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Opening extract from

Out of This World

Written by

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Published by

Oxford University Press

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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First published 2013

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-279412-3

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

Chapter 1

What would it be like when his brain exploded?

Would it go with a dull thud and just collapse inside his skull, or with a crack, flying in all directions? The sensible part of Tyrone knew that, of course, his brain *wouldn't* explode. You never heard of boys' heads exploding at the dentist, did you? Or maybe they just covered it up. Or maybe he was about to be the first . . .

He wasn't even having a filling. He could handle *that*. He didn't really mind the injection, and, although it *did* sound like his mouth had been invaded by a crazed killer wasp, he could just about put up with the drilling bit as well.

Somehow, the quiet, the concentration in *this* visit was much, much worse.

'Nearly done,' said John, his dentist. A cheerful man who wore bright jumpers and was persistently nice to people, he always insisted on being called John. Not

Mr Payne. Well, come to think of it, Mr Payne wasn't a great name for a dentist.

Right now John was cheerfully trying to drag Ty's brain out through his mouth. At least that's what it felt like with every twist and tweak. And even when he was done, and Ty could go, the horror of all this wouldn't be over. John was attaching a brace to Ty's teeth. It would be there for at least six months, pulling, dragging, pinching and bullying his rowdy, untidy teeth into shape.

'Just try to relax now,' said John. 'Won't be much longer.' As he'd been making similar promises for the last forty-five minutes, Ty wasn't inclined to believe him. He badly wanted to say something sarcastic like, '*You* try relaxing when you've got a scrap metal yard, eight fingers and a sucky nozzle thing shoved in your mouth!' but obviously he couldn't. He gurgled in a sarcastic way, but John and his nurse didn't notice.

Ty sighed, tried to be positive—his mum promised he'd have teeth like a film star when it was all over—and listened to Radio 2, which was always playing gently in the background, presumably to soothe patients. Unfortunately, it was the news, and nothing soothing ever got said in the news. Several countries were on the brink either of war or famine. A pop star was having a baby. A submarine, containing nearly sixty unfortunate Royal

Navy sailors, had sunk to the bottom of the North Sea and no-one knew how to get them up.

'OK—all done now,' said John, and took everything—except the brace—out of Ty's mouth. Ty sat up and said 'Wirrohrr,' in a mad, raspy voice.

'Sorry, dear?' said the nurse, taking his hand in hers.

'Wirrohrr, cleash,' said Ty, dribbling pathetically. She squeezed his hand and then handed him a small mirror. It was a magnifying one. In it, Ty's mouth looked like the Sydney Harbour Bridge. He groaned, shook his head, and then, remembering his manners, said 'Shankoo werry wuch,' and trudged glumly out of the surgery.

'You'll get used to it soon—and you'll speak just fine by tomorrow,' John called after him, still horribly cheerful.

In his blazer pocket, a few coins rattled a reminder that he now had to catch the bus right back to school in time for afternoon lessons. Other kids' mums would've picked them up and taken them home for chicken soup or something, he was sure. But his mum was on a ship by now, being the singer in a band which entertained people on cross-channel ferries.

Still, he thought, clambering onto the Number 5 and trying to say 'Swiftwood School please' without opening his lips, if he was lucky the metal in his mouth

wouldn't attract passing Russian space debris down out of its orbit and the bus would get there on time. Hang on though, what was *lucky* about that?

'Hey! Tyrone—glad you could join us!' Mr Brading, the English teacher, slouched back in his chair as Ty sidled into the classroom. 'Dentist was it?'

Ty nodded, willing his teacher to leave it at that and let him get to his desk without talking. But Mr Brading was the kind of teacher who believes he's very, very funny, and all the pupils love him when he jokes.

'New brace then, is it?' he thundered. A snicker ran around the room like an evil sprite, hopping from desk to desk of all Ty's meaner classmates.

Ty gave Mr Brading a tight smile and headed for his seat.

'Never mind, you'll be able to pick up Sky One now,' said Mr Brading, adding his guffaw to the snickering. Everyone had now joined in. Ty pretended to be amused, laughing politely through his nose as he sat down. A sharp jab in between his shoulder blades indicated that Dom McGill had thought up another use for his pencil (normally only employed to pick his nose).

'Never mind, Scrap Gob,' he hissed. 'You were ugly anyway.'

'OK class!' shouted Mr Brading, walking up and down like a film director and flicking back his floppy brown hair. 'A scene from *Romeo and Juliet*! Page 55 of *Shakespeare for All*. Who can help me out here? Rebecca, you I think and—and . . .'

No! thought Ty. He couldn't! He *wouldn't!*

He would.

'. . . Tyrone, I think, can be our Romeo.'

