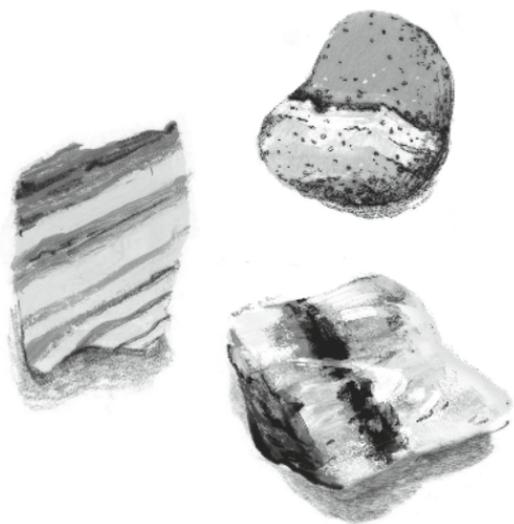


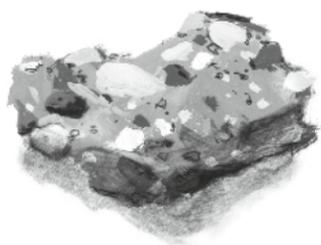
ALEX HORNE

THE
LAST
PEBBLE

Sometimes the
greatest treasures
are the smallest ones

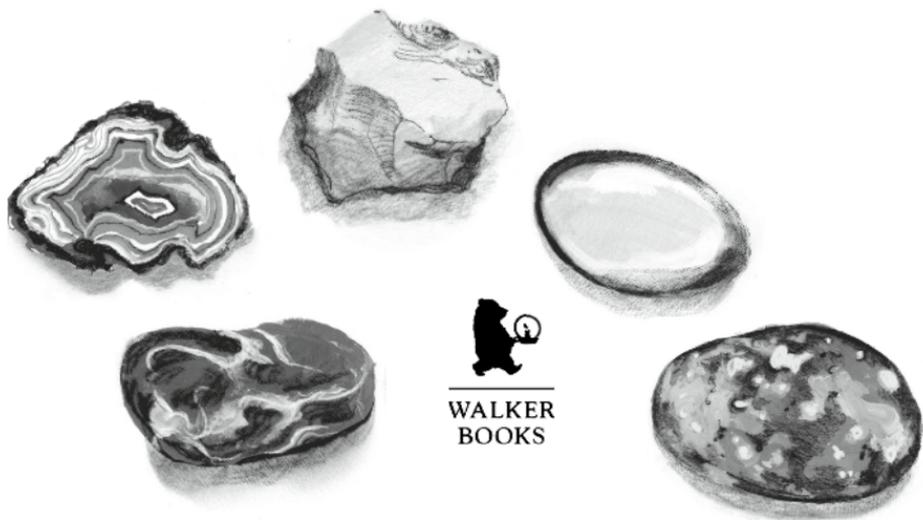
THE LAST PEBBLE





THE LAST PEBBLE

ALEX HORNE



WALKER
BOOKS

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*For grandchildren
and their grandparents*





CHAPTER 1

When I found him, he was just sat on the beach as if everything was normal. If I'd have known he'd travelled thousands of miles to be there and was about to throw my life into turmoil, I almost certainly would have left him alone. But that's not what happened.

This is what happened.

It was on a Monday, after school, when Mum was visiting Nana in the care home. She does this every Monday and I come too, because Mum lets me go down to the beach with Grandpa and I love the beach. I don't build sandcastles, because I don't like sandcastles any more and because there is no sand there anyway, just stones.

So the beach is where I go to search, collect and

detect, always wearing shoes. Every object you find tells a story, tells you something about the past or something that has happened. I'm looking for wheels or pearls or pots or skulls. I find stones mainly, but also sticks, bones, shells, bottles. So many plastic bottles. They're not good ones. They never have messages in them.

If I see any rubbish, I try to put it in a bin. But I can't pick up all the litter. That'd take up both of my hours. So when I've done ten minutes of litter picking, it's my time.

I should say that my name is Trader. I'm an almost-eleven-year-old boy, a stone whisperer and beachcomber, just like my grandpa.

I should also explain that beachcombing has nothing to do with combs. (In fact, I don't think anyone really needs any sort of comb. Other animals don't worry about their hair looking messy.) To beachcomb you simply need to keep a look out for anything unusual on the beach.

The beach is Grandpa's hunting ground too, and he taught me everything I know. I want to be just like him. People don't realize that Bognor Regis is a wild land and

he is in charge of it. “You’ll follow in my footsteps, boy,” Grandpa says, even though I’m only five foot tall. (I’ve grown one inch taller every season for the past two years. But I always have to look up to Grandpa. He takes giant steps. He strides.)

He’s lived alone for about two years now. When I was nearly nine, Nana had a serious-sounding operation and was taken straight to the care home from the hospital. She’s been there ever since. It’s the best place for her, I’ve been told many times, but I’m not so sure.

