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Kidding Around

How humour can explore serious issues in children's literature.

Julia Rosemary Wills

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ABSTRACT

Kidding Around –How Humour Can Explore Serious Issues in Children’s Literature begins by investigating theories of humour generally. It considers humour’s triggers and benefits before looking at its particular role in children’s lives. After researching the literature on the leading psychological models for children’s humour, it suggests that Wolfenstein’s model of affective mastery best explains humour’s role for children facing difficulties, and then studies four children’s writers who use humour in issues stories. Finally the study considers how their work has influenced and informed the novel that forms the creative element of this submission.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who would have been proud to read it.

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I

INTRODUCTION

*Analysing humour is like dissecting a frog. They both die in the process.*¹

E B White.

Humour is an elusive topic. Its subjective quality resists any standard definition. Despite this my study sets out to look at why we laugh, what makes us laugh and in what ways it might help us when we do laugh. It then tries to establish how laughter might help children cope with problems they might have to face.

In the first half of the study, *Kidding Around* examines the main psychological models of humour and the mechanics of comedy, those established stimuli that are recognised as likely to evoke laughter. It then focuses on the current models of children's humour and looks at how they attempt to explain changes in children's sense of humour as they grow older.

The second half of the study starts with a history of children's literature and considers when children's writing first prioritised entertainment over instruction and humour made an appearance. Four contemporary authors are studied, all of whom use humour within issues stories. The issues, how they humour is used and the writerly "devices" they employ to effect this are each looked at in turn.

The study then considers the four authors' influences on my own writing of *The Granny Plan*, the novel I have submitted for the M Phil.

Finally, a conclusion aims to draw together what I have learned from the formal study of humour, its psychology and its role in children's issues stories.

Four appendices offer further insight into the use of comedy in medicine; information about the four authors studied; Alzheimer's; and agent response to *The Granny Plan* together with a commentary of how their response offers an insight into the topic of this dissertation.

II

Why do we laugh?

A look at the main psychological models of humour.

Two and a half thousand years ago Plato² and Aristotle³ first pondered this question and debate has continued since. While there remains no single fit-all theory, John Morreall⁴ distils the three major theories to have emerged over history.

These are:

- Incongruity Theory
- Superiority Theory
- Relief Theory

Incongruity theory

The most widely accepted theory of why we laugh, this states that humour is a response to something incongruous. In this theory, supported by Immanuel Kant⁵, humour is seen to arise when things don't go together. Kant referred to this as "*frustrated expectation*"⁶.

This is perhaps clearest in this well-known joke's dynamics:

e.g. *How do you stop your dog from smelling?*

Put a clip on his nose

Clearly the expectation of having a serious answer to a smelly dog is frustrated. The answer is incongruous. For Kant this is an example of a "*sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*"⁷.

However, as Morreall⁸ points out, not all incongruous things make us laugh. Indeed, our own experience would tell us that a dead fish on the pavement is indeed incongruous, but hardly funny.

Superiority Theory

Hobbes⁹ (1588 – 1679) propounded the Superiority Theory of humour, which holds that humour arises from “*a sudden glory*” felt on recognising our superiority over other people. This theory of humour fits into his general philosophy, which holds that “*the condition of man is the condition of war of everyone against everyone*”¹⁰. This chimes with Plato and Aristotle’s original view that a basic aggression underpins humour and that laughter is partly elicited from our glee at seeing another struggle and fail.

Mel Brooks¹¹ in his famous statement:

“I cut my finger, that’s tragedy. If you fall down a sewer, that’s comedy.”

clearly agrees.

However, once again, there are exceptions. Humour does not always involve feeling superior to someone or something. A performance by Laurel and Hardy, for example, may just as easily elicit feelings of frustration or of recognition as we imagine ourselves struggling in similar predicaments to theirs. The film, *Laughing Gravy*¹², for example, where Laurel and Hardy desperately try to hide Laurel’s dog, from an animal-banning landlord, makes us sympathise with their noble intentions and worry for the dog. We can’t help but feel their frustration and anxiety as each effort they

make fails and we find ourselves thinking how we might solve the same problem. However, when Hardy's disastrous attempt to bathe the dog ends up with his going out of the window and landing in a barrel of icy water, we can't help but laugh. Our reaction feels more like relief after tension than any superiority.

Nor does feeling superior necessarily make us laugh. We are superior, say, to cabbages, but when did they ever make us laugh?

Relief Theory

Freud¹³ and Spencer¹⁴ supported this theory. It maintains that humour releases or saves the energy that is generated by repression.

According to Spencer laughter releases nervous energy. He contemplated a "hydraulic model" whereby:

*"excitement and mental agitation produces energy that 'must expend itself in some way or another.'"*¹⁵

However, critics have pointed out that most examples of humour, jokes or funny observations do not involve a long build-up of energy that needs to be released.

Similarly, others have noted that Spencer's theory cannot explain the fact that according to his thinking, people most likely to laugh would be those in a highly agitated state. In reality, this is when people are least receptive to humour.

Freud built on Spencer's ideas and further suggested three types of laughter, generated by three types of relief:

- jokes - where energy used to repress malicious or sexual impulses is released;

- comic humour - where cognitive energy involved in thinking out a problem is released; and,
- humour - where energy generated by emotions is released.

Freud believed that in joking, laughter outwitted the super-ego, that part of the personality that keeps the other two, id and ego, under control. Malicious and sexual tendencies are inhibited by the super-ego, and so Freud's relief theory can explain the popularity of sexual jokes and those with an element of cruelty, thus also embracing the superiority theory of humour. For Freud, the super-ego is beguiled by humour so that the individual finds the remark or observation funny. Freud maintained that jokes were simply a truth distracted, and that people could often say what they really felt without effectively taking "ownership" of the remark.

However, the relief theory, like the other two theories, is unable to stand alone as a single theory of humour. Most pertinently, this is because the individuals who, according to Freud would laugh most, those repressed and inhibited, do not.

Annette Goodheart¹⁶ has modified Freud and Spencer's model of relief in terms of catharsis, as a way of releasing stored up tension and pain and helping the body to heal. This links humour not with amusement, but with pain and perhaps it is important to remember at this point that the site of both laughter and crying is the same tiny area of the hypothalamus¹⁷. Goodheart¹⁸ argues that emotions release pain:

Laughter helps the release of fear and anger.

Tears release fear and grief.

Shaking releases fear.

If we do not release the tension and pain in our bodies, we store it and dis-ease develops...

Morreall¹⁹ ambitiously attempts his own universal one-fit theory of humour. This rules out both the superiority and relief theories, and builds on incongruity theory. “*Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift,*” he says and this enables us to go from one psychological state to another. The change is triggered by an incongruity. This is sudden and pleasant and what we feel as it happens is “amusement.” Unlike Goodheart, Freud and Spencer, he does not believe that pain triggers laughter, rather that laughter is the shift we experience on releasing pain. His model does not require us to feel superior either. And interestingly, in his model, laughter is not just the outcome of perceiving the shift, it can be the trigger too. In this way, laughter can make us feel happier, as well as be its result.

However, whilst Morreall presents an excellent model, Marmysz²⁰ points out that it can no more account for the laughter derived physiologically, say from tickling or certain drugs used in multiple sclerosis, than any of the other theories.

In conclusion, incongruity remains the leading explanation of why we laugh although it cannot explain all types of laughter and at times, relies on the other two explanations. At present, there remains no single “fits-all” theory of humour.

III

What do we laugh at?

A look at the mechanics of humour

The following discussion of techniques represents my research into comedy mechanics. A summary of comedy “triggers” follows in the tables on pages 16 and 17, but the foundations of funny appear to be as follows:

Comic distance

According to John Vorhaus²¹ we laugh because of comic distance. Comic distance creates a gap between us and the comic character. It gives us permission to laugh and is the reason clowns wear funny clothes. By doing so they create the comic distance between us and them, so it is permissible to laugh without damaging our self-respect. This exaggeration of costume has been with us since ancient times, through court jesters and fools, to Laurel and Hardy’s matching suits and bowler hats, Chaplin’s tattered suits and Tommy Cooper’s fez. Even the Simpsons’ yellow bodies, three-fingered hands and Marge’s bright blue beehive gives us licence to laugh.

Comic distance fits with superiority theory. By providing a space, an “us and them”, bad things become funny, because they are happening to someone else. Vorhaus further argues that comic distance relies on four traits shown by the comedy character:

- their comic perspective (how they view the world)
- exaggeration
- their flaws (differences which stretch comic distance)
- their humanity

A. Comic perspective

Comic perspective is the unique way that the character looks at his world. It is the starting point for all the funny things that happen to the character and represents their gap from the real world. Here is the link with incongruity theory, since it is their interaction with the world that is incongruous.

Oliver Hardy's comic perspective is that he believes himself in control and capable. However, the incongruity arises in his choice of Stan as his best friend. This incongruity allows Stan's "helping" to go so horribly and amusingly wrong.

B. Exaggeration

Exaggeration magnifies comic perspective.

In the above example, Stan's help doesn't just cause a small problem. It initiates disaster on a regular basis, spectacularly resulting in destroyed houses, car crashes and being chased out of town.

In Peanuts, Snoopy's comic perspective is that he is more human than dog. However, it is exaggeration that makes him achieve pinnacles of human achievement: he is the WWI flying ace, the symphony maestro, the world-class ice skater, the designer tailor, the master builder, the great orator. He is the best in every field he tries his paws.

Harold Lloyd's comic perspective was being accident-prone. But it was exaggeration that led him to hang off a civic clock-face several feet above a busy city road.

C. Flaws

Flaws make it acceptable for the reader or viewer to laugh. Like the clown's clothes, they distance us from the comic character. Vorhaus suggests that in the best comedy characters the flaws are made clearer by being set against the comic perspective. His example is Lucille Ball²². Her perspective is "I can do anything." This is counterpointed by her flaw of sheer incompetence.

Hardy's flaw is being pompous and this is set against the comic perspective of having Laurel's "assistance".

Freud's²³ relief theory would fit the humour of flaws in character. One of his tenets about "the comic" was that the watcher automatically exerts energy to think of how they would carry out the task. One "energised pathway" opens up to identify with the task, a second opens up to identify with the flaws in the comic's approach. Realising the second pathway to be useless to the watcher, the energy thus released is apparent in laughter.

D. Humanity

Finally, humanity allows us to identify with the characters and care about them. Successful stories demand that we care about the characters involved and comedy characters are no different.

To me it seems that caring for comedy characters is often helped by their vulnerability. Laurel and Hardy are almost child-like in their hopes and activities and

are similarly vulnerable when things go wrong. Snoopy remains vulnerable and Chaplin is perennially down on his luck.

However, there is another trait that all successful comedy characters share and one necessary to drama and story telling itself: a strong will. This moulds their dramatic question. Will Laurel and Hardy save the dog and stay warm for the night? They certainly are doing their best to. Will Charlie Chaplin find something to eat? He's hungry enough to try his shoe leather. This determination makes us care about them. It also sets them in conflict with themselves, others or the world around them. Again, as with all good drama, this conflict is essential.

The following tables summarise the common comedy tricks that act on the comic character.

Common Comedy Techniques

Technique	Definition	Example of character and/or humour
Clash of context	“the forced union of incompatibles” – Vorhaus	“ <i>Crocodile Dundee</i> ”: taken from the Australian Outback to “survive” in New York; “ <i>Ugly Betty</i> ”: an “ugly” girl lands a top job at a modelling magazine where appearance is everything.
The inappropriate response	a clash of context made funny by exaggeration	Harrison Ford’s response to the sword-wielding assassin in “ <i>Raiders of the Lost Ark</i> ”. After the assassin’s swordplay, Ford simply pulls out a gun and shoots him; Wile E Coyote’s escalating Acme-fuelled attempts to catch the Road Runner.
Comic opposites	where two characters have opposite perspectives	“ <i>The Odd Couple</i> ”: Oscar’s sloppiness versus Felix’s neatness neurosis; Laurel & Hardy: Hardy’s futile attempts at respectability and success consistently undermined by Laurel’s ineptitude (at all projects).
Tension and release	Storing tension (in a joke, build up) for greater release, running jokes	Holding the audience’s expectation of something happening until it does. Buster Keaton’s “ <i>One Week</i> ”: Keaton builds his house on a railway track. The audience sees the train approaching, anticipates disaster but the train switches track at the last minute avoiding the house. Just as the audience feels relief a second train comes from the opposite direction and demolishes the house.
Rule of three	Defeating expectation with a third statement. Introduce, validate, violate.	My dog has no nose. How does he smell? Terrible.

Tell the truth to comic effect	Exaggerating the truth	“I went to the bookstore and asked the assistant where the self-help section was. She said if she told me it would defeat the purpose.” Dennis Miller – comedian.
Telling a lie to comic effect	Exaggerating a lie	“I could tell my parents hated me. My bath toys were a toaster and a radio.” Rodney Dangerfield.
The doorbell effect	Setting up one thing that your characters don't want to happen, only for it to happen immediately	“We'll be fine as long as the doorbell doesn't ring.” Doorbell rings
Surprise	Something the audience does not expect	Buster Keaton's “ <i>One Week</i> ” in Tension and Release above. The audience expected the first train to smash Keaton's house. Having another train come in from an unexpected direction is the surprise. Having laughed at the averted disaster, we laugh even harder at seeing the house demolished anyway.
Set-up and Pay-off	Setting up the comic situation and misdirecting the audience's attention	A crocodile walks into a pub and orders a beer. “£3.50,” stutters the barman, hiding behind the bar. “We don't get many crocodiles in here.” The crocodile takes a swig. “I'm not surprised,” he says, “with prices like that.”
The Running Gag	A recurring event typical of a character's appearance	“ <i>A Fish Called Wanda</i> ”: the amorous effect that John Cleese's Russian has on his female companion.

Sources: Vorhaus, J. “*The Comic Tool Box: How to be Funny Even if You're Not*” USA, Silman-James Press, 1994; Voytilla, S. & Petri, S. *Writing the Comedy Film*, USA, Michael Wiese Productions, 2003; Miller, D. “*Comedy Writing Secrets How to Think Funny, Write Funny, Act Funny and Get Paid for It*”: Helitzer M. & Schatz M., USA, Writers' Digest Books, 2005

IV

Why do children laugh?

Current models of children's humour

So far, this study has looked at humour in general, without making the distinction between children and adults. What follows specifically addresses children's humour.

Unlike adults, whose humour appears fairly fixed throughout adult life, children find different things funny as they grow older.

According to McGhee there is:

“almost total consensus among researchers that humour is related to comprehending (humour reaction) or producing (humour creation) an “incongruity” ²⁴

which arises from a dual-process: a perception of the incongruity and then its resolution.

Many researchers see this link between incongruity and resolution in early development and this is relevant to our study. Just as the child make-believes in play with objects, freeing them from their usual mundane roles, so humour involves a suspension of reality, “playing along” to indulge incongruities.

Two major models have emerged from the study of the development of humour in children, which have been able to explain a great deal of data produced by other researchers in the field. They are:

- McGhee's²⁵ cognitive model; and
- Wolfenstein's²⁶ affective model

McGhee's cognitive model

This model links the different things that children laugh at with Piaget's²⁷ different stages of intellectual development. For McGhee, each stage of humour is directly underpinned by the cognitive changes at that stage in development. For a child to laugh say, at a flying cow, McGhee explains that child must have an understanding of 'cow' and why flying is therefore incongruous. For McGhee, each stage of humour relies on a 'cognitive trigger' and that trigger changes as the child's intellectual development continues.

Perhaps the easiest way to see how McGhee's model works is to look at the way humour changes throughout the child's development, essentially what becomes funny and why. The age categories are approximate and pertain to an "average" in children.

McGhee's Cognitive Model of Humour Development

Age in years	What's funny?	Why?
0 – 2	Running; jumping; chasing; climbing.	Heightened arousal – not part of cognitive development.
2 – 3	Mooing like a cow in a high pitched voice; being a flying elephant; incorrectly labelling things.	Violates normal sounds and appearances; language is now possible; language play at end of second year means that the incongruity of an object and its name becomes funny.
4 – 6	Pictures of people with big heads or shoes; stories that violate representations.	The child has acquired information about concepts (eg. information about people, buses, elephants). Transgressing the realities of those things is now incongruous and funny. Humour is spontaneous and made from personal invention;
6 – 7	Anomalies - a picture of a child pushing a pram with a pig; ready-made jokes.	The emergence of concrete operational thinking (Piaget 1947) whereby the child can hold two things in mind at once extends likelihood of abstract humour.
7	Clowning, pulling faces, playing copy-cat,	Exposed to more conventional humour at school, the incongruity upon which, for example, riddles and cartoons rely, is rejected. A child will find for example, a horse having a bubble bath unfunny because reality is not like that. School-life is consistent with reality. Incongruity is not easily accepted and humour, such as clowning, is likely to be imitation of reality (eg. teachers, other children)
7 – 10	Puns, words with double meanings, inappropriate social conduct, faulty reasoning.	Children begin to accept incongruity despite its non-fit with reality. Increased understanding of how language works leads to puns based on similar sounding nouns to surnames of peers but with a social "slant". Social impact on humour.
10 – 11	Jokes and riddles; comic strips.	The child's cognitive development continues to improve perception of incongruity. This is now accepted as a part of humour. Verbal humour becomes more sophisticated. A child's comprehension of temporal organisation improves – comic strips become funny. Continued socialisation builds emotional understanding of meaning so children can extrapolate from cartoons and jokes. eg. a bicycle with two sets of handlebars fixed in opposite directions will appear funny but also lead to ideas of what would happen on trying to ride the bike.

(ii) Wolfenstein's Affective Model

I think that this theory, put forward by Wolfenstein, with its roots in psychoanalysis, is far more helpful and appropriate to this study. Her model of humour sees it as

“essentially an affective phenomenon” defined as, “... a procedure which turns a negative experience (for example, frustration or guilt when faced with all-powerful adults and the constraints they impose) into a positive one.”²⁸

In a clear departure from the cognitive model, Wolfenstein links changes in children's humour as they age to the things that directly worry them at those ages. This neatly explains why potty-jokes are so popular as the child masters toilet training.

Wolfenstein explains that each time the child laughs, it represents an “*affective mastery*” of whatever is causing anxiety. As they grow older, the humour becomes more complex. But, at every stage it centres on getting around some form of prohibition.

For me, one of the theory's strengths, is its ability to account for the major change that occurs in children's humour at six years old. Before this, the child's jokes are self-made and crude, they rely on the child's own inventions and often incorporate a rhyming wordplay of nonsense words. But at about six, children begin craving ready-made jokes. Wolfenstein explains this shift occurs because by laughing at the character in a ready-made joke, the child can now displace its own responsibility. Humour now provides a ‘joke façade’ behind which the child can hide their less acceptable hostile and sexual impulses.

This idea of a “joke façade” derives from Freud’s²⁹ model of children’s humour.

Briefly, Freud’s model comprises three stages:

1. The Play Stage – children link words and objects together incongruously
2. The Jestling Stage – children experiment with different joke formats
3. The Façade – children are able to mask “undesirable” impulses using jokes.

This seems sensible to me, given that the switch to the ‘joke façade’ occurs at precisely the time when the child has been plunged into the highly social years of early school. No longer able to amuse themselves freely, they are freshly aware of their peers and teachers. This accords with Freud’s idea of humour as a truth distracted: the child can express something worrying, but it is disguised in humour. In Freud’s view, the child thereby escapes prohibition. In Wolfenstein’s, the child also effects mastery over that problem, and with the increased “social bonus” of making others laugh too, of fitting in despite those worries and impulses.

Could a child’s reading about a character then, finding them funny in dealing with a serious issue, help in the same way? Might the story as told present a ready-made ‘joke façade’ to hide behind? To me, this certainly suggests a scientific underpinning for Vorhaus’s comic distance and begins to suggest an emotional and socialising role of for humour.

A third model of children’s humour, falling outside the two main schools of cognitive development and psychoanalysis deserves mention. This is the work done by Kuchner (1991), summarised by Matthew D. Zbaraki³⁰ and maintains that humour is a social skill.

According to Kuchner,

“Humour evolves through a social experience. It emerges as a form of play: language play, play with and on ideas, and play with social rules and relationships.”

As Zbaraki points out, given that children are very social beings, the idea of humour developing as a product of social interaction is something that deserves further study.

For the purpose of this study, which looks specifically at how humour helps children deal with problems, I believe that only Wolfenstein’s model, operating on both the child’s cognitive grasp of events and the emotional impact of those events, seems able to offer a framework for exploring humour’s help.

How does laughter help?

The coping benefits

The coping role of humour

If we accept the idea of laughter in children as ‘affective mastery’ it seems sensible now to review the general literature on humour as a coping tool.

Dr Rod Martin³¹ suggests three main ways of coping with stress:

- changing how the threat is perceived
- reducing the physiological arousal brought on by the threat (meditation, relaxation techniques etc)
- reducing or removing the threat

and goes on to explain laughter’s role in each.

Changing how the threat is perceived

Laughter can change how the threat is perceived. Martin explains that since incongruity is widely held to underlie humour, the person who can switch readily to another perspective can reappraise the situation and change perception of the threat

He cites the work of Rollo May³² who maintained that humour is important in:

“preserving the sense of self.... It is the healthy way of feeling a ‘distance’ between one’s self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one’s problem with perspective.”

Reducing the physiological arousal brought on by the threat

The role of laughter in physiologically reducing tension is well known. First it stimulates us and then it relaxes us, lowering our blood pressure and releasing the feed good hormones, endorphins.

Other medicinal benefits of humour include³³:

- an increase in the level of immunoglobulin in tears and inside the mouth.
Immunoglobulin is an antibody defence against some viral and bacterial infections;
- an increase in beta-endorphins, natural opiates that curb pain;
- a reduction in stress hormones;
- fresh oxygenation of the blood from the attendant “lungs-workout”;
- an anti-inflammatory effect on joints and bones, which can relieve arthritic pain.

Booth Hall Children’s Hospital in Manchester, amongst others, employs ‘clown doctors’ trained to perform tricks and jokes in the children’s ward to ease pain and lift spirits (see Appendix 1). In this they are not alone. Since Norman Cousins³⁴ first showed the relationship between laughter and therapeutic benefit by self-treating himself to comedy films which anaesthetised his ankylosing spondylitis, allowed him to sleep pain-free and decreased bone segmentation rates, many medical practitioners now use laughter for pain relief.

In terms of emotional and personality benefits, psychologist Robert Holden, who ran Britain’s first NHS Laughter Clinic in Oxford now runs the Happiness Project (see Appendix 1).

Similarly, in Mumbai, India, Dr Madan Kataria has pioneered Laughter Yoga over the past twelve years. Using breathing, clapping and laughter exercises, he began a club for people to laugh together. Laughter is treated as an exercise, not triggered by jokes since he realised early on that what makes some people laugh can offend others.

Realising that “fake” laughter had as many benefits as “genuine” joke-induced laughter, club members go through exercises to trigger laughter, which then, in the group becomes spontaneous and long lasting. He sees laughter as a preventative medicine, acting in opposition to stress and helping people fend off illness and, if already unwell, to heal faster (see Appendix 1).

Reducing or removing the threat

According to Martin, humour’s role here involves ‘communicating a commonality of human experience’. Humour defuses the threat. Basically, if you can laugh at something, then it is less scary.

PART TWO - WRITING

VI

When did children's writing become funny?

Once upon a time, children's writing sought only to educate. Faced with titles such as *A Token for Children – An Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children*³⁵ (1675) children were perhaps already intended to be seen and not heard. Written by preacher James Janeway, this volume gives us the flavour of the mind-improving nature of seventeenth-century children's books. However, in fairness such books were typical of Puritanism itself and at least represent the first serious efforts to write specifically for children.

Luckily, as Colin Heywood³⁶ points out, children have always been resourceful enough to find other books to read. Before the Puritan books there were chapbooks - cheaply produced tales and adventure stories – that were aimed at all age groups.

Peter Hunt shows how the change in thinkers' attitudes towards childhood began to have a direct bearing on the content of children's books. He states:

*“Rousseau... in ‘Émile’ expressed a distinct shift in sensibility from that of Locke’s ‘Some Thoughts Concerning Education’, in which Locke continued to view the child as the tabula rasa of earlier centuries, a blank sheet on which ideas could be impressed. This was countered by Rousseau with the idea that children learn best to be rational creatures through developing naturally at their own pace, and by exploring the world on their own terms.”*³⁷

Rousseau's observation led, later in the eighteenth century, to a number of chapbooks being made smaller and with coloured covers, pieces of entertaining writing specifically aimed at children.

This tide of change from instruction to amusement continued from the late eighteenth-century. An intention to please rather than simply educate clearly underlay Lady Ellenor Fenn's *Cobwebs to Catch Flies* (c.1783) where she tells her readers that:

*"I mean to catch you gently, whisper in your ear, Be good and you will be loved, Be good and you will be happy; and then release you, to frisk about in pursuit of your innocent pastimes."*³⁸

The spirit of Romanticism now infused children's writing.

Printed rhymes next made an appearance, full of slapstick and violence and coming from a wide range of sources, which according to Iona and Peter Opie³⁹ included alehouses, barrack-rooms, street criers and politics, and must have presented a more recognisable portrait of life to children.

Fairy tales were originally oral stories, later set down and designed to appeal to adults. However, in 1804 Benjamin Tabart⁴⁰ published a set of tales designed to appeal to children. One of these, *Cinderella; or The Little Glass Slipper: A Tale for the Nursery* ran to sixteen editions in its first year. He also published Perrault's tales and others followed, often illustrated with macabre images.

In 1823 the Brothers Grimm's revisiting of ancient folk stories of gore, magic and menace was translated into English in *German Popular Stories*⁴¹. Sir Henry Cole went on to re-issue the fairy tales with beautiful accompanying illustrations in 1843. According to Hunt, the rising interest in the supernatural prevalent in Victorian times, together with the popularity of Gothic novels and dinosaur discoveries of the time

may have engendered an interest in fantasy writing. Edward Lear began writing nonsense poetry with *A Book of Nonsense*⁴² (1846) which delighted children. Revelling in verbal invention and the sounds of words, many of which were made up, Lear plunged children into a mad, exciting world where anything was possible.

Children's writing was becoming more imaginative and fun. The trend continued as more European tales were translated into English such as Heinrich Hoffman's cautionary tales in *The English Struwwelpeter*⁴³ (1848) with its humour, albeit of a vicious nature and Hans Christian Andersen's *Wonderful Stories for Children*,⁴⁴ (1846).

Lewis Carroll⁴⁵ was in many ways an outsider, happier in the company of children. This enabled him to mock and puzzle at Victorian social codes from a child's viewpoint. Rather than didactic morality-infused stories, here was a writer ready to "side" with the child, to the point, according to Hunt, of parodying instructional texts, with characters such as The Duchess⁴⁶. The Victorian delight of tea parties is parodied by the characters present at the Mad Hatter's tea party: cats smile and vanish, rabbits panic about time-keeping and a dormouse's peaceful life inside a teapot is ruined by boiling water. Here at last, was children's writing that was consistently funny. Carroll's novels and poetry were full of outlandish characters who did funny things. Who, after all, could fail to be amused at the hopelessness of Carroll's characters in *The Hunting of the Snark*⁴⁷ (1876), one particularly forgetful, who:

*He had forty-two boxes, all carefully packed,
With his name painted clearly on each:*

*But, since he omitted to mention the fact,
They were all left behind on the beach.*

or the crew, emboldened on their sea voyage by a map:

*He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.*

Finally, children had something to laugh at.

By writing directly to amuse a young audience – children they personally knew – Lear and Carroll can be seen as starting a modern attitude of ‘siding with the child’. More recent authors to have done this include Roald Dahl. In one memorable scene from *James and the Giant Peach*, James’s oppressive aunts meet a suitably horrible end:

They began pushing and jostling, and each one of them was thinking only about saving herself. Aunt Sponge, the fat one, tripped over a box that she’d brought along to keep the money in, and fell flat on her face. Aunt Spiker immediately tripped over Aunt Sponge and came down on top of her. They both lay on the ground, fighting and clawing and yelling and struggling frantically to get up again, but before they could do this, the mighty peach was upon them.

There was a crunch.

And then there was silence.

The peach rolled on. And behind it, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker lay ironed out upon the grass as flat and thin and lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book.⁴⁸

What could be more empowering for the beleaguered child?

On Penguin’s Dahl web site⁴⁹, he explains:

If you want to remember what it's like to live in a child's world, you've got to get down on your hands and knees and live like that for a week. You'll find you have to look up at all these... giants around you who are always telling you what to do and what not to do.

Parents and schoolteachers are the enemy. The adult is the enemy of the child because of the awful process of civilising this thing that when it is born is an animal with no manners, no moral sense at all.

Dahl's remark clearly flies in the face of the earliest children's tracts, which sought to discipline and instruct. Inverting these early intentions Dahl's fictional children often start their stories being oppressed by adults. But the adults suffer horribly and often meet an appalling end. Exaggeration and satire, outrageous and disgusting events are used to merrily despatch the menace of adults. Always comical, Dahl's impact lies in justice being meted out thus empowering the vulnerable child.

Looking back, it is clear that once humour had made its appearance in children's writing it evolved through many forms. But are there certain things that will always make children laugh – that, in other words, can be analysed and theorised as with adult humour in Part One above?

According to the psychologist Zbaraki⁵⁰, Kappas⁵¹ elucidated ten types of children's humour:

- (i) exaggeration
- (ii) incongruity
- (iii) surprise
- (iv) slapstick
- (v) absurdity

- (vi) human predicaments
- (vii) ridicule
- (viii) defiance
- (ix) violence
- (x) verbal humour

Further research distilled five categories of children's humour in literature:

- (I) Humorous characters
- (II) Poking fun at authority
- (III) Physical humour
- (IV) Nonsense
- (V) Humorous discourse

Which of these categories are appropriate to using humour within stories about serious issues? Which of them are relevant to the authors studied here and to my own writing?

From researching this critical study, particularly in terms of comedy mechanics, it seems to me that the category supremely lending itself to children's humour within problems is the first, that of humorous characters. Here is the opportunity for Vorhaus's⁵² comic distance, flaws, exaggeration and humanity. Here is the opportunity for the child to identify with the character and empathise with their problems, but also, to laugh at them. This laughter may derive as a product of Wolfenstein's "joke-façade", in that it is all right to laugh because it is about someone else or, because the child has already overcome that particular problem. In the view

of the children's author Beverley Cleary⁵³ "*problems that children overcame when they were younger are now amusing. What had been a problem is now a relief and funny.*"

In terms of my writing, I also believe that this category is of primary importance. After hearing feedback from children who read *The Granny Plan*, Kevin's comic distance appears to hold the key to dealing with the problem. According to my cousin's daughter, Holly (7),

"There's no way Kevin can fix it, [Alzheimer's] but I want to see what he does anyway."

Poking fun at authority, physical humour and humorous discord, I believe are elements that stem out of the humorous character and peculiar view of the world and interaction with it.

Of course, in order for humour to be used in issues stories at all, the doors to more personal issues had to be thrown open. According to Hunt⁵⁴, the USA of the 1970s led the way here. Writers such as Judy Blume and Betsy Byars put teenage pregnancy, the changes of adolescence, religion, mental handicap and peer pressure firmly on the map of children's writing.

The next part of this study looks at four contemporary authors, who have approached "problem" areas and used humour to deal with situations that are anything but amusing. They are: Morris Gleitzman, Pete Johnson, Cathy Cassidy and Emily Smith.

VII

Four contemporary children's writers who use humour to explore serious issues:

This part of the study sets out to answer the following questions:

1. What sorts of issues do these writers cover?
2. How could this humour help the child?
3. What narrative devices and “tricks” do these writers use to bring about their results?

I chose these four authors because they use humour across a wide and varied range of issues. They also write for different age groups, Gleitzman's being the lower primary end and Cassidy, Johnson and Smith the older primary to early years at secondary school.

Gleitzman approaches some of the most dreadful problems that children have or are ever likely to face, for example, life in a concentration camp. Johnson and Cassidy write for older children and their humour is used in social contexts. Smith shows how humour helps as child as his grandparent is dying and actively spotlights humour as essential when life is bad.

Whilst each author uses humour distinctively, for Gleitzman humour against the odds is his trademark. His writing has also influenced mine the most. For these reasons, more time and analysis will be devoted to his work.

Morris Gleitzman

Morris Gleitzman has a rare gift for writing very funny stories and an even rarer gift of wrapping very serious stories inside them.

The Guardian

Gleitzman's funny stories centre on some extremely unfunny topics. The list of some of his books below gives an indication:

<u>Title</u>	<u>Topic</u>
<i>Two Weeks With The Queen</i>	Colin's brother is dying of cancer. The story encompasses AIDS, death and despair.
<i>Water Wings</i>	Pearl helps with her gran's wish for euthanasia.
<i>Once</i>	Felix escapes from a concentration camp.
<i>Sticky Beak</i>	Mute Rowena is jealous of her parents' new baby.
<i>Misery Guts</i>	Keith tries to cure his parents' constant gloom.
<i>The Other Facts of Life</i>	Ben tries to save the world's starving, battery chickens and other worthy causes.
<i>Bumface</i>	Angus must act as a substitute parent to two under-fives.
<i>Adults Only</i>	Jake deals with crippling loneliness on his parents' Adults Only holiday complex.
<i>Second Childhood</i>	A father's ambition for his children makes them feel hopeless.
<i>Boy Overboard</i>	An family from Afghanistan seek asylum in Australia.
<i>Toad Rage</i>	Cane toads deal with extreme intolerance, hatred and cruelty towards their species.

Clearly Gleitzman's remarkable comic skills address major issues. However, his books are not only genuinely entertaining and funny, they also manage to be deeply moving too. Consequently, he reaches a wide and appreciative audience.

On Penguin's Gleitzman website⁵⁵ he explains:

Perhaps (the) combination of serious subject and sadness and humour may come from the fact that I'm looking for the moment that is the biggest problem in the character's life.

What also remains constant is each central character's outrageous optimism and resilience. Faced with something awful, the main character simply refuses to accept that things cannot be changed, that they must accept what adults tell them. This 'can-do' approach is, of course, their comic distance and their attempt at affective mastery over a given problem. Consequently the reader who is more aware of the reality has licence to laugh.

Later in the same interview Gleitzman says:

I'm interested in exploring a heroism that's about perseverance, not escaping or denial or bitterness or bigotry. It's the heroism of staying optimistic and continuing to struggle. Heroism for me is striving to overcome problems in the knowledge that they will never be overcome.

Through contacting his Australian agent, Peg McColl of Penguin, I was able to interview Morris by e-mail. I asked him how he felt humour helped children cope, and if he thought his books enabled children to understand acceptance. This is specifically relevant in *Two Weeks With the Queen* when it becomes apparent that Luke will die.

He replied:

Dear Julia

I think the most powerful tool children have when faced with insoluble problems is their imagination. Humour is one of the processes that happens there. It takes many forms, but is often the result of children having much more power in their imaginations than they do in the world. Power to imaginatively bend or break or reinvent rules and laws. Power to imaginatively impose their humanity on a tough and cynical world. In short, I like to write

humour that helps young readers feel that insoluble problems won't crush them and celebrates their capacity to never give up on the rest of life.

Acceptance is a tricky one. We humans juggle contradictory ideas and beliefs. We can simultaneously accept and yet not accept. Humour can embody these contradictions very vividly. Humour reminds us that even if we accept the limitations of external experience and its problems, we need never accept limits in our imaginations."

Clearly, in helping 'young readers feel that insoluble problems won't crush them' his books are empowering. And when each central character refuses to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem, it offers a different perception of the threat to the reader. It is presenting Wolfenstein's 'joke façade'. In *Two Weeks with the Queen* the reader is aware that Colin's hope of securing assistance from the Queen's doctor is an impossible long shot, but his determination in looking up 'Queen' under Q in the yellow pages of a phone book, allows them to laugh, even when Luke's situation is so desperate.

So, how does Gleitzman achieve these effects in his narrative style? A closer look at his writing reveals some clever techniques and for ease of understanding I have collected these under headings of Structure, Character and Prose and used these same headings for each author in turn.

STRUCTURE in Gleitzman's writing

The Use of Comic Distance

Gleitzman's central characters tick Vorhaus's comedy boxes of comic perspective, exaggeration, flaws and humanity.

As children his characters are, by definition, vulnerable so the reader cares about them. Their can-do comedy perspective gives them comic distance. That their efforts escalate drastically provides exaggeration - for instance when Colin's solution is to break into Buckingham Palace to see the Queen, or Keith, in *Misery Guts* attempts to cheer up his parents by painting their fish and chip shop bright orange. Flaws are in the characters' optimism and refusal to accept defeat. Humanity is in the children's aims – Colin wants to save his brother, Pearl helps her adopted grandmother to die with dignity, Angus wants the best for himself and his siblings – these are all noble causes.

Opening with a crisis related to the novel's central theme

Gleitzman usually starts his novels with the character in some sort of distress or disgruntlement, related to the central premise. This crisis is presented humorously.

The first line of *Two Weeks with the Queen* finds Colin scowling at her as she gives her Christmas broadcast and considering how lucky and important she is in comparison to ordinary people. At the start of *Waterwings* Pearl is on the roof trying to catch her mother's flyaway bra that has escaped from the washing line. What she wishes for, whilst roof-bound, is a grandmother to help her.

In *Boy Overboard* a game of football is being played against the sound of guns and tank fire.

At the start of *Bumface* - possibly the rudest first page of any children's novel – Angus's preoccupation with sex (or at least his mother's fondness for it) causes him problems in a lesson about human reproduction:

“Angus Solomon” sighed Ms Lowry. “Is that a penis you’ve drawn in your exercise book?”

Angus jumped, startled and remembered where he was.

Ms Lowry was standing next to his desk, staring down at the page. Other kids were sniggering.

Angus felt his mouth go dry and his heart speed up. For a second he thought about lying. He decided not to.

“No, Miss,” he admitted, “it’s a submarine.”

Ms Lowry nodded grimly. “I thought as much,” she said. “now stop wasting time and draw a penis like I asked you to.” She pointed to the one she’d drawn on the blackboard.⁵⁶

The use of jump cuts

Syd Field, the famous screenwriter, said that the best way of writing a film scene was to ‘come in late and leave early’. With Gleitzman’s choice of key scenes, the reader is given a series of situations illustrating the character’s problems and desires. This juxtaposition makes for comedy particularly when a scene promises one thing, only to deliver the opposite.

For example, in *Waterwings*, Pearl has bought her new-found and much wanted grandmother, a rocking chair:

“OK,” she said, “let’s give it a twirl.”

She squeezed herself into the chair and slowly rocked back and forward, eyes closed, face glowing with pleasure.

“I could spend my last days in this little beauty,” she said, “no risk.”

Pearl felt a grin creep across her own face.

She reached for the crocheted blanket.

Then with a creak and a loud snap, the chair collapsed.

“Gran,” shouted Mitch.

*Gran, speechless with astonishment, lay on her back among splintered wood and pieces of shattered tea set.*⁵⁷

CHARACTER in Gleitzman's writing

The child as focaliser

Being “inside” the main character’s head, even though the stories are usually told in third person, draws the reader closer to that character’s plight. For example, Angus’s thoughts about his classmates:

He peered round the back of the van and watched Russell Hinch give another irate yell and run off towards the mall followed by Scott and the others.

That’s what happens when people haven’t got any family responsibilities, thought Angus. They get chucked out of playgrounds and mistreat rubbish containers and make too much noise and spend hours and hours thinking up really good pirate characters for the school play.

“I wish we could go with them,” said Leo. “We could if we pretended to be pirates.”

*Little kids, thought Angus wearily as he steered Leo and Imogen home. They never give up.*⁵⁸

or,

*“Sex, he thought. Sex, sex, sex. It’s all we do in class these days. Why can’t we do something interesting, like geography?”*⁵⁹

In *Boy Overboard* this is superbly realised in the opening football game played against the ever-present threat of warfare:

*I’m Manchester United and I’ve got the ball and everything is good.
There’s no smoke, or nerve gas, or sandstorms.*

*I can't even hear any explosions. Which is really good.
Bomb wind can really put you off your soccer skills.⁶⁰*

Not acknowledging the threat

Gleitzman's characters rarely acknowledge the reality of the threat. Early on in *Two Weeks with the Queen* Colin learns that his sick brother must be flown immediately to a hospital in Sydney. The reader realises the serious medical emergency driving this. But for Colin, the perception is quite different:

Colin felt the blood drain from his face.

