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Opening extract from

The Boy Who Drew the Future

Written by

Rhian Ivory

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THE BOY WHO DREW THE FUTURE

RHIAN IVORY



This book is for my children Joseph, Evie and Noah.
And also for the bravest boy I know, Matthew Richards.

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‘Ask no questions, and you’ll be told no lies.’
Charles Dickens, ***Great Expectations***.

PROLOGUE

A twitching thing, it moves as if it were still alive.

But it can't be. The hand isn't attached to anything.

Sinews, veins and skin are dried up, discoloured, dead on the page. Yet it moves as if no one has told it. As if no one dares to say the word:

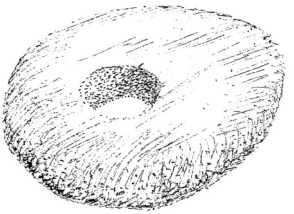
Drowned.

The boy draws it with his pen, line after line, unravelling the story that pulls him under, down into the dark water.

A hand forces itself up to the surface in his drawing, beckoning him or warning him, he can't quite tell yet. And no matter how hard he tries not to, he keeps drawing it.

The boy traces the watery lines of the past, the present and the future. With his pen shaking in his hand, he sleeps and draws, trapped between dreams and nightmares.

Twitching and twisting, he draws, as the tide waits patiently, ready to turn.



CHAPTER 1
NOAH

The barber doesn't try to engage me in awkward conversation as he cuts off my hair. I'm relieved he's a whistler not a talker as I try to make a different face look back at me in the mirror. He brushes the hair off the back of my neck and I attempt a scowl, narrowing my brown eyes, but it looks wonky. As I get up, I look down at the floor covered in light brown and blond hair. A haircut feels a good place to start.

Being the new boy again means I get to reinvent myself, I decide, as Mum buys me a new uniform at Fords department store. I try on more black trousers as she picks up a three-pack of white shirts, laughing with the saleswoman about my growth spurt. They talk as if I am not there. Mum keeps touching the back of my now naked neck as if she hasn't seen it in years. She tries to make the short hairs on my crown lay down flat, but then gives up and hands me a red and grey striped tie and two grey V-neck jumpers. They are itchy, not that I'll be wearing them in this heat. I wonder why she's buying them – *it is so hot.*

We moved to Sible Hedingham three days ago. Unpacking all our stuff into the plain, empty, rented house

only took a day or two, and now I've ticked the last two items off my list I'm out of things to do. I leave Mum paying for my clothes and go outside. I walk around looking for something to fill the weekend quiet with. *Anything*. I mentally list all the things this new place has as I pass them: a butcher's, baker's, a DIY shop, a grocer's and a library next to a large primary school. It's a new place but still has the same 'please drive carefully through our village' signs. Large pots of pastel summer flowers are scattered around boasting 'Britain in Bloom' as I head up towards St Peter's Church. On a corkboard outside the Church are signs for the summer fete and a music festival, merging with peeling parish council notices about evensong.

Another wildnerness of normality, but this village has a feel about it. A prickling tingles in my fingers as I enter Broaks Woods. Something wants to be uncovered – I can smell it coming up off the river. There is something lurking here, whistling under the cover of the shady ash trees, hidden for now.

I sigh and shake it off. I don't want there to be any room or time for these feelings. I start walking faster, building up my pace, stretching my long legs out as I break into a run, heading down towards the river.

When we drive into the grey school car park on Monday morning, I wish I'd insisted on turning up on my own. I

watch all the other students dragging themselves into school and realise that it's going to take more than a new haircut. They all look like they fit, like they know where they are going even if they don't really want to be here. I, on the other hand, have no idea, despite the déjà vu of Mum's monologue:

'I've explained about Dad's work and said that's why we've moved again. There's no need to go into details about why you left your last school, OK? This is another chance for you, Noah, a fresh start for all of us. Just *try* this time, sweetheart, please?' She switches the engine off, unclips her seatbelt and reaches across to squeeze my arm. Her bangles clang and clank in the silence. I have nothing to say so she carries on in a bright singsong voice, filling the hot car up with her hope.

'Now there's only the summer term left, so not long to go. You've got your exams next year … so no more moving, right? We're staying put this time, aren't we?' She tries to make it sound like a statement or an order, but it comes out more like a question, her voice raising at the end as she looks at me. I nod and she sighs.

