

# BOOM!

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(Or 70,000 Light Years)

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Mark Haddon

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d**FICKLING**b



**RANDOM HOUSE**  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

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# boom!

(or 70,000 light years)

mark haddon

**d****FICKLING****b**  
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This book is dedicated to Miss Williams and Lilac Four. They are ... Zack, Kiran, George H., George, Kareem, Simon, Michael, Philipp, Alek, Laurence, Tim S., Henry, Fangze, Tim W., Megan, Anna, Lily, Lottie, Lubna, Clara, Charlie, Elsie, Lola and Jessica.

I also owe a big thank-you to Anna Johnson for typing out the entire text and putting it onto disk so that I could edit properly.

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## foreword

*This book was first published in 1992 under the title Gridzbi Spudvetch! It was a ridiculous thing to call a book. No one knew how to pronounce it. And no one knew what it meant until they'd read the story. As a result only twenty-three people bought the book. Actually, that's an exaggeration, but not much. It rapidly went out of print.*

*It would have stayed out of print, but over the years a string of people got in touch to say how much they loved the book. On several occasions my publishers asked whether I wanted to update it for a new edition.*

*It certainly needed updating. It was full of references to floppy disks and Walkmans and cassette players. But it needed more than that. There were numerous little holes in the plot. Much of the writing was clumsy. And I couldn't read it without thinking Ouch! on almost every page. A new edition would need major rewriting. Rewriting takes time, however. And I didn't have much.*

*Towards the end of 2007 I got a letter from SS Philip and James Primary School (aka Phil and Jim's) in Oxford. Alison Williams said that she had been reading the book to her pupils for years and it was always guaranteed to entertain them. To prove her point she included a sheaf of letters from her Lilac Four class, and they were kind and funny and very complimentary.*

*I was finally persuaded. I put aside some time and returned to Gridzbi Spudvetch! armed with a scalpel and a red pencil. I cut large sections and added new ones. By the end of the process I'd changed pretty much every sentence in the book one way or another.*

*I'd also come up with a new title. It means something even if you haven't read the story. And everyone can pronounce it.*

## helicopter sandwich

I was on the balcony eating a sandwich. Red Leicester and gooseberry jam. I took a mouthful and chewed. It was good but not a patch on strawberry jam and Cheddar. That was my best yet.

I spent a lot of time on the balcony. The flat was tiny. Sometimes it felt like living in a submarine. But the balcony was amazing. The wind. The sky. The light. You could see the 747s circling slowly in the stack, waiting for a space on the runway at Heathrow. You could watch police cars weaving their way through the tiny streets like toys, their sirens whooping.

You could see the park too. And on this particular morning you could see, in the middle of the huge expanse of grass, a solitary man holding a metal box in his hands. Buzzing high above his head you could just make out a model helicopter, banking and swerving like a dragonfly.

Dad has always been crazy about models. Trains, planes, tanks, vintage cars. But after he lost his job at the car factory it became the biggest thing in his life. To be fair, he was brilliant. Give him a brick and a rubber band and he'd have it looping the loop before you could say, 'Chocks away!' But it didn't seem right somehow. It was a hobby for little boys and weird blokes who still lived with their mums.



A flock of pigeons clattered past and I heard the sound of a familiar motorbike engine. I looked down and saw Craterface's large black Moto Guzzi turn into the estate car park. My darling sister, Becky, was on the seat behind him, a grimy leather jacket over her school uniform.

She was sixteen. I could remember the time, only a couple of years back, when she tied her hair in bunches and had pony posters on her bedroom wall. Then something went bad, wrong in her brain. She started listening to death metal and stopped washing her armpits.

She met Craterface at a gig six months ago. He was nineteen. He had long greasy hair and enormous sideburns with bits of breakfast stuck in them. When he was younger he had spots. They'd gone now, but they'd left these holes behind. Hence the nickname. His face looked like the surface of the moon.

He had the brain of a toilet brush. Mum, Dad and I were in complete agreement about that. Becky, however, thought he was God's Gift to Women. Why she fancied him, I haven't a clue. Perhaps he was the only person who could stand her armpits.

The bike rumbled to a halt ten storeys below and I experienced a moment of utter

madness. Without thinking, I peeled off half my sandwich, leaned out and let go. I realized almost immediately that I had done a very, very stupid thing. If it hit them I would be murdered.



The slice wobbled and flipped and veered left and veered right. Craterface turned off the engine, got off the bike, removed his helmet and looked up towards the flat. I felt sick.

The slice hit him in the face and stuck, jammy side down. For a couple of seconds Craterface just stood there, absolutely motionless, the slice of bread sitting there like a face pack. Becky was standing beside him, looking up at me. She was not a happy bunny.

Now, normally you can't hear much from the balcony, on account of the traffic. But when Craterface tore the sandwich off and roared, I think they probably heard him in Japan.