"There's only room for one passenger in the plane so I'm going with him," said Dad. "You and Mum'll come down on the train tomorrow."

He crouched down in front of Colin and looked into his face. "I know it's a shock, old mate, but we've got to be tough, eh?"

Colin barely heard him. His blood was pounding in his ears and he felt sick in the stomach.

It was a shock all right. A plane. He'd never even been in an ambulance and Luke was flying to Sydney in a plane.⁶¹

Other characters acknowledge the threat and reveal more about the central character

In *Two Weeks with the Queen* an aircraft pilot asks Colin why he is planning to see the Queen and Colin simply tells him:

"I'm going to ask her to help cure my brother's cancer."

In the long silence that followed, Colin took a closer look at all the equipment humming and blinking around him.⁶²

The long silence that follows says it all.

Similarly, in *Bumface* where Angus is faced with surrogate fatherhood even though he is only at primary school himself, it is Leo, his five-year old brother who points things out for the reader. For example, while the children are being temporarily ‘consoled’ by seeing their mother in the TV show:

“Not fair,” wailed Leo. “Craig and Nolene and Lachlan and Courtney are having pizza. Why can’t we have pizza?”

Angus took a deep breath. “We’ve been through all this,” he said.

“They’re Mum’s TV family. They’re not real. We’re her real family. We’re the lucky ones. Immie, don’t put your dinner in your nappy.”

“We’re not as lucky as them” said Leo, reaching for the tomato sauce and knocking his orange cordial over. “Mum spends heaps more time with them. They’re luckier.”

“She has to spend more time with them,” said Angus. “It’s her job. It’s how she earns the money we need to live on.”

“She’s our mum,” said Leo tearfully. “She should spend more time with us.”⁶³

Use of a “dumb” companion for the lonely or troubled child

In *Waterwings* Pearl seeks help from Winston, despite his being dead:

Pearl ran into the kitchen.

She flung open the freezer door and stuck her head inside.

“It’s a disaster, Winston,” she said. “My only chance at a grandma and

she’s a monster.”

Pearl pressed Winston’s frozen fur to her wet cheek.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” she whispered.

Winston’s eye didn’t glint.

He obviously didn’t have any suggestions.⁶⁴

Jake, in *Adults Only*, is similarly reliant on Crusher and the island animals. The story opens with a ping-pong game that Jake is winning:

Jake crouched over the table and did the gentlest serve he could, straight at Crusher's furry tummy.

He held his breath.

So did the seagulls hovering overhead.

So did the crabs watching from the rocks.

For a second the ball looked as though it was heading for the centre of Crusher's bat. Then a breeze wafted in off the sea and the ball started to curve away.⁶⁵

The score becomes forty-seven to nil and Jake 'overhears' a passing crab talking:

"Poor kid," the crab was saying. "It's pathetic. Stranded out here on this remote island. No other kids for hundreds of kilometres in any direction. No wonder he's so lonely. No wonder he's so miserable he never even whistles any more. No wonder he's reduced to playing ping-pong with a teddy bear."⁶⁶

and later, scathingly:

"Oh yes," said the crab. "It's very normal to have your ping-pong opponent stuck to the other end of the table with sticky tape."⁶⁷

Jake's plight amuses and worries us at the same time.

Feelings at a physical not emotional level

Feelings are generally reported at a physical level. This simplifies the story and stops it from being slowed down as a character interprets their emotion and remains true to the child as focaliser. It also effects a more immediate empathy with the reader.

Here, for instance, when Angus is hoping his mum won't have any more babies for him to parent:

*Angus felt Mum kissing his head. His insides started to feel warm and tingly.
Then she held him at arm's length and gazed at him with soft eyes.
"I love my babies," she said dreamily. "All of them. If things turn out
well with Gavin, I'll probably have another one."
Suddenly Angus's insides weren't warm and tingly any more.* ⁶⁸

Or, in *Two Weeks with the Queen*:

*Colin sat on the kerb and felt a hot pricking in his eyes that meant either Arnie Strachan had just blown cigarette smoke in his face or he was going to cry.
Arnie Strachan was twelve thousand miles away, so it must be that he was going to cry.* ⁶⁹

PROSE Techniques in Gleitzman's writing

Short staccato sentences

Gleitzman uses short sharp sentences to mirror the thoughts and actions of his main characters, particularly at the height of a crisis. For example, in *Waterwings* where Pearl must have her beloved guinea pig, Winston, put down:

*"All ready?" said Howard
Somehow Pearl made herself nod.*

"Come on, Pearl," said the nurse, "I'll make you a cup of tea."
Pearl sat down and held Winston to her chest.
He blinked up at her gratefully.
She looked into his eyes.
"I'm sorry," she whispered.
She saw that Winston understood.
*"Do it now," she said.*⁷⁰

Layout on the page

Gleitzman's layout of prose on the page, short sentences laid out a line at a time down the page, new paragraphs starting when "strictly" they don't need to, amplifies the energy of the story:

From *Two Weeks with the Queen*:

"... His diagnosis is correct, Colin. Luke can't be cured. He's going to die."
Colin stared.
His body had stopped working.
His mind had stopped working.
He was dimly aware of Ted touching his shoulder and someone else standing close to him. A nurse.
"Bull!" Colin heard himself say.
*The doctor was still talking.*⁷¹

In the same way a poem might be expected to, the physical layout of prose on the page, contributes to the momentum of the story.

Pete Johnson

Pete Johnson writes for older children.

In *Trust Me I'm A Troublemaker* the central character Archie, like Gleitzman's Angus, is old beyond his years. However, whilst Gleitzman's Angus has the specific problem of preventing his mother from becoming pregnant, Archie has the more general problem of simply fitting in at school. Being a misfit is the issue, but cleverly, this actually affects both of the characters at the centre of the story even though they are at opposite ends of the 'normal' spectrum.

The story is told through the two narrative voices of Archie, in the form of a journal, and Miranda, the "trouble maker" of the title, by her letters to a magazine agony aunt. However, it is when Archie's father's dreadful girlfriend Cheryl, and her daughter Eliza, move in that their paths cross and Archie becomes Miranda's pupil, thus moving from being a boring 'bod' to a troublemaker extraordinaire.

Children who feel powerless to act in the face of parents' and teachers' wishes would enjoy reading this book, charting as it does Archie's battles with his father and Miranda's with her mother and Mr Tinkler, the maths teacher. Archie and Miranda both act outrageously, striking in lessons, skiving with protective excuses such as suffering "exploding diahorrea" and finally culminating in Archie's move from home into Miranda's house.

Johnson's humour effects the story lightly, but presents important messages: Adults can change, they can understand. Archie's father finally realises what the arrival of Cheryl and Eliza has meant to Archie; Miranda's mother understands the need for honest conversation with her daughter; even Mr Tinkler can give Miranda another chance. But, importantly, these changes are all achieved, not through outlandish behaviour, but through discussion. At the same time, the foolishness of trying to wholly remould a character, in terms of Miranda's desire to 'de-bod' Archie, is well-illustrated, when he finally turns on her, accusing her of controlling him just as much as any of the adults she so despises.

In *How to Train Your Parents* Louis finds himself moved to a pressure-cooker school supported by super-ambitious parents. But he only wants to be a comedian.

As in *Trust Me I'm a Troublemaker* Louis is 'educated' into dealing with his troublesome parents by a savvier girl character, Maddy. Not only does Maddy sympathise with Louis, she becomes his self-appointed agent, finally posing as his mother at an audition in London. Just as Miranda did, Maddy presents Louis with a set of rules and tactics for dealing with his parents. Similarly, Louis ends up running away from home. And, just as with *Trust Me I'm a Troublemaker* the tables are finally turned as Louis and Maddy realise that "training" isn't the answer to everything, and Louis helps Maddy escape her own 'success'.

I asked Pete Johnson how he felt humour helped children to cope. He said:

"Someone once defined humour as 'common sense dancing'. I like that and I think what humour can do is bring a sense of proportion to issues and themes. For instance: 'Rescuing Dad' was inspired by a boy asking me what it meant when parents 'separated'. He knew what it meant when they divorced, but if they separate what exactly is that and does it mean they can still get back together. Clearly this lack of communication between parents

and children generates some splendid comic material. But also, many children who have gone through a similar experience have related to 'Rescuing Dad' and like the way things are explored with a light touch.

I think humour prevents authors from being too pompous – humour actually reminds us of the human frailties we all possess – and helps people to consider issues in a non-judgemental way. So, in some ways, the father in 'Rescuing Dad' behaves rather badly but we're not encouraged to condemn him – rather to see that he's someone doing the best he can at the time.

I think comedy encourages children to take a wider – and perhaps more understanding perspective on the problems they face."

Unlike the other authors, he did see a difference in the sort of humour boys and girls preferred.

"Speaking personally: first of all, the kind of books I disliked most when I was a child were 'issues books.' To me they were just like disguised lectures or school assembly books. They had nothing to do with the pleasure of reading. I've since met other pupils – many of them boys – who are similarly resistant to being lectured.

However, in events at schools when we're discussing, for example, the way Archie is treated in, 'Trust Me I'm a Troublemaker,' it is boys who become particularly involved and have things to say. So, although I'm read pretty well equally by boys and girls – I'm aware that with the boys, in particular, it is the humour that give my books 'cred'. It is this which pulls them into the story.

There's a temptation to think of boys liking more obvious physical humour and that's partly true. They are also especially keen on jokes and being funny in class, so many relate particularly to Louis in, 'How to Train Your Parents' and Harvey in, 'Help! I'm a Classroom Gambler'.

However, in letters, a number of boys have picked up on the more sophisticated humour in, for example, 'Trust me, I'm a Troublemaker'. So I think the humour girls and boys like overlaps more than we might think. Where girls and boys differ, is in their judgements on a book, with boys quickly and firmly rejecting anything that looks like a girls' book – but girls are rather more open minded about books which feature a major boy character."

He also suggested humour had an empowering effect on everyone, not just children.

“It’s rather like when you have a bad day, then you tell someone about it and you exaggerate slightly, then your audience starts to laugh – and it’s as if you’ve got the power back over that day.

Humour also empowers children by bringing a different perspective on things – and, of course, we realise how much we share. Nothing breaks down barriers more quickly than humour.”

STRUCTURE in Johnson’s writing

Diaries and letters

Archie’s story is told through his diary, which automatically sets a time structure within the novel. Miranda’s private letters to an Agony Aunt weave into this time-scale.

The use of two first person narrators makes the story immediate and accessible to the child-reader, like sharing a secret.

This intimacy is achieved in *How to Train your parents* by Louis’ use of a journal and his adult-excluding language. Through the diction there is an assumed allegiance between him and the reader, for example, parents are “*the relics*”, Louis has arrived in “*Swotsville*”, and has to witness dire events such as his dad, “*parading about in tragic trousers.*” This clever use of child-centred interpretation immediately reaches out to the reader.

Humour derived from being ‘a fish out of water’

Neither Archie nor Louis fit their new environments. Archie is mentally too old for his classmates while Louis is in a horribly achievement-focussed environment.

Humour from social situations

Perhaps because the readers are older and more socially aware, a number of Johnson’s comedy scenes arise from cringe-makingly embarrassing social situations. Certain that he will impress his peers, Archie enters the school talent contest and tap-dances. He is ridiculed out of the hall. When he suggests a school project to the teacher in which each child must pick up five pieces of litter his classmates hoik him into a wheelie bin. However, while these events produce comedy, Archie’s confusion over the children’s hostility, his motherless situation and his attempts to look after his failing actor father give the story its humanity.

Louis too aims to entertain his schoolmates. During assembly, in an attempt to alleviate boredom, Louis cracks a couple of jokes. However, he is overheard by the headmaster, and:

I was told to wait outside his crypt and left the hall to the sound of my own footsteps.

Every single person turned away from me as I walked past them, just as if I had something catching. All I’ve done, I thought, is whisper a couple of jokes to try and cheer things up a bit. At my old school everyone whispered in assembly. Even the teachers.⁷²

Clearly, his coping strategies from his last school are no longer appropriate. He is just as excluded as Archie.

The books have a message

From the opening pages of *Trust me I'm a Troublemaker* where Miranda writes to her Agony Aunt, there is a subtle message about the perils of trying to change people:

*He's a bod , of course. The most annoying bod on the face of the planet. And I can't take any more. So what should I do?*⁷³

Aunty Prue replies that she should simply do nothing and that:

*You never know one day you might even discover that he is quite an interesting person after all.*⁷⁴

Miranda fails to heed this message. Cleverly, Johnson underpins his other sub-plots with the same premise. Mr Tinkler wants to change Miranda's approach to school and uniform, but he can't. Archie wants to change his Dad, but he can't. Miranda's mother tries help from a child-tamer to change Miranda, but it fails. The futility of trying to turn people into someone else reaches a climax near the end of the book, when Archie returns home to his Dad thereby making Miranda furious. Only now, does Archie stand up to her, accusing her of wanting to control him every bit as much as the adults do. Finally there is an acceptance, which permeates through all the relationships in the story.

How to Train Your Parents is also about understanding. When Louis has skived from school, and in London for his audition, it is Maddy who secretly phones his parents to bring them down to collect him. She has learnt that family life isn't made better by her 'training':

"I told myself I didn't care what my parents thought of me. I'd go my own way and keep them right out of my life. So I did all the training things I taught you. And it worked. They left me alone more and more. And they stopped expecting things from me, which is what I wanted.

*But I could see them hating me too."*⁷⁵

Again, talking and listening to what others need and want, is shown to be the solution when Louis talks to Maddy's parents:

"Now, can I ask you a question?" I began.

"Of course," said Maddy's dad.

"You do like Maddy, don't you?"

They both sort of jumped and chorused, "Yes," very indignantly.

"That's fine then," I mumbled. "I was just checking."

"We love her," went on Maddy's dad, in that same indignant voice.

"Oh, even better. That's the stuff," I said quickly. "Maybe you could let Maddy know that sometime. She does still want you in her life, you know."

*They were both just staring at me now, no doubt drinking in my words of wisdom. "Well, I hope that's helped. I call again soon. Bye."*⁷⁶

CHARACTER in Johnson's writing

Child as focaliser – Use of first person diction

Like Gleitzman, Johnson tells the story through the child focaliser. This is vividly realised through the narrator's diction. Archie, who is much older than his years introduces his love of tap dancing:

*"Nan introduced me to that particular pleasure."*⁷⁷

And his relationship with a difficult teacher,

*“Often I will mention something I have read in the paper that day. I think he appreciates my insights,”*⁷⁸

It could easily be someone far older speaking. Even as Miranda works her transformation, his new found ‘rebel-dom’ remains stuffily expressed:

*“I feel happier about myself than I have for weeks. I never realised wearing your coat inside out could be so cheering.”*⁷⁹

while skiing becomes:

*“a true milestone in my life.”*⁸⁰

Character shows emotional distress through a change in behaviour

Johnson shows emotions through the impact that anxiety has on Archie’s behaviour. Being so sensible, routine is important to him. So as things deteriorate emotionally:

*“Just can’t concentrate on my maths homework. Tinkler will go ballistic when he sees my feeble effort tomorrow. I can only hope the heating is still broken down.”*⁸¹

*Woke up with a black cloud hanging over me. It followed me to school where I discovered the heating is working again.*⁸²

He also, like Gleitzman, shows emotional turmoil through physical feelings. The first time that Archie skives:

*I had a bit of a panic attack at first...*⁸³

*We walked down to the little parade of shops, my stomach twisting with nerves.*⁸⁴

*When we got to the bus shelter – which was to be our hideaway – I started breathing dead quickly.*⁸⁵

Character shows emotional distress through sarcasm

Louis masks his upset with attitude and sarcastic bluster:

*“...not one second of school today was worth getting up for. In fact, I was so bored I nearly started eating my hands. I really wished I was back at Drama Club, pretending to be a digestive biscuit.”*⁸⁶

*... I spent another jolly evening under house arrest. What am I going to do about my parents? They’re getting worse and worse.*⁸⁷

*His name is Mr Walrus (that’s what I thought they said, but it can’t be right and who cares anyway as I won’t be here)...*⁸⁸

*“How do you feel about that?” asked Mum eagerly. And blow me down, she was smiling away at me too. They obviously thought I’d be delirious with joy at the news that I’m getting a tutor. I tell you, my parents’ sanity is hanging by a thread at the moment...*⁸⁹

PROSE techniques in Johnson’s writing

Perhaps because he is writing for an older audience than Gleitzman’s, Johnson relies more on verbal than visual humour.

Exaggeration

Johnson makes excellent use of exaggeration, particularly the exaggeration typical of a teenage viewpoint.

Archie laments:

“Cheryl has hijacked Dad away from me, hasn’t she? And for the moment there is nothing I can do about this.

I am just a toy of fate.”⁹⁰

While Miranda, in her letters to a magazine agony aunt, tells us:

“He (Archie) is driving everyone insane but especially me. Just hearing his patronising voice warbling on and on is enough to bring up my breakfast.”⁹¹

Louis’ embarrassment by his father’s air-guitar playing is shown as he mentions it’s to “a track from the hit parade of the 17th Century”⁹² while he describes his new headmaster as being:

“... a hundred and eight, has one huge eyebrow and spits a lot. Had to wipe my face down after he’d gone. I was soaked through.”⁹³

Metaphors and similes

Johnson’s comedy through word-pictures also comes through his funny metaphors.

Miranda tells us that Archie is:

“...about as interesting as a boiled sweet.”⁹⁴

and Archie's opinion on the herbal tea Cheryl offers him is that it:

*"tasted of nettles and underpants".*⁹⁵

while for Louis, the arrival of super-pushy parents of friends means:

*...the undead walk into our house*⁹⁶

while his friend Theo has:

*a brain the size of a planet and wear shirts that gleam like a lighthouse*⁹⁷

In this way, we are given a new and funny way of looking at things.

Combining perceptions

Johnson combines sad reflections with humour and thereby intensifies poignancy.

When we are told that Archie's mother is dead, it is through a photograph:

*"...there's one of me as a baby being held by my mum. She passed away when I was seven months old, but in that picture she looks incredibly beautiful. I look like a giant boiled egg."*⁹⁸

Similarly, a moment of high drama in *How to Train Your Parents* is defused by:

"...Only that didn't matter because along you came and I became your agent...but now that's all finished and I've got nothing."

*She started to cry then and I wasn't at all sure what to do. So in the end I flung a hankie at her. "It's all right," I said, "it hasn't got any bogies on it."*⁹⁹

In both cases, humour acts like a pressure valve, releasing sugary sentimentality or melodrama.

Cathy Cassidy

Cathy Cassidy writes stories centred on teenage girls who face major problems. In doing this, she uses humour in different ways to Gleitzman and Johnson.

In *Sundae Girl* Jude's mother is an alcoholic who is given to irrational and sometimes violent turns. Her father has left the family, her grandmother has Alzheimer's, and it is up to her grandfather and Jude to attempt to take care of everyone.

In *Driftwood* the fostered brother of Hannah's best friend Joey is so viciously bullied that eventually he tries to commit suicide.

Despite these topics the books are not depressing. Humour is employed as a form of resilience, as a way of coping by the characters, a way of looking at the world in general. What particularly struck me about Cassidy's writing in fact is the way she repeatedly strikes a balance between sadness and joy. It is as if she is saying, something awful may be happening, but if you look, there are good things too.

For example, in *Sundae Girl* after learning how her mother's drinking escalated after Jude's birth, thus making Jude feel despondent and responsible, the scene jump cuts to baking a cake with her father, a Victoria Sponge in honour of his fiancée. That the cake is lumpy and made with the wrong flour only adds to the lightness of the scene. When Jude suffers a hideous Valentine's Day morning, witnessing her mother screaming abuse at her boyfriend out of the window, she goes on to school to find her

own day spilling over with *Loveheart* sweets, planted by Carter, her friend and admirer.

Similarly, in *Driftwood*, when Hannah walks forlornly onto the beach, feeling abandoned, Paul catches up with her to show her that she is not as alone as she thinks, that her new kitten has followed her down to the surf.

This enduring balance was something Cathy Cassidy commented on when I interviewed her by e-mail:

“How do you think that humour helps the child-reader who might be facing a similar problem?”

“I think that life is full of humour and those moments of silliness, wit or irony can help all of us to get through the bad times, in real life as in fiction. Often, in real life, you can get overwhelmed with a situation and close yourself off to humour, as to other things, (love, bright sunny mornings, chocolate cake, the list is endless) and that makes it harder to handle I think. I suppose you can get swallowed up by the sadness/pain of a situation. In my books I try to show that even when life is tough, as it is for characters in all of my books in some way, life still has good things to offer - not just humour, but magic, that sense of wonder in just being alive. The bad stuff is there, and there's not always much we can do about it, but our attitude towards what's happening can make all the difference between coping or not coping. I try to show that a positive outlook and not trying to hide the problem are important ways to help you cope. Often, trying to hide the problem creates a whole lot more trouble, obviously. It's not just humour, it's about trying to find the happiness in life, no matter what is going on around you. I do think that a light touch is important when dealing with serious issues in children's/teen fiction, however. Without this, the story could be too heavy, overpowering and even depressing. In my books, I weave humour into the story naturally, it's just part of the way I write, but I am aware that this makes the stories easier to read, and that while they are enjoying the story they can absorb some of the underlying ideas/messages, too.”

So in the same way as Gleitzman forces the reader to evaluate “the threat” so does Cassidy. Not by turning it into a humorous misunderstanding or a failure to grasp what is really happening as Gleitzman does, but by buffeting the bad things with more pleasant things around them. As she says, when there is ‘bad stuff’ ‘our attitude towards what’s happening can make all the difference’.

Having noticed a difference in tone between her books and those of Gleitzman and Johnson I asked whether she thought there was a difference in the humour which appealed to boys or girls:

“I’ve found that boys and girls of that age do enjoy my books, once the boys have got past the problem of the ‘girly’ covers. I know that the humour is a key factor for the boys, they love the fun bits and the laughs and relate to that just the same as the girls. It certainly makes it easier for them to read about a girl narrator and about feelings. Perhaps later on, boys and girls humour diverges, but at this age it seems kind of universal.”

Finally, did she think humour was empowering for the child?

“I hope so... it’s helpful for all of us to let go and laugh/smile at times. Smiling/laughing can actually change the way we feel, boost our immune systems and truly make life better. Kids with family problems are often dealing with lots of serious stuff as part of everyday life - it’s good for them to take time out to just be kids, too. I’m sorry if my thoughts aren’t perhaps very ‘deep’ or reasoned - I have truly never thought of why I write the way I do, it’s just an extension of my personality, the way I am. I care about kids and I want to reflect some of the difficult issues kids have to deal with today, but also show that there are ways through those problems, and that life really can be magical and full of possibilities, no matter what.”

Indeed at times her juxtaposition of happy and sad can take on an almost symbolic importance. At Gran’s funeral in *Sundae Girl*:

Then suddenly there's a fluttering, a flash of green, and Alex points to the big black hearse, eyes shining. 'Bird!' he says.

There on the big shiny hearse bonnet is a greenfinch, small, vivid, perfect, fluffing up its feathers in the sunshine.¹⁰⁰

or, the fact that Paul's attempt at cutting his wrists, in *Driftwood* is stopped by, of all things, a kitten:

Kit tries to edge forward, but Paul huddles further into the rock face. "Stay away," he says, bringing the knife blade up to his lips.

Then Krusty squirms out of my grasp and bounds across the sand to Paul. She doesn't play safe, she doesn't hang back, she just runs up to Paul and claws her way up his legs, her tail swishing and Paul drops the knife and reaches out to stroke her fur, lifting her up to his face, his shoulder.

"Hey, hey, little cat," he says. "What are you doing here?"¹⁰¹

STRUCTURE in Cassidy's Writing

The use of the present tense

Unlike the other authors' stories in this study, Cassidy's are told in the present tense, which gives them a sense of immediacy and of a crisis building.

Parsing background into ongoing action

Cassidy doesn't stop the action of the story to fill in background. Instead she weaves it into a current crisis and often, as a private reflection, in a conversation. For example, in *Sundae Girl*, Jude's mother's drinking:

"... Rose packed a suitcase and took you home to her parents."

Mum left Dad because he wouldn't let her have whisky for breakfast. It's not exactly what I imagined, but then again, it's not exactly a shock. Mum

doesn't drink these days, but that's because the doctor says she can't. She's messed up her body with years and years of it, of drinking and weeping softly into the bottom of a whisky glass.

I always thought she drank because of Dad. Now I know it's because of me.

"Jude?" Dad is looking at me intently. "You said you wanted to know. I'm sorry."¹⁰²

Juxtaposition of humour and sadness

As already detailed, Cassidy's trademark of interleaving happiness and sadness throughout the book means that the book's message is intrinsic in its structure.

CHARACTER in Cassidy's Writing

Child as focaliser

Again the child is the focaliser. Cassidy's stories are usually told in the first person, which lends them a sense of intimacy and of a secret shared, thereby making the character's problem more immediate. In this way, the reader is brought very close to the character as their thoughts interlace the narrative and the use of fragments lend authenticity to a child's thoughts.

For example, in *Driftwood*:

By the time she turns away from him, my brother is bright pink and grinning like a madman. No change there then.¹⁰³

Cassidy also uses humour to lend poignancy and in this way she encourages the reader to laugh at the problem and not at the people enduring it. For example, with Jude's grandmother's Alzheimer's:

“Lovely dinner,” Gran says kindly as we wash up together at the sink. “Was it chicken?”

“Pasta with cheese and ham,” I sigh. “Not one of my best efforts.”

“It was very nice,” Gran repeats. “You can’t go wrong with chicken.”¹⁰⁴

or when Rose almost slaps Jude, Gran remarks ironically to the reader:

“What a very rude girl,” Gran says into the silence. “No manners at all. I don’t think we should ask her here again. In fact, I’ve a good mind to have a word with her mother.”

“You do that, Molly, love,” Granddad says, and I smile, in spite of everything.¹⁰⁵

Characters interpret their situations with humour

It is in how Cassidy’s characters show resilience in dealing with problems that her use of humour comes into its own.

Shocked at the changes in her previously kind and thoughtful brother, Hannah laments:

“Aliens came and took my brother, Kit, and swapped him for this vain, grumpy lookalike. The real Kit, the nice Kit, the one who one had a scrap with Murphy because he was pulling the legs off a spider, is probably stranded in cyberspace, eating vitamin pills, wearing a silver catsuit and having his brain scanned for signs of intelligence every few days.”¹⁰⁶

Sarcasm makes an appearance as a form of humour. In *Driftwood*, Joey, Hannah's Goth-rebel best friend, conducts a running battle through the book with teacher, Mr McKenzie, about uniform. Stopped for wearing a mini-kilt:

"But we are a Scottish school and I'm a Scottish girl... ...you're always telling us to be proud of our heritage, aren't you? So I thought that, under the circumstances -"

"You thought wrong," Mr McKenzie roars. "That skirt must go!"

"What, now, sir?" Joey blinks.¹⁰⁷

Interestingly, sarcasm is directed at the reader when is it used to ask rhetorical questions. In *Sundae Girl*:

"Well, hey, who would want a life of love, romance and ice-cream sundaes when you can settle for smoking and drinking yourself to death? It's obvious."¹⁰⁸

Emotional feelings are presented physically

Cassidy uses metaphors to focus on how emotions make her characters feel. In *Driftwood*:

Self-pity seeps through my body. It's an ugly feeling, like barbed wire inside you.¹⁰⁹

while in *Sundae Girl* after Jude's Mum has spent a night in the cells for drunkenness:

A tear leaks from the corner of my eye and slides down my cheek, and my stomach feels cold, sour, empty.¹¹⁰

PROSE techniques in Cassidy's writing

Word pictures

Cassidy, like Johnson, is talented in creating vivid word pictures laced with humour so that her characters immediately spring from the page. *Driftwood's* Joey is described as:

... weird. She is clever, she is kind, she is seriously cool, but still, she's weird, in a take-it-or-leave-it kind of way.

She always has been, ever since she marched into my classroom seven years ago, wearing pink wellies, reindeer antlers and a don't mess with me look in her big blue eyes. She pitched up in Kirklaggen like a small tornado, and she's been like that ever since.¹¹¹

Or, in *Sundae Girl*:

Year Eight siren Kristina Kowalski wiggles past. She is wearing something that might have once belonged to a Barbie doll, but has now shrunk in the wash. Scary.¹¹²

Cassidy's humour is presented more subtly than Gleitzman's or Johnson's and succeeds in wrapping happiness in sadness and vice versa, so that neither stands alone. It is this approach which presents us with a new way of using humour in issues stories although the net result still allows the reader to reassess the threat and be a part of the character's attempted mastery of it. It is as if she is saying, there may be bereavement, alcoholism, Alzheimer's and suicide, but there are still kittens and chocolate cake, rainbows and sunshine, stripy pink bicycles and beaches too.

Emily Smith (e.f. Smith)

The final author I looked at was Emily Smith and specifically her book, *What howls at the moon in frilly knickers?*

Cancer is the central issue of this book, specifically Mim's, although divorce is also a part of (Gary's) story. Mim is Julian's grandmother and together with Gary and Ed, Julian decides to write a joke book to take his mind off what is happening to her.

In contrast to the other authors, Smith sets the whole narrative strand – the making of the joke book – against the central problem of Mim's illness. Smith, in this way, takes a step further than Cassidy, in actively pitching happiness and humour against sadness.

“You might think that writing a joke book is rather an odd thing to do when your grandmother is...well, dying. Well, you go ahead and think what you like. It's what I did.”¹¹³

Julian's aim of writing the book is reinforced by Mim's attitude a few pages later:

“...sometimes, when things are really bad... laughter is all we have,”¹¹⁴

That she says this whilst glancing at photographs of her relatives to whom we are told “very bad things” have happened when other hints (e.g. the canopy for bride and groom at a family wedding) suggest the family are Jewish adds a knowing authority.

The book is different to the others in this study, because it sets out its premise directly: We need to laugh when things are bad. When I interviewed Emily Smith, through her publicity assistant Victoria Roberts at Hachette Children's Books, she explained:

"I think humour helps both adults and children to cope. People make jokes in the most appalling circumstances, often as a way of defusing the situation. We laugh at what we are afraid of, perhaps as a way of controlling it (eg look at Red Riding Hood, there are comic elements such as the wolf wearing granny's nightdress, and the "What big teeth" dialogue etc, but it is really a very scary story!).

Having said that, in WHATMIFK, I don't think any of the characters make jokes directly about their problems, eg cancer, divorcing parents. It is more that they do the joke book, (the jokes are mainly word-play rather than "situation" jokes) as a project to take their minds off their troubles."

The protagonist and his friends are all boys. Does she think that gender makes a difference to the sort of humour that boys and girls enjoy?

"No. Not really. Look at men and women – they mostly laugh at the same things, don't you think? Having said that, a man might for instance, "get" a rugby joke whereas a woman didn't just because he understood it...

Jokes come out of shared experience (which is why Shakespeare's jokes never seem that funny to us now). I am talking again about situation jokes rather than wordplay."

Finally, on the question of whether humour empowers:

"Yes. Understanding and enjoying a joke is certainly empowering – even more so making someone laugh. Sharing a joke can make you feel you belong, and for children it can even be seen as a sort of ritual (see the little sister in WHATMIFK who repeats a joke she simply doesn't understand). A good joke is often an expression of a shared experience."

Here Smith is hinting at the social role of humour for people facing the same problem. “Sharing a joke can make you feel you belong.” Perhaps this is true for the child who is reading the story too.

Smith also comments, in response to the three questions:

“I have tried to answer these questions as best I can – but in some ways I think I have said it all best in the book!”

So, how does Smith do this through her writing?

STRUCTURE in Smith’s writing

Opening each chapter with a joke

Smith begins each chapter with a ‘hand-written’ joke from the joke book. This is the most obvious juxtaposition of humour and sadness in the novel, and works particularly potently in the last chapter:

*“What is the beginning of eternity,
The end of time and space,
The beginning of every end
And the end of every race?*

Answer: the letter ‘e’

“Mim died the next day. She was only sixty-six.”¹¹⁵

Humour and tragedy are repeatedly presented side by side.

A timescale running through the narrative

Because we know that Mim is dying, there is narratively speaking a ticking clock. This sense of urgency underlies the book and contributes to the readers' rooting for Julian.

Jump cuts

The reader is propelled forwards through the book by jump cuts from scene to scene. Often the first line of the new scene will orient the reader:

*Mim was sitting bright eyed in her chair when I got back **that evening**.*¹¹⁶

or,

*"I brought these," Gary said **next day**, hauling a clutch of books from his schoolbag.*¹¹⁷

or,

*When I got back from school **two days later** I knew there was something wrong straightaway.*¹¹⁸

Stating the central premise again at the end

The return to the joke book after Mim's death brings the book full circle.

"OK, I know people die younger than that – much younger – but I still felt the unfairness of it. And I grieved for her..."

*She never saw the finished joke book. But I will always be grateful for the pleasure it gave her in those last months."*¹¹⁹

And, when Julian finally opens the now printed book, we are left with a message:

"I stared at the print. And suddenly I felt myself whirling far, far away. And from where I was, I thought how silly the joke was, how little it mattered, what a detail it was compared to the terrible things and beautiful things that happen in life.

And then, all at once, I was back.

I read the joke again.

'Yeah, Gary,' I said. 'Good one to start with.'

And I laughed." ¹²⁰

For Julian in grief, the joke book suddenly seems foolish and then almost immediately, important again. Its influence is one of grounding at a time of terrible loss. His grandmother's suffering before death and her absence are terrible things, yet her message of laughter, of its ability to be all in troubled times, is still there. Julian's remark, 'Good one to start with', which is the last line in the book, thereby gains a much stronger resonance. In grief, laughter itself is a start.

CHARACTER in Smith's writing

Characters and places

Smith uses places to conjure up people and their relationships, showing their closeness in the way they have infused other areas of life. For example, Julian's feelings about the library:

Mim took me a lot when I was little. She really loved the library. I mean, if I had some time off school because there was an election or something, she would say, "Great, we can go to ... the library!" And she would only be half joking. ¹²¹

Characters and things

She also uses objects to 'bring people back'.

*I reached for a piece of cake when suddenly I had a dark feeling in my stomach. Mim always used to love making cakes but lately she hadn't been up to it. I loved chocolate cake but I really didn't feel like eating any now.*¹²²

Finally, things can stand in for people, as near the end when Julian is banned from seeing Mim at the hospital as she is too ill for visitors, she tells him she has been thinking about the joke book:

"It's really taken my mind off things sometimes."

*I smiled. OK, I hadn't been allowed in myself to see her. But I had given her something to think about."*¹²³

And things can become symbolic of a relationship:

Mim died the next day. She was only sixty-six. OK, I know people die younger than that – much younger – but I still felt the unfairness of it. And I grieved for her...

*She never saw the finished joke book. But I will always be grateful for the pleasure it gave her in those last months.*¹²⁴

Use of physical feelings for emotional ones

Like Gleitzman, Johnson and Cassidy, Smith also uses physical feelings to express emotional ones.

For example, when Julian discovers Mim has been taken to hospital:

*"My gut seemed to spasm. 'Is it serious?' I said."*¹²⁵

PROSE Techniques in e f Smith's writing

Staccato sentences and layout on the page

Most reminiscent of Gleitzman, her use of snappy sentences together with their layout on the page, mirror the central character's thoughts:

Standing at my desk was Rosie.

Rosie from school.

Rosie in my class.

What was she doing in my library?

"What are you doing in my library?" I said.

Rosie's eyes danced. "I'm sorry!" she cried. "I didn't realise it was your library. I thought it was a public library!"

Oof!

"Of course it's a public library!" I said. "I'm just surprised to see you here, that's all."¹²⁶

Symbolism

The joke book comes to stand symbolically for what is between them. When Julian is finally allowed to visit his gran, after being kept away from the hospital, she tells him that he has been thinking of the joke book. And after her death, it still contains the message that there is still, despite everything, laughter.

So, how can we sum up the different impacts of these authors?

The Four Authors Compared

Each of the authors presents a message in their books.

Gleitzman's central message in the majority of his appears to be that although the child may not be able to solve the problem, it won't crush them. Heroism is a matter of trying despite the odds, of not giving up.

Johnson presents more streetwise characters, such as Miranda, Louis and Maddy, who attempt to change things through antagonising adults and for a while feel empowered. However, it is only when adults and children work together that real solutions are achieved. Johnson seems to be telling his readers that through co-operation things can change.

Cassidy's focus is in showing a balance between good and bad, happy and sad. Certainly there are bad things in the world, she says, but look more closely and you'll see that there are good things there too.

Finally, Smith's core message lies in the therapeutic value of laughter and is the only story premise that is directly stated: *Sometimes it's all we have.*

Although the authors write for different age groups, there is considerable overlap in their comic techniques.

All four authors use child focalisers, appropriate diction, jump cuts and depict emotional feelings as physical responses or changes in behaviour.

Only Gleitzman's heroes seem not to acknowledge the real nature of the threat. This insight is usually left to the reader and often reinforced by other characters in the story. He also uses dumb companions to humorously point up the central characters' isolation. Johnson, Cassidy and Smith have more knowing characters leading their stories.

Johnson and Cassidy's narrators eloquently emphasise the parallel world that adults seem to inhabit and present their stories as secrets shared, in journals or letters, to draw the reader in. Sarcasm makes an appearance in these authors' books and the humour is often created by verbal humour in terms of word-pictures of characters or ripostes to events.

Gleitzman's comedy tends more to the slapstick; the other authors use it as a verbal resilience to the situation (Cassidy, Johnson) and a protection (Cassidy, Johnson, Smith).

Symbolism makes an appearance in the work of Cassidy and Smith, distilling humour into hope. When the greenfinch flutters down onto Gran's hearse (Cassidy) or the joke book endures beyond Mim's death (Smith) there is a sense of things still being all right, of there still being a hope in the future.

So, how have these writers influenced *The Granny Plan*?

VIII

The impact of reading as a writer on *'The Granny Plan'*

Morris Gleitzman.

Morris Gleitzman's influence has been the most profound on my writing and the only author who significantly impacted on my style and voice *before* I started writing *The Granny Plan*. Many of his trademark ingredients – in terms of style, layout, robustness of the protagonist and severity of the problem faced – appear in *The Granny Plan*.

Being a conscientious and naturally anxious person, this led to fears that I had – in some sort of plagiarist sense – inadvertently copied him.

Discussions about “influence”

A common piece of advice given to aspiring writers is: Read. Would-be authors are advised to read widely and to read as a writer, not only enjoying the author's skill but to analyse it at the same time. How do the authors they admire handle suspense, dialogue, pacing, character and conflict? How can the would-be writer employ similar skills?

But when does learning from the published author become more than that? Having read Gleitzman extensively, I was aware elements of his voice were coming through in mine.

This was something I discussed this with my tutor, Philip Gross and on one occasion in the light of discovering an article about an author, Kaavya Viswanathan¹²⁷ on the internet. Ms Viswanathan was “caught out” for using similar phrasing and tropes to an already published author.

However, I now understand the difference between plagiarism and influence. Where Ms Viswanathan could be shown to have modelled her writing on specific sentences and had copied whole paragraphs directly from the original, changing only the occasional word, the similarity in mine was stylistic.

Gleitzman’s and my writing both employ the comic distance engendered by being too optimistic, both translate emotions into physical feelings (a technique common in much children’s writing), both use short sentences to build urgency and a broken-up layout on the page (again typical of much children’s writing, whereby the more reluctant child has a sense of faster progress).

This “overlap” was neatly summed up in Philip’s mention of the “If you liked this, you’ll enjoy...” marketing technique used by booksellers, particularly Amazon.

