

HAPPY HEAD

JOSH SILVER



A Rock the Boat Book

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Private and Confidential

**HappyHead
Commitment. Growth. Gratitude.**

For the attention of Sebastian Seaton

Congratulations!

We are writing to inform you that you have been selected to participate in the HappyHead Project as part of its inaugural intake.

Based on the research of Dr Eileen Stone and guided by world-leading professors, the HappyHead Project is the first of its kind. This cutting-edge programme will offer participants the opportunity to find enduring happiness. Completion of the programme will unleash your full potential, equipping you with the tools you need for future success.

You will be required to undertake a thirteen-day course of assessments, therapy and closely monitored non-medical intervention. For the purposes of complete immersion, there will be no contact with family members or friends for the full thirteen days. Access to devices and the internet will be prohibited until departure.

We ask you to bring the following items:

- **Trainers (no laces).**
 - **Current necessary medication.**
 - **One personal item of your choice that does not identify you, but is meaningful to you.**
- Place this item in the lockable box provided.**

The programme will begin on 1st September and you will be granted leave from school or college to attend. Arrive no later than 20:00. Enclosed, please find a questionnaire, options for transportation to the facility, a pamphlet with further information and a consent form for your parent/guardian.

Please fill out the questionnaire with complete honesty. We look forward to welcoming you to HappyHead. Attendance is mandatory.

Yours in faith,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Professor Manning". The script is cursive and fluid.

Professor G. Manning ☺



TWO

SUNFLOWERS

'Hello!' the face says, smiling widely.

His teeth are very white.

He stands back and shows us the front of his overalls, running his finger over the pocket on his chest where the word 'HappyHead' is written in bright green lettering, underneath a smiley face.

'Oh,' Mum says. 'Perfect!' She laughs in a way that sounds like she could just as easily cry, then rolls down the car window and sticks out her head. 'We seem to be a bit lost,' she says in that fake posh voice she sometimes uses.

The man walks round the front of the car, cutting through the beams of the headlights, his yellow overalls bouncing the light back into my eyes.

'Don't worry, it's hard to find.' He chuckles and bends down. 'Full house in here!' he says, poking his head through the gap in the window so it hovers above Mum's lap.

'Mrs Seaton,' Mum says, holding her hand near the man's face. He takes it and for a moment I think he's going to kiss it. I think Mum does too because she gives some sort of stifled squeal, but instead he shakes it enthusiastically and says,

'Ah! Sebastian's mother.'

'Yes!' she says loudly.

'Hello.' He looks directly at me. 'You made it.'

There is a distinct smell of antiseptic coming from the floating head. Reminds me of that pink ointment Mum put on our chickenpox spots.

'Hi,' I say to the antiseptic head.

His hair is neatly clipped and gelled into a perfect quiff, like one of the T-Birds from that film *Grease* where they dance on the car. His high cheekbones throw a shadow over the bottom half of his face.

'I'll take him from here, Mrs Seaton. It's not far to the gate.'

'Wonderful,' Mum says. 'Thank you. Just in time, hey, guys!'

Dad nods.

Lily just stares at the man.

'Right, Sebastian. Let's get your stuff.' He's still smiling.

'Right.'

A pang of nervous heat radiates in my stomach, making me suddenly feel dizzy. I open the car door and pull out my rucksack from the footwell. As I stand by the reeds and slam the door shut, the cold wind blows up the inside of my coat. I shudder.

'Everything in there?' Antiseptic asks, pointing at my bag.

'Yep,' I say.

'Current medication?'

'Er, yep.'

The sky is ash grey now.

'Personal belonging?'

'Oh, he's got that!' Mum's voice pipes up from inside the car. 'In that funny little box.'

'Is it safe?' he asks quietly.

'Huh?' I take a step backwards because he is now very close to my face. 'Yeah. It's ... safe.'

He holds my gaze. His eyes are very black. I'm not entirely sure what to do.

Then he nods.

'Great!' He slaps my back and winks. 'Let's go.'

He is smiling again.

'What about the suitcases?' Mum says. 'He might need—'

'He won't.'

