KATYA BALEN

THE SPACE WE'RE IN



ILLUSTRATED BY LAURA CARLIN

BLOOMSBURY

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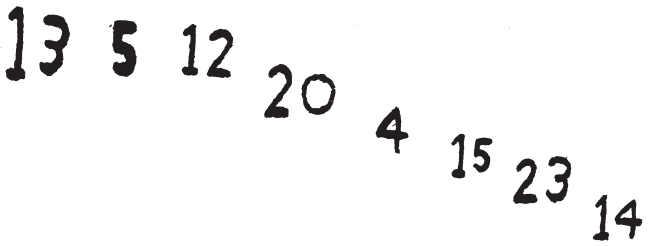
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I am ten and Max is five.

There are twenty-six days until Max starts school and we're going to buy new shoes for the new school. We've looked at his hard plastic book with its little Velcro-y laminated pictures that show him what's happening now and next. It has a blue silky smooth strap so he can wear it round his neck when we're not at home and he needs to know what's going to happen. He doesn't like the weight and the click-clack of the plastic pages though so Mum carries it for him instead. Mum showed him the pictures of shoes and the shop and we whirled

around the world on Google Street View trying to find the shop to show him so he's prepared but it's not there so she's worried worried worried. I went to Egypt on Google Street View and I showed Max but he was jumping up and down so he didn't get to look at the pyramids. Now we are in the car. *New shoes new school* Mum says to Max. Max doesn't say anything because he never says anything and he doesn't stop humming even though I ask him to stop humming.

I'm not going to a new school but I'm getting new shoes. I think that might be confusing Max, so I tell him that I'm not going to a new school. *You are* I say. *You're going to a new school*. Max keeps humming. I tell him to shut up and Mum doesn't say *don't tell your brother to shut up, Frank* because she's worried about the new shoes new school.

We get to the shoe shop and Mum parks the car too close to a wall so I have to wait in my seat while she gets Max out. She puts his reins on and I say *giddy-up* but she doesn't laugh. Max flaps his

hands and Mum shows him his special book and I say *new shoes!* but Max doesn't like that. Mum tells him words using her hands, she says *new* and she says *first shoes, then biscuit* but Max isn't looking so he can't listen.

We go into the shop and Max is still humming so people look at him. I used to tell people he was talking but I don't say that any more. The shop is big, too big for Max. I don't see anyone I know and that makes me happy but it's not the sort of happy that makes me smile. I go and look at cool shoes with high tops and long laces and I hold them up and Mum doesn't say no because she's telling the shoe lady that she can't touch Max's feet but that Mum thinks they're a size two. The lady says she'd like to measure Max because they don't like to sell shoes that don't fit and wouldn't it be easier not to have to bring them back? Mum smiles but she's not smiling really, and says that she just wants the same shoes Max is wearing but bigger and if we have to come back we will just come back.

Max is humming louder and louder and his hands are flapping down by his sides and not up in the air so

I think we might have to go. Mum talks to Max with her hands and gives him a ball to squish with his hands because that might stop them flapping. I am still looking at trainers with ticks and not school shoes because I won't get them today because Max doesn't like this.

The lady isn't happy and she says to Max to come here so she can have *a little look-see* at his feet. I want to tell her to shut up but I don't want to say anything at all so I just look at all the tick trainers with high tops and I choose ones with blue laces. I pick them up and check the size and it's perfect for me. The shoe-shop lady says *lots of little boys don't like having their feet measured* and she's *sure he'll be fine*, and that *he's a brave boy and there are stickers for brave boys* and *does he like football* because she has football stickers and *does he play football or support a football team or perhaps he likes Match Attax cards because little boys like those a lot, don't they?* And then it's too many words and Max is having his meltdown.

I don't know why they call it that, because when

something like ice melts it pours itself into a puddle and it isn't hard any more. When Max melts he's the hardest thing in the world and you think he's going to explode his bones from his body. He bites and bites and bites at his fists and his humming is a scream from his chest and nose and mouth. He is fury and he's lost himself and everyone and everything and everywhere.

All the people in the shop are looking at the furious biting boy even though they're grown-ups and it's rude to stare and the shop lady doesn't say anything any more. I don't stare. Mum is using her hands again to say *finished finished finished* and she says it with her mouth too. She picks Max up because he is stiff and small and not a puddle but he kicks and lashes and twists himself *hisssss* like a snake. His fingers are in his ears because he doesn't like the sound he's making and then the two of them push out through the door and Mum holds his reins as he gallops.