She tries to smile as she applies more lipstick, checking her reflection again in the mirror. I wish it were a real smile. I want to do more than just nod. She needs me to make her a promise, but I can't tell her a lie. I've tried before but I've never been very good at it.

I hold the door to the school open for her as the

receptionist buzzes us in. I wink at Mum as we wait in the entrance hall for someone to come and meet us. She tucks her short hair behind her ears and fiddles with her long dangly earrings and I whisper *'relax'* at her. She rolls her eyes at me. I want her to think it will be OK, that *I'll* be OK. The doors swing open and it begins. Again.

'Noah, here is your timetable, planner, some letters for Mum and a booklet on our codes of conduct.' They pile my arms high with things I don't care about or need, handing me lists of pointless rules I won't be able to follow. I imagine opening my arms wide and throwing all their stupid paperwork into the air, watching it fall like snow.

'Thank you,' I say, smiling widely at Mum as I give her a small wave goodbye. She walks away steadily, car keys in hand, and then I'm on my own. More people in sharp suits wearing photo ID tags around their necks introduce themselves. I smile again as their names and titles pour from my mind, spilling onto the hallway floor. I am guided to a classroom with a strong hand on my shoulder. A door opens and I am interred.

'This is Noah Saunders, he's joining us today. Make him feel welcome.' The heavy hand pushes me firmly into the room.

'Welcome, Noah. Right, back to work the rest of you. Find a free seat please.' The teacher returns to reading aloud from a book.

I can't hide from the staring faces in the silent room

I've interrupted. I hear a low wolf whistle and giggling from somewhere at the back and I know my skin will have flushed up blood red.

'Eva Hendries, please keep your catcalling and wolf whistling to yourself and *try* … *try* … *try* to act like a lady for once. Can you imagine Estella ever acting in this way? Miss Haversham would turn in her grave! Now, where were we…?' the teacher snaps at a girl with the long blonde hair and all the make-up and then picks up the story again. The class tunes back into the teacher's loud voice. I keep my head up, pretending to look like I know what I'm doing, and walk casually to the back of the room, having spotted one empty seat. I slide into it gratefully, but my knees crash into the table and I wince. I fold my legs under more carefully, trying hard to fit. Next to me sits a girl who is hiding under a lot of long messy dark hair. I peer at her through the curtain.

'Hi. I'm Beth,' she whispers, keeping one eye on the teacher. She reaches under her hair and flips it off her face so I can see her. She is small and dark-skinned with light brown eyes and her hair smells of lemons. She has tiny ears poking out of all her long black hair. The one nearest me is filled with silver earrings, nearly all the way up and round. Her lips are shiny, as if she's just coated them in lipgloss, and I can smell minty toothpaste on her breath. There are tiny white traces of it around her mouth. My hand moves upwards, as if to touch her lips with my

fingertips. Instead I pull back, adjusting the pencil balanced on the top of my ear, as if I'm worried it might fall off. Adrenalin ricochets around my body. I nearly touched her! I'm supposed to be fitting in, blending into the background like a wallflower, not almost touching strangers who smell of lemons. I move my hands under the table and tuck them under my legs.

'I'm Noah.' I want to say something more interesting but am at a loss for words.

'Yeah, I know, Mrs Ashwell just said but, *Hi, Noah*.' She laughs softly at me and I can't help laughing back, a little. She's got one of those laughs that are contagious, like when someone yawns. I don't really know what we're laughing at but it feels good, better, more normal. Safer.

I watch her return to her work and get a pen out of my rucksack. I look up at the whiteboard, hoping for something straightforward and simple. A worksheet falls onto my desk and a battered copy of *Great Expectations*. I mumble my thanks. The teacher points at her wristwatch before stalking off again, her black heels clipping across the wooden floor like a metronome. I've forgotten her name already. I pick up the novel in relief. I've read it before; this should be easy.

'You'd better get on with it, or she'll keep you in over break, new boy or not.' Beth warns me, speaking behind her hand which has pen all over it. I can remember *her* name. The teacher is now staring at me from the front of

the classroom, arms folded across her buoyant chest. I set my mind to finishing the worksheet before the bell. I don't want to be stuck in here with her over break.

When I get home from school, Mum is there, ready and waiting. I can smell baking. Clearly she hasn't got much work done.

