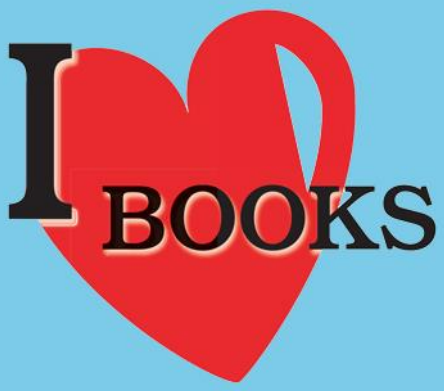


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MONDAY

After tea Frank cycled over to the rec.

'Come straight back,' her dad had said.

In her bag she had a sheaf of posters. They were A4 bits of paper her mum had photocopied at work with a picture of Quintilius Minimus in the middle and the words MISSING CAT at the top. Underneath, in smaller writing, it said: PLEASE CHECK SHEDS AND GARAGES. IF FOUND PHONE … and it listed several phone numbers.

Leaning her bike against the fence, she walked over to the slide and pulled out the first poster. Using a roll of tape, she stuck it up. It fluttered in the evening wind, so she added some more to be extra certain.

'Look at this. A missing little *puddy tat*.'

She turned and her stomach shrivelled.

'F*w*ance*th*ca lost her liddle *puddy tat*?'

It wasn't a friendly question. The person asking it in that teasing hateful baby talk was Neil Noble. He was a year above her at school and hated her. No, that wasn't quite true, was it? He didn't *hate* her. He was *obsessed* with her. He sought her out, found her in



the playground, stumbled across her at lunchtime, followed her as she walked home from school, and she didn't know why.

'You not talking? Not going to answer?' he teased. 'What's wrong? C*at* got your tongue?'

He laughed at his sort-of joke.

The two lads who stood just behind him laughed too.

They always followed him round, this pair, Roy and Rob. They never said much, never started things, just listened, watched, were the audience for Noble's show. If he were to vanish one day, they'd be left standing around not knowing what to do. He was the one that really mattered.





'N-n-no,' Frank stuttered.

She hated herself for that.

The boys laughed, their eyes narrow and flashing.

She never stuttered at home. She never stuttered in class. She never stuttered at all, except at times like this.

Noble took hold of the corner of the poster Frank had just taped up and ripped it from the metal pole. He tore it into little pieces.

'Your *dead* cat,' he said, looking off into the air, 'what's it called?'

Frank knew several things at once.

Firstly, if she *didn't* answer he'd poke and prod with more questions. Maybe he'd start making up stupid names, rude names.

Secondly, if she *did* tell him her cat's name he'd laugh, because cats are usually called normal, boring things like Mouse or Douglas, not magnificent and dignified things like Quintilius Minimus.

And thirdly, her heart was pounding fast and faster in her chest and her

stomach was trembling. She was afraid. Afraid of him, afraid of what he might do next, but also afraid that he was right, that Quintilius Minimus *was* dead. It was a thought she'd tried not to think, but still …

And then, almost without knowing it, she did the worst thing she could have done. She tried to lie: 'He's called …' And for a moment she couldn't think of a name, not a normal cattish name, and the pause dragged on while the boy raised an eyebrow, stroked his chin and stared into her eyes. And then she looked away and said, 'He's called H-H-Hector.'

'Huh-Huh-Hector,' Noble repeated. 'Huh-huh-how puh-puh-posh is that?' He snorted a vile little laugh out of his nose. 'Oh, Hector! Huh-Huh-Hector!' he called, as if summoning the cat home for tea.

His two goons joined in.

'Let's help little F*w*ance*th*ca look for her aristocratic cat. Remember, boys, be polite.'



The three of them tiptoed round the rec, looking between the swings and on the roundabout, behind the benches and in the shadows under the slide, calling out the cat's name.

'Hector! Huh-Huh-Hector!'

Frank just stood there watching, feeling an inch tall on the inside.