I put back the tick trainers with blue laces.

Finished f i n i s h e d.



3 18 15 19 19

Mum is very cross with the shoe lady but she doesn't say that to me. I am very cross with the shoe lady because she talked to Max when he was tightrope balancing and she pushed him off and down down down. *We'll try again* Mum says. *We'll try again another day*. I know that she means Dad will go and get everything and Max will stay at home and spin himself round and round until he's too dizzy to do that and then he'll watch something else spin round.

Mum takes out the special sticky Velcro-y pictures of shoes from Max's special book and she puts them away in a plastic folder that's fat with

pictures he doesn't like and then she gives him his special toy bug that buzzes gently when you touch its nose.

Max has lots and lots of special things.

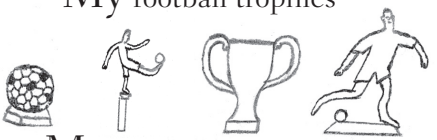
He has
His special book with
plastic pages and laminated
sticky Velcro pictures to show
him what's now and next
His special plastic
pictures that Angelique is
teaching him to exchange for
things he wants
His special box full of
things that light up and spin
and glow like
his special squashy balls
and glitter tubes and buzzy
bugs to help him
feel calm.


OWL
BIRD
CROWN
EYES
Smoke
SUN
HAT
doll
TREE
LAMP
BEE
TRIANGLE
FISH
butterfly
TAXI
FEET
Gate
RECTANGLE
SHOES
TOILET
EAT
fruit
SPIDER
TURT
drink
Table
LADDER


CLOCK
BALLOON
Glass
SOCKS
PANTS
GLASSES
SHORTS
CART
Horse
BRIDGE
SHOPPING
Envelope
Strawberries
BUS
MONKEY
TEN PENCE
DRUM.
CAMEL
BELL
Slide
Bat
BOAT
CAT
Ring
RAINBOW

I have

My football trophies



My bright red bike with

twenty-one gears



My books on detectives

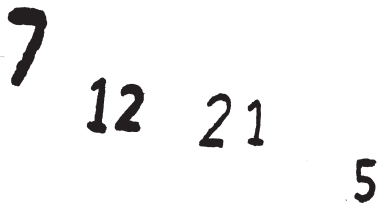
and codes and space

A lock on

my bedroom door.

When he gets home from work Dad goes on his own and gets the shoes. I stay at home in my room because he wants to be *quick about it* and Max stays at home and spins. Mum pushes her fingers into her temples like she always does when her head is bursting.

Max gets the same shoes as always and forever and mine are black with laces that give my fingers rope burn and I wish they were different.



There are twenty-one days before school starts. Max hasn't been to proper school before. When he was three Max went to nursery but he melted and melted and melted day after day after day. His face was always puffy from crying and from hitting himself until the skin around his eyes was painted with blue bruises. Then Max bit another child and the nursery asked Mum to come and pick him up. She cried afterwards and Granny M came round and was all capable and calm and put the kettle on.

Granny M is Mum's mum and sometimes I think it's funny that Mum still has her mum who comes

round and makes her tea. Granny M is like a little bird with twiggy arms in soft jumpers and legs draped in grey trousers but she's like steel underneath sometimes, like when people stare at Max or when I haven't done my homework. Mum told her what had happened at nursery and I listened even though I was pretending to be working on codes in my notebook. Ahmed and Jamie and I had a whole new alphabet made of spikey symbols and dots and lines and I was trying to push all of the new letters into my head so I could write them secret notes in class. I put my face very close to the paper so I wasn't even looking at them but I didn't write a single word.

Mum was hiccup-crying in little bursts and she said that Kelsey from nursery wanted extra training before she could be Max's worker again. Mum kept saying *he's never bitten another child before, not even Frank.* And I thought about the little pink and purple thumbprints on my arms from when Max is too excited or too hot or too cross and I didn't really think it mattered about the not-biting. Mum was trying to

swallow tea but she couldn't make it go down right and Granny M gave her a thump on the back and Mum cried again and said she was too upset to even swallow a cup of tea and *if you can't have a cup of tea in a crisis then what's the point of being British*. And then she did a laugh that still sounded like a sob. Max didn't go back to nursery after that and he and Mum were stuck together like glue.

