THE DIARY OF AN ACCIDENTAL GENIUS

Book One: The Wood End Years

By

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WOBBLE BOOKS

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DEDICATION

For everyone who ever took something apart to see how it worked, and for the neighbours who showed them how to put it back.



CHAPTER 1

THE BEGINNING OF MY EMPIRE

Monday, 19 October

My name is Oliver Percival Wiggins.

I am twelve years, eight months and four days old.

I live at 31 Fernhill Road, Wood End, Coventry.

I believe I may be the most intelligent person in the West Midlands.

Unfortunately, nobody else appears to have

noticed.

I have decided to keep this diary because I am almost certainly going to become extremely famous, and future historians will require an accurate record of my early life.

I considered employing a biographer, but my current financial position makes this impractical.

I have £7.43.

And a Tesco Clubcard.

The Clubcard belongs to Mum.

I am not entirely certain whether this counts as an asset.

My ambition is to become a billionaire before my eighteenth birthday.

I was originally going to become a doctor, but apparently that involves seven years of university and touching sick people.

I have therefore decided to become an inventor.

Coventry has a long history of making cars, bicycles and important machinery.

I feel it is my responsibility to restore the city's industrial greatness.

I informed Dad of this at tea.

He said I should start by learning how to change a light bulb.

He has absolutely no vision.

Tuesday, 20 October

Today I discovered artificial intelligence.

Everybody else discovered it ages ago, but I have only just got round to it.

Apparently it can write books, compose music, design machines and solve complicated mathematical problems.

I asked it how to become a billionaire.

It suggested starting a business.

I asked what sort of business.

It suggested identifying a problem that people needed solving.

I explained that my biggest problem was not having any money.

It congratulated me on identifying an unmet

market need.

I am beginning to suspect that artificial intelligence is not quite as intelligent as advertised.

At breakfast I announced that I would shortly be financially independent.

Dad said, "Good. You can start by paying for your own cornflakes."

Mum asked whether I had finished my homework.

I explained that homework was an outdated educational practice designed to suppress independent thinking.

She said I could independently think about it in detention.

Mum works at the hospital and leaves at ten to six in the morning, so she was already in her uniform and eating a banana standing up. She does not have time for philosophy.

I have decided not to appoint Mum to the board of directors.

At school Mr Pritchard returned my geography homework.

It had a note on it.

The note said: Oliver, please do not use artificial intelligence to write your homework. It has told me that Coventry is the capital of Peru.

I informed him that the mistake was the artificial intelligence's and not mine.

He said that was rather my point.

Mr Pritchard is our form teacher. He looks like a man who has been awake since 2019.

Wednesday, 21 October

My sister Chloe has received another parcel of free cosmetics.

She is fifteen and apparently an influencer.

She has forty-eight thousand followers.

I asked what exactly she influences.

She said, "People."

I pointed out that this was not a proper occupation.

She pointed out that she had earned £600 last month.

I have earned £1.43.

I thought that was an unnecessarily personal remark.

Dad has also started a YouTube channel.

It is called Air Fryer Adventures with Dave.

His first video was entitled "Can You Cook A Full English Breakfast In An Air Fryer?"

The answer was apparently no.

The smoke alarm went off and Mum had to open every window in the house, even though it was October.

The video has seventeen views.

I believe twelve of them were from Nan.

Nan lives in Bedworth. She watches every one of Dad's videos at least twice and rings him afterwards to say that it was lovely.

I have a YouTube channel as well.

It is called Oliver Wiggins: Future Billionaire.

It has seven subscribers.

Three of them are me.

I made two accounts to see if it made the numbers look better.

It did not.

I have decided that the Wiggins family possesses considerable entrepreneurial potential.

Unfortunately, I appear to be the only member

taking it seriously.

Thursday, 22 October

There has been a worrying increase in crime.

Dad says somebody stole our wheelie bin in 2019.

The police have still not recovered it.

I find this deeply concerning.

If criminals can remove an entire wheelie bin without detection, what is to stop them taking our television, our furniture, or possibly Dad?

I have decided to develop a revolutionary home security system.

It will use artificial intelligence, motion detection, flashing lights and an extremely

loud alarm.

I have named it the Wiggins Home Defence System.

WHDS.

I considered calling it the Wiggins Advanced National Security System.

Unfortunately, I worked out the initials.

I have bought a car horn from Facebook Marketplace.

The seller said it came from a Jaguar.

This is appropriate because Jaguars were made in Coventry, and I believe in supporting local industry.

The horn cost £3.

I now have £4.43.

Research and development is extremely expensive.

I should explain that the horn is very loud.

I tested it in the back garden at ten past four in the afternoon, for one second.

A man at number fourteen shouted over his fence, "WHAT WAS THAT?"

I replied that it was a trial.

He said, "Do it again and I'll trial you."

That is Mr Wilkins.

He is about seventy and he has lived at number fourteen since before the street had trees.

Dad says he used to work at the car factory for thirty-two years and was nicknamed "Mad Dog".

I have not yet found out why.

I will investigate.

Friday, 23 October

My security system is complete.

It consists of a motion sensor, two flashing bicycle lights, an old mobile phone and the Jaguar horn.

I have installed the equipment by the back door.

My best friend Ryan came round to inspect it.

Ryan Dhillon is the only person in our class

who owns a socket set. He keeps it in a bag.

He asked whether the system was waterproof.

I explained that we were still in the prototype stage.

He asked what would happen if it rained.

I said that was precisely why we conducted trials.

Maisie Patel, who is the cleverest girl in my class apart from me, asked at lunch whether I had considered false alarms.

I said that false alarms were preferable to actual burglaries.

She asked what would happen if a cat walked past.

I said the system would identify it as a cat.

She asked how.

I said artificial intelligence.

She asked whether I had actually programmed any artificial intelligence.

I explained that I was the chief executive, not the technical department.

She said I was an idiot.

I have decided not to offer Maisie the position of Chief Technology Officer.

Although she is very good at computers.

This presents a problem.

Saturday, 24 October, 2.17 a.m.

WE HAVE BEEN ATTACKED.

The security system detected movement in the garden.

The Jaguar horn sounded.

Both bicycle lights began flashing.

My old phone announced, at maximum volume:

"WARNING! THIS PROPERTY IS PROTECTED BY ADVANCED MILITARY TECHNOLOGY!"

Dad fell out of bed.

Mum screamed.

Chloe began livestreaming.

Three neighbours appeared outside in their dressing gowns.

Mr Wilkins threatened to put my invention somewhere that would make future maintenance extremely difficult.

I attempted to explain that this was a controlled security exercise.

He said he would control my exercise if I didn't turn the bloody thing off.

Unfortunately, the off switch was inside the kitchen.

And Dad had locked the back door.

The horn continued for another forty-three seconds.

Saturday, 24 October, 3.06 a.m.

The police have attended.

They asked whether anyone had actually tried to enter the property.

I explained that the system had successfully deterred the intruder.

The officer asked for a description.

I pointed towards the hedge.

The intruder had been a hedgehog.

It had already left the scene.

I told the officer that this was further evidence the system was effective.

The officer said, "Son, it's the middle of the night, and I've got a bag of chips in the car going cold."

I would like it noted that I was treated with

respect at no stage.

Sunday, 25 October

Dad has confiscated my equipment.

Mum says I am banned from operating anything electrical after nine o'clock.

Mr Wilkins has delivered a handwritten letter through our door.

I will not repeat what it says, but I counted the words I am not allowed to say, and there are eleven.

Chloe's video of the hedgehog night has received eighty-six thousand views.

She has called it:

MY BROTHER DECLARES WAR ON HEDGEHOG.

She has gained four thousand followers.

I have gained a lifetime ban from touching Dad's car battery.

I consider this deeply unfair.

I am the inventor.

Chloe is merely documenting my achievements.

I told her that fame without financial compensation was exploitation.

She offered me £2 to stop talking.

I accepted.

I have decided I will not discuss money with Chloe again, because she appears to know more about it than I do.

My capital is now £6.43.

At tea Mum said, very quietly, that she'd had a double shift and could we all try to make one tiny bit less noise for the rest of the week.

Nobody said anything.

Dad put his hand on her shoulder.

It was a funny moment.

I did not make a note of it in the ledger, but I have noted it here.

Monday, 26 October

Today, while walking home along the brook, I found an abandoned shopping trolley.

It was rusty, it was missing a wheel, and it contained an old trainer, two empty energy

drink cans and something that may once have been a sandwich.

Most people would see this as rubbish.

I saw the future of British transport.

I have decided to establish a new company.

WIGGINS MOTORS.

Coventry has a proud history of building motor cars.

I intend to build the world's first affordable electric shopping trolley.

I have done some research.

Electric cars need batteries and motors.

Dad has an old alternator in the garage, in a

box labelled "DON'T TOUCH".

I believe this is an excellent starting point.

Ryan has agreed to help, because he owns a socket set.

Maisie Patel says an alternator is not a motor.

I have decided to investigate whether she is deliberately attempting to sabotage British industry.

As I was dragging the trolley home, I noticed that Mr Wilkins was standing at his gate, watching me.

He did not say anything.

He did not shout.

He just watched me go past with the trolley,

and he shook his head very slowly.

Then he nodded, once, as though he had come to a decision.

I do not know what it means.

I shall add it to the list of mysteries.

Tomorrow we begin construction.

History is about to be made.

Possibly at considerable speed.

End of Chapter One.

Closing balance: £6.43. Debt to Dad: £12 (phone bill). Debt to Mum: not yet calculated. Subscribers: seven.



CHAPTER 2

THE WIGGINS EV1

Tuesday, 27 October

Today I began the construction of the first Wiggins Motors vehicle.

The trolley is in the shed.

We have cleaned it.

This took forty minutes and a bucket of water and has revealed that it is not silver, as I thought, but a sort of orange.

Ryan says that is rust.

I said it was a heritage finish.

I collected the alternator from its box in the garage.

The box says DON'T TOUCH in Dad's handwriting, in capital letters, underlined twice, with a drawing of a skull.

I did not think this applied to me, because I am not "anyone". I am the chief executive.

Inside the box was the alternator, wrapped in a tea towel, and underneath it a small card.

It said, in felt tip:

Escort Mk2. Rally of the Lakes. 1999. Never again.

I do not know what this means.

I do not think Dad has ever been to the Lake District.

He once told us that holidays are a scam invented by caravan manufacturers.

I put the card back.

I did not mention it to anyone.

I have decided to investigate this at a later date, once the vehicle is finished.

At tea Mum asked why I was covered in rust.

I said it was a heritage finish.

She said, "Bath."

Wednesday, 28 October

Today I installed the power system.

According to the internet, you attach the alternator to the wheel with a belt.

Ryan asked whether the alternator spins the wheel or the wheel spins the alternator.

I said both.

He said that doesn't make sense.

I said that was what made it an invention.

Maisie Patel stopped at the shed door on her way home. She lives on the next road and walks past our back fence every day with a violin case that she says contains a violin, although I have never seen her take it out.

She looked at the trolley for a long time.

She said, "Oliver, an alternator makes electricity. It doesn't make things go."

I asked how she knew.

She said, "It's on the internet."

I said the internet also said you could cure hiccups by standing on your head.

She said, "That one works."

I have decided to look into this.

I stood on my head for nine minutes.

I still had hiccups.

Dad came out and asked what I was doing.

I said, "Research."

He said, "You've been upside down in the shed for nine minutes and you've got a trolley full of my alternator."

He had seen the box.

He did not look cross.

He looked at the alternator for what felt like quite a long time.

Then he said, "Don't connect it to the mains."

I said I would not.

He said, "Promise me, Ol."

I promised.

He went back into the house.

He did not mention the skull.

I have decided that Dad is a mystery as well.

Thursday, 29 October (morning)

My first vehicle is complete.

It has four wheels, although only three point in the same direction.

I have fitted a plastic garden chair for the driver, because comfort is important in a luxury product.

I have installed a bicycle bell as the horn.

I have called it the Wiggins EV1.

"EV" stands for Electric Vehicle.

"1" is because it is the first.

Chloe came into the shed with her phone.

She said it looked like a supermarket trolley having a nervous breakdown.

I offered her the position of brand ambassador.

She said she would rather be dead.

Then she said, "Can I film the launch?"

I said, "It's not a launch, it's a product unveiling."

She said, "Is anyone going to get hurt?"

I said, "Absolutely not."

She said, "Then I'm definitely filming."

Thursday, 29 October (4.17 p.m.)

The launch of the Wiggins EV1 took place on the slope behind our house, known as Fernhill

Bank, which I have chosen because it is the only hill in Wood End.

In attendance:

- Ryan

- Chloe

- Maisie Patel

- a boy on a scooter who had nothing else to do

- Mr Wilkins, at his upstairs window.

I made a short speech.

I said: "Today marks the beginning of a new era in British transport."

Ryan said, "Where are the brakes?"

I explained that regenerative braking was a feature planned for the second model.

He asked what stopped the first model.

I said friction.

He said, "With what?"

I said, "The road, obviously."

Ryan said, "I'm just saying, Ol, that is a really bad answer."

I climbed into the garden chair.

I connected the alternator.

Nothing happened.

Ryan pushed me.

It was then that things got interesting.

The trolley began to roll.

It rolled quite slowly at first, and I would like it noted that during the first four seconds the vehicle behaved exactly as I had predicted.

Then the slope steepened.

The alternator, which was spinning on its belt, made a noise like a wasp in a tin.

I applied the emergency braking system.

This consisted of putting both feet on the ground.

Unfortunately, I was wearing my school shoes.

The left shoe came off.

I continued downhill.

At approximately twelve miles an hour, I became the fastest person in Wood End to be travelling in a shopping trolley.

At approximately thirteen miles an hour, I became the first person in Wood End to overtake a mobility scooter while sitting in a garden chair.

The gentleman on the scooter shouted something about insurance.

I was unable to respond because I was concentrating on steering.

I would like to point out that the steering was working perfectly.

The problem was the hedge.

Thursday, 29 October (5.42 p.m.)

The Wiggins EV1 has been recovered from a hedge.

I have sustained minor injuries to my dignity.

My left shoe remains missing.

Chloe's video has been online for forty minutes and has been viewed 61,000 times.

It is called BOY CRASHES INTO HEDGE IN TROLLEY HE CALLS "THE FUTURE".

I do not understand why it has the word "calls" in it.

Maisie Patel stood over me while I lay in the hedge.

She said, "Are you all right?"

I said, "I'm in perfect health."

She said, "You've got a twig in your ear."

I said, "It's a sensor."

She laughed.

I have decided not to be offended.

Mum came out of the house at a run, still in her uniform, still holding a mug.

She looked at me.

She looked at the trolley.

She looked at the hedge, which belongs to number twelve, and which now has a trolley-shaped hole in it.

She said, very calmly, "Is he alive?"

Ryan said, "Yes, Mrs Wiggins."

Mum said, "Good."

Then she put down the mug and sat on the kerb and put her head in her hands, and I could not tell if she was laughing or crying, and I think she could not either.

I said I was sorry.

She said, "I know you are, love."

She said, "I just don't know what we're going to do with you."

Dad arrived shortly afterwards.

He walked straight past me and went to look at the trolley.

He put one hand on the alternator.

It was still warm.

He said, very quietly, "It actually turned."

I said, "Yes. That is what I said it would do."

He said, "At twelve miles an hour?"

I said, "At thirteen."

He did something I did not expect.

He smiled.

Only for a second.

Then he said, "You're grounded."

Thursday, 29 October (9.00 p.m.)

Dad says I am not leaving the house until Christmas.

Mum says it will be a "reasonable review period".

I have been told I must replace the hedge.

I have also been told that the hedge cannot be replaced by a shopping trolley, even a good one.

I have calculated the cost of a new hedge.

It is £63.40.

My capital is £6.43.

I will need to raise a further £56.97.

Maisie Patel says that is the wrong way round and I should be thinking about how to apologise to number twelve.

I said apologies were a sign of weakness.

She said that was why I was in the hedge.

Friday, 30 October

Today I received my first letter of the day, from Mr Wilkins.

It was not like the last one.

It was not rude.

It was one line long, written in the neatest handwriting I have ever seen, in blue ink, with every letter the same height.

It said:

An alternator does not turn wheels. Read page 40. R. Wilkins (No. 14).

There was a book on the doorstep.

It was very old.

The cover is green cloth, and the spine is cracked, and the pages smell like a church.

It is called Practical Engineering for the Home Workshop.

It was published in 1962.

On page 40 there is a diagram of something called an electric motor.

It has a drawing of the parts.

I read page 40.

Then I read page 41.

I did not stop until Mum said it was half past eleven.

Page 40 says: An alternator turns motion into electricity. A motor does the opposite. The mistake most beginners make is to treat them as the same machine. They are cousins, not twins.

I have decided that this is the most interesting sentence I have read this year.

I have also decided that Mr Wilkins is a spy, because why else would he know so much?

I did not tell Dad.

I put the book under my pillow.

Saturday, 31 October

I have held a board meeting.

Present: me.

Apologies: nobody.

I have decided that Wiggins Motors has suffered a "temporary setback caused by hedge-related circumstances".

I have decided to relocate the company.

If the road is too dangerous, I will go upwards.

I have re-named the business:

WIGGINS AEROSPACE.

I believe there is considerably less traffic in the sky.

Here is the first official investor report.

I wrote it in the back of my maths book, and then copied it out neatly, because it is the sort of document that historians will want.

WIGGINS MOTORS: CONFIDENTIAL INVESTOR REPORT

Company valuation: £14 million

Vehicles manufactured: 1

Vehicles destroyed: 1

Revenue: £0

Liabilities: £63.40 (one hedge) plus one school shoe

Staff: me, and Ryan (unpaid)

Chief Financial Officer: vacant (Maisie Patel declined)

I showed it to Dad.

He read it with a very straight face.

He said, "A valuation of fourteen million. Where did you get that from?"

I said I had worked it out using vision.

He said, "Right."

He said, "Ol, that's what every one of them says."

I asked who "every one" was.

He said, "People who start things."

Then he said, "I started one once."

I waited.

Dad does not often say things like that.

He said, "It didn't work out."

Then the telly went on and the moment was gone.

Sunday, 1 November

It rained all day.

I stayed in my bedroom and read Mr Wilkins's book.

I now understand that you cannot just attach an alternator to a wheel.

You need a motor.

A motor is not the same as a dynamo.

I have spent three hours drawing the right diagram.

I have no idea how to build it.

I looked at my AI assistant.

I asked it: "How do I build a motor out of things from a skip?"

It said: That sounds like a fun project! Here are some steps...

It then recommended that I should "consult a qualified engineer".

For the first time since I met it, I think the AI has made a good suggestion.

I looked out of the window.

Mr Wilkins was in his garden.

It was raining, but he was not wearing a coat.

He was standing at the door of his garage, which is one of those old brick ones with a

corrugated roof, and he was looking inside it.

I could not see what he was looking at.

He stood there for a very long time.

Then he went in and closed the door behind him.

I have decided to approach him tomorrow.

I shall do it in a calm and professional manner.

I shall wear a tie.

Closing balance: £6.43. Debts: £63.40 (hedge), £12 (Dad). One shoe. Revenue: still zero. Books received from Mr Wilkins: one.

End of Chapter Two.



CHAPTER 3

OPERATION A-TEAM

Monday, 2 November

I approached Mr Wilkins this morning in a calm and professional manner.

I wore my school tie.

I knocked on his front door and stood up straight with the book held in both hands.

I had prepared a speech.

It began: Mr Wilkins, I wish to discuss a possible

partnership.

The door opened before I had finished knocking.

Mr Wilkins is not tall, but he is very square, like a wardrobe. He had a grey cardigan with leather patches on the elbows and a cup of tea in a saucer. Nobody has a saucer any more. I have never seen a person hold a saucer in real life.

He looked at me.

He looked at the tie.

He said, "Funeral?"

I said, "No. A business meeting."

He said, "With whom?"

I said, "You."

He said, "Right."

He did not seem surprised.

I said, "I have read page forty."

He said, "And?"

I said, "An alternator is a cousin of a motor, not a twin."

For the first time since I have known him, something changed in his face.

It was only a very small thing. One eyebrow went up about two millimetres.

He said, "Most people your age wouldn't have got past the diagram."

I said, "I am not most people."

He said, "No. You're the one who went through number twelve's hedge in a supermarket trolley."

I said, "That was a prototype."

He said, "It was a bloody shambles."

I said, "That is a matter of perspective."

He looked at me for what felt like a very long time.

Then he said, "Have you got a rake?"

I said I had not.

He said, "Wait there."

He went into the house and came back with a

rake taller than me.

He said, "Front garden. Leaves. Bag them up and put them in the green bin. Two hours. Five pounds."

I said, "I don't think that is quite what I meant by a partnership."

He said, "Then you'd better learn what the word means."

He shut the door.

I swept leaves for two hours and ten minutes.

I did not have gloves.

I now have five pounds, and four blisters, and I have learned that a man can have a very large number of leaves in his garden for somebody who does not seem to like trees.

I have noted this as a consultancy fee.

Ledger: £11.43.

Tuesday, 3 November

I have decided to form an elite organisation.

It will operate outside the normal rules of society, defend the innocent and undertake missions too dangerous for the British Army.

It will have a headquarters and a command vehicle.

It will have a logo.

It will have a name.

I have been thinking about the name since the hedge.

Last night, as I was falling asleep, Dad was watching a television programme downstairs and I heard a very loud theme tune, which sounded as though it had been played by a man hitting a dustbin lid, and Dad said to himself, quite quietly: "I love it when a plan comes together."

I do not know what this means.

But it is the best sentence I have ever heard.

I have written it on the first page of a new notebook.

The organisation will be called THE TEAM.

I considered calling it THE A TEAM.

But "A" seems arrogant. I do not want to stand out.

I want to be the leader.

I called a meeting at break.

There were two attendees.

Ryan and Maisie.

I explained that the organisation would need an engineer, an intelligence officer, a driver and a person in charge.

Ryan said, "Who's in charge?"

I said, "Me."

Maisie said, "Of course."

I said I needed an engineer.

Ryan said he could be an engineer, because he owned a socket set.

I said, "Excellent. Chief of Sockets."

Ryan said, "Can I be called Minister of Sockets?"

I said that Minister was a more senior rank, but yes.

Maisie said, "What do I get?"

I said she was the Intelligence Officer.

She said, "I'd rather join the Brownies."

I pointed out that she was too old for the Brownies.

She said, "Yes. That's what makes it a good answer."

Then she said, "What's the mission?"

I said, "To be determined."

She said, "So there's no mission."

I said the mission was to find a mission.

She said, "Oliver, that's called being bored."

I did not reply to this.

Wednesday, 4 November

We have established a headquarters.

It is the garden shed.

I examined it carefully.

It contains: a lawnmower, three tins of paint, a broken barbecue, a deckchair with no seat and approximately four hundred spiders.

The raw materials are promising.

Unfortunately, when I told Mum about my plans she said no.

I said I had not told her what I was going to do.

She said she did not need to be told.

She said the shed was for the lawnmower.

I explained that national security should take priority over gardening equipment.

She said, "Oliver, you have the most fertile imagination of any child I've ever met, and I'm a healthcare assistant. I have met children who thought they were wolves."

I said that was a very different thing.

She said, "Not as different as you'd like."

She said that if I wanted a headquarters I could have the space under the stairs.

I looked under the stairs.

It contains the hoover and Chloe's old roller skates.

It is considerably more cramped than the shed.

But it has a light switch, which gives it a certain executive feel.

I have appointed myself Head of Under the Stairs.

Ryan says it is "a bit weird".

Thursday, 5 November

Bonfire Night.

We stood on the back step in our coats and watched the fireworks over the houses on Hawkesbury Road.

Dad had made hot dogs in the air fryer.

I have to report that they were slightly better than the full English.

They were still not good.

Chloe had her phone up the whole time and was talking to it in a very high voice.

Mum had a blanket round her shoulders and a mug of tea and said she was "not dead on my feet, just resting my eyes".

At about half past seven, a very large rocket went off and lit the whole garden gold.

Dad said, "That's a good one."

I said, "I am forming a team."

He said, "What sort of team?"

I said, "An elite, undercover team of specialists operating outside the law. We will have a headquarters and a van."

Dad said, "Like the A-Team?"

It was the second time I had heard the name.

I said, "What is the A-Team?"

Dad looked at me as if I had said, What is the sun?

He said, "You've never heard of the A-Team?"

I said, "I have heard a man say 'I love it when a plan comes together'."

Dad said, "That's Hannibal."

I said, "I do not know who that is."

Dad put down his hot dog.

He said, "Ol, you have just made me feel about a hundred."

Mum said, from under her blanket, "Don't start, Dave."

Dad said, "I'm not starting."

He said, "I'm just saying."

Then he said, "Me and your Uncle Gaz used to be the A-Team."

I said, "Uncle Gaz who lives in Perth?"

Dad said, "Perth Australia, yes. Before that he

was Gaz from Bedworth who nicked all my crisps."

Chloe lowered her phone.

Dad said, "We were about eleven and nine. We used to stand at the window of Garrity's, on the Bulkington Road, every Saturday morning, looking at the motorbikes."

Chloe said, "Dad, what was Garrity's?"

Dad said, "It was a motorbike shop, love. A proper one. Smelled of oil and tyres. There was a man in there called Mr Garrity who looked like a walrus in a boiler suit."

He said, "We'd stand there for hours, nose against the glass, working out which bike we'd take when we ran away."

I said, "Ran away from what?"

Dad said, "Everything."

Then he laughed and said, "Mostly school."

He said, "Gaz wanted the big black one with the chrome. I wanted the little red one. We'd say, one day, when the A-Team come for us, we'll have a van and we'll have a gang and we'll go off round the country fixing things and nobody will ever tell us to tidy our room."

He said, "I used to plan the whole thing."

Then he picked up his hot dog.

He said, "Anyway."

I said, "What happened to the plan?"

Dad said, "I grew up, Ol."

