

Bonfires & Beasts

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John & Andy, Book 3

Nick Duberley

The bigger the bonfire, the more darkness is revealed - Terence McKenna

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

Bonfires & Beasts - JOHN & ANDY - BOOK 3

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Written by Nick Duberley.

Thanks again to my friend Mark for his unstinting help, and to my wife
Irina for her continued forbearance.

Chapter 1 – Cards On The Table

I woke up dreaming about sexy girls. The odd thing was they'd been moving around in photos, like the people do in the pictures at Hogwarts. I'd been in a panic, imagining that if I got into a photo with them, I might never be able to get out again. Andy said if I ever saw a psychologist, I'd better not tell them about my dreams, else I might be trapped for real.

Downstairs Mum and Mands were both in the kitchen. I said my 'good-mornings', gave Mum a hug, and sat at the table next to Mands.

Mum put a plate of beans on toast in front of me and said, "I've got a busy day ahead of me. You'll just have to make do this morning, John."

"I like beans on toast Mum. Especially the way you make it, with ultra-thick slices of bread and loads of butter."

Mands asked, "Are you really going to eat three?"

"I'm going to try Mands. Anyone who attempts to steal a piece risks being stabbed," I replied, brandishing my fork.

After I'd polished off two slices of beans on toast Andy said, "You should tell your mother the arrangements you made for people to bring food."

"Mum, you know the Żylińskis are bringing some food with them this evening?"

"Yes dear. I do remember you telling me."

"Mrs. Bingham is going to be cooking sausages too."

"I see. I wonder why Pauline decided to do that?"

"She likes to help Mum, and I thought..."

"You thought it would be a good idea for your poor, old mother to have help, so she did not have to do everything herself?"

"I want to help Mum, but I don't really have much idea about cooking sausages. It's probably safer if I stick to the mocktails." Obviously, I was in trouble with Mum at this point, but help came from an unexpected quarter.

Mands said, "You're hopeless Shrimp. Anyone can cook sausages."

Mum looked at Mands and said, "As you are an expert Amanda, you can help me in the kitchen when you get back from school. And do not go off into town with your friends. I expect you and Tamsin to come straight here."

"Tammy needs to go home to change."

"Call Tammy, and suggest she brings a change of clothes with her. Whatever happens I expect you back here by five. Is that clear?"

"Yes Mum."

I ate my last slice of beans on toast, made a pot of tea, and poured one for each of us.

When I passed her her cup, Mum said, "Thank you dear. You may eat like a hungry hippopotamus, but you are able to make tea."

Mands didn't like this comment. But, as she hardly ever makes drinks, it was her own fault.

"Hippopotami are jolly dangerous animals Mum, especially when they are hungry. I don't think they eat much toast in the wild though. Anyway, I am full of beans now, ready to trot off to school."

Mands said, "Oh my God, look at the time, I've got to go." Then she jumped up and tore out of the door shouting, "Bye Mum," as she went.

Andy said, "I believe your sister may have left one of her bags behind, John. Perhaps you can catch up with her before the bus comes."

I looked down and saw a carrier bag with books in it under the table where Mands had been sitting. I fished the bag out, told Mum what the problem was, and that I'd better run.

I picked up my shoulder-bag from the corner, looped the strap over my head and zoomed out of the door. Out in the Close I saw Charlie just coming out of her house. I shouted and waved to her, then pelted off up the road.

Charlie soon caught up with me, as I knew she would. I passed her the bag and gasped out, "Mands' bag, bus stop," and pointed.

Charlie got the message, and sprinted off; I slowed down and sauntered towards the crossing.

Andy commented, "Miss Charlotte put her afterburners on."

"What are they?"

"Afterburners are used in conjunction with jet engines to deliver extra thrust when needed. Concorde uses them, as well as some military jets."

"Um... Andy."

"Yes John."

"Concorde isn't around anymore. There was a bad accident, and they stopped flying. I think that happened the same year I was born."

"Sic transit gloria mundi, John. This time with a bang not a whimper though, by the sound of it."

When I got to the crossing Charlie had already pressed the button. The lights were just changing, so we went straight over. She asked, "How come we started at the same time, but I got here ages before you, NJ?"

"You run quicker than me, Charlie."

Charlie looked up at the sky and muttered, "I wonder why I bother sometimes." Then she added, "Mandy said 'thanks' by the way."

"It seemed like the right thing to do. How's your mum? I hope the sausage-related issues resolved themselves."

"NJ, if you ever do anything like that again, I'm going to kill you."

"That seems extreme Charlie. Your mother likes to help others, it's part of who she is."

Andy said, “Perhaps Miss Charlotte could act as an intermediary between yourself and her mother, should a similar occasion arise in the future.”

“I know NJ ...”

“How about this Charlie-girl? If something looks like it might be a problem, I’ll ask you first, then you decide whether to involve your mother.”

“Why didn’t you do that this time?”

“Because I’m an idiot, and didn’t think of it.”

Charlie looked at me and grinned. She said, “At least you admit it. A lot of boys would be big-headed if they were getting the amount of attention you are.”

Charlie and I walked the rest of the way to school holding hands. Shane walked in with us, chatting with Charlie about football as usual.



As soon as I got to school Jenny hurried over to me, followed by Jade and Barbara.

Jenny said, “Hi John, I need to talk to you.”

“Good morning, how can I help?”

“Jade and Babs are both keen to help only they aren’t sure about..., you know ...” I thought *Give me a hint of what they are not sure about. The price of fish perhaps? Or the state of politics in the UK? The meaning of life?*

“I see. I’m sure we can work something out. How about gathering the information on people who work for the council?”

Andy said, “I had an idea on that. As a cover story how about telling anyone who asks that it is a school project? That should be the kiss of death as far as idle curiosity goes.”

Jenny was wittering on about them all doing their best and so on.

Jade and Barbara looked at one another then Jade said, “Babs and I both know how important this all is, and we aren’t going to let you down, are we Babs?”

Barbara, although she seemed to be unable to speak, managed to nod vigorously at this point.

I said, “Right Ho! That’s good then,” and tootled off in the direction of Dawn, who was hopping from one foot to the other, as though she needed to go to the loo.

Dawn said, “Sorry John, but mum says we need to redo the videos.”

“She didn’t like what I did?”

“Oh no, it’s not that. She thinks you’re brilliant, very autistic. Only ...”

“Artistic I expect,” Andy commented unnecessarily.

“Only what, Dawn?”

“Mum hadn’t had her hair done, and she thinks she looks a mess, and I had that old jumper on and ...”

“Fine. Re-record them if you want to, only try to keep the length the same. I don’t want to have to rewrite my commentary. Can you do them after school today?”

“I’ll try, but...” Just then the bell rang, so Dawn and I went off to our classes.



Mrs. Prosser gave out Maths worksheets.

I said, “I suppose this is another instance where you advise me to ‘bung something down’?”

“Of course, John. As I have mentioned before it develops moral fibre for you to do something pointless. In later life you will come across many examples of forms and so on, where filling in a box is the key to completing the task in an expeditious manner.”

“What if I put down the wrong thing?”

“It will not usually matter. Any system ought to be able to cope with incorrect information. Empty boxes though cause problems, because it means extra work for whoever has to check them. Take question 14 for example, will it matter if you write ‘rhombus’ instead of ‘trapezium’ as the answer? Not really. But if you leave it blank, then your teacher may think you could not be bothered to answer the question.”

“Suppose I can’t be bothered?”

“Then you should pretend to be bothered, John. I believe one of your mother’s rules is to be polite. That often involves doing things you are not really interested in, like wiping your feet on the mat when you visit someone.”

I felt there had to be a hole in Andy’s argument, but I decided ‘bunging stuff down’ was likely to be the fastest option, so I went with it. After I’d finished, I thought about the Concorde crash and what else Andy might have missed, when it hit me.

“Andy, does 9/11 mean anything to you?”

“Two consecutive odd numbers, the second being prime – no not really.”

“On the 11th September, 2001 four planes were hijacked by terrorists in the USA. Two of the planes were deliberately crashed into the Twin Towers in New York, another into the Pentagon and a fourth crashed after a fight between some of the passengers and the terrorists.”

“You are not making this up, are you?”

“No. I’ll find you some contemporary news reports. There are video recordings of the planes hitting the towers, and then of the towers collapsing.”

I clicked through some of the reputable media sites with coverage of 9/11 on my laptop. For once Andy made no comment, so I left him/her/it to mull things over, and went back to the calculus I'd been doing the day before.

After I'd been looking at limits for a short time using my laptop Andy said, "How about we look at the other side of the coin and begin on differential calculus John?"

"You can't be finished with the 9/11 news already."

"Time enough to think about it later, John. Nothing can be done about it."

"But there was a war, two wars"

"I would have been very surprised if there had not been a reaction, John. You do not poke an 800-pound gorilla in the eye, and expect it just to ignore you."

"Killing all those people was not a 'poke in the eye', Andy."

"A 'kick in the balls' then, or whatever metaphor you favour. Now back to work. Differential calculus is the inverse of integral calculus and so concerned with...?"

"Dividing things up, as opposed to adding them together."

"Good. You have been paying attention. Newton was interested in how things moved, in particular the planets. Eventually he proposed his laws of motion as a partial answer. Amazing really as there are two forces at work which humans take for granted, but which make it harder to untangle what is going on when an object moves on or near the Earth."

Andy stopped there leaving me trying to unpick what he/she/it had said.

"I wouldn't mind a clue Andy," I commented, after racking my brains for about 5 minutes.

"What is the one story anyone who has heard of Newton is likely to know?"

"The apple hitting him on the head, and therefore gravity I suppose."

"Spot on. If you live on a planet gravity is unavoidable. Some people say Newton discovered gravity, which is nonsense of course. What he did was measure it, and put it in context of other forces by working out an equation for it. The second force is friction, either of solid objects, or an object moving through a fluid, which is called resistance; that is just another name for the same thing. Let us begin with equations and graphs. We can start with distance on the x-axis and time on the y-axis."

Andy had me draw a straight-line graph showing something moving at a constant speed, then a curved line on the same axes, which of course implies acceleration. We spent the rest of the lesson having a look at tangents to curves and how the idea of a limit allows you to calculate the slope of a tangent at any point on a curve, using a parabola as the example.

Andy said, "The bell is due John, and your teacher is asking you all to put your chairs round in a circle again. I imagine you will be having a class discussion after the break."

I moved my chair into the circle with those of the other kids, and then the bell went. As I left I said, "I suppose you know what the discussion after break is going to be about."

"I would say there is a reasonable chance it will be about fake news past and present, given your teacher's reaction to the talk you had with her at the end of class yesterday."

Charlie was waiting for me in the playground. "What's the plan for this evening NJ?"

"Umm..., have some food and drinks, then go and look at the bonfire and fireworks from the park, if the weather is OK."

"And that's it?"

"That's it as far as I am concerned. If you want music, dancing or running around in a muddy field, leave me out, please."

Jenny came over, obviously wanting a word.

Charlie said, "John's all yours Jenny. He's about as much use as a chocolate teapot when it comes to doing anything," and stalked off.

Jenny was embarrassed and asked, "Is Charlie in a mood with you John?"

"I don't expect she will stay in a grump for long. What may I do for you Miss Wren?"

"It's about Jade and Barbs. They well ... I think they are hoping we can meet up ... you know...umm...not just us three but well, with you too."

"Andy?"

"A quid pro quo for the work they are doing I suppose. Reasonable, but it does depend on how often and for how long, if you are willing to countenance it at all. My advice is for you to say you will have a think about it, and come to a decision tomorrow."

"I'll let you know soon, OK Jenny?"

"Thanks John, I know you are very busy, but we all want to make sure we are doing everything right, you know?"

"No worries. It looks like Dawn wants a word with me. Catch you later."

Dawn said, "Sorry. Mum messaged me. Mindy's going to do her hair, she uses natural henna you know."

"Excellent news Dawn. Much better than unnatural henna I expect. I'm planning on posting the video tomorrow. You and your mother need to get a wiggle on if you want to rerecord something new for that. See you later alligators."



It turned out that Andy had been spot on when he/she/it predicted Mrs. Prosser's next lesson would cover propaganda, and whose version of events is handed down to posterity. She began with how native peoples had been side-

lined in the history books when she was at school. I stayed out of the discussion to give the other kids a chance.

Andy said, "If you want something more recent you could tell the class about how and why the current British Royal Family came by the name Windsor. As you may know Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Arthur's, family name was 'Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha,' usually Anglicised to 'Saxe-Coburg-Gotha'. Due to anti-German sentiment in WW1 the current Queen's grandfather, King George V, declared that the name of the Royal House would change to 'Windsor' from 1917."

When the debate started flagging Mrs. Prosser asked me if I had anything to contribute so I went with Andy's suggestion to see what would happen. A lot of kids were surprised that our Royal Family was part German. It wasn't until they started checking their phones, they saw how muddled up the European Royal Families are. When things calmed down again, I mentioned the RAF Fauld explosion being one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. No one had heard of it, including Mrs. Prosser. I told the class that it would have been illegal to report it when it happened in 1944. Then, the following year, the USA dropped two atomic bombs on Japan which were several orders of magnitude bigger explosions, so the media of the time had a much larger story to report. There was now plenty for the other kids to get their teeth into. I said, "I'm not at all sure about this stuff with Jenny, Jade and Barbara, Andy. It seems like more trouble than it's worth."

"There is no such thing as a free lunch, John. You stand to gain two things from having helpers. One is progressing Project Highfields without doing all the legwork yourself. The other is learning how to manage helpers to get the best out of them. On that head, Sun Tzu mentions the importance of clarity of goals, and I would add positive feedback from you."

I thought about this and decided to let things run for a while. It was obvious that finding council workers who lived near enough for me to be able to contact them personally was a non-trivial task. I couldn't see me fitting anything new in on weekends, so I decided to suggest to Jenny a meeting one day after school next week.



Lunch was fish-pie, mash, and peas, with a dessert of sponge pudding and custard. I was in time to queue up with Charlie and Jenny for once. We sat together at our usual table. I was about to begin eating when Charlie said to Jenny, "You know, genius boy here told his class that the Queen is German, and that an atomic bomb exploded in the UK in 1944, but it was kept a secret by the government."

Andy commented, "Not far off the truth, as these things go."

"Be serious!"

"I am being serious John. At least you stirred up some interest in history. If people want to find out more, all they have to do is use Google."

Charlie watched me start in on my lunch and asked, "Aren't you going to say anything NJ?"

"This fish-pie is only luke warm. I wish they would heat the food up properly, and warm the plates too."

"Not about the food you twit. About the Queen being German and the bombs and..."

"If it means kids taking a greater interest in history, I reckon that's a good thing, Charlie. There is plenty of information on the Web, if they want to check it out."

"You're so annoying. It used to be easy to wind you up if anyone made a mistake." Charlie grinned and added, "At least you're not boring. That must have been a hell of a blast when all those bombs went off."

"Yep. It blew some massive trees so far up in the air that they came back upside down like giant darts. One account says there were dead cows standing in the fields, which were inflated by the force of the blast like giant beach-balls."

There were several 'ews' and 'yucks' in response to this, then Dawn said, "My mum says nuclear power is wrong, and we shouldn't mess with things we don't understand."

"The explosion in the UK I mentioned was made by conventional bombs, Dawn. They kill you just as dead as nuclear ones do. And for another thing we wouldn't be able to do much these days without electricity, and who can say they understand that fully? Finally, the big danger, as I see it, is man-made climate change. I'd settle for more nuclear power plants if it means we use less coal and other fossil fuels." I stood up, ate the rest of my pudding on the way to the returns rack and put everything away before heading off outside. Charlie came up to me out in the yard and asked, "Are you angry with me John?"

"No Charlie-girl, I'm not angry with you. I ... well I have rather a lot of things going on and that stuff Dawn said about nuclear power tipped me over the edge. Most humans, including us, live in a massively complicated industrial society. If we want to go back to being hunter/gatherers we'll need to kill off about 95% of the population. I don't know Charlie, maybe I take some things too seriously." Charlie nodded and we hugged one another, which helped.

Then she said, "Sorry John I shouldn't have teased you about what you said, I know this stuff is important to you."

"I tease you about sport, and you take that very seriously Charlie."

"Dawn's not the sharpest knife in the drawer NJ."

I just nodded at this. Charlie went on, “Anyway we’ve got P.E. this afternoon, so you’ll be able to blow off some steam. You’d better get changed NJ, it’s nearly time for the bell to go.”

“Right of course. It’s the first Friday.... I um...”

“You forgot again, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I’m hopeless, aren’t I? Tell you what, I’ll put it on my to-do list for next month.”

Charlie said, “You are an idiot sometimes NJ, but at least you don’t try to cover it up.” We grabbed another quick hug but no kiss. Mrs. Prosser was watching for PDAs.

Charlie beetled off, probably to hatch plans for later. Unsurprisingly she takes games very seriously.

Andy said, “You had better go and have a word with Miss Dawn, John. Underneath I fancy she is a delicate flower.”

“I am not apologising Andy.”

“Nor should you for saying what you believe. Just bear in mind to not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. You, Miss Dawn, and her mother are broadly speaking singing from the same hymn sheet.”

I found Dawn over to the right of the yard talking to Jenny, Jade, and Barbara. When they saw me coming, they fell silent. It was obvious they had been talking about me.

I said “Hi. You know I’m a bighead, and probably come across as though I think I know everything, which I don’t. You and your mother are entitled to your own point of view about nuclear power, Dawn, I just disagree is all. We all want the best for people in the future, we just do not have the same view on the details of how to get there.”

Dawn had panicked but she managed to say, “I umm ... I don’t exactly understand about everything, I’m probably being stupid. Anyway, mum had her hair done so we can record the interview again after school. That’s OK isn’t it, John?”

“Of course. No problemo. Don’t forget you’re coming to the soirée. Bring a warm coat so we can go out to watch the fireworks.”

