BOY UNDER GROUND



ISABELLE MARINOV

CLOCK TOWER PUBLISHING

Clock Tower Publishing, an imprint of
Sweet Cherry Publishing Limited
Unit 36, Vulcan House,
Vulcan Road,
Leicester, LE5 3EF
United Kingdom

Children's Publisher of the Year 2022

First published in the UK in 2023
2023 edition

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

ISBN: 978-1-78226-9755

© (text) Isabelle Marinov 2023
© (illustrations) Sweet Cherry Publishing 2023

Boy Underground

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or using any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

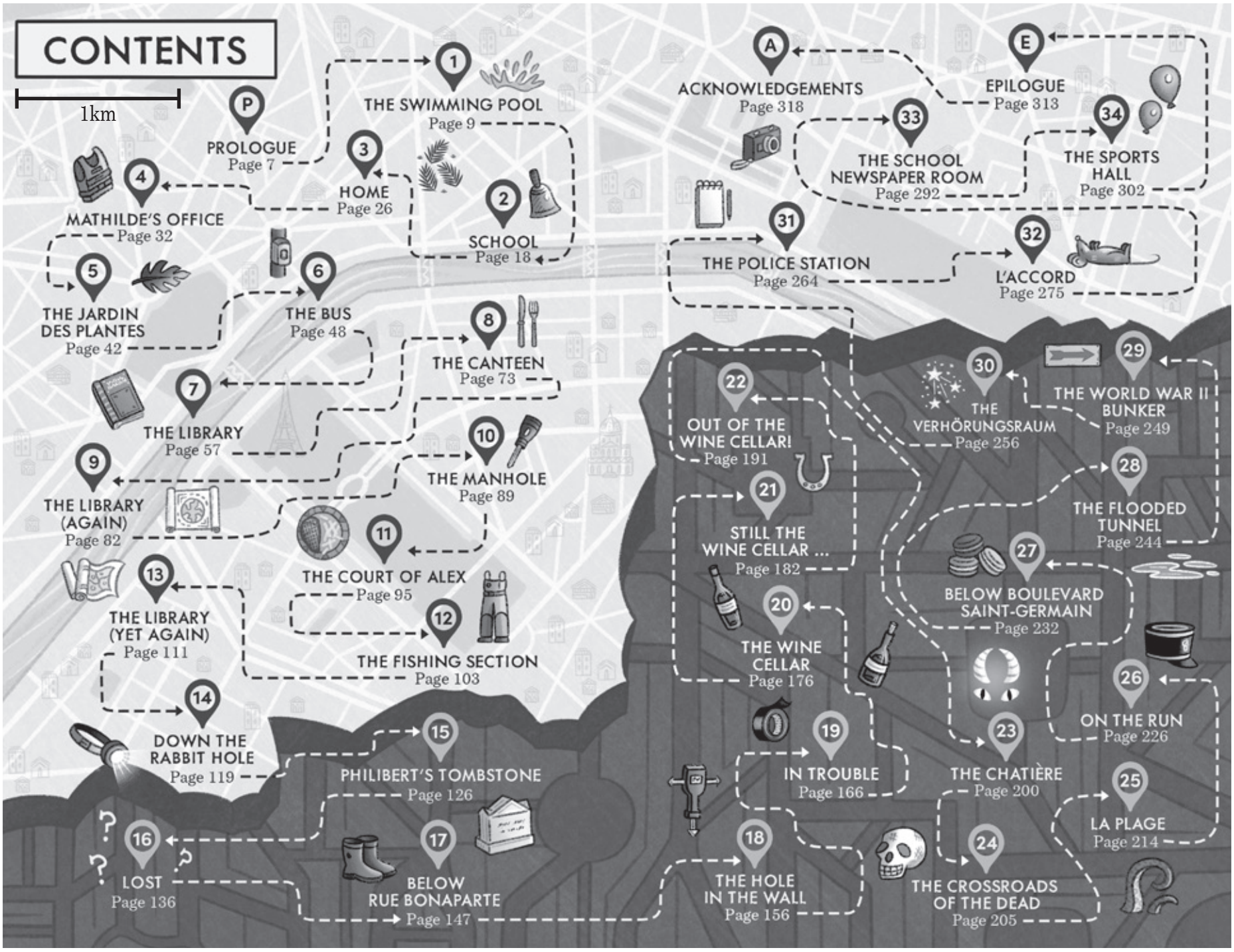
The right of Isabelle Marinov to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988. The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

