

Bethune was sitting at the long breakfast table, mumbling under his breath. “Saccharin - a sweet-tasting synthetic compound used in food and drink as a substitute for sugar.”

“I hope that you’ve not put any of that on your cereals, darling,” called his mother from the kitchen. Her orangey-red hair tumbled forward over her face as she bent down to get the milk from the fridge. “Oof, we really need to rearrange this fridge. Why do I always put on the bottom shelves the things which I need to get to every day?” She laughed at herself. She was always laughing or smiling, his mother. Nothing really seemed to faze her.

Bethune hadn’t answered her but she was used to this. He was focused on reading. He read all the time: books, dictionaries, cereal packets, motorway signs. You name it, if it had words on it, he’d read it.

Tim Bassett walked into the bright colourful kitchen. “Ugh, the weather doesn’t look great. I’m going out to start the car up and get the windows scraped. I might be some time!” He kissed his wife on the forehead and snatched up his keys.

The door had slammed sharply behind him so he had missed his wife calling after him, “You’ll need your gloves and....Oh well, he’ll soon realise!”

A beeping sound from the small travel alarm clock on the table was followed by the scraping of Bethune’s chair on the wooden floor.

“Do be careful of the floor, darling,” Maria Bassett gently admonished her son. They had not long moved into this house and she was keen to keep everything ‘just nice’. ‘Just nice’ for Maria was full of colour, with quirky ornaments, lots of cook books and furniture, which looked like it had come from decades before but, somehow, Maria could style anything and make it look just right, or ‘just nice’, in fact.

Neither of them had paid much attention to Bethune’s father as he’d rushed back in, picked up his gloves, scarf and coat and rushed back out again. Now, however, the hooting of the car horn was something they could not ignore.

“Have you got everything, darling?”

“Yup.”

“O.K. Have a lovely day and good luck in the Botany test.” Maria walked her son to the door.

“Botany - the scientific study of the physiology, structure, genetics, ecology, distribution, classification, and economic importance of plants,” mumbled Bethune.

“Bye, sweetie.”

“....Or, merino wool, especially from Australia.” Bethune had left the house, still mumbling.