Nobody said anything.

A rocket went up with a long whistle and exploded into a silver flower.

Mum said, very quietly, "Dave."

Dad said, "I'm fine."

He did not look fine.

He looked like a man who had been reminded of something.

I have decided to investigate this matter urgently.

I have made a list.

Questions:

1. What was the A-Team?

2. Why does Dad's face go funny when he talks

about it?

3. What was in the box that says DON'T TOUCH?

4. Why did Mr Wilkins shake his head and then nod at my trolley?

5. Are these four things connected?

I have put a line under number five.

Friday, 6 November

I asked my AI assistant what the A-Team was.

It said that The A-Team was an American television action series from 1983. It followed four fugitives from the army who worked as mercenaries.

I asked whether I could form one.

It said that forming a mercenary organisation may be illegal in many jurisdictions.

I asked whether it was legal in Coventry.

It said that it could not provide legal advice.

I have decided that artificial intelligence has been programmed by someone who has never had any fun.

Maisie Patel came up to me at the lockers.

She said, "I've been thinking about it."

I said, "About what?"

She said, "Your team."

I said, "You said you would rather join the Brownies."

She said, "I would. But I've noticed something. Nobody in your last three inventions has written down what went wrong."

I said that I had written down the results.

She said, "You wrote the hedge."

I said that was very precise.

She said, "I'll be your Intelligence Officer. But on one condition."

I said, "What condition?"

She said, "We keep a log of every mistake. And you don't get to delete the bad ones."

I said that this was a very unusual condition.

She said, "It's how real engineers do it. My dad says so."

Her dad teaches maths at a school in Nuneaton. He is, according to Maisie, "the least exciting man alive and also right about everything".

I agreed to the condition.

I have written down all our mistakes so far.

There are fourteen.

Two are not my fault.

Maisie says none of them are.

I have decided that she is the most difficult person I have ever worked with and also that she is excellent.

I have appointed her Intelligence Officer.

She has appointed herself "Chief of Log".

I have decided to let this go.

Saturday, 7 November

Today we drove to Nan's in Bedworth, in Dad's van.

It is not the A-Team van.

It is a white parcel van with a dent in the side and a sticker that says HOW'S MY DRIVING? RING 0800 PLEASE DON'T.

I sat in the front.

Chloe sat in the back on the spare tyre and posted forty photographs of her own feet.

On the Bulkington Road, Dad suddenly slowed down.

He pulled in at the side of the road, outside a

shop that sells vapes and mobile phone covers.

He said, "That was Garrity's."

I looked at the shop.

It was not a motorbike shop.

It had a green sign and a window full of colourful flavours.

Dad said, "The window was there."

He pointed.

He said, "We used to stand just there."

I looked at the pavement.

It was an ordinary bit of pavement, with a chewing gum stain.

Dad sat in the van with the engine running and looked at the shop for about a minute.

I did not say anything.

Then he said, "Right," and he drove off.

Nan's house smells of toast, cats and furniture polish.

She hugged me for forty-five seconds.

She said I was "too thin", which is the sort of thing she says to everyone, including Mum, Chloe and the vicar.

She gave me a plate of biscuits the size of a dinner plate.

Then, while Dad was in the garden fixing her gate, she took me into the front room and opened the sideboard.

It contained: a tin of sewing needles, a bag of old keys, a photograph of Granddad Wiggins in a flat cap, and a framed photograph of a thin boy of about thirteen standing next to a motorcycle poster.

Nan said, "That's your dad."

I said, "He looks like Chloe."

Nan said, "He's always looked like Chloe. But he could drive, you know. Your dad."

I said, "I know he drives a van."

She said, "No, love. He could drive."

She said, "He did the rallies, you know. When he was eighteen, nineteen. He had that little white Ford, and he used to drive it through the forests on Saturday nights. He was good. Better than good. Your Granddad said he'd

have been in the British Championship."

I said, "What happened?"

Nan said, "Your mum happened. And then Chloe happened. And then you happened."

She said it very kindly, but I did not like how it sounded.

She said, "He didn't mind. He never said a word. He sold the Ford, and he got the van, and he's never stopped working since."

Then she patted my arm and said, "Don't tell him I told you. He gets very quiet when anyone brings it up."

I said, "I will not tell anyone."

I would like it recorded that I kept this promise for exactly four hours.

Saturday, 7 November, 9.40 p.m.

I told Mum.

I did not mean to.

She was in the kitchen doing the washing up, and I came in for a glass of water, and she looked tired in the way she does, with her hair coming out of its clip.

I said, "Mum, did you know Dad did rallies?"

She stopped.

She did not turn round.

She said, "Where did you hear that?"

I said, "I can't say. I promised."

She said, "Nan."

I said nothing.

She put down the plate.

She said, "Yes. I knew."

She said, "I met him at one of his races, at Cannock Chase. I was nineteen and I was working in a burger van, and he came over covered in mud, grinning like a madman, and asked me for a bacon roll."

I said, "Was he good?"

She said, "He was very good."

She said, "He was the happiest person I've ever seen."

She was quiet for a bit.

Then she said, "I've never told him I think

about it."

I said, "Why not?"

She said, "Because then he'd feel bad."

I said, "That doesn't make sense."

She said, "No, Oliver. That's the trouble with grown-ups. Most of what we do doesn't make sense, we just do it so everyone else can stay comfortable."

I said, "That seems very inefficient."

She laughed, and wiped her hands on a tea towel, and kissed me on the top of my head.

She said, "It is."

She said, "Go to bed."

I went upstairs.

I did not go to bed.

I sat on the stairs for a long time, thinking.

I have decided something.

It is important.

I will write it down very carefully.

I am going to give Dad his plan back.

I do not know how yet.

But I have a team, a headquarters under the stairs, a Minister of Sockets, an Intelligence Officer who keeps a log, and approximately three months until Christmas.

I will find a way.

Sunday, 8 November

This morning I was sent to Mr Wilkins with a message from Mum, which was a plate of leftovers and a note that said Thank you for not shouting at Oliver this week.

I delivered it to the front door.

He was not in.

But his garage door was open about a foot, the way it was on the rainy day.

I was going to put the plate on the step.

But there was a very faint smell of oil, and something else, something old and sweet, like a car showroom from 1970.

I looked in.

It was dark inside.

I could see a shape in the middle of the floor, covered with a big grey tarpaulin tied down with orange rope.

It was not a very big shape.

It was about the size of a small car.

There was a tail-light sticking out at the back.

It was round and red, and it had been polished until it shone.

I stood very still.

I do not know why, but I felt as though I had walked into a church.

A voice behind me said, "That's not for looking at."

I jumped so high I nearly dropped the plate.

Mr Wilkins was standing on the path with a carrier bag from the butcher.

He said, "Do you ever knock?"

I said, "I did not want to disturb you."

He said, "You've disturbed me."

I said, "I am sorry."

He looked at the plate.

He looked at the garage.

He said, "Give that here."

I gave him the plate.

He did not say thank you.

He said, "Same time next Monday. There's more leaves."

I said, "There are more leaves?"

He said, "It's autumn. It's what trees do."

I said, "Is there a reason you have a tarpaulin?"

He said, "To keep the rain off."

I said, "Off what?"

He said, "Off the thing underneath."

I said, "What is the thing underneath?"

He said, "Private."

Then he closed the garage door and went into his house.

I stood in the road with my hands in my pockets.

I have thought about this all evening.

My theory: Mr Wilkins is hiding a prototype.

It is round, red at the back, and covered.

He was an engineer at a car factory for thirty-two years.

He was nicknamed "Mad Dog".

I do not know what it is, but it is not a lawnmower.

I have added it to the list of mysteries.

Question six: What is under the tarpaulin?

I have drawn a line under it.

Two lines.

Closing balance: £11.43. Debts: £63.40 (hedge), £12 (Dad). Team members: three. Mysteries: six. Things Dad doesn't know that I know: one.

End of Chapter Three.



CHAPTER 4

THE DISCOVERY OF ANCIENT CIVILISATION

Monday, 9 November

I raked leaves again for Mr Wilkins.

I wore gloves this time, which Mum found for me in the drawer where she keeps all the things nobody has used since 2017.

Mr Wilkins did not say hello.

He pointed at the leaves.

I raked them.

At the end he gave me five pounds and a tin of tomato soup.

I said, "This is not money."

He said, "It's a tin of soup. It's worth about sixty pence. You can have the five pounds and the soup, or you can have the soup."

I took both.

At the gate he said, without looking at me, "Did you read page forty-one?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "And forty-two?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Right."

He went back inside.

I have worked out that this is how Mr Wilkins says well done.

Ledger: £16.43 and a tin of soup.

Tuesday, 10 November

I have begun my investigation into the A-Team.

I asked Dad this morning, while he was eating toast over the sink.

I said, "Where can I find the A-Team?"

He said, "On the telly. Back in 1983."

I said, "Do you still have it?"

He stopped chewing.

He said, "It's on DVD. It's in the loft."

I said, "Why is it in the loft?"

He said, "Because your mother said we had to get rid of things, and I got rid of them. Upstairs."

I said, "Can I see?"

He said, "Don't go in the loft on your own."

I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Because last time I went up there, I stood on the water tank."

He did not say more.

He went to work.

I have decided to proceed anyway, with a

witness.

I asked Ryan, who said, "I'm not going up in a loft." I asked Maisie, who said, "Of course I'll come."

Wednesday, 11 November

Maisie and Ryan came after school.

Ryan stayed in the hallway.

Maisie and I went up the ladder.

The loft smells of dust and fibreglass and cardboard and about thirty years of Christmas.

It is full of boxes.

Mum has labelled them, in black marker, with her very upright handwriting.

XMAS DECORATIONS (NOT THE TREE).

BABY CLOTHES.

SCHOOL REPORTS (OLIVER: DO NOT OPEN).

I opened it.

I closed it.

The reports are accurate, but unfair.

Behind the Christmas box was one called DAVE'S DVDS.

It was heavy.

We carried it down the ladder like a coffin.

In it there were forty-one DVDs and one VHS tape, with a lot of men on the covers wearing sunglasses and pointing guns.

There was The A-Team, Series One.

There was Knight Rider.

There was Street Hawk.

There was Airwolf.

There was MacGyver.

There was Only Fools and Horses, The Complete Collection.

There was The Tomorrow People.

There was Doctor Who: The Pertwee Years.

And right at the bottom, in a scratched plastic case, there was Back to the Future.

Maisie said, "These are the 1980s."

I said, "I know."

She said, "Your dad has the entire 1980s in a box."

I said, "I did not know the 1980s were in a box."

She picked up Knight Rider and looked at the front.

She said, "It's a man and a car."

I said, "The car talks."

She said, "Talking cars? That's science fiction."

I said, "Then why does Dad have it?"

She said, "Because it was on telly when he was a boy."

I said, "So Dad lived in a world where cars

talked."

She said, "Oliver. They didn't talk. It was a television programme."

I said, "That is what the government wants you to think."

She rolled her eyes, but she did not argue.

I carried the box downstairs.

Under it, where the box had been standing, I noticed something else.

It was a sports bag.

It was a dark blue one, quite old, with a zip.

A label on it said, in Mum's handwriting:

DAVE: DO NOT BIN (JO).

I did not open it.

I would like it noted that I did not open it.

I did, however, notice that the zip was slightly open, and that through the gap I could see something white and curved, like a bowl.

It was a helmet.

I know it was a helmet because it had a visor.

I did not touch it.

I have never seen anything so completely left alone in all my life.

Thursday, 12 November

I have watched the first episode of The A-Team.

I watched it at lunchtime on Dad's old DVD player in the front room, with Ryan and Maisie.

I will describe what happened.

A man with a cigar (Hannibal) wore a hat and said a sentence about a plan.

A man with a gold chain (called B. A. Baracus, which is a ridiculous name) was put to sleep by a drug in a glass of milk, and woke up in the back of a van.

The other two men did things that I did not follow.

Then, at about minute thirty-five, the four of them went into a barn and came out eleven minutes later, driving an armoured vehicle made from a tractor, a cement mixer and a set of church doors.

It was held together with a welding torch and a catchy tune.

I paused the DVD.

I said, "That is not possible."

Ryan said, "It was a programme."

I said, "It took them eleven minutes. It has taken me three weeks to fix one trolley. And it doesn't go in a straight line."

Maisie said, "They have a montage."

I said, "What is a montage?"

She said, "It's when something that should take months happens in a minute with music."

I said, "That is the most dishonest thing I have ever heard."

She said, "Welcome to television."

I have decided that the 1980s were the golden age of civilisation.

I rang Dad at work.

He was in the van.

I said, "Why can't people build armoured vehicles in barns any more?"

He said, "Health and safety."

I said, "Of course."

This explains a great deal about Britain's economic decline.

I said, "Dad, I have watched the A-Team."

There was a very long silence.

Then Dad said, in a voice I had not heard before, "Which episode?"

I said, "The first."

He said, "The one with the barn?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Ol."

I said, "Yes?"

He said, "I'll be home at six. Don't touch anything."

I said, "I was not going to."

He said, "Don't touch the loft, either."

I said, "I have already been in the loft."

He was silent again.

He said, "Right."

Then he said, "I'll bring chips."

Thursday, 12 November, 9.45 p.m.

I do not think I have ever seen my dad like this.

He came home with chips and fish and two bottles of fizzy drink, and he put the A-Team DVD back in the machine, and he sat on the settee between me and Chloe, and he said:

"Right. You've seen the barn. Now you've got to see the jump."

Mum was in the kitchen, ironing a uniform.

She came to the door with the iron still in her

hand.

Dad said, "Jo, they do the jump."

Mum said, "I know they do the jump."

Dad said, "It's a good jump."

Mum said, "It's a very good jump, Dave."

I noticed that she was smiling.

She stood in the doorway for the whole episode.

She did not iron.

Dad said every line of the programme about a second before it happened.

He did all of the voices.

At the end, when Hannibal said, "I love it when a plan comes together," Dad said it with him, at exactly the same time, and punched the air.

Chloe, who has watched about eleven thousand hours of television on her phone, said, "Dad, this is really good."

Dad said, "I know."

He said it the way you say something you have been waiting thirty years to say.

At the end of the episode, he turned round to me, and his eyes were all bright.

He said, "That's what Gaz and I wanted to be."

I said, "I know."

He said, "You know?"

I said, "You told me on Bonfire Night."

He said, "Right. Yes. I did."

He said, "I forgot I told you."

He scratched his neck.

He said, "Funny, that."

I said, "It is not funny. It is the most interesting thing that has happened in this house since the hedgehog."

Mum made a noise that was partly a laugh and partly something else.

Dad said, "Give over."

But he was grinning.

I thought: I have not seen Dad grin like that

since I was six.

I have now seen it twice in two weeks, and both times it was because of an old television.

I have drawn a conclusion.

Dad was not made to be a parcel driver.

I am not saying that parcel driving is wrong. It is an honourable profession and I am grateful for every single thing he has ever delivered.

I am just saying that he looks a great deal happier when he is pretending to be in a van full of mercenaries.

Friday, 13 November

I have discovered Knight Rider.

It is about a man called Michael Knight who

drives a talking car.

The car is called KITT.

It is black and shiny and has a red light on the front that goes from side to side.

It can drive itself, it can talk, and it can do a sort of jump.

It is also, according to Dad, "a bit sarcastic".

I asked Dad why his van could not do these things.

He said it could barely start.

I have decided to install artificial intelligence in it.

I got Dad's van keys while he was in the bath.

I did not drive it.

I put my old phone in the holder on the dashboard.

I connected it to the van's speakers.

I opened my AI assistant.

I said, "Could you please take control of a motor vehicle?"

It said, I'm sorry, I can't do that. For your safety, please consult a driver.

I tried again.

I said, "Can you be sarcastic?"

It said, Of course! I'd be delighted to be sarcastic.

I said, "Say something sarcastic."

It said, That's a great idea.

I do not think it understood.

I left the phone connected.

I did not think any more about it.

In the morning, Dad set off for work.

I know what happened next because he told us at tea.

At the first roundabout the van said, in a smooth voice, "Please indicate. Or don't. It's your funeral."

Dad said, "WHAT?"

The phone said, "It's not my fault you're sitting

there, Dave."

Dad pulled over outside a Co-op.

He took the phone out of the holder.

He looked at it.

He said, "Oliver."

He said, "OLIVER."

He said, "There's a voice in my van, and it's calling me Dave."

I said, "It is a prototype."

Mum said, "Dave, are you laughing?"

Dad said, "No."

He was.

He was laughing so much he could hardly get the words out.

He said, "It said it's your funeral."

He said, "A man at the Co-op heard it."

He said, "He thought I'd gone mad."

Mum took the phone off him.

She said, "Ol, this goes in the drawer. With the gloves."

I said, "But it is a legitimate transport innovation."

She said, "It's also the reason the postman knows what Dad's like at roundabouts."

I said, "That is not a good reason."

She said, "It's an excellent reason."

I have been informed that the AI will no longer have access to the van.

It is not good news.

KITT was never separated from Michael.

Saturday, 14 November

Today we watched Back to the Future.

I have to say that this is the best thing I have ever seen.

It is about a boy called Marty who travels back in time to 1955 in a car invented by a scientist called Doc Brown.

The car is a DeLorean.

It has a machine called a flux capacitor, which bends the fabric of space and time.

It requires 1.21 gigawatts of electricity.

It also requires the car to reach eighty-eight miles an hour.

I paused the film.

I said, "This is not science fiction."

Ryan said, "Oliver, it is."

I said, "It is a documentary."

Maisie, who had come round with a packet of crisps, said, "It's a film from 1985."

I said, "Exactly. It is dated. They have used the film to hide the truth. Someone has invented time travel and told it as a story, so no one

believes it."

She said, "Oliver, you're an idiot."

I said, "I am a visionary."

She said, "Those aren't mutually exclusive."

I asked her what that meant, and she said, "Look it up."

I looked it up.

It means "does not rule out both".

This was a significant observation, and I have decided to remember it.

By the end of the film, I knew what I had to do.

I had been thinking too small.

I have decided that the Wiggins EV1 was a mistake because it was a car.

What the world needs is a time machine.

And a DeLorean costs about £40,000.

My current research budget is £16.43 and a tin of soup.

I have therefore decided to use the wheelie bin.

It already has wheels, a hinged entry system and a very large lid.

Sunday, 15 November

I have discovered that the time machine requires 1.21 gigawatts of electricity.

I asked Mum whether we had that much

available.

She said, "Not with the prices they're charging."

I said, "That is very unhelpful."

She said, "I know, love."

She said, "I don't suppose you've noticed that I've had the heating on for two hours a day since September?"

I said I had not noticed.

She said, "Have you noticed you're wearing two jumpers?"

I looked.

I was.

I realised that I had put one on over the other

without thinking.

Mum said, "It's not a big problem. It's just the way it is at the moment."

I said, "Is it expensive?"

She said, "It's everything."

She said it lightly, but I looked at her, and I saw that she was holding a very long envelope with the word FINAL at the top.

She saw me looking.

She put it in the drawer.

I said, "Mum."

She said, "Nothing for you to worry about."

I said, "Can I do something?"

She said, "You can put the second jumper in the wash."

I put the second jumper in the wash.

I have been thinking about this all afternoon.

I have added a seventh item to my list of important matters.

Question seven: How much is "everything"?

I have decided I will find out.

I have a ledger.

Monday, 16 November

This morning I called on Mr Wilkins to discuss the technical specifications of a flux capacitor.

He was in his front garden, pruning a rose bush

that had no roses on it.

I said, "Mr Wilkins, I wish to ask you a question of an engineering nature."

He said, "Go on."

I said, "What do you know about flux capacitors?"

He said, "A what?"

I explained.

I said it was a device capable of bending the fabric of space and time.

I said it needed 1.21 gigawatts.

I said I was developing a vehicle.

He put down the secateurs.

He said, "You want to learn how to bend a bloody spanner first."

I said, "That is not a very scientific answer."

He said, "It's not meant to be. It's meant to be useful."

He said, "I've worked with metal for fifty-five years, and the first thing I ever learned was that nothing happens until you can make something straight, and then something flat, and then something round. You haven't got any of those."

I said, "I am working on them."

He said, "Good."

I said, "Could I use your tools?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Because they're mine."

He looked over my shoulder at the road.

He said, "Is that your sister filming?"

It was.

I said, "She films everything."

He said, "Tell her to stand away from my wall."

I did.

He said, "Come on Saturday. I'll show you how to hold a file."

I said, "A file?"

He said, "It's a tool."

I said, "I am aware that it is a tool."

He said, "Then you'll understand it's not a lesson, it's an introduction."

I think this might be the first time an adult has ever invited me to something that he was not required to.

I am looking forward to it.

I will bring my own gloves.

Monday, 16 November (4.17 p.m.)

I have constructed a time machine.

It is made from:

- one wheelie bin (green, not black),

- forty party poppers (taped together, safe),

- one flashing bicycle light,

- one old digital alarm clock,

- eleven metres of tinfoil,

- a pair of Chloe's headphones, borrowed without permission, for the purpose of a "temporal antenna".

I have installed the clock on the lid.

I have set it to 4.16 p.m.

I climbed into the bin.

I closed the lid.

It was extremely dark.

It smelled of sour milk.

I pressed the button on the clock.

A very loud bang went off.

I assume it was the flux capacitor, which was actually forty party poppers left over from Nan's seventieth, taped together.

It was a larger bang than I had expected.

The garden lights went out.

Mum came rushing out of the back door with a wooden spoon.

She opened the lid of the bin.

I said, "I have travelled in time."

She said, "Where to?"

I said, "1985."

She said, "Well, you can travel to your bloody bedroom."

I looked at the clock.

It said 4.18.

I said, "I have travelled one minute into the future."

Mum said, "Oliver."

I said, "It is a significant breakthrough."

She said, "It is not."

Chloe, who had been filming from the kitchen window, said, "That was amazing."

She said, "Mum, he's got forty party poppers in his bin."

Mum said, "I can see he's got forty party poppers in his bin, Chloe."

Chloe said, "Can I put it up?"

Mum said, "No."

Chloe said, "Can I put it up with a caption?"

Mum looked at the bin.

She looked at me.

She said, "I don't know why I'm asking."

She went back inside.

The video was online by half past four.

It is called MY BROTHER INVENTS TIME MACHINE. IT WORKS. KIND OF. (1 MINUTE FORWARD ONLY).

It has 312,000 views.

I said to Chloe, "I would like a share."

She said, "Of what?"

I said, "The revenue."

She said, "From a video of you in a bin?"

I said, "I was the star."

She said, "You were the bin."

I would like it noted for the record that I have now been involved in two successful inventions, and both were filmed.

I have decided to take a more strategic view of my own fame.

I have written it in the ledger:

WIGGINS AEROSPACE: ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

1. Wiggins Home Defence System: deterred one hedgehog

2. Wiggins EV1: reached 13 mph

3. Wiggins Time Machine: travelled forward 60 seconds

I looked at the list.

It does not look very impressive.

But it does look like a trend.

I rang Maisie.

I said, "I have travelled in time."

She said, "Forward one minute?"

I said, "How did you know?"

She said, "Chloe's video."

I said, "It is a significant breakthrough."

She said, "Oliver, everyone travels forward one minute every minute."

I said, "Not in a bin."

She said, "I take it back. You're a genius."

I said, "Thank you."

She said, "An accidental one."

She hung up.

I have decided to accept this as a compliment.

Closing balance: £16.43 and a tin of soup.

Subscribers: seven. Mysteries: seven. Machines built: three. Facts about the 1980s: one thousand. Dad's rally helmet: not touched.

End of Chapter Four.



CHAPTER 5

THE PEEPING TOM INVESTIGATION

Tuesday, 17 November

Today in history we learned about Lady Godiva.

Mr Pritchard said she was a noblewoman who lived in Coventry about a thousand years ago and who rode through the city on a horse to protest against unfair taxes.

He said the legend is that she did it wearing no clothes.

Half the class laughed.

I did not, because I was thinking about the tax.

I said, "That is the first sensible political protest I have ever heard of."

Mr Pritchard said, "Thank you, Oliver."

He said, "The story goes that the people of Coventry were asked to stay indoors with their shutters closed so she would not be embarrassed."

I put up my hand.

I said, "How do we know?"

He said, "How do we know what?"

I said, "That they stayed indoors."

He said, "Because it's a legend."

I said, "But there is one man in the story who did not stay indoors. He is called Peeping Tom. And he got into trouble for it. So how did anyone find out he'd looked, if everybody else had their eyes shut?"

Mr Pritchard took off his glasses.

He said, "Oliver, that is... actually quite a good question."

I said, "Thank you."

He said, "But you're missing the point of a legend."

I said, "Which is?"

He said, "It's not a report."

I said that questioning established narratives was the foundation of scientific progress.

He said, "Detention. Four o'clock."

I said, "For asking a good question?"

He said, "For saying it at that volume."

I have decided that my teachers do not know what they want.

Maisie Patel, sitting two rows in front, put her hand up and said, quite calmly, "Sir, actually, I think the earliest written version is from about two hundred years after Godiva died, so it may be a later addition."

Mr Pritchard said, "Excellent, Maisie. Thank you. You see, Oliver?"

I said, "That is exactly what I was saying."

Maisie said, without turning round, "No, it wasn't."

Wednesday, 18 November

It turns out that I am going to be allowed to leave detention for a school trip tomorrow, because it is a Learning Opportunity and not a punishment.

We are going into Coventry city centre.

Mr Pritchard says the trip will include:

1. The Godiva Clock at Broadgate.

2. St Mary's Guildhall.

3. The Priory ruins next to the cathedral.

4. The Transport Museum.

Mum has given me a packed lunch and a pound for emergencies.

She said, "Please don't pitch anything."

I said, "I would never."

She said, "Oliver."

I said, "I will only pitch if there is a suitable opportunity."

She said, "That's what I'm afraid of."

Dad said, from the table, "Pitch it hard, Ol."

Mum looked at him.

