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THE
INTERNATIONAL
YETI
COLLECTIVE
SHADOWSPRING

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

For David Mason
1938–2019
Grandfather, potter, tiddlywinker
– PM

To Harry
– KR

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Tadpole (*she of unripe character*) gripped a hollowed-out reed between her teeth and eyed the long trench of muddy slop in front of her. She darted forwards and launched herself into the air, arms outstretched. As she hit the sludge with a splat, Tadpole heard the Greybeards on the banks break into a cheer, then she plunged under the blanket of mud. Tadpole blew out a blast of air to clear her snorkel and began to move – wiggling her body from side to side, arms pinned and legs flailing. It had been a while since she last slop-snorkelled and she was a little out of practice.

As Tadpole took deep breaths through the reed, she hoped she was near the finish line. But, with eyes clamped shut, it was impossible to tell. She carried on, her back aching, until at last she felt her head bump against the end of the channel.

Tadpole pushed herself up and raised a fist, expecting

cheers and happy yodelling from the spectators, but there was silence. She tilted her head to both sides to clear her ears, then wiped the mud from her eyes.

Shipshape (*she in perfect order*) stood on the bank, the Stinking Sash of the silverback across her chest, her face lined with exasperation. Beside her stood Rainstorm the Guardian (*he of damp humour*), shaking his head – his thin, sinewy arms folded over the beard that hung down his chest. The other yeti in the slop room shuffled uneasily and stared at their toes.

The silverback squinted at the pool. “Is that you, Tadpole?”

Tadpole heaved one leg over, then the other. She struggled to her feet, mud oozing from her fur into a giant puddle on the ground, and took the breathing tube out of her mouth. “Mum! We were just making sure the slopping trench was all good to go ... for when the visitors arrive.”

“Really?” said Shipshape. “I asked you younglings to fill the trench with fresh mud, smooth it over, and then make the seats comfortable with new moss.” Shipshape pointed to the rows of wooden viewing benches that rose up on one side of the room. “You were supposed to get a Greybeard game ready for our guests from the Collective.”

“Not dive into the mud like piglets.” Rainstorm glared round the room. “We could hear you in the Council chambers!”



“We were just testing it out,” Tadpole ventured.

“You were just *mucking* about,” said Shipshape. “You’ve made a terrible mess.”

Tadpole glanced at the room, now covered in mud splats. Perhaps she should have thought twice about the dive and started from inside the trench the way you were supposed to.

“We’ll clean it up right away, and get that moss spread in a jiffy,” said Slapstick (*he who trips over his own feet*). The other younglings nodded hurriedly.

“Please see that you do,” said Shipshape.

“And their punishment, O Shipshape?” asked Rainstorm, gesturing at the younglings with his staff.

“That’s enough, I think.”

Rainstorm gave an exasperated snort. “Might I suggest—”

“Thank you, Guardian, that is all.”

“As you wish.” Rainstorm glowered at the young Greybeards. “Just make sure you’re done before last horn, or I will come looking for you.”

“Why not return to the Council chambers, Rainstorm? I’ll meet you there,” said Shipshape.

The Guardian gave a bow and swept out into the corridor.

“A quiet word, please.” Shipshape beckoned Tadpole over. Tadpole sighed and followed her mother out

of the slop room.

Shipshape stroked the long hairs on her chin, silky and grey. She looked weary, thought Tadpole, there was a melancholy to her eyes. “You know how busy I am now, don’t you? With the Gathering upon us? The ambassadors are due to set off soon – any moon!”

“Sorry, Mum.” Tadpole could guess what was coming next.

“Look, I know it’s not easy being the daughter of the silverback, but you’ve got to start acting your age,” said Shipshape. “You’re not a fledgling any more.”

“I know.” Tadpole recited the next words in her head – she knew exactly what her mother would say. *Believe it or not, one day this sett will look to you for answers...*

“Believe it or not, one day this sett will look to you for answers, my love,” said Shipshape. “And you’ll need to be ready.”

Tadpole’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I get it.”

Shipshape brushed away a glob of mud from the fur on Tadpole’s face. “Do you?”

“I get it,” said Tadpole, this time with a faint smile.

