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Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind.

John F. Kennedy, President of the
United States of America 1961–1963

Bombs do not choose – they hit everything.

Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the
Soviet Union 1958–1964

Day One

US PRESIDENT WARNS CUBA: MISSILES COULD LEAD TO WAR

The Daily Times, Tuesday 23
October 1962



1

It was after tea on a school night when I found the dead body. I'd gone out to the shed to fill up the coal bucket, which was as good an excuse as any to escape our kitchen for a moment's peace. Being a Tuesday, we'd had just pie and mash for tea, and being a day with a 'y' in it, my big sister Bev was arguing about why it wasn't her turn to do the dishes. Our terrier Flea, an excellent listener, was waiting patiently for any leftover pie. And all Mum did was turn the radio up louder. It was that new Beatles song again, the one that went '*Love, love me do*', which, with the clatter of plates and smell of mashed potato, was giving me a headache.

Outside, the evening was inky black. The air had a bite of frost to it, and the only sounds were the distant hum of cars, and next door's water gurgling down the drain. I stood for a moment, enjoying how peaceful it was to not hear Bev yakking on, or the radio playing hit song after

hit song because Mum, who hated silence, had barely switched it off since Dad died.

I went down the two steps to the shed and opened the door, only now switching on my torch. I was checking for spiders, mostly, and certainly wasn't expecting anything else to appear in the torchlight. But it did. Something woolly and green. A bobble hat.

I took a tiny step closer. My heart began to thunder.

The hat was on a person's head.

They were lying against the coal heap, facing the far wall. All I could see was the jut of a cheekbone. A coat collar turned up against the cold. A muddy hand that looked more like a freshly dug potato than anything human. The person wasn't moving: they were either very fast asleep . . .

Or dead.

I backed out of the shed faster than any spider could make me move. With the door shut and bolted, I caught my breath. I tried to think. The sensible thing would be to go straight back inside and tell Mum, who'd rush round to our next-door neighbours and ask to use their telephone to call the police.

But I'd never seen a dead body. And I was curious for a look – just quickly, just to be sure – though I was far too scared to go back in the shed by myself. So I did

the unsensible thing: I went across the street to my best friend Ray's. He'd never seen a dead body, either, and I knew he'd be up for it, given half a chance.

*

It took Ray ages to come to the door. I'd started shivering by now – the shock, I supposed, and excitement and the cold, because I'd come out without a coat. My finger hovered over the doorbell. Obviously Ray was in, because the television was on and I could hear his sister's annoying laugh through the glass. I was about to press the bell again, when he opened the door.

'At last!' I cried.

'What's up?' Ray looked a bit put out, as if I was interrupting something.

'You need to come over to mine,' I told him. 'Like, *now*!'

I couldn't say any more when his family were in earshot, but hoped he was getting the message. We lived on World's End Close, which was, without doubt, the dullest place on earth: a cul-de-sac of fourteen pairs of identical square white houses with net curtains at the windows and box-hedged gardens at their fronts. The garden at number two didn't quite count because

no one had cut the grass there since old Mrs Patterson moved out in June. But the point was nothing ever happened round here. So, seeing a dead body might well be the single most exciting *and* terrifying moment of mine and Ray's lives.

Ray glanced down. 'What's with the coal bucket?'

'What? Oh!' I hadn't realised I was still carrying it. 'Never mind that. Can you—'

'Ray?' His mum interrupted from the sitting room. 'If that's Stevie, bring her inside.'

Unlike my family, Ray's used their sitting room every day: from it came the sound of dramatic, thumping music. They were lucky enough to have a television, and I often popped over to watch crime dramas and game shows, and a bit of *Blue Peter*.

'It's starting, Ray!' Mrs Johnson called again.

Ray's eyes flickered towards the sitting room: I'd lost his attention now, I could tell.

'President Kennedy's about to be on,' he said, beckoning me inside.

I hesitated. We had a dead body to inspect. Couldn't the news wait?

But Ray insisted. 'It'll only be a few minutes.'

Defeated, I put down the bucket. A few minutes at Ray's wouldn't make much difference. The body would

still be dead. Yes, my mum would be wondering where the coal was, but the truth was I'd never win over President Kennedy, not in Ray's eyes: I knew better than to even try. Ray's mum was British, and his dad was African American, which meant Ray and his siblings had cousins on the other side of the Atlantic. When people looked at his skin colour and asked nosily if he spoke English, he'd say he was half-American, and proud of it. *So* proud he kept a scrapbook of cuttings from magazines and newspapers, and had written 'Important Americans' on the front.

After the cold of outside, Ray's sitting room felt deliciously warm. The curtains were drawn and the electric fire was on, the plastic logs glowing orange. All the Johnson family were there – Ray's parents, his sister Rachel and elder brother Pete, who did his hair in a rocker's quiff.

'Don't ever call me Elvis,' Pete warned anyone who tried. 'Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, Little Richard – they're the true kings of rock 'n' roll.'