A definition of plagiarism from the Open University also crystallised the difference:

Studying any creative writing course will involve you in a process of assimilation. You will read established writers and learn how they have done certain things, and you will often try to emulate their methods. Similarly, from seeing the work of other students, you will learn from their successes and failures and you will spot techniques that you might want to try yourself. Sometimes this emulation will be fully conscious, sometimes it might be less so. Either way this is not copying or plagiarism, but rather one of the major benefits of such courses. In most cases when

*you try out an element of another writer's technique, that element becomes uniquely your own – you change it subtly or even dramatically. Your tutor will be well aware of the need to “try things out”, so don't let the fear of plagiarism inhibit you.*¹²⁸

Gleitzman's influences, together with the other authors', are detailed below. These others had an impact through the later editing stages. *The Granny Plan*, however, remains an original piece of work, inspired by my own experiences of Alzheimer's. Its gentleness makes it warmer and less boisterous than Gleitzman's and Johnson's writing, and whilst it shares the same severity of problem as Smith and Cassidy's novel, it is more comically aware than either and finds humour within the problem of Alzheimer's rather than as balance or diversion.

STRUCTURAL influences in *The Granny Plan*

The theme of Alzheimer's

The Granny Plan clearly shares Gleitzman's and Smith's central idea of a problem that cannot be solved.

I chose Alzheimer's as a topic because it has had such an impact on my life. My mother died from it (2002) after eight long years of suffering. Seeing her so reduced, 'buried alive', left an indelible mark.

According to the Alzheimer's Society Report - February 2007 (See Appendix 3) dementia currently affects some 700,000 people in Britain and the society predicts that it will come to affect over one million people by 2025. From the point of view of an audience for *The Granny Plan*, more and more children will see Alzheimer's in their own relatives.

At the time of writing, Alzheimer's remains an insoluble problem.

Depicting the illness

A major problem for me was how to make Alzheimer's amusing to a child without belittling its effects or its victims. I did not want the humour in the story to be in any way directed at the old people. As well as being tasteless, it would hardly represent Alzheimer's as the horrible, wasting disease it is, one that robs the sufferer of their very personality, autonomy and individuality. Some children's writing can portray the sufferer as 'a bit dippy' or 'happy in their own world', which ironically turned out to be the problem I faced with agents, who found the treatment of Alzheimer's too realistic and too gloomy for their audience.

Cassidy 'manages' Jude's Gran's Alzheimer's well in *Sundae Girl* by concentrating on the reactions of other characters to what Gran has to say. So too, with *The Granny Plan*, humour had to be directed outwards in different directions. These included showing the other-worldliness of Rosewell, when Kevin walks into it; Kevin's disastrous effort to remind Gran of Skanker and his subsequent "rescue" of her; the understanding – or otherwise – of Alzheimer's amongst the different characters in the book; and the portrayal of sufferers as people who were once capable, even accomplished. This last point, particularly, affords the Alzheimer's sufferers in the story, their dignity against the disease:

Kevin looked around the room properly. The walls were covered with star charts, pictures of planets and tables of numbers. Beneath them, bookcases bulged with books on astronomy. Kevin pulled one out, hoping for a picture

of a rocket or, better still, an alien. But the book was hopeless, filled with page after page of calculations. Sums were OK, in fact he loved maths, but these sums had more letters in than numbers and loads of funny squiggles.

“Does he read these much?” said Kevin.

“No,” said Alice coolly. “But he did write them.”

*Kevin stared. The old man didn't look strong enough to hold a pencil now.*¹²⁹

Gran is in the early stages of Alzheimer's in the book. She shows confusion over words, short-term memory loss, moments of complete isolation and others of lucidity. To show the ongoing nature of Alzheimer's I depicted other residents in the later stages of the illness: particularly Ted, by turns furiously aggressive then tearful and Kissy Annie who “recognises” everyone as a member of her family.

Early plot outlines of the story included Gran's death. However, as Philip Gross pointed out, this was rather too neat, and in a sense a “happy” ending, in that the punishing diminishment of Gran was over. In real life, Alzheimer's goes on for between seven and ten years so that Kevin's problem, if the reader were really to believe it, should also be one that goes on and one that he cannot make better.

The use of comic distance

Kevin is immune to the reality of his situation and continues with absolute persistence in his efforts. In these respects, he comes from a long line of would-be successful comedy characters, most notably in this study the can-do hero portrayed by Gleitzman, but before that by Oliver Hardy, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton through to modern-day comic characters such as Homer Simpson and Mr Bean.

These characters all share the necessary blissful unawareness of their actual inability to remedy anything.

Kevin is a bright boy and an early plot problem I faced was having him in a world where Alzheimer's is generally acknowledged as a black pit and yet make it believable that he would still keep on trying for a cure. The solution, I discovered, was to resolve the problem from within the character's perspective. Kevin would of course be familiar with using the Net for information and while any 'ordinary' child reading up on Alzheimer's would be put off, his brightness coupled with his resilience to reality could actually solve the problem. Being true to his armour-plated optimism would force him to seek out other explanations to get rid of new and unpleasant information. Because Kevin's only other real experience of illness is things like colds and measles and he knows that people get them to greater or lesser extents and recover, why not Alzheimer's?

He felt happiness surge up inside him. He'd only been on the internet for five minutes and he'd already discovered that Gran wasn't nearly as ill as the other old people at Rosewell.¹³⁰

Kevin's flaw is of course his supreme optimism but he brims with humanity. He wants to help his Gran, he wants her to be all right again. Like Gleitzman's Colin trying to secure the Queen's doctor's help, or Johnson's Archie trying to look after his struggling-actor father, Cassidy's Jude protecting her alcoholic mother or Smith's Julian cheering his dying grandmother, Kevin's aim is of rescue, security and reassurance and ultimately a return to the status quo. For this reason, the reader supports him.

Gran

Because of the nature of Alzheimer's, an early problem was that Gran presented as a 'flat' character. This was something picked up in the workshops, where suggestions were made to use photographs, things she used to say and Kevin's recollections. I learned that when the character cannot be visible for themselves, something else, some secondary device, must stand in. Smith uses places and things to remind Julian of his grandmother. I found I had also used this, both in bringing Gran back to life and establishing what was lost when Mum picks up an old photograph of Gran:

"That's an old one. I remember we took it on holiday. Poole, I think. Yes, that was it. Gran'd just chatted up some tattoo-covered boatman s he'd take us out on a trip around the harbour. He didn't charge us you know, though your Gran did go for a sherry with him afterwards. You were just a baby, so you'd not remember.

Mum paused.

Her shoulders sagged.

"And neither would Mum now," she said, putting the photograph back down beside the computer.¹³¹

The use of jump cuts

Leaving the reader to imagine what happens in between, as frequently used by Gleitzman and to a lesser degree Smith, was a useful means of injecting humour into the story. For example, in the first chapter, when Kevin breathes a sigh of relief, reassured of his neighbour's well-being:

He felt a surge of happiness and was just thinking of how Miss Munro would probably crack open a packet of sticky gold stars when she read this bit in his project when the drainpipe gave way and he peeled slowly backwards off the house.

**

*It was smelly inside the wheelie bin.*¹³²

The fresh impact of what has happened to Kevin is funnier than any wordy description of the calamity.

The last scene

In many of Gleitzman's stories and in Smith's, the characters are left unable to solve the problem.

The last scene of *Two Weeks with the Queen* shows Colin facing the reality of his brother's impending death and being there with him as a final gift; in Smith's story, Mim has died and Julian must go on alone. In both these cases, the character has to carry on despite not having been able to solve the problem. They must find a new way of dealing with the problem, in terms of acceptance and perhaps a change of optimism into stoicism. This was also how I finished *The Granny Plan*. Like Gleitzman's last scene in *Two Weeks with the Queen* it has the main character with the sufferer and finding solace in simply being together.

The message of *The Granny Plan* falls between the messages I perceive in Gleitzman and Smith. If Gleitzman's is that great problems may hurt but won't crush you, and Smith's that sometimes laughter is all we have, then the message I suppose behind *The Granny Plan* is simply, 'Sometimes optimism can't solve things, but it can still change them.'

CHARACTER influences in The Granny Plan

The child as focaliser

Something that all of the authors in the study do well, and which took some revising in my manuscript, was keeping the character's diction appropriate to the character. Earlier drafts had Kevin looking at Alice's 'chiselled features, hard and stone like', or referring to Gran's eating as 'camel-slow'. Whilst accurate, they were not Kevin's words and had to be changed.

The character's diction is also helped along by the use of fragments. All the authors in my study did this, to reflect the character speaking, and whilst it is not a trademark only of humorous writing, it lends authenticity to a character's thoughts:

If he helped Gran, if his project made her remember again, then that would be just the start. He could see the headlines now: "Schoolboy and dog cure Alzheimer's."

*Fantastic.*¹³³

and can mirror an unfolding drama:

It was a good idea.

A really good idea.

*Except that it was wrong.*¹³⁴

Similarly, it was important to check that a character's perception was true to the logical order of events. Early on in the book, Mum wants Kevin's opinion on her (awful) outfit. The first drafts had Kevin reacting to it before she asked. A ten-year old boy would not be so tuned in to his mother's dress sense, particularly a ten-year

old with his own worries. So, the scene was re-written and Kevin only looks at Mum's clothes only after his attention is specifically drawn to them.

Not acknowledging the threat

Like Gleitzman's heroes Kevin refuses to believe that there is not a solution to the problem.

Conflict

It was important to me for Kevin to have more than one source of conflict early in the story. This engaged the reader, setting up an empathy, which would remain as Kevin seeks to cure Alzheimer's. This early conflict, with Hannah, his mum, his headmaster, his nemesis Dave Riley and later, Alice and the Matron of Rosewell keeps the reader engaged and on Kevin's 'side'.

A dumb companion

Kevin needed a friend, a sympathetic companion, to talk to and share his ambition. However, the story can't afford to have a companion who points out the harsh realities of Kevin's quest. This is where Skanker comes in.

Gleitzman uses dumb companions to highlight the hero's determination and loneliness in *Waterwings* (Winston, the dead guinea pig), *Adults Only* (the teddy bear Crusher) and *Sticky Beak* (Rowena's cockatoo) and it became an intrinsic part of Kevin's story too. This comic device allowed Kevin to project his own hopes and fears on to another character, lending them an expression that in a non-dumb companion would be challenged. Skanker, being a boxer, has a face given to expression, which feeds

into Kevin's lonely interpretations. Being a young dog, and full of energy, also opens up comic potential.

However, unlike Gleitzman's characters with their companions, Kevin realises that Skanker can never be a full partner in their quest. He is a bright child, and unable wholly to delude himself. Consequently, when things deteriorate:

Kevin wondered if other pioneers in history had had partners like Skanker, the sort who nodded off in the middle of an important debate and still demanded half of your sausages at teatime. But they hadn't. They hadn't because other pioneers hadn't relied on their pet dogs. They had real people to help them.¹³⁵

Emotional feelings are realised at a physical level

All the authors in this study use this technique. Not only does it present a more vivid picture to the child-reader, it also prevents the story from being slowed down by any wordy self-analysis of emotions. It was a particularly useful device for Kevin, when he panics, almost realising for the first time that he might not succeed, when he meets Alice's grandfather.

An extension of using physical feelings for emotional distress is to focus on something wholly unconnected at a time of crisis.

Ceilings.

Kevin had never given them much thought before now. Or wondered why ceiling designers bothered putting swirly patterns on them. But now, staring up from his bed, he did. It was to give you something to look at when you'd decided never to leave your room again for the entire rest of your life.¹³⁶

Alice

Alice is a very important character. Appearing as Kevin's antagonist, a voice of cold reason to his sunny optimism, she nevertheless admires him for his sense of trying to put things right, of rebelling against the illness. Despite her trying to warn him off, she helps him, trying to lessen the impact on Gran and on him of his escape plan.

However, it is only at the end that we realise she too was the same about her grandfather, desperate to stop the passage of the illness and equally resentful of those who seemed to just let it happen. That she confides this to Kevin at the end, where he is at his own epiphany, defines her as a character and intensifies both the hopelessness of his task and his resolve never to give up on Gran as someone he loves.

PROSE influences in *The Granny Plan*

Sentence level

The staccato sentence style and spaced layout used by Gleitzman and Smith are used in *The Granny Plan*.

Exaggeration

Again, all the authors in this study use exaggeration. It always enlivens prose:

"Spending time with the person with Alzheimer's is very important," he read.

"Share simple tasks. Fold laundry."

Kevin had a vision of the laundry at Rosewell. Thirty old people's socks, tights, sheets, towels and underpants rose up before him, like an indoor snow slope. He mentally ruled it out. It might help Gran's Alzheimer's, but that wouldn't be much use when her arms fell off.¹³⁷

and is particularly useful where a child's skewed perception of the adult world is concerned:

*He looked at the doctor's glum mouth and saggy eyes and realised that the problem with doctors was that by the time they had qualified they had already turned into gloomy grown ups.*¹³⁸

Metaphors and Similes

Metaphors, which this study shows to be particularly well used by Johnson, are used throughout *The Granny Plan*. The more outlandish, the better:

*Projects and Kevin went together like sprouts and custard.*¹³⁹

*... no-one had explained why Hannah looked like a candyfloss-coloured Yeti.*¹⁴⁰

Closely related, word-pictures, used to great effect by both Johnson and Cassidy offer a way of quickly painting a character portrait:

*Kevin twisted round to see a tall, reedy girl of about fifteen, completely dressed in black. Her face was powdered white and she'd outlined her dark eyes, all the way around, with black eye shadow.*¹⁴¹

Sarcasm features in the humour of older children and so in *The Granny Plan*, it came naturally to Hannah and Alice, who use it to humorous effect:

"How could you be so stupid, Kevin?" said Mum.

*"Practise," offered Hannah, walking through from the kitchen, admiring her freshly painted pink nails.*¹⁴²

and

Alice's face looked as hard as a statue's in the grey light of the room.

"Kevin, why do you think Rosewell's got more locks than the Bank of England?"

"It's not because it's stuffed with gold bars, is it?"¹⁴³

Symbolism

Finally symbolism makes an appearance for the more perceptive reader.

The setting of the book in autumn time, hinted at by the conkers lying around, the dark nights and the reference to Hallowe'en were also deliberate, in suggesting a closing down, not only of the year. This is apparent back at Gran's old house, when Kevin looks out into the garden:

Nothing was there anymore. The whole garden seemed tinged grey with autumn and drippy with rain, empty apart from Alice who was wandering around the lawn, her black skirt snagging on the last of the pale yellow rose bushes.¹⁴⁴

This element of abandonment and endings is also present at Rosewell, when Kevin passes a poster on one of its walls showing a broken-down pier stretching away into black water.

IX

CONCLUSION

This study set out to look at why we laugh, what makes us laugh and why it helps us to laugh. It began with considering the current psychological models of humour, both adult and child, and concluded that Wolfenstein's affective-mastery model came closest to explaining why humour and distress can be so closely linked and particularly used in literature. The mechanics of humour were also studied, with a view to seeing their relevance in the work of the four authors studied.

Gleitzman, Johnson, Cassidy and Smith were interviewed and presented differing opinions on why humour was helpful to children facing problems. Gleitzman saw humour as part of imagination, which was a weapon against problems. Johnson saw it as bringing a sense of proportion, Cassidy repeated this idea of balance whilst Smith saw it as something to defuse a problem.

A number of writerly techniques were studied, together with a look at how the writers' work had influenced my own.

From this study, I would conclude that humour helps children by undermining the anxiety created by a problem through allowing laughter into the dark place that worry has created. In keeping with Wolfenstein's model, humour appears to show children that they can effect some degree of mastery over the problem, and in accord with Gleitzman, that the problem will not crush them. Seeing a fictional character engage with a problem, from their comic perspective, effects a degree of separation for the

reader, a joke-façade, which allows empathy with the problem, but humour at the character's attempts to solve it. This puts the problem in proportion and offers the balance needed. Within the stories serious messages appear and one of these is that not solving the problem is a possibility:

- Gleitzman's Colin must ultimately accept that his brother will die;
- Both of Johnson's characters, Archie and Louis, end up in helping the helper who sought to put everything right for him;
- Cassidy's characters live through a problem only to arrive back at the same place but refreshed with hope and new wisdom;
- Smith's Julian cherishes the wisdom his grandmother shared with him but must face up to her death.

On a practical and writerly level, this study has left me feeling better equipped to continue writing humorous stories for children, which address serious points. Having been a rather "ivory-tower" writer, my forays into the commercial world of publishing were both a shock and a disappointment, but I do feel that I can turn what I have learned to my advantage. Using humour to help children cope is a worthy cause in itself. Tailoring this to the mores of the publishing world presents a fresh challenge.

Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place.

Mark Twain¹⁴⁵

X

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XI

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XII
APPENDICES

Appendix (i)

“Comedy doctors”

Booth Hall Children’s Hospital

Theodora Children’s Trust Clowns

Robert Holden’s Happiness Project

Dr Madan Kataria’s Laughter Yoga

MedEquip4Kids

the charity that helps children in and out of hospital

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Schools

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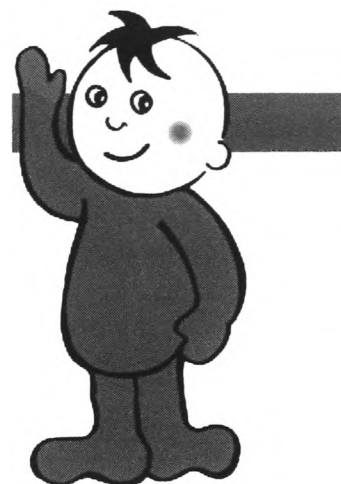
Corporate

- **Ward 6**
- 15 Folding mattresses £1,470
- 4 Wheelchairs £658
- **Ward 15**
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- New carpet £4,681



2003/04

- **Ward 6** 2 Sandringham chairs £354
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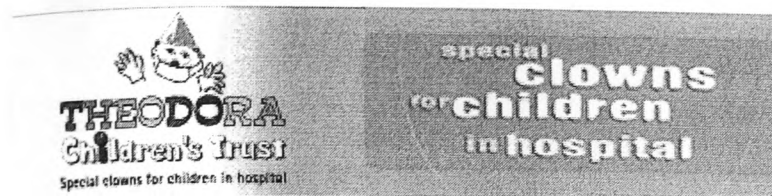
charity made easy
justgiving

Projects

Arrowe Park Hospital

Total raised

Current Project



Our Goals
Some History
Our Activities
Training
Hospitals & Institutions
A Concept Without Borders
Structure & Administration
Testimonials
Press Area
News and Events
Our Partners
Finance and Accounts
Donations & Articles for sale
Partnerships

Since 1994 Theodora Children's Trust has brought laughter, fun and magic to hospitalised children in the UK. Our clown doctors who are specially trained to work in the hospital environment, visit 8 hospitals on a weekly basis and 2 specialized institutions on a monthly basis. They are a welcome distraction from the difficult situations the children and their families face in hospital and their regular visits can have a positive impact on the children's recovery and rehabilitation. Our 7 specially trained clown doctors visit around 21,000 children and their families each year, we are currently training 8 new clown doctors and we will start working in a new hospital at the beginning of 2006.



Our " clown doctors " are active in 10 hospitals

Events

Our thanks to Smollensky's for supporting Theodora Children's Trust again this year



- Our Goals
- Some History
- Our Activities
- Training
- Hospitals & Institutions
- A Concept Without Borders
- Structure & Administration
- Testimonials
- Press Area
- News and Events
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Some history

In April 1994, the Swiss Theodora Foundation introduced two clown doctors to Gt Ormond Street Hospital, where they visited two days a week. By 1995 they had worked with 4,000 children and in 1996, when the clown doctors also started at Guy's & St Thomas' Hospitals, the UK charity, Theodora Children's Trust was set up to further expand this work.

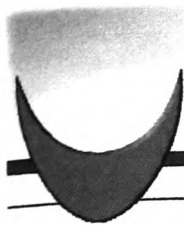
This programme was the first of its kind to be introduced to the UK, and is still the only such programme operating in England and Wales.

In 2000, the Trust began to function in earnest: a full-scale training programme has been developed with King's College London, two more clown doctors started visiting children at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge in July 2000, and in September 2001 at the Manchester Children's Hospitals. In July 2002 clown doctors began working at Southampton General Hospital and at Royal Alexandra Hospital for Sick Children in Brighton, and in November 2002 monthly visits started at the National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy in Lingfield, Surrey.

In September 2005 we started visiting children in The Children's Trust, Tadworth and in October 2005 clown doctors began visiting children at the Sheffield Children's Hospital.

Now, with a team of 12 trained Theodora clown doctors, we are visiting more than 26,000 children and their families every year.

Theodora Children's Trust - 40 Pentonville Road - London N1 9HF - UK
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 E-mail: theodora.uk@theodora.org



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- Media Headlines



Robert Holden

Our Story

The Happiness Project is a remarkable success-story that continues to unfold day by day. The cast of The Happiness Project includes top psychologists, life coaches, business leaders, spiritual ministers, leading physicians, great musicians, actors and poets – all of whom are fired with a passion to serve and inspire. Formed in 1996, we are rapidly approaching our tenth year in existence. A big thank you to everyone who has participated in our growth.



Ben Renshaw

The Happiness Project became a household name in August 1996 when the BBC broadcasted a 40 minute QED documentary, *How to be Happy*. Five million viewers watched participants make rapid breakthroughs on our unique training programme. The results, as verified by independent QED scientists, were truly remarkable. *How to be Happy* has since been shown in 16 countries to over 30 million viewers.



Avril Carson

Since 1996, The Happiness Project has pioneered one of the most exciting and effective models of learning and development. We use a unique synthesis of positive psychology and success intelligence principles to create training events that are deeply transformative and rewarding. Our seminars are attended by dedicated people who aspire to greater happiness and success in their life, work and relationships.

Public Diary

Every year we run a popular public programme of events in UK and Europe. Our signature event is the eight week course called *Happiness NOW* - as featured in the BBC QED documentary. Other public courses include: Positivity, Coaching Happiness, Success Intelligence, Positive Relationships and Spiritual Renewal. Click on [Diary](#) for further information for 2004. In past years, we have also worked with respected leaders like, Deepak Chopra MD, Patch Adams MD, Susan Jeffers PhD, Wayne Dyer PhD, Chuck and Lency Spezzano, Paul McKenna and others.

Business Masterclasses

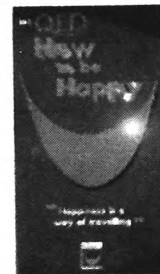
Our *Success Intelligence Series* of masterclasses and coaching programmes has won us international acclaim. We have designed and delivered presentations to over 100 global businesses on success intelligence, coaching success, liberating talent and managing change. Our chief clients include the BBC (5 yrs), British Telecom (7 yrs), The Body Shop (3 yrs), BAE Systems (3 years) and also The Football Association, Sony Corporation, Marriott Hotels, Rolls Royce, and Shell Plc. We also coach 1 to 1 the senior managers of many Fortune 500 companies.

Health Seminars

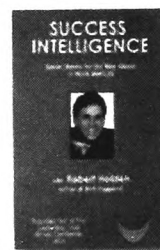
Over 30,000 doctors, psychologists, therapists and coaches have attended one of our presentations on positive psychology and well-being. We have run training courses in many hospitals including Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and have also worked closely with the NHS, BUPA and Boots Plc on major well-being projects. We have also given keynote addresses at health conferences for GP Forum, MIND, Cancer Care, Macmillan Nurses, The National Association of Hospice Workers, the European Mental Health Association and The Bristol Cancer Centre.

Conference Keynotes

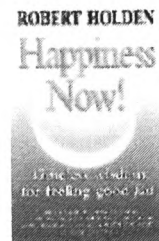
Robert Holden, Ben Renshaw and Avril Carson have presented hundreds of conference keynotes. We have an excellent reputation for delivering lively presentations that are entertaining, relevant and inspirational. We have presented conference keynotes for the global consultancy group Accenture, The Leadership Trust, the Work Foundation, the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development, the NHS Information Authority, the Young President's Organization, the International Stress Management Association, Group 4, Hewlett Packard, and many more.



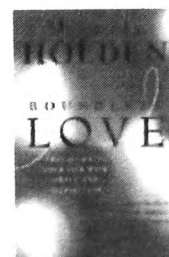
QED BBC TV Documentary



Success Intelligence VHS



Happiness Now!



Boundless Love

Higher Education

We have given presentations to many universities, colleges and schools, including Oxford University, Cambridge University, Birmingham University and Harrow School and Sure Start. Our "Confidence = Capacity" programme seeks to build a new vision and purpose for education. Our "PRO-TEEN" courses for teenagers, developed by Ben Renshaw, has also won rave reviews.

Sweet Charity

We have given training and support to many brilliant causes, including The Children's Society, RNIB, Home Start, Oxfam and Comic Relief. Every year we give bursaries on our training programmes to professionals working in charity organisations. We also give away hundreds of our books and tapes to many great causes. In 2004, we have given £25,000 of our products to The Prism Project – a personal development programme for people in prison. We also sponsor the Siddhartha School in Bodhgaya, India.

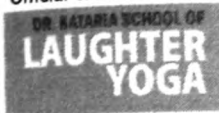
Media Headlines

We are fast approaching 5,000 TV, radio and newspaper features worldwide. Our media features include two TV documentaries, and also interviews for: **LBC Michael Parkinson**, Sky Selina Scott, **BBC Ester Rantzen**, BBC Tomorrows World, **BBC Newsnight**, Channel 4 Perfect Match, **ITV South Bank Show**, ITV Richard and Judy, **BBC 4 All in the Mind** and **Radio Steve Wright**, ITN News at 10, **The Financial Times**, Cosmopolitan, and much more! Robert and Ben are often asked to be the spokesperson for national campaigns on well-being sponsored by groups like BT, Kodak, Proctor & Gamble and BUPA.

This site has received 1,540,889 visits since 8/1/2002. Mail : Two Birches, The Harris Estate, Laleham Reach, Chertsey, Surrey, KT16 8RP Tel : 0845 430 9236

Laughter Yoga : Explains the various Healing Powers of Laughter and offers Yoga Meditation Retreat and Spiritual Retreats.

Official Website Of The



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- » photos - videos
- » inspiration - fun
- » Dr Kataria's Diary
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Dr Madan & Madhuri Kataria
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All are welcome to attend and learn more about laughter yoga.

EUROPE: Mallorca Spain 20-21 October

SEE THE VIDEOS

Check out Channel Laughter Yoga on YouTube.com to get a good overview of what laughter yoga's all about. You can subscribe to be notified of new videos. Watch now.

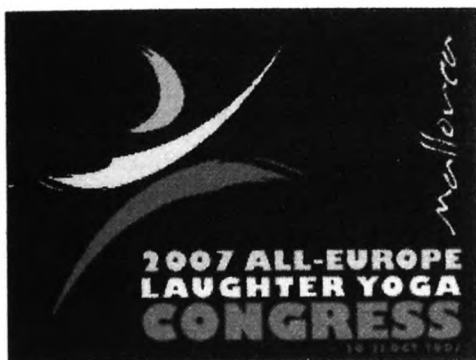
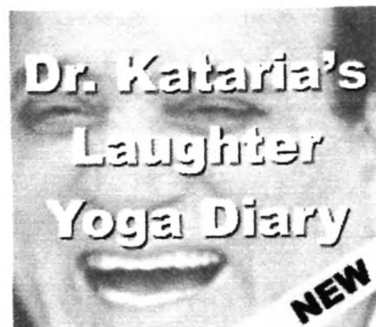


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EUROPE: Mallorca Spain 15-19 October

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We are looking for a webmaster/mistress for the new website to work in Mumbai India. Details here.



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Help the Laughter Yoga Foundation support laughter research & development and bring laughter where it is needed the most..

Laughter is the Best Medicine Humans were designed to laugh. Laughter is nature's stressbuster. It lifts our spirits with a happy high that makes us feel good and improves our behavior towards others.

Just a few generations ago happy healthy humans spent 20 minutes a day or more in laughter. Now adult daily laughtime is down to 5 minutes or less in many countries. This is one of the worst aspects of 'modern life'.

Laugh yourself healthy We all know that laughter

makes us feel good. A regular 20 minute laughter session can have a profound impact on our health and wellbeing. Laughter is gentle exercise. It fill your lungs and body with oxygen, deep-clears your breathing passages and exercises your lungs. This is really important for people who don't get regular aerobic exercise.

When we laugh our bodies release a cocktail of hormones & chemicals that have startling positive effects on our system. Stress is reduced, blood pressure drops, depression is lifted, your immune system is boosted & more. Western science is just starting to discover the great effects of laughter.

Why Laughter Yoga? Eleven years ago Dr Madan Kataria, an Indian doctor and student of Yoga was writing a paper for a medical journal titled 'Laughter is the best medicine'.

Convinced of the medical benefits of laughter and Yogic breathing exercises, Doctor Kataria was searching for a way to bring these benefits to modern man. You can't prescribe 20 minutes of laughter a day, and for best effect a range of different types of laughter should be combined.

In a flash of inspiration Laughter Yoga was born. Thanks to Doctor Kataria, countless people all over the world today enjoy the benefits of a daily dose of laughter practicing Laughter Yoga at laughter clubs or at their workplace.

Anyone can laugh without reason Laughter Yoga combines laughter exercises and yoga breathing to give you the health benefits of hearty laughter.

Laughter exercises almost always lead to real laughter, especially when practiced in a group.

Laughter Yoga is practiced around the world at laughter clubs, laughter studios, in the workplace and in many specialized applications including schools, government departments, military & police, hospitals & hospice and more. There are more than 5000 laughter clubs and studios in more than 50 countries with new venues opening daily.

Laughter Yoga International provides laughter yoga trainings for LY leaders and LY teachers. We also provide LY retreats and LY workshops for business. Dr Kataria is a noted speaker

Laughter Yoga has been featured on most major networks including CNN, ABC, BBC, NHK Japan, Channel 7 & 9 Australia, ZDF Germany and print publications including TIME Magazine, National Geographic, New York Times, London Times, LA Times, The Guardian, Wall Street Journals and many more.

LAUGHTER YOGA FOUNDATION

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Dr Madan Kataria Courses & Conferences 2007

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Dr Madan Kataria's Online Diary

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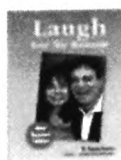


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Appendix (ii)

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PenguinBooks March 12, 2008


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Morris Gleitzman

One of Australia's, and now the world's, best-known and loved children's authors, Morris Gleitzman tackles tough subjects in a funny and offbeat way. He has never set out to write "issues books" and says that his writing is as much for himself as for his readers.



THE BASICS

Born: Sleaford, Lincolnshire, January 9th 1953

Jobs: Paperboy, Shelf-Stacker, Department Store Santa Claus, Frozen Chicken Defroster, Assistant to Fashion Designer, Rolling-Stock Unhooker in a Sugar Mill, TV Comedy Writer, Magazine Columnist

Lives: Victoria

First Book: The Other Facts of Life, 1985

THE BOOKS

When the Gleitzman family left England for Australia, 16 year-old Morris had already dropped out of school to live the hippie dream. Once in Sydney, he embarked on a series of "fairly menial things" (see above) before cramming his A-level equivalents into a year and gaining a degree in Professional Writing at Canberra College of Advanced Education. He joined ABC TV as a promotions writer, but soon began writing comedy scripts for the top-rated Norman Gunston Show. Morris became one of Australia's best known TV writers and went on to write a number of feature films and TV screenplays. These included *The Other Facts of Life*, originally written as a film for the Children's Television Foundation. When Morris decided to write a novel version of this, his publishing career began. The cross-fertilisation between scripts and novels continued (in reverse) with Morris' second novel *Two Weeks With The Queen*. This was adapted into a play and successfully staged around the world (in 1995, Alan Ayckbourn directed the London production at the National Theatre). With two novels in print, Morris says "I began to see myself as an author." Already, the hallmarks of a Gleitzman novel were in place - tough subjects presented in a funny and offbeat way. Those characteristics run through all of Gleitzman's work, from *Misery Guts* and *Second Childhood*, to *Bumface* and *Wicked!* - the multi-part novel Morris wrote jointly with Australia's other top children's author Paul Jennings. The prolific Mr Gleitzman has also become one of Australia's best-known columnists, writing firstly TV reviews and then a semi-autobiographical column for the Sydney Morning Herald; UK readers have enjoyed a taste of these writings in *Young Telegraph*.

WHAT HE SAYS...

"My stories are about relationships between kids and adults marked by love, conflict and anxiety. The characters reflect different parts of my own self. I was an anxious younger person, given to panic attacks. Writing comic scripts helped, but it was when I allowed myself to speak through my 11 and 12 year-old characters that I felt as though I had discovered a process that made me feel good about life."

"My books are co-written by me the adult and me the child and, as always happens between adults and children, there is a conflict there and my books are very much the product of that conflict."

"Perhaps (the) combination of serious subject and sadness and humour may come from the fact that I'm looking for the moment that is the biggest problem in the character's life."

"I'm interested in exploring a heroism that's about perseverance, not escaping or denial or bitterness or bigotry. It's the heroism of staying optimistic and continuing to struggle. Heroism for me is striving to overcome problems in the knowledge that they will never be overcome."

"I can't remember much of my childhood. Just the best bits (books, corned beef and scoring goals) and the worst bits (sties, rhubarb and a stiff hamster)."

"I read every book I could get my hands on. Classics, westerns, Enid Blyton, soccer star biographies, Richmal Crompton's *Just William* series (my favourites) and recipe books (particularly the corned beef sections)."

"My idea of a top day would be listening to Van Morrison in a forest halfway up a mountain with a glass of red wine in one hand and a plate of oysters in the other and 5000 paper clips in my rucksack."

"Sometimes I think dreams are stories trying to get out. I've often found that if I go to sleep thinking about a problem I'm having with a story I'm trying to write, I'll wake up in the morning with the problem solved."

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT MORRIS GLEITZMAN...

"A master of the tragicomic novel." **Books For Keeps**

"Morris Gleitzman has written some of the best children's books around." **Young Telegraph**

"Joyfully entertaining... this is Gleitzman's best yet." **TES** on *Bumface*

"This is one of the funniest, most original novels young people over 10 are ever likely to encounter." **Tony Bradman, Daily Telegraph**

"Boys coping is a rare enough theme, Morris Gleitzman treats it with intelligent and tender insight." **Julia Eccleshare, The Guardian** on *Bumface*

"Morris Gleitzman's latest is a winner... *Bumface* is the most funny, truthful and affecting book I've read for some time. I began it with delight and finished it laughing aloud. It's a joy." **Phillip Pullman, The Guardian**

"Funny and poignant at the same time... its opening scene deserves to become an instant classic." **Nick Tucker, The Independent** on *Bumface*

"Behind the slapstick humour, lots of profound and important issues are also explored." **Northern Echo** on *The Other Facts of Life*

"Very funny." **Sainsbury's The Magazine** on *The Other Facts of Life*

"A gem of a book, very Australian (embarrassingly un-British) in its wide-open emotions." **The Guardian** on *Two Weeks With The Queen*

"An extraordinary read with a joyous ending of sorts." **The Listener** on *Two Weeks With The Queen*

"To write a funny book which includes a child dying of cancer and a youth of AIDS looks to be not only impossible but in dubious taste as well. Gleitzman shows otherwise." **The Times** on *Two Weeks With The Queen*

"Consistently amusing." **Junior Bookshelf** on *Worry Warts*

"Misery Guts is a thoroughly enjoyable read." **School Librarian**

"They zip along at breakneck speed, cliff-hanger following gobsmacking shock and on to the next cliff-hanger, leaving the reader breathless and wanting more of the same, please." **Publishing News** on the *Wicked!* series

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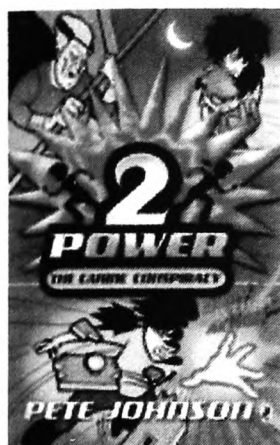
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HUMOUR TEEN FICTION ABOUT PETE

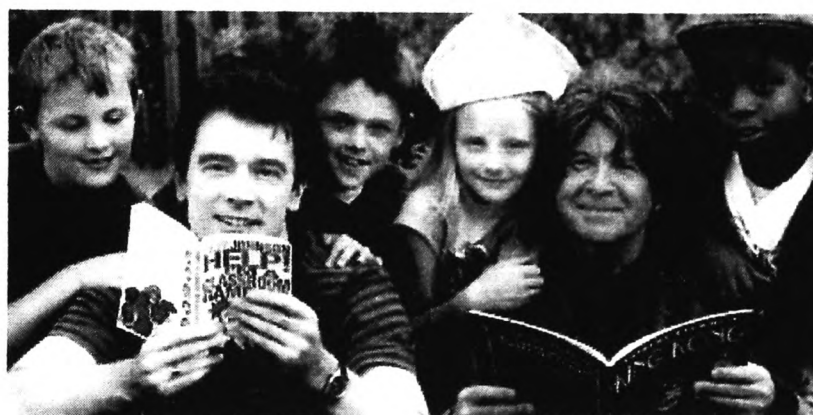
'THE BAD SPY'S GUIDE' SHORT LISTED FOR A TOP PRIZE

'The Bad Spy's Guide' has been short listed for **The Blue Peter Book Awards**. It is one of three books in **The Book I Couldn't Put Down** category. Pete says : 'This is one of the most eagerly awaited of all prize lists, so I am thrilled to be featured on it.' For more details, [click here](#).



'The Bad Spy's Guide' was described in The Sunday Express in its five star review as a 'book which grabs you from the first page. And Achuka described it as 'no ordinary teenage spy novel ... Johnson keeps readers edging ever closer, but never quite guessing the truth behind this twisting, turning story.'

'**HELP! I'M A CLASSROOM GAMBLER**' named as **CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR**



Pete Johnson's comedy romp, 'Help! I'm a Classroom Gambler' has won Leicester's Children's Book of the Year Award. The original long list of twenty books, the shortlist of five books and the winner was decided entirely by children across Leicester.

Leicester librarians described this shortlist as the strongest yet - and Pete (*pictured above with fellow author Anthony Browne and fans, courtesy of Leicester Mercury*) was delighted to win this prestigious award. He also liked the way children expressed their thoughts about the five shortlisted books through dance, music and drama at the ceremony.

Pete says: 'It was brilliant to see children reading extracts from Help! I'm a Classroom Gambler as well as dramatising Twitchy's entrance, performing a puppet show and even a fantastic Gambler rap.

'Help! I'm a Classroom Gambler has also been shortlisted for The Sheffield Children's Book Award. Pete is 'thrilled' by this news. In 2005 his novel,

Avenger won the Sheffield Award Prize (shorter novel award) but this is the first time one of Pete's comedies has been shortlisted for this prize. Thousands of children will now read all the nominated books and the winning book will be announced at a ceremony on November 27th.

Pete is delighted that his book has been selected for this highly prestigious shortlist. He says: "Comedies often have to struggle to gain critical recognition, so this is really exciting."

Five Stars for 'The Bad Spy's Guide'

Ten year old Caitlin Molloy has selected **The Bad Spy's Guide** to review in *The Sunday Express* (29th July) She writes: 'This book grabs you from the first page and it's really funny. I think anyone aged seven or over would love it.' She gives it 5 Stars *****



The Sunday Express adds: 'We loved this book too; it would make a great holiday read.'

STOP PRESS: 'Help I'm a Classroom Gambler' on Government's list of recommended books for boys

Alan Johnson, the Education Secretary, in conjunction with the Library Association, has compiled a list of the best books for boys, including **Help, I'm a Classroom Gambler**, possibly Pete Johnson's cheekiest, funniest book. Other books on the list range from Shane to Jeremy Clarkson's autobiography.

FREE DOWNLOADS ABOUT THE HERO GAME

Of all Pete Johnson's books, the most discussed is **The Hero Game**, in which Charlie discovers a dark secret about his granddad. Can you do something awful and still be a hero? Many schools are reading this book. And now you can gain a full scheme of work for The Hero Game and an interview with Pete Johnson on www.harcourt.co.uk/literature or call 01865 888080. **The Hero Game** is available from Puffin and also in the New Windmills Series (Heinemann) with a full range of follow-up activities.