Shipshape leaned in and fluttered her eyelashes against Tadpole’s cheek. “Now go and wash yourself off, then come back to help the others. I’ll see you at rehearsal later.” She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You OK, Mum?”

“Fine,” said Shipshape, turning to leave.

Tadpole went to the waterfall room and stood under the trickle of water falling through the rock, hoping some of the embarrassment would wash off too. She thought about the pressure that her mother was under – now more than ever. The canoes of the International Yeti Collective would arrive before long. It was the first Gathering of the nineteen yeti setts for as long as anyone could remember. The Almas, the Mande Barung, the Sasquatch, the Makimaki and more were all sending their ambassadors.

Tadpole didn't know much about the other yeti – they all lived so far away. But *everyone* knew about the Mountain Yeti and their brave expedition – the story carried across the world by bat messengers. It had been all anyone talked about for moons! How a gang of humans stole the Mountain Yeti slabs – the ancient carvings that recorded the history of the yeti, every yeti law and, more worryingly, the whereabouts of every yeti sett. (Tadpole knew the Greybeards had their own copy, carved in oak, resting on a bed of heather in the Council chambers.)

With the ancient slabs in the hands of the humans, every sett across the globe had been in danger. It could have spelled the end of the yeti way of life. But the Mountain Yeti didn't hide. Instead, they crossed the Earth, paddling along underground waterways, tracked down the thieves and then took the slabs away before

the humans had a chance to work out what they said. Barrelling down rivers, having adventures, embracing new things. *Now that's how to live*, thought Tadpole.

The daring exploits of the Mountain Yeti had also brought the Collective back to life.

In Greybeard school, you learned about the time when the setts of the Collective had worked together like the threads of a spider's web: all joined in one purpose – to care for the Earth. But, over time, the web started to fall apart. Although each sett still carried out their chosen role, without links between them, the net had grown weak.

At the same time, the humans grew stronger and the world began to tremble under their feet. People filled the sky with smoke from their contraptions, turned rivers and oceans foul with their filth, chopped down trees and drove animals from their homes. Worst of all, under their watch, the world became warmer and warmer still. No one knew how it would end.

“So much is at stake,” Shipshape had said in her speech to the sett just the other moon. “We need a strong Collective now more than ever. How do we fix things? Do we work with humans or against them?”

It was a question the Gathering would try to answer. Tadpole knew it was a real honour for their little sett, the Greybeards, to be hosting ambassadors from the entire

Collective. As leader of the sett, Shipshape was desperate to make sure everything ran as smoothly as possible. With a pang, Tadpole realized that she hadn't exactly helped. She shook the water from her fur and padded back into the slop room.

"Another one of your brilliant ideas, Tadpole." Tagalong (*she who always follows*) scrubbed the walls with a cloth. "Last time I listen to you."

"Rainstorm was super cross," said Slapstick.

"He's always cross," said Tagalong.

"I probably should have thought that dive through a little more," Tadpole admitted. "Sorry."

"Come on then, give us a hand ... Piglet," said Tagalong with a grin.

"Don't you start." Tadpole grabbed a mop and got to work on the floor.



At the sound of last horn, Tadpole helped Tagalong and Slapstick pack everything up, and padded along the tunnel in a hurry. She passed by the firefly nursery, lit up like sunlight, the keepers coaxing the little flies into their lanterns, then the apothecary's chamber, with its strange jars of roots, herbs and wriggling bugs. At last, she stopped on Potters' Path, the potters still at work, wheels turning, the shelves lining the walls full of fresh plates, cups and jugs drying.

Tadpole gazed at the potters, watching in quiet wonder as bowls rose out of the spinning mud, edges climbing from under their gentle fingers. It wasn't that long ago that Snowdrift (*he with white fur*) would have been at his wheel, hands cupping a lump of pale clay. Tadpole had always been in awe of Grandfather's touch – so soft, so watchful, bringing the wet mud into being as if by magic.

And now he had passed on. Tadpole felt for the clay pendant that hung around her neck as she so often did. Touching it made him feel close – as if he was still there with her – and Tadpole liked to hear his voice.