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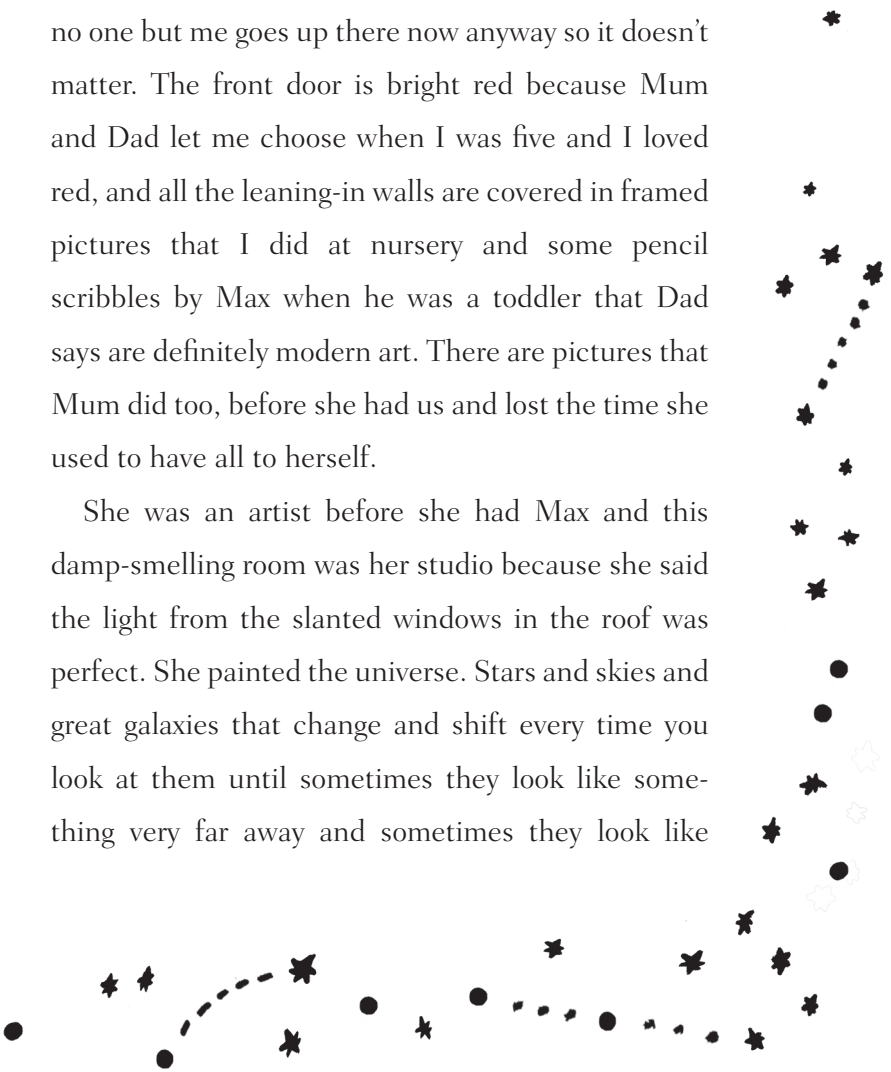
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There are twenty days before Max starts school and I am in my room listening to him shout and whirl and melt. The sound is bouncing and echoing up through the floorboards and so I climb up and up the winding attic stairs until I can't hear his howls. The stairs creak and whine but it's because we live in a ramshackle house. That's what Dad calls it and he rolls the r round in his mouth and lets it fly out with a flick of his tongue. Max laughs when he says it so he says it a lot. *My wife and my boys in our ramshackle house*. Dad made it sound beautiful, so when I looked up ramshackle on Google and it said *in a state of severe disrepair*

I thought I must have found the wrong word.

The house has got strange crumbly bits and the walls lean in towards us and the floorboards groan when Max spins. The top room all the way up the attic stairs has a musty damp smell when it rains but no one but me goes up there now anyway so it doesn't matter. The front door is bright red because Mum and Dad let me choose when I was five and I loved red, and all the leaning-in walls are covered in framed pictures that I did at nursery and some pencil scribbles by Max when he was a toddler that Dad says are definitely modern art. There are pictures that Mum did too, before she had us and lost the time she used to have all to herself.

