



LARRY HAYES

ILLUSTRATED BY KATIE ABEY

SIMON & SCHUSTER



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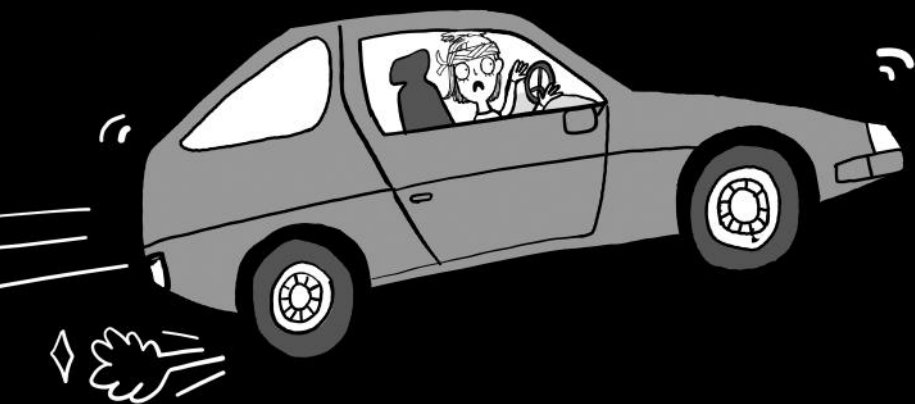
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THE YEAR 2053 FIVE DAYS AFTER OUR WORLD ENDED

It's Day 5 and things are bad.

You're probably wondering what I'm doing here.






My name is Eliza; I'm the one stuck in the car.


The car is floating in space, a million miles from Earth. It's weird, but the radio's still working and I can hear 'Life on Mars?' singing out from one of the speakers.

My baby brother, Johnnie, has got it worse – he's trapped in the boot with our dog and a bomb. And from his high-pitched shriek I can tell he's just spilled his milk on a dehydrated vampire squid that's about to rehydrate and suck away their faces.





You're probably worried about us. You're probably holding your breath, thinking, *What happens when the air runs out?*



But don't worry – never worry, ever. There's no point. I learned this the hard way five days ago.

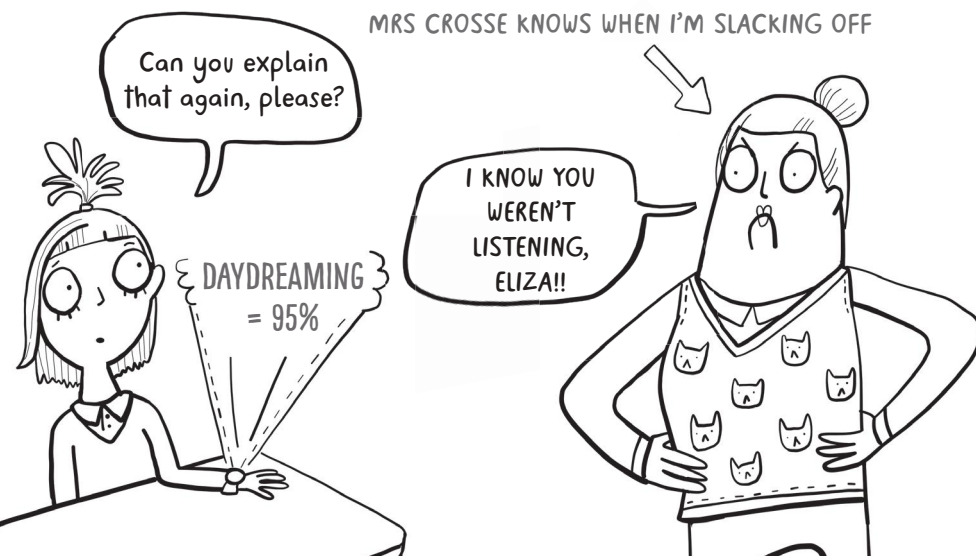


HOW NOT TO WORRY (THE HARD WAY)

I used to worry all the time. About everything.

Life for a kid in the year 2053 is tough. We've got all the old problems that kids have always had to worry about, and then a whole load more NEW problems. In 2053 there's absolutely nowhere to hide.

