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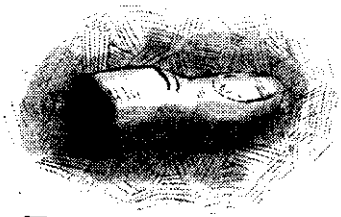
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Registration

There were three things that Sam Innocent didn't expect that first May morning at Freekham High.

The first unexpected thing: that it could actually be hotter inside the school than outside. He'd just shoved his way through a seething, sweat-soaked scrum of kids in the sun-baked playground, braving the *Who's he?* stares and consoling himself that at least it would be cooler in the entrance hall.

Fat chance. It was like walking into an oven in a sauna in a greenhouse in the Sahara Desert. Maybe a little hotter. Which was weird, since Freekham High *looked* as if it should be cold, from the outside anyway. It was stern and scary looking: a bundle of blocks, all glass and steel and concrete, sharp angles and low ceilings—mercilessly modern. 'A progressive school', according to the sign outside.

Sam knew that loads of schools made this claim. Thanks to his dad's ever-relocating job, he got to enjoy the first day of school roughly two or three times a year. At first, he'd thought 'progressive' meant they had air-conditioning, cool computers, and stuff like that. Uh-uh. Each new school was progressively *worse* than the last, true, but Sam wasn't convinced that counted.

The second unexpected thing was the girl.

There she stood beneath the sign SCHOOL OFFICE with her back to him. Her blonde hair straggled down to the middle of her back, even as she stooped over a table to fill in some kind of form.

Sam sauntered over to join her there. REPORT TO THE SCHOOL OFFICE UPON ARRIVAL AT 8.30 a.m., the letter confirming his enrolment had screamed in black capitals. As a new starter he guessed he'd have forms to fill in like blondie here. Maybe he could ask to borrow her pen; that could be a good way of saying hello . . .

When he was halfway across the hall an alarm started blaring, as if he'd tripped some invisible beam between the whitewashed walls or trodden on a pressure pad in the fake wood flooring. It

sounded halfway between a police siren and an angry goose with a throat infection. Seconds later, the hall was thronging with noisy, complaining kids, traipsing along to their classrooms on autopilot. They looked like hundreds of resigned prisoners, all in regulation green and white, trooping back to their cells after a brief taste of freedom.

Sam held still in the middle of the flow. Aside from one or two curious glances he was largely ignored. The girl was attracting far more attention, particularly from the boys.

At last the crowds passed from the hall. While the final stragglers loped out of sight down the corridors to registration, Sam continued his sweaty odyssey over to the school office. He caught sight of his reflection in the glass of a picture frame as he approached; enough to see his damp fringe was sticking up from his freckled forehead like a black spiky tiara. He plucked at it worriedly, trying to smooth it back down—just as the girl turned to face him.

She was the striking kind. In many ways the two of them were opposites; her eyes were wide and watery blue, his were oval and brown. Her nose was straight as a ski slope, his was short

and snub. Sam was usually considered quite tall for a thirteen year old, but this girl matched him inch for inch.

'Hi,' he said. 'My name's Sam. Sam Innocent.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Till proved guilty?'

His smile sagged, and she noticed.

'People say that a lot, huh?'

'Only one or two million times.'

'Thought so.' She clicked her tongue. 'So with all that practice, why haven't you worked out some smart comeback?'

'My mum taught me it's rude to devastate someone with your wit till you know their name.'

She smiled at that. 'Sara Knot,' she offered.

'Not what?'

She turned back to her form, shrugging a cascade of hair back over her shoulder. 'Not heard that one a million times either.'

'So now we're even?'

Sara didn't answer, intent on whatever she was writing. Sam wiped fresh sweat from his brow and peered over her shoulder. She was filling in a new pupil registration form.

'Hey!' he said, amazed, as he read. 'I'm starting here today too!'

She looked at him suspiciously. 'In the middle of May?'

'It's a rubbish time to start, isn't it?' he said. 'Everyone in the whole school's cosy in their cliques and gangs. Someone new turns up, spends a month trying to get accepted . . .'

She nodded wearily. 'Then it's summer. Nice long, lonely holidays.'

'Right!' he beamed. 'And in September, you show your hopeful face but everyone's forgotten you. You have to start all over again.' He blew out a long sigh of relief. 'Thought it would just be me!'

