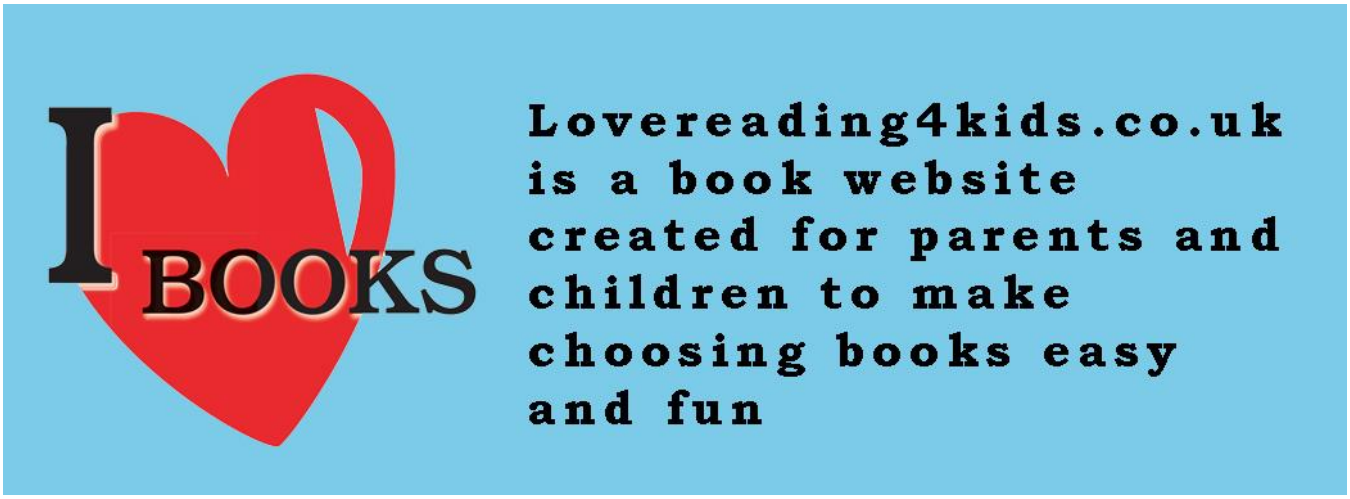


Opening extract from

The Incredible Billy Wild

Written by

Joanna Nadin

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THE INCREDIBLE BILLY WILD

JOANNA NADIN



LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
www.lbkids.co.uk

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Dear Dog,

It was Mum who gave me the name.

"You're incredible," she'd say as she swung me up into the air. "Do you know that? The Incredible Billy Wild."

I don't remember that much about her – I was only four then – but that stuck. Or maybe I just held on to it harder than all the other stuff. Whichever, the older I got, the less I understood why she'd even said it at all, because I wasn't that incredible at anything. I'm fourth slowest at running in our class including the girls. I can't juggle or do somersaults or even keep a football in the air for more than a single kick. And, like Miss Merriott says, my spelling isn't all it could be.

So I started to think maybe I'd imagined it, or maybe The Incredible Billy Wild was another boy entirely. Not me, after all.

That's what I thought, until I found you.

Imagine if I hadn't.

Imagine if I'd not gone to the shed that day. Or imagine if I'd called the police. Or, worst of all, imagine if I'd taken you back like I was supposed to.

I wouldn't be The Incredible Billy Wild. And you wouldn't have a name at all. You'd be just another Good-For-Nowt waiting for the bolt.

Imagine that, Dog.

Sunday March 13th

5.30 p.m.

Dear God,

It was my teacher Miss Merriott's idea. She said for holiday homework we had to write to you.

Seamus Patterson said he didn't believe in God, not the bloke with the white beard in the sky anyway, because that was mental. And Hassan Farooq said he believed in Allah so he couldn't do it either. But Miss Merriott said Allah *was* a god, and all religions had a god, just different versions, and we could make up our own gods if we didn't

have one. The point was to write to them to tell them what we'd done every day, and what we'd like to change in the world, like a sort of prayer and a diary all in one. We could say anything at all because it was private and only she and maybe the god we'd written to would see.

