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Opening extract from

Writing in the Sand

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1

It would be easier if I didn't have to pretend all the time. I can only imagine what it must be like, not worrying about saying the wrong thing. Not having to tell half-truths.

I don't need to pretend to be *happy*. I *am* happy most of the time. I've got my mum, Kirsty's a brilliant friend, school's pretty good, we live by the sea. What's not to be happy about?

What I'd love most, though, would be to feel normal more often. Like now.

Revising GCSE Geography might sound boring. But to me, sitting in Kirsty's bedroom sharing her laptop, it's a good feeling. It's what I think of as normal – and I take a moment to let it wash over me.

Kirsty's fingers move over the keys and the screen fills with diagrams, then explanations on cyclones. But I've stopped concentrating. Screwing my eyes up, the flat yellow and blue in the diagram on screen turns into warm sand and blue sea, and though I ought not to – and only

for a moment – I let myself run along a beach in Australia with Liam.

Kirsty says, "Here, this could be important—" She breaks off. "You're not even listening, are you?"

"Sorry." Then I say, "It's Liam's birthday."

She pushes the laptop away. "Today? I didn't realize."

I sigh. "No reason why you should."

"Does it still hurt?"

"Not like it did."

Kirsty's fingers hover over the keys, and though I can't honestly think why he'd email on his birthday, I say, "D'you mind?"

"Mind what?"

"Seeing if there's anything for me."

"Sure." The diagrams disappear and she brings up my webmail, keying in my password as if it's her own. We stare at the empty inbox, and she says gently, "Shall we call it a day?"

I push back my chair and stretch. "Okay."

I'm following her downstairs when she says, "You didn't send him a card, did you?"

I shrug. "I thought about it. But we made a clean break, so…" I jump down the last two stairs. "You know what it's like."

She gives a short laugh. "I do." She gives me a quick hug. "It'll get better, Amy. Honestly."

The house is unusually quiet, with no sign of Kirsty's

parents. I glance towards the kitchen. "I thought your mum and dad would be back by now."

"They're duvet-hunting."

I laugh, and she says, "Plus other stuff – in the sales. New kids arriving tomorrow."

I often wonder how it is for Kirsty, with her mum's foster kids needing such a lot of attention. Sometimes it's like the house is bulging at the seams. A complete contrast to my situation. Just me and Mum.

"How many kids?"

She looks mock-guilty. "I forgot to ask."

I make for the front door. "Oh well, you'll soon find out."

She puts her head on one side. "Can't you stop for coffee?"

"Better not, I left a pile of washing-up. Mum'll wonder where I am."

"She *knows* where you are."

"Yeah, but still…I'd better go." I pull open the door. "Thanks again. Don't know what I'd do without you."

She grins. "Any time."

2

"Amy?" At Mum's voice – sleepy, from her chair – I'm back in the real world. The frying pan slips from my hand into the water, which is scummy and going cold.

Washing-up (whether it's lunch dishes or messy bits and pieces left over from last night's tea) is a good time for sorting my head out. Or trying to. This afternoon I'm not doing too well. My mind wanders – again – thinking about Liam and the party he's probably having on a beach somewhere. He'll have made friends in Australia. Girls from school, evenly tanned all over. I never met his mum, but obviously she'd be there. For a few moments I'm there too; I'm slim and wearing a green strappy dress (like the one in a shop window he'd said would look good on me). It's early evening. The sun's still beautifully warm and the surf is rolling in. I run down to the sea and pretend I'm surprised when he catches me up and puts his arms round me.

Mum says, "Did you hear something?" and the dream disappears.

I listen. Yes, I can hear it. A whooshing sound coming through the gap at the bottom of the back door, the gap where we stuff newspapers in winter to keep out the draught.

I look across at Mum. Her hair, dark like mine but straight, is tied back with a black ribbon. She has brown eyes and skin people envy – they say it's like porcelain. The time I told her this once, she said she didn't fancy being compared to a teapot. Teapot, cup or saucer, she has to accept the fact: she's beautiful.