Rebecca began to read, and Tyrone flicked to page 55.

At her pause, he lifted his woeful face, pulled his sore lips back over what felt like a souvenir chunk of the Eiffel Tower and read: 'Buck lo! Thizth the Eashth and Wooliet isshh ve shun . . .' The class—and every last hope in his heart—collapsed.

Dom McGill wasn't the brightest boy in Swiftwood School, but he was probably the biggest. His hands were huge and invariably clenched. When Dom decided to hit you it was a lot like being struck with a frozen chicken.

Today, though, Dom was having more fun with his mouth. Being not the brightest boy in Swiftwood School, he was quite delighted that he'd found a good jeering

name for Ty so quickly. He felt it would last for the rest of the day, so he wouldn't have to think of another one until tomorrow.

Dom and his mates hung around by the school gates, poised like a church choir on Christmas Eve. As soon as Ty made an appearance, head down, hauling his overweight schoolbag across his shoulder, Dom raised his hand like a conductor, lifted his corned-beef chin and counted the gang in . . .

'Scrap Gob! Scrap Gob! Scrap Gob! Scrap Gob!' With only two notes to play with, the boys managed to get an amazing amount of feeling into their chant. They conveyed, with a sneering lilt, that Ty was not only a geek, stuck up, and ugly, but also that, if they had half a chance, they would cheerfully give him the kind of pasting which would smear him all over the toilet block.

Rod, who was *slightly* sharper than the rest, got into the whole chant thing so much that he even attempted a rhyme. 'Scrap Gob, Scrap Gob, get yourself a—big—job . . .' The others looked at him, confused. It messed up the rhythm a bit and didn't make sense. This distracted them while Ty ducked in among a crowd of girls and crept out past them.

By the time they'd rallied and got into the next round of Scrap Gobbing, Ty was halfway up the road.

'Oi! Scrap Gob's getting away!' yelled Dom, and the mob bundled out after him.

It was a hot July day, and Ty was sweating by the time he reached the cut across the wasteland behind his house. His pursuers were only seconds behind him, tearing up a narrow alley between the old back-to-back houses. He could hear them puffing for breath and Rod's squeaky voice still gamely shouting 'Scrap Gob! Get Scrap Gob!'

The wasteland was the length of a football pitch, but would have been useless for a game. Covered in mounds of old rubble, sheets of rusting corrugated iron and discarded rubbish, its grass grew as high as his waist, hiding ruts and potholes which could twist an ankle if you didn't know where you were treading.

Happily, Ty knew exactly where he was treading. This was *his* patch. He knew he couldn't make it across without being seen and followed all the way back home. The mob was too close on his heels. He darted to his right, skirting the high, brittle wall boundary which separated the ground from the small backyards of the old houses.

In three seconds he reached a culvert which drained rainwater off the site and into an underground stream. It was only a metre or so deep and should have been

covered, but its access cover had been up-ended years ago and never replaced. Ty dropped silently into the quiet gloom of the culvert, which was completely dry in the heat of summer. The grass that grew thick around it waved high over his head. Unless you knew where to look, you'd have no clue it was there. He was hidden and still, like a lizard under a stone.

Dom, Rod and three other boys rounded the corner of the alley and spread out into the wasteland. 'He's gone!' gasped Dom, his voice thick with disappointment and unspent violence. Rod and another boy cantered ahead, still enthusiastic. In the shade of the culvert, Ty grinned and stifled a snort as he heard Rod stumble into one of the trusty potholes and give a shrill shriek. 'Ah—nah! I've broken my bleedin' ankle!'

The city council had been promising for years to tidy up the wasteland and make a proper turfed 'green space' of it one day. As he heard Dom's gang retreating, telling Rod to stop being such a girl and muttering promises to get Scrap Gob later, Ty hoped that day would never come.

Chapter 2

'Hiya, babe . . .' Ty felt a familiar droop at his Aunty Dawn's distracted greeting. As usual, she was in the kitchen, leaning on the side, watching *The Teddy Taylor Talk Show* on the little portable TV next to the microwave.

A bag of cheesy curls lay open by her right arm and her hand worked in and out of it like a mechanical digger, shovelling the orangey nuggets into her mouth every few seconds while her eyes never strayed from the small screen, where Teddy Taylor's minders were holding apart two heavily made-up women who seemed to want to pull each other's hair out. Teddy Taylor himself was standing off to the side, holding his microphone, his suit and dyed blond hair immaculate, wearing an expression of mild compassion and dismay.

