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Opening extract from

The Accidental Time Traveller

Written by

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I dedicate this book to my sisters
Karen & Moy
with love

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It was Saturday, 15th December, 2012, and it was quarter to ten in the morning. I know it sounds weird to be so exact about it, but this story's got a lot to do with time. That was when Mum sent me along to the corner shop to buy her newspaper, a packet of Jaffa Cakes and something for myself costing no more than 30p. She called it A Mission of Trust. Thing is, I'd been grounded three times that month for sneaking out when I was supposed to be in my room doing homework. But for three days I had behaved, meaning I'd stayed in. With the doors and windows locked I didn't have much choice.

I have a den and that's where I usually hung out when I wasn't grounded, but Mum didn't know about the den. Nobody knew about it, except Will and Robbie who are in my gang. The den is a shed no one uses now in a big, old abandoned garden, and it's our gang hut. It's the best and I'll tell you more about it but, like I said, for three days I stayed away, lounging about in my room, dreaming about the seriously cool bike I wanted for Christmas.

When Mum popped her head round the door, carrying a twin on each hip, and said, "Right, Saul, I'm

letting you go round to the shop," I could feel this major whine coming on. Like I *really wanted* to go round to the shop. I didn't. I was cosy, sprawled out on my blue beanbag seat and leafing through my BMX magazines, circling the bike I wanted and the helmet and stickers and stuff. Plus it was cold outside – in fact the man on the telly said there was a good chance of snow that night. A trip to the den, maybe. Getting stuff for Mum at the shop, no thanks. The twins started crying and pulling at Mum's hair. "I'm trusting you, Saul," she said, yanking her hair back. "And you've to come straight home." I was ready to moan till I remembered Christmas was just ten days away. I thought about the BMX and all the extras I wanted and decided I needed to look good right now. I jumped up, fell back, then struggled out of my beanbag and chirped, "Yeah, ok Mum."

Mum parked the twins on my bed, sighing like it was all too much for her. Boy, could they howl! She shoved my old hat down over my ears and handed me the exact money, because occasionally I've helped myself to some spare change. "Thirty pence for you," she said. I could feel another moan coming on but held it in. You might as well chuck 30p in the river and make a wish. A Milky Way's about all you can buy with 30p, and that's over in two bites. Then I thought maybe I *would* chuck my 30p in the river and wish for a BMX, because with my parents and their lack of money – specially now I had two baby sisters, who "need clothes and food and prams and nappies galore," I couldn't be too sure all the presents on my list would show up, no matter how chirpy I was. Never mind the bike; I wasn't sure I'd get

anything on my list! Mum picked up the twins and steered me out of my room, along the hallway and out the front door. "Remember Saul," she shouted so the whole street could hear, "I'm trusting you."

Once I'd got going, it felt great to be out on my own. I slowed down, wanting this freedom to last. I was already spinning stories to tell mum when I got back – how there was a huge queue in the shop and I had to wait aaaaages! And how the ice made me walk really slow. The sky looked dark and heavy, like it might snow. The few folks I met along the street thought so too.

"Hi Saul. Good to see you. With a bit of luck we'll have a white Christmas, eh?"

"Hey Saul, not seen you about for a wee while. It's going to snow. I swear it is. You can build a snowman."

I am well known in the street cause I always say hi to everybody. Except Crow, the town bully and the one person in the world I was scared of. Like, really scared. His real name is Colin Rowe, but everybody calls him Crow. Even his name is scary. Crow is in second year, and he's seriously hard. If I spotted him, I crossed the street or backtracked into the house. But Crow wasn't prowling around that Saturday morning, 15th December. Crow probably hated getting cold. Crow hated lots of things – including me. But I didn't want to spoil this little freedom trip thinking about him too much.

I liked looking at Christmas trees in people's windows, especially ones with flashing lights, so I hung about doing that for a while. I counted nine of them, but as I wandered past the laundrette, I was itching to nip up the lane behind it, bolt along the cuddy, clamber

over the wall, race across the overgrown wasteland, wriggle through the gap in the hedge and zip into my den. Some other gang might have claimed it while I'd been stuck in at home. Crow might have wrecked it!

My gang reckons once upon a time the den was somebody's garden shed. It leans over to the side a bit, so Robbie (who has been to Italy) called it Pisa after some leaning tower there. The den is at the edge of a rambling wild garden with some ancient trees in it. There must have been a fantastic big house there. Officially the garden's in a demolition site, surrounded by a barbed wire fence then a thick hedge. It's full of nettles and rubbish and gangly old rhubarb stalks and dead birds. As well as the fence, there's a sign saying,



And in case you can't read, there's a scary skull and crossbones next to it. But you can get in through a gap in the hedge round the back where the barbed wire is slack. Only me, Will and Robbie knew about that.

The den is on the edge of town and Robbie said it was like time forgot about it, which was kind of funny considering what happened. The den was a bit creepy when we first found it, but we flicked away the cobwebs, kicked out the two dead mice and the dead rabbit, then put nice things inside to make it cosy.

Will brought his old cuddly ewok toy from when he was younger. It's called Fred and is the den mascot. He guards the place when nobody's there. Robbie brought a few old chipped ornaments, like a china dog, a blue plastic bowl (for crisps, he said) and a photo of him when he was seven, grinning in a fancy frame. I brought along a stripy blanket and a cushion and some pens to write our names on the wall. There was a wooden box in the shed filled with old gardening magazines, and we hauled in stones and bits of wood to make wee benches. It looked brilliant.

Anyway, there I was, wandering up the street towards the shop and dreaming about the den. I could see on the church clock that it was five to ten. I was walking so slow I was practically going backwards. I tried to stop dreaming about the den. The thing was, I told Will and Robbie that the gang would have a break for a bit, cause last time we were there, last weekend, it was perishing cold. Will and I were being crims on the run from the police and Robbie was being the policeman who was trying to arrest us, and we were trying to blackmail him with a few thousand quid we had stashed away in the gardening magazines and the game was really good and it was mostly my idea, but suddenly Robbie said he was freezing and he wanted to go home. Then Will piped up and said, actually, he was freezing too. So I said, "Right, fine, we'll take a break till the weather gets better."

We all looked about and were silent for a moment till Robbie said, "Pisa is like our other home, isn't it?"

Me and Will nodded. It was.

It was now one minute to ten. The corner shop came into view. I felt something wet brush my cheek. I looked up. White flecks were swirling through the air and landing on me. I like snow. I opened my mouth to catch a snowflake. One landed on my tongue, which was exactly when the church bells rang for ten o'clock, which was exactly when a car screeched its tyres, blared its horn and someone screamed really loudly.

I swung round to see a screaming girl in fancy dress standing stock-still in the middle of the road, her arms flung out to the side and her face pale as a ghost. The screeching car swerved round her, and roared off. Her screams turned to whimpers and gasps. She stumbled across the road in a panic, tripped over the kerb and fell at my feet. She buried her face in her hands and started sobbing.

I looked around for her mum or big sister or someone, but no one was there. So I bent down and patted her on the shoulder, feeling seriously awkward. "Hey," I said, "are you ok?"

She pulled her hands away from her face, stopped crying and gazed up at me, like I was some kind of superstar. I got the weirdest feeling, like a million hot needles jabbing up my spine. I'd never seen anyone like her. She had pale blue eyes, totally white, practically see-through skin, a funny shower-cap-style hat on, with long twisty red hair spilling out from it and reaching all the way down her back. She stretched her hands out, then wrapped her long fingers around my ankles.

"I have become lost," she sobbed.