Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Quantum Drop

Written by

Saci Lloyd

Published by

Hodder Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Copyright © 2013 Saci Lloyd
Images © 2013 shutterstock.com

First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Hodder Children's Books

The right of Saci Lloyd to be identified as the Author of
the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

1

All rights reserved. Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form, or by any means with prior permission in writing from the publishers or in the case of reprographic production in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency and may not be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978 1 444 90082 8

Typeset in AGaramond by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon, Surrey

The paper and board used in this paperback by Hodder Children's Books are natural recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder Children's Books
A division of Hachette Children's Books
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH
An Hachette UK company
www.hachette.co.uk



I guess what I'm going to tell you is kind of a love story, tho' if you met me face to face, you'd never in a million years take me for the romantic type. But when a girl like Tais comes into your life and turns it upside down, well, you've got to lay yourself out on the line, because otherwise what are you . . . some kind of dead man walking? Least that's the way I see it. But relax, I'm not going to give you my whole draggy backstory; me in nappies and all that *Momma din't give me enough love* and *Daddy was a rolling stone* crap . . . that's not where this is heading, no, not at all.

I suppose I've got to pick somewhere to begin, because y'know, it's not like all of the madness sprang up out of *nowhere*, but looking back on it now, the exam hall was

probably the first time the pressure blew the lid right off of me. So I'm going to start there. The final week of my college exams, in the area Test Hall, and it's a quarter past three in booth C for Candidate Number 3027. Anthony, Griffin. Oh, and look I'm going to level with you, that's not my real name. I picked it up online. But please don't take it personal, I don't mean to be rude or anything. I'm only faking up a name so it's clean between us. So that I don't know you and you don't know me because it's easier that way, easier to *talk*, right?

And so there I am, plugged into the testFrame, Biology: Paper 2 and in truth things ain't going so great for me. In fact, I'm kind of a mess. Twenty minutes have jagged past since the test began and I haven't even looked at the questions on the screen in front of me. Instead my eyes are blank-glued to the digital clock in the far right hand corner of the monitor like I'm some kind of zombie. But I'm no zombie, I'm a really smart guy. No really, I'm not bragging, I'm *smart*. Everybody says so. I'm up for a scholarship and everything.

And this exam is my big moment. It's my way to blast clear of the Debtbelt for ever. But I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do. I'm not scribbling down all that knowledge that I've spent endless months and years cramming into my skull. No, I'm blowing my future, big style, as I sit,

motionless and hypnotised by the row of dials nestling alongside the digital clock, each one reading a separate bit of me: my heart rate, blood sugar, adrenaline levels . . . and all of the read-outs pounding away in the red zones. I'm amazed the principal hasn't called an ambulance; I mean, why hook all of us up to this shit if he doesn't mean to help us out when we fly off the scale?

And it's like I'm magnetised to the zigs and the zags and the motion of the dials. I can feel my left hand trembling, gripped tight around the exam pad as sweat trickles all the way down my arm from my back. True, it's a hot day and all, but I am way beyond hot. I'm oozing, slip-sliding sweat, a steady trickle dripping from my palms, drumming out a staccato . . .

tunk tunk

rhythm as it hits the pad; forming a dark stain that spreads across the cobalt-blue foam. I've got no focus, no mind, no breath. And that's when I start to think that there's no way to say time in numbers in the Micmac language. You just can't do it. For sure, there are words for day and night, sunrise, sunset, being young, or old, all that, but there's no word for an absolute time, like four o'clock, say, which is just this weird number we've made up to

measure the world from outside itself.

And that's because for Native American Indians, time's all relative and if you want to make a meeting time, you have to say something *real* like, I'll see you when the sun falls behind those rocks . . . or when the shadows reach that wall. Something rooted in the physical world, you get me? Einstein stayed with the Indians once and said they were the best people to understand the law of relativity. Thinking this kind of shit in exams instead of answering questions is not cool, I do *know* that.

But trapped here in this place I can't find my focus. I'm floating above myself. I twist my neck, gaze around the room at all the kids, trapped inside their separate transparent cubicles, with their flushed faces and narrowed eyes, tongues poking out the corners of their mouths. You know the look. The *future generation*. All the different tribes of us. The winners, the losers, the geeks, the jokers, the sociopaths, the slackers. Homo habilis, Homo erectus, Homo neanderthalensis, Homo sapiens. Yeah, we're all here, all right. *Homo sapiens*. *Thinking human*. Jokes, right?

A girl across the way glances up, catches my roving eye and frowns at me. I make myself look back at my screen again. But it's no good. And I don't want to lie, it's all my fault; I haven't revised for even one minute. I haven't

even set *foot* in college for weeks. A cold shiver runs across my flesh.

I see the ventilator. I hear the mechanical rasp as it pumps oxygen through the tube. I see her chest, strapped into a plastic guard as it rises and falls to the beat of the machine.

Man, this is a bad day for the whole big A Griffin future. But the thing is I just don't *want* it no more. I don't want to sell my brain for peanuts or laugh like a sad loser at my boss's sad loser jokes. That's what guys like me end up doing. And there are no jobs anyhow. No, if I had my way I'd step out of this exam hall and walk the earth like Grasshopper, yeah, fighting and fixing stuff and helping folks on my lonely trek to Nirvana. But I'm ashamed of my body, my soft hands. I don't know any knots, any nooses, any traps, any poisons, any anything that'd keep me alive. And that's what I want to be, a boy *alive*. I want it more'n anything in the world.

