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Opening extract from

Cosmic

Written by

Frank Cottrell Boyce

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A rocket, launched yesterday from a private site in northern China, is missing. Yesterday the Internet was alive with rumours of a secret manned space mission. Today NASA and the Russian Federal Space Agency both confirmed that a rocket did take off but denied it was theirs. The rocket entered high orbit and then disappeared into 'deep space'. No manned rocket has left Earth's orbit since Apollo 17 in 1972.

i am not exactly in the lake district

Mum, Dad – if you're listening – you know I said I was going to the South Lakeland Outdoor Activity Centre with the school?

To be completely honest, I'm not exactly in the Lake District.

To be completely honest, I'm more sort of in space.

I'm on this rocket, the Infinite Possibility. I'm about two hundred thousand miles above the surface of the Earth. I'm all right . . . ish.

I know I've got some explaining to do. This is me doing it.

I lied about my age.

I sort of gave the impression I was about thirty. Obviously I'm more sort of thirteen-ish. On my next birthday.

To be fair, everyone lies about their age. Adults pretend to be younger. Teenagers pretend to be older. Children wish they were grown-ups. Grown-ups wish they were children.

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It's not like I had to try very hard, is it? Everyone always thinks I'm older than I really am, just because I'm tall. In St Joan of Arc Primary the teachers seemed to think that height and age were the same thing. If you were taller than someone, you must be older than them. If you were tall and you made a mistake – even if it was only your first day – you got, 'You should know better, big lad like you.'

Why, by the way? Why should a big lad know better just because he's big? King Kong's a big lad. Would *he* know the way to the toilet block on his first day at school? When no one had told him? No, I don't think he would.



Anyway, a few hours back the Infinite Possibility was supposed to complete a routine manoeuvre and basically it didn't. It rolled out of orbit, wrecking all the communication equipment, and now I'm very lost in space.

I've brought this mobile phone with me – because it's got pictures of home on it. It's also got an audio-diary function. That's what I'm talking into now. Talking makes me feel less lonely. Unless you get this message you won't know about any of this because this is a secret mission. They said that if it goes wrong they're going to deny all knowledge of it. And us. There's five of us on board. The others are all asleep.

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Can you believe that, by the way? We're in a rocket, spinning hopelessly out of control and into Forever, and what is their chosen course of action?

A nap.

When we got the manoeuvre just slightly wrong – just slightly enough to make us completely doomed – they all screamed for about an hour and then they dozed off.

I can't sleep. I can't get comfortable in sleeping bags because they're always too small for me.

Plus I think if I stay awake I might have an idea. And save us all. That's why I'm recording this on my Draxphone. If I do get home, I'm going to give it to you and then you'll understand how I ended up in deep space when I said I was going pond dipping in the Lake District.

If you are listening to this though, and you are not my mum and dad, you are probably a pointy-headed, ninety-legged, sucker-footed alien, in which case, can I just say, 'Hello, I come in peace. And, if you happen to have the technology, please post this phone to:

Mr and Mrs Digby – 23 Glenarm Close, Bootle, Liverpool 22, England, The Earth, Solar System, Milky Way, et cetera. If it's not too much trouble.'

completely doomed

The slightly worrying thing is that I am sort of enjoying this. Being doomed is Not Good. But being weightless is Outstanding. Every time I lean forward I do a perfect somersault. When I stretch my arms in the air I levitate. Back on Earth my only special skills are being above average in maths and height. Up here I've got so many skills I'm practically a Power Ranger.

Then there's the stars.

On Earth, our house is right next to the New Strand Shopping Centre. The multi-storey blots out most of the sky. The only stars I ever really noticed were the ones on the 'It's Your Solar System' glow-in-the-dark mobile I got when I was nine. And the only reason I noticed them was that they kept getting tangled in my hair. Mobiles do not make good presents for persons of above average height.

The stars look different from here. There's a lot more of them, for one thing. Big swirls and knots and clouds of them, so bright they hurt to look at.

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When you're in it, space looks like the biggest firework display ever – except it's on pause. It looks like freeze-frame fireworks. Even if you're Completely Doomed, you've got to be impressed.

The only bad thing about the view is that it doesn't include Earth. We haven't seen it since we rolled out of orbit. I said to the others, 'Well, it must be somewhere. We're probably just facing the wrong way. We'll find it. Definitely.' But that didn't seem to calm them down. One of them – Samson Two – drew me a diagram to prove that even if we were facing the wrong way we should still be able to see it. I said, 'So what are you saying? That we've fallen into some magic wormhole and come out on the other side of the universe?'

