

Throughout the book, we get Tom's version of events and shortly afterwards, Fran's interpretation of them. She does it succinctly in ten points and it won't surprise you to learn that her take on things is often very different from Tom's.

In this excerpt, Tom and Hattie have managed to oversleep, on a school day. Oh, and you should know that Hattie is currently obsessed with pirates.

'Eight fifteen, it can't be eight fifteen.'

Tom picked up the alarm clock and shook it, as if that would help.

'Right, Hattie. Listen to me,' he said, trying to wrap the duvet around his bottom half and get out of bed, which was making him flail around like a demented, half-hatched butterfly.

'We have fifteen minutes, just fifteen minutes to dress, grab something to eat and get out of the house.'

Hattie did not look galvanised. He thought about that and changed his tone. 'OK, Midshipman Howard,' he bellowed, 'we're holed below the waterline and have only minutes to abandon ship.'

'Yay,' Hattie shouted, now fuel-injected. 'Can I wear my eye patch?' She hurtled from the room.

Tom plunged around, grabbing items of clothing and shoving himself into them. He hated arriving at school as if they were being chased by demons. It

was what people expected of single fathers. 'Poor Mr. Howard, he tries, doesn't he?'

He worked hard to make sure they were rarely late and had the drive to Hattie's school and back along the valley to work, precision-planned. But not today. Today he'd be bringing up the rear with the woman who delivered her kids to school still in her dressing gown.

Hattie was at the door, dressed and eye patch in place. 'Ready Captain. Permission to take on supplies?'

'What?' he said and she whispered 'Breakfast' and they were back on track.

'Good idea,' he boomed, hustling her down the stairs. 'Suggest cereal bars and box of juice. And you can leave the teeth brushing - I have mints in the glove compartment.'

He went to the loo, glugged down a large glass of water, gathered up his papers, his bag, the car keys.

Hattie returned from the kitchen, her arms full.

'I don't recall mentioning Tunnock's tea cakes,' he said.

Her expression was serious. 'We could be drifting for days.'

He laughed and combined a hug with getting her nearer the door and thought, what the hell, it's free dental treatment until she's eighteen.

He scooped up her reading bag. 'Well done, Midshipman. Eight-thirty exactly,' he said as he helped her into the car. She was pointing at the house and

shouting, 'Look, it's sinking, it's sinking,' so convincingly that he was beginning to worry that a sudden attack of subsidence might mean it was really going down with all hands.

'Pipe down or I'll ping your eye-patch' he told her as they set off. At the gate he stopped the car. 'Got gummy?'

He watched her root around in her book bag and hold up the blue gum shield that his brother Rob had bought her for Christmas. She'd spent the entire holiday looking like an extra from Planet of the Apes. But one night he'd checked on her in bed and it was still in, so he'd confiscated it. Cue a run of fretful evenings.

Which is when he'd realised it was a more grown-up version of the yellow cot blanket with the silky edging that she worried between finger and thumb when going off to sleep. They brokered a truce which allowed her to mess about with it while he read a story and then it had to go on the bedside table next to the lumps of plasticine and the photo of her mother.

When it appeared at other times, he knew something was up. And that something usually involved Steph - a phone call promised that didn't come. Another parcel of clothes that didn't fit Hattie's body or her character.

Gummy back in the bag, they were off along the lane, and when he wasn't concentrating on where he was heading, he was looking at Hattie in the rear-view mirror as she tucked into a breakfast that would have sent Jamie Oliver ballistic.

He slowed down at the speed camera and checked his watch. On time and back as Dad in Control. Past the farm on the left, take the tight corner, just this long stretch with trees either side before the descent into Lowheatherington.

Easy peasy

'Dad, I really, really need a wee.'

Noooo.

He looked at her in the mirror.

'Can't it wait? We're only a few minutes from school.'

She was pressing her lips together and shook her head. He had ignored a look like that once before and had to have the car valeted. Steam wash, top of the range.

'You didn't go before we came out?' It was the kind of stupid question parents asked where it made no difference what the reply was. Her bladder was full *now*.

'I didn't think we had time,' she said, adding guilt on to the newly resurrected panic.

Pull on to the verge. Get out of the car. Help her out. She was hopping around with a look that screamed 'Don't take too long. I won't be able to hold it in'. He yanked some tissues out of the box on the back seat and gave them to her.

They looked at the verge, the traffic going by. No good. He grabbed her hand and she did a little running limp that made him feel even worse about hustling her out of the house.

