**Getting the Team Together…Day 1**

'*There's one now!'*, said Wil as they peered over the window sill. He shuddered a bit in the cold of the big house.

*'It's OK, he's gone past'*, replied Freddy calmly.

*'No! He's turning back again..!'*. They ducked down low, just so they couldn't be seen.

*****

They didn't like teenagers. Not one bit. They were a bit scared of them actually.

The way they peered out from behind their hoods.

The way their pants peered out over the tops of their trousers.

The way their trousers dragged along the ground when they moved.

The way they grunted when they tried to speak.

*****

*'Oi!'*, it grunted. They'd been spotted. They both stood up slowly. Freddy was relieved that he recognised the hooded figure from up at the park.

'*Something for you in there!'*, he yelled. Still sitting on his bike, the teenager flung something from the street towards the house. They ducked down again instinctively. There was a thud. The bike groaned under the weight as it made its way off up the steep hill.

They both ran to the door to collect the package. Wil just beat Freddy to the door.

*****

Well, nothing much else had happened that quiet autumn day. Wil had come over. The postman had come with another parcel from mad Auntie Annie. They'd played games with the raindrops on the window.

*'I've got it! I've got it!'*, Wil picked up the rolled up paper from the doorstep.

Freddy let him take it. *As usual, let him have it, he can't read it anyway,* he thought to himself as they perched back up at the big oak table in the dining room.

There was silence as Wil, his curly hair just peeking out over the top of the paper, scanned down the back page. Underneath a story about Reading's 1-1 draw with Cardiff, there was a small advertisement.

Wil had only just learned to read, and the newspaper was mostly too difficult for him. His favourite words that he could spot easily were '*Wil*' (his name), *'Springhurst'* (the town they lived in), and *'football'* (the game he spent all his spare time playing). So when he saw a small advertisement that read '*Springhurst will form football league'* (a single sentence containing all his three favourite words),

he was both pleased with himself, and interested to read on. Freddy was not impressed.

*'I don't know why you bother with that, you can't read it anyway'*

*'Look!*. Wil's voice was firm. Freddy went over to him.

*'Springhurst will form football league'*. Freddy read out loud and confident, although he pronounced the last word as 'lee-gew'.

*'What's a lee-gew?'* said Wil.

Freddy read on, slowly.

*'The children of Springhurst will soon have a chance to party kippate in a new dome stick soccer lee-gew. Appley cations are invited from seven-a-side teams in the are-rear.'*

*'What's a dome stick? What are appley cations in the are-rear?'*

*'OK, OK'* said Freddy (whose reading, although good, had some way to go), *'Let's try again'*.

They puzzled through the announcement together and worked out what it meant.

*'Let's do it, let's do it!'* Wil jumped up out of the chair, and for the first time that day a broad smile shone across his small, bright face. *'We can play football, we can play!'*

*'We need a team'*, said Freddy deliberately.

*'A team, a team, OK, how many?'*

*'It says seven a side. We need five more players'*.

*'Five more, five more…we can do it, we know five people, let's do it, let's do it!'*

*'We need five footballers, five people who can play football…'*

Freddy also smiled now, thinking ahead to the glory of winning the first ever Springhurst league. Holding the cup high in his hands. The cheers of the crowds. He would be captain…

*'JoJo!'* His daydreaming was stopped by Wil's shout of delight.

*'JoJo…for what?'*

JoJo was Wil's friend. Freddy had very mixed feelings about her. She was different, certainly, and was funny (well, she talked funny), but he always had some doubts about her as a friend. Or at least as a *mate*. And as a footballer – ugh!

Wil had no such reservations. To him, JoJo was a hero – exotic, exciting, hilariously funny, and similar to him in many ways. She had come to stay with Wil's family during the summer, and was now returning for a full year in their school. She normally lived in France.

Freddy tried to calm down the conversation.

*‘Look, we need to think about this. If we put a team together, we need to decide who should play so we need to find people who can play football, not just the first name that comes to mind’.*

Wil looked a bit sad.

*‘Don’t worry, let’s write it down’.*

Wil practiced a few imaginary kicks in the air, as Freddy went off to get some paper and a pen. The imaginary ball flew into the imaginary net for the imaginary winning goal.

They sat down at the table. Freddy wrote down names in his spidery handwriting.

*Freddy…*

*Wil…*

There was a very loud knock at the door. They looked at each other, so involved in the team selection that neither of them really wanted to get the door. Before they had a chance to move, there was another knock, then another. Very persistent knocking.

There was only one person they knew who would knock on a door like that. Hardy. The loudest and noisiest person they knew. Wil went to the door.

*‘Guess what, you’ll never guess, never..’,* Hardy talked quickly and loudly, pushing past Wil into the room.

*‘What’s up?’,* said Freddy, coolly.

Hardy rabitted on for a few minutes about something or other, with the other two only half listening as they looked over their short shortlist of possible players. Hardy looked over Freddy’s shoulder.

*'What’s that, then?’* he asked, more deliberately this time.

*‘We’re forming a team’.*

*‘OK, I’ll do it, I love teams! What sort of team?’*

*‘A football team’*

*‘Great! I’ll be goalkeeper!’* said Hardy. He flung himself across the room saving an imaginary goal. Wil ran over to score from the imaginary rebound. Freddy spoke,

*'C’mon, guys, we need to get a team together. A football team. We have the three of us. Who else?’*

*****

Find out tomorrow…

**Getting the Team Together…Day 2**

They sat there in silence for a few minutes. Wil scratched his nose. Freddy scratched his head. Hardy scratched his foot. They all had different ways of thinking. Freddy scribbled urgently on the paper in front of him. Wil scratched his nose again, looking thoughtful. Hardy scratched – oh well, don't worry, they all carried on thinking. After five minutes, Hardy spoke.

*'Oh I can't stand this, my head's aching. Just think of someone will'ya!'*

He got up from the table and went over to the window, staring out onto the houses opposite. Dusk was falling, and the streets were silent.

The houses were close together and similar, and most of them were three stories tall. In one of the top floor windows a few doors down the street, a light was shining. Silhouetted in the light was a small figure hunched over a table. A ghostly light was playing on his face from a screen in front of him. The flickering screen made his face light up alternately blue and red.

*'Hey, look over here!'*

Freddy and Wil were relieved that the silence was broken, and ran to the window.

*'OK – so someone is playing a game, so what?',* said Freddy.

*'It's…um… Jaz',* said Hardy.

*'Jazz?'*

*'No, Jaz'*

*'Who's Jaz then?'*

*'You know, that crazy kid, the one who can do numbers in his head'.*

*'I can do numbers in my head',* chimed Wil enthusiastically.

*'You can do two plus two…'*

*'No…I remember Jaz',* added Freddy, thinking now, *'he is the guy who is always doing those puzzles – crosswords, number games, Sudoku…'*

'*OK, but he also has that football game, and he is BRILLIANT at it. No-one can beat him.'*

Freddy scribbled Jaz's name onto the pad. They all sat down again. They all scratched again. Silence. More silence. Hardy sneezed. Freddy coughed. Wil farted. They all laughed.

Still only four names, though. Freddy broke the silence again.

*'Let's go and talk to Jaz, then. Maybe he knows someone'.*

So they set off to interview their first prospective player.

*****

They crossed the street and walked down the two doors to Jaz's house. There was a light in a downstairs room, and the strange blue and red flashes still coming from the room on the top floor. The three of them entered the front yard together. Hardy pushed through and knocked on the door.

Almost instantly the door opened. So much so that Hardy recoiled, leaving Freddy as the spokesman.

*'Hello boys, I've been expecting you…'.*

The voice came from the smallest, oldest woman they had ever seen. Apart from the suddenness with which she came to the door and greeted them, they were shocked by the fact that she was not much taller than they were. She was wearing a long green sari.

*'Come in, come in, Jaz is waiting for you upstairs. I'll make you a nice cup of tea. Just go up'.*

None of them had spoken a word. They made their way upstairs as instructed, onto a small landing. A smaller set of stairs led to the second floor. They began to climb. As they got closer, they could hear loud noises coming from the room at the top of the stairs. As they reached the door at the top, which was shut, the noise was loud enough for them to have to shout to make themselves heard.

*'You knock, then'*, yelled Hardy, to no-one in particular.

Freddy approached the door. Through the crack at the foot of the door they could see the same red and blue lights they had seen from across the street. Freddy knocked hard on the door. The noise stopped instantaneously and the door opened.

Jaz was still sitting facing away from them, a huge screen inches from his face. He continued playing FIFA21 which was right in front of him. Freddy stepped up over the doorway, and looked around for whoever had opened the door. There was no-one else in the room.

The room was dominated by the huge screen on one wall. All around, hung from the ceiling, were thick heavy drapes and cloths, which had the effect of lowering the ceiling, and of making the room very dark. Apart from the screen, radiating its blues and greens and reflecting them sinisterly off the black walls, a small bed and a wardrobe stood in one corner. Cables, keyboards, and clutter all around.

*'Foot pedal'* shouted Jaz over the noise, still not turning round. He pointed to a device on the floor, connected to his computer, which evidently operated the door.

*'Yeeaaaah!'* he yelled, as a goal went in. All went quiet. He turned round.

Sitting down, Jaz was dwarfed by the screen, the chair he was sitting in, the computing equipment in front and to the side of him. He looked like he had been transported to a world where everything was oversized, and he was normal. He smiled at the trio standing in front of him, squinting at them through his glasses.

Freddy didn't know what to say. Looking at the sight in front of him, he wasn't sure that the mysterious and other-worldly Jaz would be quite right for the team. Would he fit in? Could he play?

Just then Jaz turned back to his desk, picked up a couple of papers lying there, screwed them up into a ball, spun his chair round, threw the ball into the air, stuck his foot out, caught the ball on his foot, then volleyed the paper into a wastebasket positioned in the corner of the room. The ball of paper looped high in the air, and fell directly in the centre of the basket without touching the sides. The trio looked at the basket, then looked back at Jaz.

*'You like football?'*

*'Yup!'*

*'You want to play in a team?'*

*'Yup – you gotta team?'*

*'Yup – you're in!'*

And so Jaz joined the team.

As they left, Freddy checked the four names now on his list. Freddy, Hardy, Wil, and now Jaz. But that was it. Freddy looked at Hardy who looked at Wil who looked at Freddy. Who looked back at Hardy. Who looked at himself. They all looked at the floor.

'*Actually, I've got an idea…'*, someone said.

*****

**Getting the Team Together…Day 3**

The next morning, Freddy and Wil were back at the same table, now with four names on their list. Freddy, Hardy and Wil, plus Jaz. But that was it.

There was a clatter at the front door as the post dropped through. Wil sauntered over to the door to pick it up. In his hand the usual collection of glossy leaflets and junk mail. He flicked idly at each one before discarding it. The last one caught his eye as it flopped into the bin. A picture of Phil Foden slotting the ball into the net against Dortmund, with the words *'Win, win, win'* above his head.

*'We could do this,'* exclaimed Wil, *'look!'*

Freddy glanced over at the bright paper in his friend's hand. Just stuck through their door. For no reason.

*'Good idea,'* said Freddy, *'if we count up how many doors there are in the street, we could make some advertisements and put them through the doors. Great idea, let's do it. Right, you go and count the doors'*

*'No way, you count them'*

*'Ah come on, it was your idea…'*

After some discussion they decided that they would both go out onto the street to decide where they should post their leaflets. Freddy took his pad and pen with him. Wil was going to do the counting. They started at number three, right at the bottom of the street, close to the bus stop. There were around twenty houses on each side of the street.

A dog barked. Loudly. Viciously. From the hallway of number three.

*'Right – not that one. I'm not posting anything there'*. Wil moved on up the street, as Freddy crossed number three off his list.

They counted off a dozen or so houses, excluding number thirteen where the fearsome Mrs Bucket lived, and number nine which was empty, boarded up, and scary. When they got to number nineteen, a familiar voice stopped them.

*'And what do you think you're doing, young man?'*

The voice came from Mr Andrews, whose house it was impossible to pass, day or night, without getting noticed. Mr Andrews had fought in the war, and walked with a terrible limp. His explanation of why, was always different.

*'Now, lad, did I ever tell you about the time when this piece of shrapnel got me in the leg…'*

*'Now lad, you remember how I got this – stung by a scorpion in the deserts of North Africa…'*

*'Ah, lad, of course I'm still suffering from the time that bomb blew up under my chair…'*

But it was unwise to pass Mr Andrews without greeting him, as he was prone to shouting insults down the street after you if he felt he had been ignored.

'*Good morning, Mr Andrews!'*, shouted Freddy in greeting. Mr Andrews was also rather deaf.

*'Ah, good morning, lads, what are you up to this morning, then?'* He struggled over to see what they were doing.

*'We're going to post some leaflets'*, Wil said.

*'Roast some peanuts? That's a damn funny thing to be doing in the street. In my day if you started roasting peanuts in the street you'd get in a lot of trouble for it, I don't know, the young people these days!'*

He almost always, especially if he misheard something, finished his sentence with the words '*young people these days'*.

*'No, Mr Andrews?, we are forming a soccer team'*

*'Topped off with clotted cream? Are you mad, peanuts and clotted cream, that's a damn funny combination. I bet that Heston Blumenthal is behind this. I don't know, the young people these days!'*

This went on for some time, before they managed to get Mr Andrews to figure out what they were doing. Once he was on the right wavelength, there was no stopping him.

'*I remember back in '53, I think it was, or was it '54, anyway, I remember it well, Stanley Matthews, ah yes, the Wizard of the Dribble, against Wales, I think it was, or was it Scotland? I remember it well, a hundred thousand people in the ground that day, every single one of them cheering for Sir Stanley, or was it Sir Alf? I remember it well, I was just a young lad then, of course, no more than twelve years old, or was it fourteen? I remember it well…'*

Again, this went on for some time, until finally Mr Andrews screamed in agony, clasped his leg, and said,

*'Ah lad, don't know if I ever told you about my leg. Fell out of a plane over Nyasaland. Agony it was. Never been the same since. Football eh – talk to my grand-daughter Clara. She'd be good.'*

Finally, Mr Andrews may have said something sensible. Freddy jotted the name and house number down on his pad, and they moved on, anxious to avoid further discussion.

When they reached the top of the road, near the park, they had a total of thirty-four house numbers on the pad, having excluded also number thirty, which had been demolished when Mr Andrews had called the AA out to fix his car, and had misheard the instructions from the repair man who had said '*you'll just have to wait'*.

Mr Andrews had heard it as '*you must accelerate'*, and the car had lurched forward, through the front garden of number thirty, and ended up in the sitting room.

Freddy and Wil had just turned to go back down the road when Wil yelled out,

*‘Ow!, what was that!’*, and clasped the back of his leg.  Before he could say any more, Freddy received a stinging blow to the thigh.

They looked down and saw the two small stones which had hit them, then turned to the direction from which the missiles had come.

Sitting on the grass, a small pile of pebbles beside her, a girl.  Blonde hair.  Smiling.

*Clara*.

*****
9

**Getting the Team Together…Day 4**

Freddy and Wil had worked all evening on the advertisement. It was after dark when it was finally ready and they had braved the rain, angry dogs, and nosy neighbours, to deliver it to most of the houses in the street. The only alarm had come when the lady at number twenty-three had emerged with a broom and tried to shoo them away. She had cackled madly at them and muttered rather strangely,

*'See you in November, ha ha ha ha haaagh!'*

This statement meant nothing to them, and they had hurried off, crossing another address off their list of potential players. In fact, they had not expected much from this house, and although they had never spoken to her, they had always been worried about her, just because she was bad-tempered, and was rarely seen without that broom.

*****

The advertisement had been their very best effort.

They had started off by saying that they were forming the best team in the world and they wanted people to join, but had decided that this might put people off. The second version was too far the other way, inviting people to join the Lancaster Road Football Club. They felt this was too simple as it was directed only to the road they lived in. In the end they had decided on something more basic,

*Can you play football?*

*Want to be part of a football team?*

*Players needed for junior team*

*Playing games in October*

*Apply to 12 Lancaster Road tomorrow.*

Originally they had written '*playing in lo-cal compitativ leegs*', but they had not been sure the spelling was right, so they had simplified it to '*games'*. Wil had decorated the advertisement by drawing pictures of famous footballers on the front, and Freddy had added the words. They had ended up posting thirty copies.

*****

In the history of leaflets, this turned out to be one of the most unsuccessful postings ever. Four people turned up on that windy November day.

Well, you might say that four out of thirty is not bad, but wait until you hear who came.

*****

The first knock at the door came soon after ten o'clock in the morning. Although he lived in a different street, Hardy had come over for breakfast to wait with Freddy and Wil, and the three of them had

already been waiting for nearly two hours since breakfast for the players to flood in.

Hardy went to the door.

Jaz was standing there, in the rain, looking miserable.

*'Um….er….I, er got your leaflet. Can I play with you?'*

Hardy looked uncertain. Having been a part of the visit to Jaz's house the previous day, he wasn't sure at all about this guy.

*'Oh, please, I'm not bad'.*

*'You'd better come in'.*

*'Jaz, how're you doing?',* shouted Freddy from the other room, *'come in!'.*

So Jaz came into the room and looked around. They had put up posters of their favourite footballers on the walls of the room. Jaz, who was dressed in a red England shirt, sat down, took out his portable games machine, and disappeared into another world.

*'We'll wait for the others, then we'll go to the park for a training session',* said Freddy.

'*Hmmm?*', said Jaz, distractedly. They left him to it.

They waited for another hour or so before the next knock at the door. This time it was an urgent, loud, impatient knock. They could hear singing outside. Wil went this time.

*'What took you so long? NO WAY was I going to stand outside this door for a moment longer'*

Wil had hardly time to open the door before Clara was through it. As she came through the door, she kicked the football that was lying in the hallway so hard that it shot up the stairs, bounced off the wall of the landing area, and lobbed into one of the bedrooms. There was a moment's silence, then a crash and a tinkle of glass. Clara looked defiantly at Hardy. She glanced around and stuck her nose in the air.

*'Where's the football team then?'*

Wil gently fingered the spot on his leg where Clara had hit him yesterday, and wondered what she would be like. He soon found out. She marched into the room where they were sitting, grabbed Wil round the shoulders in an enormous bear-hug, and planted a huge wet kiss on his left cheek.

*'I like you!'* she said, grinning madly. Wil instinctively pulled back. The others were laughing, nervously.

*'I like you too...'* she said threateningly, looking over at the others.

There was another firm knock at the door. *This is going well*, thought Freddy to himself, although in truth the leaflet had only produced two players, and both of those had been recruited the previous day, so in fact their total of new players was a round zero. But the new knock at the door presented them with renewed hope that they could add to their current total of five players. Freddy went this time, whilst

Hardy tried to stop Clara from kissing Jaz.

Freddy opened the door. Standing on the mat was a small figure wearing a faded white shirt, long black shorts down to his knees, and brown football boots with very bright white laces. On his head was a flat brown cap. He was wheezing slightly at the effort of getting up the few steps to the doorstep.

*'NO! Mr Andrews, I'm sorry, you can't…'*

Freddy had half expected this, after Mr Andrews's outbursts yesterday, but he didn't quite know how to explain himself. After all, the advertisement had not been very specific. It certainly had not said what age the players should be, or that the elderly, the deaf, and the slightly mad, might not be welcome. Or in Mr Andrews's case, all three.

*'What's that lad? I saw your advert. Looked out my old stuff. I've still got it y'know…'*

With that he attempted to demonstrate a right-footed volley but succeeded only in volleying one of the pot plants next to the door, and almost swinging himself off his feet.

*'Mr Andrews, please, we're looking for a kid's team'*

*'Cooking up some ice-cream? What d'you want to cook it for? Anyway, I've come about the football, I don't know, young people nowadays…'*

*'I said, we want to enter a league for children. You would be too old to play'.*

*'Too cold today? I'd agree with you there lad. But so what, I didn't come to talk about the weather. Now, let's get on with it. I remember it well, '52 was it, when Sir Matthew Stanleys came out at Wembley. Or was it Anfield?'*

This went on for another ten minutes or so until Clara appeared at the door, ran out and gave her granddad a big hug, and pulled him inside. Freddy just looked on unhappily. This was not going according to plan. He went inside and sat down again, staring at his near-blank team list. Himself, Wil, Hardy. Then Jaz (although they were not sure he could ever be persuaded to actually go outside), Clara (who they had never even seen play football, but who they were a bit scared of, so she could play if she wanted), and Mr Andrews, sitting breathless in the chair, still fully dressed in his kit.

*****

After lunch, and no more callers, they decided to go out for their first training session. Freddy hoped that they might be able to lose their eldest player on the way up to the park. The hill was quite steep and his house was on the way, so he might just have to wait there whilst they carried on up.

Hardy was the first out of the door.

As he went through into the front garden, he noticed a small figure sitting on the wall, his back to the door. He had a large hooded top on, and was bouncing a football on the ground in front of him. He didn't turn round as Hardy approached.

*'Hi, who are you?'* Hardy said, loudly and clearly.

‘*Hi, Michael*’, said the boy, softly and faintly.

‘*Sorry’*, said Hardy.

‘*My name is Michael’*. He looked down at the ground, still facing away from them. ‘*I want to join your team’*, he said, softer than ever.

'*What did you say?*’, said Hardy again failing to hear.

*‘I want to join your football team, please’*. By now, Wil had approached the pair.

‘*Is that your ball there?*’ Freddy asked.

‘*It is’*.

‘*Right, you’re in. We’re going training. Now’*. And the whole group set off up the hill to the park.

*****

**Getting the Team Together…Day 5**

Freddy led the way up the hill. He had on his favourite England football kit – the white shirt, blue shorts, and white socks. He looked immaculate in his new blue boots, with the white tick on them. He subconsciously smoothed his hair down at the front. He turned back to his group of footballers, and thought to himself.

*My team. My very own team. Me… captain … coach…manager. We'll play like England. Or Brazil. We'll all skill people – like me. I'll be Messi. Wil can be Jadon Sancho! Hardy's Harry Maguire. We'll win the league the first time we enter it…*

His daydream was interrupted by a yell from new boy Michael. He had obviously lent his football to Mr Andrews, who had tried an elaborate move involving chipping the ball up onto his knee then onto his head. The result was that the ball was now running down the steep hill, with Michael in hot pursuit, and Mr Andrews bent double in agony. Hardy was laughing and shouting,

*'Go, Michael, go!'*

Michael, who was normally very serious anyway, was not laughing, but he caught up with the ball just outside number twenty-three, and only narrowly escaped it ending up in the garden where the old woman lived. He sprinted back up to join the group, who had just reached the park. They were standing in a big circle, facing each other.

*****

*'We've got to warm up lads'*, said Mr Andrews, planting his feet firmly apart and beginning an elaborate stretch down to the ground with his hands.

*'Yes, warm up, lots of stretching',* echoed Freddy, looking across at Mr Andrews. He also stretched down and touched the ground beneath his feet. The others followed his lead, and soon there was a collective groaning as they all started exercising the muscles they had not used all summer.

Collective groaning turned to a piercing yell, as one of the group stretched over just a little too far.

*'Mr Andrews, are you alright?'* said Freddy, jogging over to where his oldest player was bent double in pain, moaning softly to himself. He had obviously stretched too far for his geriatric body to take, his arms had collapsed and he was now shaped like a little old triangle, his head propping him up one end, his boots rooted to the ground, and his little old bony bottom sticking high up in the air.

*'Alright, alright…I'm alright…don't you worry about me…I've had worse…my leg, sucked up by an industrial vacuum cleaner it was…back in '52, I think it was…'*

Mr Andrews was hardly making any sense as Hardy and Freddy tried to turn him the right way up. By pushing him over, to the sound of more groans and incomprehensible complaints, they managed to have him lying on the ground, still in the L-shape.

*'Ah, yes, lads…very important to stretch properly before the game…ow…aaghh…what are you doing?'*

They managed to get him the right way up, sitting on the grass, and then with four of them (Freddy,

Hardy, Wil and Jaz) they lifted the completely rigid Mr Andrews to the nearest bench. Luckily, the angle he got stuck in was exactly the angle of the bench, so he fitted perfectly, and actually looked quite comfortable sitting there.

*'Be right as rain in a couple of days, don't you worry. Carry on'.*

*'Carry on?'*, thought Freddy to himself, *'Carry on?' Who's he telling to carry on?'*

They carried on. First some passing to each other, then some dribbling, then some practice turns.

They moved towards the main pitch. A woman was walking her dog close to the goal. Her dog was a large black hairy variety, and the woman was wearing a large black hairy fur coat, which from behind made her look remarkably similar to the dog.

*'Excuse me…'*, said Freddy politely.

*'Woof!'*, said one of the black hairy objects in front of him.

*'What?'*, said the other, in a screechy, high-pitched voice.

*'We'd like to play football here please, could you move please?'*, Freddy insisted.

*'Well, that's preposterous! I was here first! My darling Ronnie always likes to have a sniff around the goalposts! I'm not moving!'*

On closer inspection, the woman was about sixty-five years old, expensively dressed, although very fat under the fur coat, and with an enormous beehive of hair, fixed in position, despite the windy day. She stood, her arms crossed defiantly, staring at the expectant group of would-be footballers. Her dog Ronnie stood obediently beside her, shaking his head slightly as if to say '*here she goes again'*.

The stand-off lasted a few minutes when suddenly the woman spotted a similarly-dressed woman at the other end of the pitch, this one in a brown fur coat, a hat with fruit on the top, and with a very small cat on a lead.

*'Oh, yoo hoo, Mrs Turvey-Teapot! Over here!'*. And with that she waddled extravagantly over to the other end of the field. They were free to play.

Hardy had been watching Michael. For the whole of the training session, Michael had been playing with his football, chipping it here, lobbing it there, all the while keeping it under perfect control close to him. At times it looked as if the ball was attached to his feet, especially when he had sat down and kept the ball bouncing on the end of his toes for the time Freddy had been arguing with the woman. Hardy had started counting, but had lost count past two hundred. As they moved over towards the goalmouth, Michael got up, flicked the ball ten metres above his head, caught it on the back of his neck, rolled it down his back, back-heeled it up over his head, and caught it nonchalantly in one hand. Hardy grabbed Freddy and pointed to Michael. Freddy nodded and smiled knowingly.

*This boy had something.*

**Getting the Team Together…Day 6**

Getting to the end of November, and still only half a team.

But the latest training session had gone well.

With Mr Andrews shouting encouragement from his position on the bench, they had all had a good run-out, practicing dribbling and shooting and, at Mr Andrews's insistence, warming down after the session with more stretching and jogging.

But mostly they had watched Michael.

*'He hasn't spoken since we got here'*, whispered Wil as they took a breather on the touchline.

*'I know, but look what he can do'*, replied Freddy as they admired the incredible Michael,

'*Look! Stepovers, a quick dribble, then a left foot shot. Now, more stepovers, did you see that? That one was right-footed, top corner!'*

*'He just ran from one goal to the other, and the ball didn't touch the ground'*.

*'Did you see that!'*, Hardy raced over. No whispering for him, he almost shouted in admiration.

Michael was unperturbed. He was lost in a world of his own, sprinting here, jogging, walking backwards, all the while the ball at his feet. When Jaz decided to go in for a tackle, Michael pulled the ball back and away with the toe of his right foot, flicked it up with the heel of his left, and caught it on the back of his neck where it stayed, tantalisingly balanced, whilst Jaz picked himself up off the floor where he had slid in. Michael then flicked the ball over his head and volleyed it low into the goal. Jaz clasped his forehead in exasperation and admiration.

*****

Wil strolled over to where they had left their kit. His golden forehead was glistening in the weak sunshine and sweat shone through his closely cropped hair. His formerly immaculate black and white striped kit was streaked with mud, and his socks were down at his ankles. He sat down. He listened wearily as Mr Andrews's husky voice continued to encourage the others with stories of *'come on lads'*, and *'in my day'*.

*'Wil…Wil…'*

*'Eh, what?'*, Wil muttered.

*'Wil…'*

Wil turned to where the soft voice was coming from.

Nobody there. Slightly more urgently, the voice again.

*'Wil, ear!'*

*‘Wil…ear?’,* Wil repeated, getting slowly to his feet, and making his way to the bushes where the sound was coming from, a smile breaking across his face as he realised who was there.

*‘JoJo! You’re back! Come out of there!’*

JoJo stepped out of the clearing where she had been hiding and looked nervously over to where the others were now gathered in a circle round the bench where Mr Andrews was perched.

*‘Beeg ‘ug, Wil’.* She stretched out her arms and Wil stepped forward to hug her.

*‘I’ve really missed you’,* he said, before stepping quickly back and glancing over to the group about ten metres away. No-one had seen. He smiled again.

*‘You look formidable! You are still wearing your New Cassel stripes! O, but you are ‘ot, let me wap your leetle fore‘ed a beet!’*

*‘Er, no, it’s OK thanks, I’m fine’,* replied Wil, looking over again at the others, and self-consciously straightening his Newcastle shirt. He looked down at the ground.

JoJo was dressed like any other girl her age in a bright t-shirt and jeans, but from the time she had spent with them the previous summer, they remembered she usually wore something slightly unusual as well. Today, round her neck, she had a beautiful silk scarf with a vibrant coloured pattern on it. She fingered the scarf nervously as the group finished their session and came over.

*‘Yo yo, JoJo JoJo!’,* said Hardy jovially as he bounded over to greet her.

*‘Ah, good morning, Hardy, ‘ow are you?’,* she replied coolly. Hardy covered his mouth with his hand and smirked. They had never really got on since Hardy had teased her about trying to get his name pronounced right. She had tried very hard, but it almost always came out as very French! He still smiled when she said it.

Freddy came over and introduced the rest of the team. JoJo shook hands politely with each player, except Clara, who she tried to kiss on both cheeks.

*‘Ugh, no way!’,* Clara screamed, almost jumping back out of the way. They all laughed. Except JoJo, who pursed her lips and fiddled with her scarf.

*‘We’re putting together a football team’,* said Freddy, *‘we’re going to play against other teams and everything’.*

‘*We’re putting together a football team’,* said Mr Andrews unnecessarily, wheezing over towards them. *‘You want to join? Damn good players, you Frenchies!’*

Freddy gave Mr Andrews a withering look, whilst JoJo shuffled nervously to a spot behind Wil. Mr Andrews smiled, reached over, and pulled Freddy a couple of metres away from the group.

*‘ Look, lad, I think my playing days might be numbered. What with my back now, and this leg. Shot off in Sudan it was. Why don’t you let me be your manager? I’ve been watching football for sixty years, I can help you become great.’*

*‘I’ll think about it’*, said Freddy after a moment’s reflection, relieved at the thought that Mr Andrews might not be playing with them after all.

As they walked back down the road, JoJo tugged at Wil’s arm, and unexpectedly whispered,

‘*Wil, I think I want to join your team…’*

He turned towards her face, to see her deep brown eyes pleading longingly towards him.

‘*Oh dear… oh dear’*, he thought to himself.

*****

**Getting the Team Together…Day 7**

That day Freddy and Wil had spent the morning in the house with Clara. She had appeared at the door early that day with a copy of her *Frivolous Book for Girls*, and they had whiled away a few hours trying some of its suggestions. Clara's particular favourite had been the section on *Conkers,* which she had clearly prepared for. The conkers she used seemed to be harder and more robust than the ones she passed to them. They lost game after game, and plenty of skin from their fingers.

Later in the afternoon, they sat back down at the table where it had all started the previous week. Freddy consulted his team sheet.

*'Well, we have Michael…'*

*'YES!'*, said Hardy, unable to contain his admiration for the young prodigy.

*'We have Michael, me, Wil, you Hardy, Jaz, and Clara. That makes six. We need a team of at least seven, plus some substitutes'.*

*'And JoJo,'* said Wil quietly. They ignored him.

'*And JoJo,'* said Wil slightly louder.

*'Yes, well, OK'*, replied Freddy, *'but I'm not sure we can deal with too many girls in the team'.*

There was a moment's pause, then,

*'WHACK!' 'KAPOW!' 'SLAM!'*

Freddy reeled back as Clara attacked him.

*'What's wrong with girls, eh? You think we're not strong enough eh? You think we're not quick enough, eh? Eh? Eh? EH? You think we can't look after ourselves, eh? Well, you'll see, won't you, eh? Eh? Eh? NO WAY are you going to stop her joining the team. NO WAY!'*

She continued slapping him until he said he was very sorry, and yes, there was no reason to not have girls in the team, and yes, JoJo could join, and yes, girls were better than boys, and yes, and yes…

So, thanks to her unlikely friend Clara, JoJo was on the team. She was not present to hear the news.

*'There is one other possibility,'* continued Freddy when he had recovered from the onslaught of Clara.

Just then, Mr Andrews hobbled past the house, clutching a large brown envelope.

*****

Most of them had been at a party at the weekend. It was Jaz's 10th birthday, and they had gathered at a local sports hall for the usual diet of games, sports, and fun.

The usual diet also usually consisted of chips, beans and jelly, but this party was different. Jaz's

grandmother had produced an amazing range of food, including several different types of rice, chicken dishes in three different sauces, and various snackfoods – onion bhajis, chapathis, and naan breads. Unlike other parties, the food had been the main feature of the event, and they had feasted wonderfully.

But the most unusual thing that had happened (apart from all the kids eating the party food) was when someone had arrived late for the party.

*****

They had been busy eating, when there was  a loud creaking noise from the roof of the sports hall where the party was.  Almost everyone had looked up to where the noise was coming from.  A small skylight window, right in one of the top corners of the hall, was now open, and a pale hand was reaching through it.

The hand was followed by an arm, a shoulder, and a head, as the figure in the roof tried to squeeze through the tiny space available.  They watched, open-mouthed, as he moved his lithe body through the window.

*'COOL!'* yelled Hardy, *'look at that!'*

All the children stared up at the event unfolding above them.  The figure was now three-quarters of the way through the window.

*'But, but…how will he get down,'* said Wil, nervously.

The boy was at least fifteen metres (the height of a house) above the floor , and there was nothing around him to offer any support.  He was now sitting on the ledge of the window, his legs dangling over the empty space below him.  He was smiling.  He reached back through the window, and produced two things.  The first was a hook, attached to a rope.  The second was a large, brightly coloured package.  He shut the window behind him.

There were gasps as in what seemed like a split second, he threw the hook over the top of one of the gym apparatus bars, about five metres from where he was perched, and used the rope to swing down from the roof, landing with a skid on the floor, just in front of Jaz.

'*Jaz, sorry I'm late, Happy Birthday'*.  He handed the coloured package to Jaz.

'*Alex, how are you?  Thanks for coming'*, Jaz replied, as if his entry was the most normal thing in the world.  The rest of the guests just stared, open-mouthed.

*****

'*Jaz, Jaz, come here'*, Freddy had said as they were leaving, *'that guy, Alex is it?  We need him for the team!  We really do.  Really!'*

*'Sorry Freddy,'* Jaz replied, *'I think he's taken.  Plays for Butterfield.  You're too late'*.

Butterfield was a well-known local football club, very professional, always winning some tournament or another.  They were very serious about their football.  Freddy had talked to Mr Andrews about it the next day.

*‘Yes, he sounds like someone we need, lad.  Have you talked to him?’*

Freddy had not thought to ask Alex directly about joining the team, in fact he had been a bit scared of him following the dramatic entry at the party.

*‘Tell you what, lad, leave it with me.  I believe his parents are no longer around, but I used to go hang-gliding with his granddad, you know, before I crashed into the sea and managed to drown this damn leg of mine.  I’ll see what I can do.  There are always ways of tempting players away from other teams’.*

*****

So *that* is what Mr Andrews had been doing with the large brown envelope…

*****

Later that morning,

*BOOM!*

*BANG!*

*KARRUMPH!  Tinkle, tinkle!*

*‘I’ve had worse!’*

*‘I think he’s arrived!’* said Freddy, turning to Wil as they finished up their breakfast.

*‘Yes, good luck, Bro, I hope you make it!’*

Freddy had been asked to go to a meeting of the league that morning, to discuss the arrangements for matches.  The meeting was to be held at the Springhurst Community Hall, and although they could have got there by bus, Mr Andrews (who had now confirmed himself as their coach and manager) had insisted that they should drive.  Nervously, Wil and Freddy opened the front door.

Mr Andrews was standing by the gate examining the damage.

*‘Nothing to worry about, lad, just a few scratches.  I’ve had worse!’*

The brick wall outside their house was now missing several bricks.  The car had a large dent on the left-hand side front wing.  It matched the one that was already there on the right-hand side.  And the one at the back.  And the broken window.  And the dents in the roof.  (The roof!  How did they get there?).

*‘I’ve had a few problems with the brakes, lad.  Nothing to worry about’.*

Freddy looked worried.  Even Wil, who was not travelling with them, looked a bit worried.  Even Mr Andrews, despite saying there was nothing to worry about, looked worried.

Nevertheless, Freddy climbed into the little car.

*‘BOOM!  BANG! HUP!’*

They stopped.

*‘Ah, nothing to worry about, lad, won’t be a minute!’*

Mr Andrews went to fetch something out of the boot.  It was a large handle, which he then inserted somewhere in the front of the vehicle, and turned vigorously.  The car shook violently, coughed several times, and lurched back into life.  Mr Andrews waved the handle triumphantly.

They set off.

Despite the lurching and the banging and the wobbling, the car actually had a good turn of speed.  The problem was more that it appeared that Mr Andrews had never taken a driving test.

On straight roads they were alright, it was when the time came to turn that the problems occurred.

They came to a junction.  Mr Andrews made a perfectly reasonable right turn, but was surprised when the drivers coming in the other direction started hooting their horns, and waving their fists at him.  Freddy crouched low in the front seat as a succession of vehicles swerved out of their way.

*‘Friendly lot this morning, aren’t they, lad?’* said Mr Andrews cheerfully, waving back at the oncoming traffic, and sounding his own horn in reply.

*‘Mr Andrews, you’re on the wrong side of the road,’* Freddy tried to sound calm despite the chaos erupting around him.

*‘Goodness gracious me, you could be right there, lad.  Well spotted.’.*

Three cars ploughed into each other behind them.  Mr Andrews, in his own time, pulled over to the correct side of the highway.  Freddy relaxed in his seat a little, after looking round for any flashing blue lights which would signify they had been spotted.

Roundabouts were a particular speciality.  Mr Andrews seemed not to realise that roundabouts had an entry point (easy enough), but that you also needed to get off them in order to go the way you wanted to go.  At several roundabouts they had simply carried on going round them, in one instance, seven times.  Mr Andrews had simply smiled, hummed happily to himself, and muttered,

*‘Damn twisty road, this one, isn’t it, lad?’*

But eventually they had arrived at the meeting place.  Freddy almost fell out of the car in relief.

*****

*‘Pretty motley collection, here, lad.  We could do well in this league’,* said Mr Andrews as he surveyed the scene in front of them in the Hall.  There were chairs arranged facing a table at one end of the room, where the organisers were sitting.  There were about twenty people gathered in little groups, chatting nervously with each other.  Most were dressed in normal clothes (like Freddy, who was wearing his England football shirt, jeans, and his favourite trainers), although two groups stood out.

In one corner, was a group of three adults and three kids. They all wore identical red and white striped shirts, and each had a training jacket slung elegantly over their shoulders, or on the back of the chair on which they were sitting. On the back of the jackets was written *'Butterfield FC'* then under that *'Going Places!'*. They huddled together discussing something very earnestly.

*'Look at them, Mr Andrews'*, said Freddy nervously watching the Butterfield group, *'they seem very professional'*.

*'Don't worry about that, lad, you have the makings of a very good team, y'know. We'll get you into shape and just because you don't have the kit or the organisation, it doesn't mean you won't succeed. And you've done a great job getting that team together. One or two stars there, lad.'*

*'I know'*, said Freddy smiling, *'that Michael is something else'*.

*'You're not so bad yourself, Freddy, remember that. You just be proud of being the captain'*.

The other group was in complete contrast to the professional Butterfield outfit.

There were three of them, a young girl and two elderly women, whispering to each other in another corner of the room. Occasionally a mighty cackle of laughter would come from them, and then they would go back to their earnest discussions. In contrast to the bright colours and stripes of some of the other teams, this group were dressed entirely in black.

*****

The meeting passed without incident, and it was agreed that the first matches should be this coming Saturday. There were to be eight teams in the league. The final task at the meeting was to register the teams. Mr Andrews and Freddy queued up patiently as the teams gave their details to the organiser behind the desk.

They got to the front of the line, and the man behind the desk asked them to fill in some details. The most difficult question was the first one.

*'Team name?'* he said briskly.

Freddy turned to Mr Andrews. Mr Andrews turned to Freddy. They both looked up to the ceiling. They both looked at the floor.

'*What's the name of your team?'* said the man again.

*'The Croaking Mr Andrewss'*, croaked Mr Andrews.

Freddy looked at him as if, this time, he had really flipped.

'*How are you spelling that?'*, said the man, without batting an eyelid.

*'I smell and I'm fat? How dare you, young man? Just get the name down and be done with it! I don't know, young people these days…'*

Freddy decided not to push it. They could always change it later. They left the meeting.

*****

As they emerged from the building into the October sunshine, the group of black-clad ladies were still in a huddle just outside the door. Freddy strained to hear what they were saying as he went past. A cackle. More whispering. Then, indistinctly, he thought he heard one of them say *'bagunited'* or *'bagsunited'*, or perhaps *'hagsunited'*.

As they approached the car, Freddy turned once again to look at the group. One of the older ones was somehow familiar. Yes, that was it! But why? Clearly, definitely now, he recognised her. Her black coat. Her dark eyes. Her long straggly hair. Yes! Then, OH NO!

*****

It was the lady from number twenty-three.

**Getting the Team Together…Day 8 with JoJo**

Meanwhile, Wil and JoJo were out shopping. Jaz was playing a game. Hardy was sleeping. Michael was practicing. Alex was in hiding. Clara was just…well, just being Clara.

*****

*'Non, non, non! Absolument Non! Je refuse!'.*

JoJo put her hand on her hip and turned her head to one side, with her big eyes still staring dolefully at Wil. He put back the blue and white striped shirt he had picked up from the shelf.

*'What about this one?'*

*'Are you crazy? Ze greens just don't go wiz ze grass. We must 'ave somesing wiz style, mon ami! This team will be ze best looking in ze championnat!'*

Wil tried again,

*'But, does it really matter what we look like? We're just going out for a couple of games of football, after all'.*

*'Ah Zut Alors Wil! What are you talking about?'*

*'Well, I just thought that…'*

*'Shurt urp, Wil! A team plays with panache, with pizzazz, with a certain 'je ne sais quoi'!*

*'I don't know what you are talking about'.*

*'I said, 'je ne sais quoi'. It means a certain somesing. A certain élan, a certain flair for ze beautiful game!'*

*'I still don't get it'.*

*'Let me explain mon petit ami. If we, ze playeurs of ze team, feel we are the best, zen we will be ze best. We 'ave to believe in ourselves, we 'ave to aspire to be ze greatest in ze world!'*

*'Oh, come on, JoJo, it's only the Springhurst village league or…'*

*'NON! Never! You must never sink like zat. Zis is the biggest sing in our young lives. To be or not to be, zat is ze question. We must look ze part! We march on our stomachs!'*

Wil laughed, and put his arm around her shoulder.

*'You're crazy, you are!'*

*'You murst understand, Wil, I sink, zerefore I am!'*

Wil thought for a moment about what she had said. Then he stopped thinking. Couldn't make head nor tail of it. He picked up another kit from the shelf.

*'You see, you are learning! Zis one is murch better! Ze blues and ze reds carry a more profound messarge! Put zis one to one side.'*

Although she was horribly bossy and strange, Wil really liked being with JoJo. Anything could happen, and often it did. Her temper was legendary.

'*'Eadbands! We murst 'ave 'eadbands!*, she said suddenly, *'and wristbands! Find 'zem Wil!'*

Wil went off to look for headbands and wristbands, whilst JoJo argued with one of the shop assistants about the best colour socks and shorts to match the blue and yellow shirts. Finally they emerged from the shop with a complete kit, and set off back to Wil's house, where Freddy and the others were waiting.

*****

A few minutes later, Clara and JoJo, having left the room, returned wearing the kit.

Clara burst into the room, shirt hanging over her shorts, one sock down, one sock up.

'*Cool!'*, said Hardy.

A moment later, JoJo.

She had put her hair up in a kind of scrunched up way. Her shirt was immaculately ironed. It was tucked neatly into her shorts, and her socks were perfectly symmetrical around her knees. She wore a single wristband, and, at a slight angle, the headband across her forehead. She carried a bright white football under one arm, smiled nervously, and almost skipped to the centre of the room.

*'She's gonna be trouble!'*, muttered Hardy in Freddy's ear.

*****

They completed their last training session before the first game. Sitting on the ground with the team arranged around him, Mr Andrews was pacing up and down, giving them a final talking to.

'*Well, lads, this is it…'*, he started.

'*Hu..hmmm…?'*, Clara cleared her throat extravagantly.

*'Ahem, sorry, lads… and lasses…'*, he corrected himself.

*'Lads, and Lasses, we are gathered here to prepare for the biggest game of your young lives. I remember, back in '55, was it? Taking the field against the mighty Arsenal, or was it Chelsea? Anyway, fantastic team they had at that time. No-one gave us a hope of winning the game. And we didn't win it. Lost eight-nil! I got injured. Damn leg broken in two places. But did I cry? Did I roll around on the ground, screaming like a baby? Well, yes I did, actually. But anyway, I got up and carried on, lifting my useless leg by hand whenever I had to go anywhere. In fact I scored. Swung the leg round at the ball, connected, ball flying into the top corner. Goalkeeper dives one way, then the*

*other, ball just flies past his outstretched fingers and almost bursts the net. Goalkeeper gets up and starts yelling at me. Oops, wrong end! Anyway, lads and lasses, this is your moment, once more unto the breach dear friends, you must fight them on the beaches, you must…you must…'*

Mr Andrews looked to the skies for more inspiration.

They all looked at each other in consternation.

*'It's Wanderers first up next week. I've watched them in training. Only got one player to worry about. A kid called Skip. Australian I think. You can do it!.*

With that, he stood up, shook each of them by the hand, and walked towards the setting sun. Silhouetted against the low light, he looked like a great warrior heading off into battle. Apart from the limp.

Jaz spoke next.

*'I don't get it. What was he talking about?'*

*'Don't worry',* said Freddy, *'I think he means we should just go out and enjoy it, and that we're actually quite a good team. But we need a name for the team. Any ideas?'*

They all looked at Hardy, whose eyes were tight shut, his head pointing upwards in deep concentration. There was silence.

*'Well, come on then…!',* said Wil impatiently.

*'Don't disturb me, I'm thinking',* Hardy replied from behind his eyelids.

Silence.

More silence.

Then a little *'ooh!'* from Hardy, his finger raised in expectation.

Then a little *'no!'* from Hardy, as he forgot what he had thought of.

Then a big *'I've had enough of this!'* from Clara.

Freddy intervened.

*'We need to think up a name for our team, not just say words at random. Football teams are usually called something like 'stars' or 'athletic' or 'town' or 'united'. And we are a junior team, of children'.*

*'Springhurst Town!'* yelled Hardy triumphantly.

*'How about Springhurst United?'* said Jaz quietly, *'or Springhurst Athletic?'*

*'Maybe we need something like 'Springhurst Juniors', something that shows we are young?',* said Wil.

*‘The Springhurst Children?’*

*‘NO WAY!  That sounds like ‘The Railway Children’, YUK!’,* said Clara.

*‘Ze United Children?’* came a soft, French voice, and then, *‘If ze kids are united, zey will nev-air be deevided’.*

*‘That’s it!  We’ve got it.  Stand up everyone!  Now, put your hands together!’*

They formed a little huddle in the middle of the pitch.  Freddy drew them closer to him.  They threw their hands in the air, and Freddy announced the name of the team.

*‘We are…(duh, duh,  duuuughhh!)…Lancaster Road!’*

He went over to Mr Andrews’s flipchart at the side of the pitch, flipped over Mr Andrews’s attempt to draw a picture of a football pitch, and wrote, in large green letters,

*‘Lancaster Road!’*

His spelling was still a bit shaky, but Lancaster Road it was!

*****

*‘Lancaster Road it is then.  See you next week!’.*

*****

**Let the Games Begin – Day 1**

The twittering of the soggy birds. The squelching of a thousand tiny feet. The chattering of a hundred damp children.

That's right. Lancaster Road were about to play their first match.

*****

The week before the game had been wet. It had rained and rained and rained. During the day it had rained, and during the night, it had poured. During a brief break in the rain, there had been a hailstorm. The team had met up at Freddy's house but had been unable to train. Instead they had spent time watching replays of Match of the Day.

*'Yo…Yo!',* yelled Hardy triumphantly as David James flew the length of his goal to stop a Villa free kick.

*'Wow…!',* said Wil as Reading's Yakou Meite headed one in against Bristol.

*'Hmmm?…',* said Freddy, as Ronaldo tripped over a nasty blade of grass against Milan.

And Michael said nothing at all. He sat there, silently watching, studying. Occasionally an eyebrow would raise, his leg would twitch as if he was about to emulate one of his heros, or his head would nod in quiet acknowledgement of a great goal. At the end of the programme, he smiled contentedly to himself.

*****

When Saturday finally arrived, their tiny feet squelched onto the pitch, alongside the other teams. They jogged over to pitch E, where their match against Hurst Rovers was due to take place.

Freddy's daydreaming had now become a reality. He looked out at the scene in front of him. Hundreds of children getting ready to play. All nervous, excited, and inspired at the same time. Looking around he thought to himself, *We can do well, we really can,* and then other thoughts challenged him, *but, we've never played before, what if we get beaten?*

Just then Clara, who had brought a yellow World Cup football with her, tried to kick it the length of the pitch towards the goal, but she ended up slipping on the wet ground and falling flat on her back with a splash in a muddy puddle. She lay there still for a few seconds, then started laughing crazily. Freddy had to smile too. He woke from his daydream.

*'Right boys and girls! Remember what I said! Enjoy yourselves! Give a hundred percent!'*

Mr Andrews, who was taking his coaching role very seriously, had written out small cards for each of the players, which he was now handing out to them. Freddy's card read *Up and at 'em, boy!* Wil took his and saw the words *Fear Nothing!* written in a spidery handwriting.

Actually there was nothing to fear, because they were all lined up against an invisible opposition. With a minute to go, Hurst had not yet turned up.

But just then, a small army emerged from the dressing room area. Clad in bright yellow with green edgings, four or five coaches accompanied the team of ten players onto the playing surface. They jogged professionally over towards the Lancaster Road players. Handshakes all round. Freddy was impressed when one of them said *'G'day, skipper!'* to him. He looked proudly at the captain's band on his left arm, as he went to meet the referee in the middle.

*****

The whistle went. Rovers kicked off. Game on!

United started with Hardy in goal, a defence comprising Jaz and Wil, Freddy and Alex in midfield, and with Clara and Michael up front. JoJo was controversially left on the bench and stood there miserably, dressed in a blue tracksuit.

Right from the start, it was obvious that Rovers had more organisation, more training behind them, several strong (if not the most skilful) players, and that Mr Andrews had been right in identifying one player in particular, called Skip, who was small and fast. When he got the ball things seemed to happen. Twice he got away from Freddy in the midfield, and almost reached a point where he could shoot. On both occasions Jaz put in good tackles. The third time, Skip rounded Wil, shot low to the left corner, but then saw Hardy leap brilliantly to turn it round the post for a corner.

*'Yo Yo Ma!',* he yelled as he picked himself up and pumped the air with his fists, *'Come ON, United!'*

The game went from one end to the other, with Mr Andrews encouraging them from the sidelines, occasionally suggesting a tactical move, but more often just going for general advice,

*'Give it some welly, lad!' 'Good girl! Now, up to Michael!'*

And up to Michael it went. Picking it up on halfway, he dipped his shoulder, went round two Rovers players, flicked the ball up into the air, then nodded it across the Rovers goal to an unmarked Clara who simply tapped it home for the opening goal.

*One-Nil to Lancaster Road!*

The crowd, composed of parents and friends, cheered and stamped their feet in joy at the goal. Or rather squished their feet into to muddy turf. The Rovers fans, who had seemed confident of victory, went suddenly quiet. The only other reaction to the goal came from the neighbouring pitch, where an old lady, dressed in black, muttered to herself and thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her coat.

The last move of the first half was started by Hardy's long kick out from goal, which landed at the feet of Alex. Alex tried to trap the ball but it bounced under his foot. As it bounced up however, Alex jumped high in the air to volley a pass out to Michael on the right wing. Several of the watching crowd applauded this audacious move.

But applause turned to murmurs of consternation around the ground as Michael went down awkwardly under a challenge from the Rovers' captain Skip.

The murmurs turned to a deathly hush as Michael seemed not to be moving.

Then sighs of relief as he lifted his arms weakly, and was helped up. Two of the Rovers coaches helped

Michael stagger from the field, although he seemed not to know where he was.  The referee blew for half-time.  Mr Andrews stood scratching his wrinkled head, muttering sadly to himself.

What on earth were they going to do now?

*****

**Let the Games Begin – Day 2**

*What on earth were they going to do now?*

*****

Mr Andrews scratched his head again, as six concerned faces stared up at him from the huddle they had formed near the centre circle. Michael's family were tending to him on the touchline. The Rovers team were looking quietly confident. Mr Andrews took charge of the situation.

*'Erm, er….'*

He tried again.

*'Well…erm…you've just got to…erm…'*

*'Come ON, Grandad',* said Clara, looking up to her grandparent for a decision.

*'It's simple,'* said Wil, *'move everyone up. Bring Hardy into defence, move me into midfield, and Alex up front'.*

*'And WHO will play in goal?',* said Hardy belligerently.

*'Eet weel be me!',* said JoJo decisively, stepping lightly over the ground to where they were huddled. She adjusted her headband, pulled her gloves on, and marched (or rather, sort of skipped) her way over to the goalmouth. Hardy looked at Freddy, and raised one eyebrow to the sky. Freddy said nothing.

*'Excellent, same again this half, you can do it!'* said Mr Andrews, regaining a little of his composure.

*****

But they couldn't do it.

Without Michael, the team was not the same.

They tried hard. Alex tried out his full range of tricks to get around the Rovers defence, but the move would always break down in the face of strong defending. Clara pushed and shoved her way through, several times, but could not produce a second goal which would have given them breathing space. And at the other end, the opposition strikers were starting to come alive.

With their captain in inspirational form, they fashioned a goal from a great move down the left touchline which Hardy tried to intercept, but he only succeeded in kicking at thin air as the ball went past him and settled into the bottom corner of JoJo's net.

With a minute to go, the teams were battling it out in midfield, when Skip once again embarked on a mazy run before passing to the smallest player on the pitch who bustled the ball in off a post. JoJo, who nonetheless dived the length of the goalmouth to try to get to the ball, had no chance. She groaned as she cleaned some of the mud off her face…and her hands…and her knees. Hardy gave her a great slap on the back,

*‘Bad luck, JoJo…nothing you could do about it!’.*

JoJo managed a weak and enigmatic smile.

The referee blew for full time, and the supporters of both sides cheered for what had been a great game between two evenly-matched teams. Mr Andrews consoled his young charges, saying that they had played a great game, they could have earned a draw, it was only their first game…

Freddy sat close to the sideline, clasping his forehead in his muddy hands, contemplating the fact they had lost a match they could, and maybe should, have won. His mind was almost blank, his dream already shattered. He had missed the vital tackle, he had not captained the team properly, he had not…

*‘Freddy, lad, stand up!’* Mr Andrews was surprisingly firm.

*‘We lost a game. We lost a close game. Everyone played well. What more can I ask? Yes, it would have been great to win, but this is only one battle on a long and complex journey, this is only…’*

Sensing another lengthy military story, Freddy smiled weakly and interrupted,

*‘You’re right. We played OK, didn’t we? For a start?’*

*‘You most certainly did, Freddy, my lad. And look, things are already looking up!’*

They looked down the touchline, where Michael was already standing and keepy-upping a ball. Coach and captain looked at each other and smiled.

*****

After school on the Wednesday after the game, Freddy and Wil were munching on crisps and beginning their usual leisure time activity. Hardy was in the far corner of the room, head deep in a large yellow book.

*‘You got Firmino?’*, said Wil abruptly.

*‘No, but I need him, will you swap him for Kepa?’*, replied Freddy.

*‘Whoah! Hang on a minute! Wait for me!’* Hardy raced across the big room to join them at the table, yellow folder in hand.

*‘Right, I need Salah, five star shiny although I don’t know why, and I also need Jagielka and Brewster to complete Sheffield United, and if I don’t get Phil Foden soon I’ll probably DIE, and Ramsdale is WAY better than Allison, and who’s got Olise, I really need him I really really do, and why have Arsenal got two five star shinies especially Lacazette who doesn’t even want to play, and I’ll swap all my Watfords for just one Paul Pogba, and if you’ve got a Mason Greenwood I’ll swap him for two Harry Maguires and a couple of Freds if you like, and I wish I could be on these cards, maybe we should make our own team, I could be the first match winner goalkeeper, has anyone got a spare James Rodrigues?’*

Wil and Freddy collapsed on the floor laughing, still clutching their own folders. Hardy joined them, and managed to pick up a card which had fallen to the floor out of one of the folders. They pounced on him as he tried to slip it into his own collection. It took two of them to hold him down as they prized it

(the relatively obscure Marc Guehi) out of his hands.  They all laughed and lay there, breathing heavily.

*****

There was a knock at the door which Freddy went to answer.  He looked out of the window before opening the door.  It was Mr Andrews.

*‘Ah, hello Freddy, don’t forget training on Friday after school.  I’ll see you all there, please tell the others, and…oh…you’ll need this’.*

With that Mr Andrews handed Freddy a luminous yellow football and a carrot.

**Let the Games Begin – Day 3**

*With that Mr Andrews handed Freddy a luminous yellow football and a carrot.*

*****

At four o-clock on the Friday they gathered at Freddy and Wil's house, waiting for Mr Andrews to arrive. Jaz was studying the ball intently, a large book open at the word '*luminous*' at his side.

*'Hold it under the light, then turn the light off. What's supposed to happen is that the ball is phosphorescent'.*

*'HANG ON!',* said Hardy predictably, *'foss for ressent? What does that mean?'.* Jaz read on for a few seconds.

*'It means that the ball is painted in some special stuff that takes in light and then emits it again when it is dark. Absolutely fascinating.'* He adjusted his glasses further down his nose so that he could focus better on what he was reading.

*'So you're saying that when we turn the light off, the ball's going to glow in the dark. NO WAY!'* said Clara in disbelief.

*'Give it a few more minutes, you'll see. What else did he give you?'*

Freddy handed Jaz the carrot. Even Jaz looked a bit quizzical as he turned the pages of his encyclopaedia to the section beginning with 'C'. He fingered the pages urgently as he searched for clues to the significance of the carrot.

