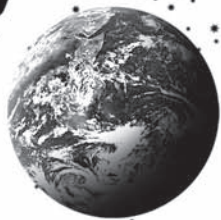


NURY VITTACHI was born on Earth and still spends most of his time there. He visits schools and tells stories to young people, sometimes in languages they understand. He has a thing about islands, and his favourites are Australia, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Britain and a nameless rock in the South China Sea he got stranded on once. He is known in China as Sam Jam, which means 'Third Bus-stop'. His greatest achievement in life has been to once laugh so hard that he blew coffee three metres out of his nose.

**TWILIGHT
IN THE LAND OF
NOWHEN**



NURY VITACHI



ALLEN & UNWIN

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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*This book is dedicated to anyone who suffers
from shyness*

Don't read this book.

Do NOT read this book. Just shut it quietly, and put it back where you found it.

Look, bozo, I'm not kidding. What is there about the last sentence that you don't understand? Are you being rude or are you just really, really stupid? Can you even *read*?

Let me try it one more time: *Shut this book and put it back right now.*

I see we have an extremely difficult customer here. Take my advice, shut this book and put it back on the shelf. It's for your own good. There are BAD things in this book. REALLY BAD things.

Not convinced? Then I'm going to have to list some of the things in this book. Don't blame me if it upsets you. It's not my fault; I warned you.

VIOLENCE. Yep. There's blood in this book. Red stuff. Splatters of it. I'm not going to tell you who gets hurt, but someone does. It's nasty. It's yucky. It's downright gory.

SAD THINGS. I'm talking about accidents. I'm talking about people going insane. I'm talking about people DYING.

KISSING. Yes, that's right, kissing. And I don't mean like how your mum kisses the top of your head when you go to school. I mean like a male and a female smooching. BLEEUUCCCHH!

If the publisher's lawyer knew what is in this book, she would probably add something like this on the cover:

We take no responsibility for any deeply traumatic condition that may yuck up your life if you are stupid enough to read this book despite the loads and loads of warnings telling you not to.

Good grief! You really are a pest aren't you? Well, this is your final chance.

Put the book down quietly and go away.

Do something else.

Go watch television.

Go play computer games.

Go eat junk food.

JUST DON'T READ THIS BOOK.

Anybody there? No?

Good.

Ha ha! Done it.

They've gone. Every last one of them.

Now it's just you and me. Me and you. Simon and the Secret Sharer.

I had to get rid of them because this book is just for me and you, Secret Sharer. Or SS, if I may call you that.

This is probably the only book in history that has been written and published for only one reader.

On TV, authors always boast about how many thousands of readers they have. Not me. I'm happy about how few readers I have. Just the one.

Now that we are alone, I'd better start by telling you a little about me. And about what led me to write this down. And how I found out about you, SS.

Before we begin, I need to tell you something. And you better set aside everything you think you know about . . . well . . . everything, really.

1

My name is—

Wait! Before I tell you my name, I have a small request. *Please promise you won't laugh.* I'm sorry to have to ask you this, but most children are horrible, vicious, nasty BRATS. Sometimes they laugh anyway, even if they've promised not to. Grown-ups are just as bad. Even teachers laugh. This is particularly shocking. Teachers are always going on about the Importance of Good Manners, yet they laugh like donkeys after swearing on the dictionary not to.

But if *you* say you won't laugh I'll believe you, because you are the Secret Sharer.

OKAY. Here goes . . .

My name is Simon Poopoo.

You are not laughing, I trust.

Let me add quickly that my family name does not mean what stupid, idiotic, brain-free morons think it means. Poopoo means 'appetiser' in Hawaiian.

Sometimes people ask me why my family doesn't

change its name. Well, we did change our name. (We used to be called Peel.)

Before we moved here, my dad opened a small food factory in Hawaii to sell spicy peanut and shrimp appetisers called *pupu*. There was already a food factory called Master of Pupu, so Dad changed his name to Mister Poopoo.

When we left Hawaii and moved here, he decided to keep his name. He said it was unusual and would get us noticed.

It gets me noticed all right. People notice me with their laughter. Bullies notice me with their fists.

But my name is not important. The most important thing about me is my remarkable degree of cleverness. I am not just the cleverest kid in the class; I am cleverer than any of the teachers. I am cleverer than the principal. I am probably cleverer than anyone alive. I may even be cleverer than God, although I am not sure about that. I haven't seen his exam results.

The most important week in the history of the universe (and this is not an exaggeration, as you will realise when you read on) began like any other, with a—*yeuchb*—Monday morning.

It didn't seem like a special day. In fact, it wasn't even a particularly nice one.

The clouds were not white and fluffy.

The birds were not singing.

The sky was not blue. It was just sort of paper-white all over, like someone had forgotten to paint it in.

The air was clear but icy, like my heart. Gusts of

freezing wind hurt my nose and ears. The birds hadn't woken up yet. And no one was talking.

Not that it was quiet. We live at the bottom of a hill, so every now and then the *iiiiieeeeeeeerrrrrr* of a bus or car straining up the slope fills the air.

That momentous morning I stood at the bus stop and thought about three horrible things.

- 1 I was starting a new school in a new town. I had precisely zero acquaintances to help me through the week.
- 2 It was the first day of a new term. There were not going to be any holidays for weeks and weeks and *weeks*.
- 3 I had a *really* bad feeling that, instead of making friends, I would acquire dangerous, lifelong enemies who loathed me.

I don't know where that last thought came from.

Except for the fact that I had been to six schools in my thirteen years. Every time I started a new one, I made no friends but acquired a new set of DANGEROUS, LIFELONG ENEMIES WHO LOATHED ME. Get the picture?

So there we were, a shivering clump, standing on the windy corner and staring at the top of the hill. Everyone was focused on the point where the school bus would eventually appear. Lots of people were sniffing. Everyone seemed to have a bad cold.

I was fingering a bruise on my forehead where I had accidentally walked into a door.

My family was standing next to me. That means my dad. He's the only family I have.

A slightly older girl was standing on the other side of him. I noticed in a blurry sort of way that she was looking at me.

Danger danger danger.

Then she did it.

‘Hi. What’s your name?’ I heard her say.

Argghhh! If there’s one thing I hate hate HATE, it’s friendly people. Why do they insist on saying hello? There is absolutely no need for that sort of behaviour. You’ll have noticed that I hadn’t done *anything* to her.

I didn’t reply or look in her direction, but turned to my dad.

He was reading an engineering magazine, as usual, and ignored my tugs at his elbow.

‘What’s—’ the girl started to repeat.

‘Simon,’ I spat, not looking at her.

‘—your name?’

‘I don’t know,’ I explained, starting to feel hot. *‘I don’t know.’*

‘Huh?’ She probably thought she hadn’t heard me right. I could tell because she wrinkled her forehead and tilted her head to one side. That’s what people usually do when they talk to me. ‘Whose class are you in?’ she asked.

‘Um, ah, two weeks,’ I said, desperately.

She looked baffled, but pressed on—the idiot. ‘Lived here long?’

‘Art. *Art*. You know, painting and stuff.’

The girl tilted her head to the other side. I think she was trying to decide whether I was obnoxious or crazy: the usual reaction. I’m a conundrum, that’s what I am.

‘Oh,’ she said after a pause. Then, believe it or not, she actually tried to continue the conversation. ‘Um, what’s your favourite subject?’

I didn’t say anything. I turned again to my Dad and gave him a sharp nudge in the side with my elbow. I needed his help. ‘Dad. Dad. *Dad.*’

He looked at me in an irritated way and lowered his magazine (*Atomic Automotive Monthly*).

‘He’s no good at talking. He’s a bit shy,’ Dad said to the girl. Then he went back to reading.

The girl gave up. There was a mixed expression on her face: half pity, half suspicion. I was used to that sort of response. She stepped back and looked for the bus. We stood in silence.

‘Dad,’ I said quietly. I poked him again with my elbow. ‘Dad.’

He waited for a while before he answered. ‘Uh?’

‘I don’t want to go to school. I *really* don’t want to go to school.’

He let out a long, irritated sigh. I knew it well. It was his *I’m-fed-up* sigh. And I knew what was coming next: his usual speech.

‘Simon. Don’t be like this. We’ve been through it all before. You have to go to school. It’s against the law for dads to keep their kids out of school. I’ll be arrested and locked up. We’ve had this conversation one million times at least. I’m not having it again. That’s the end of it.’

He went back to his magazine.

‘Dad. Dad.’

His eyebrows joined together. He hates being interrupted when he’s reading.

‘What?’

‘I’m worried. About . . . you know.’

He paused for a few seconds, as he always does before answering me.

‘What? Talking?’

‘Yes. Can you tell them I’m mute? Please, Dad? Please?’

‘I’ll deal with it. I’ll talk to them. I’ve said I will and I will, and that’s that.’

That was the only thread of hope I had. Dad had promised to explain to my teacher about the way I get mixed up when I try to talk and stuff. He had never done that at my previous schools, and I was hoping and praying that Dad’s presence would make a difference this time.

‘Tell them I’m mute,’ I said again. ‘Please tell them I’m mute.’

I’m too old to hold hands with Dad but I sort of pressed into his side. Dad was my hope. Dad would make it okay. Dad would make it different this time.

Two cars whizzed up the road and disappeared over the hill. And then everything was quiet. I slowly breathed out, conjuring a huge cloud in the freezing air.

There was silence for about half a minute.

A tinny version of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* started to play. My eyes widened in alarm. It was Dad’s phone, beeping and flashing.

I started praying a different prayer. *Please let it not be Melly. Please let it not be Melly. Please let it not be Melly.*

‘Oh, hi Melly,’ Dad said, grinning. Melly is his girlfriend and she keeps distracting him from the really important things in life, such as me and his car.

‘Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Ooh. Ah. Oh?’ he said. (Have you noticed how grown-ups on the phone make silly noises instead of words?) ‘Ooh. Ieee. Mm-mm. Ah, but I can’t,’ he said. ‘I have to take Si—yeah, I know it’s important to you, but—oh. Yep. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Mm. Yeah. Right.’

Danger danger danger.

She was asking him to do something; to meet her or go somewhere. I had to step in.

‘Dad, you promised to come to school with me today. Dad, you promised to come to school with me today. Dad—’

‘You’re *where?*’

‘Dad, you promised to come to school with me.’

‘You’re here? You mean at our place? Where exactly?’ He looked up and down the road.

‘Okay. Bye love,’ he said, and snapped the phone shut. ‘She’s here. Melly’s here. Somewhere.’ He glanced upwards.

I ducked.

A moment later, the fizzing sound of a Keeline 202 HoverSmart Shopalot (‘Takes two averagely obese adults and up to seventy kilos of shopping’) filled the air. I caught a glimpse of the latest model—metallic crystal orange with silver chrome trimming—whirring over our heads. It was out of control. Melly had to be driving.

People in the bus queue gasped. They leaped back, or covered their heads.

The vehicle crash-landed in a crab-apple tree about twenty metres from where we stood.

‘Ow!’ screeched the driver. Branches absorbed the weight of the hovercar, and it bounced up and down.

The sound of the engine slowly died, leaving only the radiator fans humming. There was a low hiss from under the vehicle. The hot underside was frying the crab-apples that grew in the tree. I could smell apple pie.

The driver pulled off her helmet and shook her hair like a dog after a bath. Melly’s hair cascaded down her back in seven shades of red.

‘Why do they make it so hard to land these things? Hi Hal. Hi Sime-Slime.’

I looked away. I did not want to be associated with this woman.

‘Hey Mel,’ said Dad. His voice went all weak and breathy, like it always does when she comes to visit. ‘Nice landing. Well—not bad for a beginner, anyway. Ha ha.’

(Have you ever noticed how grown-ups make fake laughing noises when they’re embarrassed, even when no one has made a joke?)

Melly flicked hair from her heavily made-up eyes. ‘Can you give me a teeny, weeny little driving lesson this morning, Hal, darling?’ she cooed in a little-girl voice. ‘I need it—as you can see. My test is this afternoon.’

‘You can’t. You promised to come to—’ I said.

‘Sure. Ha ha,’ Dad said.

‘*Dad*, you promised you’d come to school with me today. I need you—’

‘Hey, it’ll be fine. Ha ha.’ He flashed me a smile as fake as the laughs he was giving Melly. ‘I’ll write a note for your teacher. It’ll be fine.’

The sun disappeared. My world turned dark. I could feel myself sinking into a bottomless black hole.

Dad couldn't find a pen in his pockets. I gave him one. He couldn't find paper, so he wrote a note in tiny writing on the back of a *Mister Poopoo, King of Appetisers* business card.

He handed me the card.

This is what he had written on it:

Dear Teacher. Simon is very, very shy. He might not say anything today. Please DO NOT force him to say anything. If you do, he may say some strange things. Mr Harry Poopoo.

I tugged at his jacket. 'Please, Dad. Can't you come and tell the teacher yourself?'

He shook his head. 'It's important not to be selfish, Simon. Melly needs me. You know how it is.'

He squeezed my shoulder then climbed over a fence to get closer to the tree in which Mel sat, gently bobbing in her hovercar.

Yes. I knew how it was.

2

Half an hour later: Stress City. I was in a classroom. I knew no one. No one knew me.

I looked around. The place was crawling with revolting, shouting, stupid brats. There were thirty-two of them. They looked exactly like all the kids in all the other schools I'd been to. Kids who didn't become my friends. Kids who became DANGEROUS, LIFELONG ENEMIES instead. They were older than they had been at my six other schools, just as I was older. Each time they were older and bigger. Each time it was worse.

The noise of squalling, gossiping children was deafening. The room smelt of disinfectant. The strip-lights above us flickered on and off. The paint on the walls was grey and bits of it were starting to peel.

There was no one in the room who knew about my problem. This was going to be horrible. I could feel it in my bones. It was going to be hideous beyond words.

The teacher squinted with a scowl at the card I'd discreetly slipped onto her desk.

I listened as some of the children exchanged names, while others sat quietly—like me.

The fat boy next to me introduced himself as John. The boy in front of us turned around and told me I should call the guy Poison Cloud like everyone else did.

‘Shut up,’ my neighbour said. ‘My name’s John.’

I ignored him and looked at my hands.

Uh oh! Here was an extra problem. I could see right through my left hand. One of my fingers was completely transparent. The other three had gone sort of watery and my palm was fuzzy. Only my thumb was still completely solid. As if I didn’t have enough to worry about!

I laid my hand flat on the desk and read the words that someone had scratched on the wood: *Carrie luvs Sam 4eva.*

I was worried, but I didn’t panic. This was the fourth or fifth time something like this had happened in the past three months. It was just another depressing thing to add to the long, long list of things which made my life difficult. When parts of your body are see-through, it’s got to be a sign of something or other. But what? I was sure it would be something really, really bad. Because that’s my life: an endless list of bad things. Bad, weird things.

Only the day before, I had picked up my mother’s hand-mirror and looked in it only to discover that my face was barely there. I was practically headless. At first, I thought it might be some sort of dream or something, so I pinched myself. I was definitely awake.

There I was, staring into the mirror, but my face wasn’t staring out of it. Perhaps I was finally going completely mad. That was the only explanation I could think of.

Fortunately, my head came back an hour later, just as my fingers always did—or had done so far.

I heard a low and scratchy voice from the front of the room.

‘Which one is Simon Poopoo?’ the teacher rasped, peering at both sides of my dad’s business card. According to the sign on the door, her name was Mrs Stoep. That must have been a spelling mistake. Her name clearly should have been Mrs Stupid.

‘Poopoo?’ someone at the front parroted. The kid next to him laughed. Then another one joined in.

I could hear the news going around the class in stage whispers. ‘Some kid’s name is Poopoo.’

Soon everyone in the class was laughing, including the teacher. I guess I should have joined in too, but I didn’t feel like it.

Eventually the teacher noticed I wasn’t laughing, and aimed her thick bifocals at me.

‘Are you Simon Poopoo?’

I blinked at her. ‘Yes it is,’ I blurted out.

‘Is this card from your dad?’

‘I am, I guess. That’s what it says, doesn’t it?’

She glared at me. The wrinkle-lines in her forehead expanded in that irritated way that happens when people talk to me. ‘Apparently you are very shy. Is that right?’

‘I don’t know exactly what he means.’

‘It indicates that you will say some strange things. What does he mean by that?’

‘Yes. And Chinese.’

Her forehead turned into an angry grid. ‘Do you understand English?’

'No, no, no. Not at all. Really!'

Her eyes narrowed viciously. 'Are you trying to be funny?'

'Yes, Miss.'

She drew in her breath, straightened her body and slapped a ruler against the edge of the desk, making a violent *crack*. The class was instantly dead silent.

'I will not stand for insolent behaviour. Go and wait outside the principal's office.'

I got up and walked out the door. Since it was my first day, I didn't know where the principal's office was. I sat in the playground instead.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

6.1: Displacement

Displacement is the common name for a disease formerly classified by medical physicists as fourth-dimensional synchronitis, or 'time-sickness'.

Main symptoms

In mild cases, the sufferer feels displaced in times of stress. Typically, the mind goes blank, speech becomes difficult and the heart beats faster. This is often accompanied by a perception that time is slowing down, speeding up, or both at the same time.

History

For centuries, this condition was known as 'shyness' or 'social phobia'. In 2015, scientists discovered that it was caused by problems in a part of the brain called the amygdala. An inflamed or oversensitive amygdala can lead to feelings of extreme displacement. A small degree of displacement is normal, but severe cases have been reported.

Cause

The origins of the disease are unknown. Experiments carried out in the summer of 2014 on astronauts revealed that some individuals

appeared to be significantly 'out of sync' with their immediate environment. Their symptoms matched those of a small number of individuals with extreme shyness who had never travelled in space.

Extreme cases

Scientists have theorised that in acute cases of displacement, the sufferer could live a second or two ahead of other people. This could cause the sufferer to answer questions before they are asked, leading to severe difficulty in conducting conversations. Such individuals would also be seen as clumsy or accident-prone, as they would try to exit doors before they are opened, take hold of things before they are handed to them, and so on.

Worst recorded case

An astronaut who regularly did cargo trips between Earth and the moon has been suspected of having a displacement factor of 1.01 seconds.

Cure

There is no cure.

3

The bell rang.

Kids poured out of the classrooms and down the stairs to the chilly, bleak playground.

I hate playtime. But I hate it slightly less than class. You see, during class I'm always in grave danger of embarrassment and humiliation. The teacher could point to me and ask me to speak at any time. And I know that opening my mouth always leads to misery. Whatever I say is out of step with everyone else, because I see and hear them say things before they actually do.

Whereas during playtime, I don't need to talk to anyone. I can sit in an utterly miserable, hostile way in a corner by myself. People might think that I'm one of those kids who *like* to sit in an utterly miserable, hostile way in a corner by themselves. That suits me just fine.

I found a quiet spot on a battered green bench, one of a line of old benches that ran down one side of the playground. A few other shy kids sat there, including a couple

of kids who didn't speak much English. There was also a girl from my class who had braces and red glasses.

