THE DAY THE SCREENS WENT BLANK

DANNY WALLACE

Illustrated by gemma CORRELL

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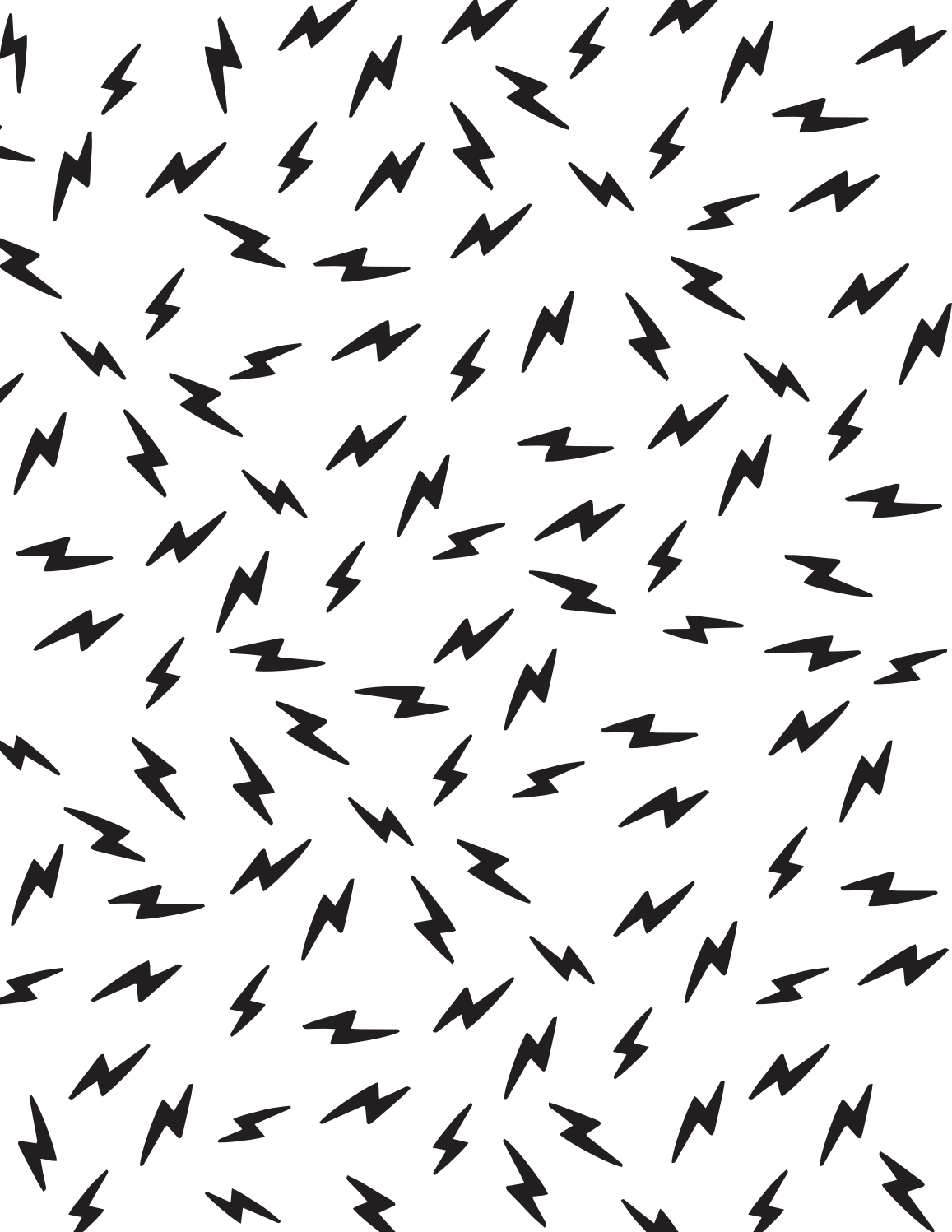
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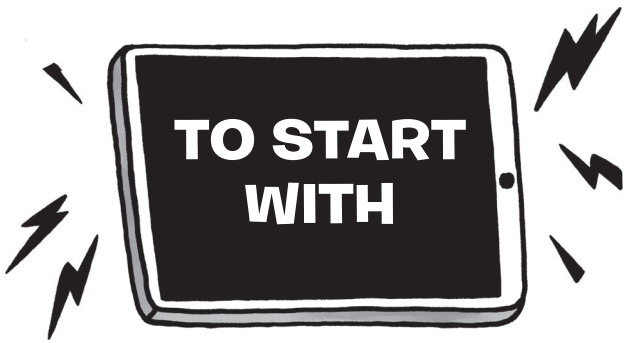
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This one's for Clover.
For making me laugh every
single day.