*'Aha, here it is!',* and he read out,

*'…During the second world war, various tricks were played on the enemy to cover up the fact that Britain had developed a system for seeing enemy planes in the dark – called radar. The Royal Air Force did not want the enemy to know this, so they invented stories, including one which said that pilots had been given cats' eyes so that they could see better in the dark, and another which said that pilots were being fed large quantities of carrots so that they could better see the enemy aircraft on dark nights…'*

*'So, he wants us to see better in the dark?',* said Wil, '*why would we want to do that?'*

*'Well, look outside, it is almost dark, and we are just going off training',* Jaz replied.

*'Hang on, though, read on…'* said Freddy. Jaz read a bit further,

*'…Both of these tricks were entirely untrue, although carrots do contain Vitamin A which is important in vision and bone growth…'*

*'I know a great trick, turn the lights off…quick!'* said Hardy, just as JoJo was coming back from the kitchen. Hardy crept under the table with the ball, which, sure enough, was now emitting a ghostly green glow.

*‘Whoo..ooo…’* went Hardy from under the table. The others covered their mouths to try to keep from laughing.

*‘Oooh…oooh!* went JoJo, stepping back in fright.

*‘WHOO…OOO…OOO!’* went Hardy, louder this time, slowly lifting the glowing ball out from behind the table, so that it looked like a ghostly sunrise set against the rest of the dark room.

*‘Ooo la la! Mama Mia! ‘Elp me, ‘elp me!’* screamed JoJo, her hands pressed hard against her eyes, her little feet tottering up and down in alarm at the sight. With the others falling about laughing, Hardy lobbed the ball at her and she departed screaming (and cursing – in French) to answer the door to Mr Andrews.

*****

They all trudged up the road to the park, each carrying at least one bag of the hundreds of carrots that Mr Andrews had brought with him. The sun had gone down an hour before, and night was falling.

At the ground, Mr Andrews gathered them around him, and started opening one of the bags.

*‘Now listen to me. Difficult game this weekend. Girls’ team…’* There was a whispered exclamation of *‘Yessss!’* from the boys present.

Mr Andrews continued, *‘when I was a lad, I would look up into the skies, and see the planes overhead…’*

*‘Mr Andrews, carrots don’t really help you see in the dark,’* interrupted Jaz, *‘but they are very good for you anyway’*.

*‘Absolutely right, lad, just what I was going to say,’* lied Mr Andrews, munching on a carrot, *‘OK, let’s get started’*.

*****

The training session went surprisingly well considering they were unable to see the goals, the sidelines, or each other. Clara, Jaz, Freddy and Wil were on one side, dressed in bright orange bibs, with Michael, Alex, JoJo and Hardy, who all happened to be in dark blue tops, forming the other team. They were a strange sight to anyone passing by.

But after some minutes, their eyes got used to the light and they started to play some football.

After half an hour or so, most of the light had drained from the ball, and the game ended when Hardy fired a shot from halfway which nobody saw at all, even though it just trickled into Clara’s goal. She kicked it away in disgust and Mr Andrews drew them together once more.

*‘So, my friends, any questions?’*

Michael spoke, quietly,

*‘Mr Andrews, why are we out in the pitch dark, playing football with a luminous ball?’*

*‘Ah, I’m glad you asked me that question Michael.  You see, tomorrow, you’re playing another difficult team.  I don’t know much about them, but they’re all girls, and I’m not at all sure about their manager.  Lives down the road here at number 23.  Now I’ve met some funny ladies in my time (especially old Rita, back in ’53 I think it was), but this one actually frightens me a bit.  Oh… and the name of their team… very odd.’*

He scratched his head.  He juggled a football nervously in his hands.

*‘Yes, take care tomorrow, you’re playing against the mysterious… Hags United!’*

**Let the Games Begin – Day 4**

*'Yes, take care tomorrow, you're playing against the mysterious… Hags United!'*

*****

It was a wet, windy and worrying sort of day. Eight nervous footballers. JoJogging up and down, stretching one way, stretching the other. Jumping on the spot.

Mr Andrews also looked nervous, but his instructions were clearer than usual.

*'Just go out there and enjoy it. We lost one last week…so what? In football there is always another game just round the corner. Give it another go. Just do your best, and give a hundred percent effort'.*

They gathered together in a little huddle and Freddy spoke,

*'Don't look at them. Just play. We have some great players, we can do this. Remember the passing, the dribbling, and the shooting. Shoot from anywhere!'*

*'BANG!'*. As he said the word *shoot* there was an enormous explosion of noise from the other end of the pitch where the Hags team were preparing in a similar huddle. Except up from the middle of their huddle rose a plume of greenish yellow smoke.

*'I…I…I don't really like this…at all…',* stammered Hardy, looking across at the group, who were now cackling madly as their coach (a fat lady wearing a dark cloak) waved her team onto the pitch.

The team itself was dressed in black baggy shirts and long flowing black trousers, which made them look rather ghostly, and produced a flapping sound when they ran.

But the half went well, as two goals from Michael, a volley from Alex, and a sliding stab home from Jaz put Lancaster Road four goals up. Freddy beamed happily from his midfield role as the team started enjoying themselves. Even the referee, formally dressed in black and white, was smiling at the quality of the football.

*'C'mon United, keep playing like this, it's not over until the fat lady sings!',* yelled Mr Andrews happily as another goal went in, this time volleyed from twenty metres by Clara, who jumped high in the air in delight.

Just then, the fat lady started singing.

*****

The words of her song were indistinct. From where most of the Lancaster Road supporters were sitting, all they could hear were words like *'double', 'trouble', and 'toil',* sung in the direction of the Hags girls, accompanied by several of the old ladies whirring their hands in a sort of stirring motion. As this was happening, the referee was involved in a heated debate with some of the Hags supporters. There was much shaking of fists, some raised voices, and a brief scuffle. The referee came back onto the pitch looking a bit ruffled, or at least a bit different.

This seemed to encourage the girls, who came out for the second half much more positively.

The second period started with Lancaster Road on the move once more, but several attacks were broken up by the re-invigorated Hags defence. The two central defenders seemed to have taken inspiration from the incessant chanting now coming from the touchline, and literally broke up the attacks, with Alex being sent flying by one scything tackle (naturally, he managed to do a double somersault and land on his feet), and Michael's progress being stopped by the other defender, who yelled *'mind yer dodgy knee, ha ha ha!'* before taking him out close to the Hags supporters, who cheered and hooted wildly.

One of the girls then set off on a long run down the left, and, bearing down on Hardy in goal, she appeared to throw something towards him. Some kind of purple powder. Before the defence could get there, Hardy let out the most enormous sneeze which almost shook him off his feet, and momentarily meant that he was unable to do anything about the shot heading towards his goal. In the end he flapped wildly at the ball to no avail. It was lodged in the back of the net. The Hags had got one back.

The next Lancaster Road attack saw Freddy running down the wing at high speed, ball close to his feet, looking for someone to pass to on the inside. As he was looking up, one of the Hags supporters stuck out her foot and sent him sprawling to the ground, with the ball bouncing harmlessly out of play for a throw-in. The supporter just looked up to the sky and whistled innocently.

The crowd turned to the referee in expectation of a free kick, at least. But the referee just screeched '*play on!'*. And laughed.

Two more goals followed, both of which were scored by the same Hags player. The first was when she was all alone in the penalty area, with only Hardy to beat, and she pointed to something in the sky. Hardy, who was already nervous about the whole game, looked up for a split second, only to find the ball in the back of the net. The second goal was when the same player was challenged by Hardy in the penalty area and dived blatantly over his outstretched hand. Once again the referee, looking rather pleased, pointed to the penalty spot, chuckling happily.

*'Wouldn't see that in the Premiership!'* shouted Mr Andrews in his usual naïve sort of way.

As full time approached, Lancaster Road managed to contain the game in middle of the park, and although the referee added six minutes on for non-existent injury time, they held on for a win. The two teams shook hands in the middle of the pitch, as assorted parents and friends ran over to congratulate them. Freddy couldn't help noticing how bony and cold the hands of the Hags girls felt.

After the celebrations died down, Wil and Freddy were walking slowly back to the changing rooms.

*'Urghhh…'*

*'What did you say?'* said Freddy, turning to Wil.

*'I didn't say anything',* Wil replied.

*'Urghh…urghhhh!'*

They walked over to the edge of the pitch, where the noise was coming from. When they got there, they couldn't believe what they saw.

*****

**Let the Games Begin – Day 5**

They walked over to the edge of the pitch, where the noise was coming from. When they gotthere, they couldn't believe what they saw.

*****

And when they thought about it, they couldn't believe that they had actually won.In a shallow ditch, half submerged in water, whistle stuffed into his mouth… thereferee from the first half.

*****

On Wednesday, Hardy and Clara were out shopping for kit with Hardy's Mum.

*'Oh for goodness sake, Hardy, why can't you ever make up your tiny mind, darling?'*

It took Clara a split second to react to what Hardy's mother had said.

*'Tiny mind!  Ha, ha, haaagh!'. She held her stomach as if it was about to fallout onto the floor of the shopping centre. 'Wait til I tell the others, Hardy, oh wow…!'*

Hardy looked down at the floor in embarrassment, for once unable to think ofanything to say.

They continued on through the mall, stopping here and there but getting nowherewith their shopping. The shopping centre was full of the hustle and bustle of Christmastraffic, the usual array of teenage layabouts, litter, excited children, and tired?looking Dads.Hardy was almost never in a shopping sort of mood, and least of all today.

His mother, who was going to be going away for Christmas, had insisted that sheshould buy him some warm clothes for the winter. They had gone from shop to shop,picking up things here and there. Just when Hardy thought they had finished, his motherhad said,

*'We mustn't forget your scarf and bobble hat, dear!'*

Hardy had forgotten about a scarf and bobble hat when he was about four years old.

Him, Hardy, wearing a scarf! No! And a bobble hat? Oh my word!

He traipsed sadly along after his mother, with Clara teasing him all the way, as theysearched for a bobble hat shop. The reason he needed the hat and scarf was that tonight wasthe night of the carol concert. In fact, the whole day was turning out bad.

*****

Hardy had got into trouble at the Nativity play earlier in the day by first shouting'He's behind you!' when one of the shepherds emerged into the light of the stable, and 'Oh noyou haven't!' when one of the Kings said that he had brought frankincense. A teacher hadpulled him out of the audience, and made him write out 'The infants play is not a pantomime'one hundred times. And that was before the evening concert had even started.

The carol concert was an annual nightmare for Hardy. His mother had forced him tojoin the school choir, and they had been preparing for the concert for weeks. Everyone wasvery nice to him, the teachers always encouraged him to participate, his mother always cooedappreciatively, but he couldn’t sing. He knew it. He just wished that someone would tellhim to do something else. Like put up the scenery, or serve drinks to the audience, or run theraffle. But singing? It just wasn’t his thing.

Wil, who was good at almost everything, had a beautiful singing voice. He andFreddy were standing either side of Hardy as the concert began.

It went off well enough to start with, the sound of Hardy’s droning drowned out bythe more tuneful performances of Wil, Freddy, and the rest of the choir. No problems withthe first few carols.

They moved on to Jingle Bells. Hardy made a few changes to the words here andthere to keep himself amused. It still didn’t make him sing them any better.

Finally, his patience and concentration seemed to snap and he started changingeverything. Once in Royal David’s City became Once the Royals beat Man City, and Hark theHerald Angels Sing became ‘Hark Wayne Rooney on the Wing’.

The choir around him started to smirk. They started to snigger. Some of themstarted to laugh. One of them fell off the bench they were perching on. Eventually, a teacherpulled Hardy out and made him write ‘Shepherds watched their flocks, not washed their socks’ twohundred times.

*****

After the concert, Wil and Freddy made their way home, down the steep street totheir house. Further down the road, outside number twenty?three, they could see aboutfifteen people. All in black. Clothes flapping in the cold wind. Dancing around a big fire inthe garden.

Chanting wickedly.

**Let the Games Begin – Day 6**

On Friday, Freddy and Wil were alone in the big, cold house, a roaring fire lighting up, and warming up, the sitting room. Their job was to decorate the Christmas tree (which they had done), and to wrap the presents for all their friends. Their Mum had organised a party for that evening, and all the friends would be there.

They went upstairs and prepared themselves for the party. Party clothes. Nice ironed white shirts. Pressed trousers. Cute little bow ties.

*Pah!*

No way! If they were going to have a party, they were going to look the part.

Freddy put on his cleanest, reddest Liverpool shirt, and a pair of really cool jeans. Slightly baggy, saggy jeans. He looked at himself in the mirror and adjusted the front of his very short hair slightly. He danced briefly in front of the mirror to an imaginary song in his head. The song was Ray singing *'You'll Never Walk Alone'* on the X-Factor semi-final. *One day that could be me*…he thought to himself.

Wil had tried to dress up smartly, but he had dressed very quickly, with the result that his shirt was hanging out of his trousers, his bow tie was hanging loosely round his neck, and one of his socks was hanging on the curtain-rail - where he had thrown it in the excitement. He couldn't reach it, so he hopped along the cold wooden floor on his one good foot. The lack of a sock was not going to stop him enjoying a party!

They ran downstairs to start packing up the presents.

*'Where's Clara's?'* said Freddy.

*'Dunno'*, said Wil, emerging from a large roll of wrapping paper, then, *'Ah, here it is! I chose it!'*

Wil handed the package to Freddy.

*'This could be trouble, Bro'*, he said.

*'I know! But it will be fun too!'*.

The package, wrapped in cellophane, contained a dressing-up costume. The package was pink. On the front it said,

*Every little girl's dream – dance like the Sugar Plum Fairy!*

For Clara? I don't think so! They wrapped it up quickly, and Freddy wrote a little note saying he hoped she would like it.

Hardy, a boy who had almost everything, was more difficult to choose for. His Mum and Dad never went to work, because one day, about two years ago, they had bought a lottery ticket and won a large amount of money. These days, they always seemed to be on holiday. But they rarely took Hardy

with them. This year he was going to spend Christmas with Wil and Freddy, whilst his parents were off skiing. Quite sad really, but they loved having him around, and he loved being there.

But what to buy for a boy who had everything? Wil had had a good idea.

*'Let's not buy him anything at all. Let's make something for him'.*

So they had spent the last week making football cards for him, featuring all his favourite people. They had done them on shiny cardboard which they had cut out, and then coloured them in yellow – just like the real thing. They had done a complete team, including all the Lancaster Road players (they had made Hardy himself a five-star shiny, match winner, best of the best player), and some of the other people they knew. This included Mr Andrews (pictured wearing his 1950s football kit), two of the Hags United girls, and even their Auntie Annie. Eighteen cards in all – the full set.

They wrote on the card,

*'To Hardy. The best friend we could possibly have. Have a great Christmas!'*

Wil then wrote a little poem on the card. *(But it was much too rude to repeat here).*

They continued wrapping the presents, which included a brand new, silver, World Cup football for Michael, and a dictionary (so that he could look up the meanings of new words) plus a thesaurus (so that he could find words with similar meanings) for Jaz. For Mr Andrews, they had purchased a warm-looking flat cap to cover up his bald little head. The card to Mr Andrews read,

*Dear Mr Andrews, thank you for helping us with the team. We're gonna be the greatest! And you will be the Jurgen Klopp of Lancaster Road! Happy Christmas!*

They had originally written *you will be the Chris Wilder of Lancaster Road*, but events had sadly overtaken them, so they changed it.

For Alex, they had wanted to buy a spy kit.

'*Yeh, but he's got most of this stuff already'*, Freddy had said, remembering the collection of gadgets and gizmos they had seen in Alex's house.

*'I wonder why?'* Wil added, thoughtfully.

Alex was not going to be at the party. *'Got to go away for a few days'*, he had said.

*'I wonder why?'* Wil had said, quizzically.

*****

They went upstairs to finish getting ready. When they came down again, a new package had been put under the tree. About thirty centimeters square, it was elegantly wrapped in luxurious golden paper. Freddy read the label on the outside.

*To my darling Freddy-ickles, good luck next year, with all my love, Auntie Annie.*

Freddy had his own problems with nicknames, but Auntie Annie was OK – she was madly eccentric, but they loved the strange things she did, and she was always sending them letters and little packages.

From the inside of the box, they could hear a faint ticking sound.  On the outside of the box, on top of the gold paper, was a label.  On the label was written, in his Auntie's extravagant handwriting:

*Handle with care – magic boots inside!*

See you next year!

*****

*Oh OK, then, here's the poem, if you insist…

*Hardy, Hardy, you're so cool,*

*Have a super duper Yule,*

*You'll be always, in my heart*

*And brussels sprouts, they make you...la la-la la-la!**

(*Smart…*of course*)

**New Year Blues – Day 1**

*'I said RESOLUTION, not revolution…!'* said Freddy as Hardy was busy turning cartwheels across the room.

They had spent hours thinking about what their New Year's resolutions should be, but really only Wil had come up with anything meaningful, and several of those were unobtainable, such as,

*'I will score in every game this season'*

*'I will skill the entire opposition before scoring'*

*'I will never get annoyed at Hardy spinning around…'*

*'Oi, Hardy, leave it out willya'!'* he shouted, thus immediately breaking his third resolution.

*'No, I like this!'* Hardy panted, as he crumpled into a heap in the far corner. As usual, they both laughed at him and with him at the silliness of it all.

But it had been different on Boxing Day. Very different. Maybe it was the wet and windy weather. Maybe they had all had too much turkey and mince pies. Or maybe their heads were sore from the day before. Whatever it was, Freddy had sat down with Wil at the end of the day, head in his hands.

*'I don't think we can go on like this, Bro. It's no good'.*

*****

On Boxing Day Mr Andrews had organised a friendly match.

Several players had got injured.

One announced his retirement.

One was nearly arrested.

Oh Dear!

*****

It had all started out well enough. At their final match of 2006, the five-three victory over the girls of Hags United, Mr Andrews had suggested a game between the Lancaster Road players and their parents on Boxing Day. He had chosen a venue (the field at the top of their street), and had agreed to provide refreshments for the players and spectators. Everyone had been keen on the idea, and the whole team had turned up at the appointed time of eleven o'clock.

Now, a few things were working against them.

Firstly, the weather. It had rained for three days solid over Christmas, and playing on the field on Boxing Day morning was like running through treacle.

Hardy ran straight onto the pitch and did an extravagant power slide on his knees, skimming at least ten metres and yelling *'Yo!'* at the top of his voice.

*'Shut it!'* commanded Hardy's father, who was dressed in rugby kit. He looked pityingly down at his son, who came back and stood muddily by his side, head bowed.

Secondly, the parents.

Most of them had had very late nights the night before, and several of them showed signs of wear and tear even before the match had begun. Hardy's Dad was not the only one with a temper that morning (although he was the only one who appeared to be in a permanent strop).

Freddy and Wil's father also looked a little brittle, although he maintained his customary good humour.

*'Come on then, Mr Andrews, let's get this show on the road!'* He had appointed himself captain of the team (the *'Greens'*) which included himself and his two sons, Alex and his grandfather (Alex had never properly known his father, who finally had never returned from one of his many trips overseas), and Clara accompanied by her mother.

On the other side (the *'Yellows'*) was Hardy and his Dad (who was marching up to the centre circle for the kick off), JoJo with her *papa*, Jaz and his Dad, and Michael with his Dad. Mr Andrews took on the refereeing duties.

JoJo's father did not show any signs of a heavy night, although his chin showed the rugged signs of three days without shaving. He wore a complete France kit from the golden years of Michel Platini. He made himself busy encouraging his team to stretch and shimmy, until Hardy's dad stared at him and said,

*'Let's just get on with it, shall we?'*

Monsieur Dupont just shrugged his shoulders and tossed his head back with a slight smile.

*****

The match started with the Greens (wearing green bibs) on the attack. Freddy, playing in midfield, was wearing the magic boots he had been given for Christmas by his Auntie Annie. Magic they weren't, but brilliant they were, a brand new pair of Nike's, in golden yellow, which fitted perfectly. In the heel was Nike's new *tick technologyTM* which showed you how fast you were running by ticking louder and faster as you built up speed. As he made his way with the ball down the wing, he sounded like a bomb about to go off.

As he got close to the corner flag ready to cross, Hardy's Dad came over and grabbed him by the shoulder.

*'Hey! Turn that thing off! I've had enough of it.'*

As Mr Andrews blew his whistle to signal a foul.

*'Leave it out, ref, that was no foul!'*

Before Mr Andrews could remonstrate with the offender, Hardy's Dad had kicked the ball away towards the crowd of onlookers, mostly Mums and grandparents, who were on the sidelines, enjoying the warm wine which was provided. Mr Andrews blew again. Hardy's Dad turned his back and trudged off back to the penalty area.

*****

Michael had put away a great goal towards the end of the first half, volleying home a cross from the right by Wil. His Dad had leapt in the air and punched it with delight, although his mother, standing elegantly on the touchline, had stared impassively ahead, arms folded.

But at half time, Michael seemed agitated. He was standing some way from the rest of the players who were enjoying Mr Andrews's half time hospitality, talking earnestly to his mother and father. His Dad had his arm round his shoulder, and they were facing his mother, who was pointing her well-manicured finger (at both Michaeland his father), tossing her well-coiffed hair skywards, and wrapping her well-expensive coat ever more tightly around her.

The game ended in a five-nil win for the yellows, mainly because Mr Hardy kept scoring by pushing small children off the ball and firing in from distance. Eventually Mr Andrews had fished around in his pocket and found an old bus ticket, mostly red in colour, and had brandished it angrily at Hardy's Dad.

*'You're sending me off? You must be joking…!'*

*'That is exactly what I am doing, and until you can play or watch the game with a little more respect, off is where you'll stay!'*

Freddy and Wil stood close to each other watching this scene unfold before them, nervously and subconsciously moving closer together as they watched. Mr Andrews looked so small as he faced up to his adversary.

Then, from the sidelines, a single clap. Then another. Then, more and more, until the whole crowd of spectators was applauding the referee. Mr Andrews appeared to grow in height as he realised the support he had for his actions. Mr Hardy seemed to shrink down as he realised his position. He picked up the ball and angrily headed off to the car park.

*****

The game over, Michael pulled Freddy to one side in his usual quiet way. He looked this way and that, as if he was frightened by something. He looked towards his mother, who stared back at him as if encouraging him to do something.

Then he handed Freddy a note.

*'Sorry'*, he murmured.

*****

**New Year Blues – Day 2**

*Then Michael handed Freddy a note.*

*'Sorry', he murmured.*

*****

Freddy had kept the note for a few days, not daring to open it. Fearing what it might contain. Worried about the future of the team. Worried for his single best player.

Eventually, when the old year had passed into 2007, he had sat down to look at the contents of Michael's letter. It was much as he expected.

*Deer Freddy*

*My Mum thinks football's to ruff. She says I always come home mudy. She wants me to start darnsing lessons on Saterdays.*

*Sorry, love Michael*

Well…! Well well…! Not well…! Freddy felt sick. True, football is rough. True, in the winter there's lots of mud. But DANCING! No! It would be funny if it wasn't so serious. Freddy sat with his head in his hands, running through the implications of the letter. An image ran through his head of Michael wearing tights and a tutu. Ughh!

*So I could move up front, Hardy could come into defence, JoJo in goal…*

*'Hey Bro, what's up?'* said Wil, strolling casually into the room.

*'Michael's out of the team. He's going to be a ballet dancer!'*

*'What? A dancer?'* Wil chassayed across the floor as he imagined Michael in his new Saturday-morning occupation.

*'It's serious, Wil, he's our best player!'* Freddy replied.

*'Well, he kind of dances down the wing and skips past players, maybe he'll be a really good dancer one day!'*

*'I don't care. We need him. We must get him back! If it's the last thing we do!'*

*****

On Wednesday afternoon, Wil, Freddy, Hardy and Clara had gone up to the field for a kickabout. Freddy had told the others about Michael's letter, and they had agreed that the best way to beat the New Year blues was to get out, in the fresh air, with a football. And without Michael, they would need all the practice they could get. Freddy had also told Mr Andrews what had happened. As usual Mr Andrews had scratched his head, and as usual he had made Freddy feel better,

*‘Don’t worry, Freddy lad, there’s always a solution to every problem.  You have a think about it, and so will I.  He’ll be back.’*

*****

Up at the field, they really let off some steam.

By coincidence, Clara and Hardy were both wearing Arsenal away shirts, on top of several layers of vests and t-shirts to keep out the biting wind.

By even more coincidence, Wil and Freddy both had on their bright red Liverpool shirts.

They warmed up a bit, then started playing a two v. two match.

*****

Talk about two different styles of play!

Wil and Freddy, the cultured midfielders from Lancaster Road, played the attractive passing game of Liverpool at their best.  Clara and Hardy played a more direct style of football, relying on physical strength and complete commitment.

The game ended up as one of their highest scoring matches ever, with Arsenal (in spite of the away strip) defeating Liverpool by six goals to three!  Hardy had taken on the role of Julio Baptista and scored four of the goals, with Clara knocking in the other two.  Wil and Freddy, who had perhaps taken the game too easily, each scored in the second half.

At the end of the game they sat down and had a drink, then started talking about the next league game this weekend.

*Until…*

At one end of the ground, a small figure.  Hooded top.  Head bowed.

It was Michael, just looking on from a distance.  Freddy waved at him, wondering how long he had been there.  Michael just waved a sad and lonely wave before turning away and trudging off down the hill.  Freddy looked at Wil.

*‘I don’t think he wants to do the dancing, do you?’*

At the other end of the ground, a much more worrying sight, although in the far distance.

A tall man, dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase.  Striding towards them.  Distant, but getting closer all the time.  Freddy looked at Wil again, raising an eyebrow in consternation.  Hardy stepped back.  His Dad was approaching.

As he got closer, Freddy thought to himself,

*Why does this man always look so angry?  What have we done to him?  What has his son done to him?  Why…*

Before he could think any more, the man was there. He must have eaten up the ground to get there so quickly. Without thinking, the four of them had formed a little defensive huddle as he approached, and they were now cowering slightly as he stood in front of them. After a short period of silence, when Hardy's Dad had seemed, unusually, to be short of something to say, he opened his mouth,

*'Freddy, I just wanted to apologise for what happened on Boxing Day. It was wrong of me, and I am very sorry for leaving like that. We were having a good game, and I was enjoying it, so I'm sorry'.*

Freddy was so surprised that he really couldn't say anything. He just managed to squeeze out an almost silent *'OK'* before Hardy's Dad turned his back on them and marched back in the direction from which he had come. A few metres away from them, he turned back, smiling now, and said,

*'Good luck against the M&Ms at the weekend!'*

*'The M&Ms? Eh?'*

*****

**New Year Blues – Day 3**

*‘Good luck against the M&Ms at the weekend!’*

*‘The M&Ms? Eh?’*

*****

On Friday, up on the top floor, they thought about what Hardy’s Dad had said to them.

The house was three stories high, and the top floor almost belonged to Wil and Freddy. Although it was high in the roof space, there was loads of room for them to put out their stuff, and most importantly to leave it lying about, without disturbing the rest of the house. They had to tiptoe over most of it to find spaces to put their feet.

There were two rooms up there, one mostly occupied by Wil’s train set, and the other more a dumping ground for all the old toys and games that they had used once, then discarded.

A jigsaw with three missing pieces.

A brilliant radio-controlled Jeep, but with no charger.

Three footballs, but with no air in them.

Actually, the part of the floor they liked best was the landing. At the top of the second staircase, the landing was where they spent most of their spare time. It had two desks, where they did their homework. Both desks were currently covered in football cards. Homework could wait. Also on the landing was a desk with their beloved computer, surrounded by cables, paper, a small rodent, and a keyboard.

*****

There was a beep from the computer.

Actually, not a beep, more a kind of burp. Jaz had come round the day before and set the alert sound to what he called *‘something more interesting’*, so that the computer now seemed to talk to them.

*‘Burp!’* it went again.

*‘Email…’* said Wil as he pushed the mouse to one side to remove the annoying screen saver that Jaz had also installed. Although it saved their screen, the endless pictures of stars and planets rushing towards them had given Freddy a headache. But without Jaz they didn’t know how to stop it.

*‘Look’*, said Wil brightly as the screen lit up, *‘seven emails!’*

*‘Seven emails? We’ve never had more than one email in one day before…who are they from?’*

*‘This one’s from jaz at kidzunited dot com’*, he read slowly,

*Hi Boys! How d'ya like the new screensaver? Cool isn't it? I did some research on M&Ms. Couldn't find anything in my books. I Googled it, but all I came up with was pages and pages about the sweets. Did you know that the world record for eating a packet of M&Ms using only your feet is 32 seconds? Are you sure he said M&Ms? There's no team in the league with that name. Seeya later. Jaz*

Wil turned back to the screen.

*'Hey, these are all from the same person…'* he said as he scanned the next six emails.

Over the holidays, he had just finished reading the fantastic *Spy Dog* and his reading had got quicker and more accurate. But even with all this practice, he had trouble with the first line of the second message.

*'This one is from harold at azaleazaleazaleazaleaoops dot com! So are all the others!'*

*'Mr Andrews? On email? It can't be!',* Freddy looked over Wil's shoulder at the string of messages, *'well, go on, open them!'*

Not one of the messages had anything to indicate what they were about, so Wil had to click on each one of them in turn to find out what Mr Andrews wanted to say.

*'The first one is empty!'*, Wil looked at the blank message in front of him, tried to scroll down the message to see what was written, but there was nothing.

*'Here let me have a look,'* said his older brother, *'no, you're right, there's nothing there'*.

The second email from Mr Andrews was also empty.

The third one had the single word *'oops'* and a row of dots.

The fourth email actually had some words in it.

*Testing, testing, one, two, three*

*Can you hear me?*

*Can you hear me?*

*Ouch, my leg*

Finally, by the fifth message, Mr Andrews had got the hang of email. His message said,

*freeman freeman stop i'm sending you an email stop this is it stop just got an email from the league stop winners get tickets for champions league final in athens stop bye stop ouch stop*

*'Wow! The Champions League final! How cool would that be?',* said Freddy quietly, almost to himself, although his dreams of winning still lay shattered by the news of Michael's withdrawal.

*'Wow! Athens! How cool would that be?',* yelled Wil, who had just finished doing a topic on the Greeks.

*‘What’s the last one about?’*

Wil clicked twice on the final email in the list.  Again, Mr Andrews’s shaky use of email was evident, but this time he had managed to forward a message that he had received from someone else.  The email said,

*dear coach*

*we’re playing you on Saturday.*

*would you mind a change of time for the game?*

*we normally play at seven o’clock*

*here is a map of our home ground*

*see you there, and may the best team win!*

*MM*

*‘So it’s not M&Ms, it’s MM…’,* Freddy said after reading the note, *‘let’s have a look at that map’*.

Freddy pressed *print* on the computer, and they studied the map which emerged slowly from the printer. Freddy turned to his brother and asked curiously,

*‘A football ground…in the middle of a forest?  Eh?*

*****

**New Year Blues – Day 4**

*A football ground…in the middle of a forest? Eh?*

*****

What a game it had turned out to be! What a location! And what opponents were *they*?

*****

At around six-thirty on Saturday evening, Freddy and his team had made their way to the woods, ready for a start at the agreed time of seven p.m. Although intrigued by the prospect of a game in the dusk, Freddy had not really given the match a second thought, nor had they prepared specially for it.

*'Maybe this is why he had us training in the dark the other day!'*, said Wil breezily as they got ready for the game.

*****

The woods were not far away, and they had all gathered with their bikes outside Freddy and Wil's house. Mr Andrews gave them one last talking to before he led them up the hill, past the playing fields, to the woods beyond.

*'Quite a tough game this one, lads and lasses, although they haven't done so well in the league so far. They seem to get ahead in the game then give it all away at the end. Strange lot…dressed all in green. Call themselves the Merrymen. Good luck, then, let's go!'*

When they arrived at the woods, it was beyond dusk, and the clearing where they were expected to play was shrouded in an eerie greyness, which was exaggerated by the trees hanging over the pitch. The pitch itself was mostly of fallen leaves and mud, but it was flat and was reasonably dry. Goals had been set up at each end by stretching a long branch between two trees, which was tied roughly with thin strips of what looked like ivy.

Wil smiled to himself. Although a bit weird, this looked like fun. He loved the bleakness of it, the smells of the forest, and the uncertainty about who they would play.

JoJo, meanwhile, was looking nervous. Thrust into the role of stand-in goalkeeper by the enforced absence of Michael, she had purchased a new pair of goalkeeping gloves which Wil was helping her to pull on.

*'Did you really have to go for pink, JoJo?'*, he said laughing.

*'Yes, my friend, I did, actually. Now, give me some practice'.*

Wil and JoJo jogged down to one end of the pitch and Wil started some gentle shots at his friend.

*'Come on, Weel, 'it zem 'arder!'*

He smiled again before firing a shot which caught the underside of the tree-branch bar before bouncing down through the goal. JoJo did her best by flinging out a hand to stop the ball, but slipped in the leaf mulch, fell down on her back, and got gingerly up, covered in mud and leaves. Although obviously uncomfortable, and perhaps thinking she would rather be back home with a nice cup of hot *chocolat*, she yelled back at Wil,

*'Is zat ze best you can do? Pah! 'Arder, 'arder!*

Wil shook his head in disbelief and stared back proudly at her, before lashing another ball at the goal, harder, as requested.

*****

At half way, Freddy was organising his team. Hardy and Wil would play just in front of JoJo's goal, with himself and Jaz in midfield, and Clara and Alex up front. He glanced up as the opposition strolled casually onto the pitch at the far end. Their captain sauntered over to the half way line as his team started getting organised.

Freddy thought he recognised the fresh-faced captain from somewhere. But…no… surely not.

*'Hi, I'm Freddy'*, he said quietly, sticking out his hand in greeting.

*'Pleased to meet you,'* said the captain, with a charming smile, '*my name's Robin'*.

*****

The game was full of good football. End to end stuff, with Robin and his men playing better in the first half, taking a deserved lead through their tallest player, John, but then letting the Kidz get back into it as Alex scored a great goal from out wide on the left. As Mr Andrews had predicted, the Merrymen tended to work the ball into promising positions and then give it away. Several times, their midfield pair, Alan and Much, would pass the ball up to Robin in attack, who would give a mischievous laugh before taking a shot at JoJo's goal, or passing to his strike partner Marian, who seemed only too keen to give the ball back to the Kidz. Occasionally Marian seemed not to know what side she was on. But the match was fun, despite the gathering gloom. Eventually, Clara, helped by good work from Freddy and Jaz (who had been taking Mr Andrews's carrot-eating advice very seriously) scored what turned out to be the winner, firing past the athletic Djaq in the opposition goal.

*****

The referee looked at his watch as the second half drew to an end. Hardy, racing up from the back, was determined finally to get on the scoresheet. Halfway into the Merrymens' half, he took an enormous swipe at the ball with his right foot. He caught it just right, in the middle of his boot where the laces were. He made a great contact and expected to see the ball fly between the sticks.

The ball flew high and wide over the goal. And the trees.

*'Better luck next time!'* laughed Robin, clapping Hardy on the shoulder in commiseration. Hardy smiled and his momentum kept him on running past the goal line, so he continued on to where the ball had nestled in a shallow ditch. He clambered down the leaves and undergrowth on the side of the ditch to get the ball. As he scrambled back out, ball in hand, he was aware of something different about the

side of the ditch he was emerging from.  A bit darker.  A shadow.

He lifted his eyes slowly upwards to look.

Four legs.  Brown hair. Two more legs.

A man.  On a horse.

*****

**New Year Blues – Day 5**

*Four legs. Brown hair. Two more legs.*

*A man. On a horse.*

*****

*'You seen Locksley?',* said the man on the horse to Hardy gruffly.

Hardy was so transfixed by the fact that there was a man, on a horse, there, in that forest, right in front of him, and that he was half covered in leaves, trying to scramble out of a ditch carrying a football, that he said nothing.

*'Come on Hardy!'*, came Robin's cheery voice from back in the clearing where the match was waiting for the ball to be returned. Hardy looked up to see Robin trotting over to where he was.

Robin didn't seem at all surprised to see the stranger.

*'Ah, Guy! How good to see you again! I wondered how long you could stay away! Fancy a game?'*

*'The Sheriff wants to see you',* said Sir Guy menacingly.

*'Oh, the Sheriff…y'know I'd almost forgotten about him.... Well he'll just have to wait I'm afraid…'*

*'Wait? Wait? Too late Locksley, hah! A little surprise for you'*

A second man, also on horseback, appeared through the undergrowth, his sneering mouth surrounded by a little grey beard, his face contorted into a permanent contemptuous half-grin. Several other men, mostly dressed in long black cloaks and with masks across their faces, lined up either side of the Sheriff.

*'My dear Sheriff, to what do we owe this singular honour?'* teased Robin, apparently unconcerned by the troop of fearsome-looking guards. *'how about a little challenge – my men against yours, first goal wins!'*

*'And for the loser?'*, sneered the Sheriff,

*'Oh, the usual, I suppose',* continued Robin, *'you take us to the castle, lock us up, Marian helps us get out, we come back here, and the whole merry game starts all over again!'*

*'Don't mess with me Locksley, or you'll live to regret it. But very well, the first goal wins'.*

Robin cackled with delight and returned with Hardy to the far end where Freddy and his team were gathered. He passed on the news to his men whilst Freddy and the other Lancaster Road players got ready for the sudden change of plan. Robin then called all the players together for a team talk, as the opposition eleven started to line up in front of them, the Sheriff leading from the back, between the

goalposts.

*‘Are you sure this is wise, Master…?’* said Much as Robin opened his mouth to speak.

*‘Ah, my dear friend,’* started Robin, *‘you worry too much as usual! Have you seen these guys play? They beat us two-one in the match, now they’ll help us do away with the Sheriff, Gisbourne, and his bunch of croneys. Speed! Speed is what we need! Look at them with their heavy armour and boots! Just run at the, run round them, and don’t worry about that ugly mug in goal. He’ll try anything to stop you, but all we need is one goal. Now, team huddle!’*

The combined teams of Lancaster Road and the Merrymen linked arms as Robin made his final tactical speech, ending up with,

*‘All for one, and one for all!’*

They all threw their arms up in the air and went to their agreed positions. The team now consisted of Little John in goal, a back four of Hardy, Jaz, Alan and Wil Scarlett, with Wil, Freddy, Clara, and Robin in midfield, leaving Alex and Much up front. The opposition occasionally responded to the Sheriff’s screamed instructions, but mostly just clunked around in one big group, lacking any organisation, motivation, or even education in the basic laws of football. Several times the Sheriff could be seen literally jumping up and down on his goal-line, tearing his hair out in frustration as one of his players either picked the ball up, passed it to the opposition, or ignored it completely. The result was a foregone conclusion.

The goal came after about five minutes of the game, when Robin and Wil put together a flowing move down the right, the ball was held up close to the Sheriff’s goal with no defenders in sight, and Robin beckoned to Hardy to sprint up the middle and smash the ball past Nottingham Forest’s hapless Sheriff. Hardy was immediately engulfed by his team-mates and went on an elaborate victory celebration.

The opposition just trudged off, back to their horses. The Sheriff looked a beaten man, but still managed a desperate cry of *‘We’re not beaten yet, Locksley, we’ll be back’*.

*‘Ah, yadda, yadda, yadda…!’* laughed Robin, high-fiving his old and new team-mates.

*‘We must be going too’*, said Freddy, *‘thanks for the game, and good luck for the rest of the season!’*

And with that, they were gone, back down the hill to home, leaving the Merrymen and their beautiful forest.

*‘Two games in one day, can’t be bad, can it?’* said Wil when they got back home.

*‘Yes, things are looking up, aren’t they, although I wish Michael was here’*, Freddy replied with a yawn.

*****

That night, Freddy lay in bed thinking of the weeks that had passed. Three games, two wins, one loss. Not bad. Good team. Good friends. Champions League tickets. Hmmm… He was drifting slowly towards that wonderful time between being awake and being asleep, when your mind drifts from one thing to another, when you can hardly keep your eyes open…

Maybe it was the the surreal nature of the match they had just played; maybe it was because he was floating towards the land of Nod, or maybe it was because of Beckham's exotic move west. Whatever the reason, his mind drifted far away to an imagined universe and started to experience one of its most vivid dreams - ever.

*****

**New Year Blues – Day 6**

*Whatever the reason, Freddy's mind drifted far away to an imagined universe and started to experience one of its most vivid dreams - ever.******

*'I just don't know',* said Jaz, peering into one of his books, *'long arms, you say?'*

*'Well, sort of like, one long arm, really'*, replied Freddy, lying back on the sofa in Jaz's second floor bedroom, *'and another one had this mad roving eye'*.

*'Was that the thing on the wavy stalk?'*

*'Yes, that was it, any clues?'*

Jaz peered again. One of his many odd interests was the study of unidentified flying objects and extra-terrestrial life, which he pursued with great relish, accounting for the occasional strange noise or ghostly light which emerged from his room. He pressed another button on his computer, and the huge screen lit up once again.

*'Nothing here about long arms and roving eyes'*, he said disappointedly, scouring the '*aliens'* section of all his online searches.

*'Maybe it was something really strange then'*, said Freddy, trying to recall more of his dream.

*'I doubt it,'* said Jaz, *'it says here that most dreams are just journeys through the imagination, and that even the worst nightmares never really mean much in the end.'*

*'But this wasn't a nightmare, this was real!'*, protested Freddy.

*'Get over it my friend, it was a dream. Just look forward to our next game. I've looked up the Champions League, and I've done some work on Athens, one of the oldest cities in the world, centre of ancient Greek civilisation...'*

*'Woah, woah, woah...!'* said Freddy, suddenly overwhelmed by the facts. *'Just tell me, when is the match, and how to do we get there?'*

*'OK, my friend'* said Jaz wisely,*'the match is on 23rd May, and getting there...'* he paused for a moment,

*'Leave that to me!'******

**Freddy's Alien Dream**

My Alien Dream

*So I'm just lying there, thinking of what Jaz and I had been talking about, drifting off to sleep. Looking lazily at the pictures of the planets on the walls, feeling the warmth of the bed underneath me. Hearing the drone from the TV in the room below.*

*****

But beneath me is not a bed, it is a seat. I'm still lying on my back, but when I try to get up, my shoulders are pinned down by two strong belts, and my feet are clamped into place in front of me. The seat is vibrating gently. The drone from the TV has turned into a deep-throated roar, somewhere far off, somewhere below us.

And I'm not alone. To my left, strapped in and smiling across at me, is my brother Wil. And to the other side, my mate Hardy, also smiling, pulling faces. Just in front of us, on two forward seats, our mate Jaz, surrounded by screens and maps, and our mission controller, a little bald head known to us only as Mr Andrews, switching switches and dialling dials on the panels in front of him.

I start to speak just as the roar from below increases in volume, building up from a low hum to a higher pitched and more persistent drone, accompanied by more shaking from the flimsy structure that we are sitting in.

*'What is this, where are we going?'*

But nobody hears. Wil gives me a thumbs-up and another smile, and Hardy claps me on the back of the head with his heavily gloved hand. The noise is becomind deafening now, and Mr Andrews is struggling to hold on to the controls in front of him as the craft shakes more violently. Suddenly, with a lurch, with a bang, and another, and an overwhelming feeling that the whole thing was going to come down on top of us, we evidently take to the air, shooting vertically upwards. Within seconds, or maybe less, we are through the clouds.

The craft settles down, and as the air gets thinner, the noise subsides into a duller roar behind us, and the shaking lessens to a more bearable wobbling sensation. Jaz, seated to the right of the captain, turns his head so that he can just see the three of us sitting behind him. He touches the tip of his finger to the tip of his thumb, forming an 'O' shape.

I could just make out Hardy as he yelled

*'It means 'OK'*

to me through the din. I nodded back dimly to him.

*****

Although the vehicle seems to be well equipped with modern technology, two things continue to worry me. The first, is Mr Andrews, our mission controller, who has stood up out of his seat, swaying slightly, and has started pulling at some wiring high above his head, as if something is not working correctly. He

pulls at one clutch of wires which come straight off in his hand.  He throws them lazily to the floor.

*‘I wonder what those were for…’* he mutters, almost to himself.

Then Jaz, who is now pulling out some large papers from the panel in front of him, ignoring the screens and controls in front of him.

*‘Here, come and have a look, it’s quite safe…!’*

Getting up gingerly from my seat, I make my way over to Jaz’s seat, which has the word *Mission Navigator* printed on the back.  I’m trying not to think of a mission commanded by Mr Andrews and navigated by Jaz.  In fact just as this thought hits me, I look out of the tiny round window, and can just see the earth receding into the distance.  I guess I’d better just trust them.

Jaz is unfolding his large maps, which cover the whole of the control panel space in front of him.

*‘C’mon Jaz, you’re joking.  These are ancient.  They won’t be any good!’*

**Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 1**

*'Yo Yo! Pass! Now!'*

Hardy screamed at the top of his voice as he surged through from defence into the midfield, waiting for the pass from Alex.

It didn't come. Instead Alex fed the ball upfield to Wil, whose mazy run past two defenders took him close to the left corner flag. Could he get the ball across, as another defender came out to meet him?

The crowd went quiet for a moment. The ball would surely go out for a goal kick?

But Wil had other ideas. He managed to turn the defender, using his own '*inside-out'* turn, which he had practiced endlessly in the garden. He called it '*inside-out'* because it involved him pretending to go outside the player (towards the touchline), and then instead turning inside and heading towards goal. As he executed the move, it occurred to him that it should be called the '*outside-in'* turn…

But no matter, he was free, six metres out. He looked up, and saw their keeper advancing towards him.

Could he slip it under the keeper? Could he blast it at the near post? Could he chip it? He looked up again.

Hardy had carried on steaming down the pitch and was now close to the penalty area.

But Alex was better placed. On the far side of the area, close to goal. And he was more likely to score. But could he pick him out?

A brilliant pass. A brilliant, brilliant, brilliant pass. Brilliant it was. Not just good. Brilliant. The ball slipped brilliantly between two players into the open space where Alex stood. With the goalkeeper floundering close to Wil, all Alex had to do was tap it home. Which he did.

*'Brilliant!'* screamed Hardy, jumping on Alex.

*'Yes…'* said Alex slowly, ruffling his hand through his long blonde hair, fully aware of the beauty of the moment.

*****

Their opponents were a mid-table team from Derby Road, which was the street next to theirs. Interestingly (*or perhaps not*), the team itself was also called Derby Road. They also trained at the field at the top of the hill, and occasionally they had met up there and had a joint kick-around. Very interestingly (*or almost certainly not*), the match was a local derby which, as Jaz had explained, was a match between two teams who lived very close to each other.

Interestingly (*yes…this IS interesting!*) at half-time, the score was one-all.

*****

During the second half, Mr Andrews, who had been shouting his usual words of encouragement, was

busy with a little gaggle of people on the touchline. There seemed to be some kind of discussion going on, and Freddy saw a tall man remonstrating with a well-dressed woman, who was being led away, clearly against her will. From out of the melee emerged a small figure, instantly recognisable in his hooded training top, jogging up and down urgently.

*Michael was back!*

Freddy's heart did a little leap, then a small whoop, then started beating so hard that he thought it might pop out through his chest. The ball arrived at his feet from Alex, and without a thought he kicked it straight off the pitch, so that Michael could get on.

Jaz, who had been quiet all game, raised his hand and looked over towards the bench.

*'OK, Baz, you come off, lad'*, said Mr Andrews, whose ability to remember names had not improved despite the weeks he had known them. Mr Andrews gave Jaz his tracksuit, before turning to Michael,

*'Now, lad, I want you to play up front, support the midfield, and help out in defence…'*

*'I know what to do, thanks,'* said Michael, in his polite, quiet way. He stripped off his top, and jogged a few metres, then sprinted a few more, before jogging past Freddy to his position up front.

*'Happy New Year!'* he whispered as he passed.

Although the match had been a good one, and Lancaster Road had not really been in any danger, the score still stood at one-one, and the minutes were ticking away.

A Derby player took took the throw-in, down the line. Clara, helping out in defence, clattered into the player and emerged with the ball. In one not-very-graceful movement, she had taken it five metres upfield, and laid it off to Wil who was steaming up on her right.

Wil, again heading straight for goal midway into the Derby half, approached a defender, dropped his shoulder to the left, then drifted right past the defender. He was within sight of the goal, about ten yards out. He could have had a shot, and would almost certainly have scored, but instead he laid the ball off to Michael who was just inside on his left. Michael could have had a shot, and would almost certainly have scored, but instead he chipped it into the air, nodded it over the last defender and volleyed it into the bottom left corner of the net.

They stood in the centre circle congratulating Michael on the goal, and congratulating themselves on the two-one result. A few words from Mr Andrews followed, then a little whine from Wil.

*'What's up, lad?'* said Mr Andrews, looking down at Wil sympathetically.

*'I'm c-c-cold…'* shivered Wil.

*'M-m-m-me too…'* said almost everyone else.

*'W-w-w-wimps…!'* said Hardy, also shivering.

*'You're right, it is a little nippy. Like my old uncle Azalea used to say,* 'red sky at night, shepherds warning!' *Wrap up warm tonight!'*

They looked at Mr Andrews with the usual sense of puzzlement.  Was there something deep and meaningful in what he had said?  Did he really have an uncle called Azalea?  And surely, red sky at night was shepherd's delight?

Freddy clapped his hands together to keep warm and they tramped off to their waiting parents.

But whatever Mr Andrews had meant, it certainly was cold, and the setting sun had turned the horizon a fiery red.

*****

**Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 2**

*But whatever Mr Andrews had meant, it certainly was cold, and the setting sun had turned the horizon a fiery red.*

*****

The next morning, all was quiet. Very quiet.

Wil struggled to open his eyes. The first time he tried, he failed. He tried again. This time, he managed to keep them open for a few seconds, and ward off the overwhelming desire to go back to sleep. They were open long enough to see his brother still fast asleep across the room.

Third time lucky. The eyes were definitely open this time. Wil stared up at the ceiling, at the same time pulling the duvet high up to his neck. It certainly was cold, in fact the contrast between the temperature of his face, outside, and the rest of him, wrapped up, was shocking.

Slowly, and subconsciously, Wil became aware of two things which made him think that all was not quite normal that Wednesday morning.

The light in the room seemed different. Most mornings at waking-up time, the room was dull and grey, but this morning it was definitely brighter. Brighter and lighter. And then there was the noise.

There was no noise. On a normal day there would be people outside starting their day, cars struggling up the hill or coasting down it, the dog from next door savaging the postman. But this morning, although those sounds were sort of there, they were more distant, as if the house had been moved far away from them, or each sound was softer and more muffled.

Wil got up and shuddered as the cold hit him. He walked uncertainly to the window and pulled back the curtain. Suddenly he was jerked into life by the excitement of what he saw.

*'Freddy, wake up! Wake UP!'* he ran and shook his brother.

*'Eh? What?',* replied Freddy, eyes still tightly shut.

*'SNOW! Lying on the ground. Loads of it! Come, look!'*

*****

The school day passed unbelievably slowly. Adults do some funny things. They really do, thought Freddy as he worked out yet another impossible fraction (*if seventy-five percent of the ground is covered in snow, what fraction of the ground is covered?).* Impossible maths had been preceded by impossible literacy (*write a story about what you would do in a snowstorm*), and then they had impossible science *(draw a diagram of a snowflake).*

*I don't want to be working out, or writing, or drawing snow, I want to be out there, in it, experiencing it. I want a practical lesson,* thought Freddy, b*ut adults just made you do funny things, all the time. Like just when you are wide awake in the evening, they make you go to bed. And when you are fast asleep in the morning, they make you get up. And just when you could do with a nice hamburger with a few lovely*

*fries, they make you eat spinach and broccoli. And when it is perfect weather for being outside, they make you stay in. Humph!*

But, eventually they were out.

*****

There were already three snowmen on their street, including the biggest one directly outside their house. Some teenagers had obviously built it, and were now attempting to destroy it, leaving the younger onlookers once again wondering why people would do this. Freddy and Wil stood outside the gate and looked down towards Jaz's house.

There, standing in the garden, was Hardy, his hand outstretched to the sky. Then he was gone.

There he was again, hand out. Then he was gone again.

He kept dashing in and out of the house, for no reason.

*****

*'What are you doing?'*, Wil said, when they had slid slipperily down the street.

*'Experiment. You wouldn't understand'*, said Hardy seriously, rushing back into the house.

After a couple more attempts, Jaz appeared at the door looking cold and confused.

*'It's not working... I've got a better idea…oh, hi guys!'*. He disappeared inside the door again and returned clad in an enormous puffy jacket and clutching his precious, most prized possession. His microscope.

*'We're looking at snowflakes but Hardy is too slow to get them inside before they melt!'*, Jaz said, laughing. A snowball caught him on the back of the neck, sliding miserably into the hood of his jacket.

*'Hey! We've got work to do here!'*

*'Serves you right, I tried to get in as fast as I could'*, Hardy said, dusting the snow from his hands.

*'Sorry. But if we do it out here, the temperature will keep the flakes as snow for long enough for us to see them,'* Jaz replied apologetically.

*****

*'Wow! That's amazing'*. Wil was stunned by what he saw through the lens of the microscope, as two single flakes of snow swam into focus and revealed their beautiful, complicated, star-like patterns.

*'And no two flakes are ever exactly the same'*, Jaz added, his voice quivering with excitement and wonder at what they were seeing. *'Usually symmetrical, and almost always with six-sides'*.

*‘Wow!’* said Wil again, moving aside to let Freddy have a look.

*‘Wow!’* said Freddy.  Hardy pushed him aside and put his eye to the viewfinder.

*‘Wow!’* said Hardy.

*‘Ow!’*said Jaz, *‘I’m getting cold.  I’m going in’*.

*****

They followed Jaz into the warm house, and drank the hot chocolate which was waiting for them.  Jaz unfolded a large sheet of paper onto the floor in front of the fire.

*‘What’s that for?’*  Wil said.

*‘League table for this season so far.  Looks good for us’*.

Hardy, Wil and Freddy joined Jaz on the floor and started to analyse the results of their first season.

*****

**Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 3**

*'League table for this season so far. Looks good for us'.*

*Hardy, Wil and Freddy joined Jaz on the floor and started to analyse the results of their first season.*

*****

*'Shhh!'*

Jaz looked round to see who was making the noise.

*'Shhh!'*

Wil looked around to see who was making the noise. He whispered to Jaz,

*'What's her problem…?'*

*'SHHHH!',* shouted the woman. Wil looked at Jaz, hunched his shoulders, and turned back to the books they had spread out on the table. The woman turned to her pile of books behind the desk and started to organise them, busily.

*'Shhh!'*, she said again, head still buried in the pile of books.

Jaz and Wil laughed silently to themselves. They were the only people in the library.

*****

Having spent time the previous day looking through their results, and the very respectable three wins and one loss so far, Wil had started dreaming of the ultimate prize – a trip to the Champions League final in May.

The snow and wind had brought down some cables in the road opposite, and one whole side of the street was without electricity, including Jaz's house. Although they couldn't cook, and could only light the house with candles, Jaz's main concern was that he was without his beloved electronic equipment. No music, no computer, no Internet.

So they had gone to the library, mainly to check out the reference section for maps and guides to Athens, where the Champions League final would take place, on May 23rd.

Wil had led the way into the small stone building which housed Springhurst's public library. The entrance area had racks full of leaflets and flyers for various local events. Only one had caught Wil's eye as they entered. It was entitled '*Kidscapism – Football Stories for Children – Read today'*. Wil picked it up,

*'Hey, look – this is interesting! Stories about football for children!'*

*'Nah, who'd want to read about a bunch of kids in a football team?'* replied Jaz, perhaps a little harshly.

They walked into the main room, which was empty apart from several million books, and a faint smell of oldness. Wil sniffed the air deliberately, trying to work out what the smell reminded him of.

*'Shhh! No sniffing. No snorting. No talking. No telephoning. No belching. No burping. No food. No farting.'*

*'Wow, lots of rules!',* Jaz had said, quite quietly.

The small lady looked down her pointed nose over the rim of her rimless glasses and glared at Jaz. Her whole body appeared to be quivering with rage at the sight of two customers.

*'Erm, excuse me, can you show us where the maps are, please?'*

*'Show you, show you? SHOW YOU? I'm a librarian, not a tour guide! Over there.'*

She waved her hand in the general direction of the right side of the room.

*****

They sat silently, hunched over the maps they had eventually found, staring at the images of Athens, the ancient Parthenon sitting high above the city on the Acropolis, and the magnificent Olympic Stadium where the final would be played. In hushed tones, due to both the awesome information and the fearsome librarian, they discussed what they had found.

*'It says the the cradle of democracy, what does that mean?'* Wil asked Jaz.

*'It is where European civilisation is supposed to have started, where people first started seriously on education, on making laws, on giving all the citizens a chance to participate in decisions affecting them'.*

*'Right…',* said Wil uncertainly, *'and what about the stadium?'*

*'72,000 people. Home to the legendary Panathanaikos'.*

*'Pana-tha-what-kos?'*

*'Pana-than-I-kos',* Jaz spelt out slowly, *'Greece's most famous football club!'*

*'And we're going there, are we?'*

*'Well, that all depends, doesn't it?'* replied Jaz, clearly a bit frustrated by Wil's failure to understand that they would have to win the league first.

*'If we win, we'll go!'*

*****

Having agreed that they were going to win the league, the rest of Friday was spent with Freddy and Hardy, discussing who might be in the Champions League final.

*‘Definitely Barcelona’*, Jaz said, *‘been to the last two finals, beat Arsenal, got Ronaldinho and Eto’o. They’ll be there again.’*

*‘What about Chelsea? Best English team in it!’*, said Hardy, who often claimed that he was John Terry, especially when he was playing in defence and wearing his full Chelsea home strip.

*‘Chelsea – I don’t think so!’* replied Freddy.

*‘Arsenal, Arsenal, A-R-S-E-N-A-L!’*, Wil chimed in noisily, adjusting his hair slightly at the front, ‘*…and I look like Theo Walcott’*.

*‘Pity you don’t play like him!’*, shouted Hardy,

*‘Hey that’s not fair! You might look like John Terry, but you play like Terry Wogan!’*

Freddy took over.

*‘Stop arguing. We’re going to win our league because we’re a great team. OK, so we’ve got Walcott and Terry’*, he said, looking over at his brother and friend scrapping in the corner, *‘and we’ve also got Thierry Henry, ‘* he raised himself up tall to look over at the mirror on the wall and smiled, *‘and we’ve got Michael’*.

*‘Who does Michael look like?’* said Jaz.

*‘Not sure, he’s sort of unique, really…’*

*‘Well Clara looks like Robbie Savage!’* said Wil extracting himself from Hardy’s headlock.

*‘Definitely savage!’* said Freddy, *‘and Alex looks like…well…Alex, and Jaz, you’re a kind of Mido’*.

*‘And JoJo…hmmm…like an exotic bird, eh Wil?’*

Wil blushed, and turned back to the table where he was laying out a large sheet of blank paper.

*‘What’re you doing now?’* said Hardy.

*‘Planning…’* said Wil quietly.