Dad said, "What? He's got to start somewhere."

Thursday, 19 November

I have completed a detailed investigation of Coventry city centre.

I will list my findings in order.

1. The Godiva Clock.

It hangs on the side of a building at the bottom of Broadgate, in the middle of the pedestrian area, and every hour a little door opens and a little model of Lady Godiva rides out on a horse, which is a very good horse for something about the size of a loaf.

At the same time, a window opens above her, and a small man appears.

That is Peeping Tom.

He leans forward and looks.

Then he vanishes.

Then the clock goes quiet, and about forty people take photographs, and nothing else happens for sixty minutes.

I observed the performance twice.

I came to the following conclusion.

Peeping Tom is not looking at Lady Godiva.

If you stand where I stood, and you look at the angle of his head, he is actually looking past her, towards the top of Hertford Street.

I told Ryan.

Ryan said, "What's at the top of Hertford Street?"

I said, "I do not know."

Ryan said, "Then why are you excited?"

I said, "Because neither does anyone else."

2. St Mary's Guildhall.

This is a very old building in Bayley Lane with a roof made of enormous wooden beams, like the inside of a huge upside-down ship.

It was built in about 1340, which is about two hundred years before anyone had the idea of the Wiggins family.

A lady in a red jumper explained that important people used to hold feasts there, and that a very large tapestry on the wall is nearly five hundred years old.

I looked at the tapestry for some time.

It shows a king and a lot of people in strange hats.

I asked the lady in the red jumper whether the building had any tunnels.

She said, "Tunnels?"

I said, "Beneath it."

She said, "There are cellars."

I said, "How many cellars?"

She said, "Several."

I said, "Are they connected?"

She said, "I'd have to ask."

I said, "That is exactly the kind of answer someone gives when they know."

Maisie said, very softly, "Oliver, stop interrogating the guide."

3. The Priory ruins.

These are next to the cathedral.

The cathedral is a very large modern building next to a very large burnt-out old one. The old one has no roof.

I was not expecting this.

It was bombed in the Second World War.

The ruins were very quiet.

A boy in the year above us was running around shouting, and Mr Pritchard said, quietly, "Please keep your voice down. This is a place where a lot of people were hurt."

The boy stopped.

Everybody stopped.

It was a surprisingly strong thing to say.

We stood in the ruins of the old cathedral, with the wind going round the stone, and I could not think of anything to say at all.

I would like it noted that this is not usual for me.

Next to the old cathedral there are the remains of a much older building, the Priory, which used to be a monastery.

It has stone walls about as high as my knee.

I looked at it carefully.

I think it is possible that the Priory stretches a very long way under the road.

I told Maisie.

She said, "Oliver, people are allowed to build things on top of other things."

I said, "Not without a plan."

She said, "Everybody always builds without a plan. That's how towns happen."

I said, "That is a terrifying thought."

She said, "It's the best thing about history."

I looked at her.

She had a notebook out, and a pen, and she was drawing a very good map of the ruins, with arrows.

I said, "What are you doing?"

She said, "My podcast."

I said, "You have a podcast?"

She said, "It's a bit of a podcast."

I said, "How many listeners?"

She said, "Nine."

I said, "That is more than I have subscribers."

She said, "Yes. I know."

She did not seem upset about it.

She said, "My mum plays it in the pharmacy."

4. The Transport Museum.

I have saved this for last.

It is in a large modern building on Millennium Place and it contains about a hundred and fifty

years of vehicles made in Coventry.

There are bicycles that look like they belong in a circus.

There are early motorbikes and old cars with brass headlights.

There is a very large and very quiet room at the back with a vehicle called Thrust SSC, which is the fastest car in the world, and which is shaped like a rocket on wheels.

I stood in front of it for a long time.

I have never wanted anything so much.

It was at this point that I saw a lady in a lanyard standing in the corner with a clipboard.

She said her name was Ms Okafor.

She said she was the education officer.

I said, "I am an inventor."

She said, "How lovely."

I said, "I have built three vehicles."

She said, "Goodness."

I said, "One of them travelled at thirteen miles an hour."

She said, "That's quite fast for a prototype."

I said, "It was a shopping trolley."

She said, "Oh."

I said, "I would like to pitch a new exhibit."

She said, "Pitch?"

I said, "An electric trolley."

I could hear Maisie breathing behind me.

Ms Okafor looked at me for a few seconds.

Then she said, very kindly, "Would you like to tell me about it?"

I told her.

I told her everything.

I explained the alternator, the hedge, the cousin-not-twin principle from page forty, the Wiggins Aerospace project and the party popper flux capacitor.

She listened to all of it.

She did not laugh.

When I had finished, she said, "Oliver, I think you've got something that most people don't."

I said, "Money?"

She said, "Curiosity."

She wrote something on her clipboard.

She said, "We run a Saturday club for young engineers. It starts in January. It's free. Would you like me to put your name down?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "I'll email your teacher."

I said, "Will I have to wear a tie?"

She said, "No."

I said, "That is a relief."

On the coach back, Maisie said, "I can't believe she listened to all of that."

I said, "I can. It was a very good pitch."

She said, "It was a ridiculous pitch."

I said, "That is what makes it a good one."

She said, "Oliver."

I said, "Yes?"

She said, "I want to go to the Saturday club, too."

I said, "You will have to apply."

She said, "I'll apply."

Ryan, from the seat behind us, said, "Can I come?"

I said, "You are Minister of Sockets. You are already in."

I have decided that today was a significant success.

Friday, 20 November

Dad was waiting at the school gates in his van.

He said, "How was the trip?"

I said, "Productive."

I told him about the Saturday club.

He said, "Free?"

I said, "Free."

He said, "What time?"

I said, "Saturday mornings. From January."

He did not say anything for a while.

Then he said, "I used to go to something like that. When I was your age."

I said, "A club?"

He said, "A sort of club. In a car garage. Run by a man called Mr Hodges. We used to take engines apart."

I said, "Did you put them back together?"

He said, "Sometimes."

He said, "Mostly we just wanted to know how they worked."

I said, "That is exactly how I feel."

He said, "I know."

He started the van.

At the first set of traffic lights he said, "Ol?"

I said, "Yes?"

He said, "I think it's a good idea."

I said, "Thank you."

He said, "And for the record, pitching to a museum is one of the maddest things I've ever heard."

I said, "Thank you."

He said, "It's also what I'd have done."

Saturday, 21 November

Today I was introduced to a file.

I had to look up how to spell it, because I did not believe it.

It is a long flat piece of steel with ridges on it.

It looks like a very rude metal ruler.

Mr Wilkins gave me a piece of mild steel about the size of a bar of chocolate, which he said was "waste from a job in 1991", and a vice, which he screwed to the end of a workbench in his garage.

The workbench is the cleanest thing I have ever seen.

Every tool hangs on a wall on a board, each with a little outline drawn round it in white paint so you can see at once if anything is missing.

There is a place for the hammer.

There is a place for the screwdriver.

There is a space where a small spanner should be, and an outline with nothing in it.

I did not ask.

He said, "Your job is to make that flat."

I said, "That is not a job."

He said, "It's the only job."

I said, "How long will it take?"

He said, "How long have you got?"

I said, "Four hours."

He said, "Then it'll take four hours."

I filed that piece of steel for one hour and ten minutes.

When I stopped, I said, "It is flat."

He put a ruler on it.

He held it up to the light.

You could see a little sliver of daylight underneath.

He said, "It's got a belly."

I said, "A belly?"

He said, "It's higher at the edges. You've been going too hard on the corners."

I said, "I'm very strong."

He said, "That isn't the point."

He took the file out of my hand.

He did not do it roughly. He did it the way you take something from a person who is about to drop it.

He said, "Don't push it. Let it cut."

He put it on the steel and moved it slowly, back and forth, in long, very even strokes.

It made a quiet shhh, shhh sound.

He said, "You see?"

I did.

I could see that the edge was getting flatter just by the way the metal was shining.

He passed the file back.

I tried again.

After a while I understood that I had been fighting it.

He sat on a stool with a cup of tea and watched me.

Neither of us spoke.

It was the quietest hour I have ever spent.

When I had finished, he put the ruler on again.

He held it up.

No daylight.

He said, "That'll do."

I said, "Is it flat?"

He said, "It's flat."

I said, "How flat?"

He said, "Flat enough to start."

I said, "To start what?"

He said, "Anything."

I stood in his garage, holding a piece of flat steel, and felt a feeling that I do not have a word for.

I think it might have been pride.

Saturday, 21 November (3.30 p.m.)

While I was putting my gloves on to go home, I asked him a question.

I said, "Mr Wilkins, why do they call you Mad

Dog?"

He was quiet.

I thought he was not going to answer.

He said, "Who told you that?"

I said, "Dad."

He said, "Your dad's got a long memory."

I said, "Is it a secret?"

He said, "No."

He poured himself some more tea.

He said, "In 1987 I was a toolmaker at the plant. We'd got a big order for a new brake part. It went into thousands of cars."

I said, "A brake part?"

He said, "That's right."

He said, "The batch came in. I checked it, the way I checked them all, and one of them wasn't right. Not much. Half a millimetre. You wouldn't have seen it."

I said, "What did you do?"

He said, "I told them. The manager said it was within tolerance. I said it wasn't. He said sign it off. I said no."

I said, "What happened?"

He said, "I stood in front of the loading bay door for three days."

I said, "What?"

He said, "They wanted the lorries out. I wouldn't move. I said, if you put those parts in cars, someone is going to die."

I said, "Did they move you?"

He said, "They tried. About eleven men. Two foremen and the head of production."

I said, "Did you move?"

He said, "No."

He said, "On the third day, a man from head office came down and measured the part himself."

I said, "And?"

He said, "I was right. The whole batch was scrapped. Four hundred thousand pounds' worth."

I said, "So why Mad Dog?"

He said, "Because I wouldn't let go."

He took a sip of tea.

He said, "It's not meant as a compliment."

I said, "I think it is."

He said, "You'd have been the same."

I said, "I would never have stood in front of a lorry for three days."

He looked at me over the top of his cup.

He said, "You went down a hill in a shopping trolley, in front of an audience, with no brakes, because you thought it would work."

I said, "That is a different thing."

He said, "Is it?"

I did not know what to say.

He said, "Same Saturday next week. Bring the gloves. Not the soup."

Sunday, 22 November

I have thought about the half a millimetre all day.

It is a very small measurement.

It is smaller than the thickness of a pencil line.

But it could have been the difference between a car stopping and not stopping.

I have decided something.

I think I might want to be the sort of inventor

who measures.

I have looked at the bag where I keep my plans.

It is full of things that are enormously ambitious.

There are no measurements in any of them.

This is a problem.

I told Maisie.

She said, "That's the most sensible thing you've ever said."

I said, "Thank you."

She said, "Don't get used to it."

Monday, 23 November

Maisie recorded Episode Four of her podcast, which is called Maisie's Local History.

I was her guest.

It was recorded in her bedroom, under a duvet, to cut out the echo.

It is about Lady Godiva.

It was very good, except for the part when I said, into the microphone, "Many historians believe Peeping Tom was a time traveller."

Maisie said, "Which historians?"

I said, "Me."

Maisie said, "Oliver."

I said, "What?"

She said, "This is history."

I said, "I am a historian."

She said, "No, you're a conspiracy theorist with a good vocabulary."

I said, "That is a very harsh description."

She said, "It's also true."

I said, "Is it going in the episode?"

She said, "Yes."

She edited the recording that evening.

The final version is nineteen minutes long.

She called it The Godiva Question (With Special Guest Who Won't Stop Talking).

It has already had eleven listeners.

Two are her mum.

One is Mr Pritchard, who has left a review.

It says: Good to see two of my pupils doing history properly (one of them, anyway).

I have decided not to take it personally.

Wednesday, 25 November

I have been looking into "everything".

I have asked questions.

I asked Chloe.

She said, "What do you mean, everything?"

I said, "Mum said it was everything."

Chloe said, "Is this about the letters?"

I said, "What letters?"

Chloe looked round, as though someone might be listening.

She said, "Mum's been getting a lot of letters. The gas, the electric, the water. They've all gone up. Dad's wages haven't. And there's the car insurance."

I said, "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

She said, "Because you're twelve."

I said, "I'm twelve years and nine months."

She said, "Oliver."

She did not say it in a mean way.

She said, "They don't want you to worry."

I said, "But if nobody tells me, how can I help?"

Chloe thought about this.

She said, "That's actually a good point."

I said, "How bad is it?"

She said, "I don't know exactly."

She said, "But I know Mum's been working extra shifts."

I said, "I thought she liked them."

She said, "Nobody likes them, Ol."

She went quiet.

Then she said, "Can I tell you something?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "You can't tell Mum."

I said, "I will not."

She said, "I've been giving her some of the money from my videos."

I said, "What?"

She said, "Don't make it weird."

I said, "How much?"

She said, "Two hundred a month. In cash. I put it in her coat pocket."

I said, "Does she know it's you?"

She said, "She thinks it's Nan."

I said, "Chloe."

She said, "Don't."

I said, "That is the kindest thing I have ever heard of."

She said, "It's not kind, it's rent."

She looked embarrassed.

She said, "I live here, don't I?"

I said, "Of course."

She said, "Right."

She said, "So it's rent."

I did not argue.

But I looked at my sister, who is fifteen and

has forty-eight thousand followers and a ring light, and I thought: she has been doing this since September and has never told anybody.

I have added something to my list.

Question eight: What else does everyone in this house know that I do not?

Friday, 27 November

Ms Okafor has emailed Mr Pritchard.

Mr Pritchard has forwarded it to the class.

It says: Thank you to Oliver Wiggins for a very lively discussion about electric transport. We would love him and any interested friends to join our Young Engineers' Saturday Club from 9 January.

I have printed it out and put it on my wall.

Mr Pritchard has written underneath, in red pen: Well done. (Please do not pitch her again.)

I have decided to take this as a compliment.

I read the email aloud at tea.

Dad said, "That's brilliant, Ol."

Mum said, "I am so proud of you."

She said it twice.

She had to look at the ceiling for a second.

I said, "Is something wrong?"

She said, "No, love. Everything's fine."

I looked at her face.

She is very good at that sentence.

But I am an inventor now, and I have started to notice when something is out of tolerance.

Closing balance: £16.43 and a tin of soup. Subscribers: seven (podcast listeners: eleven). Files held: one. Things Mr Wilkins has said that I now believe: all of them. Secrets in the house: at least three. Number of people who know about Chloe's two hundred pounds: two.

End of Chapter Five.



CHAPTER 6

CHRISTMAS AT THE WIGGINSES

Saturday, 5 December

I have launched a new initiative.

It is called Operation Pennywise.

Its objective is to reduce the amount of money this house spends on everything.

I have made a list of actions.

1. Close all doors. (Heat leaks out of open doors, according to the internet, which says so

in a very sad font.)

2. Put on a jumper instead of the heating. (Already achieved. I am wearing two.)

3. Turn off every light in every room that does not contain a person.

4. Shower for four minutes.

5. Stop Dad leaving the fridge door open "while he thinks".

I appointed Ryan as inspector.

He came round after lunch with a clipboard and a torch.

He walked slowly through the house, checking every room.

He found fourteen lights on in empty rooms.

He found the back door open.

He found Chloe sitting on the landing in a dressing gown in the dark, talking to her phone.

He said, "Are you aware you are not using the light?"

Chloe said, "I'm using the ring light."

Ryan said, "Is that on a plug?"

Chloe said, "Ryan, go away."

Ryan said, "It's for the family."

Chloe said, "It's for my job."

I have decided to exempt Chloe's ring light from Operation Pennywise on the grounds that it is also, in a way, an income generator.

I have also fitted a sand timer to the bathroom door, which allows the person in the shower precisely four minutes.

Dad went in at six.

I turned the timer over.

At four minutes I knocked on the door and said, "Time."

He said, "I've only just put the soap on."

I said, "Four minutes."

He said, "Ol, I'm a grown man."

I said, "The sand does not care."

He said, "I'll be out in a minute."

He was not.

He was out in eleven.

Operation Pennywise has not yet achieved its targets.

Monday, 7 December

Mum has put up the Christmas rota on the fridge.

It is a piece of A4 paper with a table on it.

It says who is working when.

Mum has been given the following:

Christmas Eve: 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. (night shift).

Christmas Day: 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. (a short one, she says).

Boxing Day: off.

I said, "You are working on Christmas Day and Christmas Eve."

She said, "It's all right."

I said, "But you'll miss the whole of Christmas."

She said, "I'll be back for dinner."

I said, "I thought you said Christmas dinner was at four."

She said, "We'll have it at five."

I said, "Why can't someone else do it?"

Mum said, "Because it's a hospital, love. People get ill at Christmas."

I said, "That seems extremely unreasonable."

She said, "It is, a bit."

She said, "But I like it, you know. Being on a ward at Christmas. The patients are so pleased to see you. It feels like the only place in the world where anyone is actually listening."

I said, "To what?"

She said, "To what you're saying."

She said it in a very particular tone, so I wrote it down:

Mum is tired in a way that is also happy.

I do not understand this.

I have put a question mark next to it.

Wednesday, 9 December

Chloe has proposed a joint venture.

She came into my room (without knocking) and said, "I've had an idea."

I said, "I am listening."

She said, "Dad's air fryer channel. It's got twenty-nine views. I want to make a video with him."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Because Christmas is coming and everyone's looking at food. And because it'd be a laugh."

I said, "You want to help Dad's channel?"

She said, "Don't say it like that."

I said, "How am I supposed to say it?"

She said, "Say my sister is a very nice person."

I said, "My sister is a very nice person who is occasionally rude."

She said, "That'll do."

She said, "We'll film it on Wednesday. Full Christmas dinner, in an air fryer."

I said, "Is that possible?"

She said, "Of course it's not possible. That's why it'll go viral."

I think there is a lesson in this.

I do not know what it is yet.

Saturday, 12 December

At Mr Wilkins's workbench I made a paperweight.

It is a flat piece of steel the size of a slice of bread, with all four edges filed straight, and the corners rounded, and one side polished until you can see your face in it.

It took three Saturdays.

I stamped my initials on the back with letter punches.

O.P.W.

Mr Wilkins looked at it for a long time.

He ran his thumb along the edge.

He did not say anything about the corners, which I think means they were acceptable.

He said, "What's it for?"

I said, "It is a paperweight."

He said, "I can see that."

I said, "I am going to give it to Mum."

He said, "Good."

He said, "It's the first thing you've made that's any use."

I said, "It is not a very complicated device."

He said, "The most useful things aren't."

I said, "Is that a quote?"

He said, "It's a fact."

I wrapped it in newspaper.

I have written a card for Mum.

It says: Dear Mum. This is flat. Love, Oliver.

I could not think of anything else.

It seems to say everything.

Wednesday, 16 December

The Great Air Fryer Christmas Dinner was filmed this evening.

I am the sound recordist.

Chloe is the director.

Dad is the star.

The menu was:

- turkey crown (small, and "premium", according to Dad, who paid for the word),

- roast potatoes,

- carrots,

- sprouts, "because it's Christmas",

- stuffing balls (shop-bought),

- one single chipolata wrapped in bacon.

Dad wore the apron that says KISS THE COOK (HE'S GOT A MOUSTACHE).

He does not have a moustache.

He drew one on with a pen.

Chloe said, "Okay, Dad, this is going to be great. Just be yourself. Say 'Welcome back to Air Fryer Adventures'."

Dad said, "Welcome back to Air Fryer Adventures."

Chloe said, "With energy."

Dad said, "WELCOME BACK TO AIR FRYER ADVENTURES."

Chloe said, "That's too much."

Dad said, "You said energy."

Chloe said, "Medium energy."

He tried again.

Mum, who had come home from a nine-hour shift, sat at the end of the table in her uniform with her feet up on a stool and said nothing.

I think she was just watching Dad.

The turkey went in.

At minute twelve the air fryer began to make

a worrying noise, a bit like Mr Wilkins's lawnmower.

At minute fourteen there was a loud pop.

At minute fifteen the whole kitchen filled with smoke, and the smoke alarm went off, and Dad said, "IT'S FINE, IT'S JUST THE FAT," and Chloe said, "KEEP FILMING," and Mum got up and opened the back door and said, "I'm not doing this for the pleasure of it."

Dad took out the tray.

The turkey was black on one side and raw on the other.

There was a very long silence.

Then Dad said, to the camera, in a very small voice, "That's... not how it looked in the instructions."

I thought it was the funniest thing I had ever heard.

Chloe did, too.

She put her head on the table and shook with laughter, and so did Mum, who put her hand over her mouth and made a high squeaky noise, and so did Dad, who was still holding the tray and could not stop.

Chloe filmed all of it.

She did not stop recording until Dad said, "Okay, okay, I've got it, I've got it. This year we'll have pizza."

We did not eat the turkey.

We had pizza.

The video went up at ten o'clock.

It is called DAD COOKS CHRISTMAS DINNER IN AN AIR FRYER (IT GOES VERY WRONG).

It had four thousand views by midnight.

Thursday, 17 December

Dad's video has one hundred and eighty thousand views.

The comments say things like:

This is the best thing I've seen all year.

Dave, I'm crying.

Please do the full Christmas dinner on Christmas Day.

DAVE FOR PM.

Who is the lady laughing in the background?

She's my favourite.

Mum has become a minor celebrity.

She said, "Absolutely not."

Chloe said, "Mum, you've got four thousand likes on one second of laughing."

Mum said, "It's not a career."

Chloe said, "Not yet."

Dad has received an email from the air fryer company.

It says, We love your video. Would you consider a partnership?

He read it out in the kitchen.

He read it three times.

He said, "They want me to do a proper one."

Mum said, "Dave."

He said, "They'll pay me, Jo."

She said, "How much?"

He said, "They didn't say. But it's a lot of views."

Mum said, "It's a nice thing."

I could see she was trying not to look hopeful.

Dad said, "I don't want to say it."

Mum said, "Don't."

Dad said, "It might be a little bit helpful."

Mum put her arms round him, for quite a long

time, and said into his shoulder, "It might."

I did not see any reason to interrupt.

I went upstairs and wrote in my ledger:

Dad: first ever income from air fryer: £0.

Dad's confidence: up.

I have decided that confidence should be a column.

Sunday, 20 December

I sat down with Mum tonight at the kitchen table, after Chloe had gone to bed.

I said, "Mum. I want to see the spreadsheet."

She said, "What spreadsheet?"

I said, "The one that says everything."

She looked at me.

She did not say anything for quite a while.

Then she got her laptop, opened it, and turned it round.

It was a very long list of numbers in coloured boxes.

It said: INCOME. OUTGOINGS. DIFFERENCE.

The difference was in red.

It was not a large number.

It was just red.

I looked at it for a long time.

I said, "It's very precise."

She said, "I'm good at the spreadsheet."

I said, "It's a very good spreadsheet."

She said, "Thank you."

I said, "Is there anything I can do?"

She said, "No, love."

I said, "I have two hundred and six pounds."

She said, "What?"

I said, "I have been saving. Over the last month. From Mr Wilkins, from the leaves, from the podcast sponsorship."

She said, "Oliver, you've got sixteen pounds forty-three."

I said, "I added the soup."

She laughed.

She laughed, and then she put her hand over her eyes.

She said, "Oh, Ol."

I said, "I want to give it to you."

She said, "No."

I said, "It is not a lot."

She said, "It's not that. It's that I'd never take it."

I said, "Why not?"

She said, "Because it's yours."

I said, "That is not a reason."

She said, "It's the only one I've got."

She put her hand on my head.

She said, "Listen. There's something I need you to know. We're not in trouble. Not trouble trouble. We're just... tight. Lots of people are. It'll get better in the spring when Dad's hours go up."

I said, "Will they?"

She said, "I think so."

I said, "Is that a fact or a hope?"

She said, "A bit of both."

I said, "I prefer facts."

She said, "So do I, love."

I said, "What does Dad think?"

She said, "Dad's trying."

She said, "That's the most important thing."

I said, "Is it?"

She said, "Yes."

She said, "I'd rather be with someone who's trying than someone who's right."

I put that sentence in the ledger as well.

I do not have a column for it.

I have drawn a box round it.

Thursday, 24 December

Christmas Eve.

Mum left for work at half past six this evening.

She had her bag, her ID badge and a Tupperware of cold roast potatoes.

She said, "Be good."

I said, "I am always good."

She said, "You're always something."

She kissed us all.

She kissed Dad for a bit longer.

Chloe said, "Ew."

At eight o'clock we were all in the front room: me, Chloe, Dad and Nan, who had come over on the bus with a bag of tins and a Victoria

sponge she had made for "emergencies".

Dad put on Only Fools and Horses, the Christmas special.

Nan laughed so much that her tea went down her cardigan.

At nine I got up to put the kettle on.

I looked out of the kitchen window.

Number fourteen was dark.

It was not just a bit dark.

There were no lights on in the whole house.

There was no tree in the window.

There were no cards on the sill.

The street was bright with decorations: flashing reindeer, a very large illuminated Santa on the roof of number nine, strings of coloured lights round every gate.

But Mr Wilkins's house was black, like a hole in a row of teeth.

I said to Dad, "Mr Wilkins has not put his lights on."

Dad said, "He never does."

I said, "Is he at his family's?"

Dad said, "I don't think he's got any, Ol."

I said, "What about his wife?"

There was a very small pause.

Dad said, "She died. Four years ago, now.

Margaret. Lovely woman. She used to bring us biscuits."

I said, "I did not know that."

He said, "He doesn't say much."

He put down his tea.

He said, "He's had a rough few Christmases."

I looked at the dark house.

I thought about the garage and the tarpaulin and the tail-light.

I thought about the empty outline on the tool wall where a small spanner should be.

I put these facts together.

I did not like the result.

I said, "Dad, may I take him a mince pie?"

Dad looked at me for a moment.

He said, "Take two."

Thursday, 24 December (9.40 p.m.)

I knocked on Mr Wilkins's door at twenty to ten.