'Whoop-de-doo,' said Sara drily. 'We can maybe form, like, a loser's club.'

His eyes widened as he scanned her form again. 'I don't believe it—we even have the same birthday!'

She looked at him sharply from under her fringe. 'Yeah, as if. February 29th?'

'We do!' he protested. 'The same year and everything!'

'Seriously?' She looked a bit weirded out. 'What are the chances of that happening?'

'Especially when we're both starting at this

dump right at exactly the same time,' Sam agreed, feeling kind of freaked himself.

This was the third unexpected thing.

'Maybe it's a sign,' Sam reasoned. 'A sign that we should, you know, stick together . . .'

He'd meant it to sound friendly, but Sara's eyes narrowed.

'OK, I get it,' she said. 'Ha, ha, very funny. You can stop now.' She peered about over his shoulder. 'Where are your friends hiding? Or did they wet themselves laughing already?'

'Huh?'

'All this "Hey, we're exactly the same!" stuff . . . So, what, you're the big school joker, right? Here to make fun of the new girl?'

'No! It's all true!' Sam held up his hands. 'I'm innocent!'

Sara folded her arms. 'Till proved guilty.'

He scowled. 'Once I've got one of those forms to fill in I'll prove it to you.' He peered through the office window but the receptionist was busy on the phone the other side of the counter. 'Why are you so uptight, anyway?'

'This is the second school I've had to start at this year,' Sara informed him. 'Last year I went to *three*.'

'*Me too!*' He couldn't help bursting in. 'That kind of coincidence is incredible—'

'So,' she continued heavily, 'I'm kind of used to being an easy target for creeps like you!'

Sam stared at her in speechless disbelief. Admittedly, he *had* often been labelled the noisy, jokey one in class—the boy who gave cheek to teachers in return for detentions. At least you made an impression that way. Plus you didn't have to worry about no one talking to you when you were locked up all lunchtime and couldn't talk anyway.

'And I thought I was paranoid about starting new schools!' he finally managed.

'So go get the form and prove you're not a lying scumbag,' said Sara, hands on hips.

'Fine!' Sam turned to peer in at the woman in the office. She looked to be in her fifties, with a face full of fake tan and wrinkles. 'Excuse me?' he called, leaning in over the counter—then realized she was still on the phone. She was talking about having an operation or something . . . He drummed his fingers on the countertop, hoping Sara wouldn't finish her form and push off before he could start on his own.

The woman hung up at last. Mopping her shiny brow with a hanky, she turned to him with an apologetic smile. 'Sorry to leave you waiting, lovey.'

'No problem!' Sam gave her his most winning smile—Sara needed to see he was a nice guy. 'Not your fault you're left to run things single-handed, is it?'

The receptionist pursed her lips and he heard a sharp intake of breath from Sara. She was giving him a look of pure horror.

Bemused, Sam tried to back-pedal. 'Not that you couldn't cope here with one hand tied behind your back, I'm sure.'

Sara groaned, shaking her head at him desperately, while the receptionist gave him a stony look.

'Uh, may I have a new pupil registration form, please, if you have one to hand?' Sam asked meekly. He turned to Sara, who now looked almost amused. *What?* he mouthed.

The receptionist slapped down a piece of paper on the desk and slid it over to him.

'That was quick!' he beamed. 'I have to hand it to you, you . . .'

Uh-oh.

. . . *you only have one hand*, he realized with a sinking feeling. The other was a smooth, pink plastic fake, pressing down on his form.

Great. A *fourth* unexpected thing. He hadn't seen *that* coming. From now on, he decided he would try to expect the unexpected at Freekham High—a modern, progressive, and clearly completely FREAKY school.

Sam shoehorned a sheepish smile between his crimson cheeks. 'Er, sorry to mention . . . hands . . . like that,' he told the receptionist, gingerly pulling the paper away from her falsie fingers. 'Erm, you don't have a pen handy—' he winced—'do you?'

The receptionist produced a chewed biro and passed it to him. Then she stalked off to the other side of her little office.

Sam closed his eyes. 'Ouch. How many times did I say "hand" in the last sixty seconds?'

'Too many to count on her plastic fingers, anyway.' Sara burst out into slightly horsey sniggers. 'OK, I'm convinced. That was too painful to be a put on. You just arrived here.'

