Alkaline

I woke up before sunrise. On the other side of the tiny windows near the ceiling, the storm grumbled, the raindrops pattering on the roof. My hands were wet. The clocks ticked away out of sync. Tick-tick-tock-tock.

Later, I walked into the classroom, the whiteboard turned on and playing David Cameron giving a speech, live.

I hadn’t even put my box folders away when Cameron announced: “I am very proud and very honoured to have been Prime Minister of this country for six years.”

Silence fell upon the room. Someone whispered: “He’s just resigned!”

After school, public transport was strangely quiet – people looked down at the floor and trudged through the lasting corridors between platforms. I ambled home from the Tube station, stepping in every puddle. My mum didn’t greet me when I came in through the front door. The pelmeni, which my mother rarely cooks and which I usually love seemed dull, but for a change, my three-year-old brother Theo wasn’t crying around the clock because of trivial matters.

My hands were really sticky that day, it was very unpleasant, and it was something that wasn’t happening even a month ago. Now, playing the guitar felt like a chore, and since my fingers stuck to the fretboard, slides and chord changes were very tricky. Not only was my Grade 5 guitar assessment coming up, but so were the summer end-of-year exams.

We received our examination timetables later in the week, the number of them particularly surprising. During the last exam, which was Science, my hands were really wet, and this irritated me more than when Theo passes through my room like a little hurricane.

After the Science test, my best friend Lawrence, who had black curly hair and blue-grey eyes, asked in a pensive look, “How did you smudge your yellow Junior Citizen ruler?

“Well,” I answered, “my hands produce strong alkali.”

After the summer term ended, came the summer holidays – a long stretch of time that was full of interesting things, such as playdates or visits to various exhibitions– I especially enjoyed going to the Russian exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, called “Revolution”. I learnt so many new things about the country where my parents are from, and about the language which I speak so fluently. It’s my birthday in August, so I don’t need to bring any doughnuts for my classmates, but it does mean that I am the youngest in the year.

In September, school started again, and Lawrence and I played at break times, although quite often either he had orchestra or choir, or I had some other extracurricular activity. We talked about the latest technology and made a new smartphone application, but my hands stayed sticky, – I often washed them, tried various other recommendations, but none of them actually worked.

Whenever I touched Lawrence, he would squeal “Uuuhhh, your hands are sopping wet! Don’t touch me.”

“I’m sorry…” I begin.

He cuts me off and repeats himself, this time faster and higher pitched: “Don’t touch me, Peter!”

By November, Lawrence was friends with a new 11+ boy called Noah, and we weren’t as close as we were one year ago anymore. One time, while discussing Donald Trump and his campaign with Sundar, a boy from the year below, I overheard Noah whispering to Lawrence.

“Look. If his hands keep producing that much ‘strong alkali’, he’ll drown himself in his palm sweat. His pens are stickier than glue!”

I avoided Noah from then on, and became quiet in lessons in which he sat next to him. He took his time, but he eventually asked me whether everything was alright.

I gave a short reply: “I’m drowning in my palm sweat.”

He understood, looked at my dissolved ruler and muttered an apology.

That day, I convinced my mum to take me to the doctor. They gave some liquid, which really helped.

By the end of the term, Lawrence, Noah and I became close friends, and we were nicknamed the “Teddy Bears’ Picnic” by one of the teachers. At Lawrence’s birthday party, he noticed my dry hands.

It felt great to be like everyone else again.