“Ah, my favourite grandfluff.” Snowdrift appeared at the wheel, his eye on a spinning pot.

“I’m your only grandfluff.”

Grandfather grinned from beneath his snowy beard. *“That must be why you’re my favourite. Any particular reason you have mud behind your ears?”* he asked, lifting his hands away, and letting the wheel slow down. Satisfied, he glanced up.

Tadpole scratched the back of her head, looking sheepish.

“Don’t tell me, I can guess.” Snowdrift chuckled. *“Another fine mess, eh?”*

“Something like that. Mum told me off.”

“Then perhaps you should stop doing things to upset her.”

“Are you all right, Tadpole?” Tadpole turned to see her dad, Waterworks (*he who often sheds tears*), standing there with a puzzled look on his face.

Tadpole realized she was staring at an empty potter’s wheel. “Fine, Dad.”

Waterworks followed her gaze. “You miss Grandfather. It still hurts, I know. But I believe he’s very much here.” He placed a warm palm against Tadpole’s cheek. Tadpole could see his eyes glistening.

“Thanks, Dad.” Tadpole wiped away a tear as it crept down her father’s fur.

“*My son’s right, you know,*” Snowdrift chortled.

Waterworks cleared his throat. “Now we’d better get a move on – it’s almost time for rehearsal.”



Tadpole and Waterworks arrived at the giant meeting hall to find it filled with happy yodelling and chitchat. As they nattered, the Greybeards stroked their extravagant whiskers – some reaching almost to their knees, mustachios spreading from their mouths like overhanging vines. Tadpole felt her own face, still a little embarrassed that she was yet to have anything more than the most modest beard. From the open kitchen door across the hall wafted the wonderful smell of sizzling pine weevils. Tadpole caught sight of a giant pot overflowing with sauce, and frying pans sitting on top of bubbling thermal mud, as cooks bustled about in their aprons.

Even with all the commotion, Tadpole heard her dad’s stomach let out a large gurgle. “Hope it doesn’t go on for ages – I’m starving!” said Waterworks.

“You’re always starving.”

Waterworks shrugged. “That is true.”

At the front of the cave, Shipshape stood with the choir leader, Upstage (*she who demands attention*), trying

to cajole the rowdy horde into rows with a loudhailer fashioned out of rolled-up tree bark. “Come on, you scallywags, get to your places!” she called. “No, not just you, Scallywag. I mean everyone in general.” Scallywag (*he who is naughty*) grinned from behind his enormous beard and gave her a wave.

“We’ll never get anywhere at this rate,” said Upstage.

Rainstorm thumped his staff on the floor once, twice, three times, and the Greybeards fell silent under his glare. The gathering quickly assembled into their lines.

Shipshape straightened the sash across her chest.

“Thank you, Greybeards. Let’s not waste any more time. Before we can have dinner, we need to get this welcome performance right for when the Collective begin to gather. Really put your hearts into it, yes? Remember: *great oaks from little acorns grow.*”

“From the top, if you please. The greeting song: ‘You Know What They Say’.”

Upstage waved her arms and counted them in...

You know what they say...

Hold the stone as one and it won’t feel heavy,

A good buttock deserves a comfortable seat,

With patience the ant can eat an elephant.

Oh, listen to this wise drumbeat.

*The dropping never falls far from the pigeon,
The first pancake is always a mess,
No toad comes to light without reason,
To all this and more I profess.*

*When warthogs fight, it is the grass that suffers,
A shrimp that sleeps gets carried by the tide,
Every vegetable has its season, its season.
Let these words be your faithful guide.*

*A big chair does not make a leader,
The sun which melts wax hardens clay,
Even a tiny star shines in the darkness,
You know, that's just what they say,*

You know, that's just what they say...

Upstage gave a warm round of yodelling. “Lovely, lovely,” she crowed. The Greybeards looked at each other, beaming, and the choir leader took them through the song twice more.

“*All good things come to those who wait* – now let’s eat!” said Shipshape to a happy roar.

The kitchen crew wasted no time, and quickly filed in with plates of pine-weevil flan and jugs of worm sauce.

Shipshape came over to join her family.

“Hey, Mum.” Tadpole leaned over and gave her a nuzzle.

