

you are
here!





I am here too.

We're spinning through space and time, on the edge of our Milky Way galaxy. I've seen a glittering arc of it on a pitch-black winter's night.

And it made me wonder...

...where is home?

My name is Leah.

I could never have imagined that I'd be stuck in this depressing place, still in pain. I turned 14 last Tuesday but only found out two days later. I'll explain more when they finally let me out of here. But I can't wait.

So I'm writing this out in my old journal. I think you can tell so much about a person from their handwriting- like the way they curl or slant their letters. Mine's a dead giveaway, isn't it? Overdramatic and oversensitive.

At least I've got this glossy postcard from Sean by my side. It shows the crystal blue ocean at Fintra Beach, along the coast of Donegal where he's from. My memory of him keeps me going, but summer camp seems a long time ago.



I'm looking out of the open window in this sterile, white room. A scent of autumn rises up from a heap of leaves below, and over on the left, someone's neatly planted a circle of purple and yellow pansies.

I gaze out into the distance far across brown fields and suddenly, I'm running scared through the forest to get away from... oh. Sorry. I must get to the point of this. The doctor's due back to see me again in ten minutes.

I really need to share my story, because for the last few days I've been feeling desperate... like I've got to write this down before I forget why I need to.

I'm writing this for anyone who's ever had an experience that no one could explain, or asked a big question that no one could answer. It's also for those adults who really need to listen more (I've got a few in mind).

At first, I thought my story might sound too weird, but my best friend Taka snuck in here yesterday with dark chocolate smuggled in her back pocket and told me not to change a word... well, not until I get her final edits.

With her 'no messing' stare and hands on hips, she snapped at me, "The stargazers, the survival group and climate activists from camp will fall in love with your story. The school bullies will totally hate it. So get writing! But just because you're a spelling bee champ, don't get cocky using long words I can't understand."

Taka is an Aries, and whatever anyone thinks about astrology, she is the ultimate ram - nothing gets in her way once she's made up her mind. She's already decided to be my editor, and now she's told me I only have three months to finish this - no pressure then.

The thing is, I've always loved reading true stories, especially about teenagers going on crazy adventures inside never-ending caves, out on survival trips or solving impossible mysteries. But this is the first time in my life where I have my own story, and I must tell it.

Some stories take you to a different world, but it's as real as this one. Like when Taka hung this giant, full-colour poster of the Andromeda Galaxy above her bed

-that's the nearest big spiral galaxy to our own. It's a close neighbour... only trillions of miles around the corner! If you gaze at it for a minute, you get sucked into its sparkling whirlpool of billions of stars, taking you to another world.

I sometimes imagine myself at the centre of the Andromeda Galaxy, in a life different to the one I'm in now. Maybe someone else out there imagines waking up one day living in another part of the universe.

So I wonder if what's happened to me has ever happened to anyone else.

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I was going through a very stressful time a month ago, and that's when I began drafting this in my journal... which took like ten times longer than typing! Yet writing it out by hand slowed me down a lot and let me relax. It helped me to meditate more deeply on the special people I've met and the experiences I never believed could have happened to me.

The streams of my story are turning into a flood now and I mustn't stop the flow - it's too strong. I mean, only fish like salmon can swim against the currents. So I have to write this out live, right now, even from this miserable room.

Lastly, before I forget.

Although Taka and I are both fast readers, she reckons this story needs to be read s-l-o-w-l-y. My Uncle Jake agreed with her. He said that reading it too quickly would turn it into a greasy, fast-food takeaway book - and that wouldn't taste great.

Also, I find the word 'chapter' kind of annoying. It reminds me of an English lesson where Mr Eaton gave me an earful in front of the whole class for not remembering the title of chapter 1 in a very BORING, classic Victorian novel. Blaaah!

So instead, I've used the word 'window,' as that's what I'm looking through right now. Through this window, I can clearly picture each event in my story.

And an image from the mystical island near where I grew up is already in sight...

WINDOW ONE



MY LIFE-CHANGING ESSAY



My Life-Changing Essay

At last. I'm back home and totally relieved to be up in my cosy bedroom, typing away on my tablet. The first four days in hospital were the strangest time of my life. I later found out from my Uncle Jake that I might have been through... well, something I'd never heard of before called a 'near-death experience'. Hazy memories are coming back to me about it... but my story doesn't begin there.

It began in January this year with that stern English teacher, Mr Eaton, and what was a nanosecond away from a shouting match with big Ed in class.

"Yeah, right, so I never did that grammar exercise you set. So what?" Ed shrugged, glancing behind with a big fat smirk to his back-row gang of mates.

"Grammar's rubbish. It don't teach you nuffin' you need to know in real life. You wouldn't understand that. Anyway... never 'ad time... been takin' care of my mum for months now, ever since the doctor told her she 'ad c..."

“Stop!” shouted Mr Eaton, losing his cool.

“No, I won’t. You don’t get people like me, do you? We’re not good enough for you lot, are we?”

Mr Eaton flushed red across his whole face. Beads of sweat were soon snaking down his forehead. He wiped them off with his shirt sleeve, his hand shaking.