'Come on, the suspense is too much. How was your first day? I thought you might text me at lunchtime? I haven't been able to do any work all day, not that I was worried, just … you know … wondering how you were getting on.' Mum flaps a hand in front of her face, as if to play down her concerns. She hands me a chunky slice of banana loaf and waits. I throw my rucksack to the floor and sit at the table. At least my legs fit under this one.

'It was alright. The English teacher is more than a bit *out there* but I liked History. I didn't get a chance to text you at lunch, sorry, it was all a bit full on.' I can't remember much more. I'm not withholding information, it's just there's not a lot more to tell, or at least not a lot more that I'm willing to tell, yet. I fill my mouth with the cake so I don't have to talk for a minute.

'Did you make any friends?' she says with such lightness that I can tell it's really important to her. I nod, swallowing the cake down. 'Yes. At least I think so. The girl who I sat next to in the first lesson, in English is OK. She's called Beth.'

I take a swig of the water. It's so cold it makes my teeth tingle. I need to get out of here. I don't want to talk about school any more, I don't want to play twenty questions or over-analyse every little thing I said or did. I get to my feet.

She and I speak at the same time.

'—Don't go up…'

'—I'm going up to get ready for my run…'

We laugh, not quite having steered around the awkward unsaid.

'Your dad's not here though. He's working on the Island. So make sure you take your mobile with you. *I know, I know,* but it makes me feel better.' She sips her tea. 'It's just I don't know your route or anything yet. In fact, why don't you skip your run and we could get a takeaway? I think I saw a Chinese on the high street. We could even watch one of your films, as long as its not that weird Beetle one again!' She grimaces, sticking her tongue out.

'*Beetlejuice* is a classic, Mum! OK, OK, we'll pick something when I get back? Maybe something vintage like *Edward Scissorhands*?' I offer, knowing she likes it almost as much as I do. 'What time's Dad getting back?' I move towards safer ground.

Her shoulders sag as she replies.

'Oh, late. It's going to be like this for a week or two, just while the project starts up. It'll calm down after that, hopefully.' She gathers up the plates, scattered with cake

crumbs, and loads them into the dishwasher. As she rises I stoop down and kiss her on her cheek.

'Oh, if we're having a takeaway can you get me chicken balls, vegetable noodles, some egg fried rice and … um … definitely a bag of prawn crackers.' My stomach grumbles.

'Is that all?' she teases as I fill my water bottle from the tap.

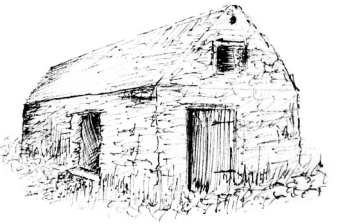
'*Ha Ha!* See you in a bit.'

She carries on chatting, but I'm not really listening anymore. My hands have started shaking as I try to close the lid of the water bottle. When her voice begins fading away, I leave the kitchen quickly, stamping out the pins and needles in my feet.

It's starting, I can feel it.

I have to move. I need to get going.

I charge up the stairs to get changed into my kit and all I can think about is running away, running down to that river.



CHAPTER 2
BLAZE 1865

Dog always sensed someone arriving long before I did, giving me time to put away anything I didn't want prying eyes to see. There were enough of them in this village.

His black head lifted off his hairy paws and tipped slightly to one side as he sniffed the air. He lay back down across the doorway, in his usual position. Dog would bark long before anyone passed through the little gate or climbed over the fence if it got stuck in the heat. Most of them came that way to see me; hardly anyone came through the wild gardens, past the old Manor House. The house had been empty since the old man died leaving it to his three nephews, the men who turned Maman and me out.

They pushed us onto the street. Maman said they'd called her a *sorcière*, a witch, told her they'd heard the rumours in the village. The fat one pointed at the road to Halstead. 'Look for a tall building with gates and ask to see the Guardians, maybe they'll believe you when you write 'widow'! Or maybe they'll put you in a yellow jacket along with all the other sinners,' he shouted at us, laughing. They said more things about my father that I didn't

understand, harsh-sounding words Maman wouldn't let me ask about. She waved my questions away, muttering curses under her breath as we stood outside wondering where to go.

Dog was snoring so I didn't think I had anything to worry about; all the same I packed my materials away into the box Emilia had given me.