He stormed towards the doors but Becky grabbed his wrist and dragged him to a halt. She wasn't worried about me. She'd have quite liked him to kill me. Just not in the flat. Because that would get her into trouble.

Craterface finally saw sense. He waved his fist and shouted, 'You're dead, scum!' climbed onto the Moto Guzzi and thundered away in a gust of dirty grey fumes.

Becky turned and strode towards the door. I looked down at the rest of my sandwich and realized that I no longer felt very hungry. There was no one in the car park now so I dropped this half too, and watched it wobble and flip and veer and land neatly beside the first slice.

At which point the balcony door was kicked open. I said, 'It was an accident,' but Becky screamed, 'You little toad!' and hit me really hard on the side of the head, which hurt quite a lot.

For a couple of seconds everything went double. I could see two Beckys and two balconies and two rubber plants. I didn't cry, because if I cried Becky would call me a baby, which was worse than being hit. So I hung onto the rail until the pain died down and there was only one Becky again.

'What did you do that for?' I asked. 'It didn't land on you. It landed on Craterface.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'You are so lucky he didn't come up here and hit you himself.'

She was right, really. Craterface had a black belt in kung fu. He could kill people with his ears.

'And another thing,' she hissed. 'His name is Terry.'

'Actually, I've heard his name is Florian. He just pretends to be called Terry.' I stepped backwards to avoid the second punch but it never came. Instead, Becky went very quiet, leaned against the railing and nodded slowly. 'That reminds me,' she said, in a sinisterly pleasant way. 'There's something I've been meaning to tell you.'

'What?'

'Amy and I were in the staff room the other day, talking to Mrs Cottingham.' Becky took

packet of cigarettes from the pocket of her leather jacket and lit one very slowly, as if she were in a black and white film.

‘Smoking’s bad for you,’ I said.

‘Shut your ugly mouth and listen.’ She sucked in a lungful of smoke. ‘We overheard Mr Kidd talking about you.’

‘What was he saying?’

‘Bad things, Jimbo. Bad things.’ This had to be a wind-up. But she wasn’t smiling. And it didn’t sound like a wind-up.

‘What bad things?’ I pulled nervously at the rubber plant and one of the leaves came off in my hand.

‘That you’re lazy. That you’re a nuisance.’

‘You’re lying.’ I slid the leaf of the rubber plant down the back of the deckchair.

‘According to Mr Kidd your work is rubbish. According to Mr Kidd – and this is the real good bit – they’re thinking of sending you to that school in Fenham. You know, that special place for kids with problems.’ She blew a smoke ring.

‘That’s not true.’ I felt giddy. ‘They can’t do that.’

‘Apparently they can.’ She nodded. ‘Jodie’s brother got sent there.’ She stubbed out her cigarette in one of the plant pots and flicked it over the railing. ‘Jodie said it’s like a zoo. You know, bars on the windows, kids howling all the time.’

The glass door slid open and Mum stepped out onto the balcony holding one of her shoes in her hand.

‘Hello, you two,’ she said, wiping the sole of the shoe with a wet cloth. ‘Honestly, the mess on this estate. I just trod on a half-eaten sandwich, of all things.’

I turned round so that Mum couldn’t see my face, and as I did so I saw, in the distance, Dad’s helicopter clip the top of a tree, burst into flames, spiral downwards and land in the gravel of the dog toilet, scaring the living daylights out of a large Dalmatian.

Dad threw the control box to the ground and lay face-down on the grass, hammering with his fists.



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## bad things

The atmosphere over supper was not good.

Becky told Mum it was my sandwich. Mum tore me off a strip for wasting good food. Becky said wasting food wasn't the point. The point was dropping it on Craterface. So Mum said you could drop a piano on Craterface and it wouldn't make much difference. At that point Becky swore and stomped off to her room.

To make matters worse, Dad had forgotten to take the chicken out of the freezer. He'd forgotten to buy more washing-up liquid. And he was sulking about his helicopter, which was now lying in the hall, burned, broken and covered with bits of gravel and dog-do.

'It's only a toy,' insisted Mum, halfway through yesterday's left-over lasagne.

'It. Is. Not. A. Toy!' shouted Dad.

It got very noisy at this point, so I slipped off to the kitchen and earned some Brownie points by doing the washing up. Unfortunately I had to use the lemon-flavoured soap from the bathroom, which made everything taste funny for the next few days.

When I'd finished I went out onto the balcony for some peace and quiet. Dad joined me five minutes later. He leaned on the railings beside me and gazed out into the darkness.

'Life's a cowpat sandwich, Jimbo,' he sighed, 'with very thin bread and a lot of filling.'

'You can mend the helicopter,' I reassured him.