It was very cold and the pavement was shining.

I held a plate with two mince pies on it, covered with a paper napkin, which Nan had tucked in and said was "to keep the heat in".

There was no answer.

I knocked again.

After a bit, I heard footsteps.

The door opened about four inches, on a chain.

Mr Wilkins looked out.

He said, "What?"

I said, "Happy Christmas."

He said, "Is it?"

I said, "It is for me. Would you like a mince pie?"

He looked at the plate.

He said, "Your mother made those?"

I said, "Nan did. My mum is at work."

He said, "Right."

He said, "Does she make a living out of mince

pies?"

I said, "She is a healthcare assistant."

He said, "I know what she is."

He closed the door.

I thought he had gone.

Then I heard the chain slide off.

The door opened wide.

He said, "You'd better come in. It's freezing."

I have never been inside his house.

It is very clean.

There is a clock on the wall that ticks very loudly.

There is a radio on the sideboard, playing quietly, a man singing about snow.

There is a small table set for one, with a knife and fork and a plate with a tin of ham on it.

There was no Christmas tree.

There was a framed photograph on the mantelpiece, of a smiling woman with short grey hair, wearing a green scarf, standing next to a small white car on a beach.

I knew that it was Margaret.

I did not ask.

He took the plate.

He looked at the mince pies.

He said, "These are the proper kind."

I said, "What kind is the proper kind?"

He said, "With suet."

I said, "I did not know there was an improper kind."

He said, "Oh, there is."

He ate one standing up, in two bites.

Then he said, quite quietly, "She used to make them. Every year. Twenty-four. We'd have two each, and give away the rest."

I said, "That's a lot of mince pies."

He said, "It's what you do."

He wiped his fingers.

He said, "You'd better get back. They'll be

missing you."

I said, "Mr Wilkins."

He said, "What?"

I said, "Would you like to come to our house for Christmas dinner?"

He looked at me as though I had asked him to run a marathon.

He said, "No."

I said, "There'll be turkey."

He said, "No, thank you."

I said, "It's a very large turkey. It's from the oven."

He said, "I don't go out at Christmas."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "I don't."

I said, "But it's Christmas."

He said, "That is the whole point."

He said it very gently.

I did not know what to say.

I said, "Then I shall bring you a plate."

He said, "You don't need to."

I said, "I know."

He opened the door.

I went out into the cold.

At the gate I looked back.

He was standing in the doorway with the plate in his hand and the hall light behind him, and he looked like a very big man who had been left behind by something.

I said, "Happy Christmas, Mr Wilkins."

He said, "And to you."

He shut the door.

I have noted the following:

Mr Wilkins is not mad.

Mr Wilkins is lonely.

These are different problems.

I think I may be able to help with one of them.

Friday, 25 December (7.10 a.m.)

Mum has gone to work.

We were not allowed to open our presents until she got back.

This was the hardest part of the whole holiday.

I sat in front of the tree for about forty minutes, looking at my own wrapped present, which is soft and rectangular and from Nan.

I think it is a jumper.

I have decided not to guess.

At ten o'clock Dad, who was making breakfast, said, "Okay. We'll do the family ones when Mum's back. But you can open one each."

I opened Nan's.

It was a jumper.

It is bright orange with a picture of a reindeer on it.

It says OH DEER.

Chloe said, "Oliver, you have to wear that."

I said, "I have decided to wear it with pride."

She filmed me putting it on.

It is already online.

I do not mind.

I have 4,400 subscribers now, because of the hedgehog and the bin and the dinner.

I am being followed by strangers.

I find it rather moving.

Friday, 25 December (4.20 p.m.)

Mum came back at twenty past four.

She had been up for twenty-three hours.

She walked in through the door in her uniform with her lanyard still on and a paper hat that one of the patients had given her.

She stood in the doorway.

We all looked at her.

She said, "Merry Christmas."

And then she burst into tears.

It was a very quiet kind.

She said, "I'm sorry, I'm fine, I'm just tired."

Dad was at her side in one second.

He said, "Come here."

She said, "I'm fine."

He said, "I know."

He took her bag, and her coat, and her shoes, and he put her on the settee, and he gave her a cup of tea.

Chloe sat on one side of her and I sat on the other.

Nobody said anything.

Nan put a blanket on her knees.

After about a minute Mum said, "Right. Present

time."

She said it with a smile that went all the way up.

We opened them one by one.

Dad got: a model of a white Ford Escort Mk2 with a number 47 on the door, which I found in a charity shop in Bedworth for £14.99 and which had a sticker that said "RARE, BOXED, HAS ALL ITS WHEELS".

He took it out of the paper.

He held it in the palm of his hand.

He did not say anything for a very long time.

I said, "Is it the right one?"

He said, "It's the right one."

His voice had gone very quiet.

I said, "I did not know whether it was the right one. I looked at some photographs of old rally cars and I picked one that looked like the one Nan told me about."

He said, "You've got the number, Ol."

I said, "Is it your number?"

He said, "It was my number."

He put it very carefully on the mantelpiece, next to the photograph of the four of us on the beach at Weymouth.

He said, "Thank you."

Mum said, "Dave?"

Dad said, "I'm fine."

He turned his back and looked at the model for a while.

Chloe, who is not normally a hugger, got up and hugged him round the middle from behind, with her chin on his shoulder, and he held onto her arm.

I do not think I have ever seen anything so quietly enormous.

Mum got: a piece of flat steel in a newspaper wrapper, with a card that said Dear Mum. This is flat. Love, Oliver.

She unwrapped it.

She looked at it.

She turned it over.

She said, "O.P.W."

I said, "Those are my initials."

She said, "I know whose initials they are."

She held it up to the light.

She said, "You made this?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "It's perfect."

I said, "It is not perfect. The left corner has a belly. Mr Wilkins pointed it out."

She said, "It's the nicest present I have ever been given."

I said, "You are exaggerating."

She said, "No."

She put it on the arm of the chair, as though she wanted to keep an eye on it.

She said, "It's going on my desk at work."

I said, "It is a paperweight."

She said, "I know, love. That's why."

Chloe got: a new ring light and a voucher.

She screamed.

It was not a good screaming. It was the kind a person makes when they have won a prize on television.

I got: the following.

- a jumper (reindeer, OH DEER),

- a book token,

- a pair of proper steel-toe-cap work gloves from Dad, which he said "you'll need on Saturdays", and I realised that he had spoken to Mr Wilkins,

- a letter from Mum that said YOU ARE ALLOWED TO USE THE SHED ON SATURDAY AFTERNOONS with a hand-drawn picture of a lawnmower with a cross through it.

I have never had a present that made me feel so completely trusted.

I read it three times.

I did not know what to say.

I said, "Thank you."

Mum said, "Don't mention it."

She said, "Don't build a rocket."

I said, "I will build something modest."

She said, "That's all I ask."

Friday, 25 December (5.15 p.m.)

We had Christmas dinner.

It was in the oven.

Dad had not touched the air fryer.

It was a very good dinner.

It had a proper turkey with crispy skin, and roast potatoes, and Nan's gravy, which is the best in Bedworth and possibly the Midlands.

At about half past five I got up and said, "Excuse me."

Mum said, "Where are you going?"

I said, "To take a plate round to number fourteen."

Dad said, "Ol, he won't want it."

I said, "I have already decided that he will."

Mum put down her fork.

She said, "Let me wrap it."

She put a big plate of turkey and everything on it, and put another plate on top, and wrapped it in foil, and tied it with a ribbon from one of the presents.

She said, "Tell him we're thinking of him."

I said, "I will."

Dad said, "Tell him he's welcome any time."

I said, "I will tell him you said it."

I carried the plate through the dark, cold street, with the lights of the Santa on number nine blinking on the road.

I knocked.

There was no answer.

I knocked again.

I waited.

At last the door opened, and he was standing there in his cardigan, with a tea towel over his shoulder.

He looked at me.

He looked at the plate.

He said, "I told you not to bother."

I said, "I did not bother. It is not a bother. It is dinner."

He said, "Right."

I said, "Mum says we are thinking of you."

He said nothing.

He took the plate.

He looked at the ribbon.

He said, "That's a good bit of ribbon."

I said, "It was on Chloe's present."

He said, "Tell your mum thank you."

I said, "I will."

He did not close the door.

He said, "Do you want to see it?"

I said, "See what?"

He said, "You know what."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Come on, then."

Friday, 25 December (5.50 p.m.)

We went round the back of the house, along the path, and he unlocked the garage with a key from his pocket.

He turned on the light.

It was a single bare bulb.

The tarpaulin was grey and covered in a thin layer of dust.

He untied the orange rope.

He did it carefully.

Then he took hold of the edge of the sheet in both hands and drew it slowly backwards, like drawing a curtain at the start of a play.

It was a small car.

It was about the size of a large garden shed, but much prettier.

It was white and pale blue, with a rounded front, a little boot at the back and round headlights that looked like eyes.

The paint was very old, but very clean.

The chrome had been polished until it was like silver.

On the front, above the bumper, there was a badge.

It said HILLMAN.

And on the back, in chrome script: Imp.

I did not say anything.

I could not.

Mr Wilkins said, "1966. Hillman Imp. Made at Linwood in Scotland, but built to a Coventry design."

He said, "We bought it new."

I said, "We?"

He said, "Margaret and me."

He put one hand on the roof.

He said, "She called it Hector."

I said, "Hector?"

He said, "I don't know why. She just did."

He said, "It's got a rear engine, which means the boot is at the front, which means you never know where anything is. She used to say it was the most sensible car ever made, and the least sensible car ever driven."

I said, "Does it go?"

He said, "It did."

I said, "What happened?"

He said, "I was taking it apart. To do it up. We had a plan. It was going to be our fiftieth wedding anniversary present, to each other. We were going to drive it to Weston-super-Mare."

He said, "I got as far as the engine."

He stopped.

He said, "Margaret got ill. And that was that."

I said, "I'm sorry."

He said, "It's all right."

He said, "It's not all right."

He said, "But it's what happened."

I looked at the car.

I looked at the little round tail-light, the one I had seen sticking out from under the tarpaulin, the red glass shining in the bare bulb.

I looked at the outline on the tool wall, where the small spanner was missing.

I thought: I know what size that spanner is.

I said, "It's a nine-sixteenths Whitworth."

He turned his head sharply.

He said, "How did you know that?"

I said, "I did not. I just looked at the shape of the outline. And I know page ninety-four."

He said nothing.

He looked at me for a very long time.

Then he said, "It's under the seat."

I said, "Pardon?"

He said, "The spanner. I put it under the seat the day she went into hospital. I haven't wanted to move it."

I said, "I understand."

I did not, completely.

But I felt as though I had walked into the middle of something very big and very quiet.

He said, "I can't finish it on my own."

He said it very simply.

He said, "My hands aren't what they were. And I don't have the heart."

I said, "Mr Wilkins."

He said, "What?"

I said, "I do not have much experience."

He said, "No."

I said, "But I have a team."

He said, "Have you."

I said, "I have a Minister of Sockets. I have an Intelligence Officer. I have a very good ledger. I have a time machine that travels one minute into the future."

He looked at me.

And for the first time since I have known him, he laughed.

It was a short, rough laugh, like a very old engine starting.

He said, "That's not a lot to go on."

I said, "It is a start."

He said, "I've never known anyone who could make a speech out of a shopping list."

I said, "Thank you."

He said, "That's not entirely a compliment."

I said, "I will take it as one."

He put his hand on the roof of the car again.

He said, "Come on Boxing Day."

I said, "Both of us?"

He said, "You, and your team."

I said, "Thank you, Mr Wilkins."

He said, "Call me Ron."

I said, "I do not think I can."

He said, "Then call me what you like. But bring the gloves."

Saturday, 26 December

I have said very little today.

I have spent the whole day in Mr Wilkins's garage with Ryan, Maisie and Mr Wilkins.

We have not touched the car.

We have cleaned the garage.

Mr Wilkins says that you cannot work in a dirty workshop.

It took six hours.

We swept, scrubbed, dusted and mopped.

We found: eleven spiders, one very old penny, a tin of Brasso from 1974, and a postcard of Weston-super-Mare, face down behind a shelf.

Mr Wilkins looked at the postcard.

He put it in his pocket without turning it over.

Maisie said, very quietly, to me, "I think he's going to be all right."

I said, "How do you know?"

She said, "Because he's not on his own any more."

I said, "That is quite a mature observation."

She said, "I'm twelve and three-quarters."

I said, "So am I."

She said, "I know. But you're less mature."

I have decided not to argue.

Ryan, who had a duster on his head, said, "Is this a good time to say I've got to be home by four?"

Thursday, 31 December

New Year's Eve.

I have drawn up my resolutions.

I wrote them in my ledger, in the proper section.

1. Measure more. Pretend less.

2. Finish what I start. (At least one thing.)

3. Help Mr Wilkins get the Hillman Imp running.

4. Give Dad his plan back. (Progress: 3%. One model car, one conversation, no actual plan.)

5. Find out what is under Greggs.

6. Stop referring to artificial intelligence as "my assistant". (Maisie says this makes me sound like I have staff.)

7. Be a bit nicer to Chloe. (Not too much.)

I showed it to Mum.

She read it twice.

She said, "I really like number two."

I said, "I thought you might."

She said, "And number four."

I said, "That is a secret."

She said, "I won't tell."

She gave me the ledger back.

She said, "Ol, you know that you don't have to fix everything."

I said, "I know."

She said, "Do you?"

I said, "No."

She smiled.

She said, "That's honest."

She said, "Happy New Year."

I said, "Happy New Year, Mum."

At midnight, I stood on the back step with Dad.

We looked at the fireworks over Wood End, going off in every direction, red and gold and silver.

Dad said, "Another one."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Been a good year, Ol."

I said, "It has been a very loud year."

He said, "That's the best sort."

He put his arm round my shoulders.

He did not need to say anything else.

Across the road, on the other side of the street, there was one lit window.

It was upstairs in number fourteen.

A small, yellow light.

It was the only one on in the street, apart from ours.

I looked at it for a long time.

I think he was awake, too.

Closing balance: £16.43 (plus the soup, which has gone). Subscribers: 4,400. Mysteries solved: one (the tarpaulin). Mysteries remaining: five. Cars restored: zero, but one is now officially on the list. People helped: possibly several.

End of Chapter Six.



CHAPTER 7

OPERATION UNDERCOVENTRY

Friday, 1 January

New year, new project.

Maisie came round at ten o'clock with a flask, a folder and a plastic wallet of printouts.

She laid the printouts on my bedroom floor in a fan shape, like a magician who wants you to pick a card.

She said, "Right. Have you heard of the tunnels?"

I said, "Which tunnels?"

She said, "Exactly."

She said, "There is a rumour that there are tunnels under Coventry."

I said, "Where?"

She said, "Everywhere. Under the cathedral. Under the Council House. Under the old market. Somebody on a forum says there's one that runs from Greggs in the precinct all the way to Coventry station."

I said, "Why would anybody dig a tunnel from Greggs?"

She said, "That's the first question I asked."

She said, "I think we should find out."

I said, "Are you proposing an expedition?"

She said, "I'm proposing a desk study."

I have never been so excited by two words.

I have appointed her Chief of Research.

She said she already was.

I have noted this and decided not to argue.

We have named the project Operation UnderCoventry.

I drew a logo of a mole in a hard hat.

Maisie said it looked like a potato.

I said all great logos look like potatoes at first.

Saturday, 2 January

I told Mr Wilkins about the tunnels.

We were in the garage, in the cold, with the door open an inch because he says paraffin heaters and shut doors are a bad mix.

He did not look up from the cylinder head he was cleaning with a toothbrush.

He said, "There's cellars."

I said, "Cellars?"

He said, "Under the old town. The bombs knocked the buildings flat, and the cellars stayed. Lot of old shops had them. Some of 'em are still down there."

I said, "Are there tunnels?"

He said, "Not the way you're thinking."

I said, "What way am I thinking?"

He said, "The way with a torch and a skeleton."

I said, "I had not specified a skeleton."

He said, "You were about to."

He put down the toothbrush.

He said, "Undercrofts. That's the word you want. A medieval cellar, with a stone arch on top. There's a few under Coventry. The Charterhouse has a lovely one. And there's a bit of the old city wall that's still got a passage in it."

I said, "How do you know?"

He said, "I grew up here."

He said, "I was in the Charterhouse as a boy. A

school trip. Nineteen fifty-one."

I said, "What was it like?"

He said, "Cold."

He said, "There are paintings on the walls. Very old ones. Fifteenth century. You'd have to see them."

I said, "Can I?"

He said, "They do tours."

He picked up the toothbrush again.

He said, "Go and see them. And while you're at it, stop saying 'tunnel'. You'll make a proper historian weep."

I wrote undercroft on my hand.

It was still there on Monday.

Monday, 4 January

Back to school.

Mr Pritchard has asked me to stay behind.

He is my form teacher. He wears the same tie every day, which is brown, and he has a moustache that moves when he is thinking.

I stood at his desk.

He said, "Oliver, I've been told you were responsible for a hedge."

I said, "That is a matter of historical record."

He said, "I've also been told you've been spotted at the Transport Museum."

I said, "That is also true."

He said, "And you've started a podcast."

I said, "Maisie Patel has started a podcast. I am a guest."

He said, "You're a guest on a podcast called 'Oliver and Maisie'."

I said, "It is a joint venture."

He looked at me for a while.

Then he said, "Here's what I'd like. I'd like you to give the whole class a presentation. History. Any subject you choose."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because you've got more enthusiasm than anyone I've taught in twenty years. And

I'd like it pointed at something that doesn't involve a hedge."

I said, "I will do it on the tunnels under Coventry."

He said, "There are no tunnels under Coventry."

I said, "Then I will prove it."

He said, "Oliver, that is not how proof works."

I said, "It is how I work."

He sighed through his moustache.

He said, "Four weeks. Ten minutes. And you have to cite your sources."

I said, "What is a source?"

He said, "That's the first thing you'll have to find out."

I left feeling that I had been given both a reward and a punishment, and could not tell which was which.

Wednesday, 6 January

Maisie and I have started the research in the library at lunchtime.

It is a quiet room. The librarian's name is Mrs Abbott. She has a cardigan with a brooch shaped like a tiny owl.

We found a book on the history of Coventry.

It is four hundred pages long.

It has no pictures of tunnels.

It has one picture of a woman on a horse, without any clothes on.

Maisie said, "That's Godiva."

I said, "I know. We did her."

She said, "Why does she keep coming up?"

I said, "She is the Beyoncé of Coventry."

Maisie said, "That's not even a good comparison."

I said, "She is famous for one thing and everyone has an opinion about it."

Maisie said, "Okay, that one works."

We found, in the index, under C, the word cellars. We found, under U, the word undercroft. Under T, nothing at all.

The word tunnel is not in the index.

I have drawn the following conclusion: either there are no tunnels, or the people who write books about Coventry have an agreement.

Maisie said, "Option one is more likely."

I said, "Option two is more fun."

She said, "That's why you're not Chief of Research."

Saturday, 9 January

The first Saturday of the Young Engineers' Club at the Transport Museum.

Ms Okafor met us at the door in a bright yellow lanyard.

There were fourteen children there, mostly

older than me, and a man with a beard who turned out to be a retired aerospace engineer called Terry.

Dad dropped me at the door.

He did not drive away straight away.

He sat with the engine running and looked at the building, and at the long glass front, and at the poster of an old racing car.

I said, "Are you coming in?"

He said, "No. I've got a shift."

I said, "You said you were off."

He said, "Did I?"

I said, "It is a Saturday. You are never on a Saturday."

He said, "Right."

He said, "I'll pick you up at one."

He drove away quite fast.

I noticed, as he left, that he had been looking at the poster the whole time.

Inside, Ms Okafor gave us a problem.

She said, "Today you're going to build a bridge. Out of paper. It has to hold a tin of beans."

I said, "How many sheets?"

She said, "Five."

I said, "How many beans?"

She said, "One tin."

I said, "Is that a metric tin or an imperial tin?"

Terry the engineer laughed so hard he had to sit down.

My bridge was a failure.

It collapsed under the beans in less than a second.

Maisie, who was on the next table, built a bridge in the shape of a tube, folded like a drinking straw.

It held three tins.

I said, "How did you do that?"

She said, "A tube is stronger than a flat sheet."

I said, "That is a basic principle."

She said, "It's in your book."

I said, "I have not reached that chapter."

She said, "Read faster."

I have decided that Maisie is my greatest rival and my greatest asset.

I am keeping both facts in the ledger.

Sunday, 10 January

Dad was in the front room all afternoon watching old videos on his laptop.

He thought I could not see him.

I could see him in the reflection in the glass of the cabinet.

It was a rally.

A grainy one, with a commentator talking very fast, and little cars throwing up mud on a forest track.

Dad was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

When a white car came round the bend sideways, he made a small sound in his throat.

I went into the kitchen and had a glass of water so that he would not know I had been there.

I have a feeling I am meant to find this out slowly.

Wednesday, 13 January

Today we visited the Charterhouse.

It is a building on the edge of the city, with a

garden, a stone wall and a tiny gift shop that sells fudge.

Our guide was a woman called Janet, who had a very gentle voice and a clipboard.

She took us down some steps into a low room with a curved ceiling.

She said, "This is the undercroft."

It was cold.

It smelled of stone.

The walls were whitewashed, and on one of them, in faded red, I could see the faint outline of a figure.

It was a man in a long robe.

Janet said, "That's a medieval wall painting.

Late fifteenth century. It was covered over and rediscovered about eighty years ago."

I said, "Was it a secret?"

Janet said, "Only because nobody was looking."

I wrote this down.

A secret is often only a thing that nobody is looking at.

Maisie wrote it down too, and said, "That's good. Can I use it?"

I said, "It is covered by my copyright."

She said, "It's on a podcast."

I said, "Then I accept it as promotion."

I asked Janet whether there were any tunnels

from the Charterhouse to other places.

She smiled.

She said, "People ask me that every week."

I said, "Are there?"

She said, "Not that anyone has found."

She said, "But there's a lot under Coventry that nobody's looked at yet. The bombing opened up some things and buried others."

I said, "So you cannot say there are no tunnels."

She said, "I can only say I haven't seen one."

I said, "That is a very scientific answer."

She said, "Thank you."

I looked at Maisie.

Maisie looked at me.

We both knew that this was a clue.

Friday, 15 January

I have investigated Greggs.

I did this on my own, which Mum says is a pity, because she would have come.

The Greggs in the precinct has a queue even at ten in the morning.

I stood in it.

I bought a sausage roll.

I ate it slowly, looking at the floor, the walls and the ceiling.

Nothing about the shop suggested the existence of a tunnel.

I spoke to the girl at the till.

I said, "Excuse me. Is there a cellar?"

She said, "For the stock, yeah."

I said, "May I see it?"

She said, "No."

I said, "I am conducting historical research."

She said, "I'm conducting a lunch rush."

I said, "Does it go anywhere?"

She said, "Like where?"

I said, "A tunnel to the station, perhaps."

She looked at me for a long time.

She said, "Do you want a vegan sausage roll? It's two for three pounds."

I said, "That is a diversion."

She said, "Mate, it's a deal."

I bought two.

I have recorded the findings:

Greggs: no tunnel detected. Sausage rolls: extremely good.

Saturday, 16 January

Mr Wilkins and I have taken the engine out of the Hillman Imp.

I should say that he took it out and I held the

torch.

This is how it works. He stands at the bench with the engine on a stand, a small aluminium thing no bigger than a suitcase, and says things like "Spanner," and "Not that one," and "The other one."

I hand him the spanner.

It is usually the wrong one.

He says, "Nearly."

I have decided that "nearly" is the nicest word in the English language.

He cleans each piece in a tray of paraffin, and lays it on a clean cloth in order.

By the end of the afternoon the cloth looked like a map of the engine.

Every piece is in its proper place.

I said, "That is very neat."

He said, "That's how you put it back."

I said, "You do not need a diagram?"

He said, "I've got one."

He tapped his head.

I said, "That is a very small diagram."

He said, "It's got everything in it."

I have thought about this on the way home.

I think it may be true.

Sunday, 17 January

My presentation is going slowly.

I have written the first minute.

"Good morning, class. Today I will be talking about what is under Coventry. Nobody knows. That is why it is interesting."

I have not been able to think of the second minute.

Maisie says I should "start with facts and finish with a question".

I have all the facts I need.

I have not got a question.

I have asked my AI assistant to suggest one.

It said, A great question might be: "What would you find if you dug beneath your own street?"

I thought about this for some time.

I decided to ask Mr Wilkins.

Monday, 18 January

I asked him over the fence.

He was hanging out his tea towel.

I said, "Mr Wilkins. What is under our street?"

He said, "Clay."

I said, "Beyond the clay?"

He said, "More clay."

I said, "And beyond that?"

He said, "Coal, somewhere. Coventry's on the coalfield. They were digging round here a

hundred years ago."

I said, "So there are old mine workings?"

He said, "Possibly."

I said, "That is much more exciting than a tunnel from Greggs."

He said, "It's also much more likely to fall on you."

I put this in the presentation.

Slide 2: What is under Wood End?

Clay. Then coal. Then, possibly, danger.

Maisie says it is a very good slide.

She also says I should not put a skull on it.

I have compromised by putting a very small skull in the corner.

Saturday, 23 January

At the club today Ms Okafor set us a design problem.

She said, "Make something that moves, using only a rubber band, a paper clip and a cardboard tube."

I made a thing that rolled across the floor and then came back.

I did not know why it came back until Terry explained about stored energy.

I said, "So it winds itself up as it goes?"

He said, "Aye, that's the idea."

I said, "That is brilliant."

He said, "It's a toy, son."

I said, "It is a toy that returns."

He looked at me for a bit.

He said, "You've got a good head for it."

I did not know what to say, so I said, "Thank you."

At one o'clock, Dad's van was outside.

He was early.

He was standing outside the museum, leaning against the door, looking at the sign.

I walked out with my toy.

