

# Disappear in Darkness



# Disappear in Darkness

John & Andy, Book 2

Nick Duberley

The wicked disappear in darkness ... 1 Samuel 2:9

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

**Disappear in Darkness - JOHN & ANDY - BOOK 2**

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Written by Nick Duberley.

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

# Chapter 1 – Not Saint Nicholas

I struggled awake and my mind kicked into gear. I remembered making a deal with Andy; I was worried about Dad. My side was to take any opportunities for more sexy stuff with girls. In return Andy would do his/her/its best to help me with Dad's problems, but only after Billy and I had had our showdown. I decided Andy was probably worrying about nothing. OK killing the chicken had been mega-weird, but Andy admitted people sometimes do odd things. I mean Dad was Dad, right? **Mr. Boring Accountant** = 'I wear a clean shirt and a smart suit, and go to work in the City'.

Then something else grabbed my attention. There was an irresistible smell of hot buttered toast drawing me downstairs - I was starving hungry.

In the kitchen, Mum was sitting at the table drinking tea and eating scrambled egg on toast.

She said, "Good morning dear, pity you weren't up earlier. There was plenty of scrambled egg on offer, until I ate it all."

I knew she was winding me up of course, but I felt a trifle on edge until she added, "not that I mind making a bit more, if someone makes their own toast."

I hopped to it and put some slices of bread in the toaster. In a fit of over-enthusiasm, I even made some for Mands, who, according to Andy, was about to rock up. Mum didn't hang around doing the eggs, so as soon as I'd buttered my 4 pieces of toast I sat down and began my breakfast. Mum even made me a mug of tea to go with it.

I munched the crispy toast glorying in the buttery, sloppy scrambled-egg. Mum watching me intently said, "I think we could enter you in a fast-eating contest John, with a reasonable hope of winning. You remind me of one of those noisy machines workers put hedge trimmings in."

"A shredder?"

"Yes, that's it."

"That's odd then, because I really dislike Shredded Wheat. Tastes like cardboard to me," I responded, grinning.

Mum smiled back and replied, "I suppose I asked for that."

I was on my last piece of toast when Mum asked, "Are you still thinking of writing a short story, John?"

"I finished one last night. Whether I'll ever write another is currently unknown."

Mum wanted to know what my story was about, but I was saved having to rehearse the plot by Mandy thundering down the stairs.

She looked at my empty plate accusingly, and said, "What have you been eating, Shrimp?"

“Good morning, dear sister.” I replied. Then added “No shrimps on offer or any other seafood, not even a sliver of smoked salmon. There are two pieces of toast I made for you, which have seen better days. Perhaps you would like me to polish them off, while you make yourself some fresh?”

Mands pounced on the toast and was about to go off on one of her moans, when she realised Mum was already making more scrambled eggs.

I asked Mum when the combined shopping trip and visit to Old Nick was happening. This earned me a telling-off for being disrespectful and the information that we would leave ‘as soon as I’m ready’.

Mands’ interest in what I was up to soon waned when she found out that I was going to see an old bloke called Nick whose hobby was woodwork.

Mum tried to recruit Mands to help with the shopping. That proved a non-starter as it didn’t involve clothes, jewellery or body-care products.



I nipped upstairs to have a quick wash and brush my teeth. Mum still hadn’t called me so I turned my PC on and checked my emails then clicked on some brain sites to let Andy top up on his/her/its interests.

I finished on the computer and powered it down then checked my bag so I’d be ready to go. Andy suggested I took my ‘Bruised, not Abused’ story with me, even though it was only scribbled down on paper. I stuffed it in, because that was easier than arguing the toss about it. The eBay special mobile went in too. I hoped to pass it to Jenny. If Mum picked me up from Jenny’s house on the way back from shopping, I could get the SIM swap done.

I was thinking about what to do next when Mum shouted up the stairs to say she was ready. She was waiting for me by the front door. Mands had already left to go into town apparently, so Mum wanted to make sure everything was properly locked. She spotted the garage door wasn’t quite fully closed. Between us, we managed to force it right down to the ground, but we couldn’t lock it. Mum said Dad had the only key.



We found Mr. Jones’s house easily enough. The garden was a wilderness as described, plants everywhere, and only a vague trail leading through the undergrowth to the front door. There was a separate drive to a garage and shed off to one side. I could see Mum was uneasy rocking up without calling first. Not properly polite according to her rules, but it got the job done. I just said, “Come-on,” and headed off up the path.

Having traversed the jungle, I discovered a front-door, but no bell, so I knocked loudly. There was a distant, but deep cry of, “Coming”.

The door was opened by a large grey-haired man with a massive beard, dressed in clothes which might once have belonged to a down-at-heel tramp.

I said, “Mr. Jones I presume,” and held out my hand. It was engulfed by a very large, muscular one and shaken gently.

Mr. Jones replied, “You must be John. Pity your Mother didn’t call you Stanley. We could have done this as a reprise of the famous encounter.”

I turned to Mum and said, “Mother, Mr. Jones has a grievance re your choice of forename for me. Apparently, it shows a singular lack of foresight on your part.”

Mum tried to go all polite of course, but our host merely took one look at her, nodded then said, “Come on in and call me Nick, unless you’re selling double-glazing, in which case you can bugger off.”

Then he turned round and headed back indoors. I followed him, leaving Mum to decide whether to join us, or to head-off and embark on a new career as a door-to-door saleswoman.

We ended up in my ideal kitchen. Large, comfortingly gloomy, full of interesting smells, none too clean and with a large stove chucking out loads of heat at one end. Nick had his priorities sorted, because the next thing he said was “tea?”

Mum looked a bit askance at the odd collection of chairs, most of which had things on them. I nabbed the sofa, sharing occupancy with half a sack of potatoes.

Nick spotted the seating problem and said, “Take your pick of chairs Mrs. Mason. Tain’t none of them exactly clean, an’ you got a posh frock on, better give ’em a bit of a dusting.”

He passed Mum a tea towel, presumably on the basis that if she wanted the chair cleaned, she could do it herself. Mum being Mum took the towel and very politely said, “Thank you very much Mr. Jones. We didn’t come here to make a nuisance of ourselves.”

“Be less of a nuisance of you called me Nick, and said whether you wanted tea or not,” was all she got for her trouble.

I decided I’d better intervene and said, “Tea for me please Nick, milk no sugar. Mum has shopping to do, so I don’t expect she will want one.”

He just nodded said, “two it is then,” and proceed to make the brew. The hot water came from the kettle on top of the stove. The teapot was a massive brown earthenware job with a chipped spout. A remarkable feature of proceedings was that he used leaf tea, not a tea bag in sight. I saw Nick take a sidelong glance at Mum as he was poodling around getting the milk, mugs and pot of tea all in order. He poured two huge mugs of tea from the old battered pot and

I realised I had found my spiritual twin as a tea drinker, when the aroma of the fresh brew hit my nose.

Nick looked at Mum again as she shuffled uneasily and said, "Doubt I'd eat your young 'un hure until he's grow'd a bit. Should be safe enough for you to leave him, and get on with your shopping, Mrs. Mason."

Mum was discomfited by Nick's suggestion she suspected cannibalism to be rife in the neighbourhood, but just said, "Oh." Which didn't help.

I tore myself way from the religious experience of communing with the tea and said, "It's OK Mum. If Nick gets really hungry, I expect he'll go for bread and cheese from the provender on the counter there, rather than trying to take a bite out of me."

Mum stood up and said, "Very well, if you are both going to take that attitude. Don't forget to call me, John." And left without saying 'goodbye', which was proof positive that she was rattled.



Nick took a huge glug of his tea and said, "Good word 'provender', not one you hure much these days. Used to know a poem with it in 'something the Chavender or Chub'."

Andy had been unusually quiet, so I asked him/her/it what was up. "Do not underestimate Mr. Nicholas Jones, John. He does not look like much, and he appears half asleep, but I would say he is as clever as they come. Keep your cards close to your chest."

I decided I had better get a wiggle on, if I was going to get to Jenny's in time for a lift home. I asked Nick about the practicalities of turning pallet wood into nesting-boxes for small birds.

"In an 'urry are ya? Come on then, better give it a go, I s'pose."

The back garden was full of plants. Here and there the greenery had stuff underneath it. Some of it metal, by the look of things. Andy said later that one mound was the remains of a Moggy Minor, apparently an ancient type of car. I would have guessed cat from the name – *who knew?*

There was a random collection of outbuildings in the garden, all obviously home-made. Nick noticed me looking round, as he ambled towards one, and said, "Bin hur' a while. Got most things what I want somewhere. Can' always find 'em though. Could really do with a good clear out."

He collected two pieces of wood from a pile to one side of the nearest shed, then went in and said, "Come in John, but stay near the door please. Nothing to hide, but I got a lot of old machines in hur'. They do the job alright, but the



health and safety side just ain't there. Easy enuff to come out wiv one fewer arm, than what you goes in wiv'."

There were tools everywhere. Some of the giant machines looked scary as hell, and the rest even more terrifying. The other principal feature was sawdust. The floor was covered in it, but then again so were all the other horizontal surfaces, and even the vertical ones had a dusting.

Nick evidently knew what was wanted to make a nest-box without being told. I was given the pieces of wood to hold. Once we'd established, we were both thinking along the same lines, I imagined he would make a start. Instead, he looked at me speculatively and said, "You looking to sell these hur boxes?"

I confirmed that was the plan, and added I hoped we could charge £10 each.

"Sounds about right. Thing is if people pay for stuff, they expect it to look a certain way. They buys with their eyes mostly. If you're selling you got to think about how something looks, not just how it functions. Need to hide the screw heads somehow for one thing. Shouldn't be too hard."

He muttered to himself a bit, and drew a few plans in the dust with his finger.

He looked at me and went on. "Thing is you're competing with some piece of crap from China or wherever, knocked up-together real cheap in a factory. What you'll be selling won't look much different, but it'll be better quality, last a lot longer, but only be made ten or twenty at a time. You got no economies of scale that way. Enuff tawking, les' 'av a go. Give us that wood, John. You might wanna stick your fingers in your ears, young 'un – be six or seven cuts wi' me chop saw."

There was a hell of a noise and saw-dust went everywhere, like a woody dust-storm. Nick didn't seem to measure anything, but it wasn't random either. I noticed he made some slanting cuts and doubled-up some pieces.

"Tha's the noisiest bit done. 6 pieces for any pseudo-cubical structure. This 'un's the front, so better drill the hole next. About one inch diameter I reckon."

Nick looked at me enquiringly and Andy said, "25 mm was the RSPB recommendation for small birds." I told Nick that would be OK.