When she said that, everyone went bonkers making up gods with laser eyes and flame-throwing fingers and the power to turn Mrs Johnson the dinner lady into a bat. Except for me. I was too busy thinking of what I wanted, which is:

- A dog. Preferably a Great Dane, because I could probably ride that, or a dachshund because it would fit in my book bag. But if not any old dog will do.
- For Seamus Patterson to disappear. Or maybe even turn into a dog. Although knowing my luck he'd be a mean one that was mainly teeth.
- To be incredible.

The Seamus Patterson bit is because he once stuck a plastic soldier up my nose and still calls me Billy Weird and then does a laughing sound.

The incredible bit is because it's the Brimley's Got Talent show on Easter Monday, which is two weeks today, and loads of my class are going to do it. Manjit Patel's doing keepy-uppy, Julie Gilhoolie's playing recorder and Paris Potts is going to sing "Price Tag" by Jessie J. At home time Miss Merriott asked if I was entering and I thought of my mum then. She used to call me The Incredible Billy Wild, like I was full of talent. Only I don't know what that talent is, and she's dead now so I can't ask her. My brother Tommo, he's the brainy one, even though he's only six. And Johnny's fourteen and annoying, but he also knows all the lines from all the *Star Wars* films and is dead good at skateboarding.

But me? I'm just Billy. So if you could make me a bit incredible at something, that would be immense.

Anyway, I hope all this is OK, talking to you like this. It feels a bit weird if I'm honest, but not totally horrible. Though if Johnny found out he'd probably say I was a little knob. He calls me that a lot, *and* he smokes cigarettes. Other Nan says Johnny's going Off The Rails.

Do you know Johnny? You probably do because you can see all of us – at least that's what we learned in the Sunday school that Other Nan made us go to after Mum died. But in case you don't, he is tallish and thinnish and mainly frowns. His hair is sort of plain brown and not in any style at all, except too long, according to Other Nan, who has told him to get it cut a bazillion times. Tommo has almost no hair because he got nits so Dad shaved it because it was cheaper than the shampoo.

Tommo's mainly into *Star Wars* and swaps. Yesterday he swapped his bobble hat for two mini Mars bars. Dad's going to go bonkers when he finds out, only he can't make Tommo swap

them back, like he did with the door keys and the Transformers sticker, because Tommo's eaten them already.

Dad's going bonkers a lot these days. He was cross with me yesterday afternoon for leaving my bike out, and then he was cross when I did put it away because I slammed the shed door and he says it's going to break soon if I keep doing that. I said the shed's mostly broken anyway but he said, "I'm not blind, Billy. I'll fix it as soon as I get some time when I'm not working or dealing with You Boys which probably won't be until Kingdom Come." I asked when Kingdom might Come and he said not for at least two weeks because he's working extra shifts at the hospital because of the strike.

He's a midwife, which is a person who helps ladies have babies. They look inside them to see if it's time for the baby to come out, and then they say "you're doing well, keep pushing" and things like that. Most people, for instance Other Nan and Seamus Patterson, think it's a weird job for a man

but me and Tommo think it's dead interesting. Tommo is especially interested in things to do with women. He says it's because the house is so full of testosterone, which is a hormone for boys only and makes us smell and get angry. Women have *eestro*-something which does other stuff to do with eggs, which we learned in school, only I'm not too sure about it all because Seamus Patterson was saying "ugggh" loudly in that bit.

Anyway, the midwives and a lot of other nurses are going on strike soon because they're not being paid enough. Only when they go on strike they won't get paid at all, which Dad said is Sod's Law. So he's working all he can now to make up for it, which means Mum's friend Aunty Geena comes to babysit a lot. I like Geena because she's into Lego and lets me draw on her iPad. Johnny hates it when she comes because he says he's not a baby and Tommo mainly sighs because he says even though Aunty Geena is a woman, she is not very good at cleaning or cooking, which means

she does not have the Woman's Touch. Tommo is desperate for our house to have the Woman's Touch because, as he says, how many normal people have to microwave their pants dry because their dad has forgotten to hang the washing out? Dad said we could wear his but we said we'd rather not, thank you.

