

KEITH GRAY

The List



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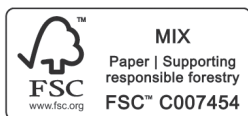
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For Lucy

*(and there's a long list
of reasons why ...)*

5 DAYS TO GO

CHAPTER 1

We had less than a week of the summer holidays left. Me and Denny were sitting on his bedroom floor staring at the empty cardboard box in between us. Denny rubbed his eyes with the back of his fists.

“It’s hay fever that’s making my eyes itch,” Denny lied. I could tell he was trying not to cry. His deep brown eyes were as shiny as snooker balls.

August was almost over. Denny’s bedroom window was wide open, letting in the last of the summer’s warmth. He leaned back against the wall, hugged his legs to his chest and buried his face between his knees. He sniffed hard but still left a damp trail of snot on one knee of his jeans.

Denny had always been shorter and skinnier than me but his unhappiness seemed to shrink him even more today. It curled him up tight.

Earlier that morning, Denny's mum had told him he needed to start packing. There was a stack of flat cardboard boxes in the middle of the carpet between us. They all needed to be made up but in the past hour Denny had only put together one box. There were at least another twelve boxes in the stack.

Denny and his mum were moving away on Sunday. In five days' time my best friend would be going to live miles away in a place I'd never even heard of.

I knew Denny had been putting off thinking about moving. I knew I'd been pretending it wasn't going to happen too.

We stared at the empty box but didn't talk. Sitting in silence began to feel too awkward, so I stood up and started to move about.

The bedroom walls were covered in Denny's drawings. It must have cost him a fortune in Blu-Tack to stick them all up. Most of the pictures were stuff he'd copied from comics but he was also getting good at drawing stuff from around

the village too. He'd even drawn himself sitting on a horse called Burdock from a few years ago.

"It's going to take ages to pack all your drawings," I said.

Denny just shrugged.

I looked at the delicate dead wasps' nest on the bookshelf and wondered how Denny was going to box it up without crushing it. He had a collection of amazing and colourful shells on his windowsill. And a Venus flytrap he called "Dave". In the corner on the floor were two towering piles of read and re-read comics. I couldn't help worrying that some of Denny's favourite things might get damaged in the move.

I looked out of the open bedroom window and over Denny's back garden to the golf course beyond. Denny's house was on a small lane right at the edge of the village and the houses here backed onto Pensing Hill Golf Course. Our parents weren't members of the local golf club, so the course was strictly out of bounds to us. We sometimes found stray golf balls in his garden and always kept them. Finders keepers. I preferred the coloured balls to the boring white ones.

I could see golfers strolling across the sunny green grass in the distance. Denny said he hated golf, so I supposed I did too.

I heard Denny groan. "I can't be arsed with this," he grunted. He lashed out with his foot and kicked the stack of flat boxes, spilling them across the floor. "Come on," he told me, jumping up.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Denny stamped down on the one box he'd made, smashing it flat again. "Let's just go," he said.

I followed Denny downstairs, happy to get out of his bedroom. I normally felt as comfortable in his room as I did in my own. But in five days' time it would suddenly become somebody else's room. A total stranger would fill it with all their favourite things, and that was such a weird thought. Weird and a little bit scary.

Denny slammed the front door behind us as we left the house. He kicked open his garden gate, banging it back on its squeaky metal hinges. He kicked the gate closed again, making it shudder and clang. In the quiet lane, all that noise felt shocking.

We walked side by side along the pavement. Denny and Jake. Jake and Denny. It had been that way for as long as we could remember. We were different but kind of the same. I was taller and Denny was skinnier with longer, messier and darker hair. But our T-shirts, jeans and trainers almost matched – except that morning I didn't have dried snot on one knee.

Denny pointed at his next-door neighbours' neat and tidy house. "I bet they don't care I'm leaving," he said. Then he pointed at the house with the big tree in the garden on the other side of the lane. "I reckon they're going to have a party to celebrate when I go."

He strode out into the middle of the road, pointing at another house, and another, and another. "And them. And them. And them," he said. "I bet you no one cares."

I hoped he knew that I cared. School started again next week and I was struggling to get my head around the idea that I'd be going into Year 9 alone.

"It's not fair," Denny groaned.

"What's not fair?" I asked. "That the people who live here don't care about you leaving?"

“Stuff them,” Denny shouted. He waved his hands in the air with his middle fingers pointing at the sky. “I don’t care about any of them.”

“So it’s not fair that you’ve got to move?” I asked.

“It’s not fair that I’ve got to move *now*,” he said. “I’m not ready.”

“Because you’ve not packed yet?” I asked.

“I’m not ready because there’s still loads I want to do,” he replied.

I was confused. “Like what?”

Denny surprised me by spinning round on the spot and stomping off back the way we’d come. I had to run to catch up as he banged and clanged through his garden gate again. He went round the side of his house past the garage. I asked him what he was doing but he didn’t answer.

The back garden was a messy, colourful jungle because Denny’s mum loved flowers but never had much time for mowing or pruning or whatever. She worked two jobs, so it wasn’t surprising. She loved her roses most of all and used manure from the local farmer to feed them.

On hot days like today you could sometimes catch a faint whiff of it.

The wooden fence at the bottom of the garden was tall but wobbly. Pensing Hill Golf Course was on the other side. Denny's mum must have told us a thousand times that we were totally, absolutely, one hundred per cent forbidden from ever climbing over.

So I was pretty shocked when Denny stood in between his mum's sprawling roses and jumped up to grab the top of the wobbly fence. He huffed and puffed as he pulled himself higher and scrambled his feet against the wood. He got his belly over the top, then sort of flopped, sort of fell down the other side.

"Denny?" I called. "Your mum will kill you if she finds out what you're doing."

Denny just shouted, "You coming or what?"