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Finding Phoebe

Gavin Extence

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For
Amelia

1

The Interesting Clouds and the Car in the Sea

Dear Mum,

2018 was the year Bethany went off the rails. It was the year many things happened, but Bethany is the main thing I need to talk about here. After all, she was pretty much the catalyst for everything else, from my doomed attempt at self-improvement to my decision to flee the country for an indefinite period. I'm not trying to absolve myself of responsibility. I should make that clear. I made my own decisions, some of which ended up causing a great deal of damage. All I'm saying is that I had to respond to a situation that was often beyond my control, and even further beyond my comfort zone. This continues to be something I struggle with.

I am, however, getting ahead of myself. I need to start at the start, on the evening my routine was broken. It was a turning point because it marked the exact moment my life stopped feeling safe and predictable.

It began with the car in the sea.

I was walking Gladys, our Welsh Border Collie, back from the north beach when the screaming became audible. It was faint

at first, barely distinguishable from the shriek of a gull carried on the wind, but as we made our way across the dunes, the sound gradually resolved, becoming more human. It was unfortunate because prior to this, everything had been going well. There were some extremely interesting altocumulus clouds gathering in the northeast, under lit by the setting sun. The rest of the sky was turning a pleasing shade of pink, and the air smelled of salt and sand and wet vegetation. But now I worried that our walk was about to be ruined. Gladys had started yipping in response to the screams, and I was faced with a dilemma.

On the one hand, I already knew what the problem was – or I had a very strong suspicion, based on the time of day and phase of the moon – and it was unlikely that anyone was going to die. If I avoided the causeway and stuck to the dunes, then I'd be home by eight o'clock and could continue my evening as scheduled, with no harm done.

On the other hand, this was probably not the 'right thing to do'.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to draw up a flowchart of options and potential outcomes. The screaming was ongoing, and it was having a significant impact on my ability to think. I resolved to take a peek at the situation to assess the danger; afterwards, I'd be able to make an informed decision about what action, if any, was required.

When we reached the top of the dune abutting the causeway, the car was approximately twenty metres distant. It was stationary in a couple of feet of swirling seawater. I doubted that any water had got inside the car as cars are designed to be watertight, but the woman in the passenger seat had started to panic nevertheless. She was halfway out of her window, trying

to climb onto the roof, while the man in the driver's seat was shouting at her to calm down and stop being so bloody hysterical. In response, she continued to scream hysterically.

I observed the scene for a minute or so, taking in the relevant facts. The car was a BMW, and it looked sporty and impractical: certainly not suitable for driving on a flooded road. As for the people, the woman looked to be approximately twenty-five to thirty years old. She had dark hair and was wearing some kind of flimsy wraparound beach dress and was not very good at climbing. The man was mostly bald, red in the face, and I estimated his age to be fifty years minimum. My first thought was that he was probably the woman's father, except he kept shouting at her and telling her to get back in the car and stop being such a fucking drama queen, and this didn't seem like the sort of thing you'd say to your daughter. So it was also possible that he was her much older husband or boyfriend. I was unable to draw any firm conclusion.

I was loath to go down to them, but Gladys had decided that enough was enough. She darted down the embankment, plunged into the sea and started barking again, with great enthusiasm. This caused both the man and the woman to turn and look in my direction, which was not easy for them because the man had to pivot in his seat and the woman was still clinging to the side of the car. And it was not easy for me because I don't like being looked at, especially not by strangers. This is something else that hasn't changed in the last six years.

'Oh, thank *fuck*,' the man said. 'Listen. We need you to get someone to tow us out of here. Can you do that?'

I told him I could not.

And there was a small pause as the waves continued to lap against the BMW's wheel arches. Then the woman started

screaming again. Or that's what I thought at first. After a moment's reconsideration, I decided that she was actually laughing, but her laughter was peculiar – a series of strangled, high-pitched yelps. Since the situation was not humorous, this was a confusing development.

So I explained, carefully, that there was close-to-zero chance that anyone else was going to attempt the causeway with the tide this high and still rising. And anyway, from the angle their car was at – approximately 45° to the straight line of the road – I found it unlikely that it could be freed so easily. My hypothesis was that at least one of the back wheels had come off the tarmac – probably the result of a poorly executed three-point turn – and was stuck in the marshy ground at the bottom of the embankment. The vehicle would be going nowhere until the tide had fallen sufficiently, which would be some time close to midnight.

'*Midnight?*' the man repeated.

'The next low tide is at 3.06 a.m.,' I shouted to him, 'but the road is clear three hours before that. Give or take fifteen minutes. It depends on the wind speed and direction and the atmospheric pressure.'

The man stared at me. I don't know why. It's possible he was awaiting further information. But in the meantime, the woman had finally managed to scrabble out of the window and onto the roof. She started pounding on the metal with her fists, which made Gladys bark again. Gladys was finding the situation extremely exciting.

'This genius said we'd be OK!' the woman shouted. 'He said it would be just like going through a ford!'

'It's not like a ford,' I told her. 'It's the North Sea.'

She ignored this and kept pounding on the roof, and the

man kept shouting at her to stop because she was making this ten times worse than it had to be, and I closed my eyes and bit the skin around my fingernails. It's a habit I've been trying very hard to break, but right then, I needed the pain to distract me. The noise, the people, the situation – it was all very distressing.

'He's right,' I told the woman, because she really was making everything worse. But she didn't hear me, so I just kept repeating it – 'he's right, he's right, he's right' – until she did.

'Who's right?' she yelled. 'Who's right?'

