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Sloth Welcomes Careful Dawdlers

Mum's face was slowly returning to its normal colour as we entered the shelter of the bay. 'Thank God for that,' she said. 'I warned you I wasn't much of a sailor.'

The beach looked deserted, apart from a small blue boat with an outboard motor.

'Sorry, chaps, this is it I'm afraid,' said the ferryman. 'I'll take you as close as I can, but unfortunately there's no proper quay or anything.'

'You mean we have to get our feet wet?' I said. 'What about health and safety?' At least I'd picked *something* up from work experience.

The ferryman killed the engine. We drifted slowly towards the shore. 'Weather permitting, I'm back here every fortnight,

with a few extra provisions and the mail. If you want a ride to the mainland, that's the best time to catch me.'

'I'll bear it in mind,' said Mum.

'You could still turn back, you know,' he said. 'I'll do you a special offer if you like.'

'Thanks, but no thanks,' said Mum. 'This is probably the best place for us right now.'

The ferryman raised a disgustingly bushy eyebrow. 'You know what they say, don't you? You'll never be happy on an island if it's somewhere you have to run away to.'

'Do they?' said Mum.

'I normally give passengers my mobile number, but that won't be much use to *you*. So if you do have any kind of emergency – not that I'm suggesting for a minute that you will – I think they keep some flares in the fishing boat. You could always try calling me like that.'

'Thanks,' said Mum. 'How much do we owe you?'

'You can pay me on the return journey,' said the ferryman. 'Let's face it, you're not going anywhere.'

The water was freezing. Millie went first, stepping into the shallows without so much as a sharp intake of breath. I screamed louder than a Year Seven girl at a sleepover. Mum wasn't exactly in her comfort zone (that would be a toss-up between a subtitled film about an unhappy art critic, and Marks & Spencer's coffee shop), but with a few words of encouragement from the ferryman, she reluctantly abandoned ship, dragging her suitcase through the white foam with a hysterical smile on her face. 'Thanks a lot,' she called. 'And keep writing.'

We stood and watched the ferry until it was a tiny blob

shrouded in mist. It was only when it disappeared completely that I started to panic.

'I can't believe you've brought us here, Mum. I mean, what do we do now? For all we know, it could be completely deserted. Perhaps Sue made the whole thing up. Dad said she was a bit of a fantasist.'

'Calm down, Jessica,' said Mum. 'You heard what that boring ferry guy said. He'd heard all about them. Look, the whole island's only a few miles long. All we have to do is find their settlement. Isn't that right, Millie?'

Millie was throwing stones at an inquisitive seagull. Mum yanked angrily on her earphones. 'I said, *isn't that right, Millie*?'

'I don't know and I don't care. So just leave me alone, OK? I'm trying to listen.'

Mum put her hand on Millie's shoulder. She wriggled free. 'Look, please, Amelia, I'm begging you. We need to stick together here. Refusing to talk is really not helping.'

'I thought you didn't want me to talk,' said Millie.

'That's not what I meant, and you know it.'

'Well, maybe you'd like me to talk now, then,' said Millie. 'How about I tell —'

It seemed to come from out of nowhere – a familiar voice that brought their 'quiet chat' to a premature conclusion. It was like that on Sloth. What with the mist and the constant moan of the sea, it was very easy for someone to creep up on you.

'You look lost. Can I help you?'

'It's us,' said Mum, rather pathetically.

The voice sounded even more familiar when it went into over-the-top mode. 'OH . . . MY . . . GOD! I didn't recognise

you with your hair like that, Mags. This is *so* great! I never thought you'd actually come. But you look like drowned rats, you poor darlings. We'd better get you back to the pods.'

Sue looked older than last time; all seven signs of ageing were now competing for control of her ruddy complexion. And although she still wore the same clothes (jeans, trainers, skiing jacket and a beanie) there was something different about her, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

'I've been collecting driftwood,' she said, waving a bunch of scabby sticks. 'It's for a special art installation. You know what I said a few years back, about finding my true voice, artistically? Well, I think it's really happening for me.'

Mum was shaking seawater out of her favourite boots. 'I'm so pleased for you.'

'Anyway, enough about me,' said Sue. 'What the hell are you doing here? I know I lose all track of time these days, but the school holidays haven't started yet, have they? And where's David? Working, I suppose?'

