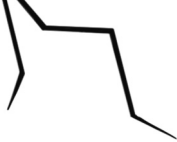


One

Mum wasn't always this way. Though without a TARDIS, I can see why you might find that hard to believe. You just see what's in front of you. Like people walk along the beach and they'll look up and spot The Lookout. Rising tall and uneven – teetering – right at the edge of the cliff. And their very first thought is: *Blimey, that house is going to topple any minute!* I swear I see those exact words written on their faces. Sheer fear. That our pebbledash cream walls, our stained slate roof might suddenly fall. Flatten



them against the sand, like Dorothy's house landing on the Wicked Witch of the East. When actually – things take much longer to fall than that, right?

“Noah! Answer me: Rice Krispies or Cheerios?”

You have to shout a question to Noah, and you have to shout it at least four times. Before he emerges from deep inside his head, like some hibernating hedgehog blinking into the light – *Someone wants me?* Away with the fairies, Dad calls it, when Noah glazes over like he's fixed to a phone. Except Noah never needs a screen.

“Huh?” He lifts his eyes finally. They look bloodshot and swollen. I heard him creep downstairs again last night.

“*Krispies* or *Cheerios*?” I shake both boxes impatiently. I don't even know why I give him the choice.

Noah mumbles, “Krispies,” in a tone like it's the obvious answer. When last week all he ate was Cheerios. He starts studying me as I pour him a bowl, slop in milk.

“Did you hear it last ni—?” he asks carefully.

“*No!*” I say, before he can finish the question, rolling my eyes for extra measure.


“You really didn't hear anything?” Noah sits back, incredulous, wedging both hands in his thick red hair so it stands to attention.

“Uh huh, that's what ‘no’ means,” I tell him, ignoring the niggle in my tummy. What I heard, I remind myself stiffly, are the noises any ancient house by the sea makes: gulls shriek, radiators tick, waves crash, beams creak.

“You can shape sounds into whatever you want,” I tell him in the grown-up, sing-song voice I use a lot lately. “Like the way you can make star signs fit your life.” Which makes me think briefly of Asha (when I'm really trying my best not to), checking hers every day.

“I'm not making it up.” Noah pulls his sulky face. All eyebrows and bottom lip.

I shrug dismissively and turn to put the milk back. I've decided it's best not to give him a “platform”. That's the posh word this pamphlet in the school library used. All right, so the pamphlet was about OCD and phobias and stuff. But I reckon it'll have the



same result. If I don't encourage Noah's fantasies, if he's no one to share them with, hopefully he'll stop having them altogether.

"Aw, *Noah*, will you give off night raiding," I groan, staring into the empty fridge. "I'll have to shop again now!"

"I haven't; it's not me!" Noah complains. Before we both glance up at the familiar creaking sounds above. The house's way of saying: *she's awake at last*. I zip back to the cluttered kitchen counter: kettle for tea, bread in toaster; while I wait: load dishwasher, pack lunches.


"Eat!" I remind Noah what he's supposed to be doing as I rush out with a mug of milky tea and some heavily buttered toast. Calling back, "You don't want to be late," because it's something Mum would say. The Other Mum that is. The one you'd need a TARDIS to know about.

I slow my pace only when I've passed through our tiled, dim alleyway of a hall and I'm facing the stairs alongside our many-greats-grandfather clock. It started after Dad upped and left, I suppose, so

that'll be four months and two days ago. (I can give you hours if you want.) I started worrying about our house. Like, really worrying. Just like Dad used to. He says old houses have voices. Now all I hear are The Lookout's creaks and groans whenever we move. Like every tread I take, up the wonky stairs, or across the uneven wooden floors above, gives it pain.

It's called The Lookout because our ancestor, Tom Walker, who built it, lit his lantern to warn ships about the rocks below. But I like to think it's because it takes care of us. Which is why it's imperative! Quintessential! Unequivocal! And every other big word! That I look after it back. So I climb daintily, like it's some test and if I fail monsters will get me – moving my feet to the part of the stairs I know are more solid; putting most of my weight on the scratched wooden bannister. Even though the extra strain in my arms makes me think of being little and on Dad's back on walks; trying my best to be as light as possible so he won't remember he says I'm getting too heavy to be carried.

The usual small animal noises are coming from



the bathroom up on the landing. It's where Mum does most of her crying. I think she reckons if she runs the sink we won't hear. I pause outside; a weak hand to the door. Then I carry on. Into Mum's bedroom, where it's still night-time and it smells of oversleeping and stale breath; musty, like you get in charity shops.

I make space for the tea and toast on her cluttered bedside table, and quickly reach to draw back the curtain for, *hooray, light*. Hurriedly yank open the wonky window: an impatient burst of cold air rushes in, like it's been waiting pressed up against the glass all night. The sea gets busy; salt and seaweed set to work on the stuffiness; the rush and smash of waves fill the silence. I'm watching a kestrel hovering motionless above the cliff edge and wondering how it stays so still, when there's a creak of floorboard; a sniff; a sigh. And Mum appears in the doorway.