For several minutes I sat there and watched the brats in the playground doing the usual stupid playground-brat stuff—running and shouting and talking and pushing each other around and so on. It was cold. The kids running around weren't cold, but those of us sitting were soon shivering.

No one was bothering me, so I was relatively happy. Or as near to the concept of being happy as I ever get, which I suppose is not really particularly near.

Time passed.

I sat.

I watched.

Time passed.

I would have got through that first break time just fine . . . if it wasn't for Trudie Stig. She was the sort of person I hated most; the sort I always avoided. Sadly for me, there seems to be no end of people who have the same sickening quality: *friendliness*.

I grunted and nodded in a not-very-friendly way as she approached. Two other girls followed behind her. They were loud and pretty and ultra-confident in a really scary way. You know the sort of girls I mean—just too perfect, like pictures on the covers of glossy magazines. I focused on my feet.

'Hi,' she said.

Without looking up, I mumbled, 'Simon.'

'You're the new boy, aren't you? What's your name?'

I sighed. This was going to be difficult. 'Art.'

The three girls looked at each other. Two giggled.

‘Really?’ said Trudie, still trying to be friendly. ‘Like short for Arthur? What’s your favourite subject?’

‘Easterpark Road. The north side.’

The three girls flashed their eyes at each other again.

The one with blonde ringlets put her hand to her mouth and laughed. ‘That’s a place, not a lesson, Dork-brain,’ she sneered. ‘So you’re from Easterpark North? Which road?’

‘I hate this school,’ I said.

The blonde girl, whose name was Eliza Marshmallow, made a he’s-crazy-so-let’s-get-out-of-here sign, spinning her index finger at the side of her head and tugging at her friend’s sleeve.

‘His name’s Poopoo,’ she whispered to the girl next to her.

But Trudie was still trying to be friendly. She had brown hair and brown eyes, and she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

‘Is something wrong?’ she asked.

‘So are you,’ I shouted to her friend.

Eliza grabbed Trudie’s arm and pulled her away.

‘You’re a weirdo,’ Eliza shouted at me as the three girls ran off laughing.

Yep. Exactly as I expected. Life at this school was going to be the same as it had been at all the others: a total disaster.

Another four or five painful minutes passed. Playtime finally came to an end with a jangling bell.

I started walking towards the building.

‘Ouch,’ I yelped.

Then somebody kicked my leg from behind and I fell

into the dust. I turned my head to see Eliza Marshmallow walking away with her sniggering group. I lay on the ground, lacking the willpower to get up again.

Then I felt long, thin fingers gripping my upper arms. A grown-up took my weight and hoisted me to my feet.

I turned to see who it was. She was a slim woman with very short hair. She held out my school bus identification card, which I had dropped. She stared at the name on the card, but she didn't laugh.

'Is this the correct spelling of your name?' she asked quietly.

'Yes,' I said, astonished. 'That would be good. Thanks.'

'Perhaps we'll just go by first names,' she said, and winked. 'Simon's a lovely name. See you around, Simon.'

And then she was gone.

I stood with my mouth open as she strolled away. Who was she? How come she didn't make fun of my name? How come she didn't laugh?

I followed her with my eyes, fixing her in my memory. She wore grey overalls under a long white coat that billowed like a cloud. She walked in a floaty sort of way, as if she barely touched the ground, and she was holding a mop.

She looked more like a cleaner than a teacher. I watched until she disappeared into some sort of utility block.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

6.2: Forms of Displacement

There are fears that the number of displacement sufferers could grow as long-distance space travel becomes more common. Medical researchers have been working to better understand the disease.

Doctors have classified sufferers into three categories.

I *Mild displacement* leaves sufferers feeling 'shy'. They can communicate with others, but stress can cause their minds to go blank and their heart rates to speed up.

II *Medium displacement* sufferers often find any form of communication difficult. They are often assumed to be inarticulate, but they often have a highly detailed and intelligent 'commentary track' running in their minds. Almost as if they are rehearsing conversations before they happen.

III *Acute displacement*, which is rare, causes sufferers to have difficulty leading normal lives. They are isolated and live in a constant state of 'déjà vu', where everything appears to happen twice. Usually the first layer of sensation—sights, sounds, smells, touch

—is far more vivid than the second, which fades in and out of view. IMPORTANTLY it is this fuzzy ‘repeat’ layer of occurrences (sufferers often perceive it as an echo) which is the real event. The first layer is a vivid foreshadowing of events in the near future. Sufferers often respond to comments which have not yet been uttered. This makes conversation so difficult that sufferers of acute displacement often avoid human contact as much as possible.

4

Back in class, Poison Cloud greeted me again. I pretended I hadn't heard him and kept my eyes averted. The last thing I wanted was to sit next to someone who made the mistake of thinking I was going to be a friend and who would make conversation all the time.

When he busied himself writing his name on his exercise books, I stole a glance at his face. His cheeks were heavy and he kept rubbing his eyes. I think he was crying.

Most people were chatting to the person sitting next to them. The glossy girls were sitting at the front, laughing loudly behind cupped hands.

I sat and stared at my left hand, which had become solid again. Luckily, no one had spotted my transparency. Poison Cloud might have felt tempted to start a conversation about it.

The next lesson passed without too much trouble. It was one of those periods where you had to watch the teacher prattle on and on, and then take notes in an

exercise book. No human interaction was needed until the end, when we had to do a twenty-word spelling test and then mark each other's papers.

I managed to mark Poison Cloud's paper without speaking to him. He spoke to me a bit, but I just ignored him.

Then Mrs Stupid announced that we were going to have a quiz. My mood went black again. I hate quizzes more than any other school activity. I know all the answers (as I said, I am extremely clever) but I never get any points. My timing is always out. I can never make my answers fit the questions.

'It will be boys versus girls. Each person will get one question,' she said. 'And if you get it wrong, I pass it over to someone on the other team. No consulting.'

She looked through her thick glasses at the wad of questions in her hand. 'We'll start with the boys at the back. The first question goes to . . .'

She glanced up and focused on Poison Cloud and me.

No, *please*. Not me. Please-please-please-*please*.

'Master Poopoo,' she said.

I froze.

The other kids giggled and repeated my name in whispers.

The teacher looked down at the list of questions. I closed my eyes. *Saved*.

There was a knock on the door.

Mrs Stupid peered through the little square window in the door. Then she gestured to the people outside to enter.

Four adults came in.

I gaped. One of them was the woman who had picked me up and dusted me down in the playground.

A lady with helmet-hair made all the noise. She introduced herself as Deputy Principal Mrs McBale and announced that she was touring the classrooms with three 'key school service-providers'.

The first was the school librarian, Mrs Brice. The second said he was the tuck-shop coordinator Mr Chung. And the third introduced herself as the school janitor Ms Blit. I bit my lip. Ms Blit was the woman who had called me Simon. I wished *she* were my teacher.

'Every student has to do twenty hours of community service each term,' Mrs McBale announced. 'You will each sign up as a helper to one of these three adults.'

The visitors gave a brief description of the duties that their helpers would do, as if we were too stupid to work out that a librarian handles books, a tuck-shop coordinator runs a shop, and the janitor keeps the place clean.

Everyone volunteered to sign up with the librarian or the tuck-shop man. I was the only person who put up a hand to help the janitor.

'Eww,' Eliza Marshmallow said. 'Kid Poopoo wants to spend his community service time in the toilets. That makes sense.'

Everybody laughed, including Mrs Stupid.

Ms Blit smiled at me.

And *winked*.

5

That afternoon, after an even longer, more miserable playtime, we were called into the hall for an assembly.

Hooray.

No, really. Assemblies are the one thing I really like in school. Unlike during class time, individual kids don't have to speak to teachers. And unlike during playtime, kids are actively discouraged from speaking to each other. I can sit in grim silence like everyone else. I like grim silences. Grim silences are my *thing*.

The principal, a tall bald man named Mr Fowles, launched into an extremely long speech about the school. It was way too boring to listen to. I daydreamed about flying over the rooftops in my dad's car, a modified Scalapoynter X31. (Hovercar fans refer to this model as a Breaker, since it is the only non-military vehicle of its type that can go fast enough to break the sound barrier.)

After twenty sleep-inducing minutes, Mr Fowles finished droning. Then some students played the violin and the piano. Then the drama teacher made a speech

asking for people to audition for the school play. Then a teacher talked about the chess club.

Yawn yawn yawn.

After all this dull stuff, Mr Fowles announced that he had ‘exciting news’.

‘Normally, Friday afternoons are Whole School Special Project sessions,’ he said. ‘But in view of the fact that this is the first week of the new term, I have asked the students’ representative on the school council to organise something a little different. Eliza, can you come up and explain what it is, please?’

I watched suspiciously as Eliza Marshmallow strutted up the stage and bent the microphone down to her level.

‘Thanks Mr Fowles,’ she said, tossing her blonde ringlets from her forehead. I had already noticed that when speaking to adults she used a high-pitched, girly voice, but her voice was more of a nasty cackle with kids.

‘Me and the students’ committee have decided to hold a contest to find out who is the most popular person in the school,’ she chirruped. ‘Anyone is allowed to stand. Students, teachers and non-teaching staff can be chosen. So, write your nominations on the sheets of paper that have been stuck on the noticeboards outside. People who have been nominated can start campaigning right away. We’ll have a final vote, in this hall, at assembly on Friday afternoon. The winner will get the title School Superstar.’

‘That does sound fun,’ said Mr Fowles. ‘I nominate you, Eliza.’

She smiled and fluttered her eyelashes. ‘Why, thank you, Mr Fowles,’ she fluted. ‘And I would nominate you.’

'Thank you, indeed, Eliza,' said the principal.

'But you are going to be on the judges' panel,' she went on. 'So I might have to give my vote to myself instead.'

Mr Fowles laughed, making a funny, low barking sound, which went *Ub! Ub! Ub! Ub!* This was the signal for all the teachers to laugh as well. It was sickening.

Then I thought about it, and I started smiling too. It looked as if the school was going to spend much of its spare time this week occupied with a popularity contest. Well, that was something that definitely was not going to involve me in the slightest. I was *quite* sure about that.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

3.1: **Dropped stitches, fabric wear and lacerations**

Despite the countless collisions of objects in space over the eons, only a small number have been big enough to damage the space-time continuum. A few examples:

- I In quadrant 7569c in the year 149786, two black holes drifted so close together that the fabric of space-time between them was severely curved. The area had to be restitched over a period of two millennia.
- II In the Delta 17 Galaxy in the year 62048, a supernova imploded so violently that it knocked the entire universe 82 nanoseconds back in time.
- III Just as this report went to press, an Earth astronaut crashed into a black speck (a tiny portion of dark matter), causing a small rip in the fabric of time in the Sol galaxy. Maintenance Crew are investigating.

6

On the way home, I sat by myself near the back of the bus. People usually like to sit in the front half or right in the back row. So I always sit in one of the seats nobody wants—about three-quarters of the way down the aisle, over the back wheels, where I will be jogged up and down by myself.

The driver spoke to me, but I pretended I hadn't heard her. I eventually got home without speaking to anyone. The secret is to never look up, so you never catch anyone's eye.

Dad was in the garage working on his car.

When I say car, I don't mean an ordinary car. Just like when I say 'Dad', I guess I don't mean an ordinary dad.

Let me tell you about my father first. Dad wasn't always Mister Poopoo, salesman of a Hawaiian snack food. He was born Harold Godfrey Peel in Houston. He went straight from school to the army, and then became an astronaut.

By the age of twenty-six, he was a member of the first

American and Chinese cooperative space station project. He was one of a team of sixteen men and women. He was a hero.

At least, he was until two weeks into the mission, when a remote-controlled TV camera caught him kissing one of the Chinese astronauts, a woman called Ding Yuan. Dad described it to me, making it sound like a yucky, long, slow wet kiss like they do in movies. He said they even used their tongues.

He got into big trouble. I guess the bosses thought that people who liked to kiss were not serious enough to be astronauts. Also, he was married to someone else at the time. No one liked him after that. Especially his wife, who immediately filed for divorce.

My dad was ordered to come back to Earth on the next space shuttle. He lost his job, left Houston, and eventually got the job selling pupu snacks in Hawaii.

Ding Yuan got into big trouble with her bosses too. She was transferred to a department that had the nasty job of running cargo between the moon and the mines in the asteroid belt beyond Mars.

According to Dad, she discovered she was pregnant on her third day on the job so she came straight back to Earth. But it was too late, she had caught a strange space disease. She got sicker and sicker and died soon after I was born.

'But the baby lived and grew into an apprentice pupu salesman,' Dad used to say, whenever I asked about my mum.

There are no pictures of Mum in our house. The first time I asked why I was about six. Dad explained that he had burned them all because they made him too sad.

When I asked again for a picture of her, he gave me a mirror that used to be hers: a small, oval hand-mirror with a flower pattern on its handle.

‘You want to see her face? Look in there, kid,’ he had said.

I thought he meant that her face was hidden in the mirror somewhere. I spent many hours searching for it, looking at the mirror in different lights and from different angles. I was about ten when I figured out that he meant my face was like my mother’s face. By that time, I had become very attached to the mirror, in the way that some kids get attached to their teddy bears or blankets. I used to carry it with me everywhere, although I kept it hidden at the bottom of my school bag. It got cracked, but I still keep it.

Sometimes I gaze into the mirror and try to imagine a woman with my nose and mouth and eyes but much older, and with long black hair.

I have one other thing that used to belong to Mum. She left me a small Bible with a white leather cover. It’s a pretty book, but too hard to read. I tried once. The first stories are quite good. Then it gets boring, with all that stuff about who begat who begat who begat who. Dad isn’t interested in it at all.

Written on the inside front page is *Remember me*, and then my mum’s name in Chinese.

That’s all I know about my mother.

After she died, I was put in my father’s care. Dad was supposed to divide his time between starting a pupu business, and raising me. That’s what he told our social worker.

But that's not what he really did. He just worked on his car all the time.

You see, Dad had never lost his interest in the space vehicle business. The car he was working on was not what most people would call a car at all. It may have looked like a standard model Scala-Poynter X31 flying four-seater transport, but Dad had installed a miniature rocket engine in the back.

It was built out of lightweight steel and it was airtight, so it could fly right up into the stratosphere, which is what they call the top of the sky. He'd spent our money buying what was probably the best flying car on the market (not counting the military ones), and then added a souped-up engine which made it super-powerful—although possibly not quite legal. It was a Breaker. And, maybe, the fastest Breaker in the world.

Dad has his own ideas about what is important and what isn't. Most of the money that he was supposed to be using to feed me and house me and clothe me was being put into building us a neat car. He didn't tell the social worker that though.

7

Tuesday dawned bright and clear and devious.

The sun shone and the sky was blue. It was a perfect day for not going to school. It was the sort of day when a kid is inspired to make eloquent excuses as to why he should stay at home. And that's just what I did.

I explained to Dad that my teacher was not just dumb but *dangerously stupid*. I told him how Mrs Stupid somehow turned the note telling her not to make me say anything into an excuse to have a conversation with me in front of the class.

'How stupid is that? *Mega* stupid, that's what. How can I learn anything from someone that stupid? It's stupid to try to learn something from someone who's so incredibly stupid. Who knows what a teacher that stupid would do? She might make us stick our fingers in electricity sockets or something to learn about electricity. Being that stupid is dangerous to kids. I might die. She might kill us by accident. She probably will. Probably today. I'm not going.' I had my fists on my hips and my feet planted far apart.

Dad stared at me. His eyebrows moved together. He pursed his lips, ready to sigh. I could see his *I'm-fed-up* expression gathering in his cheeks. Then his frown switched into a bright smile.

My mouth dropped open. Huh? No problem? I could work on the car with him instead? I couldn't believe what I had just heard.

'Okay,' he said. 'No problem. You stay with me and we can work on the Breaker instead. I need to replace the upper left brake oscillator. There's something wrong with the way it reacts to the pitch-and-roll lever.'

I was going to thank him, but I stopped myself. This was such an unexpected answer that I was suspicious. Was this some sort of cruel joke?

I was cagey for a while, but he seemed sincere. He dressed in oil-stained clothes and went out to work on the X31. I followed. He didn't stop me. We spent ten minutes tinkering around, and then he announced that it was time to go for a spin.

We put on our goggles and safety parachutes.

Dad only drives his car a couple of times a month, so I was quite excited by the prospect of a ride. He wheeled the car out of the shed. I climbed in next to him and strapped myself in.

Then he pressed the ignition button.

Have you ever ridden a hovercar? Well, a Breaker is nothing like a normal hovercar. It's jerky and powerful and LOUD. There was this roar and loads of smoke came out of the undercarriage. Then, with a loud *whuuuumm-mmmp*, the car lifted straight up into the sky. I always feel a bit sick when it does that—it's like going up in an

elevator. Really fast. (Once, we bumped into a very surprised bird on the way up and there were feathers under the seats for weeks.)

The car rose and rose until we jerked to a halt, about sixty metres in the air. It was time to fire the rockets. I held on tight to the bracing handles and pressed my body as far as I could into the seat.

Woosh! My neck jerked backwards into the headrest as we zoomed forwards.

This was pure joy. This was living. These were the moments I existed for.

In seconds, we had left the housing estate and were soaring up into the air, the buildings shrinking into small boxes below us. As usual, Dad had left the top down. The wind roared all around us. My hair whipped into my face so hard that it stung my skin.

'This is really cool,' I screamed.

He nodded and shifted his weight to one side, turning the car.

In case you have never been in a flying car, let me explain how it works. The Breaker has an aircraft-style steering wheel, like a normal hovercar. But you don't actually have to turn it, not much anyway. It's a bit like when you ride really fast on your bicycle—you don't need to turn the handles; you just lean slightly one way or the other.

In a flying car, the WOI—that's the weight offset indicator—adjusts itself to the exact weight of the passengers. The whole thing is delicately balanced. The driver shifts his weight to the right or left to make it turn, and leans backwards or forwards to make it go up or down.

But you have to be careful not to overdo it—it's easy to get into a spiral or a tailspin.

We had a fabulous time flying over town—until I saw a salmon-pink building that I vaguely recognised.

'Yuk,' I said. 'School.'

'Bye, Simon!' said Dad, pushing a button on the dashboard. My seatbelt clicked open and I was flung out of the vehicle by the spring-loaded platform built into the seat.

'Nooooooooo,' I yelled. 'I haven't got my school uniform on.' I fell. 'I hate you I hate you I hate you,' I screamed. But the sound of the parachute opening drowned my words and I drifted slowly down to the school playground.

8

Ms Blit was cleaning the boys' toilets.

'Well, she said I could come here to do my community service this period,' I said.

'Aren't you supposed to be in Mrs Stoep's class?' Ms Blit asked.

I smiled back at her.

Then she smiled at me.

'Yes, please,' I said.

'Shall I show you something?' she asked.

Something odd was going on. The out-of-sync conversation and my permanent echo seemed to be happening just as badly as ever. Yet somehow we seemed to be communicating successfully.