Mum squeezed into her soggy boot, like a desperate ugly sister. 'I think, perhaps, before we go anywhere, Sue and I should have a quiet chat.'

'Sounds intriguing,' said Sue, winking at me and Millie before following Mum a little further up the beach.

And while they whispered and hugged, and hugged and whispered, I tried to get a few words out of my sister. 'Are you OK?'

'No, not really.'

'It sucks, I know. But it won't last forever. And Mum seems to think it's for the best. I just wish we knew what Dad thought. You're missing him too, aren't you?'

'*No*,' said Millie, so forcefully I knew she was just putting on a brave face. 'It's not that. I just —'

'OK, you two,' said Sue, bounding over with the fixed grin of a ballroom dancer. 'Let's get this show on the road. Don't worry, girls, it's not too far.'

It was the furthest I'd walked since that sponsored thing round the school field in aid of stand-up comedians, and the narrow muddy path that slalomed up the side of the hill was even more hazardous for Mum's suitcase than the beach.

'Is the weather always like this?' she said.

Sue smiled. 'They say it only rains twice a year: from June to September, and October to May.'

The view from the top of the hill looked a lot better on YouTube.

'Welcome to Sloth,' said Sue, waving her bundle of sticks at the valley below. 'I'm sure you guys are going to love it here.'

'It's beautiful,' said Mum, almost sounding as if she meant it. 'So much greener than it looked on the video.'

'It might take some getting used to,' said Sue. 'Everyone finds the pace of life a bit of a shock to start with.'

'Yes,' said Mum. 'I suppose with all those animals to look after, and what with growing your own vegetables and stuff, it can get a bit frantic.'

'No, Mags, that's not what I —'

'And you live in those funny orangey things, don't you?' I said. 'That is *so* sweet.'

I counted fifteen of them; giant igloos with connecting tubes, like the water slides at the swimming pool, leading to a family of baby igloos.

'We call them the pods,' said Sue. 'They're fully sustainable

living spaces, perfectly in tune with the environment.'

'And what about the gigantic blue one in the middle?' said Mum.

'That's the Symposium – our arts and community centre. Where we eat together, meditate together, tell each other stories and make music together.'

'What a load of bollocks,' said Millie.

It was normally my job to embarrass Mum in public. 'Look, I warned you, Amelia. Any more rudeness and you'll be —'

'It's all right,' said Sue. 'A lot of our young people react like that when they first arrive. It soon wears off, believe me.'

'And what are *they*?' I said, pointing at the circle of stones, like a kind of mini Stonehenge but more pointy, on the other side of the valley.

'No one's really sure,' said Sue. 'All we know is they're at least four thousand years old.'

'That's incredible,' said Mum.

'Yeah, incredible,' said Millie. 'If I'd wanted a crap history lesson I'd have asked Mr Catchpole.'

Sue pretended not to hear her. 'They might have been a place of worship, or even human sacrifice. But they're obviously aligned with the sun and the stars, so Earl thinks they're probably some sort of Neolithic weather station.'

'Who's Earl?' said Mum. 'Is he your leader?'

Sue flashed Mum a condescending smile. 'We don't have a leader, Mags. The Dawdlers are a fully autonomous collective. Earl's more like our spokesperson, the voice of our unconscious.'

'I see,' said Mum, who obviously didn't.

'Earl's probably the most talented person you'll ever meet.

Everyone loves him. It was his idea to create a memorial in the middle of the stones.'

'Memorial? What memorial?' I said.

'For Kevin, the young lad who . . .' Sue swallowed hard. '. . . passed away. There's a little wooden cross up there already, but Earl thought it would be fitting if I created something more permanent.' Sue ran a hand through her disgustingly lacklustre hair. 'Anyway, let's get you guys through customs, shall we?'

'Customs?' said Mum. 'This is still part of the British Isles, isn't it? I didn't think we'd need our passports.'

'It's just one of Earl's little jokes,' said Sue. 'No one's allowed up to the pods until one of us has explained our little ways and customs. We don't call them rules; Earl doesn't believe in them.'

'Do we have to do it right now?' said Mum. 'I think we could all do with a couple of hours' sleep. It's been one hell of a journey.'

Sue nodded apologetically. 'It's OK, Mags. I'll take you through myself, if you like. Don't worry, it's quite painless.' Millie was doing an angry, dancey type thing in time to the voice in her head. 'Well, for most people anyway.'