He nodded, banged a weird shaped drill into a massive machine and made the required hole in one hit, taking about 10 seconds – luckily nowhere near as ear-splittingly noisy as the saw.

Nick pushed 5 pieces of wood up together to form the box, leaving the lid to one side and asked, "That look abou' right John? Simplest is best obviously. Got a single pitch roof sloping back to front."

"It's ideal. You mentioned screws?"

“Show you in a minute. Time was you’d use nails and glue, but being as this is going outside and screws is cheap as chips, that’s the way to go. Just got to be sure you have enuff, if’n you’re doing loads. Going to take 8 for the sides and 4 for the bottom. The problem is the roof. I could screw that on too, but then you wouldn’t be able to clean out the old nest. Hinges would be good, but they will push up the cost and will likely fail long-term. Can’t think of a really good answer off-hand. Push fit is simplest, but that could blow off in a gale. What d’you reckon?”

“Andy”

“It would be advisable to have a demo one made-up, even if the final version is a little different.”

I passed this on. Nick replied, “right you are,” took out two hand-held electric drills, one for drilling and the other for screwing. With me holding the pieces steady, we had a basic box put together without the lid, in under 2 minutes.

Nick marked the under-side of the lid with a pencil, then glued and nailed a couple of short bits of wood in place. “Know I said I’d just use screws, but it’d be a waste on this. New type of glue dries quick, and it’s waterproof. Bit pricey, but you get what you pay for.”

Nick tested the lid to make sure it fitted, then set it aside saying, “Be touch dry in 10 minutes, then you can cut any excess away wiv a knife.”

Andy commented, “Better ask Mr. Nick how much he will charge you, John. He might be Saint Nicholas, but I doubt he will be playing Santa Claus.”

“Did you have a figure in mind for making one of these Nick?”

“One I can do for free, no problem, i’s a gift. Fac’ I might make another for me own garden. Probably make a better roof out of old slate for that ’un. Making loads, though, tha’s another question. Bound to get boring after a bit, an’ I’d need to buy more screws in. Where’s the wood comin’ from?”

“Andy?”

“Collecting the pallets. Taking them apart and removing the nails, are all unskilled jobs, John. That sounds like a community effort opportunity to me.”

“If I can provide the wood with the nails taken out, would that be best?”

“Easiest for me. ’umping pallets around is heavy work and I ain’t getting no younger. Couple a things. The planks need to be wide enough. I can make ’em shorter or narrower, but I can’t make ’em no wider, and they needs to be dry’ish. If the wood’s soaking, it’ll take ages to dry, ’specially this time o’ year.”

I nodded, and Nick went on, “I reckon £7 a throw ’ould be fair. ’Av a think about it young ’un. Better get yourself some idea of how many you want. Only one of me, and only so much time in a day. You find someone who can do the same job cheaper, then good luck to ’em.”

He grinned at me and I noticed, as well as bits of wood, there were some odds and ends of food in his beard, probably bread crumbs I decided.

Nick picked up the lid, tested the glue, where it had squidged out, with his finger. Then took a small curved knife out of his pocket and cut away the excess. He flipped the lid over, banged it home on top of the box, and passed it to me. It was quite heavy and obviously extremely solid.

Andy said, “That is not going to fall apart in a hurry.”

I repeated this back to Nick who just nodded, and said, “Throw-away culture though these days, John. People don’ expect stuff to last.”

He looked at me speculatively and continued, “You’re friends with Star?”

“I’ve met her once. Her daughter Dawn goes to my school.”

“Thought so. Not saying this’ll help, but you could get them hippy-dippies to paint flowers on the boxes. Don’t suppose the birds ’ull care, but they ain’t the ones buying ’em.”

Andy said, “I wonder if Mr. Jones would part with that used container of glue?”

“The Billy project?”

“Precisely.”

“Umm Nick, any chance I could buy that bottle of glue?”

“Going to ’av a go yourself?”

“Possibly. I have a couple of projects on hand.”

“Got another ’un somewhere. Take this ’un, no problem, not much left in it. This glue don’t keep long once you’ve opened it anyhow. ’Ave to use it up or chuck half away. One thing, you get any on your hands, it takes two or three days to come off.”

He examined his own fingers dispassionately. They were pretty black, though whether from glue, paint or dirt, was hard to say. Nick put the glue container in an old carrier bag with a hole in the bottom and then passed it to me. I wound it up a bit and tucked it away in my shoulder bag.

“Looks like you got an old fishing bag there, John.”

“Does the job. I found it in the garage at home.”

“Good attitude. Too many idiots buying posh junk, then complaining they’re broke.” He looked at the nest-box and said, “You’d better have another bag fer that, if you’re walking.”

He scabbled around and found another used carrier bag for me.

Nick showed me out via a path that went round the house and past the garage saying, “Give us a bell when you got some idea what you’re up to. Evenings are

best. Load of crap on the tele most nights and I'm too old to be buggering around in a freezing-cold shed."

He paused, surveyed me for a few seconds and added, "Good on ya for giving it a go. Come round any time you want. We'll try putting the world to rights. Can't do no worse than the current crop of idiots. See ya." Then turned away.

He waved when I said, 'Goodbye,' to acknowledge he'd heard me and disappeared.



Andy said, "Mr. Nick reminded me of my previous host."

"You said that John had a Maths degree."

"Pound to a penny, Mr. Jones does too. A person does not refer to a box having a 'pseudo-cubical structure', unless they have a fairly advanced mathematical background."

I had a think about this, while trotting along in the general direction of Jenny's house. After a few minutes I commented, "He was clever, wasn't he?"

"You will probably meet some people in your life who are cleverer, I expect, but I doubt there will be many of them. If you decide to see him again, the question will be how far you can trust him."

"I don't have to tell him anything about myself, Andy."

“Clever people work things out without you going into details, John. He is already intrigued by you, or I do not expect you would have been invited back. It smelled like he was a pretty good cook too. I wonder what happened to his wife.”

“He was married?”

“Yes, but she is no longer around; dead, I expect.”

I decided to think all this through when I had time, which I didn't right then. I took out my mobile to find out how to get to Jenny's house. That reminded me to call Mum.

She answered almost straight away, saying “Hello John, are you alright?”

“Fine thanks Mum. I made my escape. Nick almost bit a chunk out of my left calf, but I was too quick for him. Small and nimble, that's me.”

“I suppose you two had a great time? You do realise that that kitchen hadn't been cleaned properly in years, don't you?”

“Nick is quite old, and he's still alive, so that proves you can survive without washing stuff all the time.”

“It smelt.”

“Yes, of tea and wood smoke, and fresh bread and cheese. Anyway, I'm on my way to Jenny's. I should be there in 5 minutes.”

“Do you want me to pick you up?”

“Up to you Mum. You could call in and meet Jenny's mother. I'm going to need at least another 30 minutes to go through things with Jenny, I expect.”

“I'm not happy with the way you are using that girl, John.”

“Then this will be a perfect opportunity for you to tell her that. See ya later, alligators.” I ended the call and picked sped-up, now I knew which way to go.



## Notes

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

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

## Chapter 2 – A Misinformation Campaign

Jenny's front door looked seldom used, so I went round and knocked at the back. A young woman opened the door and said, "Yes?"

She looked so remarkably like an older version of Jenny, that I thought for a split second she must be her sister, then I remembered Jenny had said she was an only child.

I held out my hand, as prescribed in Mum's rules, and said, "Good morning, Mrs. Peters, my name is John Mason, I'm here to see Jenny."

She made no move to shake my hand, instead said, "You're John?"

I got an immediate read on her. She was the proverbial open book. Her main feelings were surprise at my insignificance, and puzzlement at all the fuss Jenny had been making.

I confirmed that I was indeed 'John' and Mrs. Peters bade me 'Come in.'

I entered my second new kitchen of the day. The contrast was stark. It was spotless, very neat, and gave off the faintest whiff of floor cleaner.

Mrs. Peters shouted up the stairs, "Jenny, your friend is here."

Jenny tumbled down into the kitchen, took one look at me to confirm I was actually there, and said, "I'm sorry John, I wasn't sure what time you would come."

"No worries. I went to see Mr. Nick Jones about making some nest-boxes. Mum is doing the shopping. If it's OK I suggested she could collect me on her way home Mrs. Peters."

Jenny's mother just answered, "Yes of course, that's fine."

Turning to Jenny she went on, "Why don't you take John up to your bedroom to play, dear? I've got things to do, and I don't need you two under my feet."

Jenny stood stock still for a few seconds. I could see she was puzzled by the unexpected turn of events. When I made a move towards the hallway, she whooshed past me and up the stairs saying, "It's this way."

I told Andy that Jenny's mum was expecting me to be much more impressive, and that Jenny was shocked when we were sent up to her bedroom.

"I believe this is a similar situation to the one at Mrs. Bingham's. Because you look very young you have been placed in the child category."



Jenny's room was very pink, and in immaculate order. Just to break the ice I made a pretence of looking under her bed and behind her wardrobe, before turning round with a puzzled expression on my face.

Jenny said, "What are you looking for John, is something wrong?"

"I was just wondering where you kept your dead animals, collection of interesting shells and stones, that sort of thing," and looked at her questioningly.

She grinned back and replied, "They're all down in the cellar, with our barrels of wine and an Egyptian Mummy mum got cheap at the Church bring-and-buy sale."

I smiled and replied, "That's probably why your mum needs to do more cleaning. Mummies are notoriously dusty."

I was about to sit on Jenny's bed when I read her and diverted into the chair by her desk, saying, "I expect you'd prefer me to sit here." At least it was a swivel one, unlike Marsha's, so I was able to turn it round to face Jenny, as she sat on her bed. The chair didn't have any castors though, which was a bit odd.

I looked in Jenny's eyes and realised she was still trying to puzzle out why her Mum had OK'ed her bringing a boy up to her room. I said, "Your mother thinks we are little kids who just want to play together, Jenny." I added, "If you like I can be the shopkeeper, and you can be the customer." Recalling one of the games we used to play when I was about five.

Rather than smiling Jenny gasped, and said, "Oh my God you really can..." Then she stopped abruptly and put her hand over her mouth. Her emotions had switched to embarrassment, amazement and shock.

When I explained this to Andy and asked what he/she/it thought, the reply was, "Miss Jennifer has worked out that you are some sort of mind reader. You have given her two clues in the last few minutes. Changing where you were going to sit, and explaining her mother's thoughts."

I thought *Oh shit*, and looked at Jenny again, who had gone bright red and was gasping for air.

I said, "Are you OK Jenny? Do you want me to call your mother?"

"No, only it's so... embarrassing. I mean what you must think? I know the other girls said that, you know ... but well I wasn't sure and now ... and you're here and everything. I can see now why Marsha..." Then she ground to halt again, and blushed two shades redder.