Well, look, I don't know about you, but I found everything that happened EXTREMELY weird.

I think *everybody* found it extremely weird, if I'm honest.

Definitely me, and definitely Mum and Dad.

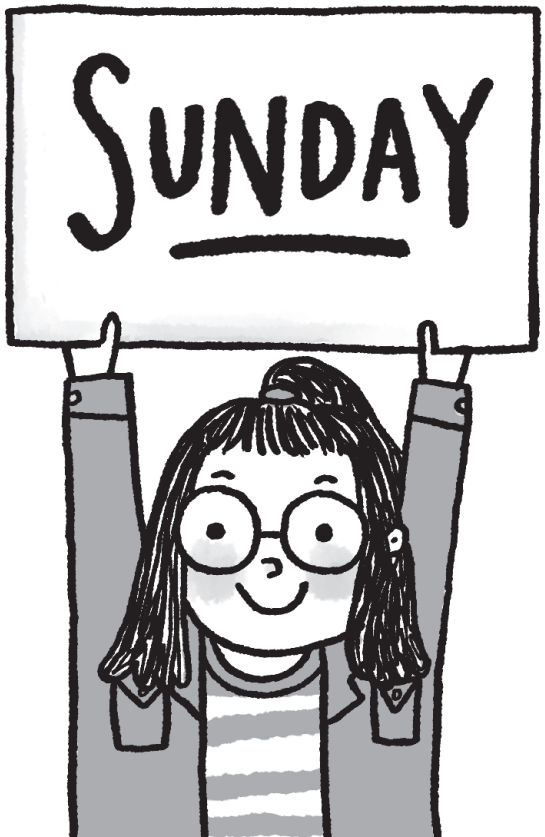
Sandra from next door definitely found it weird too.

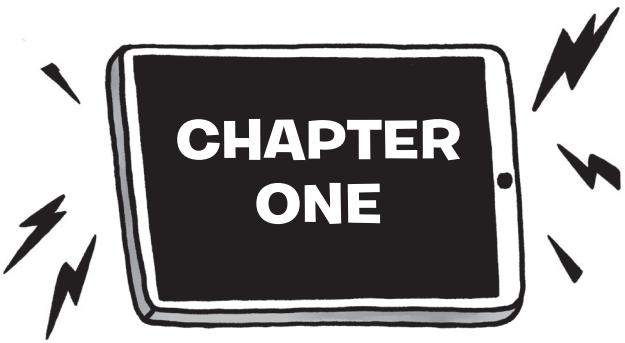
The lady we met by the side of the road definitely

did, and so did Ernie, and I'm pretty sure Boring Paul must have.

Even the angry woman with the tattoos was probably just using all those bad words because she was coping with how properly mad it all was.

But, wait! I'm getting ahead of myself and I bet you're like, what on earth is this girl Stella talking about?! So let me start at the beginning. Let me start on . . .





So Sundays in my house are awesome because on Sundays we have Bobcroft Family Film Night.

Bobcroft Family Film Night is spectacular because Dad dims the lights and Mum makes popcorn, so already this is kind of a winner, right?

The whole of the Bobcroft family then strides into the living room.

My brother Teddy sits on the Big Chair in the corner

because he's the littlest.

I sit on the beanbag (which one day, when we finally get a dog, I will give to him or her with great pleasure because I love dogs).

And Mum and Dad sit on the sofa and make all those sounds like OOOH and AAAAH that grown-ups make when they sit down and want to tell you they're totally relaxing.

Dad picks up a remote and holds it in the air like he's about to start a race, to signal that Film Night is beginning.

And like LIGHTNING I pop on Mum's noise-cancelling



headphones and get my phone out.