If she tried to run for her bike and cycle off, they'd only follow her. She wasn't fast and they had long legs.

'Hector! Oh, Hector!'

'Sir Hector!'

'Lord Hector of Devonshire, where are you?'

Eventually they stopped.

Noble came back over to her.

'It seems he's nowhere to be found, I'm afraid. But, then again, a *dead* cat's hardly likely to shout back, is it?'

'Hang on, Neil,' Rob said.

Roy chuckled.

'What?' Noble asked.

'I fink I've found him, look.'

Despite everything, for a second, for a fraction of a second, Frank felt something like hope.

'Remember who they are, remember where you are,' her stomach said, pulling her back to reality.

Rob was lifting something out of the playground's bin. It was a sticky splitting carrier bag, slopping sideways, full of who knew what old rubbish. Flies buzzed round it and something like a nappy

fell out of it with a slapping thud on to the ground.

'Oh God, Rob,' Roy said, 'that's gross.'

Rob waved the dripping bag at his friend.

A spray of grey bin juice splashed Roy's T-shirt and he yelped, jumped away, flapping and frowning.

Noble laughed. He seemed to enjoy cruelty inside his gang as much as he enjoyed it outside.

'Go on,' he urged, 'get him. Ha ha.'

But then his attention snapped back to Frank.

'Hang on,' he said, his forehead wrinkling as a thought ran across it. 'Isn't your *brother* called Hector?'

'Um, Frank?' said her stomach awkwardly.

As if she could feel any smaller, or worse, or more unhappy, Frank realised that of course he was. Her little brother was only five and in her panic she'd forgotten him entirely. Her mind had gone blank with silence, and yet *his* name had worked its way out on to her tongue.

She said nothing. Looked at the ground. Felt like crying. Didn't.

'Yeah,' Rob said, 'he's mates with our little Sid. Hector was at his burfday party the uvver week.'

Noble stared at her, his thumbs tucked into his belt. She could feel his eyes on her even as she looked away.

'You know what I reckon?' he said after a moment, and with a cold huffing chuckle. 'I reckon she's been lying to us. I reckon there is no cat called Hector and never was. She made it up. Have you been lying to us, F*w*ance*th*ca? Lying to your f*w*iends?'

Frank said nothing. She had turned to clay.

'Eh? Eh?' the boys goaded.

She felt sick.

'Eh? Eh?' they went on.

'Yes,' she heard herself whisper eventually.

'Bad move,' her stomach muttered.

Neil Noble sniggered, and as he sniggered he leant down and snatched up Frank's bag, which had been on the ground between her feet.

He pulled the roll of posters out and handed them to his friends.

'Here you go, boys. She won't be needing these then, after all.'

They began tearing them into little shreds as Noble twirled the bag around his head on its strap.

'Stop it,' Frank said, finally finding a trickle of courage.

'Bad move, yet again,' said her stomach. 'You're really great at this, aren't you?'

'Ooh,' Noble mimicked, his voice all high and wobbly, quite unlike hers. 'T*h*top it, *th*top it!'

And then he let go of her bag.

They both watched as it soared in slow motion across the sky to land with a thud in the deepest, darkest patch of stinging nettles in the whole park.

He held his hands up and made his eyes big with mock worry.

'Oh no, boy*th*,' he squeaked, 'we'd be*th*t go before she get*th* all ang*w*y.'

They laughed and filed out of the rec.

Frank just stood there on the edge of tears, on the edge of a precipice.

She could hear them laughing behind her. But quickly it got quieter and then she couldn't hear them any more.



She wasn't sure how long she'd stood there, but she hadn't cried. Though her eyes had got misty, she hadn't cried. She was getting good at that.

She was looking over at where her bag had landed. She thought about her legs, the shorts she was wearing and the sandals. She could feel a cool breeze tickling her skin. She looked at the dark bed of nettles. She didn't look at the fluttering, curling confetti that the wind was twirling round the rec. She wasn't thinking of Quintilius Minimus. She wasn't really thinking of anything much, except unfairness in general and how much she hated being her.