Beautiful but frail. More than anything, I wish for her to get better.

She's been dozing, waiting for the painkillers to work their magic. We hear the whooshing noise again. I wring out the dishcloth and stand still, listening hard. Now though, the only sound is rain splashing off the gutter.

Then there it is again, a definite snuffling. We both look towards the back door. Mum's face lights up. "If you ask me, that's a dog."

"Shall I have a look?"

She eases her position in the chair. "Go on then."

I open the back door, and it flies in – a tornado on legs. Quite long legs. It's shaggy and wet.

It shakes its head. Droplets hit Mum in the face and she laughs – something I wish she did more often.

Perhaps it's lost. Mum and me, we must be wondering the same thing, because with difficulty, she leans forward. "Has it got a collar?"

When I say, "Come here," it looks at me like we've known each other all our lives. It sits down for a second, head cocked to one side, then stands up again and pads over to where I'm waiting. I feel its neck. No collar.

"I wonder if it's a stray," says Mum. "It's not much to look at."

She's right. It's fairly ordinary. Shaggy mid-brown fur. A bare patch on its rough tail. Long claws that go *click-click* on the lino.

But its eyes… They're a deep luminous gold.

When Mum puts out a hand, it rubs the side of its face against her fingers. She scratches behind its ear and you can see how happy it is.

I stroke the dome of its head. "What d'you think it is? Boy or girl?"

Mum says, "Have a look."

As soon as I kneel down, it rolls over. I take a quick peek. "It's a boy." My mind rushes ahead. I've already decided he's a dog nobody wants, and wonder if we can keep him. Not that it would be exactly practical. With Mum the way she is.

She's frowning. "I wonder who he belongs to."

"Whoever it is, they've managed to lose him."

"We ought to notify the police," says Mum.

When I need to, I can think at the speed of light. Now is one of those times. "I've got a better idea. Why don't we put a card in the post office window?"

"Saying what exactly?"

"Something simple, like: *Found. Brown Dog. Please enquire inside.*"

My reasoning is that if we stick up a card, there won't be too many folk finding out about him. But if the police are notified, he could go on a database.

Mum makes sure she fondles both his ears equally. "That's not a bad idea." She leans back, and the dog leans forward. He's making sure Mum can still get at his ears. She frowns, "He's not what you'd call small. He must cost a bit to feed."

I don't mean to say it out loud. "We'd find a way."

"Amy – he seems really sweet, but don't get too keen; we're not in a position to—" She breaks off as the phone rings. Irrationally, I panic that someone's already noticed their dog's gone missing and have psychically spotted that it's turned up at our house. I pick up the phone. "Hello?"

Mum watches me. I listen to the caller. I'm nodding. Mum looks worried. Although of course the call isn't about the dog, I make a face at her. Then I say into the phone, "No, it's half-term – I go back Monday." The caller asks if she can visit. I can't tell her no, so I say, "Yes, okay," and she tells me what time she'll be here tomorrow. She has a jolly voice: "I'll expect to see the kettle on!" We say goodbye, and I put the phone down.

Mum strokes the dog's head. "The Social?"

"The new person. Mrs Wickham – eleven tomorrow."

Mum sighs. "Sorry, love, it's going to mean a tidy-up."

Don't I know it. It means starting upstairs and working down. It means I'll have to make it look like caring for Mum is a walk in the park. It means she'll have to try her hardest to look less disabled than she is. It means we'll have to convince this Mrs Wickham that we manage perfectly well. No way can we let her think it looks like Mum ought to be in residential care. No way can it look like I can't cope.

I think of everything I'll have to do, and wish I had more energy. I wish I didn't keep getting the sudden stomach cramps I've had yesterday and today. Which I wouldn't dream of worrying Mum about.

My spirits lift at a sudden thought. A dog in the house… This could be a definite advantage. Maybe it would make us look less like "those poor things on Dune Terrace" and more like a family. Which wouldn't be a problem if my sister still lived at home. Lisa, she's called. She lives in town with her boyfriend. Or he lives with her. I don't know which way round, because I'm not sure who pays the rent for their latest flat. Occasionally she turns up, making out she wants to see how Mum's getting on, though usually it's actually because she wants something. A bit of a waste of time, because there's never much to want round here.

