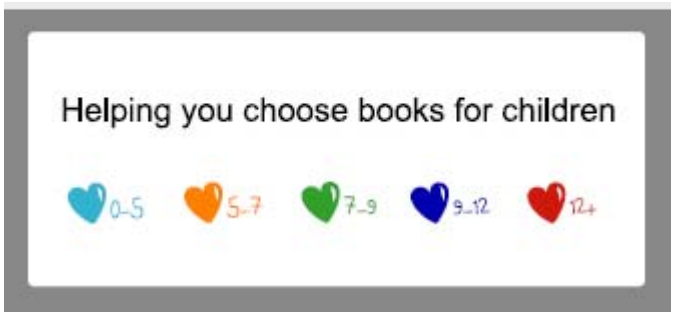
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HS1548MQ_RedMoon 22/03/2006 15:49 Page 1

TALES FROM SCHOOL

HS1548MQ_RedMoon 22/03/2006 15:49 Page 2

Hamish and the Blood-sausage Butcher

Hamish was not like other boys. There were six reasons why.

1. He never played football. 2. His father was a knotty Scot. 3. His mother couldn't cook to save her life. 4. He suffered from asthma. 5. He had no friends. 6. He always handed in his homework on time.

One morning, near the lock-up shops on Paragon Parade, something occurred which confirmed that peculiar things happened to him that didn't happen to everybody.

His route was blocked by metal barriers. Red and white striped tape, marked Do Not Enter Do Not Enter Do Not Enter, stretched between them. The surly woman who ran the launderette was leaning on the metal barrier as though she was waiting to watch a horse race.

'If them bustards won't let an honest citizen open up

her Washeteria, I'm blowed if I'm hanging round here all morning while they make up their minds,' she muttered.

Who were the carrion she was referring to? There wasn't a soul about, though Mr Joel must have already arrived for his metal shutter was unlocked and half up. The bookie, the estate agent's and the DIY never opened before nine.

'*Who* won't make up their minds?'

'It'll be the foreigners again, won't it? Creating trouble for the rest of us who pay our way. So I'm off back to my burrow for the day. And if you take my advice, you'll do the same.'

'I have to go to school,' said Hamish reasonably.

'Suit yourself. But you don't want to get yourself mixed up in their sort of trouble. You should see some of the things those women bring in to wash. What they wear under their big drapes is no mystery to me, I can tell you.' And she waddled away.

Hamish remained resolutely by the barrier. He'd been off school with another respiratory attack yet had, nonetheless, completed his homework. He must hand it in in time for it to be awarded the grades he knew he deserved. Despite his disability he was no dingbat.

If he squeezed round the barrier he could sidle rapidly down the pavement. However, what if the

closure of the thoroughfare was for a sound reason? Gas leak? Unexploded bomb? MP's visit? His life had, so far, been uneventful apart from asthma attacks. He could think of no further excuses for closing off a pedestrian street.

He'd have to go to the bus stop by the alternative route. Go back three blocks, skirt round the park, scary territory ruled by slurred drunks and aggressive ne'er-do-wells (as his father called them). Anticipating the long walk made him reach nervously for his inhaler. He could become breathless from overexertion before he'd even moved a muscle.

A dark-uniformed figure was suddenly crouching beside him. The top half of its face was hidden behind the visor of a helmet. 'Get down! Get back! Get down!'

Having a mouth order you about when you can't see the eyes is spooky. Hamish obeyed. Immediately, a whole team of them leaped out of nowhere. All in riot gear, fatigue pants, big boots, body-protection vests, leather gauntlets, visored helmets. Like a streak of navy-blue lightning, they ran along the pavement to the butcher's.

The leader clicked some quiet commands, then shouted that whoever was hiding inside was to come out. Hamish saw Mr Joel raise his arms. In alarm, or surrender? It was hard to see through the metal shutter.

Mr Joel was a mild, old-fashioned butcher. He prepared all his own sausages, black puddings, chopped-liver-and-herb faggots, pressed muzzle, marinade tripe, chitterlings. Some mornings, Hamish saw him struggle in with the sides of beef, half lambs, bags of pigs' blood for making the blutwurst. Hamish wasn't a vegetarian so he didn't mind. The only item he couldn't bear was the lungs, white and flaccid, reminding him of his own feeble organs. If the butcher spotted Hamish, he would dart out with a gift.

'For you, mein herr! See, such just a tiny smidgeon! To munch on your motorbus! To keep strong your brains.' And he would hold out a sample of that day's speciality sausage on a wooden toothpick. Mr Joel was always pressing. It was impossible to refuse his gift, even though it meant going to school with pork grease leaking through the lining of his blazer pocket.