Then she heard a voice from behind her.

It said her name. 'Francesca?'

'Don't turn around,' her stomach said. 'That way lies trouble.'

She turned around and her heart, which had finally steadied itself, slumped. It was Nicholas Underbridge. He was in her class at school, but he wasn't her friend. He sat at the back by himself. He smelt weird. He was big, not fat, just big, broad, tall. Bigger than

anyone else her age. Taller than anyone else in their class, even taller than Miss Short, their teacher. He had this funny flat face like it was painted on the front of a stone. No one liked him. He had fleas, they said. He'd broken a chair once by sitting down too suddenly. She'd laughed at him when that had happened.

And now, on top of everything else, he was here. Here and sort of smiling at her.



'I saw what happened,' Nicholas said slowly. 'Are you OK?'

His voice sounded like there was a low, dull grumbling engine underneath it.

She felt embarrassed being alone in the rec with him. She worried that someone might see. She worried that someone would assume they were friends. She'd never hear the end of it.

'No,' she said. Then, 'I mean, yes. I'm fine. It was just a bit of fun.'

'It didn't look it.'

He stood in front of her and blocked out the sun.

'It was nothing,' she said, shrugging. 'You know what they're like.'

'Hmm.' Underbridge didn't sound convinced. Not by what she was saying.

'Your bag,' he said, walking over to the edge of the nettles.

She followed him and together they stared at where her bag

had landed. It was metres and metres off, dead in the middle of the dangerous plants.

'It's a pretty bag,' he said.

It was just a bag, she thought. She was upset because it was *her* bag, not because it was pretty. She wasn't even sure a bag could be pretty.

'Do you remember,' Nicholas said slowly, balancing each word in his mouth as if he were thinking of them one at a time, 'that trip we went on to that place where they'd built those old houses?'

She did remember. It was an open-air museum. There were a whole bunch of buildings from way back in the past, from mediaeval times. But she also remembered the coach trip. The whole of her year had been squeezed into one coach and although they were like sardines in there, lots of people sitting three to each pair of chairs, she remembered Nicholas Underbridge on the back seat. He was all alone. No one would sit next to him, even though there was space, even though there was normally a scramble for the back seat. No one had wanted to catch his fleas. They'd said things like, 'I'll be sick if I have to smell *him* all the way.' Things like that.

Had *she* said it? She didn't think so. She'd sat with Jess and Amanda and had been happily squeezed into a window seat.

Nicholas was still talking as he looked at her bag. 'There was this one house that had flints stuck in the wall,' he said. 'Do you remember? Most of them were just round stones, white ones, dusty like, but there was this one that had been cracked open. Its heart

was on display, smooth and shining and just the deep blue, the heart blue, of your bag.'

Frank looked at him sideways. This was too weird.

She'd never had a conversation with him before. Who had? And now he was saying things like this? It was just plain *weird*. Who talked like that?

And before she could answer, not that she knew what to say, Nicholas was no longer standing beside her. He'd surged forward, lumbering his huge feet through the nettles.

Frank's legs prickled; she felt goosebumps shiver across her skin as she watched. Sure, he was wearing boots like a grownup's (thinking about the size of his feet they probably *were* grownups') but he was also wearing shorts. It was a hot day. But he didn't even say 'Ouch'.

He picked her bag up and held it above his head like a racing car driver lifts the trophy when they've won, but when he turned to face Frank his happy grin fell to the ground.

'Oh,' he said.

'Uh oh,' said Frank's stomach.

There was a movement behind her. The gate to the rec creaked. There were footsteps.

'Thought you might still be here,' her most hated voice said. 'Didn't know you were meeting your *boyfriend* though.'

Why couldn't he just leave her alone? What had she ever done to him? Why couldn't she do something to make him stop?