

I was born seven weeks premature. An incubator baby. Tubes stuffed up my nose, eyes screwed shut, looked like a tiny wrinkly vole.

I wasn't meant to survive.

When the nurse put me into Dad's arms for the first time, he said: *She's light as a feather*. That's how I got my name.

Kids at school think it's funny, the boys especially.

Featherweight champ, they say.

Quack quack, they chant, waddling with their feet turned out.

Tweet tweet, they chirp, flapping their arms.

I was so small that doctors came up from London and peered at me through the incubator walls and journalists sneaked onto the ward to ask questions and take photos.

I wonder whether that was what made Mum hospital-phobic – the scare she got from me being so small. And then I think about her other phobias too and where they came from, like her leaving-the-house phobia and her swimming phobia and her running-out-of-food phobia.

You were the tiniest baby Willingdon had ever seen, Dad's

told me more times than I can remember, like I'd won a prize. Anyway, it's all turned out to be what Miss Pierce, my History teacher, calls *ironic*, because people say the same thing of Mum now – except the opposite: that she's *The Biggest Woman Willingdon Has Ever Seen*. People sometimes ask me if I'm adopted. I know what they're thinking: how can someone so small belong to someone who takes up as much space as Mum?

People are still really interested in Mum and her weight and the fact that she hasn't come out of the house in years. Last summer, I found Allen, a reporter from the *Newton News*, hiding behind our hedge with his camera angled at Mum's bedroom window. He said he'd give me twenty quid if I let him take a photo. I told him to get lost, obviously.

Anyway, Mum's been chubby ever since I've known her, it's just the way she is. What's more important for you to know is that she's the best mum in the world. A mum who's funny and clever and always has time to listen and doesn't obsess about stuff like homework and being tidy – or eating vegetables. And although she's a little on the large side, she's beautiful, like proper, old-fashioned movie-star beautiful: long, thick, wavy hair, a wide, dimply smile and big soulful eyes that change colour in different lights – sometimes they're blue and sometimes they're green and sometimes they're a brown so light it's like they're filled with flecks of gold.

Whenever I think about Mum and how awesome she is and how close we are, I realise that there can't be many daughters out there as lucky as me.

So Mum being overweight has never mattered to me.

As far as I'm concerned, there are a million worse things a mum can be.

That is, it never mattered until last night, New Year's Eve, when everything went wrong. Really, horribly wrong.

New Year's Eve

1

‘You sure you don’t want to come out?’ Jake asks. ‘Rock the town together?’

Jake’s the only guy I know who can be cool and geeky at the same time. We’ve been best friends since we were a week old. My mum and Jake’s mum were pregnant with us at the same time and they went to this baby group, so we were destined to be together. Mum and Steph are really close too. Or they were until this Christmas when they had a blazing row. Now, Mum doesn’t want Steph coming round any more.

‘Rock the town in *Willingdon*?’ I ask.

Willingdon is the smallest village in England. Population 351 – blink and you’ll miss it. Jake and I are the only kids here.

Jake laughs. ‘Well, rock the *village* then.’

It’s 11.30pm, New Year’s Eve, and we’re lying on Jake’s bedroom floor, staring at the glow stars on his ceiling and listening to one of his Macklemore albums. Before his parents got divorced, Jake used to listen to hip-hop with his dad. He doesn’t really see his dad now so I guess listening to those albums is a way for Jake to feel like they’re still close.

'I've got to get back to Mum.' I get up and brush bits of popcorn off my jeans. Popcorn was the only thing that kept me going through Jake's zombie invasion film.

Jake rolls over. 'So you're letting me go out all on my own?'

'Why don't you call Amy?' I ask.

He shakes his head. Amy's meant to be Jake's girlfriend but he seems to spend more time avoiding her than actually going out with her.

At New Year, most people prefer to be in crowds: everyone pressing in, counting down, filling up their champagne flutes, music blaring. I like it quiet, just me and the person I love most in the whole world: Mum. I love Dad too, but he's so busy zooming around on emergency plumbing jobs that he doesn't have time to talk. Even on New Year's, he's out repairing people's blocked loos and leaky drains and frozen pipes. So Mum and I see the New Year in together. In those last few seconds before the clock ticks over, we hold our hands and our breaths and send wishes out to the New Year.

I love it. The magic of it. The stillness. The feeling that anything could happen.

'I'll call you,' I say to Jake.

'At 12:01,' he throws back.

That's a tradition too, my 12:01 post-New Years Eve phone call to Jake.

'12:01. I promise.' I lean over and kiss his cheek – a bit too close to his mouth, which makes us both jolt back and stare in opposite directions. 'You can tell me all about your resolutions,' I say quickly.