“I’m really looking forward to it. It’s going to be amazing! Got to go – mum said I’d better write down the points we covered in the video, so we don’t get mix muddled up.”

Dawn ran off, leaving me with the other three to deal with.

Andy said, “If you are considering hooking up with the new girls and Miss Jennifer after school next week, this would be a good time to mention it.”

I said, “As far as the new project you guys are helping with, the best I can suggest is that we meet up after school one day next week. Jenny, can you sort something out and let me know later please?” I legged it and left them to it.

“That is the spirit. Do not stress out over the details,” Andy commented.

Back in school Andy said, “I wondered why several of the other children are wearing different outfits today. Presumably that is down to you having games this afternoon.”

“Yes, I forgot to say. The first Friday afternoon of each month is games, unless it’s raining, then it’s the next Friday.”

Mrs. Prosser departed with the properly kitted out kids from years 4, 5 and 6, leaving Miss Marchant with the rest of us non-sporty bunch in the yard.

Andy said, “It looks like your Headmistress got the cosy end of this deal, not having to supervise a bunch of high-octane games in a muddy field. What do you rejects do? Dancing and hop-scotch, I suppose.”

Trying to stick up for myself I replied, “Not everyone can be good at sport Andy.”

“You will never find out if you have any aptitude for a sport if you never try, you numbskull.”

Andy was clearly pissed at me, though quite why was beyond me back then.

“Umm... Andy, I can’t be good at everything.”

“I realise that John, but you are too young to decide you have no potential at all in a whole facet of human activity. I have taken on board your assessment that you are crap at music. No problemo, as you say. But just because soccer is not your thing, that is not the end of the matter as far as physical activity is concerned. There are many other possibilities, and you may have untapped potential.”

“I’m happy to leave the tap turned off, Andy.”

“Most amusing I am sure, John. Will you continue to be content if Miss Charlotte chucks you because you have not made an effort to join in with some of her activities?”

“It’s muddy and wet and...”

“That applies to games like rugby or soccer. It does not apply to every sport, for example tennis, badminton, cricket and so forth. Games like basketball are out because of your height, but ... well never mind that for now. Let me think. Are there any lengths of rope amongst the sports equipment?”

“There are some skipping ropes and there’s a really long one we used last summer for tug-of-war.”

“Excellent – just the ticket.”

“Is this going to get me into trouble?”

“Quite likely – that is just an added bonus. This wheeze expands on the historical discussions your class has been having by reinforcing your teacher’s academic approach though activity.

“That sounds posh.”

“It does, does it not? The main aim is for you kids to have some fun enacting an imagined encounter between the redskins and the foreign invaders.

I decided it was pointless trying to correct Andy’s use of inappropriate language. Only I could hear what he/she/it said of course. I just needed to be careful not to repeat any of it.

As usual, the Head sloped off soon after the bell went leaving the school secretary, Mrs. Price, in charge. She’s completely ineffectual at controlling us lot. As Andy put it, we ran roughshod over her.

Things went very smoothly once Del and Mel were onboard. There were a few minor skirmishes, when Molly, who volunteered to be the heroine, was tied to the stake. (We used one of the portable plastic five-a-side goals as a post.)

I had the other kids collect up old cardboard boxes and other combustible materials for the pyre. Molly was doing an excellent impression of a terrified captive pleading with us not to set fire to her. I think it was an act anyway. I was too busy pretending to be the leader of the native war party to read her. She had nothing to worry about, I didn’t have a lighter or matches; also starting fires at school is definitely against the rules.

Then Miss Marchant stormed out of the building shouting, “What on earth is going on?” a lot more loudly than necessary, in my opinion.

“Hello headmistress, we are just conducting an historical re-enactment of a scenario from the time when European settlers encountered natives in the New World on their own ground. I have to admit this version of events has probably been influenced by Hollywood - still the other children seem to be enjoying bringing Mrs. Prosser’s lessons to life.”

“I cannot imagine Mrs. Prosser sanctioned you children playing Cowboys and Indians, nor tying someone up. You have Molly trussed up like a turkey.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this. I had to assume that Miss Marchant was aware that the cowboys in the USA lived at a different time and place to the early settlers; nor was it correct to refer to Native Americans as ‘Indians’. Of course turkeys are native to North America, but when trussed-up for cooking they are bound in a way completely unlike the way Molly was – in her case, more reminiscent of an Egyptian Mummy than anything-else I could think of.

“So, you refuse to answer me, John. Insolence and defiance as well as being the leader in this very dangerous practice of lashing another person to a post against her will. I see poor Molly has been crying.”

“Molly’s a jolly good actress,” I ventured.

“She is clearly terrified. I will not be mocked or defied in my own school. You leave me no choice but to put you in detention all next week. I shall be notifying your mother by email.”

I didn't bother to tell the Head that Mum isn't really an email person. I wasn't sure who the school emails were going to – Dad probably. He would definitely just ignore them.

As we put things away in the P.E. storeroom, Andy said, "Your Headmistress rather over-reacted John. No harm was done. Did you manage to get a read on her?"

"I don't often read her because she dislikes me. It's not a pleasant thing to do."

"I see. I wonder if the rope was significant. She seemed to be vehemently anti binding, lashing, tying and so forth."

"You're seeing things that aren't there Andy. Miss Marchant does not have a thing about ropes."

"Perhaps not, but I have known people who were scared of many innocuous things. Fear of spiders is a common one, but I think it would surprise you how many people are terrified of birds or bats, to give you two other harmless examples."

"Why would it matter if she is scared of ropes?"

"We are trying to find out things about Miss Marchant, John. Phobias sometimes date from an incident in the person's youth. Later you could ask her about today, and try to read her reactions."

If anyone-else had gone on like this I'd have dismissed it as nonsense, but I was learning Andy has an uncanny knack of discovering significant things about people from small clues.



Charlie and Jenny were waiting for me after school.

Charlie pounced on me immediately and said, "Damn it NJ, what did you do this time?"

"Didn't Jenny tell you? We did a re-enactment of an imagined incident during the conflicts between European settlers and Native Americans. Not historically accurate of course, but the other kids seemed to enjoy it."

Jenny said, "You should have seen it, Charlie. They wound that long rope round and round Molly so she couldn't move. Then John had us all find anything which would burn and pretended we were going to set her on fire. She was crying and pleading with us not to do it."

"They call that method acting I think," I commented.

The girls ignored me, Jenny was showing Charlie a video of the incident on her mobile.

Charlie grinned and said, "Serves Molly right. I bet she only did it because she's still after you."

"Quite likely. Maybe this means she re-assesses how dangerous I am."

“Young girls are often more attracted to dangerous boys than they are to safe ones,” Andy commented. “Something to do with the excitement I believe.” Charlie went serious and said, “Molly needs to re-assess how dangerous I am. I can see why old droopy-drawers went postal on you though NJ. It looks extreme.”

“I was given a week’s detention. Do you think I’m turning into a desperado?” “Desperate more like. Sounds like you had fun. Better than a normal P.E. lesson.”

Charlie and Jenny started chatting about who said what to whom and why. I tuned out and left them to it.

“Ow! What now?” Charlie had punched me in the arm again.

“I asked you a question NJ.”

Andy said, “Miss Charlotte wishes to know why you chose Miss Molly to be the star of the re-enactment.”

“About Molly, right?”

“So, you were vaguely listening. You said you didn’t like Molly.”

“I sure as hell don’t trust her, but she’s done a cracking job with the nest box sales and she didn’t dob me in it when I pranked Billy. Plus, she volunteered, and she did a good job of pretending to be scared at the end.”

“Being tied up isn’t scary.”

“It was when John had us all collecting cardboard for the fire, and pretended to be looking round for some matches,” Jenny said.

“You didn’t need to worry Miss Wren. I’m not a closet pyromaniac. Anyway, it is clearly stated in school rules that pupils are not allowed to set fire to things on school premises. It is bonfire night though, so I suppose you could say my performance was a nod to history.”

“Typical NJ,” was Charlie’s verdict.

Andy said, “Back in the day bone fires were about disrespecting a dead enemy. It was believed that without a body they could not make the transition into the afterlife, so burning someone’s bones was a final insult to them.”

We reached the point where Jenny’s path diverged from ours. I gave her a hug, and she trotted off happily saying she’d see me again at 7.



Back in Laurel Close Charlie and I had a quick snog before parting. Inside Mum was busy in the kitchen.

I said, “Hi, I’m home,” and was about to dodge off to change when Andy said, “You had better own up about the detention John. You do not want your mother hearing about it from someone-else.”

“Umm Mum I got into a bit of trouble at school today.”

“Not more fighting?”

“No nothing like that. We were doing this historical re-enactment in P.E., and I went a bit too far.”

“That doesn’t sound serious.”

“I had the other kids tie Molly to one of the mini-football goals and collect up stuff to burn her with. I thought you know, being bonfire night ...well no real fire was involved of course.”

“Miss Marchant can hardly hold you responsible, if Mrs. Prosser was in charge, dear.”

“It was First Friday games Mum. I forgot my kit as usual. The sporty kids went off to play proper games with Mrs. Prosser. The rest of us lot stayed in the yard and did P.E. with Miss Marchant. Leastways that’s what’s supposed to happen. Like always, Miss Marchant was busy so she went off to do some other work and left Mrs. Price in charge. I’ve got detention after school all week starting Monday.”

“Miss Marchant isn’t allowed to keep you in after school, John. I’d better have a word with her.”

“Don’t worry Mum – I’m not bothered – no need to make a fuss.”

“I hadn’t realised Miss Marchant had been getting the school secretary to supervise you for games. I’ll have to have a word with some of the other parents about that. Molly was the heroine of this drama?”

“She was excellent. She can scream really loudly when she tries. I think that’s what attracted Miss Marchant’s attention.”

“It sounds like one of the scenes from the Addams family when Wednesday and Pugsley were sent to summer camp.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“It was in the second film. Perhaps you haven’t seen that one yet.”

“Oh right – no I haven’t – something to look forward to, eh Mum?”

“Go and get changed John. The girls should be back soon. I want all of you to help get things ready once you’ve had your tea.”

I had a quick shower, bunged on some clean clothes, and was about to head back downstairs when Andy said, “It would be a politeness to call Miss Molly and enquire how she is.”

“Hi Molly. How are you after your near-death experience?”

“I’m fine thanks John. I’m sorry you got into trouble with Miss Marchant. I knew you weren’t really going to set me on fire.”

“Good. You were very convincing – maybe you’ll be an actress one day.”

“Possibly. My mother was very impressed – she believes activities are a good way for us to learn.”

“That’s good. You can tell her I’m not worried about the detentions – I’ve been very busy and haven’t had time to do much reading.”

After I’d ended the call Andy said, “Blimey O’Riley, John. Mrs. Meadows thinks you’re the best thing since sliced-bread.”

“She may have a different opinion once this Emperor Zurg conspiracy becomes public knowledge.”

“Very true, and astute of you to realise that.”



Downstairs Mands and Tammy had just got home.

“You’ve been causing trouble again Shrimp. It’s all over social media,” Mands said, when she saw me.

Mum said, “Get a move on girls. Tea’s ready.”

They disappeared upstairs and Mum went on, “Help yourself John, it’s vegetable stew.”

“Do I gather you don’t expect to see those two for a while?”

Mum usually insists we eat together if possible.

“It’s their first adult party John, and they are young girls – what do you think? By the way Ellie called. She’s sorry but she has something else on, so she won’t be coming.”

“Did she say what?”

“A date, I think. She’s such a nice girl. It’s a pity she can’t find a proper boyfriend.”

“Maybe she’s still looking in the wrong places.”

“Perhaps. It’s not as easy as all that to find someone you like.”

“You found Dad.”

“More like he found me. Anyway, enough of this chit-chat, I have a lot to do.”

Mum went off to do whatever, leaving me to relish the stew and, as the coast was clear, to help myself to seconds with more bread and butter.

Andy said, “Now that your risk of starving to death has been averted, how about having a tidy-up, and making a few trial mocktails?”

I binged my eating utensils in the dishwasher, then said, “No point in me trying to clean up in here – Mum will only do it again. I’m not sure how to make mocktails.”

“That is the point of making some trial ones John. I suggest you adjourn to the utility room. Your mother is not going to want you under her feet.”

Andy said I should start with something I fancied myself. I opted for orange juice, lemonade, and ice with a dash of lime juice. I decided to call it a ‘Flaming Surprise’. A lot of the fun was thinking up new names.

As I was sorting things out so I had all the ingredients where I could find them, Andy asked, “Have you given any thought to Christmas presents John?”
“Blimey that’s ages away.”

“I expect your mother has a list and has already bought some. It is no good leaving it to the 24th. Large ticket items take time to order. You have more people to buy for this year.”

“I bought that steam-engine for Charlie.”

“We have discussed the danger of being seen as a cheapskate. I have thought of a way you can be seen to make a grand gesture without spending much more money on Miss Charlotte.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“You, your mother and Mrs. Bingham could all chip in to buy Miss Charlotte a super-duper new bicycle.”

“Good idea. I’m not sure how much money Mum would want to spend on Charlie though.”

“Fair point. The quid pro quo is that you inherit Miss Charlotte’s current bike. That would fulfil your aim of not wasting things, and mean that your mother was indirectly funding a good second-hand machine for you.”

I had to admit this was a very clever wheeze.

“So I need to set things in motion now while there is enough time to sort all this out?”

“Precisely. I thought you could tell Miss Charlotte that your mother was thinking of buying you a bike and ask for her advice on the best models. It would not be totally untrue.”

“That would work. Charlie’s always going on about one bike or another, what sort of brakes it has and saddle blah, blah, blah. What about my old bike? I suppose I could put it on the EGGs’ website.”

“A present for Miss Jennifer perhaps, unless you have something-else in mind for her.”

“It’s a pretty rubbish bike, Andy.”

“Why not ask Miss Jennifer her view? She may surprise you. To seal the deal, you could add a tenner to whatever sum of money you plan on giving Miss Amanda this year, as a full and final payment on her old bike.”

“How do you know I usually give Mands money?”

“Call it an inspired guess if you will, or you could say I thought you’d be reluctant to go rummaging round clothes shops and perfume counters to find a present for you sister.”

I decided I’d make it £40 this year – a simple option compared to the alternatives.

Notes

Whilst I have been writing this history Andy has occasionally made remarks about what I wrote, some of which I decided to include as comments in the text. I have also included my responses to his/her/its remarks. To distinguish these interpolations from the rest of my writing I have used brackets. The squiggly ones for Andy's comments, the square ones for mine. Thus: – {what Andy said}; [what I replied]

I have used 'said,' 'asked,' etc. to describe Andy and me talking in my head. Obviously these conversations are internal to my brain, no sound is involved.



Chapter 2 – Whoo-Whoo Billy

Mum stuck her head round the door and said, “The Żylińskis are here John.” She looked at my mocktail and asked, “What’s that you’re drinking?”

“It’s a Flaming Surprise. Would you like one?”

“I think I’ve had enough Flaming Surprises for the time being, thank you dear.”

That made me laugh. I mean what a zinger.

Andy said I should compliment everyone on how they looked, and if I wasn’t sure what to say to single out their footwear – weird or what?

Mum laid out all the food, including what the Żylińskis had brought, on the table in the dining room. I took orders for mocktails, and told Marsha how lovely she looked – she had on a very sparkly top. I think Roman was a bit surprised when I said I liked his shoes.

The rest of the guests all turned up at once. I grabbed a sausage-sandwich from the plate Mrs. Bingham brought. I wasn’t super hungry, but I did have empty corners. Tammy was wearing leather boots, so I told her I thought they looked great. They looked comfortable and waterproof to me.

Tammy brought the little umbrellas, so all my mocktails appeared v professional. When offered a choice of drinks Roman opted for a ‘Bloody Hell’. It was a mixture of tomato juice and tabasco sauce, with a sprinkling of ground black pepper. I’d told Andy it sounded disgusting. His/her/its response was that you never know what other people might like.

Mum must have heard about me telling Tammy I liked her boots because she showed me her shoes and asked what I thought about them.

“Umm not as rainproof as Tammy’s boots - they are very shiny though. Did Dad buy them for you?”

Mum grinned and said, “Good try dear. Shoes are usually a safe topic for compliments. However, I don’t expect your father would notice if I wandered around barefoot. Don’t forget to keep asking people about drinks. I don’t think Pauline has had one yet.”

Just then Dad rocked up; I went off in search of Mrs. Bingham. She was talking to Mrs. Żylińska about cake recipes. Andy said, “I expect a nice cup of tea would be welcome John.”

Mrs. Bingham said, “I would like tea, if it’s not too much bother. Is anyone else going to have one?” Mrs. Żylińska gamely volunteered to try a cup of tea as made by me, so that was OK.

Andy advised me to elicit Marsha’s help to make her mother’s tea, which made sense. I noticed she made it by vaguely waving a teabag in the general direction of a cup of hot water, or that’s how it looked to me. Anyway I brought the tea to the ladies in the sitting room, while Marsha followed me

with two huge slices of her mother's cake. This provoked a round of thank-yous, followed by high-speed cross-talk in Polish between Marsha and her mother.

Back out in the corridor I asked what the chatter had been about.

"Mum say me very rude eat own cake. I tell her your mother very good cooker too. She make English cake with fruits, Mum can have if want."

"Your mother doesn't like fruit cake?"

"Think will give her spots. I say her is rubbish, people in England not have spots."

"Some people in England have spots."

"Georgia Taylor at school have big spot on nose, she no eat fruit cake – is silly idea."

Andy said, "Mr. Żyliński looks hungry, John. There is plenty of your mother's stew left from tea." I took Roman a large bowl of stew and some bread and butter on a tray.

He said, "Thanks John. Party food is ok, but it doesn't fill you up, does it?"

"My feelings exactly. I had two bowls of stew and a sausage sandwich. I might grab another if there are any left in the dining room."