'Yeah,' he said, 'I know.' Then he went all sad and silent. I knew what was going to happen. We were going to have one of those conversations about how he didn't feel like a real man any more. I wouldn't know what to say. He'd tell me to work hard at school because I needed good exam results so I could get a job because there was nothing worse than being unemployed.

I didn't want one of those conversations. Not now. I particularly didn't want to think about school and exam results and jobs.

'I don't know how you lot put up with me,' he ploughed on mournfully. 'I can't cook. I can't clean. I forget the shopping and I mope around the house all day.'

'You'll get another job,' I said. 'And anyway, I think lasagne's much nicer than chicken.'

He laughed and we stared out into the dark. After a minute or two I found myself thinking about the school thing. Mr Kidd and Fenham and the bars on the windows and the howling. 'Dad?' I asked.

'What?'

I wanted to tell him how worried I was. But it didn't seem fair. He had enough on his plate. And the possibility that I was going to be expelled wasn't going to cheer him up.

'Oh, nothing,' I said vaguely. 'Look, I've got to go and do some stuff.'

‘Sure.’ He ruffled my hair. ‘Catch you later, pardner.’

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I grabbed my jacket, slipped out of the front door and headed down the stairs.



Becky had to be lying. If she was telling the truth then she was being helpful. Warning me about what was going on. Giving me a chance to pull my socks up. And Becky had never been helpful to me in her entire life.

Plus, she had a Nobel Prize in winding people up. Last year I went into hospital to have my squint in my eye put right. Before I went in, she kept telling me about all the things that could go wrong. The anaesthetic might not work. I’d be lying there, wide awake, unable to move, watching them cutting my eye open. They might give me too little oxygen and damage my brain. They might mix me up with someone else and amputate my leg.

I was so terrified that I was wheeled into the operating theatre holding a large piece of paper on which I’d written: PLEASE MAKE SURE I AM PROPERLY ASLEEP. The nurses thought it was hilarious.

On the other hand, I did muck about in class. I was in detention every other week. And I was not Albert Einstein.

In fact, getting chucked out of school would be pretty much par for the course. Everything seemed to have gone wrong over the past six months. It wasn’t just Dad losing his job. It was Mum getting a job that paid double what he’d ever earned at the car plant. She did a part-time business course at the College of Further Education, came top and ended up with a job at Perkins and Thingamy in town.

So, while Dad slouched around all day feeling sorry for himself, circling job adverts in the paper and gluing bits of balsa wood together, Mum zipped back and forth in her new red Volkswagen, dressed in natty suits and carrying a briefcase with a combination lock.

Some days it seemed as if the whole world had been turned upside down.



In ten minutes I was standing in front of Charlie’s house. It was a big posh job, four storey garage, an actual drive. Dr Brooks, Charlie’s dad, was a short, wiry man with monumental eyebrows, who spoke as little as possible. He worked as a police surgeon. He was the guy you see on the TV, standing over the dead body, saying, ‘He was killed by a blow to the head with a crowbar at approximately four a.m.’

Mrs Brooks, Charlie’s mum, was completely different. She was a professional cook who did wedding receptions and conference banquets. She had a kitchen the size of an aircraft hangar and a fridge the size of our flat. She had a temper like a flame-thrower and talked pretty much constantly.

I walked through the gate and up to the front door, wondering why someone had ripped up the flowerbed in front of the lounge window. I was about to ring the bell when I heard a fake owl-hoot from above my head. I looked up and saw Charlie leaning out of his bedroom window. He pressed his finger to his lips and pointed round the side of the house. I kept my trap shut and followed the direction of his finger.

As I stood in the dark passage next to the garage, Charlie's other window creaked open and I saw a rope ladder falling towards me. 'Come up,' whispered Charlie. I started to climb, trying very hard not to fall off or put my foot through a window.

'What's all this about?' I asked, sitting on his bed and getting my breath back.

'I'm grounded,' he explained, rolling the rope ladder back up again. 'Level Ten. No going out. No friends round. No TV. Nothing.'

'What for?'

'I decided it was time I learned to drive,' he said.

'Why?'

'Driving is a very useful skill to have, Jimbo,' he said, turning on the radio to cover the sound of our conversation. 'It seemed like a good idea to start early. So I took the keys from the fruit bowl and got Mum's car out of the garage while she was at the hairdresser's. Did a bit of first gear and reverse up and down the drive. Then it all went a bit pear-shaped.'

'Let me guess,' I said. 'You drove into the flowerbed.'

'Smashed a headlight too,' said Charlie. 'I am seriously not in Mum's good books at the moment.'



We lay around for half an hour, reading old copies of *Police Surgeon's Weekly* that Charlie had nicked from his dad's study, looking for pictures of really bad industrial accidents. Then I finally got round to telling Charlie what had been bugging me all evening.

'I'm in trouble.'

'Join the club,' he said.

