TWO

News of a Hurricane

It started the day the letter from Aunt Gloria arrived.

Aunt Gloria is my mum's sister. Mum calls her Glo and Kat calls her Auntie Glo. Dad calls her Hurricane Gloria because he says she leaves a trail of devastation in her wake. I asked him what this meant. Did it mean she was clumsy like I am? He said it wasn't so much *things* that she upset, which wouldn't be so bad; more people and emotions. Does that mean she is evil? I asked. Dad said she didn't do it on purpose, so no, she wasn't evil, she was just a handful. I asked him what being a handful meant, and he said it meant being larger than life. When I tried to ask what being larger than life meant, he put his hand on my shoulder. 'Not now, Ted,' he said.

The morning Aunt Gloria's letter came was the same as any other. I heard the post drop as usual on the doormat. I was on Shreddie number three, and

the radio weather forecast was saying it was set fair but with a risk of showers in the southeast. Kat was eating toast standing up, wriggling. It wasn't that she had fleas, although that's what it looked like. She was listening to her weirdo music on headphones. Which meant she wouldn't hear the weather and wouldn't wear a raincoat or bring her umbrella to school. Which meant that she would get wet and I wouldn't and this was good.

Dad was hopping round in one sock, complaining about how the washing machine had eaten all his socks and he was late. Mum was looking through the laundry bag for a spare.

'Ted, get the post,' Mum said. She was in her nurse's uniform and even I know that when her words come out short and sharp like that, you do what she asks, even though I hate leaving my Shreddies to turn to mush.

I came back with six envelopes. Kat saw me and snatched them off me and picked out a big brown envelope and a small white one. I could see our school emblem on the white one. It is like a

squashed-up X and over it is a bishop's hat, which is called a mitre. Kat tried to hide it behind the big brown envelope, but Mum saw her.

'Not so fast, Katrina,' Mum said. When Mum calls Kat Katrina, you know that trouble is coming.

Kat's lips pressed up tight. She handed over the post, all items except the brown envelope, which she held up for all to see that it was addressed to her, Katrina Spark. She opened it and a catalogue came out. It was called *Hair Flair*. She walked over to the door, head nodding.

I ate Shreddies numbers seven through seventeen.

Dad started humming the theme tune of *Laurel and Hardy*, his favourite thing to watch on TV. He'd got the other sock on and was buttering toast and his hair stood on end and Mum would have said he looked 'the spit' of Stan. 'The spit' is a way to say 'exactly like' but don't ask me why. Anyway, Stan has brown hair and Dad's hair is fair, like mine, so he doesn't look *exactly* like Stan at all.

'*Katrina!*' Mum bellowed.

The eighteenth Shreddie fell off my spoon.

'What?'

'This letter from your school . . .'

'What letter from my school?'

'This letter. The one you tried to hide.'

'What about it?'

'It says you were missing last week, without a sick note. Last Tuesday.'

'Oh. Yeah.'

'Well?'

'Well, what?'

'Where were you?'

'She was AWOL, Mum,' I suggested. Kat and Mum stared at me. 'AWOL, like in the army,' I explained. 'Absent Without Leave.'

'Get stuffed, you creep,' Kat hissed. She went out and slammed the door after her.

The radio programme switched back to the news.

'Turn that thing off, Ted,' Mum said. I fiddled with the knob, but she pulled the plug out of the socket instead. There was silence. I heard Dad munching some toast.

'She's going off the rails, Ben,' Mum said to Dad.

'Off the rails,' I repeated, thinking of train accidents. I suppose Mum was saying something about Katrina being AWOL. Maybe 'off the rails' was another way of saying 'skiving', which means not going to school when you should. But I didn't dare check, not with Mum in that mood.

'Off the rails, and nobody cares,' she said.

'I used to bunk off at her age,' Dad said. 'I'd spend the day riding buses and smoking fags in the park.' My twentieth Shreddie nearly went down the wrong way. The thought of Dad with a cigarette in hand was very strange. He never smokes now. Dad tapped Mum's shoulder and when she looked up at him, he kissed her on the middle of her forehead. It gave off a funny squeak that nearly put me off the rest of my Shreddies. 'Let's discuss it tonight, Faith. I've got to run. There's a meeting about blowing up the Barracks.'

Mum's lips went up a bit. 'OK, love. Later.'

I should explain here that Dad is not a terrorist who goes around blowing up the places where soldiers live. He is a demolition expert and the

Barracks was the local name for Barrington Heights, the tallest tower block in our south London borough. It used to be where people who are socially excluded lived. Being socially excluded is a bit like being excluded from school. Instead of a head teacher telling you you have to leave, it's more that everybody in the rest of society acts like you don't exist. And you end up with all the other people who are being ignored. And you're so angry that society is treating you like this that you take drugs and shoplift and form gangs in revenge. And the people in Barrington Heights used to do all those things. Dad said it was not that the people were bad to begin with. He said the building was sick and made them sick too, a bit like a virus. So he and the council had decided to move them to new homes and blow up the building and start again.

Dad got his jacket on. He said, 'Goodbye, Ted,' to me and went out. Then Mum sat down again and went through the rest of the post. She got to the last piece, a pale lilac envelope. I saw her holding it to her nose and sniffing it, as if it was edible. Then she

smiled. Her lips went right up, but her eyes went watery. This meant she was sad and happy at the same time.

'Glory be,' she whispered. She opened it and read what was inside. I ate my last three Shreddies, numbers thirty-five through thirty-seven. She put down the lilac sheet of paper and ruffled the top of my head, a thing she does sometimes which makes my hand shake itself out.

'Hold tight, Ted,' she said. 'A hurricane's coming.'

'No, it isn't,' I said. 'We're moving into a large anticyclone.' I'm a meteorologist, or will be when I grow up. So I know. Hurricanes die out halfway across the Atlantic. They rarely hit Britain. Even the one in 1987 wasn't technically a hurricane. The weatherman called Michael Fish, who is famous for getting it wrong, actually got it right. It was only a bad storm and it had no name. A real hurricane is always given a name. Like Hannah, which gusted up to 160 miles an hour in 1957, or Hugo, which flattened half of South Carolina in the USA in 1989. Or Hurricane Katrina, a category-five storm

which devastated New Orleans in 2005. (I am sure it is no coincidence that one of the most catastrophic storms of all time has the same name as my sister.)

'I don't mean it *literally*,' Mum said, whisking my empty cereal bowl away from me. 'It's Hurricane Gloria who's on her way. My sister. Remember? She's coming to visit us, along with her son, Salim.'

'The ones who live in Manchester?'

'That's right. It's been more than five years since we saw them, Ted. I just don't know where the time's gone.'

It sounded like she thought time was something that comes and goes like the weather. I shook my head. 'No, Mum,' I explained. 'Time doesn't go anywhere.'

'It does in this house, Ted. Down a bloody black hole.'

I blinked at her, trying to figure out if she might have a point. She laughed and said she was joking and ruffled my hair again. 'Go on, Ted. Off to school with you.'

So I went on my zigzag way across the common,

thinking about time, black holes, Einstein's Theory of Relativity and storm warnings. I imagined Hurricane Gloria building up force as it drew nearer, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. My thoughts were so good that I nearly ended up walking into the pond on the wrong side of the common and got to school only just on time. 'Down a black hole,' I said to myself as I ran across the playground. My hand shook itself out. 'Down a bloody black hole.'