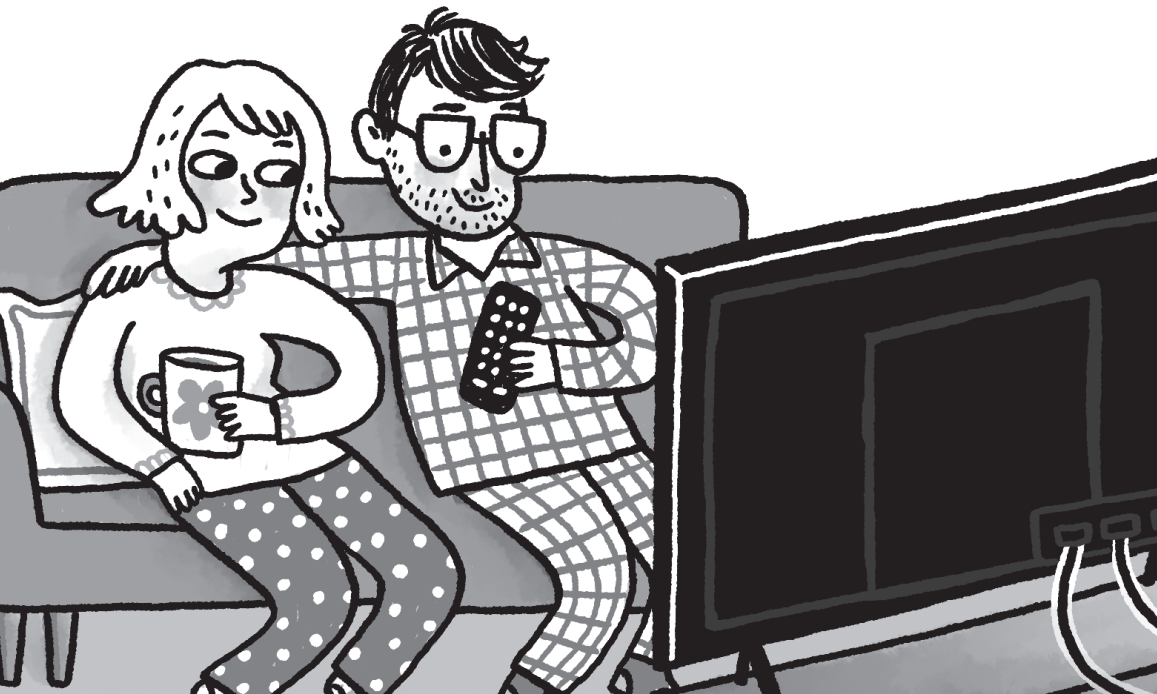
Teddy gets his tablet out.

Mum and Dad press play.

And we all sit quietly and watch our films.

Mum and Dad watch their film on the Big TV. Usually it's one where people follow each other round an old house, saying long words at each other. Sometimes Mum and Dad randomly skip bits and I'm not sure why. I guess they're impatient.

I'll usually choose something exciting but age-appropriate and on Sunday it was *Dumbo,* which I was



greatly enjoying, though I have to say it was a little far-fetched.

So, just like every other Sunday, we're all sitting there, doing our separate things like a family, when suddenly it happens.

The music stops and the elephant disappears and now I can hear Dad again.

He says, '*Offle. Boffle woffle boffle.*'

So I take off Mum's headphones and now I can actually hear him properly and he's complaining that their film's just stopped.



He's sitting on the edge of the sofa and he keeps pressing the buttons on his remote control, but it doesn't help, so he presses them again but *muuuuch* harder, as if that's going to do anything.

Well, I looked at Mum and told her my film had gone too and she asked Teddy if his thing was still working, but it wasn't.

So we all just sat there for a bit.

And then we just put down our screens and went to bed.

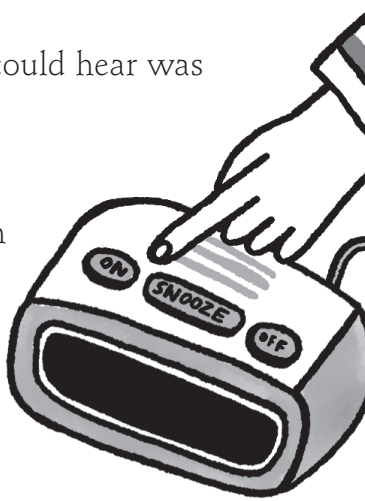


Okay, I know that wasn't the most dramatic opening of all time, but you just wait because THIS is where things get weird!

When I woke up the next morning, all I could hear was panic from downstairs.

