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The Sundae Girl

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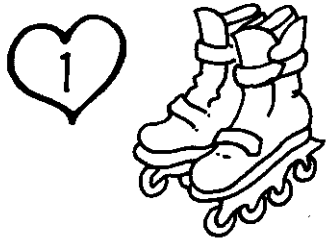
Cathy Cassidy

published by

Puffin Books

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Nobody likes Parents' Night, do they? It's when the truth comes out. Your parents discover that you haven't been wearing your nice maroon St Joseph's blazer, you've only handed in one maths homework since September and you're hanging out with a gang of scary Year Tens who have LOVE and HATE scrawled across their knuckles in black marker pen.

That's the kind of stuff most kids are stressing about, anyhow. Not me. I have a pretty good record when it comes to tests, homework and school uniform. My friends are sensible, reliable, hard-working. My teachers like me.

What do I have to be worried about?

Where do you want me to start?

I'm not worried that my family will find out the truth about school – I'm more anxious that school will find out the truth about my family.

Parents' Night? I hate it so much that when I was in Year Seven I threw away the letters inviting

my family along and told them that St Joseph's didn't do them.

'Are you sure?' Mum had asked, doubtfully. 'That seems very strange.'

'Seriously. They think it's old-fashioned.'

Mum had raised an eyebrow, but I got away with it. I thought I might get away with it right through secondary school.

Of course, I was wrong.

Yesterday, my form teacher, Miss Devlin, booked herself into the hairdressing salon where Mum works, for a shampoo and set. 'Special occasion?' Mum had enquired, rolling a sliver of Miss Devlin's mouse-brown hair on to a pink plastic curler. 'Going somewhere nice?'

'Well,' Miss Devlin had replied, 'just the Year Eight Parents' Night at St Joseph's tomorrow.'

That was that. My cover was blown, big style.

'Why didn't you tell us they'd reintroduced Parents' Night?' Mum wanted to know. 'Just think, we might have missed it!'

Mmm. Just think.

'Poor Miss Devlin would have thought we didn't care!' Mum exclaimed. 'Don't you worry, Jude, we'll be there!'

And they are here – all of them. Nightmare.

I'm here too, watching the whole thing, fascinated, horrified. Being here is a kind of

torture, obviously, but when Mr McGrath asked for volunteers to make the tea and coffee, my hand shot up instantly like the good Year Eight teacher-pleaser that I am. It's a bit like the way moths get drawn to a flame. I can't help myself, even though I know it will end in disaster and frazzled wings.

Still, dishing out the tea is one way to keep an eye on things.

I take a deep breath, steady my tea tray and stride off into the scrum, handing out a few cups of milky tea and some dark, ominous flapjacks baked earlier today in the Home Ec. department. I glide to a halt beside Miss Devlin's desk.

'Tea?' I ask brightly.

Miss Devlin shoots me a helpless, wild-eyed look, but I have no sympathy. So far, she's only met Mum. Worse is to come.

'Ah, Jude,' Mum says, flicking her blonde razor-cut bob so we all get to see the dark red layer beneath. 'Miss Devlin was just telling me that she runs the school drama club. Why ever didn't you tell her I was in show business?'

'You're a hairdresser, Mum,' I mumble.

'*Now* I am,' Mum says, exasperated. 'But what about my musical past? I've played all the top venues – Filey, Minehead, Clacton-on-Sea.'

She is talking about the weekly talent shows at

various Butlins holiday camps where she holidayed as a teenager, but she leaves out that little detail.

'Mum,' I hiss, dumping a cup of tea and a crumbling flapjack down on the tabletop. 'I thought I'd better tell you that Dad and Victoria are here. They're in the queue behind you.'

'They are?' Mum squeaks. 'Oh! Nice chatting to you, Miss Devlin. I have to go now.'

Mum and Dad are no longer together – they haven't been for twelve years, but that doesn't stop Mum from turning all drama queen if she happens to spot Dad with his girlfriend.

Mum leans across the desk, dazzling Miss Devlin with her showbiz smile. 'If you ever need some *professional* input with the drama club, I'd be only too pleased to offer my expertise!'

Miss Devlin shuffles some papers. 'Well . . . thanks, Ms Reilly,' she says, weakly. 'I'll be sure to let you know if we need any . . . um, *professional* input.'

Mum stands up, flinging a pink pashmina scarf over her shoulder and almost taking out the eye of the woman behind. She stalks out of the hall without a backward glance.