But today, no free samples. Mr Joel stood, hands up inside his shop while, with a cacophony like clanging bells, the raiders rammed at the front shutter with an instrument like the barrel of a cannon. They dented it but failed to force it up so swarmed under like blue ferrets.

Hamish was squatting by the barrier, stupefied as a dog in a thunderstorm, when the team swaggered out.

Now their visors were pushed back. Hamish saw happy eyes, smiles of satisfaction.

'So. Nothing,' one said with a grin. 'False lead. Ha ha.'

The leader snapped commands into the radio-stick clipped to his helmet. The heavyman lifted the battering ram lightly onto his shoulder like a woodsman bringing home a log for the hearth, and the team trotted off like children playing Down into the Dingly Dell. At the end of the street their transport van nosed round the corner. They scrambled in and were gone. The whole escapade was through in minutes. The grey parade was quiet.

Hamish crept to the butcher's. The shutter hung lopsided. Hamish dipped under.

Mr Joel stood, hands limp, in his wrecked shop, shaking his head. The mirror behind the counter was cracked. Hamish saw his own misaligned reflection and behind it, distorted chaos. The cold-store door at the back swung open. Half sides of pig, sheep, cow, dragged from their hooks in the cool dark, lay like savaged victims on the floor. A stainless-steel trayful of lambs' livers slid along the sloping shelf, clattered to the sawdust. Hamish jumped, too late to avoid the crimson splatter.

'What's going on?' he asked.

The butcher shrugged. 'Indeed, what? Perhaps an erroneous betrayal? One customer is not liking my blood sausage? He tried to spill the beans. He spilled the meat.' Mr Joel smiled at his little joke.

Hamish said, 'Seriously, what were they looking for?'

'Turks. Always searching for the Turks.'

'Why here?'

'How am I knowing this? Nobody is knowing the names of the sans-papiers. They work like slaves in Germany, these poor lonesome men speaking no German, then hope it is better here. The authorities like to poke the thumb at me because I speak German and make good blutwurst.'

Mr Joel's use of English could be as unusual as Hamish's mother's. Sometimes, when Anne-Marie came with Hamish to buy a slice of black pudding, she would unconsciously break into Alsace dialect with Mr Joel, leaving Hamish bemused.

'The authorities think I store Turkish delights here! Can they not see that I have no free spaces in my cold-store for men-meat? I have space only for animal-flesh. And what is all this doing for my business?'

'But Mr Joel, they'll pay you? For the damage?'

'Reparations! For broken hinges and much lost flesh. So what compensation for lost customers?' He picked up a cloth and made as if to wipe a shelf but

instead wiped his forehead. Then, from a glass jar which had not been shattered, he fished out a gherkin, brown and warty as a toad. He presented it to Hamish.

'For you. For your friendly face in time of despair. Youth is the hope for the future.'

With the minty taste of toothpaste still in his mouth, mingling now with the acid of shock, Hamish couldn't even pretend to eat the gherkin. 'Bit early for a snack. I'll save it for later. Thank you.'

'Bitte schön.'

Hamish picked up a paper napkin from the pile which used to sit neatly beside the gherkin jar but now lay scattered on the floor. He folded the gherkin into it and slid it into his pocket to join the slice of blutwurst from last week.

Mr Joel took a clean apron from a plastic pack and tied it on. 'So off you canter now, young man, to your teachers to become wise and save the sad world for me.'

Hamish hurried to his bus stop with a thundering heart. He stood in the queue. As the crowded bus approached, he realized that his white shirt and grey trousers were splattered with crimson as though he had been involved in a violent stabbing incident. Nobody drew attention to the blood-stains. They were scrabbling to maintain their places in the surge to

board the bus. Hamish stepped back, buttoned his blazer as if to keep out the cold, turned and walked home to change. He took the long way so he wouldn't have to pass Paragon Parade again.

HS1548MQ_RedMoon 22/03/2006 15:49 Page 11

Ms Florence's Demographic Elucidation

He eventually reached school in time for mid-morning break. He had missed the deadline for handing in workbooks. So he took them round to the staffroom. A stranger answered his tap on the door and knew nothing of Hamish's special disability exemptions. Hamish tried to force his tip-top homework through the open crack. The supply teacher refused to accept it.

'Do you know what time it is?' said the temporary. 'Unorthodox delivery no longer viable. You'll have to put it in the relevant teacher's pigeonhole for Monday.'