“You look exhausted,” said Waterworks.

“I could really use some food,” agreed Shipshape. She dug her fingers into her flan and lifted some to her mouth. “Mmm. So how was everyone’s moon?”

“All hands to the pump.” Waterworks poured out a large helping of worm sauce.

“Then perhaps you could go down to Shadowspring next moon and help out, Tadpole,” said Shipshape.

“But it’s my shadow-puppet play for the fledglings in the morning. The one I’ve been rehearsing for ages.”

Tadpole put down her weevil pastry.

Shipshape flinched. “Oh yes, of course.”

“You said you’d try to come this time, Mum. Remember?”

“I remember.”

“*Mum!*” Tadpole groaned.

“I’ll be there.” Shipshape held up her hands.

“We’ll both find a way to be there,” agreed Dad, wiping drops of gravy from his chin.

Over Dad’s shoulder Tadpole spied Rainstorm and his son Butterfingers (*he lumbering and clumsy*) squeezing their way through the crowded hall.

Rainstorm bowed to them. “Just wanted to wish you a good evening on our way out and remind you that we’re

meeting all the farmers and growers first thing.”

“Ah yes, about that.” Shipshape glanced over at Tadpole. “As it happens, I need to be at Tadpole’s shadow play in the morning.”

“Play?” asked Butterfingers.

“I put on shadow-puppet shows for the fledglings at school,” Tadpole explained. “You can come, if you like.”

Butterfingers shook his huge head. “Sorry, Tadpole. I’m helping in the quarry. Dad says.”

“Doing his bit.” Rainstorm patted him on the shoulder fondly. “They grow up so fast. His beard will be full before we know it.”

“Isn’t that the truth!” said Shipshape.

Rainstorm turned to Tadpole. “And what about you? Did you clean up that terrible mess of your own making?”

“All gone,” said Tadpole.

Shipshape gave an embarrassed smile. “Now about the meeting...”

“Not to worry, Shipshape. I’ll take care of it. Happy to run things in your absence,” said Rainstorm.

Shipshape let out a relieved sigh. “I don’t know what I’d do without you by my side, Rainstorm. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Good luck with your play, Tadpole,” said Butterfingers as they left.

“That Butterfingers is a nice youngling, isn’t he?”

Shipshape dropped the last bit of flan into her mouth and pushed her plate away. She let out a long sigh and rubbed her temples.

“You OK?” asked Waterworks.

“I think I might turn in early.”

Waterworks got to his feet. “I’ll come with you.

Tadpole, be a good Greybeard and clear for us?”

“Yes, Dad.”

Tadpole waited for them to go. “I can’t believe Mum totally forgot about my play,” she muttered as she stacked the plates.

Snowdrift emerged at her side. “*She is extremely busy at the moment.*”

“It’s not just that. Mum doesn’t think the future silverback should waste time on shadows,” said Tadpole.

“But I’m not like her. I’m no leader.”

“*You just might surprise yourself one moon, Tadpole,*” said Snowdrift.

“Do you think Mum is still cross with me about the peak-running thing?”

“*You mean when you disappeared for a full moon to explore the valley of the humans without telling anyone, and the whole sett panicked?*”

“Hey, it’s hardly my fault this place is so boring.”

Snowdrift chortled. “*You don’t need to explain yourself to me – follow your bliss, I always say.*”

“But you’re coming to my performance, right?”

“*As long as you want me there,*” said Snowdrift. “*Now how about a game of yettiwinks before nesting? Got to keep my eye in – I’m still the best in the sett.*”

“You’ve passed on, remember,” Tadpole chuckled.

“*That’s no excuse.*”



Back in the family den, Tadpole brought out the lichen mat, a clay pot, her squidger piece and a handful of little coloured discs, setting them up on the slab. She got herself a cup of gorse juice, and soon she and Snowdrift were pressing down with their squidgers, making the little winks click and jump in the air, trying to get them to land in the empty pot. It was Grandfather and Grandfluff playing together again, thought Tadpole, the way it had so often been during her fledgling years.

“*Blast!*” hissed Snowdrift as one of his winks flew off the bench and disappeared into thin air. He covered his mouth.

