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Opening extract from

Joe and the Hidden Horseshoe
A Boy and His Horses

Written by

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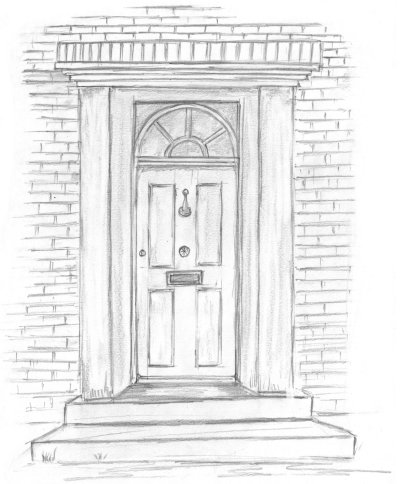
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Chapter 1



Joe felt as empty as the living room. He walked around its new boundaries. Grubby, well-worn areas of carpet contrasted starkly with good-as-new bits where the furniture had stood, leaving a ghostly plan of how it had been ever since he could remember.

Mum bustled in with her vacuum cleaner. "Out of the way, darling. I've just got to clean round the edges before we go."

"Why? What's the point?"

"I want to make it nice for the Ingrams when they move in. It's called being considerate to others," Mum

said. She switched on the vacuum and set to work.

He scowled and went into the hall, nearly tripping over some things which had been too precious to put in the removal lorry.

The front door was open. Traffic noise and a warm summer breeze wafted in from the sunlit street. The smells and sounds of the city were so familiar that for a moment Joe allowed himself to imagine nothing had changed. He was on his way to school, to aikido or to play football with his friends in the park. This was his life. It couldn't just vanish. Could it?

Dad hurried up the front steps, walked straight past Joe and shouted up the stairs, "Emily, I need those goldfish *now*!"

"Okay!" Emily's voice called back. "I'm just making holes in the roof."

"You're *what*?"

"Making holes in the roof of the goldfish container."

"Oh." Dad sighed. "Help me take this stuff out to the car, will you, Joe?"

The car was parked a long way down the street. "One thing I won't miss is the constant battle to find a parking space," Dad said as he marched along the hot pavement. It was the first time he'd admitted he'd miss anything. When anybody asked about it, he always said his new job as the head of a group of

village primary schools was "a dream come true" and "the opportunity of a lifetime".

"What'll you miss?" Joe asked, hoping Dad was having second thoughts.

"The same sort of things as you, I expect," Dad said, giving Joe a rueful smile. "Friends and neighbours, football matches at Villa Park, Granny and Grandpa a couple of streets away . . ." His words trailed off and he looked sad for a moment before smiling. "But I know this move is the right thing for us as a family. It'll be great to get away from it all, and you'll soon make new friends."

I don't want to get away from anything, Joe thought, and I don't want new friends. I'm perfectly happy with "it all" here and with the friends I've got already, thank you very much.

The things were packed away into the car, and they walked back to the house in silence.

Mum was waiting with the vacuum cleaner. "Here we are. You can put it in the car now," she said.

"There's no room, Jackie. There really isn't," Dad replied.

"There *has* to be." Mum insisted. "I'll have it on my lap if necessary."

"Okay, up to you." Dad went to the bottom of the stairs. "Do hurry up, Emily!"

Emily gradually came into view – pink sandals,

multicoloured sundress, silver-blonde hair held back with pink butterfly hairclips – walking carefully down the stairs, carrying six goldfish floating in a large plastic ice cream container.

"Right then," Dad said firmly. "Has everyone got everything?"

Joe seized the chance to put off the inevitable for a few minutes longer. "I'll just go and check."

"Well, if you must."

Joe ran upstairs to his bedroom one last time. Like the sitting room, it looked much larger now and there were marks etched onto the carpet where the furniture had been. The same feeling of emptiness overwhelmed him. The house was dead. All its insides had been ripped out. It wasn't home any longer.

He scuffed his foot against the frayed patch of carpet which Rex, his hamster, had chewed in an attempt to make a nest under the bed. Rex had lived to a good age, despite being a brilliant escapologist, but he'd died just over a year ago. Joe didn't have a pet now. He'd wanted a dog ever since he could remember, but Mum and Dad had said it was out of the question while they were living in Birmingham and working full-time as teachers.

One good thing about moving to the country was he'd been promised a dog. It looked as if they'd have horses and ponies as well, because Mum and Emily

were determined to get one, or two, or as many as possible. Joe was sure Emily would hate the hard work of actually looking after one – she wouldn't even clean out her goldfish because it made her feel sick – but she was ridiculously excited about it all.

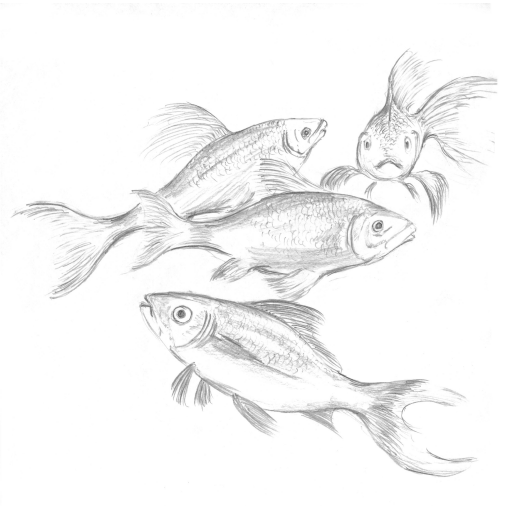
"We've got to go now!" Dad called from the hallway.

