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Opening extract from
**Fifteen Days
without a Head**

Written by
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15 days
without
a head

For Jane, Ptolemy, Hockley and Dylan,
with love.



15 days without a head



DAVE COUSINS

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TUESDAY

The front door slams. Mum's back.

It sounds like a dead body hitting the ground as she dumps her stuff in the hall and goes straight to the kitchen. I hear the thud of a bottle on the table, the crack of the cap, then the slow glug as liquid spills into a glass.

Mum coughs, drags a chair across the floor and sits down.

The smell of cigarette smoke drifts into the front room, where me and Jay are being quiet. Keeping out of the way until Happy Hour—when the first drink has worked its magic and made her smile again.

'Where are my beautiful boys? Where are they hiding?'

That's the signal, the All-Clear, it's safe to go out there. Happy Hour has begun.

We go into the kitchen. Jay runs into her arms and she's all smiles and kisses. I hang back by the door, until she waves me over and pulls me into the hug. The smell of chip fat and cigarettes is suffocating.

Jay tells her about his day at school. She listens and smiles and refills the glass. The liquid inside is thick and red.

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Slowly she stops listening. Her eyes glaze over and the smile sags. Jay's still talking, his high, six-year-old voice too loud. There's a knife on the table and he's spinning it while he talks . . . 'and then at playtime, Matt said' . . . *swish* . . . 'but we didn't want to play that' . . . *swish, clink* . . . 'so I said we should play' . . . *clink, swish, tink* . . . as it clips the bottle and Mum's eye starts to twitch.

I put my hand over the knife and tell Jay it's time for bed.

He scowls at me. 'Not going to bed.'

'Yes you are, it's bedtime.'

'Not!'

'Come on, Jay.'

'It's not up to you anyway.' He looks at Mum.

Her eyes stumble back into focus. 'What's that sweetheart?'

'I don't have to go to bed, do I?'

'Of course not, darling. Come and give Mummy a cuddle.'

My little brother gives me a triumphant look and clambers into her lap. I shrug and leave them to it. But I stay within earshot.

Happy Hour lasts for approximately one hour. Sometimes less. It's worse when she doesn't drink, when we've run out of money. No drink equals no Happy Hour. Mum storming round the flat, shouting at me and Jay because everything's in a mess. Either that, or she stays in bed all day, or locks herself in the bathroom and you can hear her crying through the door. Sometimes she's in there for hours, so I have to take Jay outside to wee behind the bins.

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I get Jay into his pyjamas by eight o'clock. He shuffles along the hall to the bathroom on all fours, then looks back at me and barks. This is perfectly normal behaviour—at least it's not unusual for Jay. I don't remember when his thing with dogs began, but he only started pretending he was one just after we moved here. He doesn't do it all the time, just when he knows it's going to wind me up—like now.

'Come on Jay, do your teeth.'

I squirt some toothpaste onto his toothbrush and offer it to him.

He shakes his head.

'If you don't do your teeth they'll fall out.'

Jay woofs and grins up at me.

We haven't got time for this. If Mum finds out he's not in bed yet, she'll go gorilla on us.

'Come on, get up!' I grab his arm and try to pull him to his feet.

Jay growls and sinks his teeth into my wrist.

I drop the toothbrush in surprise.

'You bit me!' It doesn't hurt, but he's left a perfect imprint of his teeth in my skin.

Jay looks at me, and there's a glint of a smile in his eyes.

Now I'm mad.

'Right!' This time I pick him up by the shoulders and dump him on his feet. Jay twists and squirms, trying to bite me again, but I'm too strong for him and he knows it. I pick up the toothbrush and push it to his lips. He glares at me, mouth clamped shut, cheeks flaming. Then suddenly, his face crumples and he starts to cry.

I panic—try to put my arms round him—anything to stop the noise.

That sound is one of the few things that will penetrate The Cloud. The Cloud is what follows Happy Hour, and it

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lasts a lot longer. A force-field of fag smoke and booze, with our mum inside. It reminds me of that old TV programme *Stars in Their Eyes*—when the contestant goes through the door as one person, then emerges from the smoke looking completely different. Except in Mum's case, she comes out looking exactly the same—it's her personality that's changed. I don't suppose that would make much of a TV show though.

I hear her coming now, crashing down the hall like King Kong, swearing as she bounces off the walls.

'What the hell's going on in here?'

For a second Jay stops crying. His eyes widen, but he's still too young to hear the warning in her voice. He starts blubbing again and points at me.

'Lau—rence—hurt—my arm.'

Mum snatches Jay's toothbrush from me and thrusts it in my face. 'For God's sake! Can't you do anything without making a fuss?' Her tongue has gone black and her breath makes my stomach twitch.

She's waiting for an answer, but how do you reply to a question like that? So I shrug. Bad choice. Mum hates it when I shrug. I make a mental note to try and remember in future, right before she slaps me, hard across the face.

'Don't shrug at me!'

'Sorry.'

She shoves the toothbrush at Jay. 'Clean your teeth and get to bed—both of you. I'm sick of the sight of you.'

It's five past eight. I'm fifteen, and I'm being sent to bed at five past eight.

Jay starts brushing his teeth. He won't look at me.

My face stings and I can feel the skin around my eye starting to swell. It's my own fault, I should have known what would happen.

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I lie on Jay's bed and read him a story. He's forgiven me for the Great Teeth Cleaning Incident. I think he feels guilty because Mum slapped me.

