


Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

# The Square Root of Summer

Written by

**Harriet Reuter Hapgood**

Illustrated by

**Kristie Radwilowicz**

Published by

**Macmillan Children's Books**

**All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator**

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk




HARRIET REUTER HAPGOOD

MACMILLAN



First published 2016 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-0828-1

Text copyright © Peppermint Frog Limited 2016
Illustrations copyright © Kristie Radwilowicz 2016

The right of Harriet Reuter Hapgood and Kristie Radwilowicz to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for, any author or third-party websites referred to in or on this book.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Book design by Elizabeth H. Clark
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*For my parents, for everything*

# {1}
# PARTICLES

*The Uncertainty Principle states that you can know where a particle is, or you can know where it's going, but you can't know both at the same time. The same, it turns out, is true of people.*

*And when you try, when you look too closely, you get the Observer Effect. By trying to work out what's going on, you're interfering with destiny.*

*A particle can be in two places at once.*
*A particle can interfere with its own past.*
*It can have multiple futures, and multiple pasts.*

*The universe is complicated.*

# Saturday 3 July

[Minus three hundred and seven]

My underwear is in the apple tree.

I'm lying in the grass, staring up through the branches. It's late afternoon and the rest of the garden is lemonade sunshine, but under here it's cool and dark and insecty. When I tilt my head back, the whole garden is upside down – and my laundry with it, festooned like the world's saddest bunting.

Déjà vu flattens me, and I have the stupidest thought: *Hey, Grey's home.*

When our washing line broke a few years ago, my grandfather Grey was underneath it. 'Balls and buggery to the flames of hell!' he roared, flinging the wet clothes into the trees to dry. He loved the effect so much, he insisted we repeat it every time the sun came out.

But Grey died last September, and we don't do things like that any more.

I shut my eyes and recite pi to one hundred decimal places. When I open them, the apple tree still blossoms with knickers. It's a throwback to how things used to be – which means I know exactly who's responsible.

Then I hear his voice saying my name, floating towards me over the bushes.

'Gottie? Yeah, still a total Mensa patient.'

Rolling on to my front, I peer through the trees. Across the garden, my brother Ned is coming out of the back door. Six foot of stubble and snakeskin leggings, and a clothes peg clipped to his T-shirt. Since coming home from art school a couple of weeks ago, he's been making a pastiche of Grey's summers: dragging our grandfather's things out of the shed, rearranging furniture, playing his records. He settles himself on the grass, swigging a beer and air-guitaring with his other hand. Perpetual motion.

Then I see who's following him, and instinctively duck into the grass. Jason. His best friend, and bass player in their band. He slouches slowly to the ground, where I stare a hole in the back of his leather jacket.

'It's gone seven,' Ned is saying. 'Reckon Grots'll be home soon, if you wanna say hi.'

I wrinkle my nose at the nickname. *Kla Grot – little toad.* I'm seventeen!

'It's that late?' Jason's voice is a low rumble. 'We should call the others, have band practice here.'

*No, don't do that*, I think. *Shoo*. It's been one thing, having Ned home from art school these past couple of weeks, bringing

the house alive with music and noise and mess. I don't want Fingerband here too, squawking their guitars all night and talking, talking, talking. Not when I've been an elective mute since September.

Then there's Jason. Blond, bequiffed, blue-eyed. Beautiful. And, if you want to get technical about it, my ex-boyfriend.

*Secret* ex-boyfriend.

Ugh.

Aside from the funeral, this is the first time I've seen him since the end of last summer. This is the first time I've seen him since we were having sex in the sunshine.

I didn't even know he was back. I don't know how I missed it – our village, Holksea, is the size of a postage stamp. Barely enough houses for a Monopoly set.

I want to throw up. When Jason left for university, this was not how I pictured us seeing each other again – with me lurking in the shrubbery like Grey's vast stone Buddha. I'm frozen, compelled to stay where I am, staring at the back of Jason's head. It's too much for my heart to take, and not enough.

Then Umlaut appears from nowhere.

A ginger blur through the garden, landing with a *miaow* next to Ned's cowboy boots.

'Yo, midget,' says Jason, surprised. 'You're new.'

'That's Gottie's,' Ned non-explains. Getting a kitten wasn't my idea. He appeared one day in April, courtesy of Papa.