WELCOME TO THE OFFICIAL PETE JOHNSON WEBSITE!

Pete Johnson's fiction provides a heady cocktail of 'compulsive readability' (*The Times*) and 'emotional truth' (*The Bookseller*). Inspired by Dodie Smith (they corresponded for over ten years), Pete began writing novels for teenagers that 'beg to be read and talked about' (*Glasgow Herald*) including **The Cool Boffin**, **Ten Hours to Live**, **The Protectors** and, most recently, the 'wickedly funny' (*Mail on Sunday*) **Faking It**, a comedy about a boy who can't get a girlfriend so invents an imaginary one.

He has also written some award-winning novels for younger readers, including **The Ghost Dog**, **The Creeper**, **Rescuing Dad**, and **Traitor**, which was short listed for Askews Torchlight Award and highly commended for the Sheffield Children's Book Award. His comedy **How to Train your Parents** 'should be compulsive reading for parents as well as children.' (Wendy Cooling, *The Bookseller*). It has become a best seller.

The thought-provoking **Avenger** won the West Sussex Children's Book of the Year Award and, most recently, Best Shorter Novel in the 2005 Sheffield Children's Book Awards.

His latest titles are **Trust Me, I'm a Troublemaker**, winner of the Calderdale Children's Book of the Year Award, **The Hero Game**, his first book published with an historical



theme, [Help! I'm a Classroom Gambler](#), and [The Ex-Files](#).

Pete Johnson lives in St Albans, England. He is a movie fan - both of current films and British and American films from the 1940s and 1950s. He has been a film critic on BBC Radio One, as well as a film extra and teacher of English and Drama. He collects signed books, of which he has several hundred.

[Find out more in [About Pete](#)]

[Find out here](#) how many of Pete's books are being studied in schools and libraries. Or [click here](#) for information about Pete's visits and how to arrange one.

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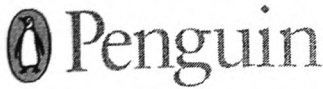
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Cathy Cassidy



Cathy Cassidy wrote and illustrated her first book at 8 years old for her little brother and has been writing and drawing ever since. Cathy has worked as an editor on Jackie magazine, a teacher and as agony aunt on Shout Magazine. She lives in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland with her husband, 2 young children, 3 cats, 2 rabbits and a mad hairy lurcher called Kelpie. Lucky Star is her fifth book for Puffin, following the success of Dizzy, Indigo Blue, Driftwood and Scarlett. You can visit Cathy's website at http://www.cathycassidy.com.

WHAT SHE SAYS...

'I think I've always loved books and as soon as I could write was scribbling stories. I got told off early in primary school for writing an eight page story - I think it was because my handwriting was so awful! When I was thirteen I was given a second-hand typewriter and began to bash out short stories for my favourite teen magazine. I must have sent dozens off, and I got dozens of very polite, encouraging rejections in return!'

ADVICE...

'Don't listen to the people who say you can't do it - if you want to do something badly enough, you can. When I was fifteen, I was asked in a French Oral exam what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said I wanted to be a writer and an artist. The examiner laughed out loud. Don't listen to negative people - go for your dreams!'

Live life to the full - have adventures, have fun, be happy, be sad. Never be afraid of your feelings. Write about what you care about, what moves you - put your feelings into your work.

Read like crazy, and write - every day, if you can. These are the best ways to learn your trade. Hopefully, one day other people will be reading your work!'

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Author Information

Emily Smith

Emily Smith was born in London and studied at Cambridge. Emily is a qualified lawyer however, after graduating, Emily worked in the newspaper industry for nine years. Her last full time work in this area was as a sub-editor for the Windsor/Slough Express series.



Emily's first book, *The Good Manners Prize*, was published by Collins Educational in 1996. However, her first real recognition came with winning the *Smarties Silver Award* for *Astrid the Au Pair from Outer Space* (Transworld). Emily says that winning the prize was completely unexpected, "I was so taken aback I even forgot to grab the free Smarties!"

Then in 2001 she won the *Smarties Gold Award* with *The Shrimp* (Random House Children's Books). Emily's first book for Orchard, **What Howls at the Moon in Frilly Knickers?**, is an emotional roller coaster of a read as Julian enlists the help of his friends to help him come to terms with his grandmother's terminal illness. Her latest book, **When Mum Threw Out the Telly** is a humorous tale about Jeff, a true telly-addict, who discovers there is more to life than TV.

Emily's latest title for Orchard is **The Stain on the Stone**. Bicycles are being stolen all over Oxford and when Jack Young's brand new bike is stolen he is determined to catch the thief. But then another mystery develops - who is writing sinister messages in the walls of the college? Now Jack has two mysteries to solve...

Emily lives in Oxfordshire. She is married with three children and says she has no hobbies or frilly knickers!

"Emily Smith writes sensitively about coping with life." - The School Librarian

Bibliography

The Stain on the Stone (May 07)
What Howls at the Moon in Frilly Knickers?
When Mum Threw Out the Telly

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Appendix (iii)

Alzheimer's report

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 - ✦ Useful websites
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- ✦ Working with people with dementia
- ✦ Research
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About the Alzheimer's Society

- ✦ News & campaigns
- ✦ About our work
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Facts about dementia Alzheimer's Society Dementia care and research

Dementia UK

In February 2007 the Alzheimer's Society published a major study on the social and economic impact of dementia in the UK.

The research, commissioned through King's College London and the London School of Economics provides the most detailed and robust picture to date of prevalence and economic impact of dementia in the UK.

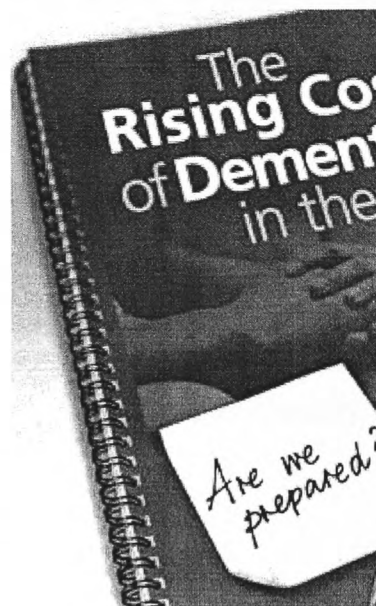
The report shows that as the UK's population ages the number of people with dementia will grow substantially. It also shows that dementia costs the UK £17 billion a year.

What does the report say?

- There are currently 700,000 people with dementia in the UK
- There are currently 15,000 younger people with dementia in the UK likely to be a major underestimate by up to three times because of the data relies on referrals to services
- There are over 11,500 people with dementia from black and minority ethnic groups in the UK
- There will be over a million people with dementia by 2025
- Two thirds of people with dementia are women
- The proportion of people with dementia doubles for every 5 year age group. One third of people over 95 have dementia
- 60,000 deaths a year are directly attributable to dementia. Delaying onset of dementia by 5 years would reduce deaths directly attributable to dementia by 30,000 a year
- The financial cost of dementia to the UK is over £17 billion a year
- Family carers of people with dementia save the UK over £6 billion
- 64% of people living in care homes have a form of dementia
- Two thirds of people with dementia live in the community while or live in a care home

What is the Alzheimer's Society calling for?

- Dementia to be made a national health and social care priority
- A substantial increase in publicly






- funded dementia research
- Improvement in dementia care skills
- Development of community based support
- Improved carer support
- A national debate on who pays for care
- Development of comprehensive integrated dementia care models



Carers and campaigners drew Gordon Brown personally down a copy of the Dementia UK report to the Treasury

More information

-  Download summary of the report (PDF file)
-  Download full report (PDF file)
-  Northern Ireland supplement(PDF file)
- Press coverage of Dementia UK
- Local statistics - England (Excel file 377Kb)
- Local statistics - Northern Ireland (Excel file 62Kb)
- Local statistics - Wales (Excel file 63Kb)
- Local statistics - Scotland (Excel file 55Kb)

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Alzheimer's Society

Appendix (iv)

A note on the publishing progress of “The Granny Plan”

Agents’ letters and a future plan

The first agents I sent *The Granny Plan* to were Pollingers in London. They are Philip Gross's agent and as my tutor, he felt they might be interested in looking at the manuscript. The response, from Lesley Pollinger, was initially very exciting:

Dear Julia

I made a couple of quiet hours in my week to settle down and read and thoroughly enjoy THE GRANNY PLAN.

There's some really good writing here. It flows nicely, the storyline is considered and nicely planned out, and I just love Kevin, and Skanker. And I mean LOVE them! All the characters are well rounded and believable, as is the plot. I think you've overcome the difficulties a 10 year old character might encounter in this protective PC world terribly well.

I really would like to read more stories about Kevin, Skanker and his family. Have you thought of using these characters again at this stage?

Now I have some 'however's' of course. I think the story may be rather long for the intended readership, and I think the title is a no-no (we once represented a story called The GRANNY HEIST which was also published as THE GRANNYNAP, and is not a dissimilar tale – it was by Ann Ruffell – so we've some experience here). I think your book is going to need more of a counter-balance to the very sad situation. This may be with more lighter moments, scenes from school, with Kevin's so called mates, or at home. I'll be thinking on about that. I began to find the Alzheimer's point becoming a little laboured, and whilst we have a male protagonist, I think in many ways it's quite a girly interest book. Your book is ultimately a fairly sad tale, (it made one of our Readers' cry – the one who said she hadn't seen your book and whose Reader's Report has suddenly materialised from June...) and whilst it raises important realistic issues and expectations, I think publishers and readers will not ultimately enjoy what at present could be labelled an 'issue' book. There's definitely important room for a 'my grandparent is in a home' storyline, but I think we should try to make it lighter in some aspects, and I think we can do this without losing your intentions. I'm going to chat with Joanna Devereux our children's books expert, and ask her to read this, and then she and I will discuss and get back to you with our thoughts.

I would be very interested to know more about you, and what else you may be writing or wishing to write. THE GRANNY PLAN is very promising work.

Best
Lesley
lesley pollinger
managing director
pollinger limited
authors' agents

and this optimism was reflected in the response of their children's agent, Joanna

Devereux:

Dear Julia

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this and felt quite moved at the end of the story. Kevin's and Skanker are very likeable characters and this is a great attempt at a first novel.

I totally agree with Lesley's comments. The Alzheimers theme is rather laboured and dominates the novel in a way which may put off publishers. Firstly you need a strong sub-plot, certainly something going on at school involving the other children is a good idea and if it links in with the main plot in some way (this could be Kevin's personal development throughout the story) all the better. I wondered if you could introduce a girl character (perhaps Alice's sister?) in his class at school in order to increase the interest for the girl reader as this will appeal primarily to a female audience. They could hate each other to start with but realise they had things in common. I also wondered if the father should make an appearance? Secondly, you need to make the story more humorous and light-hearted and handle the Alzheimers subject in a more subtle manner – couldn't this all be about making Granny better rather than labouring the Alzheimers point? Of course, it will be about Alzheimers but you don't have to put an actual name to it. Issues book that work, such as those by Jacqueline Wilson, work because they are, above all, a really entertaining read with discussion points. You're gone some way to achieving this but not completely.

You need to cut this down to around 25,000 words. Some parts are too lengthy and the action needs to move quicker. You don't need to over explain or dwell on areas that are rather mundane or repetitious. Think 'slick' and 'fast moving'. The age group for this novel is 10-12 so perhaps Kevin needs to be 11 or 12?

I do have a few other more minor comments. At times your scenarios feel a little contrived and don't quite ring true. I'm thinking of the model Kevin visits and the lady talking to ghosts. I love the old man of the bicycle though! Also be aware at all times of your audience, there were just a few times when I felt you were appealing to an adult audience and not the child. I also feel that the mother and sister need a little work. The sister, in particular, doesn't seem to have any redeeming characteristics or change at all throughout the novel. I think she could. She has chosen to hide away and ignore Granny's illness, which is what a lot of people

do, but she'll still miss her and be sad, even if that isn't revealed until the end. Also, Kevin is still her brother and I bet she'd rush to his rescue if he was in danger.

I hope these comments are helpful. The publishing market is incredibly tough so we do have to work hard at getting manuscripts as good as we can. I was interested to read about your other book ideas, it's good to see that you have plenty of other projects.

I do hope that you feel able to make these revisions. Do contact me if you'd like to discuss this further.

Best wishes,
Joanna

However, a subsequent visit to the agents indicated that a major reworking of the story was in order, which would involve removing Alice (as she was too old to interest 8-10 year olds) lightening up the Alzheimer', along with unwelcome suggestions such as 'Can't gran just be a bit dippy?'

I was disappointed that in this time of real issues stories for children covering abuse, drug addiction, even child-trafficking, that the reception of *The Granny Plan* was so tepid. But, what it did teach me, forcibly, is that publishing is very much a financial proposition, as well as an artistic one, and Pollinger's early response was echoed by several other interested agents. The cross-section of their letters, attached here, repeats the message: we like the writing, we like the characters, but the story's too gloomy for us.

What the agent response suggests is that for an issue story to be "carried" by comedy, the comedy needs to be the larger part of the story. Joanna Devereux's comments that Alzheimer's "dominates the novel" and that I need to "make the story more humorous and light-hearted" through, for example, sub-plots shows the agents' need for the book, primarily, to be marketable and appealing in a "feel-good" way.

To rewrite *The Granny Plan* along these lines would mean not being true to the original intention. Perhaps my mistake lay in writing an early novel with a topic so close to my heart. Looking at the books on the market covering issues realistically, I tend to feel that an established author might have been able to publish this book.

For these reasons I have decided to take on board the agents' advice and write a prequel to *The Granny Plan*. This will be the story of Dad's plan to remarry and its effect on the Hughes family. In this story Skanker will be a young puppy, more boisterous and uncontrollable than ever, and Kevin will, of course, want to put things right for his mother. The aim is to write a humorous story using the same, though younger characters, at a time when Gran is *compos mentis*. In this way Kevin and Skanker might build up a readership who would pursue their interest in them to *The Granny Plan*, possibly with a second book in between.

The Granny Plan

Julia Rosemary Wills

**A submission presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of Glamorgan/ Prifysgol Morgannwg
for the degree of Master of Philosophy**

March 2008

The Granny Plan

by Julia Wills

Chapter 1

“A project!” said Miss Munro, looking around the class brightly.

Kevin’s heart lurched.

Not another.

He remembered the last one.

The “Let’s Look at Wildlife” project when he’d brought in and lost Archie, his biggest and furriest house spider. Miss Munro had worn boots for a fortnight after that, even though it was the middle of summer.

Before that was the “Make Your Own Furniture” project which would have been all right if Dad had still been around to help him. Only he wasn’t, and instead Kevin had ended up chopping and sawing bits off his table until it was only big enough for Gustav the class goldfish.

He sighed.

Projects and Kevin went together like sprouts and custard.

“At the end of this week it’s half-term,” said Miss Munro, her smile widening, “and over your holiday, I’d like each one of you to adopt someone.”

Adopt someone?

He’d better tell Miss Munro about Skanker. Adopted people probably didn’t want to be mown down by a dribbly white boxer dog with a tongue rougher than a bag of thistles every day.

“Won’t they mind being adopted?” said David Riley, smirking. David Riley always smirked. Apart from when he scowled, which was usually the times when he was telling Kevin he’d pulp him.

“I don’t mean adopt in that sense,” said Miss Munro sharply. She started walking around the room. “I mean by helping them.”

Claire Philips waved her arm in the air.

“Who are we helping, Miss?”

“An old person that you know, Claire. I’d like each of you to make a difference to their life. Think about that carefully. A *difference* to their life.”

Kevin thought.

“You might talk to them about what they’ve done in the past,” Miss Munro went on, “or hobbies, families, that sort of thing. You might keep them company for a few hours. Or you might even do some shopping for them. Andrew?”

“What sort of shopping, Miss?”

Andrew’s mum worked in a supermarket. With all the discounts she got, he could do a mammoth shop for an old person and ratchet up a ton of project points.

“Anything they run out of really. Simple things, like milk or bread, maybe toilet rolls...”

David Riley sniggered.

“Who was that?” said Miss Munro, looking at Kevin. She began walking around the room again. “You have this week to think about your projects, so see me if you have any questions, and all half-term to do them. I’d like them in, finished, written up and proper, by the Monday we come back.”

Kevin felt his heart lift. This was a project he could do. He tipped his chair back against the wall, smiling.

And stopped.

Because everyone had gone quiet and he could feel Miss Munro's steely gaze boring into him. "Something funny, Kevin? Perhaps you'd like to share it with the rest of the class?"

Kevin shook his head, which was hard because his skin suddenly felt two sizes too small. Miss Munro took a step closer. "Only I'd really like to see you do well at this. Especially after your little chat with Mr Henderson last week. You do remember that, don't you?"

Remember?

How could he forget?

Mr Henderson, the headmaster, had glowered down at him, his prawn-pink peely forehead crinkling up in annoyance. After the incident with David Riley and the rice pudding and the earthworm, he said, the school had to think carefully about Kevin. If things didn't improve he would find himself going home at lunchtimes, which had sounded like good news to Kevin until Mr Henderson pointed out that of course Kevin's mum would have to be there too, since the school couldn't send him back to an empty house.

Just thinking about it made his stomach turn over. He sat properly on his chair and looked up at Miss Munro.

"This project is your last chance," she said sternly.

She was right. If Mum came home at lunchtimes she'd lose her job. Ever since

Dad'd left, it had been a struggle for her to earn enough. Jobless, they'd have no money and as Hannah told him, they'd be totally homeless. Meaning, she added, that they would end up under Green Bridge, with their Argos tent pitched on the mud bank, surrounded by toads and the wrecked supermarket trolleys that floated past in the water. Kevin didn't really think that part was true. That was just Hannah being Hannah, but since she'd promised that she would kill him first, slowly and painfully, he didn't want to risk finding out.

"It's OK, Miss Munro," he said, finally. "I already know who I'm going to do my project on."

**

"No way," said Mum, thumping the masher into the pan of potatoes.

"But Gran'd be brilliant," said Kevin. "She knows loads of interesting things."

"Did," said Mum, going red in the face.

"We could have a laugh, like we used to."

"Not anymore."

Skanker flopped heavily at Kevin's feet and sighed. He understood. He wanted to see Gran too. After all, Gran had taught him all his best footballing moves, ignoring everyone who said he was just a dog. Now there wasn't another dog in Weatherby who could dribble a ball better or nose-swipe it as accurately through the defender's legs.

"Maybe I could go shopping for her?" said Kevin.

Mum set the pan down on the draining board with a crash. Flecks of potato shot onto the floor and Kevin wondered if he should suggest buying the powdered stuff you added water to, because then there'd be less mess, until he heard Skanker slurping it up.

“You know she doesn’t need any shopping now,” said Mum tightly. “Rosewell does it all.”

Rosewell.

Mum always got upset when she talked about it, the old people’s home where they’d taken Gran. Rosewell was like a prison for old people, a prison with hanging baskets, but when Kevin said that, Mum just said he didn’t know what he was talking about, that it was the only safe place for Gran now, now that she kept forgetting things.

At first she had only forgotten small things, like which drawer she kept the spoons in or where she’d left her purse, but then she’d forgotten other things, like how you were supposed to change out of your nightie before you went shopping. When the manager of Sainsbury’s found her in her dressing gown and fluffy slippers, wrestling a turkey out of the freezer, he’d phoned the police and she’d ended up in Rosewell. Kevin thought that was totally unfair. After all, everybody forgot things sometimes. And anyway, they were talking about his gran.

“I’ve planned it all out,” said Kevin.

“Planned what, doofus?” said Hannah walking into the kitchen, dressed in a pink fluffy jumper and white jeans.

“My project,” said Kevin, “on Gran.”

Hannah flicked a sharp look at Mum as Kevin carried on.

“I can go up to Rosewell on the bus. I’ve got enough pocket money so I wouldn’t even need a lift. ”

“No means no, Kevin,” said Mum and stabbed a sausage from the frying pan.

“You’ll just have to choose someone else, love. Gran’s not well enough.”

Kevin's heart felt like the clay they'd used in pottery last week, heavy, wet and useless. It was totally unfair. Gran would be perfect for his project, whatever Mum said. He looked at Gran's photo on the shelf: chubby, shrieking with laughter, her curly white hair blowing backwards off her face, her eyes half-closed as the air gusted over her. It was taken on The Big One at Blackpool. Mum wouldn't go on it with him, but Gran would. Afterwards, she said it made her feel like an astronaut, except that they didn't have had to worry about holding on to their handbags. Kevin felt a prickle behind his eyes. He missed her. Even if she wasn't as well as she was then, she'd still help him get his project right, he knew she would. And more than that, she was the one old person he could make a difference to.

He looked back at Mum's face. One big frown. There was no point saying any more. Not at the moment, anyway.

**

After tea, Kevin started his list of project people who fitted Miss Munro's and Mum's requirements:

1. They were old
2. They weren't Gran.

Ten minutes later Mum was asleep on the sofa and his list was still empty.

Hannah, meanwhile, was upstairs having her nine-hundredth shower of the week. He knew because he could hear the water pounding and her thin waily singing coming through the floor, and besides, she'd left the box from her latest "Bubble Shop" buy on the kitchen table.

"Wild Mango" shower gel," Kevin read out to Skanker.

Skanker muttered in his sleep. He had a point. Any mango would be pretty wild if it ended up being lathered onto Hannah's face. Still, looking at the box gave Kevin an idea.

It was rubbish.

And tomorrow was bin day.

And on bin day Mr Williams, the old man who lived opposite, did his weekly good-neighbour turn of wheeling everyone's empty bins back up their drives.

He'd do.

Kevin wrote Mr Williams' name at the top of his notebook and felt a twinge of guilt about Gran. Maybe he could ask Mum again? She didn't look nearly so gloomy now, although it was hard to tell what with her being asleep. "*No means no, Kevin.*" He'd better try this first. He sighed and started a list of questions for Mr Williams.

What are your family like?

Do you have other hobbies apart from bin-rolling?

Do you need any toilet rolls?

**

The next afternoon Kevin lay on his bed, watching Mr Williams' house. Half an hour creaked past and Mr Williams didn't appear. Kevin felt a crick in his neck. He might die of boredom. At least then Mum could sue Miss Munro and afford the house. Except that Miss Munro would probably just say that Kevin hadn't been doing it right.

As per usual.

Another twenty minutes passed and Mr Williams still didn't appear. Kevin couldn't believe it: for the first time in four years, Mr Williams had chosen this

afternoon, this afternoon when Kevin had an important project to do and needed to talk to him, not to come out to put away the bins.

Kevin walked over to the window, Skanker padding behind him.

“Where is he?” said Kevin. Skanker thumped his chin onto the windowsill and sniffed. “The lady at number fourteen has already wheeled her bin in. And now number twenty-two are back. They’ll take theirs in too.”

Kevin paced the room. “What if he’s had an accident?” Skanker turned a nervous circle by the door. “Maybe at this very minute he’s lying injured on the carpet. We have to do something.”

He snatched Skanker’s lead from the end of the bed. They had to hurry. Besides there was bound to be double project points for life saving.

**

Kevin and Skanker raced up the path to the front door of Mr Williams’s house and Kevin jabbed at the bell.

No answer.

“You do know that eighty per cent of all accidents happen in the house, don’t you, Skanks?”

Statistics always made Skanker frown. Kevin pulled on his lead and they darted around the house, stopping to peer into the downstairs windows.

No one.

“He must have had the accident upstairs,” said Kevin, seriously.

He dropped the lead and checked his watch. Mum wouldn’t be home for another hour, so there was only one thing to do. He glanced quickly up and down the street and rolled Mr Williams’ wheelie bin up to the house. It was old and the lid was a bit springy,

but he clambered onto it anyway, wobbling, and grabbed hold of the drainpipe that ran up the side of the house, giving it a good tug. It seemed firm enough. He swung out and began to climb, shimmying up, pulling himself from one fixing to the next. Skanker started whining from the grass below.

“It’s OK,” gasped Kevin, between grabs. “I won’t fall on you. Promise.”

Level with the bedroom window now, he seized the sill with his left hand and swung his feet onto the top ridge of the window below. Just a little more edging across, a few more centimetres, and he would be able to see in. He tried not to think of the moss squelching up under his fingernails or the gooey slush dribbling down his arms or the way his muscles felt like over stretched bubble gum and finally peered into the front bedroom window.

Nothing.

No body.

Just a tidy room, with folded pyjamas on the bed.

He sighed with relief. A sparrow skittered along the guttering above him, peering at him with its black beady eyes.

“It’s all right, birdie,” said Kevin. “I think Mr Williams has just gone away.”

The little bird cheeped brightly and hopped further up the roof. Kevin began to relax. He could write this up in his project. After all, he had tried to help. It was hardly his fault if Mr Williams wasn’t there. He felt a surge of happiness and was just thinking of how Miss Munro would probably crack open a packet of sticky gold stars when she read this bit in his project when the drainpipe gave way and he peeled slowly backwards off the house.

**

It was smelly inside the wheelie bin.

There were snails in here, he knew, he'd seen them slithering round the rim, and he tried not to mind that one might have gone down the back of his T-shirt. Being a snail was probably quite dull after all.

He squeezed up through the smashed lid and looked out. Skanker was busy chasing an escaped biscuit wrapper around the garden.

“This wouldn't have happened if we could have done our project on Gran,” muttered Kevin, shaking the soggy teabags off his head. “And just think of the points we'd have racked up shopping for Rosewell. Toilet rolls for thirty old people!”

But it was hard to be mad and climb out of the bin at the same time so Kevin took a few deep breaths and told himself to calm down. When it was still too hard to scramble out from standing, he began rocking the bin, to and fro. The bin lurched forwards and backwards more and more until, with a horrible squeal of wheels, it pitched forward onto the lawn, sending Kevin, several banana skins, a clatter of crushed tins and a shower of potato peelings onto the grass.

Even lying face down on the grass, Kevin recognised a familiar voice.

“New game, Hughesy?”

He looked up.

David Riley was speeding past on his bike, roaring with laughter.

That was all he needed.

Chapter 2

Mum's face drained of colour when he explained about Mr Williams's broken guttering and the split bin. Ever since he could remember, her face had been like a set of traffic lights: red for happy, pink for OK and white for leave the country and as he watched, it grew paler and paler. This made his throat tighter and tighter and his voice smaller and smaller until by the time he'd finished he was only just squeaking. She stared in disbelief, first at Kevin and then Skanker, dismally chewing on a discarded sprout that he had brought back with him.

"How could you be so stupid, Kevin?" said Mum.

"Practise," offered Hannah, walking through from the kitchen, admiring her freshly-painted pink nails.

Mum shook her head.

"Don't you think we've got enough problems?"

She snatched up the pile of post from the mat and began leafing through the envelopes. They were mostly brown, which meant more bills, but among them were the lilac envelopes from *Sweethearts*, the grotty dating agency Mum had signed up with. Kevin didn't know which was worse – the bills, or the photos of ooky men with bow ties and buck teeth the agency sent her, men who always seemed to be called Larry or Theo, men who Mum sometimes went out with.

"Kevin, what were you thinking of?"

"My project."

"By climbing up other people's houses?"

"I thought something bad had happened to him. He always puts the bins away

on Tuesdays, Mum. Today there was no sign of him.”

“You could have phoned him,” said Hannah sourly.

Kevin imagined himself on the phone.

“Hello Mr Williams, just checking to see if you’re dead.”

He didn’t think he’d get many project points for that.

Just then, through the window behind Mum, Kevin saw Mr Williams’ car pull up onto his drive way and Mr Williams get out and put his hands on hips walking around his newly rearranged drainpipe.

“He’s home,” said Kevin.

Mum rummaged in her handbag for a comb and dragged it roughly through her hair.

“We’ll talk about this when I get back.”

Hannah closed the door behind Mum and picked up the phone.

“Who are you calling?” said Kevin.

Hannah regarded him frostily.

“None of your business.”

**

From his bedroom, Kevin could hear Hannah laughing. He opened his door a fraction and listened.

“And then, can you believe it, he went headfirst into the bin! No, really! The bin! My brother is such a total dork!”

It wasn’t a surprise, but Kevin still felt his stomach tighten. For as long as he could remember, he’d suffered from OSS. He lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to picture his favourite scene, years from now. Just him, and a German

psychiatrist with small glasses and a pointy beard, sitting in a room filled with splotty paintings that looked the same whichever way you hung them up.

“And tell me, Mr Kevin, why did you flatten your sister with ze steamroller? Ah it is the OSS, the Older Sister Syndrome!”

It usually made him smile. But not tonight. Not tonight, when his leg was aching and Mum was furious and Mr Williams was probably at this very moment raging about the sort of school projects that demolished people’s houses and just wait until he phoned that school, which meant that Mum would be jobless and they’d have toads for neighbours. Skanker sighed heavily and licked Kevin’s knee in sympathy.

“If only Mum had let us go to Rosewell, boy.”

Skanker furrowed his brow, arching his wrinkles over his big brown eyes.

Whatever Mum said, Gran wasn’t *always* muddled. Like last Christmas. Mum said it wouldn’t matter if they didn’t go on The Day, because Gran wouldn’t know the difference anyway, but she had. When they saw her a few days later, she was sulking, because the Queen’d tipped her off what day it had been by being on the telly. Gran was still talking about that nice lady with the trumpets and flags, sitting with a funny-looking dog on her lap. Even now, Kevin could remember Mum standing in Rosewell’s car park that evening, crying. He couldn’t understand it. He thought Mum would have been pleased to see Gran getting better. He knew he was.

Hannah’s laughter screeched up the stairs. She was either talking to Horrid or Dreadful. Their real names were Harriet and Dreena but he’d seen prettier faces on gargoyles and they were both spiteful and mean. He still hoped it was Horrid. Not because she was any less unkind, but Dreadful was Dave Riley’s sister.

“It’s like, so stupid of him,” said Hannah. “Mum’s really upset you know. And

she's got to be cool for that date with Oliver from *Sweethearts* on Thursday."

Oliver from *Sweethearts*?

Kevin put his head under his pillow and groaned. The only Oliver he knew was the school gerbil and he was a horror ball of fur with sharp teeth. He made a mental note to check Oliver's photo later.

**

"It's alright, love," said Mum. Kevin lifted a corner of the pillow and looked at her standing in his bedroom doorway. "Mr Williams says the insurance will pay for it. He'll tell them it was storm damage."

"Hurricane Kevin," sniggered Hannah, appearing behind her. Mum walked in and sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing Skanker's head.

"I know you were only trying to help, love," said Mum.

Kevin nodded. "Miss Munro said that old people were - " he paused. He'd only been half-listening but he was sure the word began with "V". Vegetable? No, that wasn't it. Vulnerable?

"Vulnerable," said Kevin, importantly. "So, where was Mr Williams?"

"Learning to wind surf in Tenerife."

Kevin crossed him off the vulnerable list.

"I've been thinking," she said, looking down at him, rubbing his hair, "If this project's causing you problems, maybe I can help?"

Brilliant.

She'd changed her mind. She was going to say he could do his project on Gran after all.

"How about Mrs Rendell?" said Mum.

“Who?”

“Mrs Rendell. She’s a hundred and ten.”

Kevin felt his jaw drop. In that case she was bound to need help. She was even older than his school; in fact she probably saw it being built, so he could ask her why she didn’t just hide the bricks so that he’d never have to do dumb projects there.

“A hundred and ten,” said Kevin, nodding.

“Mum means her house number, doofus,” said Hannah.

Mum went on quickly. “And there’s Mr Johnson on the corner and Mrs Corbett down by the church. I’ll make you a list, OK? You can start tomorrow when you get back from school. OK?”

**

The next afternoon, Kevin stood at the foot of the stairs, Mum’s list in one hand, checking through his rucksack, in which he’d packed old people emergency things: teabags, sugar, biscuits, a tin of corned beef and three toilet rolls. Above him, Hannah’s music thudded through the house. Skanker, waiting for Kevin in the hall, began wagging his stump of a tail in time to the beat. Mum was sitting at the table in the front room, sifting through the *Sweethearts* letters.

“I’m off now,” shouted Kevin. He opened the door and Skanker trotted out in front of him.

There was no reply.

**

Chapter 3

Mrs Rendell yanked open her bright red front door. She didn't look that old. Or frail. In fact, she was tall and slim and tanned. Her reddish-coloured hair was pinned up and she was wearing lots of makeup and a long orange silk dressing gown. It seemed odd to be ready for bed so early, but old people did get quite tired. And muddled about the time. Like at Rosewell, there was a clock in every room, but no-one seemed sure of what time it was, because half the residents would be waiting for lunch, whilst the other half had crept off to change into their pyjamas.

“You must be Paul's boy?”

Mrs Rendell didn't wait for an answer. She turned away, still talking, clattering down the hallway in high glittery shoes. “Come along, dear. I haven't got all day and it's rather chilly standing around like this.”

Kevin followed her, as she chattered on and on, leading him to a large conservatory, filled with jungly plants and cane furniture.

“Help yourself to some tea!” she said, before vanishing back into the house. Kevin looked around, unfastening his rucksack. Mrs Rendell was obviously all right for teabags, so maybe he should ask her if she needed biscuits instead.

“What do you think, Skanks?”

Skanker was busy lifting his back leg up beside a frondy plant in a tub.

“Behave!” hissed Kevin, just as young man, thick-set with a shaven head and dressed completely in black, appeared in the back garden and rapped on the glass of the conservatory. Kevin unlocked the door.

“Mrs Rendell about?” he said, dropping a heavy canvas bag on the floor.

“I’ve come to shoot her.”

Shoot her? Kevin didn’t want any part of that. He was only supposed to be doing a project.

The young man knelt down and pulled a black metallic rod of the bag. “You can help.”

Help?

Kevin had a sudden vision of prison: lying in bed all day, no school, no projects, no Hannah.

“What sort of help?” he said brightly.

“Help me set up the silver umbrella up behind this chair.”

Umbrella?

“For the photographs?” said the man, smiling. He pulled a camera from his bag. “This time of year the light’s too poor so we need an umbrella to reflect it back for the shots.”

Mrs Rendell burst through the palms and kissed Paul on each cheek. “Darling Paul!” she trilled and began unfastening her dressing gown. Kevin had a bad feeling. He turned back to the table and poured a second cup of tea with his eyes closed.

“Be careful, dear!” said Mrs Rendell as the tea sloshed over the saucer.

Kevin opened one eye. Mrs Rendell was wearing a gold swimsuit and matching strappy shoes. She pulled on a matching wide-brimmed hat and sat in the cane chair, one hand on her hip, the other touching the hat.

“How do I look, darling?” said Mrs Rendell.

“Fabulous” said Paul, twisting his camera lens.

Paul must have forgotten his glasses because Kevin didn't think that Mrs Rendell looked fabulous. She looked like too many peaches in a plastic carrier bag. He looked down at the man's holdall and noticed the words "*Vintage magazine*" printed in small grey letters near the top. So, she was a model? For the magazine? Modelling swimwear? He thought of Gran on the beach at Weston in a baggy purple swimsuit and sparkly flip-flops. They wouldn't have put Gran's picture on their magazine cover. But she looked a lot nicer.

"Wonderful sweetie," chirped Paul, darting around Mrs Rendell, clicking the camera madly.

Kevin's chest felt suddenly tight. He tugged gently on Skanker's lead and stood up, checking the next name on the list before walking quietly out of the conservatory.

**

Dressed in a shining helmet, his thin arms and legs wrapped in creaking black Lycra, Mr Johnson looked set to blast off into space.

"Caught me as I was going cycling," he said, unfastening the shed door. Skanker excited by the scent, started circling Mr Johnson and sniffing at his knees. Kevin hoped the smell of rubber knee-pads didn't remind Skanker of his dog toys because Skanker's teeth weren't brilliant but he could give you a nasty suck.

"I'm doing a school project," said Kevin.

"Really?" said Mr Johnson, taking off his helmet so that his stubbly grey hair stood up straight. "What's it about? The weather? Life in Australia? Picasso?"

Kevin shook his head.

"Old people. Our teacher wants us to help some."

“And I suppose that would be me?” said Mr Johnson. “Splendid! What sort of help are you offering?”

“Shopping, chatting, talking about the war -”

“How about keeping me company on a bike ride?”

**

“Did me proud,” said Mr Johnson, throwing open the shed door to show Kevin the spare bike.

Kevin gasped.

He didn't think they had bikes in the Stone Age. He stared at the saggy wheels, the rusting frame with its crossbar that curved towards the pedals and its girly handlebars wrapped around a wicker basket on the front.

“Beautiful isn't she?” said Mr Johnson.

Kevin couldn't speak.

Mr Johnson handed him a cycling helmet. “You'll need this.”

Kevin thought that what he actually needed was a decent excuse to leave, but looking at Mr Johnson's bright, excited face as he climbed onto his own skinny, big-wheeled bike, he didn't have the heart. Was this what Miss Munro meant about helping old people? He sighed, dragging the bike, yowling and bumping, out onto the path and thought of points.

Mr Johnson sailed off up the hill.

“Right then, Skanks,” said Kevin, mounting the clattery old bike. He stood up on the pedals and the bike lurched forwards, braying like a bad-tempered camel.

Skanker shot off up the hill. Kevin pushed harder and wobbled off. The bike moaned. He forced his legs round slowly and reached down for the giant lollipop gear-handle and slid it up a notch. There was a loud scraping noise but nothing else.

He tried again.

This time there was a clunk and the handle came off in his hand. Examining it as he pedalled at half a centimetre an hour, Kevin consoled himself that at least he knew what the basket was for now and dropped the gear handle in.

Halfway up the hill, wheezing and gasping, Kevin wondered who would come to his funeral. Mum definitely. Hannah if the shops were shut. Miss Munro. Yes, he could see the headlines now: "*Cruel project kills promising student,*" although "*promising*" might be pushing it a bit. Mr Johnson was now a small figure on the crest of the hill, waving to him, while Skanker, next to him, was having a lie down on the pavement.

Five minutes later, panting, his heart drilling against his ribs, Kevin arrived at the top of the hill.

"Great fun, isn't it?" said Mr Johnson.

"Fun?" said Kevin, lying down on the pavement. His bottom felt as if it had been butted by a charging bull and his legs were definitely a different shape now, bendier and much much longer. He closed his eyes and saw red and yellow sparkly lights dancing. If this was being dead, he decided, resting his head on the hard pavement, then it was certainly a lot better than cycling. Skanker lolloped up and began licking his face.

"Terrific idea for a project this," said Mr Johnson. "Why don't you have a breather, lad and I'll see you back at mine for a decent cup of tea."

**

Half an hour later Kevin sank down at the end of Mrs Corbett's drive, eating chips and trying not to think of what the other children said about her.

Ever since her husband had died, there had been strange tales at school.

Spooky tales.

Mum just said that people shouldn't tell mean stories, that Mrs Corbett was lonely, that was all, and that of course she didn't invite other old ladies round to talk to ghosts. Every Wednesday night.

Ghosts?

And it was Wednesday night.

No longer hungry, Kevin emptied the warm, vinegary bag onto the driveway.

"What d'you think we should do, Skanks?"

Bury your nose in a pile of chips and wag your bottom in the air was certainly one answer, but it wasn't very helpful to Kevin. Not when he had a project to do. A project he had to DO WELL.

Kevin stood up, debating.

He didn't fancy the idea of ghosts much and took a step towards the road.

And stopped.

Because he didn't fancy facing up to Miss Munro without a project either, and stepped back again, sighing. There was no competition really. An evening with the undead versus a no-show on his project? He shrugged and turned towards the house, pulling Skanker behind him.

"They say she uses a special board to talk to them, Skanks," said Kevin, trying to laugh, only it stuck in his throat. "Lucky we're scientists, eh, boy, and know that there's no real proof for ghosts." Skanker gruffled thickly. "Alright," said Kevin, "unless you

count that stuff we read on the net about ghost hunters.” Skanker gruffed again, more loudly. “Yes, and that programme we saw on Discovery Channel last week.”

