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Opening extract from
**The Boy Who Sailed the Ocean in
an Armchair**

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One

My name is Becket Rumsey and there are lots of important people in my life who I talk to every day. For starters: my seven-year-old bug-collecting brother, Billy, is one of them (although he talks nonsense ninety-nine per cent of the time – and the other one per cent? *Utter* nonsense). Dad, who delivers fish from The Codfather van, is another. Mainly he talks about haddock but I can live with that. Ibiza Nana, she's my grandma and she always rings for a chat from Spain. And then there's Pearl, Dad's girlfriend, I talk to her a lot and Pearl's good at listening. Plus, she gives great hugs and tells us she loves us to the moon and back, which is at least 768,800 km of love. I know this because Billy made me check. In fact, Pearl's almost a mum to Billy and me. I say "almost" because the one important person in my life who I don't get to talk to at all is my real mum.

My mum died when I was four. Not being able to talk to her is the hardest thing . Harder than trying to pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time. I don't remember a lot about when Mum died but I know she went off to hospital to have Billy and she never came back. And I never said goodbye to her. Okay, being totally truthful, at the time I didn't think saying goodbye was all that important. I mean, you're four and it's just a word, like "farm" or "zoo" or "dog". But now, at this very moment, I'm thinking goodbye is the most important word of all.

You see, it is eleven thirty on the Monday night at the beginning of half-term and I'm sitting in my dad's fish van outside a hairdressing salon called Crops and Bobbers. Dad is telling Billy and me that we've left our house at Honeydown Hills for good and we're moving into the flat above this hairdresser's, just the three of us. We're not to worry about leaving Pearl behind and, no, we don't need to worry about saying goodbye to her. She'll understand. No, we're not to ring her.

At first, I'm confused with a capital Z (so confused I can't even spell, that's how confused I am).

Not say goodbye to someone so important for the second time in my life?

Not say goodbye to Pearl?

Dad's having a laugh.

Only Dad isn't having a laugh. His face is harder than dried-up breakfast cereal left in a bowl. If I could drive I'd go straight back to our house and Pearl. Tell her Dad has lost his marbles— in fact, that his marbles are so lost they're probably floating around in a galaxy far, far away. Pearl would welcome us back and say it doesn't matter that we didn't say goodbye because this isn't goodbye at all. It's hello. She'd bring us straight inside and let us play with her tubes of paint (because Pearl's an artist). She'd say she loved us all the way to the moon and back again and give us the biggest hug and we'd say we didn't actually go to the moon, just to Eden, but we're so glad to be back again.

When I tell Dad we should go back to Pearl, his mouth drops into an easy O. "You," he mutters, scratching the koi carp tattoo on his arm, "are not going back to say goodbye or anything else. You do not need to say it."

Well, my dad is a prawn short of a prawn cocktail.

"Plus there is the little matter of us being at our new flat already and it being the middle of the night. I can't be travelling all over the place at this time with two children," Dad says, forgetting that he's just done exactly that. Because about an hour ago he woke us up, threw all our stuff into boxes and strapped Mum's favourite armchair onto the top of the van beside the plastic one-eyed cod. When we asked Dad where Pearl was he said she'd gone out and then he shooed us into the van and we zoomed away as if we were in the Grand Prix. If a van with a giant cod on the roof could enter "Anyway, this is our new life now. We're going to be living by the seaside now and this is our home." Dad points up at the flat as if he's the Wise Man from the East pointing at a star.

Living by the seaside? Our new life? I blink back my confusion. What was wrong with the old life? You can't just throw away old things like that. Otherwise we'd have slung out Ibiza Nana a long time ago. Okay, so saying goodbye doesn't seem all that important to Dad, but he's nuts if he thinks it's not important to me. Well, I'm going to do something about this. In fact, I'm not going to say goodbye to

Pearl at all. What I'm going to do is contact her and bring her here to live with us. Yes, that's what I'll do.

But now I'm thinking about goodbyes, suddenly a goodbye to Mum is what I want more than anything. So the other thing I'm going to do is say goodbye to Mum, because I *can't* bring her here to live with us. No matter how much I wish I could.

"Okay, Dad, you're the boss," I say, saluting. This is what I call "the bluff". Pretend to Dad that I agree with whatever he says when really I don't agree with any of it and I'm going to do something about it.

By the way, Dad isn't the boss in our house at all. That was Pearl. Not that I'm saying she went about being all bossy-boots to everyone, but she liked things done her way. Like, even though it was our house that she moved into, she wanted to decorate it in her style. Pearl was very stylish though, so it was okay. She wore her hair in a bun secured with a paintbrush and these long floaty velvet coats that swished the floor and when she wanted you to do something she'd smile and you'd want to do it for her because she was so lovely. In the end everyone wanted to do what Pearl asked. So, you see, Dad isn't the boss at all and that's why I'm going to be the boss on this – take control of the situation and bring Pearl back to us.