Andy said, "Neither confirm, nor deny anything John. My suggestion is to do something non-challenging."

"Such as?"



“Show Miss Jennifer the story you wrote.” Frankly, I was somewhat discombobulated by Jenny figuring out I had a special ability, so I simply went with Andy’s advice.

I dug around in my bag and pulled out the folded sheets of paper, my **‘Bruised, not abused’** story. I passed them over saying, “I decided to write a short story to go on the website, Jenny. I didn’t get round to typing it up though.”

Jenny fumbled with the sheets of paper, clearly having trouble concentrating, then said, “What do you want me to do with it, John?”

“That is a very good question, Andy. I hope you have some idea how to answer it, because I don’t.”

“Perhaps Miss Jennifer has a friend who could type it up?”

“What are you on about Andy?”

“Why not simply ask her? You will not be any worse off than you are now.”

“Umm... Jenny I know you’ve already done a lot of work for me, but you don’t know somebody who would word-process my story, do you?”

“Would that really be OK? I mean you wouldn’t mind if I asked another girl to help?”

*Apart from all of you needing a medical check-up to see what’s wrong with you? No, I wouldn’t mind, I thought.*

Andy said, “Better tell Miss Jennifer that the helper needs to keep whatever they are doing for you a secret.”

I didn’t bother to ask why. The whole thing had gone way beyond ridiculous and was fast becoming idiotic.

When I passed the secrecy requirement on to Jenny, she nodded seriously and replied “Yes, yes of course. It can’t be Lizzie, she’s a real chatterbox, how about Molly? She really wants to be involved.”

*I’ll bet she does, wouldn’t trust her as far as I could throw her, came to my mind.* “Not Molly, no, I umm ... better choose someone else, someone you trust.”

“Jade then, she’s a bit slow but...”

“That’s OK Jenny, no rush.”

Andy said, “The voices coming from downstairs, indicate your Mother has arrived, John.”

I decided that was it for this session, because it was now almost midday. I said, “Sounds like my Mother’s here, Jenny. We probably aren’t going to get any more done before lunch.”

Jenny's face fell, and she said, "I thought we were going to do the question-and-answer session. I've done a lot of preparation for it."

"How about inviting Miss Jennifer to your house for lunch, John?" Andy suggested.

"What say Jenny, fancy coming up to my place for a spot of lunch? We can do the interview afterwards and if Mum bought a new SIM, we can sort the mobile too." Jenny looked at me, somewhat nonplussed. I thought, *either she will or she won't*, and headed downstairs.



In the kitchen, the two mothers were staging the predictable politeness fest.

I waded in, just after Mum had gone for the, 'I hope John hasn't been a nuisance' line for the second time, saying, "What-ho! Mater. Did your trip to Harrods go well?"

I'd decided up-market would be fun for a change. Mum was a trifle surprised I was doing my Bertie Wooster impression. That was nothing compared to Jenny's mum though, who was very impressed and said, "I hadn't realised you'd been all the way to the City to do your shopping, Mrs. Mason."

Mum now found herself on the horns of a dilemma. Either confess that her son was making things up, or try to sustain the ludicrous notion that she'd been grocery shopping in the West End. She was bailed out by Jenny, who arrived and asked, "Mum, can I go to the Mason's for lunch please? John and I have some more things to sort out."

Mrs. Peters went off on a homily about homework, and the good it brought to the world etc., etc.

I decided we needed to press on if Mum was to have plenty of time for the lunch preparations, and interrupted this soliloquy saying, "That settles it then. Thank you, Mrs. Peters. Jenny go and get any books you need for your homework please, and we'll see you in the car."

I saw I was on thin ice with Jenny's mum, who had finally twigged that my Harrods' comment was almost certainly rubbish. I thanked Mrs. Peters for having me, added that I hoped I hadn't made myself a nuisance for good measure, and toddled off towing Mum in my wake.

Once we were outside, Mum said, "What was all that nonsense about Harrods, John?"

"Bit of name-dropping just for fun I suppose. Do I take it, as you didn't go there, you have been trying your hand at selling double-glazing?"

"No, I have not. I suppose you think that Nick character was funny? All that nonsense about cannibalism was your idea of a joke."

“It was pretty funny. Nick made a nest-box for me in about 5 minutes. He has some serious skills, as well as some serious machines.”

“And a serious beard problem. He smelled like he hadn’t had a wash in a week.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t have anyone to get cleaned up for. I think his wife may have died.”

Mum’s train of thought, along the lines of why doesn’t he ...? Came to a screeching halt and she said, “Oh I see.”

After a few minutes Jenny came out toting a couple of carrier bags. Once she was seated and belted-in, Mum drove off.



Mum and Jenny started chatting. I tuned out and tried to decide what I should do about my superpower. Andy was convinced I would be in danger if the wrong people found out about it. Jenny had sussed out something, even though she didn’t know me that well. I thought about it and realised, as Andy had said, I was used to reading any girl or woman I saw. Using my ability had become something I did automatically. The question wasn’t whether I’d stop using my power, I knew I’d never be able to resist reading someone if I could. No, the question was, *How much of an effort was I prepared to make to conceal having found out the things with my power?*

I was engaged in an inner debate with Andy making comments from time to time, when he/she/it said, “the car has stopped John and your Mother is trying to get your attention.”

Back in the outer world I heard Mum say, “John, John are you alright dear?”

I shook my head and said, “Sorry, just thinking about something,” and hopped out onto the pavement.

Mum said, “We stopped, and you just weren’t answering John. Are you sure you are all right?”

“Lost in thought Mum, sorry to be a worry. Let’s go on in and have a cup of tea, I’m parched.” Once I reached the front gate, I saw a parcel had arrived. I walked up the path, picked it up and stood to one side while Mum unlocked the door.

Jenny and I looked like super-shoppers. She had her two bags and I had my shoulder bag, the nesting-box in the carrier and the parcel. Once we were inside, I told Jenny we’d better dump things in the dining room, then give Mum a hand to bring the shopping in.

Having fetched everything from the car, I put the kettle on and made the tea, while Mum and Jenny put things away. I poured the tea and Mum put a

saucepan of food to heat up, then said, “Did I see an exciting package on the doorstep. I assume it’s something nice for me.”

“It’s probably the model steam engine Mum. Unless you have developed a sudden interest in them, I doubt it will have much appeal.”

Jenny said, “Oh, I didn’t know you were interested in model engines, John.”

“They’re OK, I guess. This one’s for Charlie, as a ‘becoming my girlfriend’ present.”

Mum said, “I didn’t get one of those.”

“You’d better take that up with Dad, I wasn’t around then.”

Jenny asked me when I was going to give it to Charlie.

Andy chipped in with “Why not now? You could take Miss Jennifer with you. There is safety in numbers, which you might need, if that photo which Miss Marsha took of herself has landed across the road.”

“They’re called selfies these days Andy.”

“Duly noted.”



Jenny and I tootled over to take Charlie her present. Jenny hadn’t wanted to come, but Mum told her she ought to have some fun, considering all the work she was doing. I’d taken the model engine out of its wrapping and checked to make sure it wasn’t something random. It looked OK actually, better than the photo.

Jenny and Mum tried to persuade me to wrap it up in fancy paper. I said if Charlie wanted to unwrap it she’d have to wrap it herself first. Mum said this was a typical ‘boy thing’ to say, and Jenny grinned at the idea.

When I remarked, “us Martians don’t do present wrapping like you Venusians” Jenny didn’t know what I was on about. I said I’d give her Mum’s book to read.

Mum asked, “Whose book are you lending out John?”

“Yours,” I replied, which settled the matter; Mum being unable to think of a witty comeback.



Mrs. Bingham opened the door in response to my knock, looked at Jenny and me, clearly puzzled, and asked, “Have you come for lunch?”

“No Mrs. Bingham, Mum’s got something on the go for us. Just dropping this off for Charlie. Is she up in her room?”

“Yes, go on up, but no running around. You youngsters make me feel dizzy. Did you find anything to use as the head for your spider costume?”

“I’m not absolutely sure on that point. Mum was going to ask around for me, but she didn’t say if she’d found something or not.”

Mrs. Bingham nodded, so I skipped round her and dashed off up the stairs, keeping my top speed below the ‘running level’ as directed.

I shouted, “Incoming” when I was almost at the top of the stairs.

Charlie shouted back, “Bugger off. It’s lunch-time you twit.”

Jenny joined me outside Charlie’s door so I said loudly, “Come on Jenny we’d better go. Sounds like someone doesn’t want their present.”

Charlie’s door flew open, she looked at us and said, “What present?”

“If you move out of the way a second Charlie-girl, I’ll come and give it to you.”

Charlie was suspicious this was some sort of a joke, but she retreated far enough into her bedroom for me to go in and put the box on her bed. Having done that, I stood back. Jenny came and stood beside me.

Charlie looked at the box, then at us two and said, “It’s a Newton 301 model steam-engine box.”

“I know,” I replied, “There’s a good reason for that. If you look inside, you’ll see what it is.”

Charlie was still unsure what was up. She opened the box very gingerly.

I said, “It’s a Newton 301 model steam-engine, that’s why it’s in that box.”

Charlie froze for a few seconds then looked at me and Jenny, completely dumbfounded and said, “I don’t understand.”

“Nothing too mysterious about it Charlie. It’s a present from me in celebration of you becoming my girlfriend. I decided to give it to you now, so it wouldn’t get all mixed up with Christmas. Maybe you and your dad can have a look at it sometime.”

Charlie stared at me still not having touched her present and said, “This is a top of the range model for its size, it must have cost a fortune.”

“Not really. I bought it second-hand, so I can’t guarantee it’s working. Anyway, isn’t it impolite to ask how much a present cost?”

Andy said, “It is nearly one o’clock John. If Miss Charlotte needs to explain her emotions to someone, I suggest you leave it to Miss Jennifer to deal with, and scoot off home.”

Seemed like a plan to me, so when Charlie squealed and threw herself at me, I dodged round her, not that easy a thing to do with Charlie normally, but I took her by surprise. That left Jenny being almost flattened by Charlie coming

at her unexpectedly. I noticed she managed to stay on her feet, which was impressive.

I said, "OK. Time I wasn't," and hoofed it, saying "Tara' to Mrs. Bingham on my way out.



Back home in the kitchen Mum looked at me suspiciously and asked, "What happened? What have you done with Jenny?"

Rather than patting myself down, and checking my pockets to show good will in searching for the missing girl, I went with, "Jenny and Charlie are having a bit of girl-time together, Mum. I'm sure you know how it goes."

Mum responded, "I know how it goes, when it's nearly lunchtime with you around. What exactly are they doing with this 'girl-time'?"