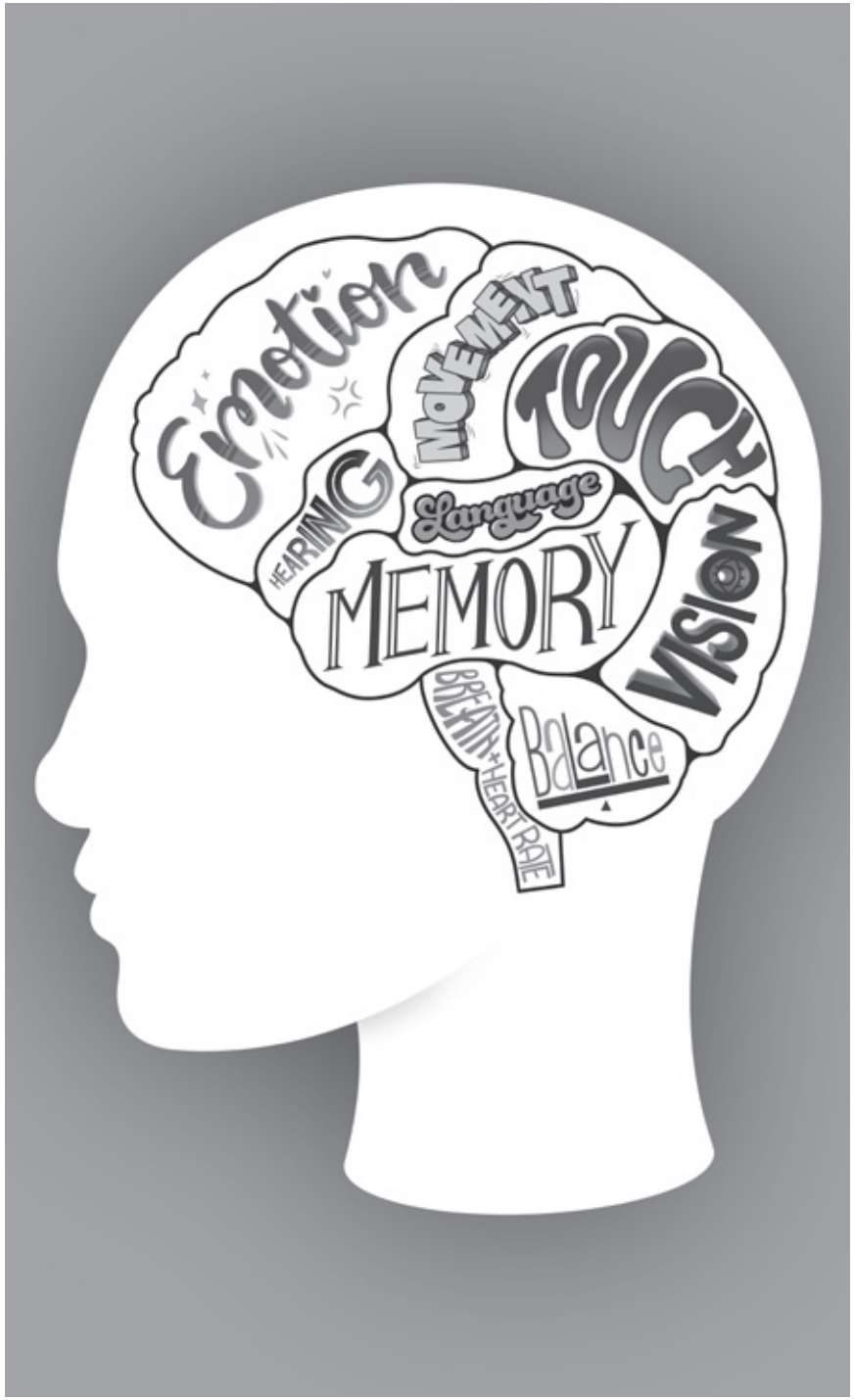
Cover design by Sophie Jones
Cover illustrations by Paula Zorite
Internal illustrations by Arthur Kearns, Jessica Walters, Jess Brown, Amy Booth, Matt Ellero and Sophie Jones