“I understand about your mum, Ed. Believe me, I understand. I’m very sorry she’s not well. You can tell me about her diagnosis after school, and then I’ll tell you about mine.”

The class was instantly hushed by the shockwaves. What diagnosis? Mr Eaton leaned sharply forward in his chair, gripping his head with both hands and bracing himself as if he was about to crash on board a plane.

Ed sat down sheepishly as Mr Eaton stumbled to his feet. We’d never seen him lose his temper this way before. He must have shocked himself to openly admit that he was ill.

“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. You don’t deserve my anger. But I’ve not been well for almost a year, and the frustration and fear have become almost unbearable. I must apologise.”

Mr Eaton gathered himself, sighed and walked to the back of the class, leaning stiffly against the radiator. The school bell wrecked the silence, but no one budged.

“It’s ironic,” he said softly. “This week’s homework essay is going to be very different. I want you to write freely. Let your emotions and reasonings flow, without worrying about grammar or spelling. Yes, that *is* what I just said.

“This essay has to be authentic. Because the topic I’ve chosen for you is... ‘Understanding people.’”

He paused to compose himself. “And to be very frank, perhaps that’s an essay I need to write too.”

Muffled laughter broke out, melting the icy atmosphere as the

class began to shuffle out of the room. I'd never heard a teacher speak about their personal life before with their students. It was very brave.

As I was passing him on the way out, I had to stop and look up. I'd always thought that he had issues with me and the way I challenged some of the world's greatest novelists as being too predictable or prejudiced. But my words leapt out.

"It's alright, Mr Eaton. We never knew. It's understood. I'm going to write that essay with everything I've got."

He half-smiled, with an emptiness in his gaze. But I meant it. He'd triggered something from deep inside. I wanted to understand people, whatever that took.



My homework began the next morning before breakfast as I was approaching the bathroom. The door was ajar, and I saw Mum frowning as she examined herself closely in the mirror. She caught me peeking.

"I must get my hair done. I can't keep these greys at bay any longer. But the cost of highlights... and my credit card's already creaking."

"At least you have hair to worry about," grumbled Dad, half-joking. He joined the bathroom queue behind my eight-year-old brother Aiden, in his new sea-green rugby shirt. "Come on, Mum. I need to go now," he piped up.

Sisu, our beloved cat, darted between Mum's legs and mine, plotting her exit – she knew to scam whenever a whiff of worry filled the air.

Then I had a wild idea. For my essay on 'Understanding people', I could actually write about my family... without telling them, of course!

Who would everyone else in class write about? Celebrities, sports heroes, maybe their neighbours? Mmm. No competition. My family would be much more interesting.

After school that day, I couldn't wait to begin. I poured some fresh grapefruit juice, rushed upstairs and switched on my tablet.

Understanding people. Where to start? With myself or my family? Maybe one would lead to the other.

I decided not to overthink it, gulped down half the glass of juice and began tapping away non-stop, trying to capture the speed of my train of thoughts.

Understanding People through their Stories

Leah Greene. 11th January

Part 1. My Funny Family and I

Mum and Dad fell in love on a boat when they were both 22. I know that sounds very romantic, but I do have a lot of evidence that it's true!

My mum grew up near the great lakes in Killarney, Ireland. And when she began studying to become a midwife, she had to work to pay for it because her family were in debt. So she took a part-time job as crew on one of those little boats that ferry tourists from Ross Castle to

the mysterious island of Innisfallen on Lough Leane, which means 'Lake of Learning'.

My mum loves telling me their story, which becomes more exaggerated every year.

"Your dad was on that little ferry boat one summer and he got clever when it was nearing the island. He clambered up onto his feet to prove how good his balance was on a moving boat, but jumped off too soon before docking and belly-flopped straight into the deep lake. My best friend Chloe and I had to dive in and rescue him as he hadn't tied up his life jacket properly – it was half strangling him!"

That's my mum's version. Dad swears he didn't need rescuing. That says a lot about their different characters.

Nearly drowning in a lake is a pretty dramatic way to get to meet someone for the first time. Anyway, Dad's a slow burner. When he returned the next summer to Killarney, it was love at second sight. Those warm summer breezes by the lake intoxicate people. He proposed to my mum in the Abbey ruins on that island, and a year later I came into the world.

Their stories help me understand why my mum worries a lot about money and why my dad is afraid of water. And I get why they both love being out in nature and discovering secret places... the lakes and haunted sites around Killarney are full of unsolved mysteries.

I had to wait five and a half years to get a brother. I'd always wanted a brother who I could spoil and tell scary stories to.

Aiden was a quiet baby and would spend hours staring into space... until he learnt to walk. Then he became an expert in knocking things off coffee tables and taking apart every piece of equipment he could find – especially alarm clocks for some reason. Now I understand why he already sees himself as the greatest scientist on earth.

I also understand where my looks come from. It seems that my sandy blonde hair comes from my dad's Norwegian father (thank you, Grandad), and my naughty pixie nose and love of the wild comes from my great aunt who was a famous explorer. As for my big ears, I've no idea where they came from or what they're doing there. All this spells mischief, which is where I got the nickname 'Miss Chief' from when I was a child. My nickname didn't last long, but the mischief did.