Roman grinned and said, "I used to be able to eat like that, now I have to watch my weight."



When I read Charlie I realised she was bored. She said, "So what are we going to do NJ?"

"How about we go to the park? I reckon they will have lit the bonfire by now."

Charlie was all for it of course. The other kids wanted to go too, and Roman very kindly volunteered to supervise us.

Having been told we had to put on warm coats, and not stay out too long, we all wobbled off towards the park.



Following Mum's rules of politeness, I was last out.

Roman was waiting for me, he said, "That stew was very good. I helped myself to a second bowl."

"Mum's a cracking cook – I'm very lucky."

"Your father seemed surprised to see us John. He did know about the party, I take it."

"Dad's been getting very forgetful. Mum's worried about him. He wasn't rude, was he?"

"Oh no nothing like that. I ... uh ... do you know if he has seen a doctor?"

"I don't think so. Mum asked him to. He can be very stubborn. My tentative diagnosis is Early-onset Alzheimer's disease."

"Going to be a doctor, John?"

"I doubt it. I wouldn't have much patience for patients."

Roman chuckled and said, "Very good. I'll try to use that myself sometime."



In the park the bonfire was shooting tongues of flame and sparks up into the night sky.

Mr. Żyliński asked, "Do people still burn an effigy of Guy Fawkes these days?"

"Not as common a practice as it used to be, I fancy. Are you interested in English history?"

"One of my hobbies. Not that I have much time for it."

Roman and I had a good chat, which was jolly interesting. He was very solid on central European history.

Marsha came over to me and dragged me off, supposedly to look at the firework display which had just started. I realised she actually wanted a word in private when she whispered in my ear, "You help me with Linda on Sunday?"

"I'll try Marsha. I take it Linda is the prefect bitch."

"Yes, she say me mum is prostitution, she do porn."

"That's stupid. No way is your mother involved in pornography." I read Marsha and caught something and added, "Is she?"

"Not exactly."

Marsha didn't really want to tell me but I found out that her mother was trying to make money doing topless webcasts on afternoons when Roman was out. Pay for display as it were.

"Your mother certainly has the right figure for it, Marsha," I commented, grinning at her.

She smiled back, then went serious and added, "Mum very embarrass, but hard for her to make money in England. She want to help with bills. Dad not know. You keep secret, yes?"

"Of course, not a word. That's one thing I'm good at."

Andy said, "Trouble John. You need to catch up with your sister. She's heading off down the hill to your right."

I took off at my best speed, leaving a puzzled Marsha by the bonfire."

"What's up Andy" I asked, as I quickly caught up with Mands. She was slipping all over the place. Posh shoes with no grip I decided, probably sandals of some kind.

"I believe Miss Tamsin and Miss Amanda had an altercation of some kind. Miss Tamsin took off running downhill. Unfortunately, the group of boys who were lingering on the other side of the bonfire to you spotted this, and went after her."

Mands said "Oh god John, Tammy's gone. We had an argument and..." I could see she was on the verge of tears and going to be as much use as a wooden frying pan.

"Go back and find the others Mands. Tell them what happened. I'll find Tammy and make sure she's OK."

"But ..."

"Not a good time for a discussion – you won't be able to keep up with me wearing those shoes. Now off you pop. I've got my mobile. I'll call you when I can, OK?"

Mands was crying, but she did as I said, and turned back to get help.

"How many boys Andy?"

"Three. I believe one of them was your old sparring partner Billy Malsom. Hard to be sure because of the light from the fire, but it smelled like him. Speaking of smells, I have a fair idea of which way Miss Tamsin went. She is wearing perfume, patchouli I think. Anyway, you need to slow down and adopt stealth mode as opposed to making as much noise as an overloaded pantehnicon. There are three of them and only two of you, and they are all bigger as well."

I thought *pantehnicon* - *what a cracking word*, but I had to get on with finding Tammy.

It turned out stealth-mode entailed zipping my anorak up to the neck, putting up the hood, covering my face in mud, switching my mobile off and slinking from shadow to shadow.

"I'll never catch her at this rate Andy, and there's no sign of the lads," I grumbled.

"If you listened attentively, you would be able to hear the gang. They are a little ahead of you. As for Miss Tamsin, I believe she has very sensibly concealed herself behind that large fir tree on your left."

"How the hell could you know that?"

"A logical deduction. Until now the breeze, which is coming towards us, was bringing stronger and stronger wafts of her perfume. That has now ceased so she must be to one side of us. The only substantial cover is the tree I just described.

I crept in under the branches of the tree. It was pitch black in there, visibility near zero. I whispered, "Tammy are you in here?"

"John? Oh, thank God...."

Tammy plastered herself to me. I think if I'd been taller, she'd have tried to climb me.

"I had to hide – I got a stitch running, and they were catching up with me. They were saying 'come here girly, we only want to play.'"

"All right Tammy the others will be here soon."

"Not quite soon enough. The lads are coming back John," Andy said.

I put my finger on Tammy's lips and whispered, "Quiet now" in her ear. We huddled against the back of the tree trunk. Tammy was shivering, and it wasn't from the cold.

I couldn't see anything but I heard Billy say, "I bet you he's here. He's really sneaky Barry. I told you ..."

"So where's this John then Billy? Disappeared again 'ave 'e. It's like Da says you're off your fucking rocker you are. We'd a caught that little bitch if you 'adn't said we needed to come back and get this John kid. Fucking ridiculous, you ought to be able to kick the shit out of 'im without needing me and Terry's 'elp."

"But he's really dangerous. He threw me on the ground at school and tried to stamp on my fingers."

"So he's a fucking ninja now as well as being a wizard is 'e? Stupid little sod."

Another voice, presumably Terry said, "Come on Barry. Leave Billy to it. Maybe we can find some action in town. That little slit's long gone by now. Bet she wet her knickers when she thought we were going to catch her."

"You can't leave me here." Billy said.

"Fuck-off back home then you div. Nobody's going to bother you, are they? Too bloody ugly for one thing." Barry told his brother. Then I heard him and his mate take off running down the path.

"Master Billy seems condemned to tell the truth about you but never be believed, John. Anyway, now is the time for some payback."

"I'm not sure Andy"

"There are two of you and one of him John. Plus force is the only argument his sort understands. It will be good for Miss Tamsin too."

I whispered to Tammy to follow me, and luckily stumbled over a large branch. As I picked it up Andy said, "Excellent, keep Billy at arm's length and off balance. Probably he'll try to run away."

I didn't ask what I was supposed to do if he didn't.

Billy was standing there looking round, unsure whether to follow the other two down into Caversham or turn back uphill past the bonfire.

As I came at him out of the shadows holding the fir branch like a lance, Billy looked towards me and said, "What? Who's there?"

"Whoo-Whoo Billy, Whoo-Whoo," I responded making a noise like an owl – it seemed appropriate.

Billy tried to scramble back, then fell in a mixed patch of brambles and stinging nettles behind him. I was just prodding him with the tip of my lance to make sure he didn't get up, when Tammy came whooshing by me and kicked him hard between the legs.

Andy said, "Time to sound the retreat John, the lads are coming back."

I managed to grab Tammy, who was trying to kick Billy again. I pulled her back behind the tree just as the two older boys came round the corner.

"Still hure Billy? 'Aving a nice lie down are ya?"

"John Mason came at me out of nowhere. He shouted, 'Whoo-whooh' Billy. Then he knocked me over, turned black, and kicked me in the balls."

As if on cue, a real owl hooted way up in a tree on our left. Barry said "That 'im is it, Billy? Come on down Johnny, fight fair." Then Barry and his mate fell around laughing as they tried to get the owl to 'come down and fight like a man.'

Finally, they pulled themselves together and Terry said, "Bloody waste of time, come on let's call it a night."

"We could 'av' climbed that fucking fence."

"Says you. It was all new chain-link, and some bugger put a couple of strands of barbed wire on top. Tain't right, tha's a public path that is."

They left with Billy trailing after them as best he could saying, "Wait for me – John's still out there."

"Right again," Andy commented, "But sometimes being right is just not enough."



Tammy and I had gone about 20 steps uphill, when Charlie almost knocked me of my feet. She was followed by the rest of the gang including Roman.

Charlie said, "Bloody hell NJ, why is your mobile always off? We've been all over trying to find you."

"Been a bit hectic Charlie. Billy, his older brother Barry, and his mate Terry were chasing Tammy. I kept my mobile off so it wouldn't ring and give us away."

"You could have put it on silent."

"It still makes a buzzing noise. Pretty quiet under these trees, apart from the occasional owl."

Roman took over and checked that no one was hurt; then we all trooped off home.

Charlie stormed off ahead, she was in a grump about not being able to contact me. Jenny and Marsha walked up with me, determined to make sure I was really OK.

Andy said, “The after-school meeting next week John.”

I wasn't sure what he/she/it was on about, then I remembered. I said, “Sorry Jenny, I've got detention all next week. I'm not going to be able to meet up with you and the girls after school. We'll have to make it the week after.”

“That's OK – I know you're very busy, and it isn't your fault you got detention.”

“It sort of is. Anyway, it's something I can cross off my to-do list”

“It is?” Jenny said in a puzzled voice.

“Yep. I've never been in detention before – you never know until you try something if you'll like it or not. A bit like Marsha's dad and the Bloody Hell mocktail I made for him.”

“Dad say, ‘yuck, crazy English’ –like good Polish vodka,” Marsha commented and grinned at me.

“My Dad's got some whisky he could have.”

“Not drink. Work later - has to drive.” Which settled that.

Dawn joined us as we walked back the last bit and said, “What are you all talking about?”

“Mocktails and vodka and that Marsha's dad having to go to work later.”

“Right. I wondered why he was only doing soft drinks”

“Nobody smoking cannabis either, eh Dawn?”

“No, that does seem weird. I don't smoke, it makes me cough. The hash-brownies are OK though,” she added grinning.

By then we were back home, so the others didn't have time to question Dawn about the sort of parties her parents put on.

Andy said, “You had better warn Miss Tamsin to keep her part in events quiet John. You don't want her to become a target for these hoodlums.”

Tammy and Mands were standing outside our door whispering to one another. I said, “Just a quick word. Best not tell anyone-else what happened Tammy. I don't want you being picked on at school. These idiots could easily have mates at Thamesmeade.”

“Um OK - thanks John. I knew I'd be all right as soon as you found me.”

That's more than I did, I thought

Mands said, “Thanks John. Tammy said you were brilliant. Did she really kick Billy in the whats-its?”

I grinned and said, “I never knew that was the scientific name for bollocks – and yes she did. I expect they've swelled up by now, and Billy is sitting with them soaking in a bowl of ice-water.” Of course, the girls went off into fits of giggles at this, so I left them to it.

Andy said, “That's a tragedy in the making.”

“They're happy enough Andy.”

“Not now you twit. What happens in a few years’ time when Miss Amanda finds a proper boyfriend leaving Miss Tamsin high and dry? It is very unlikely a young boy will buy into having two girlfriends as a package deal. Unless Miss Tamsin is satisfied to become a bit on the side, she will find herself put out on lonesome street.”

“Tammy’s OK – she might find a boyfriend too.”

“One day perhaps, who knows? But being realistic John, Miss Tamsin s not going to be any boy’s first choice. Boys and young lads pick girls based mainly on their looks. Miss Amanda is a 5, maybe a 6 on a good day to the right boy. Miss Tamsin - well she was at the back of the queue when both the looks and the brains were being handed out. There are very few prizes in the mating-game for being nice.”

“OK that’s harsh, but you might be right. It’s not my problem though, Andy.”

“You like Miss Tamsin; she is almost one of the family. If Miss Amanda dumps her, she would climb into your bed if you just nod at her, even if there was someone else in it.”

“I umm...”

“You had better come up with a better answer than that if I am right. People get caught out by obvious events all the time. Not because they are stupid, but because they did not take the time to think things through.”

Later I reflected that Andy seemed to be adding to a pile of problems I’d need to deal with but then I realised that he/she/it wasn’t making the problems up, but spotting them in advance and giving me more time to decide what I wanted to do. Andy hadn’t caused Dad to get caught up in something criminal, just pointed out to me that that might be what was going on.



Inside, most of the party were in the sitting-room. The chat was about me, and what an all-round wonderful boy I was – talk about embarrassing!

“Help please Andy.”

“Some other topic of conversation. How about Huntley and Palmers?”

Mum said, “Look, John’s blushing, isn’t that charming?”

I knew I’d get her back sometime, but that was of very little comfort right then.

“I’ve been trying to find people who worked at the old Huntley and Palmers factory. Mum’s been as much use as a see-through parasol. I don’t suppose any of you know someone ...”

Mrs. Bingham interrupted saying, “Didn’t your father work there, Betty?”

Mrs. Peters did a very fair impression of a rabbit caught in the headlights as we all looked at her. Then she stammered, “Yes, yes he did,” looked up at the

clock, said, "Goodness me is that the time? Come on Jenny we need to go. Work tomorrow."

With that and a few thank-yous they were out the door and off up the road. "Very curious," Andy remarked, but I didn't have time to consider this as the Żylińskis, as well as Mrs. Bingham and Charlie, decided it was time to leave too.

That left Dawn on her own looking awkward. She said, "Sorry but I don't think mum and Dino will be back soon. I'll call them to let them know the party's over."

While she was doing this Mum said I'd better take Dawn up to my room. Mands and Tammy had disappeared off to Mands' room and Dad was apparently in a bit of a grump about 'a load of bloody strangers' being in our house.



Upstairs. Dawn asked, "Do all your parties end this early John?"

"We've never had a party like this before. Sometimes we have people round for a meal. That usually finishes about 9.30. I'm not sure if Dad likes having people round he doesn't know. He goes to work really early, so he's often in bed well before ten. I expect you've been to a lot of late-night parties."

"Not loads, but sometimes if Dino is playing, he doesn't get back 'til two or three in the morning. I usually go to bed about midnight, if we're having people at our place. I don't like staying up very late."

"Our parents are totally different, aren't they?"

"Definitely. Only Dino's not really my father. Mum's not exactly sure who my dad was."

Dawn looked at me to see my reaction.

I just nodded and said, "Right." I didn't know what else to say.

"It's one of three possible men – mum told me their names."

Andy said, "If you are not sure what to say, say nothing."

After waiting for a response which never came, Dawn went on, "What happened in the park? We were all watching the fireworks and all of a sudden there was a big panic on, and you'd disappeared." She paused then went on, "You don't have to tell me – it's not a secret, is it?"

"Not exactly a secret, no. But don't spread it around, OK?"

Dawn nodded.

"What happened was Billy Malsom, his older brother Barry, and another lad, Barry's mate called Terry came over here probably looking to get me. I didn't even know they were around, but I realised Tammy might be in trouble.

Tammy and Mands had had some sort of argument. Tammy took off down an old path that takes you into Caversham by a short-cut. The 3 lads spotted her going off and took off after her. I caught up with Mands half-way down the hill and sent her back to get help, while I went on to make sure Tammy was OK. Anyway, when I caught up with her, she was hiding behind a big tree. So, we both hid there for a while without being found. Eventually the lads got bored and went off, then all of you arrived at a once, so it was all OK in the end.”

“I bet Tammy was scared.”

“She was. I could feel her shaking when I was holding her against the tree.”

“You’re so brave. You wouldn’t have let anything happen to her.”

“I’d have done my best Dawn, but the other two were older and bigger than Billy, and he’s much larger than me.”

“He’s just a nasty bully. I’m glad you got rid of him from school.”

“Do you know how I did it?”

Dawn shook her head, so I told her what had happened including Molly finding me in the girls’ toilets.

Dawn nodded and said, “I thought Molly knew something; she was being all mysterious about it. Were there lots of spiders up in the ceiling?”

“Loads. Jolly interesting things spiders. I don’t know why so many people are scared of them. It would be different if we lived in Australia – there’s a lot of poisonous ones there.”

“Yes, I know. I like spiders too. There are some really amazing webs up at the allotments.”

We had a long chat about spiders. It turned out Dawn knew loads about them. Then I showed her my dead bat. She really liked that, and decided she was going to try to find one for her collection. She said her bedroom was messier than mine, but she knew where everything was as long as people didn’t move anything.

Dawn looked at my books, and the small globe Mum had got for me and my telescope. She said, “It must be amazing being clever, and reading everything, and being brave and doing all the things you do.”

“Being clever doesn’t mean much unless you do something with it.”

“I guess not, but you’ve done loads of things and you’re only just getting started.”

“I bet you could do loads of stuff, if you wanted to Dawn. You’d probably be a really good cook if you tried.”

“I don’t know. I’m not clever like you ...I do help mum making dinner sometimes.”

And she trailed off waiting for me to suggest something – all I had was spiders.

“Andy?”

“Chicken coops perhaps?”

“You know a lot about chickens.”

“Not as much as Gary or his grandfather, but I feed ours sometimes, and collect the eggs.”

“Nick Jones will be finishing up making nest boxes soon. Maybe he’d be able to make small coops so people could keep a few chickens in their back gardens. You could help organise that. Molly’s mother wants the nest box project finished by the end of December. You could take over that too.”

“I’m not sure John. I mean I’d like to help if you think I could, only I don’t know anything about websites and all that.”

“Jenny would help you, and if you two get stuck you can always ask me – I know everything.”

This attempt at humour fell totally flat.

She smiled and said, “I’m going to try. Mum says you never know what you can do until you try. I’ve been thinking about bat and bee boxes. We could get rescue chickens from an egg unit. They still lay really well you know, and they sell them off cheap.”

“Egg-cellent idea - and they’re bound to go cheep – they’re chickens.”

And I grinned widely to let her know I was joking.

“Was that supposed to be funny?”

“Yes. You know EGG-cellent and cheep-cheep.”

“That’s so silly”

Andy said, “Pillow-fight.”

I grabbed a pillow and bashed Dawn with it saying, “How very dare you – I’m not at all silly.”