Tommo got the Woman's Touch thing off Other Nan, who is Mum's mum. But she's only saying it because she doesn't want Us Boys to live with Dad any more. She thinks we should move in with her on the other side of town because she's retired and has nothing to do except Charitable Deeds. Dad says no one is moving anywhere unless it's over his dead body. I don't suppose Other Nan would mind that as she is not madly keen on Dad. She's not keen on a lot of things, for instance fizzy drinks, shaved bits in hairdos and orange tans, but it is mainly Dad who is the problem.

Me and Tommo worked out all the things she doesn't like about him and the top five are:

- He is a midwife, which is woman's work, and also weird because he is only doing it because Mum died and it won't bring her back.
- He wears trainers instead of actual shoes.
- He likes football not rugby.
- His mum, Nice Nan, has an orange face.
- His favourite TV programmes are football; *Storage Wars*, which is where people buy other people's storage cupboards in case there is treasure in them only there usually isn't; *Wheeler Dealers*, which is mostly sweaty men fixing cars; and *The One Show*, because it has a bit of everything.

Other Nan only likes the news, *Songs of Praise*, which is mostly old people all singing about you, and things with David Attenborough in them. She says we're being deprived of a proper childhood because of the bad telly and Dad being at work a lot, which is also why Johnny is going Off The Rails. This

is because her neighbour Mr Norris saw Johnny sitting in the bus shelter with Fergal Patterson, who is Seamus's big brother. They were kicking an empty Fanta bottle and it hit Mr Norris's dog but Johnny didn't say anything not even sorry and Fergal said a really bad swear. So Mr Norris told Other Nan who told Dad who asked Johnny about it.

Johnny said, "I didn't say the f word, so why is it my fault?"

Dad said, "But you didn't stop him saying the f word, or tell him he shouldn't."

And Johnny said, "*You* try telling Fergal not to say the f word. If you want a smack."

Tommo said, "I know the f word." But everyone ignored him.

Dad said, "I don't know why you hang around with that boy in the first place."

Johnny didn't have anything to say to that so he just stormed off to his room and slammed the door, which Tommo said was a definite sign of being Off The Rails.

Anyway, Other Nan's wrong about Dad depriving us of our childhood, because he's let me and Tommo put the pop-up tent up in our bedroom so we can camp tonight. We wanted to put it in the garden but Dad says it's too cold and wet plus it'll only get nicked.

It's not a massive tent, God, in case you were imagining the ones like in the desert or something. It's for two people and it folds down into a circle that is about the size of, say, a sink. Only when it's popped it takes up more space than you would think, because there's not much room to walk around our room now. Plus it springed so hard that it pinged Dad in the face and knocked Tommo's Transformers off the windowsill. Tommo started crying because they're all out of order now and he'll have to arrange them again. But he stopped once Dad told us to get inside and make our beds.

Mine's like a nest. It's got my sleeping bag and a cushion for a pillow, and under the pillow I've got my precious things, which are:

- A cat's eye. Not a real one, one of the ones that glow on the road at night, and which is just a glass marble, really.
- A torch so we can see, and also do Morse Code.
- A ball made completely of elastic bands.
- Mum's second best ring, which had a red stone in it called a garnet, only the stone fell out and got lost so Dad glued in a tiny pasta shell which I felt-tipped red.

It's dead good in here, God. All orange and cosy and glowing. It feels small but safe. Tommo curled up and said it was like being inside a womb, only without all the blood and stuff. Dad said there was no way he could remember that but Tommo said "can too" and Dad didn't argue even though we all know Tommo's lying. And I wished I could remember being inside Mum, but then I thought, *At least I can remember Tommo being in there*, which I told him, which made him

happy. Then Dad went downstairs and we both lay in here for a bit all snuggled sideways, and then Tommo left to have a wee and watch telly so he's gone now. But it still feels warm and womb-like and I feel calm.

