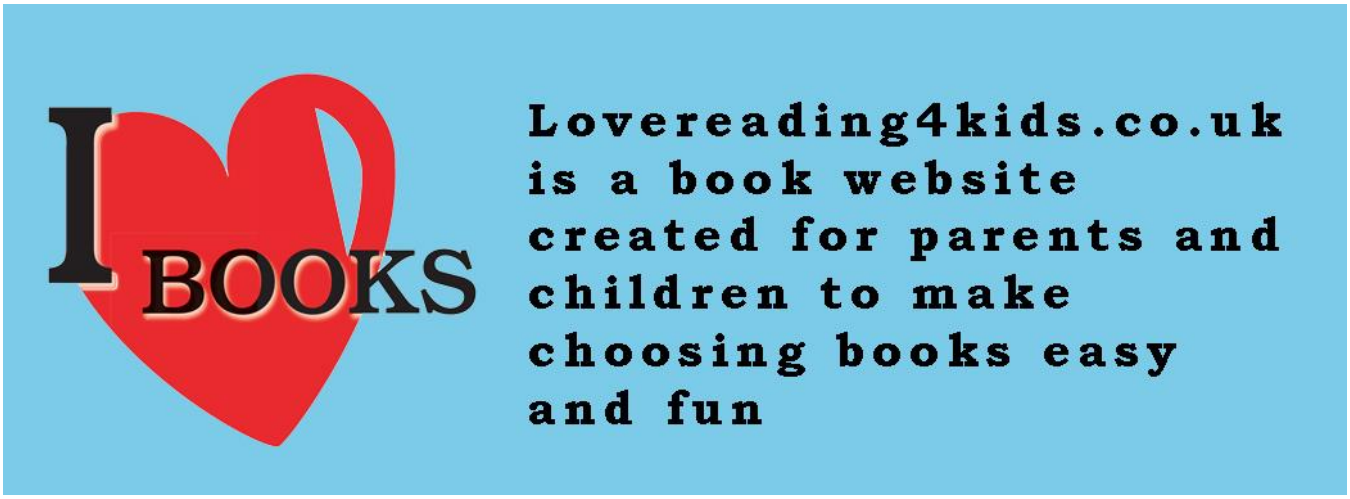


Opening extract from

A Tragic Kind of Wonderful

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Eric Lindstrom

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A TRAGIC KIND OF WONDERFUL

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AUTHOR OF *NOT IF I SEE YOU FIRST*

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To Mom and Dad,
for all the reasons

ZERO

My big brother, Nolan, used to say everyone has a superpower. Not a skill you learned, but something you were born with. And it's not always cool. Some people get perfect pitch or good intuition, while others get something useless like being able to go a long time without blinking. But if you don't judge, everyone has at least one thing they're really good at.

Nolan's superpower was, quote, "I can make myself be happy."

He proved it by having loud fun with lots of friends most of the time. But it also could be unsettling. Like when he was "happy" at times I knew he shouldn't be. He wasn't faking it exactly. It was real in a way, just not… authentic.

Happiness, he said, was like the lights in your house, running

on electricity generated by the good things in life. Unhappy people have dark houses without electricity, and they sometimes put candles in their windows to hide their sadness from others, but not Nolan. He said he had a bicycle in his head, attached to an electric generator, and he could imagine pedaling it whenever he wanted to power his real happiness lights.

If you looked closely, though, you could sometimes see his lights dim, or burn too bright, or flicker in ways they weren't supposed to. And once you saw this, you couldn't unsee it. Then you saw it a lot. I didn't understand; I was just a kid at the time. Thinking back on it now, it breaks my heart.

A lot of the time Nolan was naturally happy without having to pedal his imaginary bike. Infectious, too. My happiest memory is from when I was thirteen and he was sixteen, on the first of November.

All of us in Ms. Malik's eighth-grade English class were slumped over our desks like empty puppets, crashed and crumpled after Halloween on a school night. It was silent reading time and we were silent but not reading. If it had been kindergarten naptime, nobody would have complained.

A knuckle cracked. I saw my brother peeking into the room from out in the hall. He waved for me to come over and then ducked away. Maybe something was wrong.

I asked to go to the bathroom, got the nod, grabbed the

Magic Wand, and walked into the hall. Nolan was already outside the glass doors at the far end, on his silver eight-speed touring bike. I wondered how he'd managed to slip away from his prison-like high school without being seen.

When I opened the door, Nolan pointed at the Magic Wand. "What the hell is that?"

It was really a dowel with a plywood star glued to one end, painted with glitter. It was childish, sexist, and I hated it. The boys used a black dowel with white tips. I hated that, too, though not as much.

I waved it impatiently. "Hall pass. What's wrong?"

"Get on. I'm gonna show you something amazing."

"Now? I can't leave school! Why aren't YOU in school?"

"We won't be gone long. You can say I made you do it. Get on."

"I don't have my helmet."

"Use mine." He held it out.

"Then YOU won't have a helmet."

He rapped his knuckles on his head. "Don't need one."

Classic Nolan. But I knew the risk wasn't getting hurt, it was getting caught, and I *wouldn't get in trouble if* he *didn't wear his helmet. Didn't work the other way. He often got in trouble for stuff I did because Dad said he was "in charge."*

I bent over to set the Magic Wand down by the wall—

"No, bring it. We might need it."

I didn't know how that could be possible, but sometimes it was better just to go along when Nolan said random stuff like this.

We rode the trail by the golf course, up and down the gentle slopes. We stopped for smoothies at the Healthee Hut—the sweet strawberry kind with nothing 'Healthee' added—and laughed at people drinking bright green blenderized grass. I made him stop at Sandy Park to go on the swings since I knew when he was like this he wouldn't say I was too old and he'd push me super high. I'd shout, "Push me all the way around!" and it always seemed like he really tried to. Next he powered us through the tall weeds in the empty lot to go behind the police station, "So the cops won't see we're cutting school." We stopped at a new store that sold greeting cards and scrapbook supplies and dorky little statues, and it started to get boring till he found a silly joke book that cracked us up. He bought it and off we rode again.

Finally he stopped in front of the bank.

"Ready to see something awesome?"

I'd forgotten that was the point of this trip. Also how I'd been "in the bathroom" at school for over an hour and never showed up to Social Studies.

"What is it?"

"Bring your Magic Wand," Nolan said. He opened the big glass door. "You're gonna love this."

That's where my happiest memory ends.

My own superpower is the ability to not think about anything I don't want to think about. It allows me to relive and enjoy one of the best memories of my life even though it's moments away from my absolute worst.