She was an artist before she had Max and this damp-smelling room was her studio because she said the light from the slanted windows in the roof was perfect. She painted the universe. Stars and skies and great galaxies that change and shift every time you look at them until sometimes they look like something very far away and sometimes they look like



something you've known all your life.

She used to have exhibitions in galleries and people would pay lots of money for her paintings and every time she sold one Dad would open a bottle of champagne and they would dance round the kitchen and drink from tall thin glasses. Once, she dipped her finger into the glass and put it into my mouth so I could taste it and it *popped*

and burned and fizzed

and they both laughed when I stuck out my tongue and cried that I didn't like it. Then Mum put her arms around me and lifted me high up towards the ceiling and the three of us danced in a circle on the cold kitchen tiles.

When I was small, even smaller than Max, Mum still climbed these stairs in the morning while I played spaceships with Granny M or Dad or the nanny whose name I can't remember. Mum started the day in a clean blue shirt, always a soft blue shirt, and

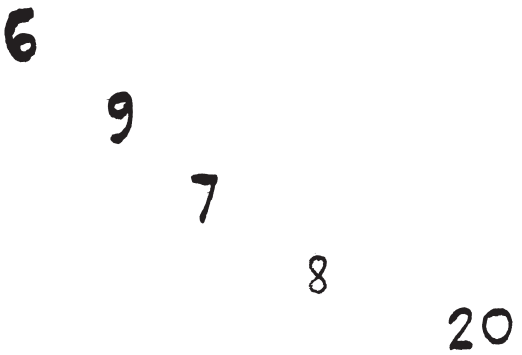
every time she came back down the stairs there were all the colours of a new painting decorating her clothes and her skin. Dad always wore a suit made from something scratchy and dark, with a shirt that stayed clean all day and sometimes a tie with pointed ends like a snake's tongue that he could flick into an impossible knot.

Before Max, he'd always be home to tuck me into bed and he would read me stories about an adventuring astronaut floating through the Milky Way in a crow-black sky, and about the boy detective Tintin who solved puzzles and codes to solve crimes. I loved those stories because all the clues fitted together at the end and then everything was OK. Dad told me when I was old enough he'd teach me a special type of code for computers because that's what he does all day at work but I'm old enough now and I'm still waiting.

Then Mum's blue shirt started stretching out further and further away from her as her belly grew a new person and Mum stopped going upstairs quite as much. Instead she would help me paint paper