Maybe it's because I get to sleep in a tent even if it is inside the house. Or maybe it's because it's the holidays so I won't see Seamus Patterson for two whole weeks. Or maybe it's just that I'm enjoying telling you stuff because now I've said all the thoughts, they don't seem to be swirling round in my head so much.

I have to stop now, though, because Dad just shouted up to say tea's ready, and if I'm late Johnny will steal my Alphabites, which in case you don't know are potatoes shaped like letters of the alphabet and are delicious.

Bye then, God.

PS I just thought of something else. If you've got time, I'd also like some new Nerf darts, and an iPhone and also world peace, because I heard

Paris Potts say she was going to put that and my other things are just for me, which is a bit selfish. Thanks!

8.30 p.m.

It's much later now and Tommo is asleep but I'm not, I'm in the bathroom, pretending to have a wee but actually talking to you, which is sort of a lie only no one has noticed so I don't think it counts.

After tea, Dad said if it's not raining tomorrow we can have a campfire instead of normal lunch because he's off shift, and then maybe we can go up the garden centre to look for a new shed. Only then Tommo said chance would be a fine thing, because Dad is always promising stuff like that and it doesn't often happen. So then Dad stamped out of the kitchen and slammed the door and Johnny called Tommo a bad word, because now Dad won't give Johnny a fiver to go out later.

But the thing is, God, I have faith, which is

when you believe in something even when you know it might not happen or even be real.

A bit like believing in you, I suppose.

Bye again.

PS I'm not sure if it's OK just to say "bye" but "amen" is for the god in church and in my head you're more like Mr Nesbit, who is our headmaster. Only you have better hair and you don't smell of soup.

Monday March 14th

11 a.m.

Dear God,

Tommo was right after all. Big Sue called, who is the boss of Dad's ward, and asked Dad to go back into work. He said yes because of needing the money for a new shed, and because of the strike, and also Tommo has grown out of his school shoes again. But then he called up Aunty Geena on speaker while he did the washing-up and it turns out she's gone to Kettering because her mum's got shingles.

Dad said, "Bloody hell, Geena, when were you going to tell me? You were supposed to be sitting tomorrow as it is."

She said, "Sorry, Danny. It's been hell on legs here. I forgot."

Dad said, "Christ on a bike. *Now* what am I going to do?"

Geena said, "What about your mother-in-law?"

And me and Tommo gasped at that, because Dad's mother-in-law is Other Nan, and even Dad says it's like having a Dalek as a nanny when she babysits. Then we did a sigh of relief because Dad said, "I'd rather stick needles in my eyes."

Geena said, "Fair point. Can't Johnny manage?"

And I said, "No!"

And Tommo said, "No!"

But Dad said, "Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose."

So now Johnny's in charge. Which I'm not too pleased about because it means no campfire. Johnny's not too pleased because of us being

Annoying Little Knobs, but Dad's sorted it so Tommo's going round Sonny Potts's house so it's only me to look after. And he's left out ham for sandwiches and a tenner for fish and chips for tea. Plus he'll let Johnny off the pound for the swear jar for saying knob. Johnny didn't have time to think of an answer because then Dad's friend Karol, who's actually a man, which Tommo thinks is even funnier than the boy on YouTube who can burp *Chopsticks*, was honking his silver Nissan Micra outside, so Dad had to go or he'd miss his lift.

So now I'm stuck at home on the first day of the holidays with no campfire, no shed-buying trip and not even Tommo. Johnny doesn't want to play Lego or any of the other ideas I suggested. He doesn't even want to talk to me. At the moment he's in his room playing music about death loudly, but what if he decides to go Off The Rails today, like Other Nan says? Or what if aliens decide this morning is a good time to land and take over Earth

and they choose our back garden and it's only me and Johnny to defend the planet? Although so far the most interesting things to happen in our part of town are:

- When Mr Lomax found an unexploded bomb in his back garden and the army closed down the road, only it turned out to be an old petrol can.
- When Philip Ratchet who is in the year above Johnny tried to rob Mrs Beasley at the corner shop, only she recognised his balaclava because she'd knitted it and she called his mum and he was in massive trouble for months.
- When Nice Nan won a thousand pounds on the bingo and moved to Spain with Maurice Watson off the Internet. Mrs Beasley said it was inappropriate and Other Nan said it was typical but we thought it was OK because she gave us twenty pounds

each and we're going to stay in Malaga in the summer.