'Possibly.'

'That the whole Earth just vanished? That it's gone?'

'Possibly.'

They all screamed until they wore themselves out, and then they went to sleep.

At least sleep uses less oxygen.

I have tried to imagine that there's someone on the other end of this phone. Someone unusually quiet. I've also tried to make actual phone calls. I sort of thought the signal might be better up here, being nearer to the satellites. But it doesn't seem to work like that.

my favourite gravity

I don't think the world has vanished. But it is worrying not being able to see it. After all, Earth is where I keep all my stuff. Thinking about all my favourite bits – my mum, and my dad, my bedroom, my computer – makes me feel a bit calmer. There's my massive Playmobil Viking ship that takes up half the floor. Or used to take up half the floor. I put it back in its box the day I discovered I'd grown facial hair. I just thought that anyone with a beard – even just a wispy one – is probably too old for Playmobil.

I say *I* discovered the facial hair. To be honest, I never noticed it, because we've got energy-saving light bulbs in the bathroom. It was other people who pointed it out to me, during the Year Six Leavers' Outing to Enchantment Land.

The most famous ride in Enchantment Land is the Cosmic. All the way there, on the coach, everyone kept on about how big it was and how scary. Everyone had a brother or a cousin who had been

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on it and Never Been the Same Again. In case you don't know, the Cosmic is a kind of metal cage with two seats in. It's attached to the top of a massive crane by kind of big elastic bands. They pull the cage down to the ground with a chain and fasten it with an electromagnet. You sit inside and then they switch off the magnet. The elastic catapults you into the air and then snaps you back towards the ground again. Then you bounce up and down for a while. It's only frightening for about ten seconds, but for those ten seconds it is so frightening that Ben's cousin's hair supposedly turned completely white. And it goes so fast that Joe's next-door neighbour's stomach came loose and ended up stuck in his own neck and he had to have an operation. Apparently he'll show you the stitches if you ask him.

Despite these obvious drawbacks, everyone said they were going to go on it. Until we got there and discovered there was a height requirement – namely a wooden Martian holding his arm straight out and a speech bubble that said, 'If you can walk under my arm, you can't take the Cosmic.' Everyone could easily walk under the arm. Except me. It only came up to my shoulder. 'OK,' said the man. 'You're on.'

See what I mean about height versus age? It's a height requirement, not an age requirement. Everyone was moaning, saying it wasn't fair and saying how rubbish it was being a kid and how they wished they were

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grown-ups. That's what they said. In fact, they were all blatantly relieved that they weren't tall enough.

The man said, 'You'll need someone to go on with you. It's two at a time or no ride.'

I looked at Mrs Hayes, our teacher. She shrugged. 'Are you allowed on if you're pregnant?'

'No,' said the man, but you could hardly hear him because everyone was so excited by the news that Mrs Hayes was having a baby.

'No one else?' said the man.

And everyone looked at the responsible parent who had very kindly accompanied our group – namely, my dad. He always comes on these things because he's a taxi driver, so he can choose what hours he works.

Florida Kirby kept nudging him, 'Go on, Mr Digby. Go on. My dad'd do it if he was here. My dad's dead brave.' She more or less shoved him past the Martian and up the ramp. The man waved us into the cage and fastened us both in. I remember Dad saying, 'Has anyone ever died on this?'

And the man glared at him. 'No,' he said. 'No one has EVER died on my ride.'

'Only asking,' said Dad.

Then the man shut the door of the cage, looked at us through the bars and said, 'But there's always a first time.'

If we'd said, 'Let me out!' then, it wouldn't have done any good because straight away this incredibly loud

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music started up and dry-ice fog came pouring into the cage and lights were bouncing around us. They really believed in a big build-up. Dad gripped my hand and shouted, 'Don't be scared, Liam.' Before I could say, 'I'm not scared,' something went BANG and we were rocketing through the air. There's a horrible crushing feeling, like a big fist squeezing you into a ball. Then at the top it just lets go of you and you feel lighter than air and not scared of anything at all, as though all the fear had been squeezed out of you. The second bounce was nearly as high as the first, but it wasn't even a bit frightening. We sat there, the two of us, laughing madly while we waited for the elastic to calm down. We bounced five more times.

