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Opening extract from
The Last Wild

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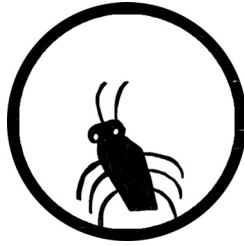
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My story begins with me sitting on a bed, looking out of the window.

I know that doesn't sound like much. But let me tell you where the bed is, and what I can see from it. This bed is right in the corner of a room only just big enough for it, and the bed is only just big enough for a kid my age.

(Twelve – just about to be thirteen – and skinny.)

The window is the size of the whole wall, made of special tinted glass that means the room stays the same temperature all the time. The room is locked shut and you need an electronic keycard to open the door. If you could open it, you would be in a long corridor with absolutely *nothing* in it apart from cameras in the ceiling and a fat man in a purple jacket and trousers sitting opposite on a plastic chair. Sleeping, most likely.

This fat man is called a *warden*. And there are lots of them here. But I think he is probably the fattest.

The corridor with the cameras and the fat warden is on the seventh floor of a building which is like a big upside-down boat made of glass and metal. Everywhere you look there are reflections – of you, other faces, the storm clouds. The curved glass walls stretch all the way down to the edge of some very high cliffs – only grass and mud for miles around, with rocks and sea below. The cliffs are in the north of the Island, in the middle of the Quarantine Zone – far away from the city and my home.

The name of this building is Spectrum Hall.

Or in full: Spectrum Hall Academy for Challenging Children.

It's just like a big school mainly. Only the most boring school in the world, that you can never, ever leave.

And as for what I can see out of the window?

I know that what is really there is sea and sky and rocks, but the light in the ceiling bounces off the glass into my eyes. So when I look out into the dark sky all I can actually see is my reflection. That and the hairy grey varmint flapping about in the corner. A 'moth' is what they call this kind – with antennae and spotted grey wings. I shoo him away, only to send him circling round the light above.

I try to ignore the flittering noise above me and carry on with my practice. 'Bed', 'chair' (one, screwed to the

floor), 'window', 'my watch' – loads of words to practise with. You see, I know what the words mean. I know how to write them. I just can't say them. No more than the moth can.

Not since Mum died.

I look at my watch again. The chunky green digital one she gave me. The last present I ever got from her. My favourite present I ever got from her. Even Dad nicked it once, because he thought it was 'nifty', and I had to hassle him to give it back.

I'm lucky to still have it – we aren't meant to keep anything personal at the Hall, but I kicked and bit so they couldn't take it. I flick the picture on to the screen.

It's a summer afternoon in our garden, behind our house in the city. You can just see the sun shining on the River Ams, gleaming beyond the top of the back wall, and far away on the other side, the skyline of tall glass towers.

Premium.

City of the south, and capital city of the Island. When the rest of the world grew too hot, and cracked open in the sun, everyone came to live on this cold grey rock – the Island – in their hundreds and thousands. If only it was hot *here* sometimes. The weather is never good. But for me this picture has just always been where our home is, where Dad is – and where, one day, I know I'll return.

Right now though, I'm more interested in the person in the garden.

It's my mum, Laura, before she got sick. She has

long curly hair the colour of shiny new coins, and she's laughing, at something Dad or I have said.

I used to be able to talk normal, you see, like everyone. Mum and I talked a lot. Dad and I talked a bit. Now though, it's like trying to learn the hardest language in the world. I know I can inside; it's just when I try to speak – nothing happens. The more I try, the harder it gets.

They want to make me talk again here – Doctor Fredericks with his tests – but it's not working. People still stare at you funny as you go red in the face, or sometimes they laugh and make up what they think you were going to say.

I'd rather try and talk to a varmint, thanks. There's enough of them – that's for sure. Flapping moths that circle round lights, like the one in my room right now, and spiders lurking in corners, or cockroaches scuttling around by the bins. All the useless insects and pests that the red-eye left behind. We don't even bother with their real names half the time. Varmints is all they are.

And I have practised talking at them, as it happens. Not that you're meant to go near them – even though everyone knows they're the only thing that can't get the virus. So I haven't reported this flapping one in my room. Because I like practising with him there buzzing around. He won't talk back. But at least he doesn't laugh or stare – I can almost pretend he's listening.

I do that a lot.