So that Monday, after school, I said my usual hello to Nana at the beginning of the visit, then scarpered. Mum says I don’t have to stay there for the full two hours because I’m “both trustworthy and annoying”. She trusts I won’t stray from the beach, talk to too many strangers or be late, and she knows Grandpa will keep an eye out for me. So it’s hello at the beginning, goodbye at the end and that’s enough for everyone.

I ran down the street, skipped over the crossing and bounded onto the beach. There was no sign of Grandpa, so I started looking for things. I’m normally a scavenging

maestro. But that Monday, there was nothing. Just the standard shingle jostling under my feet. A few gulls strutted angrily past me. There really wasn't much going on.

Out at sea, a couple of trawlers edged towards each other, while on the beach, two dog walkers shouted at their animals, encouraging them in or out of the water. And up near the seawall I saw Mary. She's obsessed with stones like me, but with a different motive. Mary is a stone stacker. She's good at it and she gets a lot of practice. She's a grown-up, so no one makes her do things like go to school or wash under her armpits. Most days she gets to spend at least a couple of hours here. I called good morning to her and Mary nodded at me, but she didn't reply. She's the silent type.

Someone shouted my name from the seawall. "Trader!" It was Grandpa. "What have you got?" he barked.

"Nothing yet," I shouted back, turning round to see him striding towards me.

Grandpa loves the beach as much as me. He prefers it late at night or first thing in the morning, when it's

just the sea and the shingle. “The waves versus the rocks. Liquid versus solid,” he says. And there, to pick up the pieces, to rescue the survivors, is my grandpa. As the sun rises, he sees what’s been thrown up from the fight the night before.

I’d be there with him more if I could. If I didn’t have to go to school. I learn more from him than I ever do in class, and Grandpa is never mean. Even though he’s a bit older than me, he talks to me like we’re the same age. In fact, he doesn’t talk to me that much at all because he’s so caught up in the comings and goings of the beach, but that suits me just fine.

As well as beachcombing, he’s taught me how to skim stones. My record is twenty bounces, although it did get quite hard to count after the first ten so I might have rounded the total up.

Mum has always said that Grandpa is my rock. She says that’s how people describe someone they can depend on. But it’s close to being a reality with Grandpa. He’s so solid, so reliable, so old and often so silent. In the past few months, he has started to fall asleep in the afternoons, sitting in his chair or even standing up at

his work bench, and then he really does look like one of those Easter Island statues.

“Strange swirl around noon, Trader,” he said as he caught up with me. Nana said he’d been here since dawn this particular Monday, like he usually is, slowly striding across the land and peering down like a giant.

“That’s good, isn’t it, Grandpa?”

“Maybe. Could be some good stuff up towards Felpham, where the breakers roll in.” This was about as chatty as Grandpa ever got.

Most of the kids at school spend their free time trawling the internet. I trawl the beaches. It’s the same, in that none of us know what exactly we are searching for. But it’s different because I might find some genuine treasure. That’s what has kept me going and kept Grandpa going for a lifetime.

All my favourite memories involve finding things with Grandpa on the beach. Once I came across two metal arrows and some cogs. When I asked Grandpa what they were, he said, “Hands.” I thought he’d gone mad. It turned out they were parts from a Victorian clock. Over the next few months Grandpa managed to

bring the clock back to life in his shed, piecing it together like a 3D jigsaw until it ticked away all by itself again. It was like magic.

When I find things like that, I can't believe other people aren't down there searching too. It's free! And new things wash up every day! The most amazing stories are waiting to be told.

Grandpa never gets too excited outwardly, in fact he very rarely smiles, but I can always tell when he's pleased. His eyes flicker. He moves a little quicker. I have to jog to keep up with him.

Another time we found an ostrich egg. "Don't ask me how that got there, Trader," Grandpa said. "Come on, let's get it home and logged."

Everything has to be logged. Grandpa is a meticulous logger. He writes detailed accounts of everything he's ever found. EVERYTHING. Not just his finds either, but anything he's ever done, anything he's ever seen, even anything he's ever eaten. I don't know when he started writing these things down, but he definitely can't stop now. It's what he does. And it isn't scrawled, joined-up writing either, just his clear, patient Grandpa font,

explaining concisely where he's been, when he was there and what precisely happened:

22nd April 2021: Bognor Beach, due south of Crazy Golf. Ostrich egg found by Trader, 11.15 am, preserved in display case. Then home for biscuits (Rich Tea).

I want handwriting like Grandpa's. He only has four fingers on his right hand because he accidentally chopped his middle finger off with a knife when he was younger than me, but this means he takes even greater care over his writing. The bigger boys at school found out that my grandad has a lower-than-average number of fingers. Some tried to tease me about it and a few were freaked out, but I was only proud. Apparently, when I was four, I told my reception teacher that I wanted four fingers when I grew up.

After forty minutes of scanning the beach that Monday, I'd gone stone-blind. They all looked the same and I was exhausted. There was nothing unusual. As my grandfather edged further ahead, I slowed down. As he

shrank in the distance, I sank to the ground. As I leaned back on the shingle, looking up at the clouds, I could no longer hear him. There was a lot of not much happening in Bognor.