*****

**Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 4**

*'What're you doing now?' said Hardy.*

*'Planning…' said Wil quietly.*

*****

Another cold Monday morning, and Freddy and Wil were looking back over the weekend.

*'I can't believe it! We won again!'* said Wil excitedly.

*'Hmmm…that's four out of five',* smiled Freddy, *'and you were brilliant, Bro!'*

It was rare for Freddy to give his younger brother this kind of compliment, but surely today was the day. Wil had played in midfield against the Wanderers on Saturday, had scored four out of the five Springhurst goals, and had even taken over from Michael in goal for the last five minutes and made an amazing save to keep the Springhurst clean sheet.

*'That was a match-winning performance, lad,'* Mr Andrews had said after the game, stating the obvious as usual, *'and I thought my tactics were brilliant, y'know Michael in goal, you in midfield, and…and…'*

*'Yes, Mr Andrews, we did play well',* interrupted Freddy, as Hardy aimed an icy snowball in Mr Andrews's direction.

*****

It had been really cold for several days and the last few mornings had seen a biting frost covering everything. Even Hardy had been moved to comment as they had jumped up and down before the game (and not because the coach had told them to – it was just so cold they had to).

*'Look at the frost on the trees, it's like Christmas all over again!',* Hardy had said poetically, *'it makes me feel really lively inside!'*

Freddy and Wil had stared at their friend incredulously. Hardy was not normally driven to poetic inspiration. In fact he was normally driven to distraction by such things.

*****

But Hardy had also played well. For the first time they had really played as a team, and Wil's goals were mostly a result of fluid passing and movement from everyone. And even JoJo had got on the scoresheet! Having come on as substitute for Freddy late in the second half, she had popped up unmarked in front of goal after a typically mesmerising run by Michael, and had elegantly stroked the ball home under the goalkeeper's outstretched right hand. She had run over to Wil to celebrate the achievement, wrapping her arms around him in a giant Gallic hug. He had responded with a brief British shrug.

But they had won again, and scored five to enhance their goal difference. Mr Andrews had said earlier on in the season that if they won by five clear goals or more that they could all squirt him with their

water bottles.  Unluckily for him, they had done so on the coldest day of the year so far, and the poor man had whimpered miserably as the streams of icy water hit him.

*****

Later, on Monday afternoon, realising that Hardy had not come round as he said he would, Wil and Freddy set off for his house.  He lived in a large rambling house down a leafy lane up beyond the football pitch.

A woman let them in.

*'He's in there, boys'*, she said, motioning them across the broad hallway to a room on the right.

Sitting in an armchair, apparently helpless, was their good friend Hardy, dabbing at a large bruise on his forehead, moaning slightly.

*'How did that happen, looks nasty?  Did you slip on the ice?  Fall into a snowdrift?  Get hit by a runaway toboggan?*

*'Heelies…'* said Hardy miserably.

*'You fell off your heelies?'*, Freddy said, suppressing a laugh, and holding Wil back with his arm, to prevent him from either laughing or passing comment.

*'They're dangerous.  I was just coming round to your place when something flew over me, low, like this'* (he ducked down dramatically), *' I looked up and back, rocked on my heels, and the wheels started turning…I couldn't stop.'*

*'What did you hit?'* Freddy said, this time smirking.

*'It isn't funny!'*, said Hardy, turning his face away from them and sinking into the big armchair in which he was sitting.

*'You went straight into a lamppost, didn't you?'*

*****

Whilst Freddy chatted with Hardy and tried to cheer him up, Wil pulled out the sheet of paper that he had produced at Jaz's house the week before.  He unfurled it and spread it out in front of him on the table.

*'What are you doing now?'* said Hardy, in exactly the same unbelieving tone that he had used before.

*'Give it a rest, I told you, I'm planning'*

*'Planning what?'*

*'Just planning'*, repeated Wil calmly.

He started drawing lines on the paper, and writing in dates at the top of the lines.

*****

They finally left Hardy feeling sorry for himself, Freddy having got an assurance from him that he would recover in time for the big game on February 17th, against the mighty Butterfield Athletic.

*‘I’ll probably just about make it,’* said Hardy dramatically, wincing as he shifted his position in the chair, *‘as long as I don’t get bird flu or something’*, he added unnecessarily. Both his friends smiled, shrugged, and turned to leave.

*****

As they meandered slowly back across the field from Hardy’s house towards their street, Freddy noticed something unusual. Well, not unusual exactly, it was the kind of thing you quite often saw in fields, close to the countryside. It was just that this one was well, different. Not normal. Abnormal in fact. Strolling confidently towards them, showing no signs of fright and no signs of taking flight. A chicken.

*‘Look at that!’*, said Freddy, slowing his walk down and pulling Wil’s shoulder, *‘what is it?’*

*‘It’s a chicken’*, said Wil.

*‘It’s not normal’*, said Freddy

*‘Atishoo!’* said the chicken.

*****

**Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 5**

*‘It’s a chicken’, said Wil.*

*‘It’s not normal’, said Freddy*

*‘Atishoo!’ said the chicken.*

*****

*‘Don’t even get close to them!’* shouted Jaz triumphantly as he scanned through the papers on the huge desk in front of him.

*‘It’s OK, we didn’t, we just turned and ran!’* said Wil, who had been quite upset at the thought that a poor chicken with a runny beak could be in such danger.

*‘It’s only one type which is dangerous, and they say here that it isn’t in this part of the country, at least not yet’,* replied Jaz, who had turned his many interests to the subject of avian influenza, and was now considered (at least by his friends) to be something of an expert.

*‘Well, I’m not taking any chances’,* said Hardy.

*‘Yeah, that’s obvious’,* replied Jaz dismissively, looking up briefly at Hardy whose face was obscured almost completely by a large red handkerchief tied round his head, covering mouth, nose, and one eye. He looked like he was auditioning for a minor part in *Pirates of the Caribbean 3.*

*‘You simply cannot catch anything, just look out for any sick or dead birds, and report them’,* Jaz added importantly.

*****

*‘Here you are boys!  Just a little something to keep you going!’*

As usual, Jaz’s grandma had spent the afternoon in the kitchen, preparing a ‘little something’ for the visitors.  A little something in this case was a vast array of cakes and biscuits.

‘*Thank you’,* said Wil quietly,

*‘Thanks a lot’,* said Freddy,

*‘Cheers Mrs Chetty’,* said Hardy.

Although it was only four-thirty in the afternoon, they tucked into the food with relish, as if they had not eaten for days.  Hardy was usually the first to finish, but this afternoon, thanks to his elaborate precautions against bird flu, he was uncharacteristically slow.

He tried first to lift up the mask with one hand and slip the food into his mouth with the other, but had ended up not being able to see his mouth, and had crammed a cream cake against his chin.

His second attempt involved him lifting the mask up with one hand, and then very quickly trying to pick up the cake and fit it into his mouth before the mask fell back to cover it. This attempt ended up with a mouthful of mask, and not very much cake. He couldn't do it quickly enough.

The third time, he thought that he would lift the mask higher up his face before eating. This left his mouth free of mask. But it covered his eyes. Unable to see where the low table containing the food was, he staggered straight into it, sending the tray of food flying across to Wil (who caught most of it), and himself flying across to Freddy (who caught most of him).

Finally, the solution. He adjusted the mask back into the optimum flu-preventing position, covering nose and mouth, picked up a cake and went over to the bookcase in the corner of the room. By lifting the front of the mask, resting it on a shelf and placing a book on it, it stayed up long enough for him to feed the food into his open mouth.

He also ended up with more food, because the others couldn't stop laughing long enough to eat anything themselves.

*****

Later on Wednesday, they all gathered round Wil as he again spread out the paper he had been carrying round for the last week. Stepping forward, still pirate-like, Hardy brandished a pen and was ready to add his own touches to the paper.

*'Hey! Stop that! This is our planning sheet'*, Wil said once again, *'we're planning what to do over half-term!'* Wil looked over to his brother for support.

*'Yeh, leave it out H, we're working out what to do each day!'*, said Freddy calmly.

*'Well, you can leave me out of it, I'll be fine, thanks'*, said Hardy, although his tone of voice was almost willing them to include him in their plans.

Wil knelt down on the floor over the paper. He had drawn nine long vertical lines to represent the nine days of half-term. He had also drawn some horizontal lines across the paper and was beginning to fill in the names of their friends, so that each box in the grid would represent what each person would be doing on each day of the half-term holiday.

Freddy got down with him, holding a pen, and propped himself up on one elbow – his best position for thinking. Propped up on one elbow, pen in hand, he looked like one of the great Greek philosophers they had seen when they had been looking up Athens. All refined and intelligent *(or so he thought, anyway).*

It was hard to concentrate. Jaz's grandma was in the kitchen and although the door was closed, the smells wafting out into the sitting room were so intense, so spicy, that Freddy was mentally transported off to exotic far-away places. Jaz's grandma used loads of herbs and spices in her cooking, and they always made the food taste utterly fantastic.

As he tried to stop his stomach daydreaming, Freddy noticed another smell enter the room. Not altogether unfamiliar, but at the same time also exotic and elegant.

Jaz's Mum had returned!

Now Jaz's Mum was something else!  Talk about cool!  And she always smelled amazing!  She strolled gracefully over to where the boys were hunched over their paper.

*'Good evening Mrs Chetty!'* Freddy said respectfully, '*where have you been this time?'*

Jaz's Mum was always travelling.  Often to the USA, and often to appear on some TV show or another.

*'My dear, I've had a few days in LA.  How are you boys?'*  She stooped down and gave Wil and Freddy a kiss on each cheek, rendering both of them temporarily speechless.

*'We're fine.  We're doing a plan for half-term'.*

*'Excellent idea, now let me see…Ah yes!  This is the day you need to think about!'*

She stretched an elegant finger over to the date Wil had marked.

14th February.

Valentines Day!

*Ooo-er!*

*****

**Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 6**

*She stretched an elegant finger over to the date Wil had marked.*

*14th February.*

*Valentines Day!*

*Ooo-er!*

*****

*'STOP PRESS! ABANDON ALL PLANNING! PUT VALENTINE'S DAY ON HOLD!'*

The radio crackled a little as it struggled to cope with the intense cold.

*'LATEST NEWS crackle crackle, IS THAT ALL beep beep SPRINGHURST SCHOOLS ARE NOW CLOSED…I REPEAT, buzz buzz beep ALL SPRINGHURST SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED!'*

And then, in slightly less urgent language,

*'All citizens are warned to stay indoors. The weather is closing in. More snow is forecast. The emergency services are unable to cope. And now over to police control HQ',*

Another voice came over the airwaves,

*'This is Commander Bill Hardnut of Springhurst police. I speak to you as an officer of the law, and as a fellow citizen. Please do not leave your houses. Stay warm. Drink hot drinks. Check on your neighbours. And children, stay inside and do your homework! Thank you'.*

*****

*'Who does he think he is kidding?'*, said Wil, laughing, pulling on his jeans over his pyjamas.

*'Well, maybe we'd better be careful…',* Freddy replied.

There was a loud knock at the door, and shouting.

*'Come ON, lads…'.* It was Hardy's voice, muffled slightly by the snow all around him.

On opening the door, a scene of complete chaos met their eyes. Cars abandoned on the steep street. Even 4x4s, belching out their smoke and fumes, struggling. Old ladies vainly shovelling snow off their driveways as more snow fell. And all around, defying Commander Hardnut's instructions, were children. Throwing stuff, mixing stuff, building things, dodging things, running, sliding, laughing.

*****

*'School's out for winter!'* cried Hardy excitedly. Freddy gave up trying to be a sensible and good citizen and joined them outside. His feet squeaked as they hit the thick white carpet underneath them.

This was the real thing.  This was not the few centimetres of wet stuff that had fallen the previous week. This was thick, crunchy stuff, the purest white colour, fluffy and smooth.  Covering everything – houses, cars, walls, street lamps.  Even people.

Up the street, one person in particular was being covered.  Mr Andrews, wearing a flat cap with a bobble hat perched on top of it, and wrapped in a huge greatcoat several sizes too big for him, was just standing at his front gate, apparently surveying the scene in front of him.  He appeared not to be moving, so the three boys walked up to check he was alright.

*'Good morning Mr Andrews, are you OK?'* enquired Freddy politely.

No reply.  No movement.

Hardy went over and waved his hand in front of the coach's face dramatically.  Mr Andrews gave a little jolt, and a mini-avalanche tumbled off the peak of his cap, down his nose, and into the neck of his jacket.

*'Ah, Hardy lad,'* Mr Andrews said with a start, *'how the devil are you?  Just taking the air this morning, isn't it beautiful?'*

*'Beautiful day for a snowball fight!',* Hardy said predictably.

*'No, I mean smell the air.  Clean, fresh, like new'.*

Hardy sniffed briefly, taking in some of the cold clear air.

*'Anyway, lads, never too cold for a training session!  Let's go!'*

And with that, picking up Jaz, Michael and Clara on the way, they headed unsteadily up the road to play football.

Or rather snow-ball.

Or more like slide-ball.

*'Alright my friends, the rules are like this'*, started Mr Andrews, *'no slipping, no sloshing, no slopping about in the snow, and certainly, no slide tackles.  No pushing, no pulling, no fouling, no free kicks, no biting, no bashing…'*

*No ball!',* yelled Hardy as the white Adidas World Cup Super ball disappeared into a snowdrift.

*'Ah, we need this, lads'.*  Mr Andrews reached into his kit bag and pulled out a dark brown round thing, approximately the size of a football, covered in leather, and with bootlaces pulling it together on one side.

*This is what we used to play with, back in the days when men were men, and girls were…y'know…girls,'* he looked nervously over at Clara, *'finest leather football two shillings could buy in those days!'*

They played with the heavy leather ball for ten minutes or so, until it absorbed so much water that even Hardy would not risk his toes by kicking it.  The game had ended in a free-for-all.

*‘Pass, pass’*, yelled Hardy to Michael, who tried a nifty flick up with a snowball, which only succeeded in flicking snow into his own face.

Freddy tried next, attempting a volley on a larger snowball, which exploded into his face with a mighty *thump*.

Michael gave up with the ball altogether, and just set off on a mazy run through the snow-covered field. His legs were hardly visible as he tried to dodge imaginary snowmen defenders, but even he had met his match when he tried an imaginary shot, caught his foot in a non-imaginary pile of thick snow, and was flung forwards, eventually sliding to a halt in front of the others. He was laughing as he spat snow and grass from his mouth.

Finally, Wil, seeing a large ball of snow flying past him, tried a fantastic Rooney-scissor-kick, missed the snowball completely and ended up, head-first in a gigantic snowdrift, legs still sticking high in the air. The others had to dig him out.

In the end, cold, wet and happy, they had trudged back down the street to Number 19, where Mrs Azalea had stuffed them full of bacon sandwiches and hot chocolate.

*****

Wil had abandoned his planning. Towards the end of the day, he just had time to write in a few brief ideas for half-term week, including:

*Go to football training*- which covered most of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday,

*Go to Aunt Annie’s* – which covered Thursday and Friday, and,

*Play Butterfield match* – which was scheduled for Saturday 17th.

He was just about to pack everything away for the night, when he saw someone had added something to his chart. In spidery handwriting, just after the third football training day, someone had scrawled in pencil,

*Valentine’s Day – send card to JoJo!*

Wil’s stomach gave a leap, and then a lurch, and then a lump came to his throat. He looked around, and then put the chart away – *very quickly*.

**Illness Strikes - Day 1**

It is Saturday, just before kick-off at the top-of-the-table clash between Lancaster Road and Butterfield. The commentators are preparing for the start of the game.

*****

*Good morning, and welcome to Radio Springhurst!*

*'Welcome too, to Springhurst Park, where we are gathered eagerly awaiting kick-off for the game between Lancaster Road and Butterfield. A new fixture this one, but both teams are doing well in the league. Could be a close one. Over to you Brian.'*

*'Well, Ron, I can see a number of small birds twittering in the trees, the clouds are a fluffy white, and the sky a powdery blue'*

*'Thanks Brian, any views on the game?'*

*'er…No'*

*'Right…er…thanks Brian'.*

*'Well perhaps we should start with a look at the two teams. In goal for the Lancaster Road side, we have Hardy, whose eccentric antics in goal haven't stopped him from keeping a clean sheet on at least one occasion. In defence today we have brothers Wil and Freddy, lining up alongside each other in a new formation. The midfield comprises the combative Clara and the jinking Jaz. Intelligent player that one, eh Brian? Brian..?'*

*'Er…yes…no, I mean maybe. Who?'*

*'I was talking of Jaz helping to run the midfield, Brian. Intelligent player, good passer of the ball?'*

*'Right'.*

*'OK…thanks again Brian. In attack, we have as usual the blonde bomber Alex, and the amazing Michael. Have you seen the boy play, Brian, quite something isn't he?'*

*'Who?'*

*'Michael, the Lancaster Road striker. I was just saying, quite a handful for defences I think you'll agree, Brian?'*

*'I haven't seen him'.*

*'OK…thanks…yet again, Brian'.*

*'Y'know, small boys in the park, jumpers for goalposts, isn't it?'*

*'Isn't what, Brian?'*

*‘Well, it… y’know, glory days of Liverpool in the 70s?’*

*‘Yes…thanks Brian. Well, you and I have been chatting for long enough, Brian, we don’t have time to go through the Butterfield team. It’s enough to say they are a tight outfit. Could cause some problems’.*

*‘Problems, problems…’*

*‘Thanks Brian’.*

*****

(40 minutes later)

*‘Well, we’re well into the second half and the score is still nil-nil.*

*But it’s Springhurst on the attack, so far they’ve found it almost impossible to break down this Butterfield defence. The ball is with Freddy, linking well with his brother down the left. Wil takes it forward ten metres, slips it to Michael, he jinks inside one defender, inside another, then crosses with his left foot, Alex is coming in…OOOOOH!, that was close, he just couldn’t stretch quite far enough, could he Brian?’*

*‘OOOOOOOOH!’*

*‘Thanks, Brian. And here’s another attack, it’s Butterfield this time, quite some distance out, he’s not going to try a shot from there is he, ohmyword he is, and it’s gone in. That’s the first goal, Hardy had no chance with that one. One nil to Butterfield!’*

*‘The birds are twittering now, Ron’*

*****

*‘Yeh, thanks again, Brian. And here, as we approach the final whistle, most of the good work has come from patient build-ups from midfield…Freddy sends a long cross-field ball to pick out Alex on the right…has he seen Jaz? Has he seen him? Yes he has, a perfect cross, and Jaz nods it in at the far post. What a brilliant goal, you don’t see many headers at this level of the game, do you Brian?’*

(there is a loud thud in the commentary box)

*‘Brian…Brian…wake up!’*

*‘Urgh, aagh, urm…sorry, Don, now what were you saying? Ron? Good goal that was’.*

*‘Thanks Brian. And it’s really end-to-end stuff now, Brian, here come Butterfield again, straight down the middle…two against one, they’re bearing down on Hardy in goal, he shoots…oh, that really was a save out of the top drawer, Brian, reminded me of Federici saving from Larsson on Saturday…! And there is the final whistle… what a game, Brian?’.*

*‘Top drawer, middle drawer, even the bottom drawer, Ron. What a game indeed! Everyone gave 110 per cent. I’d be over the moon with that result, neither team deserved to lose. On the other hand, I’m*

*feeling sick as a parrot.'*

*'Thanks again…Brian!  See you next week!  Over to you in the studio, Gary'.*

*****

*'Yes, thanks Ron, that sounded like a great game from where I was sitting!'*

*'OK, Gary, thanks, I've got to go…Brian's just fallen out of the commentary box.'*

*'OK, good luck Ron.  Well, let's take a look at the table following this afternoon's games.  Starting from the bottom, we have Hags United, going through a dreadful spell (ha, ha, ha!).  Next up from them, with three points, are Derby Road.  Mid-table, but improving all the time are the Merry Men, with Wanderers in third.  But clear at the top, on the same number of points, are Butterfield and Lancaster Road.  Both have won four, lost one, and drawn one.  It's very tight up there at the top.  But only one team can win.  Only one team can win tickets to the Champions League final!*

*****

**Illness Strikes - Day 2**

*Both have won four, lost one, and drawn one. It's very tight up there at the top. But only one team can win. Only one team can win tickets to the Champions League final!*

*****

*'D'you think we'll make it?'*, said Wil as they gathered at home after the match.

*'NO WAY!'* said Clara, *'they're much too good for us, we won't stand a chance in the replay!'*

*'Well'*, said Jaz thoughtfully, *'if we continue on the way we are doing, we do stand a chance. We have to play all the teams again, including Butterfield, but we are improving. Just look at the results.'*

They all stood staring at the table Jaz had laid out before them. Played six, lost one, won four, drawn one.

*'And we're improving. That was a great goal on Saturday!'*, said Freddy, looking admiringly at Jaz, who had headed the winner at the weekend.

*'And we've got our lucky pennant!'* he added.

*'What's a pennant?'*, said Clara.

*'A kind of flag, show them, Wil'*.

Wil's chest puffed up proudly as he remembered the most amazing day of his whole life. He pulled a small triangular flag out of his sports bag. Arsenal FC.

*'Wow!'* they all said, as he unfurled the pennant.

*'Yes!'*, said Wil as he laid it out on the table.

*'Tell them, Wil…'* said Freddy,

*'Shall I? Why don't you do it?'*

*'Yes, tell us, Wil, tell us about the card!'*

Wil looked over at Freddy, as his golden skin started to turn an embarassed shade of purple.

*'Not the card! The flag!'*, Freddy said, laughing.

*'Ah, yes, the flag…'*, said Wil nervously. They gathered round closer as he began their story.

*****

*'Well, you know we went to Auntie Annie's at half-term? We did. Well, she picked us up from home in her big car, I don't know what it is exactly but it was really shiny and big…'*

*‘It is a Rolls Royce, Wil’,*

*‘Well, anyway, it is really shiny, big, and you sink down in the seats so you can’t see out of the windows. Anyway, you know Auntie Annie, she’s a bit small too, and she couldn’t really see out of the windows either. And she was driving. Anyway we sort of got there OK, although we were stopped by the police twice. We ended up at her house in London.*

*‘When we arrived, Auntie Annie showed us up to our room, the normal one with the big big bed and the huge wooden wardrobe, and told us to get ready because she was going to have a party. Then after about half an hour she said* ‘Yoo hoo, you two!’*, and we had to go downstairs. Loads of people were coming into the house, and Auntie Annie was giving them drinks and we had to smile and be nice and stuff*’.

*‘What happened next?’,* said Hardy, intrigued.

*‘Then it was kind of boring. Three ladies came up to me and patted me on the head, and said* ‘haven’t you grown?’*, and a gentleman passed me a tray and asked me to serve the drinks. And I’m only seven. I told them that I wanted to be a great footballer and that drinking alcohol was not good if you wanted to be a great footballer. The gentleman said* ‘You’re not wrong there, laddie!’ *and then took two more glasses from the tray, balanced a third one on top of the two, and waddled off uncertainly. He waddled into a lady with a hat. Her hat fell into the trifle. Then, you’ll never guess what happened…’*

*‘JoJo popped up and gave you a Valentine’s card…?* said Hardy, mainly to be annoying.

*‘Well…no, I can’t really tell you…y’see what happened was…’*

*‘Tell us about the card, Wil!’*

Wil looked at Freddy who nodded back to him.

*‘OK, O…K! I’ll tell you about the card. Here it is! It’s from JoJo! So what?’*

Predictably, Hardy grabbed the card and opened it, with Clara. He sang the little poem inside. The two of them grinned and gurned and gabbled like goblins as they read it. Wil just squirmed and smiled in embarassment.

Then Freddy took over the story from his dumbstruck brother.

*‘What happened was that we were standing around watching the people when the door opened again. Standing in the doorway were a man and a woman, the man smartly dressed in a grey suit and the woman elegant in a long dress. They both looked strangely familiar. Our Aunt rushed over,’*

*‘Ah Theodore, my dear chap, Melanie, I’d like you to meet my nephews Wilis and Freddy’.*

*‘Then the man spoke, quietly, to Wil’.*

‘Ah, Wil, my friend, your Aunt said you would be here. She tells me you look like me and play like me. I wonder if you would like one of these?’

*‘We looked up, but only a little, at the familiar figure standing in front of us. Out of his usual kit, he*

*looked different, but it was definitely him. Standing in front of us, talking to us, and giving us this flag…',* Wil held it up for emphasis, *'my hero… Theo Walcott!'*

*****

**Illness Strikes - Day 3**

*Standing in front of us, talking to us, and giving us this flag…',* Wil held it up for emphasis, *'my hero… Theo Walcott!'*

*****

*'I can't believe it!',* said Hardy on Friday morning, *'you met Theo Walcott! It's not fair!'*

*'Yes, well, I think it's better to play than to meet players',* said Michael quietly, gently playing keepy-uppy with an orange he had found in the fruit bowl on the table. The others were hunched over the latest news from the league.

Hardy and Michael had spent most of their half-term at the same football course.

*'You were so lucky at that dribbling game…',* Hardy said to Michael.

*'Hmm, thanks,'*said Michael in his usual quiet way, *'it seems the more I practice, the luckier I get!'* He flicked the orange up off his knee and caught it on the back of his neck, where it stayed perched. Hardy willed it to fall.

*'Come on, you weren't so bad',* Michael continued, *'that save you made from Skip was amazing!'.*

*'Yes it was, wasn't it',* replied Hardy, apparently rising in height with pride at the compliment, and then leaping instinctively to his left, and catching the orange as Michael flicked it towards him.

*****

Jaz was deep into the latest fixture list, looking at their six remaining games.

*'Well, Hags should be easy enough, and Derby, but the others might be more difficult, especially as the final match will be against Butterfield.'*

*'Urghh, hmmph, urggh!',* coughed Mr Andrews, *'It's on March 31st, we need to be well up for that one my friends!'*

*'Are you OK, Mr Andrews?',* asked Freddy.

*'Hurrghhh….did I ever tell you about my leg, lad? Erhersksk!… Much worse than this, just a touch of cough….atishooooo!'* Freddy pulled back slightly as Mr Andrews wheezed and spluttered.

*'Urghurgh',* said Hardy quietly, putting his hand to his mouth politely.

*'Eh-heh-heh..!* said JoJo, even more politely, wiping her mouth with a small pink handkerchief.

*'Yes, as I was saying',* said Jaz, *'it's back to Hurst Rovers tomorrow, and we lost to them last time'.*

*'There are no easy games…huuogh…any more. All the teams want to beat us. They put out their best seven every week. Eheh…excuse me.'* Freddy clutched his throat as he spoke.

There was a mass outbreak of coughing in the room.

*‘Urghhh-eh-heh!  Don’t get me started…if one does it, everyone will!’*

*‘I-hi-ihi-ihighh!’*, coughed Clara, as if to confirm this.

*‘What you need is a good dose of carbolic soap and cod liver oil.  Didn't cure the cough but it made you think twice about coughing again’*, said Mr Andrews.

Hardy coughed again, and again.

*‘You want some, lad?  I'm sure I could find some for you somewhere’.*

*'No thanks’,* said Hardy hastily,  *‘I…think…I’ll be OK’*

*'Oh no, please no, keep away!’* came a more distant voice from the room next door.

*‘What was that?  What’s up with HIM?’* said Clara.

The sound was coming from next door and the sound was coming from Wil.

*‘Ooohhoohoo, NO!’*  said the voice, then,  *‘ahhahah...uh huh uhuh...eee!’*

Wil was apparently laughing uncontrollably, then...*'that'll do, you know its good for you’.*

There was a dramatic oughing from next door.  There was a dramatic coughing from Hardy.

*‘It's called called Mick's chest rub.  She always uses it on us.  Always makes you laugh, even if you're really ill.  Which I’m not’,* Freddy added quickly, stifling a cough.

Wil staggered into the room, still half laughing and half crying from his mother’s treatment, closely followed by his Mum, who wafted the tub of Mick’s around the room at the assembled group of coughers and splutterers.

*‘Are you* sure*that you can play football tomorrow morning?  The weather forecast is for a cold start.  I don’t think you’re fit for it’.*

*‘We’re fine, Mum’,* Freddy said, swallowing hard.  There was a light cough from someone.

*‘They’ll be OK, bit of urghhurghhurghwoosh…fresh air will be good for them!,* wheezed Mr Andrews, unhelpfully.

*‘Well, if you’re sure…’,* added Wil and Freddy’s Mum.

*‘Cool…’,* said Michael.

*‘Uhuh!’*, coughed Freddy in agreement.

*‘Ehheh!’*, splutted Wil.

*‘Ihi-ihi!’*, said JoJo delicately.

‘*Aha...agh...agh...yes!*’, said Clara.

‘*Ergh..hurgh...ighighigh...ogogogog...pwlll...urgghhh...pwf..pwf...ishis…ooooooo!’*, said Hardy, falling over.

He really did seem bad.

*****
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**Illness Strikes - Day 4**

*Hardy really did seem bad.*

*****

OK, so it was wet.  Actually it was very wet.

But that didn't mean Hardy had to look like a balloon.

Remember he was ill?  Coughing and spluttering?

But that didn't mean he had to dress up like a polar explorer?

He shouldn't have played.  Not in the rain.

But he did play.

Actually he played quite well.

But he didn't have to resemble a deep-sea diver.

First he had on a vest, which he wouldn't have chosen but which his mother had insisted he should wear if (in her words) *'you're going out to play that silly game in this weather'*.  So he wore the vest.  On top of that he had two t-shirts, the first white, and the second pink, given to him for his birthday (as a joke) by Clara.  On top of the two t-shirts he wore a dark green hooded top, with the hood up, even though it actually was not raining when the match against Hurst started.  Was that it?

Of course not.  On top of the hooded top, he wore a puffy ski jacket, one of those ones that is basically a duvet with arms.  But that was not all.

Desperate to preserve the look of the team, he had put on his Lancaster Road goalie jersey on top of the jacket.  Although the jersey had been bought specially for him and was normally the right size, on top of all this it looked small.  In fact, the arms of the puffy jacket ballooned out from under the shirt like Popeye's, and his tummy looked like it was expecting twins.

Of course he didn't stop there.  Ill as he was, he needed all the warmth he could get, so his head was wrapped in a furry bobble hat, and he wore a pair of woollen gloves under the goalkeepers' gloves.  When you add in the long-johns he wore under the tracksuit trousers, you can imagine the sight that met the opposition.

A monster in goal!  A Michelin Man!  A sad and sorry blob of humanity.  As Hardy waddled on to the pitch, there was instant giggling amongst both the home and away supporters.

*'Look, I'm ill, right',* said Hardy miserably to the group of onlookers.  He took up his position in goal.

*****

Unlike the first game, this match against the Rovers went according to plan, with the now-well-

organised Kidz midfield dominating from start to finish. Hardy hardly touched the ball, and certainly did not have to bounce to either side for any of the stops he did make.

During the first half, Michael scored two goals, the first following tenacious work by Jaz in midfield, the second a solo effort finishing up with a left foot shot. Even the Hurst players and supporters applauded that one.

Except one.

After the first goal, one of the supporters had muttered something to himself, and then flung his hat to the ground. It had landed in a pool of muddy rainwater.

After the second goal, even though it was a great effort, he had shouted something at one of his players, and then ripped off his scarf before throwing that to the ground as well.

*****

Half way through the second half, Freddy was at the back, watching the game going on in front of him, relaxed, happy to be two-nil up.

Then Skip, the most dangerous Hurst attacker, beat Clara on the left, beat Wil on the right, and started coming towards him with the ball. A dangerous player.

*Just take it easy. I'm the last man. But I can stop him. I must time this right. Let him come, let him come…now in. Right foot to the ball, keep the studs down, take it on the bootlaces, a little slide, that's it…!*

There was a murmur of appreciation from the parents and friends as Freddy picked himself up from the tackle, the ball at his feet, and strode forward with it. He had timed the tackle perfectly, and was now on half way, with some space to move in. He strode forward again, looking up for someone to pass to.

Michael, out on the left wing, was the obvious candidate. But Hurst had done their homework. Having suffered at the feet of Michael in the first half, they had got him man-marked this time, and there was very little room for the pass.

On the other side was Alex, but his path was blocked by two defenders.

As Freddy looked up, the space in front of him just seemed to get wider. He moved forward to the mid-way point in the Hurst half. He looked up. Goalkeeper looked nervous. In fact she had looked cold and nervous from the start of the game.

Freddy had one last look.

*Well, there's no harm in having a pop from here. Now, think about it, what do we practice in training?*

Freddy seemed to have all the time in the world to think through what he was going to do.

*Draw back the right foot, now swing through straight and slightly across the ball, make the contact with the front of your foot just to the left of centre, keep your eye on the ball, and CONTACT!*

*GOAL!* yelled the crowd as Freddy saw the ball start out to the left then swerve round from left to right and fly unerringly into the top corner of the Hurst net. The goalkeeper made her best attempt at a save yet, but still got nowhere near the ball.

Freddy just stood. His team-mates leapt on to him from all angles.

*****

On the sidelines, the Hurst supporter, who was wearing a shirt in the colours of the team, started to take it off, with a *I'm going to fling this shirt in the mud* kind of look on his face. He was now shouting wildly at anyone who would listen – his team, his fellow supporters, the referee, the Kidz supporters. Mr Andrews walked over calmly.

*'May I ask what the problem is?'*

*'Well can't you see, they're not fit to wear the shirt. No passion, no passing, no commitment, NO CLUE!'*

He got the shirt three-quarters off, revealing a belly that looked like it was expecting triplets.

*'Put it back on, sir, and listen to me',* Mr Andrews was firm and the man had to listen.

*'These children are nine years old. Just look at them.'* The Hurst players had just mounted a decent attack, but Skip had shot very very high over the bar, before flopping head first into a huge muddy puddle in the goalmouth. Players from both sides were laughing hysterically as the referee blew his whistle to bring the match to a close.

*'What you see there, sir',* continued the Lancaster Road coach, *'is fourteen children out in the fresh air, playing a beautiful game, playing to the best of their ability, smiling, laughing, and having fun. And that, sir, is what the game is all about. If you cannot accept that, you should not turn up in future.'*

There was a spontaneous outbreak of applause as Mr Andrews finished his speech.

Except from Hardy.

He just coughed.

**Illness Strikes - Day 5**

*Except from Hardy.*

*He just coughed.*

*****

Actually he coughed his way into hospital.

*‘Maybe he shouldn’t have played?’*, said Wil as they gathered on the top landing on Wednesday morning.

*‘Same old Hardy…always faking!’*, sang Clara.

*‘You can’t fake your way into hospital’*, Freddy added, *‘although I must admit, he didn’t really* look *that ill.’*

*‘And he kept a clean sheet!’*, said Wil.

They all looked at each other as to say *‘And that’s what matters’*, although no-one actually said it.

*‘Shall we go to visit him?’*

*‘Well, it’s World Book Day tomorrow, what are you going as?’*, Freddy reminded them, picking up the scrap of paper he had brought back from school with him on Tuesday afternoon.

*****

*World Book Day 2007*

*This is the 10th Anniversary Year of World Book Day. It’s aim is to encourage children to explore the pleasures of books and reading by providing them with a book of their own.*

*On Thursday 1st March, please dress as your favourite book character.*

*No footballers, superheroes, no cartoon characters, no animals, no footballers, no film stars.*

*AND ABSOLUTELY NO FOOTBALLERS – THEY ARE NOT BOOK CHARACTERS*

*p.s. please do not dress as a footballer*

*****

*‘Does that mean I can’t go in my Arsenal kit?’*, said Wil hopefully.

*‘What do you think?’*

*‘Hmmmph!’*

*‘So what are you going as?,* Freddy repeated.

*‘See if you can guess!’,* Clara said, disappearing into the other room.

*‘OK, I’ll go and change too!’,* said Wil, heading off up the stairs.

*****

Freddy had turned off the lights to test out his own costume, which featured a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, a dark cloak which his Mum had cut out of an old sheet, a small mark on his forehead, and a magic-makin’ shape-shiftin’ goblin-gobblin’ mischief-mendin’ portkey-powerin’ little stick.

A what?

Actually, it was a small light sabre he had got one Christmas, but as one of many Hardy Potters who would gather at school for the day, he was determined to have the best wand. He waved it around in the darkness, whispering spells to himself.

Clara appeared at the top of the stairs. She had borrowed a grey wig, had drawn some frown lines on her face, and was wearing a knitted shawl around her shoulders. The clothes were dark.

As Clara saw Freddy through the darkness, she smiled.

As Freddy saw Clara through the darkness he recoiled as he saw the single white tooth jutting awkwardly out of her mouth. It was almost luminous through the gloom.

*‘Brilliant!’*

*‘Thanks, what’s Wil going as?’*

There was a clumping sound at the top of the stairs. Clara and Freddy looked up.

*Clump, clump, clump.*

Wil had on the most enormous pair of boots, and was wearing a boilersuit – the kind you see workmen or mechanics wearing. He had plastered his face with white powder, so that he looked a deathly pale colour. Through his neck he had inserted a bolt. He clumped down the stairs, as Freddy switched the lights back on.

*‘How did you do THAT?’* said Clara, examining the bolt carefully from both sides.

*‘Two bolts!’* laughed Wil, as if they had believed the bolt went right through his neck.

*****

The phone rang. Frankenstein, Hardy, and Nanny McPhee all sprinted over to pick it up. With a deft shoulder charge, Frank just managed to edge Hardy out at the last minute. Nanny caught her shawl on the edge of the door and ended up in a heap on the floor. Her tooth flew out of her mouth. Wil picked up the phone.

*‘Ugh!’,* said a quiet voice on the other end.

*‘Ugh to you too,’*said Wil, who had been told never to talk to strangers on the phone.

*‘I mean, erggghh’,* said the voice again.

*‘Oh it’s you. We’ll be coming over tomorrow after World Book Day. Keep warm!’*

*‘…er…OK…I’ll…t-t-t-try’,* said Hardy weakly.

*****

Later in the day Michael, who went to a different school, came over wearing his full Reading football kit.

*‘You can’t wear that – it’s football kit!’,* said Clara obviously.

*‘I’m making a statement.’*

*‘A WHAT?’*

*‘I’m making a statement to say that Reading should be in the quarter-finals of the FA Cup’.*

*‘But they let in three goals in six minutes, that’s…erm…’,* Wil counted his fingers momentarily, *‘…erm…two goals per minute’.*

*‘Yes, but I was late watching the match, so I’m not counting the first ten minutes’.*

*‘Oh, OK. Be like that’.*

*‘Anyway, I’m going as Roy of the Rovers, he’s in a book…!’*

*‘Roy of the WHAT?’* said Clara.

*‘The greatest footballer who ever lived’,* said Michael.

*****

**Illness Strikes - Day 6**

*‘Roy of the WHAT?’ said Clara.*

*‘The greatest footballer who ever lived’, said Michael.*

*****

*‘Welcome again to the airwaves of Radio Springhurst, and welcome to the World Book Day Springhurst Top Ten Countdown! Brian and I are here to run through the books that YOU, the children of Springhurst, have voted your favourites over the last year. Well, Brian, the votes are in, now, shall we commence the countdown?’*

*‘Yes, Ron, well…and the winner is…F…’*

*‘NO! Brian, we have to go in reverse order, you can’t announce the winner yet!’*

*‘Reverse order, you say?’*

*‘Yes, all awards are given in reverse order!’*

*‘OK, I get it. Ahem, ahem… Is winner the and, well, Ron, Yes… F…’*

*‘NO! Brian, not backwards, just start with number ten and work upwards’.*

*‘Oh, yes, OK, maybe you’d better do it. I’ll do the number one, then’.*

*‘OK, Brian, good idea’.*

*****

*‘And at number ten, we have that blonde bombshell, that force of nature, that teenage tearaway, Mr Andrewslex Rider, in Stormbreaker, by Anthony Horowitz!’*

*‘Yes!’* said Alex, running his hand through his blonde hair, and smiling coolly at the others. The device on his belt gave a short beep and vibrated urgently. He looked down at the message scrolling across the screen,

*‘Sorry guys, gotta go, something’s come up. See you all tomorrow!’*

With that he glided out of the room, flinging his jacket casually over his shoulder as he went.

*‘Where* does *he keep going to?’*wondered Freddy aloud.

*‘And why’s he always in such a hurry?’* added Clara.

*****

The radio crackled on.

*‘At number nine, Brian, a new entry this year, unexpected this one eh Brian, not sure I know about this one…at number nine…is Kidscapism Football Stories for Children!’*

*‘Yes, Ron, it’s about football, and it’s got stories for children. I’ve heard it’s very good, although I haven’t read it myself. Says on my card that it features a team called Lancaster Road’.*

*‘YESSSS!’* they all cried in unison.

*‘Well, Brian, I’ll check that one out later. Let’s move on to number eight. At number eight, after thirty-five years on the chart, that perennial favourite, The Hobbit, by J.R.R.Tolkein!’.*

*‘I’m reading that at the moment’,* said Michael, *‘it’s about a little guy called Bilbo Baggins, who lives underground and has to battle goblins and things’.*

*‘Yeah, I love that bit where the dragon fights the ladybird, that’s brilliant!’,* said Clara. Michael looked at her questioningly.

*‘Have you actually read it? I’m halfway through and there haven’t been any ladybirds so far’*

Clara looked down at the ground. Her face went a shade of deep pink.

*****

*‘At number seven, we have…Jamie’s Dinners, by Jamie Oliver!’*

*‘I voted for that one!’,* said Jaz, just finishing off the last crumbs from a packet of crisps.

*‘You can’t read it though, can you?’*

*‘That dinner lady at school did, I bet’,* replied Wil, *‘that one who says* “d’ja want some right pukka broccoli, my darlin’?”.*’*

*****

*‘And Brian, I’m very pleased to say that at number six, a personal favourite of mine, Goldilocks and the Three Bears!’*

*‘I’ve read that one’,* said Clara quietly.

*‘Well, I suppose there are some younger ones voting for these books’,* said Freddy dismissively.

*‘Look, it’s not that I don’t like reading, I just don’t have much time for it. I read at school’,* said Clara, sort of hopefully.

*‘Ten minutes at bedtime, that’s all. Sometimes I can’t stop’,* said Michael, *‘the book I’m reading at the moment is a bit scary. Sometimes I go under the covers with a torch and pretend I’m somewhere deep*

*inside Bilbo's cave. It's great!'*

*****

*'Halfway through now, and at number five, book-pickers, is the first entry from Mr Roald Dahl, Danny the Champion of the World!'*

*'Oh I love that!'* said Wil, *'it's all about a guy who goes out with his Dad to catch things, and his Dad gets trapped and he has to go and rescue him, and he drives a car, all by himself…and…and…'*

*'Yes OK, it is good. Check it out'*, said Freddy, *'let's keep listening, I want to see who's number one'*.

*****

*'Number four, now, and at number four, this book has been on the charts an unbelievable one hundred and seventy years!'*

*'Surely he means seventeen years…he's read that wrong?'* said Michael.

*'Wait…'* said Freddy.

*'An incredible one hundred and seventy years, one of the most famous books of all time…at number four, is Oliver Twist, by Charles Dickens'*.

*'Oh, I know that one!'* said Wil excitedly, *'you gotta pick a pocket or two!'*, he sang, diving onto the sofa where Jaz and Michael were sitting and trying to reach into their pockets.

*'Oi! Leave it out!'*

*'I'm the Artful Dodger'*, Wil continued, *'I dodge here, I dodge there, I'll dodge anywhere!'*

*'Well be quiet, or you won't get any more gruel…'* said Freddy.

*'Food, Glorious Food!'* sang Wil again. He really could get quite annoying.

*****

*'At number three, for all you ghost-lovers out there, is Lemony Snicket's A series of Unfortunate Events. Can you guess who that one is by, Brian?'*

*'Er…Lemony? I mean…Snicket?'*

*'Yes Brian, that's right, well done'*.

*'That sounds good'*, said Clara quietly, *'I might try that one. I like unfortunate events'*. She glared gloomily at the others.

*****

*'We're nearly there now, Brian, at number two, we have that great work of modern literature, the*

*trillion-selling, record-breaking J.K.Rowling classic Barry Pooter and the Collosal Telephone'.*

*'I haven't read that one, Ron'*

*'No Brian, sorry, where did I put my glasses?'*

*'They're on your head, Ron'*

*'Oh, thanks Brian, yes, sorry listeners, at number two, let's get this right, Hardy Potter and the Philosophers Stone. One of the most famous books ever written. Has universal appeal. Boys love it, girls love it'.*

*'I've seen the film',* said Clara.

*'Read the book first, then see the film. If you see the film first, it spoils the book'.*

*'Nah, if you read the book first, it spoils the film'*, replied Clara.

*'Look, not every book is made into a film. Books are great. Look, we've got this to take to Hardy'*, said Freddy, producing a copy of the *Dangerous Book for Boys, 'not that he needs to be any more dangerous!'.*

*****

*'And now, children, the moment you've all been waiting for…at number one, the winner by a mile, the favourite book of the children of Springhurst…open the envelope Brian…Brian?'*

*'Ahem, yes, the envelope, I'm sure I've got it here somewhere…'*

*'Brian is just searching his jacket pockets, listeners, are here we are…and the winner is, Brian…'*

*'And the winner is…FA Premier League Shoot-Out Folder 2006-2007!'*

*'Right, thanks, Brian. There you have it, people, the children of Springhurst have spoken! Your favourite book for World Book Day 2007 is…the Shoot-Out folder!'*

*'Yes!'*, Clara waved her Shoot-Out folder above her head. Finally.

*****

*'Look, we've got a match tomorrow, it's the rematch against Hags United. We'd better get ready. Here, take this'.* He handed Clara a copy of *George's Marvellous Medicine* by Roald Dahl, *'you'll love it, you really will!'*

Clara took the book, a shy smile on her face.

*'OK, see you tomorrow!'*

*****

Just as they were leaving, the phone rang again.  Wil went to pick it up, again.  It was Hardy, again.  He was still ill.

*‘Can’t make it tomorrow, sorry’,* he croaked into the phone.

A short story about Hardy’s hospital visit, complete with crazy doctors and travels through time, will soon be available to registered users through the website.  Please check back regularly here:  Hardy’s Hospital Horrors

**Champions League Challengers – Day 1**

‘I said Philips Sport Vereniging!’ said Jaz impatiently, as he explained forthe fifth time who would be playing in the quarter?finals.‘Very niggling?’, said Wil for the fifth time, just to be annoying (for thefifth time).‘OK, I give up, let’s just call them PSV. They come from Holland, and they’replaying Liverpool.‘Wil Crouch be playing?, asked Wil, trying to raise himself up to his full1.4 metres in imitation of the giant Mr Crouch.‘I don’t know, it’s not ‘til April anyway. A lot can happen by then’.‘Well, if Liverpool are in the final, I want to go to the match’, said Wil again.‘That’s basically up to us, isn’t it? But there’s a long way to go. If Liverpoolbeat PSV in the first leg, and Man United beat Roma and then they hold on for adraw in the second leg and if Bayern beat Milan on away goals and Chelsea can getpast Valencia even if they do have to come from two goals behind like they did againstTottenham, and if we can get past Merrymen next Saturday and score at least threelike we did against the Hags this week then we stand a chance…’‘STOP!’ yelled Freddy as Jaz went on and on and on. ‘Like Mr Andrewssaid, we need to take each game as it comes, give a hundred percent, and play oursocks off. All we should think about is our next game’.‘But I want to see Liverpool’, said Wil, in a voice which said I’m notgoing to give this one up.‘It all depends’, said Jaz, ‘on what we do, and on what they do. But we weregreat at the weekend!’‘We were, weren’t we?’ said Freddy, recalling Saturday’s game againstthe girls of Hags United.Illness Strikes121*****The match had been won comfortably, by three goals to nil, despite thefact that Hardy had still been in hospital, and JoJo once again had had todeputise in goal.The Hags team, and especially their coaching staff, behaved quite well(by their standards) in this return match, after their skulduggery in the firstgame, when the referee had mysteriously disappeared. The only surprisecame midway through the second half.Lancaster Road were two goals up, both of them scored by Freddy frommidfield. He had worked out that the diminutive Hags goalkeeper wasvulnerable to high shots, and had scored with the only two shots he had hit.Actually, she was vulnerable to anything above waist height, because shereally was spectacularly small. So Freddy told his players to shoot on sight.But midway through the second half, the Hags had turned once againto some of their dirty tricks, and Clara was beginning to get agitated.‘No WAY!’ she cried as she was taken out from behind. At least thereferee gave a free kick for that one.‘No WAY!’ she cried again, as one of the Hags defenders more or lesswrapped her up in the loose black cloak?like shirt that the team wore.‘No way! No WAY! NO WAY!’ Clara looked incredulously at the girlin front of her.Clara had finally got fed up with all the fouling, and picking herself upfrom the latest challenge, had grabbed at the nearest player in frustration. Shehad pulled back the player’s black hood to reveal the most amazing sight.Her sister!‘No WAY! Not YOU!’, Clara was half laughing, and half crying.‘I’ll get you later!’ Clara said menacingly. Her sister Clara just cackled,equally menacingly, and ran back to her evil teammates.But Clara had had the last laugh by poking home the third goal of thegame following a precise through ball from Michael. This time, the littlegoalkeeper had climbed up the right?hand goalpost, and was swinging fromMonday 12 March 2007Champions League Challengers122the crossbar on her rather long arms, so Clara, instead of shooting high, justhad to roll the ball across the line before the goalie dropped down. Which shedid. It was a fitting end to a potentially tricky game.*****‘So we’re on track’, said Jaz again, turning to Wil. ‘We just need to keepgoing the way we are, and we’ll make it to Athens.’*****There was a persistent but slightly feeble knocking at the door.Freddy went over to open it.‘Hardy! How’re you doing? It’s great to see you!’The pathetic figure standing on the doorstep smiled weakly.‘I’m...I’m OK, I subbose…’, he muttered wheezily, before adding,‘It…It…was…terrible. Disbembered myself in the end. Had to get out of a window’.‘Dismembered? You mean discharged, don’t you?’Hardy clutched his brow dramatically as if that explained hisconfusion.‘It was terrible’‘Oh, I know, don’t worry, you’re out now, we’ll look after you…OH MYGOODNESS!’Hearing Freddy’s voice, Wil and Clara came running through intothe hall,‘What’s the matter?’, said Clara staring up and down at Hardy.‘LOOK!’, said Freddy, still transfixed by something. He was pointingdown to the ground.‘Urghh! Get away!’, cried Wil. They all took a step

back.
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**Champions League Challengers – Day 2**

‘What…what…what’s the matter?’ said Hardy, now sounding moreconcerned than the rest of them.‘IT’S YOUR FEET! LOOK! THEY’RE CHANGING COLOUR!’*****‘Well dey…dey… told me in the hosbidal…’, stammered Hardy as they allcontinued to stare at his feet.‘They told me about Friday, so I had nothing to do, so I did it…’‘Friday? You painted the ends of your feet?’‘Yes, dey told be it was Red Toes Day’.Freddy felt the laugh coming a few seconds before it did. It was oneof those laughs you just can’t do anything about. But it took a little while tocome. Up from his stomach, through his chest, crawling up his throat until itburst forward almost throwing him off his feet. He grabbed his mouth withone hand, grabbed the nearest thing (Clara) with the other hand, and startedto fall about.Hardy’s toes, painted a vivid shade of red, seemed to glow brighter asthey rolled around, and giggled, and rolled some more.‘What’s so funny?’ said Hardy miserably, staring down at the mass ofwrithing bodies on the floor.‘Red toes…red toes…’, Wil could hardly speak as he pointed at Hardy’sfeet. Freddy was the first to compose himself. He spoke slowly.‘On Friday…, it is Red… NOSE… Day. Red Nose… Not toes…’ hegiggled some more, ‘sorry H, but this is just too much!’Hardy wandered off to collect his thoughts and wash his feet. Luckilyhe was feeling a little better. He’d get them back somehow.Champions League Challengers125*****Freddy followed Hardy out.‘Come on H, we’re only having a laugh,’ he said, putting his arm roundHardy’s shoulders.‘You’re always having a laugh at me. Everyone is. Just because I’m not coollike you, or fast like Wil, or brainy like Jaz. I’m not good at anything’.And right there Hardy, their big strong mate, their loud, laughinglunatic friend, shed a solitary tear onto the sleeve of his jacket. He wiped hiseyes with the other sleeve.‘Oh, come on, we’ll look after you. You’re just a bit fed up with being ill,that’s all’.‘It’s nothing to do with being ILL!’ Freddy was shocked at the tone ofHardy’s voice, ‘anyway, I’m not ill any MORE. Go Away’.Wil bounced in. Freddy sensed trouble and tried to pull him away.Too late.‘What’ s up with him? Hey everyone, look, Hardy’s crying!’Hardy turned his face to his damp sleeve, and buried his head in it.‘Just leave it out. Leave him with me. Just leave…’ said Freddydesperately. Wil just carried on.’Hardy’s crying…Hardy’s crying…’, he sang, dancing round themiserable figure hunched in the chair. He went on,‘A young boy called Hardy whose noseShould be red, instead painted his toesHe was sick, almost dyingBut now he’s just cryingAnd he’s soaking right through all his clothes’What a brother, thought Freddy, how could he be so horrible?Wednesday 14 March 2007Champions League Challengers126Freddy looked pityingly at Wil, who was still laughing at his ownlimerick. When he wasn’t laughing at poor Hardy. Freddy then lookedover at Hardy. A strange thing happened.A little smile.A little smirk.A little wipe of a damp eye.Then a lurch.Then a lunge.A grab, a grope and a grapple.In a flash he was on him, two strong arms pinning Wil’s own arms tohis side, as Hardy wrestled him to the ground.‘You’ll see who’s crying now! I’ll give you a red nose!’ he screameddemonically, as Wil tried to struggle clear.They rolled around on the ground, but Hardy, miraculously restored tofull strength, was far too powerful for the diminutive Wil, and flipped himonto his back, then knelt firmly on his two arms, pinning him to the ground.Wil looked up, helpless.‘I’m sorry, I really am, I didn’t mean it, I didn’t, I didn’t!’‘You meant it, and now you’ll pay!’ replied Hardy calmly. He lifted hisleft knee up and grabbed Wil’s arm with his left arm. With his right hand heleant across and started to tickle. He knew that this would have the result hewanted. The definition of ticklish had to be re?written where Wil wasconcerned.‘No! not that! Please…!’Hardy went to tickle Wil under the arm. Before he had even touchedhim, Wil was starting to protest and starting to laugh. Hardy went in for thekill, his fingers poking and prodding at Wil’s helpless armpit. Wil wasalready out of control, writhing and rolling around, still totally pinned byHardy’s weight. When Hardy went for a second attack under Wil’s chin, hecould take no more.‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so so sorry…’‘You will be…’ said Hardy, not letting up.‘I’m so so so so so sooo sooooo sorry! I won’t do it again. I will never make upanother poem, I’ll never tease you, you’re the greatest, I’m soooo glad you’re feelingbetter…’This went on for about five minutes before Hardy finally relented andWil could get up and slip away. Freddy tried to give him a final slap as hewent past as if to say

serves you right!.Hardy stood up, smiling, and took off the thick, slightly damp, jacket.‘Right, Red Nose Day! What are you going as?’

**Champions League Challengers – Day 3**

Hardy stood up, smiling, and took off the thick, slightly damp, jacket.

‘Right, Red Nose Day!  What are you going as?’

*****

In the end, the school had banned all costumes due to an unfortunate occurrence the previous day, when a teacher had become the target of a pre-Red Nose Day custard pie, in a stunt that one of the Year Sixes had thought would be funny.

Unfortunately, the headteacher did not think it was funny, and she had forced the children to think of alternative non-fun ways of raising money.

*****

To get home, Wil and Freddy had to take a short cut through the woods near where Hardy lived, walk across the playing field (taking care not to take any of the mud from the field home with them…) and then head down from the top of Lancaster Road to their house at number 12.

It was a cold but bright day, with signs of Spring all around.  New grass was growing close to the goalmouths, little buds were appearing on all the trees, birds were tweeting happily.  A smallish white bird swooped low over the group of friends as they trudged home.

‘Hey look, isn’t that an albatross?’ said Wil, thinking back to the Observer’s Book of Birds that Auntie Annie had given him at Christmas.  The bird, clearly no bigger than a seagull, gave an insulting squawk and flew off.  Wil turned to his brother and Hardy,

‘I’m going on ahead to meet Michael.  See you back home’.

They often bumped into each other on the way back.  Although they went to different schools, Michael’s route home took him along the same path as the others, and as they got out of school at about the same time, it was inevitable that sometimes their paths would cross.  And since the football team had started back in November, Michael had become Wil’s best mate.

They met up just where the woods emerged into the playing field, and you had to go through a small gate to pass through.

As usual, Michael held out his hand.  Wil high-fived the outstretched hand, then put one finger in his ear.  Michael put his own finger in his ear, then kicked Wil on the knee.  After kicking Michael back on his own knee, Wil removed his finger from his ear and hooked his thumb round Michael’s and they pulled, trying to make a clicking sound with their thumbs.

‘We really must change that secret handshake…’said Michael quietly, ‘How’re you doing?  How was Red Nose thingy?’

Michael’s school had asked all pupils to dress in red for the day.  Michael was wearing his Arsenal home shirt, his Liverpool home shorts, and a pair of tights which his mother had lent him.  His hair was

dyed bright red.  He looked completely uncomfortable.

‘Red Nose Day?  Oh, it was OK I suppose, although we just had to sit in silence all day whilst the teacher told us jokes.  It was a sponsored ‘No Smiling’ day.  Luckily none of the jokes were funny at all’.

‘Hey, I know’, continued Wil, ‘we can raise a bit more money on the way home.  Grab that branch and block the gate!’

They could see the others, Freddy, Hardy, Clara and her sister, Alex and Jaz strolling slowly down the main path towards the gate.  They worked quickly.

‘Right, that’s the gate blocked.  All we have to do is lift this for them to get through’, said Michael, ‘but what do they have to do?’

‘Simple. They have to tell a joke.  If it is funny, they have to pay a pound to charity’.

‘And if it isn’t funny?’

‘They have to pay two pounds!’

‘Right, here goes!’

*****

‘Joke please!’

‘Eh?’said Hardy, who was the first to reach the gate.

‘It costs two pounds to get through, but only one if you can tell a funny joke’.

Hardy scratched his nose a couple of times, then stroked his chin, as if he had a beard.

‘Knock, knock’

‘Who’s there?’ replied Michael.

‘The interrupting cow’

‘The interrupt…

‘MOOOO!’, screamed Hardy, interrupting.

Wil and Michael looked at each other, trying not to laugh.  But they did.  It was really quite funny.  Hardy handed over the pound and they lifted the barrier.

‘Joke please!’ said Wil as Clara and her sister approached.  Clara looked at her sister and smiled.  They obviously had a good one.

‘Doctor, Doctor’, said Clara, ‘I think I’ve swallowed a bone’.

‘Are you choking?’ said her sister.

‘No, I really did!’  said Clara.