Was it coincidence? Or could she somehow understand me? She seemed to *expect* me to talk in an out-of-whack way.

Ms Blit led the way to the sanitary supplies closet, a walk-in cupboard full of bottles of detergent and mops. There was a small metal locker in it. To my surprise, she

opened the locker and stepped inside. It was a door—a door to a secret room.

I followed. The room looked like some sort of laboratory. She had an amazingly complicated experiment set up in a corner. It had all sorts of valves and tubes and wires and things sticking out in all directions.

‘It is?’ I replied.

‘It’s simpler than it looks,’ she told me.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I need to tell you something,’ she said.

I felt weird. Very weird. I realised, after thinking about it, that this unfamiliar feeling was a mixture of shock and happiness. Here was someone I could apparently communicate with, at school, despite my problem. This was a big deal. This was unbelievable. This was amazing. This must be a dream. I pinched the skin on the back of my hand, but I didn’t wake up.

Ms Blit was looking right into my eyes. I could tell, even though I was looking anywhere except into her eyes.

‘I’m not really a janitor,’ she said. ‘I am a Stitcher.’

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

4.3: Maintenance Crew

The fabric of time is primarily kept in order by a team of celestial seamstresses known officially as the Maintenance Crew. In popular speech, they are known as Stitchers.

The space-time continuum is continuously monitored by planet-sized organic superprocessors. Small tears triggered by ripples of dark matter can be fixed by auto-hyperchips. Black holes sometimes need more serious intervention. On rare occasions a life form will come unstuck from its place in the fabric of time. Then a member of the Maintenance Crew will be dispatched to fix the problem by hand.

Key numbers:

- The number of threads in the fabric of time is 16 quintillion.
- The relationship between energy, time and matter is $E=mc^2$.
- The number of Stitchers is 20.

9

I started counting out loud. 'One elephant. Two elephants. Three elephants. Four elephants . . .'

'Simon, I want you to count out loud in time with me. One elephant. Two elephants. Three elephants. Four elephants. Five elephants . . .'

Soon Ms Blit and I were counting together, but not quite matching.

'Seven elephants,' she said.

'Ten elephants,' I said.

'Eight elephants,' she said.

'Eleven elephants,' I said.

I stopped.

'Nine elephants, ten elephants, eleven elephants,' she said. 'Now stop.'

She looked at her stopwatch and scribbled on a piece of paper.

'Three point two seconds. That's a record. That's amazing. I've never seen a case of synchronitis so bad. It's a miracle you're alive.'

'As long as I can remember.'

'How long have you had this?'

'I really hope you can.'

'We're going to have to see if we can do something to make sure this doesn't get any worse.'

'Oh,' I said, disappointed.

'But I don't want to raise your hopes too much. Simon, I need to tell you something important. There is no cure for what you have. We can't fix it. We can't make it better, not even a little bit. All we can do is try to stop it deteriorating.'

She said this as if it was really bad news. But the mere fact that someone knew about my problem had left me stunned.

It was amazing. She spoke slowly, with pauses before starting each sentence. She wasn't in the least surprised that I answered questions before she asked them. Ms Blit seemed to know instantly what even my dad hadn't worked out till I was five or six. She knew that my brain worked in a funny way. She knew that I heard things before they were spoken and tried to walk through doors before they were opened.

We sat down. She gave me a little lecture. The first thing she said was that I had to start talking in paragraphs, instead of phrases or sentences.

'Your conversations will not crash so often, and you'll sound like you're almost making sense. Now, explain your problems to me. Take as long as you like. Just talk and talk and talk, for as long as you can. And you don't have to look at me as you talk, although it would be nice if you glanced at me occasionally.'

I stared down at my shoes and started talking.

'I've always had a problem. Dad says I am really, really shy. I didn't start talking till I was four. Even then I only spoke to my dad. He's the only person I can talk to because he knows he has to pause a lot when we chat or anything. Dad makes me go to school but I never talk to anyone. Sometimes people make me talk, but I can never have normal conversations. I hear and see things twice over, like there's an echo. But I respond to the wrong one. I always answer the wrong bits at the wrong time and I grab things before they're handed to me. I used to laugh at jokes before the punch line. When I used to laugh, I mean. People think I'm stupid. People think I'm mean and unfriendly. I am mean and unfriendly, I guess.'

'Go on.' She kept nodding as I spoke.

'I don't know what's going on. It's like things really happen after I see them happen. Often, I see the same thing take place twice over, once normal and once blurred. Kids think I'm weird. I guess they're right. I am weird. What's that thing you said I had? Dis-something?'

Ms Blit was holding her chin with her index finger and her thumb. 'Displacement. Synchronitis. Acute inflammation of the amygdala. The worst case I have ever seen.' She slowly shook her head in amazement. 'The last case I had was seven hundred and thirty milliseconds, and she was screwed up enough. Three seconds is incredible. As I said, I'm amazed you're alive.'

'Okay, I'm listening,' I replied.

'Now, my turn to tell you a few things,' she said.

She chewed her pencil for a bit before beginning. 'You've got a little almond-shaped thing in the middle of

your brain called an amygdala. We all have one. Human doctors don't know much about it but they think it's the part of your brain that deals with instant impulses and controls your emotional responses.'

I frowned. This sounded like it was going to be hard for normal kids to follow. Thank goodness I'm a genius.

She thought for a few seconds and then continued. 'Let me explain it this way. If a tiger leapt through this window, the main part of your brain, the neocortex, would start thinking logically about the best way to escape. Should you dive out the window? Or run to the door? Or hide in a cupboard? Now, if you only had a neocortex to work with, the tiger would have eaten you before you had finished thinking through the possibilities. But long before your neocortex had finished fact-processing, your amygdala would have instantly sent out a fear/danger signal, taken over your adrenal system, and raced you off to safety.'

Her face filled with enthusiasm. 'The amygdala is a strange and wonderful thing. It works instantly, almost magically. It's far more important than you humans know.'

Lines appeared between Ms Blit's eyebrows and she spoke more slowly.

'People sometimes develop a . . . er . . . problem with their amygdala. They feel displaced. They are unable to connect with people, or events. Everyone suffers a little from this at some time in their lives. People who get it occasionally may describe it as "stage fright". People who have it almost all the time are called "shy". Some people get it only when they meet someone who scares them. But what's actually happening in these cases is that the amygdala is becoming inflamed, the fear/danger signal is

going out, and people find themselves on edge and have difficulty communicating.'

We sat there in silence for a while. I noticed she had begun to wring her hands. 'Is your amygdala acting up? You look all stressed out,' I said, forgetting that I was supposed to talk in paragraphs.

She smiled.

'You know so much about this thing,' I went on. 'Are you sure you can't fix it?'

She got up and walked in circles to use up a few seconds before answering, so as to get our exchanges into the right order.

'Yes. As far as I know there's no cure.'

I thought about this before answering. 'Then why are you here?'

Ms Blit sat down again. 'It would be good to see if we can stop it getting worse. It would be really, really good to do that. And there's a chance we may succeed.'

She glanced at my eyes and gave a big smile. She grinned so hard I could see her bottom and top teeth.

I looked at her face. That big, wide smile worried me.

It was a brave smile. I'm not sure exactly what the difference is between an ordinary smile and a brave smile, but I know there is a difference. The first means that things are going to be fine. But the second means that things are almost definitely not going to be fine. When we talk about my problems, my dad uses brave smiles all the time. The social worker gives me brave smiles. All my life, the only smiles that have ever come my way are brave smiles.

'Am I going to be okay?' I asked. 'What if it doesn't work? What if I do get worse?'

She patted my hand and looked away. 'We're going to have to work together a bit to see what we can do. I want you to meet me here as often as you can. Every playtime. Before school when you can. And Simon, this is our secret. You don't have to tell anyone else about any of this.'

'Sometimes part of my body disappear,' I blurted out. 'Is that also a symptom of displacement?'

Ms Blit froze. Then she took a deep breath and said quietly, 'Yes Simon, it is. We're going to have to work quickly to stop it getting any worse.'

I nodded. 'You're right, there is.'

'I have a feeling there's something else you want to ask me,' she said, leaning forward to look me in the eye.

I looked at my shoes again. It's much easier for me to talk to people that way. 'You're the first person I can—I mean, it's so nice to talk to someone. I've only ever talked to my dad. Is there anyone else I can talk to? It would be nice to have people I can just, like, you know, chat with and . . .' I trailed off.

I could hear her quietly counting to three before speaking. 'Go on, Simon. I'm listening. Say anything you need to say. I'm here to help.'

I took a deep breath and started again. 'You said I could never be fixed. If I can never be fixed, will I ever have friends of my own? I can never have a normal conversation with other kids. I think maybe what I'm trying to say is: Is there anyone else like me?'

Ms Blit smiled—a real smile this time. 'There's no one quite like you. Every individual is unique. But don't worry about the companionship thing. Listen, Simon, there's someone for everyone. The Personal Department of what

you might call the Destiny Office of the organisation I come from arranges that. In every community there is at least one person who has the right qualities to match you. Maybe it will be your best friend, or the person you will marry. It's just a matter of finding that person. In the time-space business, we call each pair Secret Sharers. That's because each pair has shared destinies, but neither of them know it. Only we know it, because we stand outside time. It's our secret. One of the reasons why I really like working with young people is that they usually haven't yet paired off with their Secret Sharers, and it's fascinating to see how each one eventually finds their chosen partner.'

This really intrigued me. A friend? For me? 'Is there one in this school? A Secret Sharer for me?'

'Well, I'm not allowed to tell you your future. We follow really strict rules. But I know you have an unusually hard time making friends, so let me encourage you to keep your spirits up. There's a Secret Sharer for everyone. That includes you. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you had a Secret Sharer your own age right here in this school in Easterpark.' She winked again.

Whoa. Yikes. Wow.

There were not enough exclamation-type noises in the world for me to express what I felt.

As it sank in, I started to feel better than I had done for months, if not years. I had always thought I would have to go through life alone, with only my dad for company. Yet Ms Blit reckoned that I was going to have a real friend one of these days—a friend of my own. This was incredible.

10

I stumbled from the secret lab, through the smelly toilet block, and into the playground. The bell signalling the end of recess must have rung. Hundreds of children scrambled towards the staircases. Was one of these kids my Secret Sharer?

In a daze, I staggered to my classroom. I was the last person to enter.

‘Yes, I know, sorry,’ I said to Mrs Stoep.

‘You’re late,’ the teacher said, sour-faced. ‘Sit down.’

I found out that day why the kid I sat next to was called Poison Cloud. He had the worst digestive system known to man. Incredibly noxious fumes emerged from him after he ate anything—from both ends. Apparently he had privately told one of the kids that he had a serious problem with his stomach, and the kid had blurted it out to everyone. Fortunately we sat near the window. Otherwise I don’t think I would have made it through the day.

Mrs Stoep told us to copy stuff from the whiteboard into exercise books.

Instead, I started writing a journal—the journal that you are reading now. I decided that it would be important to communicate with my Secret Sharer, and since I couldn't have normal conversations, I would need to write it all down.

While I was doing that, most of the kids were chatting. Poison Cloud tried to make conversation again but I ignored him.

One of the things about being a miserable, hostile, silent kid is that you gradually become invisible. People stop noticing you. They talk as if you're not there. And by sitting quietly with your ears working, you find out a lot of stuff.

For example, I found out that one of the reasons why Eliza Marshmallow was so powerful was because her dad was director of information technology for the Easterpark city council. He was in charge of everyone's computer record. That meant his daughter could find out almost anything about anyone. She was always getting her father to look up stuff about the teachers, and then telling the other kids about it.

I don't know if it was legal, but she'd found out that the history teacher, Mr Swallow, couldn't get a loan from any bank because he owed money to a credit card company. And she found out that Mrs Stoep owned two apartments and was divorced. (It was a miracle she had ever been married. Imagine any human being wanting to live with her!)

Eliza knew stuff about the teachers that even the principal didn't know. It wasn't clear how she planned to use this information, but everyone seemed to realise that

having knowledge meant power. So most of the kids wanted to be her friend.

All anyone wanted to talk about was the nominations for Eliza's popularity contest. The leading nominations for School Superstar included sport teacher Mr Gong, cookery teacher Ms Mullet and six students, including Trudie Stig and Eliza herself.

I learned some other news, too; something that made me feel a tad uncomfortable. For a bit of fun, Eliza and Trudie had also started a parallel competition among the kids. Teachers were not allowed to know about it. It was a secret, unofficial contest to find the *least* popular kid in the school. That person would get the title Void of the Year and the contest would be held at a students-only meeting during lunchbreak on Friday, just before the School Superstar assembly. (Eliza had booked the hall in the name of a lunch meeting of the debating society.)

Poison Cloud was sniffing and rubbing his eyes. He wasn't making any noise, but I could see tears splashing onto the desk. I guessed why. He must have been one of the nominees for Void of the Year. I wondered if I ought to say something to him. I decided I'd better not. I didn't want to be associated with him. He was going to be a loser for ever, but I had this feeling that there was a chance for me. If Ms Blit could help me with my problem, things might really change.

At lunchtime I raced off to the toilets, anxious to learn more about my illness. *Displacement*. My amygdala was malfunctioning, and I had to stop it getting worse. At the back of my head was a niggling little hope that maybe I'd find a way to cure it altogether.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

7.1: The amygdala

The amygdala is a small almond-shaped structure that sits at the back of the head, just above the brain stem. It controls emotions and links individuals to the space-time continuum.

During times of stress, it sends a type of adrenalin known as norepinephrine surging through the body.

Individuals with an overexcitable amygdala show reactions ranging from mild shyness to extreme displacement.

There are no cures for diseases of the amygdala, but some medical physicists believe that deterioration can be slowed down or arrested by various experimental treatments in which the stress level of sufferers is lowered.

However, no treatment has ever worked for any sufferer with a displacement level of more than one second.

11

I found Ms Blit in the utility block. She was holding a large book.

And she was not smiling.

‘Oh dear,’ I replied. ‘That’s not very encouraging.’

‘Bad news,’ she said. ‘There is a program in this book to alleviate the symptoms of displacement. But it has only been used for displacement cases of up to one point one seconds. It’s never worked for longer cases. And I’m sure no one has ever tried treating a three-second displacement.’ She sighed. ‘This is not going to be easy, Simon.’

I started counting. ‘One elephant. Two elephants. Three elephants.’

‘Count elephants along with me,’ said Ms Blit.

‘Four elephants,’ I said.

‘One elephant,’ she said.

‘Five elephants.’

‘Two elephants.’

‘Six elephants.’

‘Three elephants.’

I stopped.

She continued to count. 'Four elephants, five elephants, six elephants. Okay, stop.' She stared at her stopwatch. 'Fractionally worse than yesterday, at just under three and a half seconds. Oh well . . . I guess it *could* be worse,' she said, biting her top lip.

But I knew that it probably couldn't be worse. A little grid of worry lines appeared between her eyebrows.

'It's getting serious, isn't it?' I said. 'Is it really bad?'

Ms Blit tapped the book's cover and flashed me a smile.

A *brave* smile.

'Let's press on.'

I could already hear the silence in response to my next question. I asked it anyway. 'What actually happens if it does get worse?'

Instead of answering, she pretended to be absorbed in her notes. 'Now let me see,' she said. 'Which page do we need?'

After we sat down at the lab table, she explained that there was no pill, no medicine and no surgery to help me. The only thing I could do was follow a set of exercises that would help to protect my amygdala from stress.

'We are going to have to transform your personality, Simon,' she said. 'We are going to have to turn your tense, stressed-out, hostile self into the calmest, most relaxed, mellow fella in the history of the world. And we are going to start right now. You ready for this? This is going to be lesson one.'

Ms Blit explained that my life was stressful for lots of reasons. The more I isolated myself, the less practice

I had in coping with what she called my ‘disability’. So the situation was just getting worse and worse. My displacement factor was continuing to increase because my stress levels were high. If I relaxed it might work in reverse.

She gave me lots of rules for how to behave in front of people. She made me repeat them and write them down.

Breathe slowly.

Lower my shoulders.

Relax my neck.

Shake my arms and let them dangle down by my thighs.

Talk in clusters of at least two or three sentences.

Nod a lot, but very slowly.

Once my body was all floppy (I was sort of slumped in a chair with my arms dangling and my head on one side), we moved on to the next exercise.

Ms Blit said I had to be aware of what my eyes focused on. ‘It’s hard for anyone with social phobia to look other people in the eye, but it’s especially hard for you because you are seeing their reaction three seconds earlier than you should.’

She held my shoulders and stared into my eyes. ‘I want you to look up and slightly to the left for two or three seconds. Then look the person you are talking to in the eye for two or three seconds. Then look down at the table or your hands for two or three seconds. Then look back at the person’s eyes for two or three seconds. Then look up and slightly to the right for two or three seconds. Then repeat.’

‘How many times?’ I asked. Then I remembered that I should speak in paragraphs, so I added a few more questions. ‘And why do I need to look people in the eye? Why can’t I just look at my shoes? And why do I have to look up? What’s up there?’

‘It comes across as reasonably natural, and it’s not hard to do,’ said Ms Blit. ‘I want you to give up the habit of looking at your shoes as soon as possible. Looking up and to one side also helps you think. Nobody knows why, but it’s good for your brain.’

She also taught me to point to people with my knees when I am sitting talking to them.

‘They call that non-verbal communication. People don’t even realise they are doing it, but it makes both people relax.’

It was weird. My first lesson in communicating with people didn’t involve any words at all.

‘Relaxed,’ I drawled, looking up and left, and then looking Ms Blit in the eye.

‘Now, how do you feel?’ she asked.

‘Is that it?’

‘You’re looking less scary. A bit.’

‘What sort of stuff?’

‘No, that’s not it. That’s just the beginning. It isn’t going to be easy to turn a porcupine into the cuddliest puppy in town. There’s lots more stuff we need to do.’

‘I don’t mind smiling at people but I don’t want to talk to them. The problem is I can’t smile. I think I’d rather just pretend I am mute. Can I do that instead?’ I asked.

Ms Blit shook her head. ‘Certainly not. You’re going to have to get used to talking to people. Talk in paragraphs.’

Leave little gaps in your conversations so that you are not always answering the question after the one that's been asked. During the gaps, look thoughtful and smile a lot, as if you are considering your words carefully. You'll get into the rhythm. You'll be fine.'

Every time I glanced up at her she was smiling. But I didn't know how to smile back. I guess I had forgotten how to smile.

She glanced at her watch. 'We need to press on. The next bit is much harder.'

She turned to the next section in the book and pushed her reading glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

8.7: Physiological treatments for an inflamed amygdala

An experimental physiological treatment to attempt to halt deterioration in cases of extreme displacement consists of a three-step exercise, first defined by Dr N. S. Selvare and Dr J. L. Wozciak, as follows.

- 1 The patient should be trained to habitually keep his zygomaticus muscles contracted.
- 2 At the same time, he should practise lifting his levator labii superioris and activating the lower lateral orbicularis oculi pars palpebraeus.
- 3 During social interaction, he should avoid knotting his superior limbs across the thoracic cage. But he should elongate and contract the upper trapezius slowly, at intervals, during receipt of auditory information.