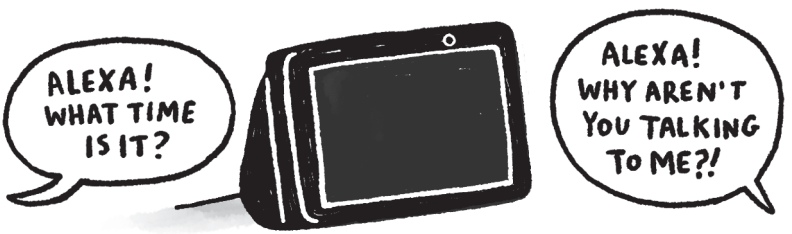
I checked my alarm clock but it was dead.

And even though I'd left my phone on charge just in case it came back to life in the night like a mobile zombie, that was dead too.



I could hear Dad in the kitchen complaining about sleeping in and being late for work.

He kept shouting, 'Alexa! What time is it?' and 'Alexa! What's going on?' and 'Alexa! What did I do? Why aren't you talking to me?!'



Mum was muttering something about how 'the systems' must have gone down, but apart from her and Dad I couldn't hear any of the other sounds I normally hear. I couldn't hear *Good Morning Britain* or Sky News on WAY too loud. Mum wasn't making her poached eggs in the microwave. *Zero* beep-beeps.

Dad hates being late. He says, when he was a kid, you

could never be late, because in those days you couldn't text people to let them know you were going to be late but you were on your way. He says if you were late, when you got there, everybody would have just gone somewhere else because you were late. And you had no idea where and you couldn't call them. So you just had to walk around for ages and hope you found them. What kind of system is that? Madness.

Someone should have invented phones a LOT earlier, though Dad says they had *one* in each house. Poor Dad, growing up like that. When you wanted to speak to someone, you had to phone their *home* phone and speak to a grown-up first! I mean, ex-squeeze me, but what? You had to talk to someone's mum and ask if you could speak to your friend! I'm sorry, but I have human rights. I don't need to get stuck answering boring adult questions about how Mum's getting on or how school is. Time is money.



Anyway, because of all the shouting, I go downstairs and immediately I can tell something is not right, right?

First up, what was that noise?

Answer: that noise was NOTHING.

There were no text-message DINGS.

There were no email WHOOSHES.

There were no bleeps or blips or tweety whistles or WhatsApp ting-tings.

Teddy was sitting miserably at the kitchen table with his blank tablet. Usually he'd be watching an age-appropriate video of giant airliners or something.



Dad's staring at his phone and shaking his head. Then he starts shouting about how come the toaster is working and the lights can turn on but the TV and his laptop are just blank screens? He says that's not how power cuts work. You either have power or you don't.

Then he says he's going to have to use the computers at work and Mum says she's going to have to borrow a laptop or something. Dad works up the road in Penzance, selling houses. Mum works from home, designing things for rich people who buy them on the internet. She doesn't charge very much. She gets very stressed though so she's got one of those apps she can stare at that tells her when to breathe. I think that's weird, cos I just seem to know when to breathe. I don't know why you need an app to tell you to breathe. Sometimes I creep up behind her and just shout *BREATHE!* This is not her favourite thing about me.

Anyway, just then there was a knock at the door and it was Sandra from next door.

She says have we heard?



And we're like, 'Heard what?'

And she says, 'Oh, you haven't heard then?'

And we're like, 'Heard what?'

And she says, 'Well, it's not good news.'

And we're like, 'Just TELL US what we HAVEN'T HEARD!'

Anyway, she says her telly broke last night and we're like, 'OURS TOO!'

And then Dad spotted Sandra was wearing a normal old-fashioned watch and asked her what time it was because nothing in the house was telling him any more. She said it was half past eight.



Now Dad was double stressed because he knew he had an appointment somewhere at nine a.m. but didn't know what it was, or who it was with, because he keeps his work diary on his phone.

He walked out of the house, shaking his head, and got in his car.

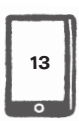
And then he got out again because he'd forgotten his phone.

And then he got back in again because it wasn't like he needed it.

And then he got back out again because he should probably take it just in case he did.

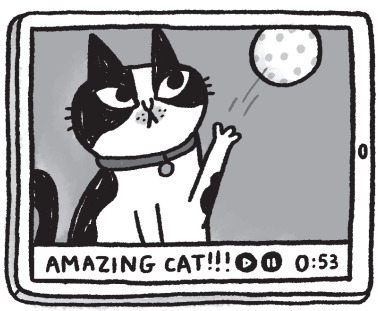


Now it was just us, Mum was trying to pretend like it was just a weird blip or something that would sort itself out asap, but I knew that something seriously odd and WRONG had happened.