He said, "What have you got?"

I said, "A returning toy."

I put it on the pavement.

It rolled away from us, and then, slowly, rolled back.

Dad crouched down and watched it.

He said, "That's clever."

I said, "It is called energy storage."

He said, "I know what it's called."

He said it very quietly.

He did not say anything else.

Thursday, 28 January

I have been practising my presentation in front of the bathroom mirror.

Chloe opened the door and said, "Are you giving a TED talk to the toothpaste?"

I said, "It is for school."

She said, "Do it for me."

I did the first two minutes.

She sat on the edge of the bath and listened.

At the end she said, "That's actually good."

I said, "I thought you would say it was terrible."

She said, "It's terrible and good. Don't say 'possibly danger'. Say 'possibly' something else. It sounds like a menu."

I said, "A menu?"

She said, "'Clay, then coal, then possibly danger.' It sounds like a pub starter."

I changed it.

It now says, Clay, then coal, then, quite possibly, a surprise.

This is better.

I have decided to credit Chloe in the footnotes.

She said, "Don't."

I said, "It is a source."

She said, "Don't."

I said, "I must cite my sources."

She said, "Oliver, I swear."

I have left her out of the footnotes.

I have put her in the acknowledgements.

Monday, 1 February

The presentation.

I wore a tie.

I stood at the front of the class with a printout, a pointer made out of a ruler and a roll of sticky tape, and a slideshow that Ryan had helped me put on the projector.

Kyle Briscoe sat in the back row with his feet on the chair in front.

He has been trying to make me laugh in lessons since September, so that I get in

trouble.

I did not look at him.

I began.

I said, "Good morning, class. Today I will be talking about what is under Coventry. Nobody knows. That is why it is interesting."

I told them about the cellars.

I told them about the Charterhouse and the painted man in the undercroft.

I told them about the bombing, and how the cellars of the old shops survived while the buildings fell.

I told them about the coal.

I told them about the girl at Greggs, who has

refused to let me see her cellar.

There was some laughter.

I did not mind.

I said, "I was asked to cite my sources. I have three. One: a retired toolmaker. Two: a guide called Janet. Three: a sausage roll."

Kyle laughed.

It was not a mean laugh.

It was a surprised one.

I carried on.

I said, "My conclusion is this. There are probably no tunnels from Greggs to the station. But there are things under this city that nobody has looked at. And I think that is a

better answer."

I said, "Thank you."

There was a pause.

Then Maisie, in the second row, started clapping.

Ryan joined in.

Then the whole class did.

Mr Pritchard's moustache moved.

He said, "Well. That was... considerably better than a hedge."

I said, "Thank you."

He wrote something on his sheet.

I could not read it.

At the end of the lesson, Kyle Briscoe stopped me at the door.

He said, "Wiggins."

I said, "Briscoe."

He said, "My nan says there is a tunnel."

I said, "Where?"

He said, "From the old Gaumont. Under the road."

I said, "Do you have a source?"

He said, "It's my nan."

I said, "That is a perfectly acceptable source."

I wrote it down.

I have never, in my life, been so pleased to be interrupted.

Tuesday, 2 February

Mr Pritchard gave me an A.

He wrote on the bottom of the report:

Original, funny, and in a few places, even correct. Keep going. — P.

I have shown it to Mum.

She stuck it on the fridge with a magnet shaped like a banana.

I have shown it to Dad.

He read it.

He said, "An A."

I said, "Yes."

He said, "I never got an A."

I said, "What did you get?"

He said, "A job."

I said, "That is not a grade."

He said, "No."

He looked at the paper again.

He said, "I'm proud of you, Ol."

He said it very fast, like pulling a plaster.

Then he went to put the kettle on.

I stood in the hall, holding my report.

I thought about writing it down.

I decided not to.

Some things should stay out of the ledger.

Saturday, 6 February

A big day in the garage.

We turned the Imp's engine over for the first time.

It was not in the car.

It was on the bench, with a battery and a bit of rubber hose and a can of petrol held up on a coat hanger.

Mr Wilkins checked everything four times.

He wiped his hands on a rag.

He looked at me.

He said, "You do it."

I said, "Me?"

He said, "It's your engine as much as mine."

I said, "It is not my engine."

He said, "It's a bit your engine."

I said, "Where is the starter?"

He said, "You press that."

I pressed the button.

The engine turned over.

It coughed.

It spat out a small cloud of blue smoke.

It stopped.

I said, "Is that normal?"

He said, "It's normal."

I pressed it again.

It coughed.

It caught.

It ran.

It was a high, busy, angry noise, like a sewing machine in a tin shed.

Ryan, Maisie and I all shouted.

Mr Wilkins stood very still with his hand flat on the bench.

His eyes were wet.

He said, "There she is."

He did not say it to us.

He turned the engine off after about ten seconds.

The silence afterwards was enormous.

Nobody spoke.

Then Mr Wilkins said, in a very ordinary voice, "Right. Who wants tea?"

Sunday, 14 February

It is the day before my birthday.

Mum says I am to have "no surprises".

This is the opposite of what a person says when there is going to be no surprise.

I have made a plan.

I will wake up on the fifteenth, look pleased, and say nothing for as long as possible.

I have also drawn up a list of possible things that might be going to happen.

1. A cake.

2. A cake with a shape.

3. A cake with a shape, and Ryan.

4. Nan, with a card containing money.

5. Dad, with something he has not said anything

about.

6. Chloe, with a camera.

I have given each a probability.

The probability of number six is ninety-nine per cent.

I have noted that I am about to turn thirteen.

I am trying to feel different.

So far, I feel exactly the same.

The ledger tells me that I have been twelve for 365 days, and in that time I have: crashed a trolley, founded a company, acquired a team, learned what an undercroft is, got an A, and helped to start an engine.

I do not know what thirteen is going to do.

I have decided to be ready.

Closing balance: £28.17. Subscribers: 9,900. Tunnels confirmed under Coventry: zero. Undercrofts visited: one. Engines started: one. Moustaches moved: several.

End of Chapter Seven.



CHAPTER 8

THIRTEEN!

Monday, 15 February (6.02 a.m.)

I am thirteen.

I have checked the mirror.

I am the same height.

I have checked my voice. It is the same voice.

I have checked my chin for evidence of manhood. There is one hair. It may be a thread from the jumper.

I have decided to count it.

I was woken at 6.02 by the sound of somebody on the stairs trying very hard not to make a noise.

This is called a quiet security system, and it is the only one I have ever invented that worked.

I should explain.

On my bedroom door I have fitted a row of three empty tin cans, balanced on the top of the door frame, with a piece of string tied to the handle. If anybody opens the door, the cans fall.

The cans did not fall.

I opened my eyes.

The door was open about two inches.

The cans were on the carpet, in a neat row, side by side, as if somebody had lifted them down one at a time.

Beside them was a small note.

Nice try. — Mum.

I lay there for a while, looking at the ceiling.

I have decided that my mother is a better engineer than I am.

Monday, 15 February (7.30 a.m.)

Breakfast.

I came downstairs very slowly, to build suspense.

The kitchen was full of balloons.

There were thirteen, on the ceiling, hanging from the light.

There was a banner across the window that said HAPPY 13th OLIVER in letters cut out of cereal boxes.

Chloe had done the lettering.

I could tell because the "O" had a small photo of her face in the middle.

On the table was a plate of pancakes with a candle on top.

Mum, Dad, Chloe and Nan, who must have come over on the very first bus, stood in a line and sang.

Nan sang in a different key and a half-beat behind.

Dad sang the loudest, and kept looking at Mum, as if checking whether this was too much.

It was not.

I stood in the doorway.

I said, "This is a lot of balloons."

Chloe said, "It's thirteen balloons."

I said, "I have noticed."

Mum said, "Blow it out, love."

I blew out the candle.

There was a cheer.

I felt, for about four seconds, extremely thirteen.

Then Dad said, "Cards first, presents after school."

I said, "After school?"

Mum said, "You're not missing school, Oliver."

I said, "I am thirteen."

She said, "You're thirteen and you've got maths."

I have noted that becoming a teenager does not bring any change in legal status.

I intend to take this up with someone.

Monday, 15 February (3.45 p.m.)

School was a normal day with three exceptions.

1. Ryan gave me a card he had drawn himself. It showed me in a trolley, holding a flag, flying in the air above a hedge. It said, "13 YEARS OF NOT DYING." Underneath he had written (so far).

2. Kyle Briscoe said, "Happy birthday, Wiggins," in the corridor. I could not tell if it was a trap.

3. Maisie gave me a very small parcel wrapped in brown paper.

I said, "Is it a bomb?"

She said, "Open it at home."

I said, "I will open it now."

She said, "No, you won't."

She was quite firm.

She went a little pink.

I put it in my bag.

I thought about it all afternoon.

I did not open it in maths, though I came close.

Monday, 15 February (6.00 p.m.)

Presents.

I will list them in the order they were given, which is the order of the ledger.

From Nan: a card with twenty pounds in it, and a knitted scarf in the colours of Coventry City.

She said, "Sky blue. It's the only colour a man can wear with pride."

Dad said, "Mum, they've been in the

Championship for nine years."

Nan said, "Don't tell me about form, David."

From Chloe: a framed photograph of me in the trolley in mid-air, taken at the exact moment I left the ground.

My mouth is open.

My hair is straight up.

The hedge is below me like a green sea.

She said, "I printed it big."

I said, "It is very large."

She said, "It's also, technically, the first thing I ever filmed that went viral."

I said, "Are you saying this is a historic image?"

She said, "I'm saying you owe me."

I said, "How much?"

She said, "One favour. Later."

I said, "I accept the terms."

I have a feeling I may regret it.

From Mum: a proper toolbox.

It is red, with a metal handle and two trays that fold out, and inside there is a hammer, a set of screwdrivers, pliers, a measuring tape, a spirit level and a roll of tape.

There is a label inside the lid.

It says OLIVER P. WIGGINS — ENGINEER in Mum's handwriting.

She said, "I asked Mr Wilkins what to get."

I said, "What did he say?"

She said, "He said, 'Not a kit. A proper one.'"

I said, "That's very Mr Wilkins."

She said, "He also said the hammer's got to be a ball-pein."

I said, "It is a ball-pein."

She said, "I don't know what that means. I just asked for the one with the round end."

I said, "I have read about it."

She said, "I know you have."

She said, "I thought you'd have the right tools for the job."

I held the toolbox on my lap.

It was heavier than I expected.

I have decided that this is the best present I have been given.

I will update that when I have finished the list.

From Maisie: (opened in my bedroom, alone).

Inside the brown paper was a small blue notebook with a hard cover.

On the front, in silver pen, she had written O. P. WIGGINS — FIELD NOTES.

Inside, on the first page, in her small neat handwriting:

For the things you find out. Not the things you invent. — M.

I turned the page.

The second page was blank.

So was the third.

All the pages were blank.

But at the very back, on the last page, she had written something else, in pencil, and then rubbed it out, and then written it again more lightly.

I held it up to the lamp.

It said:

Thank you for making me come out of my room.

I did not know what to do with my face.

I closed the notebook.

I put it on my desk.

Then I picked it up again and put it in my bag, because I thought it should be somewhere it would be used.

I have written in the ledger:

Maisie: gift value £4.50. Actual value: not measurable.

I think this is the first time in my life that I have used the word "actual" correctly.

Monday, 15 February (7.10 p.m.)

Dad's present was last.

He did not give it to me at the table.

He said, "Come in the garage, Ol."

I followed him.

It was cold, and it smelled of oil and old cardboard.

There was a bare bulb, and a workbench, and a tall metal shelf at the back with a lot of boxes on it.

On the bench was a blue holdall.

I knew it at once.

It was the bag from the loft.

The one that said:

DAVE: DO NOT BIN (JO)

Dad stood with his back to me.

He said, "I didn't know what to get you. I've never bought a thirteen-year-old anything. I never was one. I mean, I was. But I don't remember it."

I said, "It is a limited experience."

He said, "Right."

He said, "So I thought I'd give you something I know about."

He unzipped the bag.

He took out a helmet.

It was white, with a scuffed visor, and a blue stripe down the middle, and on the side, in black letters, D. WIGGINS.

Beneath it, in smaller letters, CO-DRIVER.

I said, "Co-driver?"

He said, "Aye."

He said, "I never drove the car, Ol. That was Gary Hodges. I was the one who read the notes."

I said, "What notes?"

He said, "The pace notes. The co-driver sits next to the driver and reads out what's coming. 'Left, four, over crest. Right, two, don't cut.' You do it all at a hundred miles an hour. If you get it wrong, you're in a tree."

I said, "That sounds extremely stressful."

He said, "It was the best thing I ever did."

I did not say anything.

He turned the helmet over in his hands.

He said, "We were a team. Me and Gary. We did four seasons. We did the Lakes. We did Wales. We did one stage in Scotland in the snow where we couldn't see the road. And we won."

I said, "You won?"

He said, "A class. Not the rally. We came third overall in that one. Nineteen ninety-nine."

I said, "The Lakes?"

He said, "How do you know about the Lakes?"

I said, "There was a card."

He went quiet.

Then he said, "Aye. In the alternator box."

He put the helmet on the bench.

He said, "I said never again, you see. After that one."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Gary crashed on the next one. In Wales. He was okay. But I wasn't in the car. I'd stayed home. Your Mum had just said yes to marrying me, and I said I'd skip a round to sort the wedding. And Gary took a different co-driver, and they went off a bank."

He said, "He broke his back."

I did not know what to say.

He said, "He never drove again. And I thought... if I'd been there... "

He stopped.

I said, "You would have read the notes."

He said, "I'd have read the notes."

I said, "Then it would have been all right."

He said, "Or I'd have been in the car with him."

There was a long pause.

He said, "That's what your Mum says. She says I'd have been in the car."

I said, "She is probably correct."

He said, "She usually is."

He laughed, a bit.

He rubbed his face.

He said, "Anyway. I stopped. I got a job. I got

the van. We had Chloe, and then you."

He said, "And I never regretted it, you understand. Not for a minute."

I said, "I understand."

He said, "But I still think about the notes."

I looked at the helmet.

I looked at him.

I said, "Dad."

He said, "Yeah?"

I said, "Why are you giving this to me?"

He said, "Because I want you to know."

I said, "Know what?"

He said, "That I wasn't always a bloke in a van."

I said, "I never thought you were."

He said, "You did, Ol."

I said, "I thought you were a bloke in a van who was secretly something else."

He looked at me.

He said, "Well. You were right."

Monday, 15 February (7.40 p.m.)

I put on the helmet.

It was too big.

It came down over my eyebrows.

The visor was scratched.

It smelled of old sweat and rubber and, very faintly, petrol.

Dad adjusted the strap.

He said, "You look like a mushroom."

I said, "I feel like a co-driver."

He said, "Say something."

I thought about it.

I said, "Left four, over crest."

He said, "Right two. Don't cut."

I said, "Don't cut."

We stood in the cold garage in our coats.

I could hear the hum of the freezer.

He said, "That's it. That's all of it."

I said, "It is very good."

He said, "You'll grow into it."

I said, "I will."

I carried the helmet into the house under my arm.

Mum was in the kitchen, doing the washing-up.

She looked at the helmet.

She looked at Dad.

She said nothing.

Then she dried her hands on the tea towel and

put her arms round both of us at the same time.

Chloe, in the doorway, filmed it for four seconds, then turned the phone off and put it in her pocket.

She did not post it.

I know because I looked.

Tuesday, 16 February

Today is my first day as a teenager at school.

Nothing has changed.

Mr Pritchard has asked us to write an essay about "what we want to be when we grow up".

I wrote:

I want to be a person who fixes things that other people think are finished.

He read it and said, "That's very specific."

I said, "It is a position that does not yet exist."

He said, "Does it come with a salary?"

I said, "Not yet."

He wrote Good at the bottom, with an exclamation mark.

I do not usually get an exclamation mark.

I have kept the paper.

Wednesday, 17 February

Ryan has asked if he can borrow my helmet.

I said no.

He said, "Why?"

I said, "It is not an ornament. It is a sacred object."

He said, "It's a hat."

I said, "It is a hat with a history."

He said, "Does that mean I can't try it on?"

I said, "You may try it on in the presence of a witness."

He tried it on.

He said, "It smells of Dad."

I said, "It smells of my Dad."

He said, "That's what I said."

I said, "No, you said it smells of Dad."

He said, "Is there a difference?"

I said, "Obviously."

I have discovered that my best friend is not good at nuance.

I have decided that this is acceptable.

Saturday, 20 February

Mr Wilkins asked me to stay behind after the others had gone.

It was getting dark.

He wiped his hands on the rag.

He went to the wall of the garage, to the outline of the missing spanner.

He reached under the driver's seat of the Imp, and took out a small steel tool.

He held it in his palm.

It was bright and old.

On the handle, stamped into the metal, were the words:

WHITWORTH 9/16"

He said, "Happy birthday."

I said, "It's your spanner."

He said, "It's yours now."

I said, "I cannot take that."

He said, "You can."

I said, "You said it was Margaret's."

He said, "It was hers. She used it on the Imp. She was better with a spanner than I was. Always was."

He said, "She'd have liked you."

I said, "Would she?"

He said, "She'd have said you talked too much."

I said, "And then?"

He said, "She'd have given you a biscuit."

I took the spanner.

It was warm from his hand.

It was heavier than it looked.

I said, "I will take very good care of it."

He said, "Hang it on the wall."

I said, "Where?"

He pointed to the outline.

It fitted exactly.

I hung it there.

It looked as though it had never been away.

Mr Wilkins looked at the wall for a bit.

Then he said, "That's what it's for. A tool wants to be where it lives."

I wrote that down later, in the field notes.

It is the first entry.

Sunday, 21 February

A quiet day.

I spent most of it in my room.

I had a long think about being thirteen.

Here is my conclusion:

1. Thirteen is not a different number. It is the same as twelve, but with one more year of evidence.

2. People give you things at thirteen that they have kept for a long time.

3. A birthday is an occasion on which grown-ups try to tell you something without saying it, using an object.

4. The right response is to look at the object and say thank you.

5. The thing they are trying to say is usually: I was your age once.

I have put this in the field notes.

I have also put in, under "Questions":

How do you give Dad his plan back?

I do not have an answer.

But I know it involves a car, a helmet and a retired toolmaker.

Wednesday, 24 February

Chloe called in her favour.

She came into my room at eight o'clock in the

evening and sat on the end of the bed.

She said, "I need you to do something for me."

I said, "State your terms."

She said, "I want you to sit in a video."

I said, "Which video?"

She said, "A real one. Not a fail. Not a joke. I want to do a sort of... thing about being a sibling. About what it's like to have a brother who's weird."

I said, "I am not weird."

She said, "You've got a toolbox called 'ENGINEER' and a notebook called 'FIELD NOTES'."

I said, "Both were gifts."

She said, "You're proud of them."

I said, "Naturally."

She said, "That's why it'll work."

I said, "What do I have to do?"

She said, "Nothing. Just be you. Talk."

I said, "About what?"

She said, "About what you like."

I said, "Hedgehogs, engines, the undercrofts of Coventry, the Hillman Imp?"

She said, "All of it."

I thought about it.

I said, "Will it be funny?"

She said, "It'll be nice."

I said, "That is not the same thing."

She said, "No."

She said, "It's better."

I agreed.

We filmed it in the kitchen, with the ring light.

She asked me questions and I answered them.

I talked for forty minutes.

When I looked up, Mum was standing at the bottom of the stairs, listening.

She put a finger to her lips.

Friday, 26 February

The video went up this morning.

It is called MY LITTLE BROTHER IS WEIRD (AND I'M OKAY WITH IT).

It has four million views.

I do not know how this has happened.

I do not know how to feel.

The comments are mostly kind.

This is the cutest thing I have ever seen.

I wish I had a brother like this.

The bit about the Whitworth spanner made me cry.

Where can I buy a field notebook?

OLIVER FOR PM.

(I have noted that I and Dad are now both being proposed for Prime Minister. It is a competitive family.)

Chloe has asked me whether I mind.

I said, "I thought it would be embarrassing."

She said, "And?"

I said, "It is."

She said, "And?"

I said, "It is also all true."

She said, "That's the point."

I said, "I did not know you could be famous for saying true things."

She said, "It's rare."

She said, "That's why it works."

She turned the screen round.

The subscriber count on her channel had gone up by sixty thousand overnight.

I looked at the number for a long time.

I said, "Are you pleased?"

She said, "Yeah."

She said, "But I'm more pleased about the other thing."

I said, "What other thing?"

She said, "Mum cried."

I said, "When?"

She said, "When she saw it. She put her hand over her mouth, and went out in the garden, and stood there for ages."

I said, "She cries at adverts."

She said, "Not like that."

I thought about the paperweight, and the helmet, and the little blue notebook.

I thought: it has been a very good month for objects.

Sunday, 28 February

The end of the month.

I have done my accounts.

Income: £20.00 (Nan), £5 (leaf-raking, Mrs Dunn), £3.50 (podcast sponsor: a local chip shop, paid in chips).

Outgoings: £4.50 (battery), £2.20 (paraffin, at Mr Wilkins's insistence), £6.00 (thank-you card for Maisie, which I did not give her).

Balance: £37.27.

Debts: £63.40 (hedge, now £38.40, after a payment plan).

Under "Assets" I have written:

1 toolbox, 1 helmet, 1 spanner (borrowed from the wall), 1 notebook (blank), 1 sister (complicated), 1 team (growing).

Under "Liabilities":

Dad's plan. See field notes.

I have not yet worked out how to repay that one.

But I have thirteen years of evidence, a toolbox, and a retired toolmaker's engine that turns over.

That seems a reasonable start.

Closing balance: £37.27. Subscribers: 41,000. Birthdays: one. Helmets: one (too large). Spanners: one (returned to its place). Things that are not in the ledger: several, and they matter more.

End of Chapter Eight.



CHAPTER 9

THE PORTLAND CONSPIRACY

Saturday, 3 April

We are in Weymouth.

We have been in Weymouth for four hours and I have already found out three things.

1. The caravan site is called "Sunny Bay". There is no bay in sight. There is a field, and a bin.

2. Dad has packed the air fryer. He says it is "for content". Mum says it is for the electric

bill.

3. Our caravan has a bedroom for me that is the size of a wardrobe, and a window that looks directly at the toilet block.

I have decided to refer to it as "a room with a view of the facilities".

Chloe has the other bunk, and has already put up her ring light, which takes up forty per cent of the available air.

Mum says it is the first holiday we have had since I was nine.

I said, "What happened when I was nine?"

She said, "Nothing happened. That was the point."

I wrote this in the field notes.

It seems important and I am not sure why.

Sunday, 4 April

We went to the beach.

It is a long curve of pale sand, with a pier, a clock tower and a man selling donkey rides to people who do not want donkey rides.

Dad lay on a deckchair with a newspaper over his face.

Mum read a book about a murder in a vicarage.

Chloe filmed herself in front of the sea saying, "Hey, guys, it's your girl."

I looked for things to measure.

I measured the tide.

It was coming in at roughly one metre every four minutes.

I built a wall of sand to hold it back.

The sea went round it.

I built a bigger wall.

The sea went round that, too.

By the end of the afternoon I had become the first person in Dorset to lose a war against water without any enemy casualties.

Dad lifted the newspaper off his face and said, "Ol, it's the sea."

I said, "It is a challenge."

He said, "It's been doing that for four billion years."

I said, "I am aware of the timetable."

He put the paper back.

I think he was smiling.

Monday, 5 April

Bank holiday.

It rained.

We sat in the caravan with the windows steamed up, playing a card game that Dad insisted was called "Newmarket" and that Chloe insisted was cheating.

At about two o'clock, I went outside with my coat over my head and walked to the shop at the end of the site.

It sells milk, newspapers and seaside

postcards.

At the till there was an old man.

He was very small and very brown, with white hair standing straight up and a tweed cap in his hand, and he was arguing quietly with the shopkeeper about the price of a loaf.

When he turned round, he looked at my coat.

He said, "Is that a hedgehog on your jumper?"

I said, "It is a reindeer. It has been washed."

He said, "Ah."

He said, "Are you down for the week?"

I said, "Yes. We are from Coventry."

He said, "I know it. I did a job in Coventry once.

Nineteen sixty-eight. A staircase."

I said, "A staircase?"

He said, "A lovely one. Oak. In an old house."

I said, "Are you a joiner?"

He said, "Fifty-one years."

I said, "That is a very long time."

He said, "It's gone quickly."

His name was Mr Arthur Penhale.

He lives on the Isle of Portland, which is not an island, but is joined to the mainland by a long beach called Chesil.

I said, "Why is it called an island if it is not an island?"

He said, "Because it looks like one."

I said, "That is a very good reason."

He said, "You'd be surprised how many things work on that basis."

Tuesday, 6 April

Mr Penhale invited me to see the Island.

Mum said I could go if I was back for tea, and if Dad drove, and if I took my phone, and if I promised not to talk to strangers.

I said, "I have already talked to him."

Mum said, "You know what I mean."

We drove along the coast.

Portland is a huge grey wedge of limestone

that rises out of the sea like the back of a whale.

At the top there is a lighthouse, a prison, a quarry and an enormous number of seagulls.

Mr Penhale met us outside a café.

He was wearing the same cap.

He shook Dad's hand.

He said, "Is this your lad?"

Dad said, "He's been told not to ask questions."

Mr Penhale said, "He can ask what he likes."

Dad said, "He will."

We walked to the edge of the cliff.

The sea was a long way down, blue and green and white, and the wind was so strong that Dad had to hold his hat.

Mr Penhale pointed at the rock.

He said, "You see that? Portland stone. That's what built St Paul's. It's gone into half of London. We've been cutting it out of this hill for four hundred years."

I said, "So it is hollow?"

He said, "Parts of it."

I said, "How hollow?"

He said, "Ah."

He turned his cap in his hands.

He said, "I'm not supposed to say."

I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Because there's a lot of nonsense talked about it."

