

LOW TIDE

BY TIM JONES

The grumpy man in the high-vis vest gave them an hour to get their stuff. Dad tried to negotiate, but the man wasn't having it. "Five minutes gone, fifty-five minutes left," he said. So Dad gave up and parked the car, and they walked down the hill to the house they'd been forced to abandon eighteen hours earlier.

Now it was bang on low tide, and from the outside, things didn't look so bad. The entire garden was

trashed, of course, and Manu's old sandpit was now a tidal pool – but their house was still standing, and only one window was broken.

It was a different story when Dad unlocked the ranchslider. A whiff of seawater hit them first, then the subtler smell of decay. The tide had drained away, leaving behind a stinking, sodden wasteland.

"Look at the mud!" said Dad. "It's everywhere."

"It's silt, actually," said Manu. "Silt is what you call the stuff that gets left behind when something's been flooded."

"Silt," said Dad. "OK." His face was blank, as though he didn't know what to think – but Manu did. Their house had been his refuge, from other kids and from school, and now that refuge was gone. He let out a low noise. It wasn't quite a sob, but Dad recognised it.

"Right, then," he said, pressing something round into Manu's hand.

"Mum's stopwatch from athletics. You're in charge. How long have we got?"

"Forty-seven minutes," said Manu.

"Forty-seven minutes," Dad repeated. "Think we can do it?"

They each had a list of the things they wanted. Mum had written hers last night before she'd gone into work: her jewellery box and army knife, their duvet, Nana's silver teapot, her new camera. Dad wanted the camp stove and all the records he could rescue. Stupid. What would he play them on?

Mikey – that's all Manu cared about.



There had been no time last night. The water had surged in so quickly. Dad had pulled Manu out of bed, Mum had grabbed his hoodie, and they were gone. They'd ended up at his school in an army tent, one of twenty-seven, all identical. Manu counted them twice on arrival and checked again the next morning. He'd woken to an unfamiliar green light and thought of Mikey. Cats can swim, he told himself. He'd seen it on TV. But here in their ruined house, which stank of silt and the sea, there was no sign of him – and time was ticking by.

"Mikey!" he called, searching the rooms before checking the back garden and then the front. No response. "Mikey!"

"He'll be hungry," said Dad. He watched as Manu peered into the once-shiny broadleaf. "Why don't you put out some food? I'm going to take this next load up to the car. Wish me luck!"

That didn't make sense. You didn't need luck to climb a hill. It was merely a matter of energy and physiology. But all the same, Manu said good luck and went to find some cat food. He searched the kitchen until he found a single-serve can of skipjack tuna – the one with the yellow label. It was tucked away on a top shelf. He pulled the tab, and it snapped off too soon.

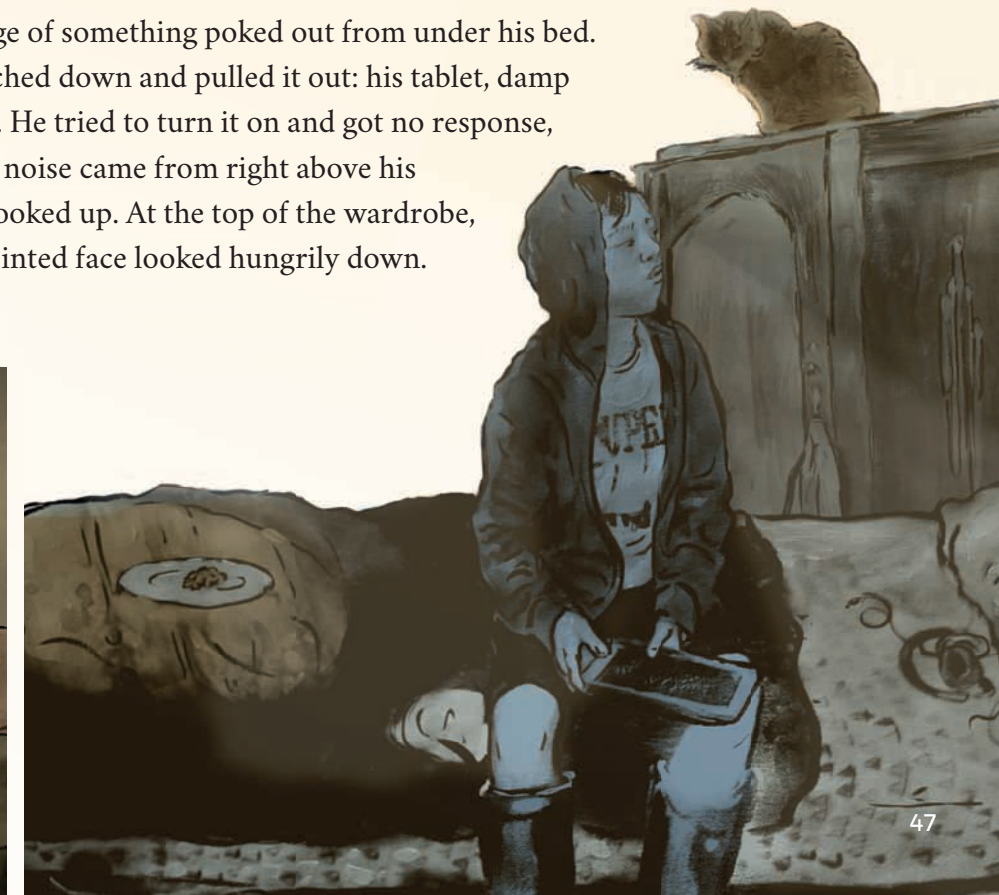
What to do? Manu remembered the night of the big storm last year, when the power was out and the electric can opener wouldn't work. Dad had shown him how to use an old-fashioned opener on a can of corn.

