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Ouch

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Registration

As the boy fell off his chair for the third time in as many minutes, Sam Innocent laughed and led the class in a ragged round of applause.

'Nice one!' Fido Tennant gave a typically winning smile and paused the camcorder. 'That was a textbook stunt fall, Smithy!'

'Textbook!' Propping himself up on his elbows, Smithy stared around the classroom, seized by sudden inspiration. 'That's it! If I fell over into a big pile of textbooks it would be even funnier!'

As Smithy got busy ransacking a cupboard, Sam saw that his friend Sara Knot looked seriously unimpressed. In many ways the two of them were opposites; her eyes were wide and blue, his were oval and brown. Her nose was straight as a ski slope, his was short and snub. And while Sam could watch someone falling over all day and not get bored, Sara was a good deal

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more sensible. She pursed her red lips, and her long blonde hair flicked around her shoulders as she shook her head wearily.

But they had things in common too. Freaky things. They were both born on February 29th of the same year. They had both started at Freekham High on the same day, just a few weeks ago. And since the two of them had got here, bizarre, peculiar events had started kicking off around the school. It was almost as if the two of them were weird-magnets or something.

'OK,' said Smithy as he gleefully balanced a teetering pile of books beside his chair. His real name was Marcus Smythe, and he was a slightly podgy black guy with close-cropped hair who seemed to find the funny side to everything. He glanced around at his audience and rubbed his hands. 'Here I go again!'

'Doesn't it hurt, chucking yourself on the floor like that?' asked Sara.

'Nope.'

'How come?'

'I've got four older brothers,' Smithy explained. 'Trust me, when your butt's been kicked as many times as mine, you don't feel a thing!'

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'OK, tape's rolling,' Fido reported, blowing a wayward lock of brown hair from his eyes, his flash camcorder trained on Smithy. 'Ready when you are.'

Smithy started rocking casually on his chair, just as he had in the build up to each of his previous falls. Soon he 'accidentally' leant back a bit too far, and launched into his now-familiar routine. His eyes widened. His mouth turned down in dismay. His arms started windmilling as the chair toppled backwards and he fell sprawling into the tower of textbooks. Sam howled with laughter once more.

'Cool!' said Fido, snapping shut the hinged viewfinder screen. 'That cash is as good as ours. Just think, a hundred quid each!'

Sam wiped a tear from his eye and shrugged at Sara's disapproving frown. It seemed like a pretty good way to make money if you asked him. Fido fancied himself a bit of a film director, but before he could make his own movies, he needed some cash—and so had teamed up with Smithy, Freekham's resident stuntman. *The Casey Camcorder Catastrophe* show on cable was offering £200 for funny video clips showing falls, slips,

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crashes, and general mayhem—provided no one taking part was hurt. So not only did you get cash for a smash, you got to be on TV too. A double-result and well worth a few bruises.

'That won't make it on Casey's show,' drawled Memphis Ball from her seat beside Sara. 'It looks too staged.' Memphis was tall and trim and bald as a billiard ball—her mum put it down to her going Buddhist but really she was just a rebel who'd shaved her head for the crack. Sam suspected she preferred watching life to taking part; but as a result, she had views on just about everyone in school – which was helpful to newbies like Sam and Sara.

'What do you mean, staged?' said Smithy indignantly as he scrambled up.

Memphis raised a plucked eyebrow, trained her stunning green eyes on him. 'Well, for a start, why would there be a massive heap of books in the middle of the classroom for you to fall into?'

Fido grimaced. 'She's got a point, Smithy.'

'I guess,' he grumbled, picking up the scattered books. 'Pity. That was a good one.'

'Tell you what,' said Fido, hitting some buttons on the back of the camcorder with easy precision.

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'Let's review the footage, see what we've got so far . . .'

'Penter should be here any minute,' Sara warned them.

'Only if he's feeling better,' Sam pointed out. 'He's been off two days already.'

'I'm hoping he gets worse,' added Smithy.

Monday evening had been Teachers' Social Night, arranged by the Head. A bunch of them had gone out for a meal to help them 'bond' as a team. Sam had hoped that they might all bore each other to death, but the actual outcome had been much messier—twelve out of twenty had come down with food poisoning. So now, while the stricken teachers' toilets were awash with unmentionable horrors, the school was awash with things that were far, far worse—supply staff.

Fido gave a sudden snort of laughter, still staring at his camcorder. 'Look, Smithy! This is you this morning, doing the bike crash on the way to school!'

'Awesome!' Smithy yanked the camcorder off Fido and Sam joined him peering at the viewscreen.

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There was Smithy, cycling along the street quite innocently, looking back over his shoulder at something. But as the camera moved to follow him, it showed he was heading for a gang of older boys loitering at the bottom of the school drive. One of them had more spots than a Dalmatian with measles.