I shut my eyes for one second. And that was enough.

As soon as I opened them, I spotted him next to me. He'd appeared as if by magic and for some reason I was there too. Maybe it was Grandpa's training, maybe it was luck, maybe it was just meant to be, but I knew at once he was special. And I know most people would call a stone an *it*, not a *he*, but this one was as alive as a stone could be. Moving slowly, I suppose in case I scared him and he ran away, I gently plucked him from the beach.

He nestled in my palm. My pebble. I smiled and gasped and closed my fingers. That was the moment everything changed.



CHAPTER 2

It's not often I see Grandpa among other people. He's usually in his shed or at the beach and that's mostly that. He often visits Nana but doesn't like to see anyone except her. Whenever he's around other people, he sticks out like a sore thumb. No, that's not right. I've had a sore thumb and it looked just like the other one. Grandpa sticks out like a broken leg, white plaster cast covered in graffiti and hoisted up in the air, the lot.

My pebble stuck out too. Or at least *I* thought so. To everyone else he was probably just another pebble, but thanks to Grandpa I know about stones, and this pebble – one of so many others lying there on the beach – leapt right out at me. He had a different

glow. He was made of different stuff; he'd come from a different place. He was exceptional.

I couldn't believe no one else had spotted him. But the beach carried on as always. Couples dragged their feet through the stones, a pair of dogs dashed around and a kid near the water complained that they'd hurt their toes. No one stopped to take a closer look. But even if they had, hardly anyone would have seen past the layer of greyish muck that disguised most of my pebble.

He was almost perfectly semi-spherical. Most pebbles in Bognor are thin at the top, fat at the bottom, or bent over one way. This one, like Grandpa, had kept in excellent shape. Circular half the way round, with one neat bite taken out so he fitted perfectly around my middle finger.

He was about the size of a large new potato and rough to the touch – covered with this grimy skin, the stuff proper pebbles pick up over time on their travels.

Beneath this coat I could just see his true colours peeking through. A rich green – dark and cloudy but bold and true like the deepest sea – and, if you looked really closely, you could see that he was freckled, like me.

I couldn't stop turning him over, staring at these patches of colour and enjoying the satisfying weight. He fitted my hand perfectly.

"Wasp, Trader?" Grandpa had appeared again. He could cover huge distances in mere seconds.

"No, nothing like that."

"What was it then, boy? You leaped up like you'd been struck by lightning!"

"It felt like lightning," I said quietly. "I found this."

I held out my hand and Grandpa peered down, giving the pebble a quick once-over, before snapping bolt upright like a push puppet.

"It's finally happened," he said to himself. Then, remembering I was there, he caught himself, grinned for the first time in ages and said, "That's better than lightning, son. If it's what I think it is, you've struck gold. Let's go. We've got to show this to your grandmother."

I knew he wasn't actual gold. Grandpa didn't like gold. No, the pebble must have been far more valuable than any precious metal for Grandpa to react like that. This was real treasure.



CHAPTER 3

“There you are, Trader,” rasped Nana when she saw us. But she was mainly looking at Grandpa, who gave her a wink and trotted over to her chair. Neither of them had mobile phones so every meeting was a reunion. They only ever communicated face to face and to me this seemed like a very good idea.

As usual, Nana was with Mum in her favourite communal room that looked out over the sea. Of the handful of other people sat on chairs facing the window, only Mrs Gumbridge was awake. The rest of the residents preferred watching TV to looking at the waves, Nana had told me.

“Yes, here we are. You look spectacular!” said Grandpa.

“Of course I do!” agreed Nana. “And how are you feeling? Anything to report?”

“Sprightly, thank you. Don’t you worry about me. It’s this grandson of ours you need to talk to. He’s made an excellent find.”

Nana turned to me, but kept looking back at Grandpa. “Come on then, Trader. Give me a cuddle and show me.”

Mrs Gumbridge sighed. “Not if it’s a skeleton,” she said. “And no seaweed either. This room still smells of that bag of rubbish you brought back last year.”

“It was a jellyfish!” I shouted, much louder than I’d expected. A couple of the sleepers stirred but none woke up.

“Course it was, dear,” said Nana, leaning forward slowly to pat my knee. This was enough to calm me down. I knew she didn’t believe me, but she was always on my side.

“Whatever it was, you should have left it on the beach,” said Mrs Gumbridge, “and not poured it all over your nana’s best blanket. That was a Christmas present from Mr Gumbridge.”

No one has best blankets. And no one wants one for Christmas. But it's true there was still a stain on it. I hadn't intentionally let the jellyfish out of the bag, but when they all got upset at the sight of it, I panicked and dropped the whole thing. The jellyfish panicked too, jumping out and landing with a proper splat.

Mrs Melling, the owner of the care home, threw it away. She likes to keep her home neat and tidy, with no surprises, and definitely no jellyfish. I couldn't stop crying. That was a bad day.

"It was remarkable, dear. I'll never forget it," chuckled Nana, when it looked like Mrs Gumbridge was going to keep talking about the blanket. "And what have you found today then, Trader?"