Antiseptic moves in front of the car and stands in his yellow overalls, teeth glinting in the beam of the headlights.

'Sorry, but who are you?' Lily says.

'Lily!' Mum turns. 'Don't be rude. Sorry, sir.'

'How do you know he even works for that place?'

'Don't worry.' He laughs. 'You make a good point, Lily. I have some ID that might help.' He pulls it out of the front pocket of his overalls and holds it up to the windscreen. Mum and Dad lean forward to read it through the glass. 'I've been asked to pick up any stragglers on the roads. Most people used the train or our coach shuttle service. We anticipated some teething problems and welcome any feedback you might have. Perhaps a map might be useful next time?' he says, looking at Mum.

'That would be helpful, er -' she squints at the ID card - 'Mark. Yes, thank you.' I can see she's blushing.

'We wanted to wave him off,' Dad says weakly as if it's dawning on him that the eight-hour trip may not have been worth it. 'Can we not come to the gate?'

'No need. We're all good from here. Aren't we, champ?'

Champ.

'Yeah, I guess,' I say, swinging my bag over my shoulder and joining Antiseptic in front of the car. When I look over at the windscreen, I have the sudden urge to get back in.

I clench my teeth together, hard.

'Thanks for bringing me all this way.' I hold up my hand in a farewell salute.

'It's getting dark.' Antiseptic takes hold of my shoulder and I feel him pull. 'Come on.'

'Wait!' Mum shouts and opens her door. She stands in front of me and holds out her arms. I step into them. She squeezes and kisses the top of my head.

'Just make sure you do your best,' she says. 'This is going to be great for you.'

'Your mum is right,' Antiseptic says, smiling.

Dad holds up his hand through the window, reciprocating my salute. 'Good luck, son.'

The man takes hold of my shoulder again. I look into the back seat and see Lily has her headphones in and is nodding along to something poppy, probably with a wholesome moral undertone.

She catches my eye. 'Bye,' she says, then mouths, *bellend*.

I turn round because Antiseptic is pulling me by my shoulder again. Harder this time. I hear a door slam and the engine revving behind me.

'Families are difficult, huh, champ?'

I don't really know what to say to this so I just shrug. The car horn beeps and the headlights swing over us with the crunch of wheels turning on the dirt.

And they are gone.

Antiseptic sets off, walking quickly ahead of me. 'It's not far. Maybe half an hour,' he says.

'But I thought we were—'

'Keep up.'

'One second!' I shout. 'Mark? I need to go.'

He stops. 'Go?'

'Yeah, I need a wee.' God. 'It's been a long journey.'

He waits for a moment, and I watch his back rise and fall as he inhales deeply. He turns, smiling.

'Go in there, quick.' He points into the dark reeds.

'In *there*?'

'Where else?'

I look at them rustling. 'It's fine. I can wait.'

He steps towards me. 'You're going to need to be resilient, Sebastian,' he says. 'It's important.'

'Right...'

'You can't always take the easy path. At HappyHead.'

He is looking at me and he is definitely not blinking. I look back at the reeds once more.

'I can wait, thanks, Mark. The urge has passed.'

'OK,' he says. 'You can go when we get to the sunflowers. Where it's less dense.'

By the time we reach the sunflowers, it's nearly completely dark. I can just make out rows and rows of them, running all the way down to a tall wire fence.

'Go on,' Mark says, pointing his torch into the field.

The pressure in my bladder hurts now and is making me see white dots dance across the sky. I bite my lip and weave my way between the rows of flowers, their heads reaching up over mine. When I look back, I see Mark silhouetted

against the sky, holding what appears to be a walkie-talkie.

He puts it to his ear. 'Not long,' he says. 'Yes. They were just a little lost. Sebastian is with me now...'

I find a big sunflower to put between us and, as I piss on it, I feel a shudder down my spine. The steam rises up round me.

This isn't exactly what I expected.

I don't know *what* I expected because there were no pictures on the pamphlet, but I didn't think I would be urinating in a field of flowers. It's all a bit Duke of Edinburgh's Award for me and there was a reason I didn't sign up for that.

'Done?' he shouts.

Jesus. I jump, steadying myself. 'One sec,' I reply.

