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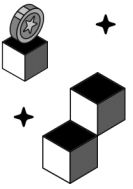
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THE BUS-STOP DECISION

I nearly manage to say something to Madeleine when we're out shopping for stationery a few days before school starts. I think she's the one to talk to, as I don't think she's quite as obsessed with the Gains School as John is.

"Are you excited, sweetie?" she asks, as we leave WHSmith with a new scientific calculator and pencil case.

"Kind of," I say, knowing that it's probably my last chance. "Did you hate Browtree?" I mumble.

"No, I didn't hate it." Then she pauses, choosing her words. "It just felt a bit … relaxed."

I think about this for a moment.

"Is relaxed bad?" I ask.

"No, not at all, I'm sure that for some kids it works perfectly fine, but you deserve the best."

I bite the inside of my cheek.

I don't understand how they are so clear on what "the best" is. Could it be that "the best" is totally different from one person to the next? If so, what is my "best"? It doesn't feel like it's the Gains, that's for sure. I risk one more question.

"Didn't you find the Gains a bit scary?"

Surely she can see? Surely she can understand that I don't want to go there? Surely I don't need to say anything else? She looks at me and I think that she's got it and that she is about to hug me and tell me it's OK and that I can go wherever I want, but she shrugs and smiles.

"It'll be fine once you get there. Shall we pop to Clarks next and get you a nice pair of smart shoes before picking up your new uniform?"

I nearly say something else. Try and make it even more obvious that I don't want this, but as I search for the words, I get stuck on what to say. Maybe they are right. Maybe the Gains School is the best. As I struggle with my thoughts, she heads off in the direction of the shoe shop and I've missed my chance.

*

On the first day of term I'm standing by the kitchen door in my new uniform. The tie is annoying and won't go flat, the trousers are itchy and the green blazer is about five sizes too big. I think about the Browtree uniform. A red jumper with their emblem, a huge oak tree, printed large on the back. It actually looks pretty cool. I imagine myself wearing that instead. As it is I'm dressed up like a right nugget and itching from head to toe.

I have to be at the bus stop for 8.05 a.m. John has already gone to work. He wakes up at six o'clock every morning and leaves the house with his packed lunch at exactly six forty-five. He works in an office doing something called IT solutions, whatever that is. Something to do with computers. Madeleine works in a doctor's surgery for two days and spends the rest of the week cleaning and re-cleaning the house. She hoovers the carpet, telling me to lift up my dirty feet even when all I have on is a fresh pair of socks and the carpet already looks pristine.

The new house is completely beige. Beige sofa, beige walls, beige carpet. Beige makes me feel sick. Frazer from my last school had five brothers and sisters and they all got to choose what colour to paint their bedrooms. Every room was bright pink

or turquoise or rainbow striped. I couldn't believe it. Even the downstairs was bright too, with an emerald sofa and yellow walls. It was so messy and loud and colourful, the complete opposite to our house. Sometimes I feel like maybe I was born into the wrong family or maybe I was swapped at birth or something. Maybe there is a kid somewhere who loves clean beige houses and is trapped inside colourful chaos and we should just swap.

I say bye to Madeleine and she waves me off from the front door. On the way to the bus stop I tap my pocket and check that I've got the bus fare. Then I think that I may have forgotten to pack my sketchbook so I check the time and sling my bag on the bench by the post box. I've got time to quickly check before the bus. I need my sketchbook, especially on day one. If no one talks to me I can just hide somewhere and draw my mechanical-squid version of the Gains School.

As I'm unzipping the bag, something catches my eye. Next to the bench, peeking out from under a bush, is a flash of red fabric. It feels familiar and I look around to see if anyone is watching. When no one appears, I bend over, take the red material and pull it out from underneath the bush. A huge

oak tree unfolds and I see the words *Browtree High* embroidered on the front in blue thread. I check again to see if anyone is watching. It feels strange, like the wind has stopped for a second. Like this is some kind of sign. I grab the jumper and run with it in my arms to the bus stop.

I don't know why I'm holding on to it. Why I didn't leave it on the bench for the owner to find. But here I am, all alone at the bus stop, with a Browtree jumper in my arms. At five past, a bus pulls into the stop with the words *The Gains School* across the front, and as I'm about to climb aboard I see another bus pulling in behind it. Different words are written across the front: *Browtree High*.

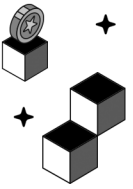
I look at both buses and then at the jumper in my arms. An idea lands in my brain and makes my eyes open wider. I couldn't, could I? I feel the familiar feeling of flip-flopping, rising panic. Of a decision needing to be made. Which bus should I get on? Should I listen to my parents? Or is the jumper in my arms a sign? A sign that I need to do something different for a change? My eyes dart between the buses. As the doors open for the Gains School, I feel sick at the idea of stepping on to the bus, of doing the thing that my parents want me to do, that doesn't feel

like the thing I want at all. I look to the Browtree bus and see kids sitting at the top in their red jumpers. I could just put the jumper on and become one of them. They look so happy, but I couldn't get away with it, could I? I can't just go to the wrong school. There's no point even trying. My head is swimming.

"You getting on, son?" the voice of the driver calls out to me, as I stand frozen on the pavement. I just can't decide. I need help. What would you do?

If you think I should **get on the Gains bus**, turn to **page 23**.

If you think I should **put the jumper on and get on the Browtree bus**, turn to **page 41**.



