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The Bone Clocks

Written by David Mitchell

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The Bone Clocks

David Mitchell

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For Noah

A Hot Spell

—

1984

30 June

I fling open my bedroom curtains, and there's the thirsty sky and the wide river full of ships and boats and stuff, but I'm already thinking of Vinny's chocolatey eyes, shampoo down Vinny's back, beads of sweat on Vinny's shoulders, and Vinny's sly laugh, and by now my heart's going mental and, God, I wish I was waking up at Vinny's place in Peacock Street and not in my own stupid bedroom. Last night, the words just said themselves, 'Christ, I really love you, Vin,' and Vinny puffed out a cloud of smoke and did this Prince Charles voice, 'One must say, one's frightfully partial to spending time with you too, Holly Sykes,' and I nearly weed myself laughing, though I was a bit narked he didn't say, 'I love you too,' back. If I'm honest. Still, boyfriends act goofy to hide stuff, any magazine'll tell you. Wish I could phone him right now. Wish they'd invent phones you can speak to anyone anywhere anytime on. He'll be riding his Norton to work in Rochester right now, in his leather jacket with LED ZEP spelt out in silver studs. Come September, when I turn sixteen, he'll take me out on his Norton.

Someone slams a cupboard door, below.

Mam. No one else'd dare slam a door like that.

Suppose she's found out? says a twisted voice.

No. We've been too careful, me and Vinny.

She's menopausal, is Mam. That'll be it.

Talking Heads' *Fear of Music* is on my record player, so I lower the stylus. Vinny bought me this LP, the second Saturday we met at Magic Bus Records. It's an amazing record. I like 'Heaven' and 'Memories Can't Wait' but there's not a weak track on it. Vinny's been to New York and actually saw Talking Heads, live. His mate Dan was on security and got Vinny backstage after the gig, and he hung out with David Byrne and the band. If he goes back next year, he's taking me. I get dressed, finding each love bite and wishing I could go to Vinny's tonight, but he's meeting a bunch of mates

in Dover. Men hate it when women act jealous, so I pretend not to be. My best friend Stella's gone to London to hunt for second-hand clothes at Camden Market. Mam says I'm still too young to go to London without an adult so Stella took Ali Jessop instead. My biggest thrill today'll be hoovering the bar to earn my three pounds pocket money. Whoopy-doo. Then I've got next week's exams to revise for. But for two pins I'd hand in blank papers and tell school where to shove Pythagoras triangles and *Lord of the Flies* and their life cycles of worms. I might, too.

Yeah. I might just do that.

Down in the kitchen, the atmosphere's like Antarctica. 'Morning,' I say, but only Jacko looks up from the window-seat where he's drawing. Sharon's through in the lounge part, watching a cartoon. Dad's downstairs in the hallway, talking with the delivery guy – the truck from the brewery's grumbling away in front of the pub. Mam's chopping cooking apples into cubes, giving me the silent treatment. I'm supposed to say, 'What's wrong, Mam, what have I done?' but sod that for a game of soldiers. Obviously she noticed I was back late last night, but I'll let her raise the topic. I pour some milk over my Weetabix and take it to the table. Mam clangs the lid onto the pan and comes over. 'Right. What have you got to say for yourself?'

'Good morning to you too, Mam. Another hot day.'

'What have you got to *say* for yourself, young lady?'

If in doubt, act innocent. ''Bout what exactly?'

Her eyes go all snaky. 'What time did you get home?'

'Okay, okay, so I was a bit late, *sorry*.'

'Two hours isn't "a bit late". Where were you?'

I munch my Weetabix. 'Stella's. Lost track of time.'

'Well, that's peculiar, now, it really is. At ten o'clock *I* phoned Stella's mam to find out where the hell you were, and guess what? You'd left before eight. So who's the liar here, Holly? You or her?'

Shit. 'After leaving Stella's, I went for a walk.'

'And where did your walk take you to?'

I sharpen each word. 'Along the river, all right?'

'Upstream or downstream, was it, this little walk?'

I let a silence go by. 'What *diff*rence does it make?'