"When last seen, Charlie was giving Jenny a sort of hug. Possibly Mrs. Bingham has intervened by now, I believe she was about to serve lunch too."

I looked down at my empty bowl, hoping that Mum would take a hint from the 'too' in my last remark. Mum however had other ideas and said, "So what did Charlie think of her present?"

"She was really surprised. I think I overdid it a bit. According to Charlie that model is one of the best of its type. Still better too much, than too little I suppose. That stew smells awfully good."

Just then there was a ring on the bell, which unsurprisingly turned out to be Jenny. Having let her in I said, "Come on, Mum's about to dish out the stew she made; it smells wonderful."

Jenny was clearly nonplussed by me abandoning her at Charlie's, but she took it very well. Coming into the kitchen, apologising for being late, washing her hands and sitting down at the table. Mum served the stew once Jenny was seated, so I cut some bread for the three of us and dug in.

It was beef stew with all sorts of vegetables. It was bark brown and steaming hot — rich, thick and altogether delicious. Just what a stew should be. Mum and Jenny chatted away about how my present had gone down with Charlie, and whether Jenny was really having a good time this half-term.

I caught Jenny watching me a couple of times as I ate, so I slowed down a bit. I figured as long as Mands didn't show up, seconds were a certainty. I felt a lot better after filling up with a second bowl of stew, I mean who wouldn't?

Mum noticed Jenny watching me sop up the bits at the bottom of my bowl with another piece of bread, and said, "It's alright Jenny. John has hollow legs and a magically expanding stomach. I used to worry he might hurt himself over-eating, but he never does."

Jenny grinned back at her and said, "I'm going to have to start a section on the website for the food John likes, so everyone knows in an emergency."

Up until then I had regarded the whole fan-site thing as ridiculous, but I immediately realised I'd been an idiot, not remembering priorities. I said, "Top idea Jenny. You've come up with something really brilliant, and I'd like to be the first to congratulate you," while beaming at her.

"I wasn't serious," she replied faintly,

"I think I mentioned before, never joke about food. Mum does sometimes, but it always falls flat. We'd all be dead if we didn't eat enough, it's an extremely serious subject. If nothing-else comes of this website the food and drink section could prove to be of vital importance."



Mum had made tea, so we sat down with a mug each to finish the meal. Mum said, "What's the plan then you two? All sorts of important things to do this afternoon."

Jenny looked at me questioningly. I thought for a few seconds, and then said, "Jenny had better get on and finish her homework first, I think. You can use the dining room, Jenny. Plenty of room to spread out on the table in there."

Jenny's face fell and Mum said, "That doesn't sound like much fun, John."

"Fun later, homework first. Jenny's mum let her visit on the understanding she did her homework. If either of you want to ring Mrs. Peters to see if she will let Jenny off the hook, be my guest."

Mum looked at Jenny then stuck her tongue out at me, when Jenny laughed, she said, "He gets awfully bossy sometimes."

As it turned out, Jenny didn't have a huge amount to do, just some maths which I decided she'd left because she was unsure how to do it. I ran through a few things with her, not doing it for her, but making up similar questions so she could see how they worked. It was mostly geometry, so it was easy to understand. Once she'd got started, I left her to it, and went back to the kitchen to see what Mum was doing.

Andy said, "You might want to check with your Mother about the new SIM and the false spider head, John."

When I asked, Mum said, "Oh yes I have the SIM for you in my bag." She fished that out and passed it to me, then went on, "I found these too," and produced two large plastic pumpkin lantern shades from a corner of the room. To be fair they were plenty big enough, but they were orange and had a fierce grinning face on one side.

I looked at Mum and said, "Thanks for these. They're very orange."

“They are pumpkin light-shades, dear,” Mum replied.

“No spider I know has an orange head, Mum.”

“No, I expect not. Disappointingly for local arachnophiles, large spider heads of the correct colour were in short supply in Caversham this morning. I had a stern word with Waitrose’s manager, and she promised to do better in the future.”

“Well done, Mum. Mustn’t let these shopkeepers slacken off. Do you think some sort of black paint might do the trick?”

“Better ask Pauline first, as she is doing the work. Dyeing them might be better.”

“Will do. I’m going to nip up to my room to check on a few things on my computer. I’ll let Jenny know where to find me if she needs any help.” Mum having nodded her assent, I tootled off upstairs having told Jenny where I would be, and switched on my PC.



There weren’t any emails I needed to bother with, so I scrolled through a few links for Andy to have something to think about, and then had a look at the EGGs’ site. I said to Andy, “Not much new here, any thoughts?”

“Either Miss Marsha is not prepared to do the work, or, more likely I think, she lacks confidence not knowing exactly what you want her to do. How about sending her a link to another site with a ‘free/swaps/for sale section’ and asking her to add something similar to your site? That would be a good test of her commitment.”

I bunged an email to Marsha with a link to what I had in mind, and asked her if she would add something similar.

I was wondering what to do next when a whirlwind entered my room, opening the door with a bang and cutting a swathe across the floor towards me. Once the dust had settled, I saw Charlie was at the heart of the meteorological phenomenon, and not only had she altered local weather patterns, but she had sucked Jenny in along with her. I decided some sort of vortex effect was involved.

I looked up from my chair and said, “Hello Charlie,” accompanying this opening sally with a hopeful smile.

“Don’t you ‘Hello Charlie’ me, NJ. I’m really angry with you. You had better have a good excuse this time.”

“Andy?”

“Go with ‘I’m a hopeless boy,’ is my advice, John. No point making up fancy excuses.”



When I repeated this to Charlie, she responded with, “At least you admit you’re useless. You’re supposed to let the person you give a present to thank you, you idiot. And what’s the idea of inviting Jenny over, and then making her do schoolwork? I hope you know you are a first-class twit!”

Jenny was looking awkward, and I was going to make some points about her mother and homework, when Andy said, “Do not argue about it. Just agree that you are a twit, and ask Miss Charlotte how she likes her present.”

I said, “Once a first-class twit, always a first-class twit, Charlie. What do you think of the steam engine? Is it any good for what you wanted?”

Charlie chucked herself at me, and as I was sitting in my computer chair, we skidded along until we hit the chest of drawers. Charlie began with “NJ you idiot, it’s brilliant...” and then went off on a long list of reasons for this, finishing with “...and dad’s going to come and check it, to make sure it’s safe.”

Then I got thoroughly snogged.

When I came up for air, I noticed Jenny was standing just inside my door, so I said, “Why not come in and sit on the bed, Jenny? Seems like your homework session has been ruled out of order. We can run through some of those questions you wanted to record me answering.”

Jenny looked embarrassed and said, “Are you’re sure?”

I saw she thought she was interrupting something between me and Charlie. That was out anyway. Apart for anything else, Mum would never stand for me sending Jenny off, just so Charlie and I could be alone.



I reassured Jenny it would be OK to have a bash at doing the interview. Then I roped Charlie in to do the videoing, as her phone is the newest. It’s a fancy one her dad bought her for her birthday.

I suppose I could have predicted what the questions would be like. ‘What was my favourite colour, film, music, school subject, sport?’ I went with ‘Green, the first Harry Potter, no idea, maths and tiddly-winks’ respectively.

Jenny had a problem with my lack of interest in music and Charlie was sure I was just being irritating naming a ‘kid’s game’ as a sport, but we got through it.

After the first couple of questions, Andy said, “this is spectacularly boring, John.”

“Agreed. Can I just cancel the whole thing?”

“You can, of course. However, I suggest you do a drawing of Jenny as she interviews you, to spice things up a bit.” This seemed preferable to being dulled out.

I said, “I’ll just get my sketchpad and do a few drawings to liven things up while we’re doing this.”

I started by doing a cartoon of the two girls together. Then went on to sketch Jenny as she asked another round of predictable questions.

Then came an awkward one. “What sort of girls did I like?”

Andy said, “Be careful, John. I advise staying away from appearances.”

“Hard to say, really,” I replied. “I like most girls to an extent, just some more than others. If they are funny and clever, those are important factors for me. I don’t like liars, or anyone who spends stupid amounts of time shopping. Perhaps when I know more girls, I’ll have a better idea. I really only know a few of the girls at school, and a couple of others from the recycling group we are trying to start. I do have a sister, and she has a best friend, who I know quite well. That isn’t a very large sample of all the girls in the world to draw conclusions from.”

We had to break for a bit to download the recording from Charlie’s mobile. After that there were a couple more obvious questions which I answered simply. Then I stood up to show the girls my cartoon of them, followed by the drawing I’d done of Jenny. She was amazed when I said she could keep it, as she really liked it.

Andy said, “Better sign and date it for her John. One day it may be valuable.”

When I repeated this as a joke, Jenny nodded seriously and replied, “Yes of course, only I’d never sell it.” For some unknown reason she had decided I was going to be an important person.

Andy said, “Give her a hug, you nitwit.”

After signing the drawing, I put it to one side, then very slowly made a move to give Jenny a hug while watching first her reaction and then Charlie’s. They both were OK with it. Jenny hugged me back briefly.



Charlie was grinning by this point and said, “So Jenny gets a nice drawing and a hug and all I got was a dirty old second-hand steam-engine and a kiss I had to steal. Hardly worth being a girlfriend some days.”

I put my arms round her, and we started a long kiss. By the time we had broken apart again, Jenny had disappeared.

Andy said, “Judging by the voices downstairs, Miss Amanda has returned home with some friends.”

I said, “I think Mands and some of her mates have rocked up, Charlie. What, say we try climbing out of my window and sneaking off through the garden?”

“What’s all this sudden interest in climbing NJ? I thought you were scared of heights.”

“I’m not scared of heights. I don’t even mind falling. It’s hitting the ground after falling from a height I’m scared of. Perhaps if we go downstairs together, I can hide behind you until I can escape.”

“You’re such a coward sometimes. It’s only a bunch of your sister’s friends, NJ, man up and don’t be such a wimp.”

“It wasn’t you, they put make-up on and curled your hair ...” I began, but then seeing Charlie was getting annoyed with me, I changed tack and continued “... never mind. Let’s go and see what’s happening. I’ll tell them you’ll hit them if I ask you to.”

“That’s the spirit, NJ. Get your girlfriend to do your fighting for you. You’re like the opposite of a knight, whatever that is.”

“A dragon?”

“Don’t be an idiot. Come on, Lancelot, I’ll go first.”



There was the aftermath of a girl explosion downstairs. Not only were they milling around in the corridor, but the kitchen was full too. I gave serious thought to scarpering out the front door. Charlie had a good grip on my hand though, so that was out. The cacophony suddenly turned to silence, and I realised everyone was looking at Charlie and me – or more specifically me. In addition to Mum, Mands, Tammy and Jenny, there was Tammy’s older sister Beverly, and five other girls who I vaguely recognised as having been over before, but were nameless to me.