Jake raises his eyebrows. 'I'm not perfect already?'

'Perfect's overrated.'

He smiles.

The thing is, beside his bad taste in films, Jake's as close to perfect as it gets. Next to Mum and Dad, he's the best thing in my life.

There are loads of people out on Willingdon Green, standing on their front lawns with plastic champagne flutes looking at the sky. Behind the fireworks, droopy Christmas decorations hang from people's houses and the shops on the parade, which makes the village look tired.

When I get to our cottage, which sits bang opposite St Mary's Church, it's the same as always. Dad's Emergency Plumbing Van is missing from the drive and a blue light flickers through the lounge windows. It's been Mum's room ever since she got too large to manage the stairs. And to share a bed with Dad.

We've had to build ramps everywhere and to make all the doors bigger so that she can fit through them. Including the front door. Which is all a bit pointless because Mum hasn't left the house in thirteen years.

So, the lounge is basically Mum's world.

I've thought about ways to get her out of the house or to help her with a diet, but whenever I suggest going for a walk, she finds an excuse not to move from her armchair, which has the telly dead in front of it and the window that looks out to The Green to the right of it, so she can alternate between looking at a made-up world and a real world she's left behind.

I suppose she's happy enough. And if you love someone, you have to accept them how they are, right?

Alongside the extra-wide doors, Dad ordered Mum a super-size wheelchair. It came in a container ship from America

and I sometimes take Mum for rides around the ground floor of the house in it. The wheelchair is so wide it nearly touches the walls. *Mum's* so wide she nearly touches the walls.

If Willingdon is the smallest village in the UK, then our cottage must be the smallest house in the UK. When I was five, Steph, Jake's mum, gave me this pop-up *Alice in Wonderland* book. One of the pop-ups is of Alice when she's eaten the cake and got really, really big: her legs and arms and head stick out of the doors and windows and it looks like any moment now, her house is going to burst open. I've still got that book and every time I look at it, I think of Mum and how big she is and how little our cottage is and how maybe, one day, the walls and doors and windows will fly off and there'll be nothing left but Mum sitting in her chair in the middle of Willingdon watching a re-run of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

On the way up the drive, I see Houdini, our pet goat, straining on his lead. He's come out of the kennel Dad made for him, and he's staring up at Mum's window – and he's screaming his head off.

'It's okay,' I say, patting his belly. 'The fireworks will stop soon.'

Houdini's a local celebrity: people from the village come and rub his horns for luck. The vet reckons he's about seventy years old but we can't be sure. A few years before I was born, Dad found him wandering by the motorway that runs just outside Willingdon and brought him home and he's been living in our front garden ever since.

'It's going to be the best year ever,' I whisper into Houdini's ear.

Houdini stops bleating, but he doesn't take his eyes off Mum's window.

‘You want to come in?’

He bows his head like he’s nodding.

‘Okay, just don’t chew anything.’

Houdini and Mum have one big thing in common: they’re always hungry. I reckon that if Mum ran out of food, she’d start chewing flowers and inanimate objects too.

I kiss the top of Houdini’s head, untie his lead from the post Dad drilled into the floor of his kennel, and take him inside.

He lets out a croaky bleat and his bell tinkles. It’s a huge cow-bell Dad ordered from Switzerland to help us find Houdini when he goes missing. Which happens about once a week. We usually find him in Rev Cootes’s garden or at the empty Lido in Willingdon Park.

I open the front door.

‘Mum!’ I call out.

No answer. Which is weird. Mum always answers. She’s got one of those deep, rich voices that make people stop and listen.

‘Mum!’ I push Houdini into the kitchen. ‘Stay there – and don’t eat anything.’ I close the kitchen door and go to the lounge. ‘Five minutes till midnight, Mum!’

I hear a groan.

I run to the door and throw it open.

‘Mum!’

And then I see her – lying on the carpet, packets of prawn cocktail crisps and Galaxy chocolate wrappers and sticky tins of pineapple strewn around her.

When I look closer, I see that her mouth is foaming and that her eyes are rolling behind their flickering lids.

You know that expression? *The bottom fell out from under me?* Well, I get it now, how, in a second, your whole

life, everything you thought was safe and solid, just disappears and leaves you grasping at thin air.

I kneel down beside Mum's body, shaking.

Mum's re-run of *Strictly Come Dancing* is playing on the TV. A long-legged blonde and an old, squat, B-list celebrity are waltzing around the dance floor – they're spinning and spinning and spinning under the glare of the studio lights, their mouths stretched into those manic smiles people put on for TV.