'No,' I insisted. 'I mean *big* trouble.'

'Tell me.'

So I told him. He was always the right person to talk to about stuff like this. He listened properly and thought hard and when he said something it was usually pretty sensible.

Charlie looked like a Victorian chimney sweep – pointy face, beady eyes, hair going in a million directions, clothes a couple of sizes too large. Not that you'd really notice him. He didn't say much in class and he avoided fights in the playground. He was the person who is always leaning against a wall somewhere in the background, keeping his eye on things.

'You know something, Jimbo,' he said when I'd finished my story.

‘What?’

‘You are one gullible prat. If your sister told you that the sky was going to fall down, you go round wearing a crash helmet.’

‘But ...’ I was feeling embarrassed now. ‘It could be true, couldn’t it? I mean, it’s possible, right?’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘there’s only one thing to do. We have to find out what the teachers really think of you.’ He wandered over to the far side of the room, shoved the bed aside, lifted a loose floorboard and extracted a small black object from the hole.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘A walkie-talkie,’ he replied. ‘And it’s going to solve this problem once and for all.’

‘How?’ I asked.

Charlie flicked a switch on the walkie-talkie and I heard his mum’s voice crackling out of the speaker: ‘... I don’t care what you say, that boy has got to learn his lesson. This week he’s trying to drive the car. Next week he’ll be burning the house down. Now, what do you fancy for supper? I’ve got some of the trout left over from the Kenyons’ wedding. I could rustle up some new potatoes and green beans—’

Charlie flicked the switch off. ‘The other one’s in the kitchen, on top of the dresser.’ He put the walkie-talkie back under the floorboards. ‘I use it to keep in touch with what’s going on down there in Parentland. Good, eh?’

‘Brilliant,’ I said. ‘But how is it going to help me?’

‘Use your brain, Jimbo,’ said Charlie, tapping his forehead. ‘We put one in the staff room.’

‘Isn’t that a bit risky?’ I said nervously. Things were bad enough already. If the teachers found me bugging their private conversations I’d be marched out of the school gates and banged up in Fenham before tea time.

‘Course it’s risky,’ said Charlie, shrugging his shoulders. ‘It wouldn’t be any fun if it wasn’t risky.’



I was halfway down the rope ladder when a light came on. There was an ominous thump and I looked up to see Charlie’s mum looming out of the staircase window.

She was carrying the secateurs she used for clipping her roses. ‘Good evening, Jim.’ She smiled down at me. ‘And what a pleasant evening it is.’

‘Er, yes,’ I croaked. ‘Very pleasant.’

‘Especially for climbing into people’s houses uninvited,’ she tutted. ‘Why, Jim, I might have thought you were a burglar, mightn’t I? And if I’d thought you were a burglar, heaven knows what might have happened.’

I clambered down the ladder as fast as I could. It wasn’t fast enough. And this is what

mean about the flame-thrower temper. I've seen Charlie's mum throw a breadboard across the kitchen during an argument. She just doesn't operate according to the normal rules of being a grown-up.

I was a couple of metres off the ground when she cut through one of the ropes of the ladder. I lost my footing and found myself dangling upside down. Then she cut the other rope and I hit the gravel, tearing the sleeve of my shirt and scraping the skin off my elbows.

As I ran for the front gate, I could hear her bellowing, 'Charlie ...! You get down here right now!' I just hoped she wasn't holding the breadboard.

## walkie-talkie

Charlie had the plan worked out like a bank heist.

He'd pop into the staff room at break and hide the walkie-talkie under a chair. The week's teachers' meeting began just after the end of school. When the playground was empty we slipped into the athletics shed and tune in using the second walkie-talkie.

If they said nothing, I was in the clear and we'd fill Becky's bike helmet with mayonnaise. If they mentioned my removal to Fenham, it was time to start doing three hours of homework a night and buying presents for all my teachers.

There were flaws in the plan, obviously. They might have more important things to talk about than me. They might have discussed my removal to Fenham last week. To be honest, I think Charlie was more interested in bugging the staff room than putting my mind at ease.

Worst of all, we might be found by the caretaker. When Mr McLennan caught the Patterson twins in the athletics shed last year he simply pretended he hadn't seen them and locked them in overnight. He was very nearly sacked but the headmistress reckoned it would help cut down vandalism if everyone knew there was a dangerous lunatic looking after the school buildings.

On the other hand, what else could I do? I had no brilliant plan of my own and at least I was doing something positive. Doing something positive, as Mum was always saying, is a jolly good thing. Much better than sitting around all day moping. Like a certain member of our family.

Besides, two people wanted to kill me. A secateur-wielding cook and a kung-fu death metal biker. One lived at Charlie's house and the other spent a great deal of time at our flat. In the greater scheme of things the athletics shed was probably the safest place to be.



