Once upon a time there was a merman and all he wanted to do was see the stars of the night sky. From his cave at the bottom of the sea he would look up every night and look up at the stars but he could not make them out properly because of the water above him. Their light would turn soft and slippery and slide onto the top of the sea like white foam. The merman would sometimes cry at night because he knew that was where his mother had gone. She was watching him from up in the sky, with the stars, and he wanted just to see her once. Mermen do not cry very often but this one did and every time he did the sea all around him heaved and shook with his sadness. He would sing and hoped his mother heard him one day and knew he was safe.

One day a ship came by. The people on board had heard his singing and they thought it was very beautiful. They came to see who was making the noise. They thought it might be a mermaid because it had the same brilliant shine of a wave as it breaks and its deep blue cracks and splits into millions of greens and turquoises. Really it sounded so nice because he sang while thinking of his mother and the thousands of dazzling little stars that danced around her in the sky but he did not say this when the men on board took him on because they would not like it. They all thought waves were very beautiful and so the merman decided to think that too, just to be sure they would like him. They saw a scar on his arm and they were sad. They said sorry. He did not know why because he had always had the scar from when he was very young.

“The writing gets illegible here: as is to be expected from a less high-achieving student. I’ve written it down on his page in my notebook. Disappointing – the rest of the story is...promising; it’s just this handwriting problem again. A bit of a let-down, really. Quite a shame, given the rest of the class has been showing such pleasing progress. This just feels a bit, well, garbled: English through a kaleidoscope.”

The merman looked on as the men dressed him in some spare clothes of theirs. They told him he looked very good and said they would show him to their Prince when he woke up. The Prince would be very happy to see someone so unique as him. The men were a bit confused when the merman did not look as happy as they wanted him to when they told him he was going to meet The Prince. He did not say he was happy. But he did not say anything. The men could tell he understood them. Sometimes he would nod or shake his head but he would not speak.

“Again, I feel like he has the story in his head, it just won’t quite click with what want. I know it’s only been a term now, but I really think he can just push a bit harder for me and really show me what he’s got to give: I want 110%, not 40. Let’s go on:”

The men took him in front of The Prince, who was a very kind man. The Prince talked to him. He said some very nice things to him but he grew bored. He said it was suspicious that the merman did not talk back to him. The Prince got out a dagger. The merman was very afraid and did not want to get hurt. “Say it.” growled The Prince. “Say hello to me and I will help you. Just speak to me and I will not hurt you. I want to hear you speak in my tongue.” He lunged at the merman, who ran back to the side of the boat. He began to cry and The Prince began to laugh – what sort of merman cries? He had expected a terror, a beast of the deep with a set of teeth to match, yet this is what he got? Pathetic. The merman was pathetic.

He opened his mouth. He tried. He tried to sing the words but they came out jagged and spiked. They were not to the merman. He opened his mouth again and tried. All that came spilling out was sea foam. The Prince lunged at him again, trying to strike this strange
creature from the deep dark depths through his heart. The merman cried out as the dagger plunged in and foam came bursting out the gash. He melted away into the sea. The Prince sighed: he really should have tried harder to speak.

The merman looked up at the sky from where he lay, a pile of white foam, drifting between the stars that were reflected on the ocean. “So,” he said to himself, “this is the night.”

“See – it gets good by the end. I think Mo is really starting to figure out how to tell stories now. It’s been quite a positive improvement. In terms of spelling and grammar, he’s come on far; however, again, it just feels like it isn’t quite natural for him yet. It’s like he’s holding onto something else and I’m not sure what or why.”

“Can we stop for a minute? Could you just repeat that last bit, please?”

I can see the look in Mr Ayari’s eyes. He is terrified. The first Parents’ Evening is always the worst. They usually get better. Behind them, I can see him thinking, translating. Him and Mo have climbed the first rung on this ladder, this stairway to a better life than the one they left behind. In his old language, in his old life, ‘foam’ and ‘tears’ sound almost the same. I know because it used to be mine.