Tadpole was puzzled. “Blast?”

“*It’s what you say if you’re cross about something.*”

Snowdrift dropped his voice to a whisper. “*It’s a Hazel word.*”

“A Hazel word.”

Hazel. Human Hazel. Grandfather’s dear friend. That

was how he put it. *Dear friend*. For a Greybeard to even think of a human in that way was unheard of.

Though humans had once been their cousins, now yeti avoided them at all costs. So much so that the Greybeards even had a way to scare them off the ranges: Murmuring.

Tadpole knew how to Murmur – every Greybeard did. It was just part of who you were, like a cat purring or the bellow of a reindeer. A Murmur began with a vibration, deep in your chest, which started low, rising higher and higher, up through your jaw, making your teeth hum, and then out through your nostrils as a buzz. Not a loud, cheerful buzz like that of a bee, but a soft, almost imperceptible drone, mournful and troubling. Humans couldn't even hear it – but they could certainly feel it. And, when humans felt a Murmur, they ran, as if their very lives were at stake, often with a strangled cry caught in their throats – or so Tadpole had heard. She'd never Murmured (properly, that is, at humans). It was only ever meant to be used when all else failed and your back was against the rock.

Yes, humans and Greybeards did not mix. And to go anywhere near a human dwelling and meet one the way Snowdrift had done? You'd be banished from the sett before your hairy feet had a chance to touch the ground – your name wiped from memory.

But that didn't stop a Greybeard like Snowdrift.

Tadpole knew the story well. How Grandfather had tripped and tumbled down the hill and into Hazel's life all those cycles ago. How their paths had literally collided. It was the start of an unusual bond that lasted a lifetime. Yet sitting Tadpole in the family den, Snowdrift had often spoken of the times he visited Hazel's dwelling in secret – of their companionship. How he made a grave for her when she passed away and laid her to rest. From time to time, Grandfather even taught Tadpole the little human tongue he knew.

Hazel had been Grandfather's secret. But Snowdrift shared it with her so that Tadpole would understand that humans could be decent folk too. Tadpole sometimes wished he'd never told her at all. It would have been easier to grow up suspicious of people, like every other Greybeard. But instead she had to keep it hidden inside. And now, with Grandfather gone, she was on her own.

Tadpole pushed down on one of her winks and watched it miss the pot completely.

“Blast,” she said under her breath.

“That can't be much fun by yourself.” Dad came from the bedroom and nodded at the empty seat opposite her. “I could give you a round or two?”

Tadpole pressed down and shot a second wink straight into the pot. “You're going down, Dad.”



Henry Wetwood stared through his dorm-room window at the dark mountains looming over Halbrook Hall. Strands of cloud stole down from the ranges and drifted through the forest. In the fading light, the walls of his new boarding school looked stained and grim, dotted with weathered crests, and rising to battlements like a castle. In the grounds was an equally gloomy cottage, with a sign that read **HEAD STER'S ESID NCE**. Halbrook Hall looked nothing like the sunny pictures on the website. Just where had he come to?

It had only been a couple of hours since Mum and Dad dropped him off, but already it seemed like a lifetime, and the gnawing ache in Henry's chest threatened to grow into full-blown misery. Apart from a two-day school camp last year, he'd hardly ever been away from home on his own before.

Henry busied himself making his bed, hastily covering the threadbare mattress that was slumped across the wooden frame. He unpacked the last of the books he'd managed to squeeze into his suitcase, and arranged his boxes of Vault and Serpent cards on the shelf by his bed.

Seeing the cards made him think of sitting round a table with David and Li, his best mates from his old school, deep in a game. They hadn't taken it very well when he'd told them that he was going.

"Mountains? Boarding school? Boys only ... no girls? You're kidding!" Li said. "What about Wi-Fi? Do they even have that?"

"Of course they have Wi-Fi," Henry snorted, although he didn't know for certain.

"Why are you even going?" asked David.

"I told you, Mum and Dad will be in Hungary."

"Then they should just eat," David chuckled. His smile faded when he saw the pained look on Li and Henry's faces.

"Never tell that joke again," said Li.

"Fair enough," said David.