They headed for the small track leading down to fields and the river.

‘Here we are,’ he said, trying to jolly up the situation. ‘That’s it, that’s right.’

They stopped just round the corner. ‘This do?’ he asked doubtfully. She shook her head and he agreed. ‘What about this?’ he said, pointing to the red-brick bungalow, empty and stuck on the market for months. They ran towards the gate. Yup, good overgrown garden and a hedge that came up to his chin. ‘Nip in there, Hats. I’ll stay right here. Find a flat bit and take off your shoes and socks so, you know, you don’t splash them.’

He looked back up the track. He hoped the car was all right parked on the verge.

‘OK, Hats?’ he shouted and got back a relieved-sounding, ‘Yes.’

Dealing with Hattie’s full bladder had set up a sympathetic urge in his own. Ignoring it didn’t work. Turning his back to the gate so that Hattie wouldn’t see if she came out, he started to pee into the hedge, not managing to avoid the ‘For Sale’ sign that had fallen into it.

A noise made him turn his head and he almost ruined his shoes. The odd woman was striding up the road, a bunch of wild flowers in her hands. She slowed when she saw him, and as she was wearing sunglasses he couldn’t see

her full expression, just her mouth opening into an ‘O’ shape. He turned back round quickly, trying to look as though it was the most natural thing in the world to be standing there peeing into a hedge, dressed in his suit.

‘Morning,’ he said brightly, hoping it would mask the noise he was making, and then ran out of anything to add. It seemed a long time until he was ready to fumble himself decent again.

Her sunglasses were now pushed up on to her hair and he saw a face that didn’t know what emotion to settle on. Confusion? Bewilderment? Disgust? She said nothing, only speeded back up and, with horror, he saw her heading for the gate.

The relevance of the ‘For Sale’ sign in the hedge hit him just as she disappeared. He would have put his head in his hands, but he remembered where they had just been.

Everything was quiet before he heard Hattie and the woman talking and they came out at the gate. Hattie skipped towards him appearing completely unfazed. He did a quick check that she had on her socks and shoes and wondered what stage of undress the woman might have found her in.

Oh God, she was still wearing her eye-patch.

‘It’s this lady again,’ Hattie said.

This lady wasn’t holding the flowers any more. That back was very straight. When he went to speak, she eyed him warily.

‘Your bungalow?’ he asked.

‘Just renting, they couldn’t find a buyer.’ She dropped her gaze to his shirt as she spoke, presumably to see if it was stain-free this morning.

‘I know this looks bad,’ he started, ‘but Hattie was desperate for the toilet –‘

‘I was,’ Hattie joined in, ‘because we overslept, which meant I didn’t have time for a wee. AND I had to eat my breakfast in the car. Dad let me have a whole load of Tunnock’s tea cakes and he says I don’t need to bother brushing my teeth as he’s got some mints in the glove department.’ Big smile to finish, showing chocolate-specked teeth.

‘Uh, when you take it out of context like that ...’

He got the same look he’d received after the ‘testicles’ comment and decided to stop making the large hole of mortification he was currently standing in any bigger.

‘Well that explains everything,’ the young woman said, briskly, smiling only at Hattie. ‘Lovely to meet you again.’ Still only to Hattie. ‘And ... and perhaps if I could give you these.’ He realised that last bit *was* directed at him and saw her open one of her hands and proffer the tissues Hattie had taken into the garden.

And obviously used.

Chapter 6

Monday 12 May

Unbelievable. Only 9.30 and I already have enough to fill today's page.

I have learned that:

1. When you see a man you barely know weeing in your hedge, you immediately jump to the conclusion that because you have had an altercation the day before, he is getting his own back.
2. Your second thought is that he might be carrying out some ancient Northumbrian ritual along the lines of, 'She's one of us now, lads, let's go round and pee in her garden'.
3. You wonder if the suit he is wearing is one specifically reserved for this purpose.
4. Urine falling on a 'For Sale' sign makes a very loud noise.
5. Only one thing is more bewildering than a person using your garden as a public convenience. And that is two people. Particularly if the second one is a child wearing an eye-patch.
6. Helping put a child's socks back on is trickier than it looks.
7. You do not need a licence to have a child. You do not even need an alarm clock.

8. Mints are, evidently, an effective alternative to toothpaste.
9. I will not be sunbathing on the lawn for a while, even though I spent
some time clearing that patch.
10. Gripping wild flowers too tightly bends the stems.