



THORN BERRY HIGH

BIG MAIN ROAD

AMY'S NEW HOUSE

BIG CITY
5 MILES

CATCHMENT DIVIDER FOR SCHOOLS

POPS + GRAN'S + PAUL + JAY'S

50 MILES
(1 HOUR)

SOPHIA'S HOUSE

SHOPS

CASSIE + JOSH'S HOUSE

ASHLEIGH PRIMARY

DANCE STUDIO

2 MILES

AMY'S OLD HOUSE
(NOW JASMINE'S)

MOLLY'S HOUSE

3 MILES TO VALLEY HIGH

VALLEY HIGH

One

“The thing I can’t understand,” says Cassie, slanting her eyes at me and redoing her ponytail as if she needs to drag this out a bit, “is how you’ve got a place at our high school. I mean, Sophia actually lives *in* the catchment area, right on the edge near the road, and she’s only *just* got in. So how can you have a place when you’re miles away?”

I look down at the playground tarmac and roll my shoe over some loose pebbles.

“Ames used to live in the village,” says Molly, resting her head on my shoulder. Her hair smells of peaches. It always does. “Right near me. Surely that’s enough, and she goes to Ashleigh, like us. She *has* to come to Valley High.”

“I am,” I say, shuffling on the bench. “Mum and Dad told me right at the beginning that they would make sure it was all OK.”

Cassie shrugs and looks across at the field. “I don’t know how, that’s all,” she says. Molly lifts her head off my shoulder.

I feel her elbow Cassie to make her stop. "Of course I hope you *do* have a place with us," says Cassie. "But the rules are you have to live in the catchment area in October and you moved *ages* ago."

The rules are... Who does Cassie think she is? The prime minister?

"It wasn't ages ago," says Molly.

"It was last summer," I say.

"Oh," says Molly. She turns to me. I'm looking at my shoes but I can feel her staring at me, as if she's just got really worried about it.

"My parents promised," I say quietly, as if I don't quite believe them myself now. "They said when we moved, they would make sure I still got in. Lots of kids go to Valley High from far away."

"Yeah," says Cassie. "But my mum says they've built tons of new houses since then and that changes everything."

I bite my lip. I want to tell Cassie to shut up. *My mum says...* Who is she today? The queen of high school placements?

But I am feeling uneasy in my tummy.

"It'll be hard," says Cassie, jumping off the bench, "for us to stay triple besties if we're not together." She glances at me and Molly, but we just stare ahead and don't say anything.

One of the lunch staff opens the big door and props it open, about to call us in.

"Well, I'm just saying," says Cassie, "you weren't on the list this morning for Wednesday's Year Seven visit. I saw it on Miss Riley's desk." She walks over to the doors and waits with Sophia.

Well, I'm just saying... I mimic under my breath.

"I wish she'd stop with this triple bestie thing," says Molly. "She told Jess the other day that she couldn't hang out with us. It's not right."

"I know," I say and I lean in to her.

"You must be on the list," she says. "Let's ask this afternoon. Come on." But I can't move. I feel sick. I stare at the ground, at my feet. I'm cold all over. Why wasn't I on the list? Last week I gave Mum the letter to order my uniform and it's still on the side, under her diary. Molly showed me her bus pass that arrived yesterday. I don't know anything about a bus.

We walk over to join the others. I don't think I can eat a thing.

"Are you sure you moved in the summer?" asks Molly, her arm wrapped in mine. "I think it was later."

"I'm sure," I say and I remember the removal men, dripping with sweat in the summer heat, coming up to my

room to take all my boxes, me tucked in the corner of my bed, staring at the clouds painted on the ceiling for the very last time. Mum promised my new bedroom ceiling would have clouds. Bigger, better, whiter, fluffier clouds but the ceiling is still mucky white and cracked.

“Actually, you’re right,” says Molly, hugging her packed lunch box to her chest. “We had that sleepover in the new garden before school went back.” I nod. “And we came to your house at Halloween, do you remember?”

How could I forget?

“We hid in that cupboard,” says Molly, “and scared ourselves silly. And Cassie screamed when the floorboards squeaked.” I smile a little, as if I remember it as fun. But it wasn’t fun to me. It was horrid. I hated the new house. I still do. It’s old and ugly and the shower works in one tiny spurt, like a broken hosepipe.

“It was so fun,” says Molly, laughing out loud. “Maxi wore that pumpkin Babygro with the matching hat.” I smile at that. He did look super cute. “Remember your mum hung doughnuts on the washing line and we had that race to see who could eat the most? And Sophia won. And then we wrapped your dad in toilet paper, like a mummy. We did his crutches too. And your gran was there, in her giant witch’s hat and she made those eyeball cakes!”