I met up with Charlie the following morning at the school gates just before assembly. His right hand was wrapped in a large white bandage, with faint bloodstains seeping through it. A hideous image flashed through my mind.

'Oh my God!' I said. 'She cut your fingers off.'

'What?'

'With the secateurs.'

'No, no, no,' Charlie laughed, shaking his head. 'She's crazy, but she's not that crazy. I tried

to escape. I jumped over the window ledge and scrambled down the ladder. I thought I come back when she'd cooled off.

'But she cut the ladder in half.'

'As I discovered.' He held up his wounded hands. 'I landed on a pile of old plant pots.'

'Nasty.'

'It could have been worse,' he said. 'There was a box of garden tools next to the pots.'



We began the morning doing physics with Mr Kosinsky. Mr Kosinsky thought he was very funny. We thought he was a stick insect with weird socks. You could always see his socks because his trousers were too short. This morning they had little pictures of snowmen all over them.

'Ah, you lot,' he said, whisking his jacket off and slipping it over the back of his chair. 'What a treat. Now, what were we doing last time? Was it, by any chance, the role of quarks and gluons in quantum field theory?'

'Gravity, sir,' said Mehmet. 'We were doing gravity.'

'Ah yes, my mistake,' said Mr Kosinsky, easing his lanky body into his seat. 'Now, who can give me a quick résumé of what we were doing on Monday?'

Dennis stuck his hand in the air and started telling everyone about Isaac Newton and escape velocity and why it was so difficult going to the loo in a spaceship.

I looked into Mr Kosinsky's eyes. Did he think I was a brainless nuisance? Had he decided that he couldn't bear teaching me any longer? Was he the sort of man who would want to expel someone?

I glanced over at Megan Shotts. She was sitting in the back row, as per usual, carving chunks out of her desk with a penknife. Megan beat up small boys in the playground. She knocked the wing mirrors off Mrs Benton's car. Last summer she let out the locusts from the biology lab. I found one in my packed lunch. I could be a pain at times, even I knew that. But I couldn't hold a candle to Megan.

I glanced in the other direction. Barry Griffin. He'd answered a couple of questions last year, got them wrong, then gone into permanent hibernation. He spent every lesson staring into the distance, motionless and vacant, like someone listening to music on earphones. Except that he didn't have any earphones. What he did have was short legs and very long arms. He looked like prehistoric man. Barry made me look like a guy from NASA.

Why should I get sent to a special school instead of those two? Becky had to be lying.

'Earth calling Jim.'

I looked up to see Mr Kosinsky standing next to my desk.

'Yes?' I said.

‘The tides, Jim. What causes the tides?’

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‘Well ...’ I said, floundering.

Mr Kosinsky bent down and looked into my ear. ‘Astonishing. I can see all the way through and out the other side.’

People started to laugh.

‘What causes the tides, Jim?’ he asked for a second time. ‘Is it perhaps the gravitation pull of the sun?’

‘It might be,’ I said gingerly.

‘Or is it perhaps a very large fish called Brian?’

‘Probably not,’ I said.

‘Jim,’ he sighed, walking back to the front of the room, ‘I sometimes wonder why you bother coming to school at all.’

My heart sank. Perhaps Becky was right after all.



After lunch I lingered by the school secretary’s door and watched Charlie do the drop. With the walkie-talkie tucked snugly inside his jacket pocket, he knocked on the door of the staff room. The door opened and Mr Kidd appeared with a mouth full of sausage roll and a copy of *What Car?* in his hand.

Mr Kidd taught art. He wasn’t really meant to be a teacher. He looked like he’d wandered into a school some years ago and never quite managed to get out. His tie was always undone, his shirtsleeves were always rolled up and he always had a slightly depressed look on his face. I think he really wanted to be at home watching Sky Sports with a can of lager. On the other hand, he could draw a really good picture of a horse. And horses are seriously difficult.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ said Charlie. ‘Do you mind if I come in and have a word?’

‘Can’t you ...’ Mr Kidd swallowed his mouthful of sausage roll. ‘Can’t you tell me what’s here?’

‘It’s kind of a personal problem,’ said Charlie.

‘Oh, all right, all right,’ agreed Mr Kidd, wafting him inside with his magazine.

A few minutes later Charlie re-emerged into the corridor and grinned at me.

‘Did you do it?’ I asked.

He slapped an arm round my shoulder as we walked away. ‘Sometimes I am so cool I even amaze myself.’

‘So what was the personal problem?’

But at this moment the bell rang.

‘I’ll tell you later,’ said Charlie, and we headed back to the classroom.





In the afternoon we did the Industrial Revolution with Mrs Pearce. The spinning jenny. Watt's steam engine. Children being sent down mines. Or rather, that's what everyone else did. Me, I just sat at the back of the class thinking about getting sent to Fenham and being murdered by Craterface and how going down a mine sounded preferable to both.