This seemed an odd question, given there was only one person I could be referring to. Moreover, it put me in a rather awkward position, not knowing the nature of their relationship. I decided the safest option was to hedge my bets. 'Your father or significantly older partner.'

The woman started screeching again. I decided she was mentally unstable, and looked at my boots for a while.

Then the man said: 'For fuck's sake! Go and get someone else. Go and get a grown-up.'

I phoned Daddy.

'Two tourists have driven their car into the sea,' I told him.

'Oh, Christ,' he said. 'Are they OK? Are *you* OK?'

'I'm OK. I'm on the embankment.'

'Stay on the embankment.'

'Of course I'll stay on the embankment.'

'I know you will. What about the tourists? Are they OK? Have they called the coastguard?'

'They're not in any immediate danger,' I said, 'and the coastguard is not required; they got stuck at the first dip in the road, before they made it out into the channel. But the woman

has climbed onto the roof and is intermittently hysterical. The man is still in his seat. And they keep shouting at each other. It's highly unpleasant.'

I was having to shout a little bit too, because the wind was gusting and the phone line was not great. The tourists were both glaring at me.

'OK. Just hold tight, Phoebe,' Daddy said. 'I'll be there as soon as I can. I love you.'

'I know. Please hurry.'

I hung up and told the tourists that my father was on his way.

'Is he bringing a tow cable?' asked the man. 'Please tell me he's bringing a tow cable.'

'He's not bringing a tow cable,' I said, rubbing my temples. 'No sensible person would try to drive on this road.'

I sat on the grass and watched the sky for the thirteen and a half minutes it took Daddy to arrive. Gladys knew that he was approaching before he'd even appeared in the distance. She had been dozing at my side, but I suddenly felt her muscles tense against my leg. Her ears pricked up, and a moment later she was hurtling across the top of the embankment, wagging her tail and barking happily. Daddy appeared a moment later; he bent down so he could pat her head, but without really breaking his stride, since there was a more pressing matter to attend to (i.e. the car in the sea).

'Hello, Phoebe,' Daddy said.

'Hello, Daddy,' I replied.

He put his hand on my shoulder. 'You're OK?'

'It's been stressful, but I'm OK.'

He nodded, then turned his attention to the tourists. The

irate bald man had also climbed onto the roof now, and the sea had risen almost to the top of the wheel arches and was presumably starting to ruin the engine. He tried to place a hand on the woman's back but she shrugged him off angrily. As you know, I sometimes miss the nuances of human body language, but in this instance, there was no nuance. Their feelings were as easy to read as Gladys's.

Daddy addressed the tourists: 'I think it's probably best if you leave the car,' he said.

'Can't someone tow us out?' the man asked. 'There must be someone with . . . I don't know, a tractor or something.'

'I'm sorry. You'll have to wait until the tide falls.'

And even though this was almost exactly what I'd told the man fifteen minutes ago, this time his reaction was very different. He just nodded a couple of times, then looked at the woman, who refused to look back. This is very typical of people. They don't care about the facts or logic of a statement. They care about who's saying it.

'Listen,' Daddy said. 'I can give you the number of a garage on the mainland. They'll recover the vehicle as soon as possible. But in the meantime . . . well . . .' He gestured at the water. 'I'm afraid you're going to have to get a bit wet. There's nothing else for it.'

The woman barely hesitated. She slid herself down the side of the car and immediately gasped as the water rose up past her knees. It was 3rd September, so I'd estimate the sea was approximately thirteen degrees Celsius (based on the daily average, which I've just looked up). The man threw his shoes and socks onto the embankment, rolled up his trousers, and then also slid into the sea and started swearing again. Daddy ignored this. He helped the woman onto the embankment and

then took off his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders, which was kind but probably of little practical use since it was her lower half that was cold and wet.

'I parked as close as I could,' Daddy said, 'but it's still a bit of a walk to the car.'

These were troubling words.

'You're not going to bring them to our house?' I enquired tactfully. 'It's just that I have school tomorrow. I'd find it extremely disruptive.'

Daddy held up his hands, the same way he might if trying to calm traffic. 'It's OK, Phoebe. I'm sure they'll be far more comfortable at one of the hotels or B&Bs. There's bound to be room somewhere.'

I nodded, instantly relieved.

The bald man was out of the water and putting his shoes back on. He looked at me, then Daddy. 'You know, your daughter's been pretty rude to us,' he said, quite unfairly.

'Just leave it,' the woman hissed.

'I will not leave it! She could see we were in trouble and . . . well, she was deliberately insulting. Sarcastic. There's no other way to put it.'

Sarcastic? I was baffled. All I'd done was try to help!

Daddy also appeared speechless. That, or he was counting in his head, which was a strategy we'd been taught in a workshop on Managing Difficult Emotions. He looked at the man for a full ten seconds, then said: 'I very much doubt that.'

The man said nothing.

'Phoebe, you can go home now,' Daddy told me. 'Take Gladys. You've done really well.'

I didn't need to be told twice. I went home.

2

The New Boy

It was almost dark by the time I got back, twenty-four minutes later than planned. I put fresh water down for Gladys, set the timer on my phone, and then spent an additional five minutes in the garden, hitting the punch bag beneath the beech tree. I reasoned that this would be time well spent, as my encounter with the strangers had left me with a lot of pent-up frustration.

Yet afterwards, as I removed my boxing gloves and conducted a swift body scan, I noted that my muscles felt just as tense as before, and my mind was still racing; all I'd achieved was an elevated pulse and aching wrists.