I glance behind me. In the dark, the sunflowers look a little bit like human heads, floating. Watching. I shudder again and squeeze the rest out, looking down at my new white slip-on Vans. I head back to the path, quickly now.

He must see that I keep checking behind me because he says, 'You don't need to worry.' I pull a face like he is making false assumptions. 'Now come on. We don't want to be late for the introductions.'

THREE

ICE EYES

It's pitch-black and all I can see is fog. We have been walking for at least forty-five minutes since we came through a huge iron gate in the wire fence.

We haven't spoken much.

At one point, I'm pretty sure we crossed a bridge. I can't be certain because I couldn't see beyond the pool of light from Antiseptic's torch. But I swear I heard rushing water.

When we finally get to the building, I can't see it all, but I can tell it's huge. The walls are white and shiny. Smooth, like plastic. Small, circular windows line the length of it like portholes in a cruise liner. The wall runs away from us until it disappears into the darkness.

'Phone, please, buddy,' Antiseptic suddenly says. 'Time to send your last text.'

I pull my phone out of my rucksack, my chunky noise-cancelling headphones attached. Shelly says they're old-school. I say they're necessary.

'I'll need to take those too.'

I wonder if there are any birthday messages. Something else from Shelly maybe. Someone from school. I look at the screen.

One message.

Mum.

I open it.

*Good luck! Mark seemed nice!!! Glad you'll be kept safe.
Take your pills!!!!*

Antiseptic is looking at his watch.

Will do, I reply.

'Sent?' he says.

'Yep.'

'We're a little late for the introduction assembly, but no one will notice.' He takes my phone and headphones and places them in a plastic wallet he has taken from a pouch in his overalls. 'Anything else?'

I turn out my pockets. My packet of sherbet pips.

'Those too, buddy.'

Kill-joy. I hand them over to the fun police. Then, he shines his torch at the wall. There is the faint outline of a door and a small keypad in the white plastic. He types in a code and there is a *clunk* and a hissing noise.

'Ooh, spacey,' I say. 'Airlock?'

He looks at me, confused.

I brush it off. 'Is this place purpose-built?'

'Just to warn you, people are possibly a little nervous,' he says. 'You know what teens are like.'

I laugh awkwardly like I've never really thought about it.

When the door opens and we step through it, I realise we are suddenly at the front of a large room. It's a bit like the sports hall at school, except everything is white and there are

no windows. There is a white platform in front of us with a white lectern and a white microphone. Facing it, there are one hundred white chairs and all but one of them is occupied by a person the same age as me, each with various versions of confused, excited and nervous plastered on their faces. The door clunks shut behind me and the noise ricochets round the inside of my skull.

The airlock hisses.

Everyone turns towards me.

Ninety-nine staring seventeen-year-olds.

Antiseptic said no one would notice.

Antiseptic is a liar.

This is my kind of Actual Hell. I want to shrivel up like a dying leech, slither back through the crack underneath the space door and crawl in the opposite direction as fast as my wretched leech body will carry me.

Antiseptic takes a spot against the wall and points to the single empty chair in the front row.

‘Go on,’ he whispers.

There are others in yellow overalls lining the walls, with similarly shiny teeth, grinning like they are programmed to do nothing else. A bit like those perpetually enthusiastic children’s entertainers that love an egg-and-spoon race and a ball pit.

One of them, a lady on the opposite wall with a blond ponytail, catches my eye and winks. She waves so much that I worry she might hit herself. I feel Antiseptic’s hand give me a small shove. I bow my head, hoping this will make me invisible.

Should I wave?

Casual wave?

Sure.

I lift up my hand.

I hear someone snigger.

Someone tut.

No.

No wave.

Abort.

I drop my hand.

I'm not sure how long they have been sitting here, but it might have been quite a while because there seems to be a high level of hostility aimed in my direction. The girl who smirked now snorts her annoyance so loudly that a ripple of laughter emanates from around her like she is the epicentre of an aggression tsunami. (I am no stranger to aggression tsunamis. They mostly happen in the school environment. They require one total smart-arse and a cluster of suck-ups that are willing to approve smart-arse's snarky comments by way of laughter. Sometimes pointing. Generally directed at one person. Current person: me.)