'You were crying,' he says.

'It wasn't crying. It just stung a bit. Sometimes your eyes water, but it's not the same as crying.'

'Didn't it hurt?'

'Nah, not really,' I lie.

There are stars on the ceiling in our room. They used to glow in the dark. When Mum stuck them up, she copied real constellations from a book in the library. She decorated the whole flat when we moved here, painted each room a different colour. There was this horrible brown flowery wallpaper in the front room, and one night Mum just started tearing it off the wall in big strips. I thought she'd gone mad. Then me and Jay joined in. The three of us dancing round the front room with Mum's Queen CD on full blast, chucking bits of wallpaper into the air, until it was swirling round us like a snow storm.

That was ages ago. When Mum was still trying.

Moving here was supposed to be a fresh start—a place where nobody knew us, a place with no history.

We live on the top floor of a building called Parkview Heights. It's a stupid name because it's only four storeys high: Parkview Parade shops at the bottom and then three floors of flats—and you can't even see the park from inside. There's a saying round here that goes: *How do you know when you've hit rock bottom?* Answer: *You wake up in the Heights!* We've got cockroaches in the kitchen and the

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toilet leaks—and if you open any of the windows, the smell from the chip shop in the Parade stinks the place out.

But it's all we can afford. Mum's too scared to apply for benefits in case they trace us back to Bridgewell and start asking questions. When people start asking questions, they don't always like the answers you give, and that's when things get scary.

Like last time—when the woman with the clipboard came round and said it would be best if me and Jay went to live with someone else, just while Mum got back on her feet. That was approximately ten seconds before Mum threw her out. The same night we were on a train coming here—The Incredible Disappearing Family. I wondered what the kids at school would think when I just vanished, then realized that half of them probably wouldn't even notice. To think that you could leave somewhere, and nobody would even realize you'd gone, because they never noticed you were there in the first place. That's hard.

The Scooby-Doo alarm clock next to the bed says 08:55 p.m. It's time.

I check Jay is asleep, then reach under my mattress and pull out the envelope with the phonecards inside. Mum stole them from the newsagent's where she used to work. She'd still kill me if she found out I'd nicked a load from her though. Free phonecalls, Mum said, but she never used them, because she couldn't be bothered to walk to a phone box. We both had mobiles at the time anyway, until Mum lost hers and pinched mine. That was months ago. I haven't seen her with it for ages, so she probably lost that one too. She said she'd buy me a new one when she gets a better

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job, but I'm not holding my breath. Until then, at least I've got these.

I slip the cards into the back pocket of my jeans and open the window. The air is thick like custard and smells of frying fish. I lever myself up onto the ledge and swing my legs through the gap. I wait a moment, feeling the heat close around me, then let myself slide.

Directly outside our bedroom window, the roof of the floor below forms a two metre ledge that runs the length of the building. The surface looks like melted grey cheese, and smells like electricity in the heat. Black sticky stuff oozes from cracks around the edges, and if you get any on your hands, it leaves a brown stain for days.

I walk along to the end of the roof, then turn round. This is the bit I hate—lowering myself over the edge. I feel with my feet for the skeletal ladder bolted to the side of the building, and try not to think about the hard concrete three storeys below. The ladder leads to a fire escape—rickety steps of rusty metal that boom and rattle under me. There's a chain across the flight down to street level, so I climb over the side, onto one of the big bins lining the access road behind the shops. I check there's nobody around, then jump down.

So far I've been lucky. I don't think about what will happen when my luck runs out. It could be tonight. I tell myself it doesn't matter. If I don't care too much I'll be OK. Most of all, I don't think about what Mum would say if she knew what I was doing. Leaving Jay on his own with her is a risk, especially in the mood she's in tonight, but I have to do this—for all our sakes.

Most of the shops in the Parade have their shutters down, but SavaShoppa, the launderette and the off-licence are still open. I cross the car park to the telephone box and

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pull open the door—a smell of wee and cigarettes steps out to greet me. I'm shaking already, but that's normal. The thing is not to think about what you're doing—just do it.

I lift the heavy receiver and check nobody has left chewing gum on the earpiece or spat in the end, then fish one of Mum's hot phonecards from my pocket and punch in the code. I know the number off by heart. I dial and listen to the buzz in my ear, waiting for somebody to answer.

There's graffiti sprayed all over the glass walls of the phone box, but I can see the windows of our flat through the gaps. If Mum looked out she'd be able to see me—but she won't. She thinks I'm in my room, in bed. She won't move until she's run out of booze, and I'll be back long before that happens. Unless Jay wakes up . . . but I can't think about that right now.

A cheery female voice answers the phone, and I'm on.

If I don't think about being on the radio it's OK. It's just me and Baz the DJ, having a conversation. He's asking me some questions, that's all. I'm not live on air pretending to be my dad and trying to win a luxury holiday.

What I have to remember is to keep the voice going. You have to be eighteen to play, which is why I'm impersonating my dad—don't worry, he won't find out: he's dead. His name was Daniel, and he didn't actually have a Scottish accent, but I wanted to disguise my voice, so I'm using my impression of Mr Buchan, our Head of Year at school. The people at the radio station seem to believe me so far, and this is my third day.

Baz is talking to the listeners, getting ready to introduce me. I wish he'd get on with it. It's the waiting I can't stand.

'Welcome back to our current Champion Daniel Roach!