"Faith, I keep telling you, you don't need to bring me my breakfast, love." Her voice – it's nothing like it used to be either. The sound of it makes my insides feel empty. It's too whispery and feathery, like one cough or a sneeze and it'll fly away completely.

And – *err, yes, I do*, otherwise she doesn't eat.

"Mmm, yum," she says, coming over to take a mouse bite of toast, her appreciation-smile looking as exhausted as her eyes and bones. She has on the same pair of Dad's old blue pyjamas. She rarely gets dressed these days. She's forever saying, "I'll get up soon." *Yeah, right*. She's been in bed so long that the back of her hair's a permanent nest. Her skin's starting to look as grey as the sea mist outside.

She climbs back under the covers while I tell her I need money to buy food later. I try to keep my eyes from drifting to the side where Dad used to sleep. To his bedside table, where his reading glasses are still sitting on top of his book: *Dorset Wreckers*, whoever they are.

"Noah can come home by himself," I say, adding an impatient, "Lots of Year Fives walk back alone," when she makes a groaning sound.

"They all live right in town, not at the edge of it," Mum says, fumbling for her credit card from her purse. She holds my eyes as I take it. Hers are watery. "I think I heard Noah going downstairs again in the



night,” she says timidly.

I look away to roll my eyes. *Hold the front page.* Noah’s been going down to the cellar *every* night, for the past two weeks or so. I know that, because I’m the one who has to go out and shout, “Back to bed!” Yeah, OK, so lately, the one who pulls her covers over her head and ignores him. I hate going anywhere near the cellar, especially at night, especially after Dad told us it’s not *safe* to go down there!

Then why don’t you do something to stop him? Mean Me wants to tell her. Except I won’t, because I’m already fearing what comes next.

“Maybe you and Noah should go and stay with your Uncle Art and Auntie Val after all.”

My heart turns into a fist. I glance back at the perfectly-still kestrel and suck in a deep breath of salt and seaweed. I’ve got to play this right. Talking about it last week ended with me shouting and Mum sobbing uncontrollably.


“I told you, we don’t need them. Noah and I’ve got everything covered.” I swallow back a stream of acid that enters my mouth. “I’ll stop Noah getting up in

the night, OK? Just don’t even go speaking to Uncle Art!”

Uncle Art can’t know Mum’s in bed all day. He can’t know she’s wearing the same pair of pyjamas for weeks on end. He definitely can’t find out about Noah hearing weird voices in the cellar. My chest’s getting tight. He can’t know I’m doing all the work: cooking, washing, fixing. He’ll use it as an excuse. I know he will. A coldness spreads over my body that doesn’t come from the open window. Uncle Art is just waiting for a reason to get us out of here and have The Lookout condemned.

When I look back again, Mum’s biting her lip hard, like I do when I want to stop myself from crying. “I can’t ... can’t ... can’t,” she starts telling the bedspread. It’s something else she’s forever saying. *You can’t* what? Mean Me nearly snaps back, a sudden blaze of anger heating my stomach. *Can’t work out the square root of pi? Can’t wait to watch Strictly? Can’t bear Facebook?*

“Faith?” Mum pleads, like she can hear inside my head.



I drop my chin to my chest and mumble, “Promise you won’t call Uncle Art.”

The waves get louder, till she finally whispers, “OK, I promise,” and the coiled snake that lives in my stomach these days settles down again. I start being as busy as the sea. Showing her we can manage very well without Uncle Art and Aunty Val, thank you very much. I pick up a crusty cardy from the floor, a mug of yesterday’s tea; make a tower of some paperbacks. Before I take quick, soft steps across the floorboards to the door, with a la-di-da, how-responsible-am-I, “Can’t be late for school!”

“Send Noah up for a goodbye kiss,” I hear Mum call out as I reach the stairs. Even shouting, her voice stays fragile and flimsy. Like she’s miles away or sinking fast into quicksand. Whenever I try to remember the sound of her old voice, the way she used to belly-laugh, and sing daft songs and holler “Dinner!” – even the way she’d argue with Dad in the months before he left – I can’t. Maybe you only hear what’s in front of you too.

I’m back downstairs with our many-greats-

grandfather clock, when I start to feel dizzy. Something’s coaxing my stomach snake. I press my hand against the clock’s solid shiny wood to steady myself. It was passed down with The Lookout to our great-greats over three centuries. “And what about the many-great grandmothers?” Old Mum used to say. The fact The Lookout wasn’t passed to women, she said, was another reason to leave. Before Dad went, all she did was list reasons to go (“*It’s too isolated!*” “*Too cold!*” “*Too unfixable!*”). I hear Dad argue back (“*It’s my home!*” “*I can fix it!*”).

My stomach snake slinks upwards through my chest. I pincer my lips and fix my mind on the clock’s creamy-white face instead – the pastel picture above the numerals that I’ve always loved. It’s of an old house at sunset, leaning over the top of a cliff while a ship passes below. It never tells the time. The family story goes that ancestor Tom Walker stopped it working the day his daughter died. Removed the pendulum; threw away the key. I trace a finger where his initials T.W. and an X are carved into the wood. “Not a kiss,” Dad said ages ago when I asked, “but