I spent my first six years near the lakes, and many magical hours playing among the ruins on the island – just me and my wild imagination. I was there to protect the island from pirates with sharp swords and tourists leaving rubbish. I remember when I was only six, I spotted a man dumping a bottle, plastic cutlery and a used paper plate and then walking right off. I ran up to him and shouted, "Who are you leaving that for, mister?" This was my little world, and no one was going to spoil it.

It makes me understand my love of adventure books and why I'm always trying to find ways to protect the planet and people who can't defend themselves.

Since we moved near Trent Park in North London seven years ago, the Japanese Water Garden near the centre of the park has become my new island. That's where I met my best friend, Taka. We both used to love running across the wooden bridges and hanging upside down from the rails. We even tried to swim in the ponds there during a summer heatwave and catch little fish with our hands – we didn't, but we loved cooling off and getting muddy. Even then, though, I realised we were very different.

She was the bold, brave and popular one at school. The red streaks on her long, curly hair were a little warning sign that she was not to be messed with. Whereas I was often to be found eating lunch on my own or reading at the back of the library. It's changed a bit though. I'm still the quieter one, but much more outspoken in class now.

Everyone says we're like sisters. It's in the stars too – Aries and Librans are sister signs. My mum thinks our differences make us much more interesting. She told me that, "Quiet folk and chatty folk mix well. They each have something the other needs."

That makes me think that different people don't need to fight each other about being different. They can enjoy their differences and learn from them.

Most adults, who believe that they really get me, usually describe me as 'precocious'. They use that label to criticise me in different ways: either, 'she's gotten too big

for her boots since she became the under-15's school spelling bee champ'; or, 'she uses way too many long words for her age'; or, 'she's unusually cute and clever for someone who's so weird'.

So basically, they don't get me at all. How can you understand a person if you squeeze them into a tiny box containing one word, like 'weird'? Boxing is easy and understanding is not.

And that's the whole point, I think. We don't understand people because we're always assuming that we do.

The essay felt alive. And until now, I hadn't realised that this was how I thought about people, including myself. I'd forgotten to mention Uncle Jake though, but he'd never find out.

I twirled one of my braids between my fingers, wondering how to continue. I had zero ideas for Part 2. So I read Part 1 out loud.

'Mmm...' I wondered, 'this is beginning to sound more like an essay about myself'. And as much as I didn't believe that adults understood me at all, it left me doubting how much I understood myself. That thought turned my whole brain inside out. Understanding myself was something I'd never consciously tried to do before.

A little volcano then erupted in my head. A volcano called 'Maia'! Why hadn't it even crossed my mind until now? That's it! If anyone on this planet understands human beings, it's Maia. She's the coolest, wisest adult I've ever met and a close family friend.

Part 2 was now downloading super-fast into my head, and I had to start writing and stop thinking.

Understanding People through their Stories

Leah Greene. 11th January

Part 2. Maia at the beach

“Understanding other people depends on how much you understand yourself. Every single relationship you build with other people depends on your relationship with yourself.”

That was Maia’s wise advice to me once.

She used to teach a philosophy course at university, but eventually gave it up because she said that the course was so stuck in the past that she feared her students would get stuck there too. She tried to change things, but change wasn’t in the uni’s philosophy.

Philosophy means ‘love of wisdom’ and Maia explained to me that, “You don’t have to study famous men in Ancient Greece, Rome or anywhere else to find wisdom. Just speak to a taxi driver, tour guide, parent, farmer, child... or listen to yourself speak sometimes. Everyone is a born philosopher. Maybe they don’t know it yet.”

I think that Maia should be a world leader – but that’s just my view. And I want to share a snapshot of her story because she understands people like no one else.

My parents met Maia when I was about seven. We were on holiday on the island of Crete, and she was staying

in the same hotel writing a book about the meaning of dreams.

I remember we were all on the beach one day, and I was crying because I was terrified of going into the sea. Other children around were pointing at me and laughing. Mum told me that Maia was standing nearby, saw me crying and ran straight into the sea, shouting out madly, "It's sooooo cold. But I love the wobbly waves!" Apparently, I switched from crying to shrieking laughter in seconds.

Maia looked so silly diving into the water with an oversized orange baseball cap on, which of course flew straight off with the first foaming wave! A few minutes later she ran out of the water smiling mischievously, with seaweed dripping from her hair.

My parents and Maia then got chatting, while I started walking down to the shore on my own, and then, step by step, into the cold sea – right up to my elbows. I'll never forget those mixed feelings of danger, joy and daring. I felt proud of myself and very happy that my parents didn't stop me – although they were watching through the back of their heads, of course!

Now I understand what Maia was trying to do; in being silly and then charging into the sea, she was trying to get me to relax and make it easier for me to overcome my fears. She gave me the courage to dare to do something that was so challenging at the time. She really understood me.