My attention shifts back to Mum. Apart from the fact that she's massive, the woman lying in front of me doesn't look anything like Mum. She's one of those bodies the camera pans over after an invasion in Jake's zombie movies: her limbs are sticking out at weird angles and her mouth is slack and her skin pale. When I touch her brow it's sweaty but her skin feels cold.

Come on Feather, think.

I did a life-saving course at the pool, though most of the stuff was linked to pulling people out of the water.

Before I can do anything, I have to clear a whole load of *Max's Marvellous Adventures* books that have fallen around Mum. She must have been reaching for one before she collapsed. They're these old-fashioned, American stories about a boy who walks around in a red superhero outfit with a goat as his sidekick. I reckon that it's a sign – that Houdini stepped right out of one of those books and started wandering alongside the motorway outside Willingdon because he was meant to be with us. Anyway, Mum loves those stories.

I snap back into the present.

Mum's wheelchair is lying on its side.

Yanking Mum onto her back takes all the strength I've got. I have to use the weight of her body to get some

leverage. I feel a thump in my chest when her back hits the carpet and I worry I've winded her.

For a second she opens her eyes.

'Mum!'

She's still there. Thank God.

She stretches out her hand. I grip it and hold it to my chest.

'You're going to be okay, Mum,' I say. 'Everything's going to be okay.'

But her eyelids drop closed again and her hand goes limp.

'Mum... please – wake up!'

Outside, the fireworks bang. It feels like explosions detonating in my skull.

I tilt Mum's head and check her airway.

This isn't happening. That's all I keep thinking. *This can't be happening.*

I put my ear to her mouth, but my blood's pounding so loud I can't hear anything.

Leaning in closer to her mouth, I wait to feel her breath against my cheek, but there's nothing.

I get out my mobile and speed dial Dad. It goes straight to answerphone.

'Dad – you have to come home. It's Mum.'

As I hang up, I realise I'm on my own. And if I don't save Mum, it'll be my fault.

I put one hand on top of the other, splay my fingers and place them on her sternum. I don't even know whether this is what I should be doing and Mum's so big I can't tell whether I've found the right place, but I have to do something.

I push my hands up and down: *one two three...* I breathe into her mouth... *one two three...*

This is hopeless.

I grab my phone again to dial 999.

And then I pause.

Mum would hate it: the ambulance pulling up outside our house, everyone from the village staring at her being carried out on a stretcher. That is, if the stretcher will even hold her.

I don't want to be gawped at, Mum says whenever I suggest we go out to the cinema or to the shops or for a walk in Willingdon Park. She won't even come to watch me in my swimming galas. I tell her it doesn't matter what people think, that she's way prettier and cleverer and funnier than any of the stupid people who make comments. But I get why she finds it hard – when you're as large as Mum, people can be mean. Really mean.

And then there's her whole hospital-phobia thing.

But she's dying. She's actually dying. Why am I even considering not calling an ambulance?

I dial.

'I have to do this Mum,' I whisper. 'I'm sorry.'

'We're going to have to call the Fire and Rescue Service,' says one of the paramedics.

I was right about the stretcher. There was no chance Mum was going to fit on it.

I look over the paramedic's shoulder. Everyone on The Green has forgotten all about New Year's Eve and the fireworks: they're huddled in clumps staring at the ambulance with its flashing lights.

'They'll have better equipment to get her out,' he adds.

I wish Dad would come home.

And I wish they'd hurry up and get Mum to hospital. The paramedic said she's stable but he won't explain why she's not waking up.

Plus, I'm angry that the 999 woman didn't listen when I told her that they'd need extra manpower, that Mum wasn't like a normal emergency patient. And because she didn't listen, only two paramedics turned up. So they had to get help from Mr Ding, the owner of the Lucky Lantern Takeaway Van, and this other guy I don't know who's recently moved into the cottage next door. And even then they couldn't lift Mum.

Dad's plumbing van hurtles along The Green. He jumps out.

'Feather!'

'It's Mum—' I start but he's already running inside.

By the time the fire engine turns up, Dad's standing next to me on the pavement with a zoned-out look. He couldn't cope with anything happening to Mum any more than I could. His hair's sticking up and I notice that his faded blue overalls are hanging off him. He's been losing weight just about as fast as Mum's been putting it on.

And the number of people standing on The Green now, staring at us, has doubled.

I know Mum's unconscious, so it's not like she's going to remember this, but I still feel bad. Really bad. Because I can see it. All of it. And I know she'd hate it:

The neighbours staring at her and cupping their hands over their mouths and whispering;

The police car plonked in the middle of the road, its blue lights flashing;

The fire engine parked right up to the front of the house with a mobile crane-like attachment sticking out the top.