Teachers can even see what you're *thinking*.



Bullies can bully you *anytime, anywhere*.



Sadie Snickpick (AKA the Butt-Flush Bully) can hack into anything. Even the school's 'smart' toilet, and can flush it whenever she wants.



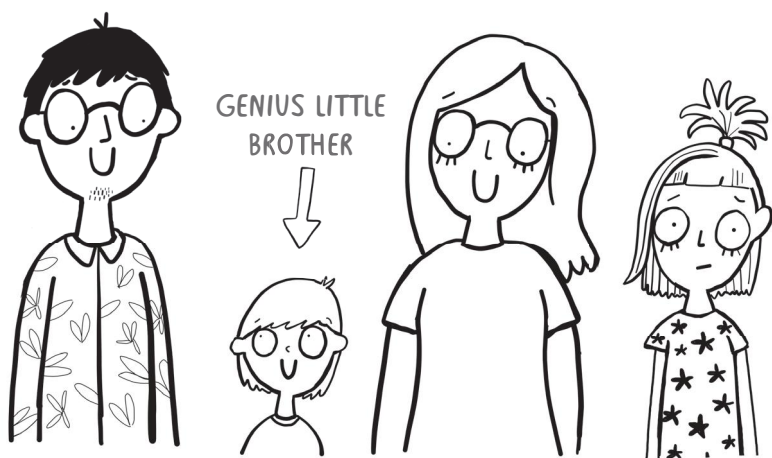
Then there's all the normal stuff that kids have always worried about.

Like, will I die in PE?



MR MURRAY, MY EVIL PE TEACHER, IS TRYING TO KILL ME.

And: is my little brother cleverer than me?



It all adds up to a big fat worry nightmare.

Mum says I've just got a big imagination. You'd think that was a good thing, but I'm a bit *too* good at imagining a catastrophe. She also says I need to think less. Which is, like, the worst advice anyone has ever given anyone.¹



¹ *Don't* believe me? Then don't think of your teacher sitting on this toilet. See, told you.

It never used to be like this. Everything used to be perfect. So I know exactly how bad things have got now.

We live in an old windmill on a cliff that is being eaten by the sea. It makes us the Weird Family but kind of cool at the same time. We have a slide into the sea (which is pretty impressive, but Mum's the only one brave enough to use it) and we have our own beach with a coral reef (Dad built it when our swing fell over the cliff²).

And, once upon a time, my parents were the best parents in the world.

My dad's an inventor; he's got a workshop and everything. He works for a massive company called **No Ahhh Technology**® who do lots of high-tech, ground-breaking, science-y things. And when he was still just a schoolkid, he invented the BIN.

2 Don't ask me how he did it. He spent months tying little bits of coral to the sunken swing and they just kind of grew.

No, not a rubbish bin. A **BIN**. A **B**rain **I**nterface **N**ode.

An amazing bin.

An amazing BIN that's basically a thing you stick in the back of your head that allows your brain to connect to a computer.

AMAZING BIN

VS

RUBBISH BIN

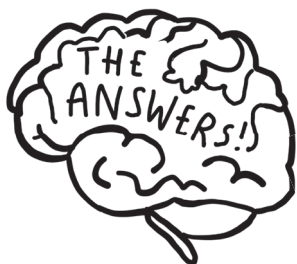


THINGS YOU CAN DO WITH AN AMAZING BIN:



PLAY VIDEO
GAMES WHILE
YOU'RE SUPPOSED
TO BE DOING
YOUR
HOMEWORK

WATCH FUNNY CAT
VIDEOS IN CLASS



CHEAT IN SCHOOL
TESTS



WATCH VIDEOS IN YOUR
SLEEP SO YOU HAVE
SUPER-COOL DREAMS



THINGS YOU CAN DO WITH A RUBBISH BIN:

PUT RUBBISH IN IT

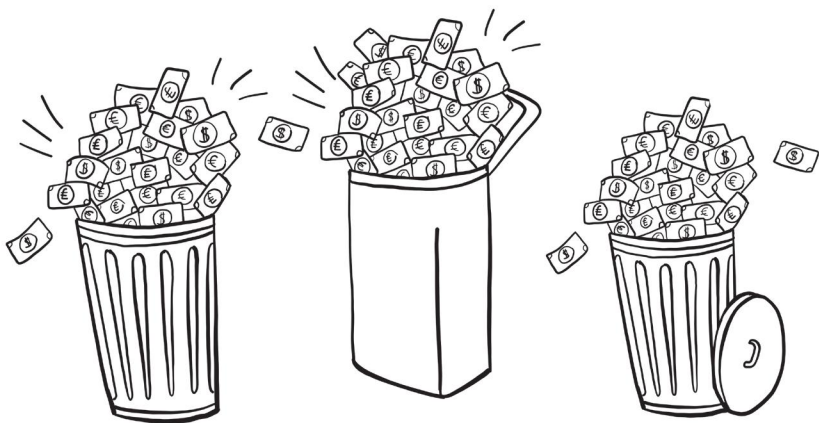
Genius, right? Maybe even billion-dollar genius?

It could have been, except everyone got terrified we'd turn into cyborgs, so **BINs** were banned all over the world back in 2029. My dad made precisely £zero.

THIS IS HOW MUCH MONEY MY DAD MADE FOR
INVENTING THE AMAZING BIN

DIDDLY
SQUAT
ZILCH

THIS IS HOW MUCH MONEY SOMEONE ELSE
MADE FOR INVENTING THE RUBBISH BIN



You'd think he'd be gutted, but Dad never seems upset about anything. He's always too busy inventing stuff. And, besides, he's also invented the world's funniest joke.³

And when I was small Dad used to invent the best games ever, mainly using our old brown sofa as a pirate ship.

Then there's Mum. Mum's an astronaut who hasn't been into space yet.



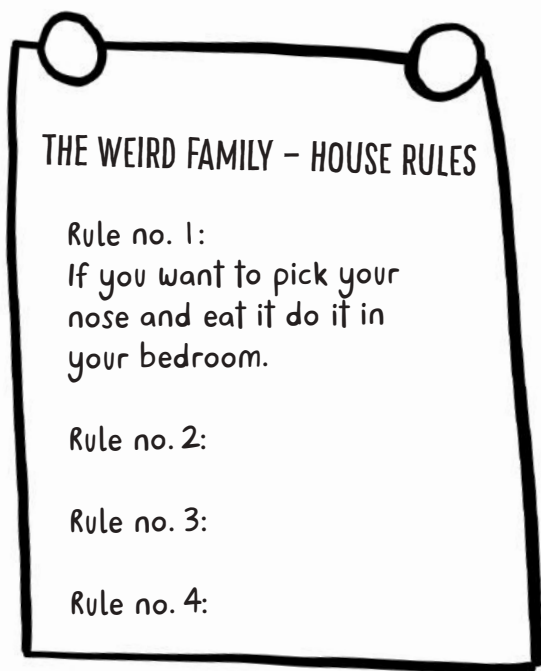
Which doesn't make sense, but she calls herself an astronaut and nobody says 'Aren't you a *trainee* astronaut until you actually go up?' because that might hurt her feelings.

³ It's true. I've got it safe in a stuck-down envelope.



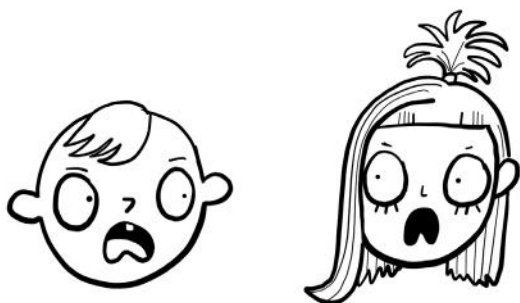
I mean, she finished the astronaut-training programme and everything. And she got a job on the space programme, at the company where Dad works, so she's on a waiting list for her first space flight.

When I was small there were never any rules (apart from one) and Mum and Dad always wanted to play with me. Always.



They were great, and they thought *I* was great.