I said, "I like nonsense that might be true."

He said, "You'll go far."

He sat on a wall.

He said, "When I was a boy there was a lot going on under this rock. The Navy had a base down in the harbour. Submarines, torpedoes, all kinds of experiments. And there were tunnels. For stores, for ammunition. Some of them are still there. Some are closed off."

I said, "How many?"

He said, "I don't know."

He said, "And my uncle, who worked in the quarries, used to say there was a whole hospital under the rock."

I said, "A hospital?"

He said, "That's what he said."

I said, "Is it true?"

He said, "I never saw it."

I said, "Did anyone?"

He said, "I don't know."

He said, "I've heard of wards. I've heard of a theatre. I've heard of beds."

I said, "Where?"

He pointed at the cliff.

He said, "Somewhere in there."

Dad, who had been listening with his arms folded, said, "Mr Penhale, is this actually true or is this a pub story?"

Mr Penhale said, "It's a pub story."

He said, "But pub stories have to start somewhere."

Tuesday, 6 April (evening)

I am in the caravan with a torch, writing in the field notes.

I have drawn the following distinction, which Maisie would approve of.

What is known

- Portland is a limestone peninsula, joined to

Dorset by a pebble beach.

- It has been quarried for centuries.

- The Royal Navy had a base in Portland Harbour. This is a matter of public record.

- There are old tunnels and workings in the rock. Some are closed.

What is rumoured

- A "whole hospital" under the rock.

What I have seen with my own eyes

- A cliff.

I have drawn a line between the second and third columns.

It is a very thick line.

I have also emailed Maisie.

I said: I have found a conspiracy.

She wrote back in three minutes.

It's not a conspiracy until someone is hiding it. Is anyone hiding it?

I wrote: I do not know.

She wrote: Then it's a rumour.

I wrote: Rumours are the first draft of conspiracies.

She wrote: You're going to be insufferable about this.

I have decided to be as insufferable as the evidence permits.

Wednesday, 7 April

We went to the Portland museum, a tiny cottage with a thatched roof.

A lady called Sheila was selling tickets and a tea towel with a picture of the lighthouse.

I asked her about the hospital.

She gave me a look that I have also received from the girl at Greggs.

She said, "There's a lot of tunnels."

I said, "A hospital?"

She said, "I've heard that."

I said, "Is it true?"

She said, "I've heard a lot."

I said, "Could you show me on a map?"

She said, "I could show you on a map where the quarries are."

She unfolded a large sheet of paper on the counter and drew a finger across it.

I could see a great many symbols.

None of them said "hospital".

I said, "Thank you."

She said, "If you're interested in the real history, ask Mr Penhale for the Verne."

I said, "What is the Verne?"

She said, "A fort. Up on the top. Victorian. It's got a ditch round it a hundred feet deep. They used it as a prison for a long time."

I said, "Is that a real fact?"

She said, "I sell tea towels, love. I'm only telling you what's on the sign."

I bought a tea towel.

It has a lighthouse on it.

I have decided it will be Mum's.

Thursday, 8 April

Mr Penhale took me up to the Verne.

Dad came too, with his phone out, as an official witness.

It is a vast fort made of grey stone, with high walls and a long dry moat that goes down into the dark.

There was a gate at the end of the moat.

It was locked.

Through the bars you could see a long passage with a low roof and a damp floor.

The air coming out was cold.

It smelled of rock and iron.

I said, "Where does it go?"

Mr Penhale said, "Under the fort. To the magazines. Where they kept the powder."

I said, "Is it a hospital?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Then why did you tell me it was?"

He said, "I didn't. I told you my uncle said there was a hospital."

I said, "Do you believe him?"

He looked at the passage for a long time.

He said, "I believe he believed it."

I said, "That is not the same thing."

He said, "No."

He said, "But it's usually how it starts."

I wrote it down.

Dad took a photograph of me at the gate, looking into the dark.

In the picture I am wearing Nan's scarf and a very serious expression.

He showed it to me on the phone.

He said, "Look at that. You look like a detective."

I said, "I am a detective."

He said, "You're a boy in a scarf."

I said, "I can be both."

Friday, 9 April

On the way home from the Verne, Mr Penhale told me something else.

He said, "You want to know a real secret? Not a pub story?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "I've been looking for twenty years,

and I can't find what's inside my own head."

I said, "Pardon?"

He said, "My brother and I. We used to play in a quarry when we were boys. There was a cave. A little one, at the back, with an iron ring set in the wall. We used to tie a rope to it and swing out over the edge."

I said, "Is it still there?"

He said, "Don't know. I couldn't find the quarry when I went back. They'd filled it in."

I said, "That is very sad."

He said, "It is."

He said, "But I'll tell you what. All those things you read about, tunnels and hospitals and the rest, most of it's just a place where somebody

lost something."

I said, "A place?"

He said, "A cave. A swing. A summer. Something that was there when you were ten, and then it wasn't."

I said, "That's a rather philosophical conclusion."

He said, "I'm seventy-eight."

I said, "I accept it."

I put his speech in the field notes.

It is the first time I have written down something I did not understand.

I think I will keep it for later.

Saturday, 10 April

The last day in Weymouth.

We did the thing that you are supposed to do on the last day.

We walked on the beach at sunset.

Chloe took a hundred and twelve photographs.

Mum took off her shoes and paddled.

Dad stood in the shallows with his trousers rolled up, shouting, "IT'S FREEZING," in a voice of happiness.

I stood on the sand with my hands in my pockets.

The sun was going down into the sea.

The sky was pink and orange, with long strips of cloud.

In the distance, on the right, I could see Portland, a long dark shape against the light.

I thought about the hospital under the rock.

I thought about beds in the dark.

I thought about the iron ring in the wall of a quarry that no longer exists.

Mum came up beside me.

She said, "What are you thinking about?"

I said, "Whether things exist when nobody can find them."

She said, "That's a big one."

I said, "It is the biggest."

She said, "What's your answer?"

I said, "I do not have one. But I think they matter."

She put her arm round me.

Her hands were cold and wet.

She said, "I think so too."

We stood there, watching.

Out on the water a small boat was heading in, its light blinking, very slowly, as though it were counting.

I counted with it.

I reached forty-three before Dad ran up the

beach and splashed us both.

Sunday, 11 April

We drove home.

I sat in the back seat with the field notes on my knee.

I have written a summary.

The Portland Conspiracy: Final Report

Claim: There is a hospital under Portland.

Evidence for: One uncle.

Evidence against: Several maps and a tea towel.

Conclusion: Unproven.

Recommendation: Return when older, with a proper torch.

Side discoveries: a joiner called Arthur; a fort with a moat; the fact that the best secrets are often just things that someone once loved.

Chloe, reading over my shoulder, said, "That last bit is good."

I said, "Thank you."

She said, "Did you get that from the old man?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Credit him."

I said, "I have."

She said, "Good."

She leaned back in her seat.

She said, "Oliver."

I said, "Yes?"

She said, "I'm glad you came."

I said, "I did not have a choice."

She said, "I know. But I'm still glad."

I have recorded this in the field notes under a new heading.

The heading is Things My Sister Said.

There are now four entries.

Monday, 12 April

Back in Wood End.

The street looks smaller than when we left.

Number fourteen has a light on.

Mr Wilkins was in the garden, pulling up weeds.

He looked up when we got out of the car.

He raised one hand.

It was not quite a wave.

It was an acknowledgement.

I raised mine back.

We both lowered them at the same time.

I thought, with some surprise: I missed him.

I went straight into the garage.

The Imp was where we had left it.

It was clean.

On the bench someone had arranged all the engine parts in order on the cloth, each one wiped, each one labelled in small neat handwriting.

At the end of the row, on a card, it said:

Ready when you are. — R.W.

I stood there for a long time.

I have never been so pleased to be expected.

Closing balance: £41.10. Subscribers: 52,000. Hospitals confirmed under Portland: zero. Hospitals rumoured: one. Tea towels purchased: one. Friends made: one aged seventy-eight, one (Mr Wilkins) re-confirmed.

End of Chapter Nine.



CHAPTER 10

THE UNITED KINGDOM OF UNDERGROUND PEOPLE

Saturday, 1 May

I have discovered the internet's secret basement.

It began with a video called "10 UNDERGROUND CITIES YOU WON'T BELIEVE EXIST".

I watched it on Chloe's laptop, with Chloe's permission, and Chloe's warning that "if you get the algorithm wrong, it'll recommend you things for ever".

It has recommended me things for ever.

I now know about:

- Derinkuyu, a city in Turkey that goes down eighteen floors and could hold twenty thousand people,

- the catacombs of Paris,

- the Cu Chi tunnels,

- a salt mine in Poland that has a cathedral in it,

- and a man in Kansas who lives in a missile silo.

I have decided that the world is less solid than I was led to believe.

I have taken out a clean page in the field

notes.

At the top I have written:

THE UNITED KINGDOM OF UNDERGROUND PEOPLE

Under it, I have written:

Population: 1. (Me. In theory.)

Sunday, 2 May

I asked Dad if we could dig a hole in the garden.

He said, "What for?"

I said, "A bunker."

He said, "Is it for the end of the world?"

I said, "It is for research."

He said, "How big?"

I said, "Two metres by two. And two metres deep."

He said, "Oi, that is a grave."

I said, "It would be a room."

He said, "No."

I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Because I know how this goes. You start a hole. The hole becomes a tunnel. The tunnel becomes a drain. And I end up explaining it to a man from the council."

I said, "I will keep it small."

He said, "How small?"

I said, "Approximately the size of a wardrobe."

He looked at me for a long time.

He said, "You'll have to ask your mum."

This is a technique known as passing the hedge.

Monday, 3 May

Mum said no.

She said it in the kitchen while chopping an onion.

She said, "No holes."

I said, "A very small one?"

She said, "No."

I said, "A shallow one?"

She said, "Oliver, what part of 'no holes' do you not understand?"

I said, "The word 'holes'."

She said, "It means a place where earth is not."

I said, "I am aware of the dictionary definition."

She said, "I mean it, love. We've got pipes in that garden. We've got cables. We've got your Nan's cat buried by the fence."

I said, "I did not know about the cat."

She said, "No, you wouldn't. You were two."

I said, "What was its name?"

She said, "Mr Whiskers."

I wrote it in the notes.

I decided that it was a good enough reason for a brief delay.

Tuesday, 4 May

I convened a meeting of the Team in the shed.

Present: me, Ryan, Maisie.

I explained the project.

I said, "We need a bunker."

Maisie said, "Why?"

I said, "To explore what it feels like to live underground."

She said, "You could just go in the cellar."

I said, "We do not have a cellar."

She said, "We don't either."

Ryan said, "I do. It's got a washing machine in it."

I said, "That is not what I mean. I am talking about a space that is entirely subterranean."

Ryan said, "Mine's quite subterranean."

I said, "It has a window."

Ryan said, "It's a small window."

Maisie said, "Why don't you build an overground bunker and bury it later?"

I said, "That is cheating."

She said, "It's engineering."

I said, "It is a very interesting idea."

She said, "You're welcome."

I said, "I have decided to accept it as a compromise."

We agreed to build a model.

It is a shoebox with some soil in it, a cardboard tube for the shaft, and a plastic figure of a soldier for the occupant.

We have called him Private Dig.

He is the first citizen of the United Kingdom of Underground People.

We buried him in the flower bed.

We gave him a small flag.

The flag is a pin with a piece of paper on it.

It says U.K.U.P.

Maisie said that the acronym sounds like someone being sick.

I said that most good acronyms do.

Saturday, 8 May

Today I went to the garage, as usual.

Mr Wilkins was standing in front of the Imp with his arms folded.

The engine was back in the car.

It had taken us three Saturdays.

I had held the torch.

I had also been allowed to tighten two bolts, under supervision, with the 9/16 Whitworth.

Mr Wilkins said, "Right. Fuel."

I said, "We have fuel."

He said, "We've got a can. We need it going to the carburettor."

I said, "How?"

He said, "A pipe."

I said, "Do we have a pipe?"

He said, "Have a look in the toolbox."

I opened the toolbox.

Inside was a piece of clear plastic tube, about a foot long, with a brass fitting on each end.

I said, "Where did this come from?"

He said, "I put it there."

I said, "When?"

He said, "A couple of weeks ago."

I said, "You put a part in my toolbox?"

He said, "I added to your inventory."

I held the tube in my hand.

It seemed like the most generous thing anyone had ever done.

I did not say so.

I said, "It is a very good length."

He said, "It's the right length."

We fitted it.

Mr Wilkins turned the key.

The Imp coughed, spluttered, and started.

It ran for twelve seconds.

Then it stopped.

We both stared at it.

He said, "That's something."

I said, "That is the best twelve seconds of my life."

He said, "You've led a sheltered one."

Monday, 10 May

Bad news.

I have been told by the Government (Mum) that the Wiggins household is to be subject to a water meter inspection.

A man from the water company is coming tomorrow to look at the stopcock.

I have asked what a stopcock is.

Dad said, "It's a tap that turns the water off for the whole house."

I said, "Where is ours?"

He said, "Under the kitchen sink."

I said, "Is that all?"

He said, "No. There's one outside, too. In the street. Under a little metal lid."

I said, "Can I see it?"

He said, "Why would you want to see it?"

I said, "Because it is the point at which our house is connected to everyone else's."

Dad said, "I'm going to let that one go."

Tuesday, 11 May

The man from the water company came.

His name was Gerald.

He had a high-visibility jacket and a very long metal key.

He lifted a small iron lid in the pavement

outside our house, and put his key down a hole, and turned it.

He said, "That's fine."

I said, "May I look?"

He said, "Go on."

I looked down.

It was dark and wet.

At the bottom, in a little brick-lined chamber, there was a brass valve.

I said, "That's the supply?"

He said, "That's your connection."

I said, "To what?"

He said, "To the main."

I said, "Where is the main?"

He pointed down the road.

He said, "Under the tarmac, about three foot down. It runs the full length of Fernhill Road. Cast iron. Put in in nineteen fifty-two."

I said, "Is it old?"

He said, "It's an old girl. She does all right."

I said, "How many houses does it feed?"

He said, "Forty-eight."

I said, "That's a lot of pressure on one pipe."

He said, "You're not wrong."

He looked at me.

He said, "You're the lad with the trolley."

I said, "I was. I have moved on."

He said, "My mate's got a video of that on his phone."

I said, "I am aware."

I did not ask further.

Saturday, 15 May

I made a mistake.

I would like it entered in the record that it was a reasonable mistake.

Here is what happened.

Private Dig, our model citizen, was buried in the flower bed with a shoebox bunker.

On Friday it rained, and the shoebox collapsed.

I decided to move him.

I decided to move him to a better place.

I decided that the best location for a model of a subterranean society was deeper.

I took a spade.

I took Private Dig.

I took the shoebox.

I walked to the end of the garden, to the place by the fence where the soil is soft.

I started digging.

It was five o'clock.

Mum was at work.

Dad was in the front room, watching a video about a man in Sweden who builds log cabins.

Chloe was upstairs, shouting at her phone.

I dug.

I got down about eighteen inches.

The soil was dark and wet.

It was easy digging.

At twenty inches the spade hit something.

It made a sound like a hollow bell.

Clong.

I stopped.

I scraped away the soil with my hands.

There was a pipe.

It was grey, about four inches wide, made of some dense and ancient material.

I thought: Aha.

I thought: a cable.

I thought: a drain.

I thought: a significant archaeological find.

I lifted the spade.

I gave it a gentle tap, to see if it was solid.

It was.

I tapped again, a little harder.

There was a small crack.

I would like to say that what happened next was a total surprise.

It was a surprise.

But it was also, in a way, inevitable.

A jet of water shot out of the hole in the pipe.

It rose to a height of approximately two metres.

It was very cold.

It hit me in the face.

Saturday, 15 May (5.10 p.m.)

I should explain that the pipe in our back garden is not the main.

It is a branch.

It is the pipe that takes water from the road to the house.

It had been there for sixty years.

It had been waiting.

It cracked from the top, and a spray of water shot upwards like a fountain at the Alhambra.

I said, "DAD."

Nothing happened.

I said, "DAD, I HAVE FOUND A PIPE."

The spray was now taller than the shed.

It was falling in a neat circle round me, soaking my hair, my shirt, my shoes, and Private Dig.

I tried to hold my hand over the crack.

This was a mistake.

It sprayed sideways into the neighbour's fence.

The neighbour's fence is the fence of number twelve.

I would like to remind the reader that number twelve already has a hedge-shaped debt.

At that moment, Dad appeared at the back door.

He stood there with a mug of tea.

He said, "What's happening?"

I said, "I have found a pipe."

He looked at me.

He looked at the fountain.

He put down the tea.

He said, "Oh, no."

He said, "Oh, Ol."

He ran into the garden.

He said, "Where's the stopcock?"

I said, "Under the sink!"

He said, "That's the inside one!"

I said, "The outside one is in the road!"

He said, "Where?"

I said, "Under a metal lid by the gate!"

He ran.

He ran in his slippers.

He knelt at the edge of the pavement and tried to prise up the lid with his fingers.

It did not move.

I shouted, "YOU NEED THE LONG KEY!"

He shouted, "WHAT LONG KEY?"

I shouted, "GERALD HAS IT!"

It was at this point that Chloe leaned out of her bedroom window and started filming.

Saturday, 15 May (5.20 p.m.)

Here is a list of the events of the following ten minutes.

1. The water pressure in the street dropped to zero. This is not a figure of speech. At number nine, a man in a shower said a word I will not record.

2. Dad ran back into the house and turned off the inside stopcock. This reduced the spray by about a third. It was still falling on number twelve.

3. Mrs Dunn from number ten came out and said, "Is that your fountain?" and Dad said, "No," and she said, "It's lovely."

4. I stood in the garden, soaking wet, holding a spade.

5. At twenty-three minutes past five, a very large figure appeared at the gate.

It was Mr Wilkins.

He was wearing his cardigan.

He was carrying a canvas bag.

He did not speak.

He walked straight past Dad, straight past me, to the end of the garden.

He knelt down in the mud.

He looked at the pipe.

He said, "Cracked at the joint."

I said, "I only tapped it."

He said, "It's been waiting to go for forty years."

He opened the bag.

Inside there was a short length of rubber hose, two jubilee clips, a screwdriver and a thick pad of folded rubber.

He placed the rubber over the crack.

He wrapped the hose round it.

He tightened the clips.

The water slowed.

It became a trickle.

Then a drip.

Then it stopped.

There was a silence.

Dad, who had come back, said, "How did you do that?"

Mr Wilkins said, "I keep a kit."

Dad said, "You keep a kit?"

Mr Wilkins said, "You never know."

He wiped his hands on his cardigan.

He said, "It's a temporary job. You'll need a plumber for the proper repair. And you'll need to tell the water company, because it's on their side of the meter."

Dad said, "Right. Thank you. Ron. I mean — Mr Wilkins."

Mr Wilkins said, "Ron's fine."

Dad said, "Ron."

They stood in the soaking garden and looked at each other.

I thought they might shake hands.

They did something much better.

Mr Wilkins nodded.

Dad nodded.

I wrote it down.

Saturday, 15 May (6.10 p.m.)

Mum came back from work to find a wet garden, a wet husband, a wet son and a wet neighbour sitting in her kitchen with a cup of tea.

She looked at each of us.

She said, "I'm not going to ask."

Dad said, "Good."

Mum said, "I'm going to have a bath."

Dad said, "There's no water."

Mum said, "I'm going to sit in the empty bath."

She did.

She sat on the edge of it, in her uniform, and laughed until she cried.

Sunday, 16 May

No water in Wood End.

It was off for the whole of Fernhill Road until a

repair gang came at nine in the morning.

By then the entire street had come out.

They stood on the pavement in their dressing gowns, with their mugs.

Mrs Dunn had brought her kettle, which she had filled the night before, and she was offering tea to anyone with a cup.

The man from number nine, who had been in the shower, came out in a towel and a coat, with a face like thunder.

He saw Dad.

He said, "Was that you?"

Dad said, "It wasn't me, it was..."

He looked at me.

I stepped forward.

I said, "It was me."

There was a pause.

I said, "I dug a hole. I hit a pipe. I broke it. I'm sorry."

I said, "I am aware that this is the second time I have broken something belonging to the street. I would like to apologise formally."

The man looked at me.

He said, "How old are you?"

I said, "Thirteen."

He said, "Thirteen."

He turned to the others.

He said, "He's thirteen."

Mrs Dunn said, "He's the lad with the trolley."

The man from number nine said, "Aye. I saw the video."

He looked at me for a while longer.

Then, very slowly, he started to laugh.

It began as a cough.

It turned into a roar.

He said, "My wife and I have watched that video forty times."

I said, "That is a lot."

He said, "You're a bloody menace."

He said it with such warmth that I did not mind.

He held out his hand.

I shook it.

His name is Terry.

He is not the same Terry as at the museum.

This one drives a bus.

Sunday, 16 May (11.30 a.m.)

A long table appeared on the pavement.

I do not know who put it there.

Someone brought a kettle.

Someone brought a camping stove.

Mrs Dunn brought a tray of flapjacks.

Dad brought out the air fryer.

He plugged it in on an extension lead through the front window and made forty-two sausage sandwiches, one batch at a time.

Mr Wilkins brought a folding chair, and sat in the middle of the pavement, and was brought a cup of tea by about six different people.

They asked him about the Imp.

He told them.

He told them everything.

He talked for twenty minutes.

I think it is the longest conversation he has had in years.

A small girl from number seven sat on his knee and asked him if the car had a name.

He said, "Hector."

She said, "Can I see it?"

He said, "Come round on Saturday."

I looked at Mum.

She was watching him with her hand over her mouth.

By noon there were about forty people on Fernhill Road.

Nobody could wash.

Nobody could flush.

And I have never seen the street look so

happy.

Sunday, 16 May (3.00 p.m.)

Maisie came round with her podcast microphone.

She sat on the kerb and asked everyone the same question.

She said, "What's it like to have no water?"

Mrs Dunn said, "It makes you realise what you've got."

Terry from number nine said, "I'd like it back, please."

The small girl from number seven said, "It's like camping."

Mr Wilkins said, "It's like 1953."

Maisie said, "Why 1953?"

He said, "Because that's the last time this street had to share a standpipe."

She said, "Were you here?"

He said, "I was a boy. We carried it in buckets from the corner."

She said, "What did you do?"

He said, "We talked."

She said, "To each other?"

He said, "It's all there was."

She turned off the microphone.

She said to me, quietly, "That's the episode."

I said, "Which one?"

She said, "The one about the underground. It's not about tunnels at all. It's about what holds a street together."

I said, "That's a bit deep."

She said, "Said the boy who was in a hole."

Monday, 17 May

The water was back at midday.

The repair crew replaced the whole section of pipe.

The foreman, a cheerful man with a sunburnt nose, came to the door.

He said, "Is there a lad called Oliver?"

I said, "I am Oliver."

He said, "I've got something for you."

He handed me a section of the old pipe.

It was about a foot long, rusted on the outside, black on the inside.

He said, "Souvenir. From the pipe you broke."

I said, "Thank you."

He said, "Don't do it again."

I said, "I will not."

He said, "You say that."

I said, "I mean it this time."

He said, "That's what I'm afraid of."

I have mounted the pipe on the shelf in my room, between the pewter hedgehog and the model of the Escort.

It has a label.

Fernhill Road main branch, c. 1952–2027. Gave its life.

Mum said the label is "a bit much".

I said it is a matter of record.

Tuesday, 18 May

The council has sent us a letter.

It says that the Wiggins household has been "advised to refrain from excavation within the boundary of the property".

It is signed by a person called Janice.

Dad read it out loud.

Mum read it out loud.

Chloe read it out loud in a posh voice.

Even Nan read it, when she came round, and she said, "That's what I've been telling you for years."

I wrote in the ledger:

Hole: dug. Pipe: cracked. Street: without water, 16 hours. Neighbours reconciled: 40. Debt to number twelve: £38.40 (hedge), plus a new fence panel (£22), as agreed.

I added a note:

The United Kingdom of Underground People has been suspended. Private Dig has been reassigned to above-ground duties.

Ryan said, "So the project's over?"

I said, "No."

He said, "You've been banned from digging."

I said, "I have. But I have been working on the wrong problem."

He said, "What's the right one?"

I said, "A country does not need to be underground."

He said, "What does it need?"

I said, "People who turn up when there's a crisis."

Ryan thought about this.

He said, "That's us."

I said, "That's the whole street."

He said, "You should put that in your notebook."

I did.

Friday, 28 May

Mr Wilkins asked if I would like to come for tea.

He did not say it in the usual way.

He said, "You'd better come in. It's not a menu. It's whatever's in."

I went round at five.

The house was the same, but different.

There was a vase of flowers on the table.

There was a second chair.

He had made a pot of tea.

There was a plate of buttered toast.

We sat, and we ate.

He did not say much.

At one point he said, "That water business."

I said, "I am sorry about it."

He said, "Don't be."

I said, "It was a mistake."

He said, "Aye. But I knew every one of those folk by sight, and I didn't know a single one by name until Sunday."

I said, "That is a very sad thing."

He said, "It is."

He said, "It's changed."

I looked at the photograph on the mantelpiece.

I said, "Would Margaret have approved?"

He said, "She'd have brought a cake."

I said, "A big one?"

He said, "The biggest."

I said, "I think we should have a cake."

He said, "When?"

I said, "When the Imp runs."

He looked at me.

He said, "That'll be a day."

I said, "I intend to make sure."

Closing balance: £35.62 (after the fence panel). Subscribers: 61,000. Holes dug: one. Pipes cracked: one. Households without water: forty-eight. Neighbours who know each other's names: all of them.

End of Chapter Ten.



CHAPTER 11

THE HOUSE THAT TIME FORGOT

Tuesday, 1 June

A letter has arrived from Dorset.

It is addressed to Master Oliver Wiggins, 31 Fernhill Road, Wood End, Coventry, in handwriting that slopes backwards, as though it is leaning away from the envelope.

