



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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“So, have you split up now?”

“Are you being funny?”

People quite often thought Marcus was being funny when he wasn't. He couldn't understand it. Asking his mum whether she'd split up with Roger was a perfectly sensible question, he thought: they'd had a big row, then they'd gone off into the kitchen to talk quietly, and after a little while they'd come out looking serious, and Roger had come over to him, shaken his hand and wished him luck at his new school, and then he'd gone.

“Why would I want to be funny?”

“Well, what does it look like to you?”

“It looks to me like you've split up. But I just wanted to make sure.”

“We've split up.”

“So he's gone?”

“Yes, Marcus, he's gone.”

He didn't think he'd ever get used to this business. He had quite liked Roger, and the three of them had been out a few times; now, apparently, he'd never see him again. He didn't mind, but it was weird if you thought about it. He'd once shared a toilet with Roger, when they were both busting

for a pee after a car journey. You'd think that if you'd peed with someone you ought to keep in touch with them somehow.

"What about his pizza?" They'd just ordered three pizzas when the argument started, and they hadn't arrived yet.

"We'll share it. If we're hungry."

"They're big, though. And didn't he order one with pepperoni on it?" Marcus and his mother were vegetarians. Roger wasn't.

"We'll throw it away, then," she said.

"Or we could pick the pepperoni off. I don't think they give you much of it anyway. It's mostly cheese and tomato."

"Marcus, I'm not really thinking about the pizzas right now."

"OK. Sorry. Why did you split up?"

"Oh . . . this and that. I don't really know how to explain it."

Marcus wasn't surprised that she couldn't explain what had happened. He'd heard more or less the whole argument, and he hadn't understood a word of it; there seemed to be a piece missing somewhere. When Marcus and his mum argued, you could hear the important bits: too much, too expensive, too late, too young, bad for your teeth, the other channel, homework, fruit. But when his mum and her boyfriends argued, you could listen for hours and still miss the point, the thing, the fruit and homework part of it. It was like they'd been told to argue and just came out with anything they could think of.

"Did he have another girlfriend?"

"I don't think so."

"Have you got another boyfriend?"

She laughed. "Who would that be? The guy who took the

pizza orders? No, Marcus, I haven't got another boyfriend. That's not how it works. Not when you're a thirty-eight-year-old working mother. There's a time problem. Ha! There's an everything problem. Why? Does it bother you?"

"I dunno."

And he didn't know. His mum was sad, he knew that—she cried a lot now, more than she did before they moved to London—but he had no idea whether that was anything to do with boyfriends. He kind of hoped it was, because then it would all get sorted out. She would meet someone, and he would make her happy. Why not? His mum was pretty, he thought, and nice, and funny sometimes, and he reckoned there must be loads of blokes like Roger around. If it wasn't boyfriends, though, he didn't know what it could be, apart from something bad.

"Do you mind me having boyfriends?"

"No. Only Andrew."

"Well, yes, I know you didn't like Andrew. But generally? You don't mind the idea of it?"

"No. Course not."

"You've been really good about everything. Considering you've had two different sorts of life."

He understood what she meant. The first sort of life had ended four years ago, when he was eight and his mum and dad had split up; that was the normal, boring kind, with school and holidays and homework and weekend visits to grandparents. The second sort was messier, and there were more people and places in it: his mother's boyfriends and his dad's girlfriends; flats and houses; Cambridge and London. You wouldn't believe that so much could change just because a relationship ended, but he wasn't bothered. Sometimes he

even thought he preferred the second sort of life to the first sort. More happened, and that had to be a good thing.

Apart from Roger, not much had happened in London yet. They'd only been here for a few weeks—they'd moved on the first day of the summer holidays—and so far it had been pretty boring. He had been to see two films with his mum, *Home Alone 2*, which wasn't as good as *Home Alone 1*, and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kids*, which wasn't as good as *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, and his mum had said that modern films were too commercial, and that when she was his age . . . something, he couldn't remember what. And they'd been to have a look at his school, which was big and horrible, and wandered around their new neighbourhood, which was called Holloway, and had nice bits and ugly bits, and they'd had lots of talks about London, and the changes that were happening to them, and how they were all for the best, probably. But really they were sitting around waiting for their London lives to begin.

The pizzas arrived and they ate them straight out of the boxes.

4 “They're better than the ones we had in Cambridge, aren't they?” Marcus said cheerfully. It wasn't true: it was the same pizza company, but in Cambridge the pizzas hadn't had to travel so far, so they weren't quite as soggy. It was just that he thought he ought to say something optimistic. “Shall we watch TV?”

“If you want.”

He found the remote control down the back of the sofa and zapped through the channels. He didn't want to watch any of the soaps, because soaps were full of trouble, and he was worried that the trouble in the soaps would remind his mum of

the trouble she had in her own life. So they watched a nature programme about this sort of fish thing that lived right down at the bottom of caves and couldn't see anything, a fish that nobody could see the point of; he didn't think that would remind his mum of anything much.