Ned stands up, scanning the garden. I try to blend, a five-foot-nine leaf, but he's already strutting towards me.

'Grotbag.' He raises one cool eyebrow. 'Playing hide and seek?'

'Hello,' I reply, rolling on my back and staring up at him. My brother's face is a reflection of mine – olive skin, dark eyes, beaky nose. But while he lets his brown hair fall unbrushed around his shoulders, mine hasn't been cut in five years and is twisted up in a permanent topknot. And only one of us is wearing eyeliner. (Clue: it isn't me.)

'Found yer,' Ned winks. Then, quick as a flash, he whips his phone from his pocket and snaps me.

'Uuuhhhnnn,' I complain, hiding my face. One thing I haven't missed while he's been AWOL all year: Ned's paparazzo habit.

'You should come and join us,' he calls over his shoulder. 'I'm making *frikadeller*.'

The prospect of meatballs is enough to coax me out, despite myself. I stand up and trail him through the shrubbery. Out on the grass, Jason's still lounging among the daisies. He's obviously found a new hobby at university – there's a cigarette half-smoked in his hand, which he lifts in a half-wave, half smiling.

'Grots,' he says, not quite meeting my eye.

*That's Ned's nickname for me*, I think. *You used to call me Margot.*

I want to say hello, I want to say so much more than that, but the words vanish before they reach my mouth. The way we left things, there's still so much unsaid between us. My feet grow roots while I wait for him to stand up. To talk to me. To mend me.

In my pocket, my phone weighs heavy, untexted. He never told me he was back.

Jason looks away, and sucks on his cigarette.

After a pause, Ned claps his hands together. 'Well,' he says brightly. 'Let's get you two chatterboxes inside, there's meatballs to fry.'

He struts off to the house, Jason and I walking silently behind. When I reach the back door, I'm about to follow them into the kitchen, but something stops me. Like when you think you hear your name, and your soul snags on a nail. I linger on the doorstep, looking back at the garden. At the apple tree, with its laundry blossoms.

Behind us, the evening light is condensing, the air thick with mosquitoes and honeysuckle. I shiver. We're on the cusp of summer, but I have the sense of an ending, not a beginning.

But perhaps it's that Grey is dead. It still feels like the moon fell out of the sky.

# Sunday 4 July

## [Minus three hundred and eight]

I'm in the kitchen early the next morning, scooping *birchermuesli* into a bowl, when I notice it. Ned's reinstated the photographs on the fridge, a decorating habit of Grey's I always hated. Because you can see the gap where Mum should be.

She was nineteen when Ned was born and she moved home to Norfolk, bringing Papa with her. Twenty-one when she had me and she died. The first photo I show up in after that, I'm four and we're at a wedding. In it, Papa, Ned, and I are clustered together. Behind us towers Grey, all hair, beard, and pipe – a supersize Gandalf in jeans and a Rolling Stones T-shirt. I smile toothlessly: prison-cropped hair, shirt and tie, buckled shoes, trousers tucked into manky socks. (Ned is in a pink rabbit costume.)

A couple of years ago, I asked Grey why I'd been dressed as a boy, and he'd chuckled, saying, 'Gots, man – no one ever dressed

you any which way. That was all you. Right down to that weird jam with the socks. Your parents want to let you and Ned do your own thing.' Then he'd wandered off to stir the dubious stew he was concocting.

Despite my alleged childhood insistence on dressing like Mr Darcy, I'm not a tomboy. They might be in a tree, but my bras are pink. Awake all last night, I painted my toenails cherry red. Hidden in my wardrobe – albeit underneath a hundred doppelgänger plimsolls – lurks a pair of black high heels. And I believe in love on a Big Bang scale.

That's what Jason and I had.

Before leaving the kitchen, I flip the photo over, sticking it down with a magnet.

Outside, it's an English cottage-garden idyll. Tall delphiniums pierce the cloudless sky. I scowl at the sunshine and start heading to my room – a brick box annex beyond the apple tree. Almost immediately, my foot hits something solid in the long grass, and I go flying.

When I pick myself up and turn around, Ned is sitting up, rubbing his face.

'Nice dandelion impression,' I say.

'Nice wake-up call,' he mumbles.

From the house, through the open back door, I hear the phone ring. Ned cat-stretches in the sun, unruffled. Unlike his velvet shirt.