Since then, she's been such a bright light in my life, especially during some very lonely times. Like when Taka was off sick for a month and there was only one other girl at school I could talk to.

Maia would remind me that you may feel very lonely, but you're never alone. "You can always be friends with yourself, Leah, and with the natural worlds."

Now I enjoy being on my own sometimes. And when I am, I try to clear my mind of regrets and other clutter... like tidying the mess on my bedroom desk. Sorting through stuff helps me unwind.

So, I think Maia has been helping me to understand myself better – not by telling me how I should think, but by showing me other ways to think.

This all flowed out in one go, as effortless and fun as skimming stones across a lake – once you get the hang of it. I was nervous, though, that Mr Eaton would find my essay too personal or emotional. "Essays need to be eminently logical," as he loved to put it.

Concentrating so much on this essay had left me exhausted. Understanding is hard work, I realised. Yet I'd enjoyed digging deeper and uncovering things about people that could never be found on the surface.

As I was switching off my tablet, the word 'understand' suddenly shape-shifted in my head, broke in two and came out as, 'under stand' and 'stand under'. That was another clue, but my brain was overheating now.

Not to gloat on it, but when we all got our essays back, I found out that Mr Eaton had given mine the highest mark. “You are beginning to understand what motivates people to do what they do, Leah,” he announced to the class. “And you’re right, it’s in their stories. Your essay demonstrates a lot of insight for a teenager.”

Although the ‘for a teenager’ bit made me cringe, it didn’t last long. I was so happy to be recognised, and right after that, I became Miss Popular in class. Even everyone’s best friend, Lina Hart, who’d never once spoken to me, tried to get chatty. Well, all that didn’t last for more than a few days, of course, but from then on, Mr Eaton stopped treating me like some stropgy girl with an attitude problem.

There was still something though about ‘understanding people’ which got right under my skin. It felt like I’d already begun writing another essay in my head.

I spent both afternoons that weekend closeted in my bedroom, writing, doodling and not wanting to speak with anyone, except for Taka, who called on Saturday.

“Still obsessed with that essay, Leah?”

“Well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“But it’s not school homework anymore. It’s over. Done. Let it go!”

“It was never homework for me in the first place. Mr Eaton opened this small window and now it’s like... I’ve got to understand what motivates people. I mean... does that make any sense?”

“I’m not sure. All this seems to be making you super-serious.”

“Oh. Sorry. I hope it’s not making me boring to be around. It’s just that this essay writing is making me happy...”

“Well, that’s alright then. And don’t worry. You’re anything but boring... although you definitely need to understand yourself better!” she cackled.

I went back to scribbling away and watching people hurrying past on the street below, each with their peculiar walks. I was consciously searching for more clues, but to what?

Then a funny memory of Mr Eaton appeared. Since speaking openly about his illness, he'd become much more mellow and free. I remembered him standing on a chair in class almost singing the whole of Hamlet's brilliant speech, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy..."

He then jumped down gracefully and gestured us to gather around him, and with the air of a wizard casting spells, he said, "So find out the mysteries of heaven and earth. Find out where you've come from... where your real home is."

Mysteries? Home? My home was in Stafford Close. He was obviously talking about some other home. What was he trying to say?

I began drifting away into a daydream about 'home' as haunting sounds of Mum's favourite cello suite – a famous one by Bach – floated up from one of our neighbours. I saw myself as a child playing with emerald green dragonflies by the shores of the lakes in Killarney. Other images came into view, in vivid colours, full screen, with surround sound of birdsong, people's voices and folk music.

I was transported to my last birthday on the island. There was 'Old Man Matty', who was one of the boat crew, my mum and Chloe, plus her daughter who was a year older than me. Dad was at home, looking after baby Aiden.

Mum loves Irish folk songs and with Matty on mandolin, we all sang our hearts out and ate way too much soda bread pudding.

There was a strange magic in the air that day, like we were being joined by dancing spirits or the ghosts of monks and choirs from hundreds of years ago. Before we left on the boat, Mum suddenly

stopped. She stretched out her hands like she was trying to touch the air and whispered, “Feel the presence.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant, but my hands and cheeks went ice-cold and tingled with some kind of electricity.