'But that's not fair. It has to be in by today or it won't get marked. I've been off sick.'

'Tough. So's half the staff. That's why I'm here.'

'I was caught in a police raid.'

'That's your lookout.'

Hamish was moody for the rest of the day. Was it the fault of the Turks? And if so, who were they?

The first lesson after break was Geography. It wasn't about foreign countries. It was about demography.

'Individuals with bright, enquiring minds will always want to know where their roots lie,' said Ms Florence who wore a pink rabbits'-wool sweater which made her appear softer than she was.

Hamish felt no attachment to anywhere, least of all to Scotland, which he recalled as damp and full of midges even though Douglas, his father, spoke of Scotland as if it were a paradise. Did enthusiasm for one's roots develop only as one grew up? If Hamish belonged anywhere, he supposed it was to London even though neither of his parents was from here.

Ms Florence's teaching method was inflexible. The class was supposed to take down in note-form everything she said.

'Pay attention, everybody. There's a lot to get through,' she began each class, wasting little time on chatty civilities such as Good morning, isn't it a lovely day?

London, as it used to be, does not exist any more. It has grown so large it has become a distorted fusion of a place which has to be called Greater London. The number of people living in this Greater London is seven million, two hundred and eighty-five thousand, and rising. Each year another twenty thousand,

according to statistics, arrive, and quite a few more than that join the hurly-burly unofficially and so avoiding the bureaucratic head-count. (Ms Florence did not know how many and seemed irritated with Hamish for asking. 'If you keep on interrupting we're never going to get to the end before the buzzer,' she said. 'You can all ask your questions when I've finished giving you the data.')

The density of people is four thousand four hundred per square mile. (Hamish experienced this concentration of humanity morning and evening when getting on the bus, and also in the school dinner-line. Burly boys who did kick-boxing instead of homework and didn't have breathing problems elbowed him out of the way.) Greater London consists of thirty-three boroughs. In some boroughs, ethnic minority communities currently account for over one-third of the population. This figure is rising. Too many people are trying to live in too small an area of land, a remorseless drift from rural to urban which is not restricted to Great Britain.

Hamish listened and scribbled facts till his fingers ached. He planned how to complete the demography homework assignment in a way that would please Ms Florence. He would bring in a comparison between the high population density, at four thousand four

hundred people per square mile, of Great Britain, with the lower density of another European country, say France, at two hundred and eighty five persons per square mile. Except of course the French would be measuring in square kilometres.

Hamish always completed his homework, even when sick. Indeed, being a sickly person enabled him to pay greater attention to writing up notes into meaningful sentences than the average school-attender. He always got good marks. Was that why nobody liked him?

Those people who cannot be contained within Greater London, Ms Florence continued, inhabit the adjoining regions known as the Home Counties. Middlesex, Surrey, Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. (Hamish reflected how 'Home Counties' made them sound cosy and reliable. He suspected that, like Ms Florence's fluffy sweater, this impression was false and that unhomely things could occur there as easily as anywhere.)

From Ms Florence, Hamish learned that there are fewer ethnic minority groups in the Home Counties than in Greater London, except around the Kentish ports of Dover and Folkestone where they arrive, hidden in container lorries or clinging to the undersides of trains. They disperse, unnoticed, towards

the overcrowded conurbations. In the coming decade, the population increase of Great Britain would be caused not by a rise in live births but by the unstoppable flood of economic immigrants.

Hamish raised his hand. 'Miss!' he said. 'Please, miss.' The incident of the search for Turks in the cold-store, even though none had been found, suddenly made sense. And it was relevant to the topic. He wanted to share the information with the rest of the class. But Ms Florence did not like being interrupted.

'Not now, Hamish. Afterwards,' she said.

Several people sniggered.

HS1548MQ_RedMoon 22/03/2006 15:49 Page 16

Family Tree

Hamish knew little about Anne-Marie's roots beyond that she spoke four languages and came from a village that used to be part of Germany, then turned into France, then back to Germany, then back to France. Her grandparents had originated from opposite sides of a changing national border.

'Sounds a messy carfuffle,' Hamish said. 'How can one country become another? It doesn't make sense.'

'Ah, 'Amish.' The H always fell off the front of his name when his mother said it. 'I can't hexplain now.' She repositioned the dropped Hs into other words. 'When you learn some more 'istory you will hunderstand.'