Dawn grabbed the other pillow, and gave me a really good thump with it saying, “You so are.” I decided she’d probably learned to fight with Shaun.

Soon we both ran out of energy. It’s jolly tiring swinging a pillow round like that, if you’re not used to it.

Dawn said, “Truce?”

I nodded and she went on, “You weren’t joking about me selling the chicken coops were you, John?”

“Nope – I can have a word with Nick if you like. Make sure he’s up for it.”

“That would be great. I’ll ask mum what she thinks. I always tell her everything because she’s a lot cleverer than me, and if I listen to her, I don’t do stupid stuff.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid Dawn. Maybe you just take longer to understand things like Jenny does.”

“Jenny’s a lot cleverer than me. We were doing triangles and how they always add up to 180 - - only I just don’t get it.”

“Andy?”

“Cut out a triangle – chop off the corners and show how you can put them together to make a straight line. Then have Miss Dawn do it with a differently shaped triangle she draws herself.”

Dawn did several just to check then said, “So all the corners of a triangle put together make a straight line?”

“Yep”

“But why 180? What does that mean?”

Andy said, “Hours, minutes, seconds, degrees Babylonian mathematics.”

“A long time ago there was a place called Babylon where they studied astronomy. They measured what went on in the skies - Sunset and Dawn – the summer day when the sun was highest in the sky, all that sort of thing. To do their mathematics they needed units like hours and minutes for time, and as it made calculating easier, they picked 60 as a base. That’s why we have 60 minutes in an hour and 60 seconds in a minute – it’s what the Babylonians chose and we still use the same system. They also measured angles. They used 360 degrees for one full rotation, 6x60 degrees. I drew a regular hexagon and wrote six 60s at its central spokes.

“A straight line is half a full turn, and half of 360 is?”

“180?”

“Spot on”

Andy said, “Sign your sketch for her John.”

It seemed silly, but I signed my little drawing of a hexagon and said, “Here you are – now if you forget you can look at this.”

“I’ll never forget now. This is like a flower and I’m always going to keep it.”

“And so another one falls under your spell,” Andy commented.

Just then Mum shouted up the stairs, “Dawn, your mother’s here.”

Star was waiting for Dawn by the front door – Dino was turning the van round further down the Close.

Star asked, "Did you have a good time, Dawny?"

"It was great. We had all sorts of food and I had a mocktail. Then we went to the park to see the bonfire and watched the fireworks down by the river. John showed me all the stuff in his room and he explained some Maths which I didn't get at school, and it was brilliant..."

"You had better thank Mrs. Mason and John, and then we have to go. Sounds like you had a great time."

Mum got thanked, I got a hug and then they climbed in the van.

Mum looked at me, and said, "Maths?"

"Dawn was stuck on the sum of the interior angles in a triangle. I don't think anyone had explained it properly to her."

Mum just nodded, then said, "Your father's gone to bed. He was really tired."

"Not surprising, getting up when he does. Thanks for doing all the party preparation, I didn't even get round to trying a vol-au-vent."

"There are a few left I think, if you're still hungry. I'm going up now. Make sure you switch things off."

"OK – night Mum."



I found the vol-au-vents, there were three left. Andy said I'd better finish them all as leaving fewer than three on a plate would look silly. They were jolly good – very mushy. I had a slice of one of Mrs. Żyliński's cakes too. It seemed like it would be rude not to try it after she'd gone to all the trouble of making it. It was a sort of biscuit sponge with cream and raspberry jam. To be honest it was a bit sweet for me, but really tasty. I made myself a mug of tea to go with it. I find tea goes very well with cake. While I was drinking my tea, I made sure everything edible was either put away in the fridge or covered up. I thought about trying some of the potato salad. It was slices of boiled potato in some sort of cream, but I decided I'd better not make a pig of myself.

Andy said that it was best to leave it to enjoy tomorrow. And that I might feel funny in the night if I went to sleep on a full stomach.



Chapter 3 – Winning Ways

I woke up dreaming I was tied to the mainmast of a pirate ship. I have no idea why I dream about boats so often. I've never been sailing, nor do I know anyone who has. V odd. The being tied-up part was easier to understand – I'd got the duvet wrapped round my legs.

Andy said that I'd better get cracking as there might be a shortage of food downstairs. A very weak attempt at humour, in my considered opinion.

Mum put a large plate of cold smoked fish, potato salad and pickled cabbage in front of me.

I said, "Thanks Mum – waste not want not, eh?"

"That isn't a complaint, is it?"

"Not at all. This looks jolly tasty. Slightly unusual is all. What did Dad have?"

"Toast and marmalade. Your father is rather set in his ways."

When I'd finished, I said, "You know I feel absolutely full."

"I noticed there were fewer left-overs than I'd anticipated. How were the vol-au-vents?"

"The best I've ever eaten – first class I'd say."

"Are you worried about detention next week, dear?"

"Nope – it will be a new experience and I've got a lot of reading to catch up on."

"You do have an odd way of looking at things, John."

"Comes with being an odd person I expect. I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you."

Just then I heard the noise of thundering hooves from the staircase.

I decided to beetle off before I could be dragged into a conversation with the girls.

Having dodged Mands and Tammy in the hall, I was about to head up to my bedroom when Andy said, "Why not nip over the road and check on Miss Charlotte, John? I imagine there are important soccer plans which need to be discussed. This afternoon's match is a vital one."

"Aren't they all?" I muttered.

I decided I might as well wobble over the road, as I'd only drunk half a mug of tea. With any luck Mrs. Bingham would make me another.

"Oh, hello John dear," Mrs. Bingham said as she opened the door. "Come on in. That was a lovely party last night, I really enjoyed myself. Just between you and me I think your father got me a bit tipsy. He kept on filling up my glass with port."

"It's good you enjoyed it. Your sausage sandwiches were great, I had two."

"I'm glad you liked them. Didn't you try any of the food Jagweegle brought? That looked very interesting."

"Not last night, but I just ate a load of it for breakfast – very tasty."

"Goodness me that does sound um ... unusual. I had cereal."

Just then Charlie whizzed down the stairs and said, "You're here – I've been wondering where you'd got to. Come on we need to talk." And she pulled me up to her bedroom by my right arm.

"Um Charlie, could you stop pulling me around by my arms? I think you've stretched this one again."

"Don't be a twit. I've got to go in a minute. Amy says Peta and I need to work on that move."

"The one with the distant pole?"

"It's the far post, you idiot – you don't want to come, do you?"

"No, I do not – the game doesn't start for another 4 hours."

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about anyway."

"Right - do I get a hint?"

"It's Lola."

"OK – what about Lola?"

"I need your help with her, NJ."

"I don't think anyone can help Lola, Charlie."

"Be serious. I need you to talk to her so she doesn't just storm off – I've got enough problems on the pitch..."

"Like what?"

"Never mind – are you going to help or not?"

"I can try – I'm good at talking."

Charlie started pulling her hair at this point – never a good sign with her. "I don't want you to give her one of your lectures. I want you to listen as well, right?"

"Have you told Lola about the bench?"

"There isn't a real bench you nut-case – it's just an expression."

"But have you told her?"

"Not exactly – I was going to wait until just before the game."

"And then I have to deal with the aftermath?"

"Please NJ – I think she likes you."

"What makes you say that?"

"When I rang her, she said you were a weird, little shit."

"That's good?"

"It's not bad. It means she's interested in you."

“OK –you’re the team captain. I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks NJ – see you later.”

With that I got a quick snog, and then Charlie left at top speed.



Back down in the kitchen Mrs. Bingham said, “That girl makes me tired.”

“She’s gone to practice a soccer move. You can relax until she gets back.”

“I’ve got lots to do, John.”

“Never mind, I expect there’ll still be lots to do if you have a break Mrs. Bingham. How about I put the kettle on, and make us both tea?”

“You could tell Mrs. Bingham a story,” Andy commented.

“Like what?”

“How about Miss Dawn’s new enterprise in support of the green agenda?”

After being suitably impressed by the great chicken-coop project Mrs. Bingham looked at me earnestly and said, “I worry about her you know.”

“Dawn?”

“No Charlotte – I mean Charlie. She’s going to be alright, isn’t she?”

“Andy?”

“Best just say you will always be there for her no matter what.”

So, I did – I mean it was obvious anyway, but Mrs. Bingham was very relieved.

“That’s good. I know I can rely on you. Charlie’s not as tough as she wants people to think, you know.”



Back home there was an email from Dawn with an attached re-recording of her interview with her mother. They’d obviously made it early doors as the sun was just rising. Andy said it should be subtitled, ‘Dawn at dawn’.

It only took me a few minutes to replace the old one with the new material – I was getting better at using the video-editing software.

I bopped the revised video on the EGGs website under a new section called “Projects”. And added another link for, “Up-coming Chicken Rehoming Scheme.”

Andy prompted me to send an email to Marsha to tell her what I’d done. It was easier to alter the website myself, than try to describe to her what I wanted changed.



After dealing with my emails and messages forwarded by Jenny, I checked on my eBay listings.

“This car looks like it’s going to sell for over £150 Andy.”

“I can see that – silly money really. Have you given any thought to packaging?”

Damn - did I ever feel like an idiot?

“Um No – it will need to be solid right? Perhaps Mum will have some ideas.”

“Having your items suffer damage in transit will prove sub-optimal John. Before you hassle your mother, how about we have a scout around and see what can be scavenged? There’s a big skip sitting out in the Close a few doors down. It was hard to tell in the dark but it looked as though there might be some useful free materials on offer.”

“You want me to go skip-diving! Mum will go spare if she finds out.”

“Have you already forgotten about the forgiveness versus permission dictum? If re-using things which have been thrown in a skip is not recycling, then I am not sure what is.”

Having sidled furtively out of our front door making as little noise as possible, I trotted up the Close to number 22. There were all sorts of noises coming from inside. As well as a skip there was a small lorry parked in the road. “The builders are still here Andy.”

“Excellent, you can have a word with them. Those large cardboard tubes, presumably from rolls of carpet, look like they might be what we need.”

“You’re bonkers. They’re like 3 meters long.”

“They will have to be cut to size of course. Ah, here comes someone now. Explain briefly, but clearly, what it is you are after.”

A huge bloke, vaguely reminiscent of a giant Mr. Malsom, came out, and chucked a load of scraps into the skip.

“Good morning. My name is John Mason. I was wondering if I could take some of these cardboard rolls, please? I’m selling some small model vehicles on eBay, and thought I could use the tubes for packing them.”

“Morning John – I’m Fred. How long d’you need the pieces of tube to be, then?”

“About 15 cm or a little more to allow for padding. Don’t let me inconvenience you though, Fred.”

“No bother. I’ll get Bill on it. Idle sod’s useless most of the time, but ’e ain’t half bad with a chop-saw.”

Somehow Fred managed to pick up all the cardboard rolls at once and carry them inside.

I heard him shout, “Come hur’ Bill, you lazy old bugger, got a job for you.”

There ensued lots of whining sawing noises similar to the ones made by Mr. Nick Jones’s machines. In the meantime, Andy had me rummaging through the odds and ends, moving bits with a piece of batten to see what else might

be on offer. I decided this was the nitty-gritty of recycling, and if I couldn't hack it, I might as well shut up about people going green. We scored a few off-cuts of wood including the batten, plus some short lengths of electric cable.

Fred emerged from the house holding a huge yellow bag filled with short lengths of tube in one hand.

He said, "Here you go." Then, taking in the fact that the bag and I were not far off the same size, went on, "Where d'you live anyway John?"

Just down here, number 2. Ours is the first house on the left as you enter the Close."

"Right you are. Come on then."

With that he strode off. I had to jog to keep up.

Fred dumped the bag outside our garage door saying, "Job's a good 'un. Got to go. Bloody Bill don't do nothing, 'less I'm watching 'im."

"Thanks Fred – that's amazingly kind of you." This earned me a wave as Fred turned back up the Close.

I put the rest of my swag on top of the builder's bag and was wondering what to do next when Andy said, "Two large mugs of tea and two pieces of cake John. Fair exchange is no robbery."

As I put the kettle on, I said, "Fred's a great bloke. I was a bit scared when I first saw him."

"Often enough really large men are very peaceable. They don't have anything to prove, and most people leave them be, as they don't want to get in a fight with them."

Mum arrived just as I was about to trot off up the road with the tray of refreshments. Spotting the yellow bag, she said, "What on earth are you doing John? You know your father can't stand mess."

"Back in a minute Mater. I'm taking tea and cake to the builders up the road, as a thank you. Don't worry about the bag, I'll stack everything in the garage."

"But John ..."

Fortunately, Mrs. Prendergast from No. 17 waved and said, "Hello," from across the road. Mum waved back and darted inside. She hates being buttonholed by Mrs. Prendergast who has a thing about donkey sanctuaries in Spain. Not a very interesting topic of conversation, after the first few times.



I shouted, "Hi" as I carried the tray of tea and cake in the front door.

Fred came in from the other room and said, "What's all this then?" Once he clocked the tea and cake he shouted back behind him, "Come on Bill, early break – tea's up."

Taking a mug and a slice of cake Fred seated himself on a huge roll of something which Andy later identified as insulation. Bill proved to be an older and smaller bloke than Fred. He said, "Ta muchly" as he relieved me of the other mug and slice of Mum's fruitcake.

"This is bloody good cake," Fred said.

"My Mum made it. I'll pass on your compliments."

"You that kid who had a run-in with Joe Malsom's boy?" Bill asked.

"Billy Malsom went to the same school as me. We have had some run-ins. Should Billy try my mettle again, he will find me a doughty opponent."

Fred grinned and said, "Hear that, Bill? John here's got an education."

"Course I heard it – sitting right 'ure, ain't I?"

"You any good at 'rithmetic John? – we could use a smart lad to 'elp out sometimes," Fred enquired.

"What 're you on about now Fred, you daft bugger? Kid's too young to be starting work."

"I ain't saying tomorrow, am I? Going to want a job one day - stands to reason."

Fred looked round and went on, "If'n you wanted to paper the walls in hure. How many 15 metre rolls would you need?"

"They's 1 metre wide," Bill added. "Got to give the kid a chance."

"Andy?"

"10 rolls minimum – more if it's a patterned paper – you always waste some when you're matching-up."

I repeated this to Fred who grinned widely saying, "See – I told you we was going to need more than 10 rolls. Bloody great roses or some'ut on that paper."

"Could be you're right at that," Bill conceded. "Who wants bloody great flowers on their walls these days anyway? Bit bonkers if you asks me."

"You ain't paying for it, are you? Better order another roll. We don't want the bloody job running over, do we? Got the fucking sparky booked for Friday week. If we ain't ready the bugger will be off doing something-else."

"Here John, you'd better take a couple of rolls of this duck-tape for wrapping up them packages. Better than Sellotape any day." Fred fished a couple of rolls of shiny grey tape out of a box in the corner.

"Is DUCT tape, not DUCK tape Fred – how many times do I 'ave to tell you?" Bill said crossly. Fred winked at me, so I knew this was a running joke.

"That's extremely generous of you Fred. Are you sure?"

It's fine. Go careful with it though – sticks like shit to a blanket."

"I'll bear that in mind. Thanks."

“No worries – got some more in me truck. All goes on the bill anyway – no skin of our nose, is it Bill?”

“You got a big enough nose - wouldn’t hurt to lose a bit of it.”

“Ha, bloody ha. Say thanks to your mum for the cake, John. Better get back at it - no rest for the wicked.”



Back home I put the tray and empty mugs on the doorstep, then used the batten to help lever up the garage door.

I couldn’t shift the builders’ bag, not even drag it. Andy said I need to make sure the tubes stayed dry, so I found a few bricks and stacked the cardboard rolls up on top of them. There was quite a tower in the end, but they weren’t in the way. I put them in the corner where the dressmaker’s dummy had been. I folded up the yellow bag and stashed it under the bench. Andy said we could probably make leaf-mould in it, but I couldn’t see Dad wanting it sitting around in our back garden full of fallen leaves.

I closed the garage door again from the outside, then beetled back off upstairs leaving the tray in the kitchen, and putting the used mugs in the dish-washer. Andy persuaded me to bring a couple of lengths of tube and the tape with me so I could try wrapping up the model for posting.

I was just figuring out how best to parcel up a model car, when Mum called up the stairs, “John, are you there?”

“Here Mum.”

“Better go down,” Andy commented. “I expect your mother will want to know what you have been up to.”

Down in the kitchen, Mum said, “There you are at last. I was just pegging the washing out - I thought I heard the door go.”

“Fred and Bill send their compliments on your fruitcake.”

“And who exactly are Fred and Bill?”

“They’re the builders doing the work up the road. Fred’s a really big bloke and...”

“You really need to be more careful John. You hear all sorts of stories these days.”

“Do you think they might be cannibals, like Nick Jones? They did have this big saw ...”

“Mock if you must – all I’m saying is, be careful. What on earth were you doing up there anyway?”

“I needed some packing material for sending these model vehicles out. They had some large cardboard tubes which Bill chopped up for me. I’m not sure how to pack them though.”

“You could pad them out with newspaper. There’s a pile of your father’s old ones in the utility room.”

Andy said, “A little cotton wool too, perhaps.”

“Excellent suggestion Mum. Is it alright if I take some cotton wool from the bathroom? I’m only doing one package this time. It’s a trial run to see if everything works OK.”

“Yes of course dear. I’ll add it to my shopping list for next week. I must say you are very well organized. Speaking of packages, do you know what you want for Christmas?”

“Actually, I did have one idea.”

I explained the great Christmas bike scheme to Mum, who nodded and said, “That might work out well. Don’t spread it around, but I know Pauline is short of money. This might be a chance for us to help her out.”

“My lips are sealed. By the way Mrs. Bingham enjoyed herself yesterday chatting with you and Jagweegle, and drinking Dad’s port.”