I continued with my evening ritual: I showered, brushed my teeth and changed into my pyjamas. When I picked up my phone to check the time again, I found a missed call and a WhatsApp message from Bethany.

I dropped by but no one answered the door. Everything OK?

In other circumstances, I might have told her what had just happened, but I knew I wasn't at my best, and the thought of a protracted conversation, even with Bethany, was daunting. My priority now was to get my evening back on track: wind down, get a full night's sleep, and be adequately refreshed for the first day back at school.

I'm fine, I wrote. ***Just got out the shower. Did you want something in particular?***

Bethany replied almost at once. *Just wanted to chat. I'm feeling a bit all over the place TBH.*

I read the message twice; it was frustratingly vague, and possibly self-contradictory. How could you feel *a bit* all over the place? I spent a minute or two contemplating this puzzle, and was just about to ask what she meant when another message came through, saving me the trouble.

It's fine if you're too busy. Don't worry about it.

I am a bit busy, I admitted. ***I've been re-watching Game of Thrones and was about to start another episode. I don't want to leave it too late or it will disrupt my sleep!***

I had to wait quite a long time for Bethany's response to come through, considering how short it was.

Fine, forget it. See you tomorrow.

See you tomorrow.

It was a relief that we'd managed to resolve the conversation so amicably, and with minimal further disruption. I resumed my *Game of Thrones* re-watch and was approximately thirty-nine minutes in when Daddy poked his head around the bedroom door. He indicated by gesture that he wanted me to remove my headphones.

'I wanted to check that you're all right,' he said.

There was a long, rather dramatic pause. I waited.

Daddy gave a small sigh. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'I'm all right,' I told him.

'I was worried that you might be . . . You know, a little wound up.'

I took a moment to consider this. 'I am somewhat wound up. It's no big deal, though. I'm focused on relaxing before bed.'

'Right . . . What are you watching?' he asked.

'Season six, episode nine. Battle of the Bastards.'

He looked at me blankly, so I turned the laptop so he could see the screen. An extra had just had a sword pushed through his throat and there was blood coming out his neck and mouth and eyes. The practical effects were extremely impressive.

'Maybe stop after this one?' Daddy suggested. 'I'm not convinced it's as relaxing as you think it is. And let me know if you need anything.'

'Thank you. I don't need anything.'

'OK. Sleep well.'

But I did not sleep well. Once Daddy had left, I found it difficult to re-immerse myself in *Game of Thrones*, and it was even harder to settle down after I'd shut down my laptop and turned off the light. There were intrusive thoughts of the car in the sea, and how it was probably leaking petrochemicals and damaging the local ecosystem. Then there were intrusive thoughts about how awful it had been trying to converse with the tourists, and how badly it had gone. I attempted a short breathing exercise to calm myself again, but it didn't really help, and I spent the next several hours staring at a dark ceiling.

Consequently, I did not feel like doing my ten-minute trampoline workout when my alarm went off at six-twenty the following morning. This was a worrying sign for the day ahead. Low intensity aerobic exercise is a non-negotiable part of my morning routine, and has been for the last four years. It's vital because, aside from the general health benefits, it also releases endorphins, which lower anxiety, raise energy levels and improve mental performance. But this morning I had to force myself, and afterwards I felt neither energised nor mentally stimulated. It was impossible to calculate my sleep deficit

because I didn't know exactly when I'd fallen asleep, but the last time I remembered checking my phone it was 3.13. My usual bedtime is no later than 23.20, so, at best, I was dealing with a loss of three hours and fifty-three minutes, or fifty-five per cent of my normal sleep requirement. I compensated by drinking one cafetiere's worth of coffee, using the extra-strong Sumatran beans from the refrigerator.

When Daddy and I pulled up outside the vicarage not long afterwards, Bethany was not there. She was late. Entirely typical of Bethany, but I'd hoped things might be different today, with it being the first day back after the summer holiday.

Daddy said: 'Well, at least she's consistent.'

This is a 'joke' he makes often when we are waiting in the car for Bethany. It's not funny, obviously, but I do enjoy the repetition, and it's an accurate appraisal of the situation. Bethany is *always* late, which means I am usually able to factor this into my plans. If she were occasionally punctual, it would be far harder to manage.

After a minute of waiting and a couple of beeps on the horn, I told Daddy I was going in. Reverend Collins answered the door when I knocked and waved me into the hallway.

'She told me she'd only be two more minutes,' he said with what I took to be an amused smile. 'Admittedly, that was about three minutes ago. You know what Bethany's like.'

'Yes. I know.'

'I'm almost ready,' Bethany shouted down the stairs. 'Stop ganging up on me!'

Reverend Collins chuckled and raised his eyes heavenward. 'How are you, Phoebe? Looking forward to Year Eleven?'

'I'm tired but otherwise fine,' I told him. 'I've drunk a lot of coffee.'

'Well, the first day back's always the hardest, isn't it?'

'Often, yes. How are you and Mrs Collins?'

'No complaints, Phoebe, no complaints.'

'Excellent.'

There was a small silence; because I hadn't anticipated the need to chat to Reverend Collins, I had run out of small talk. Fortunately, Bethany appeared at that moment at the top of the stairs. It was obvious why she'd taken so long. Her blouse was untucked on one side, but her hair was immaculate. She had tied it in double Dutch plaits, which is where you centre part your hair and arrange it in two symmetrical plaits using a reverse weave to thread in extra strands of hair as you progress from front to back. I know this because I quizzed Bethany later on, and then looked up additional details on WikiHow. It was an impressive artistic accomplishment, I'll admit, but not the sort of thing I'd ever have the dexterity to accomplish myself. My hair was in a ponytail, as always.