Joe said a final farewell to his bedroom, and ran downstairs.

Dad followed him through the front door, locked it, hesitated for a moment, then posted the keys through the letterbox.

That's it, Joe thought. We don't live here anymore.

Chapter 2



The car was full to bursting with people and possessions. Dad drove, anxiously checking his wing mirrors the whole time because the view out of the back window was completely blocked. Mum sat in the front passenger seat, hugging the vacuum cleaner.

Joe and Emily were unable to move for luggage. The goldfish container was wedged on the car seat between them. When the car changed direction or speed, water leaked out of the ventilation holes and dribbled onto the seat.

Nobody said a word. Dad turned on the radio. One of Joe's favourite songs came on. For a moment it lifted his mood, but then Emily started to sing along tunelessly. He glared at her.

She smiled her most annoying smile, and carried on.

He gritted his teeth and stared out of the window. The streets became less familiar, then turned into a dual carriageway, then a motorway. As their old life slipped away, their new one became unavoidable. The level of water in the fish container sank, drip by drip, until Emily convinced herself her pets would die. She started to cry. Dad pulled into a motorway service station, and they all struggled out of the car.

Joe's jeans had a large damp patch where they'd been in contact with the car seat. It looked as if Emily had a similar problem with her dress. He couldn't resist saying, "Ha! Ha! You've wet yourself!"

She lunged towards him, arms outstretched, ready to push.

Instinctively, he pivoted to the right.

She fell onto the rough tarmac of the car park, saving herself with her right hand. There was a pause while she lifted her hand up and inspected it. Blood oozed out of her grazed palm. She sobbed hysterically.

"Joe! Now look what you've done!" Mum shouted, helping Emily to her feet and hugging her close.

"I didn't even touch her!" Joe said.

Mum stroked Emily's silky blonde hair. "You must have, or she wouldn't have fallen over like that."

Joe wanted to explain that by swerving he'd used Emily's attacking energy against her, causing her to overbalance and fall flat on her face. It was a classic aikido move. He was sorry that Emily had hurt herself, and he'd been just about to say so. The moment had been taken away, though.

"At the very least you could apologise, rather than just standing there scowling," Mum said.

Dad managed to find some jumpers in the car for Joe and Emily to tie round their waists so nobody would see their wet bottoms. Then they went to find bottles of cold mineral water for the fish container and a first aid kit, loos and refreshments for themselves.

It was the second week of the summer holidays. The service station was heaving with families, and there was a buzz of excitement about the place. Toys, travel pillows and sun tan lotion were being whisked through the checkout along with food, drink and newspapers. Joe looked on enviously as a mother gave her son money for a magazine and some sweets. He wished his family were going away for a week or two, safe in the knowledge they'd be coming home again. Instead, they were temporarily homeless, mid-way

between one life and another. If there was a feeling opposite to a holiday feeling, this was it.

"Are we nearly there yet?" Emily asked for the millionth time.

To Joe's surprise Dad said, "Yes, nearly there."

They drove past some cottages, down a hill, over a bridge, up a hill and turned right at a crossroads. It was then that Joe recognised where they were. They'd visited three months ago, but spring had turned into summer and everything seemed different. The lane was narrow, with a wide grassy verge followed by a fence. A golden crop of something shimmered in the field beyond. The early evening sunshine cast long shadows everywhere.

An elegant dark brown horse with an arched neck trotted by on the grass verge. The young man riding it smiled, raised his hand and called, "Thank you," as Dad slowed the car to a crawl.

"Oooh! Look!" Emily cried, waving frantically and jumping up and down on the car seat, causing mini tsunamis in the fish container.

Mum bent herself round the vacuum cleaner, straining to get a better view. "Lovely!" she whispered.

Joe hoped the rider couldn't see through the car's tinted windows. Mum and Emily were so

embarrassing; as soon as they saw anything from a seaside donkey to a police horse they went completely stupid.

Mum had tried to instil a similar love of horses in Joe by enrolling him in the Saturday kids' club at a riding stables on the outskirts of Birmingham. She'd almost succeeded, as he'd really enjoyed being around horses. He hadn't enjoyed being the only boy in his group, though, nor trotting in endless circles around a dusty indoor school. The ponies all seemed to have perfected the art of using just enough energy to get by, but only when pushed, so riding was always an effort, like pedalling a bike uphill. The poor things must have been bored senseless doing the same exercises day in, day out, with an assortment of children kicking their sides and pulling on their mouths. Joe had longed to go out for a proper ride – galloping, jumping and having fun – but they'd never been allowed to leave the confines of the school.

Eventually football had started to compete for Joe's Saturdays, and when Emily had started riding it had been the final straw. Even at the age of six, she'd known how to show him up at every opportunity.

Joe hadn't ridden for several years now, but the horse trotting past him made him think. If he had a beautiful animal like that and masses of countryside

to gallop over, he wouldn't mind taking up riding again – he wouldn't mind it at all.

Emily shouted, "Look, here's the bridge!"

The bridge was made out of concrete and metal, and the car made a peculiar rumbling noise as they drove over it.

Shortly afterwards, they turned left through an open gate, bumped along a short driveway and came to a halt behind two removal lorries. Their furniture and belongings were already being unloaded onto a mossy area in front of the house, adding to the untidy look of the place. Plants of various shapes and sizes, presumably weeds, grew randomly here and there. Joe was sure it hadn't been like that when they'd visited it in April. The whole place looked unloved and unwelcoming.

"Newbridge Farm. We've arrived!" Dad said.