At the end of school we hung about for ten minutes or so, then slipped into the athletics shed. Charlie took the second walkie-talkie from his bag and turned it on, and suddenly we were spying on our teachers.

For a couple of minutes it was one of the most exciting things I'd ever done. Over the next quarter of an hour, however, it rapidly became one of the most tedious things I'd ever done. They talked about the £400 they were going to spend on new books for the library. They talked about the fire safety drill. They talked about which contractors they were going to use to re-tarmac the playground. They talked about the secretary leaving to have a baby. They talked about the staff toilet and how it didn't flush properly.

I began to understand why Mr Kosinsky wore weird socks. Choosing what to put on his feet every morning was probably the most thrilling part of his day.

'By the way,' said the crackly voice of Mr Kidd over the walkie-talkie, 'Charlie Brook came to see me at lunch today. You probably saw his bandages.'

There were murmurs around the room.

'Hey, they're talking about you,' I hissed at Charlie.

'Shhhh!' he hissed back.

'Apparently,' continued Mr Kidd, 'he was attacked by the neighbour's dog. Bit of a vicious brute, it seems. The poor boy very nearly lost his fingers. His parents had to rush him to hospital.'

'You what?' I spluttered at Charlie.

Charlie looked very smug indeed.

'So, go easy on him over the next few days,' said Mr Kidd. 'He sounded pretty shaken by the whole affair.'

Grunts of agreement came out of the little black speaker.

I glanced over at Charlie. 'Now that was clever.'

Charlie just smiled at me and said, 'Well, it looks like you're in the clear too.'

‘Maybe not,’ I said.

‘Which is more important?’ said Charlie. ‘You getting expelled, or the staff toilet not flushing properly? If you were going to be expelled, I think they’d have mentioned it.’

‘You’re probably right,’ I agreed.

‘So,’ said Charlie, ‘when do we put the mayonnaise in Becky’s helmet?’

‘Now that I think about it, I’m not sure that’s a terribly good plan.’ I stood up. ‘I don’t want to wind Craterface up even more.’

In the staff room teachers were scraping their chairs back from the table, filling their briefcases and heading home.

‘Give them five minutes to get away,’ said Charlie, stretching his legs and yawning. ‘The coast’ll be clear and we can split.’

It was at this point that something very odd happened. I’d picked up the walkie-talkie and was about to turn the thing off when it said, ‘Bretnick,’ in a woman’s voice.

I shook it, thinking one of the wires had come loose.

‘Toller bandol venting,’ said a man’s voice.

‘Charlie,’ I whispered. ‘Listen to this.’

He walked over and crouched down in time to hear the woman’s voice say, ‘Loy. Long garting dendle. Nets?’

Our jaws dropped and our eyes widened.

‘Zorner.’

‘Zorner ment. Cruss mo plug.’

‘Bo. Bo. Tractor bonting dross.’

‘Are you hearing what I’m hearing?’ asked Charlie.

‘I am. But who is it?’

Charlie listened carefully. ‘That’s Mrs Pearce.’

‘Wendo bill. Slap freedo gandy hump,’ said Mrs Pearce.

‘God, you’re right. But who’s the other one?’ I turned the volume up and concentrated.

‘Zecky?’ said the man’s voice. ‘Spleeno ken mondermill.’

‘It’s Mr Kidd,’ I said.

‘I think my head is about to explode,’ said Charlie.

‘Wait ...’ I fiddled with every knob on the walkie-talkie. I took the batteries out and put them in again. There was no getting away from it. Our art teacher and our history teacher were standing in the empty staff room saying ‘Tractor bonting dross’ and ‘Slap freedo gandy hump’ to each other like it was the most natural thing in the world.

‘Gasty pencil,’ said Mrs Pearce.

‘Spudvetch!’ said Mr Kidd.

‘Spudvetch!’ Mrs Pearce repeated.

Two chairs scraped back, four shoes clicked across the floor, the door opened, the door closed and then there was silence.

Charlie and I looked at each other and raised our eyebrows in unison. We didn't say anything. We didn't need to. We were thinking the same thing.

Forget Fenham. There was an adventure on its way, a nuclear-powered, one-hundred-ton adventure with reclining seats and a snack trolley. And it was pulling into the station right now.

## doing it the simple way

When I got home I had plenty of time to think about what Charlie and I had heard, or my account of being locked in the bathroom for an hour and a half.

I strode into the flat, threw my school bag into my bedroom and headed to the kitchen to grab a hot chocolate. Unfortunately, the kitchen was already occupied by my sister and Craterface.

‘Howdy!’ I chirruped.

My head was so full of Mr Kidd and Mrs Pearce and ‘Tractor bonting dross’ that I had completely forgotten about the flying sandwich and the death threat until Craterface lunged at me, shouting, ‘Come here, you little snotrag!’ – at which point it all came flooding back.

