Opening extract from

Fat Boy Swim

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Chapter 1
Fat Boy Fat

'Oi, boobsy. Move your fat butt! We're under pressure here.'

One rasp from Maddo McCormack in goals was enough to set Jimmy stumbling up the pitch, as though someone had given him a wedgie up the backside.

He only shuffled half a dozen steps, each one making his thick flesh judder. The impact of his foot hitting the ground had him wheezing like an old accordion.

It was hopeless. Pointless. Jimmy halted. Leaned forward, hands on knees.

Gasping.

Knackered.

Somewhere to his left he could hear the flat clack of hockey sticks as the girls played their interschool final. Voices rose through the heat and drifted across

to the field where Jimmy panted.

Summer sounds.

He hated them.

This summer was off to a bad start. For Jimmy anyway.

Unlike most years it hadn't crept in: one wee glimpse of sun in April, followed by three weeks of rain and back on with the winter clothes, bit of snow in May, then a disappointing June.

First of May this year, a furnace-blast of sunshine had scorched the west of Scotland. Day after day after day of stifling heat. Night after sleepless stuffy night. Even the ice-cream vans struggled to chime through the thick air.

After two months of weather like this, Jimmy felt he was suffocating under his own sticky weight. Made worse because it was serious school sports season. No getting out of it.

At least today's match was the pay-off for eight weeks of peace.

Blow the whistle, Jimmy willed Hamblin, the ref. It had to be full-time, otherwise he'd never have been forced from the sanctuary of the subs' bench. Although

St Jude's insisted that every pupil had a stint on the field, it was unspoken policy that Jimmy Kelly was only played in the dying moments of a game, and only then if St Jude's were winning.

They'd been 2-1 up when Jimmy went on.

Blow the whistle. Jimmy panted, lungs struggling to inhale enough air to let him straighten up, let alone move.

'Jimmy!'

'Jimmy!! **J-i-i-i-m-m-y!!!**'

His name came hurtling towards him, screeched at maximum volume. A primitive chant. Carrying the threat – no, the *promise* – that he'd be ripped apart if he didn't snap to it.

He had to look up. Wasn't going to get away with playing the invisible hulk.

'Never mind them, moron. Get your eye on that ball! Kick it back up the pitch, Kelly. It's at your feet, man!'

GI Joe was level with Jimmy on the sideline, eyeballing him. His proximity didn't make him lower his voice any. He bawled as though his lungs would burst.

'Come on, big man. Chase that ball. Boot it up the

field. He's on your back. Aaach!!! What you playing at?'

Jimmy's head went down. But that didn't matter. He could see what GI Joe was doing without looking. Swinging his whole body round from left to right in utter despair. Like he always did when he tried to get Jimmy to shift. Shaking his head in dismay was never enough. Every bit of him had to join in.

Jimmy knew GI Joe's face would be beetroot, wriggly veins bulging from his temples under the line where his bristly crewcut began. His forehead would throb visibly from the effort of screeching down the field at Jimmy.

Later, when GI Joe tried to speak at normal pitch, his voice would crack. If you didn't know what kind of bloke Coach was you might think he'd been bubbling.

Jimmy knew – again without having to look up – that even the charitable guys in defence were throwing him daggers over their shoulders as the play moved off up the field. Muttering curses under their breath. Wanting Jimmy taken off once and for all.

Others were more straightforward with their objections.

'What's the balloon up to? Ball right at him and he lets it past.'

'Blinkin' liability. Shouldnae let him on full stop.'

'Whales canny play fitba'.'

Jimmy stopped moving.

Might as well have been a universe away, the lot of them. He'd never catch up.

'Kick it back up. **NAW.** Up the way! **UP** the way!'

They were all at it now.

A dozen voices. Subs on the bench leaping up and down behind GI Joe. The rest of his side charging towards him. Circling like vultures.

'Here, Kelly.'

'Here, big man.'

'Straight back up to me. **Hurry.**'

Flustered, Jimmy could barely tell one team from the other, the oppo just clones of his own side clad in different jerseys. All he knew was sweat on hungry faces, saliva stringing from open mouths as two thundering teams descended on him.

Nightmare.

'KICK IT NOW KELLY!'

Even Jimmy couldn't ignore that voice scaling two octaves in his ear, or the clasped entreaty of GI Joe's Cumberland sausage fingers under his nostrils. He'd have to make contact with that football. After all, it was sauntering almost casually in his direction as though it was out for a wee stroll on the pitch.

All Jimmy had to do was . . .

He gulped. Straightened up, searching the panting faces in the closing semicircle before him.

There was Victor.

Star player.

Captain.

He'd aim for Victor.

Jimmy drew back his left foot, approximated a kick and – *oof* – was felled like an oak. His own defence had surged as one to tackle the nifty mover from the opposition who had sussed it would be tomorrow before Jimmy's boot touched that football. But it was too late. A superb slide kick shunted the ball just enough towards Maddo's goal mouth where the opposition striker was poised.

BAM.

On side.

'Game over. Good effort lads. 'Way and congratulate the oppo now.'

Hamblin, ref duties over, spat his whistle at Jimmy. Almost reluctantly, he peeled back the scrum champing menacingly over the clammy flesh-mound lying winded on the grass.