Beyond them, on the other side of the fence, the church tower loomed up over them dark against the glowering sky.

“But we’re rational,” said Kevin, jumping at the clang of the doorbell. By now, Skanker was too busy sniffing and barking at the bony bushes that jabbed his flank each time he walked past, to discuss the paranormal further. Ghost hunters always said that animals were twitchy around ghosts, Kevin was sure, and the way Skanker was whining and sniffing wasn't helping Kevin's courage much.

Slowly, the door moaned open and Mrs Corbett peered out. Her face looked soft as a muffin, dimply and kind, not at all the way you'd expect someone who talked to ghosts to look, but then, Kevin wasn't sure how they were supposed to look in the first place. She was wearing a bright blue trouser suit and red lipstick. They had to be good signs, didn't they?

“My name is Kevin Hughes,” he said, becoming aware of a cold stream of air rippling over him from within the gloomy house. Wasn't that what ghost hunters called a cold spot? If so, he definitely had one. All over. “And I'm doing a school project to help dead, I mean, old people,” he added.

Mrs Corbett clapped her hands together.

“And why not?” she said. “I could certainly do with some young help in preparing for my guests tonight.”

“Guests?” said Kevin, trying to sound bright about it. What sort of guests? But when he looked back she had disappeared back into the house. “I'll just tie up Skanker, then,” he added to the empty hallway.

Kevin tied Skanker to the drainpipe, whispering strict instructions not to pull it down while rescuing him unless he was absolutely sure that Kevin was being dragged beyond the grave, because they'd already had one drainpipe accident that week and Mum might as well go into the guttering business if they kept doing it, and how was she going to do that when she refused to go up ladders?

Then he walked into the house, following the hallway round to a dining room at the back. It was brighter in here, small and cluttered, with a saggy green sofa and lots of photographs and droopy tendrilly plants in dusty pots. A door, leading out onto the garden, was standing open, which at least explained the draught at the front door. Mrs Corbett, meanwhile, was busy smoothing a heavy black velvet cloth onto the round table, which stood in the middle of the room.

“Shall I put out the knives and forks?” said Kevin.

“No, love,” she smiled, “My guests won't be eating. They'll be here soon.”

Was it his imagination, or had she just looked over towards the graveyard? He shook his head, and felt his stomach tie itself in a bow around his windpipe as Mrs Corbett walked back out into the hall. Alone, he looked at the open door and wondered how fast he could clear the garden, retrieve Skanker and pull him down the drive with his newly-rearranged skeleton, courtesy of Mr Johnson's bike. Faster than a flock of ghosts, he was sure. Was a group of ghosts a flock? It might be important when it came to writing up his project. Ghosts were white and hung around not doing much, like sheep, so they could be a flock. He was just wondering if he could find out on the net when he heard a loud scraping noise from the hallway. What was she doing now? He leaned forward, peering around the doorway. Mrs Corbett was rummaging round in a drawer in the dresser. For what?

Slowly, she took a big wooden board out of the drawer and turned, holding it up against her chest, smiling widely at him. Kevin took a step back, feeling like a vampire hunter he'd seen in a creaky old film once. Only he didn't have a crucifix or an onion, or whatever it was they waved at them.

"Do you use that for talking to," he paused, "people?"

Mrs Corbett shook her head, puzzled.

"No love. I use the 'phone. Apart from when I write to my daughter, then I use email because she's in Canada and it's cheaper." She turned the board over, shrugging. It was covered in ruled squares, some coloured pink, some blue. "This is for Scrabble. You know, the word game?"

"Scrabble?"

He'd always hated Scrabble before, mostly because Hannah cheated, getting points by putting zeds on the ends of his words and saying it was street-speak and that he was just too uncool to know it, before throwing the board on the floor and stomping off - but now... He'd never been so pleased to see a Scrabble board in all his life.

Mrs Corbett was watching him thoughtfully. She poured the plastic letter-squares into a pot, so that they clattered loudly. "Me and the other ladies from the church play every Wednesday evening. In fact, tonight's our last practise before the big championships."

Championship Scrabble?

Brilliant.

He could do his project on that.

"In fact, we're off to York, tomorrow, for a whole week."

Or not.

Kevin sat down heavily, feeling achy from Mr Johnson's killer bike. Things

weren't going very well at all. He'd tried his best with Mum's list and he still had precisely nothing to show for it. Beyond the window, the garden was dark now, only the light from the room spilling onto a small patio. If he'd spent his afternoon with Gran it would have been so different.

"You sure you're alright, love?" said Mrs Corbett. "You look a bit fed up. How about a cup of tea?"

**

"All right for some," shouted Mum, struggling into the kitchen, loaded down with shopping bags. Thinking about his pointless afternoon, Kevin wondered if he could mention Gran. But Mum's face was pinched and pink, which meant her mood could go either way and besides, she was probably tired from working out which offers to buy in the supermarket. Last week, she'd brought back ten tins of half-price sardines. Kevin had started to feel like a seal, though on the bright side, he was sure he could swim faster.

"How did you get on today?" said Mum.

"OK," said Kevin gloomily.

"Really?" Mum looked harder at him. "So, how's the project going?"

Kevin thought for a moment:

Lumpy Mrs Rendell posing in a swimsuit, two knees that no longer pointed the same way and ten years off his life from the stress of expecting a visitor from the grave.

"It's going great," he said.

Chapter 4

Going great?

It wasn't going at all and Kevin wished that he could ask Mum again about going to see Gran, but it was hopeless. Every time he tried, she was too busy fluttering her fingers, drying a different coloured nail polish or pouting in front of the mirror or simply gliding round the house practising saying "Oliver" in different ways.

Oliver.

Kevin's heart sank.

Quite apart from the fact that Mum's new boyfriend had the same name and looked like the school gerbil, Kevin now remembered that Emily Stevens had brought furry Oliver back in after Easter, saying that both her lady-gerbils were now expecting babies.

You just couldn't trust an Oliver.

Still, at least thinking about Oliver made Mum feel good. Kevin didn't feel good, and especially when he thought about his project. By the Thursday before half-term, he was starting to panic properly. He'd already asked Amy Sykes if he could borrow one of her ancient aunts, because she had loads, but it was no good because they all lived miles away, and even Michael, who'd said that Kevin could use his Gran, now said sorry, but she was going away to a caravan in Llandudno with him and his parents instead.

And, what made everything totally, completely, outrageously unfair, as he'd already explained to Skanker several times this week, was that Gran was actually the one old person he knew he could really help. "*Make a difference,*" Miss Munro had said. He wished Mum would let him, but whenever he talked about Gran, she said that no-one

could do anything now. Gran had an illness called Alzheimer's Disease and that, Mum said, was that. Apparently lots of old people had Alzheimer's and it made them worse and worse and worse until they couldn't remember anything at all. Gran's memory was like an iceberg, according to Mum, with bits snapping off it and floating away.

But Gran wasn't an iceberg.

An iceberg?

It was no wonder she didn't get better with all that negative thinking. Kevin knew he could make a difference. He just needed a chance.

He stared out of the classroom window, at the trees scattering their leaves across the grass, the sky grey and fat with rain. If he helped Gran, if his project made her remember again, then that would be just the start. He could see the headlines now: "Schoolboy and dog cure Alzheimer's."

Fantastic.

Mum'd be sorry she'd ever held them back. She loved celebrities in the glossy magazines, and when he and Skanks had their photos in one, she'd be totally proud, showing it to everyone. Miss Munro would have to give him double points, too or maybe triple for making the school famous. Medical conferences. Telly interviews. He'd have to work out how to get Skanker shampooed for the cameras. Kevin was just making the list of things he'd have to do, in his head, when Miss Munro clapped her hands sharply and announced another one of her Good Ideas.

"Since we have a few minutes left before playtime," she said "why don't we share what we've done so far on our projects?"

Everyone went quiet.

Behind him, someone jabbed Kevin hard in the ribs, making him jump.

“Kevin?” said Miss Munro. “You’d like to share what you’ve done?”

Kevin reluctantly rose to his feet.

“Well,” began Kevin, “I have made a start.”

Everyone’s eyes were on him.

“And?” said Miss Munro, smiling.

“I met three old people in my neighbourhood and had a chat with them.”

“That sounds promising. What did you find out about them?”

Kevin face grew warmer.

“Kevin?”

“I, er, found out they didn’t really need my help, Miss.”

Everyone laughed.

Everyone except Miss Munro, whose face had completely frozen over.

“And you think that’s funny?”

Kevin shook his head. He didn’t think it was funny at all. Behind him, David Riley’s hand shot up.

“David?” said Miss Munro tiredly.

“Most of us are doing projects on our grandparents. Kevin should do his on his gran.”

Kevin could feel his stomach folding like paper being made into an origami elephant. And his origami elephants always ended up as crumpled balls in the bin.

A smile slithered onto David’s face.

“Kevin?” said Miss Munro.

“She doesn’t live that close, Miss,” he said, looking down.

“More like on another planet!” hissed David, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“David!” began Miss Munro.

But Kevin didn't hear any more because he was too busy diving over the other children and onto David Riley, his fists swinging. He pounded David's chest as hard as he could. David squealed and thumped Kevin back, walloping him across the nose. Kevin heard himself cry out, the pain was tremendous. It made his eyes water and he could feel a trickle of blood running down his face, taste the warm saltiness in his mouth. He drew his fist back to hit David again, but missed. In fact his fists kept missing and though he jabbed at him madly, they only sliced through air. Then he realised that Miss Munro was holding him up by his jumper, suspending him out of reach.

“That's enough! Both of you! Stop it! Now!”

Her hair had worked loose from its ponytail and fallen across her face.

Kevin stopped kicking, stopped punching and Miss Munro finally set him down on the floor while David stared at the ceiling, whimpering like a puppy.

“Anna!” said Miss Munro, “Ask Mr Henderson to come here. Immediately.”

**

That evening, Kevin walked home very slowly. It had not been pleasant in Mr Henderson's office, even after Miss Munro explained that Kevin was provoked. Mr Henderson had put on his very disappointed voice, the one he used in assembly last week he talked about the infants flushing the time-telling clock down the toilet. He said that he had a few choice words for Kevin's mum and that he would be phoning her later.

No one listened to Kevin's side of the story of course. Not that he was surprised. After all, Mr Henderson played golf with David Riley's dad. Kevin's dad never played golf. He didn't even play at being Dad any more.

Kevin tried to think of what he could do to make things better when Mum found out, but all he could think of was broccoli. It was Mum's favourite and he knew there was a mountain of the stuff in the freezer but he still didn't fancy his chances much. He could try to make a posh dinner. But what could you make with broccoli? Apart from broccoli? His brain was completely empty of broccoli recipes and, besides, his chest ached too much from David's thumps for him to concentrate properly.

Maybe he could just disconnect the phone? But then Mum might miss a call from Oliver.

Oliver?

As in hot date on Thursday, today, Oliver?

Kevin felt suddenly brighter.

His step lifted.

His heart rose.

His problems were over. Love conquered all, or something like that. Mum would be cool about Mr Henderson because of Oliver. She would be far too busy thinking about chocolates and red roses to freak out about a phone call. She'd just smile and say never mind, and then practise saying Oliver a few more times.

Brilliant.

**

Mum's was sitting at the kitchen table when he walked in. Her eyes were puffy. Her face was patchy pink and white. Splots of mascara speckled her cheeks.

"How did it go?" said Kevin hopelessly, closing the kitchen door behind him.

Mum shook her head slowly, biting back a big gaspy sob.

“Oh,” said Kevin, ruffling Skanker’s fur while Hannah clattered about, importantly spooning coffee into two mugs. “What was wrong with him?” said Kevin, glancing at Oliver’s photo, which had been torn up and scattered across the table. Discounting the brillo pad hair and goofy smile that was, because Mum already knew about that.

“He was married,” said Mum, her voice catching.

She dabbed a tissue roughly at her eyes.

“Married?” said Kevin, “but I thought it was a dating agency.”

“Doofus,” snarled Hannah, setting down the mug of coffee on the table.

“That’s why Mum’s upset.”

Mum stood up, reaching to the top of the cupboard and brought down a small bottle of brandy, splashing some carelessly into her coffee. Kevin knew the routine. He’d seen it all before. He wished he knew what to say. Gran would have. She would have slapped down her big old-fashioned handbag and pulled out a handkerchief and some good advice with it.

Kevin felt fresh panic rising in him. Mum’s good mood had evaporated big time, which meant she would kill him when Mr Henderson phoned. If only he’d told her about the gerbil babies.

Mum sipped her coffee.

“Men!” said Hannah, eyeing Kevin.

Kevin wanted to point out that he hadn’t sent his photo to any dating agency and anyway, what did she know about men when she’d only had one slow dance at the school disco with spotty Derek with the lanky hair – he knew because Andrew’s brother had told him about it – when the phone rang.

**

Kevin and Skanker, lead and collar on, paws scrabbling to go, were almost at the door, when Mum stomped back into the kitchen.

“Not more trouble,” said Hannah, smiling.

“Why didn’t you tell me Kevin?”

Kevin looked at the torn photograph, the bottle of brandy, the crumpled tissues. “I was waiting for the right time.”

“Right time?” said Mum, slumping into her seat. “And when is the right time to tell me that you’ve been caught fighting? Hauled into Mr Henderson’s office? When?”

“Fighting?” said Hannah.

“He’s only lamped David Riley. In the classroom!”

“He said - ” began Kevin.

Mum waved her hands in his face.

“No Kevin. I don’t want to hear it. I’ve heard it all before. It’s always him, isn’t it?”

She took a gulp of coffee and sloshed in some more brandy. Her forehead was rumpled, like Skanker’s when you said the word “vet” to him. This was all Miss Munro’s fault. Kevin thought he would have that on his gravestone: “My teacher did this to me.” If only she had let them do Show-and-Tell like they normally did on a Thursday afternoon, instead of talk about their stupid projects, then none of this would have happened. Or if Mum had let him see Gran.

He dragged Skanker back to his basket.

Minutes stretched..

“Why did you do it?” said Mum at last.

“Because he was mean about Gran.”

“Gran? What was he doing talking about Gran?”

“It was because of our projects,” sighed Kevin.

He tried to prepare his ears for the blast but Mum didn’t say anything at all.

Instead she just stared at him. She shook her head, puzzled.

“I don’t get it. How does David Riley even know about Gran?” she said.

Kevin glanced at Hannah. She was going bright red while trying to kill Kevin with a look. Mum followed his gaze.

“He’s Dreena’s brother, isn’t he?” said Mum.

“Like, you’re not blaming me, are you?” said Hannah, scowling. “I’m not the one with a problem in anger management. I don’t rough people up at school and cause problems for us all.”

“But you did tell Dreena about Gran, didn’t you? And now David is having a go at Kevin. Hannah, you know he picks on Kev about anything. Just go to your room,” said Mum.

“Me?” squealed Hannah. “That is just so unfair!”

“Now!” shouted Mum.

Hannah stomped out of the room, waited then stepped back in to slam the door behind her.

Kevin walked over and stood in front of Mum. Her eyes were all watery.

“I’m sorry, Mum.”

“I know, love. And I’m sorry too. Sorry you find it so hard about Gran.” She

wrapped her arm around him. “We all do. And stupid people like David Riley make things worse. But Kevin, what you did today, it just causes more problems.”

Kevin buried his face against Mum’s arm. She smelt of flowers and he knew that she must have worn her best perfume for her date with stupid Oliver. He felt as if he had a nest of hornets buzzing in his head, seeing David in his mind again, lying there, wailing. The thought should have cheered him up but his nose started to prickle instead and he knew he was going to cry. It was all so unfair.

“I want to do my project on her, Mum. We’re supposed to help old people and I know I can help her, Mum, I know I can. Whatever everyone else says - ”

“OK,” said Mum, holding his shoulders. “Calm down. Maybe we will go and see her next week.”

“Really? When?”

“Sunday? OK? But I’m not promising anything about the project.”

Kevin’s heart leapt.

“Totally. You won’t be sorry Mum. I promise.”

Mum sighed and looked away. He would show her. He would show all of them. Miss Munro, Hannah, David Riley, Mr Henderson, everyone.. He’d help Gran back to her old self again. He looked over and winked at Skanker, who flobbered his lips in agreement.

Together they would show everyone.

Chapter 5

Rosewell.

He was finally here.

It looked brighter than he remembered it. And much bigger. Really, if you didn't know it was an old people's home, you might think it was a millionaire's bungalow, although obviously a millionaire with a lot more old relatives than most. It was modern building, made with yellow and orange bricks and had tall windows that stretched from the floor to the roof. As Mum parked, Kevin could see old people waving through the windows. He checked to see if Gran was there. She wasn't, but he waved back anyway.

"Right then," sighed Mum and reached for her bag from the back seat.

"Remember what I said, Skanks," said Kevin, looking over at Skanker in the back seat. Pets weren't allowed in at Rosewell, but Kevin had insisted that Skanker come along too. After all, he was the only person who had listened to Kevin's plan to help Gran. Mum hadn't wanted to know and you couldn't count Hannah as a person. Skanker had flubbed his lips a lot, meaning that he thought sorting out Gran's Alzheimer's was a big task for a primary school project, but he did understand, Kevin was sure of that. And, being outside Rosewell would give Skanker a doggy-feel for the place. Kevin watched as Mum walked slowly towards the front door. Whatever she said about Alzheimer's melting old people's memories like icebergs, however gloomy she became whenever he explained his ideas, Kevin was going to prove her wrong. Skanker gave him a knowing look and licked his hand.

The front door at Rosewell was like an airlock on a space ship. There were

actually two doors, one in the porch and another one inside, and you had to let the first door shut tight and lock behind you, before opening the second. Mum said that it was important that the old people were kept in and safe. If they got out onto the streets, muddled and lost, anything could happen.

She jabbed the numbers into the keypad, waited for the buzzer to sound and pulled the door open. They walked through, waited for the door to click shut behind them and Mum typed the numbers in a second time. An old man stood behind the second glass door, watching them, fumbling nervously with his cardigan buttons as they walked in..

“Have you seen my Dad?” he said.

Kevin took a breath to reply but froze, suffocated by the thick smell of disinfectant. It was overwhelming, almost choking, prickling his eyes and scouring his nose. The old man nodded, waiting. Kevin’s eyes streamed. His nose burned. This must be what it was like for bacteria in the U-bend, he thought. And look what happened to them. There was only one thing for it: he stood still, held his breath, closed his eyes tight and wedged his hands against his nose.

That was much better.

Then he felt Mum poking him in the chest.

“I thought you wanted to come?” she said coolly.

Kevin opened one eye, wishing he knew the sign language for “I did but a gas mask would be nice,” but could only nod.

“Someone’s just had an accident, that’s all,” said Mum.

Accident? Had the bleach lorry crashed into the building? Then he realised what she meant.

“Stop messing about, Kevin.”

Kevin followed Mum down the corridor, his trainers squealing against the rubber flooring, fixing him to the spot with every step.

All the corridors at Rosewell led into the others, so that from above it would look like a giant noughts-and-crosses-grid, with a square drawn round the outside. Some of the inside squares were made into little gardens, courtyards of flagged stone, set with pots of flowers and shrubs, but mostly the old people just walked round and round the corridors. Kevin wondered about that. A few corridors didn't seem like much to keep Gran busy, so it was no wonder she had trouble keeping things in her mind.

Mum stopped, turned and waited for him, just as a huge woman loomed from around the corner behind her, dressed in a billowing blue dress with splotty orange flowers. She lumbered towards them, knocking Mum sideways out of the way, lurching towards Kevin, smiling widely, her arms outstretched. Kevin stood frozen against the wall, hearing the slap of her slippers grow louder as she came closer and closer.

“Jimmy” said the woman, her eyes fixed on him brightly.

Kevin glanced behind him down the corridor. It was completely empty and particularly of anyone called Jimmy, but before he could turn back and politely point this out, his world went dark.

“Jimmy Jimmy” mumbled the woman.

Kevin wriggled and squirmed, but it was hopeless. He felt the air squashing out of his lungs as the woman hugged him tighter, gurgling ominously. He closed his eyes, certain that it couldn't get any worse, when something wet and slappy landed on

his cheek.

Kissy” said the woman.

“Kevin, will you stop messing about!” boomed Mum from the far end of the corridor.

But Kevin was too busy wrestling with the woman’s circus-tent dress to answer.

“Kissy.”

“Annie, put him down!”

Another woman’s voice, sharp as flint, cut across the corridor. Light flooded back into Kevin’s world as Annie lurched away, fluttering her fingers against her lips, chuckling at him. From behind her, a small neat woman, dressed in a care worker’s blue top and trousers stepped out.

“I’m sorry about that love,” she said, wiping Kevin’s cheek with a tissue.

“It’s just Annie’s way. She kisses the people she thinks are her grandson, don’t you Annie?”

Annie smiled, slapped her hand onto the handrail and plodded down the corridor. The care worker sighed. “Not that he ever visits, though.”

She led them to a room called the Primrose Lounge, where everything was yellow - the carpet, the walls, the curtains, the dusty pots of plastic daffodils on the window sill, even the high-backed chairs set around the sides of the room had yellow plastic covers. But it was completely empty. A television was on in the corner, burbling to itself, its sound turned low. The care worker nodded towards a line of chairs, set facing towards the windows, looking out onto an enclosed courtyard, planted with a bushes and tubs of purple and white flowers.

She walked round to the front of one of the chairs.

“Jean?”

There was a murmuring from the chair.

“Hello, love. There are some visitors here for you.”

The way she spoke reminded Kevin of the Reception teacher at school: soft, and croony and very very slowly. He rolled his eyes knowing that Gran would hate that. Kevin followed Mum to the chair, ready to agree with Gran about just how annoying it was to be talked to like a five-year-old, after all it happened to him a lot too, and caught his breath.

Gran looked different.

Her curly hair had been cut short like a man’s and her face was thinner and papery, so that he could see the blue veins lightly underneath it, like the roads on the maps in Miss Munro’s geography lesson, the one where he’d drawn the school in the canal. Her eyes seemed filmy, without their usual blue sparkle.

“Hello Gran,” said Kevin.

She pressed her lips together, pale and trembly. He waited for her to speak.

“Is it lunchtime?” she said.

Kevin’s smile shrank.

“Not yet, Gran,” said Kevin.

Gran clutched his arm. Even her fingers felt thin. “I haven’t had any breakfast you know,” she whispered, looking slyly across at the care worker.

“Breakfast was twenty minutes ago, Jean,” she said, without turning round.

Kevin wondered if they had missed Gran out by mistake? After all, there were a lot of old people here and it must be easy to forget one or two of them

sometimes. Then he noticed the blob of fresh marmalade glistening on her cardigan.

He decided to make a start.

“I’m doing a project,” he said. “It’s all about remembering things. Miss Munro, that’s my teacher, says we have to talk to older people about their lives. So I thought I could talk to you. Help you start to remember again. Alright, Gran?”

Kevin was pleased with himself. He hadn’t said anything about her getting better and leaving Rosewell yet because that was Part Two of his plan and he’d only just started. Besides, it was best not to put too much pressure on old people.

“How long do we have?” said Gran, folding her hands together in her lap. Her watch slid down to where her wrist bone stuck out, her arm thinner now, stick like.

“Till the end of the week,” he said, taking hold of her hand.

“For lunch?” said Gran, dismayed.

Kevin swallowed. This was going to be a bigger job than he had expected. He pulled out his pencil.

According to Mum, people with Alzheimer’s only knew about things that happened ages ago. They couldn’t remember things that happened recently. He’d start with that then, to give Gran a bit of confidence.

“What do you think about dinosaurs, Gran?”

“Kevin,” hissed Mum.

Kevin felt his face start to glow.

“You said to talk to Gran about things that happened ages ago,” he said.

“Happened to her, Kev, not about blooming dinosaurs.”

Kevin bit his lip. For her information, Gran liked dinosaurs just as much as he did. She’d loads of plastic ones lined up along the telly in her old house, mostly the

triceratops she liked best, only she called them milk bottle tops.

Mum rubbed Gran's wrist. "Why don't you tell Kevin a bit about the war, Mum."

Kevin could see the determination in Mum's face and the way she looked into Gran's eyes, willing her to remember. He licked his pencil and waited for Gran to speak. Instead she muttered something and shrugged off Mum's hand, rolling back her sleeves and leaning forward, to peer down between her feet. Kevin noticed that the name label in her cardigan was sticking out. It said Amelia Harris.

"Who's taken my bag?" said Gran.

"No-one," said Mum, handing her the bag from behind the chair. It was the same old-fashioned, white leather bag that Kevin remembered. Gran fumbled with the gold-bobble catch and the bag sprung open. Everything inside was wrapped in paper tissues. Gran rummaged, tutting and grumbling, and finally pulled out a flat grease-stained parcel.

"So," continued Kevin, "What did you think of Hitler?"

But Gran wasn't in the mood for Hitler.

"Hungry," she said, beginning to unpeel strips of tissue paper from her parcel to reveal a rock-hard piece of battered fish. It must have been dinner last night. Or maybe the night before. Gran bit it and chewed noisily.

"Food's rubbish in this, this thingummy," she said.

"Home?" said Mum.

"No," said Gran shaking her head. "Of course this isn't my home. This is a, whatsit, a thingy."

Her brow furrowed. She took another bite of fish.

“One of those places,” she muttered.

Kevin waited. Seconds passed.

“Hotel!” she announced finally, flicking the paper onto the floor, along with her bag, so that its contents spilled out. Kevin hotched down and started to squash the parcels back in, when something sharp snagged the back of his hand. He pulled the tissues clear for a better look. It was Gran’s old front door key, a big iron thing, pinned to the silk lining of the bag. Why did she still have that? The house had been sold months ago. Other people lived there now. Kevin touched the cold metal of the key, remembering the times he’d stayed at her house on Meadow Street, those brilliant times without Hannah, the smell of baking, the big soft bed in his room, the massive furry spiders that scuttled round the attic.

“Earth calling Kevin?” said Mum, brushing the batter crumbs off Gran’s cardigan. “You’ve come to ask some questions, remember?”

Kevin nodded.

“I’ll leave you to have a bit more of a chat, then,” said Mum. “Remember to jot things down Kevin, Mr Henderson will want to see what you’ve done.”

Kevin listened to Mum’s heels clatter down the corridor and for a few moments sat with Gran in silence. An old man in pyjamas shuffled in and sat on another chair by the window.

“Tiddles!” said Gran.

Kevin thought that that was probably why there were plastic covers on all the seats though it seemed a bit rude of Gran to point it out. Then he realised that she was looking out of the window, to where a podgy black cat lolled under a bush, its back leg flung up over its fat tummy as it washed.

Was he called Tiddles too? Gran had owned a cat called Tiddles once. All he did was lie in the road, which accounted for his finally being mown down by the bin lorry. Kevin looked at the cat, flicking its tail on the ground. Medical science was pretty clever and all that, but even the nurses and the doctors who visited Rosewell couldn't bring a cat back to life. Especially one that had been flat enough to post.

"Baloo," said the old man, tottering to the window, stopping and waving his walking stick.

"Tiddles," said Gran.

"Baloo, you silly woman!"

"Tiddles!" said Gran, before Kevin could tell the old man not to be so rude to Gran.

"Baloo!" he said, jabbing his stick at her as he walked past, out of the room. Kevin sighed. He was glad that was over. Still, maybe he should write it down anyway, for his project.

"Rosie," said a girl's voice, from the corridor.

Kevin twisted round to see a tall, reedy girl of about fifteen, completely dressed in black. Her face was powdered white and she'd outlined her dark eyes, all the way around, with black eye shadow.

"Rosie," she said again, tossing long black ringlets over her shoulders and glancing at Kevin. She was wearing black lipstick and when she spoke it gleamed like liquorice against her white teeth.

"Who's that?" said Gran. "Is it the undertaker?"

Kevin shook his head. He didn't think so. They didn't usually employ vampire look-alikes. He'd seen gangs of teenagers dressed like her up in the town

though: all black velvet coats, bits of lace, black hair and scowls.

“Lot of undertakers come here,” said Gran and folded her hands in her lap.

The girl ignored them and walked past, kneeling down by the glass doors to the courtyard, tapping the glass with long black fingernails.

“Tiddles is coming!” chuckled Gran as the cat sauntered towards the door and tiptoed in through the cat flap.

“Hello Rosie,” said the girl, so softly that for a moment Kevin thought someone else had spoken. She scooped up the cat and brought it over to Gran.

“Tiddles,” said Gran.

“That’s right,” said the girl, smiling and gently handing the cat to Gran.

That’s right? Kevin rolled his eyes.

“You just said the cat’s name was called Rosie.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” she said, under her breath.

“No,” he said.

She leant closer to him. He could smell her makeup, waxy and sweet.

“A lot of the old people here had cats at one time or another. Now they see Rosie and think it’s their cat. Is Jean your Gran?”

Kevin nodded.

“Well, Jean had a cat called Tiddles once, right?”

Kevin nodded again.

Gran stroked the cat’s head, crooning.

“To your gran, the cat’s Tiddles. Ted had a cat called Baloo.”

“But that’s silly,” said Kevin.

The girl arched her brow. “Really? Why?”

”Because the old people are already confused enough. Why let them think it’s still their cat?”

“It’s kinder.”

Kinder? Kevin snorted. How was muddling Gran up even more, kinder? She’d never get her brain straight enough to leave with that sort of kindness.

“I’m going to tell Gran the cat’s proper name,” said Kevin.

“Suit yourself,” said the girl.

Kevin looked across at Gran. She was calmer than he’d seen her all morning, crooning over Tiddles, tickling his head. Maybe he’d wait a moment before he corrected her. Still, Rosewell’s answer to Wednesday Addams, was annoying him. He looked at her T-shirt. There was a picture of a cracked white skull and the words “Happy Death” written underneath. She couldn’t be a care worker, dressed like that. He wondered why she was there.

“So the cat’s called Tiddles, Rosie and Baloo?” he said, squaring up to her.

“No,” said the girl. “She’s Rosie Baloo Tigger Stripe Tiddles Montezuma.”

“That must be confusing for the cat?”

“Not really,” said the girl, tossing back her head. “She only answers to dinner.”

Kevin laughed thinly. It seemed to echo round the room.

“I’m glad you think it’s funny,” said the girl, looking down at him with tar black eyes. “I don’t.”

Kevin shrank down under her glare feeling his smile shrink like sock elastic in the hot wash. They always made red rings around your ankles after that and this girl made him feel like he had red rings all the way up, but especially around his

throat, throttling him.

“You should tell the old people the truth,” he said finally. “Otherwise they just get worse.”

“Hardly,” said the girl, her mouth as tight and black as a bootlace. She turned and walked out of the room, the silver buckles on her workman’s boots jangling. As if on cue, Rosie Baloo Tigger Stripe Tiddles Montezuma leapt from Gran’s lap and followed her, pausing briefly to flick a cold emerald look at Kevin before stalking out of the room.

Chapter 6

Kevin's face burned with annoyance as the girl's jingly footsteps faded away. He hoped that Gran hadn't overheard, but waited until his face had cooled from volcano-red before he turned round to check.

It was OK.

Gran was busy folding up a soggy flannel and tucking it neatly back into her hand bag. Ted hadn't heard either, because he'd nodded off in an easy chair outside door. His head lolled onto his chest and rasping snores drowned out the low murmur from the television.

No wonder, thought Kevin, glaring around the room. Plastic flowers that didn't smell; a television you couldn't hear; and a cat who had umpteen names. What help was all that to people who were trying to get better?

The room felt suddenly hot and airless.

He looked at Gran, still staring down into her bag. He had to do something.

"Fancy a walk, Gran?"

"Are we going home then, love?" said Gran, snapping her bag shut.

He shook his head. Should he tell her that this was her home, just for now, just until she got better, until his project sorted her out? He looked around at the waterproof covers on the chairs and the plastic beakers on the tables and at Ted dribbling onto his pyjama top and decided not to.

Then he checked that the corridor was clear of Dracula's daughter. It was empty, she'd gone, afraid probably, to stay out in the sunlight. Kevin and Gran walked to the end of the corridor and sat down together in a window seat.

She stared through the glass.

“Look what they’ve done to the hotel garden.”

“It’s the car park, Gran.”

“Ah yes.” She looked puzzled, shaking her head. “It wouldn’t have happened at the Belmont.”

“What wouldn’t?”

“They had a pond in the garden. With thingies.”

Thingies? Was that fish thingies, fountain thingies or frog thingies?

“Big orange ones,” said Gran, glancing up.

“Fish?” said Kevin.

“Is it lunchtime?” said Gran.

Kevin turned to the window. All the bleach fumes couldn’t be helping Gran. He was sure he’d read somewhere that oxygen deficiency was bad for the brain. He stood up and tried to open the small window at the top and was surprised to find it unlocked. He opened it and a slight breeze wafted in.

“That’s our car there, Gran,” he said, pointing. Gran peered. He waited for a reaction. There wasn’t one. “Can you see it? It’s the blue one, there, closest to us. See?” he said, trying to fan the fresh air in towards her. “You and mum used to go shopping in it all the time.”

Kevin watched Gran look along the row of cars, his heart sinking. It must be too recent for her to remember. She craned towards the glass and he stared harder at the car. That one, he thought, that one, willing her to look.

The car began rocking from side to side. Its aerial twanged. Its tyres sighed. Up. Down. Left. Right. Up. Down. Skanker must have found his favourite toy, the

punctured football that Mum had shoved under the front seat on the day he burst it. Skanker loved it even though Kevin had told him he'd never make the team if he ate the ball. He bounced past the window, a flash of white, one way then the other, twisting his head from side to side, ferociously shaking the ball. Noticing Kevin, he dropped the ball and flung his paws onto the parcel shelf, barking loudly.

Gran jumped.

“Skanker,” she said.

“What?”

“Skanker!”

Her eyes were bright and clear. “He’s yours isn’t he?”

Kevin wished he'd brought a tape recorder. If Mum was right, and Gran was living in the past, how come she knew Skanker? He was only two years old, not ancient history.

“So you remember him?” said Kevin.

“Of course I do,” said Gran, “I bought him for you didn’t I?”

Skanker began to leap up and down on the car seat again, turning circles and barking. He could see that Gran was remembering big time too. Remembering the things she wasn’t supposed to be able to.

Kevin threw his arms around Gran.

She was starting to get better already.

Brilliant, he thought and hugged her tighter, trying not to notice how much thinner she felt. Gran chuckled and Kevin felt happiness surge through him. Right until he spotted the girl in black, leaning against the wall at the far end of the corridor, watching them, biting her black lip thoughtfully, her teeth bright as mints.

**

“Not again,” said Mum, with a great gusting sigh as the traffic lights turned red.

Kevin tutted.

It was true.

There was no one on the crossing and he could see that the man sitting in the car opposite was just as cross as mum about it.

“Typical,” said Kevin, “the way they always go red just as you get up to them.”

“I meant about you and your attempts to help Gran,” snapped Mum. She had been cross ever since he told her that Gran was remembering things again. “It was one word, Kevin. That’s all.”

Kevin looked at Mum’s frown and decided not to grow up. There was nothing to recommend it. Several years of getting gloomier and gloomier then forgetting things whilst living in a home where you had to breathe in the scent of killer mountain-pine bleach all day. No. He’d stay ten.

“But Mum, she recognised Skanker.”

“It’s what they call a lucid phase,” said Mum driving on.

Kevin thought for a minute.

“Pardon?”

“Lucid – it means clear. People with Gran’s illness sometimes have a few clear moments. It means nothing.”

Means nothing? Skanker bristled in the back seat. As half of the team on this breakthrough, Kevin could tell that he was getting pretty annoyed about Mum’s lack of faith too.

“I told you I'd be able to help her. She knew his name and everything.”

“Today,” said Mum, going dangerously white. “She knew him today Kevin, that’s all.”

They finally pulled up outside the house and Mum wrenched on the handbrake and turned to face him. “Look love, I know you mean well, but you just don’t understand what you’re talking about. Gran’s very ill, OK?”

“But -”

“No buts, Kevin. Gran hasn’t got a cold or something, you know. She can’t lie in bed for a week and then get up better.”

Well of course Kevin knew that. Gran lying in bed had never been part of his plan. Mum ran her hands through her hair. It sprang out like a tired toothbrush.

“Gran will just forget more and more things and then, and then,”

And then something horrible happened.

Mum’s voice went whispery.

Her eyes went glassy.

She started to cry.

Kevin touched her shoulder.

“Mum?”

“I’m sorry love. It’s just -,” she stopped and blew her nose hard.

But Kevin understood. Mum already had enough things to worry about. He turned to Skanker, who was watching him with his extra-wrinkly serious face, his bottom lip stuck out thoughtfully. Kevin nodded, agreeing.

They would just have to sort Gran out on their own.

Chapter 7

It would have been much easier, Kevin decided on his fifth attempt at typing Alzheimer's on the computer, if Gran had had flu as he could spell that.

He tried again.

Overhead the floorboards squealed and the whole house pounded with music. Hannah was practising her latest dance routine.

"Prett-eeee," wailed the band, "You're so prett-eeee."

Not only could they not sing, the band must be blind as well. But for once Kevin didn't mind because it was Tuesday and Tuesday was officially Hannah's day to use the computer. But as long as she was dancing, she wouldn't notice if he were on it. Besides, Mum was right. He needed to know more about Alzheimer's.

Kevin read the screen.

"The person with Alzheimer's forgets recent things, muddles up words, and is not sure where they are or what day it is."

Kevin made a list.

Gran would need a pad to jot things in, a dictionary, a map and one of those calendars where you tore off the days.

He scrolled down to the next symptom.

"The person with Alzheimer's may wander around for hours."

Like Kissy Annie. But not like Gran.

"They may become rude when confused."

Like Ted. But not like Gran.

“They cannot recognise friends and family.”

Kevin read the symptom out loud to Skanker.

Skanker, who had been snoozing, because dogs helping in the fight against Alzheimer’s were bound to get tired, grizzled loudly, pointing out that that wasn’t Gran either, as he had clearly proved today in the car park. Kevin rubbed Skanker’s nubby head. Gran would never forget her own grandson. Not his Gran. Things were going to be all right.

He felt happiness surge up inside him. He’d only been on the internet for five minutes and he’d already discovered that Gran wasn’t nearly as ill as the other old people at Rosewell.

He scanned down the page to the section headed “Helping someone with Alzheimer’s.”

“Spending time with the person with Alzheimer’s is very important,” he read.

“Share simple tasks. Fold laundry.”

Kevin had a vision of the laundry at Rosewell. Thirty old people’s socks, tights, sheets, towels and underpants rose up before him, like an indoor snow slope. He mentally ruled it out. It might help Gran’s Alzheimer’s, but that wouldn’t be much use when her arms fell off.

He read on.

Share a favourite story.

That was worth a try. Gran might like “Archie the Spider from Outer Space” if he let her hold the big rubber spider that came with the book. He added it to his list.

Bake a cake.

Gran wasn’t allowed into the kitchen.

Feed the ducks.

Nor out to the park without a grown up.

Dress up as a famous person from history.

They had to be kidding.

He was so busy considering the next one, “*decorate a marrow*”, that he didn’t notice the music stop. Or the footsteps pounding down the stairs. Or the door open.

“What are you doing?”

Hannah stood in the room, dressed in a long fluffy pink sweater, thick black leggings and boots. She looked like a blow-dried sheep.

“I was just - ”

“It’s my day,” said Hannah. “You’re on the computer on my day.”

“But you were dancing.”

“So? You still shouldn’t be playing your games on it.”

She walked around and looked over his shoulder at the screen.

“*Helping someone with Alzheimer’s*,” she read, puzzled.

Kevin waited for the explosion but there wasn’t one. Probably because she was stuck on how many r’s you needed to spell “Kevin’s death warrant”.

“*People with Alzheimer’s love company*,” she read.

“It’s true,” said Kevin, summoning up his courage. “I’ve been reading about it. You should go and see Gran.”

Hannah shook her head. “No way!”

“But it’s been ages Hannah, and she loves visitors”

Even horrible ones.

“I don’t want to,” said Hannah, but Kevin noticed that her voice wasn’t glass-

hard as usual.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s so muddled. She doesn’t know things.”