‘Sorry, not funny enough’, replied Michael, ‘two pounds please!’

‘No way!  That’s not fair!  Here’s another one…Doctor Doctor, my son has swallowed my pen, what should I do?’

‘Use a pencil until I get there!’, replied Clara’s sister.  Wil smiled a little at that one.  Michael actually laughed.

‘OK, one pound then, pass through’.

Alex was next.  As he reached the gate, he called out,

‘I’m not in the mood for jokes’, and grabbed hold of a large branch which was overhanging the path. Swinging himself upwards he jumped onto the top of the fence, vaulted over it, and was gone, jogging across the field towards his house.  Wil looked at Michael and raised an eyebrow.  Best not to bother him, he thought.

Finally, Freddy sidled slowly up to the gate, a pensive look on his face.  I’m no good at jokes, he thought to himself miserably, desperately trying to come up with something funny.

‘Joke please!’

Freddy looked at the barrier and contemplated making a run for it, but instead came up with his own joke.

‘What did the Sheriff of Nottingham say when Robin Hood fired at him?’

Wil knew he could not laugh at this one, especially as he had heard it about five hundred times.  He smiled at Michael.  They had a winner here.

‘I don’t know’, said Michael, ‘what did the Sheriff of Nottingham say when Robin Hood fired at him?’

‘That was an arrow escape’, said Freddy, already fishing around in his bag for loose change.

‘Rubbish.  Utter Rubbish.  Two pounds please!’ Wil said, gleefully.

‘Oh well, it is for charity I suppose, you can have everything I’ve got here’, said Freddy, who in fact could only rustle up a 50p, three Mexican pesos, two Pakistani rupees, and a coin from Sweden with a hole in it.

‘Pathetic, but it will do!’  laughed Wil, ‘please pass’.

*****

‘And I’ve got another idea’, said Clara as they reached Lancaster Road, ‘y’know the match against

Merrymen tomorrow?’

Freddy thought he knew what was coming.

‘Let’s all wear our red noses for the match!’

Freddy was right.  But there was no stopping Clara.

**Champions League Challengers – Day 5**

Audio only - 19th March.
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**Champions League Challengers – Day 5**

Alex looked down at the ground.‘Are you OK?’ said Freddy, ‘You look terrible’.‘No, to tell you the truth, I’m not OK. Really not’.*****‘So what’s up?’ said Freddy, as Alex trudged slowly off towards hishouse beyond the playing fields.‘Well, y’know…’‘No. I don’t know. Can I help? Anything I can do?’‘You could get me a present’.‘Eh?’Alex looked even more sad, and Freddy thought he was going to startcrying.‘It’s my birthday today’.‘You’re JOKING! It’s your birthday, and you didn’t tell anyone? Well, comeon. Come back here, let’s tell the others’.‘No’. Alex spoke firmly and carefully, ‘I don’t really do birthdays…notsince…well you know…’Freddy stared at his friend and saw the deep sadness etched into hisface. Ever since November, when Alex had appeared at Jaz’s birthday partyin the most dramatic circumstances, he had retained an aura of mystiqueabout him. A look on his face and the way he behaved that said I’m Alex,don’t mess with me. But that same look often seemed to be indicating I’m kindof lonely, and maybe a bit scared. When he got on the football pitch, Alex wasdifferent, full of confidence, flowing moves and intelligent passing. But off it,Wednesday 21 March 2007Champions League Challengers138there was something sad about him. Even though he was a little older thanthem, he often looked like he needed looking after.‘So what do you want to do, then?’ said Freddy.‘I dunno, I guess I’ll just go home, have some tea, y’know’‘Why don’t I come with you?’ Freddy said, without really thinking.He’d only been to the house once, and had briefly met the lady who lookedafter Alex, but it was a very short visit. Come to think of it, he didn’t reallyknow much about Alex at all.‘You want to come over?’ said Alex, doubtfully.‘Yeh, why not? I just need to tell Mum’‘OK. Come then. I’ll phone Jan’. Alex’s features perked up for the firsttime in what seemed to Freddy like weeks. He smiled weakly from beneathhis shock of blonde hair.*****Freddy passed by his own house to say that he would walk homewith Alex. When he came back out to the street, Alex was talking busily intoa mobile phone.Why did he have a phone? It’s not fair! When I’m twelve I want a phone, too,thought Freddy frustratedly.And what a phone it was! It had a set of glowing lights on the front,and didn’t seem to have any buttons to press at all, just a cool black screen.Alex coolly flipped it shut.‘Prototype’‘Proto?what?’‘It’s a prototype, a new phone that is not for sale yet. I’m just testing it out’.Why’s HE testing it out? thought Freddy.*****Champions League Challengers139They reached the house, which was not far from Hardy’s, up the hilland beyond the pitch. Alex went up to the front door and held his phone upto a small black box on the doorframe. The door opened instantly andnoiselessly. Freddy stared.‘Oh hi, Alex, how are you? Had a good birthday?’Alex grunted and threw his bag in the corner. The voice was that ofJan, who Freddy had met just before Christmas when she had come to watchpart of one of their matches. Alex had once explained that Jan was his friend,but was also the person who looked after him now that he was on his own.Freddy looked around the big entrance hall. The house was old onthe outside, but quite modern on the inside, with lots of glass and mirrors,and polished wood. The floors were also shiny and the whole place lookedvery very clean. A single birthday card stood on a glass shelf in the open?plansitting room.‘So guys, whaddaya doin’ here?’ asked Jan pleasantly. Her accent was abit like Lisa off The Simpsons. ‘How’s soccer goin’, Freddy?’‘Football’s fine, thanks’, corrected Freddy, ‘you know we might be going tothe Champions League?’‘You’re gonna play in the soccer finals, WOW!’ It was clear that Jan didnot understand that much about football.‘Not play, no’, explained Freddy patiently, ‘but if we win our league, wecould get free tickets to Athens’.‘Cool, free seats in the bleachers for the ball game at the play?offs!’‘She means free tickets in the stands at the final’, muttered Alex, smiling tohimself, ‘you do know she’s American?’‘Yes I had realised that’, replied Freddy, smiling back at Alex.‘You guys should do a tour, we love our soccer in the US. I could fix you upwith a few games’Wednesday 21 March 2007Champions League Challengers140‘Great’, said Freddy unconvincingly. Jan went on, staring out of thewindow for inspiration.‘Yeah, just imagine that, I could set you up one vacation with a few gamesagainst some elementary school freshmen. Imagine you guys jogging out in front of ahundred thousand fans at Yankee stadium. You’re dressed in your brand newuniform and sneakers…’Freddy looked at Alex who

smiled again (that was three times in oneday).‘She means she could set us up one holiday with some games against someprimary school kids. She think we could play at one of the big stadiums in New York.She’d get us new kit and boots’.‘Ah, thanks’, said Freddy, laughing. Alex and Jan laughed too.It all sounded a bit far?fetched, but it did lodge an idea somewhere inFreddy’s mind. He would come back to that one later.*****He spotted something small, black and shiny lying on the coffee tablein front of him. Reaching down to it, he said to Alex,‘Hey what does this do?’‘NO!, Whatever you do, don’t touch THAT!’ replied Alex, jumping overthe sofa to where Freddy was picking up the object.*****

**Champions League Challengers – Day 6**

*‘Hey what does this do?’*

*‘NO!, Whatever you do, don’t touch THAT!’ replied Alex, jumping over the sofa to where Freddy was picking up the object.*

*****

Freddy pulled his hand away from the device and took a quick step backwards.

*‘Sorry, shouldn’t have left it there’,* said Alex hastily, *‘actually there are a few things in here that you shouldn’t touch’.* He picked up the device and it emitted a short beep. But it was what he did with it next that caused Freddy’s mouth to drop wide open in disbelief.

Alex placed the device on the corner of a glass shelf which ran along the length of one wall. He held it there for a second or two.

Gradually, the wall started to glow. Freddy stepped a couple more paces backwards, as an enormous screen filled the wall space. The glow gave way to a brighter light as the screen warmed up.

*What is this? A computer? Some kind of huge TV? The latest in computer games consoles?* thought Freddy to himself.

*‘I know what you’re thinking’,* said Alex casually, and it crossed Freddy’s mind for a moment that perhaps he actually did.

*‘It’s just a big TV really, but it has a few useful features’.* Alex looked down at the handset. It looked like a remote control, but didn’t appear to have any buttons. Alex seemed to be prodding it, stroking it, pushing it.

*‘Doh!’* went the TV with a loud booming bass sound. Homer Simpson’s yellow face filled the entire wall.

*‘So, you can watch TV, then?’*said Freddy staring at what was the most amazingly massive TV he had ever seen.

Alex fiddled some more with the remote.

*‘Yes, but that’s not really what we use it for’,* said Alex, turning to look at Jan, who was standing, her arms folded, in the doorway. She looked concerned.

*‘He’s OK, he’s one of us’,* said Alex, looking at Jan and motioning his hand towards Freddy.

*‘So, you’ve got the latest satellite technology built in, look…’*

The screen filled with green and the markings of a football pitch could be clearly seen. Their football pitch!

*‘So, you’ve got a picture of our training ground on your TV? So?’* said Freddy, trying to sound casual.

*‘No, not a picture…video…in real time…look’.*

Alex pressed something and a faint circle appeared on the screen, with two lines crossing through the middle. Alex pressed again and the image zoomed in closer. About half the pitch now filled the screen. A small figure was kicking a ball around. Alex zoomed again. Michael’s features were clearly visible as he practiced. He flipped the ball up and caught it.

*‘Michael? You’ve got video of us on your TV?’*

*‘Real-time. Look he’s heading across the pitch. Coming our way’.*

*‘But…why?’*

*‘Look at this. I just put in the coordinates of Springhurst, New York, USA. More kids playing football…or soccer as they call it over there’.*

The image changed and a group of children playing football could be clearly seen. On the edge of the image were various numbers and words, apparently indicating that they were looking at a match three thousand miles away. Freddy just stared.

*‘Look at this’,* said Alex, warming to the task of showing Freddy around. He rolled up his sleeve.

*‘What?’* said Freddy, seeing nothing unusual on Alex’s arm.

*‘Minimicronanochip’*, said Alex, pointing at a small square shaped lump on his arm, *‘implanted. Watch!’*

Alex pressed his arm. The TV went off.

Alex pressed his arm again. Homer Simpson appeared.

Alex ran into the wall, arm first. Homer said *‘Doh!’*

Alex came over and shook hands with Freddy. Immediately, Homer faded away, and Michael could be seen trudging across the park.

Alex gripped his forearm with his other hand and held it there.

The lights in the room went off.

Alex shouted at his arm, *‘Arm, ON!’*

The lights came on.

Freddy sat down on the sofa.

A dog barked.

Freddy got up.

A cat went *'miaow'*.

The two animals strolled casually into the room.

*'Meet Pinky and Perky'* said Alex.

*****

Freddy's head was bursting with questions. He knew friends with video games, he knew friends with computer games, but stuff like this? It was like something out of a science fiction book.

*'But…but…why do you have all this stuff?*

*'OK, let me explain…can you keep a secret?'*

*'Well, yes…of course I can'.*

*'No, I mean really keep a secret, not just a 'well yes maybe' kind of secret. I mean a matter of life, and perhaps… of death'.*

Freddy gulped. He thought he'd just gone round for tea to cheer up his mate. This had turned into something quite different.

*'Erm…yes….definitely…no problem'.*

*'OK, sit down'.*

Freddy sat down as he was told.

*'You see, it's like this',* began Alex, *'you've probably heard that my father was…'*

The doorbell rang.

Freddy's nervousness at hearing the story he was about to be told contrasted with a certain relief that the story was going to be interrupted. Alex went to the door.

*'Oh hi, Michael, I was expecting you. How's things?'*

*'Hi, just wondered if you guys wanted to go up the park for a kickaround?'*

*'I won't thanks, got a few things to do, but I bet Freddy will come with you'.*

*'Er, yes',* said Freddy, looking at Alex, half-thinking that the story may now never be told. He picked up his bag and headed for the door with Michael.

They walked out of the house, Freddy's head buzzing with the new information about his friend.

*'OK, see you tomorrow for the Derby game!',* he turned and called out to Alex.

But the door had already shut.

*****

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**Spring Holidays – Day 1**

For the last match before the spring holidays, Mr Andrews had gathered them together early for some pre-match training. The game was against Derby Road, and although there were no easy games any more, this was one they felt they could win.

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*'Now, lads, we've got an hour before kick-off. We're going to start with some serious warming up. Let's start by jogging slowly, once round the pitch.'*

*'Easy for him to say'*, muttered Clara, as they set off on a little jog, *'he doesn't have to run anywhere. Lads, pah! Let's start…pah!'*

*'Come on,'* said Freddy, jogging backwards at the head of his team, *'you know how important it is to warm up properly…now, swing those arms'*.

Eight young footballers swung their arms obediently (well, with only a few little grumbles), and followed the lead of their captain. They completed their lap of the pitch and returned to Mr Andrews, who was also out of breath (because he always was).

Suddenly Hardy, breathing heavily, picked up his water bottle, pointed it to the sky, and shouted,

*'Mr Andrews, look out, bandits, one o'clock, coming out of the sun!'*

Mr Andrews, whose distinguished service in the army was often overlooked, flung himself instinctively to the ground, imagining enemy planes circling overhead.

*'Haha, April Fool!'*cried Hardy as Mr Andrews picked himself wearily up from the ground, his nose and right cheek streaked with mud. Mr Andrews, although he looked a bit like an April fool, did not look like he appreciated the joke.

*'Do I look like I appreciated that joke?'* he said.

*'No, sorry'*, said Hardy, who immediately realised that the joke was not appropriate, and on top of Mr Andrews's disgust when they played wearing red noses two weeks previously, was not sensible either.

*'Right, let's get on with it'*, said Mr Andrews, *'Michael here has been practicing some new routines. Show them what you know, Michael'*.

*****

They all knew what Michael could do. He had scored six goals already this season, but he had contributed so much more to the team. Where Hardy and Alex were the muscles of the team, where Freddy and Jaz were the brains, Michael was the beating heart, the inspiration, the provoker of most of the good things they did.

Although he didn't need the practice, he had obviously been busy. In his quiet way, he started to show them some of his new routines.

*‘So, for this one, you have the ball just behind your feet, then you kind of roll it up your left leg with your right foot, then you chip it up over your head with your heel, and trap it the other side’.*

His explanations clearly made sense to him, although the others had some trouble.

Freddy got it rolling up his leg, but could not master the chip over the head.

Jaz sat down staring at his football, staring at Michael performing the trick, wondering how on earth it could be done.

Hardy rolled the ball up his leg with his hand, dragged it up over his left shoulder, then tried to trap it as it fell. Instead he stood on the ball, and fell over.

Alex managed the trick once, stood with one foot on the ball, and stopped trying.

Wil was laughing so much at the idea of a ball rolling up his leg that he couldn’t do anything at all.

*‘OK, now try this one. It was on Match of the Day. Ronaldo did it.’*

They watched again, as Michael dribbled the ball forward, did one stepover, did another stepover, then stopped with the ball just by his right foot. He dipped his shoulder as if to go to the left, but then knocked the ball against his standing left leg. The ball, which seemed to be going left, in fact bounced into space to his right, and he set off on another run.

*‘I saw that one, I saw it!’* said Wil, before adding, *‘and I’ve been trying it…’* more quietly.

*‘Go on then, let’s see. It’s great for fooling defenders!’* said Michael.

Well, this one was beyond all of them.

Predictably, Hardy could not work out which leg to stand on, and ended up standing on neither of them. Alex tried once, slipped, and did not try again. Wil was sure he had got it, but also ended up on the floor. Freddy and Jaz didn’t try at all, but challenged Michael to go past them using one of the moves he had shown them. Predictably, he did. Easily.

*****

Michael was also on top form during the game, scoring a hat-trick. He kept most of his skills hidden, *‘I’m saving them for the big games’*, he had said, but he still inspired the victory.

*****

At the end of the game, with a satisfactory three-nil scoreline, Mr Andrews again gathered the team together.

Brian and Ron from the *Springhurst Daily Press* newspaper were on the sidelines as he spoke.

*‘Well played, guys, you gave a hundred percent, and we deserved the victory’*, and then, nodding in the direction of the reporters, he added, *‘you can write what you like gentlemen’*, before turning quickly and setting off across the field back to his car. The Lancaster Road players looked at their inspirational

coach with the usual mix of admiration and complete bemusement.

*‘Well, see you all tomorrow, then!’*, said Hardy, looking at Freddy and Michael.

*‘For what?’*, said Wil, in his usual state of high excitement.

*‘Sleepover, my place, tomorrow, wanna come?’*

Without hesitation, Wil replied,

*‘Sure do – see you then!’*

*****

But Wil had never done a sleepover before.

**Spring Holidays – Day 2**

*‘Sleepover, my place, tomorrow, wanna come?’*

*But Wil had never done a sleepover before.*

*****

The house creaked.

The house rattled.

The wind whistled.

The sleepover didn’t seem such a good idea after all.

Wil kept close to his brother.

*‘Look it’s only eight o’clock!’* said Hardy, who was obviously used to late bedtimes, *‘right, we’ll need this, and this, and…erm…oh yeah, definitely this!’*

*‘Why do we need a torch?’* asked Wil.

*‘Oh, never mind about that’,* replied Hardy, stuffing a few more things into a large canvas rucksack.

They were in Hardy’s bedroom on the third floor of Hardy’s house. Hardy lived to the north of the Springhurst playing fields right at the end of a quiet lane, in a big old house, surrounded by trees.

*It’s probably the wind whistling through the trees that is making the noise,* thought Wil to himself, trying not to worry about his first ever sleepover. It definitely was a stormy night though, and in the dusky gloom outside, he could see the branches of even quite big trees swaying in the wind.

Wil looked around the room.

Hardy’s room, which was a huge space at the top of the house, clearly reflected his status as the world’s most enthusiastic Chelsea fan.

A massive poster of John Terry on one wall.

A massive poster of Hardy, in his Chelsea kit, next to it.

A smaller picture, but still big enough, of Hardy with John Terry, taken when he was the Chelsea mascot at their Premiership-winning game in 2005.

A Chelsea duvet cover.

A Chelsea pillow-case cover.

A Chelsea mug on the table by the huge double bed.

*‘Is this where we’re all going to sleep?´* said Michael, looking at the bed.

Hardy, wearing Chelsea shirt, shorts, socks, and a pair of slippers with JoJose Mourinho’s face on them, grinned.

*‘Oh no!  We’re not sleeping here.  Just help me pack these last few things, and we’ll go!’*

The huge rucksack now contained four sleeping bags, food for the midnight feast, the torch, a length of rope, and a penknife.  Hardy continued packing.

*‘Rope, check.  Chelsea scarf, check.  Balloons, check…’*

*‘Balloons?  Why balloons?’* said Freddy.

*‘Keep enemies away,’* Hardy replied, as if it were quite normal to encounter enemies at a sleepover, *‘can’t be too careful’*.

Hardy finally seemed happy that everything was ready.

*‘Shall we go then?’*

*‘Go where?’*

*‘Follow me’*.

*****

They followed, with a brief glance round at each other behind Hardy’s back, and a mutual shrugging of shoulders as if to say, *what is he doing?*

None of them actually said anything.  They formed a line behind Hardy, each of them clutching their bags of sleepover-stuff, like pyjamas, toothbrushes, that sort of thing.

Hardy led them down through the house and out into the back garden.

Down the back garden.

Deep down.

Eight o’clock at night, early April.

It felt cold.

The wind was still blowing.

Wil shivered.

Still, they followed Hardy, staying close to him for imaginary warmth, and imagined security.  And just so that they could still see him in the darkness.

The trees around seemed to close in on Wil as they walked. This couldn't be just his garden, could it? A tree nearby hissed as the wind went through it. Another one groaned. There was a crack from Wil's left as a small branch was snapped off by nature's power. Wil stumbled slightly, as his foot tangled in some bracken. He was relieved when he put his hands out and was prevented from falling by Freddy's strong shoulder.

*'Right, here we are!'* said Hardy, stopping beside a large tree. Wil couldn't see up far enough to tell what kind of tree it was, but from the leaves scattered over the ground, with their jagged edges, he took it to be an oak tree.

*'We're…erm…staying here, are we?'* said Freddy, looking up into the immense branches of the mighty tree.

*'Well, not quite here,'* replied Hardy, *'that would be dangerous. We're staying up there. Now, where is that rope?'*

Hardy pointed up into the gloom. In the branches, high up in the tree, perhaps ten, fifteen, twenty metres above them.

A platform.

*****

Hardy flung the rope over a branch about five metres above their heads, shining the torch up to make sure the rope was secure. He then tied the rucksack to one end of the rope, and tied the other end to a smaller tree nearby.

*'Come on, you climb up this bit. Use the trunk for your feet and pull yourself up using the rope. Like this.'*

*He's done this before*, thought Freddy, as Hardy hauled himself up the rope, almost walking up the trunk of the tree before settling down on one of the massive lower branches.

*'Your turn'*, he called down. Michael was next.

*'I...I…I don't think I can do it'*, said Michael up to Hardy.

*'Just concentrate, you can do it. Hand over hand, foot over foot. You'll be up in no time!'*

Freddy looked up at Hardy in admiration. Here he was, in complete control, doing something dangerous, but totally fearless. Unlike the rest of them.

But they all did make it to the main branch. They sat there, breathing heavily. Hardy was chewing on an apple. Smiling. Like he came there every night.

*'OK, now its just normal tree-climbing'*.

The platform was a few metres above them, and it was true, it was quite an easy climb. Hardy got there first and crawled expertly up onto the deck. Michael was next, followed by Freddy. Wil brought up the rear.

Wil was still concerned.  He was the youngest, and they had left him until last.  His hands were cold, his jeans clung to his legs in the clammy April night.  He hadn't really wanted to come.  He pulled himself up over two big branches, making sure he had a solid foothold on each one before proceeding to the next one.  He could hear relieved laughter from above, and could see the light of the torch through the planks which formed the base of the platform.

*Just one more branch to get over,*  he thought to himself, *just one more.*  He reached up, and could put his hand on the top of the base.  He could hear his brother,

*'It's OK, Wil, you're nearly there'*

But he wasn't quite there.  Not near enough.

He made one final reach and put both of his hands on the decking, pushing with his legs so that he could get his elbows high enough to lever himself over.

The wind whistled again.

The tree seemed to sway slightly.

His hands were not quite secure on the deck.

As he pushed again, his right foot slipped, just a little on the wet branch below.  He tried to shift onto his left foot to make up for the lost grip on his right.  But he shifted too much, and his left foothold was now unbalanced.

Teetering, twenty metres in the air, left foot slipping inexorably off the branch, right foot waving helplessly in the thin air, hands sliding from the greasy wood of the decking.

Wil had heard of peoples' lives flashing in front of them.

Which is exactly what happened now, as he slipped down, down, down, into the deep, dark, night.

*****

**Spring Holidays – Day 3**

*Wil had heard of peoples' lives flashing in front of them.*

*Which is exactly what happened now, as he slipped down, down, down, into the deep, dark, night.*

*****

Freddy heard the piercing scream, and time seemed to stand still. Like in a movie, the scream from Wil below them started loud then faded gradually as he slipped down towards the ground. Although the distance was only a few metres, and the time was probably less than a second, the whole incident seemed to take minutes, hours, even days.

Hardy laughed, as Freddy raced over to the edge of the platform and squinted into the darkness below.

*'What, you're laughing? Where is he?'*

There was a temporary silence as Freddy continued to look down. Hardy just sat back nodding conspiratorially at Michael on the deck.

Then Freddy heard laughing from below.

*'Wil, you OK? What happened? Are you hurt'*

*'I'm fine. Don't worry, there's a net'.* Wil's voice, which seconds ago had sounded as scared and as desperate as it ever had, was now calm, light, and in control. *'I wish you'd told me!'* added Wil looking up through the gloom at the dimly lit platform.

*'I'll come and get you, it is a bit slippery'*, said Hardy, who strolled casually to the edge of the platform and then, equally casually, jumped off it, into the darkness. Freddy's heart gave another minor flutter until he remembered the nets below.

Hardy helped to push Wil from below, up from the springy net strung between the lower branches, onto the main boughs, and up onto the deck. He followed effortlessly up so that the four of them were now gathered on the platform, the torch vaguely illuminating each of their faces against the dark of the tree they were in, and the imposing shadows of the other trees around.

Wil was pleased to be up there finally, but still apprehensive about the night ahead. This was not the 'hot chocolate and a DVD' sort of sleepover he had imagined.

*****

*'Whoah! Phew! Wow!'* was all he could really say.

*'That was a close one. I can feel my heart going boompety-boompety-boom'.* Wil put his hand to his chest and held it there firmly. It seemed to help to slow down his heartbeat.

*'Boompety-boom? My heart goes thumpety-thump!'* said Hardy, feeling his own chest, then crawling over to Wil, *'let's listen'.*

*‘You’re right.  It is going boompety-boom’,* said Hardy, apparently surprised by this.

*‘Well mine’s going da-bah-da-bah…oosh, da-bah-da-bah…oosh…’,* said Freddy.

*‘Erm, mine’s not beating at all…I don’t think’,* said Michael, his small face wrinkling up in concern through the shadows.  He clutched his hand close to his chest and felt around.

*‘Well, we all know you’re pretty cool, but you can’t be cool and heartless’,*  said Hardy, inexplicably laughing at what he thought was a great joke.  He went over and put his ear to Michael’s chest.

*‘You’re holding the wrong side!  When I said ‘left’ I meant on your left as you look down your nose towards your chest, not left as someone else looks at you!’*

*‘Oh, I see’,* said Michael, not really seeing the point.

*‘Pootely-poo…pootely-poo…pootely-poo!’* sang Hardy as he listened to Michael’s chest.

*‘No way!’* protested Michael, *‘my heart doesn’t go pootely-poo’.*

*‘Does too, pootely-poo!’* sang Hardy again.

*‘Come on, if we’re sleeping here, we’d better get sorted out’,*  said Freddy, changing the subject.

*****

The tree-house had some protection from the weather, with a canvas tarpaulin stretched tautly between some of the upper branches.  It also had walls on three sides, but that left one side open to the elements, and there were lots of gaps where the rain and wind could get through.

They settled down on the hard boards, cushioned slightly by the sleeping bags Hardy had brought. Arranged in a star-shape, heads to the middle, Hardy brought out the provisions he had packed.

*‘Scotch egg, anyone?’* he said, offering round four brown round things, looking a bit like cricket balls, but vaguely egg-shaped.

*‘Er, no thanks’,* was the general reply.

*‘Egg sandwich? I made them myself!’* he offered, unwrapping from their cling film four rather grey looking sandwiches.

*‘Er, no thanks’,* came the reply again.

*‘How about some cold omelette?’*

*‘Do you have anything without eggs in it’,* said Freddy, sort of politely, although his stomach was making some strange churning noises.

*‘Oh come on!’* yelled Hardy, *‘it is Easter, after all!’*

*‘Yes’*, said Michael quietly, *‘but that doesn’t mean we need eggs in everything’*.

*‘Eggsactly!’* said Wil, *‘I b-egg you, Hardy, no more eggs!’*

*‘Eggxellent!  Fine then!’* said Hardy impatiently.

*‘Can’t we just have some r-eggular food?’* said Freddy.

*‘Well, I’m getting m-egga egg-xasperated!’* said Michael.

*‘So, you won’t be r-eggquiring any of this, then?’*  said Hardy with a superior smile, pulling out four huge Easter eggs from his bag.

*‘Wow!  Thanks!’*

They gorged themselves on Easter eggs.  They talked rubbish.  They listened to the wind and the rain slapping at the tree-house.  They talked some more.  Michael stopped talking.  Freddy stopped talking.  Wil carried on talking for a bit.  Then silence.  Then a sleepy voice from Hardy’s sleeping bag.

*‘Just sleep, will’ya, it’s Easter tomorrow!’*

*That’s easier said than done*, thought Wil.  Clothes slightly damp from the walk through the undergrowth, bones slightly aching, floor slightly hard, the whistling wind, and a stomach more than slightly full of chocolate.  These were not the best conditions for a good night’s sleep.

But worse, far worse, was to come.

Drifting into a half sleep, only partly aware of the place and time, Wil slowly realised that all was not right.  He mentally checked.  Arms, OK.  Legs, OK.  Toes, wiggle them, OK.  Face?  Face?

I said, FACE?

N…N…Not OK!

Something hairy, crawling across…!

*****

**Spring Holidays – Day 4**

*N…N…Not OK!*

*Something hairy, crawling across his face…!*

*****

Wil screamed again, scrabbling madly with his hands at his face and neck. The thing, whatever it was, had gone, but it was pitch dark. He didn't know where it was in the darkness. He didn't really know where he was in the darkness.

There was the sound of frantic unzipping of sleeping bags.

Consternation of three half-asleep boys.

There was a low rumbling sound from the fourth sleeping bag.

*'Are you OK? Is that someone laughing?'* It was difficult to make out who was talking. But the low rumbling was definitely there.

*'Is that Hardy laughing? Oh, not him again!'*

*'Ig woff joft a nickoo choke'*, said the sleeping bag indistinctly.

The torch came on. Hardy emerged from sleeping bag number four, clutching a piece of string, to which was tied a small piece of material.

*'I said, it was just a little joke!'* he said, more distinctly this time.

*'No, no, NO!'* said Freddy, who had not even been the butt of the joke, '*it is not funny, and you know Wil is scared of this place anyway. Come on lads, let's go!'*.

Wil and Freddy started rolling up the sleeping bags in the half-light. The torch went off.

*'Come on, that's one joke too far, put the light on, we're leaving'*.

*'Please don't go'*, said Hardy quietly, *'I didn't want to scare him, really. I want you guys to stay here with me. It's my favourite place in the whole world'*.

Freddy looked around him. Damp, dark, and probably dangerous? Wil, worried out of his wits? Shadows silhouetted against the shrouded sky? It really didn't seem a very nice place at that moment. But then again, four friends having fun in the fog? Midnight madness in the mighty oak? Hardy, happy and horrible at the same time? Maybe they should stay.

*'OK, we'll stay, but definitely no more tricks, right?'*

*‘Right’,* said Hardy.

*****

The night passed quietly enough, despite the sounds of nature all around them.

In the morning, they compared notes.

Hardy was up first, packing his stuff into the rucksack, unaffected by the hard boards they had been sleeping on.

*‘OK, let’s go and get some breakfast! I think the others are coming over as well’.*

Wil stretched awkwardly as he got up, realising that he must have slept in an bad position.

*‘Did you hear that howling?’* he said, as if it was quite a natural thing.

*‘Don’t worry’,* said Hardy, wisely not trying any more winding up, *‘it was probably a fox, but they couldn’t possibly get up here, and anyway, they wouldn’t be interested in humans’.*

*‘Well, I’m glad about that!’* said Michael, *‘but what’s that noise now?’*

They listened for a few seconds. There was an unmistakeable howling sound coming from the garden. Wil again crept closer to Freddy.

*‘That, my friends, is Clara!’* said Hardy, and sure enough, way down below they could see their star defender waving her arms, howling a little bit, and calling them in for breakfast. They packed up and got ready to leave.

*‘You can go the way we came if you like, just jump into the net, then climb down the branches. I’m going this way’,* and with that Hardy leapt over the low wall on the far side of the deck, grabbing at a stout rope which was hanging about a metre away. As they watched they could see the rope was knotted at various points, and Hardy was down on the ground in about thirty seconds.

*‘I’m going that way too’,* said Michael, who proved to be an expert tree-climber and descender. Freddy and Wil jumped into the net and took the longer route.

*****

When they got into the house, Hardy’s mother had been hard at work, preparing a cooked breakfast for them.

The only problem was that she had obviously forgotten what she was doing in the middle of cooking, and gone off somewhere. The food, when they got it to the table, left a lot to be desired. Freddy tried to remain polite.

*‘Erm, Hardy, what is this?’* he said, pointing down to a mass of greyish, yellowish stuff on his plate. It looked like it was about to move at any moment.

*‘Scrambled egg, lovely!’* said Hardy with a muffled grin, stuffing his face with the stuff.

*‘And THIS?’* said Clara, holding up a small strip of black stuff between her fingers.

*‘Mmmmm, bacon!’*replied Hardy with his mouth full, which didn’t stop him breaking a piece of the black stuff off in his mouth.

*‘Hey! What’s that? Look out!’*said Michael, pointing at plumes of smoke emerging from one corner of the room.

*‘Oh great! Toast’s ready!’* replied Hardy, walking casually over to the toaster, wafting smoke out of his eyes as he struggled to identify where the toast actually was.

*‘I’ll stick with bread and jam, thanks’,* said Michael, sticking his knife into the pot of strawberry jam, then trying vainly to get it out again.

But they did manage to eat something, and the night had not been so bad. And now they had time for some serious shoot-out card swapping.

*****

*‘I’ve just completed Liverpool, AT LAST!’* said Wil, *‘and they were brilliant last week! If they play like that tomorrow, they’ll go through, and we can see them in Athens!’*

*‘It’s only the semi-final, they’re not through yet, and we don’t know we’re going to Athens’,* said Jaz wearily.

*‘Well, I’ve completed the whole folder’,* said Michael proudly, reaching across the table for his own folder, *‘All the five star shinies, all the teams, all the updates’.*

‘*Wow’,* said Wil in admiration, ‘*let’s have a look, then’.*

*****

There was a small pause, as Michael leafed through his folder. Gradually a look of complete horror came over his face. He spoke louder than they had ever heard him before.

‘NO! ALL MY FIVE STAR SHINIES ARE MISSING!’

*****

**Spring Holidays – Day 5**

*There was a small pause, as Michael leafed through his folder. Gradually a look of complete horror came over his face. He spoke louder than they had ever heard him before.*

*'NO! ALL MY FIVE STAR SHINIES ARE MISSING!'*

*****

They spent most of Wednesday morning searching for the cards.

Wil and Michael looked through the folder several times, to see whether the cards had been misplaced somewhere, or if someone had moved them from the correct slots, but they had not found anything.

Hardy had searched around the sitting-room where Michael had left the folder, before they had gone to the tree-house for the sleepover.

Clara had searched her own half-empty folder, and had gone out with Freddy and climbed back up to the tree-house, to see if there were any clues there. Then, she and Freddy had gone back to his house to pick up his Super Sleuth Detective Kit.

He was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery.

*****

*'You've got to help me'* he said to Clara when they got back to Hardy's house, *'we need to talk to all the possible suspects'*.

*'OK'*, said Clara, *'sounds like fun. Do you want me to apply, you know, any pressure to the suspects?'*

*'Er, no thanks, that won't be necessary. I've got my kit here, so the first thing we need to do is to look at the evidence'*.

Freddy took the folder and studied the gaps where the missing cards should be. He took out his magnifying glass and carefully ran his eye over the transparent sheet that formed the card holder.

*'Hmmm…'* he said in a Sherlock Holmes sort of way, *'very interesting'*.

*'Have you found something?'* said Clara excitedly, *'let me see, go on…'*

*'Wait, if you want to be my assistant, you need to help, and we must not rush this. But there is something there, a smudge or something. Hand me that powder over there'*.

Clara reached over and passed Freddy the fingerprint dusting powder from the kit. He gingerly unscrewed the top from the bottle and gently tapped the base, watching the fine grey powder cover the plastic. He carefully lifted the folder and tapped it gently so that most of the powder fell off again.

In three areas there was a clear fingerprint pattern. Most of the prints were around Michael Carrick and Wayne Rooney on the Man United page. The culprit had definitely been watching the 7-1 destruction of

Roma the previous night.

*‘Right, let’s get the suspects in’*, said Freddy, *‘start with Wil please’*.

*****

Whilst Clara went out to get Wil, Freddy set up two chairs either side of the small table, and switched on a small wall-lamp. He turned off the main lights so that the table was dimly lit by the weak bulb.

*‘Hey, let go of me!’* protested Wil, as Clara shoved him into the room, *‘I didn’t steal anything!’*

*‘We’ll see about that, won’t we?’* said Clara, pushing Wil down onto the chair.

*‘Press here, then here’*, she said, jabbing Wil’s fingers first onto an ink pad, then onto a sheet of bright white paper, at the top of which she had written,

*PRISONER NUMBER 1 – WILL - FINGERPRINTS*

*She is taking this a bit seriously, isn’t she?* thought Freddy as he watched Clara warming to her task of assistant investigator. He turned to Wil, sitting opposite him,

*‘Your name, please?’*

*‘Oh for goodness…!’*

*‘JUST answer the question!’* said Clara, before Wil could object any further.

*‘I’m Wil, and I didn’t steal any cards?’*

*‘Where were you on the night of the 9th April?’* started Freddy formally.

*‘You know where I was, I was up a tree with you’*.

*‘Please just answer the question’*.

*‘I was up a tree, with you and Hardy and Michael. I didn’t sleep at all that night, and I didn’t see anything. When we returned at 08.00 hours in the morning, the cards had gone.’*

*‘But your fingerprints are all over this folder’*, said Freddy, studying the intricate patterns on the folder and comparing them with the patterns just taken from Prisoner Number 1.

*‘So? Maybe I had a look at his cards sometime, so did you probably’*, said Wil.

*‘OK, thank you. You are free to leave’*. Clara stepped back, glaring at Wil as he left. She sat down in the chair he had just vacated.

*****

*‘Definitely guilty!’* she said.

*‘What makes you say that?’*

*‘Ah, you can tell by the look on his face. Fingerprints everywhere. Guilty as sin! Just wants to hide the fact he wanted those special cards.’*

*‘That’s not what I think. Can you get the next suspect please’.*

*****

There was a pushing and shoving at the doorway as Clara tried to get Hardy to come forward. He was having none of it.

*‘Get on with it, or we’ll definitely think it was you!’* cried Clara, again applying her perverse logic to the criminal investigation. Hardy sat down and was fingerprinted. Freddy looked over his notes with his magnifying glass, then looked up slowly at Hardy.

*‘I put it to you, Hardy, that you left the tree-house during the night to take the missing cards and to insert them into your own folder. So the crime occurred between the hours of 9.00 pm and 7.00 am, when the rest of us were asleep. Your motive was to build up your own collection, and you knew that the rest of us would not dare to come down from the tree in the dark, therefore you could not be detected’.* Freddy was really getting the hang of this detective thing, *‘how do you plead?’*

*‘Definitely, one hundred percent, without a doubt, two hundred percent, NOT GUILTY!’* said Hardy.

*‘Hmmm, I see, let me have a look at these prints here’.*

Freddy looked hard at the fingerprints taken from Hardy and tried to match them to the three dusty marks on the folder. He stood up and walked around the gloomy room, thinking. Clara, meanwhile, was rubbing her hands together, moving urgently from foot to foot, apparently eager to get her hands on the culprit. Suddenly Freddy half-shouted,

*‘Aha! Do you have a pair of gloves?’*

*‘Eh?’* said Hardy.

*‘A pair of gloves? I put it to you that you were wearing gloves when you committed the crime, as your fingerprints do not match those on the folder!’*

*‘Ha! Got you now!’* said Clara from the corner. Unhelpfully.

*‘I can never find my gloves, if you want to know the truth, ‘* said Hardy miserably, *‘well actually, I can always find one, but never a pair. I had this one on for a while whilst we were tree-climbing’.*

*‘AHA! So, Clara come here please’,* said Freddy dramatically.

Clara approached, convinced they had got their man.

*‘Place one hand behind your back, and then try to remove a card from the folder’.*

Clara did as she was told, and removed a card, one-handed, without much difficulty.

*‘That proves it.  You, Hardy, are a major suspect.  You may go now, but do not speak to anyone about this matter.’*  Hardy trudged forlornly out of the room.

*‘OK, we’re nearly there.  Bring out the prisoner Michael!’*

*****

*Can you work out whodunnit?  Discuss with other readers on the website in the comments section at the bottom of the story page!*
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**Spring Holidays – Day 6**

*Audio only 13th April 2007*
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**Semi-Finals Week – Day 1**

It was presentation time, after the match against Wanderers.

The Lancaster Road players were sitting in the warm April sunshine. Mr Andrews walked down the group of players, making sure they were quiet and in a straight line.

On their right was the team they had just played, the Wanderers. The Wanderers often referred to themselves as *'The Mighty Wanderers'*, and indeed they had that name printed onto their shirts, alongside the name of their sponsors, a local Springhurst travel agency.

*'Oi, get off!'* said one of the Wanderers players as his friend Barry tugged at his hair from behind. Mr Andrews, and the Wanderers coach, glared at him. He just pulled harder. Barry was well known to the Lancaster Road players, being one of the dirtiest players in the league, and also being the notorious one they called 'Barry Bully' at school. The one who seemed to always be bugging someone. Always. Every minute of every day.

*'Owww!'* cried one of the Derby Road players from one of the lines of players further away from them.

*'Shut up!'* screamed their coach.

*'Hee-heee!'* cackled one of the girls from the Hags United team.

*'Cackle cackle!'* went their coach.

The Butterfield team were the last to join the presentation party. Their coach had been giving them a last-minute post-match pre-training full-on tactical talk. They sauntered gloomily to their place and sat down in a row. Wil turned to Freddy, and was about to say something when he saw Mr Andrews still glaring at them. He decided not to speak.

The league organiser called for quiet.

*'QUIETTTT!'* he screamed noisily. Everyone shut up.

*'One brief announcement…'* he continued, *'next week is the last game of the season…'*

*'Yessss!'* said several players from among the teams.

*'QUIIIII-EEEEE-TTTT!'* he shrieked at the top of his voice. Several players covered their ears.

*'…next week is the last game of the season. I am pleased to say that there is a magnificent prize for the winners of the league…'*

Everyone, in every team, went completely silent. Even the parents, standing idly chatting in the sunshine, went silent.

*'…yes, the prize, as announced a few weeks ago, for the winning team, is a trip to the Champions League final itself.'*

*‘Yessss!’* went everyone, in every team.

*‘Woo-hoo!’* went all the parents.

*‘QUUUIIII-EEEEEEEE-TTTTTTT!’* bawled the League Organiser.

*‘…now as you know, there are only two teams that can possibly win the league from here.’*

Players from five teams looked down at the ground disconsolately. Players from Butterfield and Lancaster Road looked at each other triumphantly.

The League Organiser looked at everyone, threateningly, and then said,

*‘OK, managers, over to you. Let’s start with Wanderers’.*

*****

*‘Well, yes, er, erm…thanks to Lancaster Road for a great game today. You really have got some great players there…little lad on the wing…what was his name again, was it Michael…yes, you’ve got a good future, son, well played. To my lads, you gave everything, well done, couldn’t quite get the equaliser. But today, my player of the day award goes to…Fred.’*

There were murmurs of appreciation from the crowd. A lone high voice whooped *‘Yo Freddy!’*. Presumably Fred’s Mum.

*‘OK, let’s move on to Lancaster Road. And keep it brief please managers’.*

Mr Andrews took a deep breath, drew his shoulders back, and cleared his throat.

*‘I would like to start by thanking my opposite number from Wanderers, for a thoroughly entertaining and hard-fought game’.* He turned to the Wanderers coach,

*‘Thank you for a thoroughly entertaining and hard-fought game’,* he said. The Wanderers coach smiled and nodded.

*‘..and well played you Wanderers players’.*

A few of them smiled. Knowing smiles from a few Wanderers parents noted the compliment.

Turning to his own team, Mr Andrews continued,

*‘Lancaster Road, once again you have proved your ability, your class, and your pedigree at this level. You have passed, headed and kicked your way to victory. I salute you.* (he saluted). *I must mention one or two players in particular. In goal, Hardy, you were magnificent today, I couldn’t believe the save you made in the second half was possible…congratulations. In defence, Clara, my dear, your tenacity and strength was of the highest order…’*

The League Organiser looked at his watch. Mr Andrews continued,

*‘…and Freddy, not only did you fulfil your defensive duties, but your organisation of your team was just*

*top class.'*

Freddy smiled at the comment, but looked with concern at the League Organiser, who seemed to be moving from foot to foot in some consternation.

*'…Wil and Jaz in midfield, let me deal with you together…'* continued Mr Andrews as the crowd of parents started murmuring amongst themselves,

*'…you both had a huge part to play in this victory, which leaves us on the verge of the Champions League…'*

The League Organiser coughed loudly.

*'…and my strikers, Alex, you were superb, and ladies and gentlemen…'* Mr Andrews looked across at the assembled crowd, most of whom were talking to each other, playing keepy-uppy with their infants, or starting to walk away.

*'…Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd like to tell you about…'*

*'Please…!'* said the League Organiser, *'we have to move on!'* There was a ripple of applause from the parents.

*'Alright, let me just say that at training this week our striker Michael here showed some incredible tricks and today, in the pressure of a game situation, repeated them, scored two goals, and laid on the other two for Alex. Now, let me tell you a little bit about Michael…'*

*'NO!'* yelled the League Organiser moving threateningly towards the still-talking Mr Andrews,

*'Er…OK….OK…my man of the match this week is our substitute JoJo!'*

A confused JoJo made her way up to collect the trophy. The rest of the team smiled knowingly at Mr Andrews's continuing, unpredictable, yet vaguely charming behaviour.

*****

As they made their way across the field to the car park, Wil saw his mother talking to another lady. There was much nodding of heads, and both ladies were writing something in their diaries. Wil overhead a bit of the conversation.

*'Yes, OK, tomorrow then, I'll drop him off. Thanks darling! Bye!'*

Wil looked at his mother, and then at her departing friend. His jaw dropped. His heart missed a beat. His eyes widened. His brain throbbed. His nose sniffed and his liver did whatever livers do when they are amazed and frightened. *'What was that about Mum?'* said Wil suspiciously.

*'Oh nothing really, I've just invited Barry round for tea tomorrow'*

**Semi-Finals Week – Day 2**

*‘Oh nothing really, I’ve just invited Barry round for tea tomorrow’*

*****

*‘Ding dong!’*

The doorbell rung loud and long in Wil’s ears.

*‘Seeya!’*, said Freddy, *‘I’m off!’*.

*‘Yeh…bye..’* said Wil miserably. Freddy disappeared out of the back door.

*‘Ding dong!’* went the bell again. Wil dragged himself over to the door to answer it.

No-one there. He looked around. He closed the door. He went back into the room.

*‘Ding dong!’* went the bell again.

Wil opened the door again. Barry’s mum was standing there, with a grinning, gurning child just behind her.

*‘Oh hello, Wil dear, Barry IS looking forward to this afternoon, aren’t you Barry darling?’*

Barry peered out from behind his mother and grinned again.

*‘Now do be good, dear, I’ll come to pick you up at six. Remember it’s your karate lesson this evening. Bye!’*

*Karate lesson!* thought Wil, *that’s all I need. Not only the meanest dude in the entire universe, but now one that is trained in advanced martial arts. For three whole hours. Oh no!*

He looked miserably down as Barry marched through the door and started to check out the house.

*‘What’ve you got then?’* demanded Barry, looking disdainfully around the room.

*‘Not much, what do you wanna do?’* replied Wil, trying to sound tough and cool at the same time, *‘you want to play football?’*

*‘I DON’T play football!’* replied Barry to Wil’s surprise, *‘football is for losers and boozers, forget it!’*

*‘Right…’* said Wil, *‘how about cricket?’*

*‘I DON’T play cricket, cricket is for dropouts, washouts, and layabouts, forget it!’*

*‘Hmmm, do you like board games?’*

*‘BORED! That’s just what they make me. That’s why they’re called BORED GAMES. Only for*

*cissies, prissies and little missies!'*

*'Oh, well, I like Monopoly…'* ventured Wil.

*'Monopoly? MONOPOLY? A game played with old boots, a hat and a silly little car? No THANKS! Only for mugs, bugs, slugs and thugs!'*

*'Well, you should know…'* whispered Wil under his breath.

*'What did you say?'* Barry said threateningly.

By this time, Wil was thinking that there was nothing at all that would please or entertain Barry. Wil was almost past caring about the afternoon, when he remembered what Barry's Mum had said. With a deep breath, he said to Barry,

*'Shall we do some karate?'*

*'Yessss!'* said Barry finally, *'but I warn you, mate, I'm brilliant at karate, actually, don't tell anyone, but I'm licenced to kill…!'*

Wil gulped a couple of times, then looked across at Barry, who was rolling up his sleeves and standing with his hands splayed out in front of him, karate-style. Wil gulped again, and took a step backwards.

*'HIIIII-AAAAGHH!'* screamed Barry, running a couple of steps before launching himself into the air, his right foot pointed and aiming straight at Wil's throat.

*'AAAARGGGGGHHHH!'* screamed Barry, as Wil dodged to one side, grabbed Barry's outstretched foot as it passed by him, and helped Barry fly into the leaves of the pot plant in the corner. Barry came to rest tangled up in the foliage, with his head embraced by the leaves and branches. He sat there for several minutes, panting pathetically.

The doorbell rang again. Wil looked pitifully at Barry before going down to answer it.

He was relieved to see Michael at the door, clutching a small package.

*'Hiya, come in, great to see you!'*

Michael stepped in quickly through the doorway.

*'I recorded the semi-final last night, d'you want to watch it?'*

*'Yeh, great…'* said Wil, before adding, *'…er…I've got Barry upstairs…'*

*'Oh sorry…'* said Michael quickly, turning for the door, *'I've had enough of him at school'*.

*'No, it's OK, I've got him sort of trapped'*

*'You've trapped Barry?'*

*'Well, he's tangled up in a Russian Vine'*

*‘OK, this I have to see!’* said Michael, coming back into the house.

*****

They went back upstairs to find Barry dusting himself off having extracted himself from the vine’s clutches.

*‘That’s the last time I come here!’* he said.

*‘Fine by me,’* said Wil, *‘now just sit down, shut up, eat that, and watch this!’*

Wil handed Barry a plate of sandwiches that his mother had prepared downstairs. Barry sat on a chair and launched into a sandwich.

*‘Urghhh! Marmite!’* he yelled.

*‘Shut UP!’* yelled Michael and Wil together. Barry chomped miserably and watched as the Manchester United v Milan match came on the screen.

*‘Look, look now…’* said Michael excitedly as Cristiano Ronaldo bundled in United’s first goal.

*‘And this…this is brilliant!* Wayne Rooney latched on to Scholes’ precise pass.

They watched until the ninety minutes was up.

*‘Well, that’s it, full time…’* said Wil as Ryan Giggs set off on another run.

*‘Wait for it…’* said Michael, as Giggs turned inside and slipped the ball to Rooney, who instantly fired it past a surprised Dida in the Milan goal. Michael and Wil hugged each other in the excitement.

As the match ended, Wil turned to Michael,

*‘OK, if you know so much about football, what’s the score going to be in the other semi-final tonight? Chelsea-Liverpool?*

Michael scratched his chin. Michael scratched his head. Michael scratched the underside of his foot. Michael jumped in the air whilst scratching his left ear. Michael scratched both knees at the same time.

After a short while, he said,

*‘Chelsea at home? Stamford Bridge? Definitely 2-1 to Chelsea. Vital away goal to Liverpool.’*

*‘We’ll see!’* said Wil.

*****

**Semi-Finals Week – Day 3**

*'Chelsea at home? Stamford Bridge? Definitely 2-1 to Chelsea. Vital away goal to Liverpool.'*

*'We'll see!'* said Wil.

*****

Michael always seemed to be right, so Wil and Freddy were surprised to be able to tease him about being wrong. They were gathered on Thursday afternoon for a vital training session before their own big match on Saturday.

*'No I was right actually',* Michael said, clearly ignoring the facts.

*'How could you possibly be right, you said one-nil!'* squeaked Wil.

*'I was talking about goal difference, you see, you wouldn't understand…'* replied Michael.

*'You said two-one and an away goal to Liverpool. You were wrong!'* Wil started a chorus of '*Michael got it wrong, ner, ner, na-ner, ner'* until Freddy kicked him.

*'Ow, what was that for?'*

A mischievous smile came over Michael's facial features.

*'OK, I was wrong, but if Reina hadn't made that save from Lampard, and Cech hadn't tipped that Gerrard shot round the post, I would have been right!'*

*'Yeh, yeh, yeh…whatever'* said Wil. Michael started juggling a football with his feet, and talking at the same time.

*'But what a game! D'you think it was a penalty, Mourinho said it was?*

Jaz was listening to the conversation as they warmed up.

*'No way! And did you see Mourinho afterwards as they showed him the replay? He always thinks someone's out to get him!'*

*'OK, everyone, gather round please!'* said Coach Azalea, bringing his young team around him. He had clearly been watching the match as well.

*'Now, Butterfield on Saturday, lads and lass. A good team. And a good manager, although they always seem get the best of the refereeing decisions.'*

*He really has been watching too much football,* thought Freddy. Mr Andrews continued,

*'Now, Baz here…'*

*'Er…Jaz',* said Jaz.

*‘Yes, sorry, Naz here has been looking at the league statistics, haven’t you, Maz?’*

Jaz threw up his arms in mock resignation at Mr Andrews’s inability to get his name right, but he carried on, standing by a board Mr Andrews had put up at the side of the pitch.

*‘Yes, so, the Butterfield game. It’s a must win game for us. At the moment, as you know, we have played 11, lost 1, drawn 1, won 9. I’ve calculated the win percentage which comes in at 82%, and our goal difference is currently 21, resulting from our for/against ratio of 3.33. That’s an average of 2.73 goals per game.’*

*‘How can you score 2.73 goals?’* moaned Hardy after Jaz had finished his statistical marathon.

*‘What are you talking about?’* said Wil.

*‘What he’s trying to say,’* said Freddy patiently, *‘is that we’ve done well, but that it all comes down to the last match’.*

*‘And over the last ten years, only 4.7% of teams who have lost their first game have gone on to win the league’,* added Jaz unnecessarily.

*‘Yes, OK, but what do we have to do?’* said Hardy in his straight-talking way.

*‘Well, Butterfield have a much better goal difference than us, and we’re on the same points’.*

*‘Well, that makes it simple, doesn’t it?’* said Freddy, *‘we just have to win the game tomorrow. A draw is not good enough’.*

*‘You got it!’* said Jaz.

*‘Right, OK then’* said Hardy.

*‘Right, we can do it!’* chirped Wil.

*‘No problem’* said Alex.

*‘Hmmm…’* said Clara.

*‘Ooh la la!’* said JoJo.

Michael said nothing, but flicked the ball at his feet onto his knee, where it remained perched for a moment before he volleyed it into the goal some fifteen metres away.

*‘Let’s win it for Bally!’* said Mr Andrews.

Everyone giggled a bit.

*‘No, I mean it,’* said Mr Andrews firmly, *‘yesterday saw the passing of one of the great England players, a man who was a star of England’s only World Cup win in the glorious summer of 1966. So let us stand here for a moment and remember the genius of Alan Ball. Show your appreciation please’.*

Mr Andrews started clapping slowly to himself. Freddy beckoned to the others to join in. A strange sight perhaps, nine people clapping to themselves in the middle of a football pitch, but their own tribute to a great player from the past.

*****

Mr Andrews started drawing markings onto his board, which had some basic football pitch lines marked on it.

*'Did you see the ground Cole made up to score last night?'* he said, scrawling an arrow from the half-way line indicating JoJo Cole's amazing run into the box from his own half.

*'He could see Drogba here (*he drew another scrawl heading down the right wing) *and knew that there was a good chance of the cross coming over here* (he drew a large circle on the penalty spot) *or here* (he drew a circle on the six-metre line) *or even here* (he drew a circle in row Z of the crowd), *but what in fact happened was the ball came from here, to here, over there and then to here…'*

By this time the diagram looked like a bad day at Spaghetti Junction, but the point was well made,

*'…you are playing for each other, you have to look for space, you have to anticipate what each other is going to do. Freddy I expect you to play the JoJo Cole role, and Michael, you will be playing down the right wing today, supplying the crosses like Drogba and Robben do for Chelsea.'*

The two players swelled with pride at the comparisons, and listened whilst Mr Andrews set out his other plans for the rest of the team. He finished with one of his rousing speeches, topped off with a flourish,

*'…and then, my friends, you can call yourself Champions, and take your places at the Champions League final on May 23rd!'*

*'It'll be Chelsea v Milan',* whispered Michael, *'I'm sure of it!'*

*****

**Semi-Finals Week – Day 4**

*'…and then, my friends, you can call yourself Champions, and take your places at the Champions League final on May 23rd!'*

*'It'll be Chelsea v Milan', whispered Michael, 'I'm sure of it!'*

*****

It was Sunday morning, the day after the Butterfield game. Tired and emotional, the entire Lancaster Road squad had gathered early at Hardy's house to have breakfast, and to catch the reply of Match of the Day. The old house smelt of breakfast, and cooking sounds were coming from some far-off corner. In front of the TV the team were arranged almost according to their positions.

Hardy and JoJo were standing behind the big leather sofa where most of the others were arranged.

Freddy and Jaz were sitting on the sofa.

Clara and Wil were perching, one on each arm.

Alex was standing to one side, looking at his watch.

Michael, a bundle of nervous energy, was walking from one side of the room to the other, one moment deep in thought, the next replaying in his head some great move or another, the next moment standing transfixed by the TV.

It was getting towards nine o'clock. The show was coming to an end.

*****

*'Well, a good win for West Ham, there, Gents',* said Gary Lineker, turning to the two Alans.

*'Absolutely shocking defending by Wigan there, Gary. They're now in total freefall, aren't they Alan?'* Alan Hansen turned to Alan Shearer.

*'Well, yes, West Ham did really well, though. I particularly like the boy Harewood who made a big difference when he came on for Zamora. He's on fire at the moment'.*

*'Well thanks gentlemen,'* said Gary smoothly, *'but before we go, a very special new item where we feature a game from one of the lower divisions. Yesterday, our cameras were at the top-of-the-table clash between Lancaster Road and Butterfield FC in the Springhurst Youth League. We pick up the action mid-way through the first half. The commentator is Jacquie Oatley'.*

*****

*'A girl! Commentating! WHAT!'* said Hardy.

Clara didn't actually have to speak. She stood up and glared back at Hardy, who shrunk back as she looked like she was about to hit him.

*‘Sorry, sorry’*, he said, before quickly adding, *‘she’s very good really’*. Clara sat down, still glaring.

The picture switched from the JJB stadium and the studio to Springhurst park. Jacquie’s voice was describing the action.

*****

*‘Thank you Gary, and welcome to Springhurst Park for the first time. And here is Freddy now, the United captain, moving smoothly out of defence. Look at the boy go…he finds Michael in midfield…characteristic run from him there, very elegant, close control…he finds Jaz who plays a first time ball across the pitch to Alex. Inside to Wil steaming up from deep…his cross finds Clara….no!....just too long once again. Neither team quite finding its range. So far an edgy affair…perhaps not surprising considering what is at stake…*

*This time it is Butterfield on the attack, a long ball forward…oh!...great defensive header from Jaz…returned that attack with interest…but here they come again…that’s a good ball into the area…out comes the goalkeeper…OH!....that was a clumsy challenge…he goes down. The goalkeeper Hardy is hardly daring to look at the referee…*

*…but he’s waved play on…actually he is having a word with the Butterfield player there…it might be about diving…a lucky escape for someone I think…*

*****

At half-time, the cameras switched back to the studio.