12

What? This didn't even sound like English.

'It isn't,' said Ms Blit. She explained that these words came from Latin and Ancient Greek. 'Doctors couldn't agree on whose language to use for universal medical terms, so they made a deal to use old dead languages.'

It took a long time for her to explain what the different bits meant.

The patient should be trained to habitually keep his zygomaticus muscles contracted.

The first thing I had to do was learn about my zygomaticus muscles.

'Place four fingers from each hand on your cheeks, close to the outer edges of your mouth,' she said. 'Now twitch your cheek muscles individually, left, right, left, right. That's it!'

I felt like an idiot.

'Keep going! You're strengthening the muscles that draw your lips upwards and in the direction of your ears, your zygomaticus muscles. Can you feel them?'

I had already nodded before she finished the sentence.

‘You see, Simon, when you feel happy these muscles automatically contract, lifting the edges of your lips. But we can deliberately contract them, and trick the amygdala into feeling happy. I want you to practise until your natural expression is a smile.’

She turned back to the book and squinted through her glasses.

At the same time, he should practise lifting his or her levator labii superioris and activating the lower lateral orbicularis oculi pars palpabraeus.

In other words, to develop a natural smile I also had to move two other groups of muscles. The *levator labii superioris* turned out to be my upper lip muscles. I practised twitching those in front of Ms Blit’s mirror. It made me think of Elvis Presley, a dead singer my dad adores.

The *lower lateral orbicularis oculi pars palpabraeus* are the muscles around your eyes. I worked out that if you crinkle the cheek muscles at the bottom of your eyes, it makes the top half of your face look as if it’s smiling.

‘Eat it?’ I asked Ms Blit, incredulous.

She gave me a pencil. ‘Eat this,’ she said. ‘Well, okay, just bite it, sideways.’

I placed the pencil in my mouth, so that I looked like a pirate carrying a knife in his teeth.

‘Putting a pencil in your mouth activates the zygomaticus muscles,’ she said. ‘I want you to bite on that and smile with your eyes and do all the other stuff, too.’

I bit down hard on the pencil for a while, until I thought I could work my zygomaticus muscles. I twitched

my upper lip. I crinkled my eyes. I kept my elbows firmly pressed against my sides. I practised slowly nodding my head. I glanced at Ms Blit and at the air above her head.

Then the bell rang. Break was over.

I left the sanitation block and walked back into the classroom, a Steadtler Norris HB clamped firmly between my teeth. I was totally calm, relaxed, friendly and overflowing with smiles.

I was about to launch a whole new me. This was going to be brilliant.

13

It was catastrophic.

Oh, I tried hard enough. I smiled as much as I could. When my cheeks got tired, I put the pencil in my mouth again. I showed my teeth to Trudie Stig. I even beamed at Poison Cloud, although he was now studiously ignoring me. (I kept my eyes away from Eliza Marshmallow so I wouldn't have to smile at her.)

Mrs Stoep was looking at me strangely.

'No,' I said to her.

'Something wrong with you, Master Poopoo?' she asked.

I had a slight coughing fit. Ms Blit had suggested my doing that before answering questions, because it would help get my answers into sync.

'I'm just fine, just fine, just fine,' I said. I was starting to feel uncomfortable so I stuck the pencil back in my mouth. My zygomaticus muscles immediately twitched my smile back on. *Got to keep that amygdala calm.*

Mrs Stoep went back to marking her books.

If I was going to grin all the time, I figured might as well focus on someone who I actually wanted to smile at. I kept my gaze fixed on Trudie, who was even prettier than Eliza, and not nearly so mean. I made my eyes as big as I could until my oculi muscles started to ache.

When the bell rang to mark the end of the school day, I stuffed my books into my bag and walked fast, until I was a few steps behind Trudie. I didn't have the nerve to actually talk to her, but I wanted her to know that she was the only girl lucky enough to receive beaming zygomatics from me.

Suddenly she turned around and caught my eye. It was working! She walked straight towards me.

'Yes, yes, I have,' I stammered.

'You've been staring at me all afternoon,' she said. 'With, like, this weird expression on your face.'

She wasn't smiling.

'Oh?' I said.

'You know something, Mr Poopoo-head?' she said. 'Yesterday I thought you were weird and obnoxious, but I've changed my mind.'

'Oh dear,' I said.

'Now I think you are weird and obnoxious *and* creepy. Stay away from me or I'll report you for *stalking*.'

She turned and walked away.

14

Dad was out when I got home from school.

He'd left a note saying that he was out with Melly, but promised to stay home the next evening and play online computer games with me.

I ate cereal for my dinner and watched television until I fell asleep about midnight.

I arrived at school at 8.15 the next morning and headed straight for the toilet block.

'No, it didn't,' I complained bitterly as I stepped through the door of the secret room.

Ms Blit looked at me sympathetically. 'I guess from your expression that it didn't go so well,' she said.

'It had better,' I said.

'Let's hope the next exercise works better for us.'

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

**6.3: Alleviation of displacement:
listening**

In an experiment designed to slow the worsening of displacement levels, some patients recorded remarkable drops in the hypersensitivity of their amygdalas simply by adopting the role of active listener. It is easy for sufferers of displacement to perform this role, and it is gratefully received by virtually all social groups.

The key is for the patient to take an interest in all manner of things. The effort of paying attention to what may seem to be a boring monologue will be paid back by the gratitude of the listener.

There is an additional benefit. When people talk about their hobbies or special interests, they are more likely to talk in long paragraphs. This is of great advantage to the displacement sufferer attempting to have a normal communication.

15

'Tell me about it,' I said.

'Repeat after me,' said Ms Blit. 'Tell me about it.'

'*Tell* me about it,' I said.

'Not bad but put the emphasis on the tell.'

'Tell me all about it.'

'Perhaps try: "Tell me all about it."'

'Tell me *all* about it.'

'Try putting the emphasis on *all*.'

'Yes, I think I have.'

'I think you've got it.'

That morning, Mr Little the English teacher made us sit in pairs and work on newspaper reports about a sports event—one from the point of view of the winner, and one from the point of view of the loser.

Nobody chose to work with me, of course. Much to a girl called Melanie Peet's disgust, Mr Little made her be my partner.

'Hello,' I said. I looked over her head and to the left,

counted to two, glanced quickly at her eyes, looked down, and then looked up at her again.

I wondered if she might be my Secret Sharer, but decided against it. She was staring at me with a look of extreme pity and disgust. I sat there with my zygomaticus muscles at full extension, helped by two pencils in my mouth. I whipped them out and said: 'Yes, it is.' I shuffled around in my seat and pointed my knees directly at her.

'Hello, Simon Poopoo. Your name is really stupid.'

'It means appetiser in Hawaiian. Sorry.'

'You're disturbing me.'

I looked at her eyes for as long as I could. Then I looked down at the table top, then up again at her face, and then over her shoulder and to the right, and then down again. She had some sort of fancy flat-tipped pen, and was writing in a sort of gothic style.

'Nice pen,' I said.

'It's a calligraphy pen. Now if you would just shut—'

'Yes, I'm really interested in that.'

'What? Calligraphy?'

Melanie didn't say anything for a while. Then she gave me a sort of careful, sideways look.

'Yes, yes,' I said, zygomaticus-ing like mad and nodding slowly.

'You're interested in calligraphy?'

I just kept nodding. It seemed the safest thing. After three seconds, I said: 'Tell me about it. *Tell* me about it. Tell me *all* about it.'

'Okay,' she said, holding out her weird pen and pointing it at some of the letters she had drawn. 'Well, this bit is called the ascender. The middle bit is called the

waist. That bit that goes down, like the tail of the *y*, that's called the descender. These corner bits are called serifs, and the filled-in bit inside the serif is called the bracket. If you make the thicks and thins separate by using pressure, instead of changing angle, it's called copper-plate writing. That's because people used that style for writing on copper sheets.'

She looked at me suspiciously, to see if I was leading her on, but I kept my head bobbing up and down like one of those toy dogs people put on the dashboards of their cars.

'Yes, yes, of course I can,' I said.

'Can you do joined-up writing? Teachers call it cursive writing, but we call it running hand. What I like is doing the serifs, although it takes a long time. See?'

She drew some elegant letters.

'There are all these different types of serifs. There's bracketed, unbracketed, clubbed, cupped, hairline, beaked, rolled, hooked, slab, wedge and tick.'

I nodded for fully ten minutes until Melanie finished telling me everything she knew about calligraphy, which, if you ask me, is an incredibly stupid way of writing since it takes hours and hours to write a single sentence. My neck hurt from nodding.

It occurred to me that I might be achieving something. Melanie Peet was clearly a boring, moronic idiot with an irritating, idiotic hobby, but at least I was actually communicating with a fellow student. And a *girl*, no less. To be honest, I didn't feel less tense than usual, but I guess I had to start somewhere.

Mr Little collected our worksheets—I had done almost

nothing on mine. He held up Melanie's worksheet, declaring it to be the best, even though she had only written a few lines.

At the end of the lesson we returned to our original seats. I noticed Melanie looking at me. She wasn't exactly smiling. But she wasn't exactly not smiling, either. That seemed to be progress. Maybe I didn't have to be hostile all the time to cope with the world.

At recess I raced down the corridor and turned the corner, heading for the toilet block. But I found my route was blocked. Eliza Marshmallow and her friends stood in a line.

'No. No, I'm not, Eliza Marshmallow,' I said.

Eliza walked in a slow circle around me. 'You're up to something, aren't you Poopoo?'

I tried to get my zygomaticus muscles to work. They wouldn't. I felt around in my pockets and pulled out a pencil.

Eliza took a step back as if I had pulled out a weapon. Then she noticed it was a pencil and her eyebrows rose. They rose even further when she saw what I did with it—I laid it between my teeth. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' I mumbled.

'I've met a lot of weirdos in my time, but you, Poo-for-brains, are positively the weirdest.'

Her friends glared at me.

'He's mad,' said a girl whose name was Elly something.

I noticed, with surprise, that Melanie Peet was in the gang.

'Hello,' I said. 'Mr Little liked your serifs and stuff, didn't he?'

Melanie turned to Eliza. ‘He’s horrible. I had to sit next to him in class just now. He pretends to be interested in what you’re talking about, but he isn’t really.’

‘I’ve got an idea,’ said Eliza. ‘I nominate a new candidate for Void of the Year. Kid Poopoo.’

The others whooped with glee. I felt my face turning red. My fingers crunched up into fists. My pencil snapped in my mouth.

‘You’d better make sure you’re at school on Friday,’ Eliza added. ‘Because I have a feeling you are going to win the title by a huge margin—and no one is ever going to let you forget it.’

‘No, what?’ I asked.

She sneered in my face. ‘Do you know what happens in the Void of the Year competition, Poopoo-head?’

I didn’t say anything.

‘We’re going to invite the nominees for Void of the Year onto the stage. If any one of the voids refuses to turn up, they automatically get the title for the next twelve months. If all the nominees actually do turn up, we’ll decide who the title-holder will be. And do you know how we’ll do that?’

I dreaded to think.

Eliza grinned. ‘We’re going to do a quiz. With the way you talk complete rubbish all the time, I’ll bet you’ll enjoy a quiz.’

16

I pushed past Eliza and her gang and raced to find Ms Blit.

By the time I reached the toilet block, my right arm was completely invisible. Ms Blit leaped to her feet. She made me sit down and take five deep breaths before I said anything. As my heart stopped pounding, my arm started to reappear. Soon only my pinky finger remained invisible. I told her that I was giving up the program. It was a disaster. If anything, it was making things worse. Before, I was considered a miserable nobody, not worth paying attention to. Since I started Ms Blit's program, people actually hated me. I was fast becoming Public Enemy Number One.

'Why? What happens?' I asked.

She nodded slowly, and scratched her short, fuzzy hair. 'I'm listening, I hear you. It's important we avoid setbacks. We mustn't make things worse.'

I repeated my question: 'Why? What happens if it does get worse?' I waited for her to answer, but she didn't.

This was not fair. I pointed my finger at her and shouted, 'There's something you're not telling me. You're hiding something. I'm right, aren't I?'

Ms Blit just stared at me.

I knew I was onto something. 'There's something you are not telling me, right?'

What I said had completely wiped the fixed grin off her face. Now there was not a trace of a smile on her features, neither brave nor otherwise. She bit her bottom lip and nodded.

'Well, don't then,' I said.

'There is something,' she said. 'Something I can't tell you. Something I'm not *allowed* to tell you. Don't worry about it, Simon. I'm telling you all the stuff you need to know.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'And goodbye.' I stormed out of the room and hit my head on the side of the door as I left.

I found myself in the playground, my face in its usual grim scowl.

Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw several people pointing me out to their friends and sniggering. I knew what they were saying: *His name's Poopoo and he's the new leading contender for the title of Void of the Year.*

This school, like every other school I had been to, was proving to be hell on earth.

I spent the afternoon not speaking to anyone. I didn't smile at anyone, and I stared at the clock in the classroom, waiting for the day to end. Dad had promised to play computer games with me tonight. We had recently extended our subscription to Everworld Combat Plus Special Edition, an online game.

That would be fun. No conversation necessary. Just big, heavy weapons and lots and lots of people on the screen waiting to be blasted to pieces.

Now *that* was a worthwhile way to spend a bit of time. My fingers itched to get to the trigger and I noticed my whole hand was solid again.

17

At home, I noticed Dad's business plans for his new pupu retail operation were still in a pile on the desk, where they had been a couple of days ago. It looked like he hadn't touched them. He'd probably been working on the Breaker instead.

I went into his room. He was changing out of his oil-stained clothes into something smart—well, smart by Dad's standards, which means jeans that have less than six holes in them. It worried me. It implied that he was going out.

'Dad, are you ready for Everworld Combat Plus? I'm going to beat the socks off you tonight, just you wait.' Then, seeing the hesitation on his face, I added, 'You promised.'

He looked at me. His mouth opened. Then it flapped shut. Then he blew air out of it. 'Simon. Look, we'll play Everworld tomorrow. I've got to go out tonight. Melly did me a big favour today and I owe her.'

'Dad, you promised me that you would—'

‘She did something really cool for me, for us, Simon. Look, I’ll show you.’

He moved to a messy side-table and picked up a large, heavy, loose-leaf folder. ‘See this? This is the Aerobus Warp Corporation Manual for production of Relativity Induction C Motors. It’s proprietary information. You can’t buy this stuff; it belongs to someone and it’s top secret. She sneaked it out of her office. It’s just what I need to get the Breaker up and flying at full speed. Our car, Simon—it belongs to you and me. I’m doing this for us.’

‘Dad. You said you would play Everworld with me tonight. You promised.’

But he had already put the book back onto the table and was striding towards the front door.

‘I’ll be back late tonight. Don’t wait up for me, kid.’

‘Dad.’

When he reached the front door, he turned around.

‘I know it’s disappointing for you, but this is important to me, and it’s important to Melly. You’ve got to think about other people and not yourself once in a while, Simon.’

I didn’t say anything. Then, as my father started to move again, I said: ‘Dad, will you come to school with me tomorrow? Get me moved out of Mrs Stupid’s class? I need you to do that.’

He pulled on his gloves and smiled at me. ‘Yeah, yeah, sure. No problem. I’ll be glad to. Can’t have my boy’s education destroyed by an idiotic teacher.’

He gave me a big grin. ‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll take you to school in the X31 tomorrow and we can park it in the

playground. Let's arrive just before the bell rings, so that every kid is there to watch us. How about that?'

'Really, Dad?'

It was against the rules for parents to land their flying cars in the playground, but Dad didn't care about rules like that. Dad was cool.

'Thanks, Dad.'

He nodded. 'I promise.' He messed up my hair with his gloved hand, promised to be back before eleven, and then closed the door behind him.

I started towards the computer room to play Everworld Combat Plus Special Edition. Then I turned into my room instead and got my mum's hand-mirror out of my bag.

I told myself that I just wanted to check that my face was still there. But when I had the mirror in my hand, I realised that I wanted to do something else. I wanted to look at my mother's face.

I stared into the oval for ages, trying to see an adult woman with my features. But I couldn't. I just saw a scowling boy with a few zits and baggy eyes and dirty hair. I wanted to see past that face, into the world of the mirror. No matter how much I tried, no matter how much I wanted it, I couldn't.

What had my mother looked like? She would have had prettier features, a rounder face and longer hair than me. And all that female stuff—lipstick and eye-shadow and stuff.

An idea struck me.

I locked the front door and bolted it. Then I went into the bathroom. I knew Melly had left some girly things in the cabinet.

I hunted around until I found what looked like a pencil case. It was full of old cosmetics.

There was a thin, fuzzy stick with black goo on it. I'd seen Melly using it on her eyes. I swiped it over my eyelashes. There was also a lipstick in there. *Frosty Morning Pink Gloss*. I carefully applied it to my lips. It was sticky but tasted nice, like fake strawberry.

I found a tiny pallet where the only colours were blues and greens. I used a small plastic matchstick with a sponge on the end to rub some green paint on my eyelids.

I needed to do something about my hair if I really wanted to discover what Mum might have looked like. There were no wigs in the house. Melly had left a sort of woolly hat thing with dangly bits in my dad's bedroom cupboard, so I pulled it over my head.

To complete the transformation, I put on a blouse with a white fluffy collar that I found on the floor near Dad's bed.

I lifted up Mum's hand-mirror and looked in it.

All I saw was my own angry face looking even more horrible than before, with smears of colour over it.

I half closed my eyes and stared until my vision went blurry. But the grotesque sight in the mirror didn't change into the face of a beautiful woman. Mum was not in the mirror. So where was she? I put down the mirror and went to the window, looking up at the sky. Was there a heaven up there? Could people in heaven see people on Earth?

'Mum?' I whispered. 'Mum, are you there? Are you looking down at me? Do you watch me from somewhere up in the sky?'

There was no answer, of course. I tried again anyway.

‘Mum. Do you know how things will turn out for me? Am I going to be okay?’

The silence seemed to get louder, if that makes sense, which it probably doesn’t.

‘Mum, if you are with me in some way, can you give me a sign?’

I looked around for something that could be a signal. Evening was falling and the sky was darkening fast. ‘Mum, if you are watching me from heaven, could you make the moon shine through my window tonight? Blow the clouds away so I can see a big, clear, bright moon? That would be a good sign.’

I picked up her little white Bible. It seemed the right thing to do when asking for a message from heaven. Resting my elbows on the sill, I gazed at the sky. The clouds formed a thick, solid cover over the world. There was no moon, or even a single star visible through it. Would Mum clear the clouds that filled the sky as a sign to me?

I opened the Bible. The first chapter explained how God made the evening and the morning and that was the first day. Then he made the land, people and animals over the next few days. It was all familiar stuff. I read it again anyway.