I squealed and leaped out of grabbing range. I sprinted into the hallway, skidded into the bathroom and turned round. I saw a hideous flash of sideburns and flying fists, then slammed the door and locked it.

‘Come out and be killed!’ he shouted, battering the flimsy plywood.

I wasn’t stupid. I picked up the bottle of bleach, took the top off, pointed the nozzle towards the door and waited. The hinges strained but didn’t give way.

Moments later I heard Dad wander out of his bedroom and mutter, ‘What’s all this then?’

Craterface replied that he was going to kill me. Becky said he didn’t mean it. And Craterface said he did mean it.

I waited for Dad to kick Craterface out of the flat or knock him unconscious with a blow to the head. But he just ummed and erred and said, ‘I’m going to the shop. If you’re not gone when I’m back, there’ll be trouble.’

I was beginning to see what Dad meant when he said that he wasn’t a real man any more.

When the flat door banged behind him, Craterface laughed, hammered on the bathroom door a bit more, got bored and returned to the kitchen. Keeping the bleach to hand, I sat down on the fluffy blue bathmat and did some thinking.

And what I thought was this ... They weren’t talking nonsense. They weren’t the sort of people who talked nonsense. Ever. Mrs Pearce was eighty-five, or thereabouts, and Mr Kidd had no sense of humour. No. What they were saying sounded exactly like a real conversation. It was just that you couldn’t understand a word of it.

So they were talking a foreign language. Perhaps they used to live in Burkina Faso or the Philippines. Perhaps they’d gone on holiday to Greenland or Vietnam. Perhaps they went to Mongolian evening classes together.

In which case, why did we never see them talking at any other time? I couldn’t remember them exchanging a single word in all the years I’d been at the school.

And if they spoke a foreign language, why hadn't they told us? They were teachers. Teachers loved showing off. Only last week Mr Kidd had been reminding us yet again of how he once played cricket for Somerset under-nineteens. And Mrs Pearce liked nothing better than sitting down at the piano during assembly and adding extra twiddly bits to the hymn music that weren't meant to be there. If they could speak Mongolian, you could bet your bottom dollar they'd tell us about it.

They'd waited until everyone was out of the room. They had a secret. And it was a big one. A really big one. A secret they didn't want us to know about. A secret they didn't want any of the other teachers knowing about.

And we were going to find out what that secret was.



I waited for an hour and a half and Mum finally came home from work. I stood up and pressed my ear to the door.

'Where's Jimbo?' she asked Becky.

Once again, I heard Craterface explaining that he was going to kill me. A nanosecond after that I heard a loud crunch. I later found out that this was the sound of Craterface being hit on the side of the head by a briefcase with a combination lock.

He yelped in pain. 'Wotcha do that for?'

'Out!' barked Mum, so loudly that even I jumped. 'Get your greasy backside out of this flat now, or I'm calling the police.'

'Take it easy, missus,' grumbled Craterface.

'Keep your hair on, Mum,' whined Becky.

'And less of your lip,' snapped Mum.

The sound of heavy boots was followed by a loud slam. Then Mum rapped quietly on the bathroom door.

'You can come out now, Jimbo. That oaf is gone.'

I came out and shook Mum's hand. 'That was classy.'

At least there was one real man in the family.



After all the commotion it turned into a surprisingly pleasant evening. Dad spent so long

the shop, for fear of coming back and finding Craterface still in residence, that he'd done enough shopping for three weeks. Toilet rolls, J-cloths, washing-up liquid, scouring powder, the works.

So Mum was happy. And Dad was happy that Mum was happy. And I was happy that Mum and Dad were happy with each other. Plus, Becky was really unhappy, which always cheered me up. And anyway, she just stayed in her room, sulking, so we had a very nice time indeed.

After I'd washed up I decided to go to bed and plan tomorrow's investigations. I got my chocolate and walked up to Dad, who was sitting in front of the TV, watching *Police, Camera, Action!*

'Spudvetch!' I said, catching his eye.

He looked at me in a puzzled way for a few seconds. Then he grinned and said 'Spudvetch!' and gave me the OK sign.

I grinned back and headed off down the hall.



Charlie and I were in complete agreement. We couldn't ask them straight out. We had to be subtle. They had a secret, and they weren't going to give it away to any Tom, Dick or Harry who wanted to share it.

However, there were plenty of other things we could get away with asking. And, since I lost the toss, it was me who got to ask first.

My target was Mr Kidd. We trailed him over the lunch hour and followed him into the school library, where we found him browsing the Arsenal supporters' website on one of the computers.

I grabbed a book on Spain from the shelves, opened it, put my head down and bumped into him. 'Sorry, sir,' I said, stepping backwards.

'That's all right,' he replied, rapidly swivelling the monitor ninety degrees.