*‘Well, gents, this one is too close to call, isn’t it?’*

*‘Absolutely shocking defending at the end of the first half there. Butterfield are lucky to go in level, Gary’.*

*‘And you Alan?’*

*‘Well, yes, Gary. In my Newcastle days we always liked a good Number 9. That’s why I’ve been watching the boy Michael. Got some potential there Gary, good with both feet, speed off the mark, y’know, he could have a bright future’.*

The other Alan piped up.

*‘Yes Gary, I can only see this game going one way. A goalkeeping mistake or a piece of inspiration from Michael’.*

*‘That’s two ways isn’t it Alan?’*

The three men roared with laughter at the joke, as the action turned back to the park. Jacquie took up the commentary.

*‘Well, we’re midway through the second half now, and there’s no sign of either side breaking the deadlock. Here come Butterfield on the attack once more…oooh! that was a great save by Hardy in the Kidz goal…kept his side in it there….*

*….and the referee is looking at his watch now.  There can't be more than a few seconds left.  Coach Azelea is urging his team forward for one last attack.  I can see several parents chewing on their fingernails…they know a draw is no good to anyone here…the ultimate prize awaits the winner…a trip to Athens in three weeks' time.*

*…and the ball's with Michael now on the right wing.  This has to be the last cha…*

*****

Fizz!  Phutt!  Pzzzzz….buzzzz….phlump.

*****

The television, which had been working perfectly one nanosecond previously…

…went dead.

The match…

…was lost…

*****

**Semi-Finals Week – Day 5**

The television, which had been working perfectly one nanosecond previously……went dead.The match……was lost…*****Hardy, who seconds earlier had been leaning casually against the sofa,shot into action. He leaped up and shouted,‘Don’t worry, FOLLOW ME!’They were all worried that they would miss the end of the match, butthe gurgling sounds coming out of the TV suggested that it was terminallybroken.Hardy was first out of the door, grabbing hold of the door frame tosteady himself as his socks slid along the polished wooden floor. Wil wasnot so lucky. As his socks hit the floor his feet slid from under him and hecrashed into the wall opposite, taking Michael down with him. They sat onthe floor for a moment before jumping up and sprinting after the others, theirfeet making no progress, Tom and Jerry?like, as they tried to accelerate.In the kitchen, Hardy was fiddling with a small TV set in one corner.‘Come on, come ON!’ he said, as the little set slowly slowly warmed up.‘I said, COME ON!’The set did not warm up any quicker, but eventually a misty imageappeared on the screen. They all peered over each other to get a look. As thesound also came through, they heard the commentator clearly say,‘And the referee puts the whistle to his lips for the end of the game, and IT’SOVER…what a close game that was’.Wednesday 2 May 2007Semi?Finals Week188Eight footballers screamed at the television.‘NOOOOOO!’‘I can’t believe we missed it’, said Wil turning to walk away.‘Hang on’, said Freddy, ‘replays’.The image was clear now, and was focused back on Gary and the twoAlans in the studio.‘Well, Alan shall we just look at that last move again?’‘Yes Gary, if we look here at the boy Michael, he’s come running down theright wing there, faced by the Butterfield defender. You watch…just watch this…didyou see that stepover? Sent the defender completely the wrong way, but it’s left himwith the tightest of angles from which to score…you really think he’s going to do ithere…then…HERE…it takes a little bobble I think…and his shot from out wide onthe right is sailing over the goalkeeper’s head…’‘The goalkeeper’s completely beaten at this point, Alan…’‘Yes, Gary, he’s nowhere…the lob is so beautiful, so precise, it clears hishead…and I can’t believe… that it rolls along the crossbar like that, before going outfor a harmless goalkick. And of course, that was the last chance of the match. Thereferee blew for full time right after that.’*****Of course, seeing the game again on TV didn’t make the result anyeasier to take. They sat in silence on the floor of the kitchen as the final musicfrom Match of the Day faded away.‘It’s all my fault’, said Michael sadly, curling himself up almost into aball and burying his hands deep into his armpits, ‘I should have scored that…itwas a rubbish chip, it was always going over…’‘You should’ve passed it actually…’ said Clara, ‘I was coming up throughthe middle, I could have had a tap in…’Semi?Finals Week189‘Well, I was in a better position…there was no?one marking me out on theleft’, said Jaz.‘NO WAY!’ said Clara, ‘you wouldn’t have reached it, and even if you did,you would probably have missed!’Jaz got up, and after looking menacingly at Clara for a few seconds, heleft the room.‘THAT was not fair,’ said Freddy to Clara, ‘go and apologise to him, rightnow!’Clara looked at Freddy, then at Michael, then at Wil and Alex, thenat JoJo, and then at Hardy. They all looked back at her. She must haverealised that she had gone too far.‘OK, you’re right’, she said, and sheepishly left the room to go to findJaz.‘Listen, we got a draw, and we had a fantastic season, we can’t complain aboutanything. It was our first season in the league. And its not over yet’, said Freddycalmly.‘What’s not over?’ said Wil.‘Well, we haven’t looked through the results properly yet, have we? We mightstill win’.‘Still win? We can still go to Athens?’‘Let’s see’.*****Freddy pulled a scrap of paper out of his pocket and tried to flatten iton the floor. On it were various numbers, in different colours. Some of thenumbers were readable, others had almost faded out over time.‘So, all we need to do, is to check these results against Butterfield’s…’‘Well, they lost a game as well, and they drew the two games against us. Didthey win all their others?’ said Hardy, getting excited.Wednesday 2 May 2007Semi?Finals Week190‘Yes, we’ve both won nine games’, said Freddy, squinting at his piece ofpaper, ‘now what was our goal difference again?’ He squinted more at the pieceof paper, then started counting on his fingers…‘Two against Hurst, five against Hags…that makes eight…then another fiveagainst Wanderers, that makes twelve…’‘No it doesn’t…five

and three are seven…’‘No they’re not…’*****Two hours later….*****‘Well, thirty and four are definitely thirty?four…’‘Well, I think we scored thirty?five goals…’ said Freddy.‘OK, let’s look at Butterfield’s results…’ said Hardy,‘Well…I’ve recorded most of their games here…’ said Freddy, fishingaround in his back pocket for something.‘Or was it here?’ feeling around in his side pocket.‘Or perhaps here?’ looking in his shoe.‘P’raps it’s here’, said Hardy, grabbing Freddy’s ear, and looking intoit.‘Oi, leave it out, I’ve got it here somewhere…’*****Three hours later….*****Michael, who had been replaying in slow motion Dirk Kuyt’s finalpenalty for Liverpool which put them into the Champions League final,eventually said,‘Look, we’re getting nowhere, but I’ve got an idea’.‘What?’‘Let’s go and get Jaz. He’ll know whether we’re going’.*****

**Semi-Finals Week – Day 6**

‘Let’s go and get Jaz. He’ll know whether we’re going’.*****Michael, Freddy and Wil arrived outside Jaz’s house, pushing Clarareluctantly in front of them.‘You absolutely HAVE to apologise’, said Freddy firmly, ‘we’ve gonethrough the whole season without criticising anyone, and we’re not going to startnow’.‘I only said that he might not have scored’, replied Clara, changing herstory, obviously realising that she had gone too far.‘You know what you said’, replied Freddy. He rang the bell thenpushed Clara on to the doorstep.*****‘What do you want?’ said Jaz as he opened the door, then made as if toclose it again.‘No! Don’t shut the door! I’m really sorry for what I said. It was wrong. Weall need to work on our game…can we come in…please?’Clara actually did look really sorry.‘Oh, hi guys’, said Jaz as Freddy and Wil stepped forward, ‘OK then,come in’.‘We need your help, we really do’, said Freddy, again pulling out hisscrappy attempts to calculate the results of the league.‘Alright, you’d better come upstairs’.*****Semi?Finals Week193‘Did you see the match last night?’ said Michael as they climbed to thethird floor, ‘I couldn’t watch, but I listened on the radio’.‘I watched it’, replied Jaz, ‘I’ve got Sky, Sky One, Sky Plus, Sky Minus, SkyTwo, Sky Three, Sky Sports One, Two and Three, Sky Blue, Sky Green and Sky Pink,Sky Active, and Sky Sitting Around Doing Nothing Much at all.’‘I feel sorry for Alex Ferguson’, said Wil thoughtfully, ‘they didn’t deserveto lose three?nil like that, and he’s getting on a bit’.‘Who’s getting on a bit?’‘Sir Alex. I mean, he’s like someone from the olden days. He’s at least sixtyfive’.‘No, he’s older than that. Must be eighty. Not many chances left for him’,said Michael.‘Well, my grandma’s ninety?seven, and she still jogs three miles a day’, saidJaz.Freddy thought to himself at the ridiculousness of the conversationthey were having, although he then thought about the little old lady he oftensaw struggling up and down Lancaster Road in the mornings. She could be atleast ninety?seven, come to think of it.‘Come on, we need some answers here. We’ve tried, but we still don’t knowwho won the league’.‘OK, let’s have a look over here’. Jaz thumped away at his keyboard a fewtimes, and the screen showed up a massive table of numbers, with teamnames down one side, dates across the top, and a bewildering variety ofcolours and shadings all over it.It was almost six months since they had been in Jaz’s house trying torecruit him for the team. The house was still cold and seemingly empty,except for the big room on the top floor, which was like Jaz’s studio, his beddwarfed by the giant computer screen on the wall, and the various bundles ofcables and keyboards and clutter.‘Right’, said Jaz, tapping again at a few keys on one of his severalkeyboards.Friday 4 May 2007Semi?Finals Week194The screen flashed once, then some more numbers appeared.‘OK’, said Jaz, punching in a few more numbers.The screen beeped, went blank for a second, and revealed another setof numbers.‘Oh no!’ yelled Jaz, reaching desperately for his mouse.The screen buzzed, went blank, flashed twice, said ‘Attention – SystemError!’ then went silent. A puff of smoke emerged out of the back.‘Aha!’ said Jaz, as the screen roared back into life.‘So both teams won nine, that’s a total of twenty?seven points. Both drewagainst each other, so that’s another two points. And both lost a game, so no pointsthere’. Jaz scribbled something on a piece of paper, then tapped away again atthe keyboard. The screen burped. Twice.‘Now, we both have a win percentage of 82%’.‘What does that mean?’ said Wil.‘Well it means that we won 82 out of 100 games’, replied Jaz carefully.‘That’s impossible’, said Wil, ‘we didn’t play 100 games!’‘Well, OK, if we had played 100 games, we would have won 82 of them’,explained Jaz patiently.‘Well, I don’t get it!’ said Wil, turning away from the screen.‘We know that we’re equal on points, but we need to know the goal difference’,said Freddy.‘Ok, that’s what I’m working on now’, replied Jaz, hitting the keyboardmanically. The screen produced several farty noises.‘Oh this is not looking good’, he said after what seemed to Freddy likeabsolutely ages.Semi?Finals Week195‘If you add our goals for, take away our goals against, divide the answer by thenumber of goals Butterfield scored, then multiply that answer by the number ofmatches, take the square root of the number of days of the week, then subtract thenumber you first thought of…’The screen…blew up.Jaz dusted himself off as the pile of cables and keyboards was sentcrashing towards him.‘Well, I think we’ve done it’, said Freddy, looking again at

his scrap ofpaper. ‘we scored a total of thirty goals, with nine against…and I reckon…’ hescratched his head a couple of times, ‘I think that they had a goal difference ofnineteen’.After some more head scratching, and some more extensivecalculations from Jaz, they were really no further to confirming the outcome.‘C’mon, we should go. We’ll find out soon enough’, said Michael, gettingup to leave.*****As they got back outside, there was one commotion up the street, andthere was another commotion down the street.Up the street, an old man, shouting Freddy’s name.Down the street, three young girls, shouting Wil’s name.‘Freddy, Freddy, lad, we’ve done it! We’ve done it!’‘Wil, (giggle giggle)…Wil! (giggle giggle smirk)…Wil…come here!’Up the street, getting closer, a wheezing Mr Andrews, waving a brownenvelope.Down the street, getting much closer, the three giggling girls, waving apink envelope.

‘Freddy, my lad’, said Mr Andrews, handing Freddy the envelope,‘confirmation from the league…we won it on goal difference…you’re going toAthens!’‘Wil, my darling’, said one of the girls, handing Wil the pink envelope,‘we love you SO much, you’re going to come to our party next week, and you’ll be theonly boy there!’‘YES!’ said Freddy in triumph, holding the envelope high above hishead.‘Oh no!’ whispered Wil in embarassment, stuffing the envelope deepinto his pocket.*****

**Athens Adventure – Day 1**

*'Good luck, bro!'* said Freddy, gazing lovingly at the heap of papers and documents in front of him.

Wil looked miserably at his feet, which were stuffed into the shiniest, most uncomfortable pair of shoes he possessed.

*'Look at this! Bus tickets! Air tickets! And….',* Freddy almost whispered in awe as he passed his fingers over the white and silver tickets in his hand, *'nine tickets to the Champions League Final itself'*. The tickets were crisp to his touch, almost cardboard. *Quality*. He flexed them slightly, then examined them for the fifty-third time that day.

*Row A, pitchside, seats 230-239, entrance D, Gate 10, OACA Spyro Louis Stadium – Athens. May 23rd 2007.*

Wil examined his own ticket for the one hundred and fifty-third time that day.

*Dear Wil, you are invited to our 'Decorate a Dolly' party, on Saturday 12th May, at 3.00pm. RSVP. Love, Flopsy and Mopsy*

*'What does RSVP mean anyway?'* said Wil, just to say something.

*'It stands for Répondez s'il vous plaît',* said Freddy, *'it's French. It means 'Reply if you please''.*

*'Why did they write it in French? Anyway, I didn't reply, did I? So I don't need to go, do I?'*

*'Look Bro, we've been through this all week. Mum replied for you, didn't she? And she says if you say yes to an invitation then you've got to go. Unless you're ill'.*

*'Atishoo!'* said Wil.

*'Very funny',* his brother replied, *'you're fine. You might even enjoy it'.*

*'Enjoy it? Decorate a Dolly? Enjoy it? And look at me!'*

Their Mum had probably once wanted a daughter.

Wil, from the points of his shiny shoes, to the top of his hair-sprayed head, looked a picture of respectability, and a picture of misery. His perfectly pressed grey trousers. His starched and ironed white shirt. His little flowery bow tie. And his beautiful pink waistcoat.

*'Ooooh! Those girls are going to love you!'* his mother had said to him.

*'And THAT…is the problem!'* Wil had replied.

*'Come on, I'll walk down with you. It's only be a couple of hours, then we can start planning the trip!'* said Freddy. Wil perked up for a few seconds, and they set off.

*****

Flopsy and Mopsy were waiting at the gate of Number 2 Lancaster Road where they lived. Although it was only a few houses down from their house, Freddy and Wil usually went the long way round to avoid the house. F and M always seemed to be outside in the front garden, waiting to trap the unexpected visitor, or to greet them with a cheery welcome. Usually it was something like, '*Oh hi, Freddy, you are looking nice today'*, followed by about five minutes of hysterical giggling. Occasionally it was more specific, perhaps *'Oh Wil, I saw you score that goal on Saturday, you were just great!'* followed by an extravagant fluttering of the eyelashes, and more giggling. Girls often fluttered their eyelashes when Wil was around. Wil's brown skin usually turned a shade of dark purple when that happened.

When they got close, sure enough, they could see Flopsy, Mopsy and five of their friends hanging around in the front garden, waiting for Wil to join the party. Freddy left him outside Number 4, and ran back home.

*'Oh Wil…'*

*'Wil…'*

*'Erm…Wil…'*

The girls seemed uncharacteristically lost for words. Wil could instantly see why. Every one of them, every single one of them. Dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Casual. Scruffy even. A little giggle emerged from someone at the back of the group.

A little titter from someone at the front.

A deep rumble of laughter from the biggest girl.

And eventually…seven girls staring at Wil in his immaculate attire, falling about themselves laughing. Wil smiled nervously at the raucous rabble in front of him, then looked down, willing the ground to open up right there in front of him, and swallow him whole.

But of course it didn't. And of course the girls invited him in. And of course he ripped off his waistcoat, and rubbed his shoes roughly on the ground as he entered. And of course the tie got lost somewhere. And the girls looked after him. And JoJo was there. His special friend.

*'Weel, don't worry. I will look after you!'* she said in her wonderful mysterious accent, '*we 'ave made something very special for you to work on'*.

Wil started to relax. JoJo always did that to him. Although she had not played that much during the season, she had made some important saves when Hardy had been ill, and she had come on as a sub on a few occasions. And most importantly for the moment, she had made sure that Wil's doll was in fact an action figure and that he could decorate it in football kit.

Which he duly did. He managed to construct a character looking quite a bit like Emile Heskey in Wigan colours, and with JoJo making a beautiful Phil Jagielka, they spent most of the rest of the afternoon replaying the final-day showdown between Wigan and Sheffield United.

Until Flopsy and Mopsy, who had dressed their characters in full army kit, came along and challenged them to a fight. Although Heskey is a good footballer, he's not much good at hand-to-hand combat. So they lost.

The party ended, predictably, with every one of the girls giving Wil a massive, slobbery, juicy wet kiss, and Wil half running, half sprinting out of the door, pausing only to thank F&M's mother very much for the invitation.  As he did so, she also bent down and tried to kiss him.

But he escaped.

He arrived home, still damp, to see his brother looking at the tickets for the eighty-seventh time.

*'Now Bro, let's plan this trip!'*  Freddy said.

*****

**Athens Adventure – Day 2**

*‘Now Bro, let’s plan this trip!’ Freddy said.*

*****

*‘Socks…check! Scarf…check! Trainers…check!’ Wil was going through the things he would need for Athens, and was packing them into a small suitcase.*

*‘We haven’t got long actually’, said Freddy, glancing up at the clock on the wall, which seemed to be ticking by quicker than usual, ‘H will be here in a minute, and then we need to be down the road by two’.*

*‘What’s the time now?’ said Wil.*

*‘It’s one-thirty-five’.*

*‘Oh, that’s OK, it’s still one’.*

*‘No, one-thirty-five is closer to two o’clock’.*

*‘Well, it says one in one-thirty-five…’*

*‘Oh, never mind, just get on with it’.*

*‘Socks…check! Scarf…check! Trainers…check! Wil took the things out of his bag again.*

*‘Come ON, Bro, we’ll be late’.*

*‘I know, but I’ve run out of room for the rest of my stuff. I want to take this, this and this.’*

*‘Well, I know you need stuff for the journey, but your clothes and toothbrush are the most important things’.*

*‘No…definitely haven’t got space for a toothbrush’, said Wil defiantly, stuffing his Emile Heskey action figure (now wearing full Liverpool kit) into the bag.*

*‘Look, what’s more important? The state of your teeth, or having a few things to do on the journey?...’ Freddy looked for a moment at Wil, who was busy trying to get two size five footballs into the bag, then at Wil’s teeth, which were busy trying to escape from his mouth to get to the sink for a once-a-week brushing, ‘…OK, you don’t need to answer that, but for goodness sake, HURRY UP!’*

*Eventually Wil was packed, with the two footballs hanging on the outside from some specially constructed string that Wil had spent at least ten minutes putting together.*

*‘Now have you got your pass…?’ The doorbell rang. They grabbed their bags and raced downstairs.*

*‘Hardy! How’re you doing?’*

*‘Fine…’ panted Hardy.*

*‘Did you have to rush?’*

*‘Not exactly…’ he gasped, ‘…but look…’. He pointed behind him at three huge suitcases. Matching ones. With little luggage labels and matching padlocks. Tartan.*

*‘What on earth have you got in them? said Freddy, looking incredulously at the cases.*

*‘Well, my Mum said that ‘coz it was my first time away, I needed to be well prepared. Case one…(he pointed to case one)…is my warm weather case. Case two (he motioned to the second suitcase which was completely wrapped in cling film) is my wet weather case.’ He slumped down and sat on the third case.*

*‘So what’s that one?’ chirped Wil, smiling broadly, ‘no let me guess! That’s your heatwave case?’*

*‘No’.*

*‘Your snowy weather case?’*

*‘No’, said Hardy pitifully, ‘that is my just-in-case case’.*

*‘Just in case of what?’ said Freddy.*

*‘Just in case I lose my other two cases’ mumbled Hardy miserably.*

*Freddy took charge as usual.*

*‘Well, you don’t need those two. You’re not going to lose anything, and the weather forecast for Athens is bright and sunny the whole week. Come on, let’s go’.*

*Hardy looked happy for the first time that afternoon, and parked his two superfluous cases inside the hallway, after checking to see that his Mum had driven off. The cloud of smoke and the screeching of tyres as she left told him she had.*

*****

*They marched down to Springhurst bus station and found the bus to Gatwick. Mr Andrews was already there, with Clara and Michael. Clara had on a Liverpool scarf and was carrying a picture of Robbie Fowler. Michael was dressed in full Liverpool kit.*

*‘I didn’t know you supported Liverpool!’ said Wil as they settled into their seats on the bus.*

*‘Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don’t…’ replied Michael cryptically, ‘you never can tell with Michaels!’*

*Wil looked at him with a mixture of puzzlement and admiration. Such a cool guy, he thought.*

*They sat towards the back of the bus. Mr Andrews buried himself in his book (The Mysteries of Ancient Greece). The others were too excited to talk, so they just generally jabbered about nothing really. As they waited for the bus to depart, Freddy said,*

*‘Where’s Alex? He should be here by now…’*

*‘Oh don’t worry, he’ll make it. He’s always late’.*

*‘I know, but he’s cutting it a bit fine this time, isn’t he?’, said Freddy, as the bus driver started his engine.*

*As the vehicle pulled out, there was a thump on the roof of the bus just above them, followed by four or five quieter thumps, like footsteps, moving towards the front.*

*‘I think he’s here!’ Jaz said excitedly.*

*As the bus driver jabbed at the ‘door close’ button and the heavy door started to slowly close, an athletic blond-haired figure swung down and round the door frame, supporting himself on the bus wing mirror, and, throwing a small rucksack through the now half-closed door, turned himself sideways and slid through the door as it shut.*

*‘Hi guys!’, called Alex, as if his arrival were the most natural thing in the world, ‘sorry I’m late!’*

*‘Hi Alex!’ they called out, except for Freddy, whose head was buried in a small book. After a while, he looked up at Alex and mumbled,*

*‘kalimera… alexis… ti kanis…mu aresi... i... elarda’*

*Hmmm....*

*…at least Alex had arrived, but Freddy…*

*…seemed to be ill…’*

*****

**Athens Adventure – Day 3**

…at least Alex had arrived, but Freddy…

…seemed to be ill…’

*****

‘Don’t worry’, said Freddy, smiling, ‘It means ‘Hello Alex, how are you? I like Greece!’

‘Konnichiwa Freddy, Genki desu’, replied Alex, in Japanese.

‘Woah! That’s enough of that, we need to get out!’ said Hardy, as the bus pulled into the airport bus station. They struggled with their various cases, rucksacks, and bags, fought through the crowds in the terminal building, and found their way to the check-in area.

‘Now, lads and lasses, stick together’, called out Mr Andrews, waving a tattered brown clipboard over his head, ‘we all want to end up in Athens, remember!’. He marched off towards the banks of check-in desks, followed by the eight members of the Lancaster Road team.

The scene in the check-in hall was utterly bewildering, and Mr Andrews, who was nominally in charge of the group, was starting to look uneasy. Freddy dropped his bag. Wil, who had been playing hide-and-seek with Michael, wisely decided that it would be better to stick with the group. The sounds of chanting coming from along the hall were both exciting and slightly worrying. A chorus of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ confirmed that the group were Liverpool fans. As the chorus started, two fans trying to get throught the melée started to push. Mr Andrews looked round. A large bald-headed Liverpool fan butted into him from one side, and a small long-haired Liverpool fan pushed him from the other side. They were only steadying themselves. Sorry mate, they both said.

‘I could really do with sitting down…’ said Mr Andrews, sounding a little desperate.

‘Don’t worry, Mr Andrews, it’s just over here’, said Freddy in an attempt to reassure him. But in fact they were lost. There were about five hundred check-in desks, fifty different airlines, and five million people in the way.

*****

‘Here we are!’ Hardy said, as they finally arrived in the zone where their airline was located.

The sign above the desk said

EasyAir!The easy way to get in the air

Beneath the sign was a picture of a gentleman, wearing leather trousers and a motorbike helmet, strapping a huge pair of wings onto his shoulders.

‘I don’t think that can be right’, said Freddy, looking worried, ‘let’s try this one!’ they moved down the hall a short way to the next bank of desks.

DebonAir!The smart way to get you there!

‘That doesn’t sound like our kind of airline either’, said Freddy, looking for his ticket in the pocket of his jacket, ‘…now let’s have a look here…’. As he was searching, they passed several other airlines, none of which seemed to be going their way.

Several people, some in black cloaks, were queuing for

On a Wing and A Prayer AirKeep your hands together and hope!,

A man came running past them, and dashed up to the counter of

Air Today, Gone TomorrowSpecialists in short breaks,

but then obviously decided he didn’t want a short break after all. The final desks they passed were for

HerethereandeverywhereAIRRandom trips – not for the faint-hearted,

who promised their customers a ‘unique flying experience. We do the take-off, YOU do the landing!’. Definitely not for the faint-hearted, and not for Lancaster Road either. Finally, Freddy pulled the ticket out of his pocket and examined it.

Air Greece Check-in desks 400-450, Zone G, last check-in 1600.

Not surprisingly, the desk they had to go to was the one surrounded by Liverpool fans. A huge throbbing mass of humanity. Sweat pouring from every pore. Singing. Chanting. You’ll Never Walk Alone. We are the Champions. I’ll be your long-haired lover from Liverpool.

‘Here we are everyone’, puffed Mr Andrews, ‘now, get in the queue!’. They lined up behind the mass ranks of the Kop.

Wil stared up at the sign above the ranks of desks. Air Greece. Slip down to Athens for the weekend! He thought for a moment. Wow, we’re actually going to Greece, to Athens, to the Champions League FINAL!’

Time passed, they queued.

They fidgeted, and queued.

Wil and Michael ran around a bit. Then queued.

They joined in the chanting a bit. And queued.

They got to the front of the queue and checked in. They headed for security.

And queued.

Too much queuing, to much to-ing (and fro-ing), we need rescuing (thought Freddy), I wish we were doing (something) (thought Wil), fans booing, a mother cooing (over her baby) and a cat mewing in the corner doing (the crossword).

Through security though, and to the plane.

*****

The flight passed pleasantly enough, with most of the players, except Hardy, dozing or snoozing on and off. Hardy, with no-one to talk to, occupied himself by purchasing the entire range of the duty-free toys for sale on board, and by trying to persuade the rest of the team to carry them for him.

*****

Being the youngest passengers on the plane, the Lancaster Road players were allowed off the plane first. As they walked wearily down the steps, a small party of children, dressed in traditional Greek costume, were waiting for them.

The first boy was wearing a golden sheepskin.

‘Welcome, Liverpool fans, I am Jason!’

The second boy, muscles rippling underneath his shirt, said,

‘Greetings, Scousers, I am Heracles!’

A petite, pretty girl stepped forward, and handed a bunch of flowers to Clara, who did her best to remain polite.

‘I am Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty!’

Finally, a tall boy stepped up and said,

‘My name is Zeus, I am king of all the gods, and these are my people, you are most welcome!’ he motioned expansively at the group of children behind him, who spontaneously broke into song,

Welcome to Greece!We greet you all in peace!Our joy will never cease butDon’t mess with our police!

Freddy found himself bowing slightly in acknowledgement of the greeting. As he did so, he felt a tugging at his arm. It was his brother.

‘Did you see that, at the back…?’ said Wil, pointing towards a miserable-looking girl at the back of the group.

‘Don’t point!’ said Freddy quickly, pushing his brother’s arm down, ‘where?’

‘Over there, that girl with the straggly hair…what…it seems to be…mmmm…moving…!’

Freddy squinted in the bright sunshine and looked towards the group. Sure enough, right at the back, a girl with strange staring eyes, her hair, a tangled mass of writhing…somethings.

*****

**Athens Adventure – Day 4**

Freddy squinted in the bright sunshine and looked towards the group. Sure enough, right at the back, a girl with strange staring eyes, her hair, a tangled mass of writhing…somethings.

*****

The girl stepped forward from out of the group.

Freddy stepped back a little from the front of the Lancaster Road group.

The girl smiled modestly, her hair still a mass of curls and seemingly in perpetual motion. She took another half-step forward.

‘Come’ she said kindly, her eyes softening their harsh look, ’we are your friends. We show you our city. My name…Medusa…you are welcome’. Freddy could see she was serious, and smiled nervously back at her.

‘Thanks, I’m Freddy’.

‘Look, there, the magnificent Parthenon, the cradle of civilisation and democracy’. She pointed to her left at the hills in the distance.

‘Just… like in the books…’ whispered Wil, gazing at the instantly-recognisable building on one of the hilltops close to the centre of the city.

‘We show you tomorrow morning. We meet you on the Acropolis. Bye!’

*****

Hardy and Freddy were sharing a room together in the hotel. This was fine for Hardy as the television in the room was showing constant replays of Didier Drogba’s winning goal for Chelsea in the FA Cup Final, and Hardy was Chelsea’s biggest fan. This was not fine for Freddy as he did not support Chelsea, was tired, and was looking forward to the trip with the Greek kids the next day.

‘C’mon, turn it off now, he’s going to do the same again…!’ moaned Freddy

‘I know, just once more, look, over from Mikel to Drogba, then to Lampard…brilliant flick back to Didier…then…chip…past van der Sar for the goal!’

‘It doesn’t matter how many times you watch it, it was still only one-nil! Go to sleep’.

Hardy finally drifted off to sleep, with the television still playing replays of the goal. In his sleep, Hardy was still doing the same, repeating over and over,

‘Mikel, Drogba, Lampard, Drogba, goal!’

‘Michael, Dogfood, Lampshade, Drongo, goal!’

‘Tickle, Tockle, Tackle, Dapple, goal!’

‘Middle, Doddle, Laddle, Diddle, glow!’

As Hardy, away with the football fairies, muttered to himself, Freddy covered his head with his pillow, and waited until the morning.

*****

Some of their new friends were waiting for them in the hotel reception after breakfast on Monday morning.

Zeus was once again at the forefront of the group.

‘Kalimera, little British guys, we would like to show you the magnificent Parthenon, atop our mighty Acropolis!’

Michael and Wil looked at each other suspiciously.

‘A tour of the city…ancient ruins…no thanks!’ said Wil.

‘Oh come on,’ said Michael, ‘it’ll be OK, might be quite interesting actually’

Zeus motioned to his colleagues, who approached the group of Kidz players.

‘Each one of us will accompany one of you! Then we won’t get lost! Follow me!’

Freddy followed behind Zeus as he was told.

Michael went with the boy called Achilles.

Aphrodite teamed up with JoJo, and Clara with Jason.

Jaz and the boy named Pythagoras linked arms and started walking.

Heracles linked arms with Hardy,

‘Urghhh, get off!’ said Hardy, giving Heracles a slap.

‘You shouldn’t have done that!’ said Zeus with a chuckle. Before he could move, Heracles had grabbed Hardy by one arm and one leg, and lifted him up high above his head.

‘What did you say to me?’ Heracles was laughing and threatening to throw Hardy into the hotel fountain.

‘Sorry, sorry, I…I…didn’t mean it!’

They set off, with Alex and Jason swapping stories of their adventures, and Mr Andrews chatting to Plato, who wandered along beside him.

‘So, when was this Acropolis built then, young man?’ Plato stared at the sky for a few minutes as they walked along. He put his hand to his chin and stroked it wisely for a few moments.

‘Hmmm…’

‘What did you say, lad?’

‘Well…you see…’

‘Well what, lad, come on when was it built?’

‘Hmmmm…on the one hand…’ said Plato,

‘Yes…?’, said Mr Andrews patiently,

‘…And on the other…’

‘Oh I see, absolutely…’ said Mr Andrews.

Two great minds, thinking alike.

Wil, the last to join the group, just had the crazy-haired Medusa to go with. She stared at him and he stood quite still for a moment, until she laughed and said,

‘Come now, Wil, don’t be scared, I won’t bite!’ She grabbed his hand and pulled him reluctantly along after her.

*****

They reached the Acropolis and climbed the dusty hillside to get up to the Parthenon. A guide was waiting for them at the top.

‘Kalispera leetle Eengleesh keeds’ said the guide, ‘welcome to the Parthenon, my name is Athena, and I will be your guide for today! Now, let me start, are you all sitting comfortably?’

Various children shifted uncomfortably on the hard stone steps of the building.

‘Then I’ll begin…in the fifth century BC, the Parthenon was built as a tribute to the goddess Athena…

Various children murmured, and muttered.

Two hours later…

‘Now moving forward to the fourth century BC, this was a very interesting period…

Various children yawned, stretched and mopped sweaty brows as the midday Athens sun got to them. The tour went on…

And on…

And on…

‘Oi, look here’ whispered someone behind Freddy’s back, ‘wanna play?’ It was Heracles, who had managed to get hold of a football from somewhere.

‘Come on, get the others!’

Freddy gathered his team together, and they slipped away from the tour. Several groups of new people had joined to listen to the words of wisdom from the guide, although a few were now shaking her as she had apparently fallen asleep at the sound of her own voice.

So a match took place. Right there, in the shadow of the Parthenon. Greece against Lancaster Road. It was a brilliant match between two very evenly matched teams, and was decided by a superbly angled, slide-rule pass from Pythagoras to Heracles, who muscled it in at the far post. The only other event of note during the game was a foot injury to Achilles, which came as a result of a late tackle by Hardy which just clipped his heel and sent him sprawling into the dust.

‘I’ve never seen him get injured before’, said Zeus, ‘Anyway, Wednesday is the big day! We’ll see you there…oh…who do you think will win?’

‘No doubt about it’, said Michael, ‘2-1 to Liverpool!’

*****

**Athens Adventure – Day 5**

‘We’ll see you there…oh…who do you think will win?’

‘No doubt about it’, said Michael, ‘2-1 to Liverpool!’

*****

‘OK, let’s go, but stick together!’

It was Wednesday afternoon. They made their way out of the hotel lobby and started the short walk to the ground. Freddy puffed his chest out proudly as the little group walked from the side street where the hotel was located towards the main road. Up ahead they could see a tidal mass of humanity moving. One direction only. Stadium-bound.

Well, this is it, thought Freddy, we’ve made it. The Champions League final. Today. Now.

Although he and Wil had been to other games, nothing could compare with this. The Champions League. A final. An evening game, and a late night. In a foreign country. And Liverpool.

As they reached the end of the street to join the surge of fans, the sights and the sounds and the smells became overwhelming. Freddy stood still briefly to take it all in.

In the sky, wisps of smoke from barbecues and food stands, down the length of the street.

In the top floors of most of the buildings, the residents were hanging out of the their windows, trying to get a better look at the crowd. Some were cheering, waving at the people below. Some had put up enormous flags across their windows. Liverpool banners. Milan flags. Lots of Greek blue and white.

Towards ground level, the street lights were decorated with city flags and ribbons in the all red of Liverpool and the red and black of Milan. Every other lamp-post had the words Kalos Orisate written on them, meaning Welcome.

And then the people.

As they turned left into the street the full scale of the crowd became clear.

The players, sticking as close together as they could, joined the throng, almost like a moving carpet of people.

With Mr Andrews trying to keep them together, they were carried along on this wave of humanity towards the stadium.

Freddy, his feet barely touching the ground, started to take in the smells of the street.

At every street corner someone was cooking something. Hot dogs, burgers, kebabs, meat being roasted over open coals on skewers. The combination of aromas as they passed from one stall to another was overwhelming, vivid, exotic.

Occasionally one of the fans would let off a flare or a firecracker, adding to the mix, and filling the air with acrid red or blue smoke.

And of course, the people. With that many people crammed together in a small space, in the heat of the late afternoon. People smells. Sweat and perfume.

The tide carried them perhaps a kilometre or more, round a corner, and then…the stadium came into view. The magnificent Athens Olympic stadium. Right there, in front of them.

And the sounds, getting louder by the minute. The hustle and bustle of a busy street. Filled with fans. Full of football fanatics. Hawkers and hustlers. Police trying to keep calm. And singing. Whistling. Chanting. Wailing and screaming. For the team.

The Liverpool fans seemed to be the loudest.

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your hearts,And you'll never, walk, aloneYou'll never walk, alone…

Let it be, let it be, let it be, Stevie G,For we all know the answer, and his name is Stevie G

He's big, he's red, His feet don't fit in the bedPeter Crouch, Peter Crouch!

The street widened out as they reached the stadium entrance, and the crush was less. Freddy looked round to check everyone had made it.

'Where's Hardy?' he said, looking around.

'Oh, it's OK, he's over there, look…'

Hardy was in the middle distance, apparently talking to someone at the side of the street. Freddy and Wil walked over to where he was.

'Hi, what're you doing?' Freddy said.

'Oh it's OK mate, he's fine', said the man next to Hardy, 'he'll be with you in a minute'.

Freddy looked at the man nervously. He was about thirty years old, unshaven, with filthy yellow teeth. His hair looked like it hadn't been washed for weeks. He had on a long battered overcoat, even though it was still twenty-five degrees that evening.

Hardy could see the worry on Freddy's face. He left the man and came over. Barely audible above the din around him, he said,

'Look, leave me alone right, this guy is offering me two hundred euros for my ticket. Two hundred! Just think what I could get for that…'

Freddy felt a mixture of fear and pity for his friend. A mixture of feelings. Don't mix with these kinds of people was one. How can you even think about missing this game? was another, and where do you think you're going to go? was a third. In the end, all he could say was,

'No WAY!' He dragged his friend back towards the group, 'this is the experience of a lifetime. You

can’t miss it! We worked so hard for this. And we are still a team, remember? Come right here.’ Wil and Freddy physically dragged Hardy back. The man was almost crying,

‘Oh come on, mate, I’ll give you four hundred!’

His voice faded away miserably as they moved away from him.

*****

Gate 10, where they had to enter the stadium, was right in front of them and they had to go through a narrow entrance before reaching the turnstiles. The throng of people heading for the same entrance squeezed together once more, then opened out again on the other side and formed into neat queues.

As they were queuing for the left-most of the several turnstiles, more pushing, then,

Sirens…wailing.

Ten, maybe twenty, police motorbikes, lights flashing against the dimming night sky.

An enormous double-decker coach, completely black, windows darkened. A small sign in the front window.

Liverpool FC, Champions League Finalists, 2007

The players’ coach had arrived!

Without leaving their place in the queue, the Lancaster Road players strained to see through the crowd as the sleek mirrored door slid open. Four men in suits stood either side of the door, making a short corridor from the coach to a doorway marked Players Entrance. Everyone strained again.

First player off. The first one. Looking fit, looking ready.

Michael screamed his name!

‘GO Stevie, GO. You can do it again!’

No reaction. Michael yelled again.

‘Go STEVIE G!’

Gerrard seemed to hear. He turned and gazed into the crowd, and seemed to look at Michael.

He smiled, and gave a thumbs up sign. And then he was gone.

‘He smiled at us. He’s gonna do it! Stevie G’s gonna win it for Liverpool!’

*****

**Athens Adventure – Day 6**

'He smiled at us. He's gonna do it! Stevie G's gonna win it for Liverpool!' ***** 'I SAID… Kaka's going to win it for Milan', said Michael as they drifted down to breakfast on the day after the match. 'No you did not, you thought Liverpool were going to win', said Wil indignantly, 'I said it was going to be 2?1…and it was!' said Michael, hopefully. 'Nah, you were wrong!' Wil said again, smiling. They sat down to breakfast, tucking into the sort of feast only a hotel can provide. Loads of different cereals. Hundreds of different types of fruit. Millions of different drinks. And zillions of those little packets of jam and honey and stuff. At the back of the room, Hardy. Late. They hadn't spoken to him for twelve hours. Wearing a black and white striped shirt, black shorts, red socks, and dragging behind him the largest Milan flag you've ever seen. One of those ones they drape across the whole crowd and move along like a kind of flying carpet, floating over the heads of the crowd. They had got talking to some Italian fans after the game on the walk back to the hotel. Lots of friendly banter, lots of teasing and laughing. Congratulations and commiserations. One of the Milan supporters had said, 'Bad luck, Liverpool, but we got our revenge for 2005!' Hardy had replied, 'Yes…well…I always knew you would win. Right from when Inzaghi scored that first goal. Brilliant goal that was, the way he dipped his shoulder just at the right time to divert it past Reina', then, as if to confirm something in his mind, he turned back to the group and said, 'actually, I've always supported Milan, myself'. 'What!' said Michael, looking unbelievably at Hardy. 'Ah 'Ardy, you are our friend', said Giuseppe, the Milan fan, 'Ere, you can 'ave my shirt and my kit. You are very welcome'. Giuseppe had then taken off most of his clothes and handed them to Hardy, who reciprocated by giving Giuseppe the Chelsea kit he was hiding under his regular clothes. ***** 'You can't just change teams like that! If you're supporting a team, you have to support it, through thick and thin, through wind and rain, Mondays to Fridays, and weekends too…you can't just jump horses in mid stream!' Michael was clearly feeling poetic. 'I can do what I like', said Hardy, tripping over his enormous flag, and sliding the rest of the way to join them at the breakfast table. As he slid to a graceful stop beside the table where they were sitting, several hundred little pots of jam flew out of the flag where he had been hiding them. 'Oops! I was hoping to take them home…' he said with a sly grin. 'Anyway, Milan won didn't they, and did you see Kaka?' 'He was good, that's true' said Michael quietly. 'He is skilful…' added Wil. 'Yes look!' said Hardy, picking up an orange from the fruit stand beside their table, 'did you see that skill in the second half, running forward, dragged the ball across with his right foot, span round then dragged it forward with his left…then carried on…like this…' Hardy ran forward, slipped on the orange with his right foot, span round, dragged the leg of the table with his left foot, then carried on into a heap on the floor, splatted across his flag.

'It wasn't like that, it was like this…' said Wil, picking up an apple from the bowl. He dropped the apple down in front of him and it smashed into five hundred pieces on the floor. He kicked at it angrily. 'Actually, this is what happened', said Clara, picking up a raspberry and placing it on the floor in front of her. She stepped back five or six paces, then approached the raspberry at some speed. 'He rolled it with his left, then onto his right, then chipped it forward…' 'Where's the ball?' asked Wil. 'What…well…it was here…? Clara examined the underside of her shoe to find a slippery wet red mush, where the ball had been. 'I can do it!' said Jaz, picking up a watermelon from the table. He placed the watermelon on the ground, and took ten paces backwards. He bent his head slightly, like a bull about to charge. 'I'm not sure that's a good idea…' said Freddy quietly, as Jaz started to move forward… 'See, he ran up to the ball like this…' said Jaz, about five paces from the ball. 'I wouldn't do that, if I were you', said Freddy, louder, covering his eyes. 'And then he smashed it like this!' said Jaz triumphantly, taking a huge swipe at the ball with his right foot. The ball stayed still. Three kilos of watermelon wasn't going to budge. Jaz's foot also seemed to stay still momentarily as it hit the immovable object. Jaz himself…flew. And flew. And flew. Right into Hardy, the flag, the oranges, the

wall.  Ouch!  What a mess.  Michael got up from the table and picked up a grapefruit. ‘THIS is what he did!’ The Lancaster Road players went silent as Michael placed the ball at one end of the room.  Several of the other tourists having their breakfast stood up to get a better look. Michael started forward, dribbling the bright yellow fruit along the polished floor, picking up speed.  Then, his arms slightly away from his body to help balance himself, he rolled his right foot over the ball, pulling it left.  As he did so, he turned his body round, almost dancing or skipping backwards, at the same time pulling the ball after him with his left foot.  He skipped forwards, ball still at his feet, looked up and slightly to his right, then scooped the ball with his left foot so that it nestled with all the other grapefruit back in its bowl. The crowd roared!  The tourists clapped!  Hardy said, ‘that’s what I meant!’ Everyone laughed. ***** Later that day, as they boarded the plane at Athens airport, their Greek friends were waiting for them again at the steps of the plane. ‘We bid you farewell, English friends’, said Zeus, the tall one, ‘we play you a song!’ At some invisible signal, all the Greek children produced musical instruments – lyres, zithers, lutes, flutes, and drums.  They started playing – not music exactly, but the most incredible cacophany of sound.  As the Lancaster Road players climbed wearily up the steps to the plane, the noise fading below, Freddy turned to his brother, ‘Well, football’s over for a while, but that music gives me an idea!’ *****

**Save the Planet! – Day 1**

*‘Well, football’s over for a while, but that music gives me an idea!’*

*****

*‘Ah, stop that noise will you…I’ve got a headache!’*

Hardy carried on drumming on the log in front of him. *Tap, tap, thunk, thunk, tappety tap.*

*‘You’ve been doing that for hours, just give it a rest!’*

*‘I’m thinking. It helps me’,* said Hardy, ignoring Freddy’s pleas. He tapped some more.

*****

They were sitting, doing nothing in particular.

Or rather, half sitting, half standing, doing something, but not much.

Actually, Hardy was standing, crouched over his log. Drumming.

Freddy was walking a little further away, clutching his ears and massaging his head.

Wil actually was sitting. Doing nothing. Waiting.

They were waiting for Michael and Jaz…

Who appeared, with a crashing of leaves and branches. They burst into the clearing from one of the several paths that led off into the thick woods.

*‘Yo! How’re you doing?’* said Michael breezily, leaping off the saddle of Jaz’s bike, leaving Jaz standing astride the crossbar, looking cool and confident.

*‘Where’s your bike?’* said Hardy, momentarily stopping his drumming in order to speak.

He started drumming again.

*‘We left it at home. Just doing our bit, y’know’,* said Jaz.

*‘Doing your bit…for what?’*

*‘Don’t you know?’* said Jaz dismissively, *‘we’re doing our bit for WED tomorrow. Y’know, doubling up’.*

*‘What?’* said Wil.

*‘Eh?’* said Freddy.

*‘Tomorrow’s Tuesday!’* said Hardy.

*‘I know that!’* said Jaz, laughing.

*‘What is WED anyway?’* said Michael quietly.

*‘Well, you should know, you’ve been doing your bit!’* said Hardy sarcastically. Drumming louder.

*‘Well, he just picked me up’,* said Michael, motioning over to a smirking Jaz, *‘he wouldn’t let me bring my own bike’.*

*‘What’s that got to do with Wednesday?’*

*‘It has nothing to do with Wednesday. It’s an acronym’.*

*‘A whatonym?’* said Wil.

*‘An acronym. It’s when you take the first letter of each word in a phrase, and put them together. Like SOS, or B&Q, or MUFC, or WED’,* explained Jaz.

*‘Oh I see,’* said Wil, probably not actually getting it.

*‘Wednesday is England’s Destiny…’* said Michael, changing the subject.

*‘What do you mean?’*

*‘Well, if they win, even draw, they could be OK…but if they lose…’*

*‘What, Early Departure?,’* said Freddy.

*‘Too right, we even don’t know whether we eventually do qualify with eight draws!’*

*‘Why eight draws?’*

*‘Because, I’m trying to think of as many things starting with WED as possible’,* said Michael.

*‘You One Eyed Dog!’* said Hardy, staring surreally at Jaz.

*‘One doesn’t start with a W!’*

*‘Whatever, Dude!’,* muttered Hardy.

*‘I’ll put you out of your misery, you wild-eyed devil!’* said Jaz to Hardy.

*‘You Wouldn’t Even Dare!’* replied Hardy, picking up one of his sticks.

*‘C’mon, you know, it is World Environment Day!’* said Jaz, getting to the point at last, *‘that’s why we came on one bike’.*

*‘Bikes don’t mess up the environment!’* replied Freddy, laughing, *‘you can bike as much as you like.*

*Just don't drive cars!'*

*'Well that's OK for us, isn't it!'*

*'Wow! It's hot today!'* said Hardy, taking off his Chelsea hooded top.

*'Yes! Global warming, you see…'* said Jaz.

*'Well, it is June',* said Freddy, *'it usually is hot in June!'*

Jaz reeled off a bunch of figures about how the earth was warming up by so many percent, how the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are the highest for 600,000 years, and how we are throwing away too much rubbish, so the icecaps are melting.

Hardy got out his lunch box, opened his packet of crisps, emptied them out, and lobbed the empty packet into the bushes. He winked at Freddy, who smiled. Jaz exploded.

*'Don't drop that! Don't even throw it away! Recycle it! We can use it again!'*

*'So where is this World Environment Day anyway?'* said Hardy, picking up the packet.

*'Well, it's everywhere, isn't it? It is all around us. The forest here, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, the oceans. We just have to look after it.'*

*'My sandwiches are volcanic!'* said Wil suddenly, biting into a large hunk of rough brown bread.

*'I think you mean organic, bro',* replied Freddy, *'organic. It means the farmers don't put any chemicals on them'.*

*'Very good',* said Jaz, *'Tastes better too!'*

*'Mmm, you're right',* said Wil, spitting out a little mud, and pulling some grass out from between his teeth.

Hardy was still tapping. Quite rhythmically. Different patterns. Freddy gave in eventually,

*'Great tapping H. Gives me an idea actually'.*

*****

**Save the Planet! – Day 2**

*‘Great tapping H.  Gives me an idea actually’.*

*****

Wednesday night.  England’s must-win game against the mighty Estonia.

Freddy and Wil had planned a sleepover at their house.

*‘Hardy always wants to do sleepovers, doesn’t he?’*

*‘Well, yes,  but maybe that’s because he doesn’t really have anyone to talk to, most of the time, does he?’*

*‘No.  Except that cousin of his’.*

*‘Which cousin?’*

*‘Can’t remember his name.  Cool guy.  Small’.*

*‘Hmmm..’*

*****

They were all piled in the same bed.

Well, not all of them, but Wil, Freddy, and Hardy were spread out over a huge double bed, and Michael was getting ready to join them, putting on his favourite football pyjamas.

*‘Shhhh!’*  he said, *‘it’s about to start!’*

As the national anthems faded away, and the little radio crackled slightly under the strain of the noises coming from the stadium in Tallin, the commentators began describing the kick-off.

*‘I always watch the football at my place’*, said Hardy, looking scornfully at the radio.

*‘Yes, well, sorry, you’ll just have to listen to it, here, we don’t have that kind of posh TV’*, said Wil apologetically.

*‘It’s sometimes better on the radio, anyway’,* said Freddy.

*‘How can it be better?’*  said Hardy, *‘have you seen those replays on Sky, where they do that ‘whoosh’ thing, then the instant replay, then the split screen, the split sound.  And the commentators, professional, smooth, cool.  And Andy Gray.’*

*‘Well, open your ears!’*

Hardy looked at Freddy as if he was mad.

*‘No, listen, and imagine being there!’*

They all lay still for a few minutes, trying to conjure up the image of their beloved England playing so far away.

*‘You’re right’*, said Hardy, his eyes tightly shut, *‘I can really imagine it, long throw in, onto Crouch’s head, then JoJo Cole onto the chest like he did against Sweden in the World Cup, then…GOAL!’*

*‘You’re not imagining that, we’ve scored!’*.

All hell broke loose in the bedroom.

Freddy jumped up in one movement, so that he was standing on the bed, then took a flying leap onto Hardy, who was still lying with his eyes shut. Not for long though, as Freddy’s full weight landed on him. He opened his eyes with a start.

*‘Hey! Ow! That hurt! ‘*

Wil decided that attacking something or someone was obviously the only way to celebrate. So he attacked Michael, who had started to get up. Not content with pulling him back down, Wil also started bashing Michael with one of the pillows.

*‘Yes! One-Nil! Football’s coming home!’* said Michael.

Or rather he said *‘Esh! Wunnil! Foopall’s cubbig obe!’* through the mouthful of cushion Wil had given him.

They settled down again to listen to the rest of the half.

As the half-time whistle went, footsteps. Coming up the stairs. Coming closer. They straightened the duvet out as much as they could, arranged themselves into four straight lines, and started whistling innocently. A stray feather settled on Wil’s nose. He stuffed the pillow under himself to conceal it.

He whistled a little louder, turning his mouth upwards as far as he could, whilst still whistling, to try to dislodge the feather.

No luck.

The feather, which had been perching elegantly on his nose, seemed to have worked its way round to his nostril. There was no way he could avoid it now.

*Achoo!* he sneezed a sneeze like no other. One of those sneezes that jolts your whole body.

As Wil’s whole body jolted, so the pillow they had been fighting with was compressed. Quickly, violently, so that the two ends of it split, almost at the same time, sending feathers and dust flying out from beneath Wil’s back in two opposite directions. It looked like he himself had split open at the waist.

Wil and Freddy’s mother entered the room.

*‘OK, boys, lights out now!’* she busied herself with plumping up the duvet, plumping up the remaining pillows, and wondering in the half light of the room, what all those itchy things were she kept brushing up against.

*‘But Mum, you said we could listen to the football’,* protested Freddy.

*‘You did listen to it’,* said his mother, jabbing at various switches on the radio until it went silent, *‘it’s too late now, go to sleep boys’*.

*‘Aw Mum…’*

*‘I said, go to sleep, goodnight!’*

*****

*‘This is even better!’* said Hardy from beneath the duvet.

*‘Eh, what?’* said Michael, who in the darkness had got round the wrong way and was now becoming disorientated by the overwhelming smell of Hardy’s feet.

Hardy had sneaked the radio off the table, and had turned it back on very quietly. Pressed to his ear, only he could hear it, but at least he could relay the news to the others.

*‘Still one-nil to England, but it sounds like they’re playing well. Oh, here’s a chance, Beckham with the first time cross into Crouch, and, and…they’ve scored!’*

*‘Yesss!’* said Freddy, subconciously clenching his fist under the bedclothes, and then consciously using it to thump his brother.

*‘What was that for?’* moaned Wil.

*‘Just celebrating!’* said Freddy sarcastically.

Michael, his head now just poking out from the right end of the bedclothes said,
*‘umm…eh…what?’,* very quietly.

Hardy continued his commentary for a few more minutes.

Michael snored extravagantly.

Wil said quietly, ‘*this is a really exciting match, isn’t it’*.

No-one answered.

Wil snored expansively.

*‘Another goal!’* whispered Hardy, *‘and another brilliant Beckham cross!’*

*‘How do you know it was brilliant, you can’t see it!’*

*‘I can imagine it, just like you said!  Three-nil, not bad.  Oh, wait a minute, they’re bringing on Kieron!’*

*‘Hey, I like Dyer, he looks like me!’* said Freddy drowsily, *‘can I listen for a bit?’*

*‘Sure, here, take the radio, you need to hold it close’.*

Freddy took the radio from Hardy and lay down on the bed with it flattened against his right ear.

Hardy, lying between the prostrate figures of Michael and Wil, waited for the commentary to come from Freddy.

Nothing.

Freddy snored massively.

*‘Hey, give me back my radio if you not going to listen to it!’* said the last remaining awake person.

*‘I said, give me back my daddio, if you really didn’t miss it!’*

And a few seconds later…

*‘I read about a lady-o, a lady-o, a lady…SNORE!’*

With the radio buzzing in the background, the four tired friends drifted off to their assorted lands of nod.

But one dream stood out.

Freddy, standing on a platform somewhere. Or was it a stage?  That’s right, a stage!  Lots of people. Hundreds.  Maybe thousands.  Waving and shouting.  Freddy waving back.  And bowing.  And behind him, just like yesterday.  Hardy’s incessant drum-drum-drumming…

**Save the Planet! – Day 3**

*And behind him, just like yesterday. Hardy's incessant drum-drum-drumming…*

*****

*'Burghhh! Werghhh! Mah! Eeek! Help!'*

Hardy sat straight up in bed. His eyes were still tight shut.

*'What was that?'* he said.

He flopped straight back down again. Eyes still firmly shut.

*'What was THAT?'* said Freddy, rubbing his eyes. He looked around vaguely, shielding his eyes from the morning sun that was drifting through the window.

Three silent, sleeping people next to him.

Freddy was on the edge of the big bed, and realised that he was actually clinging to the side to stop himself falling off. In fact, the duvet, which was tucked in at the side underneath him, was keeping him in. He levered himself upwards and crawled back onto the sleeping surface. His head throbbed with too little sleep, too much dreaming, too much drumming.

Still, there was not much room.

Michael was now comprehensively wedged between Wil, who was lying flat as a flatworm, his arms and legs splayed out in a horizontal star jump, and Hardy, who was now the opposite, curled up tightly into a ball, his head jabbed into Michael's side. Michael was sleeping. Freddy could see the rise and fall of his stomach as he breathed.

Suddenly, Hardy uncurled himself with a violent lurch, and sat up again. He raised his hands up as if protecting his (still shut) eyes against the sunlight.

*'No, I can't stand it…too bright…noooo!'*

He flopped right down again, this time slightly uncurled, draped over Michael's feet.

Michael involuntarily lashed out with his right foot, landing a kick hard onto Hardy's thigh. His eyes opened.

*'What was that?'* he said again, looking round with wild goggle eyes. Michael's foot, and the rest of Michael, was utterly still. Totally innocent-looking. Hardy sat straight on the bed, his head in his hands.

*'Freddy…you awake?'* he just about managed to get the words out through his tiredness and through his cupped hands.

*'Yeh…you OK?...I had a weird dream…all this noise and stuff…'*

*‘Oh…oh…oh…I had a nightmare, a real nightmare…’* Hardy buried his head deeper into his hands, as if trying to escape something.

*‘What was it like?’*

*‘Oh, don’t make me talk about it, please!’*

Freddy thought that Hardy actually seemed very distressed.

*‘It was all these bright lights…flashing…moving…dancing…’*

*‘You really don’t need to talk about it, you know’.*

*‘OK, I won’t, but…’*

*‘But what?’*

*‘It was all these bright lights…flashing…moving…dancing, forming shapes and patterns in front of my eyes. First this way, then that, I was blinded, I was deafened, I was…I was…’*

He sat straight up, then jumped off the bed.

*‘…I was dancing, like this…aaghhh!’* he jagged this way and that, moving his arms in stiff little circles, then his legs in rectangular patterns, then all limbs randomly…*’then these colours…bright yellows with little green edges, vivid reds with pink borders…then finally this horrible, horrible…’*

*‘What? Go on!’*

*‘…this horrible, horrible, pink colour, impaled on the top of Big Ben, like random shapes, gradually forming into this pink pile of blocks’.*

It slowly dawned on Freddy what his friend was talking about.

*‘That was no dream, mate, that’s real!’*

*‘Real?’*

*‘That’s the new Olympic logo, for two thousand and twelve!’*

*‘Really? I’ll be, let’s see, sixteen then. I’m going to enter. One hundred metres. You should see me go!’* Hardy took up a sprinter’s starting position.