When we got off I was tingling all over and everything around me looked sort of more in focus than usual. Everything was crisper and brighter. The boys were all hanging around the wooden Martian, shouting and yelling and cheering. The girls were still hanging round Mrs Hayes asking her about the baby. I realized we'd only been up there about two minutes.

Florida Kirby said, 'Are you going to be sick?'

'No.'

'Julie Johnson was sick on the Ghost Train.'

She seemed to think that if I knew this, I might agree to be sick, just to fit in. Florida Kirby is obsessed with two things – celebrities and being sick. Give her a sick celebrity and she's in heaven.

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I said, 'That. Was. Golden. Can we do it again?'

Dad said, 'Not with me, you can't.'

'But . . .'

'Liam, what you've just had was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And now you've had it.'

He went off to play on the Hook-a-Duck. Wayne Ogunsiji was with him, and the two of them got into this profound conversation about Liverpool's defence. Dad said they were weak at the back. Wayne said they were solid at the back but they couldn't really distribute properly. Every now and then I'd see the cage of the Cosmic shoot up over the tops of the other rides, twisting and turning, like a moon shot from a cannon and part of me thought, I've done that. And the rest of me thought, I've got to do it again.

When it was time to leave, Mrs Hayes marched us off to this special exit they've got just for school parties. I carried on watching for one last glimpse of the Cosmic.

I must've drifted a bit out of the line, because when I tried to walk through the gate the security man said, 'Could you stand aside a moment, sir?' I stood aside and watched everyone else leaving.

When Dad went by he was so busy mentally managing Liverpool FC with Wayne Ogunsiji he didn't even glance at me. As soon as Dad'd gone through, the security guard closed the door and said to me, 'The main exit's over there, mate. This is schoolkids only.'

He thought I was a grown-up!

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People always think I'm older than I am but no one had taken me for an actual grown-up before. I could've said, 'I *am* a schoolkid. Please let me out,' OR I could've said nothing, and seized the opportunity to have another go on the Cosmic. So I did have two options but somehow, in my head, they dwindled down to one.

I went straight back to the Cosmic.

The man in charge spotted me hanging around and said, 'Didn't your mate like it?'

'My mate?' I realized he was talking about my dad.

'You know, you can do me a favour if you like. Help me plug the gaps.'

'What gaps?'

'Well, I like to keep the ride busy. It doesn't look too tempting, the cage just standing there. A lot of people chicken out at the last minute. I like to have someone who can step in from time to time.'

I said, 'Sure,' in a grown-up kind of voice and stood by the cage.

That afternoon I did the Cosmic with a boy whose mum was too scared to take him, a teenager who was doing it for a dare, someone whose girlfriend was too fat for the seat, and four others. Eight goes in all. The man said I must have a highly developed centre of gravity. Every single time, I got the same Crispy New World feeling. It never wore off.

According to the man, the Cosmic generates 4g on the way up. 'That's four times the gravitational force exerted

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by the Earth. 4g is enough to make you appreciate how comfy normal gravity is. I used to have it set at 5g, but people kept passing out, which wasn't good for business. You do have to feel sorry for anyone who lives on a high-gravity planet all the time. That must be really hard work.'

Afterwards the man bought some hot dogs and chips and we ate them in the cage, dangling gently from a piece of elastic high above the fair. You could see all the rides laid out like a model village, and sometimes a seagull went right past us. Finally, I spotted Dad walking quickly past the Fun House. I shouted, 'Taxi!!!! Taxi!!!!' which usually works.

He looked everywhere but up. It was ages before he saw me.

I suppose if you're looking for me now, Dad, you're doing the same thing. Looking everywhere but up, in space. It was a laugh watching you then. But when we got back to the ground you weren't amused.

'Where the hell have you been? We counted you out of the exit. People swore they saw you on the bus. We were halfway to Bootle before we realized you weren't with us.'

'I've been here. I was here the whole time. Wasn't I, mister?'

'Yeah,' said the man in charge. 'And what's your problem anyway, mate?'

'I'm not your mate. I'm his dad.'

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'You look a bit young to be his dad.'

'He's eleven.'

'What?'

'He's just unusually tall.'

'It's not his height; it's his beard.'

That was the first mention of the Premature Facial Hair.

And Dad said, 'Liam. Coach.'

Everyone cheered and clapped when I finally got on the coach. I sat by the window and tried to get a look at my new facial hair reflected in the glass. I could just make out little wisps of brown candyfloss. I said, 'How did they get there? D'you think the extra gravity might have squeezed them out of my face?'

