Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Accidental Friends

Written by

Helena Pielichaty

Published by

Oxford University Press

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter 1

The loud rattling startled Emma, making her step back and bang her heel into the ladder. Wincing, she turned and saw the rattling was coming from one of the college cleaners' trolleys as it rode over the low step leading through to Art Studio One. Realizing that it was that time already—the studios were always last to be cleaned as they took the longest—only added to Emma's mounting despair. Her exhibition was nowhere near finished. Not only that, it was a pathetic load of rubbish the examiners would take one look at in the morning and rip to shreds. Fact.

OK, so her tutor, Phil Kiddey, had assured her that she had absolutely nothing to worry about. That she was, according to him, not rubbish at all but actually a 'bit of a superstar'. Emma let out a heavy sigh. The trouble with Phil was he always said stuff like that, not just to her but to all the students on his course. Everyone was a 'star' and everything they did was either 'marvellous' or 'stunning' or 'innovative'. What she could do with was a second opinion from someone who would see her exhibition with a fresh, objective eye. Someone who didn't know her. Someone like . . .

Emma looked again at the cleaner. The woman had her back to her, her thin shoulder blades jutting through the sheer material of her tabard like set squares, her dark head bent as she selected her cleaning materials ready to begin. Emma recognized her instantly. It was the Polish one who had started soon after Christmas and caused a furore by mistakenly chucking away two students' sculptures that had been left propped against the waste bins to dry. She'll be perfect, Emma thought to herself. Impulsively, she strode across the floor and touched the cleaner lightly on the arm. 'Excuse me.'

The woman, just as startled by Emma as Emma had been by her moments earlier, knocked over a can of Mr Sheen as she glanced round.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump,' Emma said, righting the can and trying to read the name on the badge pinned to the cleaner's breast. 'Er . . . Kaz-ia . . . '

'Not Kazz. Is pronounced Kasha to rhyme with smasher,' the woman explained, in clear, if heavily accented, English.

'Oh! Well, nice to meet you, Kazia . . . I'm Emma,' Emma said and held out her hand for the woman to shake.

The cleaner stared at it, puzzled. She was not used to the students speaking directly to her, let alone offering actual physical contact. Emma continued quickly. 'I was wondering if you'd help me? I've been stressing over my exhibition for so long I'm going cross-eyed.'

'Help you? But I have room to clean,' Kazia pointed out, pulling on a pair of yellow rubber gloves.

Emma nodded to show she understood. 'Oh, don't worry; I'll help you with that, I promise. I just want a second opinion on something.'

At once the cleaner looked interested. She even smiled, revealing white, if slightly crooked, teeth. 'Like Dr Grey!' she beamed.

'Sorry?' Emma asked.

'In excellent TV hospital drama called Grey's Anatomy, *Doctor Meredith Grey often asks her handsome but married ex-lover Doctor Derek Shepherd for a second opinion, though she does not always take it, silly woman.'*

'Oh, right,' said Emma, 'my mum watches it. She's a big fan.'

'Did she see the one where Meredith had to keep her fist inside the man's chest because there was a bomb there and if she moves even a millimetre the whole hospital blows up?'

'Er . . . I don't know.'

'It was so exciting. I daren't breathe for whole episode.'

'Really? Wow. I'll try and catch it on DVD.'

'You should,' Kazia said, her eyes swooping over Emma from head to toe, the way one human does to another: assessing, judging, instinctively compartmentalizing. Kazia saw a brown-skinned young woman with a pretty face framed by a mass of curly, coppery coloured hair, her slim, petite frame drowning in a paint-splattered boilersuit. The girl also had bare feet,

which Kazia found endearing, if a little rash in this particular room. Who knew what you could tread on in here? Plaster. Staples. Glue. Oh, well—art students were strange like that; it was not her business. 'OK,' Kazia agreed, beginning to peel off her gloves, 'I will give you second opinion. Show me but quickly, yes? Or I will have big behind.'

'Five minutes max, I promise!' Emma laughed, leading her over to the far wall where her four canvases, each about the size of a ping-pong table, dominated the space. 'What I'd really appreciate is if you'd walk along each panel with me so I can practise what I'm going to say to the examiners tomorrow. They're assessing me at ten and I am so nervous.'

'I understand,' Kazia nodded. 'Day before my driving test I was on toilet non stop.'

Emma hurriedly filed that snippet away under 'too much information' and continued. 'O-K. If you'll just stand over here for a minute, I'll give you a brief introduction.' Emma manoeuvred Kazia so that she was standing adjacent to the panels, then cleared her throat and began the opening speech she had prepared during lunch. 'The concept of my work is based upon my first year here at Hercules Clay Further College Education, two years ago. Using the game of Consequences, I hope to demonstrate the sequence of events as they unfolded through a variety of techniques and media . . . '

Kazia interrupted then. 'Oh. You are on a three-year course? I did not know there was a three-year art and design course here.'

'There isn't. I took a year out.'

'Oh. Why?'

The question threw Emma off guard. The examiners wouldn't want to know about that, would they? It was too personal. And certainly too personal to talk to a virtual stranger about. 'Er . . . well, I think that's kind of irrelevant at the moment. Anyway, Consequences,' she continued, ' . . . although this might seem like a children's game, in actual fact it . . . '

Kazia interrupted again. If she was going to give a proper second opinion, she reasoned, she would need all the facts. 'I do not think we had this game when I was growing up in Wroclaw. Could you explain it, please?'