I can't say I'm bothered whether she comes or not, except for Mum's sake. But I wish it wasn't like this. She's the only sister I've got.

I touch the bare patch on the dog's tail. He doesn't mind.

If you're in a family, you need a name. Looking at him, I try the question out in my head. Then I say aloud, "What shall we call him?"

Mum says, "You choose."

I stroke his brownish fur. "Toffee?"

"That's good," says Mum. "I really like that." She looks into his eyes. "Toffee?" she says, and he wags his tail like mad – his way of smiling. If he *could* smile, he'd be grinning all over his face.

3

I started cleaning last night. I dusted and wiped and vacced until I was ready to drop. I didn't get it all done, and in the end I *did* drop – into bed. But not before I looked in on Mum. Visits from the Social get her worked up, and I crossed my fingers she'd sleep through. Asleep – her dark hair spread out like a fan – she's so lovely.

Toffee was asleep too, lying beside her bed. I'd tried organizing a makeshift basket for him in the kitchen, but he knew where he wanted to be. With Mum. I'll swear she got upstairs more easily with him behind her.

Early evening I'd taken him out. I'd made a collar and lead from one of the belts I used to wear before what Mum calls my puppy-fat stage (which, annoyingly, I seem to be a bit slow in shaking off). Toffee, on the other hand, doesn't have any spare fat, puppy or otherwise. Once he'd got over rolling around in the soft sand of the dunes, he was quite a good boy, which made me wonder how old he is. But I suppose it doesn't matter. All I know is he loved every minute.

*

I'm up at the crack of dawn this morning, and Toffee's eyeing the back door. He already knows my belt's hanging on the hook with our other outdoor things. I take him down to the beach. It's not cold out, just fresh – and he races along like he'll never stop. I wonder where he's from, where he was born – and if our Northumberland stretches of sand are what he's used to. Or has he never been here before?

We can't spend too long because of the threatened visit by the Social. When I yell "Toffee!" I think at first my voice has been lost in the wind. But he hears me and it makes me laugh, seeing him whirl round and hurtle back towards me.

Dog food. It's at the back of my mind all the time, that we're going to have to budget for it. Why does money have to be such a worry?

Back home, I feed him a bowl of cornflakes, moistened with a splash of milk. Not as much as he might like, but I've got to watch that last half-pint – what with Mrs Wickham wanting the kettle on.

I fill a white enamel pie-dish with water, and walk round the kitchen – which isn't much of a hike – looking for a natural place for it. Toffee turns in tight circles, waiting for me to put it down. Then he parks himself firmly beside the washing machine – he's obviously

decided where he'd like it. This is a bit of luck because it covers a missing lino tile – going a little way further to making it look like we're managing nicely, thank you.

I pop upstairs. Mum's in her room, doing her hair. I make sure I sound happy and relaxed. But when I say "Need any help?" her eyes fill up.

"Mum, don't *worry*. Mrs Wickham sounds okay. Very nice. Quite upbeat, really friendly."

"It's not that."

"What is it then?"

Worry lines spoil her face. "I don't know… It's just… Sometimes it all comes over me."

"What does?"

"Everything – you doing so much for me, when you ought to be concentrating on school."

"Mum, me helping at home is what keeps us together."

"Amy love, you do so much more than that. Look at you – you *run* our home. It makes me feel so damned inadequate."

"Well it shouldn't, it's not—"

I was going to say it's not her fault, but she butts in. "You're the one with your life ahead of you. You're the one who matters. Look at me, I'm bloody useless – just a washed-up, middle-aged—"

"Stop it, Mum. I hate you talking like this."

"You'd be better off without me."

I go cold. "Don't you go saying stuff like this in front of

Mrs Wickham." I take a breath. "Mum, listen. We manage fine. I'm happy. You're happy – most of the time. I don't have problems at school."

"I know. It's just…" She trails off.