'And the first thing I've learned at Freekham

High? Keep your hands to yourself.' He filled in his date of birth on the form first, making sure Sara could see it.

'That really is weird, isn't it,' she murmured.

'So I'm not a lying scumbag?'

'Not a lying one, anyway,' she conceded. But Sam saw her pale blue eyes sparkle as she said it.

Once the questionnaires were filled in, the receptionist gave Sara and Sam a starter's pack—or more accurately, a few bits of card and paper in a dusty plastic bag—and pointed them in the direction of a far distant classroom. By now, neither of them was very surprised to learn they'd been placed in the same form group.

'There's full school assembly each Monday morning,' the receptionist explained to Sara. 'That's where everyone will be by now, but you don't want to be doing with that on your first day. You'll see from your timetable that your first lesson's double Chemistry, in your form room. Just find your way to Mr Penter's lab and wait for everyone to come back from the main hall.'

That was their mission. But it was turning out to be harder than expected.

'Looks like there's a few laboratories,' said Sara, scrutinizing a clumsily folded photocopied plan of the various school buildings. 'All in one block.' At the end of a long, long corridor, they took a right turn which led to the world outside. After a minute panting in the strengthening sunshine, they reached another block, and Sara led the way down a long, roasting corridor paved with gleaming tiles. 'I think it's this way.'

Sara wished it wasn't so hot. Sweat was tickling the roots of her long, thick hair, and her cheeks felt as if they were glowing neon red. But besides the temperature, there was something about Freekham High that left her feeling oddly edgy. Maybe it was something to do with the smell of the place. Like most other schools, there was a definite, almost comforting whiff of disinfectant, chalk dust, and gym shoes about the corridors . . . but Sara was picking up something else too. She felt an air of great age and mustiness about the place, weirdly at odds with its modern appearance.

You're imagining it, she told herself.

'Everything in this welcome pack bangs on about the "exciting autumn term ahead",' Sam grumbled, sorting through the drab contents of his goody bag. 'They're eight months late! They ought to update it for people like us.'

'Maybe they're actually four months early,' Sara suggested, 'and we're the very first to be welcomed to *this* year's exciting autumn term ahead.'

'Maybe,' said Sam, unconvinced.

Sara frowned. 'I was being saracastic. You got that, right?'

'Duh!' Sam retorted, hoping she'd think his blushes were down to the sweltering heat. 'Of course I did.'

'And you know what else?' She paused, angled the photocopy. 'This map is rubbish.'

'Probably out of date. I bet they've changed everything round since September.'

'That's progressive schools for you.' Sara turned the map upside down, hoping it would make more sense.

'Maybe the receptionist gave us a bogus map,' said Sam.

'What, she rustled one up in revenge? In under a minute?'

'Fastest hand in the west?'

'Don't start that again. I thought she seemed nice.'

'Nice?' Sam stared at her, appalled. '*Nice?* Look, receptionists may not be actual teachers, but they're from the same stock. Anyone who would actually choose to work in a school has *issues*. Stands to reason they take their problems out on us.'

'Well, let the taking out commence.' She sighed, and turned up her nose at the faint tang of chemicals. 'I think our new classroom's just down here.'

She led them through an archway into a short, red-bricked passageway that led on to a set of silver double doors. SCIENCE BLOCK had been daubed in futuristic writing on a rocket-shaped sign that hung down from the ceiling.

'Impressive,' said Sam wryly.

But before they could go inside, the doors burst outwards and two boys emerged, struggling to hold a large cardboard box upright between them. One of the kids was broad, blond, and baby-faced, with red, ruddy cheeks. His mate was tall and rangy, hook-nosed and shifty looking. They staggered past, panting with sweaty effort.

'Need any help?' asked Sara.

'No,' snapped the tall boy, quickly. 'Get lost.'

Sam shrugged. 'We did that already.'

The boy just scowled and quickened his step. His baby-faced mate squealed as he was forced to trot along faster.

'Well, he was a real charmer,' said Sara. 'I thought everyone was in assembly?'

Sam shrugged. 'Probably bunking off.'

They went through into the whiffy science block to locate their classroom. Filled with first day nerves and bravado, neither of them gave the boys with the box another thought.

But that would soon change.