Two summers ago, Emilia had found me down by the river the night Maman died. I'd run back, the whole long road from Halstead, stopping only when I got to the river behind the Manor House. She saw me as she came out from The Swan and she helped me up from the riverbank. She forced open the gate into the Manor gardens with a few kicks from her boots and then led me to this place, to my home.

'No one will think to find you in here. It's empty now up in the Manor. Must be a bit like coming home for you?' She helped me into the hut. She came back the next day with food and some clothes and asked me too many quick questions about Maman. She panicked when I told her it was just me and that Maman had passed.

'But who's going to help me now? That's why I helped you; I thought your mother would follow. Oh God, what will I do now? Will you help me? You could do it, couldn't you, lovey? You were always there when I came to see her, helping her, watching her. I'm sure you know as much as

she ever did.' She talked on, convincing me to make her medicine, to take over from my mother.

I could see Emilia had deteriorated in the time we'd been gone. The rash was back on her left cheek like a red target mark and the swollen joints of her fingers looked sore. I knew there were plenty of dandelion roots and hawthorn hedges in the gardens that would help her and milk thistle and red clover were common enough anywhere. The disease was snaking its way across the left side of her face, which twitched as she spoke.

'You need looking after and, as you can see, so do I. I can't be seen like this. Your mother's cure was the only thing that helped. I need you, lovey. I need your help now.' She paused to look at me, waiting for me to say something.

'We can be friends, can't we, friends who help one another? I can keep your secret up here and you can keep mine under this hat. Please?' She pleaded with me as her thick red hands passed me a worn brown hat, a loaf of bread and a woollen blanket from her basket.

I wanted to help her; I could see she was in pain. So I said, 'Yes, I'll help you.'

I put the hat on my head. It fitted perfectly. I broke off chunks of the bread and ate and ate and ate.

Dog grumbled half-heartedly at the knock at the door. I got up slowly, allowing the uninvited guest time to turn tail and run if they wanted to, as they often did. I opened

the door and was met with another hopeful face, another smiling girl from the village who wanted to ask me the same question they all did.

'I'm Mary Wright,' she told me, stepping over Dog. I'd seen her helping her father in the bakehouse. She handed me a brown paper parcel which was soft and warm in my hands. The hut filled with the smell of apples, cinnamon and peace. My stomach rumbled loudly as I sat back down and took my materials from the box. I was ready to help her see what she wanted to see: *her future*.

'Ask.'

She shifted from one foot to the other, unsteady now the moment had come.

'I wanted to know, I mean to say, I wondered if you could tell me something. Jacob Hill has asked me to meet him, has asked me to think on something he's said, or at least he's wanting to say and … I want to know if I should? Can you tell me if it's the right thing, to say … yes?' She found it hard to get her words out; she kept looking around me, past me, at the floor, checking the window and the shut door.

'Marriage?' I checked.

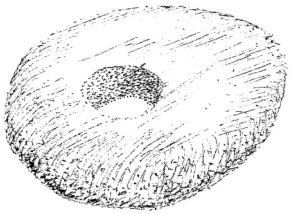
She nodded. Her cheeks flushed and she raised a hand to touch them.

My sharpened pencil flew over the page up and down, round and round. Circles and light and happiness bloomed on the page, shaping the lines that led to *yes*. It

wasn't much; it was just a few shapes on a small square. I didn't have much paper left and wasn't sure when Emilia would bring me more, she hadn't been to see me for a few days now. Emilia always brought more paper when she came, hoping I'd show her something she wanted to see in her own future.

I passed the girl from the bakehouse the piece of paper and she ran her eyes over it again and again, nodding. I hoped she'd bring me another parcel from her bakery, but I knew to make this one last. She gave me a parting smile and skipped out of my door, tripping slightly over Dog, who refused to move. Dog padded over to me once she was gone and pushed his wet nose into my hand. I opened the parcel, tore the heel off the apple loaf and offered it to him, his soft mouth open wide as he swallowed it down, drooling. He waited for more, not knowing when he might be so lucky again.

You and me both, Dog, I thought, *you and me both,* as I threw another piece up into the air, watching him catch it like prey.



CHAPTER 3
NOAH

I spot her leaving the fruit section of the supermarket. I'm not sure whether to wave or pretend I haven't seen her. I'll probably be bumping into her all the way round. Now I've noticed her, it won't be easy to hide. I tap Mum on the arm.