"Just what?"

"Your last report was so good – I can't bear the thought of holding you back."

"Don't be daft." I put on my bossy voice: "Now shut up, and let me tie your ribbon."

Afterwards I go downstairs, her words running round in my head. I wish she didn't feel this unnecessary guilt. I hope she's not getting mad ideas about what's best for *me*. Tough love and all that rubbish. If only she could accept that I need her as much as she needs me.

For a second I wish Lisa would walk through the door. So I could shake her. Till she rattled. Shake some sense into her, make her see she should be here, backing me up. Trouble is, she acts so thick I'd probably be wasting my energy. I don't think she's got a clue what it must be like for Mum, always hoping Lisa will come home. Or maybe Mum thinks Lisa had a right to walk out and lead her own life. What if she believes I should do the same thing?

I get the niggling doubt I've had before. What if I've got it wrong? What if Mum *would* be better off without me? Would she get better medical treatment in a care home?

I get a cloth from under the sink and polish the draining board until my wrist aches.

*

Hearing Mum start to come downstairs a while later, I hurry into our tiny hallway to make sure she's managing. She is, but all the same I wait at the bottom to see she makes it into the kitchen okay.

When there's finally a knock at the front door, Mum – dressed in jeans and a green shirt, is sat at the kitchen table with three mugs on a tray-cloth embroidered by her gran in front of her. The blusher on her cheeks stands out like two boiled sweets, but she looks better than she did half an hour ago. On my way to the front door, I grab her sticks and shove them in the cubbyhole under the stairs. There's no need to advertise her walking difficulties.

I open the door to a dumpy woman with grey hair so short it's almost stubble. Perhaps she knows it's a mistake, and bought the dangly earrings to make up for it. "Hello there," she says, "I'm Mrs Wickham. You must be Amy." She seems nice, and I swallow my silly impulse to say, *Sorry, Amy emigrated to Australia*. Instead I ask her to come through. This takes about three steps before doing a little dance to decide who's going into the kitchen first. In the end, she edges in front of me.

I say, "We could have gone in the front room, but the—"

"Oh no," she says, "I much prefer the kitchen, it's the heart of the home."

Mum makes a little movement like she's going to stand

up, but I give her The Big Stare that says, *Don't you dare move, you might fall*. I ask Mrs Wickham if she'd like a cup of tea.

"Actually," she says, "I could murder a coffee."

My mind goes into Grand Prix mode. Coffee. Have we got any? I open a cupboard, at the same time standing well in front of it. I don't want Mrs Wickham clocking what we have or haven't got. I spot a jar of something instant. And old. I get it out. There's about a teaspoonful of coffee sticking to the bottom. I wave the jar. "Coming up!" I tell her. Then, "Tea for you, Mum?"

Mum gets the message. "Great – thanks, love."

Switching on the kettle, I murmur, "Me too, I'll have tea."

Up until this moment Toffee hasn't moved from his place beside the washing machine. Then suddenly, like he's sat around long enough, he makes for Mrs Wickham's left foot in its sensible beige sandal. Too late for me to stop him, he makes a grab at her puffy ankle and does that thing you really wish dogs wouldn't do.

She tries pushing him off, but he's hanging onto her like a dead weight. "Get *off*!" she says.

Mum says, "Do something, Amy."

"Yes, do something, Amy," says Mrs Wickham.

"*Bad dog!*" I say and, putting my arms round his middle, I pull as hard as I can. For a horrible moment I think I'm going to end up dragging Mrs Wickham off her chair.

But Toffee sees sense, turns round in a flash and licks my nose.

Mrs Wickham checks to see her foot's still attached to her leg. "I'm more of a cat person," she says.

Mum says, "So sorry about that. Not much of an introduction."

"I'm thankful I'm not the postman," says Mrs Wickham.

I take Toffee out the back, and leave him cocking his leg against the drainpipe.

Mrs Wickham opens her briefcase and gets out a file. About us. Turning over a page, she smiles. "Alison Mitchell says lots of nice things about you." She takes a sip of coffee. "By the way, she's had the baby – a little girl." She laughs. "Now she'll find out what it's all about!"

