SOFA SURFER

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ZEPHYR

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One



You never forget the day you lose your home.

I lost mine on a Tuesday.

I'd been doing maths homework. Evaluating exponents. Torture.

'Tyler,' shouted Mum.

'What?' I grunted, more to me than her.

'Tyler,' she cried again.

Guess it must be dinner. Or I've left a shoe lying around somewhere. Not bothered, really. Anything that stops maths is good to me. I closed my books, went downstairs, and looked in the dining room. Nobody there. No knives or forks or placemats out. Must be something else.

'We're in here.'

I dragged myself into the sitting room. As soon as I set foot inside I knew something wasn't right. For a start, Mum and Dad were sitting, squidged tight together on the sofa, holding hands and smiling: something they

only do when they've been drinking. What made it stranger was that they didn't seem relaxed. They were perched right on the edge, as if there was something exciting on TV, which there wasn't. It was Sky News, with the sound off.

'Sit down,' said Dad.

I flopped on to a chair. Tallulah, my little sister, was already sitting cross-legged on the floor. The air was crackling with anticipation. For the first time ever I realised that the gold clock on the mantelpiece made a ticking sound.

'What's happened?'

'It's not what's happened. It's what will happen,' said Mum, squeezing Dad's hand, as they looked at each other with faces still debating whether to be happy or sad.

'We're going to move,' said Dad. From his voice, from his expression, from his body language, from everything, I got the impression I wasn't going to like what came next.

'Up north,' said Mum.

The oxygen level in the room dropped as Tallulah and I took in two extra-large portions of breath.

'Up north?' said Tallulah.

Mum and Dad nodded in unison.

The clock on the mantelpiece could not have ticked any louder.

'Why?' I asked.

'I've been offered a job in Bradford.'

'Where's that?' said Tallulah.

'Yorkshire.'

'Where's that?' said Tallulah.

They clearly weren't big on geography in Year Four.

'It's a big county. Up past Gran and Grandad's house.'

I stared at the TV. The presenter looked as if they were in a fish tank, mouthing silent words. I half-expected a banner to appear along the bottom: *Breaking news: the Jackson family to leave London.* I'd once got hit smack in the face by a ball in the playground. My parents' announcement was comparable to this.

Tick. Tock.

Over the last few months I'd heard them talking about properties and job opportunities and stuff like that. But that's all I thought it was – talk. Didn't for one second think the talk would actually turn into anything meaningful, like action. Mum and Dad aren't exactly the intrepid type. Dad's an accountant. His big love is golf, which is also his big hate, judging by the look on his face when he comes back. Mum works in HR, which I think is where you deal with people who hate their jobs. So why did they have to go and be vaguely adventurous?

'Well, say something,' said Mum.

But it's hard to find words when your brain's out of order.

I finally found one, hiding in a corner.

'When?'

Mum took a big breath. 'Your dad starts work in three months. I'm going to find a new job. In the meantime we'll start searching for a new home.'

Tick. Tock.

'But we've got a home.'

Mum and Dad swapped looks, as if to say, *Who's going to take this one?* Mum stepped up to the plate.

'Tyler, your dad's been given a great opportunity. We're both really stressed out working in London. It'll be a new start for all of us. Also, the air quality here's not getting any better. It'll do my asthma the world of good to get out of town. And we'll be nearer Gran and Grandad in Derby.'

She'd obviously been working on that list.

'And then there's the crime,' she continued.

'What crime?'

'It's all around us. A boy got stabbed in Richmond last week.'

'Three stops away on the tube. Big deal.'

'It was a pretty big deal for his parents.'

Mum gets worked up about stuff like that. Even cries at the news sometimes.

'Where will we live?' said Tallulah.

'We'll find somewhere nice,' said Mum, smiling at Dad for support. 'Maybe a village somewhere.'

'A village?' I spat, with as much disgust as I could muster.

'Or a small town.'

'I don't want to go.'

'Lots of families move.'

'Lots of families stay put. I want to stay here.'

Dad looked at Mum, as if to say, *Told you he'd be a nightmare.*

'You've got to give it a chance.'

But I didn't want to give Yorkshire a chance. I didn't want to give anywhere a chance. I wanted to stay here. Where I live. I'd heard enough. Got to my feet and stomped towards the door.

'Tyler,' exclaimed Mum. 'We haven't finished.'

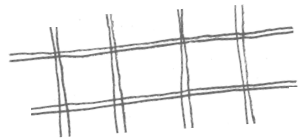
But I had.

Went upstairs as noisily as I could, kicked open the door to my room, swept all my maths books off my desk and fell backwards on to my bed. How could they do this to me? I've got everything I want here. Everything. My squad: Ben, Asher, Tom, Lucas, Reggie, Mason. Brentford FC, a bus ride away. A school I don't hate anywhere near enough to want to leave. And last but not least, I've got London, the city with a squillion things to do. The place everyone wants to move to. So what do we do? Leave it for some crumbling village, up north.

I put my hand against the wall. I don't think it's possible to love a wall, but I loved this one, and the three I couldn't quite reach, and the bedroom door, and the floor and the windows and the ceiling. It wasn't the greatest house in the world, but I suddenly realised how much it meant to me. It was part of my life. A picture popped up in my mind. Me in the hall, in a Moses basket, one day old. It's the only home I've ever known.

I took my hand off the wall and put it to my face. The cool felt good. My face was burning. Didn't think I could get emotional over a house, but that's what their news had done to me. Tears began to escape. They didn't want to go to Yorkshire either. They wanted to stay here, where they belonged. But I knew deep down it wasn't going to happen. I'd seen the looks on Mum and Dad's faces. They'd made their minds up. We were leaving.