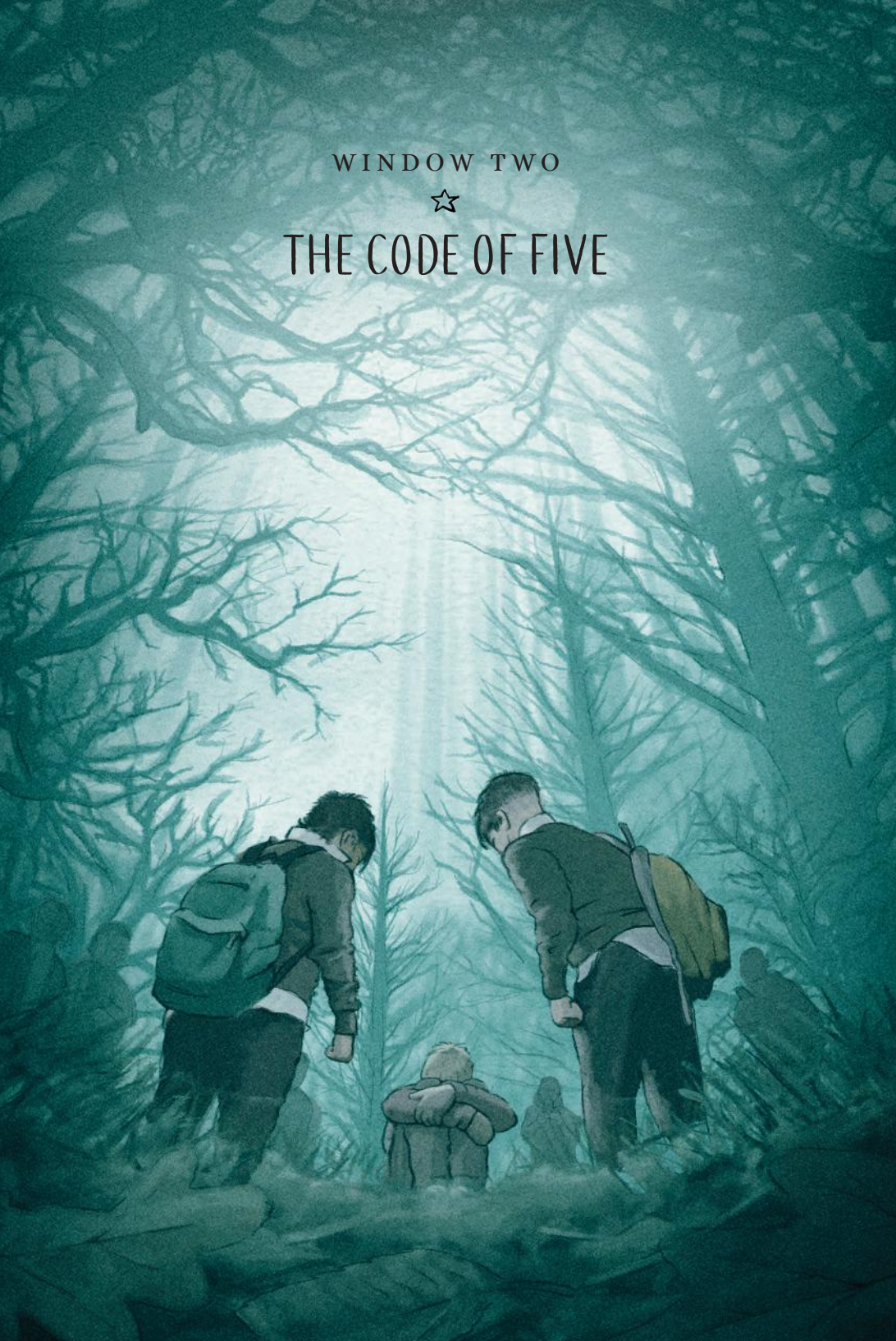
Chloe felt it too. “The fairies and elves are sleeping, like stars hidden by the daylight – unseen, yet present. I wonder what illumined people once lived on this island, surrounded by these enchanting waters. A powerful event has happened here.”

She turned pale, and I began to see a faint glow of purple around her head and a shimmer of silver pass over her face.

The cello music became louder and I woke up in the present. Wherever my daydream had taken me, I knew that I’d experienced one of those mysteries in heaven and on earth which Mr Eaton had told us to search for.

And I felt part of the mystery. Because I realised there was so much that I still needed to understand about people, especially myself.

WINDOW TWO
☆
THE CODE OF FIVE



The Code Of Five

Mr Eaton retired a few weeks after his illness was sadly diagnosed as terminal. He wrote this amazing letter to our class, saying how much he'd learnt from us and apologising again for being too strict. "Now I'm going to visit the birthplaces of every one of my favourite English poets," he wrote. "That will be heaven for me."

It was a farewell letter, and when the Deputy Head read it out, a rush of emotion swept the classroom and touched everyone, even Ed. I watched him carefully out of the corner of my eye as he tried to make out he was scratching an itch on his eyebrow – but he was cleverly using his thumb to wipe away his tears. We were all going to miss Mr Eaton.

Taka wasn't in my class, so I told her the story at lunchtime.

"He might die soon, maybe months. It's so sad. But he's going travelling around England now to visit..."

I put the brakes on, seeing Taka grimace.

"I hate talking about death. Have you forgotten what I went

through last year? Allana should never have died in that car accident.”

“Sorry, Taka. I know. Your cousin was so young... I’m sorry.”

She looked away and the moment passed. But there was a thirst in me to discover what dying was really about. Some adults were still telling me that I was too young to understand. So why did they always have a look of fear when I asked? That didn’t seem natural to me, but dying somehow did.

That evening, my mum helped me write a letter to Mr Eaton.

Dear Mr Eaton,

Writing that essay you gave us on ‘Understanding people’ has been life-changing for me. I know that sounds dramatic, but it’s true. I’m grateful you taught us to think for ourselves and to always be open to what we don’t yet know.

