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Opening extract from

The Yoghurt Plot

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Chapter 1

Hello.

My name is Bugg.

Jitterbug.

Don't laugh; it's not supposed to be a joke. It's a dance.

Since Monday we live at number 1, Cherry Blossom Avenue, Shabbiton.

The town has a pier (burned-out), a shopping centre (mostly closed), a car showroom (shiny), a skateboard park (really a building site), a huge sandy beach, a bank of pebbles and a nuclear power station (disused).

We have, in our house, among other things, a bedroom (that I share with Dad's paperwork), a TV (with Granddad glued to it), six skateboards (four with wheels) and a fridge, a large, cream, enamelled fridge that hums and whistles and stands in the corner of the kitchen. It has two plastic letters on it. An *A* and a *T*.

I mention the fridge, because I just tried to turn it off.

But it won't. It won't switch off. When I flick up the switch on the wall, it goes on humming and whistling, and the light inside turns on when you open the door. I've checked

to see that there's only one cable, and there is. It just won't switch off.

Granddad's watching telly at full volume in his dressing gown and pyjamas. He's also eating noodles. He sucks them through a gap in his teeth, one at a time, the longest ones first, the shorter ones later.

'Have you seen Dilan?' I ask.

Granddad pauses mid-noodle and glances over to me. He shakes his head and draws the end of the noodle through the tiny gap in his lips. It makes a kissing sound as it disappears.

'Dilan?' I yell up the stairs and then, when there's no answer, clamber past the folded removal boxes until I reach his room.

There's no sign of Dilan. No sign of Dilan himself, just a crumpled school uniform on the floor, some headphones and a pair of crusty socks.

Even from up here I can hear Granddad's music. I can't actually pick out the tunes, but it's like living over an old-fashioned disco, all day and almost all night.

I look out of the window. There's a thick sea mist blowing over the town, making the house feel as if it's on its own island. I can barely see over the fence, but I know Dilan's out there on his skateboard. He says the road here's better for skateboarding than where we lived before, which was only two hundred yards away in the estate. He says living in a cul-de-sac makes it more fun. It's definitely quieter – hardly any cars – and now we've got a proper garden with an apple tree and a shed, and the house has room downstairs,

so that Granddad can stay with us all the time and not be lonely any more.

And the fridge. We've got a bigger fridge.

I open the window. 'Dilan! Can you come in?'

He thumps down one end of the skateboard. 'Why?'

I look up and down the street. There isn't anyone to see, but I don't want anyone to hear me. 'Just, could you?'

Dilan lets out a sigh. 'What is it now?' he says, balancing on one pair of wheels.

I close the window and wait. I'm not going down again until Dilan comes in. I'm not going to be on my own with the fridge.

Someone opens the front door and, although I know it's Dilan, I jump.

'Bugg!' he yells up the stairs. 'This had better be good. I'm not searching under the bed again, or the cupboard, or the cellar – do it yourself.'

I jump down the stairs, my feet together, thumping in time to Granddad's TV music.

'It's the fridge,' I say.

'The fridge?' says Dilan, kicking off his shoes. 'What do you mean, the fridge? Is there something living underneath it? What is it?'

'It won't turn off,' I say. 'It's alive.'

'Why did you even try to turn it off?'

'Because it was making these horrible noises – sort of *weeeeeeeep*, and *whoooooooo*, and *ccccccccccccccccc*.'

Dilan shakes his head. 'What are you on about?'

I walk through the sitting room, passing Granddad, who

is sitting on the floor by the TV. He's left the noodles on a side table, and is flicking through a pile of ballroom-dancing DVDs. I know he's watched them all a hundred times before, but Mum says it gives him comfort, so Dilan and I are learning to leave him to it.

'Where's this fridge then?' says Dilan, behind me.

I lead him into the kitchen, a room he never visits if he can help it. I'm scared of monsters, but Dilan's scared of washing up.

Actually, Dilan's scared of soap and water – I don't think he's had a shower for more than two months.

We stop in front of the fridge. 'OK,' I say, 'watch.' And I unplug the fridge.

The little red light on the front stays lit.

'That could just be a time-delay thing,' he says. 'My phone takes ages to turn off.'

'Does it really take this long? I switched it off five minutes ago.'

Dilan obviously doesn't believe me.

'What about this then?' I ask, swinging the door open. The inside light pings on, illuminating the butter dish.

Dilan raises an eyebrow.

'And listen,' I say. 'Listen to it.'

We stand in silence. Granddad's dance music shakes the thin wooden walls of the house. The fridge hums. It whistles, it burps, it sings. It's as if it knows what Granddad is listening to; it's even in tune.

Eeeeeeeeeeee

Oooooooooooooh

Fsssssssssssssssh

We listen for minutes, and the noise goes on.