'You're four minutes late,' I told her, as we exited the vicarage.

'It's nice to see you too,' Bethany said.

I ignored the *non sequitur*. 'It's probably because of your hair.'

'Thank you,' she replied. 'I'm glad you noticed.'

Bethany is socially adept and reasonably intelligent, so it was surprising that she'd missed the point in this way. I had to consider the possibility that she, too, was suffering from insufficient sleep. But I didn't get a chance to ask, because as soon as we'd climbed into the back of the car, Daddy said: 'All set for the new term, Beth?'

And Bethany replied: 'Yes, thanks, Mr B.' And their conversation continued unbroken for another four minutes and thirty seconds until we reached the stranded BMW.

I had hoped that it would have disappeared in the night,

like an unpleasant dream, but it was still stuck at the bottom of the embankment, blocking half the causeway. The falling tide had left an ugly patina of sand, mud and seaweed smeared across the door panels.

'Yikes,' said Bethany. 'Another one?'

I put down my book, *American Gods*, on the seat between us and began a detailed account of the events of the previous evening. Bethany seemed interested, but I hadn't got far when Daddy interrupted.

'Can we do it without the swearing, please?'

'I'm quoting verbatim. *Stop being such a fucking drama queen*. That's what he said.'

'You don't have to quote verbatim,' Daddy said.

I looked at Bethany, who grinned and rolled her eyes. I'm not certain what this was supposed to signify, but I felt a momentary flash of pleasure nonetheless – as if I was being included in a small conspiracy.

'They were definitely a couple,' Bethany told me, once I'd finished my truncated account. 'But you shouldn't have mentioned the age gap. It's no wonder things got awkward.'

This was useful feedback, but clearly ludicrous. If I'd drawn attention to something that was *obvious* – at least to most people – then why get offended? Also, relationships involving age gaps are not a taboo, and are actually rather common across primate communities. Thanks to a documentary on mountain gorillas I'd seen on *National Geographic*, I was able to outline for Bethany the evolutionary pressures that underpin this configuration, whereby females often select older mates based on social status, access to resources and the ability to support numerous offspring. Conversely, males often select younger mates who are more likely to be fertile.

'Please tell me you didn't compare them to mountain gorillas. Not to their faces?'

'I did not get the chance.'

'Well, that's something,' Bethany said.

As we exited the causeway and approached the main road, a tow truck passed us coming the other way. It was a very welcome sight.

The early drop-off, owing to the mid-morning tide, meant that Bethany and I were the first people in class, and had almost forty-five minutes of unstructured time to fill before registration. This was far from ideal. The litre of coffee I'd consumed with breakfast had left me agitated – 'tired but wired' – and I sorely needed something to occupy my mind. Fortunately, I'd prepared for this eventuality. I asked Bethany if she'd like to test my vocabulary using a worksheet I'd printed out the previous afternoon – '100 words to sharpen your expression', which would obviously be useful for my fiction writing – but she declined. She said she would prefer to do nothing at all! It was a weird choice, but not the worst outcome as it meant I could spend the time reading without fear of interruption. But before I could initiate this plan, Mrs Holloway walked in with an unfamiliar boy. He was tall and lean, with dark floppy hair, flawless skin and super-white teeth; he looked as if he'd been grown in a lab as part of a project to create the next terrible boy band.

'Hello, girls,' Mrs Holloway said. 'This is William. He's new this term. Can I trust you to make sure he settles in OK?' She was looking at Bethany here, so I assumed the *you* was singular and I was not being included in this request. I was one hundred per cent on-board with this decision. Bethany

could handle the situation while I stayed as uninvolved as politely possible.

Mrs Holloway left and William sat at the desk in front of ours; and by sat, I mean slouched. His posture was closer to horizontal than vertical. He'd rotated his chair so that he was half-facing us. He gave a slight nod. 'Hey.'

'Hey yourself,' Bethany replied. Because that's the kind of thing Bethany says sometimes.

I stuck to the safer formula and said: 'Hello, William. It's nice to meet you.'

'It's Will,' William said. 'I prefer Will.'

Bethany shrugged. 'Will it is.'

I decided to adapt this remark with a witty twist, and said: 'As you will, Will.'

Will looked confused. Bethany was fiddling with one of her plaits, looking unusually flushed. Since no one was saying anything, I concluded it was the optimum moment to escape the interaction, and, citing a genuine need to use the lavatory, I exited the classroom. It was a shrewd move, because when I returned, Bethany and Will were happily exchanging banalities, and I was able to slip back behind my desk with minimal fuss.

I managed to read eight pages of *American Gods* before the next problem arose. The problem was Jessica Chapman, who arrived in the classroom and immediately stole Bethany for a lengthy reunion ritual that entailed copious hugging and squealing. Happily, I wasn't asked to participate in this, but it did mean that I was left alone with Will, who took out his phone and started scrolling. This presented a conundrum as the use of mobile devices in the classroom is prohibited at all times. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have attempted to police this rule – firstly, because I'm not a fan of it myself,

and secondly, because past interventions have not ended well. But this was not a normal circumstance. With it being his first day, it was possible Will had not yet had time to familiarise himself with the school rules, and was thus acting out of ignorance.

My duty was clear. I cleared my throat twice, and, when this failed to elicit a response, clicked my fingers a few inches from his ear. It may have been a small violation of social protocol, but I didn't want to make an unnecessary scene in front of Bethany and Jessica.

Will looked at my fingers. He looked at my face.