After they take the lounge window out, I stand there watching, like everyone else, as a crane lifts Mum out of the cottage. Only it doesn't look like Mum. It looks like a massive unconscious woman I've never seen before, a

woman trapped in a huge net that's being hauled out of our cottage like an enormous bloated, human fish.

And it's true. Dangling unconscious in that net, Mum looks more like a wounded animal, a beached whale or a bear that's been shot down, than a person. And you know what the worst bit is? As the crane lowers Mum onto the front lawn and as the firemen open the net, it's like I'm seeing her for the first time – in 3D, HD, Technicolor:

The grease stains on the front of her sweatshirt.

The smears of chocolate on her sleeves.

The sticky splodges of pineapple syrup on her tracksuit bottoms.

Her stomach hanging over the waistband where her T-shirt has rucked up.

And her messed-up hair, matted and knotty. If there's one thing Mum's proud of, it's her hair. That's why, every night, I wash it for her in a bowl of hot water I bring in from the kitchen, and, every morning, before I go to school, I make sure it's brushed. It doesn't matter that no one will ever see it – it matters to her. And anything that matters to Mum matters to me.

I feel guilty for feeling embarrassed, and for letting the firemen haul Mum out here for everyone to gawp at.

As I watch the firemen and the paramedics lever Mum into the ambulance on this inflatable stretcher thing they call an Ice Path because it's used for rescuing groups of people who get trapped in ice, or water or in mud, I realise that I've betrayed the most important person in my life.

I should have found another way to get her help.

Dad turns to me. 'What happened, Feather?'

He doesn't mean to, but the way it comes out, it sounds like it's my fault.

‘I found Mum lying on the floor,’ I say. ‘I came back from Jake’s just before midnight...’

I look at the ambulance and think of Mum in there, all alone.

‘She wouldn’t breathe,’ I say, my voice shaky. ‘They think she’s had some kind of fit.’

Dad’s got bags under his eyes and he’s got that pale, shell-shocked look the soldiers have in the pictures Miss Pierce showed us at school.

‘I should have been with her. I shouldn’t have gone out.’

‘Feather... come on...’

Dad puts his arm around me but I push him away.

‘It’s true Dad. If she hadn’t tried to get up on her own...’

My hands are shaking. I wish I could turn back time, just by a few minutes, then I could have prevented this from happening.

Dad steps forward again and folds me into his arms and this time I don’t fight back.

He kisses my forehead and says: ‘It’ll be okay, Feather.’

I nod, because I want to believe him. Only right now my world feels a zillion miles from *okay*.

Dad tells the paramedics that we’ll follow in the car, which is his way of saving them from having to point out the obvious: that there’s no room for us in the back of the ambulance.

As we watch the ambulance turn out of The Green, followed by the fire engine and the police car, I realise that it’s already 1am. I’ve missed the New Year coming in.

And then I see Jake running across The Green, and I realise that I haven’t kept our 12:01 promise and that makes me feel worse.

‘I was worried...’ Jake says. ‘When you didn’t call. And then you didn’t answer your phone.’ He looks over at the people gathered on The Green, at our open front door and at the lounge window sitting on the drive. ‘What happened?’

I shake my head and then lean into his chest. He holds me and for a while, we just stay there, not saying anything.

Then Jake takes my hand and we go back into the house. When we get to the kitchen, we find Houdini standing with his front hooves up on the windowsill, his big bell clanging against his chest. He’s got the same zoned-out look as Dad did earlier, which makes me think that he must have known that something was up with Mum before anyone else did. Maybe Dad’s right. Maybe Houdini is a magic goat.

As the three of us stand watching the last of the fireworks petering out in the dark sky, I make the most important resolution of my life:

If Mum wakes up, I say to myself, to the sky and the stars and anything out there that might be listening, if she lives, I’m going to look after her better. I’m going to make her well again – for good.

January

I stand at the door and look at all these grown-up people sitting on tiddly chairs in the Year 4 classroom of Newton Primary.

‘I’m sorry we have to be in here.’ I recognise the man at the microphone. He helped the paramedics with the stretcher. He’s doing up Cuckoo Cottage next door.

Taped to the wall behind him, there’s a poster of a woman in a red dress with curly writing running up her body: *Slim Skills: The Key to a Whole New You*.

I’ve been reading up about being overweight on the NHS website and it said that joining a weight-loss group was a good first step, so I found the one closest to Willingdon and this is it: my first Slim Skills meeting.

I look around for Jake – he’s meant to be here for moral support – but there’s no sign of him.