'I'm just going to look at the DVDs. I'll catch you up.'

She nods absentmindedly and goes back to the honeydews.

I walk quickly now I've made my decision. I can hide from Beth at the back of the store until Mum has finished and then sneak out to the car park.

As I reach the top of the aisle, Beth is coming down it. She's laughing, trying to turn the corner, fighting a trolley with difficult wheels. A man tries to take the trolley from her to help, but she refuses to let him. Could be her dad, although they look nothing like each other.

'Hi. Beth? Hi,' I shout before I can stop myself and my arm lifts all by itself over my head in some sort of awkward wave. She sees me and, thank God, waves back. Then we both stand there.

She says something to her dad and he walks down the

aisle past me. He gives me a nod and then reaches behind me for something on the shelves. I move out of the way and walk towards Beth and even though this hadn't been the plan – this had been the complete opposite of the plan – I find myself smiling.

'I'm bored. Want to come and look at the films?' she asks and I nod.

'I warn you now, there's nowhere in the village to buy DVDs. They used to have a rental place but it shut down last year. *Gutted*. They used to do CDs too, me and Georgia and Eva were always in there. They had this ace little booth with headphones where you could listen to a couple of tracks before buying. I just download tracks now though.' She waits for me to say something.

'Everyone downloads stuff, don't they? I mean *I* don't, I still like CDs. I like the booklet thing you get at the front you know with pictures of the band and then the notes they write, thanking people and how they got their inspiration and stuff.' I follow her as if on some kind of autopilot, despite my brain shouting, *'Please make a U-turn when possible,'* over and over like Mum's stroppy satnav lady. Beth walks to the back of the supermarket where all the films are, trying not to get in the way of people charging around before it shuts. And my stupid feet just keep following her.

'Dad loves it in here. He likes to wait around until closing time, for the bargains. Mum's still at work, evening

surgery,' she carries on as we scan the DVDs. I already know her parents are GPs because we've been doing family trees in History, another class we have together. Her mum's family are originally from Vietnam and her dad's family from Sible Hedingham. Her tree looked a total mess, especially when we had to add in what trades or professions our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had, if we knew. Turns out my family are pretty ordinary, which is ironic. I have a milliner on my mum's side from Luton who made hats for royalty. My dad's side are slightly less interesting, all spending their time in foundries and down mines in Wales.

'My mum's the same. I lost the will to live in the fruit section. My dad's at work too. He's been at work since we moved here practically, which is doing my head in. It's not so easy running on your own, he kind of paces me. Mum's dropping me off at the woods on the way back.' I gesture to my shorts and running shoes to excuse my look. If I'd known she'd be here I'd have changed, I'd have at least put some wax in my hair or something.

'Nice that you do stuff together, you know, like a hobby. I'm sure it'll ease up once your dad settles in to his new job?' She's not bothered by my running gear.

'Maybe, he just gets easily distracted when he starts a new project. He wants it all to be perfect, wants everything to be just right, all the time. Like we're some happy little family!' I force myself to stop talking by rubbing my hand

over my mouth. I want to clamp it there to shut myself up but don't want to freak her out.

I have no idea why I am launching into my family's dynamic, standing in a supermarket on a Friday night with a girl I've just met. I don't talk about myself at all usually, at least not the real version. I normally stick a fake smile on my face and churn out the clichés that have always let me slot in unnoticed in the past. But this is new, this talking, and it has to stop. *I* have to stop.

'Sorry … what?' I realise she's asked me a question. She is holding up a film. It looks awful. The cover is full of explosions, bits of debris flying everywhere and sweat-stained people in vests ducking for cover.

'I said is this your type of thing? What kind of films do you like?'

I shake my head, scanning the shelves for something half-decent. 'Not really. I've seen it though. I saw it with my dad at the cinema in … umm, ages ago, when it first came out. It was predictable.' I shrug, hoping she won't ask me any more questions.

She has changed out of her school uniform and is wearing a fitted navy blue vest, short cut-off blue jeans and blue flip-flops. Her nails are painted a dark blue colour to match her vest, but it makes her hands and feet look almost dead. The air conditioning is a bit aggressive; Beth shivers as she puts the DVD back on the shelf. She spins back round to look at me, her long hair swinging

into my arm, tickling it. She gathers it up in one hand, pulls a hairband off her wrist with her teeth and somehow manages to put it all up in a bun-type thing on the top of her head. Half of it falls out again and she tucks bits of it behind her ears, which are full of studs and sparkling hoops.