"This time it's just a stone," I said, taking him from my pocket. Mrs Gumbridge shook her head and tutted.

Mum and Nana both smiled. Grandpa did too – twice in a day. "It's not *just* a stone, Trader. This one's a keeper."

"I'm sure it's lovely, dear," said Nana, but I was suddenly reluctant to show her. The stone seemed to have lost his lustre away from the sea and anyway,

she wouldn't understand how special he was even if he had a label like in a museum. Often only Grandpa understood what things meant. And he knew what all the important things were without needing to look in books or on Google.

"Show her, Trader," said Grandpa, and a small nod of his head persuaded me to open my fingers and reveal the pebble. To my surprise, I saw a flicker of genuine amazement in Nana's eyes. She looked at Grandpa, who nodded again.

"Well, that's just lovely," she said. "Isn't it, Grandpa?"

He gazed at her for a moment and I could tell this was a meaningful look. "I think it really is," he said. "Let's hope so. We're going to do some investigations. Don't want to get ahead of ourselves."

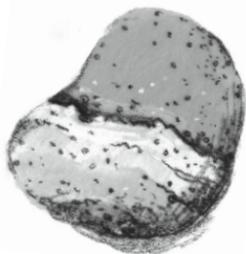
"Quite right," said Nana.

We didn't discuss the pebble any more after that, but something had happened in that tired old room. Something had passed between Nana and Grandpa thanks to my small, mysterious pebble. I didn't know why yet, but this was important and I felt a small glow inside me as the four of us sat there, Nana and Grandpa

holding hands and chatting about the weather and what they were going to have for tea, Mum watching on and me holding the pebble.

On the surface, it had been an ordinary day: a boy found a pebble on a beach and kept it with him. But there were 99,999,999,999 other pebbles on that beach, give or take one or two. I had a one in 100 billion chance of finding him. And that's not counting the unlikely odds of me being in Bognor at all that day, or of me even existing on our planet. I'm a lucky boy. And this was a lucky pebble.

Leaning back on my chair beside Nana, I shut my eyes and had the quickest of daydreams. The pebble felt warm in my palm. I imagined the waves washing over him. I heard a far-off cry. And when I looked up, I saw that Mrs Gumbridge had managed to knock a glass of water over her own feet. My grandparents chuckled quietly and I tapped my pebble to say thank you.



CHAPTER 4

I've lived in Bognor Regis for almost exactly eleven years and it's one of the few places I know with a surname. You can call it Bognor if you like, or if you want to be really polite, Mr Regis, but you might get some odd looks if you do that.

Before Bognor, I was an explorer. Well, my parents lived in a campervan and never stayed more than one night in the same place, and I was in my mum's tummy. Some of the boys in my class refuse to believe they were ever in their mums' tummies. They say it's disgusting. I used to tell them it was practical and miraculous, but they didn't listen so I stopped saying things to them. Unfortunately, that didn't stop them saying things to me like, "Where's your spade?" and "How's the trading,

Trader? Made any good trades today, Trader? Trading time, is it, Trader?"

But let's go back to that happy time before I was even born. My mum told me that pregnancy had been a good opportunity to see the world, but I don't think it was the ideal time for me. I didn't have the best view. I'm not complaining, but it is frustrating that I can't remember anything about where we were or what we saw.

As soon as I was born, we settled down. It was time to plant some roots, as Mum would say, and she chose Bognor. Dad got a job in London so spends most of his time travelling between there and Bognor, and Mum and I get to spend most of our time near the sea.

I'd be very happy not having roots pinning me to the ground, particularly the schoolground, where Ben and Rick laugh at me all the time. I don't care about them, though. I suppose I did care when they buried my books on the football pitch and when they filled my school bag with shingle, but only because it took me time to sort out, time that I'd much rather have spent doing the things I like doing. (Like beachcombing, which is why they were picking on me in the first place.)

But, apart from school, I like it here.

Bognor is in West Sussex, which is near East Sussex. To be precise, Bognor is 27 miles from East Sussex. It is 28 miles from the Isle of Wight, 60 miles from space, 70 miles from Dad's job and 110 miles from France. I've got a lot of maps in my bedroom, all lined up from east to west. That's another good thing about roots. It helps to have a house and a bedroom, so you've got proper places to put all your things.

Those distances are as the crow flies. I prefer those measurements because I can't drive. My dad, on the other hand, drives a lot. He never seems to take holidays any more because, according to my mum, there are people to pay for, which makes me feel more like a product than a person. But I do understand. My dad has to go to work in London so that my mum can look after me and Nana. Grandpa doesn't need so much looking after.

That's another thing that I like about Bognor.

It means we're near Grandpa. He lives exactly a quarter of a mile from our house. If I'm going there by myself, I sprint through town, skip across the six stepping stones that are almost hidden under the grass and weeds

in his garden, then wait outside the shed listening and trying to work out what he's up to inside. It could be anything, but it's probably one of five things: whittling, carving, polishing, contraptions or blowing. I'll explain all of those as we go along. But when I ask him what he's doing, it's always the same answer. "Tinkering."