*‘In your dreams, mate!’* said Michael, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

*‘No!, don’t remind me of my dreams…aaghhh!’*

*****

*‘Well I dreamed about one of my parents’,* said Michael, waking up, dreamily.

*‘Which one?’*

*‘Well, I can’t really remember, it was like a cross between my Mum, my Dad, my Grandad, Uncle Bob, and Aunty Selina’..*

*‘Sounds like a monster…’*

*‘No, it was definitely a parent…’*

Freddy turned to his friend.

*‘Parents aren’t like that really, are they?’*

*‘Oh no, this was a good dream. I was lying in bed, surrounded by all the cuddliest cuddly toys you’ve ever seen. This strange mixed up adult came into my room, and said ‘Good Morning, Michael dear’, how are you?’. It slowly drew back the curtains and said ‘Is this too bright for you?’, and then ‘it’s time for school now….’ I said, ’aw no, it’s much too early’, and the mysterious parent said,’oh, OK, dear, that’s fine, you have another hour in bed, you can go to school late and I’ll write a note to your teacher. I’m sure she won’t mind’.*

*‘This sounds pretty unlikely’,* said Freddy.

*‘There’s more. I drifted off to sleep and when I woke up again, it was ten o’clock in the morning. The strange being was there again, carrying a big tray full of breakfast things. It said, ‘I’ve brought you your favourites, crisps, coca-cola, and I’ve spread your sandwiches extra thick with chocolate spread! I do hope you enjoy it!’*

*‘That sounds like the best dream ever!’*

*‘Well, actually it all got a bit much. By the end I was feeling sort of sick’.*

*‘Well, I’m feeling sick just listening to it’,* said Hardy dismissively

Wil sort of woke up, then started babbling.

*‘Eeaowwm!’* His head tossed to the right. *‘Rrrrooom!’* His head tossed to the left. He repeated these sounds and movements several times.

*‘Wow, he’s having a nasty dream too…!’* said Hardy.

*‘Actually, I think he’s OK’,* replied Freddy.

What was Wil dreaming about?

*****

**Save the Planet! – Day 4**

*‘Actually, I think he’s OK’, replied Freddy.*

*What was Wil dreaming about?*

*****

*‘Eeaowwm!’*, said Wil again, a mad smile crossing his face.

‘*Rrrrooom!’* , he said, then *‘Yess!’,* as he lifted his arms in dreamy triumph. He sat up and looked around, arms still in the air.

*‘Morning, Bro’,* said Freddy, *‘you OK?’*

*‘Yes, I’ve just had this amazing dream!’*

*‘Sounds like you were in pain!’* said Hardy, *‘in fact, I bet I know what you were dreaming about!’*

*‘Bet you don’t!’*

*‘I think you were playing football, were running down the wing, then this HUGE defender came up to you and instead of going for the ball he lunged at you, and took your legs from under you. You were badly injured and they put you in an ambulance and drove you to hospital. On the way, the ambulance was driving really fast, going round a corner like this, eeaowwm!, and then round another corner like this, rrrrooom!, and then they got you in the operating theatre, they put you on the operating table, gave you some kind of injection…you looked up…and there was a doctor, in a white coat, with a big white mask over his face. You could see in his eyes he was smiling madly…he reached behind him and picked up this massive…and you screamed Eeaowwm!, three nurses held you down and you screamed Rrrrooom!...and then you woke up!’*

*‘I don’t think he would have woken up with a smile on his face!’,* said Michael, *‘I think it was more of a cool dream, about football…’*

*‘Maybe…’,* said Wil. Michael continued,

*‘I think you were playing for Lancaster Road, but you’d bought these special boots which gave you secret powers. You were playing on the wing, you picked up the ball in your own half of the pitch, and you took off. The special boots gave you super powers, and you shot off down the wing Eeaowwm!, cut inside the defender, and with a mighty Rooommm!, the ball screamed into the net, burst through the net and flew into the crowd’.*

The four of them sat there for a while, laughing at the crazy dreams. Freddy was quiet.

*I know my brother*, he thought. *I think the noises he was making, and the tossing of his head from left to right, were about driving. I think he was driving. And if I know him well, I think he was in a race of some sort. He was dreaming of being a racing driver. And if I know my brother,* thought Freddy carefully, *he would dream about a racing driver that was cool and calm and young. And who looked a bit like him!*

*‘Lewis Hamilton?’* said Freddy, tapping his brother on the shoulder. Wil looked round at him, smiling in amazement.

*‘You got it!’* said Wil, before adding, *‘…but, how did you get it?’*

*‘I know you well’*, said Freddy, laughing.

*‘It was amazing. I was in this car at the front of the race. I could see the other cars behind me. I just drove and drove and drove, round and round. I could see thousands of people waving at me, cheering, screaming. But all I could hear was Eeaowwm!, Rrroom!, Eeaowwm! Rrooom! And then, at the end, I saw this black and white flag, and when I stopped and got out of the car, people were jumping on me, patting me on the back, smiling and laughing’.*

*‘That was a cool dream alright! And most of it was true. Hamilton won his first race on Sunday!’*

*‘Wow, cool!’* said Wil.

*‘Let’s get up!’*, said Hardy, *‘I’ve got a problem today’.*

*‘What’s your problem?’*

*‘Well, my cousin is coming over, and he’s…well…really…kind of nice…but…well, he’s also…really…kind of annoying.’*

*‘He’s your cousin, how come he’s so annoying?’*

*‘Well, for a start, he’s the son of my mad Auntie Hardy…’*

*‘Aunty Hardy?’*

*‘I told you she was mad. Her real name’s Harriet, but she calls herself Hardy!’*

*‘OK, and what’s so annoying about her son?’*

*‘Ermm….he’s too young!’*, said Hardy desperately.

*‘That’s no reason to find him annoying!* said Wil, *‘I’m young, and I’m not annoying, am I?’* Wil flicked Hardy’s ear a couple of times, annoyingly.

*‘OK, so he’s a bit young, but also, I don’t know…’*

*‘What?’*

*‘He’s just a bit too cool!’*

*‘How can you be TOO cool?’* said Wil.

*‘Wait until you meet him’*, said Hardy.

*‘OK, what’s his name?’* replied Freddy.

*‘Oh that’s annoying too!’*, said Hardy, *‘he calls himself Lil’ Jimi!’*

*‘Well, if he’s a bit small, it’s OK to call yourself Little’,* said Freddy.

*‘No, that’s just it, it’s not Little, it’s Lil. Just…you know…annoying!’*

*‘Well’,* said Freddy, *‘let’s go and meet him!’*

*****

They strolled over to Hardy’s house later that morning. As they walked from the park up the lane to the big house, they were passed by a brightly coloured van, its windows blacked out and decorated with different coloured flowers and patterns.

*‘That’s them…’* said Hardy, kicking idly at the ground, *‘they’ve arrived’*.

As they got closer to the house, the van came back towards them, music blaring from its stereo. It passed them and disappeared off down towards town. They walked on, and the big house came into view.

Sitting on the step, one rucksack and one long black case beside him, Hardy’s cousin. Baseball cap perched on his head, tipped to one side.

*‘Yo H!’* he cried, *‘Long time no see, how’s it going?’*

*‘See…’* muttered Hardy, *‘annoying!’*

*****

**Save the Planet! – Day 5**

*Sitting on the step, one rucksack and one long black case beside him, Hardy's cousin. Baseball cap perched on his head, tipped to one side.*

*'Yo H!' he cried, 'Long time no see, how's it going?'*

*'See…' muttered Hardy, 'annoying!'*

*****

Hardy went and pushed against the heavy front door to his house. The door, made of solid oak, creaked satisfyingly as he pushed against it, and it swung open on its rusty hinges. Creaking and squeaking. The boys followed Hardy through the door, followed by Jimi, struggling behind with his cases.

Hardy's house was something else.

Across the park from where the others lived, Hardy's house was at the end of a long lane, lined with mature trees. As the lane approached the house, it widened out into a grassy area and a gravel driveway. Both the drive and the lawn had seen better days, but the house itself was strangely beautiful in an imposing sort of way.

*The sort of house that would look good on a dark night, with the moon outlining the chimneys, and a couple of bats flitting around above it*, thought Freddy, as they entered the big hallway.

Compared to their own house, Hardy's place was like a mansion. Wil and Freddy came here quite often, but it never felt like somewhere you wanted to stay very long. Hardy's Mum and Dad were rarely at home, and Hardy himself usually seemed pleased to be somewhere else. The big difference between Hardy's place and their own, was the noise. Back in Lancaster Road the houses were close together, there were always people around, noises from cars running up and down the road, children playing, music in the distance.

But not at Hardy's house, in the country, far from anywhere. There was nothing to hear. Mostly, all you could hear, was silence.

But the hallway was impressive.

As they entered, Freddy looked down at the polished wooden floors, and just resisted the temptation to take a flying power slide across them. Looking up, the ceiling seemed miles high, but that was just because in this part of the house it was double the height, so that the hallway roof went right to the top of the house. The first floor rooms were arranged around this entrance hall, with a little balcony in front of them. Hardy's mother appeared briefly at the balcony, waved and smiled sweetly at him, then disappeared into one of the rooms.

*Twang!*

Freddy looked round to see Jimi, sitting on a step at the other end of the hall, holding a guitar, which he had removed from its long black case. He pulled on a couple of the strings, which made a high-pitched twanging sound.

*‘Wow! Cool!’* said Michael, walking over and sitting on the step next to Jimi. Wil joined them, sitting to the other side of Jimi. He looked admiringly at the neck of the guitar, beautiful polished brown wood, with gold metal fittings holding the strings.

*‘That was rubbish!’* said Hardy dismissively, *‘it sounds like you’re playing a rubber band!’*

Jimi looked at his cousin and shook his head. *‘Just wait, man’,* he said.

*‘Annoying’,* muttered Hardy.

*‘Can I have a go?’* said Wil, taking hold of the guitar.

*‘Sure,’* said Jimi, *‘just hold it, OK? Don’t play it, right’*

*‘OK’,* said Wil, looking in awe at the amazing instrument in front of him. In addition to the engraved neck, the body of the guitar was a deep burgundy colour, with flecks of silver and gold in the paintwork. The strings caught the light coming in through the big hallway windows. The guitar seemed alive with light, and with possibilities.

Jimi helped Wil sling the strap round his neck, and helped him position the guitar properly across his body.

Wil stood up, legs slightly apart, the guitar neck pointing away from him, his right hand ready to strike.

*‘You look ridiculous!’* said Hardy.

*‘You look amazing!’* said Michael.

*‘Can I have a go?’* said Freddy

*‘Sure, man’,* said Jimi.

*‘Pah!’* said Hardy.

Each one in turn posed with the guitar, except Hardy, who marched impatiently around waiting for them to finish.

After each of them had had a go, Jimi strapped the guitar back on, and plugged a thick red cable into the socket on the instrument.

*‘So how come, you’re called Jimi, anyway?’* said Michael, a sense of admiration evident in his voice as he asked the question.

*‘Well, I didn’t really want to be called Jimi’,* said Jimmy in reply, *‘I wanted to be called Jimmy, or perhaps…’.*

*‘You are called Jimi!’* exclaimed Wil,

*‘No, I meant I wanted to be called Jimmy!’* said Jimi, smiling, *‘Or Keith?’*

*‘You wanted to be called Keith? That’s so uncool, Jimi’s much better, or…er…Jimmy?’*

*‘Or Slash’,* said Jimi.

*‘Slash, Keith, Jimi or Jimmy? What are you talking about?’* said Wil.

*‘Guitar heroes’,* said Hardy miserably from the other side of the hall, *‘he always brings his guitar with him’.* He walked off to one of the rooms leading off the hall.

*‘So, can you actually play anything?’* said Wil.

*Deaaanggggghhhh!* said Jimi.

Wil looked at Jimi as the hallway resonated to the sound of that one note. Pictures on the walls shook. Glass in the windows rattled. A small cat jumped down off one of the chairs and scuttled out of the room, scowling and mewing in the direction of Jimi, as if it had seen all this before. Michael clapped.

*‘Wow!’* he said.

*‘Wow!’* said Wil.

*Deaaanggggghhhh!* said Jimi.

*Amazing!* thought Freddy.

*Deang-duh-dang, deang-duh-duh-dangggghhh!* said Jimi, standing now, and shaking the neck of his guitar to make the last note ring out even more, reverberating around the huge empty space.

*‘Jimmy with a Y!’* he said triumphantly, *‘his most famous song!’*

*‘Wow!’* said Wil and Michael, in unison, almost singing.

*‘And Keith with a K!’* Jimi bent slightly over his guitar, looking for the right strings, turned one of the knobs on the guitar body slightly, then struck one of the most famous chords in history,

*‘Dung-dung, da-da-daaa, duh-da-daaagh!’*

*‘Wow!’* said Wil.

*‘I can’t get no satisfaction’,* said Michael.

*‘I’ve got an idea’,* said Freddy.

*****

**Save the Planet! – Day 6**

‘I can’t get no satisfaction’, said Michael.‘I’ve got an idea’, said Freddy.*****For the rest of the day, Jimi amazed them with his virtuosity on theguitar, picking out tunes, bending notes, shaking the house to its veryfoundations, and talking in that so?cool way of his. Even Hardy’s mother hadcome down to watch and listen.‘Listen man, I’m tired’, said Jimi, although there was no man in thebuilding.‘Yes, I think it is time to stop now,’ added Hardy’s mother, ‘andHardstaff, you know your father wouldn’t be pleased when he gets home’.Hardy’s pleasure at the end of the guitaring was thoroughlycountered by his embarrassment at his mother using his real name. Freddyand Wil just about managed to stop themselves laughing, because they knewfrom experience how much Hardy hated it. It had been his grandmother’sname before she was married, but why he had to have it now, he really didn’tknow.‘Hey man, cool name!’ said Jimi, leaning back against his guitar case,tilting his hat to even more of an angle, and chewing on the end of a plectrum.‘Er, thanks…er…man’ said Hardy, trying to sound cool, his face losingsome of its redness.‘Why do you call everyone man, er…man?’ said Wil.‘I dunno, man, just go with the flow, right?’ replied Jimi.‘Yes, absolutely, right…man’, said Wil. This guy was so cool.‘Actually, man, I gotta plan, for the old man Stan, you know, he’s a film fan,so I began to plan a trip to Cannes for him and Suzanne’.

‘Wow, cool’, said Wil, who hadn’t understood a word Jimi had said.‘Father’s Day’, grumped Hardy, ‘well, I’m not doing anything!’‘You’ve got to do something H,’ said Freddy kindly, ‘we’ll give you ahand. Let’s make a card at least’.‘Actually, I’m going to do one for my grandad instead’, said Hardy, hismood brightening a little.‘And I’ll do one for Mr Andrews’, said Michael.‘We’ll do something for our Dad’, said Wil and Freddy together.So, there in the hallway, they set about making Father’s Day cards inpreparation for Sunday.*****‘Hey! Is it Father’s Day or Fathers’ Day?’ said Wil, hunched over apiece of paper, staring at the two words he had written.‘What do you mean?’ said Hardy.‘Well, I don’t really know how to spell it’.‘I?T’, said Michael, unfunnily.‘Ha ha, no, what I mean is, I don’t know where this thingy goes’, addedWil, being a little more specific.‘What thingy?’‘This apos…aposo…astroposophy’, said Wil.‘He means, the apostrophe’, explained Freddy, sounding sophisticated.‘So, where do I put this apstroppykey?’ said Wil.

‘It’s a preposterous apostrophe!’ said Freddy, ‘and you put it between ther and the s. It means ‘belonging to the father’, so that means it is a day belonging tothe father’.‘It doesn’t belong to one father, it belongs to all of them’.‘Hmmm….you could have a point there, Bro, put it after the s, that means itwould be a day for all fathers’.Hardy and Wil looked at each other, then at Freddy.‘What does it matter?’ said Hardy.‘Well it does matter, sort of’, said Freddy unconvincingly.‘Well, I’m going to put Grandfather’s Day, with this thingy just there. He’smy grandfather and he’s the best, and so this day is for him and him only’.‘Well said, man, well said’, added Jimi dreamily.‘I’m going to write mine in German’, said Freddy.‘Trust you to do something clever!’ said Wil, busily writing his owncard.‘Well, Dad goes to Germany a lot, he will understand. Normally I do boringcards’.‘Liebe Vater’, muttered Freddy to himself.‘What did you say?’ said Hardy.‘Liebe Vater’, repeated Freddy, ‘it means ‘Dear Father’ in German’.‘Well, my Dad would throw me out of the house if I said that to him!’ saidHardy.‘Whatever’, said Freddy, continuing with his card.‘I’ve done a poem’, said Hardy proudly a few minutes later.‘OK, let’s hear it!’

‘No way!’ replied Hardy, ‘it’s for my Grandad!’‘Oh come on!’ said Wil.Jimi, who had been sitting watching for the last few minutes, sidledup behind Hardy, and looked over his shoulder. Hardy didn’t see him.‘You’re not seeing it!’ Hardy repeated. Jimi went back to his guitarcase, and pulled the instrument out. He started to sing.Fathers, Uncles, Grandads‘Hey that’s my poem!’ said Hardy indignantly.‘Oh come on, let him finish’, said Freddy. Jimi continued, strumminghis guitar along with

the poem.Fathers, Uncles, Grandads,They tell you off sometimes,They drink and smoke and swear and curse,They commit all sorts of crimesThey sit around, they lark aboutThey read the paper, scream and shoutAnd when they finally do go outThey don’t come backTil morningWhilst Mummy flits around the house,Floating like a fairy,All Grandad does is moan and grouse,All rough and tough, and hairyBut actually, its not quite that bad,He’s kind, he’s funny too,And I know he love’s me so,And Grandad, I love you!*****

As Jimmy worked on a chorus to the song, and Hardy started tappinghis heels on the hard wooden floor, Freddy went back to daydreaming abouthis idea.Which had now become his BIG idea.*****

**The Big Idea – Day 1**

*Bang! 'Wah!'*

*Bang! 'Wooh!'*

*Bang! 'Arghh!'*

*****

Freddy and Wil walked down the long garden after school on Monday.

*Bang! 'Wooh!'*

*Bang! 'Wah!'*

*Bang! 'Urghh!'*

*****

Freddy and Wil pushed through the gap in the overgrown hedge at the end of the garden. The noise was louder now, almost shaking the air.

*Bang! 'Woogoooh!'*

*Bang! 'Waagaahh!'*

*Bang! 'Splurrghh!'*

*****

Hardy was sitting in a clearing at the end of his garden, close to the tree where they had spent that cold April night, with a huge hammer in his hand, and pieces of shattered wood all around him.

*'What are you doing?'*, said Freddy, grabbing Wil's arm to stop him saying anything. The normal feelings of impending laughter when Hardy was on one of his missions were rising up inside him.

*'I'm building something'*, said Hardy, not looking up, but raising the hammer high above his head again and bringing it down on one of the timbers.

*Bang! 'Oowaagghhh!'* he yelled.

*'What are you building, then?'*, said Wil, walking over to Hardy, who had put the hammer down and was sitting leaning back, his hands supporting his weight on the ground behind him. He seemed to be surveying the chaos around him.

*'It's for him'*, he said, motioning over towards the hedgerow to his left. Wil and Freddy looked over to see Jimi, lying in a huge pile of grass or straw, guitar in hand. A single blade of grass was sticking out of his mouth. He chewed at it idly.

*‘Hey man, and…man!’* said Jimi nonchalantly, waving vaguely in the direction of Wil and Freddy, *‘he’s building me a house!’*

*‘He can’t put you in a house…man!’* said Wil, looking back at Hardy.

*‘You can’t put him…in a house…down here!’* said Freddy, picking up Hardy’s hammer and tapping at a piece of the shattered timber.

*‘I just can’t stand that constant guitar-playing!’* cried Hardy, covering his ears, even though for the moment Jimi was not strumming anything on his guitar.

*‘I’m only hangin’ out and goin’ with the flow’*, smiled Jimi, turning again to the guitar, and strumming a rich major chord which resonated deliciously around the enclosed garden clearing, *‘don’t put me down’*. He strummed a deeply sad minor chord and turned his eyes to the ground.

*‘Give me some help, here’*, said Hardy, *‘Mum says we can use this, but we might need to do it up a bit’*. Hardy led them towards another gap in the tall hedge, leading to yet another secret corner of the garden.

*‘I’m good at BIY!’* said Wil, taking the hammer from his brother.

*‘It’s DIY, and you know it’*, said Freddy.

*‘NO! Bash it yourself! That’s what I do!’* said Wil, pretending to bash at Freddy.

*‘Destroy it yourself’*, sang Jimi, strumming.

They stooped low and went through the gap in the hedge.

*****

*‘What a mess!’* said Wil.

*‘I know, it needs a lot of work’*, replied Hardy.

*‘Cool!’* said Jimi.

*‘It’s perfect!’* said Freddy.

Their eyes were met by a wreck, a ruin, the remains of a rusty relic which had seen much, much better days. It had once been a large, solid garden shed, but a tattered hole in the roof, and a door hanging off its hinges gave away the clues to its current demise.

*‘She says it’s ours, if we want it!’* said Hardy.

*‘It’s perfect!’* said Freddy again, *‘perfect’*, he repeated.

*‘For what, just for Jimi?’* said Wil, looking rather sadly at Jimi, envisaging the poor deluded guitarist sitting there, water dripping through the roof from a freezing sky, holes in his fingerless gloves, strumming pitifully away at an old broken guitar…’

*‘NO, for all of us!’* said Freddy, *‘we do it up, we kit it out, we play in it, we hang out, we can do our team meetings here, we can…we can…and yes, Jimi can play!’*

*‘What, like our shed, our base, our den?’*

*‘Exactly, Bro! This can be our team HQ!’*

Hardy and Wil looked at each other doubtfully, and then at the shed, doubly doubtfully. Looking back through the hedge at Hardy’s pile of splintered wood, with a triple dose of doubt, Wil said,

*‘How can we possibly repair it?’*

*‘The only way we can do it, is to start now, and not stop until we’ve done it!’* said Freddy, advancing to the door of the shed. He pulled gingerly at the door handle.

To his surprise, the handle pulled easily, right off in his hand. To his greater surprise, the door itself also pulled towards him, right off its hinges. It flopped onto the damp grass with a heavy *flump* noise. Little droplets of water spattered out from all around it.

*‘OK, there’s plenty to do’,* admitted Freddy, peering into the dark space beyond the door, *‘come and have a look’.*

*****

The weather, the worst in June since records had begun, was closing in that Monday afternoon. A storm was probably on the way, because the skies had become a deep grey colour, and the wind had started to move the tops of the tall trees. More than a rustling, but less than a whistling, but nevertheless, the day was approaching an early close, and an eerie darkness was beginning to fall.

*****

*‘Are you sure we want to go in now?’* said Wil.

*Sure, let’s just take a look’,* said Freddy.

*‘It looks haunted to to me’,* said Wil.

*‘Don’t be silly!’* said Freddy, leaning on the door frame and peering further inside.

*‘If there’s something strange,*

*In your neighbourhood,*

*Who you gonna call?*

*Ghostbusters!*

sang Jimi, strumming away on the guitar.

*‘Hey it’s not haunted, right, it’s an old shed!’* said Freddy, stepping one pace back and looking round at

the others.

Just then, there was a frantic rustling sound from inside the shed, and a small object shot out of the door and beneath their feet.  At the same time, a distant but heavy rumble of thunder shook the ground.

*‘Er…OK…perhaps we’d better wait til tomorrow’.*

*****

**The Big Idea – Day 2**

*Just then, there was a frantic rustling sound from inside the shed, and a small object shot out of the door and beneath their feet. At the same time, a distant but heavy rumble of thunder shook the ground.*

*'Er…OK…perhaps we'd better wait til tomorrow'.*

*****

*'Come on, man',* said Jimi, stepping forward, *'it's not so bad, we can use this for light'.* He produced a small torch from his guitar case. As he switched it on, it glowed briefly from the tiny filament, then went out. Jimi switched it off again, then on again. Again, the bulb glowed briefly. Then out.

*'Yes, OK, but I'm not sure',* said Freddy again, stepping back from the door and looking round again. Another rumble of thunder made him even less sure.

*'Hey was that lightning?'* he said, visibly concerned.

*'Nah, man, that was just my torch',* said Jimi, twisting the top of the torch to try to wring a bit more out of the batteries.

A huge clap of thunder, much much closer this time, made them all jump. Freddy thought he felt the ground shake under his feet.

*'Right, we're going',* he said, turning to Jimi, half pulling him away from the doorway. Rain was starting to fall. Not light rain, and not a downpour, but those heavy summer raindrops, each one seemingly self-contained and powerful, splashing extravagantly on the grass.

*'There's floods everywhere at the moment, we must go, have you seen the news?'* said Freddy, trying a different angle for his argument. The raindrops, still huge, fell a little faster. The group turned to leave the clearing where the shed stood.

As they turned to the exit, which was a gap in the high hedge, a vivid bright light jabbed into the ground just the other side of the gap. Freddy had never seen anything like it before. He shielded his eyes with his right hand. Looking through the gap in his fingers, he even imagined he saw a wisp or two of smoke just through the gap where the bolt had hit the ground. Or maybe had hit a tree in the next clearing. Or maybe hit someone standing there? He looked round quickly. Hardy, Jimi, and Wil were still beside him. But they were transfixed. Staring at the now empty space beyond the hedge. Which milliseconds before had been filled with light.

*'Er…man…'* said Jimi. A huge crash of thunder erupted apparently just over their heads. The eye of the storm. The centre. The epicentre. Right in the middle of it. The most dangerous part.

*'Er…man…'* said Jimi again, *'er…that wasn't my torch'.* It was one of the most obvious statements in history.

*'We…we…we…can't go on. We're….well…trapped!'* he said. For the first time, they heard Jimi sound less than totally cool.

*‘If we go out there, we’ll get fried’,* said Hardy, *‘there are too many trees, the lightning will get us’.* He sounded desperate. *‘There’s only one thing for it! We need to shelter…r in there’.*

Minutes ago, the dark, damp, dangerous-looking shed had been the one place they didn’t want to go. Now, it seemed to be their only hope. The whole group turned to look at the opening, its door lying abandoned on the ground. The doorway was dark, forbidding, like the opening to a long tunnel, with an unknown destination. They turned again to the gap in the hedge, which led to the relative safety of the big garden, and the house beyond. Warmth. Food. Drink. Maybe hot chocolate. A warm bath.

*Crackkk!*

Another huge bolt of lightning came to earth somewhere close and to the left of them. There was the sound of splintering wood and a creaking noise as the tree it had hit swung precariously in the wind.

Without a word, they made a beeline for the doorway, and almost jumped inside, turning around as they got in, so that they could at least benefit from they remaining light in the garden. Clouds shifted overhead. Big threatening grey clouds. Almost black. Constantly moving. The eye of the storm.

Jimi wrestled with his torch again. The barest light struggled out of it, but only the lightning really allowed the shed to reveal its secrets. And then only for a split second at a time. They huddled together, just inside the doorway.

*‘Well, now we’re here, and we’re stuck here, we might as well look…’,* said Jimi, as another mighty rumble of thunder interrupted him. He turned and took two or three paces into the dark.

*‘Aw, man!’* there was a thud as his head hit something hard above, followed by a rapid fluttering and squawking sound. Two pigeons struggled out towards the faint light of the doorway. The others instinctively ducked down to let them out.

As Wil ducked down, he took a small pace towards the corner, and his foot landed in something. Something soft. Squishy. Whatever it was oozed up over his shoe, and made contact with his ankle. He reached down to brush it off, then thought better of it. He let out a quiet *oorghhh!* sound. A disgusting smell wafted up to his nostrils.

More scrabbling. Another *‘aw!’* from Jimi.

*‘What’s up?’* cried Freddy into the darkness. Something else, larger this time, scrabbled its way past them and out into the garden. Freddy turned to see something shoebox-sized, black, with a long tail, racing across the clearing.

*‘I can’t see anything!’* said Jimi, as sheet lightning this time lit up the sky above, and the inside of the shed through its cracked windows.

*‘Ah that’s better, an old mattress, a bike, aw…what was that?’*

There was a thump as Jimi fell.

*‘Owaggh, my knee…what’s this now? There’s this kind of a raised bit here.*

They could hear Jimi panting in the darkness. Hardy called out.

*‘Are you OK?’* he actually sounded concerned for his cousin.

*‘I’m OK, man, thanks, I just tripped. I’m coming out again. I’ll just try the torch one last time’.*

As he reached close to the back of the shed, Jimi’s torch caught a glint of silvery light in the far corner. Lightning flashed again overhead. More distant this time. The thunder was quieter too.

*‘It really is dark now, but the storm is passing’,* said Freddy, *‘I really do think we should go now, really I do’.* His tone sounded more measured, but still anxious. Wil shivered. Hardy shuddered.

*‘Yes, let’s go!’* said Hardy.

*‘OK, man’,* said Jimi, *‘but you’ll never guess what we’ve got here! This is going to be awesome!’*

*****

**The Big Idea – Day 3**

*‘Yes, let’s go!’  said Hardy.*

*‘OK, man’, said Jimi, ‘but you’ll never guess what we’ve got here!  This is going to be awesome!’*

*****

After the excitement of the storm, the base, and Jimi’s extraordinary discovery, Friday at school just seemed to go on and on.

And on.

And on.

*‘What time is it anyway,’* Wil asked his brother in the playground.

*‘It’s about thirty seconds after the last time you asked what the time was’,* Freddy replied.

*‘So?  What time does that make it?’*

*‘Well, we’re out here, so it’s not lesson time, is it?’*

*‘Have we had lunch?’*

*‘Well how does your tummy feel?’*

*‘Oh, yes!’*

Freddy looked at his brother and smiled.  *Innocent*, he thought, *not a care in the world.  Doesn’t even know what time of day it is.*

There was a mass game of football going on across the broad, wet playground.

*‘It’s two-fifteen, Bro, that’s quarter past two, a quarter of the way round the clock face, the big hand is pointing at the three, and the little hand is just past the two…’*

*‘Yes, OK,  I know what you mean’,* said Wil, sounding a bit put out.

*‘Sorry.  Why don’t we join in this game?’*

*‘OK, which way are they going?’*

*‘Good question, I’m not sure’.*

The game seemed to be a mass scramble for a dusty old tennis ball.  There was a goal marked out on one wall at the far end of the playground, and at the other end was a pile of school jumpers acting as goalposts.  The teams were only distinguishable by their heights.  The short team was made up of Year 4s, and the tall team was made up of Year 5s.  And the tall team featured one player in particular,

slightly taller than the rest.

*'Right, right, stop the game!'* he shouted above the noise of the game, and the assorted noises of the playground.

Year threes, playing a mad game of *'it'*, where the school bin was 'home'. Several year threes were standing on the bin, trying to escape the clutches of the latest 'it' person. The bin was wobbling ominously.

Year twos, having a brilliant game of *'take-down bulldog'*, which currently featured every single year two, on the ground, nursing some kind of injury or another.

Year Ones, experimenting with a new game called *'girls catch boys'*, the rules of which seemed rather complicated, but generally seemed to consist of the girls, well…catching the boys. Screaming from the girls, hollering from the boys.

And the Reception kids, crying because three minutes ago someone had been their best friend, and now was their worst enemy. Oh…and now laughing, because they're best friends again. Oops, and now crying again!

And of course, the Year Sixes, sitting around in small groups, discussing their homework (*sure!*)

*'I said, like, stop the game!'* repeated the tall team captain, holding up his arms, then grabbing one of the smaller members of the opposition, and holding him there, a vice-like grip around his arm. Wil grabbed Freddy.

*'Oh no, what've we let ourselves in for here, that's… Barry!'*

*'I know, don't worry, leave him to me'*.

Barry sneered at the two new arrivals.

*'Hey, this looks like, like fun. Look who's like, here!'* said Barry to the group of players that had gathered round as the game was halted and Wil and Freddy had walked over. Barry advanced on the pair, pulling a smaller group of his team with him.

*'So, like, what do you, like, want. This game is full,'* he mocked. Wil recoiled slightly as Barry came closer, but then put his hands up karate-style to remind Barry of their last meeting. Barry in turn recoiled and turned to Freddy.

*'I said, like, what like, do like, you like…want?'* Barry was almost shouting now. Several of his mates snickered like jackals pathetically sniffing around for an easy kill.

*'We don't like, want, like anything',* said Freddy, to the delight of some of the younger players standing a few paces behind Barry, who was unaware that he was being imitated.

*'Yeah, well, you're not like…playing here!'* The jackals howled with laughter. Freddy moved forward.

*'Whose game is this…er…like?'* said Freddy.

*‘We like started it, and we don’t want anyone else playing. In fact, like, we don’t, like, like you!’* One of the jackals fell on the floor clutching his sides in hysterics. The others jumped on him and started tickling him for good measure. Barry looked down proudly at his mates.

*‘Well Mr B,’* scoffed Freddy, *‘we don’t really care what you think. This is, like, our playground, and we’re going to, like, play!’*

A gradual round of applause spread across the group. Someone shouted *‘I like it, like!’*

Freddy and Wil took their places as the game resumed.

Michael, who had been watching these events unfold, had joined in too. When the match restarted, it was him who carved a path through the opposition to score the only goal of the game, and it was he who managed to further embarrass Barry, by flicking the ball through his legs, dropping his shoulder to the left but then going right, and skipping on to score. Barry, who had tried in vain to pull Michael down as he passed, was left sitting on the ground cursing miserably to himself.

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The game finally came to an end, and the last school hour finally passed. For Freddy, an hour of angles and degrees, and for Wil an hour of bangles and beads.

And for tonight, and tomorrow, and the weekend, back to HQ, in the daytime, to find out Jimi’s secret discovery.

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**The Big Idea – Day 4**

*And for tonight, and tomorrow, and the weekend, back to HQ, in the daytime, to find out Jimi's secret discovery.*

*****

Back at school on Monday morning, Jimi's influence was obvious.

*'Yo M',* said Wil, high-fiving Michael.

*'Yo!',* replied Michael.

*'Yo H!',* called out Wil to Hardy across the playground.

*'Yo…'* said Hardy, before hastily adding, *'why are you talking like that?'*

*'Well…it's cool isn't it?',* replied Wil, *'Yo Alex! Yo Clara!, Yo JoJo!'*

There were several more minutes of yo-ing before everyone had greeted everyone else. Except Jimi, of course, who was much too cool for school. Well, for their school anyway. Hardy had explained unhappily that Jimi attended some kind of academy for talented children, which is why they only saw him at weekends.

*'I can't wait until next weekend',* Wil had said, his admiration of Jimi knowing no bounds.

*'Yo Barry!'* said Freddy finally, looking pitifully at Barry.

*'Yo yo!'* said Barry, trying hard, but making himself look utterly foolish. His friends started laughing maniacally at him, until he turned round and threatened each one of them in turn, his fists held high, boxer-style. Freddy walked away, smiling.

*****

Michael was kicking a ball up and down, as he usually did during any spare time. Wil watched for a while, as the ball went rhythmically up and down. Occasionally Michael would catch it on the bridge of his right foot, where it would settle, motionless, until he flicked it back up to continue the up and down motion.

*'I call this one the yo-yo!,* said Michael, the ball seemingly attached to his foot as it looped up and down, *'I've been practicing this all weekend. What did you do?'*

*'You'll never guess, you know what I told you on Friday, well, y-y-y-know, the st-st-storm…'*

*'Slow down a bit, what are you saying?'* said Michael. Wil sometimes stammered a little when he was desperate to say something. Which he was now.

*'You must come down, you must, you'd love it, it's great, really, will you come?'*

*‘Come where, what’s great? Let’s sit down’.*

Michael led Wil over to one of the benches at the edge of the playground. These benches were usually full of chatting children on a Monday morning, but as they sat down, they discovered why today was different.

*‘Urgghhh!’* said Wil and Michael together, sitting down, then standing straight up again to examine the slimy green patches on their trousers. The weekend rain had turned the natural shine of the wood into an unnatural combination of dirty water, green algae, slippery mud, and the occasional patch of aerial bombardment from the birds above.

*‘Too late now!’* laughed Michael, sitting down again, *‘can’t do much about it!’*. They sat back down.

*‘So, you said you were at Hardy’s place during the storm, you sheltered in some kind of shed, Jimi explored in the darkness, found something, but then you all left. What happened next?’*

*‘Well, you won’t believe it!’* said Wil softly, leaning over towards Michael, as if sharing a secret.

*‘Try me!’* said Michael.

*‘No, you won’t believe what we found!’*

*‘Well, I can’t believe it if you don’t tell me, so tell me!’*

*‘We found…a box full of buried treasure!’* Wil smiled.

*‘I don’t believe you!’*

*‘OK, I’ll whisper it to you!’*

*‘OK’,* Michael turned his head to the side and moved towards Wil, his trousers sliding greasily across the bench.

*‘….’* said Wil into Michael’s ear.

*‘What, did you say something?’*

*‘I said, whishoowishoosish’,* said Wil.

*‘Whishoosish? What does that mean?’* said Michael.

*‘I said, mimifundajunky!’* whispered Wil a tiny bit louder.

*‘Mummy fun day funky?’* replied Michael, guessing wrongly.

*‘No! Jimifundajunket!’*

*‘Jimi found a junket!’,* said Michael, looking round the playground.

*‘Oi, don’t tell everyone, it’s a secret’,* said Freddy, walking over towards them.

*‘Not much of a secret!’* said Michael, *‘what’s a junket, anyway?’*

*‘It’s a kind of milky dessert thing…oh never mind, he didn’t say junket, he said DRUM KIT!’*

*‘Jimi found a drum kit?’* repeated Michael.

*‘Where is it?’* sneered Barry, moseying over to where a little crowd had now gathered.

*‘Oh go away, will you’,* snapped Freddy, no longer remotely scared of Barry and his cronies, who slipped away meekly when challenged.

*‘Can you play it?’* said Michael.

*‘Nah – we tried, but we were all rubbish’,* Wil replied, *‘anyway, most of the tops of the drums were all saggy, and when Hardy tried to play one of them, the stick he was using went straight through. We’re meeting Jimi back there tomorrow, do you want to come over?’*

*‘Sure!’* said Michael, his face etched with concentration, his mind apparently racing with ideas.

As was Freddy’s.

*We need some help here. We can’t do it on our own,* he thought. *But once we’re finished, it’s going to be great!*

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**The Big Idea – Day 5**

We need some help here. We can't do it on our own, he thought. But once we're finished, it's going to be great! ***** The next day, Freddy, Wil and Michael trotted happily over towards Hardy's house, eager to embark on the next stage of the HQ project. Hardy had found paint and paintbrushes, and with the various offcuts of wood that Hardy had been working on before, they were in a position to repair the door and some of the worst holes in the outside walls. 'I'm looking forward to getting on with the inside!' said Wil as they waited for Hardy to open the door. 'It's going to be a lot of work, though', said Freddy, 'if we want to make it really good'. 'I think we need stuff to do in there', said Michael. 'It's even hard to know how big it really is', said Freddy, 'with all that stuff in there. When we've cleared it out, we'll be able to see. Then we can start planning. We can put a dartboard in there, and have the drums, Jimi can come with his guitar, we can keep our bikes in there…' 'Don't forget football stuff!', said Michael excitedly, 'we can store the training gear, we can plan the games, Mr Andrews can come over for team talks…' 'Hi, how're you doing?' Hardy opened the door. 'Fine, let's go!' They picked up the gear from outside the back door. Paint pots, brushes, and wood. They walked jauntily through the garden. Motivated men, on a mission. Hardy had made them each wear one of his Dad's old shirts. Hardy's Dad was no giant, but the shirts made each of them look like something out of the Seven Dwarves. Freddy and Hardy could just about walk without tripping over, but Wil and Michael kept tripping over the ends of the shirt?tails, or over the long?hanging sleeves. Wil was the only one to fall over, but he made the most of it by rolling over twice. His white shirt was now a dirty shade of brown. The grass underfoot was still damp from the huge bucketloads of rain it had received throughout June, and the prospects for July were not that much better. But the day, at that moment, was sunny, and they could feel some warmth on their arms through the thin material of the cotton. Freddy thought that the weather had some potential for being good, without being summery just yet. 'Hang on!' said Hardy as they turned the corner into the clearing off which the shed stood. The clearing was empty, and the familiar break in the tall hedge was visible at the far corner, despite the hedge being overgrown. 'What?' said Michael as Hardy held him back with a firm hand. 'Listen!' commanded Hardy. They stood still for a minute, shirts wafting in the breeze. Not a sound. But then a bang. Then another. Then silence. Then more banging, rhythmical banging, urgent banging. Distant, but not that far away. 'So, someone's working back at the house?' said Freddy. 'Yeh, that's what it sounds like, but…there's no?one in the house'. 'Maybe Jimi came down to help?' said Wil. 'I don't think he's here this week', said Hardy, his voice wavering slightly as he spoke. They stepped forward, half?confidently, half?aware that something was not quite right. No?one really wanted to go first, but no?one wanted to look scared by staying back. In the end, the four of them sort of shuffled forward across the clearing towards the break in the hedge which led to the shed. *****

'Oh, I've just remembered something!' said Hardy, turning go back. 'What have you remembered?', Freddy said. 'I've forgotten', said Hardy. 'I know, you've forgotten something, what is it?' 'I can't remember', said Hardy. 'You can't remember what you've forgotten, but you need to go back for it?' 'Wow, come over here!' Wil had reached the hole in the hedge first. He was kneeling on the ground, and peering round the corner. In the usual place, the hedge. The tree. The rusty wheelbarrow. Hardy's old tricycle rusting in the corner. The shed. But the shed was not alone. The shed was not standing there, quietly, minding its own business. Looking old and forlorn. The shed had company. ***** The door, which was directly facing them, and which they had tried to put back on its hinges the previous weekend, was still propped up in the position they had left it. Sort of closed. But outside there was a large pile of the former contents. The accumulated rubbish of decades was lying in a pile to the left of the building. And the building itself, was full! Of people. Little people. Working. Wednesday 4 July 2007 The Big Idea 266 Hammering. Nailing. Drilling. And laughing. Their silhouettes were visible through the cracked windows of the door and the window in the front wall. At least four or five of

them.  Some kind of light. The cacophony of different sounds coming from within was loud now.  A hefty hammering, followed by some nifty nailing, some serious screwdriving, and some devilish drilling.  And then, always, some light laughter.  Like laughing lions.  Or happy hyenas.  Or joking jackals. ‘Who, or what,  is THAT?’ whispered Hardy, who had not gone anywhere, ‘and in my garden, too!’ ‘Let’s watch for a minute’, said Freddy, the four of them now crouching down and peeking through the hole in the hedge. As the variety of sounds continued, it was clear that the activity inside the shed was totally concentrated and productive.  Although they could not see what was going on inside, they could make out voices occasionally during the silences, talking urgently, rapidly, but positively.  After some talk, a quick laugh, then more action.  Concentrated action.  Banging, hammering and drilling. They watched for maybe fifteen minutes. ‘What are we going to do?  Whoever they are, they’re doing something to our shed, and they’re trespassing’, said Hardy, his grip tightening around one of the pieces of wood he was carrying. ‘Let’s try to get a closer look’,  said Freddy, ‘if we go round there and crawl into the hedge, we can probably get a look through the side window’.  He motioned over behind and round him, indicating for them to backtrack and try to get closer, even though at the point he was suggesting, there was no gap in the hedge.

When they got round to the side, they found that they could only see anything through the thick hedge by crawling right through the base on their stomachs. Lying there, breathing heavily, now only a few metres from the side of the shed, but fully concealed, they could see the tops of the heads working away inside. And one of them was very very familiar. ‘I don’t believe it!’ Hardy whispered in astonishment, ‘what on earth is HE doing there?’

**The Big Idea – Day 6**

‘I don’t believe it!’ Hardy whispered in astonishment, ‘what on earth is HE doing there?’

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‘It can’t be…but it is!’, stuttered Freddy, ‘how did he get in?’ ‘I don’t know, but we’ve got to get him out!’ replied Hardy. ‘How many of them are there?’ added Michael. ‘I think it is HIM, plus three, maybe four more…’ ‘We could take them I think’, Michael added quickly. ‘What do you mean, take them?’ whispered Hardy. ‘Well, you remember what he’s like, a total coward if you confront him. Let’s march right up to him and tell him to get lost!’ said Michael. ‘But what are they doing in there?’ ‘It looks like they’re working’. They crawled out backwards from the hedge where they were lying, brushed themselves down, and made their way carefully to the entrance to the clearing where the shed stood. The banging and laughing from within continued. ‘Oi, you, who are you?’ shouted Hardy from a safe distance. The banging and clattering and laughing continued. They ventured a bit further forward, about five metres from the doorway. ‘Oi, who are you?’, repeated Hardy, his voice strong on top but wavering underneath. The banging stopped. The laughing faded away.

The door opened. Slowly. Standing there, just outside the doorway, flanked on either side by his ridiculous schoolfriends, was Barry. Holding a hammer. Smiling stupidly at them. ‘What are you doing here, and why are you in OUR shed?’ said Freddy, no longer afraid of Barry or his cronies. He stepped forward confidently. ‘Well, we…’ started Barry. Unseen to the others in their focus on the confrontation in hand, Jimi had arrived at the house and had strolled down to the garden to see how they were getting on. To their surprise, he now stepped forward from behind the others. ‘Bazza Baby! What’re you doin’ here, man?’ ‘You know Barry?’ said Hardy. ‘Jizza my man!’ said Barry, stepping forward and enveloping Lil’ Jimi in a huge bear hug. ‘Bazza’, groaned Jimi, under the weight of the embrace. ‘Jizza…’ said Barry, ‘how’s it going?’ ‘Good, good, just hangin’ with my good friends here. Who’re this lot?’ ‘Oh, I hardly know them, but they do as I say. Get lost boys!’ The jackals slunk away from the shed as Barry and Jimi walked up to the doorway. ‘See I heard my good friend here talking about the shed in the playground. I just thought I’d come to check it out.’ Freddy winced. ‘You’re no friend of mine’, he said, with a hint of menace in his voice.

‘Or mine’, squeaked Wil from the background. Michael remained silent, but the scowl on his face and his downturned mouth told Barry what he thought. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I spend all my days with these fools…’ he motioned over towards the jackals who had slipped out of the garden, ‘and when I heard you’d found a drum kit, I just thought I wanted to help, right. I’ll go if you want me to’. ‘Yeh, just go, will you’, said Hardy, ‘how did you get in, anyway?’ ‘There’s a hole in the fence down there. I’m going. Hope you like what we’ve done. Bye!’ Jimi turned to the rest with a disgusted look on his face. ‘You can’t just send him away. He’s a friend of mine.’ Turning to Barry he said, ‘Bazza, can you still play?’ ‘It’s been a while,’ said Barry, ‘but let’s see!’ Barry walked cautiously over to the pile of rubbish that he and the jackals had cleared from the shed and started picking around, searching for something. After a few minutes, he emerged with two thin tree branches, each about fifty centimetres long. He pulled off some of the external little twigs as they walked towards the front door. ‘That’s amazing!’ said Freddy as they walked through the doorway. ‘We thought we’d just try to help!’ replied Barry, his voice sounding relieved that they were inviting him in. Although still a mess, the interior of the shed was recognisable as, well, the interior of a shed. There was a floor, a bit muddy and grimy, but definitely a floor. There were walls. Four of them. Standing more or less upright. There was a roof, made of corrugated metal of some sort. There was a small hole in the roof. With a bird’s nest partially sealing it. And at the far end, where Jimi had hit his knee, and where Barry and his friends had cleared

away most of the clutter… …was a raised part.

A stage. With the drum kit, taking pride of place, in the centre. Barry marched over to the kit, carrying his two bits of tree. Jimi smiled slightly, closed his eyes so that only the very centre of his pupils were visible, and nodded his head, as if appreciating something. Although nothing had yet happened. Barry bent over the kit, as if examining something. He tutted a couple of times. He shook his head. He grasped one of the drum stands, and bent it slightly. He tried to turn one of the knobs below the snare drum. It was stiff. He muttered something under his breath. He sat on the drum stool. It collapsed. Hardy laughed. Freddy kicked him. Barry got up, rearranged the stool so that it would support his weight, and lifted his sticks high up in the air. There was a boom. And a crash. And a splash. And a hiss. And a rumble. And a slap. And a tap. And then two booms, close together. Followed by a single slap. Boom?boom?slap. Then there was a boom?boom slap?slap. Repeated. Then, a boom?boom slap?slap hiss. Boom?boom slap?slap hiss. Then, tapping. Lots of it. Fast tapping.

Tap?tap?tap?tap, tap?tap?tap?tap. The tapping didn't stop, it gathered pace, it was incessant, as Barry made the drum kit sing. As the tapping intensified, it was accompanied by some boom?booms. Ta?ta?boom?boom, ta?ta?boom?boom…then some splashes. Splash! Barry's face became redder as the activity intensified. Freddy, Wil and Michael stood there, mouths agape. Jaws dropping. Jimi continued to nod his head slightly, in time with the drumming now. Ta?ta?boom?boom, ta?ta?boom?boom, SPLASH! Ta?ta?boom?boom, ta?ta?boom?boom, SPLASH! Rumble rumble rumble… Ta?ta?boom?boom, ta?ta?boom?boom, SPLASH! As Barry worked his way round the kit, Freddy found himself not just tapping his foot, but almost involuntarily dancing on the spot where he was standing. Ta?ta?boom?boom, ta?ta?boom?boom, splash…CRASH! Ta?ta?boom?boom, ta?ta?boom?burgggh! Ta?ta?burghh, ta?ta?burghh, pluff! Barry laughed, as the perished drum skins tattered under the assault of his sticks. He came down from the stage. 'Not bad', he said, smiling, 'a bit of work on them, some new skins, it'll be cool!' 'Cool, man', said Jimi. 'Yeh, cool!' said Wil. 'That was great', said Michael.

Freddy said nothing. But his big idea was getting bigger by the minute.

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**Get Healthy! – Day 1**

*'Three…four…urghh!'*

*'Start again!'*

*'One…urghhh…two…urghhh…th-r-eeee…splat!'*

*'That's rubbish!',* said Clara, writing busily on her clipboard as she stared down at the pathetic figure on the ground.

*'I'm trying, really I am, but I'm injured, you see…'* Hardy said, lying on his side, rubbing his left arm, *'I don't think press-ups are good for my tennis elbow'.*

*'Tennis elbow? Rubbish! How would you get that, you don't even play tennis?'*

*'Well, there's something wrong with my arms, anyway',* said Hardy miserably, *'I'll do something else…'*

*'OK. Star Jumps. Ready? One…two…three. What's up now?'*

Hardy was lying on the ground moaning, clutching his thigh. His left leg was splayed out in front of him and his right leg had buckled underneath him and was sticking out to the rear.

*'Agghh, now, it's my old injury, you know, the one I picked up against Derby Road last season, when I was ill',* groaned Hardy.

*'You can't even do a star jump? Oh man!'* Clara laughed as she turned to her next victim.

*'And you've made my Chelsea kit all muddy!'* shouted Hardy after her, as the dampness in the turf started to soak through his shorts and socks.

*'I'll be along to give you your lunch in a minute, got to build you up!'* replied Clara sarcastically as she walked away.

*****

Across the field, Michael was warming up for the bean bag race by juggling the bags between his hands and feet.

*'OK, that's enough of that!'* snapped Clara, *'let's see fifty press-ups, NOW, one…two…three…'*

Michael instantly dropped to his hands and performed fifty perfect press-ups. Clara nodded appreciatively and scribbled busily on her notes. A small bead of sweat formed on Michael's forehead. Clara watched it slowly as it crawled down his face.

*'I knew there was something about you that was different',* she said. Michael elegantly wiped the drip from his forehead. *'What have you done to your hair?'*

*'Sorry',* said Michael smiling, *'it's a Becks thing!'*

*‘But it’s all grey!’*

*‘I know, he’s making his debut for the Galaxy this weekend, in LA’,* said Michael, smoothing his cropped hair down at the front.

*‘Yeh, and it’s against Chelsea! One-man team…one-man team!’* cried Hardy, who had got his breath back and was miraculously walking without any hint of a limp, strutting his stuff in his Chelsea kit.

*‘We’ll see’,* said Michael carefully, *‘he’s not their only player, although he is injured, so it might be difficult for Galaxy’.*

*‘Oh, yes, I see, like me’,* said Hardy, limping away.

*****

The preparations for Sports Day were not going well.

Clara had appointed herself coach of the North team, which included Hardy and Michael. Freddy and Wil were in the South team, along with Alex and Barry. And Jaz was in the West team.

Freddy looked round at the rest of the South team, lazing around on the grass waiting for the practice to resume.

*What a bunch of layabouts!* he thought to himself.

*‘I know what you’re thinking!’,* said Wil, striding over, *‘you’re thinking, ‘what a bunch of layabouts’, aren’t you?’*

*‘Well, look at them!’,* said Freddy, amazed at his brother’s perspicacity, *‘no hopers, that’s what they are. Unfit. Unfat. Unfunny.’*

*‘How can you be unfat?’*

*‘Well, look at them, Wil…’,* implored Freddy, *‘they’re not fat exactly, but they’re stuffing themselves with rubbish just before a major training session!’*

Several children continued stuffing themselves with the contents of their lunch boxes. Not a lettuce leaf in sight.

*‘Relax! It’s only Sports Day!’,* said Wil.

*‘I know, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take it seriously. It’s taking it apart that’s important’.*

*‘What?’* said Wil. Freddy desperately searched his mind for the correct phrase. He’d read it somewhere, but it hadn’t come out right.

*‘I mean…sorry…it’s the taking part which is important, not the winning’,* he remembered.

There was a shrill blast from a distant whistle, as the teams were summoned back to the session. The South team wandered over to the waiting teachers and joined the other three teams already there.

*‘Now!  Captains come forward please!’* shrieked the teacher.  Clara stepped forward from the Norths, and the other captains joined her.

*‘I have the events listed here for Friday.  There will be flat races, obstacle courses…’*, yelled the teacher, waving envelopes above her head, *‘you need to decide who’s going to be in each one.  I’ll leave that to you, captains’*.

There was a mass surge forward as the children tried to get closer to see what the envelopes contained. The teacher was barely visible as every single child dashed up in an attempt to grab the contents.

*‘I will NOT have…urghh!’*  yelled the teacher as her arm, holding the envelopes, became the only part of her that was visible.  She bobbed up once, so that her head could be seen above the throng, then disappeared back down again.  There was a flurry of arms and legs.  The melee continued with two hundred children scrapping on the ground, and no sign of the teacher.  The noise was like dogs yapping, or piranhas, snapping at their prey.

Miraculously, out of the mess of bodies, crawled the teacher.  Her normally perfect hairstyle was now caked in mud, and strands of matted hair hung despondently down her face.  Her glasses were similarly smeared with mud.  Her tracksuit was rucked up and ruined.

Even more miraculously, she was still holding the four envelopes.

Raising herself up to her full height, she turned to face the heaving throbbing mass of children.

*‘RIGHT!’*  Her voice pierced the air.  Silence fell.  Her glasses slipped.  Someone smirked.

*‘RIGHT!’*  she repeated, looking at the smirker, *‘THERE’S GOING TO BE SOME CHANGES HERE!’*. Dramatically, she tore up the envelopes, slowly, one by one.  A lone voice called out,

*‘Oh…oh…we’re sorry…please don’t cancel Sport Day’*

*‘CANCEL?  CANCEL?  HA HA HAAAGGHHH!’*  she cried.

*‘I’m not going to cancel...I’m just going to change some of the events, that’s all!’* As she said the word *change*, a small smile seemed to play around the corners of her mouth.

And with that, she turned, and her glasses fell with a splat into the mud.  She whisked them up, put them muddily on her nose, and was gone.

*****

**Get Healthy! – Day 2**

*And with that, she turned, and her glasses fell with a splat into the mud. She whisked them up, put them muddily on her nose, and was gone.*

*****

Back at HQ after school, Barry was practising.

Hardy, Freddy, Wil and Michael were standing outside. The front door was shut. They stood silently as the rhythms bombarded them from the inside. The flimsy wooden walls of the shed were no protection from the noise, but standing where they were, in the cold damp July atmosphere, the drumming was muffled slightly. But still persistent. The walls of the shed seemed to respond to Barry's efforts, especially when he hit the bass drum. The rhythm he was playing at that moment was mostly on the cymbals, giving a *tickety-tick* or hissing sound, but every two bars he gave the bass drum a mighty kick, and the walls groaned, apparently elasticated, as they responded, then fell back. Responded, then fell back. Every two bars.

*'He's great!'* said Hardy, clapping his hands in time with the rhythm. Michael was doing a little dance around the clearing where the shed stood.

*'I wish I could sing!'* he said, picking up a stick from the ground and pretending to use it as a microphone.

*'Yes, but we need a rhythm section first',* said Freddy, who had been giving his big idea more thought.

*'Sounds like he's a one-man rhythm section!',* Michael replied, as Barry launched into a crashing solo, the sounds on the individual drums hard to distinguish as he went round the kit at breakneck speed.

*'Nah',* said Freddy, *'I've been reading about this. You need drums and bass, then at least one guitar. We've only got Barry and Jimi, and even then, I'm a bit worried about Jimi'.*

*'Jimi's great too!'* said Michael, his enthusiasm for the big idea shining through in his voice.

*'I know, but Jimi might want to be the leader'.*

*'So?'*

*'Well, he might want to play lots of solos and things. We may need someone else to play guitar as well'.*

*'I closed my eyes,*

*Drew back the curtain,*

*To see for certain,*

*What I thought I knew…'*

Michael sang tunelessly, twirling his pretend microphone in imitation of the weeks and weeks of JoJosephs he had seen on television.

*'Yes, well…'* said Freddy, rehearsing in his mind his own ambitions of singing in front of his band.

Barry continued as Hardy rummaged around in the piles of junk that Barry and his mates had cleared from the inside of the shed.

*'No – not that!',* he said as he lobbed a rusty bicycle off the top of the heap, *'I know it's in here somewhere!'*.

*'Definitely not that!',* he cried as a succession of half opened bags of garden compost and seed flew over his shoulder, exploding onto the ground behind him.

*'Ah, now then...'* Hardy pulled a large wooden box from near the bottom of the pile, *'this might be use…aaaaghhhh!'*

Hardy leaped back from the box, rubbing furiously at his hands. He staggered five or six paces back from the box. His scream had been loud enough for even Barry to hear, and the drumming had stopped. The door to the shed opened to reveal Barry, shirt open to the waist, sweat pouring off him from the efforts of playing.

*'Whassup?'* he yelled.

Barry always yelled. Maybe it was the drumming. Maybe it was the fools he associated with. But he hardly ever just spoke. Normally. He yelled.

*'Er….er….in there!'* Hardy pointed to the box.

*'What's in there?*

*'It's…huge!'* cried Hardy. Barry marched over to the box. *Actually he's quite brave,* thought Freddy to himself.

Barry kicked at the box. Nothing.

Barry turned the box round. *With his bare hands!*

Barry peered into the darkness of the box.

Barry put his index finger of his right hand inside the box, and then withdrew it. Slowly.