"Yes, Becket Rumsey," says Dad, running his hand over his bald head. You know Dad means business when he starts using my full name. "You're quite correct. On this, I am the boss. What I say goes."

"Yes, Stephen Rumsey," I reply, thinking that Dad has had a funny turn.

To be honest, Dad has had a few funny turns recently so I shouldn't really be surprised. For the past two weeks he has been extra quiet, plus he'd leave for work early and get home late. Pearl said she didn't believe he had to work so hard. She got angry about it. Dad would laugh and say she was giving him a haddock. That was him joking about. But Pearl didn't like it. She'd say fish aren't funny. Obviously she doesn't know the joke about the fight at the seafood restaurant where four fish got battered. Fish *are* a bit funny. In the end, Dad didn't bring fish home for our tea any more and he didn't talk about them so much.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, looking back on it...Dad hasn't been Dad for the last few weeks.

In fact, looking at him now, standing in front of our new flat, I'm not sure who Dad really is.

Okay, so we're here, a few minutes away from the ocean, and standing in front of a blue blistered door to the right-hand side of Crops and Bobbers hairdressing salon. Dad says, "This is it," and checks out my watermelon-slice-wide super smile. I think he's impressed that I'm so happy with all these changes. What he doesn't realize is this: it is the smile of a boy who is going to sort out everything. It is the smile of a boy who thinks his dad has gone completely bananas and the only thing left to do is pretend to be as bananas as him.

Billy pipes up that this flat isn't really our new home so it must be my birthday present. He lifts his finger and makes a home for it inside his nose, before jiggling it around like beads in a kaleidoscope.

Sweet Baby Cheeses! My entire family is bananas now. As if! Dad is not going to buy me a flat. I mean, I was just hoping for a life-size skeleton on my birthday, like any eleven-year-old boy. Though imagine if the flat *was* my new den, like Billy says: a place where I could store all my medical encyclopaedias. Imagine if Dad was investing in the future, knowing I'll need a special place where I can work in peace to find a medical cure for the heebie-jeebies...

Okay, this is ridiculous. I'm going as bananas as them.

"Why do you think I'd buy Becket a flat?" asks Dad, his eyes ping-ponging from Billy to me. "Anyway, it's not your birthday until next Monday." Dad says it like I don't have a clue when my own birthday is. "What parent would buy their child a flat as a gift anyway?" continues Dad, ushering us closer to the blistered door.

"A rich one?" I reply.

"Pffttt..." says Dad. "There's no money in fish." He points at a name on the buzzer. "Come here, Becket. Look at this. I haven't got my glasses on. What does that say? Is it Cat Wom..." Dad runs his finger over the illuminated button.

Holy smokes! “It is!” I exclaim. “Are we going to be living next door to Cat Woman? I can’t believe it.” At that point Dad pushes the button and even though he takes his finger off sharpish it keeps buzzing.

The lady who opens the door looks nothing like Cat Woman. For starters, she isn’t wearing cat’s ears or a funny mask. Although, to be fair, I might have actually wet my pants if she had been. Cat looks us up and down and then up again, as if she’s watching some vertical tennis match. Billy tries to hide behind my leg as Cat gives Dad the key to our new flat and then asks us to follow her inside. Once up the staircase, Cat points to Flat A. “That’s me.” And then Flat B. “That’s you. I own the hairdressing salon below. Come in for a cut at any time.” She looks at Dad’s bald head. “Maybe not.”

Meanwhile, Billy is muttering over and over, “I think we should go home now.” Wise words from young Billy; quickly ignored by old Daddy. I feel Billy’s cold little hand slip into mine and he gives me a squeeze. Okay, so it feels like he’s milking a cow, but I know it’s his secret way of asking me if everything will be okay. Call it a sort of code if you will; like the Enigma Code I learned about at school, only a billion times less complicated. This way we can “speak” to each other without actually moving our lips. It started a long time ago, when Billy came home from the hospital and he would grip my hand and I would squeeze his back.

This time, even though I squeeze Billy’s hand back, I don’t actually believe everything is okay.

Billy whispers, “Why have we run away from home? Why isn’t Pearl here? This is very much a mystery and we have to solve it.”

“I know,” I mumble back, “exactly what I was thinking.”

Billy squeezes my hand again, but more urgently this time.

I squeeze his hand back.

Then I remember that he picked his nose.