‘There was a booking clash with the assembly hall,’ the man goes on. ‘I’ll make sure it’s sorted for next week.’ He spots me and juts out his chin. ‘It’s Feather, isn’t it?’ he asks.

Everyone turns to look at me.

There are a whole load of people from Newton that look vaguely familiar and then I notice Mr Ding, the owner of

the Lucky Lantern Takeaway Van, which sits in the middle of Willingdon Green. He smiles at me and wobbles on his tiny Year 4 chair.

I'd never thought of Mr Ding as needing to lose weight. I mean, you'd be suspicious of someone in the Chinese-takeaway business being skinny, right?

A couple of places along from him sits Allen, the reporter from the *Newton News* who I found in our back garden a while back.

'Are you lost?' asks the microphone guy.

'No...' I begin.

I know what they're thinking: what's a scrawny kid doing at weight-loss meeting?

Be brave, I tell myself. If you're going to take this resolution seriously, if you're going to have everything in place for when Mum wakes up, you have to be proactive.

I take a breath. 'No, I'm not lost.'

A door bangs somewhere in the corridor. A few seconds later, Jake rushes in. He smells of fresh air and Amy's perfume.

'Sorry... got caught up,' Jake says, breathless.

Which means that Amy wouldn't let him go.

Jake and I go and sign the register at the back of the room and then we sit down. I can feel people looking at me and I know it's because they've heard about Mum. The day after she got taken to the hospital, there was an article in the *Newton News* with a fuzzy picture someone must have taken on their phone: it looks a polar bear under a green sheet is being stuffed into the back of the ambulance. I bet Allen took that photo.

Anyway, Jake does the paper round so he nicked all the copies he could get his hands on and we made a bonfire in the back garden.

‘You bearing up?’ Jake asks.

‘I’m fine.’ I squeeze his hand. ‘Now you’re here.’

The guy at the front clears his throat. ‘As I was saying.’ He smiles out at the room. ‘I’m Mitch Banks, your Slim Skills Counsellor. And I’ll be with you every step of the way.’

What if she can’t take steps yet? I think.

He walks away from the microphone, grabs a pair of scales off the floor and holds them above his head.

‘At the heart of every meeting is the weigh-in.’ He bangs the scales. ‘They’re our nemesis, right?’ He pauses for dramatic effect and then leans forward and eyeballs us. ‘Our truth teller?’

Half of the people in the room nod. The other half look like they’ve been asked to take their clothes off and run around Newton naked.

‘Well, these scales are about to become your best friend.’

‘Mum won’t fit on those in a million years,’ I whisper to Jake. Even if she did manage to get both feet on the standing bit, the digital numbers would go berserk. Mum’s in a whole other league.

‘We’ll work it out,’ Jake says.

That’s another reason I love Jake: he’s fixes stuff.

Mitch goes on. ‘So we start from where we are.’ He thumps the scales with his left hand. The numbers flash. ‘We’ll make a note of our weight in our personal journals. Charting our progress is a key part of the Slim Skills method.’

I’ve already made a weight chart: it’s on my bedroom wall. I’m aiming for Mum to lose twenty pounds a month. The point isn’t to get her all gaunt looking – I still want her to look like Mum. I just have to make sure she gets better. Once she wakes up, that is. Which she will.

The room's so silent you can hear the Year 4 chairs creaking under all those grown-up bums.

'So, who's going first?' Mitch scans the room.

Everyone stares at their feet, like we do at school when we don't want to answer a question. I'm no expert but this guy doesn't seem to be going about things quite the right way. I mean, if it took guts for me to come here, and I'm not here for me, think about how all the overweight people are feeling.

'I'll go,' Mr Ding says, which I think is really brave.

'I hope this doesn't mean he'll stop making those amazing spring rolls,' Jake whispers.

People come all the way from Newton for Mr Ding's spring rolls. Dad gets them for us as a treat when he's had a long day and is too busy to cook.

Mitch stands up and walks to the front and, one by one, Mr Ding and the other people from Newton heave themselves out of their Year 4 chairs and go and queue for their weigh-in.

'So, what are your names?' Mitch Banks stands over me and Jake, holding up a Sharpie and a white sticker.

'Feather,' I say, 'Feather Grace Tucker.'

Mitch writes FEATHER in big capitals. 'That's a nice name.'

I shrug.

He turns to Jake.

'And you?'

'Jake.'

Mitch hands us our name stickers.

'So, why are you here?'

'You know why I'm here,' I say.

'I do?'

‘You helped Mum – on New Year’s.’ My cheeks are burning up.

‘Oh... yes.’

‘You live next door to us.’

‘Right.’ He scrunches up his brow. ‘Forgive me, but I still don’t understand.’