'Did you just get home?'

'Something like that.' He smirks. 'Jason and I headed out

after dinner – Fingerband rehearsal. There was tequila. Is Papa around?'

As if cued by a hidden director, Papa floats from the kitchen, a mug in each hand. In this house of big stompy giant people, he's a *Heinzelmännchen* – a pixie-pale elf straight out of a German fairy tale. He'd be invisible if it weren't for his red trainers.

He's also about as down to earth as a balloon, not batting an eye at how we're scattered on the grass as he perches himself between my upside-down cereal bowl and me. He hands Ned a mug. 'Juice. Here, I have to talk both of you to a proposition.'

Ned groans, but gulps the juice, emerging from the mug slightly less green.

'What's the proposition?' I ask. It's always disconcerting when Papa tunes in to reality enough to run ideas past us. He seriously lacks *Vorsprung durch Technik* – German precision and efficiency. Not just a blanket short of a picnic: he'd forget the picnic too.

'Ah, well,' Papa says. 'You both remember next door, the Althorpes?'

Automatically, Ned and I turn to look across the garden, at the house beyond the hedge. Almost five years ago, our neighbours moved to Canada. They never sold the house, so there was always the promise of a return along with the To Let sign and its constant parade of tourists, holidaymakers, families. It's been empty for the past few months.

Even after all this time, I can still picture a grubby little boy in Coke-bottle glasses squeezing through the hole in the hedge, waving a fistful of worms.

Thomas Althorpe.

Best friend doesn't even begin to cover it.

Born in the same week, we'd grown up side by side. Thomas-and-Gottie – we were inseparable, trouble times two, an el weirdo club of only us.

Until he left.

I stare at the scar on my left palm. All I remember is a plan to swear a blood brothers pact, a promise to talk to each other. Three thousand miles wasn't going to change anything. I woke up in A&E with a bandage on my hand and a black hole in my memory. By the time I came home, Thomas and his parents were gone.

I waited and waited, but he never wrote me a letter, or emailed, or Morse-code messaged, or anything we'd said we'd do.

That autumn, my hand healed; my hair grew long. Little by little, I grew up. Little by little, I forgot about the boy who forgot me first.

'The Althorpes?' Papa interrupts my thoughts. 'You remember? They're getting divorced.'

'Fascinating,' croaks Ned. And even though he abandoned me, my heart skips a little on Thomas's behalf.

'Indeed. Thomas's mum, I was on the phone with – she's moving home to England in September. Thomas is coming with her.'

There's a strange sense of inevitability to this announcement. Like I've been waiting for Thomas to come back this whole time. But how dare he not even tell me! To have his mum call Papa! *Chicken*.

'Anyway, she'd like that Thomas is settled back before starting school, which I agree,' he says, adding a *harrumph*, a classic Papa telltale sign that there's more to the story than he's letting on. 'It's a bit last-minute, her plan, but I offer that he stay with us this summer. That's . . . that's my proposition.'

Unbelievable. It's not enough that he's coming home, but he'll be on my side of the hedge. Unease blooms like algae.

'Thomas Althorpe,' I repeat. Grey always told me saying words out loud made them true. 'He's moving in with us.'

'When?' asks Ned.

'Ah.' Papa sips from his mug. 'Tuesday.'

'Tuesday – as in *two days' time*?' I shriek like a tea kettle, all calm evaporating.

'Bagsy not it,' says Ned. His face has reverted to hangover green. 'The bunkbeds are going in *your* room, Grots.'

Papa harrumphs again, and launches the *Gotterdammerung*. 'Actually, I offered for him to stay in Grey's room.'

Four horsemen. A shower of frogs. Burning lakes of fire. I may not know my Revelations, but disturbing the shrine of Grey's bedroom? It's the apocalypse.

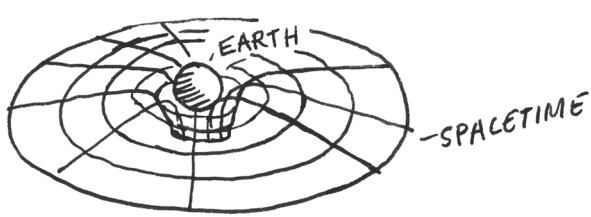
Next to me, Ned quietly throws up on the grass.

