jumping up and down now.

“Yurts, Katie, not yurks!” Mum has gone very pale.

Chapter Two

My grandad always says that you should always look a gifted horse in the mouth, or something like that. Anyway, it means that you should make the most of something lucky when it happens. I am already in the hallway and opening the front door, whilst Mum is still doing her impression of Bubbles before he ate all the goldfish food.

There are now two men in dark suits under the car bonnet and looking cross. One of them is starting to shout quite loudly into his mobile phone. I wonder if he would let me borrow it to record a vlog with the actual prime minister of the whole of the United Kingdom.

“WHERE IS THE SECURITY CONVOY? For goodness’ sake! You do realise you will never work at Downing Street ever again. I will personally see to it. What kind of circus are you running? You have lost the prime minister.”

The man shouting into the phone looks very angry and I am thinking that now is not a good time to ask to borrow it. I am wondering instead if the person on the other end would let me come to his circus, as I have never been to a circus before. But they are probably quite upset if they have lost the prime minister. I once lost a new pair of trainers at the start of Year 4 and Mum kept forgetting to buy me some new ones so I had to use the really smelly pair out of the spares box. Losing a whole prime minister probably feels worse.

“Excuse me, young lady.”

The actual prime minister has her head out of the car window and is calling me a young lady. I have never spoken to a prime minister before so I am not sure what to do, so I try a sort of curtsy thing and use my best speaking voice. “Hello, I have just seen you on the television talking to

Sophie next to the graffiti outside the pound shop. I really don't like that pound shop because I always think it smells a bit like wee, but Mum likes to go in there because they always have two packets of custard creams for a pound which she says is really good value. Mum is quite cross with you about the tinned salmon, but I am not. I don't like tinned salmon or tuna or pilchards . . ."

"Katie Anne Ramble!" Mum is standing behind me holding Benji and looking very red in the face. "I am so sorry." Mum is shaking her head. "I really don't know what to say . . ."

"I think Katie has summed it all up very eloquently." The prime minister is opening the car door and I am trying to see if she has a microphone but there are just lots of newspapers and a pair of glasses. "What on earth is happening, Rankin?"

The man has stopped shouting down his mobile. "Well it's a terrible fiasco! The MET are advising us to stay inside the vehicle, especially given our unsavoury location." I am not sure how he has decided that the Morton estate is not savoury, like a sausage roll or cheese scone.

"Hello, what's going on here then, could I help at all?" Terry has come downstairs from his flat and is holding his toolbox. He is always trying to impress Mum with his toolbox.

The driver pops his head out from under the bonnet. "Looks like the fan belt's gone for it, mate."

"Well I am used to fixing things up. Would you like me to take a look at it?"

"No, I really don't think that will be necessary. If you could all just stay at least three feet from the prime minister at all times."

"Oh, for goodness sake, Rankin! Let the man take a look; the quicker we can get out of here the better. Just wait until the press get hold of this!" The prime minister is putting her head in her hands a bit like Mrs Osbourne does when Billy keeps pretending to fall off his chair in Maths.

"Would you like a cup of tea or some Vimto squash, Prime Minister? I am not allowed Vimto squash after tea but I think Mum will let you have some?" I am hoping that the prime minister chooses the Vimto squash then Mum might let me have some too.

"Katie, I think a cup of tea would be just the thing."

“The MET are telling us to stay inside the vehicle.”

“Look, Rankin, if I am to be very shortly surrounded by the press, I would much rather face them after a cup of tea.”

“I think Vimto squash is very refreshing too.” I am disappointed that she is choosing tea.

It is quite strange to see the prime minister sitting on your sofa next to the cushion with the loose stitching on it. The prime minister looks as though she thinks it is a bit strange too. Mum has told me to stop talking while she makes some tea but it is difficult to stop talking when there are so many things that you want to say.

“Have you ever been in a yurt, Mrs Prime Minister?” I can’t help but ask this and I am pleased that she doesn’t look cross.

“No, I haven’t ever been in a yurt, although I did attempt a glamping holiday a few years ago. However, it wasn’t quite what I expected. I much prefer my château in the South of France. Please call me Mrs Halverlay, it’s much more friendly.”

I do not know what the ‘chatty’ thing in the South of France is but it doesn’t sound as good as a yurt. I want to say this but Mum has brought the tea so I am thinking that I had better not.

“Do you take sugar? I wasn’t sure, we don’t normally have sugar, but I have got sweeteners if you would like. We keep those in for my dad when he comes round for dinner on a Sunday, not for his dinner obviously, but for his cups of tea . . .” Mum is talking non-stop and really fast.

“Please don’t concern yourself. It looks a very acceptable cup of tea, thank you.” Mum is hovering now and not sure what to do. “Have you lived here very long, err, Mrs . . .?”

“Oh, it’s Miss Ramble. Err, Rebecca or Becky, usually. Not long, about a year.”

“How do you find it? It seems quite cosy.”

“Um, yes, it’s a bit of a squeeze but we all find a space.”

“This estate seems friendly, so far. Do you find it has a good community spirit? Your neighbour seems very keen to be helpful.” I do not like it much when Terry is being helpful, except for the time he took me to Hannah’s party when the buses went on strike.