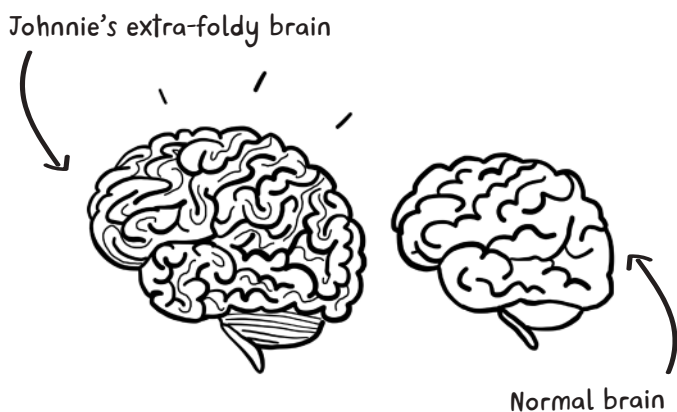
I wasn't afraid of anything back then. I had no idea that I had everything to lose. Then my brother was born. And I lost everything.



That was five years ago. And **TWO THINGS** soon became obvious.

THING NUMBER 1: Johnnie's a genius, just like Mum and Dad. But maybe even more. Mum ate loads of sardine sandwiches when she was pregnant with him, and the doctors said the fish oils made his brain surface go extra-foldy.

I'm sure if you smoothed out the surface of Johnnie's brain it would cover an area the size of a basketball court.



When he was born, Johnnie was so clever he didn't even cry. He spoke. An actual word.⁴

Having a genius baby brother is (obviously) the worst thing ever. You wouldn't like it either, trust me. No one would. For a start, he's better than me

⁴ I know you don't believe me. But it's 100%, **IN BOLD**, DOUBLE UNDERLINED, SIZE 18 **TRUE**. Mum always said it was just a burp, but I *know* – I was there.

at everything. And I mean *everything*: maths, music, science . . . everything. If I write a story, Johnnie writes a novel. I make up a song? Johnnie will compose a symphony. Anything I do, Johnnie's there, just waiting to outdo me. I swear if I invented something, Johnnie would go out and win the Nobel Prize.

But that's not even the worst of it. There's the **second thing** about Johnnie that makes things so much worse. Oh so much worse.

THING NUMBER 2: Johnnie has a weak left leg.

So what? That doesn't sound too bad, you're probably thinking. But the doctors are worried. And Mum and Dad are worried. **Dead** worried. His weak leg is probably going to turn into something worse. One day, he might stop being able to walk, and he might even never get to be a grown-up. When I play

with Johnnie, I sometimes think about that, and it makes me want to cry.

Right now, Johnnie's weak leg isn't a huge

Brain = strong

problem. If he runs, he sometimes veers off to the left. And he struggles a bit on stairs. But Johnnie is a genius, and things that would totally frustrate you or me don't hold him back for a second. Not one.



left leg = weak

The worst thing is not knowing what will happen next. Most doctors say he'll get weaker and weaker. Mum and Dad

say we've got to be hopeful, but the hope – the waiting, the not knowing – is killing our family.

The hope means my parents work all the time now for **No Ahhh Technology**® and it's miles away and we don't see them all week. Dad works for *zero* money. Instead he gets funding for inventing a cure

for Johnnie, and Mum's working super hard earning *extra* money so we can live in the meantime.

I only really get to see them on Sundays. The rest of the time Gran looks after us. Her idea of childcare is to look disappointed and tell me to be more like Johnnie.

GRAN IS TOXIC



Even when they are around, Dad mainly plays pirates with Johnnie because he feels guilty. He thinks I'm too old for pirates now, so Johnnie and Dad play on the old brown sofa that used to be *my* pirate ship, and I'm lucky if I get tied up and fed to sharks.

Mum feels guilty too, and she really hates seeing me unhappy. So she's always trying to solve my problems because she knows I'm useless and can't solve them myself. But the truth is they can't be solved, unless I can feed my PE teacher, Mrs Crosse and Sadie Snickpick to real sharks.

But then, just under a week ago, the day after my tenth birthday, the day I now call Day Zero, my disaster zone of a life went nuclear.