# Monday 5 July

[Minus three hundred and nine]

'Spacetime!' Ms Adewunmi scrawls on the whiteboard with a marker-pen swoosh. 'The four-dimensional mathematical space we use to formulate – what?'

Physics is my favourite subject, but my teacher is way too energetic for 9 a.m. For a Monday. For any day after I've been awake all night, which since October is basically always. *Spacetime*, I write down. Then, for some inexplicable reason – and I instantly scribble it out – *Thomas Althorpe*.




OBJECTS CAUSE SPACETIME TO CURVE

'E equals McSquared,' mumbles Nick Choi from the other side of the classroom.

'Thank you, Einstein,' says Ms Adewunmi, to laughter. 'That's the theory of special relativity. Spacetime – space is three-dimensional, time is linear, but if we combine them, that gives us a playground for all sorts of physics fun. And it was calculated by . . . ?'

*Hermann Minkowski*, I think, but instead of raising my hand, I use it to stifle a yawn.

'That guy Mike Wazowski!' someone yells.

'What, from *Monsters, Inc.*?' asks Nick.

'They travel between worlds, don't they? *McSquared*.' I hear from behind me.

'Minkowski,' Ms Adewunmi attempts over whoops and catcalls. 'Let's try to focus on reality . . .'

Good luck with that. It's the last week of term, and the atmosphere is as fizzy as carbon dioxide – probably why Ms Adewunmi's given up on the curriculum and is making her own fun.

'Anyone else for interstellar dimensions? How would you describe a one-way metric?' *A wormhole*, I think. A one-way metric is a blast from the past. That's how I'd answer. Ned bringing back Grey by repatriating his Buddhas, leaving crystals in the bathroom sink, cooking with way too much chilli. Jason, smiling at me in the garden after almost a year.

Thomas Althorpe.

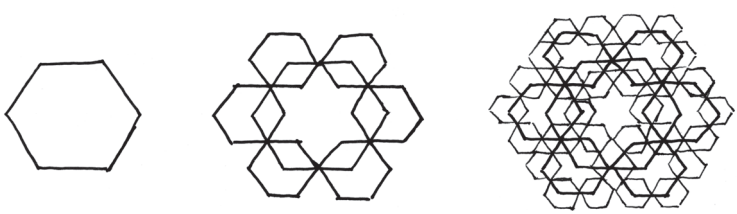
But I've never spoken up during any of Ms Adewunmi's

lessons. It's not that I don't know the answers. And back at the village school in Holksea, I never minded saying so and having everyone stare at the maths-genius-prodigy-freak-show-nerd. We'd all known each other since forever. At the town sixth form, classes are twice the size and full of strangers. But mostly, it's that ever since the day Grey died, talking exposes me. As though I'm the opposite of invisible, but everyone can see right through me.

When Ms Adewunmi's gaze lands on me, her eyebrows go shooting off into her Afro. She knows I know the answer, but I keep my mouth clammed shut till she turns back to the whiteboard.

'All right, then,' she says. 'I know you guys have fractals next period, so let's keep moving.'

*Fractals*, I write down. *The infinite, self-replicating patterns in nature. The big picture, the whole story, is just thousands of tiny stories, like a kaleidoscope.*



Thomas was a kaleidoscope. He turned the world to colours. I could tell you a hundred stories about Thomas, and it still wouldn't be the big picture: he bit a teacher on the leg. The vicar gave him a lifetime ban from the Holksea summer fete. He put a

jellyfish in Megumi Yamazaki's lunch box when she said I had a dead mum, and he could thread liquorice shoelaces through his nose.

But it was more than that. According to Grey, we were *wolf cubs raised in the same patch of dirt*. Thomas didn't belong on his side of the hedge, where the lawn was neatly clipped and his scary dad's rules were practically laminated. And I didn't quite belong on mine, where we were allowed to roam free. It wasn't about like, or love – we were just always together. We shared a brain. And now he's coming back . . .

I feel the same way as when you flick a rock over in the garden, and see all the bugs squirming underneath.

The bell rings, too early. I think it's a fire drill, till I see everyone around me holding worksheets in the air. The whiteboard is covered in notations, none of them about fractals. The clock suddenly says midday. And, one by one, Ms Adewunmi is plucking paper from hands, adding them to her growing pile.