I said, “Hi all. Something exciting going on?”

The attention shifted to Jenny who said, “I was just showing the others the drawing you did of me. I posted it on your website too, that was OK, wasn’t it?”

“Sure, why not? You’re my main fansite editor and keeper of the official ‘**John Mason mobile**’, Jenny – almost unlimited power for good or ill lies in your hands.”

Jenny looked at me totally confused. If this sort of casual idiocy was going to baffle her I decided she wouldn’t last long. A number of girls started asking questions simultaneously. I held my hand up, palm out in a ‘stop’ gesture and said, “One at a time please.”

One of the not fully identified girls (possibly Bunny or Benny, or even Binny), asked “What did you mean Official Mobile, John?”

“Jenny has kindly consented to have a go at answering my messages and calls now I’m well on my way to becoming a media sensation. I’ve given my official mobile into her keeping.”

“But what if someone actually needs to speak to you?”

“That’s the cunning part. I have an unofficial mobile. Jenny can text me or whatever to let me know I need to call whoever it is.”

“That’s just stupid,” Beverly said. Unlike her sister, Bev can be aggressive. In fact, I was surprised to see her with this group, she usually hangs out with her own mates.

“You may think it’s stupid Beverley, but if you try ringing Brad Pitt, I imagine you’ll get one of his helpers. It seems unlikely he’ll answer your call himself and say ‘Hi Brad here, how may I help you?’”

“You’ve got a real big opinion of yourself, don’t you, Johnny? How about I give you an attitude adjustment?”

I was trying to think how to respond when Charlie faced up to Bev saying, “How about you pick on someone your own size? John’s my boyfriend, and anyone who has a problem with him is going to have to go through me first.”

Even though Bev was much bigger and stronger than her, Charlie was clearly up for a ruck right there in our downstairs corridor.

Bev, realising she was in a minority of one, just as clearly was not up for a fight. “You feel like that, it’s your problem girlie. He don’ look like no sort’a catch to me. Anyhow, I’m outta here. Bye now kiddies.” Bev sauntered off out the front door without even thanking Mum for having her.

The attention turned to Tammy, who said, “I’m so sorry. Bev can be really rude and nasty sometimes. Mum says it’s a stage she’s going through. Perhaps I’d better go.”

Mum said, “Don’t be silly Tamsin, we all know that wasn’t your fault. I expect your mother’s right, and Beverley will be a lot different when she’s older.”

One of the other girls muttered, ‘Bigger and grumpier,’ which got some laughs. Mum pretended not to hear.



Andy said, “Spider heads” which completely threw me initially, but then I worked out what he/she/it meant.

I said, “Now that’s done, I think I’ll beetle off over the road to Charlie’s.”

Charlie looked at me and said “I’m right here NJ”

“I know. I can see you. It’s not you I’m going to visit. I have two spider heads to deliver.”

This provoked a couple of ‘Eeks’ and a ‘you what?’ from the girls. Mum twigged what I was on about and retrieved the two pumpkin head lanterns from the top of a wall cupboard and passed them to me saying, “Don’t make more of a nuisance of yourself than usual John.”

I legged it with my booty, after thanking Mum for being a brick, leaving a host of unanswered questions and a plethora of comments behind me.

Mrs. Bingham gave the pumpkin heads a professional once over, sniffed disapprovingly and said, “Nylon, I expect – won’t take any normal dye.”

“What about black paint?”

That earned me a stare of the, *this kid’s not all there*, variety.

She said in the tone of someone keeping things simple for an imbecile, “You can’t wash material once you’ve painted it Johnny – it would just end up in a mess.”

“Not really an issue in this particular case. I doubt Charlie and I will wear this outfit more than twice.”

Mrs. Bingham was still not happy, and muttered something about ‘spendthrifts’, but she trotted off to the garage and came back with a dusty tin of paint, colour unspecified.

I asked, “Shall I give it a try?” in the spirit of we’re all in this togetherness.

Mrs. Bingham was absolutely horrified and responded, “No you will not! The last thing I need is paint all over my kitchen. You can just take yourself off home again. I’ll try a little on an off-cut from inside one of these to see if it takes. Quite apart from anything else young man sewing comes first, and painting or whatever other messy activity you have in mind comes last. All brains and no common-sense, I’d say,” and she fixed me with a look.

“Umm, I’ll take myself and my lack of common-sense off then, Mrs. Bingham. Thanks for all your hard work on this project. Goodnight now.”

“Goodnight, Johnny. This costume gives me the heebie-jeebies..”

“Just the ticket then,” Andy commented, which presumably indicated approval.



Back over the road, Mands’ gang of hangers-on had slung their hooks, as Andy put it. Mum was ready to serve tea.

I froze in place when I realised what time it was and said, “I was nearly late for tea. I lost track of time.”

Mum pretended to have a heart-attack and collapsed in a chair, Charlie went off in a fit of the giggles – Mands got angry and said, “Rubbish, you never forget tea-time – it’s impossible.”

Tammy was worried and asked, “Are you feeling OK John?”

And Jenny was confused, trying to work out what all the fuss was about.

I said, “Thanks for your concern, Tamsin. I do feel a trifle discombobulated. Perhaps the fumes from painting the pumpkin heads black in Charlie’s kitchen just now has affected me adversely.”

Charlie said, “Oh my God NJ, you didn’t! Mum must have gone completely spare. You absolute idiot...”

“As it happens Charlie, although I offered to help with the painting your mother nixed the idea. No painting was done by me at least. What’s for tea, anyway? I’m jolly hungry, now I come to think about it.”

Charlie wanted to throttle me, but by this time I’d washed my hands and sat at the table. It was a bit of a squeeze with 6 of us. Mum served us steaming bowls of vegetable soup with garlic bread on the side.

Jenny said, “I don’t precisely understand. What was that about paint and Charlie’s mum?”

I explained about painting the fake orange pumpkin lanterns black, and that I’d offered to do it in the kitchen.

Jenny thought for a bit and said, “But you wouldn’t really have painted them in Mrs. Bingham’s kitchen, would you John?”

Normally I’d have been a bit peeved to have been engaged in more chit-chat when food was on the table, but the soup was so hot even I had to give it a bit of a chance to cool down.

“Why not?” I responded, “It would only have been paint, I can’t see the problem.”

The rest of them agreed that I really was a typical boy, and that I would have made a total mess. It seemed like a moot point to me, as I certainly wasn’t going to insist on painting things. It wasn’t something I’d wanted to do for my own amusement.

I dipped some bread in my soup to get a start and let the others get on discussing boys and black paint in an indoor setting. Eyes on the prize as Andy had said, which in this case was first bash at seconds. It turned out however that Mum had made a ton of soup, so there was plenty for everyone.

I ate three bowls of it and was so full I didn’t even fancy a cup of tea afterwards. After the clear-up, Mum said, “It’s time I ran you back home Jenny, it’s getting dark so early these days.”

I was about to make a sarcastic comment about the axial tilt of the Earth making it easy to predict the hours of darkness for any spot on its surface stipulating an elliptical orbit around the Sun when Andy said, “you definitely need to accompany Jenny home, John”

“But Andy...”

“Don’t you ‘but Andy’ me, young man.” He/she/it responded in a fair imitation of Mum’s voice which took me by complete surprise. I had to pretend to be coughing to cover the laughing fit.

Having assured everyone I was OK, I said, “I’ll come with you Mum to make sure Jenny doesn’t get lost on her way from the car to her back door.”

“That’s OK John, I can manage,” Jenny replied.

Mum said, “Nonsense. John is trying to be polite for once. It makes a nice change.”

Charlie was looking a bit down, so I suggested she came too for the ride. Given the round trip was going to take us less than 10 minutes, I wondered what all the fuss was about, but Charlie cheered up at my suggestion. Clearly I’d done something right for once.

Charlie and I held hands in the back, which was great. On arrival I saw Jenny down the path to her back door. I hardly needed to use my mobile, because there was a very bright street-light nearby. I wondered how much electricity it used and decided this was the sort of issue a local environmental group ought to look into. Once we stopped by her door there was an awkward pause after Jenny said what a lovely time she’d had.

Andy said, “Give her a hug you nitwit.” Which I duly did.

This seemed to have been the right thing to do because Jenny was happy when she said, ‘Goodnight John’ and let herself in.

I said, “Is there a rule about when I should be hugging or kissing girls and when I shouldn’t? Right now, I’m jolly confused.”

“If you go with always doing more or less what you did previously John, you will not go far wrong. Unless the girl tells you not to of course. If a status change means more demonstrative action is called for, I will endeavour to warn you in advance. Generally, a hug, or a kiss on the cheek is appropriate in informal settings. Anything more could be considered an unwelcome sexual advance.”

Which was a good deal more useful than an ‘it depends’ answer, but there were all sorts of holes in this guidance. I decided I’d better ask Andy if something new came up. I certainly didn’t want to embarrass anyone, least of all myself.



Safely back in the car Charlie grinned at me and asked, “Did Jenny get a snog then, NJ?”

“No she did not. We had a friendly hug, if you must know.”

“Good, all the more for me.”

Mum said, “You two had better slow down, or I’ll have to have a serious chat with your mother, Charlie.

“Sorry Mrs. Mason.”

“That’s Sally, remember dear. I’m not unsympathetic. On the other hand, you are both very young and have plenty of time to grow up without rushing things,”

“I’m not sure I have enough time to grow up Mum. I’ve got a lot of growing up to do, physically speaking.”

“You have a lot of growing up to do emotionally speaking too John. I don’t want either of you to get hurt, and that’s what will happen if you try to run before you can walk.”

“Sound advice,” Andy commented.

“I thought we agreed I was going to try things.”

“We did, yes. But I also have to agree with your Mother that rushing your fences is a short-cut to a nasty fall. As always with growing-up it’s a matter of balance and judgment, which is tricky of course for youngsters, as you have so little experience to draw on.”

“I’ve got you to advise me, Andy.”

“Indeed you have, and I have been trying to give you good advice, but in retrospect things with Miss Marsha in particular went rather further and faster than was wise.”

“No fucking though,” I commented to lighten the mood.

“Yes indeed ‘no fucking’ as you say with jocular intent, I take it. But there is a lot of ground short of sexual intercourse which will be complex to navigate until you are older.”

“You can pretty much see anything you want in the way of porn on the internet these days Andy. Anyway we did make an agreement last night.”