I smile and nod and I’m glad Molly has a good memory of that night, even if I don’t. I think it was one of the first times we really knew Pops wasn’t well. He ate a whole plate of biscuits, every one of them. And then he got really upset at the costumes and noise and Gran had to take him home early, her witch’s hat shoved on the back shelf of the car, its pointy top all twisted.

We sit in our usual Year 6 spot. Cassie is up at the counter. We open our packed lunches. Mum’s put a note in.

Amy – sorry there’s no yoghurt. Love you x

“I wish you hadn’t moved away,” says Molly.

“Yeah, me too,” I say and I take out my tuna wrap and I feel suddenly very tearful thinking about the list of names for Valley High. The list I’m pretty sure my name’s not on.

Two

It's nearly a year since we moved but I still hate home time. I still hate watching Cassie and Molly and Sophia walk down the road, chatting away while I wait with Sam for someone to pick us up. Sam is fine about it all. He likes the new house. He doesn't care about the peeling wallpaper and the stained carpets. He loves the garden. It's wild and rough and that's heaven to Sam.

The worst part of all is watching the new Year 3 girl, Jasmine, walk home with her mum. They always wave at me as if we are friends. They bought our old house. Jasmine probably puts her bag on the lovely white banister and goes and lies down on her bed and looks at the clouds on the ceiling. My clouds. Mine.

Mum pulls up and we both get in. "Good day?" she says. I don't say anything. I don't want to talk. Sam starts rambling on about some bird called a nuthatch that he saw at lunchtime.

"Are you absolutely sure it wasn't a butpatch?" says Mum, elbowing me gently as she waits for us to put our seat belts on. "Or a wutmatch." My mouth is desperate to smile but I bend my lips so it can't. I slump down and stare at the parade of kids passing by.

Mum restarts the engine. Sam rummages in his bag and gets out his magazine. I think of the list again and I feel a bit sick and cross. All mixed up. When I get like this it's like little insects are chasing around inside me. A kid at school had scabies once. It's this thing where little mites live under your skin and make you itch and itch. That's how I feel right now. Like thousands of little mites have tunnelled under my skin.

"You haven't returned the uniform order letter for Valley High," I say, my words all snappy and sharp. "Sophia said the deadline is this week. Everyone else has sent it in."

Mum pulls away. "Um," she says. "No, I haven't yet. I'll get that sorted."

I stare out of my window, trace a line of bird mess that's been there for weeks.

"And there was a list. Of people going to the Year Seven welcome day. And I'm not on it."

Mum's phone rings through the speakers.

"Sorry," she says. "I'll have to take this quickly."

“Course you do,” I snap. Mum answers it and her boss’s voice booms through the car. It’s funny how she tells us she never likes to talk while driving, even though she’s hands-free. Funny how right now, when I’ve put her on the spot, funny how *now* she’s talking. Surinder starts rambling on about tests and the clinic and trials and Mum answers her with boring science stuff and they talk all the way home. And then I feel a bit bad because Surinder says that things need to be looked at ‘more carefully’ and Mum sighs a bit and grips the steering wheel. Mum’s job at the laboratory sounds super hard. But she had to take it. She had to earn more money. After Dad’s accident, there were lots of things that ‘had’ to happen.

She parks the car and they are still talking. Sam jumps out, flings his bag at the front door and then races round the side to the garden. I’m going to wait. She’s going to answer me. But she just puts her boss on to her mobile and climbs out and keeps talking.

One great, big *sarcoptes scabiei* races through me. That’s what one mite is called. I memorized it. I never even knew the poor kid in Year 3 who had them. But Cassie made up some stupid story that we had been spotted buying ice cream together and I had scabies too. I get eczema sometimes on my wrists, little sore patches that need cream.

She pointed at the tiny red spots and told everyone I had the dreaded mites. She went on and on about it, as if it was the funniest joke ever. So I learned everything I could about scabies and by the time everyone had forgotten about it, I was convinced I *did* have them. Mum found me crying one day, really crying. She sat on the bathroom floor next to me and waited and hugged me and I told her. We went straight to the pharmacy. The lady was really nice and said it was perfectly normal to worry about such things. She took me and Mum into a quiet room and asked me some questions and said she was certain I didn’t have them. Mum bought me a chocolate bar, a huge one with biscuit chunks, and I felt so much better.