I have never received a letter from Dorset.

I have decided to open it on the stairs, so that I can be dramatic if necessary.

Dear Oliver,

You asked me about the staircase I built in Coventry. I have been thinking about it since April and have found my old notebook. It was Hartwell Manor, on the north side of the city, 1968. A Georgian house with a lot of rooms and not enough people. I made a new banister for the curved stair in the far right corner of the great hall. It took eleven weeks. The old woman who lived there, a Mrs Hartwell, brought me a cup of tea every day at four and never once put the cup down on the same side as the saucer.

I do not know if the house is still standing. If it is, it is worth seeing. If it is not, then I am sorry to have wasted your stamp.

Yours,

Arthur Penhale (joiner)

P.S. The staircase had a trick to it. You'll see.

I read the letter three times.

Then I ran to the garage.

Tuesday, 1 June (4.20 p.m.)

Mr Wilkins was under the Imp with a lamp.

I said, "Mr Wilkins, do you know Hartwell Manor?"

His boots did not move.

After a while he said, "Why?"

I said, "A joiner in Weymouth built a staircase there in 1968."

He said, "A joiner in Weymouth."

I said, "It is a long story."

He slid out on the creeper and sat up, wiping his forehead with the back of his wrist.

He said, "Hartwell. It's off the Tamworth road. Past where the old pit was. Big gates. I haven't been up there in forty years."

I said, "Is it still there?"

He said, "It was. Something to do with a trust. I think they open it up sometimes."

I said, "How do you know?"

He said, "There was a notice on the church board."

I said, "Which church board?"

He said, "St Chad's. Where the old folk's lunch

club is."

I said, "I have been meaning to ask about that."

He said, "Don't."

I said, "Do you go?"

He said, "Thursdays."

I said, "You never told me."

He said, "You never asked. You asked about carburettors."

I have noted that this is accurate.

I said, "May I come on Thursday?"

He said, "It's for the over-seventies."

I said, "I am prepared to lie about my age."

He said, "You would. I'll ask the vicar."

Thursday, 3 June

I went to the St Chad's lunch club.

It is in a church hall that smells of floor polish and mince.

There were about thirty old people at long tables, eating shepherd's pie and talking about knees.

I wore a clean shirt.

Mr Wilkins introduced me by saying, "This is Oliver. He's mine."

I do not know what he meant by it.

I have decided it was good.

A very small old lady in a lilac cardigan looked up from the end of the table.

She had white hair in a net, pale blue eyes, and a face like a walnut that has had a lot of fun.

She said, "Is that the trolley boy?"

I said, "That is a title I am working to retire."

She said, "My great-nephew has got you on his telephone."

I said, "I am aware that is how the world works now."

She said, "I'm Doreen. Doreen Fletcher."

I said, "How do you do."

She said, "Ninety-three. Ninety-four in September."

I said, "That is a magnificent age."

She said, "It's an age."

Mr Wilkins said, "Doreen, he's asking about Hartwell."

Mrs Fletcher put down her fork.

She said, "Hartwell Manor?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Why?"

I said, "A joiner told me about a staircase."

She said, "The curved one."

I said, "How do you know?"

She said, "I lived there."

Thursday, 3 June (1.40 p.m.)

I will write this down carefully, because I think it is the most important conversation I have had this year.

Mrs Fletcher lived at Hartwell Manor from 1940 to 1945.

She was seven when she arrived.

Her house in Foleshill was bombed in the Blitz, on the night of 14 November 1940.

I know that date.

Everybody in Coventry knows that date.

She said, "Mum and Dad were in the Anderson shelter in the garden, and they were all right. But the house wasn't. There was nothing left. Not a brick."

I said, "I am very sorry."

She said, "It was a long time ago."

She said, "They took the children out of the city. Hundreds of us. To the big houses. I went to Hartwell with my brother Ken and eleven other children. There was a Mrs Hartwell, a very tall lady with a stick, and two maids and a gardener, and an old cook who made rice pudding every day, whether you wanted it or not."

I said, "Was it nice?"

She said, "Oh, it was marvellous."

She said it with a sudden, shining, unexpected force.

She said, "It was the biggest house I'd ever seen. It had three staircases and a hall with a

black-and-white floor, and a nursery on the top storey with a rocking horse. And the woods! We were allowed in the woods. All day. Nobody minded where we were as long as we turned up for tea."

I said, "That sounds extremely good."

She said, "I was frightened for the first week. And then I wasn't."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Because of the banister."

I said, "The banister?"

She said, "The curved staircase. In the far corner of the hall, on the right. The banister was oak, polished like glass, and it went all the way down in one long sweep. We weren't allowed to slide down it. Of course, that's why

we did."

She laughed.

She said, "I did it every morning for five years. Ken broke his wrist on it in 1942."

I said, "I admire him."

She said, "He didn't. He cried for a week."

I wrote in the field notes:

Fact: Mrs Fletcher slid down the banister of a real house, for five years, and is still happy about it.

Friday, 4 June

I told Maisie.

She came round after school and I read her all

my notes.

When I reached the part about the banister she put down her pen.

She said, "This is a real thing."

I said, "I know."

She said, "It's not a rumour."

I said, "I know."

She said, "It's a primary source."

I said, "I am aware that she is a person."

She said, "Oliver, I've been wanting one for a year. All the episodes are books. This is a woman who was there."

I said, "Would she do your podcast?"

She said, "Would she?"

I said, "I think she would be extremely pleased."

Maisie went quiet.

Then she said, "Can I tell you something?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "I don't think anyone has ever asked me to be their friend because of the podcast. They either laugh, or they don't care."

I said, "I am not your friend because of the podcast."

She said, "Why, then?"

I said, "Because you are correct more often than anyone I know."

She thought about this.

She said, "That's a weird reason."

I said, "It is the best one I have."

She said, "I accept it."

Saturday, 5 June

A notice was in the paper.

I found it at the back of the Coventry Telegraph, which Mr Wilkins has delivered and which he lets me read on Saturdays if I wipe my feet.

It said:

HARTWELL MANOR — OPEN DAY

Saturday 19 June, 11am to 4pm

Grounds, ground floor, tea room. Free entry. Run by the Hartwell Trust.

I looked at it for a very long time.

I said, "Mr Wilkins."

He said, "I saw."

I said, "May we go?"

He said, "I thought you might ask."

I said, "I will need transport."

He said, "I'll see what I can do."

He had a look on his face that I have only seen once before.

It was the look he wore when the engine caught.

Sunday, 6 June

I told Dad about Hartwell.

I said, "There is a big house, and a lady who slid down the banister, and a staircase built by a man called Arthur Penhale. I would like to go to the open day."

Dad said, "Sounds like a day out."

I said, "Will you take us?"

He said, "I'm working Saturdays now. The new route."

I said, "You said you were off."

He said, "They changed it."

Mum, at the sink, said nothing.

Dad said, "I'll try to swap."

I could tell that he had no intention of swapping.

I do not think it was that he did not want to go.

I think there are some days when a person cannot make himself walk through a door.

I wrote in the field notes:

Dad has stopped getting Saturdays off. I do not know when this began.

Then I wrote:

I think it began in January.

It was a stomach-dropping thought.

I have put a question mark next to it.

Tuesday, 8 June

I have done some investigating.

I opened Dad's work rota on the family computer.

I am not proud of this.

The rota is a spreadsheet.

It shows that Dad has been offered Saturdays off, every week since January.

He has declined them.

I do not understand.

I asked Chloe.

She was in the hall, brushing her hair.

She said, "I know."

I said, "You knew?"

She said, "He takes the extra shifts. For the money."

I said, "But the rota says he is entitled to them off."

She said, "He's entitled. He doesn't take them. Because the extra shifts pay time and a half."

I said, "For the family."

She said, "For the spreadsheet."

I said, "Mum's spreadsheet?"

She said, "It's red, Ol. It's been red since

September."

I stood in the hall.

I said, "I gave Mum my savings."

She said, "She gave them back, you idiot."

I said, "She did."

She said, "Did you think she wouldn't?"

I said, "I thought it was a small help."

She said, "It's the thought."

I said, "That is what people say when it is not enough."

She put down the brush.

She said, "It's not enough. But it's not nothing."

I said, "How do we make it enough?"

She said, "I don't know."

She said, "I'm trying."

I said, "I know about the two hundred pounds."

I had not intended to say it.

It fell out of my mouth.

She went rigid.

She said, "What two hundred pounds?"

I said, "The two hundred pounds you give Mum every month. In the envelope. She thinks it is from Nan."

She stared at me.

She said, "How do you know?"

I said, "I am the Chief of Intelligence."

She said, "You're the Chief of Nosiness."

I said, "Maisie says that is the same job."

She said nothing.

She sat on the bottom stair.

I sat next to her.

After a minute she said, "Don't tell."

I said, "I will not."

She said, "Promise."

I said, "I have promised."

She said, "Not on a technicality."

I said, "I promise on the Whitworth spanner."

She said, "That's not a thing."

I said, "It is to me."

She looked at me.

She said, "You're still weird."

I said, "I am aware."

She put her head on my shoulder for about three seconds.

Then she got up and went upstairs.

Saturday, 12 June

Mr Wilkins and I have spent the Saturday

cleaning the Imp's interior.

The seats are dark blue vinyl, cracked on one side.

There is a smell of old leather and cold tea.

In the glove box we found:

- a road atlas (1971),

- a packet of Polo mints, empty,

- a pair of ladies' gloves, beige, with a button at the wrist,

- and a folded piece of paper.

Mr Wilkins looked at the paper for a long time before opening it.

It was a list, in a woman's rounded handwriting.

Weston: B&B (ask for sea view). Pack: thermos, rug, cards. Ron: don't forget the map this time.

He said, "She wrote that the week before."

I said, "Before what?"

He said, "Before she went in."

He folded it up again.

He put it in his shirt pocket.

He said, "I'll keep that."

I said, "Of course."

He said nothing for some time.

Then he picked up a cloth and began polishing the dashboard in small, slow circles.

I took the Polo mints and the road atlas into the house and put them on the kitchen table, where he could find them when he was ready.

Saturday, 19 June

Hartwell Manor.

I will describe it as accurately as possible.

We went in Mr Wilkins's neighbour's car.

(The neighbour is Terry from number nine, the bus driver. He volunteered when he heard. He said, "It's a day off, and I owe you a pipe.")

In the back seat sat me, Maisie, Mr Wilkins, and Mrs Fletcher in her best coat, holding a handbag on her knee like a cat.

It took forty minutes to drive there.

We went out of the city along a road that got narrower and greener.

The houses grew further apart.

We passed a pub, a farm shop, a field of grey horses.

Then there was a long wall of mellow brick, and a pair of high iron gates, standing open.

A hand-painted sign said: HARTWELL MANOR — WELCOME.

We drove through.

I held my breath.

The drive curved through tall trees, and at the end of it, framed by branches, was a house.

It was the colour of toast.

It had three storeys and a roof with many chimneys.

There were rows of tall windows with white frames, and a flight of stone steps up to a front door the size of a barn.

On the left was a long low building with arches, which Mrs Fletcher said was the coach houses.

On the right was a smaller wing, joined to the main house by a covered passage.

She said, "That's the annex. That's where the cook slept."

I said, "It's enormous."

She said, "It didn't seem so big at the time."

Her voice was thin.

I looked in the mirror.

She was staring out of the window, with her hands very still on the handbag.

Terry stopped the car on the gravel.

Nobody got out.

Mrs Fletcher said, "I haven't been back since nineteen forty-five."

Mr Wilkins said, "You don't have to go in."

She said, "I know."

She said, "But I'd like to."

Saturday, 19 June (11.45 a.m.)

The great hall.

I would like to call it a hall, but it is a room the size of our whole street.

The floor is black and white marble in a pattern like a draughts board.

There is a ceiling with plaster flowers.

There are portraits of important people, looking down with the expressions of men who have been told to hold still.

And in the far right corner, exactly where the letter said, there is a staircase.

It curves.

It rises in a smooth white spiral, wide at the bottom and narrower at the top, with a banister of dark polished oak that swings around the curve like the neck of a swan.

I stood at the bottom and looked up.

A tall man in a waistcoat, one of the volunteers, said, "Beautiful, isn't it? The banister is actually a restoration. It was replaced in 1968."

I said, "By Arthur Penhale."

The man blinked.

He said, "How did you know that?"

I said, "He wrote me a letter."

The man said, "I... we'd lost the name. We had it down as 'a craftsman from Dorset'."

I said, "He is seventy-eight and he lives on Portland."

The man looked at me as though I had pulled a

rabbit out of the wall.

He said, "Would you excuse me? I'd like to get the curator."

I said, "Certainly."

I turned to see what Mrs Fletcher thought.

She was standing in the middle of the black-and-white floor with her handbag in both hands.

She was looking up the stairs.

Her eyes were full.

She said, in a whisper, "It's smaller."

I said, "Is it?"

She said, "No. It's the same. I'm bigger."

She put her handbag on the floor.

She took hold of the banister with both hands.

She stood there.

Then, very slowly, with great dignity, she began to climb.

She went up three steps, and four, and five, with Mr Wilkins close behind her.

At the turn of the stairs she stopped.

She was breathing hard.

She looked down at us over the rail.

She said, "Oliver."

I said, "Yes, Mrs Fletcher?"

She said, "Is anyone looking?"

I looked around.

The volunteers were with a group in the library.

The curator had not yet arrived.

There was nobody in the hall.

I said, "No."

She said, "Good."

She hitched up her coat.

She sat sideways on the banister.

I said, "Mrs Fletcher, I really do not think —"

Mr Wilkins said, "Doreen."

She said, "Ron. Hold my bag."

He took it.

She lifted her feet.

And Mrs Doreen Fletcher, aged ninety-three, slid down the banister of Hartwell Manor, in a lilac cardigan and good shoes, for the first time in eighty-two years.

It took about four seconds.

It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

She landed at the bottom with a small bump.

She sat there with her mouth open.

Then she began to laugh.

It was a big, helpless, enormous laugh, that bounced off the plaster flowers and echoed down the long corridors.

Maisie, who was filming on her phone, said, "I got it. I got it. Oh my God."

Mr Wilkins was wiping his eyes with the back of his sleeve.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs.

I do not usually have words for these things.

I said, "Was it the same?"

She said, "It was exactly the same."

She wiped her eyes.

She said, "I thought it'd be smaller."

Saturday, 19 June (12.30 p.m.)

The curator is a woman called Dr Ellen Marsh.

She has short grey hair and a very large pair of spectacles on a chain.

She came out of an office at a brisk walk and stopped dead when she saw Mrs Fletcher.

She said, "Is this the lady who...?"

A volunteer whispered something.

Dr Marsh took off her glasses.

She said, "Mrs Fletcher, I'm so pleased to meet you."

Mrs Fletcher said, "I hope I haven't damaged it."

Dr Marsh said, "It's survived worse. The house

was a school for the children of munitions workers after the war. They did it all the time."

Mrs Fletcher said, "So it's a tradition."

Dr Marsh said, "I think it must be."

She said, "I have been trying for three years to find someone who lived here as a child. We have almost no records from the wartime years. The family papers were lost in a fire in 1962."

Mrs Fletcher said, "I've got a few things."

Dr Marsh said, "Have you?"

Mrs Fletcher said, "A tin."

Dr Marsh said, "A tin?"

Mrs Fletcher said, "A biscuit tin. Peek Freans. I've got drawings, a few photographs, and a map."

Dr Marsh said, "A map?"

Mrs Fletcher said, "Ken drew it. In 1944. It's the woods."

I leaned forward.

I said, "What is on the map?"

She said, "Well. The paths, the pond, the old oak. And a place where we weren't allowed to go."

I said, "A place?"

She said, "We called it the Hole."

I could feel the back of my neck go cold.

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Because there was a door in the ground. A little brick thing in the hill. We were told it was dangerous. We weren't allowed near it."

I said, "What was it?"

She said, "I don't know."

She said, "But I know where it is. It's on the map."

I looked at Maisie.

Maisie looked at me.

Mr Wilkins looked at both of us, and said, very slowly, "I do not like that expression."

I said, "What expression?"

He said, "The one you've both got."

Saturday, 19 June (2.00 p.m.)

We were taken round the rest of the house.

I will list the features, in order.

The coach houses: long stone stables with a clock tower and a dovecote, now used for craft workshops and a tea room.

The annex: a quiet building with narrow stairs and small rooms. Mrs Fletcher said, "That's where the cook slept. And the maids. And, on bad nights, us."

The servants' stair: a plain stair in the back of the house, going from the kitchen up to the top corridor. It is narrow and steep and smells faintly of soap. Mrs Fletcher said, "This is the one we used when we weren't supposed to be

in the house."

The nursery: on the top floor. The rocking horse is still there. It has lost its tail.

The woods: a vast green space behind the house. I could see them from the nursery window, stretching away in rolling waves of darker green, with a glint of water through the trees.

I said, "Could we walk in the woods?"

Dr Marsh said, "They're not open to the public today. There's a lot of undergrowth."

I said, "We would be very careful."

Dr Marsh looked at me for a moment.

Then she said, "Mrs Fletcher, would you like to see them?"

Mrs Fletcher said, "I'd love to."

I did not say anything.

I was concentrating on looking very sensible.

Saturday, 19 June (3.20 p.m.)

It was warm.

The trees were enormous.

We walked, slowly, on a path that was mostly roots and leaves.

Mrs Fletcher leaned on Mr Wilkins's arm.

Dr Marsh walked with a stick, because she said the ground was uneven.

She said, "I'd like to tell you something."

I said, "Yes?"

She said, "I'm not allowed to promise anything."

I said, "I understand."

She said, "But the Trust has been trying for years to find out what's in these woods. There's a bit of land that the surveyor marked as 'unclassified'."

I said, "Unclassified?"

She said, "It means we don't know what it is."

She said, "It's overgrown. It's in a dip. We think it might be an old ice house. Or a drainage chamber."

Mrs Fletcher said, "It's neither."

Dr Marsh turned.

Mrs Fletcher said, "I'm sorry, dear. But I know what it is."

She said, "It's a shelter."

Saturday, 19 June (3.40 p.m.)

We did not find it that day.

We reached a small clearing with a pond at the bottom, and a very old oak with a hollow trunk.

Mrs Fletcher looked around.

She said, "It was over there."

She pointed to a dense wall of brambles, ferns and fallen branches.

It was impossible to say what was behind it.

She said, "I haven't been here since I was eleven."

She said, "I might be wrong."

She was not wrong.

I could tell by the way she was looking.

I took out the field notes.

I wrote down the position of the oak, the pond, and the direction of the sun.

Maisie wrote it down too.

Dr Marsh said, "We'll have to get a team in. There's a process. It may take until the autumn."

I said, "Autumn."

She said, "I'm afraid so."

I said, "That is a long time."

She said, "It's the way."

I said, "May we come back?"

She said, "I'd be delighted."

She put out her hand.

I shook it.

She said, "Thank you, Oliver."

I said, "For what?"

She said, "For asking the right question."

I said, "Which was?"

She said, "Whether the woods could be walked in."

I said, "That was not a question. That was a request."

She said, "It's the same thing, if you mean it."

Sunday, 20 June

Maisie's video of Mrs Fletcher on the banister has been watched 820,000 times.

It is called 93-YEAR-OLD GRAN SLIDES DOWN BANISTER SHE LIVED NEXT TO IN THE WAR (82 YEARS LATER).

Maisie has not edited it.

She said, "It doesn't need it."

The comments are wonderful.

I'm crying at my desk.

Whoever filmed this, thank you.

Hartwell Manor, I need to visit.

My nan lived in a house like that in the war.

Get that woman a medal.

Who is the old man holding her handbag? I love him.

I showed Mr Wilkins.

He read the comment for a very long time.

He said, "I do not hold handbags."

I said, "You held one with great skill."

He said, "It was a one-off."

I said, "Of course."

He said, "Don't tell anyone."

I said, "It has been viewed by 820,000 people."

He said, "Right."

He sat down.

He said, "Well."

He read the comment again.

He did not look displeased.

Saturday, 3 July

The Dad situation.

I have been thinking about it for a fortnight.

I have drawn up a plan.

It has three parts.

1. Find out why he keeps taking Saturdays.

2. Find out what he would say if I asked him to come to Hartwell.

3. Find out whether the Imp will run by the end of summer.

I have discovered that parts one and two are the same question.

The answer is in the rota.

He takes Saturdays because they pay more.

He takes them because Mum is worried about the money.

He takes them because the spreadsheet is red.

He takes them because, if he stops, he will have to think about what else he could be doing.

I think this is the nearest thing to a conclusion that I have reached.

I have written it in the field notes.

Underneath it, I have written a vow.

I will find a way to put him in the passenger seat.

I do not know how.

But it has to be soon.

Wednesday, 7 July

Term is nearly over.

Mr Pritchard has given us a list of "summer reading".

It has twenty books on it.

I have ticked six.

He has put an asterisk next to Practical Engineering for the Home Workshop, which is not on the list, and written in the margin: Not the same as the others, but I'll allow it.

I have asked him if I can write an extra-credit essay on Hartwell Manor.

He said, "What's the subject?"

I said, "A house that time forgot."

He said, "That's a good title."

I said, "It is Maisie's."

He said, "Give her the credit."

I said, "I have."

He said, "And Oliver."

I said, "Yes?"

He said, "Keep your head down this summer."

I said, "I always do."

He said, "You don't. You put it in a hedge."

Closing balance: £44.90. Subscribers: 118,000. Banisters descended: one (Mrs Fletcher's). Shelters located: zero. Shelters suspected: one. Doors in the ground: one, unconfirmed. Dads who need to be asked: one.

End of Chapter Eleven.



CHAPTER 12

THE SHELTER IN THE WOODS

Saturday, 17 July

The summer holidays have begun, and I have been given a job.

It is not a paid job.

It is a volunteer job.

The Hartwell Trust has sent a letter, on thick cream paper, signed by Dr Ellen Marsh.

It says that permission has been granted for a

"preliminary survey of the unclassified area in the north woods", and that the survey will take place on Saturday 7 August.

It says that Mrs Fletcher, Mr R. Wilkins, Miss M. Patel and Master O. Wiggins are invited to attend "in an advisory capacity".

I have never been invited in an advisory capacity.

I read the phrase aloud to Mum, twice.

She said, "That's lovely, love."

I said, "I am an adviser."

She said, "You've been one for years. Nobody listened."

I said, "Now they have asked."

She said, "Then try to look as if you know what you're doing."

I said, "I always do."

She said, "No, love. You look as if you know what everyone else is doing."

I have decided this is a compliment.

Wednesday, 21 July

Dad has been quiet.

He has been doing Saturdays and Sundays and the early shift on Wednesday, and when he comes home he sits in the van outside the house for a few minutes before he comes in.

I have noticed this from my bedroom window.

I do not know what he is doing.

I think he is listening to the radio.

I think he is not ready.

I have put in the field notes:

Under no circumstances to mention the Imp until I have a plan.

Plan: still pending.

Saturday, 24 July

The Imp is finished.

I must be accurate.

It is not finished. It has no number plates, no MOT and the passenger door is held on with a bungee cord.

But it runs.

I should explain how this happened.

Over the last six Saturdays, Mr Wilkins has fitted the engine, connected the gearbox, bled the brakes, replaced the fuel line, rebuilt the carburettor, changed the oil and put on four new tyres.

I handed him the tools.

I held the torch.

I wrote down the sizes of the bolts.

On one occasion I was permitted to fit a spark plug.

(I fitted it in the wrong hole and was corrected.)

(He said, "Nearly.")

This morning he sat in the driver's seat, put his hand on the key, and looked at me.

He said, "Stand clear."

I stood on the other side of the garage with Ryan and Maisie.

He turned the key.

The engine fired at once.

It was bright, busy and cheerful.

He pressed the accelerator and the noise rose into a high, happy buzz.

He let go.

It dropped to an idle.

He sat there with both hands on the wheel,

looking straight ahead.

Nobody spoke.

He said, "She sounds right."

Maisie, who was crying a bit, said, "She does."

Ryan, who was crying more, said, "I didn't expect to cry at an engine."

I said, "Neither did I."

I was not crying.

I had a piece of dust in my eye.

Sunday, 25 July

We took Hector for a drive.

Not far.

Just up and down the street, at about three miles an hour.

Mr Wilkins drove.

I sat in the passenger seat, which is lower than I expected, with my knees up near my chin.

The little car rattled and buzzed along Fernhill Road, and every head on the pavement turned.

Mrs Dunn stood on her doorstep with her hand over her mouth.

Terry from number nine came out in his vest and shouted, "OI! RON!"

Mr Wilkins raised one finger from the wheel.

The small girl from number seven ran along beside us, shouting, "HECTOR! HECTOR!"

I said, "Everyone knows your car."

He said, "They do now."

At the end of the road he turned in a slow circle and stopped.

He switched off the engine.

He said, "That was nice."

I said, "It was."

He said, "I'd forgotten."

I said, "What?"

He said, "What it's like to be looked at for something other than my age."

I did not know what to say.

I said, "Hector is very good-looking."

He said, "He's not bad."

Thursday, 29 July

I have a plan for Dad.

It came to me at the Thursday lunch club, between the shepherd's pie and the rhubarb crumble.

I was sitting next to Mrs Fletcher.

She said, "You're thinking."

I said, "I always am."

She said, "No. You're thinking about someone."

I said, "How do you know?"

She said, "You've got your Ken look."

I said, "What is a Ken look?"

She said, "My brother. He used to look like that when he'd lost something and wasn't ready to say."

I said, "I haven't lost anything."

She said, "Haven't you?"

I told her.

I told her about the helmet and the rally and Gary Hodges and the notes.

I told her about the Saturdays and the spreadsheet and the van.

She listened with her head on one side.

When I had finished she said, "He's frightened."

I said, "Of what?"

She said, "Of wanting something."

I said, "That seems irrational."