After we said goodbye to Nana on the day I found the pebble, Grandpa and I went straight to his house. More specifically, we went straight into his shed, which is more like an Aladdin's cave than a garden shack. From the outside it looks quite ordinary, but on the inside there's so much stuff on so many shelves, in so many drawers, on hooks hanging from the ceiling, in cubbyholes inside an ancient wardrobe, and in every single other nook and cranny. It feels like it has ten times more corners than any cuboid could feasibly contain. Everywhere you look there's something spectacular. Incredible stones, of course; semi-precious, officially, but completely priceless to me. Topaz, sapphire and jet, all found by Grandpa on the beach, brought home, polished and placed in old camera-film canisters with handwritten labels. One of my favourites is the amber. Did you know that amber

has hidden electricity? If you rub it with a rag and hold torn-up scraps of paper near it ... wow! The paper grasps the amber, desperately clinging onto the surface. I never get bored of that trick.

But there aren't just stones or sticks in his shed, there are winches, wands and handles, magnets, tools and ropes too. It's like a hardware shop crossed with an antiques market where everything is free but you can only touch if the shopkeeper says it's safe. In pride of place, on the highest shelf, is a beautiful blue bottle, buffed up by the sea. It still has the message inside that was there when Grandpa found it. The writing is completely illegible, but I often try to decipher the code. Sometimes I pretend it's a treasure map. You can see why I want to spend more time here than at school.

I couldn't wait to use Grandpa's equipment to take a closer look at the pebble. Grandpa was excited too. He was normally unflappable because, I thought, he'd seen everything before. This pebble, though. This pebble had definitely flapped him.

"Come on! Let's go! Your pebble!" he yelled, as warmly as a yelling person can yell.

I pulled the pebble out of my pocket. Grandpa bent himself in half to look at him, his eyes growing wider and wider, his mouth opening too.

“May I hold it?” he asked eventually.

I nodded, and he tenderly took the pebble from me. He looked so much smaller in Grandpa’s paddles, and almost seemed to dance to his touch as he turned him over and over, probing delicately, muttering to himself all the while. “Yes... Just what I thought... Could well be... Most surprising...”

His hand snapped shut around the pebble.

I had to resist peeling open his four fingers again. I didn’t like not being able to see my pebble. “Where’s it from?” I asked. “And what is it? What’s it been doing? And how old is it? How did it get here?”

“Well” – Grandpa sighed – “I don’t know everything just yet.”

Yes, you do! I thought. *Otherwise you wouldn’t be so excited.* But Grandpa couldn’t be rushed, so I slumped on a chair and waited.

“I do know it’s not a Bognor rock,” he continued eventually.

I wanted to say, “I know *that*.” Deep down, I thought I might even know what type of stone he was. I was almost sure, but I didn’t want to get it wrong. And I wanted Grandpa to tell me his story because that’s what he does best.

“It’s unusual, this one,” he started. “But to know everything about it, we’ll need to work on it. We’ll need to strip it bare. And after that, it won’t look like this any longer. Are you all right with that?”

“OK, Grandpa. Sounds good to me.”

Grandpa nodded. “Good lad. It’s the same with people. If you want to really get to know someone, you have to get to their core. You have to ignore their trousers, their car, their jewellery. You have to look beneath the haircut, the make-up, the tattoos. Get to what’s inside them. That will tell you their real story.”

I knew what he meant. It isn’t just a case of stripping away a stone’s clothes. You have to buff away all the sludge that has stuck to it over time, rub it clean of all the gunge that clings like glue to a stone’s surface; you have to scour the build-up of time. And sometimes after that there’s not much left.

As long as we weren't harming the pebble himself, I didn't mind. I didn't like it when people bored holes through special stones to turn them into jewellery, and I really didn't like it when people scrawled messages or painted patterns all over them. Pebbles didn't need defacing. They just needed what my mum called TLC and what my granddad called elbow grease.

"Let's get to work," Grandpa said.

Together, we were going to rewind the clock, to find out the pebble's truth.

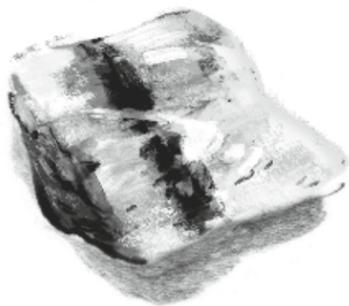
Unfortunately we couldn't rewind the actual time, and at that moment several of the clocks in the shed struck six p.m. DONG! DING! BLANG! I was late for tea at home. So we'd find out the pebble's truth just as soon as I was able to get back to Grandpa's shed. I tucked him back in my pocket and was about to hurry home when Grandpa stopped me at the door.

"This little stone will change everything," he said, as solemnly as he'd ever said anything to me before. "Everything."

Everything? I thought. There are a lot of things out there.

“How? What do you mean, Grandpa?” I asked, which I think was fair enough.

“Everything,” he repeated. “See you tomorrow!”