“What things?”

“All sorts of things like when her birthday is or who’s the prime minister.”

Kevin thought back. It hadn’t said anything about prime ministers on the symptoms page. He added prime minister’s photo to his list.

Hannah watched him and shrugged. “She’s just not our Gran anymore.”

“Yes she is,” said Kevin. “And I’ll prove it.”

“Oh yeah, Mum told me how pleased you were when Gran recognized the old fleabag,” she said.

“He’s not an old fleabag,” said Kevin. He patted Skanker’s side. Not since he’d had those tablets from the vet anyway, but he couldn’t say that, not with Skanker listening. “Anyway, it means that Gran’s getting better.”

“You reckon?”

“Yes. I’m going to help her.”

“Help her?” said Hannah, “And how does a ten-year-old doofus help someone with Alzheimer’s?”

Kevin drew himself up in his chair.

“Actually, I’m doing the research now,” he said.

Hannah rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Really? And I don’t suppose anyone’s ever told you it’s the doctors who find the answers, not ten-year old kids?”

Kevin said nothing.

“So if you’re serious, you’ll also need to get a medical degree before the end of half term.” She walked across of the room. “Studying on your computer nights of course. Not mine.”

She closed the door behind her.

Kevin stared.

He wasn’t sure which was the most amazing. The fact that Hannah hadn’t killed him, or that she had come up with a good idea.

Doctors.

He hadn’t thought of that. But Hannah was right.

A degree in medicine was exactly what he needed.

**

Kevin watched Dr Barker emerge from the surgery, tired and dishevelled, his balding head gleaming in the glow of the lamp posts around the car park.

“Doctor Barker?”

Doctor Barker smiled, reaching into his overcoat pocket for his keys.

“Yes?”

“My name’s Kevin. I need some advice.”

“Appointments start at nine tomorrow morning.”

Dr Barker walked to his car and slotted the key in the lock.

“It’s urgent.”

Dr Barker frowned. He set down his tattered briefcase. “Come here then, under the light,” he said. Kevin stepped closer and Dr Barker peered down at him through silver-rimmed glasses. “Hmm. What appears to be the problem?”

“Alzheimer’s” said Kevin.

The doctor took off his glasses. “Aren’t you a little young?”

“It’s not mine. It’s my gran’s.”

“Ah, I see. So why are you here?”

Honestly. Weren’t doctors supposed to be clever?

“Because I want Gran to get better and I need some help.”

“Help?”

“Like a cure.”

The doctor chuckled and shook his head. “If I had a cure, young man, I wouldn’t be working at this little surgery. I’d have made a fortune. I’d be driving the sunny coast roads of Monte Carlo in a silver sports car, with a gorgeous young woman in a small bikini, um, I mean -”

Kevin folded his hands and waited for the doctor to go back to his normal colour.

“So where can I get a cure?” said Kevin.

“From the people who do research in hospitals. One day.”

“Are there some at Wetherby General?” said Kevin. He reached into his pocket, feeling for loose coins, wondering if he had enough for his bus fare.

“There’s no point haring off there now,” said the doctor, opening his car door.

“Alzheimer’s is one of medicine’s puzzles, it’ll take time to find a cure.”

Time?

There were only four days till the end of half term. He looked at the doctor’s glum mouth and saggy eyes and realised that the problem with doctors was that by the time they had qualified they had already turned into gloomy grown ups.

“But she’s starting to recover,” said Kevin.

“Hmm,” said the doctor.

Kevin wished Skanker were there too because he was enthusiastic and would ruff in support and stick out his lower lip, waiting for a proper answer. And bitten the doctor’s ankle if he carried on being so miserable.

“She’s starting to remember things that happened recently.”

“Hmm,” said the doctor again.

“Recently,” said Kevin importantly, just in case the doctor had missed it whilst he was humming, “and that’s not what’s supposed to happen with Alzheimer’s, is it?”

The doctor rubbed his chin with his hand, looking hard at Kevin.

“You’re very fond of your gran, aren’t you Kevin?”

Kevin nodded.

“How long has she been ill?”

“She’s been at Rosewell for a few months. But she shouldn’t be. She’s not nearly as ill as the others, you know. She just wants to come home. I reckon with my help she can, that’s why I’ve come to you for advice.”

“I see.”

The doctor’s face was going pink and Kevin hoped he wasn’t thinking about the woman in the bikini again.

Finally he spoke.

“OK. I can see that it means a lot to you. In that case, perhaps there are some things that you can do.”

**

“I don’t think a dog has ever made medical history before,” said Kevin, two days

later, as Skanker turned circles in the back garden.

The doctor had told Kevin about something special.

“It’s called Immersion Therapy.” Kevin paused. “Im-mer-shun,” he said more slowly, because it was a big word for a dog. Skanker furrowed his brow, listening. “He didn’t say it would totally cure Gran,” said Kevin. “But as we know, that’s just the way doctors are. Gloomy.”

The doctor said it was important to use things to bring back Gran’s old memories. So Kevin’d spent yesterday up in the attic, hunting through the boxes of things that Mum had kept from Gran’s old house, collecting photographs and pictures and letters, bundles of old clothes she used to wear, bottles of perfume and jewellery. He rubbed Skanker’s velvety head.

“But we’ve got something better than all that to remind Gran, haven’t we? You’re going to be very important.”

Kevin stuffed Gran’s favourite ladybird brooch into his rucksack while Skanker watched, tilting his head from side to side. “You’re going to make medical history, boy.” Skanker slapped his lips together. “Immersion. Got it?” Skanker harrumphed. “I suppose it’s called that because you flood the old person with memories. So they’re immersed like when the water comes up round you in the bath-”

Skanker bolted, jowls and slobber streaming backwards, into the bushes.

“No, boy! Not a bath for you!”

The bush shook like a giant green jelly. Kevin dropped down onto his hands and knees and peered through the spindly branches. A pair of brown, bloodshot eyes looked back.

“It’s just a technical term,” said Kevin.

But Skanker wouldn’t budge. Even after Kevin collected a box of dog biscuits from the kitchen and waved a lamb chop-flavoured one, Skanker’s favourite, between the branches he still wouldn’t move.

“C’mon, boy!” he coaxed.

The bush harrumphed. Kevin sighed and pulled up his hood then crawled in after him, scratched and poked by the branches, reaching for Skanker’s collar. Trying to keep his voice calm and promising no more baths ever when they were famous as medical pioneers he started to pull. He was half-in and half-out of the bush, his legs up in the air, his chin on the ground, when he heard the first snigger.

“What’s with the shrub-diving?” said a thin spiteful voice.

Kevin swam backwards through the branches, still pulling Skanker’s collar and scrambled out. Dreadful was standing in the garden beside Hannah.

“You’re going out?” said Hannah, only it didn’t sound like a question. Kevin heard a slow swish of branches behind him and Skanker skulked out in a show of doggy solidarity.

“We’ve got things to do, yes,” said Kevin, rubbing Skanker’s head.

“Good,” said Hannah. “Because Dreena and me are going to have a girls’ afternoon with Mum. We thought she needed some cheering up, after everything.” Everything meaning his fight with Dave Riley, no doubt. And the phone call from Mr Henderson. And the way Mum worried about his project on Gran, even though Kevin had explained how it was going to work. He shrugged, picking a few snaps of twig from Skanker’s back.

“Cool,” he said. “We were just going anyway.”

He picked up his bulging rucksack, now filled with three photo albums, two framed pictures of Skanker as a puppy, a photo of Gran at her house in Meadow Street, her best hat - though he'd had to squash it down a bit - two old dresses and a photo of the prime minister, and led Skanker out of the garden, trying to ignore the giggles behind him.

Chapter 8

Twenty minutes later, Kevin thanked the bus-driver as he and Skanker stepped down onto the pavement. After all, she had been very patient, first waiting while Skanker checked everyone's shopping bags and crotches before sitting down, and then not minding when he bounced down the aisle, howling as the fire engine screamed past. Skanker loved sirens and he loved a good sing. Now standing in the middle of Rosewell's rhododendrons, Kevin was reminded that he also loved tracking down lost chips.

"Remember," said Kevin, "You're not allowed in, so no-one must see you."

Skanker tugged harder on the lead while Kevin dug his heels into the mud and peered through the leaves, trying to count the windows to Gran's room. Branches slapped him in the face as Skanker ploughed on and Kevin prayed that there were no squirrels around because if Skanker saw one, they would break the land water-skiing record through the shrub border.

"Luckily, Gran's bedroom is nearly at the end of the corridor, miles away from the care workers' room, so we should be OK."

Skanker and Kevin hurried to the edge of the car park, where Kevin checked that no one was looking, before they darted across it and hotched down, SAS-style, to creep along the lawn to Gran's window.

"This is the one," said Kevin.

Skanker flopped down, flattening a bed of pansies and Kevin knotted his lead around one of the stumpy black lampposts.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes to let you through that window.”

Skanker looked up dismally, wearing his squashed cabbage face.

“OK,” said Kevin, “I know it looks a bit narrow from here, but don’t worry, I’ll be pulling you through.”

Skanker didn’t look any happier.

“You’ll be fine,” said Kevin.

**

As Kevin walked up the main corridor, he could hear music echoing from the Primrose Lounge. Someone was singing a glum song about losing everything he’d ever owned. Kevin looked around the doorway.

A chubby man in a sparkly red jacket and bow tie was sitting on stool at the front of the room, singing into a microphone. He was holding a ventriloquist’s dummy, dressed in exactly the same way as him. They both swayed in time to the music, the dummy’s little wooden mouth clacking up and down.

“I who have guffin,” sang the dummy, his polished head swivelled from side to side.

Around them, the old people sat in a big circle. Some of them had nodded off. But not Gran. She was sitting on the opposite side, mining her handbag.

“It’s alright. You can go in.”

The voice made Kevin jump and he turned round to see a care worker carrying a tray of plastic mugs.

“Who’s he?” said Kevin.

“Charlie Chuckles,” smiled the woman. “They like to have entertainers in to cheer the old people up.”

Cheer them up? Charlie Chuckles began singing about losing the love of his life. Kevin looked around the room as the song became slower and sadder. Eyes glazed, jaws dropped, shoulders sagged. Even the budgie in the cage by the window stopped swinging and stared miserably into his little mirror. The song finally moaned to a halt.

“What did you think of that one Mr Simpson?” said Charlie Chuckles.

“Grilliant” said the dummy.

“Rubbish!” bellowed Ted, reaching for his walking stick, propped up against the next chair, and flinging it across the floor. A care worker hurried to pick it up, frowned at him and shook her head.

She turned to Charlie. “How about ‘I do like to be beside the seaside’?” she said. “Everyone likes that one. It’s nice and jolly.”

“I don’t do that one,” said Charlie. He changed the music, knelt down and began to sing in a low, mournful voice: “When my dog Shep died...”

Kevin was relieved that Skanker wasn’t around to hear this one. He stepped into the room and made his way to the empty seat next to Gran and sat down. The care worker opposite blew her nose loudly and dabbed her eyes.

“What do you think Mr Simpson?” said Charlie, half way through the song.

“That dog was ny gest friend,” chimed the dummy, looking back up at him.

Kissy Annie slapped into the room, cuddling and kissing a rag doll. She waved its arm to Mr Simpson who pointedly ignored her and stuck his sharp wooden nose in the air. The music changed.

“I wish I was travelling again!” sang Charlie.

So did Kevin.

An old lady with copper-coloured hair stood up and began to turn wobbly circles on her own, sashaying into the middle of the room with an imaginary partner.

“Sit down you silly old moo,” boomed Ted.

“Ted!” said the red-eyed care worker.

Another old lady, with tight grey curls and big glasses, stood up and walked around the room, running her finger along the windowsill, muttering about dust.

“Disgusting,” she muttered, eyeing Kevin sharply. “And teacher's coming Today.”

Gran looked at Kevin, her eyes clear and bright.

“Can we go home now?” she said.

“Soon,” he said.

Just as soon as the Immersion Therapy worked.

**

“I’ve brought you some things,” said Kevin, helping Gran into the easy chair in her own room. All the old people at Rosewell had a bedroom with their name and photograph stuck on the door. Gran looked different in her picture, chubbier and happier. Still, with his help, she’d soon look like that again.

Her room was bright and neat with a single bed edged with guardrails, a small wardrobe and, in a tiny side room, a toilet and sink. Gran sat on the edge of the bed and held her open bag out towards him. It brimmed with crunched up pieces of paper. He picked one out, unravelled it and read, “8 Meadow Street, Wetherby,” written in shaky handwriting. The next piece of paper said the same thing. And so

did the one after that. The fourth said 'Jean Higgins'.

Gran laid her hand on his arm, checked there was no one listening and looked hard into his eyes.

"I do it to get better," she said quietly.

Kevin felt his heart go cold as her fingers tightened on his arm and she looked around her before carrying on in a whisper.

"I don't like it here, you know."

For a moment Kevin couldn't speak. There was a lump in his throat, like the time he'd accidentally swallowed one of Hannah's gobstoppers because he thought he'd heard her come back into the house.

"I know, Gran," he said finally. "That's why I'm going to help you. Right? I've already been to the doctor for advice and it's easy. All you have to do is to take a look through the things I've brought and start remembering. We'll do it together, with Skanks, OK?"

Gran squeezed Kevin's hand, nodding as he opened the photo album.

"You remember our day at Weston?" he said, pointing to the first picture.

A movement outside the window caught his eye. It was her again, the girl in black, striding across the car park towards the front door, her ragged black skirt tangling around her legs, her hands shoved into the pockets of her black army coat. What was she was doing here? Didn't she belong in some draughty castle, where she could walk around the turrets all day scaring the ravens? Kevin turned back to Gran who was chuckling softly.

"Diana," she said, "My sister."

Kevin wondered if he'd missed a picture. He looked down at the photo and

his heart sank. It was a picture of Mum.

“That’s Karen, your daughter,” said Kevin firmly. “Maybe you need your glasses on?”

Gran peered harder.

“Karen?”

It must be her eyes, thought Kevin. Or maybe Gran’s sister did look like Mum once? After all, families were supposed to look like one another, weren’t they? That’s why Mum was always telling him he had his uncle’s freckles, although no-one had explained why Hannah looked like a candyfloss-coloured Yeti.

Gran held the album closer.

There was still one person who couldn’t be confused with anyone. Kevin opened the window.

“C’mon boy! H’up!”

Skanker didn’t move except to open one eye and scrumple up his face so that he looked like a pile of wet washing. He muttered softly and pretended to take an interest in a nearby rose bush.

“It’s OK,” said Kevin, unwrapping his lead from the post and tugging on it. “The window’s big enough really.”

He leant out over the sill, grabbing hold of Skanker’s collar and stub of a tail and began hauling him up. Skanker scrabbled at the window, frantically paddling the air, stopping only each time he was close enough to slobber a lick on Kevin’s cheek. The world’s first dog ballet, thought Kevin miserably, wondering if there were any nurses at Rosewell who could fix two dislocated arms and a slipped disc without asking any questions. He remembered seeing a couple of wheelchairs parked in the

corridor outside. They could have one each if things went wrong.

“Well, look who’s here,” wheezed Kevin as Skanker finally landed on the lino.

Gran’s face lit up.

“Skanker! What a big dog you are now,” she said, rubbing his ears.

“Do you remember him as a puppy then?”

“Oh yes,” said Gran. “He was like a little bag of sugar on legs.”

Now he was more like a sofa on legs thought Kevin, but even his suspected hernia couldn’t stop the pride he felt fluttering up in his chest. If only he’d brought a camera. Their second breakthrough. He could have recorded the moment, shown the photograph to Miss Munro: Skanker lapping proudly at Gran’s hand as she beamed down at him, her memory flooding back. His project points would double, triple. He sighed blissfully. Immersion therapy was brilliant.

At that moment, a sharp breeze sliced through the room and flipped open the door to reveal Rosie Montezuma Tiddles Doris Baloo sitting in the corridor, washing her unmentionables.

Kevin froze.

Rosie stopped, mid-lick, locking eyes with Skanker, her fur rising like an electrocuted doormat.

“Down!” shouted Kevin, just missing Skanker’s collar as he sailed through the air, bounced off the bed and landed with a thud on the lino. Kevin watched horrified as Rosie Montezuma Tiddles Doris Baloo rocketed up the curtains in a blur of fur, claws and fury and Skanker skidded out into the corridor, his paws skittering over the lino, twisting and sliding, desperately trying to claw to a stop as he doggy ice-skated

backwards out of view.

There was a scream.

And a thud.

And the sound that lots of plastic plates make when they all clatter onto the floor and rattle round together. Kevin peered around the doorframe. A care worker was lying on the floor covered in shepherd's pie, carrots and green beans. Clods of meat and potato speckled her uniform and dribbled down her face, while gravy ran down the walls in streaks and pooled in greasy puddles over the floor. Skanker began lapping it up enthusiastically.

"What on earth is going on?"

Kevin watched, his heart somewhere around his knees, as a frosty-faced woman in an equally frosty white uniform as starched as her face, appeared around the corner. She was tall and slim, with fierce grey eyes and a thin, angry mouth.

Kevin shrank back into Gran's room, looking round desperately for somewhere to hide. He couldn't slide under the bed because its guardrails ran down to the floor, the curtains only came down to the windowsill and if he got into the wardrobe, he'd probably be gassed by mothballs.

"Who is responsible for this?" said the woman. Kevin peeped around the doorframe as the woman tucked a thick curl of light-blond hair behind her ear, and looked straight at him.

"Are we going home now?" said Gran.

"No, Jean," said Matron, walking into the room. "But this grandson of yours may well be."

She put her face close to his. This close up, her eyes were as bloodshot as

Skanker's, she ought to relax more, after all nursing could be stressful, but Kevin decided against pointing it out. She spoke slowly, leaving big gaps between the words.

"Is. He. Yours?"

Kevin took a deep breath.

"No, Matron, he's mine."

It was a girl's voice. Matron stepped out of the room and Kevin followed her.

"Yours, Alice?" said Matron.

Kevin felt his jaw drop. It was the girl in black. What was she doing, taking the blame? Behind her, the care worker furiously pulled carrots out of her hair whilst batting Skanker off. Alice knelt down beside her, her skirt stuck out like dishevelled feathers across the floor. She looked like a crow in a rainstorm.

Matron's eyes glittered. "Surely you of all people know better than to bring animals into the home?"

Alice helped the care worker to her feet, brushing the remaining lumps of potato off her uniform and stretched up to unhook Rosie who was busy shredding the curtains.

"Yes and I'm sorry, Matron." She looked hard at Kevin. "It was a really stupid thing to do."

"Just look at the mess," said Matron, pointing a plump foot at a nearby gravy puddle.

Skanker, who was listening carefully, padded over to clean it up. Alice opened the corridor window and set Rosie down outside in the courtyard.

“Don’t worry Matron. We’ll sort it out.”

She opened a nearby cupboard, pulled out a bucket and mop and thrust the bucket at Kevin. “Fill this up in the kitchen at the end.”

Matron glared suspiciously at Kevin.

“Now,” said Alice and prodded him hard with the bucket.

“Mary,” said Matron, turning to the care-worker, “if you’re alright, you can take Jean back to the Primrose Lounge.”

Gran stood huddled against the wall.

“Time to go back and listen to our entertainer, Jean!” said Matron, in a loud voice, although Gran was standing right next to her.

Kevin trudged slowly down to the kitchen. None of this had been part of his plan and for a moment, he hesitated. Maybe he should try to explain to Matron about the Immersion Therapy? But since it was only the care worker and Skanker who were immersed and then in shepherd’s pie, it probably wouldn’t help. He splashed warm water into the bucket. Besides, Matron’s face was already like an anteater with a pine cone stuck up its snout, so telling her about immersion therapy might make her worse, because when it did work, she’d be out of a job. He walked back out into the corridor, deserted now, except for Alice, black and jagged against the bright paintwork, who was holding out each plate in turn for Skanker to lick clean.

“Thank you for helping us,” said Kevin.

“I didn’t do it for you,” she said simply, her dark eyes glittering like beetles in the rain. “I did it for your Gran. She lit up last time you visited, I saw you both, out in the corridor. If you get banned she’ll be miserable.”

“Well, thank you anyway,” said Kevin, thinly.

Alice looked up at him, then sank the mop into the water and began wiping the floor.

“Well, it’s not her fault you’re stupid,” she said.

“Stupid? It wasn’t my idea. It was the doctor’s.”

“The doctor’s?”

“He told me to use my intelligence.”

“I see,” said Alice witheringly.

“As a matter of fact,” said Kevin, “he said that showing Gran things from the past would make her remember.”

Alice picked Skanker’s white hairs from her skirt, held them out in front of her and let go, watching them float down one by one. She put the bucket and mop on one side and began drying the floor with paper towels.

“And you really think he meant the dog?”

“He was helping her get better,” said Kevin.

Alice looked hard at Kevin.

“Get better?”

Alice’s eyes were bright as a blackbird’s. This is what it’s like to be a worm, thought Kevin, coming face to face with what’s going to eat you, but without the fun living-in-squishy mud bit first. Skanker nudged the back of Kevin’s knees, pushing him to stick up for himself.

“Yes,” he said, “We are helping her. It’s called Immersion Therapy.”

He snapped on Skanker’s lead and walked him back into Gran’s bedroom, uncomfortably aware that Alice was following him. He was grateful that she’d helped

Gran but all the same, he had things to do and he wished she would go back to Transylvania. He turned his back to her and upended his rucksack on the bed. Alice walked over and sat down in the easy chair.

“Your Gran into politics then?” said Alice, picking up the picture of the Prime Minister.

Kevin plucked it from her hand and set it back down.

“No. It’s to remind her of what else is going on. For when she comes out.”

Alice opened her mouth to say something but then changed her mind. Good He didn’t want any more of her advice. The world was already full of negative people and what could you expect from someone who dressed for a funeral every day? Alice picked up the next picture. “Where’s that?”

She held up the photograph of Gran’s house.

“It’s where my Gran used to live, in Meadow Street.”

“I know Meadow Street. I live quite near there, on Montford Avenue.”

Montford Avenue was a road of mansions, tall gabled houses that sprawled in gigantic leafy gardens. It was the place Mum always said she would move to when she won the lottery. Kevin looked at Alice, her layers of black, her heavy boots, her black-lipsticked scowl and tried to imagine her in one of those houses, stomping through its big posh rooms, rooms probably stuffed out with antiques and carpet that came up to your ankles. She must bash around like a trapped bat.

“Don’t your parents mind you coming here?” he said.

Alice rubbed her black fingernails against her skirt, and held her hand out to admire.

“Hardly. They’re glad to have me out of the way. That way they can get

ready for their next deadly dinner party.”

Her voice was as hard and sour as pear drops.

“You don’t get on with them?”

“Well done, Professor,” said Alice. “Let’s just say we have different interests. Like, if I were at home now, in the holidays, I’d be dragged out riding with my mum. Trotting round country lanes with a dumb animal isn’t my idea of fun.”

“Horses aren’t dumb,” said Kevin.

“I wasn’t talking about the horse.”

Kevin felt his mouth snap shut. He looked down at Skanker who was nodding in agreement. After all, they knew about living with difficult people too, didn’t they, having Hannah in the house? He padded over and sank his face into Alice’s lap, looking up sympathetically with his big brown eyes. Kevin felt a pang of annoyance shoot through him. Skanker had chosen a fine time to join the Dark Side. Still, he supposed it had been a trying day and Alice probably still smelt of cat and gravy.

He finished laying out the things he had brought for Gran and began to write her a note.

“Dear Gran”

“What are you doing?” said Alice.

Honestly, this girl was annoying.

“I’m leaving Gran a note, for when I come back tomorrow.”

“With the dog?”

“Of course with Skanker. He’s helping me. Right, I need to think.”

“Cool,” said Alice and carried on watching him.

Kevin took a deep breath. This was all he needed. The bride of Frankenstein

suddenly fascinated by someone writing a note.

“You don’t spell Thursday like that,” said Alice. “It’s got an R in it.”

Kevin put in the R.

“And no Z,” she added.

“Thank you.”

Alice looked over his shoulder and read the note out loud.

“Dear Gran,

Have a look at these while I am gone. They will help you remember more things. I will be back at the weekend.

Love from Kevin.

PS. Today is Thursday. See calendar.”

“Then you’d better put these out too,” said Alice, rummaging into Gran’s paper-filled handbag for her glasses. The bag was still lying on the floor where Gran had left it, which was odd, thought Kevin. She never usually left her bag behind, but then she hadn’t expected to be suddenly frog-marched back to the Primrose Lounge.

“Are you going now?” said Alice, standing up and stretching, the long black ribbons of her cardigan hanging in snaggles.

“I suppose so. I don’t think I’d better risk seeing Matron again, especially with Skanks. I’m not sure she believed you.”

Alice shrugged. “He’s a neat dog.”

“Thanks.”

He wanted to point out that Skanker had more than just good looks, that he had brains too, and was in fact half of the team helping Gran. Then he thought about the carrots and gravy splattered up the wall and changed his mind.

“He gets a bit carried away sometimes,” said Kevin. “Doesn’t always think things through properly.”

“Hmm,” said Alice. “Well, they do say dogs take after their owners, don’t they?”

Kevin tugged on Skanker’s lead and turned back to Alice. “Why do you come here? Is it just to get away from your parents?”

Alice shook her head. “Nah. Though that is an added bonus. D’you really want to know?”

Kevin nodded.

“Then I’ll show you.”

**

Chapter 9

Kevin's heart sank as Alice led them back down the corridor towards the Primrose Lounge. Charlie Chuckles was still singing and there was no way that Kevin and Skanker would be able to pass the doorway without disguises, although Skanker never much liked his dog-sunglasses because the elastic made his head sore. Kevin was relieved when he saw Alice walk into the next room.

"I don't believe it!" she said, disappearing into darkness. "They've pulled the curtains again!"

She yanked the curtains apart and Kevin's heart jumped as dim daylight flooded the room.

An old man, shrunken and trembling, was sitting in a wheelchair looking straight at him. His face was yellowish and hollowed, more like a half-melted candle than a real person, and his eyes were pale and filmy.

"This is Alistair, my grandfather," said Alice, rubbing the old man's bony shoulders.

"Hello," said Kevin.

The old man didn't move. Skanker hesitated in the doorway, his nose twitching and Kevin noticed that there was a funny smell in here, musty and sour beneath the bleach fumes. Skanker crouched, refusing to budge and Kevin hoped that the old man hadn't noticed. It wasn't like Skanker to be rude. He tied his lead to the door handle and smiled at the old man, who stared back stonily, his face unmoving.

"Alistair's forgotten how to smile," said Alice, straightening the tartan rug over the old man's stick-thin knees.

Forgotten how to smile? How could anyone forget how to smile? Apart from Alice, that was.

“He must enjoy your visits, though?” said Kevin.

After all, with someone who never smiled it must be hard to tell.

“Yes. He does.” She bit down her thumb nail. “I’m sure he does, although he doesn’t know who I am any more.”

“Doesn’t he?”

Alice looked away. “It’s just a part of the illness, that’s all.”

Pity flooded Kevin’s chest, gushing in like the water when he filled the car-washing bucket for Mum. He could feel it, pounding around inside him, squashing his heart in his chest like the car sponge against the bucket’s sides. Alice was being so brave. He didn’t know what he would do if Gran didn’t recognise him. Which was OK because he was sure it would never happen.

“He must have it really badly,” said Kevin, finally.

“Sorry?”

“Your granddad,” said Kevin, lowering his voice. It seemed rude to talk about Alistair when he was sitting there right in front of them. “Alzheimer’s. He must have a really bad dose.”

Alice ran her long pale fingers through her hair. “What are you on about?”

“Just that I’m sorry,” said Kevin.

He wished he hadn’t said anything. He didn’t like the way Alice was looking at him. It made him feel transparent, as though she could hold him up to the light and see straight through.

“Sorry? About what? Having a really bad dose of Alzheimer’s? Kevin, don’t

be stupid. You don't get it bad. You just get it. End of story."

End of story?

Well, that just showed what she knew about the subject. Still, it wasn't her fault. After all, she hadn't benefited from extensive internet research and a professional man-to-man conversation with Dr Barker.

She kicked the wheelchair brake off and pushed the chair to the window to a silver telescope that Kevin hadn't noticed before, settling at the end of it like a giant black moth.

Outside it was dark.

"Alistair's just had Alzheimer's longer than the others," she said. "It's what happens."

Kevin wished that he had been around to help earlier. But, thinking about it, he would still have been in the infants' school and Mum wouldn't have let him come.

"They think you like it dark in here to nap, don't they Alistair?" said Alice, leaning over the chair. "But I know you don't. Let's have a look at the moon." She turned to Kevin. "Alistair used to be an astronomer."

Kevin looked around the room properly. The walls were covered with star charts, pictures of planets and tables of numbers. Beneath them, bookcases bulged with books on astronomy. Kevin pulled one out, hoping for a picture of a rocket or, better still, an alien. But the book was hopeless, filled with page after page of calculations. Sums were OK, in fact he loved maths, but these sums had more letters than numbers and loads of funny squiggles.

"Does he read these much?" said Kevin.

“No,” said Alice coolly, “But he did write them.”

Kevin stared. The old man didn't look strong enough to hold a pencil now. Alice pointed at the wall, at a photograph of two men in black suits.

“And that's a photo of him at the BBC, giving the Christmas lectures on the telly. He was a real mega-brain.”

Alistair dribbled onto his shirt. He wasn't looking at the charts or the photo or the books or the telescope. He was staring at the floor.

A faint panic rippled up Kevin's ribcage.

“Did you bring all these things in?” he said.

Alice nodded, still at the telescope. “Uh huh. I suppose I was doing a bit of your, what-did-you-call-it? Immersion Therapy.”

So why hadn't it worked?

“Would you believe it,” said Alice. “They've moved the telescope again and now the lens is all smeary. Honestly, it's like they try to be annoying sometimes. Kevin, there's a lens cloth in the wardrobe next to you. Bring it over.”

Kevin found the lens cloth and stumbled around the bed, edging behind the wheelchair. Alice rubbed the lens clear.

“Take a look,” she said.

Kevin pushed his face to the eyepiece. This was Alistair's telescope, he thought, it had been so important to him. It was the one thing he ought to remember, to take care of, to sit and look through. Kevin tightened his grip on the telescope, now uncomfortably aware of the old man's breath brushing against his hand, damp and clammy and tried hard to focus on the moon. It was remote and clouded, just a sliver of cold white in the dusk.

“Are you all right?” said Alice.

Kevin nodded. After all, pioneers didn’t panic. Not even when faced with results that were at first a bit difficult to explain. He told himself to breathe deeply.

In.

There must be a reason why Alice’s Immersion Therapy hadn’t worked.

Out.

She’d probably done it wrong. That was it. You must have to smile as well.

In.

But anyone could see the room was bulging with the old man’s stuff.

Out.

So? It *was* working with Gran.

In.

Or at least it would have, but for the world’s most annoying cat.

Out.

Wouldn’t it?

Charlie Chuckles’ singing grew louder in the room and made it difficult to have scientific thoughts.

“Let me go!” chimed Charlie.

“I wish they would,” said Alice, “and change the number combination on the doors. I don’t know where they dredge these guys up from Alistair, but he needs binging out on some decrepit old cruise ship. Then Mum and Dad could listen to him drone on instead.”

Kevin drew away from the telescope.

“Still, he’s survived Matron,” Alice went on. “So he’s probably bomb-proof.”

Kevin's brain thumped.

Matron.

She could mash Charlie Chuckles and turn Mr Simpson to firewood without breaking a sweat.

So what was it like for Gran?

And Alistair?

Kevin turned to look out at the car park, remembering how careful he'd had to be to smuggle Skanker in. What sort of place banned ground-breaking dogs? Anger fizzed up in him like water on sherbet. And locked old people in, forcing them to listen to Charlie Chuckles? Made dinners that were so mushy you could suck them up with a straw? Where even the cat was neurotic, having more names than a celebrity baby and likely to shred a curtain in seconds?

Kevin looked across at Alice who was lowering the telescope stand and positioning Alistair close enough to look.

He took a deep breath.

This was important.

"Alice, how long has your granddad been here?"

"Five years," she said.

Proof, thought Kevin.

Rosewell had to be the problem. Rosewell had to be why Alistair had become worse even though Alice had used Immersion Therapy. Which meant that there was no way that their plan was going to work properly here. Not while Gran was being fed liquidized carrots and breathing in clouds of bleach fumes with Matron popping up like a mad jack-in-the-box round every corner. It was like those polar bears Miss

Munro had told them about once. The ones at the zoo who paced round and round and round all day in snowless enclosures, stressed out until they went mad with boredom. That was happening here. Captive old people, wandering endless corridors all day, out of their natural habitats of tinned rice pudding, gallons of tea and those frothy lace things Gran used to have on the back of the armchairs, until they went wonky as the zoo polar bears and gave up.

There ought to be a television documentary about it. He'd phone the telly company as soon as he got home. And find the suit Mum made him wear to weddings so that he could present the programme.

No, forget that. He had to sort Gran out first. He watched as Alice slid the telescope down its stand, bringing it closer to her grandfather's face, only for the old man's head to slump hopelessly onto his chest.

He had to get Gran out quickly. Somewhere that wasn't Rosewell, somewhere that the immersion therapy could work properly, somewhere where she'd be able to start remembering.

Kevin felt his ribs tighten and told himself to calm down. It was OK. He could do it.

They still had some half-term left.

**

Chapter 10

Standing at a bus stop in the rain, Kevin knew, was not typical of groundbreaking scientists, but at least it gave him and Skanker time to think about what to do next.

“The thing is, Skanks,” said Kevin, as the thin sleety rain slid down his back, “Rosewell doesn’t mind the old people going out if someone responsible takes them. But after what happened today...”

Skanker gruffed, probably embarrassed that he’d lost them their professional standing with Matron. But every pioneer had problems, and problems, as Miss Munro said, were only opportunities with grumpy faces. Which clearly made Matron a major opportunity.

“It’s OK, boy. She’ll be the one who’s sorry when we cure Alzheimer’s and tell the newspapers how unhelpful she was.”

But Skanker just carried on staring glumly at his reflection in a puddle, tilting his head first one way then the other, as the raindrops splashed and rippled the puddle’s surface.

Kevin bobbed down beside him.

“It’s alright, Skanks,” he whispered. “Honestly. We’re still partners.”

Kevin found that lying flat on his back on the pavement, pinned down by Skanker’s knobbly paws, wasn’t as uncomfortable as he might have predicted, although he could have done without the face wash. Skanker’s tongue was rougher than a sandpaper flannel and his breath still stank of boiled carrots. Kevin struggled to his feet, batting Skanker away whilst picking the soggy leaves from his fleece.

“The thing is, Skanks, Mum’s the only responsible person we know but there’s no

point even asking her to help, is there? Last time we shared a breakthrough with her she burst into tears. So we'll just have to take Gran out on our own."

The bus growled around the corner and Kevin and Skanker stepped on board, smiling weakly at the passengers who leant away as they trudged soggily past, Skanker stopping every so often for a shake.

"Where was I?" said Kevin, sitting on the back seat.

Skanker thumped his rain-speckled head onto Kevin's lap. In the manky yellow light of the bus, his crumpled face was even starting to look like a doctor's, although doctors didn't usually dribble so much on your knees. Kevin rubbed a clear patch in the condensation and watched the orange patches of light melt across wet pavements as the bus rumbled past.

"We'll take her to Meadow Street," said Kevin. "Because Gran's always on about going home isn't she, and the Immersion Therapy would be bound to work totally there."

Skanker muttered thickly.

"No Skanks," sighed Kevin, "we wouldn't be arrested *totally* there too. I'm quite aware that other people live there now, thank you. I'll just let them know we're coming, that's all. Simple, see?"

**

"What do you think?" said Mum, standing at the top of the stairs, as they let themselves back into the house.

"About what?" said Kevin.

"This," said Mum, turning.

She was wearing a fake leopard skin coat, short black skirt and boots.

“Great,” said Kevin thinly.

Skanker padded in, lolling his tongue in disbelief. They had a lot of things to think about and women’s fashion wasn’t one of them.

“Thanks,” said Mum. “They’re Hannah’s really, but I need them for Sunday.”

“What’s happening then?”

“Mum’s got another date,” said Hannah, appearing beside Mum, clapping her hands. “Sunday Lunch at The Speckled Pig with Eddie.”

“Eddie?”

“Her new man from *Sweethearts*. Go for it, Mum!” said Hannah. She linked arms with Mum and Kevin watched as they began to jump up and down together on the landing. Didn’t Mums have to do Mum-things sometimes? Finally she stopped bouncing and looked over the banister at Kevin.

“You are pleased aren’t you, love?”

“Sure, Mum.”

He draped his wet coat on the end of the banister and began to walk towards the sitting room.

“Eddie’s got a good job, you know,” called Mum. “He’s a professional and everything!”

Well, unless he was a professional jail breaker, that wasn’t going to count for much at the moment. Kevin reached down into his rucksack, pulled out Gran’s photo and stood it up next to the computer.

“Escapes,” he said, typing onto google.

Skanker ears shot up like a starched bat’s.

“It’s OK Skanks,” said Kevin, pushing the dog’s ears back flat again. “They don’t send you to prison for stealing your own Gran. Especially when you’re under sixteen.”

He decided not to point out that in doggie-years Skanker was already twenty-one and scanned down the list to a top article about three prisoners who’d been eaten by alligators as they crossed a swamp while escaping from their Florida prison.

Kevin looked at the picture of the smiling alligators, realising with a lurch, that even if they weren’t chasing Gran, she still wasn’t that steady on her feet. Which was another important point.

“We’re going to need a getaway vehicle,” said Kevin.

Skanker buried his nose under his paws. It wasn’t like him to be so glum. The only time he’d seen him like this was when he’d had worms but it couldn’t be that now because he’d had the tablets. No, Skanker’s mood had gone downhill ever since he’d seen Alice’s grandfather. Kevin wasn’t surprised. Seeing Alice’s grandfather had been the first time either of them had realised just how big a job curing Alzheimer’s was.

Kevin clicked down the screen. Five minutes of research later, he’d found out that a man called Harry Houdini could escape from iron chains while hanging upside down off the San Francisco bridge and that a day trip around Alcatraz Prison cost twenty-five dollars with a fish-lunch included.

The next site looked better.

“*The Great Escape*,” read Kevin.

Brilliant. They needed one that would work. The screen filled with a

photograph of a rugged fair-headed man half-smiling, half-scowling astride an old-fashioned motorbike. “*The Great Escape*” seemed to be a film but the motorbike was still a good idea, although obviously he’d need a kids one and with a sidecar for Gran and Skanker.

The door opened softly. Kevin was relieved to see Mum back in her Mum-clothes again.

“I’ve been thinking about your project,” she said. “And I’ve brought you something to help.”

Fantastic. How did Mum know he needed a kids’ motorbike? Then he saw the size of the bag. It was small and made of paper. He peered inside.

“An exercise book?”

“For you to write your project up in,” said Mum with a wide smile. “I thought it’d be useful. Besides, it’ll impress Miss Munro.”

Kevin looked down at the book’s cover, at the writing on the front: thirty-two pages which roughly speaking was about thirty-one-and-a-half more than he needed.

“Thanks, Mum.”

“You don’t mind about Sunday, do you? I know it’s the last day of your holiday and all, but it’s the only time Eddie can make it. And you and I can always do something another time.”

“It’s OK,” said Kevin, knowing that you had to be mature about these things.

“I ‘spect you’ll be busy anyway,” said Mum, tapping the exercise book. She picked up the photo of Gran. “That’s an old one. I remember we took it on holiday. Poole, I think. Yes, that was it. Gran’d just chatted up some tattoo-covered boatman so he’d take us out on a trip round the harbour. He didn’t charge us you know, though your

Gran did go for a sherry with him afterwards. You were just a baby, so you'd not remember."

Mum paused.

Her shoulders sagged.

"And neither would Mum, now," she said, putting the photograph back down beside the computer. "Maybe you could put it in your new book, you know, to show how Gran was back when she was alright?"