Panicked, I look in front of me. There's a worksheet there, but I haven't written on it. I don't even remember being given it.

Next to me, Jake Halpern hands in his worksheet and slouches away, his bag knocking against me as he slides off the stool. Ms Adewunmi snaps her fingers.

'I . . .' I stare at her, then back at my blank paper. 'I ran out of time,' I say, lamely.

'All right, then,' she says, with a small frown. 'Detention.'

*

I've never had detention before. When I check in after my final lesson, a teacher I don't recognize stamps my slip, then waves a bored hand. 'Find a seat and read. Do some homework,' he says, turning back to his marking.

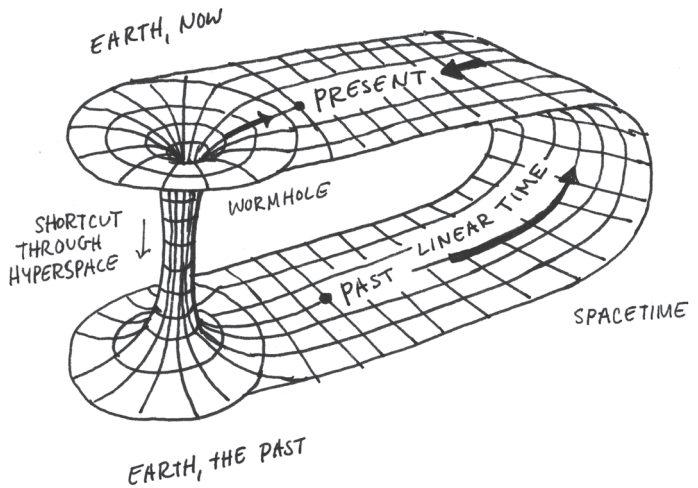
I make my way through the hot, half-empty room to a seat by the window. Inside my ring binder is the UCAS packet I got in tutor group this morning. I shove it to the bottom of my rucksack, to be dealt with *never*, and pull out Ms Adewunmi's worksheet instead. For lack of anything better to do, I start writing.

## THE GREAT SPACETIME QUIZ!

**Name three key features of special relativity.**
*(1) The speed of light NEVER changes. (2) Nothing can travel faster than light. Which means (3) depending on the observer, time runs at different speeds. Clocks are a way of measuring time as it exists on Earth. If the world turned faster, we'd need a new type of minute.*

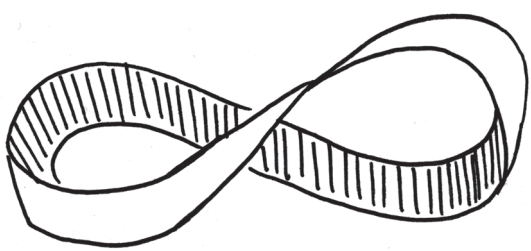
**What is general relativity?**
*It explains gravity in the context of time and space. An object – Newton's apple tree, perhaps – forces spacetime to curve around it because of gravity. It's why we get black holes.*

**Describe the Gödel metric.**
*It's a solution to the $E=MC^2$ equation that 'proves' the past still exists. Because if spacetime is curved, you could cross it to get there.*



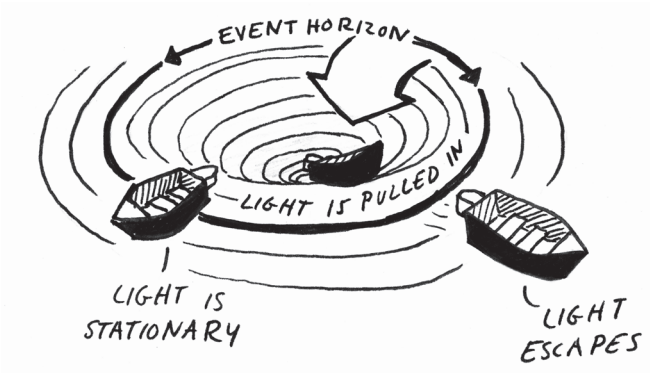

**What is a key characteristic of a Möbius strip?**

*It's infinite. To make one, you half twist a length of paper and Sellotape the ends together. An ant could walk along the entire surface, without ever crossing the edge.*



**What is an Event Horizon?**

*A spacetime boundary – the point of no return. If you observe a black hole, you can't see inside. Beyond the Event Horizon, you can see the universe's secrets – but you can't get out of the hole.*




**Bonus point: write the equation for the Weltschmerzian Exception.**

*?!*

Even after I stare at the final question for several centuries before giving up, it's still only 4.16 p.m. Forty-four minutes till I can escape.