Mum grinned despite herself and said, “Don’t say that John, you’ll have me at it next. Mrs. Żyliński’s name is Jadwiga.”

“I know Mum, but it’s a step up from Jillski, don’t you think?”

“But it’s so embarrassing.”

“I daresay the Żylińskis will have to get used to English people mangling their names. A lot of people will probably assume Roman comes from Italy.”

“Your father didn’t help. I think he was trying to get Pauline drunk.”

“Do you think he fancies her?”

“No, I do not! It’s David’s idea of a joke, and in very poor taste I might add.”

“Surely that depends on the port. You knocked back most of the last bottle, as far as I remember. That must have tasted OK.”

“John, you little monster ...”

I ran rapidly round the table as Mum launched a physical assault on my person, snagged a newspaper from the pile by the tumble-dryer in the utility room, and dodged Mum again, to run off upstairs.



“That went well Andy.”

“Just as well your mother loves you. She would probably kill you if she did not.”

Having checked my emails and messages again, it was time for lunch.

Dad was lurking in the hall. He said, “What’s this your mother told me about you getting the builders in John? You should ask me first if we need any work done, you know.”

"It's alright Dad I just had a delivery in a big bag used by the builders up the road. It's all stacked away neatly in the garage now – no problemo."

"What on Earth was your mother talking about then?"

"Women, Dad – they're aliens - no point trying to understand what they say. Anyway, lunch is ready. It smells like beef stew to me."

"It does, doesn't it by Jove. Aliens you say, I'll have to tell the boys in the office you said that."

"Aren't here any girls in your office, Dad?"

"Never used to be – rare as hen's teeth. Some now of course. I have to be careful though, in my position. There's a lot of rules about fraternisation with members of the opposite sex and so forth. Best just to leave it. Keep my nose clean and stay out of trouble, is my motto."

Pity you didn't take your own advice re horse-sex videos, I thought.

Not only was there lusciously dark-brown beef stew with loads of vegetables, but Mum had made mini-dumplings too, using one of Mrs. Żyliński's recipes.

"This is a culinary triumph, Mum. One of your best yet."

"Don't be silly dear."

"John's right Sally, this is absolutely excellent. By the way John isn't getting the builders in, you must have been confused."

"That's not what I said David ... oh never mind, do you really like the dumplings? They're not much trouble to make..."

I tuned out at this point, so I could luxuriate fully in the glory of the food.

I was wondering about seconds when Andy said, "May I remind you that your role as team mascot and Lola pacifier means you need to be at the game a little ahead of kick-off?"

"Damn it Andy, I've only got 25 minutes."

"Best make good use of them by getting on your bike then."

Which was a spectacularly unhelpful comment.

"Sorry Mum I've got to go. Charlie wants me to be there before the game starts."

Mum just nodded but Dad said, "Eh what?"

"It's the football team, David," Mum said, trying to explain.

"You're not getting into sports gambling are you, John? Very dicey my boy, give that a wide birth - a lot of it's rigged you know."

"Good advice I'm sure Dad. If I see any dodgy characters hanging around, I'll do my best to avoid them."

I didn't listen to the rest of the conversation. I shot upstairs, made sure everything was switched off, got my bag and my anorak – shouted "bye" and, once I'd put my helmet on, I was off on my bike, as Andy had suggested.

I was tempted to cycle across the main road until Andy said, "It's only a soccer match John. If you get killed riding your bicycle in traffic you will leave your mother in one hell of a jam."

That was like a bucket of cold water in the face. I slowed right down and pushed the bike over the crossing in relative safety.

"Your father gives good advice," Andy commented. "A pity he did not act on it himself. A case of once bitten twice shy perhaps."

"I was thinking much the same earlier."



Charlie pounced on me when I got to the sports centre.

"About bloody time. Where have you been N? Never mind, eating I expect. Come on, Lola's inside."

"What about my bike?"

Charlie shouted to Helen, who came over and took charge of it.

Lola was sitting on a sofa in reception. I was tempted to ask where the bench was, but decided I'd probably worn out that joke.

Having pushed me inside, Charlie scarpered without say goodbye. It was obvious why, Lola was furious.

"Charlie says you stitched me up."

"I did tell you that she picks the team, not me."

"But it was your idea to bench me."

"True. But here's the thing you're too old, and almost certainly too good, for this league, as is the other player you are paired with. It seems like a fair deal."

Lola calmed down. He/she grinned ruefully and said, "And I'm the wrong sex."

"That's your business, not mine."

"I guess. I just love playing football, you know."

I nodded.

Andy said, "For most people it only takes one person to want to be in a sexual relationship with them; as long as they have the support of family and a few friends too."

"Tell me to piss off if you want, but I wondered how your parents felt about you ... you know."

"Piss off."

Then Lola grinned and went on, "Seriously mum's OK. She's been great, just wants what's best for me. Dad's ... while he thinks I'm fucking-up I suppose. He doesn't like the thought that I'm going to be transitioning."

“Right. Bit hard finding someone, I guess. You know like a boyfriend.”

I was so far out on a limb here it wasn't funny, but I thought Andy's insights might be of some help to Lola.

“You asking? You're not really my type but ...” then Lola broke out in a big grin so I knew he/she was only pulling my leg.

“It only takes one.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“For most people it's enough of one other person really likes them and wants to be in a relationship with them.”

“Easy for you to say. I heard them girls talking before. Most of 'em wants to trip you up, then hurry to get underneath so you fall on top of them.”

“OK I'm popular now. It's like some sort of groupie thing. I don't think it will last.”

“It might – what you going to do then?”

“No idea – enjoy it, I guess. Would you want a load of young girls wanting to do stuff with you?”

“Might be OK.”

I left Lola to think about this, then he/she went on, “Nah you're right – be a pain after a bit. I don't fancy girls anyway.”

“Boys?”

“Not so much.”

“Donkeys, ponies ...?”

“That's fucking disgusting ... I'm not a bloody perv, right?”

Lola was ready to flatten me – not at all amused.

“Right. Got it – and so?”

“Look I don't know, right. It's bloody confusing, if you want to know.”

“In that case ruling out over 50% of the population is a sub-optimal strategy.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Over half the population is female, Lola. Earlier you said you didn't fancy girls. Better to say you don't fancy any of the ones you've met so far. Maybe one day ...”

“One will come along I do fancy?”

“Not impossible, as far as I can tell.”

There was a long pause then Lola said, “You think I should wait. Not get anything done yet?”

“I'm not you, and I have no idea what transitioning means for you, but it sounds like something that you can't undo easily.”

“Well put John,” Andy commented. “There may be someone out there who would fall for Lola right now.”

I went on, “There could be someone out there who would want be with you just as you are now.”

“You mean a girl?”

“Or a boy ... probably not a donkey – you seemed to be dead set against them.”

Lola grinned and said, “You’re a fucking weirdo – you know that, right?”

“It has been pointed out to me before from time to time.”

“Good on ya anyway – I mean thanks John.”

“You’re very welcome.”

I saw Lola was picking up his/her things ready to go.

“Not staying for the end of the game?”

“Nah – off back home, maybe get a kick-about in the park. I’ll nip out back and catch a bus into town. Keep a low profile, right? I’m used to that. Tell Charlie – tell her I said no hard feelings and good luck.”

“Of course. I will pass on your felicitations tout de suite.”

“Fucking nutter,” was Lola’s final remark, before heading off towards the back of the building.



Outside I walked over to where the girls were playing. Ellie was standing on the touchline. She said “Oh hi, John – I thought you must be giving this one a miss.”

“Nope. Super-mascot Mason ready for action.”

“You don’t know anything about a girl called Lola, do you? I can’t be seen to countenance the fielding of over-age players.”

“You might want to emphasise that approach to the other-side’s coach Ellie. I heard that one of their players was over-age.”

Ellie didn’t like this much, but it wasn’t me who had brought up the topic.

Andy said, “You had better find out how things are going John. It will be half-time soon.”

“So how are the soccerettes doing?”

“I’m not sure you should call them that.”

I just waited and finally Ellie went on, “It is nil-nil. Rather a scrappy game with few chances.”

“Anything I should tell them?”

“You could say that they are doing well. The other side is probably the best team in the league.”

“Andy?”

“Tell them you think they will win 1–nil.”

“Why?”

“Confidence - sometimes prophecies become self-fulfilling. Statistically nil-nil is more likely, but why not push the boat out?”

The whistle went and the girls all came running over to me and Ellie.

“OK, as you probably noticed, I didn’t see much of that first half. Ellie tells me that we have this lot on the ropes and it’s only a matter of time before one of you scores. I’m predicting a one nil win, and I’m hoping you are all going to crack on in the second-half and make it happen. Well done so far.”

There were a few slightly puzzled expressions but overall, they seemed up for another half of running round like mad-things screaming their heads off.

Charlie came over to me and quietly asked, “What happened with Lola?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I guess not. Margie stormed off when they benched her.”

“Worked out OK then.”

“Yeah. What was that crap about us winning one–nil?”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Yes but...”

“You’re their leader Charlie. I’m counting on you to make it happen.”

“Yes, but ...”

Fortunately, Charlie had to go, as the ref was ready to blow to start the second half.

Ellie asked, “Are you trying psychology now?”

“If it works – it works. Charlie’s much happier when they win.”

“I’m sorry I missed your party last night. Was it good fun?”

“Best soirée I’ve ever been to. Why not ask another attendee for her verdict? It looks like Jenny is on her way over.”

Jenny was very red and out of breath when she arrived. I introduced her to Ellie then said, “Ellie wanted to know what she missed yesterday at Maison Mason. I told her that it was the best party ever, and we’d all got drunk on port.”

“But we were drinking mocktails. There wasn’t any alcohol in those was there?”

“Nope. Made them myself. I have it on good authority that Charlie’s mum drank several glasses of port. Though come to think of it I wasn’t supposed to say anything, so you two had better forget I told you.”

Having got the conversational ball rolling, I left Jenny and Ellie to it.”

Andy said, “You are getting better at that.”

“What exactly?”

“Getting people talking so they don’t feel embarrassed.”

“I never really saw the point of just chatting. But it’s been fun interacting with adults like Fred and Bill, and Nick Jones.”

“Humans, taking them all in all, are social animals, John. If you come across one who is not, he or she is likely to be a very odd bird indeed.”

Jenny tapped me timidly on the shoulder to get my attention. I said “Hello Miss Wren what may I do for you? Lucky for me it’s you not Charlie. I’ve got a bruise coming I think.”

Ellie grinned and said, “Getting beaten up by your girlfriend, John? Do you want me to get involved?”

“Better not. She’ll only hit me harder. Do I gather you want to ask me something?”

“I was asking Jenny about the party, and she mentioned there was some Polish food, only she hadn’t tried it.”

“Mrs. Żyliński is a very good cook. She brought cakes and some smoked fish and a potato salad. I had a big slice of her cake before I went to bed last night, then I had smoked fish, potato salad and pickled cabbage for breakfast...”

Jenny began giggling, interrupting what I was about to say.

I looked at her questioningly.

She said, “You didn’t really eat a large slice of cream cake before you went to bed, then have smoked fish, potato salad and pickled cabbage for breakfast, did you John?”

“Sure did. I ate the last 3 vol-au-vents and had a cup of tea with the cake last night after Dawn left. Seems to me parties where people bring food are a jolly good idea, especially if they are good cooks.”

I saw I was about to be cross-questioned on my eating habits when luckily all sorts of screaming broke out on the pitch.

“What happened, Andy?”

“The plan came together in a very satisfying way. Miss Charlotte took the ball down the left-hand side right to the byline, crossed, putting it on a plate for Miss Peta to head in at the back post.”

“First time I’ve heard of crockery being involved in a soccer game – is that allowed?”

“You are incorrigible. Better to get it out of your system with me, I suppose.”

I watched the game for about ten minutes cheering when Jenny and Ellie did. It seemed a bit of a mess to me, nobody seemed to be getting anywhere. Then one of our opponents kicked the ball right down the field and I saw a forward streak past Helen and almost score. Only failing because Amy got her fingertips to the ball, diverting it round the post.”

“Was that a ball over the top into space, Andy?”

“It was.”

“And did Amy make a very good save?”

“Miss Amy made an exceptional reaction save. She has the makings of a very fine goal-keeper.”

“Just checking – I think I’m beginning to get the hang of this.”

“That will probably lead to trouble,” Andy responded pessimistically.

After the game got underway again Jenny said, “Sorry, but I’m going to have to go. Mum said I had to be home before it started getting dark.”

Andy said, “Well don’t just stand there like a turnip John. Tell Miss Jennifer you will walk her home.”

“The match hasn’t finished.”

“You know what the final score is going to be.”

Ellie offered to drive Jenny home later, after she’d checked that the girls were OK. I said, “It’s alright Ellie I’ll walk back with Jenny – it’s sort of on my way.”

“What about the game?”

“I already told you what the score will be. Congratulate them all on the win, particularly Peta and Amy. And please tell Charlie I’ll call her later.”

As we were walking back towards the sports hall Jenny said, “I’m sorry you won’t be able to see the end of the game John. I feel much safer with you though.”

“No worries – don’t tell anybody but I’m not really interested in soccer. Anyway, I was there well before the game started. I’ve done all I could to help.”

As we wandered on Andy said, “Leaving your bicycle to its own devices? Or should I say Miss Jennifer’s prospective bicycle.”

“Jenny, it looks like I’ll be getting another bike for Christmas in a sort of swap. I know it’s not much, but I wondered if you’d like to have Mands’ old bike I’m using now.”

“You can’t just give me your bike.”

“I can’t? That’s a pity. I’ll have to ask Dad to take it down to the recycling when I get my other bike. It’s really not worth the hassle of trying to sell it.”

“But, but”

Jenny was practically bursting with outrage at the thought of me getting rid of an old bike, with hardly any value.

I said, “It’s OK Jenny, I know you don’t really want it. Tell you what, when I’ve finished with it, I’ll leave it at your place, and you can take it down to the recycling for me. How’s that? It will save Dad a job.”

At this Jenny threw herself at me. She’s a lot more solid than she looks. It wasn’t easy to work out what she was saying exactly, but the substance was that I was altogether wonderful, and that she was an amazingly lucky girl. It’s

really hard to resist that sort of attention. I've had many followers over the years, but none more whole-hearted than Jenny.

"A rather more positive reaction than you were expecting for the gift of an old bike?" Andy said.

"It's not just an old bike to Jenny, is it?"

"No – it is your bike, which makes it special."

"It's an odd way of looking at things."

"Common enough. How much would an old pair of John Lennon's glasses sell for, I wonder?"

I watched Jenny walk to her gate with no mishaps, then trotted off home.



Mum put the kettle on when I got back. We had a cup of tea and the last of Mrs. Żyliński's splendid cake.

Mum said, "Your father's not happy about all the things you put in the garage John."

"I could move them somewhere I suppose."

"He'll probably have forgotten all about it by tomorrow," Mum replied sadly. Then putting that thought behind her she asked, "How did the football go?"

"The girls were winning one-nil when I left."

"You didn't stay for the end of the game?"

"Nope. Jenny had to get home. Her mother didn't want her walking back when it was getting dark. I walked with her as far as the top of her road."

"Well done dear - quite right."

"By the way I told her I'd give her Mands' old bike, after I get another."

"The Christmas present idea of yours might not work out, and it was Amanda's bike, John"

"I'll come up with another plan if necessary. I've decided to give Mands an extra £20 on her Christmas money to compensate her for the bike."

"That will have to do I suppose. I hear there was trouble in the park yesterday. Some boys chasing after Tammy."

"Yep, fortunately we managed to evade them. Tammy was scared though. I told her not to talk about it in case she gets picked on at school."

"Who was it, John?"

"Billy Malsom, his older brother Barry, and Barry's mate Terry. They were looking for me, I think."

"I wish you'd told me. Something needs to be done about this."

"Such as? It's a public park Mum, no one can stop kids going there. Yes, Tammy got a fright, but the only one who was hurt was Billy."

“What did you do to him?”

“Me? Not much. Just scared him and pushed him over. Tammy gave him a terrific kick between the legs though. Pay-back for him picking on her sister, Dani.”

“Dani?”

“When she went to the Meadows, before the Harpers moved. Billy used to call her names like ‘darky Dani’.”

“I’m glad Tammy did what she did then,” Mum said fiercely.

“Vigilante justice, eh Mum?”

“It’s the only thing his sort understands – and no I don’t want you fighting but if you have to, I’d rather it was the others who get hurt.”

“Me too Mum, me too.”

After another drink of tea Mum said, “We’re going shopping again tomorrow, dear.”

“Again?”

“Your sister has grown out of the clothes I bought her for school in the summer. There is no way round that. I don’t suppose you’ll want to come.”

“Complete waste of time if I did. My clothes still fit me. Anyway, I’ve got lots to do you know – I’m extremely busy.”

“Not the Franklins, I hope. What is it about them anyway?”

“They’ve got this huge place with loads of rooms. I think it’s Victorian. It might even have a cellar. Anyway, that’s all up to Charlie. She’s team captain, it’s her responsibility.”

“I need to be able to check you are OK, John.”

“I’ll turn my mobile on and keep it on while I’m way from the house tomorrow.”

“What about when you’re here?”

“The ancient landline system still works. I know you were used to using semaphore and carrier pigeons back when you were a girl, but times change, Mum.”

“I remember when mobile phones first came in, we thought ...”

“You should document that for history. There can’t be many people still alive with memories of the olden days. TTFN.”

And with that I retreated to my bedroom before Mum could tell me off.



“You had better call Miss Charlotte,” Andy advised.

“Congratulations on your win Charlie-girl.”

“We lost 1-3.”

“You sound very happy for a losing team captain.”

“OK - so we won 1-nil, but it was no thanks to you. You shouldn't just bugger off like that.”

“I left a message with Ellie for you. Oh, and Lola said, ‘no hard feelings, and good luck.’”

“It wasn't the same without you there. How come you knew what the score would be?”