You might think I'd panic that all the screens and tech seemed to have just sort of vanished, but I am not a panicker and I am perfectly able to go without watching a viral video for a bit. Between you and me, sometimes I can't help feeling a little jealous or not quite good enough when I watch those things anyway.

Like, you know those YouTube or TikTok vids where you click on one and it's some guy throwing a ball at a cat, and the cat hits the ball, and the ball bounces off a wall and lands in a cup? I've never done anything like that.



And I can't sing like this girl I saw on a foreign *X Factor* thing, and she was only eight.

And I can't do any of those make-up tutorials very well because Mum doesn't buy much make-up and what she does have is *for special*.

My old teacher used to say that not everybody can be

extraordinary, because if everybody was extraordinary, there wouldn't be any really extraordinary people, would there? Just extra ORDINARY ones.

Well, that's STUPID.

Because what I am really good at is being highly-organized. Which I know sounds a bit rubbish, but it is GOOD to be organized. I always know where my shoes are and no one ever has to yell 'Stellaaaa!' at me to brush my teeth. I take pride in always being one step ahead. The key used to be Post-it Notes, until I realized that was bad for the environment, so now I use the organizer on my mum's old phone. There's nothing more satisfying than a full calendar, complete with handy information. Like what time the chip shop opens and how many supermarket loyalty points I've got (five). I think I'm probably already the most organized girl in Mousehole.

I am also responsible. I award myself a certain amount of screen time each week, as recommended by the



World Health Organization. I enjoy order, planning, and knowing where I am supposed to be and when. I am regularly praised by grown-ups for my sensible approach, which is why I agree with my parents that now is not the right time for the family to get a dog because it would require more scheduling and planning. And even though I would volunteer to walk it myself every morning and evening and I could take it to the beach or run around in the woods with it, I agree that at the age of ten I am not old enough to do this yet.

And I am FINE with all this. I will wait for Jacinda.

Anyway, being organized is what I'm thinking about as I walk to school with Mum and Teddy because right now it's going to pay to be prepared. I can already see that this problem with the screens isn't just on our street. I reckon it's hit all of Mousehole.



The streets in Mousehole are steep and narrow and they wind round and round.



Everywhere I look, people are walking around with their phones out in front of them. Some of them look puzzled and some of them seem properly panicked. I'm getting a *major* 'watch out' vibe. Every now and again they'll tap at their screen, or press the buttons to see if anything starts working again, but none of them look happy.

It makes me want to check my own phone, but that's still blank too. Mum let me have her old one because she says, even though when she was young kids didn't have phones, it is better to be safe than sorry. Mum is always worried about me wandering off, or running into baddies wherever I turn, or maybe getting stuck in quicksand. I think she watches too much TV. I find a lot of adults have very vivid imaginations, but I think that should be encouraged.

Anyway, as we walk past the café, I look in the window and the TV isn't on like it normally is.

The nice thing is that people seem to be talking to each other. Even though all they're talking about is their phones. 'What is that, a Samsung?' I hear one man say to another man.

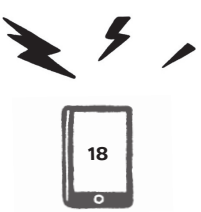
'It's a Sony,' he says.

'Has that gone too?'

'And my Kindle.'

'Weird, innit?'

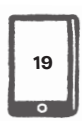
'Weird.'



When I get to school, all my friends tell me it's happened in their houses too.

Charlie Fennel says they were watching *Dr Who* on catch-up and right when it got to the really important moment where Dr Who was going to save everybody, the telly just stopped. He said he was devastated because now he doesn't know how it ends. I wanted to be nice so I pretended I'd seen that episode and told him the way it ends is that Dr Who doesn't save everybody and actually just dies. Charlie looked a bit confused and sad, but at least he's got an ending now.

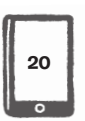
My teacher is Mrs Newington and she's new in town so we call her Mrs New in Town. She moved to Mousehole because none of the parents at her last school liked her. She used to work in London but she said she prefers it in Mousehole because people don't spit everywhere. It is a pretty good village so you should Google Earth it. It's got hundreds of reviews on the internet, and most of them four or five stars, so it's on point. And you can get a very



big sausage roll at Hole Foods.

