

LONDON TOPS



SURREY ISLES

JUNIPER
TOP

LIGHTHOUSE

BOX HILL

VIEW POINT

BOX HILL FIER

PHIL'S PHISH BAR

LEITH HILL



ARE YOU A REAL WORLDER TOO?

Sixteen nautical miles north lies London Tops, home before we lost Mum and Monzi.

It's ten years since the 2044 tidal surge, when Dad brought me to Box Hill Island with Gran and the others. They created the perfect Real World, so we'd be free to be different, to be *us*.

We were all gathered right here at the viewpoint when I first met Izzy and Adam. I was only three. Adam and I were the same height, but he was talking already. Izzy was barely even walking.

I stretch out in the grass, as the sun soaks the grey cells of my e-skin-covered body, and hold up my silvery hand. It glistens in the warm light. Behind it, in the distant water, fragments of a sunken skyscraper glimmer like tiny sails on the horizon; adrift in the sky, a wispy octopus-shaped cloud.

Gran says the smart skin we wear instead of clothes is ‘all thanks to those colour-changing, shape-shifting cephalopods of the sea’. She never told us why she called it PIE, only that she designed it to ‘free the people’. She does like to eat pies, though. How did pre-Surgers live without it? And all those homeless, how could they have kept safe and dry?

My neck tingles from my hood vibrating.

Someone’s coming.

I tilt my head and glimpse a small, sparkling turquoise figure.

It’s Izzy darting back from the woods, but she’s headed straight for the curved stone wall beside me. I look round to scan for Adam’s tall body and rainbow-coloured skin. He’s still stood at the forest edge beneath the Autumnalis tree. I watch him plant his feet thoughtfully astride the snowdrops and reach up into its knobbly branches. I turn back.

“Did you see him, Nem?” Izzy calls to me. She’s bent over the wall and waving her sea-blue arms in Adam’s direction.

I shut my eyes, letting a cool breeze sweep my bare face. “Picking blossoms again?” I picture Izzy’s scrunched-up beady eyes staring at Adam. “You *know* it’s—”

“I *know*,” she says, catching her breath, “—‘One of the few trees that flower in hólchoko’...”

Weird to think pre-Surgers had more than two seasons.

Hölchoko sounds a lot cooler than *autumn* and *winter*.

I open my eyes to find Izzy gawking at our friend.

He's not alone.

A boy, out of nowhere, is lurking in Adam's shadow. The boy's face is pale and he looks much older than us, but his body's a *lot* smaller than ours. He's wearing clothes and, stranger still, he's floating.

Out the corner of my eye, I catch Izzy teetering to squat behind the wall. She grabs her shell-shaped Spondylux brooch from her chest and bolts back up to point the device straight at the boy. Her metallic skin sparkles as Spondylux scans the boy's short slender body.

It begins projecting a life-sized hologram of him, starting with his feet riding in black sneakers. It skims his dark-green velvet trousers, matching unbuttoned tailcoat jacket, two slight humps protruding around his shoulder blades. It detects a round smartwatch, too, dangling on a gold chain from his waistcoat pocket. And finally, a quirky black top hat with six swaying, gold letters sprung from its brim.

Izzy pulls back her hood and combs her sea-blue fingers through her scruffy peach hair while Spondylux defines the young man's features: **MILKY SKIN. SLIGHTLY UPTURNED NOSE. WIDE SET BLUE-GREEN EYES. MATTE BLACK HAIR. EXCEPTIONAL LASHES.**

Izzy crawls up to me at speed. I inch back as she inspects my face with hers. “Your eyes,” she says, biting into an apple-pear. “He’s got your eyes, hair too.”

I glance away from her arctic crunching to check that my eyes and hair are still *exactly* where they ought to be. Izzy frowns and spins back to view the scan results.

Mum had black hair, too. Most common human hair colour. Wish I could remember her face, though. Dad never talks about her, or ever saved any photos.

SUBJECT UNIDENTIFIABLE, declares Spondylux before projecting miniature holographic possibilities, **PRE-SURGE HUMAN. WARCRAFT CHARACTER. FESTIVAL PERFORMER.**

Izzy shouts out the letters bobbing about the character’s hat, “M-O-O-J-A-G. Moo jag?” The unclassified being, now balanced on one leg in yogic tree pose, just stands there with his hands clasped over his head.

“Mooooo jag,” I mutter, watching a green woodpecker glide by. The snickering bird lands on a rotten tree stump by my shining feet. It twists its head to probe its razor-sharp beak deep into a crevice. I picture the ants inside, scurrying for their lives. At least this beautiful, rare bird won’t go hungry today. Its cute red moustache means he’s a *he*...I’ll call him ‘Bill’.

“Are you two *mooing*?” Adam calls. He still hasn’t seen the boy now hovering upside down behind him. A wave of Adam’s brown hair flops down over his forehead as he prises a frilly flower from the tree.