“Indeed. Though technically our agreement was made after midnight, to be pedantic. You should not do anything sexual which makes you uncomfortable John, just because you believe I would enjoy it. That would come under the heading of short-term gain risking long term pain. As for pornography there is a difference in kind between watching something at third hand, and being



involved in it yourself. As an example, take an accident in which someone dies. That is a common enough thing on the news. Then imagine what it would be like if you had been there and saw it at first-hand.”

As Mum often says I have a very vivid imagination and so this point of Andy’s hit me hard. I mean there’d been a house fire on the news earlier in the week in which three little kids had died. I could hardly bear to think about it.

When the car stopped, I came back to the now and realised Charlie and I must have been hugging all the way home. She said, “That was really nice NJ. This boyfriend business has its good sides.”

“I agree Charlie I’m definitely jolly lucky.”

Out in the Close we had a quick kiss, with Mum watching from the doorstep and then said our ‘Good-nights’.



Back in the house Mum said, “She’s a really sweet girl.”

“Jenny or Charlie?”

“Both of them. You need to be careful with Jenny, John. She has a serious crush on you.”

“I more or less worked that out Mum. What I’m not sure about is what ‘being careful’ means in this instance.”

Mum thought for a bit and then said, “be nice to her, but not too nice.”

I just looked at Mum then said, “Thanks for that, oh wise one. Any updates on that wooden frying-pan prototype of yours?”

Mum said, “Oh you ...” paused, then went on “it’s difficult, I mean...”

“I’ll try, OK? I don’t know why Jenny likes me so much. As far as I can see I’ve mostly given her a load of annoying work to do. Perhaps that’s what she always wanted, someone to give her stuff to do they couldn’t be bothered to do themselves. Quite frankly not just Jenny, but girls in general and how they think and why they do the things they do, are beyond me getting my head around. I’m just going to have to try my best not to make massive cock-up of things and apologise early and often for only being a boy. How does that sound?”

For some reason Mum replied “I’m really proud of you you know, John.”

Then we had a nice hug and I toddled off upstairs, switched my computer on and sat not really looking at the screen, having brought up some stuff on how brains work for Andy’s delectation.

After clicking through web pages for Andy he/she/it said, “was there anything you wanted to ask me about, or did you want to mull things over on your own John?”

“You know you said stuff went too quickly with Marsha. I’ve more or less promised, you know...”

“Good point John. And rather more more than less, I think. You have an obligation, assuming she is holding up her end of the bargain. I encouraged you to do things with Miss Marsha.”

“And?”

“And now you are going to have to call her and either say the deal is off for reasons involving your Mother and your girlfriend, or you are going to have to stand up your end of the bargain, presumably on Sunday week.”

“I don’t mind you know Andy, and not just because of my deal with you. I mean I like Marsha, and what we did was fun, only...”

“You are thinking that if the full story came out Miss Charlotte would almost certainly cut you adrift?”

“I guess so. It’s one thing giving another girl a kiss or a cuddle, but...well I’m not sure if Charlie would dump me or not.”

“That is a possibility. As you say a kiss or a cuddle is one thing but stimulating a girl to such an extent that she has an orgasm is another box of frogs entirely.”

“Yes.”

“There are a few things to take into account, John. For one, Miss Marsha may decide that things went rather further than she intended them to. I am not saying that is likely, but it is possible. Also, I think she will be straight-up with you. She is the sort of girl who will tell you what she thinks and wants. I expect her mother will have warned her to keep whatever you two do as quiet as possible. Getting a reputation for being sexually precocious is something almost any mother is going to warn their daughter against. Finally, we come back to Miss Charlotte and her potential take on all this. I can not help but feel that Saturday’s soccer match and the probable continuance of the reward scheme is going to play a part in how she feels.”

“You think the reward scheme will be happening again, even though Mum agreed with Charlie it wouldn’t?”

“As you yourself noted Miss Charlotte is extremely competitive. In any team sport a small improvement in effort and commitment from all the players can be the difference between winning and losing.”

I thought about this for a bit then said, “You think Charlie will be less worried by what Marsha and I do, if the reward scheme ratchets up a notch?”

"I am not guaranteeing it John. There are a number of imponderables, but the soccer match in question is only two days away. There will be more information to go on before your promised assignation with Miss Marsha. My experience tells me things rarely stay static in human relationships, at least in their initial stages. Either they intensify, or they fizzle out altogether. That applies both to what is expected of you by the soccerettes and to what Miss Marsha would see as a reasonable return for her endeavours."

"Marsha is more of a worry than the footballers, Andy."

"Quite true John. She is older than they are, and that makes a big difference. One thing which may help is that I do not expect Miss Marsha to be on the market for very long."

"Come again?"

"Was that a pun?"

"No, it bloody well was not."

"Just checking. My point is that Miss Marsha is quite a pretty girl with a fast-developing body, a sunny nature and an outgoing personality. I assume the reason she does not currently have a boyfriend is due to her having moved here from Poland, coupled with going to an all-girls school. Even with those handicaps, considering her more than passing interest in sex, I'd say she'll have found a boyfriend in the next 6 months."

"That's quite a long time Andy."

"Perhaps it is. One thing is for sure we are not going to resolve all this now. Are you going to check your emails and mobile messages before you go to bed?"

"Sod it. I meant to get that bloody mobile sorted and give it to Jenny."

"Tomorrow is another day, John. You have accomplished quite a lot recently."

"You could have reminded me."

"I could. But there is a fine line between being a back-up memory aide and nagging, or micro-managing your time."

"Right, yes – as you say it's no big deal. I just need to get it done before school starts again, I suppose."

"Speaking of reminding you of things with regard to Miss Jennifer and your mobile may I mention that you have not followed up on the legality of receiving semi naked selfies from an underage sender?"

"Jenny can't end up in trouble because some girl sexted me – that's just stupid."

"As has been remarked on more than one occasion John, the law is an ass. It is also true that ignorance of the law is not a defence. Before you decide what to do, if anything, I suggest you at least check out the legal situation. Knowing

what the law says is one step towards circumventing it, if that is what you wish.”

That was as near as Andy gets to nagging and given I was involving Jenny I swallowed my natural tendency to believe that life makes sense, and took a look at the law on-line.

Boy was I glad I did. You can be criminally prosecuted if someone sexts you, if they are under age! It doesn't matter if you don't know them or if you never even realised you had been sent a sexy photo.

“This is ridiculous Andy.”

“Quite possibly so but the question is what do you propose to do about it?”

“What am I supposed to do about it? I can't change the law, and it's not me doing the sexting.”

“As a minimum you need a clear rule for Miss Jennifer to follow. You now know the law so you can make up your own mind what to do if you receive more sexts. But Miss Jennifer is acting on your behalf so she needs guidance.”

“This is ridiculously complicated, Andy.”

“That's life John. Things become uncomplicated when you die.”



I was wondering about getting an early night when Andy said, “What about getting your homework out of the way?”

“I'm going to feel guilty, if I copy a story from the internet Andy.”

“Up to you of course, but I believe this comes under the heading of not being able to make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. I do not think there is a resolution to the brainbox academy issue which will leave everybody happy. You did give your Mother fair warning that you are not prepared to cooperate. If it helps at all you could also front up with your teacher and tell her what you are doing.”

It didn't take a genius to realise that Andy was right and there was no happy outcome for everyone. I really liked Mrs. Prosser and of course I loved Mum, but when it came down to it I wasn't prepared to compromise my own future on this issue. Of course, I could have flat out refused to go in September, assuming I did get into the nerds' hot house, but I decided it would be preferable to avoid the issue by doing as Andy suggested, and ploughing my school work. Some unpleasantness now seemed preferable to a much bigger row later. Being dragged off against my will to somewhere I didn't want to go, was something I was prepared to do quite a lot to avoid.

One issue occurred to me, so I asked, “What happens about the work I've already handed in? I always get top marks for Maths for example.”

“Obviously I have not seen all your previous work, John. If there is a large body of extremely good work on file that would be a major stumbling block. However, it occurred to me that the maths exam questions you handed in last week could be used to advantage in a misinformation campaign.”

“I don’t see how Andy. Mrs. Prosser was mega-impressed with that work.”

“There are more ways of getting exam answers correct than working them out, John.”

I thought for a bit and said, “I’m not going to like this am I?”

“Probably not. Disinformation and sneakiness appear to be foreign to your nature. I might just observe that a bit of bragging by you to Master Angus about how you found answers to a lot of school work on various websites would almost certainly do the trick.”

“Sounds like lying to me Andy.”

“That depends. You would not have to go as far as saying you used the answers you found, John. I am sure everyone, apart from a few people who know you well, will jump to the conclusion you have been cheating. One way of finding out who really believes in you.”

“If I do this I’m not going to lie to Mum or Charlie or Mrs. Prosser about it Andy.”

“Fair enough. As I take it the key player will be the redoubtable Miss Marchant. Not much contentious happens in a small school without the Head being drawn into it. I believe you observed that she has taken a dislike to you, which could well be very useful. There is a story there I think.”

I considered all this from various angles and decided it could be seen as a joke of sorts.

Andy gave me some time to think, then said, “The story John?”

“Right. Do you have any ideas? I guess I can print something out, without committing myself.”

“Precisely. Always good to have options, even if you decide not to use them. I thought ‘Call of the Wild’ by Jack London might fit the bill, as the central character is a dog. Almost certainly your teacher will be familiar with the story, so she will soon smell a rat. It was written long enough ago that I imagine it’s possible to download the whole text for free.”

Andy turned out to be correct in every particular. The main problem I ran into was that it is such a good story I lost myself reading it. I was about a third of the way through when Andy interrupted saying “Might I suggest you finish this another time John? It is after 11pm.”

“Yes right. I could copy it over to my laptop I guess.”

“You could, but do not forget I can act as your e-reader.”

“You can?”

“Yes I have mentioned that I can make texts I have seen before available to you.”

“You already have this on file, as it were?”

“Yes. My previous host read it the best part of 50 years ago. Try this.” And Andy rolled the text in my mind’s eye, starting from where I had left off. I found it quite odd to read that way when I started, but I soon got used to it.

After another few paragraphs I said, “OK. Stop now please Andy.” I paused then went on tentatively, “you don’t really forget anything do you?”

“No.”

“Considering how long you have been around and all the things you seen and heard, that is one humongous storage requirement.”

“Yes.”

“That pretty much proves alien involvement. I can’t conceive any human technology being able to do that.”

“Perhaps in the future?”

“I’m not going to opt for an explanation that involves time being twisted, Andy. It’s all very well in sci-fi stories, but in real life time travel is impossible. If people in the future could alter the past then somebody would have gone back and killed Hitler. The past is fixed – it happened – end of.”

“You are almost certainly correct.”

“Thanks, and well thanks I suppose.” I hit the bathroom and then jumped straight into bed.

As I was about to ask Andy to put me to sleep, he/she/it said, “Are you worried about having an alien in your head John?”