Two



Fast-forward six months.

I now live in Ilkley, West Yorkshire.

And I hate it.

Our new house has all the usual stuff – front door, windows, drainpipes, roof, rooms. It's also got something else, a stupid name – *Fairview*. Maybe it had a fair view once, when it was built by the Victorians or whoever. Now it's got a view of a road and three lock-up garages. But Mum and Dad love it. Or they seem to love it. Don't really care. All I know is that my home is over three hundred kilometres from where it should be.

Our house isn't the only thing screwing up my life. It also happens to be the start of the summer holidays. What's wrong with that? This is what's wrong with that: I'm faced with weeks and weeks of nothingness, trapped in a place where excitement has been abolished, with no mates whatsoever. Well, not entirely true. I have

made two friends, Dom Kingham and Jack Goddard, but right now they may as well be enemies. Dom's gone to his parents' house in France for the entire summer, and while Jack's still here, he might as well not be. The only thing I can rely on him for is being unreliable. We arrange to meet. He cancels. We fix up a game online. He's busy. I think while he's number one on my new friend list, I'm at the bottom of his. I only get a look-in when his other mates are busy. Probably in his contacts as *TLR: Tyler, Last Resort*.

I miss my old home like mad.

Might sound a bit odd, but I took photos of all the rooms before we left, and every now and then, I lie on my bed and look at them on my phone, remembering everything that went on there. The kitchen window I broke with a football. The sitting room, where I found my badly wrapped bike one Christmas morning. My bedroom, where I used to hang out for hours with my mates, my real mates. The downstairs cupboard, where I used to throw my school jacket. The bathroom with the toilet I puked in when I got gastroenteritis.

I didn't tell Mum and Dad about the photos. They'd only go mad.

Tyler, you've got to move on.

Where to?

Thought I might have got over it by now. But I haven't. Even though the rooms are familiar, I still hate

them, like kids in class you can't get on with, no matter how hard you try. It's as though our old house has died and I'm the only one who's sad.

Mum's got a new job. Always said she wanted to work from home, and now she does, as a content moderator for some social media company. Has to watch all that horrible stuff online she won't let me watch, then tell someone to take it down. From the look on her face by tea time, she's more stressed than she ever was in London. Not that she'd ever admit it.

Dad's also got a new job and works really long hours. The country doesn't seem to have done much to relax him, and he turns into Mr Moody when he gets home. At weekends, he goes walking after a golf ball with some neighbours.

The family member who's most in love with Ilkley is Tallulah. She seems to have made friends with just about every single seven-year-old in town, and her summer comprises a diary full of play dates. Good for you, little sis.

But Mum was right about one thing. In half a year of living in West Yorkshire none of us has been stabbed.

There was something else good to come out of moving up here.

Dexter.

When we moved, Mum and Dad promised we could get a dog. As bribes go, it was champion, as Yorkshire

people say. I've even put him in the contact list on my phone, with a made-up number. Loneliness does weird things to you.

Time for one of his walks.

In the kitchen, there he is, ever-ready Dexter, tail wagging, eyes wide open, tongue unfolded, waiting to go. It's all you have to do to make a dog happy. Open a door. Dexter's a Border Collie. Farmers often use them as sheep dogs. Not that we have any sheep. The only thing he has to herd is me.

I grabbed his lead from a hook on the wall and walk outside.

'Bye, Fairspew.'

We went down the street, and across the fields towards the River Wharfe, me at a trot, Dexter as if he'd been shot from a canon. We reached a big wooden gate, but before I could open it, Dexter was already on the other side, squeezing flat on his belly and squirming through, desperate to reach the open space. We crossed Riverside Gardens, Dexter darting this way and that, but never far from my feet, as if attached by an invisible string.

'You love it here, don't you?'

Dexter's tongue flopped out. Dog speak for, *Yes, you idiot.*

Fields and woods and hills and lakes and streams. Perfect if you have four legs. Not so perfect if you have two. And you're fifteen. And friendless. And bored.

'Want to chase sticks?'

That's the most stupid thing you've ever said, Tyler.

I found a big stick and threw it as far as I could. Within seconds it was back at my feet, covered in slobber, ready to be launched again.

'Wonder what my friends in Chiswick are doing now?'

Dexter looked at me. Clueless.

I used to FaceTime them, but not any more. Just too painful. Seeing them, but not being able to be with them. Hearing about the things they'd done, reminding me of all the things I hadn't done. Mum says we can go and visit them some time, but that would be torture too. A few hours, when what I'm really after is weeks. And then heading back up the M1. In slow-moving traffic.

'I still hate them for what they've done. What do you think of my parents, Dex?'

Dexter squatted and did a poo.

I laughed.

Briefly.

I'd forgotten the poo bags.

I looked around to see if anyone had spotted Dexter's curly calling card. Luckily there was no one near, and I hurried away. Probably get arrested here for doing something like that.

We crossed the bridge over the River Wharfe and past the rugby club.

'Can you believe we're not even going on holiday this year?'

Dexter seemed happy at this news. No kennels for him.

'How could they choose a new kitchen over two weeks in Spain?'

Unable to answer, Dexter ran off.

Typical. The one year I most wanted to get away, we stay put. Mum had her heart set on an island with a granite top, twin sinks, and cupboards. I had my heart set on a different sort of island. Mum won.

What was I going to do? While I loved Dexter, I couldn't walk him every minute of every day. His paws would be down to stumps by September. I needed to find something else to fill my days. Something that didn't cost much. Something that maybe gave me the chance to meet someone. The answer came a few minutes later.

As we turned into Denton Road, I saw a white building in the distance, surrounded by a wall. A place where many hours could be happily killed.

Ilkley Lido and Pool.