Don't worry, sweetie! Take a seat! Ponytail mouths.

'Hurry up, fucknugget,' someone witty whispers from the crowd.

I am incredibly hot and realise I haven't inhaled for a while.

Mum says in times like these I must find *inner confidence*. I never really know what she means by this. Maybe it means I should say something charming and fantastic like, *Don't worry, you don't need to panic, Seb is here, and these thirteen days just got extra!!!* then jump on the platform and drop into

a perfect *shablam*, causing the room to whoop and cheer, so I will be forgiven and become the Immediate Favourite.

Instead, I find myself shuffling to the chair, slumping down into it, my face burning. I focus my gaze on my rucksack, which I have placed over my lap like a parachute that I'm about to use to jump out of a plane. Beyond it, on the floor, I can see my new Vans, which are now muddy and have little flecks of yellow on them from pissing in the sunflowers.

Bollocks.

I feel a layer of cool sweat crawl over my back. I lift my foot as stealthily as I can and wipe my shoe on the back of my trousers, in the hope that the girl on my left with a rigidly straight fringe suspects nothing. The yellow flecks of urine do not budge. Her eyes scan over me and down to my shoes. I see it flash across her face. She knows. She knows that what she's looking at is in fact my very own piss splatter. She looks at my face, seeking an explanation. I give her a smile because it's the only distraction I've got. She raises her eyebrows as if I've just asked her to have sex with me in a bin, snarls, then turns her head to the lectern with her hands on her lap, her pleated skirt all neat and perfect like her hair.

I look to Antiseptic for something. I'm not sure what. Help, probably. He smiles.

There's a strange *energy* in the air.

I'm not one to *feel energies* like Shelly says she does, but this one is so intense I can't miss it. It's thick like glue.

Expectation.

People are whispering things around me.

'When does this thing start?'

'I'm missing a girls' holiday to Mykonos for this.'

'Where can I smoke?'

Somewhere, a girl's voice is telling anyone who will listen that her name is Eleanor and that she is *so* excited to be here, among the *first-ever* cohort for this project.

'I'm thrilled,' she is saying. 'We need to radiate positivity for this to work.'

Someone murmurs in half-arsed agreement.

'Some people just radiate *twat*,' a gravelly northern voice says quietly from directly behind my head.

When I turn round, the first thing I see is the tattoo on his light brown skin, right on the side of his neck.

A bird's wing.

Long, dark, oversized jumper with a hole in the seam by his shoulder.

Jet-black hair falling into his eyes.

They flick upwards. Ice blue.

Tall. All angular, like a sketched manga character.

Black nail varnish.

He clenches his jaw and a vein bulges in his neck, making the wing wiggle.

Shelly told me I should try and make some new friends. Maybe I should say hello.

A small scar on his cheekbone catches the light.

'What?' he says.

I snap my head back to the lectern. The sweat on my back is now seeping through my T-shirt.

'Hey, bro, cool tattoo,' I hear the boy next to him say.

'Back the fuck off,' Ice Eyes says to him.

The energy thickens to treacle.

‘What’s your problem, bro?’

‘Don’t talk to me,’ Ice Eyes says, louder now.

‘Just making conversation.’

‘Do I look like I want a conversation?’

‘Wow, Jeez. Apparently not,’ the other voice says. Then, quieter, ‘You look like you want a good fucking wash, though.’

I hear a chair scrape. Before I can turn, Ponytail has scuttled down the row and is standing next to them.

‘What did you say?’ Ice Eyes is on his feet.

‘Hey, fellas, it’s a little hot in here. Anyone fancy a quick cool-off?’ Ponytail says in a sing-song voice, bright and plucky, like she’s giving it some welly in a West End production. ‘Mr Blake? *Finneas*? Fancy a breather?’

Ice Eyes ignores her.

The other one is standing too. I turn my head just enough to see that he’s built like a double-door fridge.

‘Say it again,’ Ice Eyes says.

Fridge Boy snorts defensively. ‘I said ... you smell like a urinal.’