We've also got fresh air and lime-green water and crashing waves and little lanes. Oh, and two beaches! We don't go out that much though. I wish I could just go exploring on my own, but Mum says there's too many baddies about, even in Mousehole. We went out more when we were little. I used to love going into the woods and making dens. But, like Mum and Dad say, things just get busy, don't they? Grown-ups certainly seem to live in a high-pressure environment (at least that's what my dad says) and so it is only right we all make sacrifices, isn't it?

But I got a new scooter for Christmas and Teddy got a stunt kite when he turned four this year and we've only taken them out once or twice. I always imagine taking my future dog to the beach and letting it get all muddy. I won't care how muddy it gets, I'll always wash it. But right now we're allowed a bit of screen time before dinner, so that's okay too. I guess anything I really want to experience I can watch on YouTube.





Anyway, Mrs New in Town told us her telly had broken as well, *and* her phone, *and* her smart watch. She usually does the register on an iPad but that wasn't working so she just wrote all our names down on a piece of paper, but then she didn't seem to really know what to do with it, so she just put the paper in a drawer and shut it.

She said we couldn't use our magic screen in class to learn today and that she'd put a DVD on for us about the history of the Post Office while all the teachers had an emergency meeting with the headteacher about what to do. But then, of course, when she went to turn the TV on, it wasn't working either. She seemed really freaked out about it all. I mean, if teachers don't know what's going on, then what are us kids supposed to do? Then she

tried to make us feel better by saying all the screen stuff was bad right now, but that the grown-ups would fix it soon. The government would be doing something. She said something about a cyber attack.

'What's a cyber attack?' asked Charlie Fennel and I told him that was how Dr Who got killed.

I thought all this was pretty fun at the time because it wasn't like it could go on for ever. We had a power cut at home once and it was great because we took out the board game me and Teddy got for Christmas and actually played it. And no one could cook because nothing worked so we went *out* for dinner.

I also didn't know what Mrs New in Town meant about attacks or the government. Why would they care about some TVs and phones in Mousehole? We're right the way down at the bottom of the country. We don't even have a McDonald's.

But Charlie Fennel said that his dad had been listening to the radio this morning on an old one he got out of his



shed. He said that it wasn't just Mousehole that had been hit by this 'strange phenomenon' (cue spooky music). It was *everywhere*.



So Monday continues as normal, right? But while we were at school, learning about Ancient Greeks and their pots, it turns out all the grown-ups were more concerned about their phones and computers and things.



It's actually kind of hypocritical (this month's new word) when you think about it because they're always the ones going on about how it's kids that are going to get square eyes, and yet you turn their phones off for a bit and they all start crying in the street.

Dad is muttering and fiddling with an old radio when me and Teddy walk in after school. The radio's got paint

all over it. I think a builder left it here when he did our bathroom. It's got a metal tube that you have to pull out from the top of it to get a signal and then you have to turn a button to tune it in. It's so old it looks like something Jesus probably used.

Anyway, Dad finds a radio station and there's a man saying people should phone in to talk about how they can't use their phones. It sounds like he hasn't had a single call all day.

Dad tries to find another station but when he fiddles with the button it's just static noise, so he gives up and turns it off. He starts talking to us about his bad day at work. 'The whole system is down,' he says, but I can't help thinking he's being dramatic. I mean, hello**?** Free day off**!** That's not exactly the worst thing ever**!**

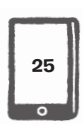
Mum is being just as bad and panicky. She can't see if anyone has ordered anything from her website or not. She usually sends off a few packages a week of her fancy design stuff, but just lately she's also set up an eBay shop