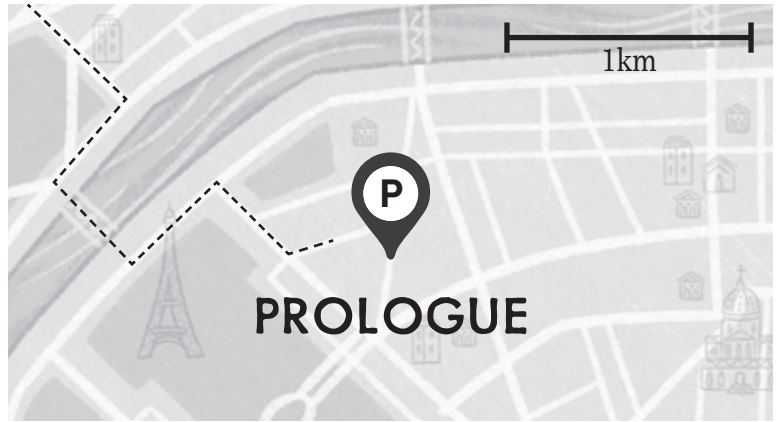
www.clocktowerpublishing.com

Printed and bound in Turkey

For Eli and Jonah


CONTENTS
1km
P
PROLOGUE
Page 7
1
THE SWIMMING POOL
Page 9
2
SCHOOL
Page 18
3
HOME
Page 26
4
MATHILDE'S OFFICE
Page 32
5
THE JARDIN DES PLANTES
Page 42
6
THE BUS
Page 48
7
THE LIBRARY
Page 57
8
THE CANTEEN
Page 73
9
THE LIBRARY (AGAIN)
Page 82
10
THE MANHOLE
Page 89
11
THE COURT OF ALEX
Page 95
12
THE FISHING SECTION
Page 103
13
THE LIBRARY (YET AGAIN)
Page 111
14
DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE
Page 119
15
PHILIBERT'S TOMBSTONE
Page 126
16
LOST
Page 136
17
BELOW RUE BONAPARTE
Page 147
18
THE HOLE IN THE WALL
Page 156
19
IN TROUBLE
Page 166
20
THE WINE CELLAR
Page 176
21
STILL THE WINE CELLAR ...
Page 182
22
OUT OF THE WINE CELLAR!
Page 191
23
THE CHATIÈRE
Page 200
24
THE CROSSROADS OF THE DEAD
Page 205
25
LA PLAGE
Page 214
26
ON THE RUN
Page 226
27
BELOW BOULEVARD SAINT-GERMAIN
Page 232
28
THE FLOODED TUNNEL
Page 244
29
THE WORLD WAR II BUNKER
Page 249
30
THE VERHÖRUNGSRAUM
Page 256
31
THE POLICE STATION
Page 264
32
L'ACCORD
Page 275
33
THE SCHOOL NEWSPAPER ROOM
Page 292
34
THE SPORTS HALL
Page 302
E
EPILOGUE
Page 313
A
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Page 318





Did you know that the brain can be mapped, just like a country or a city? I like to think of it as the main circuit board of the body, with different parts in charge of different tasks.

My brain probably looks just like anyone else's. Mathilde, my therapist, says that if you looked at my brain, you couldn't tell that my circuitry has trouble transmitting the different data it receives. There's no sign that says my senses are extra sensitive to stimulation. That I can smell a melon being cut two rooms away, or that the sun is too bright for me even on cloudy days. As for controlling the volume of my voice when

I'm excited – impossible! It's like I need to speak louder to hear myself over my thoughts because my brain is so busy processing all the information.

My brain can do some really cool stuff. I have a photographic memory. I can take detailed mental pictures of things I see, even if it's just briefly, and store them for later. My mental photo album is HUGE. Only you can't tell because the brain doesn't reveal its workings the way other organs in the body do. The heart pumps blood. Kidneys filter waste. It's pretty obvious what they do just by looking at them. But the brain is, despite all modern medical knowledge, still a mystery. Which is why the idea of a 'typical' one is strange to me, or that mine is somehow 'divergent'. I only know what's typical for me. *Hugo*.

And typically, I like to begin my stories with a map …



Here's a map we're all familiar with: the map of the world.



But two hundred million years ago, the world looked very different. That's because all the continents – Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe and Australia – were glued together in one huge *super*continent called Pangea.



Then the continents drifted apart.

That's what happened to me and my friends, Alex and Julie. Slowly they just drifted away from me. Now Julie reminds me of Australia. She loves the water (minus the sharks), and three weeks ago she broke the record in the fifty-metre butterfly. Alex is like North America: loud and self-confident, like he speaks and lives in capital letters.