But that was a year ago and nothing exciting has happened since. So it's unlikely that anything will happen today, especially not aliens because they're not real. Tommo says they are but that's only because of *Star Wars* and anyway I Googled it and there's no scientific proof.

So I'm just staying in the tent for now. And if I get bored then I've got you to talk to, God. The more I do it, the more I like talking to you. I might even carry on after this homework's done – after Easter, I mean. If that's all right with you. Miss Merriott's always saying it helps to talk, for instance when I get picked last in PE, or if Seamus Patterson's called me a spanner, or when it's Mother's Day. And I know Miss Merriott means talk to her, or Dad, or even Johnny. But if I do talk to her Seamus Patterson might hear, and I can't talk to Dad because he's too busy, or

Johnny because he'll just call me a knob, so that leaves you.

Bye for now.

4 p.m.

Dear God,

Something happened. Which maybe you already know. But in case not, what actually happened is this:

At about half-eleven, Johnny came in and said he'd got a text from Leia (who is his girlfriend and is half from Poland and also a goth). She wanted to meet him down the skate park so I had to go too, but could I not hang around him the whole time and make him look like a knob. I said fine but could I have a snack first, for instance some cheese on Digestives, which sounds weird but is actually an excellent combination, only Johnny said there wasn't time and he'd get me a Mars on the way. I thought that sounded fair so I got my coat and went to the shed to fetch my bike, which

is when it all started. Because when I got there the door wasn't shut.

I felt sick then, like when you go over a humpback bridge too fast. I knew Johnny hadn't left it open because he keeps his skateboard under his bed with his magazines and cigarettes and other secret stuff. So I knew it must be my fault for slamming the shed door, which had broken after all, and probably my bike had been burgled and the old lawnmower too and that meant I was in Big Trouble. Bigger even than the time me and Tommo left the tap running upstairs when we were playing submarines, only Dad called us down for tea and water came through the ceiling into the fish fingers. Which Tommo said was more realistic for the fish but Dad didn't agree.

Anyway, when I went in the shed, the bike was still there and the lawnmower and the old bin bags of baby clothes that Dad hadn't yet taken down the charity shop. I did an actual noise out loud like I'd been holding my breath and hadn't even known

it, because I was so happy. But then I sucked the breath back in because I saw that the bags were all ripped and the clothes were scattered around and some of them looked like they'd been chewed. And I could see exactly who had chewed them. And I knew then that you'd listened to me. You'd REALLY listened!

Because curled up on the floor, asleep in a nest of old babygrows, with a hat made out of a dinosaur T-shirt and a box of empty bird seed still in its mouth, was a real, live dog.

It wasn't a Great Dane, or even a dachshund. It was a greyhound, which I know because Nice Nan, the one who's in Spain with Maurice off the Internet, used to take us to the dog-racing sometimes. Only this one didn't look so much like those dogs, all shiny and sleek. This one was thin and pale and shivery, and it smelled of old wee like Dead Grandpa used to. If I hadn't seen its thin ribs go up and down with its breaths, I'd have maybe thought it was a ghost of a greyhound come to

haunt us. I was just thinking how amazing a ghost greyhound would be, only not more amazing than a real one, when Johnny shouted, "Come on, Billy! Shift it!"

I had to think really quickly then and the thought I came up with was to shut the door and go back into the house saying "I feel sick". Which I know is a lie but I think it's one of those lies that are for a good cause. Like when Mum used to say "does my bum look big in this?" and Dad would give me a "zip it" look which means be quiet and then he'd say "no way", only her bum did look big.