Was alright?

Kevin let it pass.

"Mum, I need a kid's motorbike."

"Is that what you're looking at?"

She walked round behind him to look at the computer screen.

"Hey! That's Steve McQueen! Isn't he gorgeous? I think Eddie's a little bit like him. I'll show you the photo of him that *Sweethearts* sent and you can see what you think." She paused. "No."

"No, what?"

"No, the bike. They're too expensive, Kev. I'm sorry. Maybe I'll see for Christmas, off e-bay or something."

Well, that was a great help seeing as how he needed it tomorrow. Kevin's heart sank as he ruled motorbike off his mental list of getaway vehicles, leaving him with a list with nothing on it.

"Tea'll be ready at half six," said Mum.

She rubbed Kevin's damp hair and walked out. He could hear her singing from the kitchen.

“What now, Skanks?”

A loud snore rumbled from under the table.

Terrific.

Kevin wondered if other pioneers in history had had partners like Skanker, the sort who nodded off in the middle of an important debate and still demanded half of your sausages at teatime. But they hadn't. They hadn't because other pioneers hadn't relied on their pet dogs. They had real people to help them.

He watched Skanker's ears ripple as he dreamed, then sighed and turned to Gran's photo. She was still smiling at him, encouraging him, willing him to help her.

He thought again of Alice's granddad, brittle as a twig, quivering in the chair, frail and muddled. It made his brain thump. They couldn't let Rosewell do that to Gran. They had to get her out to fix her.

But how?

Prisoners in films on the telly usually tunnelled out with teaspoons. But even with Skanker, who was a top digger without using a spoon, they didn't have enough time.

They only had one day.

Kevin closed his eyes and thought back to Rosewell's bedrooms and lounges and corridors.

“Skanker! I've got it!”

There was no reply so Kevin hotched down under the table, lifted one of Skanker's ears and loudly announced, "Wheelchair! We saw some in the corridor, remember?"

Skanker opened an eye, muttering. Well, of course, a wheelchair wasn't nearly

as fast as a motorbike, Grumpy had a point. But on the upside it'd cause much less fuss going down Rosewell's corridors, wouldn't it? Which only left telling the people at Meadow Street that they were coming.

Kevin quickly tore the middle pages out of his new exercise book - Mum was right, it was already turning out useful - and began to write a letter.

**

Despite being a dog about to win the Nobel Prize for medicine, Skanker was still finding it hard, on Sunday morning, to focus. He flopped down, furrowing his brow, thumping his head onto his knobbly paws and chewed his flat football..

"You do realise," said Kevin, putting down his toast to prize the ball out of Skanker's mouth, "that we may not have time for a game of footie today? We've got a lot to do."

He pulled harder on the ball and Skanker leapt up, bracing himself for a tug-of-war, growling and shaking his head.

"Because," said Kevin, between gasps, "this is it Skanks! This is our big chance. This is what is going to cure Gran. A proper session of Immersion Therapy."

Skanker tussled with the ball, his legs quivering. He slobbered wildly and the ball shot free from his teeth sending Kevin crashing over backwards. Sitting on the floor, his back against the washing machine, Kevin stuffed the ball into his rucksack, just in case they had time later. He leaned over and hugged Skanker's muscley shoulders. Skanker's fur smelt of canal water, stale and a bit fishy, the way it always smelt when he had been dragged out into the rain, like yesterday, when Kevin'd towed him down to the post box to send off their very important letter together.

Kevin hugged him harder. That had showed real commitment. He was still a top partner.

Mum walked in, still in her dressing gown, her damp hair wound around blue velvety rollers.

“You writing your project up today, love?”

Kevin lifted his eyebrows importantly. “Umm.”

Mum flicked the kettle on. “Only Miss Munro will want to see what you’ve done tomorrow, won’t she?”

Kevin thought guiltily of the exercise book left by the computer and wished that he could explain to Mum that pioneers were more practical sort of people, who didn’t write much even when one of them wasn’t a dog.

She walked over and hugged him.

“You know I’m really proud of you love for the time you’ve been spending with Gran?”

Kevin felt pride bubble up in him like shaken lemonade. In that case, she was going to be mega-impressed with them this evening, when she found out exactly what they’d done for Gran.

**

Chapter 11

Skanker looked dismally at the lead as Kevin tied him to the post next to Rosewell's front door.

“Behave, OK? No barking, bouncing or squirrel-scaring. And definitely no looking through the window for Rosie Baloo. She's probably retired with stress now, anyway.” Kevin pointed at the door. “And remember - as soon as I come through there we're gone, OK? Stay calm but alert, Skanks. Remember your goalie training.”

**

The Primrose Lounge was empty, silent but for the telly mumbling away to itself in the corner, so Kevin carried on along the winding corridors, listening for the sound of people. He hurried, glancing up at the notice boards, covered with magazine pictures of royalty and flowery gardens and sunsets. On the last notice board there was a picture of a broken-down pier, stretching away into cold black water. He looked at it again. They should definitely take that one down. He couldn't see it cheering anyone up.

Finally, at the end of Violet Way, he heard murmuring and then, almost there, the smell of warm toast. Everyone was having breakfast in the Bluebell Room.

Brilliant.

In fact, totally brilliant.

Because if he were fast enough, he could get Gran out while everyone was busy in here, miles away from the front door.

Gran was sitting at a table in the corner with Kissy Annie, humming along with the hymn music playing from a radio on the windowsill.

“All right, Gran?” said Kevin, sitting down.

She smiled, chewing her toast round and round and round, slowly as a camel. They ought to leave now, right now, but Gran'd only taken one bite of toast and she'd need loads of brain sugar today. Kevin pulled her plate across and began slicing the toast into small squares the size of postage stamps.

"Try this," said Kevin, handing her one.

Gran took it and began to wave it about in front of her, nodding in time to the music and opened her mouth. She let her hand drop and began to sing.

"All things bright and -"

"We haven't got time for that, Gran," said Kevin and nudged her hand towards her mouth.

"Kissy?" said Annie.

"Or that," said Kevin, wondering if he should put up his hood.

He slopped more milk into Gran's tea to cool it and glanced nervously around. Alice was sitting on the other side of the room, her hair tied in two bunches, wrapped into messy coils either side of her head, spoon-feeding her grandfather porridge, coaxing him, making a perfect O with her purple-lipsticked mouth. She made Kevin think of a mother feeding her baby except that Alistair was sagging and old and wasn't going to grow up into a bumbly toddler. Panic bashed against his ribs.

"Come on, Gran. Hurry up!"

Gran chewed harder but Rosewell's toast was clearly springier than a new trampoline. Kevin prodded a piece to check and watched miserably as it bounced straight back into shape. Kissy Annie gurgled, fluttering her fingers near his face, waving to him. He fluttered back.

Maybe he should just scoop Gran's breakfast into her bag? Let her eat it later, when they were back at Meadow Street? He had to do something. At this rate they'd

still be sat here at teatime. He grabbed a handful of toast and reached down for Gran's handbag just as Matron sailed into the room.

"Good morning, everyone," she said, gliding past them.

Kevin dropped the toast, sat bolt upright and drained Gran's tea in desperation. They had to go, leave while Matron was here and busy with everyone else. Kevin scraped his chair back, watching as Matron scanned the room and walked over to an old lady with short white hair, busy rubbing a vase of plastic flowers with her skirt.

"Filthy," she said. "I only dusted it yesterday. Now look at it."

"Come and sit down, Agnes," said Matron.

"But they'll be here soon," insisted Agnes, "and I don't want it messy."

"Then we'll do it after breakfast, all right?" said Matron more firmly and took the vase from her, setting it back down on the shelf.

"Where's my tea?" said Gran, peering into her cup. "They clear your stuff before you've finished in this cafe."

Kevin leant over.

"You can have a cup of tea at Meadow Street," he whispered.

"Meadow Street?" boomed Gran.

"Ssh!" said Kevin. But Gran was already on her feet, grabbing hold of the edge of the table, continuing her broadcast to the whole of Rosewell.

"I'm going home!"

Matron's eyes glittered, ice-bright and Kevin knew at that moment, that if telepathy really did exist between best friends, Skanker would have flung himself into the flowerbed in despair. Part of him wanted to go and check, in the interests of science, but he had other, more important, things to worry about. Like Matron, who was approaching fast.

“Home?”

Her voice had become strangely soft, without its antiseptic sting and she placed her hands lightly on Gran’s shoulders, looking into her face. Kevin’s heart bounced off his ribs.

“You are home, Jean.”

Gran planted her slippered feet firmly, pursed her lips and looked up into Matron’s face.

“And you are a silly woman,” she said.

“Good on you, girl!” shouted Ted from the table in the corner, waving his fist in the air.

Kevin’s insides knotted, but Matron only smiled.

“Isn’t it nice that your grandson’s come to keep you company, Jean?” said Matron. “Such a helpful lad, isn’t he? Without that silly dog of his, of course.”

Gran blew a raspberry.

“at a girl!” shouted Ted. He rose up from his chair and began turning small circles next to the table.

Kevin felt his jaw drop. He stepped back and stared at Gran. She’d always been so ladylike before, neat and polite, with pots of talcum-powder and boxes of posh writing-paper edged with violets. She’d never blown a raspberry. Even that time he’d cycled over her foot she’d only said “Gosh”. But she was different now.

He looked at her, tilted towards Matron, her eyes bright, biting her lip. Being here with Matron was bound to do that to you though, wasn’t it, especially when Matron started making snooty comments about Skanker. After all, it was Matron’s fault that half of his groundbreaking, medicine-pioneering team par excellence had had to be tied to a post in the garden in the first place.

Matron brushed the toast crumbs from her uniform. She smiled at Kevin and spoke to him in a whisper.

“All our residents want to go home, love. Don’t get upset.”

Upset?

Kevin felt as though a Catherine Wheel had been strapped to his ribs and lit. This was fantastic.

“Why don’t you take your Gran to the Primrose Lounge, Kevin?” said Matron, “there’ll be coffee and biscuits in there a bit later on.”

“Coffee and biscuits, coffee and biscuits” mimicked Ted like a mad parrot, “how about a beer?” He flung out his arm and sent his cup and saucer spinning to the ground. They shattered. Alice jumped up and edged her way between the old people, all craning to look round at him and began picking up the shards of broken china.

Kevin took Gran’s arm as Matron moved away towards Ted. Her eyes twinkled.

This was their chance.

**

Back in Gran’s room, Kevin rummaged frantically through the wardrobe, battling through layers of silky dresses and woolly cardigans, thick with the smell of mothballs and stale perfume.

“This isn’t my bed, you know,” said Gran.

“No,” said Kevin, although his reply was muffled by a pink flannelette nightie that had developed a life of its own and was trying to smother him.

“My bed hasn’t got bars.”

“Don’t worry, Gran. You’ll have a proper bed back again soon, when you don’t live here any more.”

He dived back into the wardrobe and started again from one side.

“It must be in here somewhere,” he said, finally.

“What must?”

Kevin startled by the voice, looked around the wardrobe door. Alice was standing in the middle of the room, her arms folded, the long droopy triangles of her black sleeves hanging down in points towards the floor. Gran, meanwhile, had gone.

“Where’s Gran?”

“I just passed her in the corridor,” said Alice.

Terrific.

They were supposed to escape as a team. Kevin took a deep breath and plunged back into the wardrobe, yanking the dresses along on the rail.

“I came to make sure you were alright,” said Alice above the clatter and scrape of hangers.

“Yeah. Why shouldn’t I be?” squeaked Kevin. It was hard to speak when you were trying not to breathe.

“You know, with your Gran being like that with Matron?”

Kevin stopped searching and looked at Alice.

“Like what?”

“Blowing raspberries? Taking Matron on? Being like, so angry?” Alice’s voice

sounded awkward, suddenly too small for her. “I thought you’d be bothered, if you hadn’t seen it before. But the old people go a bit mad about things, violent sometimes as well, swinging their fists and swearing, and other times they just go quiet or burst into tears and it’s like, no-one really knows what’s upset them. I just came to say it’s the illness, that’s all. It makes them freak out over nothing.”

Them?

She was talking about his Gran.

And Matron hardly counted as “nothing”.

“Anyway,” Alice went on, her white face tinged pink, “what’re you doing?”

“Looking for Gran’s coat.”

“Right,” she paused. “Kevin, your Mum *is* here too, isn’t she?”

“With swirly bits on the collar.”

Alice narrowed her eyes, making them dark and weaselly. “Jean hasn’t got a coat in there, Kevin. The old people don’t need them. That’s because they don’t go out. Remember?”

“Sometimes they do.”

“Yeah, right, with an adult. So *is* your Mum here?”

Kevin looked away.

“I thought not. You can’t take Jean out on your own, Kevin. It’s too risky.”

“How can it be too risky? We’re only going back to her house.”

Alice shook her head making her earrings, long jags of black plastic, clatter.

“No way, Kevin. Anything could happen.”

“Like what?”

“You could lose her.”

“Lose Gran? Don’t be stupid.”

“Alright, suppose she just wanders off when you’re not looking?”

“Why would she?” said Kevin. “She wants to go home.”

Alice’s face looked as hard as a statue’s in the grey light of the room.

“Kevin, why do you think Rosewell’s got more locks than the Bank of England?

It’s not because it’s stuffed with gold bars, is it? The old people have to be kept

in. It's too dangerous for them, out there."

He stepped past her and she twisted round.

"It's not safe. You know, before my granddad came here, the police were picking him up twice a week, wandering along the canal path in the middle of the night, totally lost."

"What was he doing out there?"

"Who knows? He certainly didn't."

"So why didn't he just go home?"

Alice's eyes were urgent, her mouth pursed. "Because he couldn't remember where home was. Kevin, when you don't know who you are anymore, how are you going to know where you live?"

Well, that only proved how different Gran was from her grandfather. Gran'd never wandered down the canal at night. And she knew where she lived. You only had to ask her. Or look in her handbag, since she'd written it down about a million times.

"Gran has to go out so that she can recover," said Kevin.

"Recover?"

Her tone of voice made Kevin's chest feel suddenly tight. She stepped closer to him so that he could smell her makeup, waxy like crayons.

"You still don't get it do you?" she said.

In her daggy horror-film clothes with her mad hair, she was the one who didn't get it.

"It's never going to happen here, is it?" he said. "Look at your-"

He stopped, feeling his face warm.

Alice shook her head and looked into his eyes. "You don't even know what

you're trying to cure."

Didn't he? He'd done the research. She was the one who'd let her Granddad turn into a broken old scarecrow, dumped in a chair. He didn't have time for this.

"I have to get the wheelchair."

"No, Kevin. Stop!"

"You're in my way."

Alice hesitated, bit her lip.

"Your Gran isn't going to get better, Kevin."

Kevin felt a jolt pass through him.

"You're holding me up. Excuse me."

"They don't get better from Alzheimer's. Did you hear me?"

How could he not hear Rent-a-Gloom's latest broadcast? Brought to him in full stereo blacker-than-black misery? He pushed past her, reaching for the door handle. She barred his way.

"Don't go!"

"I need the chair."

"No!"

"Now!"

"And if I tell Matron?"

Kevin stopped, feeling his heart spin and crash land. Alice's eyes glittered darkly, like ice on tarmac.

"Please," said Kevin, hearing his voice suddenly waver. "Please don't?"

Alice grunted, shaking her head quickly.

"You're - "

She stopped and snatched her breath before thrusting her pale hands up at his face, stopping him from saying anything else and slammed out of the room.

**

Kevin found Gran in the Primrose Lounge. She was sitting by the tall windows with Rosie Baloo, both of them watching a blackbird as it bounced across the wet lawn.

Kevin helped her into the wheelchair.

Don't get better.

Don't get better.

Alice's words. They hurt like wasp stings, jabbing inside his head.

"Just hold onto the handles, Gran," said Kevin.

He looked into her thin, drawn face, her short hair roughly combed back, the way she seemed to have to listen so carefully to him.

Don't get better.

Don't get better.

But every disease had a cure didn't it? You only had to watch the medical programmes on telly to know that. Even that African monkey disease, the one that made your insides so runny that you squished like a raspberry, had a cure. So Alzheimer's did too. And he was going to prove it.

He hoisted his rucksack onto his back, now stuffed out with an extra dress and two cardigans in case Gran felt the cold, and peeked around the doorway.

Ted was sitting on one of the window seats further along the corridor, his face cupped in his hands, staring at the floor.

Great.

That was all they needed, a rousing cheer from him as they rolled past, certain to bring Matron running. He willed Ted to go back into the Bluebell Room. Or

shuffle down the corridor. But Ted didn't move.

"Here's Tiddles," said Gran brightly.

Rosie strutted past, rubbing her velvety black head against the wheel of the chair, before leaping into a nearby armchair and curling up.

Maybe they should risk going anyway?

Matron stepped into the corridor.

Maybe not.

Matron said something and Ted lifted up his head. His face was wet with tears. Ted - grumpy, complaining, stick-lobbing Ted, who told Matron just what he thought about her and Rosewell all the time - was *crying*?

"It's alright, love," said Matron, putting her arm around his shoulder.

And Matron was being nice?

"You come with me," she said. "We'll have a little chat and then you can help me paint some of the signs for the Autumn Fayre, OK?"

Ted sniffed thickly and let Matron help him up. She took his arm and led him back slowly into the Bluebell Room.

Kevin's stomach mashed around like the scruncher on the back of the bin men's lorry. What was up with Ted? And how come Matron was being nice? Well, he couldn't think about it now. You had to be single-minded to escape and they had to go. Right now. He checked the corridor again.

Nothing.

Just a low murmuring from the Bluebell Room.

"We're off, Gran."

He stepped back and took hold of the wheelchair, clasping the handles so tightly that the rubber grips burned into his palms, before lowering his head and swinging the

chair round the corner. Kevin began to walk faster.

“Isn’t this lovely?” said Gran.

As long as no one saw them.

Kevin began to jog, moving faster and faster still until he was running down the long corridor, the chair squealing, racing towards the light that pooled in front of Rosewell’s doors. Finally, with a last backward glance down the long empty corridor Kevin bashed the numbers into the keypad, swung open the doors and slammed out into the car park.

**

Chapter 12

“Stupid stupid gravel!”

Kevin dug his heels in further, pushing the wheelchair furiously, forcing his whole weight down against it. Sweat trickled down his forehead, his face and his back, chill in the cool October morning. The wheelchair was still jammed stuck. Even now that Skanker had stopped pulling in the opposite direction it still wouldn't budge.

“Aren't they beautiful?” said Gran, reaching a hand out towards the floppy purple flowers in the border. “Dad loved those. What are they called, love?”

She began to struggle out of the chair for a proper look but this was no time for a gardening lesson.

“Gran, don't get out of the chair.”

Behind him, the front door slammed. He froze knowing that any second now Matron's voice would bellow across the car park, flatten him and finish him with a good pebble dashing of gravel. He braced himself, fixing Skanker with a stern stare, willing him not to do anything daft, like bite Matron's foot off.

“Pull it!”

Kevin spun round.

Alice was sprinting towards them, a woman's coat bundled, tangling in her arms. She thrust it at Kevin, seized the wheelchair and hauled it round.

“Like this,” she said furiously and began to drag the chair backwards behind her, scanning Rosewell's windows as she wrenched the chair over the squealing gravel and into the street.

Out of sight of Rosewell, Kevin waited as Alice helped Gran into the coat, deftly fastening the buttons.

“Where d’you find that?” said Kevin.

“Staff cloakroom. Jean’s about Matron’s size.”

“You didn’t?”

“I did, and a good job too watching you lot. Honestly, ‘Kevin and Gran’s Big Day Out in the Car Park’.”

“We would have got it moving,” said Kevin. After all, they were scientists not wheelchair drivers.

“When? Next week?”

Kevin kicked a conker down the pavement. “You said we shouldn’t even do this.”

“That’s right,” said Alice, nodding. “You shouldn’t.”

“So why are you here?”

“Because someone has to look after Jean. You and Skanks’ll only get in a mess again.”

As if.

“I thought you were going to tell Matron,” said Kevin.

“Matron?” sneered Alice. “Don’t be dumb, I wouldn’t do her any favours. I’m only sorry I’ll miss seeing her face when she finds out Jean’s gone.”

Kevin looped Skanker’s lead over the wheelchair handles and pushed.

“We’re off!” said Gran, kicking her slippered feet, except that they weren’t because the chair was stuck again.

“Let me,” said Alice, stepping across. “I’ve had more practise.”

“We can manage, thank you,” said Kevin.

He knelt down to have a closer look at the wheel. Skanker licked his ear helpfully.

“Really?” said Alice. “This is the brake,” she said, kicking down on a silver pedal and pushing the chair so that it began to move smoothly along the pavement.

“You’re wrong, you know?” said Kevin, whispering so that Gran wouldn’t hear. “About people not getting better. Because that’s only what’s happened so far.”

Skanker, his brow rumped, gruffled serious agreement from the pavement.

“So far?” said Alice.

Kevin watched as one corner of her bruise-dark mouth twitched ever so slightly, lifting almost, but not quite, into a small smile.

“Which is where you two come in, right?”

“Exactly.”

“And you’re what, nine?”

“Ten.”

“Ten’s a bit young for a doctor, you know. Even a really clever one. But, then again, I suppose you do have a dog who’s a leading scientist to help you too, don’t you?”

Kevin hunched his shoulders. She didn’t need to make fun of them. She was the one who’d gone and invited herself, not him, she didn’t have to come too. He felt her dark stare boring into him, knowing that she was hesitating before saying something else. Finally she spoke, more softly this time.

“You don’t know nearly as much as you think you do about Alzheimer’s. You’re going to need my help.”

“Yeah? Like how?”

“Like going to the toilet.”

“I’ve always managed, thank you.”

“Not you, you drooble, your Gran.”

“Well she’s had even more practise than I have.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “That’s just one of the things you don’t know about, Kevin.”

Gran was busy smoothing her coat, clearly not listening to either of them. Kevin wasn’t surprised. He couldn’t remember Gran even using the word toilet, never mind owning up to having problems with them. And anyway, what sort of problems?

“She panics,” said Alice. “She usually takes a care worker in with her. I figured you mightn’t be too keen on helping in that department.”

“Panics?” said Kevin.

“It’s part of the illness. Thing is, by the time she comes out of the loo she’s forgotten what the room she left was like. Suddenly it’s all new to her, she doesn’t know where she is, so she’s like, scared stiff.”

Kevin thought he’d freak out too if he came out of the toilet and found himself standing in Rosewell, but he couldn’t say anything because there, suddenly looming, with a million windows that anyone on a hot date could look out of and spot them, and particularly Mum and Eddie, was The Speckled Pig Hotel.

He put up his hood.

“Cold?” said Alice.

Kevin shook his head, turned his back to the hotel and began to lace one foot over the other, walking sideways down the pavement.

“Neat,” said Alice. “But if you’re serious about ballet you really need a leotard.”

Very funny.

“I don’t want to be noticed, is all,” said Kevin, looping one foot over the other.

“Right. So why prance around?”

Skanker grizzled.

“If you must know,” said Kevin, moving his feet faster, certain that Alice had speeded up on purpose, “my mum’s in there on a date.”

“A date? Cool. So where’s your dad?”

“He doesn’t live with us anymore,” said Kevin. “In fact, he lives miles away now. I hardly ever see him.”

Alice twisted a loose piece of hair around her finger.

“Lucky you,” she said at last. “I wish my dad’d push off. And take Mum with him. They make me want to vomit.”

“That’s how I got Skanker,” said Kevin.

“Vomiting?” said Alice.

“No. When Dad left, Gran bought him for me. She knew a lady who bred Boxers.” Kevin lowered his voice. “Skanker was the littlest puppy and his back legs were a bit wonky, so she didn’t charge Gran very much. But his legs are OK now and we don’t talk about it in front of him.”

“Sounds like you got the best end of the deal,” said Alice.

Kevin didn't think that having Skanker was better than having a dad, even though Skanker was a mega-supreme top dog apart from being totally rubbish at football. But there was no point, looking at Alice's face, in saying anything. She didn't like dads, hers or anyone else's, nor mums either. He was just glad she was OK with grans.

They were past the hotel now.

"Maybe he was a bit of a wimp anyway?" said Alice finally.

"No way," said Kevin, "not my dad. He was a fireman."

"Velcro," said Gran.

"Hey?" said Alice.

"Was a devil to sew on, all prickly," said Gran, rubbing her fingers together.

"Brilliant," said Kevin. "She means my dad's uniform," said Kevin. "Mum used to complain about having to repair the Velcro on it. So Gran always did it for her."

"Right," said Alice, drawing out the word.

"They couldn't have buttons you see. Metal ones got too hot near a fire and the plastic ones melted. Fancy Gran remembering that."

"Fancy," said Alice, bumping the chair down the kerb.

**

"Number eight," said Gran.

"You remember this road, don't you Gran?"

Gran chuckled.

Kevin was pleased to see that Gran's old house looked just the same: same old navy front door, same old garden with its border of shrimpy flowers and the prickly

hedge where he'd found the monster wasps' nest, even the sticky-up bit of the path he'd tripped over - cutting his knee and needing five stitches at the hospital leaving him with a top brilliant scar - was still there. He remembered how Gran'd bought them fish and chips that night, to cheer him up, and they'd sat in front of the telly to eat them, washing them down with mugs of lemonade.

Alice parked the chair and turned to Gran.

"We're here, Jean! Alright?"

"Lovely dear," said Gran. "Let's have a cup of tea."

"Did you tell them when you'd get here?" said Alice, helping Gran up the path.

"No, just that it was today."

"Right."

Alice and Gran were at the porch now. The floppy orange roses Gran'd planted years ago still trailed over the top of it. "And what did they say?"

"Nothing, because I wrote to them."

Alice stared. "When?"

"Yesterday. Just ring the bell, Gran!"

Gran was busy in her handbag.

"Yesterday was Saturday," said Alice, walking back towards him.

"The bell, Gran!" called Kevin.

"So there's no post today, Kevin," said Alice. "Which means there's no way they could've had your letter."

Gran was waving something about, over her head. It glinted in the dull light. Her old front door key.

"Gran, no!" called Kevin.

But it was too late. Alice turned and ran back towards the house, just as Gran stepped inside and closed the door firmly behind her.

Chapter 13

“Kevin, why did you let that happen?” shouted Alice, jabbing the doorbell over and over, slapping the door with her other hand.

“Me?” said Kevin. “You were closer! You could’ve stopped her!”

He hurried across, dragging Skanker behind him.

“Oh really?” Alice held her finger down on the bell making it ding-dong madly through the house. She glared at him. “You distracted me!”

“How?”

“By being so stupid. Honestly, Kevin! Sending them a letter on a Saturday. Are you even on this planet?”

“Well, if you hadn’t been so busy asking questions I could’ve stopped Gran going inside, couldn’t I?”

Skanker gruffed, clearly pointing out that but for Alice they’d’ve been in the house by now, starting the Immersion Therapy instead of standing out here like a trio of oversized garden gnomes. Alice walloped the door harder, her face flushed pink, her hair uncoiling from its flimsy hold.

“There’s no-one home,” she said finally.

“Gran is.”

Alice shook her head, pursing her mouth, dark as a bruise.

“I mean the people who live here. They must be out otherwise they’d have come to the door by now. So she’s in there on her own.”

Well, that wasn’t so bad, thought Kevin. She could start remembering.

“She’ll come out in a minute,” he said.

“You reckon?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t she?”

Alice held her hand against her brow.

“Look, go round the back and see if you can get in that way.”

Kevin shrugged and set off round the side of the house, towing Skanker behind him.

“I can’t see why she’s freaking out, Skanks,” said Kevin. “Gran’ll open the door in a minute. She’s probably just thrilled to be back home. That was the whole point of coming, wasn’t it? Alice just has to see a bad side.”

Kevin pulled the squealy gate open and unclipped Skanker, who pelted around the back garden. You couldn’t blame him. All the extra energy you needed to help solve problems was bound to need burning off.

Kevin saw Gran’s little conservatory and felt his heart lift. They always used to sit out here. And it looked just the same, the paint peeling off the woodwork, the curly white metal shelves stacked with flowerpots. The new people had filled them with climbing red flowers on canes.

Brilliant.

Gran would definitely remember this. He cupped his hand against the glass and peered in.

No one.

He tried the door handle.

Locked.

The door keys were lying on a table just inside.

“Gran always took ages to get to the door when we visited. D’ you remember, Skanks?”

Skanker shot past him like a racehorse.

“And she’s worse on her feet now. Quite wobbly.”

Wobbly.

What if she’d gone up the stairs and wobbled? What if she’d had an accident? That’d explain why she didn’t answer the doorbell, wouldn’t it? Or come and sit in the conservatory.

Kevin’s rammed the door handle up and down and up and down. It was locked tight shut. He stepped back onto the damp grass and looked along the top windows. The little bathroom window was open. That was good. Even if Gran didn’t come to the door, which of course she would, she must, maybe he could borrow a ladder from somewhere, climb up, unlatch the big window and squeeze into the house.

“Gran, can you hear me?”

Skanker stopped and ruffed loudly behind him. You needed a reliable partner when you were at the cutting edge of medicine. Then Kevin noticed that Skanker was facing the opposite way, legs rigid, nose-tilted, glaring at sparrow on the fence.

“Heel!” commanded Kevin.

Skanker ignored him.

“Now!”

Honestly, didn’t he have enough problems with a wobbly Gran, a furious Goth and, in a minute, probably having to climb in through the bathroom window and not

go headfirst down the loo, without his trusted medical partner turning into a cat as well? This never happened to doctors on telly.

Skanker padded reluctantly back.

“C’mon. We’ll have to ask Rent-a-Moan what she thinks.”

They walked round to the front of the house. Alice had gone. The front door was standing open.

Skanker ruffed.

“Yes,” said Kevin. “You’re right. It *was* nice of her to tell us.”

They hurried into the house, closing the door behind them.

“In the kitchen,” called Alice.

“Gran OK?”

“Fine.”

The house was silent, except for Alice murmuring to Gran, her voice low and urgent carrying down the hall, and a clock somewhere, ticking loudly. When he walked into the kitchen, Alice was perched on a gleaming white worktop, kicking her heels together, while Gran stood just outside the door, in the conservatory, draped in the thin October sunlight, shining through the glass. Kevin could smell the peppery scent of the red flowers now. They made his nose tingle.

“How d’you get in?” he said.

“Jean opened the door for me.”

“Told you she would,” said Kevin proudly. He walked through to Gran and put his arm around her shoulder. “Is it nice to be home again, Gran?”

She smiled and handed him a flower.

“Geraniums,” she said.

“That’s brilliant!” announced Kevin. He turned to Alice. “Did you hear that? She’s starting to remember! It’s working already!”

Skanker leapt up at him, planting his wide knobby paws on Kevin’s shoulders, his stub tail wagging madly.

“That’s right, boy! A breakthrough!” said Kevin. They danced round together. “Smells!” he added.

Skanker dropped to the floor, looking guilty.

“No, not you boy!” he said, ruffling his fur. “Smells! They’re important in helping people to remember. I read it somewhere.”

“Medical journal, perhaps,” said Alice coolly. She slid off the counter. “Which is great, Professor, but we have to go now.”

“Why?” said Kevin.

“Sorry?”

“Why do we have to go? We’re here, in Gran’s house and she’s remembering. With no one else about, it’s top for Immersion Therapy.”

“And also getting arrested, Kevin. In case you’ve forgotten, breaking and entering is still a crime in this country.”

“But it wasn’t breaking and entering. Gran’s got a key.”

“That is so not the point, Kevin.”

“But look at her.”

Gran was leaning on a white metal shelf, looking out through the bank of flowers into the garden.

“She’s remembering,” said Kevin.

Alice shook her head.

And froze.

Because someone was opening the front door.

Kevin's heart slid into his sock.

"Hi! Mike, is that you?"

It was a woman's voice, high and cheerful.

"Mike?"

Gran turned and looked up at Kevin. "Who's that?"

Alice bit her lip.

"You'd better let me deal with this, Kevin," said Alice quickly. "Just stay here with Jean, OK?"

"But it's my project."

"Yeah, and look where it's got us."

Charming.

Kevin looked at Skanker's upturned face, a cauliflower of annoyance, as Alice jangled across the kitchen and through the door.

"She thinks she knows everything," said Kevin.

He waited.

"She doesn't."

There was a scream and Gran jumped, dropping her flowers.

"It's OK, Gran," said Kevin. He stooped to pick them up again and handed them to her. "The woman's just seen Alice, is all."

He exchanged a knowing look with Skanker. It was bad enough the woman thinking she had burglars without finding out that they were vampires too. He walked

out to the hall. The woman was about Mum's age, although her hair was less messy and she looked a bit funny, drawn back against the wall like that.

"Who are you?" she said.

"My name is Alice Stark," said Alice, her face gleaming eerie and white as the moon in the dingy hall. "And this is Kevin Hughes. There's no need to be frightened."

The woman took a step towards the open front door as Alice went on. "We're not thieves. We can explain everything."

"We want to borrow your house," added Kevin.

"Pardon?" said the woman.

"Your house."

Alice jabbed him in the ribs.

"What are you on about?" said the woman. "My husband will be back any minute."

"I did write to tell you," said Kevin.

"He's a part-time bouncer," said the woman.

"Kevin's letter didn't get to you in time, is all," said Alice sharply, eyeing him like a bad-tempered lynx.

"It's my Granny project," said Kevin. "I'm curing Alzheimer's."

The woman looked at him, amazed. "Is this some sort of a joke?" she said, fumbling in her bag and pulling out a mobile phone. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't call the police right now."

Alice pointed her thumb back over her shoulder.

"Take a look out there."

**

Although Kevin didn't much like Alice's tone of voice he had to admit that it was a good idea to point Gran out straight away. Burglars might be young, or even look like Dracula's niece, but most of them didn't bring their grans with them when they went out robbing.

"And you say she used to live here?" said the woman.

"Yes," said Kevin. "But she's not so well now. She's starting to forget a few things. That's why I've brought her here to remember. I'm going to cure her."

"But I thought you said it was Alzheimer's?" The woman's face fell. "My uncle had that too. Kept taking all his clothes off in the middle of the street. In the end we had to take him to a home as well."

Kevin wanted to point out that Gran had never taken her clothes off in any street, and to ask if the woman's uncle had gone to Rosewell. Dropped trousers would be all Gran needed in her delicate state. The woman looked over at Gran and smiled. Gran smiled back, chuckling.

"Still, they're happy in their own little world, aren't they?" said the woman.

Happy in their own little world?

Kevin knew then that the woman had never been to Rosewell. She had never seen Ted bawling his eyes out or Annie waiting every day for her grandson who never turned up and she had definitely never seen Alice's granddad. Kevin could see he'd have a lot of work educating normal people about Alzheimer's once he was in the public eye.

The woman was looking at him oddly.

“What’s her name?”

“Gran,” said Kevin

“Jean,” added Alice.

“Well,” said the woman, “I’m Miriam. Do you think Jean’d like a cup of tea?”

Kevin smiled and nodded. Even though the woman, Miriam, didn’t know much about Alzheimer’s he could see that she was going to be helpful.

**

“Do you remember when we used to play footie out there, Gran?” said Kevin, sitting next to her in the conservatory. “We used saucepans for goal posts and you kept booting the ball over the fence. Mr Williams next door did his nut. Said it’d bruise his strawberries and when he’d gone you said he’d have a bruised something else to go with it if he didn’t leave us alone.”

Gran looked out into the garden.

“Or what about when you got us that monster paddling pool,” went on Kevin, “filled it up, stepped in to test the water and slipped over? You couldn’t get out for laughing.”

Gran leant forward in her chair, peering out through the glass, trying to see.

“It’s not there now,” said Kevin quickly.

Nothing was there anymore. The whole garden seemed tinged grey with autumn and drippy with rain, empty apart from Alice who was wandering around the lawn, her black skirt snagging on the last of the pale yellow rose bushes. Kevin looked over at Gran. She didn’t look as though she was remembering the paddling

pool. Maybe it was because they'd only done it once? Mostly they'd sat in here, watching her little telly.

"Hey Gran, what about the nights we brought our tea out here and watched that Quiz Show? You remember, "Play or Pass! Mind the hot-zone!" all that?" Gran still looked blank. Maybe she was trying to remember the paddling pool after all?

"Keep out of the hot zone and into the win zone!" chirped Miriam from the kitchen.

"That was it, wasn't it, Gran?" said Kevin. "The man used to have a funny shiny suit. You said that his hair looked like barbed wire. Roger something, with a bright orange tan."

"Ricardo, he was Roger Ricardo!" said Miriam.

Kevin was pleased that Miriam was trying to help with science, but he wished she'd let Gran have more of a think first. After all, it was Gran who was supposed to be doing the remembering.

He nudged Gran.

"You used to get all the answers right."

She reached out and put her hand on his and smiled, a proper smile like in her old photographs, not the pretend ones she made at Rosewell.

"You're a good boy," she said softly.

Kevin felt his ribs shrink and his eyes start to prickle. Working towards a scientific breakthrough was bound to be moving but it was a bit embarrassing too. Especially since Alice was now tramping back over the lawn towards them. He sniffed loudly and cleared his throat.

“We ought to go soon,” said Alice, stepping back into the conservatory, shaking the hem of her skirt, glittery with water.

“Why?” said Kevin, looking round to check Miriam couldn’t hear. But it was OK, she was busy ferreting around in a cupboard.

“Because they’ll have noticed Jean’s missing by now. Matron’s probably gone into orbit and it’s not fair on them. We should at least ring.”

“But then they’ll come and pick us up.”

“Well, that’s alright isn’t it?”

“Not yet,” said Kevin.

They didn’t have anything proper to tell them yet. They needed something concrete to prove that Gran was getting better.

“Ten minutes,” said Alice and sat heavily in the empty chair next to Gran.

Skanker flopped his head in her lap and looked up at her, his brow furrowed, wearing his Thomas Edison face. Kevin had told him all about Edison and how he’d done nine thousand experiments to make a perfect light bulb. You had to have patience if you were a scientist and, as Skanker was now trying to point out to Alice, they’d only been there half an hour.

Gran would make progress, he knew she would. And then they’d all see. Mum, Hannah, Matron, Alice, the doctors, the newspaper people. Everyone. Everyone who said it couldn’t be done.

Miriam walked through from the kitchen, twisting her hands together.

“Kevin?”

He looked up. Miriam’s face was knotted with worry.

“What is it?”

“It’s your mum,” she said. “She’s at the front door.”

Chapter 14

Kevin couldn't remember the last time Mum had been so angry, although he was pretty sure it must have been before Dad left home.

"Kevin! Do you have any idea of the trouble you've caused?" she shouted, her face white and furious in the shadowy hall. A tall, fair-headed man stood behind her. That had to be Eddie, although he didn't look much like Steve McQueen, and Kevin hoped that the disappointment wouldn't make Mum even madder.

"Ten minutes ago," she went on, "I was sitting in a lovely hotel, having a nice time for a change, and then Matron rings me up and says Mum's gone missing. I nearly had a heart attack! But then I started thinking. About you. About your project. And I knew exactly what you'd done, you idiot!"

She turned away, wiping her face with the back of her hand. Kevin felt his stomach twist. She hadn't been crying had she? Mum crying was a million times worse than Mum shouting.

"I'm sorry, Mum," said Kevin. "But you have to take risks when you're a scientist."

"Scientist? Breaking into someone else's house?"

Kevin thought for a moment.

"It was Gran's house once," he said.

"But it isn't now, is it?" said Mum.

Skanker barked from the back of the house and Kevin began to wish he'd brought him out here with him. After all, teams were supposed to stick together when things got rough, weren't they?

Miriam stepped forward and touched Mum's shoulder.

“It’s OK, Mrs Hughes,” she said. “I’ll admit it was a shock when I found them in my house, but they do mean well.”

“Mean well?” said Matron, slamming the front door back against the wall and stepping into the house. Outlined by weak sunlight, Kevin thought she looked like a gunslinger from the Wild West. He took a step back, straight into Alice.

“Where’s Jean?” demanded Matron, hurrying down the hall towards them.

“She’s out there,” said Alice. “She’s fine.”