Me, I feel more like Antarctica: remote, isolated and with a permanent risk of melt-down. Right now, on our weekly school trip to the indoor swimming pool, that risk is particularly high. It's too loud. The swimming teacher's whistle, the voices – everything echoes. And don't get me started on the fluorescent lights. All I want is to cover my ears and shield my eyes and hide in a corner until we're done. My brain is so busy dealing with just the *smell* that I have a hard time focussing on anything else.

I'm near the shallow end of the pool, right where only my toes touch the bottom. It's just

enough to reassure me that I can run away if I want to. Everyone else is further out, swimming.

Most of us have been playing water polo for the past fifteen minutes and I haven't had the ball once. That's fine with me and the new swimming teacher, who only has eyes for stars like Julie. Right now she's gliding along one of the lanes like a dolphin – one with straight black hair and brown freckles.

Four years ago, when she was eight, Julie started to develop a curved spine. It's called 'Scheuermann's Disease', but a couple of girls in our class made fun of her and called her a hunchback. It made Julie very sad, so I told her facts about maps that made her smile. That's how we became friends. But then Julie's doctor told her parents that she should take up swimming to help straighten her back. Not only did her back straighten, but she became really good at swimming. I mean *really* good.

Since then, things have changed between us. She doesn't seem to be interested in hearing

about maps, and she never invites me over anymore.

'Hey, Spy!' A voice booms. 'Close your mouth, you'll swallow a fly!'

My name is Hugo but everyone calls me Spy because I often wear sunglasses, even when it's not sunny. Apparently I look like I'm wearing a really bad disguise, but it's because my eyes are super sensitive to light.

A few people laugh at what Alex has said, but the echo makes it sound like more.

Alex and I used to be friends too. We would group our toy cars by model and colour during playdates. Well, *I* would. Alex would share his encyclopedic knowledge of all things automobile with me. Like the fact that it would take less than six months to get to the moon by car travelling at a hundred kilometres per hour. And if you parked all the cars in the world bonnet to boot, the line would stretch from Sydney to London, then back to Sydney, then back to London, then Sydney again. But that was calculated a few years ago, so who knows

how far the line stretches now? Not that it matters. These days Alex just makes fun of me. Seventy-four days ago he emptied a carton of milk over my head. I still don't know why.

Alex throws the water polo ball to me. It hits my nose and splashes out of play. With the teacher distracted, the other players' eyes turn to me.

'You're supposed to catch the ball,' someone says.

I know that. My brain just has trouble telling my arms what to do sometimes.

'He's too busy watching Julie,' Alex snorts.

'You wanna join her, Spy? Show her your moves?' A new voice joins in, and then another.

'I bet he does a killer butterfly, don't you, Spy?'

'Go on, Spy! Time for a new school record!'

Suddenly there's a chorus of voices, rising in a strangely hypnotic chant that bounces off every surface, crowding me from all sides: 'Go, Spy, go!'

The teacher's whistle blows. 'Back to the game!' he shouts.

My ears ring from the noise. My nose stings from the ball. The fluorescent tubes on the ceiling turn into stage lights, getting brighter by the second. I can feel myself losing control. I need to distract my brain.

I glance at Julie. She's just climbed out of the pool, looking strong and determined in her dark blue swimming costume. Someone hands her a towel. She glances my way but doesn't seem to see me. I want her to listen to my stories again. I want things to be like they used to be.

'Go, Spy, go!'

Maybe I just need to remind her that I exist?

'Go, Spy, go!'

At the very least I can escape the noise.

I take a deep breath and plunge into the water, throwing my arms forward and kicking my feet. The result is a belly flop and a nose full of chlorine. It's unlikely to impress Julie, but the voices are finally muted, the lights are dulled. I stop swimming for a moment and let myself float just under the surface. Bubbles

escape my nose, letting me sink a little deeper. And the deeper I go the quieter the world becomes. The pressure of the water is like a tight hug, a liquid blanket enveloping me. It feels so good.

I can hold my breath for a very long time. I used to practise in the bathtub while Mum or my sister Zoé timed me. My personal record is one minute and three seconds.

I close my eyes and imagine I'm diving down to red coral reefs, swimming alongside colourful striped fish and anemones swaying in the current. I kick my way to the bottom of the pool and try to stay there without letting more oxygen out of my lungs, which is hard. Archimedes' Law means that any object less dense than the surrounding water will naturally float back to the surface, like my body is trying to do now. I smile at the memory of Zoé congratulating me on being less 'dense' than water. That was a good joke.