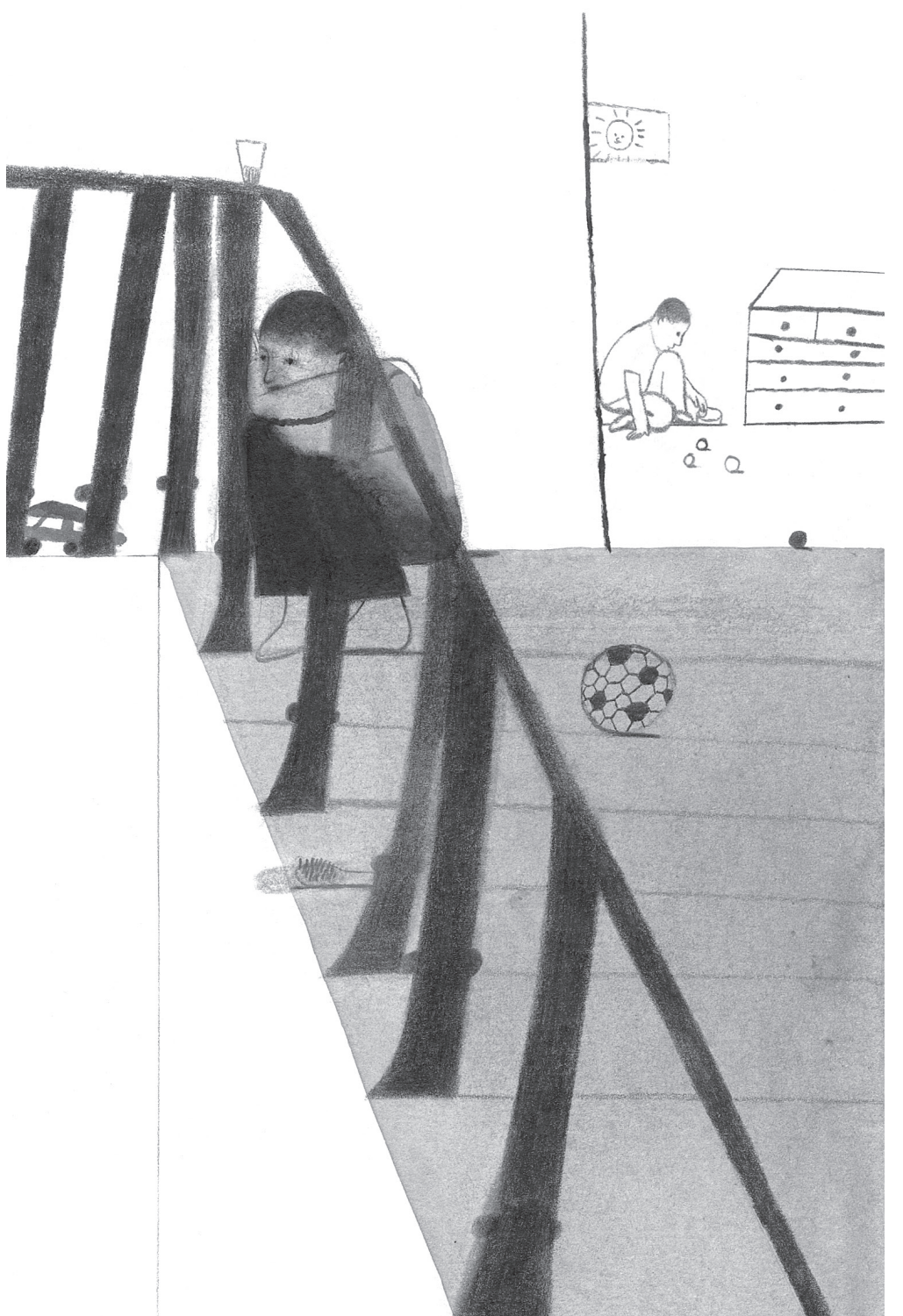
planets to hang from my ceiling and together we mapped out the stars on my walls. When Max was born she stopped going upstairs at all and she didn't sell any more paintings. Dad started wearing his suit so much it was like it had become stitched to his skin and there were no more bedtime stories because Dad wouldn't be back from work in time and Mum would be with Max.

And now I sit on the floor in Mum's studio surrounded by dried-out tubes of paint that have lost their smell and I scribble my codes on to a huge blank snowy-white canvas. My favourite code is the number-letters-spiral cipher which is just about the easiest code in the universe but it's my favourite anyway. Cipher is just another word for code really but I love the way it sounds. I don't know what the hardest code in the universe is but I want to be the one to invent it. I don't want anyone to be able to crack it, and I'll use it to write everything that burns inside me on days like this.



There are nineteen days before Max starts school. Dad has just got home from work and he promised he'd be home for tea but tea is *finished*. Mum and Dad are having a whispery hissed fight about Max and about *what is best*. Their fight is the loudest since the time Max gave Mum a black eye without meaning to hit at all but still hitting, watery swelling puffing along her cheek and ink-blue teardrop bruises spilling in a starry galaxy around her temple.

I peep through the banisters while Max sits in his room and peacefully rolls a marble round and round a plastic peanut-butter lid. Dad stands stiff like a soldier but his hands are stuffed deep in his pockets so that the stitches



make little crackles. Mum throws her arms wide like she's about to give him a hug so big it would wrap around and around him but instead she just starts to cry. She howls that all she wants is to take us away somewhere beautiful. Dad makes these odd little chirrupy shushing noises that sound more like a bird than a man but Mum doesn't notice the birdman standing in her living room. He needs to help her. She says it over and over. Her eyes are swimmy and full and she gulps air like she's drowning.

I don't want to watch any more but I can't move without them noticing me so I sit so still that my lungs start to ache for more air. Mum wipes her eyes and sniffs and says *It'll be OK won't it? I just wish we could get away from all of this*. And in that moment I wish that my piggybank that's shaped like a football had more than eleven pounds and forty-seven pence in it so I could take her on holiday far away from our ramshackle house.

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There are eighteen days before Max starts school. Dad tells me that he's going to start doing more for me and Max and won't that be nice, a bit more time together. *Mum's been feeling tired, champ, so we have to help out a bit more than we do right now*. He looks a bit guilty when he says this and he starts tugging at his tie so that the knot gets tighter and tighter.