Matron stopped and stared at Alice. “That, madam, is a matter of opinion. And what are you doing here? I thought you had more sense.”

Kevin waited. All he needed now was for Alice to stick up for herself and say that she’d tried to stop him. He braced himself for Matron’s blast, since it’d probably knock him out through the wall and into the conservatory with Gran.

“Kevin needed some help,” said Alice simply.

He turned and offered her his best doctor’s smile.

“How about a lovely cup of tea?” said Miriam brightly. “Might help us all to calm down a bit?”

“Great idea,” said Eddie.

His voice was deep and gravelly, just the sort that calmed people down.

Unless they were Matron.

“I don’t want tea,” she said.

No, thought Kevin gloomily. She’d probably prefer a murder. His.

“I have to check that Jean’s OK,” she added.

“I’m sure Kevin didn’t set out to cause trouble,” said Eddie.

“Really?” said Matron, catching her breath. “And how long have you known him? Last Thursday he had the home covered in gravy thanks to his liability of a dog,

and now he's taken a sick old lady out of Rosewell, without asking." She flicked a glance at Alice. "Or proper supervision."

Kevin hoped that Gran couldn't hear, out in the conservatory because she wouldn't like being described as sick. Or old. But then, with Skanker woofing like that, she probably couldn't hear anything they were saying. Kevin felt a faint shiver of worry. Why was he barking again?

"Not to mention leading us all on a wild goose chase," Matron went on. "Do you know I've had to leave twenty-nine other residents in the middle of our Sunday Singalong, to come down here to sort this out?"

She stopped.

Her face crumpled and she sank down heavily onto the bottom stair as if her batteries had conked out.

"I just don't know," she mumbled.

Kevin stepped from foot to foot and looked from Mum to Eddie to Miriam and then back down at the top of Matron's head. Hunched over like that, all saggy, he couldn't help but start to feel a little bit sorry for her. After all, it couldn't be much fun looking after a lot of old people who didn't know who you were and went AWOL with your coat when you were just doing your job. He remembered how she'd been kind to Ted that morning and his stomach churned. He wished she'd go back to normal and shout.

Skanker began barking again.

"I'd better check on him," said Kevin, glad to escape.

Mum nodded. "OK. Sounds like he's seen a squirrel or something."

Kevin trudged down the hall. Skanker hadn't seen a squirrel, Mum was wrong about that, because it wasn't his squirrel bark. It was too loud, too rough. More like his alarm bark in fact, though that was silly. What was there to be alarmed about?

Kevin walked into the conservatory and Skanker stopped barking, turning to stare fiercely at the line of empty chairs instead. Behind Kevin the conservatory door stood open. The garden was empty.

Gran had gone.

Chapter 15

“Gone, Kevin? What do you mean, gone?” said Mum, following him out into the garden.

“Gone. As in she was here and now she’s not.”

Miriam and Eddie clattered out behind them onto the patio.

“It’ll be alright, Karen,” said Eddie. “She can’t have gone far.”

“She’ll be out in the street,” said Matron, hurrying past on her squelchy shoes.

Only she wasn’t.

Matron stepped from foot to foot, looking up and down the street. She walked away, disappearing from view but Kevin could still hear her shouting Gran’s name, over and over again.

“Jean? Where are you? It’s Matron. Can you hear me, Jean?”

She reappeared and hurried back up the path, punching numbers into her phone.

“Hello? Is that the police?” she said quickly. “It’s Brenda Lewis, Matron of Rosewell Home. A resident has gone missing.”

Police?

What did Matron think Gran was going to do? Hold up a bank with her handbag?

Matron paused, panting. “No, we don’t need an ambulance. Not at the moment, anyway.”

“Why’s she calling them?” said Kevin.

“Because your Gran’s a bit muddled nowadays,” said Eddie gently.

Kevin stared at him.

“Kevin knows that,” said Mum. “In fact, that’s been the problem all along.”

The problem all along?

Kevin took a deep breath, trying to keep his voice level because knowing his luck, Mum’d probably decide to marry Eddie even though he was a bit slow when it came to Kevin’s grasp of Alzheimer’s, “What Mum means,” he said Kevin, “is that we’ve been helping Gran to get better.”

He waited for Eddie to be surprised or interested or even apologise for the grown-ups barging in and spoiling everything. He wanted him to say something helpful in his soothing gravelly voice. But he just stared. Mum stepped forward and put her arms around Kevin.

“Gran was going to remember things,” said Kevin, his voice muffled by her coat.

“Oh love,” said Mum in a wobbly voice.

“We only needed a bit more time,” said Kevin.

Mum sniffed and let go of him to search through her pockets for a tissue. He hotched down and sank his face into Skanker’s neck. Feeling the cool rain-matted fur, squelchy as moss against his cheek he shut his eyes tight. Dr Barker would be furious if he knew they’d been stopped on the verge of their breakthrough. And whose fault was that? He glared up at the adults standing round him and Skanker like a fence.

“She’s about five foot tall, wearing a thick navy blue coat and house slippers, officer,” continued Matron into her phone, pacing up and down the garden. “Yes, it’s Alzheimer’s.”

Kevin felt a shiver of worry ripple through him. Matron’s panic was definitely catching. He looked past her, into the house to where Alice was standing in the

conservatory, half-hidden by the wall of red flowers. He wished she'd come out and help, but she just stood there, still and bleak as a statue, her face downcast, worried. Matron bashed another number on her phone and waited.

"Mary," she barked. "It's me. Jean's gone. Yes, gone. The police are on their way but would you give Dr Barker a call?"

"Dr Barker?" said Kevin. "Brilliant."

Matron eyed Kevin coolly.

"Let him know we'll probably need him later on," she said.

Kevin couldn't speak for the others but he could certainly do with some of Dr Barker's help.

"The police will need a recent picture of Jean," said Matron, snapping her phone shut and dropping it into her enormous handbag. "Mrs Hughes, do you think you could nip home and find one?"

"I've got one here," said Kevin. "It's in my rucksack, in the hall."

"Right," said Matron and walked to the door, rubbing her feet noisily on the doormat before stepping inside.

"There's not much point standing round out here," said Miriam. "Why don't we all go back in the warm and have a hot drink while we wait for the police?"

Mum turned and followed her, slipping over the wet grass, but Eddie stayed.

"Come on, mate," he said.

Kevin looked up at Eddie's wide, well-meaning face and decided he was probably all right on an ordinary day. But not today. Not when your Gran had just gone off without telling you where she was going.

Eddie waited.

Time stretched.

“OK,” he shrugged. “You know where we are.”

He turned and walked away. Kevin listened to his footsteps across the patio and waited for the conservatory door to click shut behind him, for the grown ups to move away from the window where they stood, lined up, staring out at him. Then he clipped Skanker’s lead onto his collar and ran out of the garden.

**

Meadow Street was empty, its trees rustling in the chill breeze, scattering their gold-brown leaves onto the pavement. A bus rumbled past them, sluicing through the shallow puddles close to the kerb, splashing Skanker with greasy water.

“She can’t have gone far, boy,” said Kevin pulling Skanker closer. He checked the driveway of each house as they passed in case Gran had remembered an old neighbour and called in for a cup of tea and peered over privet hedges and garden walls into the windows of empty rooms, cluttered with photographs and sagging plants. The houses seemed empty, filled with shadows.

They reached the corner and turned towards town.

“Kevin!”

He turned. Alice was running towards them.

“I’m not coming back!”

He started walking again aware of the sound of her boot buckles jingling, the slap slap of her feet on the wet pavement.

“Hang on, Professor,” she said finally catching him up, a little breathless.

“Have you come to say I told you so?”

Alice shook her head, scattering the raindrops lacing her hair.

“No point,” she said. “You already know I think you’re stupid.”

“Thanks,” said Kevin.

“S’OK,” said Alice.

Kevin felt Alice’s gaze, dark and intense, watching him from under her fringe.

“But I’m not about to join Matron’s Mafia back there, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she added.

Kevin looked into Alice’s face.

“So why are you here?”

“I thought you might need this.” She held out her mobile phone. “For when you find her.”

Kevin slipped the phone into his pocket.

“Thanks.”

He turned towards town, hunching his shoulders against the cold thin rain, aware of Alice’s dark gaze following him as he and Skanker walked quickly away.

**

“Maybe we should’ve brought something of Gran’s for you to sniff,” said Kevin as they reached town. “Then you could’ve tracked her?”

Kevin looked down at Skanker’s saggy face and squashy nose.

“Or maybe not.”

After all, Skanks was a boxer and none of his relatives had been bloodhounds. The only thing Skanker’d ever tracked down was a lost chip.

They found the small grubby precinct almost empty. A woman soothed a squally toddler in a pushchair, a gang of teenagers lolled on the broken brick edge of the flowerbeds, an old man with a dog the colour of chewed gum stared dismally into the window of a camera shop.

But there was no Gran.

Kevin walked out of the precinct onto the High Street, checking every shop they passed. She wasn't in the café they used to go in for lunch or the mini-supermarket or the newsagents. Nor was she in McDonald's or the travel agents or the card shop on the corner. She couldn't have walked into the church either because its iron gates were locked with a chain.

"So where is she?" said Kevin.

They were standing in the little flagged market square set around the war memorial at the top of the High Street. They used to sit here with Gran, eating iced buns, her favourite from the bakers shop opposite. But the shop was shut now and the wooden benches were all empty, slimy with rain. Tatty pigeons strutted round pecking at scraps of rubbish.

Kevin shivered.

The rain was becoming heavier. It splotted into the puddles and gurgled down the drainpipes. He remembered that Gran only had her slippers on, the brown bootee ones with the zips. So her feet would be soaking wet. Kevin felt his heart squash inside him. What was up with them? Why hadn't they found her? She was an old lady, not an Olympic sprinter. And Weatherby wasn't a big town. They should have seen her by now, shuffling along the pavement, fumbling through her bag, sitting in the café or even coming out of the newsagents with a big box of Maltesers. Like she used to, whenever he stayed with her, because they were his favourites.

Kevin stared at the newsagents, feeling the tears starting to well in his eyes. Well, he wasn't about to cry. Dr Barker wouldn't. Doctors didn't. They stayed in control. And besides, he had to think about Skanker. It didn't do your partner's morale much good to have someone bawling into your fur.

Stay calm, he told himself.

Calm.

He turned a full circle, and then another more quickly, gazing all around him, at the gleaming empty pavements and the pieces of rubbish scudding along in the wind. At the far end, the library's twirly stone columns and big clock loomed bright against the silver sky.

"D'you think she went there?" said Kevin.

Skanker shook himself violently spraying the street with raindrops.

"No, I know she doesn't read much anymore, but Alice says that's because all the books at Rosewell are about car maintenance or Victorian murderers."

A siren whined in the distance.

"C'mon" said Kevin, tugging at Skanker's lead, starting to run. "We have to hurry."

The library felt musty and stifling hot after the rain. But old people liked warmth so Gran might have come here, to dry out.

It was a good idea.

A really good idea.

Except that it was wrong.

Kevin made two whole circuits of the library and three trips to the Romance section to make properly sure, but even though nearly everyone in the library was old and wobbly and getting warmer none of them was Gran. He bashed out through the heavy wooden door.

"Now what?" he said, untying Skanker's lead.

It was hard to talk when your lungs were suddenly too small. But they'd been to all the places Gran used to go together, hadn't they?

He looked across the road.

All except one.

**

The park was little more than a square of grass, bordered at the far end by a screen of trees and small duck pond. There weren't many people around now, just an old couple walking along in their wellies and winter coats and, on the far side of the grass, two boys kicking a football to one another. Kevin and Skanker walked down the dirt path under the trees, the bare branches clattering above them.

"She might be by the duck pond," said Kevin, forcing himself to be bright.

"What do you think, boy?"

Skanker padded on for a while before suddenly lunging forward on the lead, eager to race down the path, his paws paddling the air with each excited step.

"What is it boy?" said Kevin, feeling his heart lift. "You think she's here, don't you?"

Skanker scrabbled off the path, straining his neck, flobbering and jabbing his nose in the air. The lead was burning Kevin's hand, but he didn't care. This was fantastic. Skanker was starting to act like one of those dogs on the telly, the ones who told their master about children who'd fallen down a mine shaft or come off their horse in the outback. Now, looking at him quivering and desperate to help, Kevin felt a twinge of guilt for all the times in the last week that he reckoned Skanker was a bit of a poor partner, doctor-wise. He was doing brilliantly now.

"Alright, alright!" said Kevin, stopping to unclip the lead. "Just go find her, boy!"

Skanker shot across the grass, a blur of white cutting a diagonal path, his paws pounding the muddy grass. Kevin's heart soared. He fingered the phone in his pocket.

He'd be calling Mum soon, telling her they'd found Gran. Skanker was almost flying over the grass now, sending up small clods of turf, straight towards, towards -

“Skanker! No!” shouted Kevin.

But it was too late.

Skanker launched himself at the smaller of the two boys playing football, knocking him into the mud and snatching the ball. Kevin sank down as Skanker proudly brought it back, lolloping along, shaking the ball furiously, his stubby tail wagging in tiny circles. Kevin had tried to teach him so many times to intercept and bring down a striker, to power the ball to the goal, but he had chosen now, of all times, now when they were supposed to be finding Gran, to do it.

“You great big stupid doofus!” shouted Kevin into Skanker's face, “You're supposed to be helping me find Gran! You're supposed to be on my side! What do you think you're you playing at?”

Skanker looked at him expectantly, still holding onto the ball with his teeth. After a moment he stopped wagging his tail. Kevin felt mad enough to shout more but he couldn't because there was a lump in his throat now and his voice had disappeared. Skanker dropped the ball at his feet.

Somebody started shouting.

“Hey, your dog better not've bust our ball!”

Kevin looked up. The tall boy was stomping towards him, furious. Kevin picked the ball up quickly and wiped the slobber on the grass.

“It's OK,” he said, throwing it back to him.

He clipped on Skanker's lead and stared down at the scuffed grass, his head heavy with failure. Where was she? Where was Gran? Why couldn't he find her?

The boy thumped towards him.

“He’s put bite marks in it,” he said, thrusting the ball under Kevin’s nose.

“See, it’s all dented.”

Kevin looked at the pitted ball and back up at the boy. Behind him, along the path, Alice was coming towards them, her black skirt snagging in the wind, her face creamy-white in the fading light beneath the trees.

Kevin pushed past the boy.

“Hey,” said the boy, catching Kevin by the arm, “you owe us.”

Alice glared darkly at the boy. “Owe us what?” she said, walking up to him. She was taller than the boy and peered down at him hard, as if he were an interesting but very squashable insect.

The boy shrank back.

“What does he owe you?” said Alice again, more loudly.

He shook his head and turned, hurrying back to his friend, muttering. Alice looked back at Kevin.

“They’ve found her.”

Chapter 16

Kevin followed Alice as she turned towards the edge of the park, to where Eddie and Mum were waiting for them, standing on the pavement beside the car.

“Is she alright?” said Kevin.

Alice didn't reply and Kevin felt his heart freeze over.

“Alice? Is she?”

“Sort of,” she said. “They're taking her to hospital, just to be on the safe side.”

They headed across the grass, up the slope and through a small gap in the park railings.

“You should've phoned me,” said Kevin.

“And you should've switched on the phone, Professor.”

Mum looked cold and tired, leaning against the car, talking into her phone. She snapped it shut as they arrived.

“Love, you're soaked,” she said. She dropped her phone into her bag and rubbed his hair. “That was Matron. They're taking Gran to Weatherby General. C'mon.”

Kevin pulled Skanker into the back of the car with him while the others clambered in.

“So where was she, Mum? Me and Skanks looked everywhere for her in town.”

Mum wrestled with her seat belt, watching Kevin in the rear view mirror.

“She wasn't *in* town.”

Mum sniffed loudly and Eddie patted her arm before turning to speak to Kevin. “The police found her walking down the motorway.”

“The motorway?” said Kevin.

Eddie started the engine, pulling out into the road

“On the hard shoulder,” said Alice.

Kevin felt his stomach lurch, imagining Gran deafened by the thundering traffic, clutching at her handbag as she stumbled along, the water seeping up through her slippers.

Alone.

“The motorway?” said Kevin again. “What was she doing there?”

“She caught a bus,” said Alice. “When she was the only person left on board at the bus station the driver asked her where she was going.”

“And?”

“She didn’t know, Kevin. The bus driver was worried so he took her to the canteen for a cup of tea and then nipped out to call the police. When he came back, she’d gone.”

“Onto the motorway?” said Kevin.

“Bus station’s on the link road,” said Alice simply.

Kevin sat back in his seat, his damp clothes feeling clammy against his back.

He stared out at the leafless trees, the rain heavier now on the car window.

None of this should have happened. It wasn’t part of his plan. And it wouldn’t have happened if they’d been left on their own.

“She will be alright, won’t she?” said Kevin.

Mum twisted round to look at him.

“I hope so, love,” she said. “The hospital want to make sure and Matron’s asked Gran’s doctor to come over and examine her too.”

“Doctor?” said Kevin. “Which one?”

“Dr Barker. I suppose.”

Kevin felt his heart lift.

**

The ambulance lights splashed orange and blue across the puddle-pocked road as Eddie drove past Casualty into the hospital car park.

“That must be her,” said Mum, her face pushed close to the window.

The ambulance doors flew open and Kevin felt his breath snag as he caught sight of Gran’s legs sticking out, her bootie slippers sodden, caked in mud and tatters of grass. Eddie parked quickly and Kevin leapt out and ran across the wet road, dragging Skanker behind him.

“Gran!” he shouted, running towards the ambulance, skidding around its open doors.

And stopped.

Gran was in a wheelchair, wrapped tight as a parcel in a white blanket with a giant oxygen bag strapped over her face. Her hair was plastered to her head with rain and her skin looked pale and taut. Her eyes were closed. The ambulance man, a burly smiley man with the sleeves of his green paramedic boiler suit rolled up, unclipped the seatbelt from around the wheelchair.

“Gran, can you hear me? It’s Kevin!”

Her eyelids fluttered open. Kevin let go of Skanker’s lead and jumped up into the ambulance. He put his hand on her shoulder, trying to stop her trembling. She looked at him, her eyes blank and puzzled.

“It’s Kevin,” he said again, hearing his voice waver this time.

Gran closed her eyes.

Kevin turned to the ambulance man. "She will be alright, won't she?"

"With us looking after her?" he replied, smiling.

He pressed a button in the ambulance and a ramp began to whir down. Kevin leaned over to Gran.

"We've been looking everywhere for you, Gran. We couldn't find you."

He stopped because his voice was all wobbly and worse, his eyes were going all watery. He pressed his lips tight together, willing himself not to cry. Skanker, still sitting on the road, thumped his chin onto floor of the ambulance, sniffing the funny medical smells.

"Best get her inside," said the ambulance man.

Kevin stepped out of the ambulance, still talking, aware that Mum, Eddie and Alice were standing beside the ambulance, watching him.

"Gran, you don't have to open your eyes, it's OK. This is still Kevin. I'll be coming to see you soon." He picked up Skanker's lead, waiting as the man rolled Gran down in the wheelchair and followed them, catching sight of Mum's face. "Only it might not be tonight as Mum'll might be a bit cross with me." He looked again. "Actually it might not be tomorrow either. But I'll come soon as I can, I promise."

The ambulance man stopped to tuck Gran's blanket tighter. Kevin leant forward and hugged Gran. His face touched a small patch of her cheek left clear by the oxygen mask. Her skin felt cold and dry, more like paper than a person.

"I love you, Gran," said Kevin, scrunching up his eyes to stop the tears.

He stopped and pulled Skanker close to him, watching as the ambulance man pushed Gran into the hospital and the swing doors of Accident and Emergency creaked shut behind them.

**

“I’ll go with her,” said Mum brushing past Kevin.

She glanced back as another car splashed past. It was Matron. And Hannah. Kevin’s heart sank as he saw her sitting in the front seat, hugging herself and scowling. “Better ask Matron to come in too,” she added.

“I can come-” began Kevin.

“No.” She turned to Eddie. “Would you take him for a hot drink or something? He’s frozen.”

Kevin took a step forward.

“Please Mum?”

Mum shook her head. “No, Kevin. I’ll come and find you afterwards, OK?”

Kevin wiped his nose quickly along his sleeve. “But I need to talk to Dr Barker about things,” he said.

“I’ll find him too, don’t worry,” said Mum crossly, and hurried through the doors just as Hannah flounced across the road from the car park, dressed in a fake fur coat the colour of bubble gum and matching jeans.

“Who’s that?” said Alice, dismayed.

“My sister,” said Kevin.

“Your sister?” Alice stared. “But she’s so -” she searched for the word, “pink.”

“You’ve really done it this time,” said Hannah. “Mum was totally beside herself and it’s all your fault.”

Alice looked hard at her. “And you’ve come to help us, have you?”

Colour seeped into Hannah’s cheeks, till it matched her coat.

“Where’s Mrs Hughes?” said Matron, bustling past Alice, jangling her keys.

Eddie nodded towards the doors and she blustered inside.

“Come on,” he said to the others.

Kevin tied Skanker to a sign post just outside the main entrance and followed Eddie in, along pale green corridors, shivering as the over warm air washed over him, to a canteen that smelt of soggy potato and gravy.

**

Half an hour later, after Hannah had complained about the hidden fat in her meal, the hard plastic seats and flat lemonade and Alice had scowled her down, Dr Barker appeared around the canteen doors with Mum. Kevin pushed his hot chocolate away and stood up. In the funny light Dr Barker's face looked crumpled, shadowy and too yellow.

"Hello, Kevin," he said and then nodded to Eddie, Alice and Hannah.

Kevin pushed back his chair and hurried over to him. "I have to talk to you."

Dr Barker's smile faded, then disappeared. Close up, his face looked wrinkly as tired plasticine.

"No Kevin," he said softly. "I'm sorry. It's I who have to talk to you."

**

Dr Barker led Kevin and Mum to a sticky table in the corner and sat down heavily.

He sighed a doctor-sigh and Kevin sat down, sighing with him.

"I'm glad to see you," said Kevin. "Can you believe how they spoilt everything just as we were about to get somewhere!"

"Listen," said Dr Barker.

Kevin put on his listening face.

"You shouldn't have taken your Gran out of Rosewell, you know that, don't you?"

Kevin felt his chest shrink.

Dr Barker leaned towards him.

“What did you think you were doing?”

“Making her better, of course.”

Mum put her arm around Kevin’s shoulder.

“Better?” said Dr Barker.

“Yes. You know? Doing what we’d discussed? The Immersion Therapy.”

Dr Barker wasn’t saying anything so Kevin went on. “It wasn’t working at Rosewell, so I thought bringing her home would make it work faster.”

Dr Barker still didn’t speak. He must be getting angry at the way science had been derailed.

“I know Mum thinks it was a bit risky,” said Kevin into the silence, “but pioneers do have to take risks, don’t they, Doctor?”

Dr Barker folded his arms.

“I’ve misled you,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“If I made you think that Immersion Therapy could cure your gran, then I misled you.”

“But you said it would.”

“No, Kevin. I said it *might* help her remember things.”

“Which’d mean she was getting better?”

Mum started sniffing again.

“No,” said Dr Barker. “That’s not the same thing at all.”

Kevin sank back against the chair, feeling his clammy jumper sticking to him. “You said to show her lots of old things. You said things about her life, things before she started forgetting. She remembered Skanker. And the flowers at her house. She, she -”

“You jogged some old memories, Kevin. That’s all. And that won’t cure her.”

Kevin felt his heart hammering.

“It has to. What else is there?” he said, his voice louder and wobblier now, echoing round the big empty room. He could feel Hannah and the others at the far table staring at him. “What else?” said Kevin, almost shouting.

Dr Barker stood up, shaking his head.

“Nothing,” he said.

He looked sad and sorry for himself, like he wished he wasn’t a doctor at all which was hardly surprising, because what was the point of all that learning and going to college and everything if you couldn’t cure people at the end of it? He met Kevin’s eyes with a hard grey stare.

“There is absolutely no cure for Alzheimer’s.”

**

Ceilings.

Kevin had never given them much thought before now. Or wondered why ceiling designers bothered putting swirly patterns on them. But now, staring up from his bed, he did. It was to give you something to look at when you’d decided never to leave your room again for the entire rest of your life.

“Absolutely no cure,” sobbed Kevin to Skanker, who was miserably chewing his flat football on the bedroom floor. “Did you hear me?”

Skanker chewed harder. Above Kevin, the ceiling pattern began to blur and go fuzzy. He stuffed his fingers into his ears but he could still hear Dr Barker in his mind saying that he was sorry, so sorry, that he’d misled Kevin.

“Sorry!” shouted Kevin.

Skanker thumped his front paws onto the bed, snuffling at Kevin's salt streaked face. Kevin rolled away, face down on his pillow, remembering how Dr Barker had patted Mum on the shoulder as he left, saying he'd give her a call tomorrow. Why? What was the point of his saying anything to anyone ever again? Kevin began to cry properly, hot heaving sobs, wet and messy, wodgy tears that stung his eyes and streamed down his face, soaking into big hot undocterlike tearstains on the neck of his T shirt and pillow. Skanker licked his cheek then jumped up onto the bed, pummelled the bedspread with his muddy paws before flopping over sideways onto Kevin.

"She's never ever going to get better," said Kevin, muffled by fur. "So she'll be just like Alice's granddad."

He laced his arms around Skanker's neck and sobbed, shaking with crying, soaking Skanker's fur. Alice had been right all along. Her and everyone else. Everyone except him. His eyes stung. His nose burned. Even his skin hurt from crying.

He hated Rosewell.

He hated Dr Barker.

And he hated Immersion Therapy. Every last stupid dumb rotten bit of it. He'd already ripped up his new exercise book and his maps and newspaper pictures of the prime minister and stuffed them in the bin. The photographs of Gran he'd piled up neatly next to her best hat and the old brooch of a ladybird she used to like. When she knew what brooches were. And ladybirds.

He'd messed up.

He'd messed up Mum.

His stupid project had spoilt her first date and completely ruined her chances of ever marrying Eddie.

He'd messed up Matron.

She said that his stupid project had made her look unprofessional because now everyone thought her old people walked down the sides of motorways.

And worst of all, he'd messed up Gran.

He was supposed to make her better, to make her remember. Instead of that his stupid project had left her stumbling along the hard shoulder.

Kevin screwed his hot eyes shut.

"It can't get any worse, Skanker," he wailed. "It just can't."

Then he remembered.

He had school tomorrow and Miss Munro wanted the projects in.

**

Chapter 17

Even though Kevin had his back to her he knew Miss Munro was looking at him. He could feel it, she'd been looking at him all day he was sure, and now she was doing it again. Her eyes bored into the back of his head as hot as a spotlight.

The playtime bell rang.

"If anyone has forgotten to bring in their projects, or has had any other problems," she paused, "then they can see me before they go out to play."

Kevin was the first out of the classroom. He ran headlong to the end of the playground and thumped down onto an empty bench. What was the point of talking to her? Everyone knew his project had been his last chance and he'd messed up big time. He sank his face into his hands, watching the world go black through closed eyelids.

"You gonna tell us about your project, Hughesy?"

Kevin opened his eyes. David Riley was standing in front of him, his freckled face pink with glee. "Are you?" he said. "Going to tell us what you did, eh? Your sister told mine all about it last night."

Behind him, David's friends kicked a football impatiently to each other, waiting. Kevin said nothing. He felt nothing. Frustrated, David started stepping from foot to foot, jittery as a flea, but Kevin simply looked past him, to where Mr Henderson was pacing the playground, watching them. He'd go ballistic when he heard what had happened, and then he'd upset Mum again, and Kevin was sorry about that, he really was, but none of it mattered now, not compared to having let Gran down.

Andrew Biggs, from Year Six, picked up the football and walked. “We playing footie, or what?”

David scowled. “Don’t you know that Hughesy lost his Gran on the motorway yesterday. Left her walking down the hard shoulder.”

Andrew stared at David. “What’s funny about that?”

David Riley shrank. He took a step backwards, his face russet. Behind him, Andrew kicked the ball away, across the open space of the playground. The others followed, leaving David behind, with no one to listen, standing small and alone and looking foolish, until he finally ran awkwardly after the ball. Kevin wished he could feel better about that, but he didn’t. He had Gran to worry about. Pinned down by scratchy sheets in a hospital bed, old and frail and muddled, in a place she didn’t know, which was what his stupid project had done.

When the end of playtime bell clanged, he jumped up and ran to the back of the line, keeping his face down, determined not to meet Miss Munro’s eyes as he walked past her, following the others into the classroom.

**

“Who’d like to talk about their project first?” said Miss Munro.

Kevin shrank down further in his seat.

Claire put her hand up. Miss Munro handed Claire her project from the pile on her desk. It was a bright orange booklet with a cover spangled with silver stick-on stars. She began reading out loud about the long walk over the dales she’d taken with her grandmother.

The dales.

Not the motorway. Kevin glared at Claire.

James Smith was next. James's project was mounted on a giant piece of white card covered with pages of writing, headed "My granddad." There were photos of an old man smiling.

Real smiles.

Not Rosewell smiles. Kevin glared at James.

Miss Munro was watching him.

"Would you like to say something, Kevin?"

Kevin shook his head.

"So, who's next then?" she said.

Hands waved in the air and Miss Munro chose Alison, who walked to the front and pinned up a piece of paper on the whiteboard. It said "Alfred. My brilliant neighbour," in bright painted letters across the top. Kevin groaned loudly.

"Kevin?" said Miss Munro. "Are you all right?"

"He looks like he's going to cry!" said Alison.

"Or be sick," said David brightly.

No one laughed. Kevin stood up, knocking his chair to the floor. Thirty pairs of eyes swivelled round and fixed on him. Andrew was nodding at him madly to sit down again. But he wasn't going to sit down. Not here, not now, not ever. Instead he began walking towards the door.

"Kevin Hughes! Stop right now."

Miss Munro's voice sounded frightened. Kevin felt the door handle cold against his palm.

"Sit down!" said Miss Munro sternly.

Out in the corridor, the end of school bell rang. Kevin looked at her, at all of them watching him, waiting to see what he would do, then he pulled open the door and ran headlong into the corridor and out of the school.

**

Town was busy.

In the poky mall, people stood round chatting, drinking frothy coffee from cardboard cups, bustling past with glossy bags. Overhead on the tannoy a woman was singing about fish fingers.

Fish fingers?

She should be talking about Alzheimer's.

People didn't have time to worry about fish fingers when one day they wouldn't even know what a fish finger was. Kevin sat down heavily on the edge of a brick flowerbed, filled with bright pink plastic tulips and stuck his fingers in his ears but it was no good, he could still hear the tinkly fish music. That woman should be telling people that there was no cure, that they should go home now and start labelling things. She should be telling them about the scientists and clever doctors and nurses and people who smart enough to send rockets to the moon who wouldn't be able to stop them forgetting where they'd left their coat. Or their house. Or their grandson.

He screwed his eyes tight shut, squashing back fresh tears and sank his face into his hands hearing the thrum of music, the clatter of footsteps, voices laughing and chattering. When he opened his eyes there was a tight knot of teenagers close by, all dressed in long black coats, some smoking and there, in the middle, watching him, was Alice. She said something to the others and walked over to him, sat down and began smoothing the black lace of her fingerless gloves.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“Like, where else is there to go when you’ve got double RE last lesson?” She nodded towards the others. “Actually, we’re quite often here at this time if school isn’t, you know, totally riveting.” She looked up at him from under her fringe. “So, how come you’re not on your way home? Are you OK?”

“I’m great,” said Kevin sourly.

“You don’t look it.” Alice stretched out her legs in front of her, clicking her boot buckles together. “Is this about what happened yesterday?”

Kevin turned to face her, nodding miserably.

“Miss Munro decided we’d show our projects last thing. All the others were talking about what they’d done.”

“You could have told them what you’d done,” said Alice.

“Are you being funny?”

“I don’t do funny, Kevin.” She picked an uprooted tulip off the floor and brushed the crumbs of soil from its plastic petals. “Only I think what you did took a lot of courage.”

“You do?”

“Sure. It’s not everyone who’d have the guts to steal their gran from under Matron’s nose.”

“Hannah says it was just stupid.”

“She would,” said Alice scowling. “The toxic fairy. Anyway, if you ask me, I think that stupidity and bravery are pretty close. I mean look at all the people who get medals. Most of them didn’t think about the risks before they leapt in. Maybe being brave just means you need to be stupid too.”

“Thanks.”

“S’OK.”

“Have you got anything else to say?” said Kevin.

“Sure.”

“What?”

“That sometimes it takes even more courage to admit that you can't fix things after all.”

Kevin sat back, feeling a bitter metallic taste in his mouth. This was what defeat tasted of. He glared at a toddler squalling as her mother pulled her off the fake palm tree she was cuddling.

Alice leaned closer to him.

“Kevin, trying to fix Alzheimer's while you're at school is totally dumb. I've always said so and now you've proved me right. There's just no way you're going to be smart enough.”

“Right.”

“Don't be like that.” Alice brushed the soil from her hands and looked up into his face. “Look Kev, the people who make things happen and discover things, well, they're usually older than ten, aren't they? All I'm saying is that you're being a bit hard on yourself.”

A tall boy of about seventeen, thin and bony in a shiny black leather coat, shambled over to them. His hair was long and greasy, it hung in straight clumps around his bony face and Kevin noticed that his nose and eyebrows were pierced with dull silver studs.

“You coming, Al?”

Alice shook her head and the boy looked at Kevin, shrugged and slouched back to the others who were already walking away, pushing each other and laughing loudly.

“So what are you going to do now?” said Alice.

“I’m not going to try and cure Gran any more if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I’m not.”

Kevin looked down at the tiled floor, grubby, littered with sweet wrappers.

“I don’t think she knew who I was yesterday.” Kevin spoke under his breath, staring down at his feet. “I never thought that would happen.”

Alice looked away, her eyes sad and distant beneath the heavy glossy outliner. People passed chattering and laughing, stopping to look in shop windows, chatting on mobile phones. Finally Alice spoke. “I know how you feel,” she said slowly, “I should do.”

Kevin thought of Alice’s grandfather, a lost old man in a room full of fading star maps, as she went on. “I was just like you at the start,” she said. “I couldn’t bear it when the doctors wrote him off. I kept searching for the magic pill too, something that would make him better, make him like he was before. I freaked at the way everyone else just accepted it, like it was somehow all right.” She paused. “But in the end, now, well I had to accept it too.”

Kevin stared at her.

“What?” said Alice, “You thought I just gave up?”

“You never said anything.”

“Would you have wanted to know, Professor?” She bit her lip. “But even though you can’t do a single thing to make your Gran better, you can’t give up on her.”

Kevin stood up.

She was right.

What on earth was he doing sitting here wasting time, angry about Miss Munro and her dumb project? That didn't matter. Or what the headmaster was going to do. Or Dave Riley, Claire's clever-clever gran, Matron, Rosewell's reputation, not even Dr Barker who Kevin couldn't think of without feeling red hot and furious. No one, no one mattered at all, no one except Gran.

"I'll never give up on her," he announced loudly to the shoppers passing by. A couple of girls stopped to look at him and burst out laughing.

"Oh, not again," said Alice.

"I don't mean like that," said Kevin. "I do know I can't cure her. But she's still my Gran, isn't she?"

"Right. So what are you doing sitting in the middle of a shopping centre?"

"Hey?"

Alice rolled her eyes. "Like, shouldn't you be at home, sorting it with your mum?"

Kevin leapt up. He started walking, aware that Alice was following him. "It's OK. You don't have to come with me. I can sort it out myself."

"I know, Professor," she said, catching up. "Your Mum's pretty cool really, she'll be fine. Just stand up to that septic cheerleader sister of yours, will you?"

Kevin shrugged.

"Take it from me, Kevin, the only other thing I ever saw as pink as her was a jellyfish at Blackpool Zoo. It was big and poisonous, like her, and spent its days wobbling round the tank stinging everything it met."

"Also like her," said Kevin.

"Right," said Alice. "So sting back. OK?"

Kevin watched her walk away. She stopped and looked back.

“Just make sure you can still visit Rosewell, OK?”

“You mean you'd miss me?” called Kevin.

“Sure,” she said, half-smiling. “Like toothache when it's been fixed.”

**

“Where've you been?” said Mum, jumping up from the table, her mobile clutched in her hand as Kevin walked in.

“Truanting,” said Hannah.

Skanker skidded across the kitchen floor and threw his paws onto Kevin's shoulders, licking his face madly.

“Which at least makes a change from stealing old ladies,” sniped Hannah.

Kevin looked at her, standing there puffed up and poisonous.

“What d'you say?” he said, taking a step closer to her. He breathed in hard as she looked down at him, her eyes glittering. “Hannah, when was the last time you went to see Gran? When? Tell me. Weeks? Months ago?” Even though the blood was roaring in his ears now, Kevin heard Hannah's mouth snap shut. “And we all know why that is, don't we?” he went on. “Because the only things in Hannah-world are grotty mates and fluffy jumpers and being horrible to everyone. That's all you do.” Hannah swung round to Mum, billowing up and furious. She stuck her hands on her hips, waiting for Mum to say something, but Mum only watched coolly. Finally, she spoke.

“Hannah, when *was* the last time you came with us?”

Hannah gaped.

“Mum, that is so totally unfair. You know how upset it makes me.”

Mum shook her head and handed her the phone. “Do something useful. Ring the school and tell them he's home.”

Hannah snatched the phone and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

“They’re going to go ballistic with me at school, aren’t they?” said Kevin.

“I’ve messed up and they’ll make me come home at lunchtimes, so you’ll have to give up your job and we’ll have to move out and be under the bridge with the frogs and shopping trolleys and -”

“And stop!” said Mum, waving her hands. “I rang Miss Munro this morning to tell her what had happened.”

Kevin looked at Mum’s face. They might as well get the tent from under the stairs now.

“It’s all right, love,” she said softly. “I told her what you’d tried to do. She doesn’t think you messed up at all.”

“Pardon?”

“She said her mum had Alzheimer’s too, so she understood. Well, sort of.”

Understood? Kevin thought back to Miss Munro, who was always so neat and well-organised. She didn’t look like the sort of person whose relatives walked down motorways without them, looking for home. But then, you just couldn’t tell.

“In fact,” said Mum, “she thought you’d probably tried harder than anyone with your project.”

“Even though I haven’t written anything.”

Mum nodded.

“Did she say anything else?”

“Just that Alzheimer’s was too big for one person to sort out.”

Skanker thumped his head into Mum’s lap.

“Two, Mum,” said Kevin.

**

Rosewell's windows were bright squares of yellow light, sharp against the darkness as they arrived. Mum parked and Kevin was relieved to see that Gran's curtains were still open, that she hadn't gone to bed yet. They'd brought her back from hospital that afternoon, Mum said, so she might be too tired to see them. Kevin jumped out of the car and Skanker squaddged his nose against the window, waiting for him to open the back door.

"I'm sorry, Skanks, you'll have to stay here, this time," said Kevin, through the glass. "But I'll see if you can come in next time, on a lead and everything. OK?"

Skanker wrinkled his brow, puzzled, watching them as they walked away. Kevin heard a single woof and it made him feel bad. Skanker was right. It was totally unfair being a scientist who hadn't found the answer to the Alzheimer's problem *and* left in the car at the same time.

**

Gran seemed even smaller, frail and blown about and all rumped, the way you'd expect someone to look who'd been walking down the side of the motorway. She was sitting in the Primrose Lounge, framed by the tall windows and Matron was sitting with her, combing her hair gently and talking to her. Kevin felt his heart tighten and ran in.

"Gran, it's me!"

"Look," said Matron, smiling.

Smiling?

Mum must have been busy on the phone with Matron as well. "Can you see who it is, Jean?" prompted Matron.

Gran's eyes clouded. She pushed out her lower lip out and looked harder at him, her brow creased with thinking.

“Maybe she’ll answer that later,” said Mum gently, touching his arm.

Gran stretched and put her arms around Kevin, pulling him tightly to her. He felt his heart lift, the tears prickling the back of his eyes.

It was the only answer he needed.

**