‘We need to get help for Feather’s mum,’ Jake says. ‘We thought you could help.’

‘She’s in a diabetic coma,’ I add.

It’s better to say things straight, that’s what Mum’s taught me. What she means is – it’s better *not* to be like Dad. Dad thinks that dodging things or joking about them will make them go away. Like Mum being overweight – and look how that worked out.

‘Oh... I’m sorry,’ Mitch says.

‘That’s why she went to the hospital. She had a fit. But it’s okay, she’s going to wake up,’ I add. ‘Isn’t she, Jake?’

Jake nods. ‘Of course she is. Mrs Tucker is the toughest woman I know.’

Mum and Jake get on really well. She sees him as the son she never had.

‘I’m glad to hear it.’ Mitch scratches his forehead. I guess his Slim Skills manual didn’t prepare him for this kind of situation.

‘And when she does, I’m going to help her lose weight. That’s why I’m here,’ I say.

‘That’s a kind thing to do, Feather,’ Mitch says. I can hear the *but* sitting on his lips. ‘A *very* kind thing indeed.’ He smiles. ‘Do you think she might need a bit more help... I mean, medical help?’

‘You get people to lose weight, right?’ Jake blurts out.

Jake feels just as strongly as I do about Mum getting better.

‘We help people help themselves, but Feather’s mum...’ Mitch says.

‘You’re discriminating against Mum because she’s *too* big?’ I ask.

‘No... not at all...’

‘She hates doctors and hospitals. When she wakes up, she’s going to freak out,’ I say.

He nods. ‘Well, maybe, once she’s back home and feeling stronger, you could come with her and then we can have a chat.’

‘She won’t be able to do that. Not at first, anyway.’

‘She won’t?’

‘Mum doesn’t leave the house.’

‘Oh—’

‘I thought I could learn stuff and tell her about it. And that maybe it would help her to know that other people are struggling too.’ I take a breath. ‘I’m coming here on her behalf. And Jake’s my best friend, so he’s going to help me.’

My plan was to pick out a few people who Mum might like and then invite them over to the cottage to show her that there are people who understand how she feels and can help her as she tries to get to a healthier weight.

Besides me and Dad and Jake and Jake’s mum, Mum hasn’t had a visitor in thirteen years. But if I’m going to keep to my resolution of helping her get well again, that’s going to have to change.

Mitch lets out a sigh and sits on one of the low tables next to the little chairs.

‘Even if Slim Skills can help your mother... she’s going to have to do this for herself.’

Mum can't do anything for herself. She can't get out of her chair or put on her clothes or clean her face or walk. Dad and I work on a rota to make sure she has everything she needs. Which was what led to her not being able to get any help the other night when she collapsed on the carpet. No, Mum needs someone to help her take the first steps.

'The philosophy of the Slim Skills programme states that a person has to want to get better.' Mitch smiles like he's on a TV ad.

I brush my fringe out of my eyes. I'm beginning to feel that coming here was a mistake. Mitch doesn't understand. But it's okay – Jake and me have got a whole list of other things to try.

'I think we'll go,' I say.

'Feather...' Jake starts. 'We're here now, let's see how it goes...'

'It's not working!' I snap.

Mitch stands up and says, 'Feather—'

'If you can't help Mum, I'll find someone else. Someone who understands.'

'I do understand, Feather. I was just trying to make clear that it's your mother's journey—'

'She's not on a journey. She's in hospital, in a coma – and it's our job to help her.'

Mitch definitely doesn't get it. He's probably just doing this because he can't get a proper job. What kind of guy runs a weight-loss group anyway?

I peel off my name sticker, hand it to him and head out of the door. Jake runs after me.

'Hey, what happened in there?' he asks.

I keep walking down the corridor.

'We'll try something else...' I say.

‘I think you should give Mitch a chance.’

I ignore Jake. It’s one of the ways we’re different: when things aren’t going well, he thinks it’s worth waiting things out, whereas I just cut loose. Take Amy, for example: I think he should have dumped her ages ago.

As we walk past the assembly hall, I stop and stare at a poster by the swing doors:

THE WILLINGDON WALTZ, SUNDAY 1ST OF JUNE.

June 1 is Willingdon Day and the waltz competition is like the icing on the cake. Willingdon Day isn’t that big any more but everyone still looks forward to it. It’s my birthday too.

‘Hey, it’s Mrs Zas,’ Jake says. ‘Cool.’

