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Opening extract from

The Unforgotten Coat

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Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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our good guide

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I hadn't seen this photograph since the day it was taken, until now. Even so, I can tell you anything you want to know about it. The boy on the left is Shocky. The one on the right is Duncan, who used to come to school with biscuits in his pocket. He's married now, inexplicably. The girl on the left is Mimi Toolan and the one on the right is me.

At the moment the picture was taken, I was mostly wondering whether Mimi would ask me back to hers after school. Mimi's mother let her play with her make-up, which my mother definitely did not, even though I was mature and sophisticated.

I was also thinking Oh. My. Days. Shocky has put his hand on my shoulder! Once, just before Christmas, I had managed to manipulate Shocky into being my partner in a classroom activity. This should

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have resulted in a moment of physical contact because it was a trust game, only it turned out that Shocky was not to be trusted. And by the time this photograph was taken, Shocky had completed an unbroken run of two hundred and thirty-seven days of failing to notice my existence.

How do I remember my thoughts so clearly? Because those were the only thoughts I had in the first two terms of Year Six:

1. Mimi, can I come back to yours?

2. Shocky, please notice me.

Also, this photograph was taken in the summer term of Year Six. And doesn't everyone remember everything about their last summer in primary school? The sports day. The leavers' trip. The leavers' photograph. The endless discussion of which school you were going to next, the promise to stay friends even though you were going to different schools. Everyone signing their names on everyone else's shirts on the last afternoon. And all the time, you had the feeling that day by day, inch by inch, a door was opening and sunshine was pouring in, and any day now you would be allowed out through that door,

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laughing and yelling so loud that you wouldn't even hear when it closed behind you, for ever.

I can tell you when it was taken. It was the second week of the summer term. During morning break, Mimi spotted two kids – one big and one little, the big one holding the little one's hand – staring through the railings of the playground. The little one was wearing a furry hat and they had identical coats. Mad coats – long, like dressing-gowns, with fur inside. But any coat would have looked mad. The sun was beating down. The tarmac in the car park was melting. Everyone else was wearing T-shirts.

Mimi went over and said, "What are you two looking at?"

The big one put his finger on his lips, shushing her, and said, "Pay attention to your teacher." He pointed at Mrs Spendlove, and the very minute he did, she blew the whistle for the end of break, like he knew she was going to do it.

When we were all lined up, somehow these two were standing right behind me. I was looking at the littlest one, who had his hat pulled down right over his eyes. It looked so uncomfortable; I wanted to fix it for him – but the big one put his hand under my chin and turned my head away. "Don't look at him," he said.

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He was asking for a slap, quite honestly. But before I could do anything about that, Mrs Spendlove was walking us into class. The two boys went straight to the back and the little one made himself at home in what was supposedly my seat. I stood there, staring right at him, thinking he'd take a hint. But no.

Mrs Spendlove said, "Everyone, I'd like you all to say a big hello to a new face in our class. A happy new face, I hope. This is Chingis."

Everyone said hello except me. I said, "What about the other one, Miss? What's he called?"

She hadn't noticed the little one until then. "Oh. Chingis," she said, "I'm afraid your little brother isn't in this class. He's in Miss Hoyle's class just along the corridor."

"No," said Chingis, "my little brother is in this class. Look, he's here next to me."

Everyone laughed except Mrs Spendlove. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "I mean he *belongs* in Miss Hoyle's class." She was flapping her hands at the rest of us to be quiet, mortified because she thought we were laughing at him and it was her fault. But I was standing next to him and I could see he hadn't made a mistake. He was digging in.

"Julie, would you show Chingis's brother to Miss Hoyle's class?"

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