CHAPTER 5

I was still term time, but the summer holidays were teasing me from around the corner (like Ben and Rick most days), so annoyingly I couldn't go to Grandpa's the next morning. School was even more of a waste of time than usual. It was the last days of my last year in primary school, and we were all treading water. (Treading water is actually impossible because water is wet and floppy, and you can't touch it. I'm bad at doing it for this reason, so it's always more like slowly-sinking-in-water for me.)

That Tuesday, I packed my school bag on autopilot, walked to school and tried to drift anonymously through the day. This was my standard school behaviour. I'd always been a bit of an outsider. Also, I didn't have friends.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't a complete loner.

I didn't mind some of my teachers (two) and some of the other kids (Charlotte). Charlotte was in my class but had only joined for our last year. I'd known instantly that she was different to the other kids. Unusual. Special. Like my pebble. We'd only talked once or twice, about the things we liked – not about the things we didn't like – and she didn't laugh at me once.

The other kids didn't really get me. Most of the things I liked weren't the things that anyone else liked. Charlotte had her own unusual hobbies, but somehow this seemed to make her more popular, not less. All the other kids found her intriguing and me weird. So my school life was all about becoming invisible and getting to the end of the day as quickly as possible. Tuesday felt like the longest day of my school life so far. I was desperate to get back to Grandpa's shed.

At lunch I did my usual trick of going to the toilets after class, so I'd be last in the queue for the canteen. I took out the pebble and stared at every square millimetre of his surface. From every angle I saw something different, hints at what was inside. Something seemed to shine out at me. Feeling warm inside myself again, I emerged from

the toilets and joined the back of the line.

You might think being last in the queue would mean I'd be left with the dregs of dinner, the things that no one else wanted to eat, and you'd be right. But it also meant I could choose exactly who I sat next to. Or rather, who I didn't sit next to.

This time I spotted a seat in the far corner of the room, on a table with some kids a couple of years younger than me. I was safe here. I got to work on a mountain of cold mashed potatoes, some alarmingly white chicken strips and some very pale parsnips. I find that if I close my eyes and think about other things hard enough, I can distract my tastebuds from what they're meant to be doing. It's a really useful skill. Today I thought about my pebble.

When I opened my eyes, the Year Four kids had gone, and their puddings were being scoffed by the massive mouths of Ben to my right, and Rick to my left. It turned out my skill might not have been quite so useful on this occasion.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” whispered Rick. “Looks like your little friends have run away again. Serves you right for being so creepy.”

“Who eats with their eyes shut?” sneered Ben. “A weirdo who’s scared of mashed potato, that’s who.”

Ben and Rick carried on goading me and I tried even harder to think about my pebble, hoping they weren’t going to make me do their homework again. I should explain that I didn’t really do their homework. I’m cleverer than that. I’d discovered that Ben, being from France, was great at French. Rick, being the son of the maths teacher, was good at maths. But Ben hated maths, Rick hated French, and they weren’t clever enough to sort this out for themselves. So I simply copied Rick’s maths into Ben’s book and Ben’s French into Rick’s. They had no idea I wasn’t doing the work myself, and if a teacher ever got suspicious, they’d blame the two of them, rather than me. Perfect. Also, the teachers were just as scared of Rick and Ben as I was, so we’d all found a solution that worked.

When I didn’t react, they changed tack and started stealing food from my plate. I focused even harder, scrunching my eyes tighter. But I could tell they were still there, standing up now and leaning across me. The pebble started shining bright in my mind, then brighter

still, shaking until he exploded like a volcano and music came blaring from inside of him like angels singing. I started to smile.

Then nothing. I couldn't sense their grubby fingers any more. I couldn't hear their heavy breathing. I opened my eyes. They'd gone. I could still hear the music though, although it was less like music now and less angelic, more a constant shrill ringing of an alarm. It was the fire alarm! I'd been saved.

I followed the rest of the school into the playground. After the register was taken, Mr Fletcher, the headmaster, explained that someone had set the alarm off deliberately and that when he found the culprit, that person would get a detention on the very last day of term.

He was looking at Ben and Rick when he said it. They were the usual suspects. But I knew it couldn't have been them. Had my pebble somehow come to my rescue? Was he really that magic?

I had just a few days left at this school and for the first time I felt like I might actually make it through to the end.



CHAPTER 6

When we were finally released at the end of the school day, I ran straight to Grandpa's shed and burst in to find him holding a house brick wrapped in sandpaper.

"What are you doing?!" I said, shocked. I trust Grandpa as much as I trust my mum, but in quite different ways. He might not be able to make me my favourite tea or give me a hug when I don't realize I need one, but my grandpa can do pretty much everything else and I knew there'd be some sort of fairly logical explanation.

"Waiting for you, Trader. Come on, we need to get polishing. Where's the rock?"

How long had he been standing there? All day? This

was the most excited I'd ever seen him! He was hopping from one foot to the other in a very un-Grandpa-like way and seemed about a hundred years younger. Today was going to be even better than when Grandpa built Invention Number 61, a contraption to water plants using a hose, a stool, three colanders, a shuttlecock, two barrels and an anchor. It might even be better than the afternoon of Invention Number 125, when he made a doorbell extension which meant he could see who's at the front door without leaving his shed. He made it out of three funnels and a magnifying glass that he found on the beach on Christmas Day when I was six. "The sea gave me a present," he'd shouted. "One day it'll get you one, Trader. If you're patient."