Henry told them all about Béla Karman, a famous Hungarian author, and his first new book in thirty years – and how he'd chosen the Wetwoods to publish it. "Dad says it's a masterpiece, a bestseller. It's going to save our publishing business."

“I still don’t understand where boarding school comes in,” said David.

“Well, this Karman guy’s a genius, but a bit eccentric – he wants Mum and Dad to stay out there with him in his farmhouse in the middle of nowhere in Hungary – but just Mum and Dad. He won’t have it any other way,” explained Henry. “They have to go there for six months.”

“And so you’re off to boarding school,” said Li.

Henry sighed. “Dad reckons it’ll be good for me – he went to boarding school at my age.”

“Maybe you could come and stay with me instead,” said David.

Henry pictured David’s small room, crammed with untidy bunks, three brothers sharing. “They already enrolled me – thanks anyway.”

“But you’re our Vault Master,” Li complained. She gestured at the neat rows of cards spread out on the table.

“It won’t be forever. We’ll just have to put the campaign on hold. Maybe we can play online?” Henry laid down a card. “Tollbridge Ogre ready to attack! How do you answer, Warlock Jones?”

“Interesting.” David examined the cards in his hand and chose one with a wand on it. “I cast a vanishing spell.” He picked up the dice and rolled.

“Twenty!” Henry turned his ogre face down. “Ogre defeated.”

“Nice try,” said David.

“And what about our eco club at school?” asked Li. “Elf Queen Li observes the battlefield.” She rolled a six.

“I’ll be back to help soon, I promise.” Henry looked at the campaign table and thought for a moment. “Queen Li, you see a path into the woods, but you are not sure where it leads.”

“But Queen Li uses her map,” Li declared, playing a card with a picture of a map on it. “She advances into the woods.”

“Nice,” said David.

Li shook her head. “Boarding school, really? It sounds so Harry Potter.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Henry.



With the clanging of an old hand bell, Henry’s roommate, Murray, came back to their room to get him for dinner. Swamped by a blazer many sizes too big, his shirt collar dwarfing a thin neck, Murray seemed just as nervous as Henry for someone who wasn’t even a new boy.

“What are all those?” asked Murray, pointing at the boxes.

“Vault and Serpent.” Henry showed his best wizard card.

Murray shrugged. “Never played it. What do you have to do?”

Henry shuffled through his pack, telling Murray about adventurers and friendship and noble quests. Of crossing paths with wonderful beasts and thwarting villains. He showed Murray the game board and notebooks. “I can teach you how to play later, if you like?”

“Great. It’s been ages since I played a board game. Got a few at home, but Dad can’t be bothered with games.”

“My dad tried to join a campaign with me and my mates once. But he was hopeless,” said Henry.

“At least he tried, right?” said Murray. “Come on or we’ll be late.”



The dining hall was a huge old room filled with shadows. Lights hung from the lofty ceiling, but half of them didn’t seem to be working. The room was full of loud talk and the clank and scrape of cutlery on metal dinner trays, but at least the food looked edible – some sort of stew with potatoes, and sponge cake swimming in custard.

Once they’d jostled their way to the front of the queue and thanked the cooks as they slopped out the food, Henry trailed behind Murray to the end of a long table. From there, they could see out over the sports fields to the woods beyond.

Henry was relieved that his arrival barely attracted any attention at all. He was quite happy to be invisible – he didn’t

feel much like talking. Mrs Nettles, the house parent – a broad-shouldered woman in a tweed jacket – sat at her own small table. She gave him a quick smile and that was that.

Henry realized that he was starving and started hastily tucking in. As he was finishing, most of the boys were already back in the queue for more.

“You need to be quick around here if you want seconds,” said the boy sitting opposite. “I’m Stuart, but everyone calls me Bony.”

“Henry.” He offered his hand. Bony reached over and shook it.

“New, eh?”

Henry wiped Bony’s gravy off his fingers and nodded.

“I was new once.” Bony scraped the last of the custard from his tray and eyed the servery, but the cooks were already packing the pots away.

Henry glanced round the dining hall. At the far end of the room sat a group of older boys, leaning back in their chairs.

“Senior prefects,” said Murray, following his gaze.