'It's freezing in here, isn't it.' She rubs her arms. I can feel my fingers twitching, wanting to touch her cold skin, to warm it, to wrap my hand around her wrist and hold her there. Instead I grab another DVD off the shelf, taking a small step away from her. I should leave. I should go. Just turn around and run. But she starts talking again and my feet become disconnected from my brain.

'Anyway, I'm not a big fan of action movies, but then I'm eclectic, apparently,' she carries on, oblivious.

'Oh? Who told you that?' I ask, an edge to my voice that sneaks in and surprises me.

'My parents. We have film nights on a Friday, well, not every Friday, depends what their surgery hours are like. Anyway, every other Friday I get to pick. Mum is a big musical fan which can be really hard going. Dad's more of a sci-fi geek which I can cope with.' She keeps taking films off the shelf, reading the blurb on the back and returning them to their place.

'Have you seen this one? Mum bought it for me to help with English. It's OK only because of Miss Havisham, it's

the Helena Bonham Carter one, she's ace.' She moves closer to me holding out a shiny copy of *Great Expectations*. She still smells of lemons.

'Look, there's a bargain basement bin.' I walk over to it, putting some distance between us. There are always good finds in the bargain bin, films that have fallen out of favour or weird ones that never made it. They're normally pretty cheap too.

'Ah, I see you are eclectic too, Mr Saunders,' she says, gently pushing into me so she can look in the bin too.

'So how was your first week in Sible Hedingham?' she asks, rifling through the films. 'Nosy neighbours driving you mad yet?' she adds in a jokey voice, but keeps her sharp eyes on me.

'Not bad. I've had worse. Haven't met any neighbours though.'

I lift out *Gone with the Wind*. She shakes her head violently. So eclectic doesn't reach to the classics then.

'Oh, I thought she'd have been round by now, staking her claim, marking her territory and all that.' She begins fiddling with all the silver rings on her fingers.

'Who's *she*?' I don't like the idea of someone from school being too close. Last time Dad found us a house next to a field with no neighbours at all. Not that it made any difference in the end.

'Ah never mind, you'll see. So "had worse" … what do you mean? How many schools have you been to?'

And then I find it, what I'd been hoping to discover. A Tim Burton film.

'*Yes!* Now we're talking, this is more like it.' I hold it up for her approval, neatly sidestepping the question about schools, and all the other questions that will follow if I'm not more careful, if I don't watch my step and keep my mouth shut.

'Got it,' she declares, the smugness unmistakable.

'What? Are you kidding? No one I know's even heard of this.' I shake my head and look down at the copy of *Big Fish* in my hands. This is a first and it makes me stop, stop and really look at her.

'Eclectic! I did tell you. You can't go wrong with a Tim Burton film, can you. *Edward Scissorhands* is my all-time top favourite. It's my dad's turn to choose the film tonight so we're talking some zombie apocalyspe with spaceships but next time it's my turn … you can come over, if you like? We'll watch *Big Fish*. So save your money,' she offers, talking and talking and talking while I stand there without a plan B.

'OK,' I answer quickly before I can change my mind, knowing I should take it back, drop the DVD, run back down the aisles and out of the door.

But I don't.

Instead I say OK again. I make it something definite, something new.

And something dangerous with her in the middle of it all.

'Ooops, sorry, love. Can't seem to get this thing to steer properly. Hi, I'm Sadie, Noah's mum.' My mum nearly runs into my foot with her trolley as she introduces herself to Beth.

'Hi, I'm Beth, it's nice to meet you. We were just having a look at the bargains.' Beth points at the film in my hand.

'Ah now, not more films, Noah? He took up nearly half the removal van with his boxes of films! Anyway we need to get to the checkout before they close. See you down there, Noah.' I watch her push the trolley off down the aisle and then turn back to Beth.

'So, see you later then?' My arm lifts again, as if it has a mind of its own. Why on earth do I keep waving at her? Why don't I just walk away and stop bloody talking?

'Sure. See you at school on Monday. Have a good weekend,' Beth says, perfectly in control of her own body.

She gently takes *Big Fish* out of my hands and drops it back into the bargain bin, leaving the touch of her skin on my hand like a mark.