'No phones in the classroom,' I explained. 'I'd advise reading the Thorton Park Student Handbook. It's available as a PDF via the school website.'

His response was unexpected: after a few moments of silence, he started to laugh. Obviously, I didn't reciprocate because I didn't see the joke and don't partake in pro-social laughter – i.e. fake laughter used to facilitate in-group bonding. I only laugh when I find something genuinely funny.

Will stopped laughing and gave me a look that I couldn't interpret. 'Oh, shit. You're being serious?'

I confirmed that I was.

'Thanks for the advice,' Will said, 'but I think I'm gonna risk it.'

And he went back to whatever he was doing on his phone. Just like that!

Daddy often tells me that I'm too quick to judge people, but in this instance, I felt justified. I decided that I did not like Will, and I would avoid interacting with him in the future.

3

Biology

I can tell you the exact day I stopped liking school. It was four years and seventeen days ago, following an incident in a Year Seven Biology lesson. Before then, I'd been wavering a bit. I loved learning, but I found the larger ecosystem of secondary school hard to cope with. Moving from a small school to a large one was intimidating, as was having to meet so many new people in such a short space of time. I only felt secure when I was with Bethany, when I could take my social cues from her and achieve a kind of automatic acceptability as her friend. It wasn't that the other pupils were actively unkind, or even unfriendly. It was more that I was growing increasingly aware of my own 'peculiarities' – of all the ways in which I stood out from the crowd.

Nevertheless, I'd always believed that this situation was manageable, that if I worked hard to understand all the hidden codes and rules of the schoolyard, I'd be able to adapt and blend in. I was never going to be conventionally popular like Bethany, nor did I want to be, yet I hoped I'd be able to carve out a niche for myself on the periphery of school life, as unobtrusive as a barnacle clinging to the underside of a whale.

The Biology Incident was the turning point – the thing that shattered this aspiration. You will be the only person I've ever

told this story to, Mum, although I think about it often. It was extremely humiliating.

It started out as an ordinary school day, except that I'd been suffering mild stomach cramps all morning, a fact that I'd hitherto attributed to a particularly sharp grapefruit I'd eaten for breakfast. It was only when I went to the toilets at the end of morning break that I noticed I'd bled in my underwear.

I wasn't particularly alarmed at this point. You and Daddy had done a good job preparing me for puberty, from quite a young age, and once I'd comprehended the problem afflicting me that morning, my mind turned immediately to practicalities. This being my first period, I did not have any pads with me. The obvious thing to do would have been to go at once to the school nurse, but I was conscious that this would make me late for class; I'd have to walk in late and I'd have to explain myself in front of everyone, which I wanted to avoid if possible. Bethany had gone ahead and would already be taking her seat, so I could not enlist her help.

Under time pressure, I decided my best option was to use toilet roll as a temporary pad. The bleeding seemed light, and I'd be able to go to the nurse at lunchtime to address the situation properly.

I realised this plan was not the best almost as soon as the lesson began. My hypersensitivity meant that I was acutely aware of the alien sensation of having toilet roll stuffed in my underwear, and I was certain that its position had shifted, either during the walk to the lab or when I sat down. The possibility that I might bleed through my uniform now worried me. I didn't know how likely this was, but once I'd had the idea, there was no shifting it. The scenario just kept circulating in my head like air in an unventilated room, stale and suffocating.

I think I made it through about fifteen minutes of the lesson before I decided I couldn't go on. Mr Jameson, our Biology teacher, was demonstrating how to test for glucose using a dried apricot and a phial of Benedict's solution, but I couldn't concentrate on a word he was saying. I'd tried to ground myself by counting my breaths, but this had only made me aware of how shallow and ragged my breathing had become, and how quick my heartbeat. It seemed to me, at this point, that I could suffer the minor embarrassment of excusing myself from class, or else risk the major embarrassment of *actually* bleeding through my clothes. That was if I didn't suffer a meltdown first, or an all-out panic attack.

That it would be a minor embarrassment, at most, was my genuine belief at the time. After all, people did excuse themselves from class now and then, either on medical grounds or to answer the call of natural bodily functions. I couldn't see why this instance should be any different, and I knew the correct protocol to follow: raise your hand, ask permission to leave, state your reason.

I raised my hand, and Mr Jameson noticed me straightaway.

'Yes, Phoebe. You have a question?'

I nodded. 'May I be excused to visit the school nurse? I'm menstruating.'

The giggles started at once, followed by the whispers, and then more giggles, along with some isolated expressions of disgust. Within a few moments almost everyone was laughing. Everyone except Mr Jameson, who was red, angry, and shouting for calm, and Bethany, who had her head in her hands. She later told me that I had provided too much information. I should have kept things vague and said that I was feeling unwell. In fact, I didn't even need to say this much.

No teacher was going to interrogate a twelve-year-old girl who suddenly needed to see the school nurse. But being vague does not come naturally to me.

Before he turned to teaching, Mr Jameson used to be in the army. He commanded troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and does not, in normal circumstances, struggle to maintain discipline. But on this occasion, he had to pound his fist on the workbench. 'SILENCE!'

The effect was immediate, but, to be honest, it did not make the situation much better. An eerie hush fell across the laboratory.

'Phoebe, you're excused. Would you like Bethany to go with you?'

I looked at Bethany, who no longer had her head down. She gave a small smile, which I took as a sign that she was willing to help me if I wanted her to. But I was too humiliated to talk in that moment – even to Bethany. I needed a moment alone, to process my error and avert a total shutdown.