Mum knocks on the window, the phone still glued to her ear and signals at me to get out. I shake my head. No time for Mum now to sit next to me and hug me and wait for me to talk. Oh no. I slide down further in my seat and look away. She goes inside the house, still talking and I just sit there for a while, staring at the front door and the peeling paint and the piles of bricks. They’ve been sat there for months. Dad was going to build a bit of wall at the front of the drive. But then his leg was bad again and he never got going. Sam has made them into a bug hotel. Spider webs link up across the top bricks.

It starts to get hot in the car so I open the door and let the cool breeze blow in.

Molly wanted to ask Miss Riley about the list. She wanted to see my name on it. There, in black and white. But I didn't want to ask. Because I have a very strong feeling that my name wasn't on the list. And then Cassie would be right, which always makes her smile in that annoying 'told you so' way.

No one comes back out to get me. I slump down further in my seat and then I hear the school bus from Thornberry, the high school on this side of town, trundle by. It stops just along the road. I stare in the wing mirror and watch and wait for the kids to pass by our house. They all seem very tall. The uniform is green. Who wears a green uniform? And the girls have pleated skirts. Apparently, the pleats make it hard to hitch the skirts up. I heard about that in October, when we went to the school open evening. I walked round chewing gum, refusing to take part, telling anyone who asked that I was going to Valley High. Mum and Dad were so cross. I only know about the skirt because while I was having a pee, I heard two girls talking. They were washing their hands and I caught bits when the water stopped. They were moaning about the new skirts and how they couldn't roll the waistband over.

It was horrid, that trip. I was so mad, so determined not to take part. And then it got worse. Mum was upset with me and asked Dad to drive home. But his leg was too stiff to drive so Mum had to, both hands gripping the steering wheel except when she had to lift one to quickly wipe her eyes with a crumpled tissue. Dad sat very still, breathing hard, and I slumped down in the back seat, staring out of the window.

Dad's accident changed everything. He had been away, helping his friend build a house and he had left late to get home. He had driven too fast over a patch of ice. His own fault. That's what he says. Spun the car and banged one side of it into a tree. The phone call had been late at night. Gran and Pops were staying, helping Mum while Dad had been away. They could still do that then. Pops could cope then. The phone rang and rang and when Mum answered it, she screeched a little and shouted for Gran and I knew something bad had happened to Dad. I lay very still, trying to make out the shapes of my clouds on the ceiling, trying to trace the outline in the dark and hoping that if I could make the whole cloud join up, everything would be OK.

It took a long time for him to get better. Months in hospital, months in a wheelchair. He couldn't build houses. We weren't sure if he would *ever* be able to build houses

again. We didn't have much money. We had to sell our lovely house and buy a cheaper one, out of town. And that's how we ended up here.

There is a tap on the window. Dad is there, holding Sam's bag and a glass of juice.

"Come on," he says. "Bad day?" I peel myself out of the car and take the juice and lean in to him. He smells good. He strokes my hair. We stand for a second and then I hear voices and another group of high schoolers tumble by, yelling and tugging at each other and I quickly break away from Dad and turn back to get my bag. I unzip it and stuff my jumper inside and zip it back tight. I check the kids have passed and then I look at Dad.

"I haven't got a place at Valley High, have I?"

Dad pulls his hand through his hair. He moves from one foot to the other. And then he looks at me and his eyes are watery, like they were for so long last year.

"No, Amy love." He sniffs hard and rests his hands on my shoulders. "We've tried everything. We are *trying* everything, but I'm sorry, right now, you're down for Thornberry." And then he hugs me hard and I stare at the pile of bricks and a spider on its web, scuttling along one of the threads. "I do have some good news, though," says Dad, one arm wrapped around me as he leads me round the back of the house. "I've

been signed fit for work. I heard today." He smiles, really smiles and that makes my heart jump because since his accident, Dad's smile has never been quite the same. The scar has pulled it slightly to one side and sometimes I still notice, as if the old one is hiding underneath.

"That's great, Dad," I say.

"It means I can agree a date to start taking on some new building projects and I can get going on this pile again." He wipes his hand along the windowsill, pulling at the splintered wood and then looks up at the roof.

"Look, Ames," he says, pointing to the sky. "A dinosaur." I follow his eyes, look up past the roof at the cloud passing by, three white strands pulling out like the horns of a triceratops. It's our thing, looking for shapes in clouds. I try to smile but I can't take part in our cloud game right now.

"I miss the old house," I say, quickly turning away. It will spoil Dad's news if he sees me start to cry. I don't know why I'm crying. I don't know if it's because I'm going to Thornberry or because I miss my old home or because I'm still mad with Mum.

There are so many reasons right now.