Resisting the urge to nap, I start doodling: the Milky Way, constellations of question marks. Geometry jokes, spaceships, Jason's name written then scribbled out, over and over and over. Then Thomas's, same thing.

When I look down at the worksheet again, it's a total mess.

4.21 p.m. I yawn and open my notepad, planning to copy my answers on to a clean page.

$E=MC^2$, I begin.

And the second I write the $^2$, the whole equation starts to shimmer.

Um . . . I yawn and blink, but there it is: my handwriting is definitely *shimmering*. All it needs is a pair of platforms and a disco ball.

I flip the notepad shut. The cover says it's A4 standard medium-ruled in faint, blue parallel lines. Heart fluttering, I fumble a couple of times opening it back to the right page. Those ruled lines are now rippling like sound waves across the paper.

Once, I read that lack of sleep can make you hallucinate if you stay awake long enough. But I thought it meant migraine aura-type black spots in front of your eyes, not cartoon-animated notepads. As if to prove me wrong, the equation begins to spin. Distantly, I'm aware I should probably be panicking. But it's like trying to wake up from a dream – you give yourself the instruction, and nothing happens.

Instead, I yawn and look away, out of the window, and begin counting backwards from a thousand in prime numbers: 997, 991 . . . My curiosity gets the better of me around ninety-seven, and I glance back at the notepad. It's not moving. There's my biro scrawl on lined paper, nothing more.

*All right, then*, as Ms Adewunmi would say. It's the summer flu, or the temperature in here, or the being-awake-since-yesterday. I shake my shoulders back, pick up my pen.

I'm writing Jason's name again when the notepad disappears.

Seriously.

My pen is hovering in the air where the page should be and suddenly now isn't. It's so ludicrous, I can't help it: I laugh.

'It's not giggle time, Miss Oppenheimer,' warns the teacher.

*Ms*, I correct in my head. And then, *'Giggle time'? What, are we, seven? I've had sex! I've made irreversible decisions, awful ones,*

*huge ones. I'm old enough to DRIVE.*

He frowns at me – I'm grinning like a loon, so I pretend to write on an invisible notepad until, satisfied, he turns away.

I look back at the absence-of-notepad, and swallow another cackle. Because I'm wrong: it's not invisible. If it were, I'd be able to see the desk underneath. But instead, there's a rectangle of nothing. An absence. It looks sort of like the black-and-white fuzz when the TV won't tune in, or how I imagine the indescribable gloop beyond the boundaries of the universe, the stuff the Big Bang is expanding into.

Am I going bananas?

I bend down, peering underneath the desk. Lumps of gum, a Fingerband sticker, and graffiti on solid wood.

But when I sit upright again, there's still that rectangle of television fuzz.

It's not growing, or changing, or moving. I slump in my seat, and stare at it, hypnotized. Drifting back to five years ago. When there was a boy.

An attic.

And a first kiss that wasn't.

*'Bawk, bawk, bawk,' Thomas says from the other side of the attic. 'Chicken. Bet there's not even arteries in your hands.'*

*'Mmmm.' I don't look up from the anatomy encyclopedia. Like everything else in Grey's bookshop, it's second-hand, and there's biro graffiti on the pictures. 'Let me check.'*

*He's wrong, you do have arteries in your hands, but I'm planning*

*to do the blood pact anyway. I just want to look at this book first. The pages with boy parts especially. I turn it on its side, tilt my head. How does that even . . . ?*

*'G, what are you doing?' Thomas peers over my shoulder.*

*I slam the book shut.*

*'Nothing! You're right. No arteries,' I lie, my face bright red. 'Let's do it.'*

*'Gimme your hand,' he says, waving the knife. 'Oops.'*

*The knife flies through the air. When Thomas turns to get it, he topples over a stack of books.*

*'What are you kids doing up there?' Grey bellows from the floor below.*

*I yell down the stairs, 'Nothing. Thomas is just reshelving. We thought we'd use this wacky new system called the al-pha-bet.'*