'Isn't that Connor Flint, the Living Zit, and his bully boys?' Sam frowned. 'He's meant to be a bit evil. Taking a chance, weren't you?'

'Shut up and watch, you'll love this bit,' Smithy assured him.

He gasped as Smithy crashed into the middle of Connor's gang, scattering them like skittles before falling off his bike and somersaulting across the driveway.

'Ouch!' Sam winced. 'Impressive work, Smithy.'

'That's not the best bit, *look*!'

As Connor scrambled back to his feet, his trousers ripped wide open. The camera zoomed in to show a grotty pair of blue stripy boxers.

Sam and Smithy roared with laughter.

'Pretty cool, huh?' said Fido, craning his neck to see. 'Flint was *furious*! In front of all those

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people! Serves him right, he picks on so many kids . . .'

Sam kept watching the tape. 'Looks like he's going to pick on you, too!'

Connor was scowling as he turned to find Fido catching his pants on camera. He bunched his fists and started to stride over – and the picture wobbled and blurred as Fido beat a quick retreat.

'Did he catch up with you?' asked Sam.

'Nah,' Smithy said breezily. 'Anyway, he's all mouth, no ripped trousers. Come on, Fido, rewind it to yesterday lunchtime—the stunt in the caretaker's hut.'

Sam stared at them in amazement. 'You got in *there*?'

'Nowhere is safe from the Fido and Smithy faked disaster show!' said Fido as he worked the buttons.

'Especially when the old duffer keeps a key under the mat,' Smithy added.

'You guys are so lame,' sighed Sara. But she came over to see the stunt in any case.

Now the screen showed Smithy in front of a pile of carefully stacked boxes. It looked as if he was searching for something on the floor. But

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suddenly he slipped on something and fell backwards into the boxes, which crashed down around him. And then a red-faced, bald-headed man in blue overalls entered the frame.

'You got caught!' said Sam. 'Red-handed! What happened?'

'Duh,' said Smithy. 'Keep watching and find out!'

The caretaker tried to grab hold of Smithy, but slipped in some spilled washing up liquid and crashed to the floor.

'*Big* ouch!' chortled Smithy.

'Like, how totally clever,' said Sara drily.

Biggins's angry voice sounded thin and tinny through the camcorder's speakers, but there was no mistaking the rudeness of his words.

'You caught him swearing like that on tape!' Sam marvelled.

'That's why we didn't get into trouble,' said Fido sheepishly.

Smithy nodded with a crafty smile. 'I told him that if we got into trouble, we'd produce the tape as evidence.'

Sam couldn't believe his cheek. 'You never!'

He nodded cheerfully. 'Biggins decided he

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didn't want the Head knowing he'd said stuff like that to poor, impressionable pupils like us.'

'So that's two enemies you've made in as many days,' said Sara. 'You guys had better watch your backs.'

Smithy rolled his eyes. 'Lighten up, Knotty.'

'Don't call me Knotty!'

'You heard her,' said Sam. 'Do notty call her Knotty.' He and Smithy burst out into sniggers again.

'I'll just go back to the bike shed stunts at Breather yesterday,' said Fido, not joining in; Sam reckoned he was quite sweet on Sara. 'Those falls you did were pretty convincing, Smithy.'

'I nearly broke my legs, that's why!'

'Well, I reckon every one of these stunts is a money winner,' Sam observed. 'You should do some of them in disguise, Smithy, so you can send in more than one of them—get more money!'

Smithy turned to Sara. 'What d'you say, Knotty? Get your hair cut—I'll sweep it up and make a wig!'

'Or maybe Ruth could donate some of her chest hair,' Sam suggested.

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'I heard that, Innocent.' Ruth 'Ruthless' Cook glowered at him. She was class thug, built like a rhino but with fewer brain cells. 'Want me to pull out your stupid spiky fringe one hair at a time?'

'Quick, Fido, get your tape running,' quipped Smithy. 'That's got to be worth two hundred pounds to *Casey's Camcorder Catastrophes*, right?'

Ruthless rose to her feet—but quickly sat back down as the door swung open and a towering woman in tweed barged inside, her heavy heels clicking on the classroom floor.

'No Penter again!' hissed Sam triumphantly. 'Yes!'

'But is Mrs Janus really much of an improvement?' Sara sighed, as the two of them returned to their places.

'All right, class, settle down,' Mrs Janus snapped in her deep booming voice. 'You're stuck with me again so let's all try to make the most of it.'

In Sam's experience, most supply teachers were weedy pushovers, more concerned with surviving the school day than actually trying

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to take lessons. But Mrs Janus was the exception. Perhaps because her preferred subject was Drama, she was very good at playing the tough nut. Her hair was all piled up on her head like a nest of snakes; her eyes glared from beneath heavy lids plastered in blue eyeshadow; her mouth was a slash of lipstick beneath her outsized nose, and her tweed skirt and jacket barely contained the various bits of her burly body. The rings on her left hand were so big they might have been knuckledusters—certainly you wouldn't want to find out for sure.