“Mars is in Sagittarius, and with a full moon rising...”

“Bollocks. You don't believe in astronomy.”

“I believe in astronomy Charlie, it's a science. It's astrology I don't believe in. That is bollocks.”

“You're the most annoying Listen, you're going to be there tomorrow, right?”

“There where?”

“The Franklins' of course, don't be a twit.”

“Peta and Amy certainly deserve ...”

“They aren't coming. Amy's got something else on and Peta's just too shy.”

“No point in me being there then. They were the main factors in your win.”

“The others”

“It's either a reward scheme or it isn't, Charlie. If you decide to change it you should let me know first. ---Anyway, I'm jolly busy ...”

“Fine. Have it your own way.”

And with that Charlie ended the call.



“That did not go well, Andy.”

“Miss Charlotte is not high-maintenance, but she does have her moments. Perhaps she will have calmed down by tomorrow.”

I called Jenny next, “Hello Miss Wren, all OK?”

“Hi John. I'm so excited I can't believe you're going to give me your bike. Mum said I could put it in the shed and ...”

“Bit of a rubbish present really, Jenny.”

“Don't say that. It'll be much easier for me to go places and ...”

“Places like Laurel Close? “

“Well yes - - you're not laughing at me are you.”

“No Jenny, it's very flattering, and I think you'll look really sweet on a pink bike. You'd better have the bike helmet too, they match.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I don’t think pink does anything for me. I might ask Mands what she thinks.”

“You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

“Only a little bit. I’ll get a new black helmet to match Charlie’s bike.”

“Oh, OK thanks John. And mum says thanks for seeing me home safely. Was Charlie upset you didn’t stay for the end?”

“A bit. Anyway, she’s in a grump about something else now. Any other news?”

“Oh, I almost forgot. Dawn rang. She wants to speak to you.”

“Was it about the EGGs website?”

“I think so. It’s a bit hard to be sure with Dawn.”

“Dawn is going to be taking over the site from Marsha, and also doing the nest box stuff when Molly finishes after Christmas. Give her a hand if you can Jenny, she’s going to need help.”

“I’ll try. Um Dawn is a bit scatty sometimes.”

“Good point. I’ll back the EGGs site up when I get a chance.”

“Should I be doing that for your site? I mean I didn’t know and...”

“It’s alright Jenny I did it for your site too. I have admin rights remember. I can show you how; it’s not hard. Come to think of it I’ll schedule automatic back-ups – one less thing to remember.”

“It’s not my site, it’s yours.”

“It’s about me, but it’s you who does most of the work; I could never be bothered.”

“I guess....”

“Don’t guess Jenny. Be proud of what you’ve done. You don’t hear Charlie guessing whether it’s her soccer team or not.”

“That’s different ...”

“It always is – no two things are ever precisely the same. Anyway, I’ve got to go, it’s nearly teatime.”

“What shall I tell Dawn?”

“Say you’ll try to help her with the website and that she’s not to worry if anything gets mucked up, I have a back-up. Maybe you two could meet up sometime. Dawn doesn’t bite, or at least she’s never bitten me anyway.”

Jenny giggled and said, “I’m not worried about Dawn biting me, it’s just ... it’s something new I suppose.”

“That’s part of what makes life fun Jenny, trying new things. I’m just going to list my old bike on eBay to see if I get any bids.”

“Don’t be mean. You’re giving it to me because you like me, and because I’m doing a great job on the website.”

“Very true – bye Jenny.”

“Bye John – enjoy your tea.”

“Miss Jennifer is gaining in confidence. Miss Charlotte was right, being around you is helping her grow-up.”



Tea was fish and chips and peas. The batter on the cod was golden and crunchy, and the chips were really thick, but cooked perfectly all the way through.

Dad was back, and dug into his meal no problem. Tammy and Mands were there too. I kept catching Tammy giving me little smiles whenever I looked at her.

After I'd finished about 75% of my food, I looked at her and said, “You seem happy today, Tammy.”

“I was just thinking about what happened in the park.”

“And what happened after. The bucket of ice-water and all that?”

Mands went grumpy and said, “John don't.”

Tammy was happy enough though, giggling away.

Dad said “Eh what? You don't want to be putting ice in good whisky my boy. Ruins it completely.”

“No one was talking about whisky David, only you,” Mum responded.

“I distinctly heard John say something about ice – my hearing's perfectly fine you know.”

“I was talking about iced-water, Dad”

“Oh, I see – though why you want ice-water with this fish I don't know – spoil the flavour.”

“They were talking about that incident in the park, dear. You remember I told you about that boy Billy coming after John again?”

“Did he by Jove – nasty piece of work from what you said before – gave him the right-about, did you John?”

“I tried. He had couple of older boys with him, but we managed to elude them in the dark. I pretended to be an owl.”

“A what?”

“An owl. You know ‘whoo-who’. Then after, when they were talking, a real owl called from a nearby tree. The lads were trying to get it to come down and fight like a man. It was a real hoot.”

“A real hoot – did you hear that, Sally? A real hoot ha-ha – probably three sheets to the wind mind you – trying to get an owl to fight them I mean, not going to happen, is it?”

Mands and Tammy were both giggling now Mum turned to them and asked, “What exactly has got into you two.”

Tammy said shyly, “What John said about Billy – I mean it was very funny.”

“What did you say John – something-else about owls?” Dad asked.

“Nope – something about balls. Billy got kicked between the legs, after I pushed him over. I just said he’d probably gone home to soak his whats-its in a bowl of iced-water to bring the swelling down.”

“Ha–hah, hee-hee, very good John. At home with his” Dad looked round the table and found Mum glaring at him. “I mean it is a funny image you know, trousers down and um ... well mixed company and all that. You do have some adventures, John. I remember when three of us – well another time perhaps. Well done my boy, well done. I’d better get back at it, lots on you know,” and he made his escape.

With Dad gone Mum smiled at Tammy and said, “I hear you got some pay-back dear.”

“Yes Mrs. Mason... I ...well John was there and so I knew I’d be alright, and Billy really tormented Dani you know.”

“John told me about that. I hope you caught Billy a good one.”

“You do?”

“Yes, and I expect your mother will say the same.”

“I haven’t told her. John said to keep it quiet.”

“It’s OK to tell your mother Tammy,” I reassured her. “Don’t go gossiping about it with your mates is all. Billy would be embarrassed, and he might try to get you back.”

“Oh right. Um thanks John.” And with that the two girls departed.

Mum asked, “Do you know why Tammy ran off in the first place?”

“She had an argument with Mands – I don’t know what about.”

Mum just nodded.

“Do you think those two will be OK?” I asked.

“They seem fine John.”

“I meant longer term – what happens when Mandy finds a boyfriend for example?”

“What makes you ask?”

“It could be tough on Tammy, if she’s left hanging.”

“There’s someone out there for everyone dear.”

“Maybe, but they might be hard to find. I...”

Andy said, “Lola.”

“I met someone the other day – um very keen on football.”

“And?”

“And, well I think they were born a boy, and are planning on transitioning to become a girl, only he or she is not sure. I mean it’s complicated.”

"It certainly sounds it. How old is um he, or I suppose I mean they?"

"About 14, I think. I told them it only took one other person to like them, you know whatever they decide."

"Very good John – that's true."

"What I didn't say is that finding that other person might take a really long time. And I was wondering if that applied to Tammy too. She's really sweet natured, but..."

Mum nodded sadly and I could see she was thinking the same as me. "Life's not fair dear. That's one of the things you have to come to terms with as you get older."

Andy said, "Package."

"What?"

"Your eBay sale."

"Changing the subject could I give you something to post, please? I haven't packed it yet, but the model car should have sold by now."

"That shouldn't be a problem. You're going to use one of those cardboard tubes?"

"That's the plan."

"You'd better write the address on a label – your father has some, I think. I'll buy one of those black plastic envelopes at the post office. That will protect it from getting wet."

"Thanks Mum – do you want me to pay you?"

"No thank you dear. I feel guilty about how little I spend on you compared to your sister."

"I eat more than her."

"I know, but food is not that expensive when you cook it yourself from scratch."

"Not going to resort to ready-meals then Mum?"

"No, I am not. Off you go and make sure you pack that model properly. I'm just going to relax in front of the TV."

"Anything special you're not watching this evening?"

Mum stuck her tongue out at me and said, "Mind your own business Mr. Nosy Parker."

I mean I ask you, how immature.



When I knocked on Dad's door, he unlocked it and said, "Oh there you are John. Just a moment," and fished a £20 out of his wallet, "I meant to give you some money to buy yourself a drink on me."

"You already gave me a twenty just the other day."

"I did? Well never mind, take it anyway. That story about the lads wanting to fight an owl was worth a few quid."

"Thanks Dad. Do you have any address labels I could use? Mum thought you might have some old ones."

"Oh right. I'm not sure to be honest, old memory banks not what they were. Now let me see."

Dad began opening drawers and looking round at random.

Andy said, "There is a box on a shelf under the printer which says 'Avery labels - A4', John. Probably for printing addresses from a computer, I expect."

I found the box easily enough. Inside was a load of A4 sheets each with 20 individual sticky labels on."

I said, "How about these Dad? Could I take a couple of sheets?"

"What, eh? God Lord are they still all right? I got them ages ago. I don't think I ever used more than one sheet. Easier to get it done at the office. Take the box John, one less muddle around the place."

"Thanks Dad. Just let me know if you need any, OK?"

"Of course – not very likely – waste not want not, eh?"



The packing went OK. Slow, but OK – Andy set high standards. The duct tape was sticky as hell. I wasted some before I got the hang of using it.

Andy said the best approach with the labels was to just cut one off the sheet, backing and all. Then, once I'd written the name and address on it, to use a rubber band to keep the label with the package to give to Mum for posting. It was a bit of work but considering how much the model had sold for, well worth it.

I switched my personal mobile on just to check it was all OK. Predictably it started buzzing about 5 second later.

"Hi Charlie, I sold that model car for"

"Never mind that now. How come you answered your phone?"

"Mum said she needed me to put it on tomorrow in case she needs to contact me. I thought I'd better test it, and..."

"Stop wittering NJ. There's a rumour going round that Lola's really a boy called Leslie, who used to play football in Billericay."

"Right."

"What do you mean 'right'? Is it true?"

"No comment."

"So, it is true. Dammit NJ ..." and then she went off on one about Lola blah, blah, blah. I tuned out until she ground to a halt.

“Look Charlie, Lola has a load more to deal with than which football team to play for. I suggest you just bank the 1-nil and move on.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?”

“Look ... never mind. I told Amy and Peta you said they had to come tomorrow.”

“I didn’t say that, Charlie.”

“So, you want to back out now?”

“I didn’t say that either.”

“So, you will come.”

“Yep. Provided no zombies intervene, or a meteor strike, or”

“Charlie ended the call, Andy.”

“So, I gathered. Never mind, worse things happen at sea.”

“Such as?”

“Such as people drowning when their ship sinks.”



I carefully wrote the name and address of the winning bidder on a label then took the package downstairs to give to Mum. She checked it over and said, “Well done John – this looks like a good job. Where did you get the tape from?”

“Fred gave me a couple of rolls of it out of his building supplies. They use it for mending ducks apparently.”

“I believe it’s called duct-tape, dear.”

“That’s what Fred’s mate said. Doesn’t seem very plausible – I don’t think I’ve ever seen a duct. Now ducks...”

“We used to go down to the river and feed them stale bread.”

“That was a long time ago Mum.”

“It doesn’t seem that long ago to me. Put your package on top of my bag, then come and snuggle up.”

“Bit cold?” I asked on my return.

“You’re always nice and warm, and someone keeps switching the thermostat down.”

“House-elf probably. They’re getting very environmentally conscious these days.”

“I see. If you see our elf, tell him or her that your mother isn’t getting any younger, and feels the cold. How did you want your parcel sent John?”

I was about to say ‘In the post’ when Andy said, “You had better pick an option where the recipient signs to say they received it.”

“Can it be signed for?”

“Will do. It’s only an extra pound or so I think. Are you planning on selling the rest of the models.”

“Yep. It’s going to take a while though. I need to take several good photos and write a little bit to say if there are any scratches and give some idea of how old I think the model is. A lot of them seem to date back to the 60s and 70s.

“Your father must have been given the older ones by a relative I suppose.”

“Before or after you got married?”

“Cheeky monkey. We were married the same year Amanda was born, if you must know.”

A thought occurred to me and I asked, “How many months after you got married was Mands born?”

Mum blushed a little and said, “Just over 3. I had to have my dress taken out. Don’t tell your sister, John.”

“Why not? It is the 21st century you know.”

“I know dear but – well I don’t want her getting ideas, if you must know.”

“We do sex-ed in school these days.”

“It’s not the same thing, and anyway...” Then Mum went off on a long, complicated ramble about teenage girls and sex. I just left her to it.



I didn’t really want to go back up to my bedroom - it was lovely being cuddled up with Mum. But there were more models to list for sale, and the spy stuff Andy suggested I buy to sort out.

Sitting in my computer chair again I asked, “What’s next Andy?”

“I advise a call to Miss Dawn, John.”

I’d found a load of different mini-cameras for sale fairly cheaply and said, “What about these?”

“I want to have a word with you about that later. The reason for contacting Miss Dawn now is that team efforts are about people all playing a part. Miss Charlotte does not just turn up to captain on match days, she also does a lot of work with her players at other times. I believe Miss Dawn wants to help you get the green group going, but you have to remember that managing a website will be new to her. Some hand-holding and a few ‘well dones’ are all that will be required I expect.”

“Hi Dawn, I heard you spoke to Jenny about the website.”

“Yeah. It sounds really complicated - I just don’t think I’ll be able to do it.”

“Two things which may help. One - it all sounds a lot trickier than it is. The best thing would be for you to sit down with Jenny and go through a few procedures like editing a page. She could come to your house or you could go

to hers. The second is that I will make a copy of the whole EGGs site this evening. If there is an accident or something stops working, I can just restore the site from the back-up and it will be back to exactly as it was before anything was altered.”

“Can you really do that?”

“Yep. It’s not a very big site so it will only take me about 5 minutes to make a copy of it all.”

“You’re so clever - I wouldn’t know how to do anything like that.”

“I am clever, but there is only one of me Dawn. I need help to get things done. You know more about the allotment and the chickens there than I do. I’m going to have to learn, so you will need to explain to me how it all works.”

“It’s really simple, you”

“That’s exactly what I think about managing a website. It’s really simple, you”

“I um ... I guess things seem simple when you know how they work.”

“More or less, though I expect there are things you don’t know about chickens, and there are loads I don’t know about websites. I just know enough to be able to do what I need to.”

“Right. Yes of course it seems obvious when you explain it. Usually, mum can help but she doesn’t know anything about this either. By the way Dino called to say he dropped your bike off. He put it down the side of the garage. I hope that’s OK.”

“Excellent news. I’m not entirely clear how Dino came to have my bike in the first place though.”

“Helen rang Jenny - she was worried that you’d forgotten your bike. So, Jenny suggested she call me because we have a van. Anyway, Dino has a gig on in Reading this evening so he sorted this out on his way there. Um... did you forget it? I do that sometimes with my things - mum says I’m a bit scatty.”

“I left the bike because I walked Jenny home and I couldn’t be bothered to push it. I do forget things sometimes but not this time. I’m going to give the bike to Jenny when I get another one for Christmas.”

“Oh – I bet she’s pleased.”

“Like a dog with two tails. She’s a lot stronger than she looks. I thought she was going to hug me to death.”

“That’s so nice of you. I don’t think Jenny has much. Her mum doesn’t earn a lot.”

“You’re right about that. I have to go now. You’d better call Jenny again and sort out a meeting. Night Dawn.”

“Night John – it’s going to be so great helping you with everything.”

“Well done John – there is no substitute for the personal touch,” Andy commented.

“What about the snooping stuff for finding out more about what Dad’s involved in?”

“I have been giving that a lot of thought. It comes in two broad categories. Software, and hardware items like cameras, sound recorders, trackers and so forth. I think the risk/reward ratio of putting a camera in your father’s office is hard to justify. In the first place we know your father deals primarily with transactions conducted on a computer - in other words he is not making a bomb in his office.”

“And in the second place?”

“The fact that these small cameras are cheap and easily obtainable means that you are not the only person who could put one in your father’s room, John.”

“You think they are spying on Dad?”

“Assuming there is a conspiracy which involves committing highly illegal acts, the conspirators have to be paranoid about being betrayed.”

“Bloody Hell, Andy - they could have seen me going into Dad’s room on Thursday.”

“Possible, but highly unlikely. Monitoring a spy camera 24/7 is a very time-consuming job. Plus, your father is not the only person who will be under surveillance. Even if you were spotted there are various possible explanations for your actions.”

Such as?”

“Playing a prank on your father. Looking for money to steal. These people do not know you, John. A ten-year-old boy going into his father’s room at around tea time is not highly suspicious. On the other hand, going in there with a spy camera, and fixing it so you can monitor what your father is doing would take rather more explaining.”

“Seems like I can hardly do anything.”

“You need to be like a mouse, scurrying noiselessly round in unseen places, John. The highest priority is not getting caught. It will be of no use finding out everything that is going on if you end up being killed for your pains. As I see it the main thing is monitoring what your father does on his laptop, and also on his mobile. I doubt he uses his phone in the way a youngster would, but it needs to be checked.”

I sat and had a think about all this.

“How could they get a spy camera into Dad’s room?” I asked.

“Generally, someone coming in to do work like fixing a leak would be used, or someone doing a supposed meter reading. In this case however it would have been simplest for the Emperor just to tell your father to put a camera or cameras in his room.”

“Dad put them there!”

"If I am right – yes. What could your father say if asked, John 'sorry I don't want you monitoring me as I'm considering betraying you?'"

"Fuck."

"As you say. On to what I think you should buy. I expect the best available spying software is illegal. I presume that means finding it not on eBay or Amazon but some criminal marketplace."

