Away With Words

For Naïa – finally!

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Away with words

Sophie Cameron

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

One

The head teacher had *slugs* on his face. Lime–green, right in the middle of his chin.

Not the animal – the word.

The word *slugs* stuck to his chin in lime-green letters.

"Welcome ~~~~~~, Gala," Mr Watson said. " ~~~~~~ ~~~~~~ school."

At least, that was how it sounded to me. I tried to read the missing words as they fell from the head teacher's mouth – they were bright and bold, egg-yolk yellow – but I was too distracted by the *slugs* on his face. Why had he been talking about slugs so early in the morning? Maybe he was a gardener and was worried about his vegetables. Maybe he stepped on one on his way into school and felt bad about it. Maybe he'd eaten them for breakfast. Maybe that was normal in Scotland.

Mr Watson must have noticed me staring because he brushed his hand over his chin, and the word *slugs* fell on to the desk. "I think you ~~~~~~ ~~~~~~," he told me. "~~~~~~ ~~~~~~ change, but ~~~~~~."

The sentence dropped

piece

by

piece

from Mr Watson's mouth and disappeared into the pile of words in front of him. It wasn't even nine o'clock yet, and his desk already looked like he'd spat out half a dictionary! I saw a few words I knew – a small grey *cold* caught behind the space bar on the keyboard, *music* in cursive purple letters by his coffee cup – but I still had no clue what he was saying.

Beside me, Papa smiled and nodded. "Gala is very ~~~~~~ ~~~~~~," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. His voice slipped into that funny up-and-down thing it always did when he spoke English, as if his vocal cords were riding a carousel. "I am sure ~~~~~~ ~~~~~~ happy here."

The word *happy* caught on the collar of Papa's jacket. It was a light blue lie. I wasn't happy to be here. I didn't want to be in Scotland at all. It had only been five days since we'd moved here from Cadaqués, a little town by the sea in the north-east of Spain, but I already missed it so much it hurt. I wanted to be back at my old school, racing my friend Pau down the corridor and getting into trouble for talking too much in class. I wanted to go home.

As words spilled from the head teacher's mouth, there was a knock on the door. Mr Watson said a large orange, "Yes?", and two girls stepped into the office. They were both around my age, almost twelve. One was White and

very tall with freckles and light brown hair, and the other was Black and short with smiley brown eyes and braces on her teeth. The tall one said something, and Mr Watson nodded.

"Thank you, ~~~~~. Gala, this is ~~~~~ and ~~~~~," he said, turning back to me. "They ~~~~~."

The girls smiled awkwardly at me as Mr Watson talked. There was a word he kept saying, something I'd never heard before. I realized from the way he was pointing to the girls that it was a name. When Papa nudged me to reply, I quickly scanned the desk and found it dangling from the tip of a pencil in Mr Watson's pen pot: *Eilidh.*

"Hello –" I tried to sound out the word – "Eyelid?"

The girls blinked at me, then the tall one's eyes went wide, and she said a lot of bright pink words very, very quickly.

Seeing I was lost, Papa finally switched to Catalan, the language we spoke at home. It turned out *Eilidh* was their name – both of them, Eilidh Chisholm and Eilidh Obiaka – and it was pronounced 'A-lee'.

Mr Watson and Papa both chuckled at my mistake, and the girls giggled too. It wasn't a mean sort of laughter, but I felt my cheeks go red. Why bother spelling it E-I-L-I-D-H if they weren't going to pronounce half the letters? That made no sense whatsoever.

Outside Mr Watson's office, a bell rang. He and Papa stood up and moved towards the door, so I did the same. From the way the Eilidhs lingered by the doorway, I guessed

they were here to show me to my first class. The one with braces, Eilidh O, gave me another smile and stepped aside to let me into the corridor.

It was noisy now, dozens of kids laughing or swinging their bags or shoving last-minute breakfasts into their mouths as they went to their classes. This place was bigger than my last school, and with everyone rushing around it felt enormous – there must have been twice as many kids here. But that wasn't the reason my mouth fell open.

It was because of the words.

Hundreds and *thousands* of words falling out of m*ouths*

and flying through the air,

bouncing off

walls

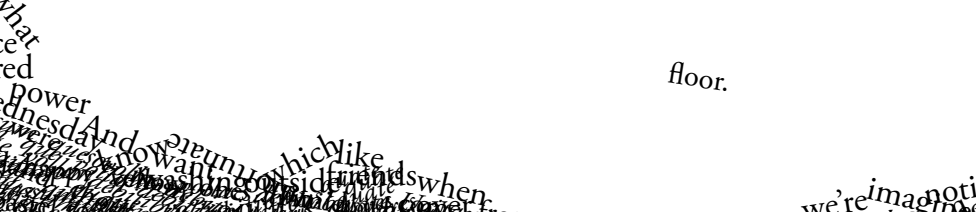
and

fluttering

to

the

floor.



ANGRY RED WORDS and happy yellow ones. *Timid whispers in pastel tones* and **excited shouts in bold, thick fonts**. There were tired words that **blurred with a yawn around the edges**, and *sleek cursive words that could only have come from rumours and secrets*. There were so many that they already came up past my ankles – a glittering stream of speech curving past the reception desk and along the corridor as kids splashed through it without a second thought.

My old school was filled with words too. Back there, I never paid them much attention. Sometimes my friends and I would flick them across the desk to each other when we were bored in class, but I'd never thought about how many there were around us. Not even when the school cleaners came to sweep them all away at the end of the day. When I was speaking Catalan or Spanish, I hardly noticed when the words left my mouth – I just brushed them off my clothes or picked them away if they landed in my food. Here they were all I could see, all I could hear. And I could barely understand anything.

"Are you OK, bug?" Papa asked me in Catalan. "I know it's a lot but you'll get used to it."

Seeing words in our own language and Papa's familiar ochre shades felt like a lifebelt, but it was quickly pulled away when Mr Watson said a loud white, "Oh!" He went to reception, spoke to the woman standing behind the desk and came back holding a sheet of paper.

"Your ~~~~~, Gala," he said, handing it to me. "Eilidh and Eilidh will ~~~~~."

On the paper was a timetable with Class 1C at the top and my subjects printed below. When I looked up,

Mr Watson was pointing towards the corridor behind reception, but I couldn't catch what he was saying. There were too many words whirling round us, and I couldn't pick out the ones I needed. Papa explained in Catalan that the Eilidhs were in most of my classes, and they would show me to registration. I didn't even know what 'registration' meant. It sounded like it might be something to do with computers or filing cabinets.

"OK, Gala?" Papa touched my hair and smiled. "Have fun. I'll see you at home."

Papa shook Mr Watson's hand, said a bright blue goodbye to the Eilidhs, then waved to me again before walking towards the main doors. Ever since we arrived in Scotland last week, all the English words that I'd learned at my old school and from Papa and TV shows had been jumbled up in my head, a puzzle that I couldn't put together. But, as I followed the two Eilidhs towards the next classroom, a few pieces finally connected.

This is NOT my home.