I swing back through the crowd, clutching my tea tray. I come across Gran and Grandad arguing with Mr McGrath. I'm not sure why. He's not even one of my teachers.

'Hello, dear,' Gran says blankly as I edge past.

'D'you know, you look just like my granddaughter!'

Perhaps because I am? I give her the last flapjack and hope it doesn't get stuck in her teeth.

Back at the tea-urn, Kevin Carter from my English class is sipping tea from a PTA bone-china cup. He dunks a flapjack, unsuccessfully. The tea turns into beige soup, or perhaps some kind of wholemeal porridge.

'Hey, Jude,' he says. 'Want a hand?'

'No thanks, Carter. Keep it to yourself,' I retort.

'Call me Kevin if you like,' he grins.

'OK. Thanks, Carter.'

'Suit yourself. I'd be a good waiter, y'know. Careful. Fast.' He sticks out a leg and shows me a huge, clunky Rollerblade boot, then does a fancy turn, slopping tea all over his jeans.

'I'm just learning,' he says. 'Brendan Coyle is setting up a street hockey team.' He points through the window, where some Year Eight lads are skating about in the floodlit playground, battering each other with hockey sticks.

'Nice,' I say.

'Are your parents here?' Kevin Carter asks, pouring himself another cup of tea.

'I think they're around somewhere,' I say vaguely.

'Will you look at that!' he guffaws, looking out across the hall. 'Who does he think he is, Elvis Presley?'

Dad and Victoria have reached the head of the line for Miss Devlin. Victoria looks neat in a dark city suit, but Dad is wearing a grey raincoat over his white rhinestone catsuit. He has a gig later, an eightieth birthday party at some old folks' home. He smooths his black quiff and sideburns as he sits down.

I should explain – Dad is an Elvis impersonator. This is not a fact I tell many people. I have no intention of telling Kevin Carter, obviously.

Miss Devlin glances up, does a double take and gives Dad a forbidding look over the rim of her teacup.

'Think he's someone's dad, or just the floorshow?' Kevin Carter muses.

'No idea.' I let my hair swing forward to camouflage the blushes as I prepare a new tray, piled high with flapjacks and dishwater tea, and Carter lets out a low whistle as Year Eight siren Kristina Kowalski wiggles past. She is wearing something that might have once belonged to a Barbie Doll, but has now shrunk in the wash. Scary.

'Kristina Kowalski is *hot*!' Carter breathes, executing a perfect figure of eight on his Rollerblades before crashing into the tea-urn. Hot is not a word I'd use to describe Kristina. She is wearing so little, she may be in danger of frostbite.

Just as I think Kevin Carter is safely distracted

from my family, Gran and Grandad join the end of Miss Devlin's queue. Grandad is wearing his yellow tartan waistcoat with the Marilyn Monroe tie, and Gran is knitting as she waits. It's the green scarf, today. At only three metres long, it is easily the most portable.

'Who are *they*?' Carter gawps, following my gaze. 'Unreal! I wonder what poor kid has to put up with grandparents like that?'

My heart plummets. Carter is going to guess the exact identity of that poor kid, unless I take evasive action – and fast.

'Actually,' I tell him, 'they're Kristina Kowalski's mum and dad.'

Carter just about chokes on his tea. 'Parents?' he yelps. 'They can't be. They're way too old.'

Kristina only joined the school this term, and so far she's a bit of a mystery girl – if a girl who wears shrunken skirts and lashings of shimmering lipgloss can actually qualify as mysterious.

'Oh, yes,' I lie. 'Very strict too. Mr Kowalski used to be a championship boxer. Last month, Kristina's dad came home and found her smooching with Martin Peploe from Year Nine, when she should have been babysitting her seven little sisters. Mr Kowalski threw Martin Peploe out of the house. He landed in a rose bush – terrible scratches, and greenfly.'

'Seriously?' Carter marvels. 'I never heard that!'

'Would you broadcast it, if you were Kristina?' I ask. 'Or Martin Peploe, for that matter?'

'S'pose not. Maybe they grounded her, and that's why she's kind of a recluse? Seven little sisters. Wow!'

Mr McGrath looms up, and I try to look busy, setting out clean cups and saucers on a new tray.

'Ah, Carter, good to see you helping out at this kind of function.' Mr McGrath beams. 'Not like those young thugs out there with the hockey sticks. Now, Mrs Yates was just saying she'd love a nice, hot cup of tea – perhaps you'd take one over to her?'