*'Is this what you were looking for?'* Barry smiled warmly at Hardy. Barry didn't often smile warmly at anyone.

*'NO! Don't come close!'* Hardy said, cowering behind the other three.

Hanging off Barry's outstretched finger was a spider, on it's web.

The spider was at least 3 millimitres across, and it's legs stretched out a further 2 millimetres, giving it

an overall size of around five millimetres.  Hardy shivered.  The others laughed.  The spider smiled and looked pathetically at Hardy.

*‘Right, OK, now what I was thinking was…’,* said Hardy, going back to work on the box, and the pile. He scratched around some more and came out with a long stout pole, and some rope.

*‘I saw this once’,* he said excitedly, *‘you stick the pole through a hole in the top of the box, you tie the string on here, then you…’*

*‘Yo, Mr Bass Man!’,* came a call from behind them.

*‘Er, Yo! Er Jimi!’*  said Hardy.

*‘Hiya!’*  said Freddy, turning to Jimi, whose arrival was unexpected, but very welcome.  Things seemed to happen when Jimi arrived.

*‘Why did you call him bassman?’*  said Wil.

*‘String bass.  String. Box. Pole.  You’ve got a bass’.*

Hardy twanged the string, which was tightly drawn between the top of the stick and fixed to a point on the top of the box.  It made a satisfying *thud* sound.

*‘Pull it tighter man!’*

Hardy obliged, pulling the pole towards him and strumming again.  A more interesting *thung* sound this time.

*‘We got us a bass, boys!’*  said Jimi.

*‘Come!’* commanded Barry to Hardy, *‘Let’s play!’*

*****

**Get Healthy! – Day 3**

‘We got us a bass, boys!’ said Jimi.‘Come!’ commanded Barry to Hardy, ‘Let’s play!’*****The Friday of Sports Day dawned.Actually, it didn’t so much as dawn, rather it floated in through atorrent of rainfall. Whilst Thursday had been merely damp, Friday was wet.Rivers of water ran across the school playing fields, forming deep muddylakes wherever the ground dipped. All the devices designed to channelwater, the gutters, the drainpipes, the drainage channels, were blocked oroverflowing. Water hazards were everywhere. The playing fields were atropical green colour, having been soaked with rainfall for the previous twomonths.‘Right! Now remember, this is a chance for you to show your parents whatyou can do! Don’t forget! Best behaviour!’Hardy looked out at the sky, which looked threateningly back at him.It looked almost human, like an enormous person holding out a pudgy fingerto them as if to say, you come outside and we’ll dump so much water down on you,you’ll wish you’d never lived. An enormous grey person, ready to get them.‘My parents won’t come out in this!’ he said, turning to Freddy, whowas was doing his best to look on the bright side.‘No I don’t think mine will either, but look, it’s brightening up over there!’‘Silence!’ screamed the teacher as a flash of lightning momentarily litup the room. She held her clipboard high above her head, to signal to thechildren that it was time to process out to the field. It also served as amakeshift umbrella.‘We can’t go out, it’s pouring!’ said Wil as the long line of sorrychildren snaked out into the deluge.

‘Silence!’ roared the teacher predictably.Within seconds, their clothes were soaked through. The hair of mostof the girls lay soggily across their foreheads, drips off the ends adding totheir discomfort.‘This is outrageous!’ muttered Clara as they were forced to sit down onthe ground. She managed to find a damp spot, but was not actually forced tosit in a puddle.‘You’re lucky!’ said Wil, forced to sit in a puddle.‘Now, everyone wave at your parents!’ the teacher cheepedenthusiastically. The children waved over towards the bank of seating thathad been positioned on the far side of the running track.Three parents waved back from under their umbrellas. The other twowere huddling together for warmth, and failed to see the waving hordes ofwet children.That’s right. Only five parents turned up. Hundreds of empty seats.Uneaten strawberries. Undrunk gallons of beer.*****The events started with a Reception class running race. The eightchildren lined up at the start, ready for their thirty metre dash. As the whistlewas blown, four of them hared off down the track, two of them hared off thewrong way, and two of them burst into tears, to add to the generally wateryatmosphere. The winner celebrated by tripping up as he crossed over the lineand sliding a further ten metres into a particularly deep puddle. By sitting upstraight, he could just keep his head above the water. More tears. Yet morewater.After a number of other events, the Year five obstacle race wasawaited by its participants with a mixture of dread and excitement. Freddy,Alex, Hardy and Jaz were all taking part, but after the confrontation onMonday, they knew the event could be a lot different from what they hadpracticed, which consisted of walking a bit holding a bean bag, jumpingthrough a hoop, dropping the bean bag into a bucket, and then jogging,carrying the bucket, over the finish line.

Freddy looked down. No bean bag. Just a small, soggy piece ofpaper. Without any further warning or explanation, the race started.‘Three?Two?One GO!’ screamed the starter.Freddy bent down and picked up the piece of paper. As he openedit, it fell limply into two pieces but he could just make out the writing on it,which said,Forward 2 pacesLeft three pacesThenDIG!He looked across at the others in the race who were looking back athim. With a shrug of the shoulders, he stepped forward two medium?sizedpaces, and then left another three. There was a round patch on the groundbeneath his feet, about the size of a football, where the earth had beendisturbed. He dug frantically at the ground with his hands.The earth came up quite easily, sodden as it was. Huge clumps ofyellow and red clay stuck to his hands. And his feet. And to his forearms. Abit spat up from the hole, and stuck to his right cheek.After digging out a small hole, he found the bean bag. Glancing over,he could see Alex with his bag already

on his head, starting to move down thecourse. He could also hear the teacher cackling with glee. He pulled madly atthe bag, and extracted it from the sticky mass of earth in which it stood.The bag was a bit bigger than he expected and had obviously beenwhite before it had been buried. He picked it up and started to move off.‘On your head!’ cackled the teacher.Freddy placed the squelchy blob on his head. He set off down thecourse towards the bucket. The squelchy blob was not actually a bean bag atall. It was filled with flour. On a dry day, flour wouldn’t have been so bad,so long as you didn’t drop it. On a wet day, flour was bad. Mixed withwater, the flour became a sticky mass, and some of it started escaping fromthe bag, oozing through the thin material. Freddy could feel it seeping intohis hair, and as he approached the bucket, he could feel some of it, white and

glue?like, sliding down his head and over his ears. A globule paused by hisear, then dropped sullenly into the neck of his t?shirt. He winced.As he approached the bucket, he picked the bag off his head andtossed it in.SPLAT!The bucket was not empty. Inside was a gloopy mess of stuff theteacher had concocted inside the classroom. Glue, paste, lots of scraps ofpaper, different coloured paints. Freddy was showered with green paint,representing his team. Alex, one lane across from him, was covered in red.Freddy picked up the bucket.‘Now run, run!’ yelled the teacher next to him, holding her stopwatchout as he set off on the last phase of the course.As he ran, paint, glue, paste, paper, flour, water, mud and clay,slopped over him.Over his shoes. His socks. His legs. His shorts.Green. Grey. Brown. Off?white. He crossed the finish line and sethis bucket down carefully. Alex had won, although he was even moresplattered than Freddy. Back down the course, Jaz was struggling, andwhen he finally made it over the line, he slipped with the effort, trailing hisbucket behind him. As he slid to a halt, the bucket ended up emptying itselfall over him in a glorious gloopy globule.He sat there trying to clean paint and flour off his glasses.Alex and Freddy just had to laugh!*****After the events had finished, and even though the rain had not, theyall agreed that they had had a fun, if different, sort of sports day. Even theteacher looked pleased.‘See you tonight!’ Freddy called across as Alex was leaving.‘I’ll be there’, said Alex cheerily, before adding, ‘I hope!’

‘You can’t miss this for anything!’ replied Freddy, smiling soggily tohimself.*****

**Get Healthy! – Day 4**

*‘I’ll be there’, said Alex cheerily, before adding, ‘I hope!’*

*‘You can’t miss this for anything!’ replied Freddy, smiling soggily to himself.*

*****

On Sunday morning, back at HQ, Hardy was trying to get his makeshift bass working. Although it looked fine, he couldn’t get more than the most basic *thup* sound out of it.

*‘There’s got to be some solution man…’* said Jimi thoughtfully, looking intently at the box, *‘oh, hey man, I didn’t see you there. How’s it going?’*

Freddy, who was sitting huddled in a corner of the shed, said nothing.

*‘I said hi, man, how are you?’* repeated Jimi, walking over to where Freddy sat, and waving his hand in front of Freddy’s eyes.

*‘Uh, eh, what?’* said Freddy, *‘Oh, hi…er…Jimi’.*

*‘You OK, man, you look kinda rough!’*

*‘What? Oh yes, fine…thanks’.*

Freddy returned to his book. Jimi returned to Hardy and the box.

*‘Yes, we need some way of the sound getting out. At the moment, when you twang the string, all the sound is getting lost inside, like the box is swallowing it up’.*

*‘We need to plug it in to your amplifier really’,* said Hardy hopefully.

*‘I know what you’re saying man, but you’ll have to wait for that! There’s got to be a simpler solution’.*

Freddy nodded his head slightly as he read, then suddenly jerked his head up.

*‘Hey, you’ll never guess what, you won’t believe this…’*

*‘NO!’* screamed Michael from the doorway, *‘don’t tell us! Let us read it ourselves!’*

*‘Uh…oh…yeh…sorry’,* muttered Freddy quietly, his head dropping slightly as he returned to his book.

*****

*‘I think we need to make a hole in it!’* said Hardy, *‘that way the sound could get out!’*

*‘Yes, you’re probably right there, man’,* Jimi replied.

*‘How can we do it?’*

*‘Let’s try this’,* said Jimi, picking up a rusty hammer from the pile of junk outside the shed.

*‘I’ll do it’,* said Hardy, *‘I’m stronger than you, and you need to look after those fingers!’* Jimi smiled appreciatively.

*‘Oh no! Oh my word!’,* said Freddy from the corner, *‘Mad-Eye Moody has just been…’*

*BANG!* Hardy brought the hammer crashing down onto the side of the wooden box. The box jumped a few centimetres backwards, but the thick wood remained intact.

*‘…and Ron has just been given…’*

*CRASH!* Hardy brought the hammer down once more. Again, the box failed to give in. Freddy returned to his curled up position, and carried on reading.

*****

*‘Maybe we need something stronger. Is there a saw out here?’* said Michael.

Michael, Jimi and Hardy went outside to look for more powerful tools. Freddy carried on reading. As they returned, with a sort of long, bent two-man saw, Freddy looked up again,

*‘Where’ve you been, did I tell you about Hermione accidentally…’*

*BONG!* The bells of the church next to Hardy’s house started to ring out for midday,

*‘…and then a Death Eater…*

*BONG!*

*‘I told him not to say anything!’* said Michael in frustration, as the bells of the church rang twelves times. Freddy had given up trying to compete with them.

*‘Well, he’s been reading for twelve hours already’,* said Hardy, *‘he probably can’t even think straight. So, let’s try this!’*

They sawed, and they sawed, and they sawed. Freddy tried, and tried, and tried, to tell them what was going on, what a Deathly Hallow actually was, what happened to Dumbledore, and who the mysterious RAB actually is, but the sawing drowned out his fading, faltering, feeble voice. As Hardy picked up the broomstick and jabbed it into the top of the new bass box, Freddy said, quite perkily this time,

*‘Oh no, Hardy’s just said…’*

*THUNG! THUNG THUNG!* Hardy’s bass rung out around the enclosed room. It sounded sweet, and mellow, and rich. Jimi jumped up and down in the excitement, and reached over for his guitar. Michael went to sit at the drum kit.

Freddy, barely able to raise his head, murmured,

*‘Oh…that’s so sweet, Hardy and SNORE!...er…I mean Ron and SNORE!  er…SNORE!’*

And with that, Freddy closed the book and fell into a deep deep slumber, his mission accomplished, his mind full of happy thoughts.  He started to dream a long complicated dream about the time Hardy used the Polyjuice Potion to do that terrible thing to….

*NO!*

*****

**Get Healthy! – Day 5**

*And with that, Freddy closed the book and fell into a deep deep slumber, his mission accomplished, his mind full of happy thoughts. He started to dream a long complicated dream about the time Hardy used the Polyjuice Potion to do that terrible thing to….*

*NO!*

*****

There was pandemonium on the playground as the last day of school finally arrived. Apart from multiple games and quizzes, they hadn't really done anything that morning.

And now it was over.

Six whole weeks.

Of freedom.

Freddy and Wil were standing waiting to be picked up. Michael came running over, his arms outstretched.

*'I'm going to miss you!'* he said, giving each of them a huge hug in turn.

*'Well, OK, but we live just down the road, don't we?'* retorted Freddy.

*'Yes, but…oh wow, look over there!'*

In the distance across the playground they could see a large brightly coloured square box, tottering slowly towards them on two legs. The box looked heavy in the way it was swaying from side to side. They could just make out Hardy's mop of black hair over the top of it.

*'That's a bit over the top, isn't it?'* said Michael to Freddy, laughing.

*'I wonder what it is?'*

Hardy staggered towards them and set the box carefully on the ground. There was a clinking of glass as he put it down. It sounded like small bits of glass. Pieces of glass, in fact.

*'Before you ask, I don't even know what's in it',* puffed Hardy, straightening his clothes matter-of-factly. *'It's another one of my Mum's great ideas, although she doesn't even know what the teacher looks like. She said it would be good for next year. Actually I had a little accident coming through the gate, I hope it's alright'.*

He tapped the box with his foot and it chinked again. He smiled in a slightly embarrassed way.

*'We're going away at the weekend!'* said Wil cheerily.

*'Where are you off to?'* replied Michael.

*‘We don’t even know!  Dad said to just pack a few things and be ready on Saturday morning!’*

*‘Wow, how exciting!’* said Michael, *‘I’m going to football camp next week, but I’ll be back in August, can we meet in the park?’*

*‘Sure’*, replied Freddy, who hadn’t really thought of football since the trip to Athens, *‘in fact the season starts in August, and our league will start playing in September’*.

*‘I can’t wait!’*  said Michael.

*****

*‘Here you are, Miss Smith!’* said Hardy, half passing and half throwing the package in the direction of his teacher.  Miss Smith, who was quite a sporty teacher, attempted to catch the box but, unaware of how heavy it was, had not established a strong enough grip on it.  It tumbled down to the ground.  The box itself made no noise as it dropped, but the contents rattled, crashed, and smashed around inside it.

*‘Oooh, thank you, Hardy’,* said Miss Smith falteringly, *‘…that’s…erm…just what I wanted… I think.’*

Hardy smiled painfully as he imagined the state of the glassware inside, and smiled more painfully as the other children lined up to give their teachers small gifts and cards.

*****

The pandemonium was increased by the reaction of the Year 6s to their last day at school.  Normally, the Year 6s were confident, strong, aggressive, and very proud of their status as the top dogs at school.  Today was different.

Snivelling wrecks.

Complete cry-babies.

Utterly-butterly.

They were standing around in small groups, hugging each other, or grabbing random teachers in soggy embraces.

*‘Oooh, I’m really gonna miss you!’*

*‘You’ve been the best teacher, EVER!’*

Two of the students had started signing each other’s arms with the phrase *Friends to the End*, which prompted everyone else to produce pens and markers, and start signing every part of their friends’ anatomy.  Shirts, arms, legs, knees, all got signed, with a variety of emotional messages.

*See you in the next life!*

*You’re the best!*

*Don’t leave me!*

*Ouch!  You're hurting my arm.*

*****

As they all started to disperse, Freddy pulled his team around him.  He managed to find Alex, Jaz, Wil, Michael, and Clara .  Hardy was picking up broken glass from the playground.

*'Well, have a good summer.  Let's meet at HQ in August when Hardy gets back.  We've got a season to prepare for.  It all starts again on September 5th!'*

*****

**Get Healthy! – Day 6**

*‘Well, have a good summer. Let’s meet at HQ in August when Hardy gets back. We’ve got a season to prepare for. It all starts again on September 5th!’*

*****

It was the Friday before they went away. Wil and Freddy had gone to check out HQ with Hardy, before they dispersed for the summer.

*‘Where are you going again,’* said Hardy, as they sat outside HQ soaking up some rare July sunshine. Everything around them was a deep green reflecting the massive levels of rainfall so far this summer.

*‘I told you before, we don’t know yet!’* said Wil impatiently, taking deep breaths of the freshly cut grass smells all around him. *‘Dad’s planned a sort of surprise’*.

*‘We don’t even know if we’re going today or tomorrow!’* said Freddy, evidently pleased at the prospect of something exciting happening.

*‘Humph…’* said Hardy sadly, looking down at the ground, *‘my Mum and Dad are going to America. But I’ve got to stay here with HER’*. Hardy pointed vaguely in the direction of the house, where his grandmother was busy cooking.

*‘She’s OK’*, said Freddy, *‘she’s a great cook!’*.

Hardy tried to brighten his mood, but failed.

*‘I know, but I’ve nothing to do here all summer. Nothing. NOTHING!’*

Freddy thought Hardy was going to cry.

*‘Don’t worry H’*, he said, going to put his arm around Hardy, who pulled back, turned away slightly, and curled himself up against the side of the shed.

*‘We’ll be back in a couple of weeks!’* said Wil brightly.

Freddy looked at Hardy with a mixture of pity and embarassment. Embarassment because he knew that if there was a surprise planned for them it would be absolutely fantastic, that was guaranteed, and he felt a little guilty that Hardy would not be a part of that. Pity because Hardy looked so pathetic, just sitting there.

He went into the shed, which had a shaft of bright light shining through the window. The light fell directly on the drum kit which as usual took centre stage. Freddy sat down at the kit. A wood pigeon, seemingly perfectly at home, flitted around in the roof-space. Otherwise all was quiet.

Freddy picked up the drum sticks that Barry had left perched on the shell of the bass drum and tapped lightly at one of the cymbals. The wood pigeon hopped along the roof beam it was standing on.

Freddy played a little rhythm on the cymbal and the snare drum.

*Tupper-tupper tish! Tupper-tupper tish!*

The pigeon hopped again.

*Tupper-tupper tish! Tupper-tupper tish!*

The pigeon stood on one leg and extended its left wing out towards where Freddy was sitting.

*Tupper-tupper tish! Tupper-tupper tish BOOM!* Freddy played the fourth beat on the bass drum.

On hearing the *BOOM* the pigeon hopped off its one foot and spun round on the rafter, using its wings for balance. As it landed following a three-hundred and sixty degree turn, Freddy hit the bass again. Again, the pigeon pirouetted elegantly around on its perch.

Freddy smiled at the absurdity of it all, convinced he was imagining it. He went round the kit a couple of times, hitting everything in sight, before finishing with a final crash on the main cymbal. The pigeon danced round two or three times, before finishing with a single spin, lifting up its left wing and bringing it extravagantly across its body and bowing courteously to Freddy.

*I knew this shed had something spooky about it*, he thought, as the pigeon mopped its brow with a small handkerchief.

*****

Freddy continued to play idly on the drums, picking out rhythms on the tom-toms.

*Dum-dum-bof, dum-dum-bof...*

He was getting ready to join the others outside when he played a little riff, sounding like a sort of *dum-dum-bom-dum-bommmm*.

The last *bommm* rung out around the shed. The shed seemed to rumble a bit as he played it.

He played the riff again. D*um-dum-bom-dum-bommmm*.

This time, he was sure he felt the rumbling in the shed more firmly. Again.

*Dum-dum-bom-dum-bommmm*. The last *bommm* this time definitely caused a rumbling sound which carried on long after he had stopped playing it, and long after the drum had finished echoing. Eventually it stopped. Freddy got up and went outside.

*'Here, look'*, he said quietly to the other two. Come in here and listen. Wil and Hardy entered the shed and Freddy sat back down.

*Dum-dum-bom-dum-bommmm*. Hardy looked quite concerned as the last note rang out, and the whole area in which they were standing shook under their feet. The pigeon, which had been calmly observing up until that point, shot out. Freddy played the riff one more time. He felt he had to. He couldn't stop himself.

*Dum-dum-bom-dum-bommmmmmmm.*

The vibration didn't stop this time, it just got bigger, wilder, more violent, until the ground was shaking like in an earthquake. Hardy and Wil grabbed hold of each other.

*'Get down on the floor'* shouted Freddy above the rumbling sound, *Get down!'* His voice was faint as the floor where he was standing opened up under him, and he was swept off his feet by the force. He grabbed at anything he could, grasping at one of the drums close to him. The smallest tom-tom that he caught hold of came off in his hand and he was left holding it as Wil tried to stop him being pulled towards the hole that was enlarging every second. Instead Wil, too, was pulled inexorably towards the bright light which emanated out of the now huge crevice in the floor. They slid, no more than a few centimetres, grasping, grabbing at anything they could.

Only Hardy could save them. He inched forward, and managed to touch fingertips with Wil. They struggled to get a proper grip as Freddy's weight pulled Wil in the other direction. Hardy made a desperate lunge to get to them, but only succeeded in slipping, so that his momentum carried the three of them towards the light.

At that moment, Freddy resigned himself to whatever was going to happen to them. He was in a sitting position now, moving, dragged along by an invisible force, towards the light. Natural light. The three of them sat, quite calmly, arms linked.

Utterly helpless.

*****

**Carry On Camping – Day 1**

‘Nice place you’ve got here, lad’, grunted Mr Andrews as he surveyed the basethey had built for themselves at the bottom of Hardy’s garden, ‘not bad at all’.‘We like it!’, said Wil quickly, ‘but…what’s that noise?’‘What noise is that, lad, I can’t hear anything?’, Mr Andrews said, rubbing hisears briskly with his gloved hands.There was the usual background noise coming from the base. Jimi and Barrywere playing about on the instruments, and the (sometimes) tuneful sounds wereinterrupted occasionally by a shout of ‘Yeh man!’ from Jimi, or sometimes athreatening ‘Don’t you touch that!’ from Barry, as someone approached his drum kit.Freddy stood by Mr Andrews, who was putting together a complicated-lookingstructure just outside the shed.*****‘Shall I give you a hand, Mr Andrews?’, said Freddy enthusiastically. He wasjust pleased to be back playing again, after all the disappointments of the winter.‘No, I’m OK, lad, this bit…er…er….just goes here, I think’.Freddy turned towards the shed to fetch the others.‘Where’s Hardy?’ he said, as he silently counted his players.‘Said he had some kind of special mission…’, said Clara, ‘…he’ll be back in aminiute’.‘Alright, then, let’s get started!’ Freddy rubbed his right ear.There was a crash from outside, and a clanging of metal tubes.‘Ah…oh…um…this bit goes here I think…!’ said a weak voice, clearly comingfrom a body, which was now partially hidden under a mass of metal tubing and panels.Mr Andrews was buried under the structure he was trying to assemble. It wassupposed to be a clipboard for organising their training moves.‘Yes, definitely…this tube here…and this one here…I think’.Freddy pulled coach Azalea out from under the clipboard, which was facedown on the floor, with five legs sticking up in the air.

‘Oh well, never mind about that then’, said Mr Andrews, ‘we can do without it’.He gave it a kick with his bony right foot. It collapsed noisily, one leg defiantlypointing to the sky.*****‘What IS that noise?’ yelled Clara, although the drumming had stopped.‘What’s with the humming, man?’, said Jimi, strolling out of the shed.‘I don’t know, it’s…it’s getting louder’, said Wil, who had joined them.‘Well, it’s not loud exactly, but it certainly is annoying… is it your amp?’ saidFreddy to Jimi.Just then Hardy appeared through the gap in the hedge, from the direction ofthe house. He looked very, very pleased with himself. Michael was jogging alongsidehim, smartly dressed in the new Arsenal away kit, a bottle of water in one hand, theother hand clamped firmly over his right ear.Clamped to his foot (well, almost) was a football, as usual. As theyapproached the clearing, Michael trapped the ball on the ground, then appeared toboot it high into the tall trees at the far end of the garden. He put the bottle down,and stood quietly with both hands now over his ears.The ball struck the tallest tree high up on the trunk and bounced to the rightas they looked at it. It flew some ten metres into the branches of a lower tree, whereit filtered slowly downwards and dropped towards the roof of the shed. Perchingbriefly on the V-shaped roof, the ball slid down towards the guttering, from where itrolled slowly but surely off the front end of the shed and into Michael’s waiting arms.‘Wow!’ said Wil, ‘how did you do that?’‘Practice!’ said Michael, smiling, ‘but…what is that noise?’ He put the balldown again and covered his ears.‘Noise, what noise?’ said Mr Andrews, whose ears were famous for not hearingabsolutely everything.‘That high-pitched squeaking’, said Freddy.‘Your roof is leaking?’ said Mr Andrews, gazing over towards the shed. ‘Well, getit fixed’.‘He wouldn’t hear it’, said Hardy, his arms folded defiantly across his chest.

‘Wouldn’t hear what?’ said Freddy.‘The mosquito’, said Hardy.‘The MOSQUITO?’ they all said, almost at the same time.‘Keeps out teenagers, fixed it myself’, said Hardy, smiling.‘Well unfix it, I can’t stand it!’ shouted Clara.‘But it works, I thought it would be good. We don’t want anyone hearing ourplans. Look around you, can YOU see any?’‘Well, no…but…’, said Freddy, trying to think of a good argument.‘Oh come ON!’ said Clara, grabbing Hardy’s arm, and frogmarching him backtowards the house, ‘you’re going to turn this thing OFF’.You didn’t argue with Clara.So Hardy didn’t. The noise soon stopped. Mr Andrews continued with hispreparations.*****‘It’s a long time since we’ve played,

my friends, and the opposition can onlyhave become stronger. We will have to play with more determination than ever'.'He's even older now', thought Freddy with a kind of sadness, thinking back tolast year when Mr Andrews had appointed himself as their first coach. He looked on asthe little coach instructed the players on how to defend at a corner, wondering ifthey could ever repeat the glory of their first season in the league, the six victories,the trip to Athens, and the fun they had had when they met Jimi and Barry for thefirst time.'Now, you…you… and you…you go here, in a diamond formation', said MrAzalea. He scratched his head.'The ball comes over here, and you…you…and you…you go here, a triangularformation works best in this situation.' He scratched his arm.'And finally, you…you…you, and…er…you, plus you here, you over there, andyou filling the gap in the middle, in a sort of isosceles pentagonal formation, with youat the apex…yes that should work!'

Mr Andrews surveyed the mess of bodies in front of him. Not only did he seemto have forgotten their names, he also seemed to have lost count of how many ofthem there were.But for Freddy, none of that mattered.They were back.And they had a big game coming up at their home ground of Lancaster RoadPark on Saturday.*****

**Carry On Camping – Day 2**

The next day, Mr Andrews was once again trying to motivate his team attraining, with tales of great matches gone by.‘I was there in ‘53’, he started, ‘When Tom Finney and Sir Matthew were attheir peak…worked like clockwork they did’, he said, tapping his watch, whichseemed to have stopped. ‘Where is Clara?’, he continued, ‘I told her to be here atfour!’‘Do you mean, Sir Stanley, Mr Andrews?’ said Freddy politely.‘That’s right, lad, Sir Matthew Stanleys, once of the best ever, he was!’replied the coach, his eyes misting over at the memory of it all.‘And then, it seems like yesterday, at Anfield, seeing the great Kevin Keeganleap above three defenders to glance the ball in at the near post’, he said, his eyesnow filled with tears as the emotion got to him.‘What – THAT Kevin Keegan?’, said Hardy brusquely, ‘the one with grey hairwho’s at Newcastle? You mean, he actually used to PLAY?’‘Of course, son. He didn’t always have grey hair, you know, he used to have oneof the best hairdos in the business!’ Mr Andrews ran his hand through his own hair,which pinged back into place, like Homer Simpson’s.‘And then, it seems like only last year, that goal Michael here scored againstButterfield’, continued Mr Andrews, looking down at Michael, who was juggling a trainingball from left foot to right foot, ‘the way you picked up the ball in midfield, twostepovers, a turn, a quick look up, and the ball, soaring…majestically…into the farcorner’. The coach was now bawling his eyes out with the memory of it all. Freddypulled the team together.‘Now, Derby Road on Saturday, it could be easy, but we’ve been out of theleague for a long time. Come on, we need to work on those passing movements!’Mr Andrews, who had now composed himself and wiped the tears away with aspotted handkerchief, started them on some training moves, slaloming in betweenthe poles and shooting at Hardy in the goal.*****After a few minutes of this, and some penalty practice, Mr Andrews organisedthem into two teams.

‘Right…you, you and…er…YOU! Over here!’ he motioned to his left, and Alec,Hardy, Wil, and Freddy wandered vaguely towards his left hand. Hardy carried onwandering.‘Oi, Hardy! Come back here!’ the coach yelled, ‘you’re captain of the Blues’.Hardy stood proudly to one side of Mr Andrews, glaring at his team mates. Hewas wearing his full Chelsea kit, with its Premiership sleeve badge glinting in the weakMay sunshine. Beside him Freddy and Wil, wearing matching dark blue t-shirts, andAlec, coolly clad in a no-sleeved sky-blue vest, jogged impatiently up and down.‘And you, Michael, you can be captain of the Reds today!’Michael brought the ever-bobbing football he was juggling down to rest on theback of his neck, then flicked it up and caught it behind his back. He smiled quietly tohimself as Clara, Jaz, and JoJo, also in red (well…pink in JoJo’s case) came tohis side.‘3-2…3-2…to the Blues!’ said Freddy, taunting the opposition before thematch had even started. ‘I bet you’d rather be Arsenal!’.Michael turned away, a determined look on his face, remembering his team’searly exit from the European competitions.*****‘Right then, what I want to see is this…then this…then this…’ Mr Andrewswas scrawling roughly on his flipchart.‘You, Wil, you run down here, like Kally, cross it here to Diddy…that’s you,Ally, then you fire it from here to…er…here, like that. One-nil to the Blues, OK?’They all looked at his chart, and then at him. Kally, Diddy, Ally?‘Yes that’s a good move’, said the coach, looking again at his artwork.‘Next, I want you, Michael, to burst into the penalty area like Stevie, or is itGerry, then pass it to Ferdy…that’s you Jazzy…then pull it back and score. That’llbe 1-1, right?‘How can you plan what the score is going to be?’ moaned Wil as Mr Andrewscontinued, warming to his Champions League semi-final theme.‘So, then, it goes to extra time, and you, Freddy, step up and take thepenalty when Hippy brings down Bally. That’ll be 2-1! Then all it needs is for Droggy

to hit another one, and Babby to rescue one for the Reds, and it’ll be 3-2, just like yousaid, and just like last night!Mr Andrews mopped his brow again, and chuckled to himself.‘Excellent, excellent, hmmm, yes…excellent…well done Azalea old chap…’, hechuckled to himself.‘Does he really know those

players?’ said Wil, amazed at the way the coachseemed familiar with the stars of Chelsea and Liverpool.‘Nah!’ replied Hardy dismissively, ‘he’s making it up as he goes along, as usual’.‘Well, let’s play it his way, anyway’, said Freddy poetically, ‘it’s a big day onSaturday, we’re playing away, and we might as well make hay before the May Dayholiday!’The Blues looked at him, impressed.The Reds looked at him, stressed, and depressed.When it came to poetry, Freddy considered himself…the best!*****

**Carry On Camping – Day 3**

‘La-dee-dah-de-dah!’ sang Hardy tunelessly, but loudly, as the minibus rattled over the bumpy road.

‘Ooh-la-la-lee-la!’ sang JoJo, tunefully, but annoyingly.

‘Hmmm….!’ said Jimi, looking round at the slouching players around him.

They were on their way to the Derby Road ground for their crucial league match, and although the opposition were thought to be quite weak, the players were clearly nervous.

‘I’m nervous’, said Wil.

‘Clearly’, replied Freddy.

See?  Clearly nervous.

*****

Jimi who, since he had joined them the previous summer, was now the unofficial mascot and cheerleader for Lancaster Road FC, was trying to keep them occupied.  Although Derby Road was only two streets away from Lancaster Road, Mr Andrews had decided that it would be good for team spirit if they travelled in a minibus.

‘Mr Andrews?’ asked Freddy, as the coach drove the bus (or should that be the coach drove the coach, or….oh…never mind).

‘Yes, lad?’ said Mr Andrews, temporarily halting his whistling.

‘Are we there yet?’

‘No, lad, be patient.  I’m trying to get you to feel what it is like to travel to an away game’.

‘Well…’ stammered Freddy.

‘I feel sick’, said Wil.

‘Nearly there now!’ cried Mr Andrews cheerily.

‘Listen to this, guys!’said Jimi, ‘ and do what I do!’

Jimi had taken up a position on the back seat of the bus, and had moved Alec from where he was sitting, so that Jimi could relax across three whole seats, his guitar resting elegantly on his knees.  His cap, which bore the logo of Lancaster Road FC, with the slogan ‘Lancaster Road – Jimi’s JoJolly Crew’ on it, was tilted at an angle, casting a dark shadow over the left side of his face as the sun streamed in from the right.

Jimi struck a chord on the guitar.

‘No hang on, maybe I prefer this one’.  He hit another combination of notes.

‘No actually, this one will do!’  The third chord resonated through the grubby minibus.  Everyone looked up.

‘Running, running, running…No!’, sang Jimi.

‘Walkin’, walkin’, walkin’…nah…that won’t do man!’  Jimi stared at his guitar.  The others all stared at Jimi.

‘This is better’, said Jimi, talking partly to himself and partly to his instrument.  He was oblivious to the half-dozen mystified stares facing his way.

‘Rollin’, rollin’, rollin’ along…We’re on our way, we’re singin’ our song…We are tough and we are strong…We play our way, we can’t go wrong

Jimi strummed a big heavy chord on the guitar.  There was a little ripple of applause from the three people sitting closest to him.  He looked up momentarily and grinned from under his cap.

‘Now, everybody..,the chorus!’

‘Rollin’, rollin’, rollin’ along…’We’re on our way, we’re singin’ our song…

Within a few minutes, everyone was singing along to the chorus as Jimi made up more verses, although Hardy and Barry insisted on singing the bit about being tough and strong.

‘We play our way, we can’t go wrong!’  thought Freddy happily to himself as Mr Andrews swung the rickety minibus into the car park.

*****

The previous day had been spent preparing for their Bank Holiday camping trip.

‘We’re all going on a camping holiday…!’ Hardy had tried to sing.

Nobody had joined in.

‘I think right…here…’ said Jaz, pointing to a dot on the map he had stretched out in front of him, ‘just on the fold there.  There seems to be some water there, so there must be a lake or something.  We could camp on the beach’.

‘What, in this weather?’ said Clara.

‘Yes, why not?  It would be perfect!  We can walk there from here, and the forecast for Monday is good!’

‘Right.  Sorted!’ said Hardy, ‘Let’s do it!’

*****

As Hardy and the others went in search of rucsacs and tents, Freddy smoothed out the old map and peered at the location they had just chosen.  Although the words were indistinct, if he screwed up his eyes in a certain way, he could just make out the microscopic writing above the little blue smudge which represented the lake or pool they were heading for.

He screwed his eyes to the left.

He screwed his eyes to the right.

Whichever way he looked, the result was the same.  The tiny writing clearly said Lake Cauchemar, and whichever way he thought about it, however he translated it, the word cauchemar always translated, from the French, as,

Nightmare Lake!

And they had just arranged to camp there.

*****

**Carry On Camping – Day 4**

‘Boring! Boring! Boring!’ sang the Derby Road parents.

‘You don’t know what you’re doing!’ sang the Lancaster Road parents.

‘You’re not fit to wear the shirt!’ sang one of the Derby Road parents to one of the Derby Road players, who was clearly unfit, and whose shirt definitely didn’t fit.

‘Pull your socks up!’ sang Hardy’s Dad to Hardy, whose socks had slid to a mushy mess round his ankles.

Mr Andrews looked on and scratched – as usual. His head mostly, as he tried to decide what to do.

*****

As you can probably imagine, the Derby Road game was not going well.

Back in early 2007 they had had two games against the same opposition, and had won 2-1 and 3-0, so they had expected an easy victory against a meagre opponent.

But you can’t be too optimistic. You can’t just come into a game with one training session and hope to play to your best ability. You can’t believe that the opposition have not got better. You cannot not think that too many ‘nots’ are going to not confuse anyone who’s not reading this stuff?

No! Stop! You’re tying me in knots!

*****

They were not playing well. And the real reason was a combination of things. Lack of training, certainly. Over-confidence, definitely.

And Mr Andrews’s crazy plan to take them on a minibus tour of Springhurst, absolutely.

Wil had staggered out of the bus as they finally arrived at the ground, his face a mixture of grey and green, his legs wobbly with the juddering, shuddering ride they had just had. Michael, normally one of the quietest of the team, had been even quieter.

They had started the match slowly, and got slower. Although Derby Road had not scored, the Lancaster Road players were slower to the ball, and were going to lose unless Mr Andrews could do something to inspire them.

*****

At half-time, Mr Andrews stopped his scratching and marched over to the team, who had collapsed on the ground near the penalty area.

‘Get up you lot!’ he screamed.

Freddy was shocked.  Their little old coach actually seemed angry.  I'm sure coaches aren't supposed to yell at their team, he thought to himself.

'I said get up!' continued Mr Andrews, 'you don't deserve to rest!  You haven't done anything! You!...', he yelled at Hardy, 'nothing!  And you..!' facing Wil, 'zilch!'  He put his face, now incandescent with anger, close to Michael, 'YOU – Nil!'.  Going round the other players, he shouted, 'You – zip, you – zero, you – nada, you – nought, and finally you, my own grand-daughter, I can't believe it…', (he drew a deep breath), 'YOU – Nil, nada, nothing, zip, zilch, zero, nul points! NOTHING!'

'OK, we haven't played well, but what are we going to do about it?' said Michael in his quiet calm way.  They all looked at Mr Andrews, who paused for a long time, his little face looking sad, as if a dream was slipping away from him.

'There's only one thing for it', he said calmly, 'an old technique I remember from the old days.  When men were men.  When girls were…girls.  And when a good cold shower never hurt anyone'.

With that he spun round, grabbed the team water bottles from the carrier behind him and began spraying water at the team.  Driven on by anger and frustration, his bony fingers squeezed against the bottles as water flew around him, his players scattering in all directions as the icy cold water fired them into action.  Freddy, water seeping right down the front of his shirt, pulled his soggy team around him.

'Right, come on, we can do this.  Remember last year – get going!'

*****

Inevitably, the second half was a different story.  With Freddy and Wil controlling the midfield, all it needed were  some typical skills from Michael to see them home.  The final score was 2-0 but it could have been more.

The best moment had been when Michael, faced by three defenders, had dummied a pass across to Clara, but had in fact flicked the ball between the two main defenders, run to the left of one of them, picked up the ball the other side, and then nutmegged the third before running straight on goal, giving the goalkeeper 'the eyes', and sidefooting it home.  The crowd had cheered with a combination of relief and excitement.

And by the end, the crowd had put their earlier disappointments behind them, and a low chorus of 'One Michaely Michael, there's only one Michaely Michael!' had echoed round the ground as they celebrated victory with more water-spraying, this time at their inspirational and unorthodox coach!

'See y'all tomorrow!' said Freddy as they departed after the game, 'and don't forget, bring a sleeping bag, a torch, and…something to defend yourself with!'

*****

**Carry On Camping – Day 5**

‘I hope this is worth it…!’ moaned Hardy as they puffed their way to the top of the hill towards the campsite.

Although Hardy was taller, bigger and stronger than the others, it never made any difference. He was always the one complaining. He complained about his knees, his back, his toes, his left eye, and his shin.

‘Ow! My ear!’ he cried as he crashed Clara, who had stopped to adjust her boots. ‘That’s the same ear that I bashed during the second half on Saturday…or was it the first?’

No-one listened. There were there now. There were more important things to think about.

Like where they were going to put their tents.

Like where they were going to sleep.

Like why was it called Nightmare Lake?

*****

‘Look at these trees!’ said Hardy, ‘yes…these should do nicely!’

‘There’s a good flat bit over there for a game’, said Michael, still in football mode, unpacking a red Premiership ball from his bag.

‘Hey, hang on, give us a hand here!’ said Freddy, ‘I’m struggling!’

‘Not as much as him!’ replied Michael, smiling and pointing over to Hardy, who was trying to put a hammock between two trees.

It didn’t look like a hammock. Not from where they were standing. Lots of canvas, yes; several ropes, yes; and two large trees. But would it work?

‘See, all you do, is perch on the side here …’ (Hardy took a quick look at the instructions), ‘…place your right hand here…’ (Hardy placed his right hand on the left edge of the canvas), ‘…and pull yourself up and rest here…’

Hardy paused on the edge of the canvas, one leg hanging out of the hammock, before crashing to the ground with a yelp.

‘Yelp!’ he said, ‘I must have got these instructions wrong’.

He turned them the other way up.

‘Ah, yes, raise your right leg, put your left hand here…’ he put his left hand under his raised right leg, ‘…grip the canvas here, and…swing…’

(wait a second…)

‘CRASH!’  Hardy, for one second hung in the air, then slid along the length of the hammock and smashed into the tree at the far end.

‘Hmmm…’, he said, ‘I think I’ll just do it my way…’

‘Hiyaaaggggh!’ he screamed before running at the hammock, and leaping onto it.  The hammock was having none of this, and as he hit it, it spun round and round on its length, wrapping him up in coloured canvas.  Then, the hammock decided to unwind, spinning Hardy crazily and spitting him out on the ground in front of them.

‘Can I sleep in your tent tonight?’ he whimpered.

*****

‘Hey look!’ said Hardy later, ‘this is GREAT!’

He was tugging at something, a piece of rope maybe, behind which emerged an old boat.

‘NO-ooooo-oooo!’

A familiar cry erupted from the trees behind them, and Mr Andrews, waving his bony arms in the air, was galloping down the path towards the water.

‘You can’t go out there!... It’s not your boat!...  You haven’t got any lifejackets!... And on that lake!’

‘No it’s fine, really it is!’ cried Hardy, as the boat drifted out towards open water, ‘Look, you can even stan…!’

Hardy didn’t say anything else, as he tried to stand up.  His foot had made a big hole in the bottom of the boat.  Water was pouring in.

‘Help?’  asked Clara quietly.  ‘Help?’  she asked again.

‘HELP!’ yelled Hardy…

*****

**Carry On Camping – Day 6**

‘Just calm down down, will you, you’re making it worse’, said Clara, quite calmly considering that her boat was clearly sinking.

‘Calm?  CALM? How can I be calm, the boat is sinking, and my foot…my foot…help!’

Hardy’s foot had indeed disappeared in the gaping hole in the bottom of the boat.  As he tried to steady himself by holding on to the side, more of his leg slipped down.  He was in up to his knee now.

*****

‘Just stay there, whilst I think what to do’, said Mr Andrews, sitting down on a rock.  He scratched his chin thoughtfully.

‘There’s no time for thinking…help us!’ cried Hardy, as he slipped further down into the water.  The lake seemed to be gobbling him up, and Freddy thought he could see the water grow darker as the shadows lengthened.  But maybe he was just imagining that.  In his mind he could hear the flapping of wings high above, and the squawks of birds.  Vultures maybe.  He looked up.

Nothing.

‘OK, I’m coming in,’ a firm, said a quiet voice from behind him.  Freddy looked round.  There was Michael, pulling off his hooded top to reveal a black no-sleeved shirt, and kicking off his shoes.

‘No – don’t do it!’  Freddy objected, although it was obvious that Michael was going to the rescue.  Playing in Freddy’s head now was a thumping tune, as Michael sprinted down the beach.  Maybe it was the music from James Bond, or perhaps it was Mission Impossible?

With a huge splash, Michael dived headfirst into the water, and speared like an arrow towards the stricken boat.  Clara looked on at the busy figure swimming towards them with a mixture of admiration and fear.  For herself, for him.  For them.  Hardy sank a little further.  He whimpered pathetically.

Michael reached the boat.

Michael laughed.

Michael didn’t laugh that much.  But he laughed now!

Michael stood up!

The water barely covered his thighs!

Hardy looked at him, as his leg, still stuck through the hole in the bottom of the boat, stopped sinking any further.  He smiled weakly and tried to climb out.  In pushing himself up, he slipped, and his other leg crashed through the hole in the boat.  He was now standing, up to his thighs in water, with the boat wrapped around him like a skirt.

There was much laughing and teasing from the shoreline, until Freddy and Wil, followed by Jaz, leapt

into the water and crashed through the shallows to pull Hardy and Clara out of the boat, which disintegrated into rotten splinters around them. After giving Hardy a thorough splashing, and messing about with Michael's football for a while, they returned to get ready for the night ahead. Mr Andrews tried to regain control of the situation.

'OK, you were lucky this time'. He looked round each one of them in turn. 'But next time, you might not be. So remember, no boat-borrowing, no lifejacket-losing, no senseless swimming and definitely no fancy football in the lifeless lagoon. Got it? Good.'

*****

As they settled down to sleep, Freddy shifted nervously about in his damp sleeping bag.

There was definitely something playing on his mind. He was out at Nightmare Lake. He had already imagined sea creatures, and vultures circling overhead (or was it just that red kite?) One of his best friends had nearly drowned. His favourite football coach had yelled at them. He shifted around again, his head grating on the sharp ground underneath the tent.

Or maybe, just maybe, he was worrying about their next match. A crucial match, due to take place the following Saturday. Images flooded into his head. Dark images. Cackling and laughing. Dark black football kit. Dirty tricks. Yes, that was it, he was definitely thinking ahead to their next match. What would be the outcome? And what would be the score? And would they live to tell the tale?

And soon it was morning. He must have slept eventually, but as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, he knew it couldn't have been much. Hardy, amazingly, was still asleep, lying on the ground tangled in the cloth and cords of his hammock, just where it had deposited him as he had tried to get into it one last time the previous night.

'Brrghgghh! Brats!' mumbled Hardy as he tried to wake up.

'Arrghhh! R-R-Rats!' stuttered Hardy, as sleep departed him and his eyes opened.

'Lurgghhh! Messy and Weak!' he stammered, followed, as he got up, by a garbled, 'yesss…stress and leak!'.

They gathered around the poor figure on the ground.

'What is he talking about?' said Clara, glaring down at him.

'I think I know…and it's not good news!' replied Wil.

'So what is it?'

'Think about it. On Monday. SATS…Assessment Week! Oh no!'

'And then…', said Freddy, 'the game next Saturday! It's going to be a BAD week!'

*****

**A Bad Week for Jimi – Day 1**

The sun was high in the sky as they trotted out onto the pitch. Patches ofwispy clouds broke up an otherwise perfect summer's day. Song thrushes sang, andskylarks…well…larked about. Starlings did…star jumps.Freddy had let Clara lead the team out – as it was her tenth appearance forthe team since she had joined last year. She wore her blue and red colours proudly,and waved to the small crowd on the touchline, smiling.There was a short pause before the opposition emerged from a huddle on thesidelines. Jimi, who was sitting cross-legged on the touchline, guitar in hand,muttered out the words to a song ('Sisters… are doing it… for themselves'), perhapssuggesting that this match would not be so easy as they had thought.*****Almost imperceptibly, a few more clouds gathered up and momentarilyblocked out the sun. Michael squinted upwards.'Don't look at the sun', said Wil.'Well, I'm not', replied Michael, 'because it's gone'.Although not exactly true, the sun had been obscured by a huge cloud whichwas rapidly turning from white, to light grey, to a deep shade of dark grey. Otherclouds appeared from nowhere. It became a bit colder, and a breeze got up. Was thata rumble of thunder in the distance? Mockingbirds mocked, crows crowed, androbins…starting robbin'…Well, you get the idea. As the opposition ran onto the pitch, things started toturn nasty.*****Freddy and Mr Andrews had spent some time planning for this match, afterthe last time, when the girls had changed the referee at half time, and Wil haddiscovered the original referee lying in a ditch at the side of the field, groaningpathetically.This time, they had pulled Michael back into defence, where his speed would beable to outrun the most dastardly attacker, and put Clara up front (as a one-womanstrikeforce). With Alec, Wil, and Freddy forming a three-man midfield, and Jazsupporting Michael at the back, they looked a formidable unit. Hardy, in goal as usual,

had taken precautions, and was wearing shin pads, knee pads, elbow pads, a chestprotector, three pairs of gloves, a cycle helmet, and sunglasses.*****They were lined up for what seemed like hours, but was only a few minutes. Theopposition girls (now in a little huddle in the centre circle) were singing their own song,to the tune that Jimi was playing on the guitar.'Hey, what're you doing?' called Freddy to Jimi on the sideline.'Cool it, man, I'm only playing. I didn't know they would sing my song!' Jimireplied indignantly.'Yeh, well, don't encourage them, right?' said Freddy.'I'll play what I like', muttered Jimi, who got up and walked away. Freddy wasgoing to go after him, but then thought better of it. I really need to talk to him, hethought.*****The match started, and Lancaster Road were soon two goals up, the firstthanks to Clara's close control in the box, and the second courtesy of a penalty,which was awarded when Clara herself had been up up-ended by two of the girlsgrabbing her ankles at the same time and dumping her face down in the goalmouth.The dirty tricks were coming thick and fast – sly little digs in the ribs, quicklittle taps on the ankles, shifty little shots to the shins, and testing trip-tackles.But nothing could prepare them for what was to come.*****Michael, dazzling as usual in defence, had brought the ball out down the leftwing. From far on the right, the tallest of the Hags defenders had sprinted after him,and had crudely slide-tackled him from behind, crumpling him into a miserable heap onthe ground. Michael had seemed motionless, but was perhaps counting to make surehe still had the right number of arms and legs. Although moving, he was obviously in abad way. The Lancaster Road supporters looked on quietly as their star player laystricken on the floor.Just then, another tall figure emerged from the side of the pitch, carrying abucket in her left hand, and a sponge in her right.Thank goodness. First Aid. The Magic Sponge!Michael sat up groggily.

'Here love, have a bit of this', sneered the First Aid Lady, dipping the spongeinto the bucket, and offering it to Michael.Offering it? Wasn't the magic sponge supposed to go on the injury?Michael, still shaken from the tackle, took the sponge in his hand, and soakedhis face with the cool liquid. His face brightened, and a little steam rose from thebucket.'I said have a bit of it!', said the lady, sounding quite cross. She grabbed thesponge from Michael, then picked up the bucket and poured some of the liquid

into hismouth. From a distance, Michael heard Hardy yell, ‘No!’On the side of the bucket was a small label. Freddy peered down at the label,and just caught sight of the writing before the First Aid Lady was off again to herpost at the side of the pitch, where some of her colleagues stood laughing andpointing…at Michael.The label said LaughCryFlyJuice.*****Michael got up and flexed his injured leg. It moved in all the right ways, so hejogged up and down on it. He looked fine. He even smiled a bit.Then he smirked. Then he giggled. Then he grinned, and beamed. Then hestarted laughing. Michael was a serious boy. But he laughed and laughed and laughed,holding the sides of his stomach as he guffawed.Suddenly, his face went rather serious. He looked down at the pitch, the smiledisappearing from his face. A huge tear splashed onto the hard ground. Thenanother, and another. He sobbed. He snivelled a little. He started to moan and weep.Bawling his eyes out.After a minute or so of uncontrollable howling, Michael looked up, smiled again,and gazed into the far distance.He lifted his arms, and spread them out wide. Then he started to run, wavinghis arms up and down like an albatross., running faster and faster as he tried to getoff the ground. He ran, trying to fly, over to the far side of the pitch, where Jimi wasnow playing a tender version of ‘Fly Me to the Moon’.Despite Michael’s departure, the match ended with a five-nil victory, and ahat-trick for Clara.

Freddy’s thoughts turned now to the Champions League final on Wednesday,and of course, how to get Jimi and Michael back.*****

**A Bad Week for Jimi – Day 2**

There was Wil, staring at the huge screen in front of him, shuffling about impatiently.

There was Freddy, trying to concentrate on his homework, but failing.

There was Alec, staring out of the window, all the time checking his mobile phone, which occasionally beeped back at him.

There was Jaz, tapping urgently into his laptop.

Here comes Hardy, clomping down the stairs.

'It's only four o'clock!' said Freddy in the general direction of his brother.

'I know, I know, just forty-five minutes to go!', cried Wil, now jumping up and down.

'Eh?' said his brother.

'I read it, I read it, it starts at 4.45!' said Wil.

'I don't think so…' said Jaz, tapping something into the computer.

'Yes, yes…they're three hours different from us, so if it normally starts around eight, this time it will start about five. Definitely'.

'Definitely not', said Jaz, definitively, 'you've got your times wrong'.

'No…eight take away three is five!' replied Wil defiantly.

'But they're ahead of us. Look on the map. We're here…and they're over here. The world's spinning this way, here's Greenwich, here's the dateline, here's Moscow, round to the east – that's the right to you – so they're ahead of us. By three hours. That's it.'

Wil scratched his head. 'So you're saying, I've got to stand here for another THREE HOURS?'

'Precisely – in fact, it is now three hours and five minutes until kick-off. But I've got an idea – help me here'.

*****Hardy emerged into the room, which his Dad had equipped especially with the latest widescreen, megapixel, TFT, DVD, HD-Ready, PE, PSHE, DS, Wii, MUFC television. He picked up the sleek black remote control and pressed a few buttons.

'Hey, Squidward, you've sat on my crabby-patty' squeaked a little square voice.

'Oi, turn that off, we've got work to do!' said Jaz. They gathered round the figure hunched over the laptop.

Michael peered at the rows of figures Jaz had displayed on the screen. His brand new Arsenal shirt was

perfect, pristine,  and he was very proud of it.

‘Why are YOU wearing Arsenal?’ said Clara, who had joined Hardy in the blue of Chelsea.

‘Well, they’re my team, right?’ said Michael, ‘and I’ll support them ever more, even tonight!’.  They all looked at him, a bit confused.

‘You might as well just support Lancaster Road instead’, said Hardy.

‘Well, I think we know who YOU are following!’, said Clara, laughing.

Hardy, as usual for important games, whoever was playing, had every bit of Chelsea kit on you could imagine.  He had the latest Premiership home strip.  He was wearing Frank Lampard-signed boots (aha! So that’s why he was clomping down the stairs), and he was carrying a Chelsea mug.  On his head he had a blue Chelsea bobble hat with a picture of Didier Drogba on the front.  He even had a mask of Drogba on a little stick, which he occasionally held up to his face, just to remind everyone who he thought was going to win, and who would score.

‘If Drogba performs tonight, Chelsea will win.  He’s their driving force’, said Freddy in a matter-of-fact kind of way.

‘Did you say ‘diving force’?’, said Clara, leaping full-length onto the sofa.

‘Right, look here’, said Jaz.  ‘I’ve done some calculations’.

‘Calculations?  You don’t need to calculate anything!’, shouted Clara from deep in the sofa, ‘we’re going to win, two-nil, I can feel it!’  She waved her little Chelsea flag up at the others.

‘I’m not so sure’, said Freddy, his pride at being a Manchester United fan welling up inside him, ‘if Cristiano and Wayne get going, you won’t stop them!’

‘Well, if you look here like I said’, Jaz murmured, ‘you might get some ideas’.  He worked urgently at the keyboard, then sat back, admiring the mass of numbers in front of him.

‘Look at this graph here.  Rooney has played thirty-eight times and scored in twenty-four games. Ronaldo has scored forty goals in forty games, that’s one per game, a one hundred percent record. When Rooney and Ronaldo play together, United usually win by at least three goals.  On the other hand, Ballack’s performances have been rising like this, and Lampard has come back to partner him and he has scored in the last three games’.

‘OK, so who do you think will win?’

‘I’m coming to that’, said Jaz, tapping some more.  ‘Now, if you look at this line here, going up, and this one here, going down, round the corner, and up again, you can see what I mean…’

‘What DO you mean?’ said Clara impatiently.

‘Well…here, and here, shows that when Chelsea play on a Wednesday after seven pm, they tend to score first.  And this table here shows that Man United, when it is below fifteen degrees in the stadium, always get someone booked just after half-time’.

‘Oh COME ON!’ said Clara, ‘WHO IS GOING TO WIN THE MATCH’.

‘I’m coming to that…again’, said Jaz, refusing to be ruffled under pressure, ‘the thing is…it is a Wednesday, the match is in Moscow, it will be ten degrees, there will be seventy thousand in the stadium, there is no ‘R’ in the month, a black cat strolled in front of our house this morning, and I accidentally walked under a ladder’.

‘You’re making this up!’ said Freddy, laughing.

‘Well, OK…m-m-m-maybe it’ll be a draw then’, stammered Jaz, sounding flustered. His computer gave a little beep and the screen went blank.

‘Actually, it’s going to be one-nil to Chelsea’, muttered Michael, ‘Drogba, early in the second half. Cross from Ballack’.

*****In the corner, Jimi, wearing all black, strummed a sad tune on his guitar. A Blues I think.

Or should that be a Reds?

*****

**A Bad Week for Jimi – Day 3**

The next day, there was more clomping down the stairs as they satdiscussing the game. A faint chant of ‘campeoni, campeoni….’ emerged from thestaircase.Hardy burst through the door. He was wearing a complete Manchester Unitedkit, red boots, a red bobble hat, and was carrying a flag with the image of CristianoRonaldo on it, which he was now waving madly.‘You can’t just change teams like that!’ said Michael.‘Well I just did!’ replied Hardy, sounding quite proud of himself, followed by, ‘Ilike to support a winner!’, as if that justified his having changed overnight.‘So if Chelsea had won, you would have stayed in blue?’‘Well, maybe…’, said Hardy uncertainly.‘Look’, said Michael in his quiet but assured voice, ‘imagine that you areplaying for Lancaster Road and that for once, you get beaten by Butterfield…you’renot going to turn into a Butterfield supporter, or go and play for them, are you?’‘No, but that’s different. It’s like if I have my favourite water and pasta fordinner, that doesn’t mean I don’t like other things…’ said Hardy.‘Eh?’, said everyone else.‘That’s not the point’, said Michael, ‘when you support a team, you’ve got to beloyal’.‘We’ll support you…ever more!’ sang Hardy.‘Yes, but you were singing that about Chelsea only yesterday!’ said Clara.‘I know, I know, but does it really matter?’‘I think it does. I’ve been an Arsenal fan for all my life, and I’ll never give up onthem, however bad it gets. And sometimes it gets really bad’, Michael explainedpatiently.*****

Freddy looked across to see Jimi, still sitting in the corner where they hadleft him prior to the game. He had set the guitar to one side, and was sitting crosslegged,his head in his hands.I’ve got to do something, thought Freddy. I think he’s great. We all do. I don’twant him to be unhappy. I’m going to talk to him. But I’d better be gentle with him. Hedoesn’t look like he is in the mood for jokes. He looked across at their strange friend.Dressed in his long flappy jeans, and his flowery shirt, he looked like something from abygone era. But past or present, there was no mistaking the look on his face.Wil looked across at his older brother, and then at Jimi. It was Wil who hadbeen most inspired by Jimi’s guitar-playing the previous summer holidays. Hethought about what he could do to help. I know, I’ll tell him a few jokes, that’ll cheer himup! He strode up to where Jimi sat.‘Yo Jimi!’ chirped Wil, ‘how are things, have you head the one about the…’‘I’m not in the mood for jokes, man,’ replied Jimi morosely. Freddy pulled hisbrother to one side.‘Leave this to me’, he commanded, and Wil slunk off.‘What is it J?’ said Freddy, concern radiating from his voice.‘I don’t like being called ‘J’’, said J.‘Sorry J’, said F, without thinking.‘Look F, I’m fed up with F, F and F, U C?’‘Hmmm….not exactly’, replied F.‘It’s football, football, football, the whole time. I can’t stand it any more. Eversince I came, it’s been this game, that game, this training session, that trainingsession…you know?’‘Time for training!’ yelled Clara from the other side of the room.‘See?’ said Jimi, from Freddy’s side of the room.‘Well, why don’t you come with us? That would be great!’ said Freddy, lookingdown at the thin figure beside him. He was actually doubtful that Jimi could play…helooked vulnerable…weak even. Freddy realised that they all knew Jimi for his guitarand…that was about all. They didn’t know anything more about him. Guitar in hand,Jimi was somebody they all wanted to know. Without the guitar, Jimiwas…well…nobody.