'You've never played it?'

'No,' Kazia said.

Emma gawped in astonishment. Until now she had presumed everybody had heard of Consequences. What if the examiners hadn't heard of it either? Maybe it was only her family who sat round the table on rainy Saturday afternoons and made up silly stories on scraps of paper. Nightmare! She'd failed from the outset! These were basics she should have predicted! Oh, crap!

Frantically, Emma ripped a sheet of paper from the spiral bound book she had been using to jot notes down. 'OK, I'll explain it to you. It's dead easy. What you do is take a piece of paper like this. Then you have to write down a boy's name on top. I'll write my brother Dan's down because it's short . . . ' Quickly,

Emma printed 'Dan' in neat capital letters. 'Then you fold the paper over to cover it, like this.'

Kazia watched intently. 'Mmm.'

'Then you write a girl's name. Do you want to do the girl's name?' Emma held out the pen but Kazia shook her head.

'I have terrible handwriting. Like drunken carp. You do it for me,' she said.

'What shall I write? I could put Becky? That's my sister. Nine going on nineteen, unlike Dan who's twenty going on twelve.'

'Not Becky. I like name Meredith better,' Kazia said, 'no offence to sister.'

'None taken.' Emma wrote Meredith with a flourish then folded the piece of paper over as before. 'So that's the first part.'

'OK,' Kazia nodded, 'you were right. Dead easy.'

'Indeed,' Emma said, calming down a little. 'Now, this piece of paper links neatly with my first piece of art which, as you can see from the label on the wall, is entitled "Consequences Part One: Boy's Name/Girl's Name".' Emma paused, waiting until Kazia had slipped the paper into her pocket and turned to face the panel.

They stood for a few seconds, Kazia to take in the work for the first time, Emma for the millionth. 'This represents my typographical element,' Emma added.

Kazia studied the abstract design intently. It consisted of repeating four short names, James, Grace, Leon, and Emma time and again in different colours, shapes, and sizes, vertically, horizontally, diagonally; sometimes

separate, sometimes overlapping. Sometimes the names were painted, sometimes printed, other times filled with cut-out bits of newspapers or letters or documents. 'These are the names of your friends? James, Grace, and Leon?' Kazia asked.

Emma nodded. 'Yes. They are the first people I met here, on day one.'

'Ah,' Kazia replied. 'The people you meet first are often the ones you stick to.'

'I guess.'

Kazia sniffed and then took a deep breath. 'Well, I like the way you have used a wide variety of typefaces with serifs and sans-serifs,' she said slowly, then added, 'Good use of colour too. Strong colours but one does not dominate the other.'

Emma stared at her. 'You know about serifs?'

Kazia nodded and looked most pleased with herself. 'Mr Kiddey is very kind. He lends me lots of books on art so I can learn what is garbage and what is not garbage when I am cleaning studio.'

'Oh.'

'So it is nice for me to be asked by student to give second opinion. I can use my knowledge.' Kazia smiled then stepped forward and examined a large letter J. 'What is the significance of the print inside here?'

Yes, Emma thought to herself; this was exactly the type of question she could expect! She flicked her hair back from her shoulders in preparation for her answer. 'What you see are scans of our GCSE results. I've used them in all the letters, where appropriate. Basically

Consequences is all about the consequences of what happened to the four of us on the day the results were announced. It was because of them—or lack of them—we all met that September. I wanted to explore the effect a common rite of passage, such as the taking of GCSEs, could have on four random individuals.' Emma glanced anxiously at Kazia. Had she sounded too pretentious?

Kazia simply nodded, then leaned even closer to read the print inside the J. 'So, this James. He was bright boy?'

At the mention of James's name, Emma felt the back of her neck warming. 'Very bright,' she agreed.

'So the consequences for him were good?' Kazia asked, wanting to sound keen and interested.

'Erm . . . no, actually, they weren't. Not really. Not . . . immediately anyway.'

Kazia frowned. Even though she didn't know very much about GCSEs the grades given in the large 'J' looked reasonable to her. 'Please explain more.'

'About why I chose those particular typefaces?'

'No. About why James did not have good consequences with his grades.'

'Oh,' Emma said, hesitating. This was the second thing she hadn't anticipated: that she'd be asked questions on the personalities behind her letters. She could have understood it if she'd been doing portraiture. Hadn't Tracy Chevalier written a whole book about a maid in one of Vermeer's paintings? Girl with a Pearl Earring *or something? But for an abstract design*

piece? Would she be expected to talk about the people behind that? Yet why not? That's what made art interesting, wasn't it? Gave it depth? Brought it to life? Who knew what the examiners would ask! Phil warned they'd throw in the odd curved ball; maybe this would be one. 'Well, OK. Er . . . to understand about the impact of James's results, you have to go back three years, to a Thursday in late August, and imagine you are in a very old boys' public school in West Sussex . . . '

'Like Eton? With cricket and rugger and midnight feastings?'

Emma smiled. 'Well, not Eton exactly but yes, along those lines.'

Kazia nodded enthusiastically. She approved wholeheartedly of public schools, along with all other things British like Yorkshire pudding and Pears' soap and haggis. 'Go on,' she urged.

Emma rubbed her neck and stared once more at the swooping letter J on her panel. 'If I remember from what he told me, James opened his results in the library . . . '