Hamish knew more about his father's roots, for Douglas liked to reminisce about isles and lochs, castles and crofts, kilts and customs. To be born north of the border made a man more wholesome than to be born anywhere else. A Scot was stronger, more honourable,

more adaptable, and more eident, which meant diligent and industrious and was one of Douglas's favourite virtues. Scotland had produced the world's greatest engineers, sailors, rugby players, inventors. Hamish supposed that it was due to being the son of an eident Scot that he always got his homework done. Scots were also lyrical in spirit, had poetry in their souls. (Hamish did not think he'd inherited this trait.)

'The finest writers of the last three centuries have all been Scots. A ballad sung by a Scottish baritone at dusk overlooking the water is one of the most stirring sounds of all time.'

Hamish found his father's enthusiasm perplexing. 'If Scotland's nirvana, why do we live here and not back there?'

'We Scots,' said Douglas, 'are braw roamers, travellers, explorers. Think of Robert Louis Stevenson, all the way to the South Sea Isles he went.'

While Douglas delivered his discourse on Caledonian wonders, Anne-Marie bent her head lower over her book. She didn't take sides.

Douglas said, 'Where the English are concerned, the Scots and the French have always been close partners. On account of the Auld Alliance.'

'What?'

Douglas was fykie over correct speech. 'Wot, wot,

wot! If you followed your own path, I dare say you would soon be footering with innit and wassit too? A crude tongue denies language its full flowering. I take your question to be, What is the Auld Alliance?'

Hamish wished he hadn't asked. Douglas's explanation was long-winded, yet eager, as though the Franco-Scottish coalition against their common enemy had happened last week rather than seven hundred years ago.

Why did Hamish so distrust his father's nationalist tendencies? One was supposed to honour one's father, perhaps even love him. Why couldn't he feel mildly fond of him?

Hamish probably loved Anne-Marie, though he couldn't be sure. Even the heir to the throne of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland admitted on telly that he didn't know what love was. And Hamish had nothing to compare his feeling for Anne-Marie with. No brothers or sisters, no pets because of the breathing problem. There was Heather, the grandmother, in her croft beside the loch. But you can't feel affection for someone you've only visited twice.

'Maman,' he asked Anne-Marie. 'Am I adopted?'

'Don't be so foolish, 'Amish!' she said.

'Really?'

' 'Eavens above. *I* was the one 'oo push you out. *I* am the woman 'oo know.'

'Okay. Just wondered, that's all.' He closed the topic before she talked childbirth. They'd already done that stuff in PSHE.

He hungered for the future time when he would get away. But how was it ever going to be possible when he relied on Anne-Marie each time he had one of his attacks? No one else would be able to judge it right, that fine line between calmly administering the drug and hoping the crisis would pass, and knowing when to dial for the paramedics to rush in and shove the oxygen tubes up his nostrils.

'Maman?'

She glanced up from her book. 'Yes, 'Amish my dear.'

'Can asthmatics become explorers?' If Robert Louis Stevenson could reach the South Sea Islands despite tuberculosis, was there a chance that Hamish and his asthma could move away from London and its high population density?

' 'Amish! Hall sees funny questions! What 'as got hinto you now?'

Natural restlessness and the desire to be apart from their family comes to everyone as they start to realize that the world is broader than they'd assumed when they first viewed the four sides of their cots.

★ ★ ★

Some evenings, Douglas had to work later than others. To Hamish this was a relief, a time of respite. One evening, when Douglas still wasn't home by eight o'clock, Hamish put a pizza in the microwave. After six minutes, he took it out. He sliced it in half, put each of the halves on to a plate, gave one to Anne-Marie who went on writing notes in the margin of her book, and ate the other himself while he checked his school time-table for the following day. Then he said goodnight, kissing Anne-Marie on both cheeks as he always did. She returned the double-cheek kiss, which he found less extraordinary than the way she pronounced certain words. He went along the corridor to his room. He closed his bedroom door.

He got out his collection of flags of the nations. There was not a lot he could do with them, his room being too small to display more than six at a time. He could probably rearrange them into some special order in the box, say alphabetical, or in order of the chronological date in which each country had gained its independence from the colonial power. It had never been his idea to collect flags. It was the hospital occupational therapist who had suggested to Anne-Marie that Hamish needed an absorbing home hobby since he could not get involved in vigorous sport.

Hamish considered how, when he eventually managed to leave home, which would not happen till he went to university, he would leave behind the flag collection.

When he heard the rap at the front door, he switched out the light and lay down for sleep without questioning why Douglas would not let himself in with his own front-door key.

Douglas had not come home. The fervent Scot deserted the family before Hamish had his own chance to, and in a far from pleasant manner. The stushie at the station in the rush-hour was the start of many adjustments to Hamish's home life.