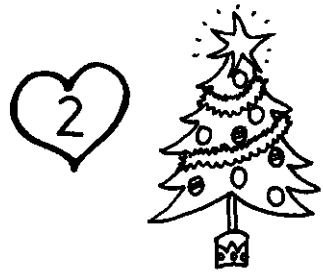
He lifts the loaded tray and hands it to Carter, nodding encouragement. Needless to say, he hasn't spotted the Rollerblades.

Carter takes the tray, throwing me an anxious grin. He glides off across the polished floor, the tea tray balanced on one hand. He makes amazingly good progress, to start with at least, but disaster is inevitable. Suddenly, he gets tangled up with the end of Gran's green scarf and falls headlong into the crowd, showering everyone with tea and flapjacks.

'Oh dear,' says Mr McGrath.

He's not as bad as I thought, that Kevin Carter.





Don't get me wrong, I love my family. I live with Gran, Grandad, Mum and Toto in a semi-detached house in a street called Pine Tree Avenue. There are no pine trees anywhere around, except now, in December, when they are in every window, decorated with fairy lights and tinsel.

At this time of year, Grandad likes to give his name and address as Patrick Reilly, 211 Christmas Tree Avenue. This causes problems with banks, taxi drivers, delivery firms and postmen. The fact that he has a full white beard and a figure like Santa Claus does not help matters.

Gran used to be a calming influence on him, but for a few years now she's had Alzheimer's disease – Old-Timer's Disease, Grandad calls it. She's not in any kind of pain, but she forgets stuff, like names and dates and even how to get dressed properly. Not long ago, she went missing and we tracked her down in Tesco, still in her dressing gown, loading a trolley with kiwi fruit

and telling an anxious shelf-stacker how to knit an Aran jumper.

I remember when Gran was the one who held the house together, the one who baked fresh scones if I brought a friend over from school, jam tarts on a Sunday. She used to make me beautiful jumpers with stripes or Fair Isle patterns, and hats and mittens and scarves and shawls for friends and relatives and neighbours. Now, it's just the scarves, and nobody really wants them. They are metres long and full of lumps and holes.

It should be Mum looking after Gran and Grandad, looking after me, but she just isn't that kind of person. She is forty-four years old, going on fourteen. Sometimes she's gorgeous and glamorous and funny. Sometimes she really is not.

In the evenings, she sits at the piano hammering out grim old Irish songs that make you want to cry into your cocoa, telling anyone who'll listen about her glory days as a singer. 'I could have been a star,' she likes to tell me. 'I won the weekly talent contest at Butlins in Clacton-on-Sea in 1981, and I often played the piano at the Irish centre. Very popular, I was. Then I met your dad, Jude, and that was the end of that.'

Now Mum works part-time in the hairdresser's on the corner, a salon called Chop Suey after its

owner, Sue. Often, people ring up to order egg-fried rice and chicken noodles, and get annoyed when offered blonde highlights instead.

And Toto? He's our dog, a tall, languid Afghan hound with flowing strawberry-blonde hair. He is very beautiful, but very stupid. The dogs' home told us he was a pedigree, but that he'd run away from home so often his owner despaired of him. This appealed to Grandad, who likes a challenge.

Toto has never run away from us, perhaps because Mum brushes his hair and scooshes him with leave-in conditioner every day, or perhaps because Grandad buys him gory old bones from the butcher and walks him for miles every morning and night.

'Well,' Grandad announces, the morning after Parents' Night. 'Your teachers were full of praise, Jude. Well done.'

'Yes, well done,' Mum agrees, sipping her black coffee while the rest of us pick at our cornflakes. 'You take after me. I was always good at school too, you know.'

'Fiddlesticks!' says Gran, and Mum shoots her an angry look.

'What?' she asks, blinking sweetly, smoothing the tea-stained green scarf out across the table and brushing off the remnants of last night's flapjack crumbs. 'I dropped a stitch, that's all.'

Mum frowns and goes back to her coffee.

'I don't know what your father thinks he was doing there,' she says darkly. 'Dressed in that – that *catsuit* thing too. Whatever must your teachers have thought?'

'He had an OAP party to go to,' I say lightly. 'He was going straight on there after the school.'

'Why does he have to embarrass us like that?' Mum sulks.

'I thought you liked all that showbiz stuff,' Grandad reminds her. 'And you were just as bad yourself in the beginning, admit it! White PVC knee-boots, black minidress, blonde beehive hair . . .'