You’ve inspired me to want to discover what else exists ‘in heaven and earth’ and where I’ve come from. I feel like I’ve just begun and am now reading Hamlet – although I haven’t got past the first few paragraphs yet. Shakespeare’s language is another mystery!

Enjoy your travels. You will always be a great teacher.

With my best wishes,

Leah Greene

After I’d given the letter to the Deputy Head, I was overcome with an unexpected sense of having outgrown school... or maybe needing to think about it in a fresh way. It left me with a very new thought – if I was to understand people better, maybe I should try to look a bit differently at the teachers and students who I mix with at school.

That thought was a bit depressing, though, because Taka is my only real friend there. And for me, our school is only exciting when there's an arts and crafts project, a sports day or a special field trip to somewhere far away. Otherwise, it's as annoying as our history teacher, Mrs Maynard – talking down to students with her fake posh accent is bad enough, but banging on about her grandmother who married a royal no one's ever heard of... why does she keep doing that?

Our art teacher, Mr Kowalski, is easier to understand. He does everything in slow motion and tells us amazing stories about painting on his own near the edge of cliffs. If things are less than perfect, however, his bottom lip starts twitching and he looks like he might burst out crying.

Mind you, I'm a bit of a perfectionist too, especially about my braiding techniques. I do French braids, fishtails, braided ponytails, buns, the lot. I enjoy doing plaited twin tails for school, as that seems to annoy people who think they look childish. They mock me by calling them 'girly pigtails', but that just makes me laugh.

I do get on with a few of the teachers and students, but I can't understand why I get picked on a lot. It's like Anunda and her best friend, Rhianna, who've never forgiven me for fouling them both in a school football match. I told them I was only going for the ball, but Rhianna growled, "Yeah, right. They all say that, don't they?"

They threatened to get me after school, but so far, they've never dared gang up on me because they know Taka would come after them. Other girls aren't so lucky.

Looking at people differently was going to be a steep uphill climb.



One afternoon during that spring school term, Taka and I were taking a longer route home through Trent Park. There was a path

halfway that led to a stream, where we sometimes bumped into Aiden and his mates. On this afternoon, however, as we got closer to that path, we heard a commotion and scuffled noises coming from behind a clump of trees on the other side.

I heard a boy cry out. We both ran, full speed. My God, it was Aiden.

“Leave me alone! Please. Let go.”

“You’re a waste of space. Little turd. What a loser,” someone was shouting menacingly.

As we reached the trees, there was a bunch of teenagers just hanging out and doing nothing except watching Aiden getting beaten up. “Stop!” I shouted out furiously. But the two Bentoni brothers, who we instantly recognised from behind, had already shoved Aiden to the ground. His short, skinny body rolled over and thudded hard against a tree trunk. They were about to kick him, but by this time Taka, me and another girl called Ava had already rushed over to stand in their way.

The Bentonis laughed viciously. “Oops. Girls to the rescue. What a wimp.” They slinked off, turning around at one point to show their big smirking faces to the crowd.

I snarled and swore loudly at everyone standing around as we lifted Aiden carefully to his feet. He was struggling not to cry.

“I’m okay. Don’t make a fuss.”

“Aiden, you’re bleeding. You’ve got a cut across your forehead and cheek. And you must be bruised all over.”

He let me wipe the blood from his face with a tissue as he pressed around his ribs.

“Just bruised. Not much pain. It’s okay.”

His hands were trembling though, as he wheezed and coughed. He sat down, looking utterly dejected. I guessed this wasn’t the first time.

“We need to go to the police,” insisted Taka.

“No way. They’ll make me pay for it at school.”

I took his hand, but he snatched it back.

“How long has this been going on for?” I asked.

“I’m off.”

“Aiden!”

“Forget it. And don’t say a word to Mum or Dad.”

He limped forward a few steps, wincing, and then managed to sprint away.

The Bentonis had a bad reputation in this area. Even older students in my school tried to avoid them.

Ava was in Aiden’s class and told us some of what had been going on. “I reported them once for kicking and punching another boy in the playground. They enjoy picking on people who they think are weak or uncool... almost got expelled for it once. They always look angry and ready to take it out on anyone they don’t like. I’ve seen Aiden run away from them before. I didn’t know he was your brother.”

“Yes. Thanks, Ava. I’ve got to go.”

“Call me if you need me,” cried Taka, as I raced off.

When I got home, I rushed up to Aiden’s room doing my best to remain calm. I was already calculating how to take revenge on the Bentonis when I remembered Maia calling revenge ‘a fool’s game’. I deleted all my thoughts. My brother simply needed me now.

“Aiden!” I called out. “We need to talk about this. Come on.”

Nothing. Seconds flew past. I called again. Eventually, he opened the door a fraction and peered through the gap, looking despondent.

“Shhh. Dad’s going to hear.”

“What’s been going on?”

Aiden stepped back and as I came in, he slumped down on the

floor in the corner, pressing his head into his knees. I waited, but he said nothing. So I sat down opposite him.

"Aiden. Let me check your wounds."