In some ways, Aunty Dawn was like his mum. She had the same wide, well shaped mouth and dark brown

eyes. But her nose was shorter, her dark hair fluffier and she was quite a bit heavier. Ty's mum worked hard to keep her figure. She had to; she was an entertainer. Aunty Dawn worked from home. Apparently. Ty had never seen her do a stroke of work. It was something to do with telesales, his mum said. But it was lucky for them that she was so flexible (Ty had a mental image of Aunty Dawn trying to touch her toes and falling into the cat litter tray) because it meant she could be around at their place when mum had a gig and couldn't be there. Ty's dad had died when he was just a baby.

So Aunty Dawn was his guardian roughly half of the week. Guardian was probably a bit strong, thought Ty, heading upstairs to dump his school bag and peer unhappily into the bathroom mirror at his horrific mouth. If Aunty Dawn was guardian of anything in his house it was the telly and the fridge.

'I AM DAWN!' Ty suddenly declared, flicking back an imaginary cloak and giving his reflection a steely gaze. 'GUARDIAN OF THE FRIDGE, PROTECTOR OF THE CHEESY CURLS! And this . . .' he walked across the landing and peered down the stairwell into the open plan kitchen at his aunt, lost in a TV debate about tattooing, '. . . is my domain!'

It wasn't that he disliked his aunt. She was cheerful enough company and she didn't tell him off. In a way that was the point. She didn't tell him off because she didn't really notice him. There was a good chance that she wouldn't look at him between now and next Christmas, so there would certainly be no discussion about his new brace. No sympathy, and certainly no special tea-time treat to make him feel better, which his mum would surely have offered if only he'd had his mouth done at the end of the week when she was here.

And she *would* be here at the other end of this week, Ty told himself firmly, even though experience had taught him that quite possibly, she wouldn't be.

Feeling sorry for himself, Ty changed out of his school clothes and into his jeans, T-shirt and trainers. By the time he'd cut himself some bread and cheese, while Aunty Dawn laughed and nodded at the TV, he was feeling better. Even the difficulty of getting his tea past his brace (he later had to gouge a fair bit of it out with the handle of a teaspoon) didn't dampen his mood too much—tonight he'd be up at Kestrel's Croft with Sam, catching moths.

Sam was a countryside ranger. Ty had met him a couple of times on school trips and then when he'd joined the Young Naturalists' Club had been pleased to

find Sam was one of the people running it. Sam was brilliant. Different. He was probably in his late twenties, Ty guessed, and completely mad about insects. He loved all wildlife but insects were really his thing. He ran tours for schools and other groups, taking them deep into the woods around the city, showing them how to spot where wild creatures had been, pointing out the deadliest fungi, and holding out amazing tiny creatures in the palm of his hand for everyone to stare at.

'This,' he'd say, 'is a shield bug. Also known as a stink bug. If you ever scare it, you'll know why. It shoots out an evil stink which sticks to your skin for days if you're unlucky enough to get the full blast.'

'Here,' he'd say, 'Look—this is the easiest way to get yourself some emergency rope.' And he'd seize a great long stinging nettle in his bare hand. Then he'd hold the root and shoot his clenched fingers up the stalk, whipping off all the leaves.

'Doesn't that hurt?!' winced Ty.

'Nope. Not when you do it like this—and look . . .' he'd looped and twisted the stem and tugged hard on it. 'Emergency rope. You can build a shelter using this stuff.'

Sam and Ty got to be friends. Sam had even shown Ty his moth collection back at his ranger's bungalow on

the edge of Kestrel's Croft. He had hundreds of them. Some dead, some alive, some comatose in margarine tubs in his fridge. You had to be careful how you went about making a sandwich at Sam's.

The bungalow had a bedroom and a kitchen, a bathroom and a sitting room, but there was hardly anywhere to sit. Every surface had something weird or wonderful on it, from ancient knotty branches that Sam was halfway through whittling, to boxes of birds' feathers, casts of deer tracks and beautiful, papery wasps' nests. It didn't smell like a house. It smelled like a wood. Like a den.

Sam's den was fifteen minutes' bike ride away from Ty's house. He made it there by early dusk. Ty knocked on the door and it swung open. 'Come and get one, Ty,' called Sam, handing him a large round box-like thing, made of light, silvery metal.

Sam, a well built man with close cropped fair hair and dark grey eyes, emerged with another round box and a backpack on, which was full, Ty knew, of ropes and sugar and wine.

There were two good ways of trapping moths. One was to use the light traps which they were carrying—big reflective boxes with bright lights inside, which lured in the moon-seeking insects and kept them safely

trapped until morning. The other way was to get them drunk.

Sam and Ty crunched across the dry woodland floor in the dimming light, heading for trees on the edge of a clearing, which had some good, low-hanging boughs. Ty climbed into one of them, and hauled up the ropes Sam passed to him, looping them securely around the strong branches. Then Sam made up the glutinous mixture of red wine and sugar, which he passed up to Ty in a flask.