There're some cartoon explosions on the telly. Mam tells my sister, 'Turn that thing off and shut the door behind you, Sharon.'

'That's not fair! Holly's the one getting told off.'

'*Now*, Sharon. And you too, Jacko, I want—' But Jacko's already vanished. When Sharon's left, Mam takes up the attack again: 'All alone, were you, on your "walk"?'

Why this nasty feeling she's setting me up? 'Yeah.'

'How far d'you get on your "walk", then, all alone?'

'What – you want miles or kilometres?'

'Well, perhaps your little walk took you up Peacock Street, to a certain someone called Vincent Costello?' The kitchen sort of swirls, and through the window, on the Essex shore of the river, a tiny stick-man's lifting his bike off the ferry. 'Lost for words all of a sudden? Let me jog your memory: ten o'clock last night, closing the blinds, front window, wearing a T-shirt and not a lot else.'

Yes, I did go downstairs to get Vinny a lager. Yes, I did lower the blind in the front room. Yes, someone did walk by. Relax, I'd told myself. What's the chances of one stranger recognising me? Mam's expecting me to crumple, but I don't. 'You're wasted as a barmaid, Mam. You ought to be handling supergrasses for MI5.'

Mam gives me the Kath Sykes Filthy Glare. 'How old is he?'

Now I fold my arms. 'None of your business.'

Mam's eyes go slitty. 'Twenty-four, apparently.'

'If you already know, why're you asking?'

'Because a twenty-four-year-old man interfering with a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl is illegal. He could go to prison.'

'I'll be sixteen in September, and *I* reckon the Kent Police have bigger fish to fry. I'm old enough to make up my own mind about my relationships.'

Mam lights one of her Marlboro Reds. I'd kill for one. 'When I tell your father, he'll flay this Costello fella alive.'

Sure, Dad has to persuade piss-artists off the premises from time to time, all landlords do, but he's not the flaying-anyone-alive type.

'Brendan was fifteen when he was going out with Mandy Fry, and if you think they were just holding hands on the swings, they weren't. Don't recall him getting the "You could go to prison" treatment.'

She spells it out like I'm a moron: 'It's – different – for – *boys*.'

I do an I-do-not-believe-what-I'm-hearing snort.

'I'm telling you now, Holly, you'll be seeing this . . . car salesman again over my dead body.'

'*Ac*tually, Mam, I'll bloody see who I bloody well *want*!'

'New rules.' Mam stubs out her fag. 'I'm taking you to school and fetching you back *in the van*. You don't set foot outside unless it's with me, your father, Brendan or Ruth. If I *glimpse* this cradle-snatcher anywhere near here, I'll be on the blower to the police to press charges – yes, I *will*, so help me, God. And – *and* – I'll call his employer and let them know that he's seducing underage schoolgirls.'

Big fat seconds ooze by while all of this sinks in.

My tear ducts start twitching but there's no *way* I'm giving Mrs Hitler the pleasure. 'This isn't Saudi Arabia! You can't lock me up!'

'Live under our roof, you obey our rules. When *I* was your age—'

'Yeah yeah yeah, you had twenty brothers and thirty sisters and forty grandparents and fifty acres of spuds to dig 'cause that was how life was in Auld *feckin*' Oireland but this is England, Mam, *England*! And it's the 1980s and if life was so *feckin*' glorious in that West Cork *bog* why did you *feckin*' bother even coming to—'

Whack! Smack over the left side of my face.

We look at each other: me, trembling with shock, and Mam, angrier than I've ever seen her, and – I reckon – knowing she's just broken something that'll never be mended. I leave the room without a word, as if I've just won an argument.

I only cry a bit, and it's shocked crying, not boo-hoo crying, and when I'm done I go to the mirror. My eyes're a bit puffy, but a bit of eye-liner soon sorts that out . . . Dab of lippy, bit of blusher . . . Sorted. The girl in the mirror's a woman, with her cropped black hair, her *Quadrophenia* T-shirt, her black jeans. 'I've got news for

you,' she says. 'You're moving in with Vinny today.' I start listing the reasons why I can't, and stop. 'Yes,' I agree, giddy and calm at once. I'm leaving school, as well. As from now. The summer holidays'll be here before the truancy officer can fart, and I'm sixteen in September, and then it's stuff you, Windmill Hill Comprehensive. Do I dare?