Ice Eyes raises his fist and a cold darkness flashes across his face. He’s about to swing when, quicker than I can inhale, Ponytail grabs his wrist, twists it so he turns, and pulls him away. She leads Ice Eyes along the aisle and down to the back of the hall where they disappear through a door. As if they were never here.

A few people whisper in confusion.

‘Pathetic,’ Eleanor’s voice says.

I turn and look at Fridge Boy. He gives a weak little laugh and says, ‘Pussy,’ then sits back down, folding his arms.

Antiseptic moves forward to stand in front of us. ‘It’s been

a long day, but remember, guys, let's approach each other with kindness.' His voice is smooth and soft like something from a meditation app.

'That freak started it,' Fridge Boy mutters.

Antiseptic puts his hand out in front of him. 'Let's leave it now.' He stands with his hand in front of Fridge Boy's face for what feels like a little too long. Like he's casting a therapeutic spell.

The room falls silent.

Antiseptic slowly moves back to the wall.

I look at the Overalls. Watching out over us. Smiling.

I think about my sherbet pips.

I think about Finneas.

Maybe the pastoral team are giving him a nice cup of herbal tea and a debrief.

The buzz of silence rings in my ears.

'Welcome!' a loud voice booms from the microphone. Suddenly the lights dim. People shush each other.

'Finally,' someone groans.

A woman has appeared in a spotlight on the white platform. She is not wearing yellow. She's wearing black. A long, finely tailored coat. Her grey hair is cut neat and short, and her half-rimmed glasses sit on the tip of her nose.

She looks at us. Her eyes twinkle.

'Welcome to HappyHead,' she says, her voice strong and deep. Calm. Steady. For a split second, I think we're supposed to clap. I think other people do too because the girl with the straight fringe next to me lifts her hands as if to begin. But, before she can, the Overalls standing round the edge of the room all speak at once.

‘Hello, Madame Manning,’ they say. ‘Commitment, growth and gratitude lead to a happy head.’

Silence.

Maybe now is the time to clap.

‘Indeed, they do.’ Madame Manning taps her nails on the edge of the lectern. ‘We are in an epidemic. An epidemic of unhappiness. The data has shown that, without intervention, you, the youth of our country, are in serious danger of many things, but most importantly in danger of yourselves. And it is glaringly obvious that, now more than ever, you need help. A way out.’

OK, a little bleak, but sure.

‘Friends, here is the good news: HappyHead has the answer.’ She smiles for the first time. I’m not entirely sure it suits her. ‘Our radical new project is here to put *you* at the centre of your journey into adulthood and give you all the tools you need to fulfil your potential as happy human beings. We seek not only to transform lives but to save them. And you, you lucky people, were selected at random from across the nation and have become the first – the very first – to experience this. You, each and every one of you, are special.’

Madame Manning takes a step back from the lectern.

A song begins to play.

‘Shiny Happy People’ by REM. I know it because Dad chooses this one in the car sometimes, when Mum lets him pick.

Madame Manning raises her hand and a large screen descends from the ceiling.

The room goes completely dark. A film starts to play.

Aerial shots of a large white shiny building in the middle of miles of countryside.

Sunflowers.

Grass.

A river.

Teenagers running through trees. Playing football on a pitch. Bright sunshine. Smiling.

‘Welcome to HappyHead,’ a drawling American voice says, like something from a Hollywood film trailer. ‘The next thirteen days will be among the most important of your life.’

Sad-looking teenagers waving goodbye to their parents.

Unpacking bags in bedrooms.

Eating together in a dining room.

Laughing.

Hugging.

‘Here at HappyHead, you will undergo a project created by top experts in their fields.’

The HappyHead smiley face appears.

‘Because we care about *you*.’

A man in a suit points at us. He laughs.

‘You will be grouped together in teams of four.’

Teenagers high-fiving. Fist-bumping. Laughing. I assume these people are actors, giving it all the enthusiasm they can muster.

‘In these teams, you must work on a number of specially designed assessments...’

Teenagers in a tent.

Teenagers climbing an assault course.

‘And we will be watching you.’

Overalls furiously tapping their fingers on the screens of their tablets.