Randomly, this made Dad really furious. 'Liam – blah blah – looking for you for the past two hours – blah blah. Had every taxi driver in the county looking for you. Reported your magical disappearance from a moving bus . . .'

'I wasn't on the bus.'

' . . . your magical disappearance from a moving bus to the police.'

'No!'

'And then I find you cheerfully waving and eating chips on a fairground ride. How d'you think I feel about that?'

'Happy that I'm alive?'

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He glared at me and said, 'Possibly. In some remote and noble corner of my heart, yes. But mostly no.'

I said, 'I'm sorry.'

Then he said, 'You should know better, a big lad like you.'



That's the thing about parents. If you go missing, they worry that you might be dead. Then when they find you, they want to kill you.

Dad was furious because while he'd been worrying himself sick I hadn't been worried at all. Why wasn't I worried? Because I knew he'd come back for me. I never thought for a minute he wouldn't. When you're a kid you think your dad can do anything.

It's different now. If you ask me now if I think Dad is going to pop up at the controls of this rocket, two hundred thousand miles above the surface of the Earth, and fly us back to Bootle, I'd say – probably not.

I suppose that means I'm not a kid any more.

i nearly shaved myself to death

Even though I could barely see the Premature Facial Hair, once I knew it was there, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was ticklish and it was tempting to stroke it. Stroking it made other people notice it and when other people noticed it they tended to shout, 'Wolverine!' and worse. Which is why I decided to get rid of it.

I slashed at the brown candyfloss with Dad's razor, which did get rid of it. Sadly it also got rid of a lot of blood.

Sheets of blood just sort of fell out of my face. I wasn't quite sure what the procedure was so I squashed a towel into my chin, prayed that I wouldn't die and carried on squashing and praying for about an hour. I was starting to think that maybe I was already dead when Mum called me for supper. When I went down she said, 'What happened to you? You look like you've boiled your face.'

Dad said, 'He's been shaving.'

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‘What?’ said Mum. ‘He can’t shave! He’s too young to shave! He’s *much* too young to shave.’

‘Well, he’s definitely too young to have a beard,’ said Dad. And he showed me how to shave in a less life-threatening manner.

‘The only thing is,’ he said, ‘now you’ve started, you’ll have to carry on. The hairs will get harder and harder the more you shave them.’

So I don’t get wisps of candyfloss any more. I get this stuff that looks like naturally occurring toilet brush.

Mum said, ‘Liam, you’ve got to stop growing so fast. I’m not ready to lose my little boy yet.’

Mum got so worked up about all this that she took me to see the doctor. The doctor said there was nothing to worry about. That made Mum really worried. She asked to see the specialist.

‘Specialist in what?’

‘Well, you read about these people, don’t you, who grow up too fast? Their hair starts falling out when they’re teenagers, then they get wrinkles and they look like old men but they’re only twenty.’

She’d never mentioned these people to me before. She must have noticed my look of absolute terror because she said, ‘They’re very rare. But they do exist. You read about them on the Internet, don’t you?’

I was relieved when the doctor said, ‘No, I don’t think

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I have read about them, to be honest. I could send you to see a bone specialist at the children's hospital.'

At the hospital they gave me scans, blood tests and an 'I've been brave' sticker. They took me to see a specialist, then a special specialist. They both said that I was normal. Completely normal. Extra normal. Abnormally normal.

But tall.

'He's just a little boy,' said Mum. 'He's growing up too quickly.'

'We all feel like that about our children, Mrs Digby. The important thing is to remember that he is still a child. Even though he looks like a grown-up. Just because he can't shop in the children's clothes section any more, that doesn't mean his childhood is over. Boys grow at different speeds. Particularly at this point in their lives. You might go back after the summer, Liam, and find that everyone's had a bit of a spurt and you're not even the tallest in the class.'

'D'you know, that makes sense,' said Mum. 'His dad was tall at primary, and now look at him. He's well below average height.'

'In fact,' said Dad, 'I'm slightly above average.'

'In fact you are not.'

'Only very slightly – but very very definitely – I am above average.'

'We'll talk about this another day,' said Mum,

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which is what she always says when she wants you to shut up.

The special specialist was partly right about the growing spurts. Nearly everyone had one over the summer.

Including me.

When Mum wanted to mark my height on the See How I Grow chart in the kitchen, she had to get a chair to reach the top of my head. 'Oh,' she said, 'you've had a spurt!'