So I just shook my head, retrieved my bag and left. Each action felt utterly strange. It was almost as if I was watching myself from the outside, in slow motion. I don't know when I started crying, but I suppose it must have been after I'd left the room, otherwise I'm sure Bethany would have been sent with me. I spent some time outside the nurse's office trying to compose myself, but I couldn't have been all that successful, as the nurse tried to give me a hug as soon as I'd explained my situation, and I bumped into a filing cabinet trying to evade her. She made me sit down and got me a cold glass of water, then told me I was exempt from the rest of the Biology class. This was good, as it gave me the time I needed to go to Boarding and change my underwear.

Later that morning, someone threw a tampon at me in the corridor. It struck me on the back of the head, causing me to jump and cry out, then fell to the floor with a muffled slap. I heard giggling from behind the lockers but decided not to investigate further. I didn't want to know who the culprit was, and had no intention of reporting the incident. I just wanted to forget it.

I was still upset at lunchtime, and planned to spend the whole hour in isolation, reading or playing chess against my phone (assuming I could concentrate on either). But my priority was just to stay away from the dining hall, where I was sure I'd face further teasing. I picked up a sandwich from the canteen and sat on the grass on the far side of the playground, partly hidden by a broad sycamore tree. I suppose Bethany must have seen me leaving and followed; she turned up a couple of minutes later and sat down beside me.

'I thought you might want some company,' she said.

'Thank you. As long it's not too embarrassing for you. I know people are still laughing at me.'

I suppose my words could have appeared sarcastic, even though I hadn't intended them that way. Bethany looked slightly wounded for a moment, before giving a firm shrug. 'That's their problem, isn't it?' She put her arm around my shoulder. It felt a bit awkward, but I was grateful nonetheless. I understood that she wasn't just trying to comfort me; she was telling me that she wasn't embarrassed to be with me, in the strongest way she could. 'How are you feeling?' she asked.

'It hasn't been the worst morning of my life,' I told her, 'but it's still pretty bad.'

'I'm sorry I wasn't more help. In class, I mean. It's just . . .'

Whatever Bethany had been going to say, she apparently changed her mind. 'It's just nothing. It wasn't OK for me to stay silent while everyone was laughing.'

'I'm not sure what else you could have done.'

'I could have said something. I s*hould* have said something.'

I shrugged. 'It's OK. It's hard in those situations. I understand.'

'Is there anything you need now?' Bethany asked. 'What can I do to make it better?'

I thought about this for a few moments. 'I don't want you to tell your mum when she picks us up. I'd rather no one else knew.'

'Are you sure? My mum would want to look after you too. You know she would.'

'I'd rather just forget about it,' I said, fearing this was, in fact, impossible. It was already difficult not to keep replaying the events of the morning again and again in my head. It was like picking at a wound.

Bethany stayed silent for a while and then nodded. 'If you're sure. What about your dad, though? Will you tell him?'

'I don't think he's qualified to deal with something like this. Plus it would make him sad.'

'What would? Knowing that *you're* sad?'

'Yes. I don't want him worrying about me. I'll just tell him to add sanitary towels to the shopping list like it's no big deal.'

Bethany gave a small smile and squeezed my shoulder.

'Could you tell me what I should have said?' I asked her. 'I'd like to know exactly what I got wrong.'

So Bethany talked me through the various ways in which I could have handled the situation differently. I suppose it was useful in a practical sense, but it didn't make me feel much

better about myself. If anything, it just left me more aware of my own limitations, of my failure to grasp the basic rules of the classroom – the unwritten rules – or not until it was too late.

When I got home that afternoon, I let Gladys out in the garden, then spent several minutes cuddling her on the lawn. It was consoling, but not enough. So I went to my room and attempted to comfort-read some of the first fantasy books you'd given me as a child, such as *The Hobbit* and the *Chronicles of Narnia.* When I couldn't concentrate on this, I turned to the self-help section of my bookcase and located the first letter you ever wrote to me, when I was five years old. I've read this letter many times over the years, so I know it by heart, but I still like to hold it in my hands every now and then, when I need to feel close to you.

Dear Phoebe,

This is very important information because it's all about you! Daddy and I hope that you will read it and then keep it safe, so you can read it again, whenever you need to.

As you know, everyone is different. Everyone has things that they are good at, as well as things they are not so good at. Not everyone likes the same things as everyone else. Everyone has things that they are scared of, but not everyone is scared of the same things.

Phoebe, one of your differences is that you have something called ASD, which means Autistic Spectrum Disorder. You may also hear it called

just autism, or even Asperger's, or Asperger's Syndrome. They all refer to the same thing really, so we'll just call it ASD. It's a bit like Mummy having ME, but ASD doesn't make you poorly. It changes the way your brain works. I hope that learning a little bit about it will be helpful (and interesting!) for you.

ASD is the reason you find some things harder than other people. It's the reason you don't always like looking at people, especially at their eyes, and it's why you sometimes find it difficult to talk to people and understand what they are saying. Your ASD means that you struggle with your balance sometimes (like when you have to tip your head back to have your hair washed), but it's also the reason you love the feeling of spinning and swinging. And it's why you have some really <u>amazing</u> skills, like reading so well and remembering things brilliantly.

These are not all the things you are good at or all the things you find difficult. It's impossible to write down every single thing about anyone. But I hope it gives you an idea of why you feel the way you do about some things.