DAY ZERO: THE DAY MY WORLD ENDED

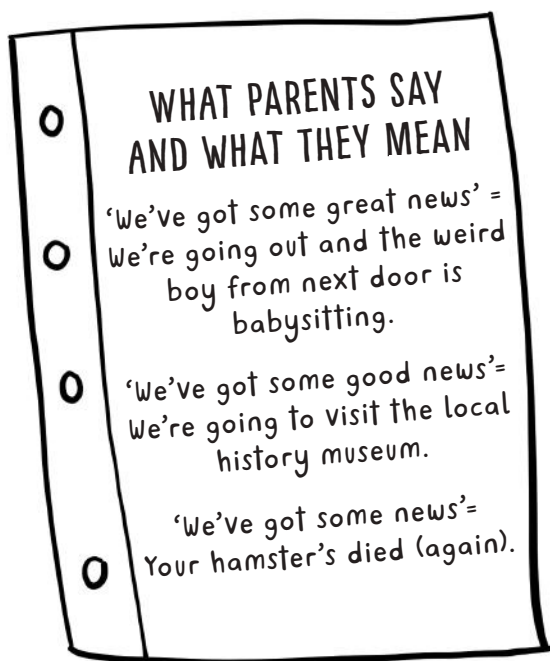
It all came out of the blue.

We were playing in the garden when Mum and Dad called us in. Mum's a hugger; she'd normally grab me and say something lame like, 'I've been missing you,' even though I'd only seen her ten minutes before. But this time she just looked blank. Blank and weird like she was staring at her phone. But without the phone. Dad looked blank too, which is slightly more normal, but that's only if you've caught him before his first coffee.

They sat us down and Mum said, 'We've got some news.'

I was immediately *on edge*. If your parents ever

tell you they've 'got some news', trust me, it's gonna be really bad.



With parents you have to translate *everything*.

They both smiled, and Dad said, 'We love you very much, but . . .'

I was immediately *terrified*. Nothing good comes

after that, ever. Dad had a sad face. This was going to be truly awful.

‘We’re leaving home.’

I was immediately *relieved*. This was just one of Dad’s jokes. My dad loves ‘zany’ jokes; they don’t even have to be funny.

Johnnie and I waited patiently.

The punchline was coming.

We just had to sit this out.

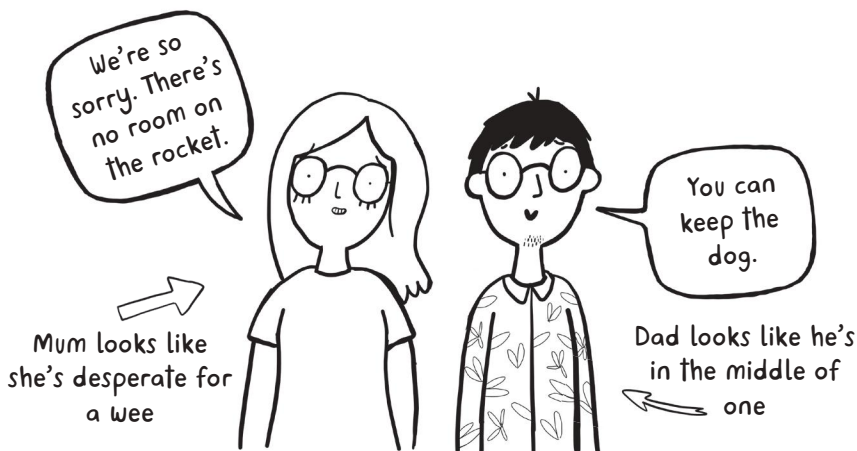
‘Our boss, Mr Noah, has offered us the Chance of a Lifetime,’ Dad continued. His eyes looked dangerously bright. He turned to Mum, and together they said in one big happy voice, ‘We’re going to be the first people on Mars.’

Johnnie’s chin and lip started trembling. If this was a joke, Dad was taking it to another level.

Then Johnnie started crying. Proper crying. I gave him a squeeze.

‘It’s just a joke, Johnnie.’