He tries to put me and Max to bed and it all goes wrong. Max's bath isn't right and it never is but Dad doesn't sing the bath song or splash the water

with a pat of his hand to show that it's really OK. He doesn't put on the bedtime lightshow that speckles the stars across Max's ceiling and bathes his little face in all of the universe. Everything falls out of place and I sit on my bed listening to the screams that echo from room to room until I hear Mum's soft voice sing a lullaby that rises up over Max's sounds and hushes them back into his mouth.

I brush my teeth and put on my pyjamas and read four pages of my book and have my half hour on the iPad which has a cracked screen from when Max flew it down the stairs *whoosh bang*. I time myself and no one comes to tell me the time's up so I have forty-five minutes instead and then I turn out my light because no one comes to tell me to do that either.

I hear Dad slip out from Max's room and his socks padding on the floorboards outside my room. I pretend to be asleep and he puts his face around my door. I squint through half-closed lashes and through the blur I can see his tears.

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19
21 18 5 19

There are seventeen days before Max starts school and Mum and I are going to a flea market to hunt for treasure. Mum wakes me up early, even earlier than for school and the sun is painting the sky with orange streaks. We leave Dad and Max at the kitchen table eating breakfast and walk to the train station just the two of us with no Max strapped into his too-big pushchair or flapping and bouncing as he walks next to me and taking up all my space. It's just me and Mum and she holds my hand even though I'm ten.

At the station she buys me a hot chocolate with extra whipped cream that is piled up like a cloud in the cup and on the platform she talks to me about my favourite things. We talk about space and the universe and how it would take 800 years to fly to Pluto in a normal plane and how the sunset on Mars is blue. We don't have to sing songs or talk with our hands or hold Max's stiff-melting body when the rumble of the train on the tracks makes him scream. When we get on the train she taps our secret code on to the palm of my hand and I tap it back.

Our code is Morse code and it was invented



hundreds of years ago before telephones and texts



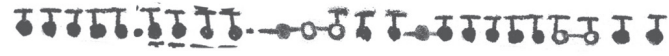
and emails but the people who used it then had



machines that tapped out messages made of short



taps and long taps. It was for sending messages to



places far away, and you can even do it with torches



by making long flashes and short flashes but Mum and I use it when we're right next to each other so it's special and it's ours. We use our hands and Mum taught it to me when I was little and we were learning to speak to Max with his signs. We all had to learn how to say finished and thank you and biscuit with our hands. But when I was scared or angry or crying or lonely, Mum could take my hand in hers and the taps and lines dot-dot dot-d a s h-dot-dot d a s h-dot-d a s h-d a s h meant she loved me. Just between us.

When we get to the flea market we walk through a world of colour and shapes and noise and we don't have to make it all go away because Max isn't with us. It feels like the world has been switched on. I can smell dust and age and when a man drops a chair we don't have to leave because of the bang. Mum finds me a whole set of *Beano* comics from right back when they started and their pages are yellowed with all the years since they were printed but there isn't a single crease lining the

paper. I imagine the child who had them all those years ago being so careful with the delicate sheets that felt like flower petals and I hold them in my hands like they are made of glass.

Mum can spot a bargain at a thousand paces and as she wanders through the tightly packed aisles of people all burrowing through piles of clothes and knick-knacks and ornaments she's the first to spot a glint of colour peeking up from the bottom of a wet cardboard box. She puts her hand in and gently digs down until she frees her prize. She holds a little scrap of light, a luminous orb filled with arches and swirls and bubbles that shine and reflect the whole world around us. Mum says it's a paperweight but it looks like it's a piece of magic to me. It flings out its colours like a magician pulling handkerchief after handkerchief from his sleeves just like the one at Jamie's eighth birthday party. I'd wanted him for my party but in the end we went to the cinema instead and Dad had to stay at home with Max anyway.

When we get home Mum puts the paperweight on

a shelf in my room next to my football trophies and its light bounces off my star-print walls where the constellations swirl and twinkle. My room is somewhere Max can't go and it's full of my treasures. I have a padlock on the outside of the door to keep it locked when I'm out and he's not, and the padlock has a code to open it. It's 2302 because that's my birthday and Max doesn't know that.

Now my room is even better than before. Mum stands back and declares the glass orb looks just right and it's like it had been made especially for our house and for my room. It slots right into its place like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle and I glow inside because it's like magic and Mum bought it just for me and it looks *just right*.