Extending his long arms, Hamblin corralled the mob away, steering it towards the middle of the pitch. Beyond lynching distance of Jimmy.

Not once, however, did Hamblin check any of the insults his pupils hurled like clods over his shoulders in Jimmy's direction. Not even when Victor jooked round him and crowed, ***'Fat Boy Fat'***, to an accompanying volley of gobs and laughter.

Hamblin was too busy scowling at Jimmy himself.

'Bloody cup lost on aggregate. Useless butterball shouldnae be allowed anywhere near a pitch.'

Chapter 2
Changing room

Jimmy waited behind on the pitch, wishing the grass could swallow him up, even for a while. Flat on his back, he stared at the blue, blue sky until he felt recovered enough to examine the mucky trench Victor Swift's stud had gouged in his shin after the final tackle.

That's for starters, fatso.

Best wait a bit.

Let the others get changed.

After all, he wouldn't be missed.

The PE block felt deserted as Jimmy entered. He allowed himself to relax a little.

Could have been worse, thought Jimmy. If it hadn't

been a Friday afternoon, Hamblin might have been tempted to repeat last year's humiliation. Forcing Jimmy into the showers. Trying to compensate the rest of the team after Jimmy's crucial own goal.

'Everyone will sit quietly on the benches – *quietly,* I said, McCormack – until Kelly has showered and dressed. You'll all be dismissed when he's nice and clean for his mammy.'

A year on Jimmy still squirmed at the recollection. Having to shower naked. Whole team watching. Hearing their snorts and laughter over the running water. Maddo blowing up his cheeks. Victor slapping them flat with great farting noises that sent the other lads into hysterics.

'Sir, Kelly needs all they showers on. He's only wettin' one of his bum cheeks.'

'You missed a bit you canny see, fatso . . .'

'I didnae know you got red-haired whales . . .'

'Ah can see Kelly's tinky-winky . . .'

'Sir, this is putting me aff ma dinner . . .'

After the shower, the further indignity of having to towel off and dress. Then clamber into giant underpants, sweaty fingers fumbling to button the trousers and

failing to so. Jimmy feeling the mass of his belly mash against the material.

Sticky.

Clumsy.

Hopeless.

Hamblin had leaned against the door of the changing room, tapping his whistle against his teeth in that annoying way of his. Whenever Jimmy glanced up he was trawling the reactions of the team with his hard blue eyes. Thin smile on his face.

Sorry about today, lads, but this'll cheer you up.

Only when Jimmy was struggling with his shoelaces, all the blood rushing up to his head as he bent over, Maddo poking him in the backside and going *boingggg*, had Hamblin let the others go.

'Show's over lads.'

Anything but that today, decided Jimmy.

And he had timed it well. All that was left of the team was the muck they'd trailed in from the pitch for the cleaners. Clumps of slimy mud with bits of grass sticking

out like sparse hair pockmarked the floor. Empty cans and plastic bottles, none of them upright, littered the benches. Dods of chewing gum stuck to the walls. And then there was the smell. The fug of deodorant catching Jimmy's throat and irritating his chest couldn't mask it. Nor could the tang of the putrid pink carbolic Hamblin insisted the boys lather up with in the showers. Even the sweet echoes of the hair gel the lads used to get their fringes spiked up like the singer from the well-cool band they all liked wasn't camouflage enough.

What was the smell exactly? Earth, and sweat and dirt. A boy smell. A team smell. Shared activity. Belonging.

It was a smell that made Jimmy hungry.

Jimmy heard water running. He picked his way across the muddy floor to the showers. Sighed. One shower had been left on full, its jet angled just so to soak the clothes bundled underneath it. Jimmy's school socks were wedged into the shower drain, blocking it so that several inches of scummy water swirled between Jimmy and the shower tap. In that water, among floating islands of hair-balls and discarded sticking plasters, sailed

the contents of Jimmy's schoolbag: textbooks, jotters, diary. And his shoes. The schoolbag itself dangled upside down from a high window ledge.

He was an expert by now, was Jimmy, at concentrating on the task in hand. That way he didn't allow himself to dwell on reasons *why* things happened. You focused on the moment and when it had passed, you forgot about it. Moved on. Aunt Pol taught him that. Said it worked for her.

Jimmy used this technique today, stepping into the blocked shower still wearing his football boots, and trying – at least – to save the textbooks from more damage. The jotters had already begun to shred in his hands, but luckily they were the ones he'd finished with this year. Mum liked to keep them.

But the books . . .

Jimmy laid them on the benches, wondering if they would dry out. They were for fourth year English. Mrs Hughes had handed them out today for holiday reading: *Look after them, now.*

His blazer was also for fourth year. And fifth. And sixth, gulped Jimmy, holding the dripping garment at

arm's length and turning off the shower. Less than a month old, specially made because of the size. No way would Mum be able to fork out for another.

Jimmy forced himself not to think about these problems. They belonged to the future. For now he had to deal with getting himself and his drenched belongings home. His travel pass, somewhere in his blazer pocket, was pulped beyond recognition.

Awkward in studs, wet bundle leaving a trail behind him, Jimmy began the long walk home. He kept his head down when he passed the staffroom, praying he was invisible.

But he didn't slip past the staffroom unnoticed, although there was only one person left on such a fine Friday afternoon in June.

And GI Joe wasn't a proper teacher anyway.