I glared at Mum. It was time to end this. She shifted about on her chair. They both looked so weird, I was *sure* the punchline was coming. But all they said was:



And finally: ‘We’re leaving home tonight.’

And finally-finally: ‘Why are you crying? I know it seems like the worst thing ever now, but this is what children dream about! TOTAL FREEDOM. Freedom to do anything you want. Go to school,

don't go to school. Pick your nose. Eat it. Flick it. Kill ants. Look at a screen all night.'

I said, 'Dad, please don't go away.'
And then I cried.

Myrt jumped on my lap, like she always does, but Mum just stared at me.

No hugs, not even a smile. Dad looked confused, like he was struggling with a fart. For a moment I thought he was going to burst out laughing, but then he shook his head and gave me a pat on the arm.

I remember thinking, *A pat on the arm? What sort of parent gives their kid a pat on the arm?* I'd spent years being suffocated by hugs and cuddles from both of them, and now all I got was a pat on the arm.

'Sorry, Elizaroo,' he said, 'but this is the Chance of a Lifetime.'

It was all so weird that my brain struggled to



catch up with itself. I remember Johnnie asking, 'When will you come back?' And I remember holding my breath and then I remember Mum smiling and saying, 'We're not coming back; there's only enough fuel to go one way.'

I ran up to my bedroom and cried until the snot came out. And then I sucked it over my top lip and down into my mouth until I felt sick. Then I vommed it all up in the bathroom, and the whole cycle started over again.

Until I fell asleep.

HOW TO SURVIVE WITHOUT PARENTS

When I woke up on Day 1 of my new life, I kept my eyes shut for the longest time. I figured nothing bad could happen until I opened them. And if I just waited long enough, maybe it would all turn out to be a crazy dream.

But deep down I knew this was real. I went through to the kitchen, and there was no Mum, no Dad, just Johnnie, sleeping in the dog's bed with the dog. I suddenly



realized that I'd left him to say goodbye to Mum and Dad all on his own. And now I didn't know what I'd say to him when he woke up.

There was an envelope on the table with my name on it – *Eliza Lemon* written out in Dad's neat old-fashioned handwriting.

I just stared, too afraid to open it.

Johnnie finally woke and yawned his way to the table. He struggled up on to his chair. 'What's that?' he eventually asked, looking at the envelope in my hand.

'I don't know. It's from Dad.'

He took the envelope, ripped it open and read.

Morning, Eliza,

Welcome to the first day of your new life!
The good news is that there's nothing left to worry about. The worst thing that can ever happen to you has happened.

Sorry we had to leave home, but this is the Chance of a Lifetime. And remember: anything's possible, but only if you can stop worrying all the time. You knew that when you were small, but you've somehow forgotten it.

Tell Johnnie we love him too. Good luck!

Lots of love and kisses,

Daddy (and Mummy) x x x

PS Call Gran if you need anything.

Johnnie's chin was twitching; he was gonna cry.

'Do you think that's true?' he asked. 'Is anything possible if you can stop worrying?'

'Don't be stupid – of course not.'

I took the letter and read it twice. Dad was mad if he thought we'd call Gran for help. She'd get rid of Myrt in a heartbeat, just because Myrt bites her every now and again.⁵ I'd rather be adopted. But Dad was right about one thing: there *was* nothing left to worry about. The worst thing ever *had* happened.

I sat there, rereading the letter, and after all these years full of worry, I just felt empty. Like I'd puked up my brain with all that sick. Sure, there were still loads of things that could get worse, but when I

5 **Myrt is (a bit) Savage.**

Don't think badly of Myrt. She just gets (a bit) angry now and again. And she *hates* Gran's orange cardigan. It's a long story, but, don't worry, I'll explain it all later on.



tried to think about what else might go wrong, for once, I just . . . couldn't. For the first time in my life my imagination stopped working.

'Breakfast?' asked Johnnie, getting up from the table.

One of the things I don't get about Johnnie is that he can be totally upset one second, and I mean totally, totally upset, but completely fine the next. That was what happened now. He just climbed down from the table and asked if I wanted scrambled eggs.

