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opening extract from

Girls Out Late

written by

Jacqueline Wilson

illustrated by

Nick Sharratt

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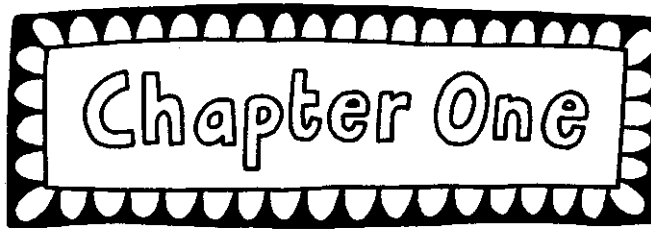
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Chapter One



Girl Time



We're going out tonight, Nadine and Magda and me. It's not a Big Night Out. We're certainly not going to stay out late. We're just going on this little after-school shopping trip. No big deal at all. We'll meet at half past six at the Flowerfields Centre. Wander round the shops on their late night. We'll eat in McDonald's, then home by nine like good girls.

I don't bother to dress up or anything. I change out of my school uniform, obviously, but just into my black baggy trousers. They've been in the washing-machine one spin too many times so that they're now technically not black at all, more a murky grey. Still, they're just about the only trousers in the whole world that are big without making me look enormous. They almost give the illusion that there's a weeny little bum and long lean legs hiding under all that bunchy material.

I try my newest stripy pink top but I'm not too sure about it now. It's a little too bright to be becoming. It makes my own cheeks glow positively peony. I wish I looked deathly pale and ethereal like my best friend Nadine. I'm stuck with permanently rosy cheeks – and *dimples*.

I search the airing cupboard for something dark and plain and end up purloining a dark grey V-necked school sweater belonging to my little brother, Eggs. It fits a little too snugly. I peer long and hard in my mirror, worrying about the prominence of my chest. No matter how I hunch up it still sticks out alarmingly. I'm not like my other best friend, Magda, who deliberately tightens the straps of her Wonderbra until she can practically rest her chin on her chest. My own bras seem to be a bit too revealing. I try tucking a tissue in each cup so that I am not outlined too outrageously.

Then I attack my hair with a bristle brush, trying to tame it into submission. It's as if my entire body is trying to get out of control. My hair is the wildest of all. It's longish but so tightly curly it grows up and out as well as down. Nadine is so lucky. Her long liquorice-black hair falls straight past her shoulders, no kinks at all. Magda's hair looks incredible too, very short and stylish and bright red (dyed). It looks really great on her but if my hair was that short it would emphasize my chubby cheeks. Anyway, with my bright pink face I'd be mad to dye my hair scarlet. Not that my stepmum Anna would let me. She even gets a bit fussed when I use henna shampoo, for God's sake.

Anna eyes me now as I clatter into the kitchen to

beg for some spare cash. Eggs is sitting at the table playing with the hands of my old alarm clock, muttering, 'Four o'clock, telly time, fun. Five o'clock, more telly time, fun fun. Six o'clock, teatime, yum yum.'

'That's my alarm clock,' I say indignantly.

'But it's been broken for ages, Ellie. I thought it might help him learn the time. Do the big hand thing, Eggs,' says Anna.

'Honestly, it's embarrassing having such a moron for a brother. And he was the one who broke it, fiddling around with the hands.'

'Twelve o'clock, midnight, big sister turns into a pumpkin!' says Eggs and shrieks with laughter.

'Are you off out, Ellie?'

'I'm just meeting Nadine and Magda to go late-night shopping.'

'Seven o'clock, bathtime, splashy splashy. Eight o'clock, bedtime, yuck yuck.'

'What about your homework?'

'I did it when I came home from school.'

'No you didn't.'

'I did, honestly.'

'You were watching television.'

'I did it *while* I was watching television.'

I don't usually watch kids' TV but there's this new art programme that has some amazingly cool ideas. I'm going to be a graphic artist when I grow up. I'm definitely not going to the Art College where my dad lectures though. I'm certainly not cut out to be one of his adoring students. It's weird to think that Anna was once. And my mum. She died when I was

little but I still miss her a lot. Eggs isn't my whole brother, he's just a half.