I had been patient, and now the sea had given me something too.

So, taking it in turns with the sanding brick, we started to work away at the pebble, removing the top layer of sand and grime. Grandpa was at least twice as quick as me. I struggled to hold it in two hands, let alone one, but he wielded it like a magic wand and I loved watching him work.

We continued to pass the pebble back and forth between us for at least an hour, cleaning him up and, eventually, wearing both of us out. Despite being the strongest man in Bognor, Grandpa did get tired nowadays and I hated seeing him exhausted, so I knew it was time to go.

“We’ll get there soon,” he said. “We can wait just a little bit longer.”

I nodded. “OK, Grandpa, I’ll be back tomorrow.” I left him panting at the table, staring at the pebble.



On Wednesday, I was officially impatient for progress. I knew the pebble was unusual and different but so are some biscuits. I needed Grandpa to unlock his secrets and let me in. What was the story? What had I found? Why was he so much more important than a Jammie Dodger?

I have always hated Wednesdays, right from the very beginning. And by “the very beginning” I mean the *W* at the start. *Double-U*. That’s no name for a letter. It’s

a cop out. *M* doesn't go around calling itself *Double-N*. *W* should be a *Wee* or a *Wuu*. And then the rest of the word speaks for itself. Or rather it doesn't. There's really no need for the first *d* or one of the *es*. They just make life even harder. *Wensday*. There. Wouldn't that make life better?

For some reason, I said all this to Charlotte on this particular Wednesday morning. And as usual, Charlotte didn't laugh at me. "Yes, that makes sense," she said quietly.

Charlotte doesn't ever speak loudly, something that only makes people listen to her more. You have to be quiet and pay attention when she's speaking, otherwise you can't hear her at all. If you say the name "Charlotte" without making any noise with your throat, that's how Charlotte sounds all the time.

She didn't look at me but went on drawing a sketch of a bus on a scrap of paper. She'd only used a few strokes of her pen, but it was so accurate I could almost hear the engine and feel the movement.

"Did you do that by yourself?" I asked. She nodded. Her hair had fallen in front of her face, like curtains across a window. Charlotte has the shortest hair of any

girl in my year. It's very dark and straight and goes down to beneath her ears, but there it curls up abruptly and stops. It's the same length all the way round so she often hides her face behind it at the front.

"How did you do that by yourself?" I prodded further.

"I don't know," she said. "I just draw what's in my mind. Nothing else really."

"That makes sense too!" I said excitedly. "Like all those silly letters in Wed-nes-day! Things are better when they're simple!"

Charlotte still didn't look up but after a little pause, she nodded again. "I guess so," she said. She looked up then, briefly.

That was a typical conversation with Charlotte. She didn't waste ink or words and I was always happy sitting next to her. I could chat away and she'd listen and draw and she'd never question why I do the things I do or why I don't do the things everyone else does. She didn't tease me for collecting rocks and not liking football and she didn't call my grandpa or me a weirdo. Also, I liked that she had her own hobbies. She was into buses. Buses and art. And of course I didn't tease her for that.

“Why do you always draw buses?” I asked.

“Because...” she started. “Because they can take you anywhere. Also, they look great, don’t they? Like big red friendly spacecrafts or giant robot ladybirds.”

“I guess so,” I said, and then she smiled for a second.

Charlotte smiled as infrequently as my grandpa, and hers were usually secret. Not many people have seen Charlotte’s smile, but I have. By my calculations it comes out twice a month, like a crescent moon, but on its side. It gets bigger gradually then quickly fades again. Crescent moons take it in turns to face one way, then the other. Charlotte’s smile can be lopsided too. I wish I could see it more often, like I wish I could see a full moon every week or even every day.

Ben and Rick saw this particular smile too, which I was not happy about. I wanted it for myself. “Great drawing,” said Rick unimaginatively, looming over her shoulder and pushing me out of the way.

“That is good, actually,” agreed Ben, shoving me back further. “Can you show me how you did that?” Charlotte said yes because she’s nice, and I faded even more into the background.



When I entered Grandpa's shed that afternoon, I was greeted by some windscreen wipers that were mounted on a shelf and seemed to be hand-pedal operated. Also, they were covered in what looked like cream.

"I don't understand what that is, Grandpa," I said, not for the first time when talking about one of his inventions. Take Invention Number 468. I thought it was just a vacuum cleaner stuck to the ceiling, but Grandpa explained it was a Hair Hoover – a special machine that would suck his hair out of his eyes when his hands were dirty. Incredibly useful, he insisted, even though he didn't really have enough hair to actually get in his eyes.

"Summer's coming," he said this time. "Invention Number 502 is the Suncream Self-Spreader. You squeeze the stuff on the wipers, get pedalling, and it'll spread it all over your back without anyone else having to be involved. It's quicker too, and much more even. Watch." Grandpa started pushing the pedals with his hands and the wipers flung suncream onto every wall of the shed.