Then something grabs me. Before I know what's happening, my head is cresting the

surface of the pool. Next my whole body is hauled out of the water and I feel cold, as if someone has pulled my cosy duvet off me.

The swimming teacher lays me on the floor. I stiffen, thinking about all the bare, verruca-infested feet that have walked over these tiles.

'Put him on his side!' someone shouts. 'Check his lungs for water!'

'Is he still breathing?'

'His eyes are open!'

I try to tell them that I wasn't about to drown and that I didn't need saving, but I'm too dazed by the return of the fluorescent lights and echoes. While everyone confirms the obvious, I squint at the other end of the pool where Julie has long since disappeared.

Just this once, I'm glad she didn't notice me.



Julie is always busy these days. Whether she's on her way to the pool for swimming practice or to the school library for homework, it's like her life no longer has time for activities with no obvious goal – such as the exchange of interesting map facts.

That's why I decided to write to her.

The letter will take just over a minute to read. I timed myself and it took me fifty-eight seconds and twenty-one milliseconds, but I wrote it, so I would add extra seconds for someone who's unfamiliar with its content. And everyone has a minute to spare. Even Julie.

Dear Julie,

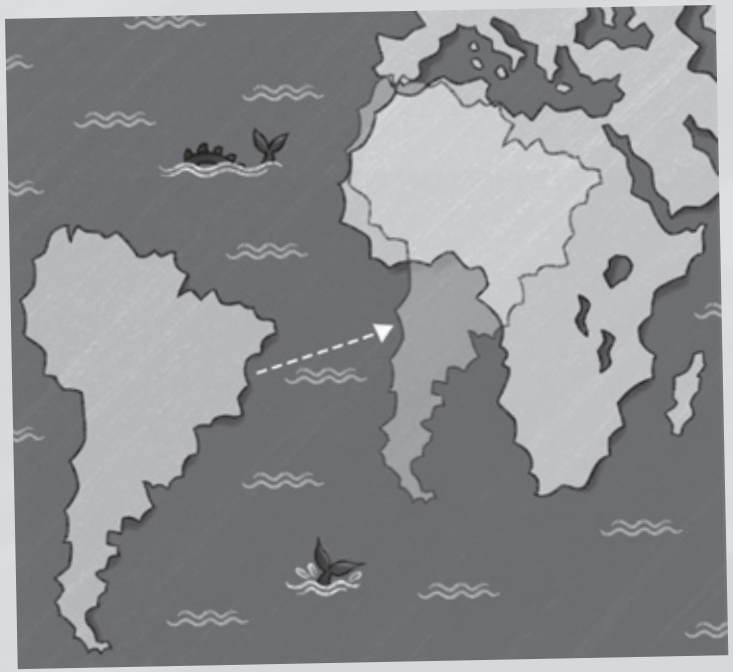
A year and 187 days ago we were in P.E. together. Remember? It was a Monday and it was raining. You wore a blue T-shirt with white shorts.

Mademoiselle Dutronc asked us to do a backbend. Most of the girls were really good at it, especially Sophie and Pénélope. They dropped back without any help, their arms pressing into the ground like pillars, their spines curved in a perfect arch. I was less flexible, like most of the boys. Mademoiselle Dutronc gave me a large plastic ball to lay my back on and bend over backwards. In the end, even I managed to do it, although my arch was more like a flattened crescent.

You were the only one who couldn't bend backwards, not even on the ball. Mademoiselle Dutronc told you to open your chest and your shoulders, and you said you couldn't. She said that wasn't possible – that everybody could. You told Mademoiselle Dutronc that you had back problems and she said you were too young to have back problems. And then Sophie and Pénélope started giggling and

calling you Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Your face turned red from anger or embarrassment, or maybe from both. All I know is that I made you laugh when I told you later, during breaktime, that if you combine South America with Africa, you get the head of an Allosaurus. Lake Victoria becomes the dinosaur's eye, and the Argentinian coast becomes its lower jaw.

Do you remember this?





After that, I told you a new map fact every time you looked sad. But then you took up swimming and you became really good at it. You hung out with the kids in your swimming team, with the large shoulders and small waists that make their bodies look like the letter V.

Nobody called you a hunchback anymore.

Since then, you've drifted away from me, but I haven't given up hope that you might make a U-turn and that we will drift back together again: you and me, and even Alex.

I hope you enjoy the picture of the Allosaurus.

Your friend,

Hugo

I wrote the letter at breaktime, with my hair still damp from the swimming pool. I printed it out at lunch. By fifth period I'd managed to slip it into Julie's rucksack. It's the end of the day now and I don't think she's found it yet. But she will. And she'll love it. Who doesn't love letters?