Sweeeeeeeeeeeeee

'That doesn't make sense,' says Dilan, walking around the fridge, checking for wires. 'Ah,' he says, 'it must be plugged in underneath.'

I hadn't thought of that. He checks for wires by nudging the fridge out from the wall and sliding a fish slice underneath. He scoops out a green plastic *C*. No wires. He arranges the letters on the fridge door.

CAT.

'See?' I say. 'It won't turn off.'

'It must be rechargeable,' he says. 'It must have a battery.'

I hadn't thought of that either and together we pull it right out so that we can look behind. But there's no room for a battery, and there's no switch, just a squashed red thing that was probably once a tomato.

We stand, staring at the back of the fridge, listening to it singing and humming, and sounding . . . human.

'I think,' says Dilan, 'that you might be right. It is alive. We have bought a house with a living fridge.' As he says it, the door springs open.

Chapter 2

I jump. I jump right out of the kitchen, into the hall.

Dilan turns and raises an eyebrow. 'It's only a fridge, Bugg.'

Mum bursts in through the door behind us, shopping bags dangling from her wrists. 'Gosh, it's foggy out there, never known one like it. Your poor granddad would call it a pea-souper.'

'Mum,' says Dilan, 'this fridge doesn't seem to need electricity to run. And the door opens – on its own.' He glares at me.

Mum wrinkles her nose. 'Really? That can't possibly be true.'

'Look, we unplugged it. The light still works.' He opens the door wide. Inside, apart from yellowed plastic, the fridge looks normal. It's almost completely empty except for a shelf of yoghurts with foil lids and the last scrap of butter smeared on the butter dish.

'How odd,' says Mum, stepping back and rustling the shopping bags. 'Well, there must be some explanation. It *was* running when we arrived, and those yoghurts were there. I haven't had the heart to throw them away.' She reaches past

me to pick one up. 'They haven't swelled up or anything, and I know that yoghurt keeps for ages.' She holds the yoghurt at a distance, studying the label. 'Funny – they're almost retro – like the yoghurts on the TV when I was a child.' She puts it back on the shelf. 'Sort this shopping away for me, dears. I'm just going to see your granddad.'

We empty the bags. Dilan does the cold food and I do the cupboards. The fridge hums almost tunefully. It feels like we're sharing the room with another person.

'Right,' says Dilan, looking down at all the things that won't fit.

'Take the yoghurts out,' I say. 'We don't really want them in there – do we? They must be toxic by now.'

He shuffles the contents until the yoghurts come out, and they stand on the side – a row of eight waxy cartons.

'Hmm,' says Dilan. 'These are . . .'

'Old?' I say, picking up one of the yoghurt pots. I examine it for a sell-by date. It doesn't have one. It doesn't even have ingredients on it. There's a faded yellow picture of what could be a peach; that's all.

Dilan holds another. It might be blackberry flavoured – or it might be coal dust; the picture's so bad I can't tell.

'Dare you to open it,' he says, holding it out under my nose. I look down at the top. It's a foil lid with the word YOGHURT printed across it in blue capitals. Not even the slightest hint of a flavour. It could contain anything. It could contain a monster from a distant galaxy. Admittedly, it would be a very small one.

'No,' I say.

‘Scaredy-cat,’ he says.

I stare at the yoghurt pot. It’s too small to house anything really lethal.

Surely.

The clock on the wall ticks away the seconds. The fridge sets up a new tune. Idly, I rearrange the plastic letters on the fridge. ACT.

I turn the yoghurt upright, hold my breath and peel back the corner of the foil.

Nothing happens. It doesn’t explode – nothing climbs out of the pot.

We peer inside. ‘It looks exactly like ordinary yoghurt,’ says Dilan. ‘There was no *pft* when you took off the top; it’s fine.’ He looks disappointed. ‘It isn’t even full of alien bacteria, unless alien bacteria don’t act immediately and are in fact *slow-release alien bacteria*. Like one of those plug-in air fresheners.’

I ignore Dilan and stare into the pot.

‘Dare you,’ he says.

‘Dare you back,’ I say.

‘Double dare,’ he says.

So I take a spoon from the drawer and dip it into the yoghurt.

A yellowy blob trembles on the bowl of the spoon.

‘Double double triple dare,’ he says, his eyes wide and fixed on my mouth.

‘OK,’ I say, and drop the yoghurt onto my tongue.

Nothing happens. Nothing – except that, not to be outdone, Dilan rips the lid from his pot. His is a mild lilac

colour. He plunges the spoon deep inside and takes almost half the contents in a single mouthful.

'That –' he says. 'That's delicious – best yoghurt I've ever tasted.'