And the next moment he was standing on a chair, scrambling away at the hob. He was smiling to himself, and suddenly I felt a rush of anger.

'How can you stand there making eggs? Mum and Dad have left us, and they're NOT COMING BACK. Do you understand? They're NOT COMING BACK.'

I immediately felt bad. This was the pattern of

my life: always doing stuff that I regretted. Johnnie looked sad again and stabbed at the pan with his spatula.

‘Don’t worry, ’Liza,’ he said. ‘We’ll think of something.’

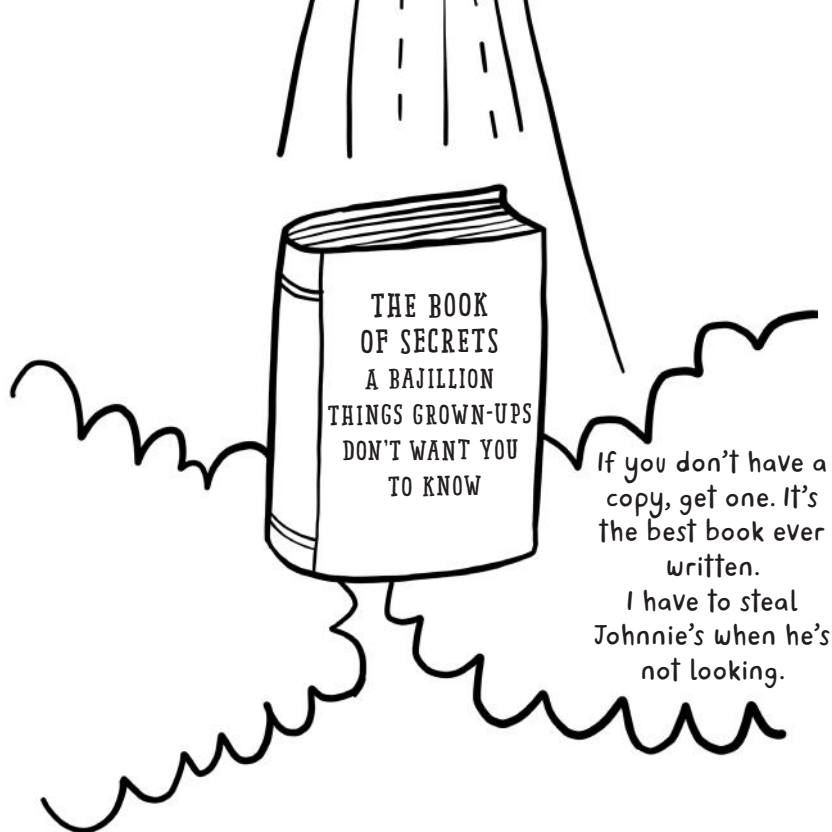
I knew he was actually thinking, *Don’t worry, I’ll think of something*. But before I could force him to admit it, the eggs were ready. So we sat at the kitchen table and ate them.

‘I’ve been reading up on how to survive without parents,’ he said through a mouthful of egg. ‘There’s a chapter in *The Book of Secrets*.’

He waved the book at me before opening it. *The Book of Secrets*. It was his most treasured possession in the whole world, and I was immediately interested.

‘It doesn’t look *that* hard to be honest. There’s even a chapter on how to become a kid millionaire.’

I looked blank, so he just kept talking.



'You know, so we can hire servants to do everything that Mum and Dad did for free.'

Another few minutes and Johnnie would have been well on his way to becoming a billionaire. But before he could start reading, a single word changed everything.

It was me who spotted it. One word written on

the back of Dad's letter. If the letter itself was weird, then the back was Super Weird. So Super Weird it made my heart shiver.

The writing looked like a toddler's, or maybe someone using the wrong hand, maybe even their foot. And there really was just one word . . .

HELP

My hands were shaking as I put the letter back down on the table. Did Dad write that?

'You need to call them,' said Johnnie. 'Use your new phone.'

I tried Mum first, but it cut straight to voicemail. Dad's just rang and rang and then went dead.

I looked at Johnnie. 'So what now?'

'I dunno. We could see if there's anything on the news?'

So we did. And there was. And the news was bad.