“You’ve got to stand very close and you should probably wear swimming goggles,” he said. “Now then, I’ve got to do a spot of metal work. I’d actually put those blinkers on now, if I were you.”

After placing the pebble on a cloth to one side, Grandpa pulled a metal chain from his knapsack and laid it on the table. It looked weighty and distinguished, like something a mayor would wear, but it had clearly been bashed and bent over time. From his toolbox he then plucked his biggest hammer and set about walloping what looked like a very expensive necklace as hard as he possibly could.

“Just got to straighten it up,” he shouted, and as sparks started to fly, I grabbed the goggles and pulled them over my face. Despite the thickness of the lenses, I couldn’t help but flinch with every blow, so I started telling Grandpa all about Charlotte’s bus picture to distract me from the violence.

“That sounds like a cracking drawing, Trader. Now if I can just flatten this bit...” he muttered.

CLANG!

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

“Stubborn thing...” CLANG!

“She’s called Charlotte, Grandpa. I haven’t really spoken to her much since she joined the school, but that’s cos I haven’t really spoken to anyone much.”

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

He carried on with incredible precision considering the size of the tool he was brandishing.

“But I think I might speak to her more this week. I might tell her about the pebble.”

CLANG!

“Grandpa? What do you think?”

Grandpa wasn’t listening. “I just need to get it back to how it was before.”

“Looks like you’re doing well,” I said. “I was just saying I reckon Charlotte might be interested in the pebble. Do you think so, Grandpa?” I was hoping I might have made a friend at last.

CLANG! CLANG!

“Grandpa, do you think Charlotte will care about the stone?”

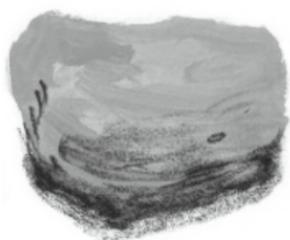
CLANG!

“Grandpa!” I shouted in desperation.

I'd never shouted at him before, and he seemed startled. With a quick shake of his head, his familiar grandfatherly expression returned and he looked at me with warm, tired eyes.

"I'm sorry, Trader. I was miles away. Years away! Yes. Yes! You must tell her about this. Will you just give me another couple of days? I promise, I'll tell you everything soon. Everything."

I nodded calmly and left him to it, but on my way home I had to stop and scream at a hedge in frustration. We were so near to the end of the stone's story but still so far from the beginning. Luckily, events at school would take my mind off the pebble for the next 48 hours. Unluckily, those events were fairly traumatic for me.



CHAPTER 7

It's extremely tidy, my bedroom. Mum doesn't think it is, but it definitely is. She tells me to tidy it every single day, almost as often as she tells me to listen and to stop sprinting in the kitchen, but it is the tidiest room I've ever seen. I know where absolutely everything is and absolutely everything is exactly where it should be. I've got an inventory, so I should know.

My clothes live on the floor. That way, I can see what T-shirt I want to wear on any given day as soon as I wake up. Also, I can put on the correct shorts for a particular situation immediately and I can throw my socks into their section without even looking. It is definitely the most efficient way of storing my clothes.

This system also means that my wardrobe is free for

more important things. The hangers are where I suspend anything long and dangly that I've found at the beach: ropes, nets, flags, seaweed and jellyfish. These last two are not so popular with Mum, but I always dry them on the washing line first so it's usually not a problem.

I keep my books in my drawers so they're safe and out of sight. If their spines were constantly staring at me, I'd panic that I've not yet read them all and never get anything else done. This way they are grouped, labelled and tucked away.

Currently I have eight drawers. Two in the wardrobe, three in my chest of drawers, one in my bedside table and two under my bed. This is the perfect number because all my books can fit in all the spaces and they all have their proper place: my old I-SPY books in the wardrobe (all completed), along with every school book I've ever had, and past and future diaries in the chest of drawers. There's a total of 99 in there because I like to be prepared and once I'm over 100 years old I'll stop and spend my remaining time reading them back.

My maps live together under the bed near my feet. Stone guides and tide timetables are stowed under there

too, but at the head end. There is also a complete set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* stacked up in the corner. It's outside the drawer system but that's OK because it's enormous so has to have its own area. Also, I use it all the time so it needs to be out. It's far more reliable than our Sussex internet.

The drawer beside my bed contains my most precious items and is the only one with a lock, so no one else can handle my current diary or *The Pebbles on the Beach* by Clarence Ellis. These are what I look at when I go to sleep and when I wake up.

This excellent book storage means my bookshelves are free for even more important things – my stones. The shelves surround the room and the stones are ordered by type, alphabetically, with individual families lined up smallest to largest. There are 85 stones in all, and when the pebble was finally identified, he'd be here too.

On the shelf to the left nearest the door when you come in, you'll find two cubes of chalky chert that looked like crumbly Greek cheese when I found them, on the same day, on the beach. Next to these, three citrine pebbles, pale and perfectly round, one that I plucked