“Yes, I think most people are quite friendly.”

“Do you have employment, Miss Ramble?” Mum is starting to look a bit grumpy and I am not sure why. I’m wondering if she has remembered that she is cross about tins of salmon.

“Yes, thank you. I work at Katie’s school as a dinner lady and a cleaner.”

“Oh, that sounds very suitable. Do you find that it fits around your commitments as a single parent?”

I am really wishing that I could ask about yurts again, and I want to know if Mrs Halverlay has her very own microphone, but I know that Mum doesn’t like it if I interrupt when adults are talking. But I am bursting to ask and they are talking about boring things that I already know about.

“Can you make any rules that you want, and tell people to do things when you are the prime minister? Can you make rules about yurts?” It just bursts out and I give Mum the look that means I really couldn’t help it.

“Well, Katie, that’s a very interesting question. A prime minister can only make rules, or laws, in agreement with Parliament.”

“I think Parliament would definitely agree with yurts, and exciting and good learning trips to do rafting, and not sending children to Year 5.” Mum is giving me the cross look.

“Is this a school trip? It is heartening to hear that an inner-city school in this area is able to offer such positive experiences. When are you going?”

Mum’s eyebrows look as though they might fly off her forehead. “Mum can’t afford to send me and I would really, really, really like to go. I will almost definitely be the only one who has to go to Year 5 whilst everyone is in a yurt with Mrs Osbourne. If you were not busy it would be really good if you could make a rule that says the whole of Year 6 can go. I know you are very busy talking to Sophie on the BBC into the microphone. Do you have your own microphone?” Mum has gone quite pale.

Mrs Halverlay does not look angry but she is looking at the door as if she is expecting someone. “I imagine it is very difficult being a single parent, but as a government we are building a country where we are supporting people to get back into full-time work and make the most of opportunities. By making work pay we are empowering those less fortunate to improve their financial situations.”

I am not sure if this is a yes as she has not said the word yurt or

microphone. Mrs Halverlay also did not mention tinned salmon but Mum is doing the **VERY** cross face. I am thinking that when the prime minister goes home, I am going to get told off for interrupting.

“I really can’t believe you have just said that.” Mum is speaking but she is not looking at me, which means she is super cross.

There is a sharp knock on the door and the shouty man called Rankin is looking round the door. “Security is here, Prime Minister; we are ready to move. We are attracting attention now.”

Mrs Halverlay looks very pleased about this but I am not. I am not sure if she is passing a rule about yurts or not.

“Well thank you so much for the tea. I should like to wish you all the very best for the future.” She is holding out her hand for Mum to shake but I think she is so cross with me for talking about yurts she has forgotten how to shake hands, so I decide to shake it instead.

Mum is standing very still and is not looking at me or Benji, who has fallen asleep on the chair as it is past his bedtime. She is just staring at the door. She looks a bit like Bubbles but **AFTER** he had eaten all the goldfish food.

I am worried now, as Mum must be so cross that she has frozen on the spot. “Mum, I am sorry for not stopping talking like I promised. It’s just that . . .”

“We have nothing to say sorry for, sweetheart. We are not the ones who should be sorry . . .” Mum looks at the door and then off she goes and I am hoping that she is going to ask the prime minister to make a rule about yurts.

The Great Prime Minister Swap by Laura Warminger

SYNOPSIS

Katie Ramble is a vlogging superstar, but only in her head. When her mum gets cross and challenges the prime minister to swap places for a week, the family find themselves living in Downing Street. However, Katie begins to suspect that they are being used and when Edward Rankin decides her mum is too good at being Prime Minister, she must stop him making a fool of them in front of the whole country.

BIOGRAPHY

Laura lives in beautiful Norfolk with her husband and two daughters. Being a quiet person means all your best conversations are in your head. Writing is like digging them an escape tunnel.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘A really good fun idea and lovely writing. I loved Katie’s voice and the premise is great.’

‘Fab title! Really lovely relationships between Katie, Benji and Mum. Benji is super cute and feels very realistic.’

‘Very interesting idea, love getting politics into children’s books. We have nowhere near enough depictions of lower working class and single parent families in books. I like Katie’s voice – it’s very funny and endearing. I want to read on – the excerpt was over too fast.’

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HONORARY MENTIONS

Although not appearing in this anthology, the following pieces received honorary mentions:

DEIDRE SAVES THE EMPIRE by Zoe Jane Cookson

THE ENCHANTED PET SHOP PRESENTS . . . GAVIN THE GOLDFISH
by Becky Danks

TIYA by Carry de la Harpe

THE DARKEST CORNER by Jane Dudeney

HESTER FIESTA PARTY-PLANNER EXTRAORDINAIRE (& MOYNIE,
THAT'S ME) by Annie Edge

SHIFTING ORBITS by Sarah Fulton

DEMON(ISH) by Jenny Ireland

THE CONVERSION PLAN by Attiya Khan

TRUTH WILL OUT by Aliss Langridge

OF INK AND FLAME by Cara Lovelock

UNDERCURRENT by Lucinda Marsden

LIFTED by Abi Moore

BLOOD GIFTS by Lucy O'Hair

CHARMING? by Jon Tilley

GHOSTS OF MARS by Stuart White

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