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Opening Extract from...

Inside My Head

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Zoë

The house is a complete mess. There are boxes with Dad's handwriting on them everywhere: *lounge*, *dining room*, *kitchen*, blah-blah-blah. I have to step round them to get into the kitchen.

'Morning, love,' Mum says, standing in front of the sink stroking her massive pregnant belly. The sun floods in through the window behind her. Dad's sitting at the table, fiddling about with a screwdriver and the plug on a lamp. He doesn't even look up at me.

I kind of mumble a reply. I'm not awake enough for proper words just yet.

'Bit of unpacking today, Zoë. Yeah?' Mum says. 'Get this place sorted out, get it looking like a home! Our

new home in the country.' She smiles. She's way too enthusiastic.

So I don't answer her. I open kitchen cupboards instead. They're all empty. No bowls. No cereal. Nothing.

'What you looking for, love?' Mum says.

'Cornflakes.'

'Over here. On the floor,' Dad says. 'In this packing box.'

I walk over, grab the cornflakes. 'Where's the bowls?'

'In the hallway,' Dad says. 'There's an open box marked *kitchen*. Spoons are in there as well.'

I sigh, put the cornflakes on the table and walk through to the hall, grab a spoon and a bowl and stomp back to the table.

'Sleep well, love?' Mum asks.

I don't answer. I didn't sleep well. I was thinking about everything that I'm missing in London.

'It's so much quieter at night here than back in London,' Mum says.

I pour cornflakes into my bowl and grab the milk bottle.

'It gets darker at night as well,' Mum says. 'There's less light pollution. Have a look up at the sky tonight, Zoë. It'll be full of stars.'

I don't say anything. I just shovel spoonfuls of cornflakes into my mouth and wish that I was anywhere else but here.

David

Right now, I'm on my stool in Mr Hambleton's lesson, in his manky science lab that stinks of gas and chemicals and burnt splints. Mr H has just shown us an experiment – some chemical reaction or other – but because I was too busy messing about with Knaggs and Joe and Mills, I have no idea what happened. We're supposed to be writing the experiment up in our books now, answering some questions and all that stuff. My exercise book is open, but I haven't written a thing. And sitting next to me, to my right, is Knaggs. His book's still closed. He's playing with the gas tap in the middle of the bench, pretending to switch it on and off.

'Wouldn't it be cool to just switch the gas on?' he says. He turns to me with a smile on his face. 'Just let the lab fill up with gas!'

I shrug my shoulders. 'Yeah, s'pose. Be dangerous, though, wouldn't it, inhaling all that gas?'

'No. It'd be all right,' Knaggs says, fiddling with the tap again. 'You'd only inhale a bit, cos we'd tell Mr H and he'd have to evacuate us, wouldn't he? We'd get the rest of the day off school! Think about it.'

I smile. The rest of the day off school would be great.

Joe, who's sitting opposite me and Knaggs, looks up at us. 'Imagine how much trouble you'd get in, Knaggs,' he says. 'They'd chuck you out for good if you did something like that.'

Knaggs shrugs. 'They wouldn't know who'd done it,' he says. 'Not unless some little puddleface grassed me up.'

'I'm not saying anyone'd grass on you,' Joe says. 'I was thinking what if they could tell which tap the gas had come out of?'

Knaggs makes a face, like he couldn't care less. He laughs. 'Yeah, right. Like they have sensors on the gas taps! Or CCTV. Get real, Joe.'

I laugh too. I can tell today's is gonna be one of those lessons. In half an hour I'm gonna come out of the lab with that weird guilty feeling, like I've got

away with something I shouldn't have. I can feel it in the air. Things are gonna get silly. They always do in Mr Hambleton's lessons. 'So are you gonna do it, then, Knaggs? You gonna switch the gas on?' I say.

Knaggs smiles. 'Yeah. Watch this,' he says. And he opens the gas tap. Only when he does, absolutely nothing happens.

Mills looks up from his book. From the look of it, he's nearly finished his write-up already. 'It's switched off at the mains, you pebblehead,' he says in this kind of tired, bored-sounding voice. 'Do you really think they'd trust us to have the gas taps on all the time?'

Knaggs closes the gas tap. He looks up. He sort of looks embarrassed for a second. But then he smiles. 'Course I knew it was switched off at the mains,' he says. 'I was just shitting you all up. You should have seen your faces. Pebbleheads!'