The most important thing for you to understand is that having ASD isn't good or bad, or right or wrong. It's just a part of you, and another thing that makes you who you are. Mummy and Daddy think you are the most wonderful daughter in the world. You may not

always like to ask for help, but we love you very much and will always be here for you, whenever you need us. So, please, never be afraid to come to us with any problems or questions, and if there's anything in this letter that you'd like to know more about or don't understand, then please ask us about that too!

With all my love, now and forever,
Mummy

Reading this had always brought me comfort in the past, but today it did not. Because I'd had a realisation. That I could ask for advice endlessly, from Daddy and Bethany. I could read countless books on social protocols and appropriate behaviour. I could read all the self-help books in existence. And there'd still be things I didn't get. No matter how much I learned, and how many errors I tried to correct, there'd always be something else, some universal expectation that was obvious to most people but alien to me.

I processed these thoughts for a long time, and eventually came to a sort of muted acceptance. Passing as 'normal', blending in, was not a realistic behavioural goal, and it never had been. The logical response was to adjust my ambitions accordingly, and aim lower. A first step would be to restrict myself to the most basic social interactions, the ones that were unavoidable, routine, and carried the least risk of committing a serious mistake. Talking to large groups or in class should obviously be avoided at all costs, as the risk of large-scale humiliation could not be justified by any potential benefit – even the very large benefit of acquiring additional knowledge on an interesting subject. If I needed to discuss the

curriculum with my teachers, I could do so before or after lessons.

Having made some practical decisions, I felt a little better. I was still certain that I'd face teasing over the next few days, and possibly weeks, but I hoped that it would peter out eventually. Even if people didn't forget, it seemed unlikely that they would still be throwing sanitary products at me a year from now.

As for the wider implications of my social withdrawal, I told myself that these would be very limited. If I were to be honest, Bethany was my only true friend. I'd always tried to exchange pleasantries with my classmates in the past – so as not to appear aloof or discourteous – but Bethany was the only person my own age with whom I actually felt comfortable. We'd grown up together. We shared a bedroom in the school boarding house five nights out of fourteen, whenever the tide times stopped us from returning home in the evening. The point is, when I ran through these facts in my head, I felt reassured that I had one friendship I was happy with and would never have to worry about. Or so I thought.

4

The Argument

It was the second week back when I spoke to Will for a second time. Or rather, he spoke to me. In keeping with my 'minimal engagement' policy, and in light of the poor impression he'd made first time round, I would not have approached Will for a conversation unless it was a matter of the gravest importance. Possibly not even then. There was a disturbing rumour circulating that he'd been kicked out of his previous school. Kicked out! I don't often listen to gossip, in part because I'm seldom in a position to hear it, but in this case, Bethany was unusually eager to share. She'd heard the story from Emily, who'd heard it from Sienna, who'd heard it from Callum, who'd heard it from 'the horse's mouth'. Yet, when pressed, she admitted that nobody seemed to know what Will's crime had been. I concluded that the rumour might not be one hundred per cent credible, like the time when everyone was whispering that Natasha's father was a hitman who used to work for the Russian secret service but he turned out to be a chartered accountant (though there were some who still maintained this was just his cover story). Nevertheless, I could not dismiss the gossip entirely. I already knew that Will was a rule-breaker, so a prior expulsion from school was not out of the question.

He approached me at lunch break. I was sitting in the portico at the south entrance, using one of the fluted pillars for back support and partial concealment. Will must have spotted my ankles and shoes from the path at the bottom of the steps.

He loomed in front of me for a while, then waved an annoying hand in front of my face. I realised at this point that he probably wasn't going to leave unless I acknowledged him, and with great reluctance, I removed my headphones.

'Aren't those on the list of banned electrical items?' Will asked. He was probably making fun of me, but I decided it was easiest to answer the question at face value.

'They're frowned upon, for unspecified Health and Safety reasons and because most of the teachers find them irritating, but they're not technically prohibited, as long as you don't wear them in class or in the corridors. If you want further information, you can go to the office and ask for the Policy on Electronic Devices. I'm sure they'd be happy to give you a copy.'

I tried to keep my tone neutral, but it's possible that I was glaring at him. Bethany says this is my default expression during most conversations. Nevertheless, Will showed no sign of offence. He also showed no sign of leaving.

'So what are you listening to?' he asked.

'Music,' I told him.

He made a whirling gesture with his hand, which I interpreted as a request for yet more information.

'I *was* listening to Nightwish.'

'Never heard of them.'

This was unsurprising. 'They're a Finnish symphonic metal band. They're relatively niche in the UK but have a significant following across Northern continental Europe.'

'Metal? You're into metal?' For some reason, Will seemed to find this hilarious.

'I'm into Nightwish,' I told him. 'They're *symphonic* metal.'

'What's the difference?'

'In addition to the normal set-up of heavy guitar, bass and drums, they also have synthesised orchestral arrangements, and a classically trained soprano on vocals. And the music is more layered and complex.'

'Jesus,' Will said. 'What do you think of K-Pop?'

This was an odd question. 'I'm not an expert, but based on what I've heard in the corridors, I find it trite and uninteresting.'

'It was a joke . . . Forget it. What else *are* you into? Other than Nightwitch.'

'Nightwish. Do you mean music or in general?'

Will rolled his eyes. 'Music. The thing we're currently talking about.'

This question was much easier to answer. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

I nodded firmly. 'Nothing.'

'You mean . . . like . . . ?'

'Correct. I listen to Nightwish exclusively. I've tried a variety of different artists in the past but always found the experience less rewarding. My conclusion was that I'd rather not waste my time listening to inferior music.'

'Don't you get bored?'