“A *moo* man doing the *jag*,” I call past my shoulder. I jump up to gaze over the wall. Dozens of boats with visitors to the festival are docking along the pier. It’ll be funny seeing Real Worlders dressed up in those scratchy old clothes.

I turn back, so Izzy’ll quit poking my middle. She shakes her head at me and waves furiously at the boy now tipping his hat to us.

“UNIDENTIFIABLE SUBJECT!” she shouts to our friend.

Adam tuts, ignoring his vibrating PIE skin, and presses his long nose into the pile of soft petals in his hand. He must just think Izzy’s winding him up again. “Suppose this cow guy’s wearing a funny pre-Surge hat?” he calls.

Izzy and I stare wide-eyed at the stranger. Adam, grumbling at his skin turning orange, cocks his head to spy for us as the boy’s shadow sneaks over his shoulder. He jumps, startled by two eyes ogling him, and leaps back. The visitor wobbles returning to the ground and greets Adam with a tidier bow.

“*Namaskar*,” he says, glancing away and popping the hat back on his head.

Adam hesitates, stumbling into us as we creep closer. “*Namaste,*” I say, trying the greeting from Balancize and clasping my hands. Izzy nods, punching her right fist into the palm of her left hand in Tai Chi salute.

The boy presses his hands together, too. “*Nĩ hǎo, jambo, kon-nichiwa...*” he calls, spouting hello in multiple pre-Surge languages, “*...privet, shalom, ciao, merhaba, salam, bonjour, hola, yiasou, moni, goddag...*” We watch, amazed, as he keeps on and on until finally cheering “*...gajoom!*”

Gajoom? Don’t know that one. But there’s something really familiar about it...

The boy peers through squinted eyes at our faces and studies Adam’s multicoloured mosaic skin. He reaches out to touch it but snatches back his hand, as though something’s tried to bite it, and rummages round his jacket’s inner pockets. He huffs, flinging an arm over his shoulder to pull a sack off his misshapen back. He draws out one.. two.. three thick, pencil-length, striped sticks and dares to stroke our glistening hands as he gifts one to each of us.

I glance away. It’s the sugar stick Gran talked about. Her dad would always buy her one on their trips to the seaside, before the Surge. “It’s rock.”

“Edible rock?” Izzy asks. She raises the stick to her pouty little mouth and licks.

“You *can* eat it, but it’s hard enough to break your teeth.”

“That’s why it’s called *rock*, then?”

I lick it with the tip of my tongue and grimace at the sickly sweet taste. Adam’s brown oval eyes look as though they might pop out, as we watch each others’ skins shift to yellow.

“It’s pure SUGAR,” he says, holding out the stick between his fingertips.

I nod. “It’s candy.”

Izzy’s skin vibrates as she coughs up a chunk. “Look!” she shrieks, gawking at the gnawed stick in her hand and rattling it in my face. “It says ‘IZZY’.” Adam inspects his own name, also stamped in thick violet lettering on the end of his. Cupping it behind his long-fingers, he sneaks another lick.

Gran said that the name’s ‘stamped right through; as much as you eat, you can still read it’. I bite off a small chunk to reveal its fractured end. Stroking the warped letters of my name, I turn slack-jawed to the suspiciously familiar Moojag character. “How do you know who we are, sir?”

“How do *you* know who *you* are, sir?” He twitches his mouth and turns from our confused stares to rummage his sack.

“Are you a Real Worlder, too?” Izzy asks him.

He glances up at her and pulls out a dusty old scroll, which

he cautiously unravels. “Are *you* a Real Worlder, too?” The unfamiliar material rustles as it unwinds and finally meets the ground. It’s foolishly long. We can barely see the clumsy figure now hidden behind it. He pokes his head out to read the text:

We hereby invite you to
THE ANNUAL EXHIBITION & STICKY PARTY
23rd January 2054 @ 32 o’clock
Stikleby Hall, Gajoomdom

Letting it snap up into a neat roll, he crams the paper back in his bag and hands Adam a flat, off-white, rectangular thing.

“Gajoomdom,” says Adam with his questioning stare. “Is that where you’re from?” Moojag grins, peering eagerly at us inspecting the familiar object. Adam holds it out on the palm of his hand. “It’s the old email symbol,” he says, turning to me and gently lifting the triangular flap.

“It’s an envelope,” I say, gazing round at the stranger.

Where *is* he from? An island we don’t know? Maybe sailed over for the festival? Which would explain the clothes...but how does he have *candy* and *paper*—when they stopped cutting trees decades ago? He *hovers* too. Even *we* can’t do that. Maybe it’s some future tech...or from another planet!

I look back to find Moojag spinning on his heels, muttering senseless verse, “Round or square, sour or sweet, yum yum yum, eat eat eat...” He tips his hat to us and drifts off through the evergreen shrubs, releasing the sherbet scent of their yellow flowers as he vanishes into the woods.