I dip the spoon deeper into my pot. I can't work out the taste. Is it peach – or pear? Or maybe apricot? I peer at the outside of the pot. The label really doesn't tell me anything. There isn't even a company name, and the picture is so indistinct it might as well be a fried egg. And then I see faint numbers on the side. A one, a nine, a seven and a four.

'1974?' I say, pointing to the pot. 'It can't be that old.'

Dilan tilts his yoghurt and examines it. He stares for a long time, long enough for me to scrape the last smears from the inside of my pot and then run my tongue around the inside, just to make sure.

'It might say 1-9-7-4 – but it can't be a sell-by date. They hadn't invented them then. We studied that in food tech. Perhaps it's some sort of inspection code. You know, like clothes have numbers on them, to say who checked them.'

I shrug. I look towards the countertop, where the other six yoghurts are.

Except they're not there. The countertop's not there either.

'Dilan,' I whisper.

'What?' he says, running his tongue around the inside of his yoghurt pot.

'Look.'

'What at?'

I gaze around at what ought to be our kitchen. 'Everything.'

Chapter 3

I grip the fridge door. It's the same fridge – it's grubbier – but definitely the same.

'Oh,' says Dilan next to me. 'What . . . ?'

I turn slowly till my back's to the fridge and look around the room. It's a kitchen. The cooker's in the same place. The sink's in the same place, but they aren't the same cooker or sink. Where the wooden countertop with flush under-cupboards should be, is a pale blue version of the same thing. Where the cottage-rose tiles covered the walls, is orange paint. The kitchen table seems to have turned from wood to plastic. The chairs have developed vinyl squashy seats and dented metal legs. The kettle has shed its plastic outside and become a bare metal pointy thing with a huge plug hanging out of the back.

Something grey boils on the cooker. The stink coming out of the pan catches in my throat: a thick mix of dishcloths and old meat.

Even the floor's gone. It was tiled; now it's blue and white squares.

'A cat,' whispers Dilan, pointing. 'We don't have a cat.'

The cat gazes at us. Lifts up a hind leg, licks its bottom and then slips out through the slightly open back door.

'C'mon,' says Dilan. 'Let's get out of here – we need fresh air.'

'Shhh,' I say. 'Listen.'

'I can't hear anything,' he says.

'Exactly,' I say. 'What's happened to Granddad?'

Leaving the yoghurt pots on the strange blue countertop, Dilan steps towards the lounge door. I'm sure it was wood, but now it seems to be wobbly glass. Through it I can see an orange carpet and some brown shapes.

He puts his hand on the handle.

'Don't,' I say.

'It's our house,' he whispers back.

I pause in the middle of the kitchen. I'd like to run, but I want to know who's in the living room. I sort of want it to be Granddad, but then again, I sort of don't.

Dilan presses down the handle. The door clicks, and there's the faintest brushing sound as it rubs across the carpet. Dilan glances back towards me before sticking his curly head through the gap. He stops with his head still visible from my side and slowly draws back, pulling the door and leaving it just short of closed.

He points towards the back door and I follow him, tiptoeing across the kitchen and out into the garden.

And there's another surprise. The elderly apple tree with our washing line attached seems to have been replaced with a much smaller one. The driveway is covered in grass, with a shiny old-fashioned car on it, and the fence is in fact a hedge.

Dilan points towards the road and we race out onto the rutted gravel track.

'Whoa,' says Dilan staring at the ground beneath his feet. 'It was tarmac ten minutes ago.'

'And that,' I say, pointing at a building site stretching away towards a distant wood, 'was houses.'

We stare. We stand and we stare, and the more we do it, and the longer I have to think about what's happening, the sicker I feel.

'It wasn't Granddad,' says Dilan eventually.

'No?' I say, unsurprised.

'No. It was a fat bloke asleep in front of the telly – watching something in black and white.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Did you recognise him?'

Dilan shakes his head. 'He was big, ugly, with sideburns, not at all like Granddad – but it wasn't just that – the whole room had changed. There was loads of random orange furniture and a really nasty carpet, and, Bugg – the weirdest thing was that the conservatory was gone.'

'Gone?' I turn back towards the house and peer through the hedge. Dilan's right. The conservatory isn't there – and not only that, judging by the buttercups sticking their heads through the grass, it hasn't been there for a while.

I sit on a tree stump that I don't remember being there. In the distance I can see the sea, the town, the pier, although the pier looks different; there seems to be more of it. In fact, the burned-out pier that's been losing bits in winter storms for my entire life seems to be complete, with flags and towers and everything. I scan the view. For the first time

ever, I see the digger that sits on the shingle bank move. It takes a large bucket of stones from one place and drops it in another. A large orange ferry slowly crosses the horizon. A fishing boat bobs gently on the waves.

'And,' says Dilan, looking down at the ground, 'most importantly, my skateboard has gone.'