Even if it doesn't have cool stamps on it like the postcards Dad sends when he's away. Even if it's not handwritten. A letter means that the message inside it is important. I want Julie to know that when she reads mine. Maybe she'll even keep it like I do the postcards from Dad …

The school bell rings. The shrill, high-pitched sound reverberates through my body – even though I put my noise-cancelling headphones on ahead of time. At the classroom door I just about manage to take the flyer my form tutor is handing out, then I'm swept along with a tide of people pushing and shoving, screaming and laughing. I would rather wait until everyone has left, but I'm too afraid I'll miss the bus.

I notice that these flyers have popped up everywhere: in the locker area, along the corridors and all the way to the school entrance. I look down at the one in my hand.



A figure walks beside me and I move my headphones down around my neck.

'Are you going?' Enzo asks as we head towards the school bus.

Enzo is one of Alex's followers. Alex's followers always laugh at his jokes. They bring him food in the canteen. Sometimes they even do his homework for him. In exchange, they get his protection from outside attacks. If you're part of Alex's group, nobody dares to mess with you. Alex considers an attack against any of his followers an attack against him. A bit like NATO, I guess. Or a Mafia boss. It makes sense for Enzo to be part of that

group. He's twelve, like me, but he looks like he only just turned seven.

'No,' I say. 'I don't like parties.' Which is not entirely true. I might like them if I knew how to talk to other kids so that they'd let me hang out with them. Mathilde says I need to work on my 'communication skills'.

Then, because Mathilde says it's good to ask questions: 'Are you going?' I ask. 'Who will you go as?'

'Iron Man,' Enzo says. 'My mum's making my costume using real LED lights.'

'I'm not sure Iron Man's your best choice.'

'Why not? He's the strongest.'

'Exactly,' I say. 'You're really small for your age. And then there's your voice. You have a girl's voice.'

Enzo gives me a blank stare.

'You won't make a believable Iron Man, is what I'm saying. You're more like Spider-Man,' I suggest. 'He's skinny. And I'm sure your mum can change the costume. Spider-Man's suit is red and blue, and Iron Man's is red and gold.

She can just swap the gold for blue and you'll be good to go. Except for your voice, but I guess you can't change that.'

'Wow.' Enzo is shaking his head. 'That was mean …'

It's my turn to look blank.

'I'm not being mean. I think Spider-Man's cool too.' I hold up three fingers the way Spider-Man does when he's about to fire his webbing. My hand is shaking a little. I'm panicking. I don't like this.

'No wonder no one wants to hang out with you.'

Enzo's words hit me like the water polo ball, this time straight to the stomach.

'I'm sorry,' I tell him. 'But it's the truth. I'm not good at lying.'

'Just being mean,' Enzo says. And he walks off alone even though we're both heading to the same place.

Sometimes, even when I try to be friendly, it comes out wrong. I'm like a magnet that's poled the wrong way: repelling instead of attracting.



'Hey, Hugo. What's up?' Zoé asks, inspecting her hair in the hallway mirror.

When I said I have no friends, that wasn't entirely true. Zoé is my friend, but she's also my sister so I'm not sure if she counts. Either way, for the longest time, I never had to make any effort to win her over. Zoé always liked it when I told her things. She always listened to me. And she never expected me to ask her questions to show that I was interested in how she felt and what she thought. I never had to apply all the complicated conversation rules that Mathilde tries to teach me.

But lately things have changed with Zoé

too. Ever since she turned fourteen (145 days ago), she no longer listens to me. Not in the way she used to. She's too busy looking in mirrors. That includes real mirrors, but also shop windows, Mum's silver teapot, windows at night, and probably the gold-coated visor of a space helmet if she ever met an astronaut. She hasn't, but you get my point. All she needs is a reflective surface.

'Omigosh, look at that frizz,' Zoé sighs, trying to flatten her blonde fringe with her fingers. 'My hair looks like sauerkraut.'

Her friend Lisa peeks over her shoulder. 'I think it's cute,' she says.

'I want to get it straightened.'

'Your hair comes out curly because your hair follicle is oval instead of round,' I say. 'Even if you straighten it, it'll just grow back curly.'

Zoé rolls her eyes and sighs. That's something she never did before, either.

'Hugo,' she says, 'thanks for your scientific input, but this is girl stuff. You don't understand.'

Clearly.