There are two reasons why I like the Bible. One is that it’s the only thing I have that contains a message from my mum. Second, it’s supposed to have the answers to the big difficult questions of life. There seem to be so many big, difficult questions in my life, and I need answers. Meeting Ms Blit earlier in the week had made me feel that there might be answers elsewhere as well.

I flipped back to the inside cover and looked at the words written by my mother. *Remember me.*

‘Mum. I’ll always remember you. But will you remember me? Will you blow those clouds away?’

I watched the sky darken for a long time. The clouds were thicker than ever. No moon or stars appeared. And then it began to rain.

What a waste of time. I put down the Bible, tried to wipe the make-up off my face, and went to play Everworld Combat Plus Special Edition.

18

The next morning I woke to light streaming through the open window. My eyes hurt so badly I had to close them again. I felt awful.

It wasn't difficult to discover why. I'd been sleeping on a hard lump of something. Where was I? This wasn't my bed.

Blinking, I rolled over and gradually got my bearings.

I had fallen asleep on the floor in front of the computer. The game controller was digging into my back.

Oh no. I had fallen asleep with Everworld switched on. This was seriously bad news. If you are logged on, other people can kill your characters. If you are logged on and fast asleep, you cannot fight back.

I did a quick inventory. Of my twenty-eight characters, twenty-three had been killed. I only had five left. All that work ruined.

This wasn't the first time I had fallen asleep in front of a computer game. When I did, Dad usually found me and

tucked me into bed, before logging off the computer. Why hadn't he done it this time?

I dragged my tired bones to his room. His bed was in its usual unmade state, so I had to look carefully to see if he was in it or not. He wasn't in it. I guessed that he hadn't come home last night.

I checked the telephone. No messages. He must have stayed at Melly's house.

Still, I was sure he would be on his way back. After all, he'd promised to take me to school in the X31 today, and make them change my teacher.

I looked at my watch. It was 8.25 a.m. I'd missed the school bus already. If I was going to get to school on time he'd better hurry up.

I phoned Melly's number.

Dad answered the phone with a groan. 'Unh? Yeah?'

'Dad. Dad. It's me. You said you'd take me to school today. In the Breaker? You're going to talk to the school office about changing me to another class. You have to come and take me to school because I've missed the school bus.'

He groaned again. 'I'm in no state to do anything this morning, kid,' he said. 'Melly and I went out on the town. Can't you—'

'No.'

'—get a taxi or something?'

'Dad, I don't have any money. You promised you'd come to school with me this morning.'

He gave one of his long, tired sighs. 'Simon, you always want me to solve your problems for you. Sometimes you have to sort things out for yourself. I am really,

really tired, and I really don't want to deal with this just now. Get yourself to school and we'll talk about it tonight.'

He put down the phone.

I said to the handset: 'I wish you were dead, Dad, instead of Mum.'

I decided not to go to school that day. For a start I had no way of getting there. In fact, I made a big decision.

I wasn't going to school *ever again*. Once I had made that decision, everything was fine. I felt much better.

Who cared if Eliza Marshmallow named me Void of the Year? I wasn't going to be part of that community any more, so it wouldn't make any difference.

If I refused to go to school, then they would eventually have to expel me. I could start again somewhere else. We'd have to move to a new district probably, but we'd done that often enough.

I might even use some of the things I learned from Ms Blit to help me make friends at the next school.

Thinking of Ms Blit reminded me of something. She said I had a Secret Sharer in Easterpark. Maybe at this school. If we moved, I might not find him or her.

I shook my head. I didn't want to think about anything serious.

So I went to play in Dad's car. I do that sometimes when he's out. I sit in the X31 and pretend to drive. Of course, I don't do it like a little kid—I don't put my hands on the steering wheel and say *brmmm-brmm*, like a baby. I know how to drive . . . Well, I know a bit. I've got a Scala-Poynter X31 flying car simulator

program on my computer, and have been driving that for years.

I went to the garage and spent an hour in the car, checking out the controls, and pretending I was skimming the top of the stratosphere.

This is something I have learnt over the years. If there's stuff going on that makes you feel bad, don't think about it. Distract yourself with fun things instead.

There was a sliding noise—the garage door opened.

I froze.

The door trundled noisily upwards and the room was bathed in light.

Dad was back! He would be furious. I wasn't even allowed to open the garage when he was out, let alone play in the car.

'Sorry, Dad,' I blurted to the silhouette at the garage door. 'I was just having a look. I haven't switched anything on or changed anything. Honest.'

The shadow moved closer. I couldn't see who it was, but I realised it wasn't my father.

19

I heard a tinkling laugh.

‘I hope I don’t look too much like your dad,’ said Ms Blit. She moved away from the light shining through the door and I could see her clearly.

‘I’m not going again. Not ever,’ I replied.

‘Didn’t feel like going to school today?’ she asked.

She came to the front of the car and peered at the dashboard.

‘Yeah, it is. It’s pretty amazing, isn’t it?’ I said.

‘This looks like a rather high-powered vehicle,’ she said.

I was very surprised when she got into the car on the driver’s side and nudged me over into the passenger seat. I guessed Dad’s car was so cool that even an adult like Ms Blit wanted to sit behind the wheel and get the feel of it.

‘Not much,’ I said.

Still looking at the controls, she said, ‘Have you thought about the things I told you?’

'I understand. At least, I'm beginning to understand,' I said. 'I've got a problem with time, haven't I? I am ahead of everyone else. Almost like being able to see the future.'

Ms Blit nodded.

'I've sort of become loose from the space-time continuum that everybody else is on,' I went on. 'I'm an anomaly, aren't I?'

She continued to nod.

'I need to get re-attached again, don't I?'

She slowly shook her head and turned to me. I could see from the movement of her lips that she was silently counting to three before she answered. 'You can't,' she said, so quietly I barely heard her.

'What happens if I get worse? I keep asking you that, and you never answer.'

Ms Blit looked at the dashboard for a while. Then she turned to face me with a grim expression on her face. 'Time for me to tell you some things I hoped you would never need to know,' she said, in a sniffling sort of voice. I noticed that her eyes were damp.

'Whoa, stop!' I yelled.

She started to press buttons on the X31. Her hand went to the ignition key.

'Stop! *Stop*. You can't drive this thing. Dad would go mad. It's strictly not allowed. Only he knows how to drive it. This is like no other car. Dad built it. You will not believe how angry he is going to be.'

She wasn't listening, and neatly reversed the car out of the garage.

Ms Blit really seemed to know how to drive the thing,

because she pressed the buttons and pulled the levers and did all that stuff without hesitation.

Before I realised what was happening—*wbuuuuum-mmppp*—we were rising into the air. I felt excited and horrified at the same time. Seconds later, she switched from the hover motor to the jets and we zoomed away over the rooftops of the estate.

I shrieked at her over the sound of the roaring engines, ‘My dad is absolutely going to kill you. He is going to kill you stone dead. And me. He will kill both of us. Nobody, absolutely nobody, is even allowed to touch this car, or even enter the garage and look at it. We are dead meat. *Dead meat.*’

Even as I said the words, I was surprised to find that I was not as scared as I should have been. I guess so much had happened that week that I was numb. I didn’t really have any energy left to feel anything.

She pressed the button to close the roof over our heads. It became quiet enough to talk in a normal tone of voice.

‘I guess you’re taking me to school,’ I said, as we headed in that direction.

Ms Blit flew with surprising style, although she didn’t seem to like straight lines. She swooped down between the trees, and then tilted off to the right to skim the treetops over Southerly Wood, before heading back in the direction of school.

‘Nope,’ she said. ‘I’m taking you to a place where you are going to get a real education.’

She shifted her hips and tilted the vehicle to the right. It yawed steeply and swung over a small estate of houses towards the outskirts of Easterpark.

We turned left over a freeway, topped a small hill, and then turned right into an avenue of cypress trees.

'Frosty Morning Pink Gloss,' I replied.

'What's that stuff on your lips?' she asked.

'Yeah, better not.'

'I guess I shouldn't ask.'

I noticed we were heading into a rural area. Squares of farmland flashed beneath us, a patchwork quilt of different shades of green, brown and yellow. Then I saw a church steeple ahead. The engine's whine dropped half a tone and we slowed down.

'Here we are,' Ms Blit said. We floated down and came to an elegant stop in a graveyard. She was a fantastic driver. I thought no one could land as smoothly as my father, but Ms Blit landed the X31 as if it had no weight at all. As if it were a butterfly landing on a flower.

We stepped out.

'Of course. They miss them,' I said. 'Like I miss my mum.'

'People think the saddest thing that can happen is for a person they love to die.'

Ms Blit and I sat on a crumbly old tomb. It was covered with moss, but she didn't seem to worry about her clothes.

'Some people believe in heaven, reincarnation, or some other kind of afterlife,' she said. 'Others believe that there is nothing after death. But almost everyone agrees on one thing. There's one place where everyone who dies definitely lives on. That's in the hearts and memories of the people who loved them. It's important to people of every religion, and to people with no religion at all.'

A person's ideals, the memory of what they looked like, things they said, what they achieved—all these things live on in the souls of the people who knew them.'

She ran her hand gently over the soft, green moss on the stone. 'In many countries, the most important holidays are those on which people visit their ancestors' graves. In China, families go to the graves of their ancestors twice a year, to keep their memories alive. In Hong Kong, photographs are engraved on some gravestones to help loved ones live on in people's hearts. In America, some people build statues and mausoleums to those who have died, or play videos of them. Sometimes they even freeze bodies in the hope that the person might be brought back to life one day.'

'No, I don't.'

'Do you feel we are in a crowded place?'

She gestured at the cracked statues and stones around us. Some of them were standing at odd angles, like ancient teeth from a massive jawbone.

'You're right. There's nothing here but bones and stones. Where are the people? Whether we believe in heaven or not, we have to admit they are nowhere that we can reach. That's what's so sad about people dying. As far as the living are concerned, the dead are nowhere, except in our hearts.'

She put her arm around me. 'You know, Simon, people in the space-time maintenance business—well, we reckon there's something worse than being nowhere. And that's being in a place called Nowhen.'

She picked up a stone and threw it as far as she could, right out of the graveyard.

‘People who fall out of the fabric of time are nowhere that can be reached, just like dead people. But when they fall out of time, they don’t just stop existing after a certain day. They fall out of time completely. They fall out of *all* time. Time future, time present, and time past. That means that every reference to them disappears, physical, spiritual and emotional; forwards and backwards in time. Like anyone who dies, they stop existing in the present and are erased from the future. The difference is that people who fall into Nowhen enter a state in which they have never been conceived. They have never been born, they have never been children, they have never grown up. Every interaction they have ever had with anyone, or anything, disappears. No one remembers them because no one knows that they existed to begin with. Being in Nowhen is far, far worse than being nowhere.’

This conversation was beginning to spook me. When I spoke, my voice came out high-pitched and feeble. ‘How come I’ve never heard about this place?’

‘Because no one who has ever been there has ever returned, Simon. No one who has ever been there . . . *has ever been.*’

I was silent for a while. Then, in a small voice, I said: ‘Are you saying this is going to happen to me?’

She nodded.

‘No one will remember me?’

She nodded again.

20

According to Ms Blit, there were rules that prevent Stitches from telling people things about the universe. Temporal beings are not supposed to know about lots of things; Nowhen is one of them.

She insisted that she was going to lose me to Nowhen very soon if I didn't submit to treatment; she was willing to risk breaking a few rules to get my cooperation.

Stitches are dispatched to help whenever anyone or anything becomes more than 500 milliseconds displaced from time. Ms Blit said I had probably been merely 300 or 400 milliseconds displaced at birth. My worsening condition had gone unnoticed until I was close to my to current reading of three and a half seconds.

'We need to stop your deterioration. The theory is that somewhere between three point three and four point one seconds, the sufferer enters a condition known as Partial Detachment,' she said. 'This is when the sufferer is so divorced from present time that he or she becomes transparent. From then on, the speed of deterioration

increases dramatically, with patients becoming hundreds of milliseconds more detached every few minutes. If displacement intensifies to five point two seconds, the sufferer is thought to enter a condition called Twilight. Your bouts of transparency are early warning signs. I think you're teetering on the edge of Twilight.'

She took a deep breath, and reached over to hold my hand.

'Yes, please do,' I said.

'I need to tell you about Twilight.'

I looked at a flock of swallows flying over the trees.

'When the sufferer enters Twilight, he or she literally becomes invisible in the temporal world. Twilight, like everything connected with displacement, is irreversible. Within two hours, perhaps less, all traces of the sufferer disappear entirely. He or she will fall into the state we call Nowhen. And that's when all traces that he or she has ever existed will disappear.'

I still found this hard to understand. 'Sort of like dying?' I asked.

She watched the flock of swallows swooping over the church tower before replying.

'It's not like dying,' she said. 'It's worse. People who die stop existing in temporal reality for the rest of time. You won't just stop being. You will never have lived.'

Now I was spooked.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

**6.4: Alleviation of displacement:
memorisation**

Further experimental techniques to alleviate displacement focus on employing the prefrontal lobes and the parahippocampal cortex, the areas of the brain that deal with short-term and long-term data storage.

A well-known psychological shortcut used to improve interaction among social phobics is the memorisation of the names of the people in the patient's social group. The sufferer learns the names and titles of everyone he is likely to meet and reinforces the knowledge by establishing multiple memories of it. This makes conversation starting easier, and is a simple but useful tool to create and cement supportive relationships.

21

Ms Blit told me that people who can memorise the names of those around them build 'positive social networks' at three or four times the speed of people who can't.

Did I mention earlier that I am brilliantly clever? Stuff like learning lists of names is a piece of cake.

I have an awesome memory. I can memorise numbers, dates, places, anything. This part of the program was going to be a cinch.

Ms Blit drove me to school and I sneaked into the classroom during break and borrowed the register. I photocopied it, and returned the original to Mrs Stoep's desk. I sat in the toilet and memorised the names of every kid in my class. Easy. It took me less than five minutes to learn the lot, all thirty-two names. I'm such a genius I even learned their middle names.

When the bell rang I raced out of the toilets. Two boys from my class were walking down the corridor.

'Hi, Malcolm Duley Wheeler. Hi, Geoff Soto Mbele,' I said, perhaps a little earlier than I should have.

They glanced at me. 'Yo, Poopoo,' they grunted, in a not-unfriendly way.

Maybe it was going to work!

I raced down the corridor, naming everyone I recognised. 'Hi, Deedee Seung Yee Chung. Hi, Edward Richard Lin. Hi, Melanie Claire Devereux Peet.'

When class began, Mrs Stoep was arranging the books on her desk.

'If I were a teacher I wouldn't need a register,' I told Poison Cloud. 'I already know everyone's names in this class, John McCauley McCloud.'

Poison Cloud blinked at me in surprise. It was the first time I had voluntarily said anything to him. It was also the first time this term anyone had called him by his real name.

Mrs Stoep had overheard me. 'Oh you do, do you, Master Poopoo?' she said, looking up.

The way she called everyone except me by their first name riled me. My fists clenched. 'I am,' I said. 'You may.'

'Are you saying you already know the names of all your classmates?' She said it loudly so that everyone heard. 'May I test you?'

Suddenly, I got that tense feeling that I used to think was shyness but I now knew was displacement. My brain froze. My neck muscles tightened.

This was bad. Now I could see two Mrs Stoeps going around pointing at individuals in the class. I was confused. I told myself to react to the second image, but the first image seemed more real and I kept responding to that. I saw her pointing at a boy.

'That's Edward Lin,' I said.

‘Who shall we go for first, Master Poopoo?’ said Mrs Stoep. ‘Who is this young man?’ She pointed to Edward Lin.

‘Vanessa Matlock,’ I said to the Mrs Stoep I could see pointing at Vanessa Matlock.

The class laughed.

‘I don’t think so,’ sneered Mrs Stoep. I tried desperately to focus on the right Mrs Stoep; as usual, I had lost track of what was real.

Now I saw her pointing to the boy who sat next to Melanie Peet.

‘Brett Wilholm.’

The class laughed again. For them, she had just got round to pointing at Vanessa Matlock.

‘And who’s that?’

‘Martina Scernis.’

Everyone laughed. She was pointing to Brett.

‘And that?’

‘Josh Chin.’

Everyone roared. For them, she was pointing at Martina. Pushing back my chair, I walked quietly out of the room.

‘Who’s that?’ I heard Mrs Stoep call out behind me. I knew that *now* she really was pointing at Josh Chin.

‘So you should be,’ I said to Ms Blit.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said.

‘It was awful. I got the names right, but since I was one step ahead of everyone, no one realised. This plan is a disaster. I am not going to continue. I want surgery. I want my amygdala removed. I mean, doctors can take

out people's hearts, and replace their livers and all that. I want an amygdala transplant.'

Ms Blit paused before replying. 'Can we just try—'

'No.'

'—one more exercise, at least?'

'No. This is supposed to make my life less stressful. It's making it worse and worse. I am going to end up in—that place. You said it was important that we didn't make it worse.'

She paused to get our conversation back in line. 'You're right. It is important that we don't make it worse.'

'Since this treatment is doing me harm, I vote we abandon it and go for Plan B or something instead, okay?'

She let out a long, sad sigh. 'Okay,' she said quietly.

'Good,' I snapped. 'By the way, what is Plan B?'

She smiled. I could see that it was only a small twitch from her zygomaticus muscles. Her lower oculi and her labii were not working at all. It was not even a brave smile, just the ghost of one.

'Ah,' she said. 'Well, to be honest, you have neatly identified a problem there. There is no Plan B.'

'Oh.'

I didn't know what else to say, so I asked her to tell me more about Nowhen. Surprisingly, she did. Maybe she thought she'd scare me into trying harder at Plan A.

What I didn't tell her was that Nowhen was sounding more and more appealing by the minute. A place where you completely disappeared sounded like a place I wanted to be. This world was just too painful.

22

Dad never found out that Ms Blit and I had borrowed his car. He didn't come home that night either. I ate some beans out of a tin for dinner.

I had secretly decided that I wasn't going to fight my worsening displacement any more. I would just quietly disappear from this world.

Life would be easier for everyone. Dad would be happier; he could concentrate on the X31 and his girlfriend. Mrs Stoep would have one less troublesome kid in her class. Eliza Marshmallow would be robbed of having me to humiliate in the Void of the Year competition—but I didn't mind that in the least.

Ms Blit could fix all the other time-related problems in the universe or take time off with the other members of the Maintenance Crew, or the celestial seamstresses, or whatever they called themselves. She had told me that she had quite a social life and was planning to get married in a few months. She planned to have six children, she said, all the same age, but born separately. (Stitchers can do that.)

If I was going to die, I decided I might as well do it in a spectacular way.

My plan was to kill off my last five Everworld characters that night, then get into Dad's car and drive it into the stratosphere. Since I had never actually driven it before (except in a computer game), I figured that would be stressful enough to push me over the edge.

The amygdala in my head would go wild and I would vanish into Nowhen. And if that didn't happen, the likelihood that I would eventually crash was one hundred per cent, because I had no idea how to land the thing. Even in the computer simulation I had crashed every time I had tried to land it. That would definitely be stressful. And then—pow!—I would disappear from everyone's lives. Gone from sight. And from mind. And from history. As if I had never existed.