Everyone calls her Mrs Zas because her real name is too long for anyone to remember. She’s only been in the village for a couple of months. She set up Bewitched, the fancy dress shop next to the church. Apparently, when I was too small to remember, there was this amazing dance teacher who more or less taught the whole village to dance, only she got ill and so had to stop working. There weren’t any dance classes for years and years and then Mrs Zas stepped in. People in the village are still adjusting. Willingdon is kind of old-fashioned and Mrs Zas goes around in these loud wooden clogs and brightly coloured headscarves – and she’s always in costume, which is a good form of publicity for her shop, but still a bit out there. Today, she’s got a black-and-red dress on with a million frilly bits and she has castanets tied to her wrists and she’s darting around the dance floor, straightening people’s backs and arms and giving them instructions in her gravelly Russian voice.

‘You must flow... *flooow...*’ Jake imitates her, sweeping his arms through the air like he’s painting on a gigantic canvas.

We watch Mrs Zas clip-clopping around in her clogs.

Dad said the Willingdon Waltz used to be so big that, one year, the BBC came to film it for a documentary. *You were too young to remember*, Dad said. It’s not really fair how all the good things seem to have happened when I was *too young to remember*.

‘Maybe your mum will come out and watch this year...’ Jake says. ‘If she’s feeling better.’

‘Maybe...’

Mum loves watching *Strictly* so much, you’d think she’d be really keen to see the Willingdon Waltz, especially as she’s got the best view of the Green from the lounge window. But it’s like she’s got a thing against Willingdon Day as a whole. Every year, when it comes round, she gets antsy and tells me to draw the curtains and to turn up the TV and, once we’ve had some birthday cake and I’ve opened my presents, she goes to bed early.

I take the flier and put it into the back pocket of my jeans.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ I say.

They put Mum in a single room and pressed two beds together so she'd fit. Dad's asleep in the seat next to her, wrapped up in one of those white, holey hospital blankets. While I've been staying at Jake's, Dad hasn't left Mum's side, which is a good thing. If Mum's going to get better she needs to see how much Dad loves her. And how we couldn't live without her.

'She looks so peaceful,' Jake whispers.

Steph dropped us off. She's waiting in the car park. I told her to come in, that after everything that's happened Mum will have forgotten all about the row they had at Christmas, but Steph said it was best not to crowd Mum.

I'm glad I've got Jake with me at least.

As I look at Mum's sleeping face, I imagine what it must be like to lie there, my heart beating, my blood pumping, my brain sending its Morse code messages from synapse to unconscious synapse, and yet to be unconscious – being there and not there. Being both at once.

Jake's right. She does look peaceful. Though, with her hospital-phobia thing, she's going to be anything but peaceful when she wakes up.

'I wish someone would tell me what's going on,' I say.

I asked the doctor to explain and he said I should ask Dad and Dad said that it was complicated, which basically means he thinks I'm too young to handle it. If Mum weren't in a coma, she would have stood up for me. She says I'm more mature than most of the grown-ups she's met.

So, I grab the clipboard at the end of Mum's bed and flip through the notes.

'Feather...' Jake starts. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'If I'm going to help Mum, I've got to have the facts.'

I scan down the page. It's mostly random scribbles from the doctors and nurses who've been doing her obs, notes on medication and blood pressure and temperature and stuff. And then I see it.

Weight: 37st 2lb.

'What is it?' Jake leans in.

I drop the clipboard. It clatters to the floor.

Dad stirs in his sleep.

Jake picks up the chart and puts it back in its holder.

'Feather?'

'We've never weighed Mum,' I say to him. 'I mean, I knew she was big, but thirty-seven stone? Can anyone even get that heavy?'

No wonder she got sick.

I look at Mum. It's like she's floated away in that big body of hers and I worry that maybe she won't ever find her way back to me.

I go over and kiss her cheek and feel relieved: it's warm and soft and alive.

'We're going to get you better, Mum, I promise,' I whisper by her ear.

And then I put my arms around Mum's body and give her

a hug, because that's what she always does to me when I'm feeling tired or sad or ill. Mum's hugs are the best: her arms are so big they fold you up and make you feel like you're in the safest place in the world. I've often thought how rubbish it would be to have to hug one of those bony, skinny mums I see sitting in their cars outside Newton Academy.

'Here,' says Jake, handing me the photo frame we picked up from home.

It's basically the only photograph in the whole house. Mum hates photos just about as much as she hates water and hospitals and running out of food. She says that we should remember the past in our heads and in our hearts, rather than being frozen into bits of shiny paper or screens. She doesn't seem to mind this one though. It's of me sitting in the middle of The Green, hugging Houdini. I'm about ten and I'm wearing a pair of faded dungarees and I've got loads of freckles and Pippi Longstocking plaits and I'm grinning from ear to ear.