THE GAINS SCHOOL

The driver says again, "Are you getting on or what?"

This time he sounds angry. I quickly dump the red jumper in the bus shelter and step on to the bus. As I take my seat, I turn my head and stare out of the back window, watching the Browtree bus get smaller and smaller until we turn a corner and it vanishes.

I shake my head and smile to myself. I can't believe I even considered getting on the wrong bus! It would never have worked. They would have found out straight away that I was at the wrong school and called my parents. I would have been in so much trouble. But a tiny voice in my head tells me that it would have been worth it. At least then my parents would know how I feel, without me having to say it to them. Oh well – I'm on my way to the Gains

School. Living out the decisions that they make for me, as usual.

I look around the bus and see some other kids who must be new as well; their blazers look as ridiculously big as mine. At the back are kids with braces and spots, who look far too big for their bodies. They must be much older. Everyone's heads are down, vacant faces lit up by phones. You can stare at anyone when they're on their phone and they never notice. It's like the outside world vanishes. I spend ten minutes staring at people without them knowing and then when I'm bored, I get my sketchbook out.

I draw a bus that is being ripped in two with another bus coming out of it. It's pretty cool but I don't have time to really get going as the bus stops and people start getting up. We're here. I close my sketchbook and take a deep breath in. Out of the window I can see the huge iron gates and children piling through them towards the terrifying school building. I'm almost surprised there's no mechanical squid emerging from it.

"First I couldn't get you on the bus, now you won't get off! Come on, lad, wake up." It's the grumpy voice of the bus driver.

"Sorry," I call, as I shove my sketchbook in my bag

and jump up from my seat. I had no idea the bus had emptied. On my way to the doors I drop my pencil and it rolls under a seat. As I'm fumbling around for it the driver shouts, "GET OFF THE RUDDY BUS!"

So I have to abandon my pencil, even though it's one of my favourites. I scramble off the bus and look back at the driver, shaking his head and closing the doors behind me.

Part of me wishes that I'd made the other choice and got on the Browtree bus. I bet the driver of that bus was less angry. Maybe he was even friendly and fun and played music the whole way. I'll never know.

I turn to the school and hear a bell ring. The kids all start walking faster into the grey building. I catch up and follow them in. Madeleine said that all the Year Sevens have to go to the hall first to be put in their classes. I have no idea where the hall is. I can't remember how to get anywhere in this huge building with its identical classrooms and long corridors. I'm standing in the entrance and I can go either way. Left or right. I feel the familiar feeling of not knowing, but before it can turn into full-blown frozen panic, I spot a boy who is half my size and whose sleeves look like they're dangling way beyond his hands. He must be a Year Seven. He turns right so I follow him.

As the older kids funnel off to various classrooms, the corridor is left with new kids. Ahead of us we can see the head teacher's face and shoulders towering over the tiny kids. He's standing by a huge set of double doors that lead into a grand-looking assembly hall. He nods as kids walk in and occasionally stops them to adjust their tie or tell them to tuck their shirt in. At least I have found the hall! It already feels like the longest morning of my life. If the rest of the day is like this, I'll be exhausted.

I keep following the boy with the long sleeves and sit in a chair next to him. The hall fills up and whenever anyone talks there's a violent shushing that comes from the back of the room. I try to see which teacher can make a *shush* sound so intense, but every time it happens I turn round and it stops. Like a game of Grandma's footsteps but with angry shushing instead. It makes me think of a drawing of a robot with its finger to its metal lips, but before I can go fully into my draw dream, Mr Sourden glides on to the stage.

"Knowledge itself is power. *Ipsa scientia potestas est*."

He pauses dramatically, as if he thinks we will all spontaneously applaud. When we don't, he carries on.

"This is the Gains School. Here, we expect you to be the best. Nothing will go unnoticed. An untied shoe or an odd sock, a forgotten pencil or a tapping foot. That is where the rot sets in. We will have no rot in the Gains School. If you work hard, listen and learn, then you will leave the Gains School a better version of the person you are today."

It all sounds a bit intense to me. He carries on talking for about twenty minutes about all the ways we can get a detention and then sends us in alphabetical order to line up and get instructions for where to go. By the time the T's are told to stand up, I've nearly drifted off to sleep, which was definitely on the list of ways to get into trouble. The long-sleeved boy gets up at the same time and we head towards the teachers handing out pieces of paper. I peek at the girl in front's piece of paper, which tells her that her class name is **EXCELLENCE** and where she needs to go to become a better version of herself.

"Timple?" calls a lady with tiny glasses. I put my hand up and she hands me a piece of paper. It reads:

YOU ARE IN CLASS:
DECISIVE
Please make your way to room SC12.

As I walk out, looking at the paper, I immediately need to make a decision about which way to go. The word **DECISIVE** seems to grow on the page, making the worry in my chest grow with it.

The boy with the long sleeves comes and stands next to me and shows me his paper.

"We're in the same class," he says. "I'm Rupert."

He pulls up his gigantic sleeve and holds out his hand for me to shake.

"I'm Fred," I say, shaking his tiny hand. "Do you know where you're going?"

"Yup, follow me."

As the words leave his mouth, a violent *shush* comes from the hall and this time it's close and directed right at us. The power of it makes me jump and I look in the direction it came from. A terrifying woman with a bald head has her finger on her lips and is scowling at us. Rupert starts walking and I follow. This place is worse than I thought, but at least Rupert seems to know where he's going.