‘Our team of senior Assessors will always be on the periphery, making sure you are *exactly* where you need to be, readying you for when you leave. Madame Manning is joined by the internationally renowned Professor Lindström, our therapy lead, and the formidable Professor Fernsby, our physical tasks expert!’

Three people in black, sitting at a long desk, Madame Manning in the middle.

Woman on left looking floaty, long blond hair and a kaftan.

Man on right sharply dressed in suit, thick-rimmed glasses with a wise face. Smiling.

‘But try to ignore them. Your job is to complete each task to the best of your ability!’

A teenage girl runs over a finish line, pumping the air in joy.

‘And always remember: be *honest*.’

A boy is crying. Someone who looks like a therapist hands him a box of tissues.

‘We are asking you to trust us.’

The boy takes one and smiles.

‘So that we can help you.’

The therapist nods approvingly.

‘You will stay in our Changing Corridor. For fact fans: this corridor is one of the longest in the country, with one hundred bedrooms! All the rooms are numbered.’

Scanning down the corridor at speed.

Numbers above doors.

100

99

98

97...

‘Each morning a screen opposite your bedroom door will show you a new number. You must move to this bedroom. New day, new room!’

A boy looks up at a screen opposite his bedroom door.

‘Why change rooms, you ask? Good question.’

Laughing Overalls in the Changing Corridor.

‘It’s part of our assessment process. We want to see your *adaptability*.’

The boy unpacking his things in a new room, making the bed.

‘It’s our way of tracking everyone’s progress. So, early starts for room changes, I’m afraid!’

Alarm clock showing 5:30. A girl yawns and bounces out of bed, smiling.

‘We also want to see your *initiative* and *resourcefulness*.’

A girl sharpening a knife in a forest.

‘*Intelligence*.’

A boy rapidly completing a Rubik’s cube.

‘*Emotional* and *physical* strength.’

A girl watching her friend cry as she lifts some weights.

‘And, of course, *teamwork*.’

A group of laughing teenagers cradling hot drinks by an open fire.

More aerial drone shots. Fields and grass and sunflowers.

The white building.

‘A few key rules to keep you all safe.’

We zoom in on the forest. A wire fence.

‘You may have noticed the perimeter fence. We don’t want anyone entering the compound who shouldn’t be here. There’s no need to go near it.’

People sitting round a bonfire, singing.

‘Another aspect of safety here at HappyHead is ensuring optimum *physical health*.’

Boy on exercise bike. Girl on treadmill.

‘We want to monitor you as closely as possible so, using state-of-the-art technology, we will be inserting a small chip just above your collarbone, right *here*.’

A kind-looking lady in a nurse’s uniform points to her collarbone.

‘The procedure involves one small incision and heals *very* quickly. This way, we can be on hand if you *ever* need help.’

A boy having an asthma attack on top of a hill. A helicopter lands. Overalls jump out and give him an inhaler.

Boy wipes the back of his hand over his forehead. ‘Phew!’

‘Keep your personal item safe in your bag. You will get your phone back when you leave. Sadly, no contact with family or friends. We want to assess your mental state without distractions.’

Teenagers staring at a sunset with their arms round each other.

‘You’ll love the Cosy Room. During assigned downtime, you can chat and get to know your teammates there, supervised by the wonderful Reviewers. Do not discuss your individual assessments with others unless encouraged to.’

Teenagers playing pool in front of laughing Overalls.

‘And, finally, remember we are always here for you. This is *for* you. So, when you leave, you will do so with a happy head.’

A final shot of teenagers reuniting with their families.
Hugs. Smiling.

The sun sets.

The film stops.

The music stops.

Darkness.

I hear the buzz of the screen as it disappears into the ceiling from where it came. I feel a tingling in my feet. No one speaks. I might be mistaken, but did the American man say something about putting a chip under my skin?

The spotlight comes back up on Madame Manning. She begins to clap. All the Overalls join her. So much clapping.

‘Exciting, hey?’ she says.

A whoop from the Overalls.

When I was nine, I went on a weekend away with school. I remember feeling like I might never see my mum and dad again and I cried and cried. For some reason, I am reminded of this now.