Johnny said, "Are you serious?" I nodded and clutched my tummy a bit for effect. But then I thought that might make Johnny stay behind or call Dad, and I didn't want either of those things to happen, so I unclutched it and said I probably just needed to eat something or have a poo, which is what Dad says ninety-nine per cent of stomach aches are. Johnny said I should have gone earlier

and he was going to be late now. But I said why didn't he go by himself and if I was actually sick I'd text him so he could get home before Dad. Johnny said OK, but to definitely text him if there was an emergency, and then he was gone. And then it was just me and the shed with the dog in it.

I don't know if you have the same feelings as people, God, or even if other people have the same feelings as me, but it was like the air in the kitchen was crackling with a sort of electricity. And the electricity was called possibility. Because right then I knew that anything could happen.

I waited for the front door to slam, then I ran back to the shed and opened the door gently so as not to wake the dog. But I think the yelling from before must have woken it because it wasn't on the nest any more. It was in the dark bit behind the lawnmower and its legs were trembling. It looked like it had seen a ghost, only this time the ghost was me. I said, "It's OK, it's Billy." But the dog didn't seem to think that was any better than

a ghost because it squished itself even further into the dark. Then I had an idea. I said "wait here" and ran to the fridge to get the ham for lunch.

There were six slices and I took them all, because Johnny says he's being vegetarian because Leia said all meat is murder, even Peperami, and I don't mind just having cheese instead. Then I took them back to the shed and held one out to the dog, but it still didn't want to move. So I crouched down and shuffled on my knees across the floor towards the dog until I was really near and could hear its breathing, which was really fast now, and I held out the ham. This time it snapped it up and nearly snapped my hand too and I panicked and pulled it back. But then I thought maybe the dog was more scared than me, so I said "well done" and, even though my hand was shaky, I held out another piece of ham, only I shuffled back a bit so the dog had to move to get the meat, and it did. And then it moved again until it was right out in the garden with its legs still trembling but with

my hand stroking its neck and six bits of ham in its belly.

Only then I'd run out of plans. The dog didn't have a collar on so there was no name and no number to call, like you're supposed to. Probably what I should have done is just ring the police or the RSPCA or even Mr Collins from Number 42 who has two Shar-Peis called Alf and Rita and knows what to do with dogs.

But I didn't.

Instead I got a babygrow out of one of the bin bags and put it round its neck as a sort of lead and by using that and waggling my hammy fingers I got the dog up the garden path and into the house.

And that's where we are now, God. Still in the house. Or actually, if you want to be factual about it, I'm on my bed and the dog is in the tent. It wanted to go into the downstairs toilet first. And then the larder. I worked out that it liked small spaces, so I showed it the tent and it went straight in and laid down. And in a minute I'm going to lie

down with it. And then when Dad comes home maybe I'll say he can take down the tent now and he'll see the dog inside and his heart will melt and it will be like in a film and the dog will bring everyone together, including Other Nan, even though Dad says her heart's made of flaming stone, which is not actually meltable.

Until then, Johnny is out, and Tommo is with his friend, but I've got someone to play with. I know it's not a person, just a dog, and it can't do Minecraft or Lego or even talk back. But it's still nice to have it around. It's company, which is what Nice Nan says is the best thing about Maurice. That and his ability to win on the horses.

8 p.m.

Dear God,

Something else mad happened.

I was sitting in the tent just looking at the dog thinking it was sort of like a dragon, with its long face, only a delicate one, when the doorbell

went. I had a panic then because what if it was Other Nan, or the police doing random checks for children being at home on their own, which isn't illegal but is inadvisable, according to Tommo who Googled it. And then Dad would be in trouble for doing something inadvisable. But then I thought what if it was someone important, or just Johnny who'd forgotten his keys so I answered it. Only it wasn't the police or Other Nan, or Johnny or someone important, it was Paris Potts with Sonny and Tommo, who had faces painted like a tiger and a butterfly.

She said, "Why didn't your Johnny come to collect Tommo like he was supposed to?"