"Shhh. Keep your voice down. I washed the blood off. Put two bandages on. The bruises don't really show yet."

"Okay, but... look, you need to tell me... what's been happening?"

Aiden hesitated. I waited again. He finally opened up and spoke shakily about the name-calling, shoving and kicking which the Bentonis had been doing to him and two of his classmates since term began. I was burning inside. It was painful to hear. At least he felt he could confide in me, but what could I say or do to help him?

Maia had shown me how she would sit down with a blank sheet of paper whenever she was facing a big challenge. She would make notes and sketch out the bigger picture of what was going on and then place herself in it. "Always start impersonal first. Then personal. Otherwise, all you have is your view, not the overview," she'd explained.

I understood that, but the problem in this case was that I didn't know what the bigger picture was. Anyway, this was my brother. Of course it was personal.

After Aiden finished talking, I caught the thread of an idea. Could my essay help solve this?

Still struggling to keep cool, I said, "I think most bullies are insecure people who try to act strong by picking on someone smaller than them."

"But I *am* smaller than them," Aiden mumbled.

"They're also weak. Bullies are always trying to prove themselves, which only weak people do."

"Yes. But they beat people up badly," said Aiden, now getting teary. I began to lose the plot here and my only thought was to

storm into his Head Teacher's office the next day and demand that she lock them both up in a dark cell.

I tried another tack.

"Look, Aiden. I heard the Bentonis live with their stepfather who's a control freak. I know that's no excuse, but behind their anger and boasting, maybe they're just looking for respect or attention?"

"So now you want me to make friends with them?" he fumed.

"I'm sorry," I said, realising that I was making things worse. "I know it hurts."

I so didn't want my brother to feel this fear. I closed my eyes and took in a deep, long breath.

"Some animals, like dogs, smell fear. Bullies do too, so they attack... I mean, you remember Dad explaining that to us once?"

Aiden nodded reluctantly, but then snapped, "I told you not to tell Dad or Mum."

"It's okay. I haven't. But you must."

"Yeah, but you didn't tell them when it happened to you once."

"Well, I was wrong... and anyway, as soon as I found out the name of that girl who'd been leaving those hate notes for me in the classroom, I reported her to the Deputy. Plus, Taka always has my back. If anyone is picking on me, she somehow miraculously appears around a corner or at the end of a long corridor. She has this way of standing tall and looking mean, which backs off the bullies big time."

I stopped. Aiden's face had scrunched up. He wasn't going to take in another word. I realised my big mistake – Aiden didn't have a friend like Taka and my little speech had just made it worse, again.

I needed to put my essay into practice differently and understand my brother, not just bullies.

“Aiden. I’m with you. I understand your fear of bullies. It’s okay, you’ve got me. You’re not alone. I’ve got your back. This is going to stop.”

I meant it.

Aiden swallowed hard.

“Look, I know Mum’s out for an hour, but why don’t we go and talk to Dad right now? Yes?”

I sensed Aiden shudder inside. Clutching his ribs, he followed grudgingly behind me as I tracked Dad’s voice to the kitchen, where I overheard him finishing a work call.

Dad was puzzled at the hasty entrance of the two of us, standing side by side like we were a delegation from the local youth club. Aiden’s bandaged forehead and the dirt marks all over his shirt sounded the alarm as Dad’s eyebrows arched high. I waited to give Aiden the space to tell his story, which he did in graphic detail.

When he described the first bullying incident, Dad looked distraught. As Aiden went on, Dad’s face sank in horror as he grasped the extent of what had been happening. He clasped his hands tightly.

By the end, Aiden was choking up and Dad went over and hugged him like he’d never let him go. “I’m truly sorry you’ve had to go through this. It’s devastating to hear. But I’m very relieved that you’ve told me. And I know what I need to do before we go any further.”

Dad grabbed his phone and ran straight out of the kitchen and into the back garden. Baaamm! The door slammed shut.

“Let’s eavesdrop,” I whispered, pointing to the kitchen window. Aiden discreetly opened it.

“No. I can’t wait. Please tell her it’s urgent,” we overheard Dad arguing. “She needs to be aware of how bad the bullying is getting at her school. She needs to know about my son.”

Dad rarely raises his voice, but when he was speaking, we were

worried that both neighbours and half the road would hear every word. Right afterwards, he came back into the kitchen looking satisfied but shaken.

“It’s going to be okay, Aiden. Please, don’t worry. I spoke to the Deputy Head. She’s on the case right now, not only for you. There are others. Anyway, do you want to have a chat about it?”

I’ll never forget that talk between my brother and Dad. It was as if each word was meant for me too. He didn’t offer Aiden a theory or tips on bullying. He offered his experience.

“Remember when I was working as a construction manager on big building sites in central London? Well, on one major contract, I was running a team of over twenty tough men and women, under the pressure of deadlines. I had to break up several fights and even got threatened physically myself.