‘I’m hopeless, man’, said Jimi, ‘I’ve tried, it just doesn’t work for me. Look, thelast time I tried it, I got this injury. It was bad man, you want to take a look?’Before Freddy could speak, Jimi had hitched up the leg of his jeans to reveala pasty white shin, and a very small bruise.‘Hmmm…that looks bad…can you walk on it?’ said Freddy, trying to soundsympathetic, and trying to suppress the smile in his voice.‘I’ll be OK’, responded Jimi uncertainly.‘Look man’, said Freddy, trying to speak Jimi-talk, ‘we’d love you to play, andyou’re not rubbish. Just join in. And don’t forget, no-one can play the guitar like you.We’d all love to do that!’Jimi smiled weakly and gazed down at his beloved guitar. There was a pauseuntil he finally responded. His voice wavered uncertainly.‘Alright, man, if you say so, I’ll give it just one more try. Let’s go…*****

**A Bad Week for Jimi – Day 4**

The next day they had ventured out onto the field for practice. Mr Andrews had joined them and was trying to persuade Jimi to take part.

'OK, I can do this!' said Jimi, seemingly more confident than he had been the previous day.

'Right lad, that's the attitude I like. Not sure about the kit though'.

Jimi was wearing exactly what he had been wearing the day before. And the day before that. And the previous day. And the day prior to this one. And earlier.

And he would probably be wearing exactly the same tomorrow. And later. And afterwards. And even the following day.

'Now, first, let's try a simple pass. I'll side-foot the ball to you, like…this,' (Mr Andrews's body creaked as he manoeuvred into position for the pass), 'and you side-foot it back to me, like…'

Jimi toe-poked the ball fifty metres over Mr Andrews's head.

'Hey, Man! I love this game!' he smiled for the first time in a week.

'No…no! You need to use the side of your foot, lad, like this'. Again Mr Andrews gently side-footed it to Jimi.

This time Jimi ran towards the ball, but slipped on the damp turf, and ended up sitting a few centimetres from the ball, looking at it. But not kicking it. He was still smiling.

'Try again, just a little slip, that's all!' said Mr Andrews.

Jimi tried again. This time, the soaked material of his jeans became caught under his shoe as he ran up. This time he slipped over forwards and went shooting along the wet ground. This time he did make contact with the ball. With his head.

'Aw, no, see? I can't play this! Not at all!' He looked miserable again.

'Try this, then', shouted Clara from the goal-line, 'maybe you're a goalie, just catch it'. Clara lashed the ball from twenty metres, straight at Jimi. He managed to get his fingers to it just before it caught him in the face. The ball flew away towards Michael, who brought it down from waist height and trapped it instantly under his right foot.

'Be careful! Those are the only fingers I've got!' moaned Jimi.

'Alright', said Michael quietly. 'Try this, it's not so hard'. Jimi, already collapsed in a heap on the floor, looked up as Michael balanced the ball on his right foot, and kept it stationary there for a few seconds.

'I could do that!' said Jimi, struggling up. Taking a ball, he placed it on his right foot. He kept it stationary there for a few micro-milliseconds.

‘Then you just flip it up, onto your knee, two bounces here, then up onto your left shoulder, flick your shoulder up, ball over your head onto the other shoulder, flick it up, back of the neck, roll it down your back, chip it with your right heel straight over to Clara’.

‘You’re killing me, man!’ said Jimi, half laughing.

Michael flipped the ball up, bounced it twice on his knee, up onto his left shoulder, flicked his shoulder up, watched carefully as the ball went over his head, flicked it with the other shoulder, balanced it on the back of his neck, let it run down his back, then chipped it with his right heel ten metres to where a grateful Clara caught it chest high.

His team-mates applauded wildly. Two men, dressed in tracksuits and standing far away at the other end of the ground, but looking on intently, wrote something down in a notebook.

Jimi put the ball back on his foot. As he did so, his left foot slipped on the soft ground and he fell backwards. The ball spooned up in the air. As it fell he put his knee up to protect himself, the ball hit it, and ballooned back up in the air, falling down onto his left shoulder, bouncing high over his head, and then hit the other shoulder. As it hit the right shoulder, Jimi grabbed his left one in pain, and the ball slapped him wetly on the back, and rolled down his neck. He tried to get up, slipped again, and kicked the ball ten metres to his left, where it hit Clara squarely in the face.

His team-mates shook their heads sadly. Except Clara, who yelled at him, through a mouthful of muddy football.

‘OK, you were right. Maybe football isn’t your thing’, said Freddy sympathetically, ‘but there must be something you could do to support the team…’

‘Look, man, you’re a football team, what can I do to help you?’ Jimi sounded so dejected. Jimi looked so wet. Jimi smelled kind of funny.

‘Pick yourself up, lad!’ said Mr Andrews briskly, ‘I don’t like to hear that defeatism. Now everyone is good at something! What’re you good at lad?’

‘Nothing’, said Jimi predictably.

‘You can play the guitar!’ said Wil.

‘Well, I don’t think that’s going to help the team…’ said Mr Andrews, laughing, ‘…what else can you do?’

‘Actually, maybe he could sing a song for us at matches,’ said Freddy, aware that really that was all Jimi could do.

‘Yeh, that would be great. He could write a song for us. We could sing it as we go on the pitch!’ said Clara excitedly.

‘Actually, I’ve been working on a few tunes’, Jimi muttered, ‘although I can’t decide which is best’.

‘That’s settled’, said Freddy.

‘Tomorrow, we’ll listen to Jimi’s songs!’

‘Yes’, said Clara, ‘ and we can vote on the songs!  We can call it the ‘Lancaster Road-Vision Song Contest!’

*****

**A Bad Week for Jimi – Day 5**

‘This is definitely my favourite!’ said Clara, colouring in a large figure on a piece of card.

‘Oh come on, don’t be nasty’, replied Freddy, who was in charge of the ones.

‘I’m doing the zeros, hee hee!’ said Clara happily, ‘Nul points!’

‘I’m doing my favourite number five’, said Michael, holding his own card up for the others to see.

Barry was busy shifting his drum kit onto the little stage they had created outside the HQ at the bottom of Hardy’s garden. Jimi was nowhere to be seen.

‘He said he was really nervous’, said Freddy nervously, ‘so we’ve got to be nice to him, right?’

‘We can’t be nice if the song is rubbish!’ said Clara, waving her ‘zero points’ sign above her head, ‘if it is ‘nul points’ I’m going to tell him so!’

‘Yes, OK, but we’re trying to choose a song for our team, so we need to like at least one of them’.

‘I’m not going to like one of them if they are all rubbish!’ said Clara (again), waving her ‘zero points’ sign above her head, around her waist, and then hopping about with the sign stuck right in front of her face.

Barry was struggling to shift the bass drum onto the stage.

‘You want a hand?’ said Wil.

‘Don’t you touch it…whatever you do!’ replied Barry, staring at Wil, and rolling his sleeves up. He finally got the drum in position, and sat sweating on the drumstool. Picking up his sticks, he tapped around each drum, sliding each one into the exact place he needed it.

Wil had produced a banner which he had strung from two trees. It read ‘Lancaster Road-Vision Song Contest’ in very large black writing, ‘Jimi’s Got Talent’ in very large green writing, ‘The J-Factor’ in smaller yellow writing, and then finally ‘you deside’ in light grey. Wil was still taking his time over some of his spellings.

Freddy collected up the various points scoring cards, and put them down on a table he had set up in front of the stage. Clara, Michael, Wil, and Alec sat on four logs which served as chairs. Barry sat at the drum kit, and did a little drum roll.

Jimi was nowhere to be seen.

Barry gave another little drum roll.

There was a scrabbling around in the shed.

Barry gave another little drum roll.

A faint ‘oh, man’ came from inside the shed.

Barry slammed his sticks down on his drums.

Jimi appeared, shuffling out of the door, his guitar slung low across his body. He walked slowly over to the front of the stage area, where a large ‘J’ had been placed on the floor. He smiled weakly.

‘Hello…er….my name is Jimi, man, and…er…I think I’ve got the J-Factor’.

‘Sorry, wrong show!’ said Clara laughing, ‘Get off!’ Freddy kicked her under the table. Jimi slunk off. Barry followed. There was much talking from inside the shed.

A few minutes later, Jimi re-appeared, looking a little more confident. Barry followed. Jimi made his way to the front of the stage.

‘Hello…er…er…my name is Jimi, and…er…I think I’ve got talent’.

‘Wrong again!’ screamed Clara, ‘it’s a song contest! To find the best song for Lancaster Road football club. Get it right!’ Freddy kicked Clara twice. She didn’t seem to care.

Jimi and Barry were now arguing loudly from inside the shed. Strange noises, and strange sounds. After what seemed like a long time, they reappeared. Barry was carrying a gold and black flag, which he perched beside his kit. Jimi walked to the front of the stage area. He strummed a chord on the guitar, and Barry struck up a bouncy beat on the drums. Jimi started to sing.

‘Offul Dufful, dufful fufful, offul dufful…’

Freddy shifted uneasily from foot to foot. This song, whatever it was, was not going to win. The judges fiddled with their cards.

After what seemed like hours, Jimi brought the song to a close, and muttered a brief ‘Tanke Shein’. He scuttled off stage with Barry.

‘Oi, come back, wait for the points!’ yelled Clara. The two musicians stood at the front of the stage, heads bowed. Michael was the first to deliver his verdict.

‘Well, yes, I kind of liked it actually. What was it about? What was the connection with football?’

The two musicians bowed their heads a little further.

‘So what does offul dufful mean, anyway?’ Michael persisted.

The two musicians bowed their heads so that they were nearly falling off the front of the stage.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ repeated Michael.

‘NUL POINTS!’ screamed Clara, waving her zero sign triumphantly above her head. The other judges reluctantly followed suit, and Barry and Jimi raced back into the shed.

The next song involved Barry in setting up some kind of washing line between two trees, and the song,

as performed by Jimi, entailed him singing and smiling, whilst dodging in and out of the washing. Once again the words were indistinct.

Once again…

…nul points.

Finally, Barry emerged with a flag in the colours of Lancaster Road.

Aha, this looks better, thought Freddy. Barry laid down a drum sound, a deep rhythmic funky beat.

And Jimi emerged onto the stage, wearing a Lancaster Road shirt, his ever-present battered old jeans, and a black baseball cap pulled down over his eyes, which were anyway covered with dark black sunglasses. He played a massive power chord at full volume.

Aha, this is definitely, definitely going to be better! thought Freddy, as the judges started searching for their four and five cards.

*****

**A Bad Week for Jimi – Day 6**

So Jimi smiled,And Jimi sang,Yes, Jimi really did his thang!He danced aroundHe pranced aboutThe judges loved itAnd ‘scream!’ and ‘shout!’

Went the crowd.

He even shot one in the goal‘This soccer’s easy, man’, he saidThen slipped and fell,And bumped his head,

But got up laughing.

But looming large, looming, loomingAs Michael’s latest shot was zoomingTowards the goal, he turned and said,

‘Use your feet, and use your head,Think about the game,’ he said,‘We’ve matches coming, big ones too,You know whatYou’ve got to doWe can win, coz we can playLike Arsenal, play the Arsenal way!’

They’ll came from far, they’ll came from wide‘That Lancaster Road, now they’re a good side’But can we win?Or can we draw?

Can we even dream to clawOur way into the finals?

Can we really do it?

We’d need Ronaldo, Tevez tooAnd even Wayne the he-manBut for now we’ll have to do,With Jaz, and Wil and Freddy!

‘Lancaster Road, Lancaster Road!’That’s all we hear you scream,‘We know, we know!’, is our reply‘Coz it’s your favourite team

(But please be patient, take your time,Coz’ ‘Lancaster Road’ is hard to rhyme!)

But Freddy thought back to the trainingYou know, the one where it was raining?The one where Jimi fell and flappedAnd Michael kept them all enraptWith skills and shots, and balls quick-trappedWhen Hardy was complaining?

Who were those two, standing by?As Michael chipped one to the skyThen trapped it cleanly on his footThen turning, turning round to shootFired it past the keeper.

‘Buenos Dias’, said the guysAll smiles and Spanish charm,‘That boy right there…we’d like to talk…’(And Freddy noted with alarm…)‘We’d like to have a chat you see…We’re wondering if he might be free…To play with us, we like his styleIn fact we’ll make it worth his while

We’ll ask his Mum, in fact we’ll phone herTo see if he’ll come… to Barcelona’

Oh no!

I’m not so sure,I want to warn ‘yer(as Michael headed, from a corner)Those two are up to bad, you

see(as Michael juggled with his knee)They’ll have him, steal, take him on!And you’ll be lost without him, sonHe’s coolHe’s hotBut what he’s notIs up for sale – to anyone.

*****

**Testing Times - Day 1**

Believe it or not, Jimi was still at it one week later. As the sun soaked them in glorious June warmth, Jimi, his sleeves rolled up, his face a picture of concentration, sang, ‘I’m singing, in the rain, Just, singing, in the rain… What a glorious feeling… I’m happy…again!’ ‘I’m glad he is’, remarked Wil, as he tied his laces, ‘last week was terrible!’ ‘Yes, but he’s found his place now,’ replied his brother, ‘official team mascot, singer, guitarist, songwriter, and motivator!’ ‘Well, he doesn’t motivate me!’ said Clara. ‘He’s good fun to have around, though, isn’t he?’ ‘I suppose so’, replied Clara grudgingly. As they trained in the warm sunshine, preparing for the weekend’s tournament, again the two strange figures were standing in the distance looking on. Just staring really. Except when Michael had the ball. Then they became animated, talking quickly to each other, heads inclined, clipboards at the ready. Busy scribbling. Their scribbling seemed to intensify the more Michael played. If Michael did a couple of stepovers, they scribbled something on their clipboards. If Michael did some keepy-uppies, the scribbled some more. When Michael did one of those things where you keep the ball up, circle your foot around the ball, and then keep it up again before the ball drops, they scribbled so fast it was as if smoke was rising from their pens. Finally Mr Andrews had had enough. ‘I’ve had enough!’ he croaked. ‘Get yourselves a drink, I’m going to talk to them!’ He took a swig from his own flask, coughed twice, and tottered over to the far touchline. ‘Who are they anyway?’ said Clara. ‘They look like they’re from another club’, replied Wil. ‘They look like they’re from another planet!’ said Hardy.

‘Certainly another country’, Freddy muttered, ‘and they seem to be interested in Michael’. ‘What do you mean, interested?’ said Clara. ‘Well, look, every time Michael gets the ball, they write something down and start chattering away in a foreign language. Did you see when he scored the penalty? They were hopping up and down, laughing, almost singing…anyway, Mr Andrews will sort them out!’ In the distance, Mr Andrews was sorting them out. He had marched over to them at a fine pace (for him), and started off by wagging his finger at them. Then he had pointed his finger right at them. Then he had sort of jabbed his finger into one of their faces. And then the other one. After that, he had put his hands by his sides. He had then inclined his head to one side, as if listening carefully. Then he had started nodding his head. Freddy looked over again. Mr Andrews was now nodding his head vigorously up and down, and…what was that…he was actually smiling at the two men, who were laughing back at him. Mr Azalea laughed too, then grabbing each of their hands in turn, shook hands with them warmly. One of the men then handed him a pen, and he appeared to sign something quickly on a piece of paper. Freddy actually saw him look over guiltily at the team before writing. What was going on? Who were these guys? Why was Mr Andrews so pleased with himself? Mr Andrews staggered back across the pitch. ‘Amazing…amazing!’ he said, smiling and shaking his head, as if in disbelief, before adding…’quite irregular of course…very irregular…oh yes…yes…we won’t be seeing them again!’ The two men continued standing beside the pitch. Clipboards poised. One of them bent down and pulled two small packages out of the bag at his feet. ***** Training came to a close with Michael doing one of those backheel thingies, where he flipped it up high with his heel and the ball came down in front of him, from where he crossed the ball in a high arc towards the penalty spot. Flying in from the edge of the area, Clara of all people was there to power in a diving header into the top corner.

Frantic scribbling from the men who were supposed to have gone. Wreckless writing from the swarthy strangers. Desperate drawing from the dudes who should have disappeared. And devious jotting down from the fearsome foreigners. ‘Hey, Michael, can we talk to you a minute, please?’ Michael looked shocked at the call from across the pitch. He turned away. ‘We do NOT talk to strangers! Go away!’ yelled Clara, stepping two paces towards the strangers. ‘She’s right! Go away!’ added Hardy, stepping two paces back. ‘It’s OK,’ said Mr Andrews, ‘I’ll deal with this, you stay here’. Mr Andrews walked across and met the two men mid-pitch. There was more hand-shaking, and laughing, and nodding of

heads. The two packages were handed over. A final handshake. Mr Andrews returned to the Lancaster Road team. He handed one of the packages to Michael. *****

**Testing Times - Day 2**

On Wednesday, they were round at Hardy's house, and they had been watching Spain beat Russia 3-0 in the European Championships. Michael was wearing a full Barcelona football kit. They hadn't seen that before.

Freddy looked puzzled and thought to himself. *Two strange men speaking a foreign language, two packages on the training pitch, and now this. I'm going to ask him directly.* He took a couple of paces across the large room towards Michael. Michael moved away and stared whispering something to Hardy.

'What? Speak up!'

'I said, have you got a spushur casebook?' said Michael, slightly louder.

'What are you talking about?' said Clara brusquely as she entered the room. She was also completely clad in brand new Barcelona kit.

*Two strange men, two packages…this is all beginning to add up,* thought Freddy again.

'Ola!' said Michael quietly to Clara, who waved back.

*Two strange men, two packages, speaking Spanish…this is all beginning to multiply and divide as well,* thought Freddy grimly.

'OH! You want a Spanish phrasebook!' cried Hardy, finally hearing the message that Michael was trying to convey to him. Michael looked shamefacedly back.

*Two strange men, two packages, Spanish phrasebooks…this is all beginning to add up, multiply, add up again, divide a couple of times, take the square root, and measure the perimeter!* thought Freddy as the prospect of him losing his best player loomed ever larger.

*****

After checking that nobody else was around and with a quick call across the hallway of 'follow me!', Hardy led them to a large door on the west side of the entrance hall.

(Unlike the rest of their houses, which were mostly tightly packed on Lancaster Road, in Hardy's house it made sense to speak of the 'west' side, and the 'north' entrance. The house seemed to have endless rooms and endless gardens, and this massive entrance hall where they were now standing patiently by the door, to which Hardy was now anxiously searching for the key).

Freddy was looking north towards the kitchen, Michael was admiring the badge on his new kit. Clara looked east out to the garden where they had established their base back last summer, whilst Jaz and Alec were in deep conversation about whether 'left' meant 'east' or 'west', and whether 'up' meant 'south' or 'north'.

Think about it!

‘Do you have an atlas anywhere?’ said Jaz to Hardy.

Hardy was just looking around him, north, south, east and west, apparently worried that someone might see them. He fumbled some more with the keys.

‘I’m sure there’ll be an atlas in here somewhere’, he mumbled, ‘ah, this is the one!’ He inserted the key into the door.

*****

There was a creaking sound as the door swung slowly open. It was the sort of sound you only really get in films where they want to make a door sound really squeaky and really scary. Only this was in real life. The door swung open with that kind of film-squeakiness, to reveal darkness beyond. Freddy thought he saw Hardy shudder slightly as he reached his hand into the blackness to search for a light.

As the lights popped into life, a cloud of dust descended from the ceiling. Hardy pushed away a cobweb from the doorway and led them in.

‘Wow! This place is amazing!’ said Clara looking around her.

‘You never told us this was here…!’ said Freddy.

‘Well, to be honest, I didn’t really know it was here until recently. I found these keys, see, and…well one of them just fitted the door’.

‘So, we’re not supposed to be in here?’

‘We’re only looking for a couple of books, right, then we’ll go back outside’.

Freddy looked around the room. Dust, dust, and more dust. And more dust. And more.

And behind the dust, racks and racks and shelves and shelves of books. Hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of books. Hardy scraped at one of the shelves.

‘Look, here, this is what you need, come this way’, he said.

Michael followed Hardy over towards the shelf marked *Travel.* Subconsciously nervous perhaps, the others followed, so that their footprints marked out a little track on the dusty floor.

Freddy coughed. ‘It must be years since anyone came in here!’

‘Well, my Grandad used to look after the books, and after he left, well, there was no-one to take any care of them, so we just sort of forgot about it’.

Freddy looked around again and breathed deeply to try to stop himself coughing. It was obvious that the room had been cared for at one time, because everything, as far as the eye could see, was neatly arranged. Books old, and books new, arranged in size order, some coloured books here, some older leather-bound books there, and some piles of papers in a corner. But everything just how it should be.

Everything looked old though, because of the fine covering of dirt and dust. And everything smelled

old, the smell of leather, and the smell of age, like your attic or an old storage shed.

As Hardy removed one or two of the volumes, and the others crowded round to see what Michael had selected, two thoughts were occupying Freddy's mind.

The first thought was about how they could keep hold of Michael if a big club came calling for him. And maybe it was too late already.

The second thought occurred to him as he squinted into one of the corners. Why, he thought, when everyone is over there, when no-one has been in here for ages, then why…why… has someone or something scraped out in the dust the words,

*Welcome to… THE LIBRARY!*

**Testing Times - Day 3**

Freddy considered the situation.

They were in Hardy's house.  That was OK.

They were in a room, just off the main hallway.  That was OK as well.

They wouldn't be in there for long.  OK.

It was  a bit dusty. He could deal with that.

Michael had found his book about how to speak Spanish.  That was not so good, but they could deal with that later.

He looked down again at the writing on the floor.  Not good at all.  It clearly said *Welcome to the Library*.  And it was obvious that it had been written very recently, because the dust was only just disturbed.  Sort of scratched out, it was.

Freddy heard a scratching sound from the corner into which he was squinting.  Probably just some pipes creaking or something.

The writing was not good, but what happened next, something subconscious, provoked deep anxiety in Freddy's mind.  He looked at his watch, again screwing his eyes up to get a proper look in the dimly lit room.

Friday.  Friday the thirteenth of June.  The day before the tournament.  Friday.  Friday the thirteenth.  Of June.  Friday…the THIRTEENTH!

As the thought shot through his mind and landed like an arrow in the centre of a target, something else happened.

All the lights went out.

*****

There was a scream.  A girl's scream.  It cut through the pitch darkness and buried itself deep within Freddy's brain.  The scream was long, and loud, and desperate.  Someone from the far side, where they had been looking for the books, stumbled.  A grunt.  A knocking in the distance.  A swear word.

'Ow!'  the voice was Hardy's.  'This n-n-never happened before'.  The voice was urgent, panicky.

The door slammed.  Shut.

*****

There was another scream, then another.  This time Clara was joined by Jaz, normally the most phlegmatic of people.  If he was worried, they all should be.

Freddy tried to assess the situation, as his heart thumped rhythmically and audibly in his chest. Ten seconds after the door had shut, there was silence, and to him his heartbeat was amplified to a throbbing pulse that could be heard throughout the room.

*Calm, calm, stay calm,* he said to himself.

'Stay calm', said a small voice.

*Stay calm,* he said again, almost mouthing the words in the darkness. He ran through the situation once more.

*Friday the thirteenth, the day of danger and doom, and dodgy doings! And darkness and doors. He tried to make sense of it all. The Library. The library! Where had he heard that before? And what had happened? Yes that's right, the library, strange people in white suits…it was all coming back to him now, and the people inside the suits…they were people weren't they? And then someone had started telling them what to do…someone had taken charge…had waved that little thingy around and saved the day…*

These thoughts raced around his brain and took less time to think than it took you to read about them.

Suddenly, a small blue light in the distance. Freddy didn't know how far away it was, but it illuminated the face of his friend Alec.

*Good. He can deal with this*, thought Freddy.

'I'll deal with this', said Alec, 'we've just got to find the interstelastic thrusters and reverse the polarity on the groove-finders'.

More silence, as Alec went about his work. In the dim glow of whatever he was holding, Freddy could make out the dark faces of his friends. He just couldn't get to them across the wide room, because it was too dark to see what was between him and them. So he sat where he was, on the floor, knowing that the words he had read were somewhere just to his left, and that whoever, or whatever had written them, may well be somewhere close by as well.

Alec worked quickly at whatever he was doing, and little clouds of dust would appear illuminated in blue every time he made a sudden movement. He was concentrating on one of the shelves close to where the others were waiting.

'Yes, it's here, if we can just…'. The light went out for a moment, to be replaced by a whining noise, and then more silence.

'Who are you?'

The question came from close to where Freddy was sitting.

'Eh?' said Freddy, not looking towards the voice, nor turning his head. He was frozen, his mind desperately trying to work out a reasonable explanation.

'Who are you?'

‘Erm…we’re…in…the Library’.  Even in the terror of the situation, Freddy knew that this was a ridiculous thing to say.

‘Who are you?’  the voice repeated.  Freddy’s heart pounded like a jackhammer.

He could see Alec still working away in the far distance.  *Whatever he is doing, he must hurry up*, he thought.  His mind also gave him time to think about the voice.  Was it an illusion?  Was it a person? Was it alive?  Was it…dead?  It was a small voice, like a child’s, or like a baby’s.  Who was it?

‘You are in trouble!’ said the voice.

‘Deep trouble!’ said the voice, ‘I’ll be back’.

There was a brief scratching sound to Freddy’s left.  The voice…was gone.

*****

**Testing Times - Day 4**

OK, could all managers please report to the beer tent immediately!

Crackle…crackle…buzz…

I'm sorry, please cancel that last message…could all managers please report to the control tent as soon as possible.

There was a huge scrum as five hundred managers converged on the organisers' tent to find out the details of the knockout stages.

'Well, we made it through on goal difference', shouted one of the managers above the melee.

'Goal difference doesn't count in this tournament!', yelled another.

'Well, it says here that…!' added a third, waving the tournament rules in the air above his head.

'OK, OK, let's have a little calm please, gentlemen!' called the tournament organiser, 'and then I can explain the rules for progression to the quarter-finals!'

The throng of people slowly quietened down.

'Now, as you know, there were seventeen groups of eight teams. The winners of each group will be decided as follows. Please listen carefully.'

Several managers started talking again.

'I said, please, listen carefully!' implored the tournament organiser, 'this could get a little complicated'.

Two managers scratched their heads, then turned around and left.

'So, the winners of each group will go forward to a pre-quarter-final re-group stage to decide progression into the last eight. These will be matches of three minutes each way, and you have to take one player off at the end of each minute. All matches are six-a-side, so you can work out how many players you will need for the game – good luck!'

'That's outrageous!' screamed four managers all at once, 'we'll end up with only one player on the pitch!'

The organiser smiled to himself. 'That's right, one vs one! It's a new rule this year!'

He continued.

'For teams that came second in their group, based on the number of corners conceded, divided by the ratio of goals scored to goals against, you will be playing each other in a round-robin format, starting at 2.00 pm on pitch Z. Good luck!'

‘What?  How do we know we came second?’

‘Ah yes!  So, it’s simple!  You just work out how many corners you conceded in each match, then take your total number of goals, divide that by the number you let in, then take away the number you first thought of, OK?’

‘No, not OK’, said a burly manager, moving forward to the front of the group, his rules booklet held out in front of him like a sword as he cut through the throng.

‘Well, I would have thought it would be obvious’, said the organiser, ‘if you do that sum, then take the first letter of your team name, you can see which teams will progress’.

This further detail of the qualification process gave the burly manager pause for thought.  He scratched again.  Several others looked at each other, puzzled.

‘Just to repeat, corners, goals, and alphabet!’  The organiser looked very pleased with himself.

‘The way I see this, if your team has a name that starts with a letter high up in the alphabet, then you get through’, queried one of the other coaches.

‘That’s right, we had to sort it out somehow!’  The organiser beamed with pride at his innovative approach.

‘So, we’ve played five matches, and just because our team is called the Zebras, we’re going…’

‘Nice kit, black and white stripes’, interrupted the official, ‘now, shall we move on?’

Another group of coaches left the tent, mostly managers of teams like ‘The X-rays’, and ‘Y-R-We Here?’

‘Any questions?’ smiled the organiser.

‘Yes, how are the winners going to be decided after the quarter-finals?’ piped up someone from the back.

‘Ah, I’m glad you asked that!  Well, we here at Ripoff Rangers would like to thank you all for taking part in our…’

‘Just tell us, will you!’

‘Yes…absolutely… the final will be won by…the team that…’

‘Oh get on with it!’

‘Yes…the final will be won by…Ripoff…sorry… the final will be won by the team beginning with R…sorry…by the team with best goal difference.  In the event of a draw, the match will be decided by a game of ‘Paper, Scissors, Stone’.  Thank you!’  The man sunk down out of sight, and crawled out of the back of the tent to a waiting car.

*****

Thanks to the ingenuity of Alec, they had finally escaped from the Library and made their way over to the tournament. It seemed like hundreds of teams had entered, and everyone was completely confused. After Mr Andrews had returned from the managers' tent, scratching his head and wondering how a team with a name like Lancaster Road could ever progress, Jaz had sat for a while in the sunshine shielding the screen of his laptop from the glare.

'OK, according to this, there is no doubt that…' he tapped some more, '…we've made it through…and we will be playing against…' tap tap tap '…FC', tap tap tap '…Barcelona!'

Freddy looked across at his star player.

Michael smiled…wryly*.

*****

* slightly humorously, knowingly. Dryly.

**Testing Times - Day 5**

With just three seconds to go before the game, Lancaster Road jogged down to the far end of the pitch.

Where a team in dark black shirts were already practising.

‘We were here first, go away!’ said their tallest player.

The referee blew his whistle again.

Lancaster Road trotted back to the middle.

‘I’m sorry…there seems to have been a mistake…’, said the referee, consulting his 200-page booklet of rules and instructions, ‘I think, we’re supposed to be on K4 not A4, follow me!’

There was feverish activity on the Lancaster Road bench, as bags were hurriedly packed, stray bottles and tops were recovered, and the team made their way over to pitch K4.

The Barcelona team strolled to their waiting transportation, a gleaming silver Mercedes minibus, with individual tables, little table lamps with lampshades, and an individualised copy of MatchAttax magazine for each player.

The referee shouted a cheery ‘See you there!’ to his Spanish friends, and led the Lancaster Road team down the dingly dell, through the enchanted wood, over the bubbling brook, round the clashing rocks, and finally arriving at pitch K4. When they got there, the FC Barcelona players were getting last minute massages, talks with the psychologist…you know the rest.

*****

The referee’s whistle finally blew for the start of the match, which had been further delayed by the realisation that Lancaster Road’s kit was similar to that of their opponents. Inevitably, Lancaster Road had been asked to play in bibs. Mr Andrews had managed to scrape together the seven bibs needed. They were more or less the same colour. Green. Ish.

*****

The greens actually started quite well, from the kick-off forcing a corner when Clara had basically booted it as far as she possibly could and the goalkeeper had inadvertently turned a ball, that was a metre or so wide of the goal, round his post.

But otherwise it had been one-way traffic, and the wrong way at that.

Barcelona’s eighth (yes…eighth!) goal, was to be their last, but it was arguably the best of the lot. Every player touched the ball before it ended up lodged in the back of Hardy’s net.

It started with Values (bought cheaply from Real Madrid) in the Barcelona goal, rolling the ball to Poo Yol (bought cheaply from South Korea). He had then stabbed it across to his fellow defender (a dark-skinned girl called Lillian), who had taken the ball forward down the inside left channel. Linking with her midfielders – she passed to the messy one whilst the other made a deco-y run down the right – the

ball found its way to the brilliant striker who, on reaching the penalty area, slipped the ball to his striking partner who slammed the ball past Hardy into the net.

‘Oooh!’, went the Barcelona supporters, as the players celebrated what was going to be  a comfortable win.

*****

The referee blew his whistle one final time.  ‘A minute left, gentlemen!’ he called, much to Clara’s visible annoyance.  Miss Thuram from the opposition scowled too.

From the kick-off, Barcelona almost immediately regained possession, with Messy-boy jinking one way then the next, before slipping the ball on really skilfully to the strikers.

But Clara, still fuming, came in with a brilliant tackle just outside the Lancaster Road penalty area.  She passed the ball to Wil who took it forward and  was approached by both of the Barca defenders.  Wil looked up as two of the best defenders in their age group faced him down.  He stopped, the ball nestling beside his right foot, and looked up.

Michael, who had seemingly lost interest in the game and had been chatting with some of the Barcelona coaching staff, suddenly came off his wing and sprinted into the box, yelling for the ball.

If only Wil could find him.

If only…

Wil dragged the ball back from a lunge from Thuram, then looked up again.  Almost without thinking, he stabbed the ball with his right foot and it passed between the prone defender and the other.

Straight into Michael’s path.

What was he thinking?

Who knows?

Why did he do it?

No-one knows.

An open goal.

The ball at his feet.

On his right foot.

Only the keeper to beat.

The eyes.

Left, then right.

Side-footed.

The keeper diving.

The ball.

In the back…

… of the net!

*****

Freddy fell to his knees as the whistle blew for full-time.

Never, in the history of football, had an eight-one defeat tasted…

…so sweet!

*****

*OK – so we've mentioned famous players eight times here, can you spot them? Some are obvious, and some are not! Check the website for answers!

**Testing Times - Day 5**

‘Look, I’ll think about it, right.  I can’t say right now’, said Michael, half whispering to Freddy.  He was clearly embarassed and uncomfortably with all the attention.

‘No, that’s not fair, you’re going to have to make a decision.  You’ve got people depending on you’, implored Freddy.

‘I can’t say, I just can’t say’, Michael was almost sobbing.  He turned away.

*****

Freddy and Michael had been talking for almost half an hour before the quarter-final against the team from Spain.  Michael had spent the rest of the day talking to the people from Barcelona who had been tracking and watching him for weeks.  It really seemed as if this was the end for the team, with its best player about to move on.

The announcer crackled into life once more.

OK, the fourth quarter final between Lancaster Road and FC Barcelona Lions will take place in two minutes on pitch A4

There was a frantic scurrying around amongst the parents and coaches of Lancaster Road.

‘What did they say?’ said a bemused Mr Andrews.

‘It’s on A4’.

‘I don’t care how you got here, where are we playing?’

‘We’re playing on pitch A4’, explained Jaz carefully, ‘and if you look at the map, we turn left here, over the rickety bridge, down the leafy lane, through the hedge backwards, then over the ford in the river, and we’ll be there’.

‘Through a river, I’m not getting my feet wet!’ yelled Clara.

‘Come on, let’s just go, we’ve got a match to play!’ said Freddy, pulling the team around him. Especially Michael.

They turned right, up the leafy lane, pushed their way through the hedge forwards, crawled under the bridge, and strolled over the dried-up river.  As they arrived at the ‘M’ pitches, it was clear the opposition was ready for them.

*****

The opposition team were resplendent in the blue and maroon stripes of Barcelona.

On the sidelines was a coaching staff of about twenty people.  Three players were getting treatment for injuries sustained earlier in the tournament.  One was getting last-minute instructions from the Head

Coach.  Another was lying on a makeshift couch, his eyes firmly shut, as the team psychologist encouraged him to visualise scoring the winning goal.  A serene smile played on his lips.

Two of the players were receiving attention to their hair.  They both had long black hair, and both of them had little hairbands to stop the hair flying around in the wind.  As one of the coaches (the Hair Coach?) was attending to him, one of these players kept a ball bouncing around at his feet, bouncing once on his heels, twice on his toes, onto his thigh.  And all the time, a toothy grin played on his lips.

The Lancaster Road players flung their assorted bits of kit onto the ground at the opposite side of the pitch.

As the Barcelona players formed a huddle on the far side, surrounded by their management team (dressed in matching tracksuits with the the famous mes que un club legend on the back).

‘It’s OK, it says they’re a mess of a club!’ said Wil, laughing nervously as the opposition stretched in unison.

‘More than a club, Bro, it means they are more than a club!’ replied his brother as Mr Andrews led them through their warm-up routine.

‘Thirty seconds, please gentlemen!’ called the referee from the centre spot.

‘Right you lot, I’ll go and sort out the kick-off’, said the coach, and tottered off to introduce himself to the opposition.

There was much handshaking a laughing again, and one of the Barcelona coaches even planted a kiss on each of Mr Andrews’s cheeks.  The Lancaster Road coach also pointed across at Michael, nodding his head vigorously, and laughing some more.  Freddy took his chance.

‘Look we’ve got twenty-five seconds, you’ve just got to decide…’

‘I don’t have to decide now, why now, come on, tell me that…’ replied Michael.

‘These guys want you to go, look at them!’.  There was more pointing, and sage nodding of heads from the Barca team.

‘OK, so look at this, what would you do?’ said Michael, looking around him at the pile of discarded drinks bottles, the assorted kit, deflated footballs, and random litter which represented the Lancaster Road camp.

‘But these people are your friends, we love you, we’ve been playing together for nearly two years, come on…!’

‘I just don’t know, I just don’t.  Sorry’.  Michael again looked close to tears.

There was a loud blast from the referee’s whistle.

‘I tell you what’, he said at last, ‘if I can score against this lot, then that’s it’.

‘That’s what?’ said Freddy, his eyes narrowing.

‘If I can score against Barcelona, I’m staying with Lancaster Road!’

*****

**Frozen! - Day 1**

‘Right my feathered friends!’, called Mr Andrews, the bright sunlight beaming offhis ageing head and reflecting off his tattered spectacles.‘Feathered?’ whispered Wil with a smile to his brother.‘Flap your wings! It’s cold!’ yelled the coach, who started flapping his ownarms around and encouraging them to do the same.‘Now jump up and down on your spindly little birdy legs!’ he added, continuingthe ridiculous bird metaphor. They jumped up and down on the rock-solid groundbeneath them, which felt unyielding and unfriendly.‘And now, your beaks, keep them tight shut, you need to concentrate!’‘Tweet, tweet’, said Hardy morosely, through pursed lips.*****Mr Andrews was fiddling about in his bag as they continued to warm up.'Now, I know it is here somewhere...' he muttered, as a shower of mysteriousobjects tumbled out of the cavernous bag. It was mostly the paraphenalia of atypical sports coach – spare studs, old footballs, a towel, a few bibs, and othersmaller equipment.'No...don't need that!', he exclaimed, tossing out a half-chewed sandwich in thedirection of Freddy, who picked it up gingerly and examined it.‘Definitely don’t need that one!’ he yelled, laughing, flinging a pair of soggy greyunderpants randomly out. They caught the wind and flew towards the cornerflagpost, where they attached themselves and almost immediately froze, suspendedin the icy breeze, stuck out like they were challenging someone to touch them. Oreven go near.'Definitely won't be needing that!' said the coach, hurling a bottle halfcontainingsome bright green liquid in the direction of Hardy, who caught it, and madeto throw it right back at him.'Don't do that!', said Freddy hastily, 'let him look for whatever he is lookingfor, it seems important'.

'I saw that, lad', said Mr Andrews, his head still stuck in the bag. Hardy lookedshocked at how the little man had noticed. He looked around in consternation.'Don't even think about it! I run a tight ship here. Oh yes! And this season youwill see, we're on a roll, we're gonna fly, you wait, I've told the other coaches there'll beno stopping us!''Do you think that is wise, Mr Andrews?' said Freddy politely.'Or even true?' Hardy snarled.'Ah, we've got some doubting Thomases have we?' Hardy again looked aroundto see if a Thomas had unexpectedly turned up. 'Some moaning minnies, eh? (Nominnies, anywhere). ‘Some whingers and whiners have we? Right! You, whoever youare, you'll be out! You will!'Hardy looked around for a third time and saw that there was no-one else thecoach could have been speaking to.'Out? Whoever I am?' He scared incredulously as Mr Andrews inserted most ofthe top half of his body into the bag.'I know who you are, Lardy lad, but yes, you'll be out!' came the triumphant ifmuffled cry, 'O-U-T, out!'Mr Andrews emerged with caked mud and dust pouring off him, a tattynotebook in his hand. He pointed threateningly at Hardy, for no apparent reason.He opened the book about half way through. A slice of mouldy bread peeleditself and its butter off the opened page and dropped forlornly to the ground.*****'He went on a coaching course', whispered Freddy to his brother and toHardy, 'some special thing for best, experienced coaches'.'More like ‘worst , past-it, coaches’', muttered Hardy unhappily as Mr Andrewsstrode past, his attention consumed by the notebook.‘That’s more like it, lad, ‘World Class Coaches’, thank you very much. Nowwhere was I?’Hardy grimaced as the cold bit through several layers of clothing.‘I haven’t done anything for this team’, he moaned. ‘I just stand there, lookingmean, and occasionally save the ball. There’s no point to it all, at all. At all. At all.’ Helooked like he was going to cry.

‘Come on!’ said Michael quietly. Michael had been trying to practice someskills, but the ball was so heavy with moisture that all he could succeed in doing wasbalancing the immovable object on his foot, where it promptly iced itself to his laces.Yes…it was very…very…cold.‘Now, here we are’, said Mr Andrews studying the book, ‘if you go there, youthere, and you over there, then we have this formation…here’. He looked again at thelittle book in front of him.‘And that…my friends…is how we are going to beat Derby Road at theweekend! Simple!’ He stood triumphantly, book held high, his puny arms unshieldedagainst the winter weather, but apparently impervious to the freezing conditions.‘Mr

Andrews?’ asked Freddy.‘Yes, lad, no question about the tactics I hope?’‘No, but…the book seems to be…upside down, isn’t it?’Mr Andrews peered at the book, and gradually turned it round before staringonce more at the diagram in front of him.‘Ah…now…eerrm…we can definitely win…if you go there…you gothere….you go there….’*****

**Frozen! - Day 2**

All in a fluster after trying a number of different formations, Mr Andrews had abruptly ended training early, as the first snow flakes had started to fall.

‘Too cold, too wet, and too confusing!’ he had cried, half in frustration and half in triumph.

*****

They were now gathered in Hardy’s kitchen, drinking hot chocolate, wondering about the Cup game to come. Hardy had cheered up considerably.

‘Considering everything, I have cheered up considerably’, he announced, downing another mouthful of chocolate.

Nobody said anything.

‘We’ve been doing adverbs and subordinate clauses’, he said, sitting up a little straighter on the stool, ‘very difficult, actually’.

Silence.

There was a loud slurp from someone’s cup. And a giggle, from Wil.

‘Just because you’re in Year 5 now doesn’t mean you know everything!’ he said.

‘Well, you young ones wouldn’t understand anyway’, replied Hardy, looking round the room at his team-mates, ‘we do loads of hard stuff, you wouldn’t believe it…really hard’.

‘Go on then, tell us something hard’, challenged Wil.

Hardy looked round the room. Sitting up next to him was his mate Freddy, who was pretty good at everything. Slumped on a chair in the corner was Jaz, who was a maths hot shot. Wil was brilliant at science. Clara, who was sitting at the table looking through a fixture list, was known to write amazing stories.

‘Actually, who are we playing, and why are we playing on a Sunday?’ said Hardy, changing the subject.

Clara muttered into her mug. ‘Mnmla’.

‘Who?’, said Wil.

‘Sorry!’ replied Clara, swallowing, ‘I meant Villa. And in the Cup. Cup games are always on a Sunday’.

*****

Outside, the snow was falling relentlessly, those thick snowflakes, like little clouds, falling gracefully

and settling on the frozen ground.  The trees in the garden bore a heavy fruit of snow which bore down on their branches, making them droop listlessly, hanging around like bored teenagers.

‘We need more action!’  said Hardy suddenly.  ‘Not enough action! Not enough!’.

With that, he ran round the room waving his arms at each one of them in turn.  Not saying anything. Just waving.

‘Snow does that to people’, said Jaz quietly, ‘well-known fact.  Can go quite mad actually’.

‘I’m not MAD!’ screamed Hardy madly, ‘I need to get out of here!  OUT!  Just let me out!’

‘We need to bottle this!’ said Freddy, ‘he’s never that enthusiastic about his football!’

‘Out, out OUT!’  said you-know-who.

‘Outy, outy, outilly out!  OUT!’ he added.

Freddy stood up.  ‘Right let’s get him out of here!’

‘Yes!  Outy-poos!’, cried Hardy with a mixture of childish joy and a kind of sinister madness.  His eyes widened and shone like jewels.

‘You OK?’, said Freddy, peering at him.

‘Oh yes!  Oh Yes!  OH YES!’  said Hardy, tears appearing at the edge of his eyes.

Hardy skipped out through the back door wearing only his Chelsea t-shirt, pursued by Freddy, Wil and Michael, hurriedly pulling on coats.  Jaz remained in the room, poring over the recent results from Villa’s matches.  Clara decided to keep him company.

**The Play's the Thing - Scene 1**

The Scene:  A large sunlit room.  There are three doors leading from the room, and a large picture window, looking out over rolling countryside. (Doors are not labelled, but door one leads to a small cupboard, door two to the kitchen, and door three to the library)

The Cast of Characters:  Freddy, a young boy, who is staring out of the window, his hand resting thoughtfully on his chin.

Freddy:  Hmmmm….

He tilts his head to the other side, and rests his chin on the other hand

Freddy:  Hmmmmm….

Door three opens suddenly.  Another boy, Wil, bounds into the room

Wil:  Hi Bro!  How are ya?

Freddy:  Good morning, young brother, and how are you?

Wil: Eh?

Freddy: I said, Good morning, young sir, and how do you do, today?

Wil:  Why are you talking funny?

Freddy:  We're in a play.  They always talk funny in plays.

Wil:  Yes, indeed they do, my good man.  Like that!

Freddy:  Yes!

Wil: Yes!

They move purposefully to the window and talk silently to each other for a short time.  Wil walks to centre stage

Wil:  Where is the Princess?

Freddy:  Good question!  I haven't seen Princess Clara for days.  I wonder if she wandered up yonder?

Wil:  Up where?

Freddy:  Up yonder.  I did just ponder whether she'd taken a wander up yonder hill…

Wil looks confused

Wil:  Where is yonder?

Freddy:  (pointing towards the green hills through the window)  Over there!

Wil:  Hmmm….Freddy:  (pondering, and looking towards the hills)  Hmmmm….

Wil:  Well, I can't just stand here pondering all day!  I'm off to see Hardy.  He's working in the library.Wil exits stage left, through door one.  Freddy looks out of the window once more and looks at his watch.  Thirty seconds pass.  There is a distant coughing sound.  Wil re-emerges from door one.

Freddy:  Wrong door?Wil: Wrong door.  Just a cupboard.  Bye! (he exits stage centre through door two)Door Two re-opens.  Wil returns.Freddy:  Wrong door?Wil: Wrong door.  Just a kitchen.  Bye! (he exits stage right through door three)Door Three immediately re-opens.  Wil jumps back into the room.Freddy:  Too dark?Wil: Definitely too dark in there.  I'm going back this way!  (he exits once again through door one)

From outside the window, there is a grunting sound.  Freddy makes his way over to the window, and opens it.

Freddy:  Hello!  Who's there!  (no reply).  Hello! (louder this time).

Sheep (or Goat):  Baaaaa!

Freddy:  Eh?  What?

Sheep:  Baaaa!

Freddy looks down outside the window.  A goat is grazing just below the window ledge.  In the distance a small figure appears on the horizon.

Freddy:  Hey!  Who's that?

Door One opens, and Wil steps out, brushing dust from his arms and body

Wil:  (rushing to window) Who's what?

Goat:  Baaaa!

Freddy:  Look, over there (pointing), over yonder!

Wil:  (yawning) Yonder, yonder, yonder…

Freddy:  No, over there!  Who is that?

Clearly visible now is a small figure running over the hills and dales towards them.  The compact figure is moving fast, and is being pursued by a group of animals.

Freddy:  Wow!  That guy can really run!

Wil:  Well, so would you  if you were being chased by a flock of killer goats!

The small figure (whose name is Michael) arrives beneath the window, out of breath.

Freddy: Hello, who are you?

Michael: Huh? (he struggles for breath)

Freddy: What brings you here? What do you want? Why are you here?

Michael: Me? Oh, I'm just a lonely goatherd. I've been searching for XabiAlonso everywhere (he bends down to cuddle the goat by the window)

Wil: XabiAlonso?

Michael: Yes! My fastest goat! (he strokes the animal's back proudly)

Wil: What is a goatherd, anyway?

Michael: What do you think? I herd goats. Goats go this way, I herd them. Goats go that way, I herd them this way. Goats run off, I herd them. Herding, that's all. Just herding.

Wil: What is herding?

Michael: Look at me? Am I stupid? I've just run over that mountain, with a herd of goats. We were looking for our last goat who had run off. I kept my goats in a group. I herded them. Herding, see? Herding.

Wil: OK. So why are you here?

Michael: I'm looking for the Princess. Have you seen her?

There is a loud bang in the distance. Door Three opens. Hardy, a taller boy, walks in, carrying a small sports bag with the handle of a tennis racket sticking out of it

Hardy: Ah, hello! Tally Ho and JoJolly-dee! Anyone for a spot of tennis? (he sets his bag down on the ground with a heavy thud)

Freddy: We're actually looking for the Princess.

Hardy: Princess, princess? What princess?

Freddy: Princess Clara of course. Have you seen her?

Hardy: Erm…No, no, haven't seen her anywhere! Tennis, anyone?

Door Two opens. Michael walks in, followed by twelve goats. He opens door one. Goats one and two enter door one. He shuts the door. Goat three manages to open door three with its teeth. Goats three, four and five enter door three. Michael shuts door three behind them. He opens door two. Goats six, seven and eight have opened the fridge and are proceeding to devour the contents. Michael hurriedly shuts the door. He starts running from door to door. He opens door one. Goats one and two exit door one and go through door three, which goat five has forced open. Goats nine and ten are busy chewing on the curtains by the window. Hardy is talking to XabiAlonso. Goat twelve has gone to sleep.

Michael:  I MUST find her!

Freddy and Hardy (together):  Well, she's not in HERE!

Michael:  Well, I'm going out to look for her!

Michael exits stage left, pursued by goats.  They exit through door one.

Freddy:  Strange.  Very strange.

There is a scrabbling noise from behind door one.  Michael, plus goats, emerge from the store cupboard. They exit through door two.  The scene closes with munching sounds coming from the kitchen.

**The Play's the Thing - Scene 2**

The sun is shining on the hillside. The scene is set on the verandah outside the room which was the scene for scene one. The setting is looking out over the hills. There is a strange sound in the distance. An elderly gardener is pushing a wheelbarrow. He looks up.

Mr Andrews (the gardener): Ooh, my arthritis! Ooh, I can hardly stand. (he gradually stands upright). Oi! Get off my azaleas!

Mr Andrews picks up a clod of earth from his wheelbarrow and flings it at a goat which is munching on some flowers. The goat exits, stage left. There is singing in the distance.

Mr Andrews: What's that? (the singing continues)

Michael: (in the distance) All I am is a lonely goatherd,Yay – odder – day odder yay hay hoo!

Mr Andrews: What's that? Goatherd? Well herd some goats then! (he fights off several more animals as they savage his flowers).

Michael: Good afternoon.

Mr Andrews: Hmph!

Michael: Good afternoon. I'm looking for the Princess.

Mr Andrews: Haven't seen her. Sorry. (he turns back to his work)

Michael: How can you be so sure? She was here earlier.

Mr Andrews: (whispering) Well, it's like this you see. When I came out here this morning, there was these two boys in the house. I could see they were up to no good, and so I observed them from a distance, all the time bending down, pretending to be tending my prize rhododendrons.

Michael: You what?

Mr Andrews: What you haven't seen my beauties? Follow me. (he makes to leave)

Michael: No! I'll see them later! What about the Princess?

Mr Andrews: Well, as I was saying, I was looking after my dahlias…

Michael: Rhododendrons?

Mr Andrews: That's right! I was looking after my bluebells…when I saw out of the corner of my eye…Princess Clara…heading for the kitchen.

Michael: Yes?

Mr Andrews: Well, that's it.

Michael:  That's all you can remember?

Mr Andrews:  Well…I might be able to remember a bit more.

Michael:  Go on…

Mr Andrews:  (scratching his head underneath his cap)  Well…I can't remember any more.

Michael picks up a ball of string which the gardener is using to tie back some of the plants.  He pulls the string away from the plants and wraps it round the ball.  A strand is left hanging from the ball.

Michael pulls the ball of string back with his right foot and balances it on his instep.  He chips it up and, tilting his head back, catches the ball on his forehead.  He grabs the strand of string in his teeth, lets the ball drop almost to the ground, then swings his head to fling the ball to where the herd of goats are standing.

XabiAlonso traps the ball with his front right hoof, then chips it up and volleys it back to Michael, who brings it under control at his feet.

Michael:  Have you seen the Princess.

Mr Andrews:  I could do that once.

Michael:  What?

Mr Andrews:  Football.  Good I was.  Very good.  Can't do it now though.  Y'know, my knees.  My eyes.  My memory.

Michael:  Your memory?  What's wrong with your memory?

Mr Andrews:  What were you saying?

Michael:  Where is the Princess?

Mr Andrews:  Oh yes!

Michael:  What?

Mr Andrews:  I don't know!

Michael:  Aagh!

Freddy and Wil enter from the direction of the tennis court, accompanied by Hardy.  Mr Andrews leaves across the far side of the garden, pushing his wheelbarrow.

Michael:  Good game?

Freddy:  Not bad.  No Princess though.  We thought she would come and make up a doubles.

Wil:  We'd better find her.  I hope she's not in trouble.

Hardy:  Ah!  She'll be fine!  She's always wandering off.  She'll be reading in the library, cooking in the kitchen, or trying to get out of the store cupboard.

(there is a distant banging sound)

Freddy:  Yes, OK, I suppose we should stop worrying!

Michael:  (looking thoughtful)  I'd just like to know she's OK though.

Hardy departs across the far side of the garden, carrying his bag.  As the stage lighting goes dim to signify the end of the scene…there is an enormous bang which appears to come from the right side of the stage.  Someone screams.

Another loud bangMichael singing on the hillside.Jimi appears – wandering minstrelFinishes with a loud bang.

**The Play's the Thing - Scene 3**

Scene 3 is set in the walled garden. Freddy and Wil are standing stock still, staring at the scene in front of them. Michael has tethered his goats, and is making his way over.

Freddy: I can't believe it. She was here just a minute ago, and now…now…

Wil: Has…has someone called the police?

Hardy: (arriving from round the corner of the garden, and talking into a mobile phone) Yes, I've just called them, they'll be here in a minute.

Michael: But…but…I don't understand.

There is a screech of tyres from outside the garden. A policeman appears, wheeling a bicycle

Policeman Mr Andrews: (out of breath) I got here… as soon as I could…

Hardy: On a bike? We need cars, ambulances, the fire brigade, the boy scouts! (he talks quietly into his phone)

Policeman Mr Andrews: Now look here, young man, you leave this all to me. I'm in charge now, and I don't want anybody to move!

Freddy, Wil and Michael stand transfixed by the scene in front of them. Hardy paces around. The policeman pulls out a notebook and flips it open.

Policeman Mr Andrews : Hello, hello, hello…! (he looks around at the four people standing close to him)…and….hello! What have we got here then? (he licks his finger and turns over a new page in the notebook)

Hardy: (whispering) Get on with it!

Policeman Mr Andrews: What was that? Your name, young man, is going in my little book! (he smiles triumphantly and writes something in the notebook). Now, first we need to secure the scene! You lot, don't move!

The policeman struggles with his utility belt, looking for something.

Policeman Mr Andrews: (talking quietly to himself) Trunchion…no don't need that! Radio…no…doesn't even work. Piece of string…yes…could be useful. Bullet proof vest….nah…too hot! Aha…handcuffs…yes…I might need those for you lad (he turns to Hardy)…two pound coins…a rolled up newspaper…a three-day-old sandwich…now…what else have I got in here?

The policeman proceeds to remove several more items from his belt and clothing. In his confusion, he removes his belt, then his jacket, his shirt and his string vest. There is a small pile of items on the floor in front of him.

Policeman Mr Andrews: Ah, yes, now where was I? Cold. It's cold!

Hardy:  Well, you're half naked, man!  I'm leaving.

Policeman Mr Andrews (rumaging around on the floor):  You're going nowhere.  Alonso!

There is a clumping sound from outside the garden, some mild mannered baa-ing, and then light footsteps.  A goat, wearing sunglasses, saunters into view round the wall.

Policeman Mr Andrews:  Thank goodness you're here.  Could you take over please,  I'm looking for something.

XabiAlonso (slowly walking round the garden)  Yes…very interesting…I must say.  Do you want me to interrogate the suspects, sir, or shall I just carry on munching this grass here?

Policeman Mr Andrews:  Interrogate them!  Secure the scene!  Use your initiative, man!  Draw lines round the body!

XabiAlonso (walking over to the body, which is covered in a white sheet.  He chews the corner of the sheet absent-mindedly, then pulls it back with his teeth and peers underneath)  Oooh!  Nasty!

The sheet twitches slightly, then settles back down.  Freddy turns to Michael and Wil, and smiles.  Hardy looks on anxiously.  The goat, a small piece of sheet hanging from the corner of his mouth, turns to the group in front of him.  Then he turns back to the policeman.

Policeman Mr Andrews:  Oh for heaven's sake, Alonso.  If you can't do it, I'll have to do it myself.

(The policeman has put his jacket back on.  He takes his notebook and pen from his jacket pocket.  He drops the notebook)

XabiAlonso eats the notebook.

Policeman Mr Andrews:  I knew we should never have employed animals!  (He wrenches the last quarter of the book from the goat's mouth, and starts to write).

XabiAlonso:  Sorry, Sir, I was a bit hungry.

Policeman Mr Andrews (moving over to the suspects)  So, you, you and you, were you in the house?  And you, where were you?  With him and him…and him?  Or were you actually with him over there?  And you (turning to the body in front of him), why are you just lying there?

(The body twitches again, and the curtain comes down)