"The dark web. That's really dodgy Andy."

"It could hardly be otherwise. Still there are degrees of risk. Unless you can access MI5 or CIA programs the best software available will be being produced by criminals. I doubt you will be ripped off. The sort of people who buy criminally produced snooping software do not take kindly to being messed around. Direct and deadly reprisals are to be expected by anyone who tried to swindle them."

It turned out that TOR was what I needed to access the dark net. I was in so far over my head it wasn't even funny.

"£400 for this spying software is nearly all the money I have Andy."

"Yes, but look what you are getting for it. Not only real-time monitoring, but WEB-based storage of all activity and the ability to boot the computer remotely - plus capturing any visual or audio input. If it comes to it, you could put it on your mother's Visa card."

"Very funny. Mum's going to kill me if she finds out."

"Will that be before or after she kills your father for getting himself involved in all this?"

In the end I went for it and paid via PayPal. If Mum queried what I'd been up to I was going to have to lie, there was no two ways round that. Next, I listed some more models for sale. I had money coming in and going out in much larger amounts than I was used to back then.

"The spy cameras are going to have to wait Andy."

"Only for a few days. That next listing of yours ends soon."

"Seriously, do I still need them?"

"Yes. At least two, I think. You may want them in a hurry. Even if you do not, you still have Project Highfields on the books - plus the stated use of putting them in a couple of nest-boxes."



Mum knocked on my partly open door, then came and sat on my bed.

"I wanted a quick word with you dear before I turn in, and I don't want you flying off the handle."

"Say on aged relative – you have my undivided attention."

"I mentioned the issue of your education to Mr. Żyliński last night and he suggested Reading School. I'd more or less ruled it out because of the fees,

but apparently they do scholarships. You'd have to sit an entrance exam, but I think you'd have a good chance of passing."

"I thought I'd driven a stake through the heart of this bloody problem, Andy."

"Calm down John. Your mother only wants what is best for you. Start by finding out more before blowing a fuse."

"Whereabouts is this school?"

"It's quite near the town centre, not far from where Roman works. I think a number of his colleagues' children go there."

"Why didn't the Żylińskis send Marsha there then?"

Mum grinned and said, "She's the wrong gender for one thing. Reading is an all-boys school – at least for the younger children."

That made me frown, but I was managed to get a grip on myself. Next, I went with, "When would the exams you mentioned be, do you think?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I haven't had time to check, but I'd think they'd be around Easter. Their school year is much the same as state schools, so their new year begins in September."

I decided I'd better put up some token resistance at least and said, "I don't know Mum I'd miss all my friends – Charlie, Jenny and Dawn - all that lot."

"I know dear but you would be able to catch a bus that would take you most of the way there."

"OK – I'll give these exams a try."

"You will? That went more easily than I expected. Are you up to something?"

"I'm always up to something Mum. You know me."

"And in this case?"

"Let me think."

"What say, Andy? This stuff Dad's involved with isn't going to drag on until Easter, is it?"

"January at the outside. You father's mental health is deteriorating rapidly – that is a limiting factor. He must be under tremendous strain."

"The thing is Mum you never know what's round the corner. A meteor-strike, a pandemic, the Zombie Apocalypse – things could be a lot different by Easter."

"Counting on something happening which will alter our lives significantly is not like you."

"I know I can't predict the future, Mum. But odd things do happen to me, especially recently."

"That's true I suppose, and life is unpredictable. I can predict I'm going to be of no use tomorrow unless I get to bed soon."

We had a quick hug and said our 'goodnights', then Mum toddled off.



“Not what you want to hear, but I believe Reading School offers an exceptionally high standard of education. You would find it academically challenging.”

“OK, but I’m hoping secondary school will be fun too. Do you really think I’d enjoy going to an all-boys school Andy?”

“No, I do not. Only time will tell us what will be. As you quite rightly observed, seeing the future, unless one has a fully functioning crystal ball, is an impossibility.”

“I’m looking forward to going to school with all my mates from the Meadows, Andy.”

“Including Billy?”

“That shit. I thought I’d seen the last of him. They came looking for me last night, didn’t they?”

“It was a reasonable guess that you would be in that park on bonfire night – so I would say, Yes they did.”

“Is that it now, do you think?”

“Hard to say. I doubt Billy will choose to confront you on his own. But if his brother and his friend want to make more of it, they could. They know where to find you after all.”



An email pinged in from Marsha saying that she would be round early tomorrow with Linda. I replied that was fine, and I was expecting them.

Then I asked, “Anything else urgent Andy?”

“Nothing urgent no, but I did think you might like to read the start of Romeo and Juliet in preparation for Wednesday.”

“I’m not in the mood for reading Shakespeare now – too tired.”

“Fair enough – how about I summarise the plot? That should not take more than 5 minutes.”

“Go for it.”

I mean I really couldn’t believe it. “That’s it? It’s like totally idiotic.”

“That is, as you say, it. An ancient Italian tale reworked by a genius to bring what could be cardboard cut-out characters to life.”

“OK – fine – but it’s all misunderstandings - someone stabs someone, then Romeo loses it and kills the killer. Juliet pretends to kill herself and Romeo, the plonker, assumes she has, and kills himself – what a dimwit.”

“You would say the moral of the story is ‘never assume?’”

“Well Duh, to use one of Mands’ expressions.”

“You have learnt a valuable lesson then John. Shall I wake you at eight tomorrow?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Indeed – but you have callers coming.”

“OK – eight it is.”

I did the necessary in the bathroom, by the time I was back in bed it was gone 11.30. I don’t cope well unless I get a solid 8 hours sleep, so I had Andy put me straight out.



Chapter 4 – Unjustly Dumped

I woke up in the middle of dreaming I was an owl who had just eaten a v tasty mouse. It would have been epic, except Billy was a grizzly bear, and kept shaking the tree I was roosting in. Quite why I didn't fly off to a quieter tree, I have no idea.

Downstairs Mum had made porridge with luscious plump raisins in. I put loads of honey and cream on mine. Andy reminded me to switch on my mobile, and about halfway through eating my wonderous breakfast the bloody thing buzzed. It was Marsha of course.

I said, "Hi Marsha, how goes it?"

"Hi John. We coming."

"OK. Where are you now?"

"In park - where was bonfire."

"Bloody hell Andy, they're nearly here."

"Indeed. My advice is to ask them to wait in the Close for you. It appears to be quite a clement morning."

"It's practically dark," I grumbled but receiving no reply from Andy I went on, "OK Marsha I'm just finishing my breakfast. I'll meet you out in the Close, OK?"

"You come out meet us, Yes?"

"You got it - see you soon."

I was hampered in the act of gobbling down the rest of my porridge by Mum wanting to know what was going on. I told her about the bullying Marsha was suffering at school, and explained I'd promised to try to do something to help.

Mum was in a mood anyway. Dad had decided to have a bath before breakfast and Mum was expecting Mands and Tammy to appear soon. I didn't comment, but the chances of those two catching an early enough bus from Reading to arrive before nine seemed remote to me.



Outside Marsha was sitting with an older girl on our wall waiting for me. I say girl, but Marsha's companion was really a young woman.

Andy gave a wolf-whistle and said, "Stunner" as we met up.

Marsha said, "Hi John, this is Linda."

"Hi Marsha. Hi Linda, very pleased to meet you."

I received a flaccid handshake from the new girl who said, "You can call me Trixie."

When I looked puzzled, she went on, “My acting name is going to be Trixie-belle.”

“You’re going to be an actor?”

“Adult videos and internet stuff – you know.”

“Porn star – good choice,” Andy commented.

I went with “Right”, not having a clue what to say.

Trixie was unperturbed adding, “People say I have a lot of potential.”

“More actual than potential, I would say - two very large, prominent ones. As an actress she will never fall flat on her face,” was Andy’s verdict.

“Put a sock in it will you? I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Wondering whether Miss Trixie-belle’s nipples are more than 1cm long I expect. She is not wearing a bra under her top, that is for sure.”

I was about to tell Andy to be quiet again, when Charlie rocked up.

“Hi Charlie”

“What’s going on John?”

Trixie jumped in and said, “You must be Charlotte. Marsha told me Johnny had a sporty girlfriend. Still looks aren’t everything, are they?”

Trixie patted my arm and went on, “I was just explaining to Johnny how he can help me with my acting career.”

Then she batted her eyelids at me and added, “Us struggling actresses need all the help we can get.”

“I don’t think ...” I began.

“Before you blow her off remember that Miss Trixie is the key to finding out about the bullying,” Andy advised me.

“I don’t think ...” I began again.

“That’s because you’re busy staring at this bimbo’s tits,” Charlie commented. She was decidedly unchuffed.

“I don’t think there is much I can do to help Trixie. I’m only ten and there are laws about kids and porn.”

“But you have a growing following on social media, surely we can come to an understanding,” Trixie said looking down at my crotch.

“Blow-job on offer for sure,” Andy commented.

“For fuck’s sake Andy, will you shut up?”

Charlie said, “Perhaps you should take Miss ‘I forgot to put my underwear on this morning’ up to your room NJ? She obviously wants to give you a private performance.”

Linda had clearly pissed-off Charlie, who had now lost it.

“If you really think so Charlie. Look after Marsha for me, will you? I won’t be long. Come on Linda, follow me.”

"This is either very brave or extremely foolhardy, John. You do not like being told what to do, do you?"

"I don't like it when my girlfriend thinks I'm after another girl when I'm not. I already told Charlie I'm trying to help Marsha."

I could hear Mum and Dad having a ding-dong in the kitchen when we went into the hall. Dad was getting it in the neck about the girls being late, though quite why it was his fault was unclear.

Upstairs Linda sat on my bed while I sat in my computer chair, swivelling round to face her. She seemed less confident and younger now we were alone. She said, "What do you want me to do, John?"

"Tell me what's happening with Marsha."

"Excuse me?"

"Marsha is being bullied at school. She says you're involved."

"It's not me who's doing it."

"You said something to Marsha about her mother."

"I don't remember. I say lots of things to lots of people - mostly it doesn't mean anything."

"Who is behind the bullying, if it isn't you?"

"Mildy - she's head-girl. I call her Mouldy, stuck-up bitch."

"But you do what she tells you to."

"If Mildy, says you're out, you're out - nothing happens at Holy Jo's without her being for it. She's genuinely posh - her family own horses and everything."

"Why doesn't Mildy like Marsha?"

"No idea. You're not going to help me, are you?"

"In the future I might - if there's something I can do without getting in trouble. Right now, I've got more on my plate than I can cope with."

"Up to your armpits in alligators," Andy interjected.

"How do I meet this Mildy anyway?"

"You don't - not unless you're related to the Royal Family or something."

"You see her."

"At school. She wouldn't give me the time of day otherwise - I'm much too common for the likes of her."

"In school then."

"You're a boy, no way they'd let you in. Visiting time on weekends is the only time boys are allowed."

"Visiting time?"

"Some of the girls are boarders. Their families come to visit them."

“OK, a weekend then.”

“Blimey this is hard work, Andy.”

“Stick with it, John. You are doing a sterling job.”

“There’s a prefect-rotas for weekends,” Linda said.

“Can you check it please?”

“I guess.”

Linda flicked through a few things on her mobile then said, “Mildy’s on next weekend. I expect she’ll only do Sunday afternoon though. She usually has afternoon tea when she’s there.”

“Next Sunday afternoon it is.”

“I umm ... I can’t be there long. I’ve got stuff to do.”

I read Linda and realised she had a lot more going on than I’d expected.

“Family things?”

“Yeah. I’ve got two younger brothers. Dad - he try’s his best, but he works long hours driving.”

“And your mother?”

“She went off with another bloke. That’s when dad hooked up with Annabelle – you can find her site, she’s Miss Whippy.”

“You’re joking!”

“No honest. That’s where I go the idea for Trixie-belle from. Annie does bondage and caning and all that.”

“You want to do that too?”

“No, I’m definitely a bottom.”

“You’ve got a big bottom?”

Linda giggled and said, “No silly. Annie’s a top - she does stuff to other people – blokes mostly. I couldn’t do that I like to be...”

“On the receiving end?”

“Yeah – you can spank me sometime if you want to. Only I’ve got to go now, there’s a load of washing and ironing to get done for the boys for tomorrow.”

“So, a career, not University?”

“Yeah – I’d like to make some money first anyway.”

She put her hands under her breasts and lifted them up saying, “These puppies won’t stay like this for ever. Annie’s a double-D, and hers are starting to sag. Mine are bigger, and I’m still growing.”

As I followed Linda downstairs and out the door Andy said, “Smart girl – she is making the most of a tough situation.”

“I guess - she’s missing out on an education.”

“Limited options. It is nearly impossible to bring up two kids and do a degree John. Plus, unless she got a place at Reading, she would have to move.”

Outside Marsha was sitting on the wall by herself waiting for us. She looked cold, and I realised Charlie had just left her to it.

“Hi Marsha, Charlie shouldn’t have left you by yourself.”

“It OK. I big girl. What happened?”

“Turns out it’s Mildy, the head girl, who is behind all this.”

“That bitch. She really up self, nose in air. She”

“OK Marsha, I’m on it. Next Sunday I’ll come to your school and try to settle this once and for all.”

Marsha brightened immediately and said, “Really? You come Holy Jo’s next Sunday?”

“Yep – It’s Mildy’s turn to do visitor duty. I’ll be there if she is.”

Marsha clasped her hands over her head and did a little victory dance saying, “kurwa zajebisty – you’re dead bitch”.

“It’s not sorted yet Marsha.”

“No but you nail her, I know.”

“What does ‘kurwa zajebisty’ mean?” I asked mangling the pronunciation horribly.

“Best not say mum and dad – is Polish swear words, OK?”

“OK, got it. You two had better go. Linda has homework to do.”

I winked at Linda who grinned back and said, “Thanks John. Think about my offer, OK?”

Marsha said, “We go now?”

“I’ve got other stuff to do too.”

I got a hug from both girls.

Andy said, “Miss Linda needs to be careful; she could put someone’s eyes out with those nipples.”

As they turned to go Linda gave me an exaggerated wiggle of her bum, then tottered off after Marsha.

“How does anyone walk in high-heels like that?”

“Carefully. A sprained ankle is always a possibility,” was Andy’s response.

“Do you know what ‘kurwa zajebisty’ means?”

“Literally ‘whore fucker’ I believe – ‘fucking awesome’ would come closest to the sense meant by Miss Marsha. Translation is always” Then Andy went off on one about the difficulties of translating expressions from one language to another.



Just then Charlie came storming out of her house. Simultaneously Mum stuck her head out of our door and called me.

Charlie said, “What the fuck do you think you’re playing at?”

I waved to Mum to let her know I’d heard and said, “You left Marsha sitting out in the cold.”

“She was your visitor, not mine.”

“Fine. I’m going in to see what Mum wants.”

“But...”

“You have one super-annoyed girlfriend on your hands, John.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. Charlie knows she’s in the wrong about Marsha, she’s just jealous of Linda’s looks.”

“The course of true love never did run smooth.”

“Romeo and Juliet again?”

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

“I suppose they were all idiots too?”

“Clever people often do stupid things when they are in love. Rationality and strong emotion are not common bedfellows.”

Back in the kitchen Mum asked, “Are you sure you’re going to be OK, dear? We’re leaving in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be fine Mum – no problemo.”

“Your father wants to give you some money to buy lunch with as you’re not going to be eating with us.”

Mum looked pointedly at Dad who said, “Eh What? Oh yes money. Here’s a ...um yes twenty John.” As he pulled first one tenner and then a second out of his wallet under Mum’s scrutiny. “Be a lot cheaper than buying lunch for you at the Horse and Jockey, that’s for sure. Mind you spend some of it on food my boy. No liquid lunches with us coming back to find you’re three sheets to the wind, eh?”

“You’re sure Dad? You gave me a £20 yesterday.”

“Think nothing of it – you’re only young once son.”

Mands said, “Can we go now? It’s going to be heaving in town by the time we get there.”

This prompted a general exodus leaving me on my own in the kitchen wondering about making another cup of tea. Then the doorbell went. Needless to say, it was Charlie.

“Aren’t you coming? We’re running late.”

“To the Franklins?”

“Of course. Peta and Amy will be waiting for us. That’s assuming you have any energy left after doing whatever with that bimbo.”

“Linda has hidden depths.”

“Hah-hah. As much hidden depth as a dinner plate, that one. Now come on. Follow me – I’ll tell the others you’re on your way.”

With that she nipped out of the gate and pedalled off at high speed.

“Miss Charlotte has a lot of energy this morning,” Andy commented.

I felt like staying at home and relaxing, but I had promised Andy I’d take opportunities which presented themselves for having sexy times with girls.



Of course, Charlie was long gone by the time I started cycling up the hill to the Franklins.

“Not feeling in the mood for fun and games?” Andy asked.

“Not really.”

“You have had a lot going on, and there is the stress of installing the spying software on your father’s laptop to come. It is hardly surprising that you are not filled with the joys of Spring.”

“It’s not Spring either.”

“True. The shorter hours of daylight do affect people’s mood in general. Unsurprising that early man invented festivals to thank the gods for causing the Sun to start warming the world again. People often refer to that celebration as Christmas these days of course.”

“It’s supposed to be about the birth of Christ, Andy.”

“So some would have you believe. It is very unlikely that the historical person known as Jesus was born in December. The 25th December has more to do with Judaic beliefs, you know. I would discount the cult of Mithras as the origin if I were you. Be that as it may there is no ignoring the coincidence that many calendars had the winter solstice happening on that day.”

I was thinking about all this when I arrived at the Franklin’s house. There was no sign of Charlie, but Helen was waiting for me.

She said, “We’re using the granny annex. Mum said it would be better as its separate and you can’t hear the noise so much. That’s OK, isn’t it?”

“Fine by me. What about granny?”