And Dad said, 'Seven inches is not a spurt. Seven inches is a mutation.'

On my very first day at Waterloo High, I was the tallest person on the lower-school site.

The new uniform Mum had bought at the beginning of the summer didn't fit any more and they had to send off for an extra-large lower-school blazer. I got a special dispensation to wear my own clothes for the first half-term.

When we went to get my travel pass for the bus to school, the woman in the office wouldn't believe I was school age so we had to go home and get my birth certificate. And then the next morning, when I showed it to the bus driver, she wouldn't believe it was mine, and I had to get off the bus and text Mum, and she came down and explained to the driver of the next bus that I was unusually tall for my age.

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‘It’s not the height, love,’ said the driver. ‘It’s the stubble.’

Mum said, ‘Am I going to have to do this every morning?’

‘Only till we all get used to him.’

In the end, Mum sent off for a passport for me. I kept it in my pocket in case I got questioned again. Dad said, ‘That’ll keep you out of trouble.’

How wrong can a person be, by the way?

Dad also gave me his old mobile phone, so that if he ever lost me again – like in Enchantment Land – he would be able to find me. His phone’s got DraxWorld on it. In case you don’t know, that’s this cosmic application that shows you your present location, directions to anywhere from anywhere, and also live satellite photographs of anything in the world. You can use it to look at volcanoes erupting. Tidal waves. Forest fires. Anything. Dad uses it to make sure the traffic is flowing smoothly on the bypass.

That first day at Waterloo High, I was on DraxWorld all the way to school on the 61. I used it to look at theme parks and thrill rides. I found Oblivion in Alton Towers, Space Mountain in Eurodisney, the Terror in Camelot, Thunder Dolphin, Air . . . all of them. As the bus was crawling along Waterloo Road I typed in Waterloo, wondering if I’d be able to get a satellite view of me on the bus. Instead the screen filled up with ten thousand

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options. There were Waterloos everywhere. Waterloo Station in London. Waterloo the port in Sierra Leone. Waterloo in Belgium. You could go round the whole planet, just jumping from Waterloo to Waterloo.

I found Waterloos with waterfalls, Waterloos in the jungle, Waterloos in snowy mountains and Waterloos with sandy white beaches. I couldn't figure out why anyone who wanted to live in a Waterloo would think – yes, Waterloo, but not the one with the big beach, or the one in the limitless white wastes of Siberia; no, the one with the flyover, handy for the New Strand Shopping Centre.

DraxWorld gives you directions to anywhere, so it's not like it would be hard. If you were a proper grown-up and not just a stubbly boy – if you were my dad, for instance – all you'd have to do is fill your car with petrol, turn left, turn right, go straight on and next thing you know: white beaches, snowy mountains, coral reefs. Truly, grown-upness is wasted on grown-ups.

When I got to school, Mrs Sass (the head) saw me in reception and said, 'Ah . . . Tom?'

'Liam.'

'Yes, of course. I'm Lorraine – come this way.'

I remember thinking, Fancy her telling me her first name. Isn't that friendly? Mrs Kendall never told us her first name when we were in Joan of Arc.

So 'Lorraine' took me off to the staffroom and

started telling me the names of all the teachers. They all shook hands with me and said they were pleased to meet me. I was thinking, What a polite school! I wonder if they do this to every new kid. It must take ages. Then Lorraine said, 'Everybody, this is Tom – sorry, Liam – Middleton, our new head of media studies.' And she was pointing at me.

I know I should've put her right there and then, but someone gave me a mug of coffee and a custard cream and sat me down in a nice big easy chair. So I thought, I'll tell her later when I've eaten the biscuit.

Then Lorraine said, 'We've got assembly this morning. I'll bring you up on to the stage and introduce you to the whole school. Do you have anything you'd like me to say about you – like what football team you support, or any special interests?'

I suppose that would have been a good time to say, 'Very interestingly I'm not a teacher. I'm a Year Seven.' But she just seemed so happy, so I said, 'I like massively multiplayer online computer games.'

She looked a bit blank.

'Like World of Warcraft. You know, where you have an avatar, and your avatar has skills and goes on quests?'

'Ah,' said Lorraine, 'skills. We are great believers in promoting skills here at Waterloo High.'

'I've got a lot of skills,' I said. 'Of course, some of them aren't that useful in real life – like dragon taming.'

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Some of them are illegal – like knife-throwing. I think that's illegal.'