‘Let’s give our first-ever intake a HappyHead hello,’ Manning says.

‘Hello!’ the Overalls say, and wave.

‘Now, before we proceed, I must introduce you to the most important person in this building. The reason you are here. The reason you have been given this chance. Please be upstanding for my dear friend, the genius Doctor Eileen Stone.’

Chairs scrape.

We stand.

The airlock door opens. *Shumm.*

A lady steps through the doorway. She puts her cane on the floor in front of her to steady herself and it echoes against the white walls. *Donk.*

She edges forward, her gentle eyes taking each of us in like a turtle slowly blinking in its surroundings after years of hibernation. She stops and slowly, very slowly, she takes off her raincoat and passes it to Antiseptic, revealing a multicoloured patchwork cardigan, her two long grey wiry plaits falling down like rope in front of it.

I mean, what do I know, but this is where *I* would have had the applause.

The reveal. Iconic.

Instead, people just stare in silence.

She must be seventy, at least. She is wearing wellies.

‘And the whack-job has landed...’ Fridge Boy whispers.

‘*Shh!*’

Tentatively, she makes her way to the bottom of the stage and we watch in collective, uncertain awe. Waiting for her next move. Some of the Overalls even bow their heads slightly, smiling warmly as she passes them. The admiration for this rural royalty beams round us. Antiseptic overtakes her and mounts the steps, holding out his hand. She takes it.

She is a little ... shaky. Each welly hesitantly finds the edge of the step and pushes her up, one after the other. Everyone is holding their breath. I can feel it. *Hear* it around me.

She makes it and we exhale as one.

Antiseptic takes a stool from the back of the stage and places it next to the lectern in the circle of light. She looks at it for a second, then turns to face us. She closes her eyelids. She doesn't open them for what feels like a little too long

to just be taking in the moment. I begin to wonder if she is praying, or casting a spell, or about to ask us all to join her in a meditative chant.

Finally, she speaks.

‘Thank you, Madame Manning.’ Irish accent. Soft. Gentle. I almost want to say *sexy*. OK, maybe not. *Inviting*. ‘Please sit. All of you. And I will explain.’

We do. Like we are under her spell.

She has really kind amber eyes. I notice ... *tears*.

Yep. She’s nearly crying. That’s happening.

‘You are all in danger.’ Lovely. ‘The science is fact. The evidence is concrete. We have seen a drastic rise in emotional dysregulation among young people, the extremes of which are becoming increasingly unsafe. Levels of aggression towards others and towards self are on the rise. Depersonalisation and derealisation are up. Interpersonal and communication difficulties are areas of significant concern. You are progressively vulnerable to invalidation. *Self*-invalidation. You feel stuck. Lost. Loneliness is an infection so strong in some of you that you no longer know how to function in our society.’

Why did she look directly at me when she said that?

‘I am aware this sounds incredibly morbid.’ Oh, good. ‘But you are all aware of the shift that has happened in the past few years. Your generation is in crisis. I do not wish to frighten you. We do not blame you. You are victims. And the government has been looking, *searching* for an answer to this crisis with little success. Until now. They have agreed to trial our project, HappyHead. Born as an idea a long time ago that in theory is strikingly simple, but in reality may be vastly complex. Which is why you are here.’

She takes a moment. ‘Not one of you is the same. The science shows us that your genetic make-up is unique; your predisposition to feel things is set at a different degree – a different *temperature* – to your neighbour. And our lives, our stories, our circumstances move the dial. We are the gun and our experience pulls the trigger. If this is so, how can a single treatment fit all of us? We are far more complicated than this gives us credit for. Tick boxes and worksheets won’t cut it any longer. The treatment must be tailored to suit you. Because here, at HappyHead, we will get to *know* you. And thus we can *push* you. To find acceptance of yourselves. To cultivate a desire to change. To learn skills, progress and connect. To move forward into adulthood, prepared. This is vital. Without these things, how can we truly experience life?’

Silence.

Do we... Do we speak?

I am becoming less and less able to decipher when people want actual verbal answers.