She said, "When you've got a family, wanting something is the most dangerous thing there is."

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Because it might cost them."

I did not say anything.

She patted my hand.

She said, "So don't ask him to want it. Ask him to help."

I said, "With what?"

She said, "Tell him the car needs a co-driver."

I stared at her.

She said, "It's what he does."

Friday, 30 July

I asked.

I did it in the van.

Dad had come home early.

I got in the passenger side and shut the door.

I said, "Dad, I need a favour."

He said, "What sort?"

I said, "I need a co-driver."

He looked at me.

He said, "For what?"

I said, "For Hector."

He said, "Who's Hector?"

I said, "Mr Wilkins's Imp. It runs. We are going to take it to Hartwell Manor next Saturday, for the survey. Mr Wilkins is going to drive. I need someone to read the map."

He said, "Ol."

I said, "It is a two-person job. One to drive. One to read."

He said, "You could do it."

I said, "I could. But I am not qualified."

He said, "I'm not either."

I said, "You are the only person in this family who has ever called a corner."

He did not speak.

I said, "Left four. Over crest."

He closed his eyes.

I said, "Right two. Don't cut."

He opened them.

He said, "Who put you up to this?"

I said, "Nobody."

He said, "Was it your mum?"

I said, "She does not know I am asking."

He said, "Was it Mrs Fletcher?"

I said, "She was an adviser."

He laughed.

It was a short, breathless laugh.

He rubbed his face with both hands.

He said, "Ron's seventy-six years old."

I said, "Seventy-four."

He said, "He's not going to want a lad from Wood End telling him how to drive."

I said, "He will want you to."

He said, "How do you know?"

I said, "Because he told me."

This was not strictly true.

But I have learned that sometimes the truth is a thing you arrange.

Dad was quiet for about a minute.

Then he said, "What time?"

I said, "Eight o'clock."

He said, "I'm on the rota."

I said, "Mum has swapped it."

He looked at me.

I said, "I asked her this morning."

He said, "You said she didn't know."

I said, "She didn't know why."

He shook his head slowly.

He said, "You're a bloody menace."

I said, "That has been mentioned."

He started the van.

We drove home.

At the corner of our road he said, without turning his head, "Thanks, Ol."

I said, "It is a professional arrangement."

He said, "I know."

His voice had gone slightly rough.

I looked out of the window until it passed.

Saturday, 7 August (7.30 a.m.)

The big day.

Mr Wilkins brought the Imp out of the garage into the road.

He had washed it.

He had polished the chrome.

He had put on the number plates (temporary ones, entirely legal; I have the paperwork).

The little car shone in the morning light.

Dad came out of the house in a clean shirt.

He stopped on the doorstep.

He looked at Hector.

He looked at him for a long time.

Then he walked down the path, slowly, with his hands in his pockets, and stood beside Mr Wilkins.

They looked at the car.

Mr Wilkins said, "It's a Hillman."

Dad said, "Imp. Sixty-six."

Mr Wilkins said, "Linwood built."

Dad said, "But the engine's a Coventry Climax design."

Mr Wilkins turned his head.

He said, "You know that?"

Dad said, "I read it."

Mr Wilkins said, "Aye."

They both looked at the car.

Mr Wilkins said, "Do you want to sit in it?"

Dad said, "I don't want to get in the way."

Mr Wilkins said, "You're the co-driver. Get in."

Dad opened the passenger door.

(He held the bungee cord with one hand.)

He folded himself into the seat.

Mr Wilkins got in the other side.

I climbed into the back, where there is exactly enough room for a boy and a flask.

Mum was at the gate.

She had her arms folded.

She did not look cross.

She looked like a woman who has been given a very small piece of a very large wish.

She said, "Take care of them."

I said, "I always do."

She said, "Not you. Them."

She leaned in and kissed Dad on the forehead through the window.

She said, "Go on."

Mr Wilkins pulled out the choke.

He turned the key.

The Imp started.

It buzzed like a very contented wasp.

We drove away.

I looked back through the little rear window.

Mum and Chloe were standing together on the pavement, holding hands.

Behind them, up and down Fernhill Road, the neighbours had come out of their houses.

They were waving.

I do not know who started it.

They were waving all the way down the road.

Saturday, 7 August (8.20 a.m.)

I want to record what it was like.

The Imp is small.

It is so small that every bump goes through your spine.

It is so loud that you have to shout.

It smells of hot oil and old vinyl and very faintly of toast.

Dad sat in the front with a map on his knee.

It was a proper map, a paper one.

Mr Wilkins had asked for it specially.

Dad unfolded it.

He ran a finger down the road.

He said, "Left at the lights."

Mr Wilkins said, "Left."

Dad said, "Three hundred yards, then a roundabout. Second exit."

Mr Wilkins said, "Second."

Dad said, "Then straight on. Long straight. Don't go over forty, there's a camera."

Mr Wilkins said, "Right."

Dad said, "Then the Tamworth road, bear right at the pub."

His voice had changed.

It was lower, steadier, and quicker.

It was not the voice of a parcel-van driver.

It was the voice of someone who had once sat in a ditch at midnight in the snow, in a Welsh forest, with a torch in his teeth and a driver who could not see.

I leaned forward between the seats.

I said, "That's the voice."

Dad said, "What voice?"

I said, "The pace notes voice."

He said, "Is it?"

I said, "It's very good."

He did not look round.

He said, "I'd forgotten I could do it."

Mr Wilkins said, without taking his eyes off the

road, "You can do it."

Dad said, "You're not going to criticise?"

Mr Wilkins said, "I've been driving sixty years. Nobody's ever read me a map properly."

Dad said, "Margaret?"

Mr Wilkins said, "She'd do it with her eyes shut."

There was a pause.

Dad said, "Then we'll do it for her."

Mr Wilkins said, "Aye."

Dad said, "Right. Left three, tightens. Over the brow."

Mr Wilkins said, "Left three."

The little car went over the hill like a boat on a wave.

I held onto the flask.

I do not think I have ever been so happy in my life.

Saturday, 7 August (9.40 a.m.)

We arrived at Hartwell Manor.

The gates were open.

Dr Marsh was waiting on the gravel with three people in hard hats and a man with a very large machine on a trailer.

Mrs Fletcher was already there.

She had come in Terry's car, with Maisie, and was sitting on a folding chair under an

umbrella.

She waved.

The Imp drew up in front of the steps.

Mr Wilkins turned off the engine.

For a moment, nobody moved.

Dr Marsh said, "Is that... a Hillman Imp?"

Mr Wilkins said, "Nineteen sixty-six."

Dr Marsh said, "It's a beautiful thing."

Mr Wilkins said, "It's been waiting."

He got out.

He stood beside the car and looked up at the house.

He said, "Forty years."

Dr Marsh said, "You've been here before?"

He said, "I came up once, on a works outing. Nineteen eighty-three."

She said, "Did you?"

He said, "Never saw the woods."

Saturday, 7 August (10.15 a.m.)

We went into the woods.

There were nine of us.

Dr Marsh, three surveyors, a man with a radar machine on a trolley, Mrs Fletcher in a wheelchair that Maisie and I took turns to push, Mr Wilkins, Dad and me.

The path was soft and green.

It was a warm day.

The light came down through the leaves in long gold stripes.

We reached the clearing with the old oak.

Mrs Fletcher put up her hand.

She said, "Stop."

We stopped.

She pointed.

She said, "That's it."

It was the wall of brambles.

The surveyors went in with long-handled

shears and cut a way through.

It took forty minutes.

I will not describe the brambles.

I have forty-one scratches, nine of which are on my face.

At last they pulled aside the final curtain of leaves.

Behind it was a bank.

It was steep, covered in moss and ivy.

In the middle of it, half hidden, was an arch of old red brick.

It was about four feet high.

It was filled in with a slab of grey concrete,

cracked and stained.

On the slab, scratched into the surface, were two words.

They had been written with a nail.

The letters were uneven and childish.

They said:

THE HOLE

Mrs Fletcher began to cry.

Saturday, 7 August (11.30 a.m.)

I will keep this short, because I do not know how to write it.

The survey team put the radar machine against the slab.

The screen showed a hollow space behind it.

A small room.

Dr Marsh looked at the screen for a long time.

She said, "It's a cavity. About three metres by two."

She said, "It's got a vaulted roof."

She said, "It's a shelter."

Mrs Fletcher said, "I told you."

Dr Marsh said, "You did."

She said, "We'll have to get specialist permission before we open it."

Mrs Fletcher said, "How long?"

Dr Marsh said, "A few weeks."

Mrs Fletcher said, "I'm ninety-three."

Dr Marsh looked at her.

She said, "I'll see what I can do."

Wednesday, 18 August

We opened it.

It took ten days.

Dr Marsh made some calls, and a man came from the council, and a woman from something called Historic England wrote a letter, and by Wednesday morning a small group had gathered outside the arch in the woods.

It was the same nine as before, plus a photographer.

Two workmen lifted the slab with a chain.

It came away with a long, grinding groan.

A smell came out.

It was the smell of cold stone, and earth, and something very old and dry.

I held the torch.

Dr Marsh went in first.

She had to stoop.

She was in there for about two minutes.

We waited on the grass.

Nobody spoke.

A bird was singing somewhere.

Then Dr Marsh came out.

She straightened up.

She said, in a very quiet voice, "I think the children had better come first."

Wednesday, 18 August (11.00 a.m.)

I went in.

Maisie came behind me.

Mrs Fletcher, in her wheelchair, was lifted gently by Dad and Mr Wilkins, one on each side, and carried in.

It was a small brick room with a curved roof.

There were two wooden benches along the walls.

There was a shelf, with a tin mug on it.

There was a faded blanket, folded on one of the benches, so old that it had turned to a sort of dust.

And on the walls, covering every inch from floor to ceiling, were drawings.

They were done in chalk, in pencil, in charcoal, in something that looked like crushed brick.

Houses with smoking chimneys.

Aeroplanes with big round eyes.

A cat with six legs.

A tall lady with a stick.

A man with a hat, labelled in wobbly capitals MR GREEN GARDENER.

A big yellow sun.

A tree with apples.

A boy holding a flag.

And, on the far wall, in a long line across the middle, a row of small stick figures, holding hands.

Underneath, in letters of different sizes, were names.

KEN. DOREEN. PEGGY. TOMMY. JACK. ROSE. FRANK. BETTY. LILY. ALF. JOAN. MAUREEN.

Twelve names.

Mrs Fletcher was looking at the wall.

She did not say a word.

She lifted one hand and pointed at the second name from the left.

Her finger trembled.

She said, "That's me."

Wednesday, 18 August (11.20 a.m.)

Under the row of children, in the corner, there was a line of writing.

It was in a different hand, larger and neater, in blue pencil.

Dr Marsh read it aloud.

She read it very quietly.

"For the nights the sirens went. We were never frightened in here. — Miss Hartwell, 1940."

Mrs Fletcher said, "That's Mrs Hartwell's niece. She was nineteen. She used to bring us in when the alarm went. She'd sing."

Dr Marsh said, "What did she sing?"

Mrs Fletcher said, "'We'll Meet Again.'"

She said, "And 'Run, Rabbit, Run.'"

She said, "She had a terrible voice."

She began to laugh and cry at the same time.

I stood in the corner, holding the torch.

It was the quietest room I have ever been in.

I looked at the chalk drawings of the aeroplane with the round eyes.

I thought about a girl of seven, in a strange

house, in a war, drawing on a wall in the dark.

I thought about the whole of this place waiting under the leaves for eighty years.

Maisie, beside me, whispered, "It's a primary source."

I whispered, "It's a room."

She said, "It's both."

She was crying, too.

I put my hand on her shoulder.

She did not move it away.

Wednesday, 18 August (noon)

The historian came.

His name is Professor Anand.

He is a thin, quick man with a bow tie and a camera, who arrived by taxi from the university and ran across the grass shouting, "Is it intact? Is it intact?"

He went into the shelter.

He did not come out for two hours.

When he did, his face was pink and he was holding a notebook in both hands.

He said, "It's extraordinary."

Dr Marsh said, "It's all original."

He said, "It's a complete civilian shelter from the Blitz. Untouched. We have a handful of surviving examples, mostly Anderson shelters, mostly altered. A private brick shelter, with

children's drawings, with names. This is..."

He stopped.

He said, "I've been a historian for thirty years. I have never seen anything like it."

Mrs Fletcher, from her wheelchair, said, "I'd like it if you did look after it."

He knelt on the grass, beside her.

He said, "Mrs Fletcher. I promise you."

She said, "Not a museum."

He said, "I beg your pardon?"

She said, "Don't put it in a glass box. The children drew on it. It wants to be seen."

He said, "I'll do what I can."

She patted his hand.

She said, "That's all anyone can do."

Thursday, 19 August

The news is out.

It was on the local television at six.

It was on the national news at ten.

A woman in a red coat, standing in front of Hartwell Manor, said, "A remarkable discovery in the grounds of a Georgian country house near Coventry. A Second World War shelter, sealed for eighty years, has been found by a thirteen-year-old boy and his friends."

I said to the television, "That is not accurate."

Chloe said, "Shh."

The woman said, "Oliver Wiggins, who became briefly famous earlier this year for crashing a shopping trolley..."

I said, "I resent that."

Chloe said, "Shh."

The woman said, "...has now been credited, by the Hartwell Trust, with finding the shelter."

I said, "I did not find it. Mrs Fletcher found it. I merely asked whether the woods could be walked in."

Chloe said, "Oliver, they're thanking you."

I said, "For the wrong thing."

Mum said, "Let them."

I said, "I would like it noted that Mrs Fletcher,

Dr Marsh, Ken Fletcher, Miss Hartwell and a twelve-person line of unnamed children are in fact the principal characters."

Mum said, "Then say so."

I said, "To whom?"

Chloe turned to me.

She said, "To everyone."

Friday, 20 August

Chloe made the film.

I did not know she was going to.

She and Maisie had been in her room for two days, with the door closed, working on something.

On Friday evening she came downstairs with her laptop.

She said, "Sit down."

We all sat.

Mum, Dad, Nan, who had come for tea, and me.

Chloe set the laptop on the table.

She said, "I made something."

She pressed play.

It was a short film.

It was three minutes long.

It was not like any of Chloe's videos.

There was no music at the beginning, and no

jokes, and no ring light.

It opened with a shot of the woods in the early morning.

Then the arch.

Then the brickwork, in close-up.

Then, slowly, the faces in the drawings.

A boy with a flag.

A cat with six legs.

A row of twelve children holding hands.

Over the pictures, in Chloe's calm and steady voice, she said:

"In 1940, a lot of children from Coventry lost their homes in a single night. They were sent

to a big house in the countryside, and when the sirens went, they went to a small brick room in the woods and drew on the walls.

For eighty years, nobody knew.

This summer, a boy from Wood End — my brother — asked an old lady about a banister. And she told him a story. And he listened.

I used to think that being famous meant being looked at. Now I think it might mean being the person who looks.

Her name is Doreen Fletcher. She's ninety-three. She was seven when she drew this. And this is what she remembers."

The film cut to Mrs Fletcher, sitting in the wheelchair in the shelter, with a torch shining on her face.

She said, "It was cold. And dark. But there was a girl who sang. And I wasn't frightened."

The screen went black.

A line of white text appeared.

"Some things are worth finding."

Nobody spoke.

Mum had both hands over her mouth.

Dad was looking at the table.

Nan said, "Oh, Chloe."

Chloe said, "It's rubbish."

Nan said, "It is not."

Chloe said, "It's got no hook."

Nan said, "It's got everything."

I said, "Chloe."

She said, "What?"

I said, "That is the best thing you have ever made."

She said, "Don't."

I said, "It is."

She said, "I mean it, Ol, don't. I'll cry, and I've got a face to maintain."

Dad stood up.

He went round the table.

He put his arms round her.

She resisted for about two seconds.

Then she went quite limp.

He said, "I'm so proud of you."

She said, "Get off, you smell of van."

He said, "I know."

He did not let go.

Saturday, 21 August

The film has been seen by four million people in twenty-four hours.

Chloe has not read the comments.

She said, "I can't."

I read them for her.

I don't normally comment but this made me cry on a bus.

My grandad was evacuated. He never talked about it. I'm going to ask him.

Doreen, you are a legend.

Chloe, you are the real thing.

Tell the boy he's got a gift.

Not the trolley one. The other one.

I did not know which other one they meant.

I put it in the field notes under Questions.

Sunday, 22 August

Dr Marsh telephoned.

She said that the Trust has voted unanimously to conserve the shelter as it is.

It will be fenced, drained and roofed.

A small wooden path will be built so that visitors can look in without entering.

It will be called The Hartwell Children's Shelter.

She said, "Mrs Fletcher has one request."

I said, "What?"

She said, "That the children's names are on a plaque, and that yours is not."

I said, "I would never ask."

She said, "I know."

She said, "But we're putting a small one on the bench by the oak."

I said, "A bench?"

She said, "It says: In memory of Margaret Wilkins, who would have liked it here."

I could not speak.

She said, "Mr Wilkins asked us."

I said, "When?"

She said, "On the day of the survey. He took me aside by the car. He said it was where she'd have wanted to sit."

I said, "Thank you for telling me."

She said, "He'll be pleased you know."

I said, "He will pretend not to be."

She said, "Yes."

Saturday, 28 August

An important day.

At ten o'clock in the morning, all of Fernhill Road assembled outside number fourteen.

I had put out a notice.

It said:

FERNHILL ROAD: EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.

AGENDA: ONE ITEM.

BRING A CAKE.

Forty-three people came.

They brought sixty-one cakes.

The pavement groaned.

Mr Wilkins came out of his front door in his best suit.

I have never seen him in a suit.

It was grey, with a wide lapel and a thin tie, and it fitted him exactly, as though he had been waiting for it.

He looked at the crowd.

He said, "What's this?"

I said, "It is the cake."

He said, "What cake?"

I said, "The one I promised when the Imp ran."

He said, "That was a figure of speech."

I said, "I do not use figures of speech."

He said, "Oliver, you use nothing else."

I said, "I accept that."

Behind him, in the drive, Hector stood gleaming.

Mr Wilkins looked at the cakes.

He looked at the neighbours.

He looked at the small girl from number seven, who was wearing a paper crown.

He said, "I don't know what to say."

Mrs Dunn said, "Say thank you, Ron."

He said, "Thank you."

Mrs Dunn said, "That wasn't so hard."

He said, "It was."

Terry from number nine began to clap.

Everyone clapped.

I looked at Mr Wilkins.

He stood very straight, like a man receiving a medal.

His eyes were bright.

He said, to nobody in particular, "Margaret would've hated this."

I said, "Would she?"

He said, "She'd have been mortified."

I said, "And then?"

He said, "She'd have had the biggest slice."

Everyone laughed.

He did too.

Then he walked across the road and took a slice of Victoria sponge from Nan's tray and bit into it.

He said, with his mouth full, "It's good."

Nan said, "I know."

Saturday, 28 August (afternoon)

At two o'clock, in front of the whole street, Mr Wilkins held up his hand.

He said, "I've got something to say."

Silence.

He said, "I've lived on this road for fifty-one years. I've said hello to maybe five people in the last four."

Someone said, "Four."

He said, "Four."

He looked at his shoes.

He said, "I'm not a man who says much. I'd like to say thank you to a lad called Oliver, who is the most irritating child I have ever met."

I said, "Thank you."

He said, "I wasn't finished."

I said, "I apologise."

He said, "He knocked on my door at Christmas with two mince pies when I'd have preferred to be left alone. And I hadn't been alone for years. I'd been lonely. There's a difference."

I said, "I noted that."

He said, "I'm sure you did."

He said, "I thought I had a car I couldn't finish and a wife I couldn't bring back."

He stopped.

He took a deep breath.

He said, "I've only got one of those now."

Nobody moved.

He said, "But I've got a street. And I've got a lad. And a team of three or four idiots who can hold a torch."

Ryan, at the back, said, "Four."

Mr Wilkins said, "Four."

He said, "And I've got a car that runs."

He said, "So if anybody wants to go to Weston-super-Mare, it's a two-seater, and I'll be the one at the wheel."

Mum was crying.

Chloe was filming.

Dad was looking at the car.

Mr Wilkins said, "Dave."

Dad said, "Ron?"

Mr Wilkins said, "Can you read a map?"

Dad said, "I can read a map."

Mr Wilkins said, "Then you're coming."

Dad said, "I'd like that."

Mr Wilkins said, "And Oliver."

I said, "Yes?"

He said, "Bring the Whitworth."

Saturday, 4 September

We did it.

We drove to Weston-super-Mare.

It took four hours and forty minutes.

The Imp, which is rated for sixty miles an hour, was driven at forty-five the whole way.

Dad read the map.

I sat in the back and handed out the sandwiches.

Mr Wilkins did not say a word until we reached the Severn Bridge.

He said, "She always wanted to see that."

I looked out of the window.

The water went on for ever.

At about two o'clock, we pulled onto the

seafront.

It was wide, and grey-gold, and full of people eating chips.

There was a pier.

There was a bandstand.

There was a very long beach, and the tide was out.

Mr Wilkins parked the Imp on the promenade.

He turned off the engine.

For a long moment he sat there, looking at the sea.

Then he got out.

He walked to the railings.

He took a piece of paper from his pocket.

It was the list from the glove box.

Weston: B&B (ask for sea view). Pack: thermos, rug, cards. Ron: don't forget the map this time.

He read it.

He folded it.

He put it away.

He said, quietly, "I did remember the map, love."

Dad, beside him, did not say anything.

He put a hand on Mr Wilkins's shoulder, just for a moment.

Then he took it away.

We ate chips on the seafront.

We played cards on the rug.

We drank tea from the flask.

When the sun began to go down, Mr Wilkins looked at me.

He said, "Is the spanner in your pocket?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Good."

He said, "Never go anywhere without it."

Sunday, 5 September

We stayed the night in a bed and breakfast.

It was called Seaview.

The room had no sea view.

It had a view of a car park and a hotel sign, and, if you leaned out of the window and looked at an angle, a very small triangle of grey water.

Mr Wilkins looked at it for a long time.

He said, "She'd have complained."

Dad said, "Would she?"

Mr Wilkins said, "To the landlady. In a nice way. For forty minutes."

He said, "And then she'd have said it was perfect."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because of who she was with."

I wrote that in the field notes.

It is the last entry in the book I was given by Maisie.

It has taken me eleven months to fill.

Wednesday, 8 September

Term has started.

I am in Year Nine.

Nothing has changed, and everything has.

Ryan has a new rucksack.

Maisie has a haircut and a book deal (a small one, from a local press, for the podcast).

Kyle Briscoe nodded at me in the corridor.

Mr Pritchard has a new tie.

It is green.

I was going to mention it, then thought better of it.

I have given a lot of thought to what I would like to say at the end of this year, and I have realised that I do not need to say anything.

I have only to list.

Year-end ledger.

Income: £184.10

Debts: £0 (all repaid, including the hedge, the fence panel, and Dad's £12, which he refused to accept and which I put in his sock drawer)

Assets: 1 toolbox, 1 helmet, 1 Whitworth

spanner (9/16), 1 notebook (full), 1 pipe (on a shelf), 1 sister (famous), 1 mother (extraordinary), 1 father (co-driver), 1 neighbour (Ron).

Subscribers: 612,000 (the number is not important)

Hedges destroyed: 1

Hospitals discovered under Portland: 0

Shelters discovered in woods: 1

Friends: a lot

I read it twice.

I have decided that I am a billionaire.

I have decided not to explain.

Friday, 10 September (night)

I was lying in bed, thinking about the shelter, and I could not sleep.

I turned on the lamp.

I opened the field notes.

On the last page, below the final entry, I found something I had not seen before.

It was a small drawing, done in pencil.

It showed a castle on a hill.

Beside it, in tiny letters, was written:

Coventry has more than one story. Ask Mrs F about the knights.

I looked at it for a long time.

I turned it over.

On the back, in Maisie's neat handwriting, it said:

I put this in on your birthday. You weren't supposed to find it until you'd finished. — M.

I took out my pen.

I turned to a clean page.

I wrote:

Saturday 11 September. New project.

Subject: the knights of Coventry.

Source: one old lady, one friend, one very small drawing.

Chief of Research: M. Patel.

Chief Executive: O. P. Wiggins.

Chief of Sockets: R. Dhillon.

Head of Engineering: R. Wilkins (unwilling).

Co-driver: D. Wiggins.

Director of Communications: C. Wiggins.

I thought for a moment.

Then I added a final line.

Chair of the Board: J. Wiggins.

I closed the book.

I switched out the light.

Down the road, in a garage at number fourteen, a small white car was sleeping under

a tarpaulin it no longer needed.

In the morning there would be tea, and toast, and a day.

I have decided to be ready.

Closing balance: £184.10. Debts: none. Subscribers: do not ask. Hedges: replaced. Staircases descended: one, by someone else. Dads: restored. Neighbours: found.

End of Book One.

The Diary of an Accidental Genius will return in Book Two: The Knights of Coventry.

MEET THE CHARACTERS

OLIVER WIGGINS



Twelve, an inventor, and very possibly the most intelligent person in the West Midlands

DAD (DAVE WIGGINS)



Parcel-van driver, ex-rally driver, and the loudest singer in the house

MUM (JO WIGGINS)



Healthcare assistant who works every shift going and still notices everything

CHLOE WIGGINS



Oliver's big sister, an influencer, always filming

MAISIE PATEL



The cleverest girl in the class (apart from Oliver), Intelligence Officer

RYAN DHILLON



Oliver's best friend, the only boy in the class with a socket set

MR WILKINS (RON)



The grumpy neighbour at number fourteen, who knows exactly what size a spanner is

MRS FLETCHER (DOREEN)



Ninety-three, and still the best banister-slider in England

ABOUT M.C. WOBBLE

M.C. Wobble writes books about the sort of characters nobody ever puts in books — blobs, beasts, and things made entirely of baked goods. The stories are silly on the outside and surprisingly warm on the inside.

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