Brilliant!

Two hours later, I had completed step one of the plan. I had killed off my last five avatars in Everworld.

I had switched off the computer and picked up the X31 keys when the phone rang. I hated phone calls (for obvious reasons), so I did what I normally do: ignored it.

After a few rings, the machine switched to answer-phone and a woman's voice began speaking. 'This is a message for Mr or Ms Poopoo—sorry, is that how you pronounce it? This is the Records Office here. You didn't leave a number when you requested the records and photographs concerning Ms Ding Yuan. So I looked your contact details up on the system. I'm just calling to let you know that we're running a little behind, but the material should be delivered to the address you

specified by the end of the week. You can pay on receipt of the material using any credit card. Goodbye.'

I stared at the phone. Ding Yuan? That was my mother's name. Records Office? What did that mean? What records?

Dad must have ordered some stuff from government files about Mum. Why? And what would be in the files? Would there be photographs of her? Or pictures of her and me together? What did she look like? Did she really look like me? How did she die? Would there be clues in there to explain why I turned out like this?

I sat down. My mother. Records of *Mum*. To be delivered here. By the end of Friday.

I put the car keys back on the hook and got out her mirror and stared at my face again. I was still determined to go to oblivion, but I was going to delay it for a day—just long enough to see, just once, what my mother had looked like.

23

My father came home at eight o'clock the next morning.

'That's okay, Dad,' I said.

'Hello, Simon,' said Dad, looking sheepish and a bit guilty. 'Sorry I didn't make it home last night. Or the night before. Melly and I have had a couple of pretty heavy nights.'

'You promised you would.'

'And I can't come to school with you today. Next week, maybe.'

'Okay.'

'I need to take the relativity induction manual back to Melly. She's going to sneak it back to her office this morning.'

'Bye, Dad.'

'I'm just going to deliver it to her. See you later. Bye, son.'

He felt awful, I could tell. His head was kind of low between his shoulders and he spoke in a high, nervous voice.

I wanted to find out about my mother, and about that phone message from last night, but I didn't want to say anything that would show that I knew more than he thought I knew. I decided to bring up the subject of my mother without mentioning the call.

'Dad. I want to find out more about Mum. Are there any records about her or anything?'

My father turned and looked at me. 'I've told you, Simon. I think it's better we don't talk about her. I got rid of all the pictures and stuff for your sake, and mine. Maybe one day, when you're older, we can talk about her. But not now. Damn. Where is that blasted manual?'

He went into his study and started throwing things off flat surfaces onto the floor. Then he raised his voice. 'Simon, have you seen that book of Melly's? I'm sure I had it around here somewhere.'

I knew that he had left it in the computer room. I picked up the manual to give it to him.

'Here you are, Dad . . .'

Some pages flipped open and I noticed a diagram—a cartoon of some sort. It was a sketch of a man looking into a mirror. But there was no face looking back at him. The mirror was *empty*.

I was amazed. This cartoon seemed be about *me*. Or were there other people who looked in mirrors and sometimes failed to see their own faces reflected back at them?

The text under the picture read: 'Basic Relativity and the Principles of the Matter-Energy C Induction Engine.'

I dropped to the floor and started reading hungrily. I didn't understand much of what I read. It was something about the applications of a discovery made by a man

named Albert Einstein, a name I recognised as belonging to a famous dead scientist.

Before I had finished the first paragraph, Dad entered the room and asked for the manual.

‘Dad, I just need to read this first. Remember how my hands sometimes go transparent, and I told you that my face went transparent once?’

‘Give me the book, kid.’

‘Dad, there’s a picture here about this guy Albert Einstein looking in a mirror and not being able to see his face. That happened to me a few days ago. You know how my fingers used to go transparent. Dad, I’m finally learning something about what’s been happening to me. I met this woman at school who—’

‘I’ve got to go. Melly’s waiting for me.’

‘Dad, please let me just read this. Give it back to her next week. Or tomorrow. This could be really important. I need to find out—’

He snatched the book out of my hand.

‘As usual, you only think about yourself. Let me remind you that Melly borrowed this book from her company at great personal risk. There is no way I am going to get her into trouble for helping me. I promised to deliver this to her at 8.30 this morning, and that’s what I am going to do.’

After he left, I sat and stared at the wall for a while. I wasn’t going to school. I just wanted to think about things. Things like: What did my mother look like? And how exactly did she die? Why was Albert Einstein’s face not reflected in his mirror? Did he have what I had?

If there was really no cure for my Displacement, then I still wanted to disappear into Nowhen. But I wasn't ready to give up yet, and I was beginning to suspect that my questions were all leading me somewhere. But I had no idea where.

I went to the bookshelf to see if I could find anything about Albert Einstein, but there were only car books. I looked him up on the internet, but I only found lots of boring articles about physics. I couldn't find anything that said his face didn't appear in mirrors.

The phone rang. I ignored it.

There was a beep and the message function came on.

'Simon, it's me,' said Ms Blit's voice.

'I don't want to go to school ever again,' I said out loud, even though she couldn't hear me.

'Why aren't you in school?' she asked.

I leaped to my feet.

'By the way, I'm at your front door,' she added.

I was already racing to let her in.

'I'm fine,' I replied as I opened the door.

'Hello, Simon. Are you okay?' Ms Blit asked, snapping shut her mobile phone.

'I've got something to tell you.' I sat down on the couch and motioned for Ms Blit to sit next to me. Then I took a deep breath and began.

'I've come to a decision. If there really is no cure for my condition, and I'm going to end up in Nowhen anyway, then I'm not going to fight it. I'm just going to let myself disappear. It will be easier for everyone. Even you.'

Ms Blit counted to three then said, 'That's a big decision. And it doesn't have to end like that. We are

going to stop you getting worse. We really are.’ Her voice was really quiet.

‘That’s not enough,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to just stop getting worse. I want a cure. That’s the only thing that will change my mind.’

Ms Blit had opened her mouth to speak but I knew what she was going to say, so I ploughed on.

‘Don’t bother telling me that there is no cure. I know that already. But there are two things I want to do before I let myself go into Nowhen. The first is to see a photo of my mum. The second is to find out more about Albert Einstein. In my dad’s book about car engines there was a picture of Einstein. He was holding a mirror in front of him but there was no face reflected in it. Just like me. I wish I could talk to Albert Einstein.’

Ms Blit got up without saying a word and walked straight out the front door.

24

I sprinted after her. She strode to the garage and threw open the door. Then she opened the boot of Dad's car (hovercars have two engines; one at the front and one at the back) and started fiddling with something inside.

'What are you doing?' I shrieked. 'Dad's going to kill you!'

She counted to three before replying.

'Get in the car and sit down,' she said. 'We're going for a ride. Strap yourself in. It's going to be a long one.'

She didn't have to ask me twice. I loved riding in the X31 and Ms Blit—sorry about this, Dad—was the best hovercar driver in the world. Maybe in the universe.

I don't know what Ms Blit did to the X31's back engine, but the way the car travelled was amazing. It sounded different, too. It moved like a torpedo cutting through the air. It seemed to be going much, much faster than before. Everything around us was a blur—even the trees and houses way below. Only the distant hills seemed to stay in focus.

Ms Blit flicked switches and turned knobs, making the car go even faster. It started to shake.

‘Slow down,’ I yelled.

My seat rattled. I gripped the bracing handles so tightly that my knuckles went white.

The car sped up even more.

‘*Ms Blit!*’

The surrounding hills started to blur and the dashboard glowed blue. I’d never seen that happen before.

‘Hold on tight,’ she said, calm and in control.

I pushed myself back into the seat and shrieked.

‘*Aaaaaaaaaah.*’

There was a thunderous *whoosh* and the sky and clouds disappeared. The car shot forwards like a rocket and it was hard to see anything out the window. We were racing iridescent rainbows of no shape and all shapes. Then we were going down a tube. Then we were flying across a flat plain. Then we entered something spinning. Then it stopped spinning and our craft was spinning. Then we entered a zone of pulsating stars.

I couldn’t speak. I kept gulping and wondering what this was doing to my stress level.

Finally the craft steadied and Ms Blit seemed to put it into some sort of autopilot mode. She flicked a few switches and then took her hands off the wheel and looked at me.

I couldn’t see anything I recognised. Flickering colours filled my view, like the aurora australis. But instead of just being overhead, they were all around us.

Eventually, I managed to find my voice. ‘Where—where are we going?’

Ms Blit paused for three seconds before answering. 'Wrong question,' she said.

I thought for a moment. 'When are we going?'

She nodded.

'Are we going—can we go somewhere else in *time*?'

She counted slowly to three before answering.

'Bingo, Simon! Do you know you're a genius?'

'Well, I've often suspected . . .' I shrugged.

'What you said before was absolutely right,' Ms Blit went on. 'We need to approach your problem from a different angle. In your case, none of the old answers work, but maybe we can find a new solution. I'm taking you to meet Albert Einstein.'

'One, two, three—this is amazing. I didn't know you were allowed to take people back in time,' I replied.

'We're not.'

'One, two, three. Will you get into trouble?'

'Yes,' said Ms Blit.

'One, two, three. Sorry.'

'I'll lose my job, but it doesn't matter. Sometimes you have to do what you think is right, even if it is against the rules.'

'One, two, three. Why will you lose your job? I mean, you're only trying to help. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it?'

'I've already told you way too much. I've told you about the state of Twilight and Nowhen. That's enough to get me thrown off the Maintenance Crew. It's strictly forbidden. This morning I woke up feeling really bad. I'm not making good progress with you at all, Simon, and I'm going to be honest with you from now on. I wish

I had been truthful all along. Your deterioration is continuing to accelerate. I've broken the rules to tell you things I shouldn't have, to try to force you to keep on the program. That didn't work. I think this may be our last chance.'

'One, two, three. How will your boss find out that you told me that stuff? I won't tell. It'll be our secret. I promise.'

'Everything that happens in time is visible to those in charge who work outside it,' she explained.

'One, two, three. Can't you speak to your boss's boss? Explain everything. Who's in charge?'

'At the top? That would be the one we call the Weaver because he's hidden deep in the structure of everything that exists—woven in, like an invisible thread. He doesn't need to be told. He already knows everything.'

'One, two, three. What will you do?'

'Pretty much what I told you yesterday. I'll be asked to leave. I'll get married. My boyfriend works in the operations department of maintenance. He's impatient, which is kind of a funny personality defect to have in our line of business. People who work outside time aren't usually impatient—doesn't make sense for them to be, if you think about it. But I know how he feels.'

'Is he nice?'

'He's absolutely gorgeous. And he's been waiting for me for eons—literally.'

'One, two, three. Do your mum and dad like him?'

'They adore him. They wanted me to hand over my post as soon as I met him. But I like my job. I *liked* my job.'

‘One, two, three. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. It had to happen one day. And what I’ve got ahead isn’t so bad. Unlike you, I like people. And like I told you, I want to have a big family. Lots of children. At least six. Maybe more.’

The car started to shiver slightly. She adjusted some of the controls to steady it.

‘Your dad’s done a good job with this car. I would have found it hard to believe that a car at this stage of Earth’s development could be souped up to do this job.’

‘You still haven’t told me when and where we are going.’

She didn’t answer. Somehow I could guess. ‘Are we going to 1879? That’s when Albert Einstein was born, isn’t it? In a place called Munich? Have you ever taken anyone back in time before?’

Despite her brave smile, I could see that she was very nervous. Her cheek muscles were flat and she kept sort of gulping. ‘I’ve never taken a temporal being out of time before. None of us have. This is very, very much against the rules. But I decided this morning that if I was going to be hung for a lamb, I might as well be hung for a sheep. That’s a good Earth saying. If I’m going to prevent you going to Nowhen, Simon, I’m going to have to do a lot of things that aren’t allowed. The trouble is that the only person who can really help you, is you. You can’t give up. Do you understand me? All I can do is provide you with the information. And I am going to provide you with every bit of information I can. The rest is up to you. That’s why I told you about Twilight. And that’s why I am taking you to see Al.’

‘After all this is over, where will you live?’

A dreamy expression crossed Ms Blit’s face. ‘From when I was a kid I dreamed about having an underground farm on what you call Halley’s comet—then we could tour the universe. I’ve always thought of Halley’s comet as the loneliest body in the universe. It needs company. I’ve always been drawn to lonely things. I guess that’s why I’m here with you. It won’t be so bad. I’ll see my family a bit more. They live on Asceti III. It’s a glorious planet a million light years away from Earth. It’s a wonderful place. The sea is above the sky! Can you picture that?’

It was hard enough to picture Ms Blit as a farmer.

‘I’m an only child, so my parents are devoted to me. Can you believe, they call me every day? Every single day. As if I were a kid. It’s a bit embarrassing in a way, but there’s no such thing as being loved too much. So, don’t worry, I’ll be just fine. I’ll settle down and give my parents the grandchildren they’ve been waiting for within a year or two. It’ll be good to have time to do other things. I’ll hang out with friends. Do a bit of gardening. Spy on you. Watch you grow up.’

Ms Blit touched her neck and pulled out a silver chain. On the end of it was a little heart. ‘Have a look at this. There’s writing on it,’ she said.

I bent over and saw the words *Remember me* etched in tiny letters in the centre of the heart.

‘That’s what it says in my mum’s Bible,’ I said.

‘When temporal beings say it they mean it at face value,’ said Ms Blit. ‘It’s a message from a person that they want you to keep them in the back of your mind. The

phrase means a lot more to a Stitcher, though. It means, “Keep us out of Nowhen.” It’s like a prayer.’

‘Are all Stitchers women?’

‘You ask too many questions. And more to the point, I give you too many answers. Do your homework.’

She handed me the book she always carried and told me to read the section which was about Albert Einstein. It was very different from the things I had read about him on the internet encyclopedias.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, first edition

7.1: Albert Einstein and relativity

Albert Einstein was born on the planet Earth in the Sol galaxy on March 14, 1879.

Although history books usually refer to him as Einstein, a member of the Maintenance Crew who visited him revealed that he was called Big Al by his friends. He was of average height and his hair stuck out in all directions, like a man touching a Van der Graaff generator—one of those metal balls of electricity. His companions at the patent office where he was employed called him Shaggy (or, more accurately, *Haarig*, because most of them spoke German).

Big Al had various office jobs, but his hobby was physics, the study of the universe. He had been raised with a traditional understanding of the mechanics of existence. The basic understanding of physics at the time Al was studying it was as follows:

The foundation on which everything exists is Time. Time is measured in chunks so that people can understand it better: on the first day God did this, on the second day he did that, and so on.

Building on this biblical view, a very intelligent human being called Sir Isaac Newton noticed that there were certain rules

which were always followed in nature. These were called the laws of physics, although no one knew who enforced the laws. Curiously, no one even theorised about the presence of a Department of Time or any kind of Maintenance Staff.

Among the most famous laws that scientists discovered between the time of Newton and Einstein were these:

- Gravity pulls lighter things towards the centre of a heavier object.
- The speed of light is 299 792 kilometres per second.
- Nothing can move faster than light.

Most physics students accepted these facts, wrote them in their exercise books and never thought of them again until exam revision time.

Not Big Al. He felt there was something wrong with these basic, fundamental facts about physics. But he couldn't work out exactly what it was. He thought about this all the time.

One night, Al dreamed that he was travelling at the speed of light.

He was zooming along at 299 792 kilometres a second. His shaggy hair was blowing away from his ears and his moustache was flattened against his face.

At that moment, he had a strange thought. He wished he had a mirror with him so that

he could look at his face. Not so he could see himself with his hair all over the place and his moustache flat; but to check one of the most fundamental facts of physics.

If he had had a mirror to hold in front of him, the image of his face would be travelling at 299 792 kilometres a second from his face towards the mirror.

But if Al himself was already travelling at 299 792 kilometres a second, in some sort of super car, how could that be? Since one of the laws said that nothing can go faster than light—including light itself—his image would have to go faster than light to catch up with the mirror.

In other words, he would be holding the mirror in front of him, but it would not reflect his image. It was an intriguing idea.

If his face wasn't in the mirror, what would appear in it? Nothing? Someone else's face? The face of God? If there was nothing there, what did nothing look like? Was it black? Was it white? Or would there be no colour? What colour is no colour? The whole mirror problem really bothered him. There was no satisfactory answer to these questions.

This dream triggered a series of ideas that led Albert Einstein to be the first human to unravel many of the deepest secrets of the universe.

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The car shook. The colours in the sky started spinning. The X31 appeared to be revolving as it flew.

I had to stop reading. The bright, multicoloured lights began to fade and we emerged through some clouds into a night sky. Lights twinkled in the blackness below us, and stars shone between the clouds above.

We swooped down and parked the car on the first-floor terrace of an old stone house.

‘We’re in Zurich,’ said Ms Blit. ‘In the year 1905.’

26

A man with very shaggy hair was sitting in the window we were hovering next to. Ms Blit nudged me.

‘Hello Mr Einstein.’ I cleared my throat nervously.

‘Hello strange dream boy. You can call me Al, everyone else does.’

‘Well, Al, I’m hoping you can help me find an answer to a very difficult question.’

‘And I think we can help you answer a few questions of your own,’ broke in Ms Blit.

But Al was looking past Ms Blit to the Breaker. ‘*Was ist diese Sache?*’

‘It is a piece of equipment that I think you’ll find useful. It’s a vehicle that travels at the speed of light.’

His eyes widened and he smiled. ‘My dreams are getting stranger and stranger,’ he said to no one in particular. ‘And I thought last night’s was the strangest ever.’ He climbed out of the window.

I clambered nimbly over into the back of the car, so that Al could sit next to the driver. I wasn’t exactly

sure what Ms Blit had in mind, but maybe if I just observed Al for a while I'd discover something about displacement.

Ms Blit turned the ignition key and—*whuuuuuummmppp*—we took off vertically.

'*Dieses ist erstaunlich,*' exclaimed Al. From his tone of voice, I think he was saying that the Breaker was seriously cool.

He turned to Ms Blit and spoke in English. 'If you are my guardian angel, please remind me to eat Frau Gesundheit's toasted cheese bread before bed every night. Last night's dream was not nearly so vivid. *Ja*, it must have been the cheese.'

'What did you dream about last night?' Ms Blit asked.

'I dreamed I was flying at the speed of light. That's 299 792 kilometres a second. But I wanted to have a hand-mirror with me. I was frustrated that I did not have one.' He suddenly looked distressed. 'Ach! And now here I am in tonight's dream, this time an amazingly vivid and real dream featuring a real flying car, and again I have no mirror. I should have brought one with me tonight. Maybe I can get a mirror just by willing one to come into the dream.'

He shut his eyes and held out his hand. Nothing happened.

I reached into my pocket.

'I've got one you can use.' I put Mum's mirror into his hand.

'*Danke, danke,*' he said, staring into it. He tidied his moustache and did up a button on his pyjama top.

