

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 it's 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.