It was awkward turning the wheel: the opener kept slipping. But Manu persisted, and he was able to slide the tines of a fork under the ragged edge and prise it up. The smell of tuna rose from the can. Surely it would tempt Mikey out of hiding.

Thirteen minutes to go. Dad was back. Manu scraped the fish out of the can and onto a dinner plate – Mikey's bowl was gone – then he walked around the house, calling the cat's name.

Eleven minutes. The ruined lounge. No sign of Mikey. No one would ever sit on this furniture again. Bathroom, toilet, kitchen, laundry – all the rooms, nothing. Eight minutes. Manu went to his bedroom and carefully set the plate down on his favourite duvet cover, right in the middle of Jupiter. The duvet showed the view of the planet from its biggest moon, Ganymede. Manu wanted to go there one day. In the next room, he could hear Dad on the phone talking to Mum. She would be working late at civil defence again. Manu wouldn't get to say good night. He got up to shut the door and sat back on the bed.

The edge of something poked out from under his bed. Manu reached down and pulled it out: his tablet, damp and grimy. He tried to turn it on and got no response, but a faint noise came from right above his head. He looked up. At the top of the wardrobe, a small, pointed face looked hungrily down.



Three minutes. “Dad!” he yelled. “Dad!”

By the time the stopwatch began to beep, Mikey was safe in Manu’s arms, fed, though not exactly purring. “It’s time to go,” Manu said. “We have to go now.”

“Five minutes won’t do any harm,” Dad said.

And even though Manu worried about the high-vis man, his dad was right. As they left the house for the final time, waves were just starting to slop through the wide gap where the seawall had been breached. They didn’t look so dangerous. But the tide would be even higher tonight – a king tide – and who knew how their house would be in the morning.

“Why didn’t they fix the seawall while the tide was out?” Manu asked as they trudged up the hill.

“They’re more worried about protecting the city centre,” said Dad. “That’s Mum’s problem now.”

“Can’t the engineers just build a bigger seawall?” By then, they’d reached the car. Mikey was squirming in Manu’s arms, and Dad didn’t answer.

The man in the vest tapped his watch and looked annoyed, but he didn’t say anything. Dad opened the passenger door, and Manu clambered in. Mikey hated the car, and he wriggled and meowed to get away, but Manu wouldn’t let him go until the doors were locked. Mikey slinked under a damp sleeping bag. He stayed there all the way back to the school.

That night, the wind blew, flapping the canvas above their heads. It took Manu a long time to fall asleep. He woke later to a familiar voice. Mum was back. Reassured, he drifted off again, a small, furry figure pressed against his side. As they slept, the king tide slowly receded, taking everything it could find: a gold earring ... the sleeve of a record ... an empty tuna can.



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by Tim Jones

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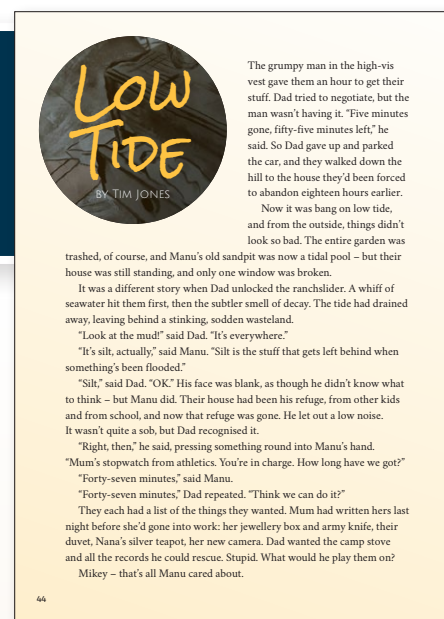
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