I could feel my face going red then, because I don't talk to the girls in my class. I don't really talk to anyone. But Paris had her hands on her hips and her eyebrows all up in the air like she was waiting for an answer, so I said, "Something came up." Which isn't even a lie.

But she said, "A likely story."

So I decided to change the subject and asked her why was Tommo a butterfly. She said because he chose it and she couldn't do Chewbacca which was his first choice. Then, and this is the mad bit, God, she walked right into our living room with Tommo and Sonny following after her. Paris Potts from school was in my house! That's the first time anyone from school's been round mine, unless you count when Manjit Patel knocked on our door by mistake because he thought Harvey Monks lived here. Anyway, Tommo was getting upset then because of us being home alone, which was inadvisable, and said he was going to call Dad. But I told him not to because Johnny would be back any minute.

Tommo said, "What if he's not? What if he's gone Off The Rails and is in prison or has run away to America?" Tommo is very keen on America, and on all of us running away there, because of the wide choice of burger varieties. "Then we'll be alone for hours and the police will come," he carried on.

I said, "He hasn't run away. And anyway, we're not alone."

Tommo said, "Yes we are."

And I said, "No we're not."

And he said, "Yes we are."

And Paris said, "Yes you are, Billy Wild, you're all on your own, so stop telling fat ones."

And then I was feeling all hot and twitchy, partly because of Paris being here, and partly like I had this jumping bean inside me or a nugget of fire, and the nugget was the dog and it wanted to come out so I shouted, "No we're not, because God's sent someone to watch over us so the police won't mind."

Tommo's eyes went really wide then, like he'd seen a ghost, or a man swallow a sword like we saw at the circus once. He said, "Is it Nice Nan and Maurice?"

When I said no, he and Paris and Sonny did guessing, for instance Dr Who and Han Solo and everyone off *Coronation Street*. But I said it wasn't

any of them and if I showed them they had to promise to be calm and especially not to shriek, which Sonny does a lot, especially when he's had a lot of Haribo which is most of the time. Paris said it had better be something good after all this dramatic build-up.

I led them upstairs into the bedroom, all tiptoeing and shushing, and then I lifted up the flap of the tent and said "Ta-dah!" Which is when Sonny did a massive shriek, and the dog did a howl and ran out of the tent and down the stairs. The next thing we know there's a massive crash in the living room and then a sound like when Tommo dropped Other Nan's china shepherdess on the patio. Paris said "Omigod" and Tommo said "Uh-oh" and I felt that humpback bridge feeling again.

When we got down to the living room the feeling didn't go away. It turned out the dog had knocked into the sideboard and the photo of Mum and Us Boys on the seesaw in Scarborough had

fallen on to the floor and the glass had smashed. Tommo started crying.

Paris said, "He's probably cut himself. He might bleed out. We'll have to call nine nine nine!" She made Tommo hold out his hands but there was no blood.

Then I knew why he was crying and it wasn't any sort of cut.

"It's not that," I said quietly. "It's because it's the only photo we've got of Us Boys and Mum."

Paris picked up the photo and looked at it. "Is that really you?"

I nodded. "And Johnny."

She shrugged. "Tommo's not even in it."

Which isn't true, because he is actually inside Mum's tummy, but anyway, it made Tommo cry even louder. Which is when Johnny walked in and found us.

And Other Nan was wrong because Johnny swept up the glass and got Tommo a chocolate milk out of the fridge to cheer him up so he hasn't

gone Off The Rails, at least not yet. Only that's when we smelled it.

At first Johnny thought I had farted and said, "Christ, Billy, that is minging." But I said it wasn't me, and Tommo said it wasn't him or Sonny. Paris said it couldn't be her because she's a girl, and Johnny said, "Who even are you?" and she said, "I'm Paris Potts, duh. Anyway, he who smelt it dealt it." Johnny said he hadn't dealt anything that bad, not ever, which is when I realised who had dealt it. I looked under the kitchen table, and there was the dog, and there was something else and all, because it wasn't just fart it had dealt. It was a massive poo.