When Mum and Dad first met, Dad was in a Beatles tribute band called the Fab Four. He was supposed to be Paul McCartney – I've seen the pictures. Mum got into that whole dressing-up thing, and the band let her fill in as backing singer sometimes. Sadly, she wasn't very good, so any dreams of a career pretending to be a young Lulu or Cilla Black bit the dust pretty quickly.

'I grew out of it,' Mum says sharply. '*He* just got fat and had to give up the Fab Four to become an Elvis lookalike. How sad is that?'

'He makes a living,' I point out, thinking of the weekly cheque he sends Mum to help pay for my shoes, my winter coat, my piano lessons.

'Well, anyway, he shouldn't lurk about at Jude's Parents' Night. What did he think he was *doing*?'

'The same as us,' Grandad sighs. 'I asked him to come. He has a right, Rose – she's his daughter too.'

Mum scowls. 'I wish she wasn't.'

'You can't change it, love,' Grandad says. 'It's done. Blood is thicker than water.'

I've heard it all a million times before, but I still don't get it. Mum left Dad, all those years ago. She cancelled the wedding and scooped me into a rickety pram with a suitcase balanced on top, and she marched back home to Gran and Grandad's. It was her decision to leave – so why is she still angry, twelve years on? Beats me.

I finish my cornflakes, rifle through the stuff on the clothes airer for my gym kit.

Mum is brushing out Gran's long grey hair. Before she got ill, Gran had the most fantastic hair – she'd wear it up, in a French pleat or a wispy bun, or knotted loosely with a bright silk scarf tied round it. Now, she forgets to even brush it, so Mum does it, smoothing it, plaiting it, pinning the braids up across her head so she looks like the picture on the cover of a book I once read. Heidi, but with wrinkles.

'Ah, Molly,' Grandad sighs. 'My sweet Irish colleen.'

'Who's Molly?' Gran asks brightly. 'Do I know her?'

'You're Molly, pet,' Grandad says sadly. He stacks up the breakfast plates and dumps them into the sink.

'All I'm saying,' Mum huffs, 'is that if he insists on turning up at Jude's school, he should at least leave *that woman* behind.'

'Victoria is a lovely girl,' Grandad says firmly. Victoria is a bank clerk in Grandad's local branch. 'Very kind. And she's always been good to our Jude, hasn't she?'

Victoria is great, but Mum definitely doesn't want to hear that. Not this morning, and not from me. Unless I can tell her that Victoria eats raw liver for supper and tortures small animals as a hobby, my comments are not wanted here. I stay silent.

'That dreadful suit she was wearing,' Mum says. 'And her hair! Why can't she get it done professionally?'

'She looked very nice to me,' Grandad says.

'And that engagement ring was just *beautiful*,' Gran chips in.

Mum drops the hairbrush, and it clatters on to the floor. We all stare at Gran, eyes wide with horror, but she's gazing down at her knitting again, brows furrowed. She might as well be a million miles away.

Mum makes a kind of choking sound. 'Engagement ring?' she gasps. 'I didn't see an engagement ring. Did you?'

We shake our heads, stunned into silence.

'He wouldn't. Would he, Jude?'

'No,' I whisper, but I don't know, not really. Dad loves Victoria, I know that. She loves him. Why shouldn't they get married? But . . . wouldn't he tell me first?

'Take no notice of your gran,' Mum says boldly. 'She's always getting things mixed up. The very idea!'

I pick up my bag from the coat peg in the hall. Mum's right – Gran does get muddled up. Not this time, though. Something tells me that this time Gran's not muddled up at all.





Everyone is talking about the Green Scarf Incident from yesterday's Parents' Night. Kevin Carter's fateful fall has been transformed from something clumsy and embarrassing into something wonderful, heroic. Carter has a bandaged right arm and gets out of work for hours, until someone remembers he's left-handed.

By late afternoon, the true identity of the batty old couple with the green scarf at the centre of the action is at last revealed. Kristina Kowalski, glancing down at me like I'm something disgusting she just scraped off her spike-heeled shoe, is not impressed.

'You told Carter they were my *parents,*' she hisses. 'You sad little loser.'

'I . . . er . . . thought he was talking about someone else,' I bluff.

'Yeah, right,' Kristina says. 'And I do not have seven little sisters, OK? I'm an only child. Really, Jude, I pity you.'

She wiggles on up to the back of the English room and perches on Brendan Coyle's desk. Her skirt, another shrunk-in-the-wash special, slides up scarily to reveal acres of fake-tan thigh. Kristina Kowalski is the only girl I know who comes to school in December wearing high heels, ankle socks and a micro-mini. I hope she gets icicles on her bum.