And I live where I live, right? In the Debtbelt. And from all I hear that's a lot of places nowadays. My name is Anthony Griffin and I *am* the boy next door. Nothing special 'bout me. I'm in every street in every neighbourhood and every city on earth. Hell, I probably live over the way from you . . . I'm in Athens and Baltimore and Berlin and

Buenos Aires and Detroit and Helsinki and Istanbul and Lisbon and Mexico City and Mumbai and Nairobi and Santiago and São Paulo and Shanghai and Stockholm and Tel Aviv and Tokyo and Toronto and Washington DC and wherever else you are. I'm global, man.

In the exam hall I close my eyes. I squeeze them shut against the images. But it's no good.

I see the tubes snaking into her ribcage. I see the liquid draining into a container at the foot of her bed. I watch the steady drip, drip as fluid is siphoned from her body, easing the pressure on her shattered chest.

And suddenly an ice-cold breaker of fear bubbles up in my chest, splashing bitter salt up through my throat, stinging my eyes, catching at my tongue. And as it surges upward, the wave passes out through the tip of my head, growing bigger and bigger until it towers above me, a wall of surging power. I crouch down in my seat, bracing myself for the impact. I've got to break free! If I stay here I'll drown. I've got to bust out before it's too late.

I hurl myself sideways just as the wave starts to crash. Flying across the aisle, I land in a sprawl into the cubicle opposite, my head connecting hard with someone's knee. I look up. Max. Of all the people to crunch my skull into

it has to be him. I hate that guy. He jerks his body backwards, his mouth twisting into a snarl. A shocked gasp echoes around the exam hall, as a thousand students turn around to stare.

My eyes lock on to Max's and for a long moment we stare at each other in mutual hatred.

'You, boy!'

The shout bounces off the hall walls. I turn my head. A man in a dark blue suit cut in the Asiamodern style is striding purposefully towards me. I look around wildly, trying to work out a plan. I can still fix this . . . pretend I fainted or something . . . that'd work, right? The man will be here any second. I order myself to do it, to do myself a favour for once in my miserable life. To smile at him, tell him I didn't eat breakfast . . . tell him I feel sick, beg for a second chance.

And for a second I lie on the floor, caught between two lines of action. The man is approaching fast, he stretches out his arm, reaching for me . . . and that's when I decide. Lurching to my feet, I set off full tilt for the exit, the hall blurring around me as I streak across the floor, reaching the ID barriers and smashing through them in one giant leap.

You should see me fly; I swear there's sparks flying off of my sneakers as I skid like a maniac down the corridors.

I don't stop till I bust out of the front gates of the exam centre and I don't stop even then, but keep on running, till my last breath is blown and I pull up at the crossroads on the High Street, fighting for air like a crazy fish on a line. For a moment I think I'm going to black out. I double up, beating down the nausea inside, but after a few minutes it starts to pass and I feel better, calmer. I'm not frightened any more. I spit a couple times and then straighten up.

I look around me in wonder, as if it's the first time I've ever been in this area. Why did I run here? I frown, trying to work out what day it is. I glance at my deck. Thursday. Yeah, of course. The day of my big exam. But that's all behind me now. A snapshot of the rota I've pinned up on my bedroom wall flashes into my mind. Thursday is Estate day. And the Estate is just over the way. That's why I'm here. Ah yeah, it all makes sense now.

But before I set off, I scan three-sixty, checking for any Betta boys on the prowl. I've got to take care. It's a scary time for me now, I don't mind telling you. My security levels are sky high. Not that they've ever been low since the crash. For years now I've taped credits to the base of my shoe and stuffed anything worth anything down my boxers *and* worn two pairs, the inside ones tight, tight. I've been robbed so many times it's not even funny. But

things have been on a whole new level recently.

To my relief the street is clear, so I turn to the left, setting off at a good pace past the discount stores, fried chicken shops, bars and gambling joints. And as I walk by, again and again and again they roll past me, like they're on a repeating loop, like cheap background in a low-budget game. Dead-end stores on a busted street, lidded by dirty grey graffitied rollers. And me the superhero walking on by. But I ain't no hero, I'm just me and I jam my hands into my pockets and keep my head low, eyes down.

In a few minutes I reach Bobby's discount liquor store and, ducking around the side, I slip through a rusty gate into a dustbowl park that stretches, dry, towards the old canal. I pass through a line of trees and as I come out the other side, that's when I get my first view of the Estate; the north side of the tower block rising up like a rotten tooth. My grandad says a bank on the other side of the world owns half of all the apartments here. He says he bets they wish to high hell they didn't. Looks like we lost a war.

Skirting round some wiggy roses I break into a jog but when I reach the locked gates on the far side of the park, I pull up for a minute and again scan three-sixty, but mostly focusing on the strip of road that separates me from the great grey hulk of the Estate. All clear again.

Good. Grasping the topmost rail with my right hand, I hurdle over the gate, dart across the road, and on the far side I bounce on to the sidewalk and immediately cut sharp left, squeezing my body through a junk-filled side alley, before emerging a few seconds later in the central square of the Estate.

Pressed against the concrete, I blow out a breath and glance up at the great grey walls rising above me. It's like I've just broken into jail. But I can't stay here, I've got to get a move on. Skirting past a strip of broken-bottle-studded grass, I race through a playground area with a couple tyres hanging from rusty chains, and just a few paces beyond it I finally reach my destination; a raggedy corner of the parking lot, filled with scrap metal and broken pallets.

Flinging myself on the cracked asphalt behind a burnt-out car, I press myself flat. My friend Ali showed me this spot once, back when we still hung out together . . . and now it's *my* hiding place, my observation point. It smells like bitter weeds and vomit. It smells like whole lives gone up in smoke. But I don't care. I'm on a mission. I'm searching for a voice. The voice that's burnt right through me like a brand.