'I do not. They have eight studio albums and several live recordings. That's plenty. And they've had three different lead vocalists in the last twenty-two years, and their music has evolved significantly. It's not like pop where it all sounds identical and follows the same basic template.'

I'd tried my best, but Will still looked baffled. The conversation was clearly going nowhere.

'Was there something you actually wanted?' I asked politely.

Will nodded; I think he was as keen to move on as I was. 'You're good friends with Beth, right?'

'Yes, we're best friends.'

'Cool. So I was wondering, is she, like, you know . . . unattached.'

'To what?'

Will rolled his eyes and spoke very slowly. 'Does she have a boyfriend?'

'Oh.' I took a few seconds to think. Not because of the question itself, which required zero thinking time, but because of the possible intent behind the question, which was more problematic. I decided to clarify matters straightaway. 'She does not have a boyfriend. Are you asking because you want to know if she'd be interested in you in this capacity?'

'Yes.'

'Absolutely not.'

No one likes to receive bad news, obviously, but all things considered, I felt Will's scowling at me was unjustified. The phrase 'don't shoot the messenger' sprang to mind.

'OK. Thanks for that, *Phoebes*. Can I ask, why not?'

'Numerous reasons. But the main one is that her father definitely wouldn't want her dating. He's extremely religious.'

'Religious?'

'He's a vicar.'

'A vicar? You're kidding, right? Not a literal vicar?'

'No, he's a literal vicar. In the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Holy Island.'

Will ran his fingers through his hair. 'Beth seems . . . really normal.'

'She is normal.'

Will sniggered at this. 'Yeah. No disrespect, but you may not be the best person to judge that.'

'Touché,' I said; Will gave me a funny look. 'However, I've known Bethany all my life. You've known her a week. I'm obviously in a better position to judge than you are.'

'Yeah, but . . . So she's super-religious, right?'

This was an interesting question. I assumed Bethany's faith was still strong, but I didn't actually know. Following some advice from Daddy, I hadn't spoken to Bethany or her family about religion since the infamous Easter of 2015, when I'd presented Reverend Collins with some of the more unusual arguments I'd found against God's existence – the Problem of Animal Suffering, the Argument from Disappointment, the Impossibility of Omniscience (AKA: How Does God Know He's Not in *The Matrix*?).

'If you want to know about Bethany's beliefs, you should ask Bethany,' I told Will. 'But it's really a moot point. There's zero chance that her father would approve of any romantic relationship at this stage in her life.'

Will snorted at this. 'And does Beth always do what her dad tells her to?'

Another question without a straightforward answer. But the priority, I decided, was not to give Will false hope. 'Maybe not *always*,' I said, 'but she's not going to get into a big argument with her parents over something trivial like this. It would have to be something that actually matters to her.'

He mumbled something unintelligible. I asked for a repetition.

'I said *whatever*,' Will said.

And he left. This was good because I'm not always able to discern when a conversation is over. I estimated that we'd been speaking for at least five minutes, which was the longest I'd spoken to anyone other than Daddy or Bethany in quite some time. On the whole, I thought I'd done pretty well. Having to dispense romantic advice was entirely new territory for me, yet I'd managed to deter Will from what was obviously a pointless endeavour without making it personal – i.e. I'd only mentioned external problems and hadn't had to draw attention to any of his character defects. And I'd saved Bethany from the embarrassment of having to deal with Will's unwanted advances in person. All while evading the most common pitfalls of unplanned social interaction.

I gave myself a virtual pat on the head, and went back to my music.

The next day I had put the conversation out of my mind, since it seemed unlikely that there would be any follow-up. It was the hour between after-school Enrichment and dinner, and I'd returned to our shared room, where there was no sign of Bethany. I was sitting cross-legged on my bed, reading the thesaurus, when she burst in.

'What *exactly* have you been saying to Will?'

I'm not used to being asked for an exact reproduction of discourse, especially not by Bethany; usually, it's the opposite, and she interrupts me to insist on 'the shortest possible summary'. I wasn't certain why this normal protocol was being reversed, but from Bethany's posture and intonation, I diagnosed that she was angry, and I was eager to clear up any misapprehension on her part. Since I'd not said anything rude,

unkind or inaccurate about Bethany, I had to assume that Will had presented a misleading picture of our conversation, either directly to Bethany or via some intermediary. This was a common and annoying problem, and provided a strong argument for the superiority of exact words over a vague synopsis.

After a false start, when Bethany told me I should skip the entire Nightwish prelude, I was able to provide a full and uninterrupted run-down of the previous day's conversation. I expected this to quell her anger, but, bizarrely, the opposite happened. She seemed more and more annoyed, until she, metaphorically, exploded.

'For God's sake, Phoebe!'

'Is there a problem?'

'Yes – you! You're the problem!'

I've grown practised at suppressing negative emotions, especially in the school environment, and I think it served me well in this instance. I was feeling extremely confused and anxious, but I managed to keep my voice and demeanour calm. It helped that I still had the thesaurus open, so I could focus on the pages rather than having to maintain eye contact.

'I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. I don't—'

'You made me sound like a child!'

This was specific, but still unhelpful, as the problem was in no way obvious. By any standard definition, Bethany *was* a child. She was fifteen. She wouldn't be an adult for another two years, seven months and three days. This was an indisputable fact. But I was reluctant to state it outright, for fear of provoking further inexplicable anger.

'I'd appreciate it if you *didn't* talk about me in the future.'

Despite the polite language, Bethany didn't sound any calmer. 'I don't need you interfering in my life, and I especially don't need you embarrassing me again.'

She left the room.

I decided it would be best if I stayed put until dinner time.