'Thief!' Eggs suddenly screams, pointing at me. 'That's my school jumper, take it *off*!'

'I'm just borrowing it for the evening.'

He doesn't even like this school jumper. Anna has to sweet-talk him into it every morning. He prefers the weird, wacky, rainbow-coloured concoctions that Anna knits for him. When he was going through his Teletubby phase he had four – purple, green, yellow and red – so he could be Tinky Winky, Dipsy, La La or Po as the mood took him. Today Eggs is wearing his magenta Barney-the-Dinosaur jumper. I am immensely glad I am way past the stage of Anna making me natty knitted jumpers.

'But you'll muck it up,' Eggs wails.

'*I'll* muck it up?'

Eggs is such a slurpy, splashy eater his clothes are permanently splattered orange (baked beans), yellow (egg yolk) and purple (Ribena). I examined his sweater for spots and stains very carefully indeed before putting it on.

'You'll make it smell.'

'I won't! How dare you! I don't smell.'

'You do, you do, doesn't she, Mum?' says Eggs.

'I *don't*,' I say, but I'm starting to get panicky. I don't really smell, do I? Has my deodorant stopped working? Oh God, does everyone back away from me with wary expressions and pinched nostrils and I just haven't noticed?

'Ellie doesn't smell,' says Anna.

'She does, of that yucky powdery sweet scenty

stuff. I don't want my school sweater ponging like a girl,' Egg insists, tugging at the jumper. I swat his hands away as best I can.

'Stop him, Anna, he'll rip it!'

'Yes, give over, Eggs. Though it is *his* sweater. Honestly, for years and years you wore your dad's extra large T-shirts that came way past your knees. Now you want to wear Eggs's teeny weeny little sweaters. When are you going to wear anything that fits?'

I don't ever borrow Anna's clothes. We have a very different style, even though she's only fourteen years older than me. And we're a very different shape too. She's skinny, I'm not. But I've decided I'm not going to let that bug me any more. I went on a seriously intense diet last term and started to get obsessed about my weight. But now I'm getting back to normal.

To prove it I eat a toasted cheese sandwich with Anna and Eggs even though I'll be munching at McDonald's later.

'What time shall I get Dad to come and pick you up?' says Anna.

'I don't need Dad to pick me up, I'll get the bus back.'

'Are you sure? I don't like the idea of you coming back on your own when it's getting dark.'

'I won't *be* on my own. I'll be with Nadine all the way on the bus, and as far as Park Hill Road.'

'Tell you what, you travel back to Nadine's house and give us a ring when you get back there. Then Dad can drive round and give you a lift, OK?'

'OK, OK.'

I smile at Anna and she smiles back as we acknowl-

edge our compromise. We never used to get on, but it's weird, now we're kind of friends.

'It's not OK. Tell her to give me back my school jumper, Mum!' Eggs yells, kicking at me.

I will never be friends with Eggs. He's still wearing his school lace-ups and he's really hurting my shins. I might be wearing combat trousers but they're totally ineffective against weapons of war.

'Don't get me all hot and bothered, Eggs, or I might have to go and spray myself with perfume to cool down,' I say. 'I *might* accidentally dowse your dopey old sweater.'

'No, no, no! Don't you dare!'

'Stop teasing him, Ellie,' says Anna, sighing. She's digging in her handbag. 'How much pocket money have you got left?'

'Absolutely zilch. In fact I owe Magda, she paid for me to go swimming last Sunday.'

'And you already owe me for that pair of tights from Sock Shop.'

'Oh God, yes. Help, I'm bound for the debtors' prison.'

'Can't you kind of – budget?' says Anna, unzipping her purse.

'I try, but Dad's such a meany. Magda gets twice what I get for her allowance.'

'Don't start, Ellie.'

'But it's not fair.'

'*Life* isn't fair.'

I'll say. Still, the minute I'm fourteen, I'm all set to get *some* kind of paid work – you name it, I'll do it – then I'll be able to keep up with Magda and Nadine. Well, halfway up.