Mum had liked Mrs Mitchell. "Give her my congratulations," she says. "What's the baby called?"

Mrs Wickham wrinkles her forehead. "Gosh, somebody did tell me… No – it's slipped my mind."

"Ah well," says Mum, "so long as they're both doing well."

"I'm sure they are," she says, but I can tell she's a lot more interested in Mum than in Mrs Mitchell. "Now then," she says, tilting her head to one side so one long earring nearly touches her shoulder, "how are we getting along?"

"Good," I say. "Brilliant."

Mrs Wickham looks at Mum. "And *you*, Mrs Preston, you're—"

I butt in because I'm still worried Mum's not going to play it the way we usually do: the way we put someone off when they try to find out what life is really like for us. I treat Mrs Wickham to my carefree smile. "Mum's doing great," I say, "really great. Don't you think she's looking well?"

When Mum says, "I certainly *feel* well," I have to hide my relief. "All my pills," she says, "are doing a good job—"

Mrs Wickham interrupts. "There are that many?"

"Well, not really," says Mum. "I suppose I'm mainly referring to the celecoxib."

Mrs Wickham makes a note. "That's for your arthritis?"

Mum says that's right, and loses her deformed fingers in her lap.

"Have you noticed an improvement?" asks Mrs Wickham.

"Oh, definitely." At this rate Mum should be getting an Oscar. Even I begin to believe her, until I remember the look in her eyes when she needs her painkillers. And the relief when they kick in.

When Mrs Wickham asks how she copes while I'm at school, Mum is amazing. I'm almost reeling at the way she gives a convincing rundown of how she keeps on top of things.

I say, "I come home at lunchtime."

Mrs Wickham says, "Would you like to stay for school lunch?"

"Why would I want to do that? I'm only five minutes away."

She says, "I was only thinking, you must be quite stretched with your GCSEs."

So she's worked that out.

Mum includes me in her smile. "There's not long to go now."

Mrs Wickham makes another note, and I wonder if it's because I sounded less than polite. I can't think what the big deal is about me and school meals. You'd think I was about ten.

We – Mum and me – have wondered about asking for help. But we're not risking it. No way. With both of us happy enough, there's no point in stirring things up – perhaps even giving the Social the wrong idea. All right, we *could* get some very nice woman popping in to help, but there's no guarantee they wouldn't send a nosy parker. I'm not saying intentionally – but if someone caught Mum on a bad day it might be a job convincing them that things are okay. Most of the time our arrangements work out fine.

But there were times – times I was going out with Liam – when I was torn in two, thinking I ought to be at home with Mum.

Mrs Wickham turns over another page of printed notes. "Let me see…" she says. "How is your other daughter?"

No one has any idea Lisa has moved out. Not even Kirsty. Which I hate. The thing is though, I'd have to ask

her not to say anything. It wouldn't be fair and she might worry about me. If she doesn't know, there's no risk she'll let something slip.

Mum responds to Mrs Wickham's enquiring look. "Lisa's fine," she says, "working hard."

"Good," says Mrs Wickham. "And what's her job?"

Mum hesitates.

Quickly I say, "She's in retail." Which is true: two weeks in Asda, six in Tesco, ten in Aldi. The last was a record. "She's learning as she goes."

Mrs Wickham closes her file and stands up. "Wise girl. There's no substitute for experience."

Mum gives a little smile. "That's what I hoped to do."

"Oh yes?" says Mrs Wickham.

"I did work for a while," says Mum. "Bottom rung of the ladder at M&S. Then I got married and had our Lisa." She pauses. "Next thing we knew, Amy came along. After a bit I wasn't so well…and this thing started."

I catch Mrs Wickham's quick glance at Mum's hands, at the "thing" that twists them out of shape. Does Mrs Wickham know what happened to Dad? I suppose it's in the notes somewhere, how he left when we were little. When Mum began to get ill.

When I show her out, she pats me on the shoulder. "Try to keep that dog under control."