It was Jake's idea to bring it. He said that even though Mum was unconscious and even though her eyes are screwed shut and her brain's far away, it's important to surround her with things she loves.

As I place the photograph on the bedside table, I hope that maybe in middle of the night, when none of us are here to notice, her eyelids will flicker open and, if they do, she'll see my grinning, freckled face looking back at her and it might help her remember I'm here and that I want her to come back to me.

Before Jake and I leave the room, I take Mum's brush and run it through her hair. I'm relieved to see that the nurses washed it. Like Mum's eyes, Mum's hair is beautiful. It's a goldy-blonde and smooth and shiny and, when she lets it

down, it goes all the way down her back. In all the time I've known her, Mum hasn't had a single haircut. When I was little, it made me think of Rapunzel and I got this picture of Mum hanging her hair out of the lounge window and Dad dressed up as a prince scaling the side of the house to save her.

My hair's like Dad's: brown and straggly.

For a few minutes I get lost in brushing Mum's hair. I think of all the times I've brushed it back home, mostly late at night, before I go to sleep, while I tell her about my day. One of the good things about having a mum who doesn't ever leave the house and doesn't have a job or anything to do except watch re-runs of *Strictly* is that she always has time to listen.

'I love you, Mum,' I whisper, and put the brush down.

'We'd better go,' says Jake, 'Mum's waiting.'

I nod. Though, if I could choose I would curl up next to Mum on the bed and stay with her until she wakes up. I want to be the first person she sees when she opens her eyes.

As Jake holds open the door for me, I hear a couple of nurses chatting in the corridor. We saw them on our way in, an old one with a square jaw and a young one with a sharp black bob. They were sitting at the nurses' station drinking their tea and filling in their charts and listening to slushy stuff on the radio. I should lend them Jake's Macklemore albums.

'Done her meds?' the old one says.

A rustle of paper.

'Yeah. Crazy doses,' the young one says.

Ever since Mum got to be the size she is now, she's had to take triple-strength medicines: her body's so big and it's got so much blood in it that she has to overdose on paracetamols just to make a dent in her headaches.

‘Ever seen one this big?’ the young nurse says.

I hear Jake gasp beside me.

Blood rushes to my cheeks. Nurses shouldn’t be allowed to talk about patients like that. *No one* should be allowed to talk about *anyone* like that.

‘Come on, Feather, let’s go.’ Jake takes my arm.

I shake him off and yank open the door. I’m standing in the middle of the corridor now. The nurses don’t notice that I’m staring right at them and that I can hear every word they’re saying.

‘How long do you reckon she has?’ the younger nurse adds. ‘I mean, when she wakes up?’

My body freezes.

‘Feather...’ Jake says.

‘Shhh!’

‘Six months – if she’s lucky,’ the older nurse says. ‘I mean, at that size, any number of things could get her.’

‘Don’t listen to them, Feather. They don’t know what they’re talking about.’

‘They’re nurses, Jake,’ I hiss. ‘They know *exactly* what they’re talking about.’

I charge to the nurses’ station and stand in front of them, my hands on my hips. Jake hangs back.

‘What did you say?’ I look from one nurse to the other.

‘Oh!’ The younger nurse steps back like I’ve trodden on her toes.

The older nurse shoots her a glance. Then she turns to me. ‘Nothing, my dear.’

‘It didn’t sound like nothing.’

‘Sorry we disturbed you,’ the older nurse says.

‘You didn’t disturb me. You were saying, about Mum—’

‘Feather, let’s go,’ I hear Jake say from behind me.

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ I say. ‘I want you to explain why you said those things about Mum.’

‘It’s okay, dear,’ the older nurse says, smiling one of those fake, *there, there, dear* smiles. I’m beginning to realise why Mum hates hospitals so much.

‘No. It’s not okay. You said...’

The older nurse looks down at me. ‘You look tired, dear.’

‘I’m not tired. I want to know about Mum not making it.’

The young nurse goes red.

The older nurse puts her hand on my arm.

Jake’s standing beside me now.

‘Maybe you should talk to your dad.’

And then a call bell buzzes from one of the other rooms and the older nurse says, ‘Excuse me’, and then the younger one says, ‘Sorry’ and walks back to the nurses’ station and I’m left standing there.

I feel Jake taking my hand. ‘Come on, Feather, let’s get out of here. Like they said, you can talk to your dad. We’ll come back tomorrow morning.’

But I don’t need to talk to Dad. I know what they meant: that it’s lose–lose. That even if Mum wakes up from her coma, she’s going to die anyway. And that, if we don’t do anything about it, and fast, she’ll be gone in six months.