'Sir ...?' I asked, trying to force his eyes off the page.

'What, John?'

'It's Jim, sir.' I took a deep breath. 'I was thinking of learning some Spanish.'

'Really?' he said, looking at me rather oddly, as if I had food all over my face or a dangling bogey.

'We're going on holiday there, sir. Do you speak Spanish?'

'No,' he said warily. 'Why are you asking me these questions?'

'I was wondering how quickly I could learn a foreign language. Just the basics, I mean. If I really tried.' I took a second deep breath. 'Do you speak any other languages, sir?'

‘Languages aren’t really my strong point,’ he sighed. ‘I’m a pictures bloke, really. Now the stick in my head. But languages ... Well, it’s in one ear and out the other. I tried learning a bit of French in Brittany last year, but I sounded like an idiot. And if I’m going to sound like an idiot I’d prefer to do it in my own language.’



Charlie’s target was Mrs Pearce.

He got his first chance three days later when the subject of explorers came up. Scott losing the race to the North Pole and dying on the way, Livingstone trekking up the Zambezi River, Captain Cook sailing to Australia and eating biscuits with weevils in them.

‘Have you ever explored anywhere, Mrs Pearce?’

It was Charlie’s voice. I twisted round in my seat. There was a small, bandaged hand sticking up in the air.

‘Of course not,’ replied Mrs Pearce, smiling and shaking her head.

She was right. It was a pretty stupid question. With her tweed suit and her handbag, I couldn’t imagine Mrs Pearce exploring anything more dangerous than the freezer cabinet at Sainsbury’s.

‘I mean, haven’t you been anywhere exciting?’ Charlie soldiered on. ‘Like Africa or India or someplace?’

It all sounded a bit heavy-handed to me. Charlie had never shown much interest in history before. But she was delighted by his question.

‘I’m afraid not,’ she said, taking off her glasses and polishing them with her handkerchief. ‘I’ve never actually been abroad. I go to Scotland most summers, but I don’t think that counts as exploring.’



I was waiting for Charlie at the school gates, wondering what on earth we did now. If they had a secret, they were covering their tracks extremely well. So well that I was beginning to wonder if the conversation we overheard was nothing more than a very vivid dream.

‘Jimbo,’ panted Charlie as he ran up to me. ‘Sorry I’m late. Had to get the walkie-talkie out of the staff room.’

‘And what story did you tell this time?’

‘Got the headmistress to sign me off sport for a month. You know’ – he held up his bandaged hand – ‘told her it was doctor’s orders.’

‘So what happens when the headmistress talks to your mum at the next parents’ evening?’

Charlie shook his head. ‘She never gets a word in edgeways.’

‘So,’ I said, getting back to the important subject, ‘what do we do now?’

‘We should have recorded them,’ said Charlie. ‘If we could play the conversation back the maybe—’ He stopped mid-sentence and looked back towards the school. ‘I’ve had an idea.’

I turned and saw Mr Kidd walking across the playground towards us, juggling his briefcase in one hand and his car keys in the other.

‘All this suspense is driving me up the wall,’ said Charlie. ‘Let’s do this the simple way.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, feeling slightly panicky.

Charlie stepped out into Mr Kidd’s path. He waited until Kidd came to a halt in front of him, then said, in a cheery voice, ‘Spudvetch!’

Mr Kidd froze for a second. Then his briefcase slid out of his hand and fell to the ground. He didn’t seem to notice. His jaw started to move up and down but he was obviously having trouble getting any words out.

I started to feel a bit ill.

‘But you’re not—’ said Mr Kidd. Then he stopped himself.

His fingers clenched and his back stiffened like an angry cat’s. And then something happened to his eyes. If Charlie hadn’t seen it too, I might have thought I was imagining it. But I wasn’t imagining it. For the briefest of moments there was a fluorescent blue light flickering behind his pupils, just like the eyes on Charlie’s robot piggy bank. Except that Mr Kidd wasn’t a robot piggy bank. He was our art teacher.

I was about to turn and run when, as suddenly as it had begun, it was all over. His eyes returned to normal. Slowly and deliberately he put his right hand over his left wrist, as if calming himself down. He breathed deeply and said, ‘You off home, boys?’

I tried to say, ‘Yes,’ but it came out as a strangled squeak.

Charlie was on his knees, refilling Mr Kidd’s briefcase. He stood up and handed it back.

‘Thank you.’ Mr Kidd smiled. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Have a good evening, boys.’

We stood and watched him walk into the car park. He pressed his key fob and the indicator lights on his battered Fiat winked back with a little *boop-boop* noise.

‘Crikey,’ said Charlie.

A swarm of fizzy white lights started floating across my field of vision. The sky started to spin round, my knees went wobbly and I had to sit on the wall to stop myself fainting.



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