'I think it probably is.'

'I did try to persuade the head in my last school to start a World of Warcraft club, but she just looked at me like I was an idiot.'

Lorraine looked at me like I was an idiot.

Then the bell went. 'We'd better go through to assembly. Maybe you should just introduce yourself. Don't worry about being interesting.'

So that's how I ended up on the stage, standing just behind Mrs Sass while she talked to the whole school. There were about eight people in the front row who knew me because they'd been at Joan of Arc Primary too, including Florida Kirby who kept waving and making faces. Mrs Sass said everyone was welcome and she hoped everyone had had a good summer and then something about a new registration procedure and then she said, 'And now I'd like to introduce you to a new member of staff. He's going to be teaching media studies and he'll be form tutor for Class Nine Mandela. This is Mr Middleton . . .'

And she pointed at me.

I stepped up to the microphone and said, 'Thanks, Lorraine – sorry, Mrs Sass.' But everyone in the hall was already muttering, 'Lorraine . . . her name's Lorraine . . .' and Lorraine was looking cross.

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All these faces were looking up at me. Part of me was thinking, I really should think more about the consequences of my actions. Then this wouldn't happen to me. But another part of me was thinking, This is good.

I said, 'Morning, everybody.'

And everybody said, 'Morning, sir.'

Sir!

I said, 'Has anyone here been to Waterloo near Liverpool?'

Twelve hundred hands shot up and waggled in the air like a salute. Looking out at them, I felt like the bad emperor in *Star Wars*. I took a breath and said, 'Has anyone been to Waterloo in Belgium, scene of the original Battle of Waterloo in 1815?' No one. I said, 'Siberia. Siberia is as big as Europe. It's got the largest freshwater lake in the world. A lake so big it has its own species of dolphin. The ice is so thick that the railway runs over it. It's also got a town called Waterloo. Has anyone here been to Waterloo, Siberia?'

No one put their hand up.

'Why not?'

No one answered, but they all squirmed in their seats, as though going to Siberia was homework and they hadn't done it.

'Waterloo in Sierra Leone?'

No one had.

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‘Sierra Leone has lush rainforests and amazing history. Anyone?’

No one.

‘Why!?’

They all squirmed again. ‘Why have we all been to the Waterloo with the bypass and the shopping precinct when none of us has ever been to the Waterloo with the waterfall, the Waterloo in the jungle, the Waterloo by the frozen lake? Why? These places – they’re not in Narnia. You don’t have to find a magic wardrobe to get to them. They’re not in Azeroth. You don’t have to create an avatar and climb inside a computer. They’re real places. You can go there by bus. Sometimes it’ll take a lot of buses. But they’re just there. They’re part of your world.’

Someone shouted, ‘Yes!’

I was amazed to see it wasn’t one of the children; it was Mrs Sass. I realize now that she thought I was being a bit metaphorical. She thought I was going to say something about how education opens up new worlds for you or something. But I didn’t. I said, ‘Let’s go!’ No one moved. They all thought I was being metaphorical too. I said, ‘Come on. What are we doing here? Let’s go. Come on. Follow me.’

I don’t know where that last bit came from. It just came out. It was part of the flow of the thing. I walked out down the middle of the hall towards the doors at the back. It took a minute, but somebody followed me.

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Then someone else. Then someone else and someone else and everyone followed me out of the hall, through the lower-school exit and into the playground.

The sun was shining. The birds were singing. I walked up to the gates and pushed. Nothing happened. Waterloo High is a high-security school. The gates are locked at 9 a.m. and no one can get in or out without a swipe card. That's why there was a man in a leather jacket standing on the other side of the gates, talking into the intercom.

'I'm the new head of media studies,' he was saying.

And over the intercom the secretary was saying, 'I don't understand. You're already here. You're taking assembly.'

By then Mrs Sass was at the gate. She looked at the actual new head of media studies. Then she looked at me and she hissed, 'Who are you?'

I did try to explain it all to her. I said, 'I'm really sorry, Lorraine.'

'Don't call me Lorraine any more. It's Mrs Sass.'

'Yes, Mrs Sass.'

'Why didn't you tell me your real name?'

'I did.'

'But . . . well, you should have more sense, a big lad like you.'



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When I got home Mum said, 'So how did it go? First day at big school?'

I said, 'All right.'

'Is that all you've got to say? All right?'

'No.'

'What else?'

'I'm starving.' Sometimes it's better not to go into too much detail.