'It's pretty muggy. I hope the storm stays off the mainland until we've got our moths,' said Sam, as Ty dripped the wine carefully down the ropes until they were blood red and giving out a sweet, heady smell.

'How's your mouth feeling?' Sam asked. Ty realized this was the first sympathetic question he'd had about his new brace.

'A bit sore. And my teeth feel kind of tickly—like I want to scratch my gums or something,' he said. 'But at least I can speak OK now. When they first went in my lips were swollen.'

'Bad luck,' said Sam, with feeling. 'It'll be worth it in the end. Just keep your head down,' he added, knowingly. He was well aware of the trouble that Ty had with bullies at school. Sam knew what it was like to be laughed at for something you couldn't help.

The sky was darkening now. To the east, fingers of purple reached across and to the west, as the sun sank into the trees, fat, bubbling clouds piled up in great pink pillars. A flash lit them up for a microsecond.

'Ah rats!' cursed Sam. 'Looks like it might hit us after all, although the forecast did say it was staying off the mainland tonight.'

Three other volunteers had joined them. Within an hour, they had six rope traps set up and the warm evening was steeped in the scent of sweet red wine.

Sam and Ty set up the light traps at the foot of the trees. Some moths would just go for the lights but others—often the rarer species—would drift towards the ropes and drink the sugary wine. Their feet would stick and they would have to stay put, unharmed and intoxicated, until morning, when they could be identified and counted before being freed.

By 9 p.m. everything was set and the volunteers were departing. 'Better get home, Ty,' said Sam. 'I'll see you back to the road.' As they set off there were one or two flashes again in the night sky. 'Hang on!' said Sam. 'I just want to double-check the lids of the light traps. If it does rain they could get swamped. Wait here a minute, Ty.'

Ty stood while Sam disappeared into the darkening wood. The birds had stopped their pre-roost chatter and

a few owls were calling. Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash, much brighter than any so far. To Ty, it seemed almost green.

'Whoa! Sam! Did you see that?!' he called out. He held his breath and waited for the thunder, which surely must follow. But after several seconds, it was still quiet. Odd, thought Ty. Then something caught his eye. Several yards away, beneath some holly trees, something was glinting.

Ty wandered across, thinking it might be a glowworm. Although it was a little late in the year for glowworms to be out. Probably just a bit of plastic, reflecting, he thought. But the glinting was surprisingly steady—almost a glow. Kneeling on a tussock of cool grass, Ty peered down into the crispy layer of brown holly leaves and peat. There it was.

About the size of a chestnut, bizarre and beautiful, lay a lump of . . . what? Metal? Crystal? Rock? It was hard to tell. It glowed gently and glimmered at the edges, sometimes green, sometimes purple, then blue and now—red! Fascinated, Ty picked it up. It was weighty, like metal. Between his fingers it felt both crystalline, as if it were covered in tiny jagged shards, and yet smooth. The thing rolled, almost trickled down his curved fingers into his palm.

And there it seemed to *nestle*. When Ty closed his fingers over it and squeezed, he felt is if it was very slightly *giving*. And yet, when he opened them again and stared at the strange nugget, it was smooth and hard. The dancing, glimmering light that had caught his attention, now settled into a steady purple glow.

Ty sniffed it. He could only smell the earthy scent of his own skin. Carefully, he put his lips to it. It was warm but perfectly solid now. What on earth was it?

'Ty! Where are you?' Sam was back. Ty leaped up and went across to him.

'I've just found something really weird,' he said.

'Oh? What's that then?'

Ty opened his palm, but the thing was darker now, and with the failing light, could barely be seen. Perhaps it was just a pebble, after all.

'There's not enough light,' he said. 'I'll bring it after school tomorrow, if you're around.'

'Sure. I will be,' said Sam. 'Thanks for your help. You can come and see what we've found. Looks like the storm's going to miss us after all. OK—you all right to carry on from here?'

They had reached the main road that flanked the nature reserve. Ty had left his bike chained up at a lamp-post here.

'Yeah! Fine. See you tomorrow.'

As Sam vanished back into the wood, Ty slid the strange thing in his palm into his jeans pocket. He undid his bike chain with some difficulty, as the numbers on the combination lock kept spinning off in all directions—*and* the lamppost light suddenly fizzed and went out above him.

'Cheers!' said Ty, glaring at the dead bulb. 'Oh—brilliant!' Now his front headlight had gone dark, with a slight pop. The red one at the rear flashed three times before the ruby glare seeped away to nothing.

Ty cycled home in the dark, the strange metallic thing oddly warm in his pocket. He didn't notice several more street lights flare and then lapse into darkness as he passed.