“Nope. Doesn’t hurt and I like you. Nothing I could do about it if I was worried. We’ll just have to get along as best we can.”

“An extremely cogent point. How about a Miss Amanda dependent morning call?”

“Yes please. Goodnight, Andy.”

“Goodnight, John.”

## Chapter 3 – Cross Dressing

When I woke up I remembered dreaming about aliens. Inevitable I suppose, given my late-night chat with Andy. It had been scary because they had been taking my memories away, rather than doing an Andy, and recounting other people's memories to me.

Downstairs there was a massive saucepan of porridge with plump raisins in it bubbling away on the cooker. Having said 'Good morning' to Mum and given her a hug, I could see she was in a tizz about something. I said, "What's up Mater? Vicar due to prop round later to make an inspection of the premises for cleanliness. It is proverbially associated with Godliness I believe."

"Please don't have one of your awkward days John. If you must know your Father rang last night and he's coming home tomorrow."

"Be reasonable Mum, he does live here, at least some of the time anyway."

"Yes, but I wasn't expecting him back until Sunday, there's so much to do."

"I could help," I responded brightly.

Mum gave me what I believe is technically known as a withering stare and replied, "you can help by staying out of my way." Which told me.

I felt much better with some hot porridge, loaded with double cream and honey inside me. I mean who wouldn't? Leaning back in my chair, supping on a hot mug of tea I said, "Did I tell you Charlie has an away match tomorrow afternoon? That will get me out from under your feet for a bit."

"I can't take you John I've got too much to do."

"No problemo, I'm golden."

"You're not going to ride Amanda's bike there are you?"

"Of course not Mum. I'm not bonkers like Charlie, and anyway I have no idea where it's being played, apart from being somewhere not too far away I expect."

"How do you expect to get there then?"

"There are 11 or 12 girls going from round here Mum including Charlie. I expect at least one of the vehicles will have sufficient space available that they will be able to cram a small boy into it. If all else fails I'll give Coach Ellie a ring, and ask her to pick me up."

"JOHN!"

"Joke Mum. You really are in a state this morning."

"I know, and you're not making it any better, and it's gone 9 and your sister..."

"Shall I try to wrest the fair damsel from her boudoir?"

Just then the sound of thundering hooves came from the stairs, so my offer to help proved superfluous. Mands, followed by Tammy stumbled into the kitchen. Mands said, "Sorry Mum, Tammy and I were talking and didn't realise what the time was."

I mean talk about weird, spending time chattering when breakfast was on the table.

Mum said, "I've told John not to be a nuisance today because I'm busy and I'm going to say the same to you Amanda. Good morning, Tamsin by the way, you're never any trouble dear."

After Tammy had replied 'Good morning' back to Mum, Mands said, "But Mum..."

"I don't want to hear it Amanda. You can have twenty pounds, then after you've had some breakfast, you can take yourselves off to town." Mands and Tammy grabbed a bowl of porridge each and scampered off back upstairs, presumably to put some 'going to town' clothes on.

"Can I have £20 to go shopping in town too?" I asked.

"Why, do you want something John?"

"No, not particularly. I was just checking on the extent of the largesse on offer." I looked in Mum's eyes and realised she was counting down from ten in her head, which is something she does when trying not to blow her top. "I'll be in my bedroom if you need me," I said over my shoulder, as I hoofed it up the stairs.



Having sat in my chair and turned my computer on, I said, "So what jolly japes shall we get up to today Andy?"

"You have cheered up a lot since last night John."

"I'm ready to wrestle the world, Andy. Or at least the small part of it that comes within my ambit here in the greater Caversham area."

"I see. As an initial suggestion how about trying to find someone to provide a supply of suitable wood to Mr. Nick?"

"I'm willing, I'm just not sure where to start."

"How about asking Ms Starlight? She strikes me as someone who might know the right people. Perhaps her son and Garry would be interested in earning a little pocket money."

"Do you think it's too early to call now?"

"Most people do not consider 9.25 to be the crack of dawn, John."



I thought briefly about trying a joke to do with Dawn and being cracked, but then decided Andy wasn't the right audience for that sort of humour.

Star answered my call with a cheery, "Hi John, beautiful morning isn't it?"

From what I could see of the day through my bedroom window it wasn't be raining for once, so I agreed it was a beautiful morning, after saying 'hello'. Then went on, "I wonder if you can help me?"

"I'll try."

"Thank you. I visited Mr. Nick Jones yesterday to discuss making the bird-boxes and he agreed to do the work if suitable wood was supplied. I believe pallets, taken apart and nails removed, would be best, but I'm not sure where to find any. Transport is an issue too."

"You need some help and someone with a van?"

"Precisely"

"Better mention money John. £1.50 a pallet deconstructed and delivered would be reasonable," Andy commented.

There'd been no response from Star, so I said, "I'm not sure how this will work out Star. How about a trial run of 6 pallets for £10 taken apart, denailed and delivered to Nick's place? Is that possible?"

"It might be. Where's the money coming from?"

"I will front up the cash. As long as we sell some boxes, then I should make the money back."

"You're not giving them away?"

"No. If you or someone else fancies doing this for free, that would be great. I'll help. But, as I'm funding this, I'd at least like to cover what it costs me."

"The pallets will be free I expect."

"I'm paying Nick £7 each to make them."

"Shit!"

"My take is that making a solid nest box from scrap timber isn't that easy. Nick has all the tools and he knows exactly what he's doing. I've checked on-line and the cheapest ones are around a tenner. Ours will cost the same, but will be much better quality. Perhaps we could paint them with flowers."

"That's a great idea. You're so naturally artistically gifted, you'd be brilliant at that."

"I don't want to hog this project. Others need to invest in it too. You know pulling the pallets apart, doing some stencils. Then probably someone will have to deliver them. We can all contribute."

“Excellent. I’ll get on it right away. We’re having a demo up in London next weekend if you’re interested by the way.”

“I’ve got rather a lot on Star. For one thing I’m supporting Charlie’s football team on Saturdays.”

“That’s good. It’s usually the other way round.”

“What is? You’ve lost me.”

“Usually it’s the girl supporting her boyfriend’s team John. You’re breaking the mould.”

“I am? That’s um .... different.”— “Anyway got to go. Places to be, people to see.”

“I was at Greenham you know.”

I decided the skids were really under this conversation now, so I just went with “You were? That’s good, Bye for now,” and ended the call.

Andy said, “In case you were wondering Greenham Common was a peace camp not far from here, next to an air-base.”

“What were they doing there?”

“Protesting against US nuclear missiles I believe, at least originally.”

“Did it do any good?”

“A lot of people seemed to think so. Most of the protesters were women. It was a very ‘burn your bra’ type set-up apparently.”

“You don’t sound overly convinced Andy.”

“There is no doubt about the sincerity of the beliefs of the protesters. In my opinion however, the efficacy of their campaign is another matter.”

“Missiles still around?”

“No, the missiles were indeed removed. It might be noted that land-based nuclear missiles went out of fashion militarily speaking, especially for a small nation like the UK, in favour of ones on nuclear submarines. Bit different in a vast country like Russia or the USSR as it was then, when they have the whole of Siberia to hide their missiles sites in. Anyway, the cold war finished and I suppose you could say the USA won. Now the Yanks have China to worry about, which is a rather different kettle of fish.”

“And Star was there?”

“Apparently. She must have been very young. The majority of the camp had broken up by the mid 1980’s. Perhaps she was there with her mother.”

I did a quick check on-line to see what the Peace Camp had been like. Then Andy said, “Excellent swerve to avoid getting roped in to painting the boxes, by the way John.”

“I’m breaking the mould and I’m naturally artistically gifted, stands to reason I’d be good at swerving too, Andy.” I paused, but didn’t get the mental raspberry I was expecting, so I went on, “Actually I wouldn’t mind helping, but I’m not sure I fit in at Star’s place.”

“Worried someone might give you a joint to smoke?”

“There is that, but the décor in the hallway and the threat of being subjected to more home-made musical entertainment were uppermost in my thoughts.”

I assumed this had settled the pallet business for now, but Andy said, “You had better give Mr. Nick a call; to let him know the state of play.”

“You don’t think it would be better to wait until Star gets back to me?”

“No, I think you can assume pallet wood will be delivered at some point. The only imponderable is when.”

I called Nick’s landline number thinking he would be unlikely to carry his mobile around with him.

After about 10 rings he said, “Loony bin, senior patient speaking.”

I mean how cool was that? I wished Dad would say that sort of thing.

“Hi Nick, John Mason here. Do you want me to come round and tighten a few screws for you?”

“Wouldn’t hurt none, got a few loose for sure. Been looking for my scruples all morning. No idea where I put ‘em.”

“Perhaps invest in a few new ones? Anyway, I’m calling to say I have negotiated a tentative arrangement with Star to deliver the wood from 6 pallets to you, duly denailed and hopefully suitable for turning into bird boxes. ETA yet to be determined.”

“So I’m getting a load of Hippy-dippies turning up on my doorstep in a VW camper with flowers painted on the sides, am I?”

“Quite possibly. Potentially they could help in the hunt for your scruples, assuming you’re still looking when they show up.”

“Unlikely John. I’ll have forgotten all about that by then I expect. Who d’you say you were again?”

“The Chief Medical Examiner.”

“Tha’s right, I remember now. Coming down to brass tacks, how many of these bloody boxes am I s’posed to be making fer you anyway? I’ve got some spare wood hure I can make a start wiv. Oh an’ I ’ad an idea for a cheap hinge for the lid. A bit of old bicycle inner tube tacked in place would do the trick. Wouldn’t look too pretty. The birds wouldn’t mind, but people buy with their eyes as often as not.”

“Andy?”

“Call it 20. Ten with and ten without hinges is my advice.”

I passed this on to Nick who said, “Right you are then. Hoping to catch the Christmas market I s’pose John.”

“To be totally honest I don’t have a clue what I’m doing Nick. It’s a fingers-crossed and hope for the best exercise as far as I’m concerned. Still I’m learning a lot.”

“Such as?”

“What marijuana smoke smells like for one thing.”

“Hippies, got to love ’em. Dun half take me back. Still best get on. Shoulder to the wheel, nose to the grindstone and so forth. See ya.”

“That’s what I call a phone conversation Andy. He’s special, isn’t he?”

“You two do seem to hit it off. Perhaps you could take Mr. Nick up on his invitation to pop round sometime?”

“It’s getting hard to fit everything in Andy.”

“Better to be too busy than bored stiff. I think you’d be surprised how much you can learn from old people. Youngsters often regret not talking more to their parents and grandparents when they were alive. Perhaps you could combine a visit there with one to Miss Jennifer.”