It goes quiet on our bench for a while. No one wants to say anything. After a bit, I decide I might as well get some work done, so I pick up my fountain pen and start writing: date, title, sub-heading, blah-blah-blah. I get quite a lot done, even up to the method and the diagram and the results table. But then I get a nudge from over to my right. Knaggs again. He knocks my arm so that I end up drawing on my own work.

'Knaggs, you plum,' I say. 'Look what you've done.'

But Knaggs ignores what I say and points to the

front of the class. Gary Wood has come in late. He's talking to Mr Hambleton, although I can't hear what he's saying cos it's so noisy in the lab.

'Farmer Boy's late again,' Knaggs says. 'I reckon his dad's tractor must've broken down!'

I laugh. See, at our school, being a farmer is bad news and calling someone a farmer is like a term of abuse.

I watch Mr H tell Wood what to do for a few seconds. But halfway through, Mr H stops talking and looks up at the classroom. 'Year Ten, keep the noise down, please,' he says. 'You've only got twenty minutes till the end of the lesson. I want you all finished! Otherwise you'll stay in at break.'

He's right about the noise and the amount of time till the end of the lesson. But everyone knows that he doesn't mean what he says about staying in at break-time. Mr Hambleton always threatens to keep people in at break if they don't finish, but everyone knows that what he'll actually do is keep you in for about a minute before he realises that he wants to get out of the lab and he'll just let you go. Happens every time. And you know why? Cos Mr H is a smoker and he wants to get to the school gate so he can have a fag. It's true.

Most people are looking at their books now. It's a bit quieter in the lab. Won't last long, though – it never

does. I get back to my work too, start to put the results in the table. Beside me I can sense that Knaggs still isn't getting on with his work, though. He's messing about with the gas tap again, staring into space. His book is shut.

'You could do it,' Knaggs says suddenly. 'All you'd have to do is find the mains gas tap and turn that on at the start of the lesson. It's probably in the prep room, isn't it? Then all the taps in the lab'd be on, wouldn't they?'

I don't look up. I finish putting numbers in the results table.

But Mills is nearly finished. He puts his pen down. 'They'd catch you, Knaggs,' he says. 'They'd find your fingerprints on the taps, you plum.'

I laugh. I put my pen down and look up.

Knaggs doesn't laugh, though, he just smiles. 'Wrong!' he says. 'I'd wear gloves, Mills, you puddle-face!' And he gives Mills the middle finger.

We all laugh.

Over to my right, I can see Wood sitting down. He doesn't talk to anyone, just opens his book and gets writing.

'So,' says Mills, 'you're gonna wear gloves when you set off the gas taps, yeah? That's decided, is it?'

'Yeah,' says Knaggs, smiling. 'Course. The perfect crime.'

'Brilliant,' says Mills. He laughs. He's a sarcastic bugger, Mills. 'So, then all the cops'd have to do is find the idiot wearing gloves in the science lesson and they'd've got the culprit! Told you, you're a plum.'

We all laugh.

Mr H looks up again. 'Quieten down,' he says. 'Fifteen minutes till the bell now. You must get finished.'

So I look at my book again. I'm getting to the difficult bit now. I'm s'posed to write a conclusion from the results and then answer some questions from a textbook. And seeing as I have no idea what the experiment was really about, I might have to borrow Mills's book to see what I'm meant to write. I look around for something to distract me, so I won't have to try and figure out what the investigation was s'posed to show for a while. But all around me, people have their heads down, writing. And Mr H has started prowling round the classroom, looking over shoulders at people's work. So I get my head down too, look at the results, try and work out what the hell they mean. But it's no use. I could sit here and stare at them for the rest of my life and I still wouldn't have a clue. So I look up, check whether Mr H is watching, and then lean across and tap Mills on the arm.

'What?'

'What have you written in your conclusion?'

Mills looks around, sees that Mr H is standing on the other side of the lab, behind Rachel Cluck, and passes his book across the bench. I grab it and start writing, change the odd word here and there so it doesn't look too obvious that I've cheated. Knaggs does the same. He's managed to catch up with me somehow.

It's quiet in the lab for a little while. Don't know why. Certainly wasn't cos of anything Mr H said. Maybe it's cos he's walking round the class, checking on people's work. He's getting close to our bench now. I finish copying down Mills's conclusion and push the book back to the other side of the bench. And about thirty seconds later, Mr H comes walking past our bench, looking over our shoulders.