Johnny didn't know which to be more cross about, the poo or the dog, but he decided the poo was the first thing to be tackled. He went to the shed and got Tommo's Bob the Builder spade, and scooped it up and put it in a plastic bag and put the bag in the bin. Only then we had a pooey spade.

Johnny held it out to me and said, "Your turn."

Which made Paris scream and go, "Omigod, that is the most disgusting thing, like, ever. Just throw the spade away as well."

Only that made Tommo's eyes go all wide and I thought he might start wailing again so, even though she was right about it being disgusting, I got some kitchen roll and some spray and cleaned the spade and the floor.

When all the poo was gone and Tommo said the spade passed the hygiene test, Johnny said, "Right, now do you want to explain why there's a stray dog in the house?"

I felt weird then, God. Because I knew you'd sent the dog, but Johnny doesn't believe in you. He says it's like believing in the tooth fairy, or Father Christmas. But then I remembered what Miss Merriott said about faith – that it's about believing even when other people say you're doolally.

"God sent it," I said. "I asked for it and God sent it so that Dad's heart will melt and he won't be cross all the time any more."

Johnny went quiet then, and stared at me dead hard, and I waited for him to shout, or tell me I'm bonkers. But in the end he just shook his head and said, "You'd have been better off asking God to make Big Sue disappear." Because Big Sue is the one organising the strike, which is making Dad worried, which is making him shouty in the first place.

Then Tommo said, "You said God's not real, though, Johnny, so how could he do that?"

And Sonny said, "Nice one."

But Johnny said, "Whatever." And then, "Shut up."

Tommo said, "No you shut up."

Johnny said, "Don't be a knob."

But Tommo didn't repeat that because of the swear jar.

Instead, Johnny looked at the dog again, and said, "You are so going to be in Big Trouble when Dad gets home."

Tommo said, "YOU'RE so going to be in Big Trouble for being out all day."

Which I agreed with.

But Johnny didn't. He said, "If you DARE tell Dad I was out I will literally kill you."

And Paris said, "Literally? Like with a gun or something?" Because Miss Merriott is always telling us off for saying "literally" when we don't mean it.

But Johnny did mean it. He shouted, "Literally. With my bare hands. All right?"

Only it wasn't all right, because then Tommo started crying about being killed by bare hands, and Paris and Sonny started arguing over whether that was even possible, and I saw that the dog, who we'd sort of forgotten about even though we were arguing over it, had slunk into a corner and was trembling again.

"Ssshhh," I said. And amazingly everyone did *ssshhh*. I went over to the dog, and sat next to it and stroked it and said "ssshhh" to it too. And so did Paris, and so did Sonny and Tommo.

"It's all right," I said. "It'll all be all right, you'll

see." Which I didn't know was true but it's just what you have to say, isn't it?

Then I remembered something. "And anyway," I said. "Dad will be too busy having his heart melted to be cross."

"As long as it doesn't do another poo," said Paris.

"It only did a poo because it was scared," said Tommo. "I saw it on *Dog Rescuers*."

"So we won't shout any more," I said.

Johnny said, "Fine. But if anyone asks, it was your idea."

I said, "Fine."

And Paris said, "Can I come back and see the dog again?"

And I said, "I suppose."

And she said, "Nice one."

Then Johnny walked Paris and Sonny home because it was their teatime, and came back with fish and chips and mushy peas. The dog had some too, only not the peas, which it tried but didn't

like, or the pickled egg, which Johnny said would make its poo smell worse than earlier. Now the dog is back in the tent ready to surprise Dad when he gets back, and me and Tommo are going to bed soon too, only in our own beds because the dog didn't seem keen on us sleeping in the tent.

So mainly I wanted to say thank you. Because I asked for a dog and now I've got one and so Dad's heart is going to melt and he'll stop going bonkers and want to be home with Us Boys all the time. And also, because of the dog, Paris Potts is going to come round mine again. Which I didn't ask for, and I know she's a girl and a bit loud and sometimes annoying, but it's actually a bit incredible.

Night then.