‘This is the beginning of a remarkable journey. My dear friend Madame Manning will be here on the front line, running the project with her team of Assessors. I won’t be staying at the base, my office is a little further out in the woods, but Madame Manning has agreed to keep me updated. I like to remain in the middle of nature. It’s where I find my comfort. And much of my inspiration.’

Manning steps forward into the spotlight next to Stone, smiling proudly. ‘It is always hard to drag the doctor away from her work. And we don’t want to detain her any longer.’ She is taller, more alert, sharper. They are an odd

couple, yet somehow they seem aligned. Connected, like sisters might be.

Manning clasps the sides of the lecturn. ‘Constantly using her research to perfect the programme, *led by the science*, Doctor Stone has created the structure of your assessments, which will begin tomorrow. The Assessors and I, with the help of our wonderful team –’ she lifts her hand, gesturing to the Overalls – ‘will be implementing them. In the morning, after chip insertion, we will begin with a brief individual assessment and then you’ll meet your teams. Now, Doctor Stone, we mustn’t keep you.’

Stone nods. ‘It is a pleasure to meet you all. You are in the safest hands I know. I would trust Madame Manning with my own life. Welcome, all of you. Welcome to HappyHead.’

Manning takes the doctor’s hand and squeezes it in a way that makes my tummy give a little involuntary charged pulse. Stone stares at us like she is looking at her long-lost children, then blinks away a few final tears and turns to shuffle across the platform. The clank of her stick on the floor cuts through the air.

Antiseptic helps her down. He gently places her raincoat over her shoulders. And she makes her way back to the airlock.

The door opens. *Shumm*.

Her coat wafts behind her as she leaves. A cloaked, welly-wearing Jedi.

Just as the door is about to close, I see Ice Eyes standing outside, Ponytail holding his arm. Stone approaches him and puts her hand on his shoulder...

Shumm. The door shuts.

‘Now,’ Manning continues, ‘straight to your rooms. Please change into your greens, which you will wear from now on. I will see you all in the assessments. Good luck. Finally, remember: *commitment, growth and gratitude lead to a happy head.*’

She smiles, steps off the platform, and strides off down the middle aisle to the door.

Everything is blurry.

People begin to slowly stand. Overalls beckon them forward, towards the exits, calling their names. They say things to me and I am pointed in certain directions, then led down different white corridors, through various white doors. I move past rooms with digital screens opposite them, noting the names of people and colours, all a shade of green. Olivia: Bottle Green, Freyor: Pickle Green, Jimmy: Avocado Green, Ola: Forest Green, Paula: Moss Green, Ahmad: Cyber Green.

I am left outside one of the doors.

Above it, the number 27.

‘This is you, Sebastian. The colour is your team name. Rest up, you must be exhausted.’

Words flash up on the digital screen on the wall opposite my door:

SEBASTIAN: ACID GREEN
YOUR TEAMMATES WILL BE:
ELEANOR BANKS
ASHLEY CHANDA
FINNEAS BLAKE

Ice Eyes.

Tomorrow: 08:00.

Individual assessment: Guided Meditation.

Good luck, Sebastian.



I look down the corridor to see others staring up at their screens. One by one, they enter their rooms. I can hear sobbing, but the corridor is so long I can't see who it might be. I turn to my room and step inside.

Everything is white.

A single bed in the corner. A tray with a piece of salmon, green beans and an apple sits under the circular window on a desk next to a digital clock, its screen giving off a soft red glare. Rubber cutlery is placed next to it. Green clothes are folded neatly on the chair. Hoodies and joggers. The floor is a soft white carpet. There is a small bathroom with a toilet and shower, a sink and a mirror.

I empty my rucksack on to the bed. My inhaler and my two weeks' supply of pills drop to the floor. I pick them up and pop one through the metallic film.

I place it on my tongue and swallow, the familiar chemical aftertaste bitter at the back of my throat.

There is a song by Bowie that sometimes gets stuck in my head. It's not my favourite but I can't seem to stop the melody from spinning round and round and round.

From the fifth track on the album *Heathen*. I can't quite remember the words. Something about being afraid. And completely alone.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and wait.

For what, I am not sure.