'OK, boys,' he says. 'Make sure you get the questions done as well.'

As soon as he's gone, me, Knaggs, Mills and Joe laugh. And we all stop writing. Knaggs leans over to his right to talk to Wood, who's at the other end of the bench. 'Hey, Farmer Boy,' he says. 'I see you were late this morning.'

Wood looks up at him, but doesn't say anything.

'What's the problem? Tractor break down or something?'

I laugh. So does Knaggs.

But Wood just looks straight back at Knaggs. He

isn't smiling. 'Shut up,' he says. He bends over his book again and starts to write.

Knaggs leans back to our part of the bench. 'Hey, lads,' he says. 'Do you know this one?' And then he puts on this fake Norfolk accent:

'Oi carn't read,
oi carn't write,
but that don't really matter.
Cos my name is Gary Wood
and I can drive a tractor!'

That's funny. We all have a laugh at that. I look at Wood. He's still writing, trying to pretend he isn't annoyed. But you can tell he is. He's staring way too hard at his work. He'll burn a hole in it if he isn't careful.

I look at my watch. Still another five minutes or so till the bell. I think about starting on the questions in the textbook. But over to my right I can see Knaggs leaning towards Wood again. This'll be funny. I'll do the questions in a bit.

'Hey, Wood,' Knaggs says.

'Leave me alone.' Wood doesn't even look up.

'What's it like being so ugly?' Knaggs says.

Wood doesn't reply, but the rest of us on the bench snigger. Knaggs does this a lot and it's funny as hell.

'Just asking,' Knaggs says. 'You know, I used to

think that you must be the ugliest person on the planet, Gary.'

Wood isn't writing any more. He's gripping his pen tightly, just staring at his book.

'Well, that's what I used to think,' Knaggs goes on.

I let out a little laugh, cos I already know the punchline.

'That is, till I saw your mum on the internet. Man, is she ugly!'

Everyone on the bench bursts out laughing. It's so loud that Mr H looks round at our bench and we all hush up a bit.

I look at Wood for a reaction. He bristles a bit. But then he sort of sits upright, puffs himself out, like words can't hurt him. He looks over at Knaggs. 'Yeah, well, I'd rather be ugly than a short-arse,' he says.

No one laughs at that. There are just a load of faces that say '*That's not funny*'. And Wood looks embarrassed that he said it. Wood's face has gone red. I can see a vein sticking out on his temple. He looks like he's gonna burst a blood vessel.

Maybe Knaggs should give it a rest now. But he doesn't. He leans across again.

'Is it true your mum and dad met in a factory?' Knaggs says to Wood.

Wood puts his pen down and shuts his book. He stares at the bench. His eyes are bulging. He's so

angry it's difficult to look at him.

'I heard they were just two lonely cheese puffs, travelling along the conveyor belt, when their eyes met. Love at first sight.'

Wood looks up. He takes a deep breath. His jaw's clenched. 'Shut the fuck up, Knaggs,' he says, quiet.

'What?' says Knaggs, smiling, pretending to be all innocent. 'I thought it was a nice story. And, you know, it explains why you look so much like a delicious cheesy corn snack!'

Everyone laughs again. See, the funny thing about Wood – apart from the fact that he's a farmer – is that his head looks exactly like a cheese puff. Seriously! It does. His face is covered in big orange freckles and his hair's all short and ginger. Even his eyelashes look like they're covered in cheese-puff dust. It would be tragic if it wasn't so funny.

But Wood's not laughing. He looks like he's trying not to explode. 'Shut your face, or I'll fucking kill you,' he says to Knaggs.

Knaggs just laughs. 'No need to be so aggressive, Gary,' he says.

'There are a couple of minutes to the bell,' Mr H calls out over the noise that's built up in the lab again. 'You must have answered at least the first three questions before you leave this room.'

So we all kind of quieten down again, look back at

our books. I try and answer the first three questions. If I at least get something written for them, I'll be able to go when the bell goes. But soon I feel a nudge in my ribs. Knaggs. He points over to Wood. Wood is just sitting there, staring at the bench, jaw clenched, eyes bulging. Knaggs smiles at me. I've got that weird guilty feeling already.