“After six months of this, I’d absolutely had enough. So, I developed what I called a ‘Code of Five’ and trained all my teams in it. I can still recall it word for word:

- 1. Avoid dangerous situations, if you can.**
- 2. Don’t let anyone wind you up.**
- 3. Breathe deeply, stay calm, get help.**
- 4. Know what you won’t do.**
- 5. Learn from every challenge.**

“This ‘Code of Five’ was a bit of a lifesaver for me and my teams. It might help you a lot. You can find your own, too.”

Dad wasn’t telling Aiden or me exactly what to do, but he was certainly showing us what not to do. Aiden sighed, relaxed his shoulders, and sat upright in his chair. At the same time, I could feel my spine straighten and this surge of strength pulse through me.

Over the following week, I noticed that something had toughened up in Aiden.

On the Friday after school, Taka and I were wandering through the park when we saw Ava striding towards us.

“Leah, I wanted to tell you about your brother at school today.”

“What?” I asked as a wave of anxiety rippled through me.

“Well, I watched him walking down the main school corridor this morning. I was at the other end, only a couple of metres away from the Bentonis who were lurking there. There were no teachers around, and I knew they were going to go for him.

“I was about to step in, but Aiden was strolling towards them with this amazing air of confidence. He didn’t stoop or look down at his shoes. When he got closer to them, he looked both brothers straight in the eye for a few seconds and walked off.

“You should’ve seen the surprise on their faces. One of them swore at him, but they never laid a hand on him.”

I was so relieved and thanked Ava for her care. Taka hugged me close. “Whatever happens in the future, your brother’s become a lot braver and smarter at outfoxing the foxes.” I glowed with pride.

Just before half-term, the Bentonis received a final warning. When we told Dad about it, he smiled. “Well, just remember that the Bentonis are not your enemies. Creating enemies is a complete waste of energy and time. You could spend that time with your friends, yes?

“People who feel inferior often create enemies. That’s what bullies do. It makes them feel superior.”

I wrote Dad’s words below his ‘Code of Five’ and made it into a little card – I carried it in my backpack for whenever I needed to remind myself. This entire experience had helped me become a little calmer and more in control of my own reactions.

What felt urgent now, though, was to become more confident in myself... something which came so naturally to Taka. I knew that I was still a kind of nervy girl and too self-conscious, but I could feel that was changing.

Then, as if something in heaven or on earth had been listening in, an awkward situation spun my thinking 180 degrees.

I was waiting for Taka by the gates after school had finished, and saw her in the distance chatting with a little group in front of the library entrance. I began walking over, and as I got nearer, I heard her cracking jokes and winding up the boys, obviously unaware that I'd already been waiting quite a while for her.

I stopped a few metres away and sensed this nasty storm of jealousy and irritation brewing up inside me. I was about to make a dash for the gates, but in the next instant, Taka spotted me.

"Hey, Leah. Come and join us. We're just joking about the new Head Teacher and her ridiculously outdated navy-blue outfit. Power dressing it is not!" They all sniggered, but I would have sprinted away if I could have. I didn't fit in and didn't want to.

"Got to get home now, Taka," were the only words I could manage, as I broke out in a raw blush of embarrassment. My face was almost burning as I turned to leave.

"Oh, okay. I'll say goodbye then to this sad little bunch of teacher's pets!" They all let out another roar of laughter.

As we walked out of the school, Taka faced me with a look of sheer confusion.

"I don't get it, Leah. What's up with you?"

"Nothing. Really... I mean, well, it's just that you always seem so confident around everyone, even the boys. And I..."

"Don't compare us, Leah. You know we're very different," she tutted. "You don't need to be like me. Don't forget that I'm a fiery Aries and you're a cool Libran! Remember what your Uncle Jake told us about that? I barge straight in on things, and you tiptoe carefully around the edges.

"Anyway, I'm not as confident as you think."

"Really?"

“Well... yes. I mean, I’d like to trust myself more.”

“What’s that got to do with being confident?”

“A lot. You know my mum studied English Lit at uni, and she told me once that the word ‘confidence’ comes from Latin. It means, ‘with trust’. So she often reminds me that if I want to be more confident, I need to trust myself more.”

“Wow. Trust. That’s so strange. I’ve been thinking for weeks that I need to trust myself more.”

“Well, start now!” she teased, laughing to herself.

My face had cooled down, and the stress began to drain out of my body. I skipped around her, feeling a ton lighter.

“Good to see you a bit less serious, Leah!”

When I got home afterwards, I went straight down the narrow side entrance and out onto the small, square lawn in our back garden. I took off my shoes, lay down, and let my fingers comb through the crisp, fresh grass. A parade of brilliant white clouds drifted slowly overhead.

Maybe I was beginning to understand more about why people do what they do. I was certainly starting to understand more about the world I was growing up in. And as those clouds disappeared from view and blue space opened overhead, this warm sensation of calm washed over me.

I had a picture of me standing on a wide pathway that led into a vast forest... like I was about to go on a journey into the unknown. All I had was myself. But now I understood myself a little better.

Everything had gone quiet.

I stood up, tall. With arms reaching upwards and feet wide apart, I made a star shape with my body.

Feeling a rush of strength, I heard myself say, “My name is Leah.”

I don’t know why, but it made me feel like I was really worth something.