Ms Blit pointed to the screen in the dashboard. 'That

shows the speed. I've programmed it so that the whole dashboard display will glow blue when we reach 299 792 kilometres a second. Are you ready? Everyone hold on.'

I gripped the steady handles and so did Al.

The car shook as Ms Blit stomped on the accelerator. I was so proud of my dad. He might be a hopeless father, but he's a great mechanic. The Breaker was rising to the challenge amazingly well.

We soared over Zurich.

My hair whipped my face. Al's hair flopped around and got into his eyes. I could feel my cheeks being flattened by the speed we were doing.

Ms Blit pressed a button and the automatic roof closed. The wind dropped. Then she stamped hard on the accelerator again.

The car shook.

Colours whirled. I felt myself being pressed into the seat. Out of the corner of my nearly shut eyes, I saw the dashboard start to glow blue. Everything around us turned white.

'This is it,' I heard Ms Blit shout.

Al slowly lifted Mum's mirror up to his face. He had his eyes closed. When the mirror was directly in front of his face, he opened them. What he saw made him gasp.

He saw his own face staring back at him—his mouth was open and his eyes were popping out of their sockets—but it was definitely his own face.

He shrieked.

Ms Blit slowed the car. The blue glow disappeared from the dashboard. The white light faded and we were back in the clouds.

Then the darkness of the night sky returned and the city lights twinkled once more.

We headed back to Al's house in Zurich.

Al's face was white. He pulled a piece of paper out of his dressing gown pocket and scribbled madly on it.

As soon as it was quiet enough to talk, I started to ask him my question, 'Excuse me Al. I have a problem with time and—

'Small boy, my face was there!' Al interrupted. 'In the mirror. Did you see that? Did you see that! Why was the mirror occupied? One of the laws of physics says that that nothing can go faster than light, so how did my image catch up with the mirror? Was that really me in there or not? These questions are important, because they change the way we understand the universe. And they give us great power.'

'What sort of power?' I asked hopefully

He thought for a moment and then spoke slowly and carefully.

'The speed of light—that means the speed at which images normally travel towards mirrors—is 299 792 kilometres a second, right? The speed of your flying car is also 299 792 kilometres a second. That means that when we were flying just now, you would think the speed of the image of my face travelling towards your mirror was 299 792 plus 299 792, which equals 599 584 kilometres a second. Understand so far?'

I was already nodding.

'That seems simple enough,' he continued. 'But since nothing can travel faster than 299 792 kilometres a second, the equation is really 299 792 plus 299 792 equals 299 792.'

He stopped and looked at me. ‘Can you see the problem?’

I could. It didn’t add up right. You can’t add two numbers together and end up with one of the original numbers, unless one of the numbers is zero.

‘Little dream boy,’ he said. ‘The laws of physics are based on the assumption that the first thing God made was Time. After that, God made the other forces of physics. But I now know this belief is wrong. The first thing was not time, but the speed of light. It was set at 299 792 kilometres a second. If God exists, then that is the first sentence in his book of creation. That is the first rule. That is the only absolute, the only constant thing in existence. It was the first thing. Full stop.’

Even though I followed his argument, I didn’t see why it was so important. ‘So what? What does it matter whether God made one rule first or another rule first?’

‘Good question. And I have a good answer. You see, everything in the universe has to fit around the first rule. Everything else has to bend to the speed of light. The duration of things, the size of things, the shape of things—these all have to be flexible, twistable, malleable. They all take second place to the rule that light travels at 299 792 kilometres a second. If anything comes close to breaking this number one rule—for example, if a man in a vehicle flying at 299 792 kilometres a second took a mirror out of his pocket—then all the other laws of physics bend to make sure the number one law does not get broken.’

Ms Blit leaned into the conversation. ‘You see, Simon, up to this date, scientists believed that time and space are

things that cannot be altered. A second lasts a second, wherever you are, whatever you are doing. A metre measures a metre, wherever you are, whatever you are doing. Al's experiment tonight showed that this isn't true. The speed of light always stays the same, time and space must change to fit. You can scrunch them up.'

'I don't know this word scrunch,' said Al. He straightened up in his seat and wagged his finger. 'I need some new terminology,' he said. 'The speed of light is a special law of physics, since it is constant in the way that other laws are not. So I'm going to call it 'c' for constant.'

His eyes widened. 'And now I need something else,' he said.

'Another bit of evidence?' Ms Blit asked.

'No,' he said. 'A toilet. All this late-night excitement.'

He climbed out of the car and into his bedroom window, leaving Ms Blit and me together.

'Are you following all this?' she asked.

'I think so,' I said.

'It's what happens next that shows how useful this little excursion has really been. Tomorrow, Al will start writing about his discoveries. Over the next decade or so he will write the *Special Theory of Relativity* and the *General Theory of Relativity*. Scientists all over the world will be very excited by these books. If the speed of light is the only constant, then it follows that other things are bendable. If distance can be altered, you can "warp" the solar system and travel across the galaxy really quickly. If time can be reshaped, you can travel into the future or the past.'

'I understand. But why was there a picture of Al and the mirror in my dad's car manual?'

'Well, Al will write a lot of things, but his greatest work will explain that solid things that you can touch (objects with mass) and things that you can't touch (like energy) are all related to the great constant, c . The book will also explain precisely how they are related to each other. Big Al will give people a mathematical formula to make the link easy to remember.'

'Is it very long and complicated?'

'No. It's very short and simple.' She reached into the glovebox and scrounged around until she found a pen and a bit of paper, on which she wrote:

$$E = mc^2$$

'That's pretty easy to remember, isn't it? It means that the energy something has (E) is equal to its mass (m) times the speed of light (the great constant, c) multiplied by itself. Once Al had showed that energy was made of solid things and solid things were made of energy, people went on to realise that this was a useful discovery. Instead of burning coal or trees to make energy, you could release the energy that was locked inside solid things. Burning a single piece of charcoal makes a tiny bit of energy. But releasing the atomic energy in a single piece of charcoal would make a huge amount of energy—enough to provide light and heat for a whole city of people. Scientists went on to use this principle to set up energy factories called nuclear power plants.'

I nodded. I knew about them, although I didn't know that Einstein had come up with the idea.

'Within four decades of Al's death in 1955 there were millions of people around the world using electricity generated by nuclear power plants for warmth and lighting and cooking. Within a decade and a half of the beginning of the twenty-first century, people began using nuclear energy in engines, resulting in powerful vehicles, such as flying cars—like the Scala-Poynter X31. That's why Al's face is in the car manuals.'

I nodded again, more slowly. 'But none of this is directly related to my problem. I'm beginning to think this trip was a waste of time. Al wasn't displaced from time after all. His face is reflected in the mirror, whether he's standing still or going at the speed of light. The picture of him in Dad's car manual was just an illustration of a scientific theory that we've helped him to prove wrong.' I slumped down in the back seat. 'He can't help me after all. Take me home. It's all over.'

Before Ms Blit could answer, Al appeared at his bedroom window and shouted, 'Hey, dream boy. You and your flying car have helped to answer many of my most important questions. Didn't you say you had a question for me?'

I clambered into the front seat and leaned out of the car window.

'No thank you, Al. There's nothing you can do to help. There is no cure for my problem. I am displaced. I have come loose from time. And I'm just going to go home and slip quietly into Nowhen.'

Ms Blit leaned over and squeezed my hand.

'I do not know this Nowhen that you speak of,' said Al thoughtfully. 'But coming loose from time—that is a very big problem for a small dream boy. I do not know how to help you.'

'See!' I hissed at Ms Blit, wrenching my hand from hers. 'I was wrong. Can we go now?'

But Al was still talking. 'When did you first become separated from time? If my scientific training has taught me anything, it's that you have to examine the origin of a problem if you want to solve it.'

'That's no help to me, Al,' I said, sulkily. 'I've suffered from displacement since I was born.'

'Then I think you must go back before you were born. If you can identify the very moment you were cut loose from time, then, maybe, you will find a way to mend the tear.' Al pulled his head in the window. 'Good luck, dream boy. And thank you for your help. I can't wait to wake up and start writing about our discovery.'

I could hear him muttering about Frau Gesundheit's toasted cheese bread as he shut his bedroom window.

Ms Blit didn't say anything, but she looked thoughtful as she revved the hovercar's engines.

I watched Zurich disappear beneath us. I hadn't got quite the answer I was looking for, but maybe Al was right. Maybe I'd been looking in the wrong place.

'I need to find out more about my mum,' I said to Ms Blit. 'I need to stay out of Nowhen long enough to find out what happened before I was born.'

'We'll manage it,' she replied softly. 'I don't know how, but somehow.'

27

We flew back to the present day.

It was still Friday. I walked into the playground.

From the corner of my eye I saw the benches in the covered area. Safe, shadowy, quiet, out of the way. The perfect place for a hostile, isolated kid with a throbbing amygdala. The benches seemed to be calling my name. I could see shy kids sitting there. There was that girl Amy with the glasses, and the other usuals. I wanted to sit with them, but I forced myself to turn away.

Things were becoming clearer to me.

I had mysteries to solve. The biggest one was the mystery of me.

And somehow, the mystery of me was connected to the biggest mystery in the universe: the mystery of Time.

I needed to get my displacement under control. And I had to find out more about my mum. The only thing to do was to win myself some more *time*.

I was on the verge of entering Twilight—from there,

it was a one-way street to Nowhen. Ms Blit said that there was no point hiding at home.

‘You need to learn how to live a normal life, how to cope with stress, how to build up a support network, and how to deal with difficult people and situations without losing control. And you need to learn all that right now,’ she said. ‘It’s the only thing that will buy us time.’

First, I tried to twitch my zygomaticus muscles into active service. Nothing happened. I pulled out my Steadtler Norris HB and stuck it in my mouth sideways. It helped. Now I could feel where those muscles were.

Ms Blit had warned me against leaving the pencil in my mouth. She said it made me look crazy. So I just kept it in there for ten seconds and then took it out again, hoping my smile would stay in place. I practised making my eyes bigger, to work the oculi and labii muscles.

I tried to remember people’s names as I walked past them in the playground.

‘Hi, Arthur Desmond Kwan. Hello, Stefanie Elizabeth Honeyfield. How’s things? Hey, Adam David Grishin. You okay?’ Then I remembered that Ms Blit had told me to try it with first names only. ‘Yo, Lauren. Hey, Rebecca. What’s up? Hi, Chris. How’s it going?’

Some of them ignored me, but I reckon I got a half-friendly grunt from two or three of them. I was smiling. I was using people’s names. What else? Oh yes! Be interested in things.

I noticed that Cheryl Wolowski was doing a cat’s cradle thing with elastic strings.

‘Hi, Cheryl. What are you doing?’ I asked. ‘By the way, in case you’ve forgotten my name most people call me Stinky Poo.’

She looked at me curiously. It’s hard to be rude to someone who’s rude to himself.

I remembered a really good rule that Ms Blit had taught me. When you walk through a playground or a party, always aim for clusters of people in odd numbers: three or five or seven. The chances are high that one member will be feeling left out of the conversation and will be happy to talk to you.

There were five kids by the basketball net. They were talking about something they had seen on TV. One kid—I didn’t know his name—was standing slightly away from the others. Perhaps he was too shy to join in. He had some cards in his hands.

‘Hi, mate. What are those cards?’ I said, nodding at him. ‘Do you collect them?’

He showed me one bearing an image of some sort of train.

‘I collect Japanese bullet train cards. I’ve got more than a hundred. Wanna see?’

I kept nodding slowly.

He talked for the next eight minutes about his collection. It was incredibly boring, but I was really good. I kept smiling and working my trapezius muscle—also known as nodding.

He looked pitifully grateful. Clearly bullet trains were the only thing he could talk about and he had never found anyone with the patience to listen to him before.

'Thanks,' I said, holding out my hand.

He smiled and handed me a card. 'I've got two of these. You can have one,' he said.

'Yeah, maybe sometime,' I said.

'You want to come to my place and see my card collection?'

I felt almost like a normal kid. I was going to conquer this.

Before the bell rang for the end of break time, I went to the drama studio where the school chess club was meeting. Ms Blit told me that since I had trouble with verbal things I should try non-verbal activities.

Do you know the best way to play chess?

With pauses, that's how. Lots of pauses. Everything that happens in chess is followed by a pause. Somebody makes a move, and then there's a pause. The other guy makes a move, and there's a pause.

Also, you need to be incredibly clever to win, and I'm incredibly clever. (Have I mentioned that before?) Chess suited me perfectly.

Although I didn't win (the other player was more experienced), I was quite sure that I would eventually be the school chess champ, if not the champ for the whole district of Easterpark North. Life was going to be okay.

The latter part of Friday morning was taken up by biology class with Mrs Stele and I was feeling remarkably calm. Mrs Stele was quite strict about silence in class, and this played straight into my hands.

I spent most of the lesson 'chatting' with John McCloud. We passed an exercise book between us and

wrote notes to each other. My almost-four-second displacement was no problem at all.

It turned out that John was also an Everworld Combat Plus Special Edition fan. Can you believe it? His characters even fought my characters regularly. In fact, he had killed several of mine the other night while I was sleeping on the carpet.

By lunchtime, when John and I walked down the steps to the playground, I was feeling more relaxed than ever before.

Then Melanie Peet ran up to me.

‘Come on, Poopface. Come on, Poison Cloud,’ she said. ‘It’s time for the Void of the Year competition in the school hall. You two are the only nominees. All the kids are going. Eliza’s got a quiz ready and it’s going to be amazing.’

‘Don’t go,’ said John. ‘Just ignore her.’

‘If you don’t go, then you automatically get the title,’ she said. ‘And you’ll be branded a coward for the rest of your life.’

‘Don’t go,’ John repeated. ‘I’m not going. You can’t win against people like Eliza.’

I knew he was right. But when I saw large numbers of students streaming into the hall I felt a gulp of nervousness in my throat. Would it be more stressful to face Eliza now, in front of everyone, or to run away and know that she was orchestrating all the kids in school to hate me?

With a sigh I followed Melanie Peet into the school hall. John ran away, to hide in the toilets. *I’m going to keep calm*, I told myself. *I’m just not sure how.*

28

I was on the stage in the school hall. There was a lectern for the quiz master, a small table for the two candidates, and a projection screen.

I sat at the table and frantically rehearsed the things that Ms Blit had taught me. I kept sticking my pencil in my mouth, trying to keep my cheek muscles high.

Edward Lin was setting up the microphones.

‘Eddie,’ I mumbled. He couldn’t understand me, so I took the pencil out of my mouth. ‘Eddie, pass me a glass of water, Eddie. Thanks, Eddie.’

I found that my cheeks were having trouble rising, so I stuck the pencil back in again.

‘Eddie, tell me all about your life,’ I said, forgetting that it was hard to be the world’s best listener while simultaneously doing all the other things on my list.

Edward ignored me, so it made no difference.

The hall quickly filled with students, but there was no sign of the Glossy Girls.

The digital clock at the back of the school hall flipped

over to 12.34. But where was my tormentor? Eliza was nowhere to be seen. No time to worry about that. I just had to concentrate on keeping my displacement factor from rising any more.

Bang! The door at the back of the hall crashed open and in marched Eliza Marshmallow, along with Trudie, Melanie and Lisa. They all looked incredibly attractive.

Eliza marched to the front of the hall.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’m here. So we can begin.’

I was calm. Well, calm for me, anyway. I was smiling. I was reciting everyone’s names quietly in my head. I planned to press the buzzer after every question and then cough for three or four seconds before answering—that way my answer might more or less match the question that everyone else heard.

Eliza took to the stage and tapped the microphone to make sure it was working before launching into her speech.

‘In the run-up to the Personality of the Year competition this afternoon, we are going to identify the person who is most devoid of any personality at all, the Void of the Year.’

The audience hooted.

‘We have two candidates,’ Eliza continued. ‘Kid Poopoo is already on the stage. Our other candidate will be here any minute.’

On cue, the doors opened and a group of large boys manhandled John McCloud into the hall. He was sobbing.

They pushed him up the steps and forced him to sit down next to me. He wailed and wailed, stopping only to draw breath with a watery sniff.

‘Please welcome Poison Cloud, also known as the Smell Factory.’ Eliza picked up a sheet of paper from the small pile on the lectern in front of her. Then she stabbed a button on a computer. The first thing that appeared on the large screen was a photo of a middle-aged woman I had never seen before—but she looked vaguely familiar. It was bizarre. She was in a wheelchair and wore white clothes, as if she were in a hospital or something. Her black hair stuck out in all directions. She had Chinese eyes.

‘The first question goes to Simon Excrement . . . I mean Simon Poopoo,’ she said, triggering a raucous laugh from the audience.

‘Simon, who is this woman?’

I stared at the image. I had no idea who she was or what her name might be. But I felt I should.

I had seen her before. Somewhere, some time, I was sure I had seen her before.

‘Running out of time . . .’ said Eliza, looking at her watch. ‘Five more seconds. Four. Three. Two. One.’

I couldn’t take my eyes off the image.

Eliza was giggling. ‘You wanna know who this is?’ she asked the audience. ‘Simon the Poopoo doesn’t know.’ She turned to me. ‘Simon, you want to know who this is? This is . . .’

I gasped. ‘It can’t be!’

‘. . . your mother.’

The audience burst into laughter and applause.

Everything went into slow motion. I stood up and gazed at the image. Now I knew where I had seen it before. I’d looked at that face every day in the mirror. I’d

seen it in my mind's eye. That face had bits of my face on it. Or, to be more accurate, I had bits of that face on mine. But her face was rounder than mine. She had longer hair, and higher cheekbones. She was beautiful.

'The ultimate display of ignorance,' said Eliza. 'Have you ever heard of a kid who was so stupid he didn't recognise his own mother?'

'Where—?' I began.

Oddly, she anticipated my question. 'She's in the loony bin at Sandifield. Where else would she be? I traced her through her medical records. I'm good at that. I can trace anything about anyone. And I know why she's locked up there—she talks garbage all the time, just like you do.'

I couldn't believe what she was saying. I realised it must have been Eliza, not my dad, who requested my mother's records. She must have had them delivered to her house. That meant my mother was alive and locked up somewhere. *She was alive!*

I was shaking. I was stunned. And when I put my hand down to steady myself, I noticed that my arm was becoming transparent.

Ms Blit ran to the front of the hall. She was shouting: 'Calm down, Simon, breathe deeply.'

I found myself chanting: 'One elephant. Two elephants. Three elephants. Four elephants. Five elephants. Six elephants. Seven elephants. Eight—'

'Elephants! Start counting,' shouted Ms Blit. 'One elephant. Go on.'

'—elephants. Nine elephants, ten elephants.'

'Two elephants, three elephants,' said Ms Blit.

‘Eleven elephants, twelve elephants.’

Ms Blit counted to twelve elephants and her jaw dropped open. ‘Oh no! Five seconds plus! Calm down, Simon, please.’

I walked over to the lectern and pushed Eliza out of the way. My zygomaticus muscles were still high, so I guess I had a crazy grin on my face. I held up both hands to silence the chattering.