Henry watched as one of the boys in the middle of the group, his hair towering in an oily quiff, beckoned towards the neighbouring table and pointed at his tray. Moments later, a team of younger boys started to clear the prefects’ table, taking the trays, scraping the leftover food into the bin, and stacking them by the kitchen door.

Henry pushed his tray away and pulled out his phone, resting it on his lap, hoping to see a message from Mum and Dad, but he couldn't get a signal.

"Put that away," hissed Murray. "I can give you the Wi-Fi password back in our room."

Henry shoved the phone back in his pocket, but at the same time felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see the prefect with the quiff standing over him. "No mobiles in the dining hall."

"He didn't know," said Murray. "He's new."

"I can see that." The boy pinched the fabric of Henry's blazer. "What's your name?"

"Henry Wetwood." Henry tried to keep the warble out of his voice.

"In with you, is he, Murray Mint?" The boy turned to Murray. "Didn't you tell him that a phone in the dining hall is instant confiscation and detention?"

Henry gulped. "It won't happen again."

The boy paused, running a hand through his hair. "Well, seeing as it's your first day..." he said at last.

"Thanks," said Henry.

"But you owe me," said the boy.

"That's Fraser Ragbone, the head boy," Murray said, as soon as the prefect had left.

"I'm glad I don't owe him a favour," said Bony.

"Shush, Bony," said Murray.





Back in his room after evening prep Murray rummaged around in his desk drawer and gave a piece of printed paper to Henry. “Here’s that Wi-Fi password.”

“Thanks.” Henry pulled out his phone and tapped in the code. His heart lifted to see a notification.

Writing this on the train back to London. Hope you’re settling in all right and your room-mate is nice. (Dad says he had three room-mates squeezed into one room his first year!) I wish we could have stayed a bit longer to see you settled – it all felt so rushed. But you’ll like boarding school, Dad and I are sure of it. The months will fly by, you’ll see.

Anyway, our flight is tomorrow – excited about meeting Karman and working on the book. Chat when we can. Miss you.

Love Mum and Dad xxx

Henry started writing back. At first, he tapped out everything that was going on in his head – how lonely he felt, how awful Halbrook was, his smelly mattress, the prefects. Couldn’t they turn round and come and get him? But then he imagined their faces when they read all that and deleted the message. He started again, but a clanging

bell interrupted him, accompanied by a bellow of, “Lights out!” Henry quickly typed a simple:

I’m doing OK. Miss you. Love you too.

Not long after, their door swung open. Henry recognized one of the boys from the prefects’ table, a tablet in his hand.

“Mint?”

“Here,” said Murray.

“Wettie?” asked the boy, tapping the screen.

It took Henry a moment to realize the boy meant him.

“Here,” he whispered.

“Lights out in ten.”

“That’s Fletcher. He and Fraser are like this,” explained Murray, gesturing with two fingers close together once the prefect had moved on.

Henry climbed into his bed and curled up in a ball, staring at the hole in the plaster that looked like a map of France. His sheets felt stiff and unfamiliar. Underneath he could smell his mattress, like a damp dog.

Later, as he lay in the gloom, trying to escape into sleep, Henry felt a strange rumble coming from below. The windows rattled and his bed trembled. He sat up, heart thudding. Then, as quickly as it had started, it was over.

“Did you feel that?” Henry whispered. But the snores coming from Murray’s bed told him his room-mate hadn’t. Henry shut his eyes and wished he was at home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inspired by his own family and by his time as a primary school teacher, Paul Mason likes to write stories that get young readers turning pages. His published work crosses a range of genres, and includes *The Twins*, *the Ghost and the Castle* and the *Skate Monkey* series.



He lives on an island in Aotearoa New Zealand, and can be found with a little book and a fountain pen in his hands, catching ideas before they disappear.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



Katy Riddell grew up in Brighton and was obsessed with drawing from a young age, thanks to growing up in a house of artists, including award-winning illustrator Chris Riddell. Since graduating with a BA Hons in Illustration and Animation from Manchester Metropolitan University, Katy has worked on a variety of commissions including *Pongwiffy* by Kaye Umansky and *Midnight Feasting* by A.F. Harrold.