'Whatever you're looking at, Dorian, put it down,' she snapped.

Fido winced—probably at the use of his real name. He concealed his camcorder further under the table, but didn't pack it away. He and Smithy were too busy enjoying the show.

Sam had to admire their nerve. He, on the other hand, was keeping quiet today. He'd tried messing with Janus yesterday and she'd stomped on him. He'd received a detention in about six seconds flat, which was very nearly a personal best.

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Janus went on to take the register—but when she called out Marcus Smythe, he could only manage a spluttering chuckle, his eyes glued to the footage. Clearly the bike shed stunt falls were good stuff.

'Right, I've had enough of this,' Janus boomed, striding towards them. 'Whatever the joke is, share it with the class.'

'They . . . uh . . . already offered it to us, miss,' said Sam, trying to buy Fido and Smithy time enough to lose the camcorder. 'We didn't want it.'

But Janus would not be distracted. 'What do you have there, Dorian?'

'Just my camcorder, miss,' said Fido, shutting it up and pushing it into his bag. 'Mr Steen asked me to bring it in today.'

'Oh, did he now?' She reached in and yanked the camcorder straight back out again. From the sound of the tinny voices, it was still playing. Janus stared at the screen for a few moments. Then her beady eyes widened, making her make-up crack.

'Right, you pair of little idiots,' she said, suddenly flustered. 'I'm confiscating this.'

'But, miss, you can't!' Fido protested. He

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unfolded a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. 'Look, a note from Mr Steen to my mum, asking if I can bring it to Social Studies class. It's an emergency – the school one's broken down and I said I'd lend him mine. He needs to tape some workshops today for some visitors this afternoon.'

She crunched up the paper in her fist and dropped it. 'All right—I'll confiscate this tape!' She flipped the camcorder over, looking for the eject button. 'You're here to work, not watch yourselves fooling about!'

'You can't take that tape—it's the only one I've got!' said Fido quickly. 'Without that the camcorder's useless!'

She bore down on him. 'And when exactly *is* your lesson with Mr Steen?' she thundered.

'Next period, miss,' said Smithy, a bit shaken.

'I'll speak to Mr Steen myself at break,' she promised. 'The moment he's finished with it he'll hand it over to *me*.'

She started to pass him back the camcorder—but it slipped from her bejewelled hand. It would have smashed on the polished tile floor if Smithy hadn't dived for it, just managing to

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curl the tips of his fingers around the straps.

He blew a long sigh of relief, and Fido grinned weakly. 'Butterfingers, miss.'

Janus's eyes had narrowed to blue slits. 'I'll be seeing you later, boys,' she hissed. Then she bustled back to her chair, a trail of stale perfume lingering in her wake.

At that moment, the hooter kicked off, warning the school of the start of lesson one. Its soundchip was broken and tricky to fix, and the weird honking noise usually raised a few smiles in class. But right now, no one dared move, watching Janus uncertainly.

'Go on, then, clear off, all of you!' she snapped.

Gratefully, the class complied—with Fido and Smithy leading the pack. Sam fell into step with Sara and Memphis.

'You were right, Sara,' Sam whispered. 'Come back, Penter, all is forgiven.'

Sara puffed out her cheeks. 'What's with her? That little show was just all-out freaky.'

'Yeah, it's weird,' said Memphis thoughtfully. 'I've had Janus before. She's not normally as uptight as that. Maybe she's had a row with her brother.'

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Sam frowned. 'You know her *brother*? *Mr* Janus?'

'Janus is a *Mrs*, dork-brain. Didn't you see the bling on her finger?'

'It's an engagement ring, isn't it?' said Sara.

Memphis nodded. 'And the one next to it is her wedding band.'

'*She* should be banned if you ask me,' Sam grumbled.

'Her maiden name is Bruce,' Memphis went on. 'She used to be an actor, she reckons, Belinda Bruce—but she packed it in when she got married.'

Sam wasn't impressed. 'In other words, she was rubbish and never got anywhere.'

'You can judge for yourself—we've got her for Drama after lunch. Anyway, her brother is *Mr* Bruce, the supply PE teacher.'

'Is he a failed actor too?'

'He's filling in for Mrs Hurst while she's sick. Guess he'll be taking us for Games after breather.'

'Can't wait,' Sara sighed.

'What are the odds of a brother and sister both being supply teachers and both at the same school?' Sam marvelled. 'Reckon they come from a whole family of educational substitutes?'

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'Why not? This *is* Freekham High,' Sara reminded him. 'Where weird stuff goes to happen.'

'Since you two turned up, anyway,' said Memphis, her green eyes sparkling.