'Ignore her,' Nuala O'Sullivan says, beside me. 'Everyone has grandparents. What's the big deal?'

'No big deal,' I sigh.

'And anyway, that thing with the scarf was a useful diversion.' Nuala grins. 'It took the heat off your dad. If Kristina ever finds out about him . . .'

'Don't. It doesn't bear thinking about.'

'Oh, Jude, you worry too much,' she laughs. She can afford to – she has a normal mum and dad with normal jobs and normal dress sense.

Miss Devlin sweeps into the classroom, a small, fierce whirlwind dressed entirely in navy blue. 'Miss Kowalski, back to your own seat,' she snaps. 'And Miss Kowalski – I wonder if you could remember to wear a skirt tomorrow? Knee-length, grey, regulation. If you forget yet again, perhaps I could find something in the lost-property cupboard for you?'

'No thanks, *Miss* Devlin,' Kristina replies. 'I'll remember.' She makes it sound like a threat.

We settle down to write an essay called 'School Uniform: For or Against?' I surprise myself by coming out in favour of knee-length grey skirts, stripy ties and hideous maroon blazers. In uniform, you can blend in, become invisible. You look just like everyone else . . . even if you're really not.

'I hate uniform,' Nuala whispers. 'Who wants to be a sheep?'

I do. I really, really do.

At the end of the lesson, we hand in our books and put our chairs up on the desks, because it's the end of the day. The bell rings out, but we never get away that lightly, not with Miss Devlin. St Joseph's is a Catholic school, and Miss Devlin is an old-style Catholic. She makes us join our hands, close our eyes and pray silently.

When the shuffling and coughing dies down, I pray for Gran and Grandad, Mum and Dad and Victoria and Toto. I pray that Gran was wrong, even though I'm not sure what's so scary about the idea of Dad getting married. It just is.

'Let us finish,' Miss Devlin says, 'by offering up a special prayer for Kevin Carter, so that his wrist heals quickly. For Brendan Coyle, so that he learns to stop wasting time in my lesson. And Kristina Kowalski, so that she finds her school

skirt and her manners. We pray to St Jude – the patron saint of hopeless cases. Amen.'

There's a snort of laughter from Brendan Coyle and then we're dismissed, clattering down the stairs and out towards the school gates.

I'm halfway down the street when Kevin Carter skates up and gives me a high five with his bandaged hand.

'That prayer worked quickly,' I observe.

'Aw, it was just a scam. Thought I'd go for the sympathy vote. So, how come your parents named you after the patron saint of hopeless cases? That's a bit mean.'

'They didn't,' I say shortly. I've heard it all before, this stuff about St Jude, and I refuse to be bugged by it.

'So how come . . .'

'Dad named me after his favourite song,' I explain. 'It was a Beatles track called "Hey Jude". Mum didn't mind because her favourite film star was called Judy Garland. There were no saints involved, OK?'

'OK.' Kevin Carter nods, but seems in no hurry to move off. I walk on, and he skates along beside me, tripping occasionally on uneven paving stones.

'I wanted to say sorry,' he admits at last. 'About last night, y'know?'

'It's not your fault you're useless on Rollerblades.'

'Not about the fall,' he says. 'I mean, I am sorry about that, but . . . it was the laughing at your grandparents, really. I didn't realize.'

I raise one eyebrow. 'Doesn't matter,' I say. 'They are odd. That's just the way it is. Could have been worse.'

He could have clocked that Elvis was my dad.

'Was he really a championship boxer? Your grandad?'

Grandad worked for the post his whole life, but Kevin Carter's not to know that.

'Might have been.'

'OK. Well, I know you don't have seven little sisters – you're an only child, like Kristina. But the rest of the story . . . the bit about watching *Neighbours* with Martin Peploe from Year Nine. Was that you?'

I stare at Kevin Carter, amazed. He thinks I once sat on a sofa with Martin Peploe? I can feel myself going pink. It's the best compliment anyone ever gave me.

'You don't have to talk about it if you don't want.' Carter shrugs. 'Some things are private.'

'They are,' I agree.

'But I'd like you to know that I think Martin Peploe has excellent taste.'

Carter winks, scarily, and skates off down the road like someone just put a rocket down his trousers. He gets right down to the junction before colliding with a pillar box.

'I'm getting better,' he shouts over as I cross the street.

Better than what? I wonder, but I know what St Jude would say. Better than hopeless.