As well as a television set, the Johnsons had a modern swirly brown carpet and a posh brown velvet settee that you weren't allowed to sit on if you were eating. Tonight, Ray's mum and sister had pulled it closer to the television.

'Hi,' I said to them all, ducking behind my fringe. Though I'd known Ray forever, I was still a bit shy around the Johnsons. It took me ages to get used to other people, and in a roomful of them, I tended to shrink into myself.

Pete lifted his chin at me in greeting. Rachel gave a little wave. Mr Johnson, Ray's dad, glanced up from the screen.

'Hey, Stevie, how're you doing? Fleabag not with you?' He loved dogs like I did, and said Flea was always welcome, even after the time she ate the bathroom soap, then sicked it up on the stairs.

'No,' I answered, then whispered to Ray as we squidged on to the settee, 'Promise we'll be quick?'

'It'll be minutes,' he assured me.

I folded my arms in my lap: I could probably sit still for that long.

On the TV, the intro music faded. The newsreader, with his immaculately parted hair and cut-glass accent, wished us all a good evening.

'Coming up, an announcement from the White House: we have a special report from our American correspondent . . .'

It was only now that I began to wonder what this 'special report' was about. Perhaps Mr Kennedy was

sending another American up into space. Or sorting out the business in schools Ray had told me about, where his American cousins couldn't sit in the same classrooms as white kids or use the same toilets or restaurants. It must be important, whatever it was, because Ray's dad had come home early from the American airbase where he worked.

The scene then switched from the studio to America itself, and to a huge white building, flying the country's flag from its roof. A new voice – a woman's – came on air.

'Tension is mounting over Cuba . . .' the reporter said.

There was a brief shot of an island somewhere hot, then men in suits carrying important-looking files, then, at last, the President of the United States of America. He was sitting behind a desk, staring directly at the camera.

'Fellow Americans . . .' Mr Kennedy's square-jawed face filled the screen. Compared to our prime minister, who was old, with a droopy moustache, he looked film-star handsome.

The Cubans, Mr Kennedy told us, were building secret missiles. Russian ships were on their way across the ocean now, loaded with supplies to help make more of these weapons, which would be used

to threaten America. This was why the American navy had blocked the Russian ships' route. Something like that, anyway. There was no mention of rights for black people or rockets going into space. It was all over very fast.

As the next news story began, I nudged Ray so he'd get to his feet too.

'Let's go,' I hissed, jerking my head towards the door.

He didn't move. The rest of the Johnsons all started talking at once.

'Where's Cuba?' Rachel wanted to know.

'On the other side of the world, baby, in the Caribbean,' Mr Johnson replied. 'It's a Communist country, so basically they're friends with the Russians.'

'It won't affect us, don't worry,' Mrs Johnson added.

'Yeah, but if the Cubans fire a nuclear missile at America and the Americans fight back, then – you heard him – they're only ninety miles off the American coast—' Pete mimed a big explosion with his hands.

'Whoa!' Rachel was startled. 'Is there going to be an actual war?'

Ray's parents shared a look, the sort adults did when you strayed too close to something they'd rather not talk about.

'How about I make some tea?' Mr Johnson said quickly.

Everyone moved off to the kitchen, except for Ray and me. We had more pressing matters to deal with.

*

When I told Ray what I'd found, I wasn't sure he believed me.

'A body? In your *shed*? Geez, Vie, are you sure?'

Which made me almost doubt it myself, especially once we were in the familiar surroundings of my back yard.

'Okay.' Ray squared his shoulders. 'Which shed is it in?'

We had two sheds – one for coal, the other for the washtub and mangle. Both were bolted shut.

'That one.' I pointed to the left-hand shed.

'Right.' Ray rubbed his palms over his clippered-short hair. It was a sure sign he was nervous, as was his tendency to talk a lot, which was what he then began to do.

'You're sure they're dead? How close did you get? Have you checked their pulse or anything? Did they have any belongings on them, like a wallet or a bus pass, because I think—'

'Ray?' I stopped him. 'When I looked, they weren't moving, all right? And before you ask, I've not told my mum yet, either.'

'Gee, okay. But how did anyone get in your shed in the first place? You reckon they weren't there earlier, when you got your bike out for your paper round?'

I shook my head. The paper round took about forty minutes. I did it every day, before and after school, and Flea came with me. But today she'd been a pest, barking at every cat we came across, so I'd taken her straight indoors when I got back, forgetting to put my bike away.

'The person must've turned up here after, what, half past three?' Ray pondered.

'I s'pose so.'

Though that didn't explain how they'd got into our back yard. To reach it you'd have to pass by the kitchen window, and Bev would've been home from school by then, making tea and toast like she did every night before starting her homework.

'The body?' I reminded him. 'Are we having a look or not? Because my mum'll be out in a minute, wondering where I am.'

Just as we inched forward, a noise came from the shed. A rumble as the coal moved. A bump. A scraping sound. Someone saying 'Ouch!' and 'Blast it!'

I looked at Ray: Ray looked at me.

The voice was a girl's, and she didn't sound dead in the slightest.