Right, varmint, I say to myself in my head, *let's see what you think I'm saying this time.*

So I'm just about to have a go at saying 'B-E-D' again – or at least the 'B', or even a noise that sounds like a 'B' – when the speaker hidden in the ceiling splutters into life. You can almost see the spit fly out of the holes. The varmint whirls angrily away; he doesn't like it any more than I do.

'Calling all, ah, students. Your first meal of the day is, ah, served, in the Yard. You have t-t-ten minutes.'

There's a clank as he replaces the microphone in its stand, and a hum as he forgets to turn it off and I hear his heavy breathing for a minute before he remembers and flicks the switch.

Doctor Fredericks, the Governor.

He can give himself as many titles as he likes; he's still just an ugly man in a white coat with a comb-over, whose breath smells of sweets. The day after they brought me here – bundled out of my home in the middle of the night – I gathered with all the new kids in the Yard while he stood behind a lectern reading words off a screen, his jacket flapping in the air-con.

'Good afternoon, ahm, boys and, er, girls. Welcome to S-Spectrum, ah, Hall. You have been sent here because your parents want to, ahm, f-f-forget about you. Your, ah, schools can no longer t-t-tolerate you, so they have asked us to help. Because we are a special institution, dealing with special c-c-cases like yours. And I'll tell you now how

it's going to, ahm, work.' His amplified words bounced off the walls. 'Look behind you at the sea. It is the filthiest and most p-p-polluted sea in the world, we're told.'

He stared down at us through his bottle-top glasses and flicked away a loose strand of greasy hair as we gazed out of the glass walls behind us at the waves chopping and crashing at the cliffs.

But I didn't believe that Dad wanted to forget about me.

Six years later, I still don't.

'There are t-t-two ways, ah, out of here. Through our front gates, as an improved and functioning member of society. Or off these bally c-c-cliffs and into the, ahm, sea. So either learn to, ah, m-m-modify your behaviour, or jolly well learn to, ah, dive!'

I haven't learnt to do either yet.

I pull on my trackies, shove my feet into my trainers and strap on my watch. Then there's a beep, and the light in my door goes red, orange, then green, before sliding open with a hiss. The fat warden is standing there in his crumpled purple jacket and trousers, my door keycard dangling on a strap from around his wrist.

'Come on, Jaynes,' he mutters, scratching his hairy chin. 'I haven't got all day.'

I'm not surprised, with so much sitting on your bum and sleeping to do, I think. That's one of the advantages of not being able to speak – you never get in bother for talking back. I step out into the corridor and wait.

One by one, the other doors along from me beep and slide open. And out come the other inhabitants of Corridor 7, boys and girls my age, all in trackies and trainers like me, their hair unbrushed, their faces blank. We look at each other, and then the warden silently points to the other end of the corridor.

I feel his eyes boring into my back as we walk past him along the passage and into the open lift.

The Yard is full of noise, which gets right inside my head. Most of it from the queue for the servery, a polished counter set into the wall, lined with pots. Metal pots full of pink slop, which some women with grey hair and greyer faces are busy dishing out, all of them wearing purple tunics with a big F stamped on the front.

F for Factorium. The world's biggest food company. More like the only food company now, since the red-eye came and killed all the animals. Every last one, apart from the varmints.

So Facto started making formula for us to eat instead. Which now makes them the only *company*, full stop – they run *everything*. First the government asked them to take care of the red-eye, and then they ended up taking care of the government. They run the country now, from hospitals to schools. Including this one. I don't know why making food or killing animals makes you good at running schools as well, but the first thing you learn in a Facto school is: never argue with Facto.

'What's the flavour, miss?' shouts Wavy J, waving his

plastic bowl in the air, somehow first in the queue already. That's why he's called Wavy – he's always at the front of every line, waving. I don't even know his real name.

Behind him is Big Brenda, a fat girl with hair in bunches who has to sleep on a reinforced bed. She's here because she ate her mum and dad out of house and home – even during the food shortage – and got so big they couldn't look after her any more. That pale-faced kid with bags under his eyes is Tony – who got in trouble for stealing tins of food. And now he's here, quietly nicking some headphones out of the bag belonging to Justine, who is here because she was caught being part of a gang. A gang of thieves who got around everywhere on bikes, who nicked not just tins of food, but anything they could get their hands on. Like music players and headphones. That little kid she's talking to with spiky hair and a devil grin – that's Maze, who has an attention deficiency. The kind of attention deficiency that makes you chase your mum around the kitchen with a knife. And then right at the back, behind them all, is me.

I know their names. I listen to their conversations. I know why they're here.

But I don't know why I am.