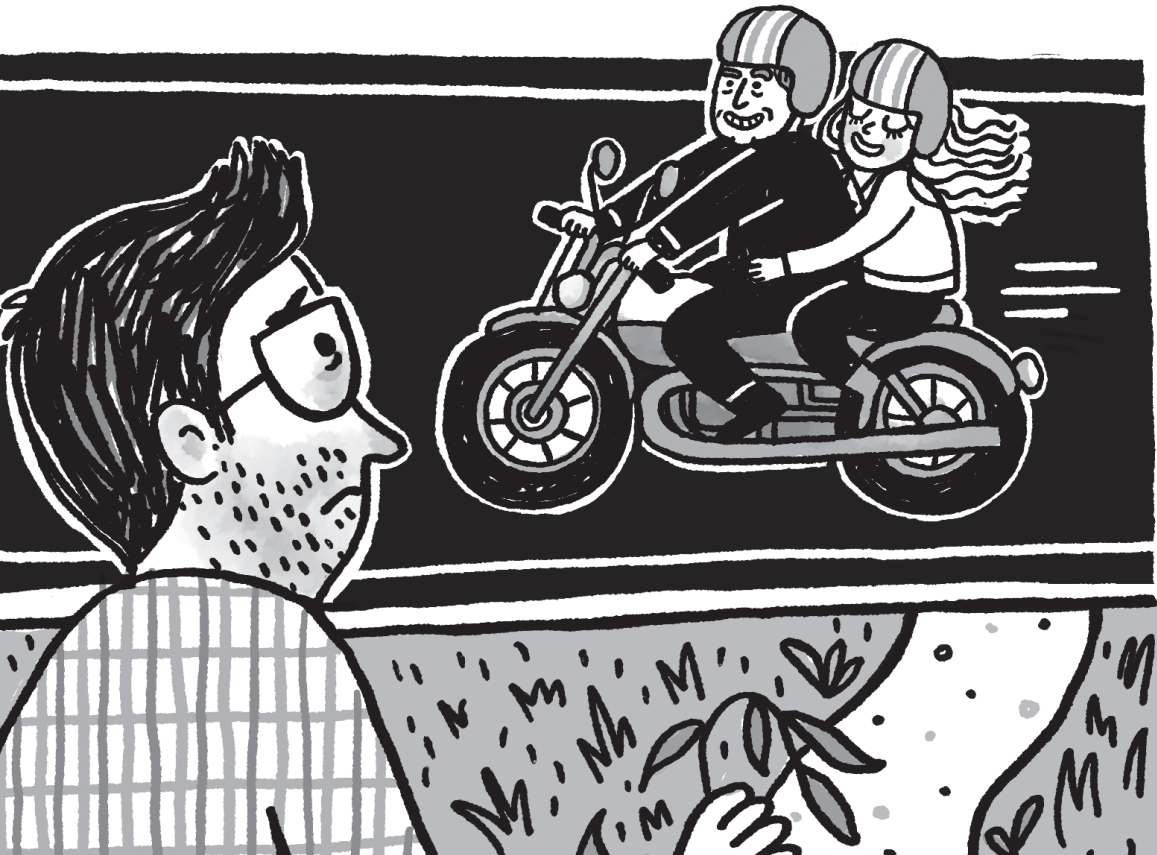
where she sometimes sells some of our old toys that we don't need any more. I wondered if it was for charity but Mum says it's for a rainy day.

Dad keeps checking his phone to see if it's working. It's like he can't stop looking even though he knows nothing has changed. Dad's *always* on his phone, but he doesn't use it as a phone. I know some people still use phones to actually ring up and talk to people – you see it on TV, don't you? – but Dad says that's the last thing he wants, to actually talk to people. He doesn't even like getting messages. 'Oh no!' he says when his phone pings with one. 'They want me to call them back! It's a nightmare!' And we all laugh at him.

Dad gets really stressed sometimes and I think he's a bit sad about his job. One night, after they'd had one of their arguments, Mum told me Dad feels like he's got to the ancient age of forty-two and suddenly thinks he should never have been an estate agent in the first place and that he's wasted his time. Last summer Dad bought



a motorbike called *Blue Thunder,* which seemed to make him feel better, but two months later he had to sell it because sometimes we don't have quite enough money. The old man who bought *Blue Thunder* lives in Mousehole too, and Dad looks really sad every time we hear it zoom by. Once, when I was helping Dad in our front garden, we saw the old man roar by with a woman who must have been his daughter on the back and Dad just stood



there, staring. I've told Dad he could use my bike if he wants. Personally, I think Dad should be happy he is a forty-two-year-old estate agent. He could be a forty-*one*-year-old estate agent, with a whole year's less experience on the job! Plus he can take whatever he wants out of the stationery cupboard. (At my school the stationery cupboard is pretty empty. They keep asking the parents to provide the school with pencils and pens. Er, they've already provided the school with *children* – what more do they want?!)

Anyway, the doorbell rings and Sandra from next door comes in and says, 'Guess what?'

And we're like, 'What?'

And she says, 'No, go on, guess what?'

And we say, 'WHAT?'

And she's like, 'Guess!'

And we're like, 'Your telly's still not working?'

And she says, 'Yeah.'