‘I accept the title of Void of the Year,’ I yelled.

John McCloud stopped crying.

Everybody jeered.

And then I disappeared. Vanished completely. Gone. Turned totally transparent. Invisible.

Everyone gasped.

It had happened. I had fallen into Twilight; from where no one ever returns.

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Everything went slightly blurry and parts of my body that were normally within my field of vision—arms, torso, feet—disappeared.

I heard one person scream—I think it might have been Ms Blit. But everyone else burst into applause.

‘Cool,’ Edward Lin said. ‘How’d he do that?’

The scene was fading in and out of view. I felt Ms Blit grab hold of me and hustle me through the wings of the stage and out of the back door. I guess she couldn’t see me, but made a grab at where she thought I might be.

‘Stand there for a moment,’ she said, placing me against a wall.

She picked up a bag of flour that she had taken from a stack of things Eliza had brought to throw at me, and broke it over my head.

‘There. Now I can see you at least.’

I didn’t say anything. With my vision going in and out of focus, I didn’t know whether I would be able to communicate at all.

'Listen to me,' she said. 'You've gone beyond the limit. You're falling out of the fabric of time. You've entered Twilight. There's nothing I can do to stop it. I'm sorry, Simon. I'm so, so sorry.'

I tried to speak. I flapped my mouth, but it was full of flour so I kind of spluttered.

Ms Blit, her eyes full of tears, said: 'I can guess the questions that you will want to ask. How long will it take before you end up in Nowhen? I have no idea. This has never happened before to anyone on my watch. Judging by the way you are fading, I think it will be a matter of an hour or two. No longer than that. Oh Simon, I am so sorry. We tried, we really did.'

She started to weep. 'I'm going to take you to see your dad. If you're going to disappear for ever, you might as well be with him.'

The picture of my mother was probably still up on the screen. I shook my head and pointed in the direction of the hall. 'I want to see my mother,' I said.

'Your mother? How are we going to get there?'

Just then, there was a sound I recognised. It was a high-pitched whine over a throbbing, rumbling sound—Dad's Breaker. I grabbed Ms Blit's hand and we raced into the playground. Dad was landing.

'Don't turn the engine off. We need you to take your boy somewhere,' said Ms Blit.

'Simon! What's wrong with you?' Dad shrieked. 'You look like a ghost.'

I knew what he meant. I had caught a glimpse of myself reflected in a window. I was visible where the flour had settled on me, but I looked like some sort of

white statue. Flour hadn't landed on my left foot, so you couldn't see it at all.

My father recoiled. 'He looks like a ghost,' he repeated to Ms Blit.

'It's worse than that,' she replied. 'Ghosts hang around.'

Dad stared angrily at her. 'Who are you? What's going on? What have you done to my son?'

'Listen, you.' Ms Blit jabbed Dad in the chest. 'Simon's not going to be around for much longer. You must be the one person other than me who knows about his condition, right?'

'What do you mean?'

'Simon has a serious medical condition. As you well know. He's had it all his life, and you haven't done anything about it, have you?'

'What do you mean?'

I stood up. Although it was me who was changing, I found myself looking at Dad as if he had become someone else.

'Dad,' I said quietly.

Ms Blit was still yelling. 'There's something wrong with your child. He lives out of sync with the rest of the planet. And he's been going transparent.'

Dad said nothing. His face seemed frozen.

'Dad.'

He turned to look at me.

'I'm dying.'

'No,' he whispered. His eyes were bulging. He was angry and sad and confused all at once.

'I have less than two hours to live, and I want to say goodbye to Mum before I go.'

Dad opened his mouth, then closed it again. He gulped and said in a breathy voice, 'Your mother's—'

'She's not dead. You lied to me.'

He looked at me with panic in his eyes.

I stared hard at him, and felt as if I were growing taller.

'You know?' he said, in a strangled voice.

I nodded.

Dad staggered backwards. The colour drained from his face until he was almost as white as I was.

'I had to pretend she was dead. After what happened she was—'

'Take me to her,' I broke in calmly.

'Yes,' he whispered. 'Yes.'

He looked towards the car, but didn't move.

'Move your bum,' thundered Ms Blit. 'We don't have much time.'

He snapped into life and started the car. Within seconds, the three of us were flying over Easterpark towards the neighbouring town of Sandifield. We hovered for a while over various streets until Ms Blit pointed to a large white house hiding in a cluster of trees.

'That's it. Lower her over there.'

The car landed in the gardens of Sandifield Lodge.

I couldn't believe that I was going to see my mother at last.

30

My mother looked more delighted than surprised to see me. I would have thought that anyone would be alarmed to see a figure who was mostly transparent and covered in flour. But she wasn't. Then she looked at Dad, and her eyes crinkled.

'Harold?' she said, slowly.

He nodded.

'You haven't visited in years. And is this . . . ?' Mum pointed to me. Dad nodded again. 'Thank you. I wanted to see him more than anything else in the world.'

'This is Simon. Your son. Our son.'

'Hazel,' she said. 'Like mine.'

'He's got your eyes,' Dad said.

'Dark and straight,' she said.

'And your hair,' said Dad.

Mum was answering questions before they were asked! She was displaced, just like me.

'Hello, Mum,' I said.

'I've missed you,' I said.

'I've missed you, too,' she said.

We stared at each other, speechless. There was the face that I had thought about for so long. She was beautiful. She was a hundred times more beautiful than I'd imagined.

I said: 'I've missed you for a long time. All my life.'

'I've missed you all your life, too,' she said. Her eyes filled with tears.

Dad spoke crossly: 'How come neither of you can have a normal conversation with anyone else, but when you talk to each other, you sound fine?'

'Displacement,' interrupted Ms Blit. 'It's a long story.'

'I'm so glad you've come,' said my mother, putting her hand on my dusty white cheek.

'Me too,' I said.

'Don't leave me again,' she said.

I looked at Ms Blit. She sniffed and her chin wobbled. I guess she didn't know what to say.

'Mum,' I said. 'I've come to say goodbye.'

'So soon? You'll come again tomorrow won't you?' she asked.

'No,' I said. 'I won't be able to come back.'

'Too busy?' Mum said. 'Well come the day after, then. Or next week. I don't mind. I'll wait. I've waited so long already. I knew you'd come one day.'

'Mum, I can't ever come back. I'm not going to be here for long.'

She knitted her brows. 'Don't be ridiculous. You're only thirteen. You're not going to die of old age, that's for sure.'

'I'm not going to die, exactly. I'm just not going to be around much longer.'

'Silly boy.' She took my hand and held it to her cheek.

‘This is a dream, isn’t it? That’s why you look so white; why I can see through you. I hope I never wake up from this dream.’

We sat and held hands in silence for a while. It was funny. Each of us had finally found someone who we could talk to, and all we did was sit there in silence.

‘Mum, I’ve still got these things,’ I finally said. ‘These things of yours. I’ve always kept them.’

I pulled out her hand-mirror and her white Bible. ‘I lent your mirror to this guy called Al who made, like, one of the most important scientific discoveries in history with it,’ I said.

My mother leaned down and pulled something out of her bag. ‘Look,’ she said. She was holding a small white Bible, like mine. ‘Snap.’

She waved it at me gently. ‘I hope you’ve read it. Or at least some of it. Bibles are not just for carrying around, you know.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve read some of it. But there’s something wrong in here.’

Her eyebrows rose. ‘Something wrong? Surely not.’

‘There is,’ I said. ‘It says that God started by making the first six days and then rested on the seventh. But Al, who is the cleverest guy who ever lived, even cleverer than me, made a great discovery.’

I don’t think Mum was really listening. She was just gazing at my face and smiling. ‘Go on,’ she said absently. ‘I love to hear you talk. Your eyes are so full of life and love. Like your dad’s used to be.’

‘Al found out that the first thing created was the great constant; the speed of light. Days came later. Time came

later. Light takes priority over time. That's why time isn't stable. It's important, but it's kind of hard to explain.'

'You think you know what this book says, but you haven't really read it,' she said. 'You're just like your dad. You don't focus on the important things.' She flicked the Bible to the first page of Genesis. 'Can you read this to me?'

I read it out loud. 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.'

I stared at the book. How could I have missed this? It *did* say that light was the first thing to be made, and that time came later.

Ms Blit leaned forwards and read over my shoulder. 'Incredible,' she said. 'I'd never noticed that. Al Einstein could have saved loads of time if only he had read this properly.'

'Give me a hug,' said Mum.

I was never a cuddling sort of person, but somehow I didn't mind hugging Mum, even in front of Dad and Ms Blit.

After a minute or so I could see alarm in Ms Blit's eyes. I guessed that I was fading further.

'Simon,' she said. 'We can barely hear you. I think our time is up.'

'Mum,' I said, pulling away from her. 'I just came to say goodbye, really.'

'I wish I could make this afternoon last forever,' she said. 'Isn't there anything we can do?'

'No,' I said.

She sighed. 'Please?'

‘No. We can’t.’

‘Oh Simon, I would move heaven and earth to keep you a little longer,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry Mum. I wish I could stay but—’ I stopped. Al’s words were buzzing around in my head like a swarm of excited bees. I turned to Ms Blit. ‘If speed is the only constant thing, then there must be something we can do. Can’t we move heaven and earth? Al said that the cause of my problem might lie before I was born.’

I turned to face my parents. ‘Mum, Dad, did anything happen to me before I was born?’

‘The accident,’ Mum whispered. ‘I was pregnant when I had my accident.’

‘What accident?’ I croaked.

‘It was on the cargo run to Mars. I hadn’t gone very far when I bumped my spaceship into a tiny speck of dark matter. I went spinning off course and crashed into an asteroid. When the rescue team found me they thought I was crazy. Nothing I said made any sense. When they were checking me over, they also discovered that I was pregnant.’

I felt Ms Blit freeze beside me. At first I thought it was panic at the rate at which I was vanishing. Until she grabbed my hand.

‘Simon. You’re a genius.’

I tried to look modest—not that anyone could really see me.

Ms Blit turned and pointed to the car. ‘Get in. All of you.’

We stood and stared at her.

‘Get in the car. *Now.*’

31

We got into the car. I sat in the back with Mum. Dad sat in the passenger seat. Ms Blit had told him, to his horror, that she was going to drive. But she didn't join us right away. Instead, she opened the engine casing and spent several minutes fiddling with something. Then she fixed the convertible hood.

'What are you doing to my car?' Dad fumed.

'Fixing it up a bit,' said Ms Blit. 'Your warp drive isn't set up quite right. And your hood wasn't airtight. I think I've fixed it. I'd better have or we'll soon know about it.'

She climbed into the driver's seat and pressed the controls. *Whuuuummmpp*. We blasted upwards and zoomed into the sky.

'What are you doing?' Dad asked. 'This baby is only designed to go to the upper stratosphere.'

'Oh, we're going to have to go a little further than that,' said Ms Blit.

'If I were you, I'd give it a little more throttle and gear down on the—'

'You are not me,' she snapped. 'Shut up.'

Dad lapsed into angry silence.

Ms Blit turned and faced my mother. 'Now, I want you to tell me exactly where you had that little accident that landed you in hospital.'

'It was a long time—' said my mother.

My dad interrupted. 'It was near the moon. This car isn't designed to leave the Earth's atmosphere. It would fall to pieces. Besides, there's not enough fuel in this car to go to the moon and back. It's a ludicrous idea.'

'That's not a problem,' said Ms Blit. 'We're not coming back.'

Dad went white. He tried to wrestle the controls from Ms Blit, but she slapped his hand really hard and then pushed him away.

He slumped back into his seat, his face paralysed with horror as the car started to heat up. We soared up through the stratosphere and out into the blackness of space.

'We're dead,' Dad said quietly. 'We're all dead.'

Ms Blit nodded.

Somewhere between Earth and the moon, we found it.

It was a little tear in the fabric of space and time; a speck of dark matter. It didn't look like much—just a glowing, rippling, fizzing area of nothingness.

Mum had remembered the co-ordinates—they were obviously engraved into her brain.

'What are we doing here?' asked Dad. 'This is dangerous. We should NOT be near a black speck. I want to go *home*. We need to radio for help. Get some fuel delivered or something. Let's get away, *now*.'

Ms Blit fired the car's tow rope at the tear in space. After using the levers to control the rope's movement, she managed to get part of the grappling bit hooked around the centre of what she called 'the dropped stitch'. The throbbing speck seemed to suck the grappling bit in.

Having achieved that, she folded her arms and took a deep breath.

'What are you going to do now?' Dad gasped. 'This is so dangerous. We are all going to DIE.'

'It's all right, Harold,' said Mum. 'I think she knows what's she's doing.'

Ms Blit looked Dad in the eye. 'What I am going to do now is to give the biggest piece of cloth in the universe a little tug. Not too far. Just far enough. I think I know roughly how to do it.'

'What's going to happen to us?' Dad asked.

'You three, I'm afraid, are going to vacate this car.' She leaned over and reached towards the three red switches that controlled the ejector seats.

'Stop!' screamed Dad, trying to grab her arm. 'You're a crazy woman. If you eject us all into space, you'll kill us. We don't have space suits on. We'll explode.'

'I know,' said Ms Blit.

They grappled over the controls. Mum and I just watched.

'She's going to kill us,' Dad shouted, looking over his shoulder. 'Do something!'

Ms Blit must have been stronger than Dad, because she managed to break free and press the ejector seat buttons.

The car roof sprang open. Three ejector seats pushed upwards.

Mum, Dad and I were flung into space.
We flailed around.
There was a bright white flash.
We all died.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, second edition

3.2: The time shift

On Friday, May 15 at 2.36.15 Sol time, one of the oddest events of recent eons happened. The entire universe moved forwards 5.0125 seconds.

It is not clear why this happened. At the time of writing, investigators are still conducting an enquiry into the incident.

The only agents who could possibly have achieved such a thing are the Stitchers. But all were present and accounted for, doing legitimate tasks, at the time of the incident. So far, the implications of this event remain a mystery.

I never did find out what the white flash was.

I sat in the playground writing faster and faster, because all sorts of things were speeding out of my head.

I'd already forgotten what I'd scrawled in the previous chapters.

I was sure there were lots of very *very* important things in my head, but every moment it was becoming harder to reach them. It was like trying to remember a fading dream. Or like trying to reach a paper boat on a pond—when you stretch out to grab it, the pressure of your touch sends it sailing out of reach.

Hadn't I just written something about being in space in my dad's X31?

Then again, I'd also written that I died when, clearly, I was alive and sitting on the green bench in the playground, writing in my journal.

Maybe I should ask Mum or Dad. I think they were with me. Was there someone else in the car? Mum, Dad, me

and—? I keep thinking that someone else was driving the car into space. But maybe not . . .

After all, I'm not dead, am I?

My eyes keep wandering towards the utility block, and I didn't know why. There's nothing in there but toilets and janitor's equipment. I know because I snuck in there to check. So why do my feet keep taking me there?

I am sitting pondering all this, when someone interrupts me.

'Hello,' said that quiet, serious-faced girl who sits at the back of the classroom and never smiles.

'Hi,' I said.

'You're always writing. Are you writing a book?'

I moved so that she couldn't see what I was scribbling. 'I'm writing a record of important events for somebody.'

'Who?'

'Um, it's a secret,' I said.

There was silence.

'I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you. I'll go. It's just that . . .'

She looked down at her feet.

'What?'

'Nothing.' She started to walk away.

'What?'

'Well, it's just that . . . Mrs Stoep said we need a partner of the opposite gender to do our Ancient Greeks project with and I wondered whether you . . . I think you and me are the quietest people in the class.' And then she gave a pathetic little laugh.

'What's your name again?'

'Amy. Amy Dala.'

'Is your middle initial G?'

'How did you know?'

'I don't know.'

'Where are you from?'

'Hawaii.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

She kept looking at her feet when she spoke. She really was shy.

I puffed out my chest. 'Amy, don't worry. I used to be shy. Being shy sucks. I mean, I'm brilliant. I'm probably the most intelligent person in the whole school, including the teachers. But no one realises it because I was too shy to speak up.'

Amy smiled. I think she thought I was making some sort of joke.

I smiled, too. 'Anyway, the important thing is that I am not shy any more. It's easy to get over it. You've got to smile. You've got to relax. You've got to look people in the eye. You've got to learn people's names. You've got to make yourself interested in other people. You can get over shyness, you know. I'll tell you a good trick. You look in the playground and you find groups of people in odd numbers: three or five or seven in a cluster.'

Amy Dala was still staring at her feet, unused to having anyone talk so passionately to her about anything.

'Where did you learn that?' she asked.

I paused, confused. Where *did* I learn that?

Amy looked up, and I noticed her gazing at my neck.

I touched my throat and found a silver chain. *How did*

that get there? I'd never worn jewellery before. I pulled the chain to see what was at the end of it, and found a small heart.

'That's nice. Is something written on it?' Amy asked.

'Yes. There are two words on it. It says . . .'

 I looked at it more closely.

There were no words on it. I stared in silence at the necklace until Amy cleared her throat.

'Okay. Bye. See you,' she said nervously. 'I guess I'd better go and—' She turned to look back at the green benches where the shy kids sat.

'No,' I interrupted. 'Stay. I want to show you something.' I pulled a pencil out of my pocket. 'Getting over shyness is really easy. First, you have to take a pencil and put it sideways in your mouth. No, it really works. I'll show you.'

And that's all folks.

You can stop reading now. I'm not sure why you started in the first place. I'm pretty sure I told you not to. Anyway, this is where it ends. Or maybe this is where it begins . . .

I'm not going to be writing in this book any more. I'm far too busy hanging out with friends and stuff. John McCloud said I used to be really weird and spent all my time in the janitor's office in the toilet block. But I think he's just having me on, because this school doesn't even have a janitor.

It says at the beginning of this book that it's dedicated to my Secret Sharer.

I'm not sure who that is. It may be John, or one of my

other friends. If you've read all the way up to here it may even be you!

Or maybe it's Amy.

But I'm not going to write anything about me and Amy. That story's not for sharing. I don't think you'd like it anyway. For a start, I think there's going to be KISSING in it.

Care and Maintenance of the Fabric of Time, second edition

4.3: Maintenance Crew

Key numbers:

- The number of threads in the fabric of time is 16 quintillion.
- The relationship between time and matter is $E=mc^2$.
- The number of Stitchers is 19.

Author's note

Although I don't really know how many celestial seamstresses there are, the scientific parts of this story are based on fact. Einstein really did have a vision, or daydream or fantasy, about riding in a super-car that could fly at the speed of light. And in his dream, he really did use a hand-mirror and discover that it wasn't blank. Once he worked out what it all meant, he wrote a book, in 1905, which revealed for the first time that time itself could be bent, altered or damaged. This idea was called 'the theory of relativity'. No one knows where a man living 100 years ago got the idea of a hover-car that could fly at the speed of light. This story tries to explain how it could have happened. If you'd like to find out more about Einstein or want to contact the author, you can go to www.allenandunwin.com or the author's website at www.jam100.com