“Her mum wasn’t all that keen on me being around Andy.”

“Into every life a little rain must fall, John. Anyway, just a thought.”



I checked my emails, amongst them was an auto-generated one from the eBay seller asking me how much I liked the steam-engine, which reminded me I’d better contact Charlie in pursuance of my boyfriendly duties.

Charlie said, “Hi NJ. Just crawled out of bed I suppose.”

“As it happens, I’ve had my breakfast earlier and have been negotiating the supply of 20 new bird-boxes.”

“Going to be on Dragon’s Den?”

“They’d be too small for a dragon Charlie, unless it was really tiny one.”

“It’s a TV program for people setting up new businesses, you twit.”

“Is that the one where they all sit around in semi-circle and someone shows off a new see-through oven-glove they’ve invented?”

“Yes.”

“Never watched it.”

“You’re such an idiot sometimes, NJ. How come you know what it’s like if you never watched it?”

“Mum puts the TV on in the sitting room in the evening and sits there not watching it. I often help her out with that.”

“I sometimes think ... never mind. What are you up to anyway?”

“No plans for today. I offered to help Mum with some work round the house, but she told me to keep out of the way.”

“I wonder why. She’s smart, your Mum. Fancy a kick around in the park?”

“You’ve got a match tomorrow, Charlie. Can’t you save up all your kicking for that?”

“I thought we’d get some practice.”

“You thought you’d get some practice, and I’d end up running around to no purpose. Best find another victim. I’m already as fully committed to the soccerettes as I want to be.”

“Spoilsport. Oh, and mum wants us to try the spider costumes on.”

“What time?”

“You could come round for tea, mum’s at work until later.”

“Very funny, not your mum being at work of course, the tea joke, that was hilarious. How about I pop round about 5, would that be, OK?”

“Sure. You don’t want to come to the park?”

“No I do not. Tell the rest of the gang ‘Hi’ from me please.”

“Okey-dokey. See you around Joanie,” she finished with a fit of the giggles.

Somehow, I’d managed to forget my reputed gender dysphoria, but Charlie hadn’t of course. I could see ‘Joanie’ becoming a running gag.

“This ‘John’s really a girl’ thing isn’t going away Andy.”

“I expect the joke will wear a trifle thin with repetition John. It really is a comic situation though. On a more serious note, the potential for disguise might be very useful.”

“You’re not seriously suggesting I pretend to be a girl!”

“Why not? Pretending to be a girl won’t change you into one, any more than Miss Charlotte pretending to be a boy would make her one.”

“What would be the point?”

“A disguise is just that John, a way of being seen, but not being seen if you will. Time was when you could tell someone’s occupation just by what they wore or listening to how they spoke, *‘vestis virum facit’* as the saying goes.”

“Andy!”

“You did say you wanted to learn Latin. In English then, ‘clothes made the man’. In these more egalitarian times such societal divisions have gone by the board, so dressing a particular way as a disguise is a different proposition. When you come down to it there is not much difference between the clothes you habitually wear and the ones a lot of girls your age do. Apropos of your visit to Miss Charlotte’s, may I remind you that you were considering printing out a section from ‘Call of the Wild’ to hand in as your homework?”

“Thanks Andy, remind me again later please. Back to the girl thing. It’s really not that hard to tell when you meet someone whether they are a boy or a girl.”

“No, I suppose not. Still, it is only small things. How your hair looks, mannerisms, the way you walk and talk. I would have thought you might regard it as a challenge to fool somebody who did not know you.”

“You’d have thought wrongly then. It would be dead embarrassing trying to pass myself off as a girl if I was caught.”

“The pressure to conform to a stereotype, to fit in with your peers should never be underestimated.”

Somehow Andy always seemed to find a chink in my armour so I considered doing things I never would have otherwise. Why I resented being told I was conforming to a stereotype I have no idea. It was obviously true, but for some reason it made me think I wouldn’t mind being different, at least occasionally. Of course Andy has to be the master manipulator of all time, but I hadn’t fully twigged that back then.



A few minutes later I found myself in the bathroom trying to look like a girl, after fishing one of Mand’s tops out of the laundry basket. I can’t believe, even now, that Andy succeeded in talking me into this. To my mind, when I looked in the mirror, I saw an inappropriately dressed boy.

Andy said, “You certainly are not going to fool anyone close-up, but from a distance it might work. Your hair is a dead giveaway. Could you let it grow and opt for a more androgynous style?”

“Obviously I could, I just don’t think I want to.”

“It is only hair John. It grows, you can restyle it or even cut it short later, if you really do not like it. You have enough girls around, one of them would be only too pleased to cut it for you.”

“Mum would know I was up to something.”

“Your Mother has got plenty to deal with what with your Father being the way he is and Christmas coming up.”

“That’s ages away.”

“For you it is, but for your Mother, who has presents to buy and food to organise, it really is not that far off.”

“I’ll think about it OK?”

“OK”

I decided growing my hair longer wasn’t that big a deal. For one thing I wasn’t a fan of the barber’s shop Mum took me to. It was mostly for older guys and I felt out of place.

As I was in the bathroom, I decided to have a shower, not having had one for a while. Afterwards I put Mand’s top back in the basket along with my clothes and trotted back to my room with a towel round my waist, carrying my trainers.

Having told people, I was extremely busy I now found I had nothing to do. I asked Andy and he/she/it suggested putting a photo of the bird box on the EGG site, looking to get some advance orders.

“Seems a bit of a cheek offering something for sale which isn’t even made yet Andy.”

“I don’t think Mr. Nick will let you down John. Anyway, a nest-box is hardly a vital buy. I believe it is what is called a discretionary purchase in marketing terms.”

I logged in to the EGG site. Marsha had added the ‘For Sale’ section to it, but of course it was empty. I thought, *might as well be me who christens it.*

I took some photos of the nest-box with my mobile, then Andy said, “Perhaps some photos of the box in place in your garden John? I assume you intend to put it up.”

Out in our back garden I ran into problems. For one thing we don’t have any large trees and for another Dad does not own a drill so fixing the box to a wall was out. Andy suggested attaching it to the electric pole, which is just the other side of our back hedge, but I knew I’d really be for it if Mum caught me fiddling with that while on top of a ladder.

Andy said, “A fair point I suppose. Probably there is some a bye-law prohibiting interfering with electric poles. My only other suggestion is the down-pipe from the gutter. It should be relatively simple to wire the box to that.”

“Dad would go spare. He’s very particular about the rainwater system.”

“It’s late October John. How likely is it that your Father will come out here to check things in the next 6 months?”

Dad had already completed the bi-annual hedge trimming and the grass had more or less stopped growing. I decided the box would probably go unnoticed

for a while. I'd forgotten Dad's leaf collecting ritual. As I said before, I can't be expected to remember everything.

"What happens if birds do nest in it, and then Dad spots it?"

"In that case you will have a good argument that they should not be disturbed. I do not imagine your Father would wish to interfere if that happened. As so often in life John, I think you will find it easier to get forgiveness than permission."

"You know this easy wiring stuff. Did you mean I should wrap some wire round the box and the pipe? It doesn't seem like that would be a strong fix."

"Let us take the box and go and have a look in the garage John. The next step is to find some wire."

Taking the key from the board in the hall I scooted down the corridor and even though Mum was in the kitchen, I don't think she spotted me. There was some thick wire hanging in a loop on the garage wall. When I took it down it was pretty heavy. Andy said it was galvanised steel fencing wire.

I asked "Will it do?"

"At a pinch, Yes. It would be difficult for you to bend with your fingers though John, it's heavy duty. If you wouldn't mind putting it to one side, I have an idea about a different use for it. In the meantime, is that a reel of electric cable on the top shelf?"

It turned out it was. I managed to hook it down with an old broom handle and had a look at it. "It's grey plastic and pretty ugly Andy."

"That's the plastic insulation sheath John. If you strip that off, you'll find some nice shiny copper wire inside, which will be ideal."

"Not to be thick, but how exactly do I strip the copper wire out of this cable?"

"Find a small knife, that yellow handled one on the bottom shelf will do. Put the end of the wire on the bench and cut a 10 cm slit along it. You will find it easiest to hold the cable in place further up from the end with your left hand and cut towards the loose end."

Surprisingly this wasn't hard, once I got the hang of it. Then Andy went on, "Now you have the bare copper wire and the other two insulated strands exposed, all you need do is use a pair of pliers to pull on the copper one while holding the other wires in your other hand."

"Slight snag Andy, I'm not sure there are any pliers."

"I see. Your Father is not into DIY, is he? Another approach would be to take a large nail or screwdriver and wrap some copper wire tightly around that. Then use that as a handle, gripping it so that the wire is between your fingers."

"Like this?"



“No you will hurt yourself if you hold the wire that way.”

He/she/it showed me a diagram of the correct method, which involved the wire going between my first and second fingers. After some trying and failing, I eventually made it to work. Andy advised me I'd probably need about a 4-foot length. I'd given up worrying about Andy swapping measuring systems all the time. Looking for a way of cutting the wire I remembered the secateur-thingsies I'd used to cut the rope ladder. The only problem was I didn't know where I'd left them. I asked Andy and his response was that when last seen they were in my shoulder bag. Almost being caught pilfering from Mrs. Bingham's garden had affected me badly I decided.

I was about to toddle off to fetch my bag when Andy said, “Copper is a soft metal, so it's quite easy to cut it with a hammer, or anything heavy made from steel.”

“Cut it with a hammer?”

“More accurately shear it, but the outcome is the same. Put the wire on some solid metal like the edge of that spade and then with your fingers well away from the point of impact, hit it with a hammer.”

“Like this?” I gave it a try and got nowhere.

“Not precisely. Rest the spade so that its bottom edge is in contact with the ground. You want it to move as little as possible.”

It worked on the third attempt.

“It might have been quicker to fetch my bag.”

“Very true. But one day you might want to cut something and not have shears or secateurs or snips to hand. This is an alternative method which gets the job done. Anyway you're going to need the secateurs for another project.”

“I'm not stealing more stuff, Andy. Criminals end up in jail.”

“Only if they get caught, John. Now the next job is to hammer the nail into the side of the box where the side joins the back.”

“I can't go nailing the box to the downpipe Andy, that's ridiculous.”

“The idea is to make a hole either side to thread the wire through John. As there is no drill, the nail is used to make holes.”

Knocking the nail in in the right place wasn't all that hard. I was pretty pleased with myself, until I realised it needed to come out again in order to leave the hole. Andy guided me through using the claw on the hammer acting as a type of lever to extract the nail with a small block of wood to prevent damage to the box and alter the fulcrum point. Doing the same to the other side was much easier and although the holes didn't line up perfectly they were definitely near enough.