*There's a muffled curse and a giant rumble of laughter. I turn back to Thomas, who's retrieved the knife and is carving our initials into a bookcase. He won't be here tomorrow. We'll never see each other again. On what stupid planet is that even possible?*

*And it means there's about four hours left to do something I've been thinking about for weeks.*

*'Thomas. No one is ever going to kiss you,' I announce. He looks up, blinking owlishly behind his glasses. 'And, no one's ever going to kiss me either.'*

*'OK,' he says, and takes a huge inhaler puff. 'We should probably do that then.'*

*We stand up, which is a problem. I grew ninety-three feet this summer. The eaves are low and I hunch, but I'm still six inches taller*

*than him. Thomas clambers on a stack of books, then we're the right mouth height. He leans forward, and I suck peanut butter off my braces. Here we go . . .*

*'Ow!'*

*His head hits my chin. The books slide out from underneath him. Our hands flail in the air, grabbing at each other, and we smash into the bookshelves. We're still untangling ourselves when Grey comes bellowing in, chasing us downstairs to the front door, hands flapping like big hairy butterflies.*

*'It's raining,' I pretend to whine. It's the seaside, I don't mind getting wet, but I want to hear what he'll say –*

*'You're a twelve-year-old girl, not the Wicked Witch of the West,' Grey booms, slamming the door behind us as I giggle.*

*Outside, Thomas and I teeter on the porch, the air soggy. He looks at me, his glasses smeared, his hair curly with humidity. His hand forms a fist. Little finger pointed straight out at me.*

*A salute, a signal, a promise.*

*'Your house?' he asks. I don't know whether he means for a kiss, or the blood pact. Or both.*

*'I don't know how to be, without you,' I say.*

*'Me either,' he says.*

*I lift up my hand, and curl my finger into his. Then we jump off the step. Into the rain.*

A paint-stained finger taps on the fuzz in front of me, and instantly, it's a notepad again. I blink, looking around me, dazed.

'What are you doing?' Sof is standing in front of the desk.

Silhouetted against the windows, she's just an outline – pointy hair, triangle dress, stalk legs, light blazing all around her. An avenging angel, come to rescue me from detention!

I'm confused, sleepy. Sof and I have barely been on corridor nodding terms all year, yet here she is, throwing her portfolio on the ground and her body into the chair next to mine.

After blinking the sun out of my eyes, I blink again when I see her curly hair done up in a Mr Whippy cone, red lipstick, rhinestone glasses. Sometime between now and whenever I stopped noticing, my erstwhile best friend has remade herself into a fifties musical.

'Uh, hi,' I whisper, unsure whether we're allowed to talk. Not because it's detention, but because our talking has dwindled lately. We nod and smile in the college canteen or the library, but we don't hang out the way we did at our old school.

She leans over to peer at my notepad.

'Huh,' she says, tapping my doodles, where I've scribbled out both Jason's and Thomas's names so they're illegible. I suppose this explains my dream. 'Is this your artistic comeback?'

It's a pointed remark. At GCSE, Sof opted for art, geography, German. I went with her choices to save making my own; which sums up our entire friendship. I never told her I had different plans, once we started sixth form – it was easier to wait for her to notice I wasn't at the next easel.

'Physics quiz,' I explain.

'Whatcha do to get thrown in the gulag?' she croaks. For a

white-witch-tiger-balm-super-hippy, she sounds like she gargles cigarettes for breakfast.

'Daydreaming.' I fiddle with my biro. 'What about you?'

'Nothing,' she says. 'It's time to spring you.'

When I look up at the clock, she's right. The teacher's gone. The room's empty. Detention ended an hour ago. Huh. It doesn't feel like I've slept for that long.

'They lock the bike sheds at five.' She stands up, fiddling with the strap on her portfolio. 'Do you want to catch the bus with me?'

'OK . . .' I say, only half paying attention. I stare at the notepad: it's only biro and paper, but I shove it right to the bottom of my rucksack like it's to blame for what just happened.

Was I really asleep? Is that where the last hour went? I think back to Saturday, a whole afternoon lost before I found myself under the apple tree.

Perhaps I am insane. I take that thought, and shove it as far down as it will go too.

Sof's waiting for me at the door. The silence that rides between us all the way home is so heavy, it deserves its own bus ticket.