I dare. Pack, then. Pack what? Whatever'll fit into my big duffel bag. Underwear, bras, T-shirts, my bomber jacket; make-up case and the Oxo tin with my bracelets and necklaces in. Toothbrush and a handful of tampons – my period's a bit late so it should start, like, any hour now. Money. I count up £13.85 saved in notes and coins. I've £80 more in my TSB bank book. It's not like Vinny'll charge me rent, and I'll look for a job next week. Babysitting, working in the market, waitressing: there's loads of ways to earn a few quid. What about my LPs? I can't lug the whole collection over to Peacock Street now, and Mam's quite capable of dumping them at the Oxfam shop out of spite, so I just take *Fear of Music*, wrapping it carefully in my bomber jacket and putting it into my bag so it won't get bent. I hide the others under the loose floorboard, just for now, but as I'm putting the carpet back, I get the fright of my life: Jacko's watching me from the doorway. He's still in his *Thunderbirds* pyjamas and slippers.

I tell him, 'Mister, you just gave me a heart-attack.'

'You're going.' Jacko's got this not-quite-here voice.

'Just between us, yes, I am. But not far, don't worry.'

'I've made you a souvenir, to remember me by.' Jacko hands me a circle of cardboard – a flattened Dairylea cheese box with a maze drawn on. He's mad about mazes, is Jacko: it's all these *Dungeons & Dragons*y books him and Sharon read. The one Jacko's drawn's actually dead simple by his standards, made of eight or nine circles inside each other. 'Take it,' he tells me. 'It's diabolical.'

'It doesn't look all that bad to me.'

'"Diabolical" means "satanic", sis.'

'Why's your maze so satanic, then?'

'The Dusk follows you as you go through it. If it touches you,

you cease to exist, so one wrong turn down a dead-end, that's the end of you. That's why you have to learn the labyrinth by heart.'

Christ, I don't half have a freaky little brother. 'Right. Well, thanks, Jacko. Look, I've got a few things to—'

Jacko holds my wrist. 'Learn this labyrinth, Holly. Indulge your freaky little brother. Please.'

That jolts me a bit. 'Mister, you're acting all weird.'

'Promise me you'll memorise the path through it, so if you ever needed to, you could navigate it in the darkness. *Please*.'

My friends' little brothers are all into Scalextric or BMX or Top Trumps – why do I get one who does this and says words like 'navigate' and 'diabolical'? Christ only knows how he'll survive in Gravesend if he's gay. I muss his hair. 'Okay, I promise to learn your maze off by heart.' Then Jacko hugs me, which is weird 'cause Jacko's not a huggy kid. 'Hey, I'm not going far . . . You'll understand when you're older, and—'

'You're moving in with your boyfriend.'

By now I shouldn't be surprised. 'Yeah.'

'Take care of yourself, Holly.'

'Vinny's nice. Once Mam's got used to the idea, we'll see each other – I mean, we still saw Brendan after he married Ruth, yeah?'

But Jacko just puts the cardboard lid with his maze on deep into my duffel bag, gives me one last look, and disappears.

Mam appears with a basket of bar-rugs on the first-floor landing, as if she wasn't lying in wait. 'I'm not bluffing. You're *grounded*. Back upstairs. You've got exams next week. Time you knuckled down and got some proper revision done.'

I grip the banister. '"Our roof, our rules," you said. Fine. I don't want your rules, *or* your roof, *or* you hitting me whenever you lose your rag. You'd not put up with that. Would you?'

Mam's face sort of twitches, and if she says the right thing now, we'll negotiate. But, no, she just takes in my duffel bag and sneers like she can't believe how stupid I am. 'You had a brain, once.'

So I carry on down the stairs to the ground floor.