Helen grinned. “We don’t actually have a granny – not here anyway. We just call it that because the people before us had it converted for their granny. Or

at least I think they did. It used to be a stable you know. You can still see a lot of the old building on the ground floor. They preserved it. I umm ... I'm wittering on, aren't I?"

"A bit – it's jolly interesting though. Do you think Jesus was born in a stable?"

"Um ... maybe. There was a donkey, wasn't there?"

Helen led me round the side of the annex to a metal staircase which went up to an entrance on the first floor.

"Wouldn't this be a bit of a climb for granny to get in and out. It must be pretty slippery when it's wet."

"Actually, it's not too bad. Anyway, there's a lift inside, but this way is quicker."

"A lift?"

"Yeah. A little one like they have in some shops for people in wheelchairs to use."

"They've got a lift, Andy."

"So I gathered."

"I've never been in a house with a lift in before."

"It's an annex, not a house."

"Same difference."

"As you say, sir."

After she'd shown me into a small sitting-room Helen said, "Charlie seemed upset."

"She's angry with me about something – I wouldn't let it worry you. Who's my first victim?" I asked with a grin, trying to lighten the mood.

"Peta, only she's really nervous. I don't think she knows much about umm ... you know boys."

"I will endeavour to go easy on her. No love-bites this time round."

"God no! She'd freak I think."

"Very well then – send her in, if she hasn't already done a runner."

"Will do. Charlie's trying to calm her down."

Andy said, "You had better open that other door John; I assume the bedroom is through there. Then move away from the external door, so Miss Peta doesn't feel trapped when she comes in."

"I lure her in by looking non-threatening, then trap her in the bedroom when the opportunity arises?"

"Precisely. You are a fast learner."

I consider making some sarcastic comment about getting all A's in Mrs. Prosser's class, but I really wasn't in the mood for banter.



Helen pushed Peta through the door, said, "Here she is," then closed the door behind her.

To say Peta was a s nervous as advertised would be an understatement; she was quaking where she stood.

Andy said, "You had better keep your distance and try to engage Miss Peta in conversation. She appears to be about to freak out."

"No shit Sherlock. What exactly am I supposed to say to her?"

"You could begin by trying to find out why she is so scared of boys."

"Hi Peta, feeling a bit nervous?"

"Hi John. Uh yeah. I don't you know ... I um ... I never ..."

"No brothers?"

"Oh no, it's just me and mum and dad."

"No boys at school?"

"Oh no, I go to Fernside. It's private. Not posh or anything. It's OK, I guess. Some of the teaching is a bit rubbish and um... it's all-girls of course."

"So, no boyfriend then?"

"God no. I don't think I'll ever have a boyfriend. I well"

"Because you're tall."

"Well duh! I'm not just tall, I'm a freak. I can't even talk to boys, I'm too shy."

"You're talking to me. I'm a boy."

Peta gave me a little smile and said, "I am, aren't I?"

"Any time now Andy, I'm running out of ideas here."

"You are doing very well John. You could try the old dictum that 'everyone is the same height lying down'."

"It's new to me."

"Then hopefully it will be new to Miss Peta too. Sometimes the old gains new currency with a new generation."

"Do you know what they say about very tall people like you, and very short people like me?"

"No. What?"

"That everyone is the same height lying down."

I took Peta's left hand gently in mine and led her into the bedroom. Then letting it go again I slipped off my trainers and lay on my left side on the bed.

"Um what happens next?"

"Up to you Peta. You could take off your shoes and lie down too if you want."

"Shoes?"

"One of Mum's rules. No shoes on the bed."

"Makes sense, I guess. Are there other rules?"

"Yep loads. Another is, all clothes stay on."

"They do?"

"Yeah, but I can rearrange them a bit."

"How does that work?"

"Lie down and I'll show you."

After levering her trainers off, Peta lay down on the edge of the bed as far away from me as possible.

Very slowly I reached over with my right-hand and began undoing the buttons on her blouse. She went completely rigid watching my hand like it was a snake. She didn't say 'stop' though – in fact she didn't say anything just began breathing really heavily.

"I do that and then I reach in...slide my hand inside your bra like this and begin playing with your nipple."

"Oh God, shit – fuck, fuck, fuck ..."

I hadn't expected to find much inside Peta's bra, she was obviously totally flat-chested, but her nipple was long and rubbery like a cylindrical pencil eraser.

"She's enjoying this, Andy."

"Indeed. Ask her to roll towards you and then you will be able to kiss her. Her left nipple might appreciate some attention too."

"Roll over my way please Peta."

"Like this?"

"Yeah, and now for your other tit."

It began on my side as a gentle first kiss. Peta had other ideas though. She mashed her mouth to mine and then seemed intent on trying to swallow me whole.

"She's stronger than she looks, Andy."

"Good muscle tone and good aerobic training, plenty of lung capacity. It is probably her first proper kiss, hence the over-enthusiasm."

Eventually we broke apart, both needing to catch our breath.

“OK Peta?”

“What? Oh yeah. I’m OK, I think. I did it right, didn’t I?”

“Very good. Really sexy.”

“I was? You’re not just saying that?”

“Definitely.”

“I don’t think it’s going to help me find a boyfriend though.”

“Confidence will help, and they say there is someone for everyone. It just might take you a while to find that person.”

“But... “

“You want one now, or at least soon?”

Peta nodded, her big blue eyes wide and trusting.

“Better start hanging around with tall people. Basketball teams, high-jumpers ...”

She grinned, then said, “I quite like netball, but that’s only for girls.”

“I didn’t say that the person you are looking for was male. Females make up over 50% of the population.”

“I’m not like that. I...”

“Don’t knock something you haven’t tried. The idea at our age is to have fun. It will be a while before you’re thinking of getting married, I expect. Could I ask you to send Amy in please? I’m short of time. I’m busy this morning.”

“Oh yeah sure. It was great. What should I tell the others?”

“Whatever you want, it’s your John Mason experience. I won’t be saying anything about it. If you don’t either then people will just make up stories about what happened. Me swinging from the chandelier, or something.”

“There is no chandelier, silly.”

“Anything can happen in a story, Peta.”

As she was putting her shoes on Andy said, “Give her a kiss before she goes you twit.”

“There’s a height differential problem, Andy.”

“Stand on the bed then.”

“Um Peta, how about a kiss to say good bye?”

Peta looked at me teetering on the edge of the bed and said, “Good idea.”

We had a nice kiss then, as she was about to go, she said, “Oh, almost forgot” and fished a pair of panties out of her jeans pocket adding, “These are OK, aren’t they?”

“Helen’s suggestion I suppose. Very pretty. Are these pink daisies?”

“They’re supposed to be little roses I think – see ya.”

She dashed off and Andy said, “You did well John, very well. I presume that advice was based on the chat you had with Lola.”

“Yep. It seemed to me that if it was good for one person, it would be for another.”

“Good advice on including girls in the hunt. Miss Peta has a way better chance of hooking up with another girl. Easier to find, and no risk of getting pregnant.”

“We do have freely available contraception these days, Andy.”

“And you also have a lot of unplanned, teenage pregnancies. No girl in the history of the world ever got another girl pregnant.”



When Amy came in, I was lying on the bed with my back to the headboard. She stood in the bedroom doorway and said, “I don’t know why I’m here. Charlie said you insisted.”

“Charlie goes beyond what I tell her sometimes. The reason I thought you should be here was you made a great save and without that you wouldn’t have won the match.”

“I thought it was going in.”

“That doesn’t matter, you kept it out. Anyway, you get to choose what John Mason experience you want. If you just want to talk, that’s fine by me.”

“It’s not that I don’t like you John, it’s just”

And at this point she came to a halt.

“Any ideas Andy?”

The obvious one is that Miss Amy doesn’t fancy boys.”

“You’re not into boys?”

“I didn’t say that.”

I sat forward on the edge of the bed and finally managed to read Amy. In her mind was a very familiar face.

“Charlie?”

“Oh my god. I haven’t told anyone – you can’t ... that’s awful ... I...” and with that she ran off.

“That didn’t go too well Andy.”

“No indeed. Blurting out the first thing that occurred to you was not wise.”

“It just took me by surprise is all. I’m pretty sure Charlie isn’t into girls.”

“That will not be a consolation to Miss Amy.”



I wobbled down into the yard, hoping to sort things out, when a volcano erupted all over me.

“What the hell did you do to Amy? She wouldn’t tell me anything, and she ran off crying.”

“I um... well it was a little unfortunate ...”

“A little unfortunate! You fucking nutcase. She’s my best friend you dimwit. First it was Miss Trixie-tits this morning and now you’ve made Amy cry. You’d better tell me what happened right now.”

“Andy?”

“Cave in now and your self-respect will be in tatters. Not something you will easily recover from.”

“I promised all the girls that I would keep their John Mason experiences confidential, Charlie – and obviously that includes Amy’s.”

“I suppose you will tell me next that you’re going to be seeing your new girlfriend Miss ‘I’ve got more tits than brains’ again.”

“She’s not my girlfriend Charlie, you are. I do plan on going round to St Josephine’s next weekend.”

“Un-fucking-believable. You’re a bloody weirdo – I don’t need a boyfriend like you. You can sod right off.”

And with that she climbed on her bike and cycled off at high speed.



“I think I just got dumped Andy.

“Most perceptive of you to notice.”

Helen came over to me and asked, “Is everything OK, John?”

“Not exactly – Charlie just dumped me.”

“Oh my god. What happened? Did you guys have an argument?”

“More of a misunderstanding really. I’d better be going too,” I said, while looking round vaguely for my bike. To be honest I felt totally discombobulated.

Helen just said, “Oh,” but Andy chipped in with, “I seem to remember you promised Miss Patricia you’d try to help her with her boyfriend problems, should the opportunity arise.”

“I’m not feeling much like it, Andy.”

“The world has not stopped turning. Just because you have a temporary issue with Miss Charlotte that does not mean other people’s problems have disappeared, or become less important to them.”

Helen said, “My parents were looking forward to meeting you, John.”

“Yes, it’s a pity things worked out as they did. Hopefully I’ll be able to have a word with them another time, please give them my apologies. As it is I’d better go and have a chat with Pat before I go. That’s assuming she’s home.”

“Are you sure John. Pat’s been in a hell of a grump these past few days.”

Helen clearly thought I’d lost the plot. I couldn’t blame her; it was a rational conclusion.

“I’m sure. You’d better show me the way. I don’t want to get lost in the labyrinth.”

“It’s not so bad once you get used to it.”

I reflected I’d probably be able to find my way round like a native if I spent a few more Sundays visiting the Franklins.



As I followed Helen up and around, I asked, “What makes you think Charlie and I’s falling out will be temporary, Andy?”

“You two have a lot in common and you basically like one another a lot. Plus Miss Amy and Miss Charlotte will talk soon I expect, and that will resolve that issue.”

“And the Linda one?”

“Do you expect to see Miss Linda again after next Sunday?”

“I wouldn’t think so – not soon anyway.”

“Then that sets a limit on how long that will drag on, does it not?”

“Charlie can be really stubborn.”

“Unlike you I suppose? She may have a problem finding a way to climb down off her high-horse. That is true.”

“Any advice?”

“Let me consider it – I will endeavour to contrive a cunning plan.”



When we were at Pat’s bedroom door Helen asked, “Are you sure?” again.

I nodded. She said, “Good luck.” And left me to it.

It seemed pointless knocking just to be told to go away so I opened the door and went in.

“What the fuck do you want? Come back to poke fun at me I suppose. You can sod right off.”

“Not the first time I’ve been told to do that this morning Pat. I’ve come to see if you are the mood to listen to some advice.”

“Such as?”

“Any time now Andy.”

“Shared hobbies are a good way of meeting people. How about something in the fresh air like bird-watching?”

“Have you ever thought of going bird-watching?”

“You’re bonkers. I hate birds. All those feathers, scaly feet, and creepy eyes – evil little devils. Is that your best plan ...?”

Andy said, “Astronomy then. The Leonid meteor shower is currently visible on clear nights.”

“The Leonid meteor shower is”

“You don’t need to tell me that. I was watching meteor showers with my own telescope when you will still a baby.”

“What happened then Pat - get bored with astronomy? Not enough stars out there to hold your interest?”

“I ... what the fuck does it matter? It’s not your problem.”

“Get a name if you can,” Andy advised me.

“You used to have friends who liked astronomy.”

“Yeah well, I don’t suppose any of them remember me. They’re all nerds anyway.”

I read Pat and got a picture in her mind along with an echo of a name. “Curly ginger hair, glasses something like Angus?”

“His name is Fergus. Who told you about him anyway? Helen, I suppose.”

“You and him were good mates?”

“I sort of dumped him. It was ages ago.”

“I know what that feels like,” I muttered.

“Get her mobile,” Andy said, “It is on the bedside table.”

“It’s locked - what next?”

“Enter 6 4 3 1. I saw her unlock it last time we were here.”

“What are you up to? That’s my phone.”

“Just a moment Pat, I’m busy.”

“No Fergus on here, Andy.”

“Try one of her most recent contacts.”

“Hi Pat.”

“It’s not actually Pat calling, Julie. This is John Mason here. I wonder if you could let me have Fergus’s number, please?”

I had to dodge round a bit and climb over Pat’s bed to stay out of her reach.

“OK I’ll message it. You’re that weird kid who Pat’s been going on about, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me. Bye Julie.”

I passed Pat her mobile back. It was that, or get a good thumping.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Putting you back in touch with an old friend. Do you know so many boys that one more is going to be a problem?”

“No, but he’s a real nerd and...”

“News just in. I’m a nerd and I like girls and sex. You need to have a look in the mirror if you think you are going to win any beauty pageants, Pat. Give this Fergus a chance. If you still don’t like him after seeing him again, then no harm will have been done.”

“I wouldn’t know what to say it’s been ...”

“Pass me your mobile, please.”

“But ...”

“Last chance. I haven’t got all morning.”

A message from Julie pinged in just as Pat handed her mobile over. I called the number.

“Uh, Hello.”

“Hi Fergus, this is John Mason here. I’m calling on Patricia Franklin’s mobile. She’s been talking about old friends and your name came up. Only she was too shy to ring you herself, hence the call.”

“Patty-cake?”

“Time to bow out John,” Andy commented.

I passed the mobile back to Pat, collected my bag from the corner, and was about to leave when Andy said, “They are struggling John. One extra shove is needed.”

I tuned in again just as Pat said, “Bye Fergie – see ya.”

She looked at me and said, “Um, thanks John. He sounded just like I remembered him.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did you get a date? Fix up some time to go meteor-shower-watching together? Anything?”

“Um no. I don’t think he’s interested in me like that. I ...

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, let’s assume Fergie doesn’t have a girlfriend and isn’t gay. You say you’d like to go out star-gazing together. You forget to bring a sleeping-bag so you have to share - easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.”

“Better give her a run through John. She is used to studs picking her up when they make most of the running, not having to work with a probable virgin.”

Pat was wombling on about something. I ignored her, took off my trainers and climbed in under her duvet.

“What next Andy?”

“Pretend to be Fergie of course – awkward, geeky, afraid of girls and physical contact; keen on having sex in theory.”

“OK I get it.”

I lay back pretending to hold a pair of binoculars up to my eyes and said, “Look Patty-cake I think the clouds are clearing.”

“Um, what do I say?”

“You want get close you nitwit. Tell him you’re cold, and ask if it would be OK if you shared his sleeping bag.”

“It’s chilly out here Fergie. Can I get in with you?”

“I don’t know ...”

Pat looked at me desperately

“Just do it you idiot. He’s shy. This may be the first time he’s been propositioned by a nubile wench.”

“Is that all I am to you?” Pat asked grinning.

“You’ve got all the right weapons, Pat; you just need to learn to use them.”

I held the duvet up and she snuggled in beside me saying, “This is nice.”

I tried a squeaky, “Oh yes!” then went on in my normal voice, “How about some action? Accidently on purpose rub your breasts against my arm.”

“Like this?”

“That ought to do it – very nice indeed – great tits.”

“I didn’t know we’d gone back to bird-watching,” Pat replied, which I though was pretty funny.

“Andy?”

“While you are at it you might as well deal with premature ejaculation. More likely than not in a situation like this.”

“What’s the answer – I mean what comes next?”

“Great pun, John.”

“Thanks.”

“Young lads are quick to come and quick to recover. If she gives him five minutes and warms him up again, he will last longer second-time round.”

Pat was snuggled up against me doing a great job of rubbing her tits on my arm. Obviously, a believer in method acting I decided.

I copied Peta from earlier, starting with a kiss and then trying to climb inside Pat’s mouth. Meanwhile I began humping her leg in the way I’d seen a terrier do once to somebody in Waitrose’s car park.”

“Very good John. A bit of a spasm at the end, then maximum embarrassment.”

I stopped, broke off and said “Oh my God Pat I’m so sorry, I didn’t know what I was doing. I’ve ruined everything haven’t I?”

“Did you just come?”

I wasn’t clear if this was addressed to me or Fergie, so I replied in a normal voice, “I didn’t, but Fergie did. I thought you’d better be prepared, just in case.”

“Typical fucking nerd. What am I supposed to do, if he does leave me hanging?”

“Reassure him that it’s all OK and get him going for a second round. You do do blow-jobs I suppose.”

“It’s about all I do some weekends.”

“Well then get him hard and climb aboard, or something like that. Quite probably he’ll be a virgin, so will need a bit of training.”

“I ...”

“Look Pat, do you want to keep get banged by studs who probably don’t even know your name, or do you want to try a relationship with a boy when you know more about sex than he does? All the great-looking, sporty boys who know what they are doing in bed probably already have girlfriends. And guess what, they aren’t going to dump them so they can go out with you instead.”

“You don’t sugar-coat it, do you?”

“The truth is the truth – you either deal with it, or live in fantasy-land.”

“Thanks John, I guess. So, you didn’t really come ... I mean ...”