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sin bin – *sin-bin*.
in British English
noun:
1. (in rugby, ice hockey, etc) a location away from the field of play where players who has committed a foul are sent to sit for a specified period.
2. (education) informal. A detention centre on a separate site from a school where misbehaving schoolchildren are sent as a punishment.

Unwin's English Dictionary

Part One

The Orphanage





1

‘THE MYSTERIOUS PACKAGE’

‘Master Digby, I presume.’

Maurice Menton marched across his office and shook Digs’s hand. The solicitor had an explosion of hair that looked as if it had been styled by a hungry goat and wore a red velvet jacket with a wide striped tie to hide his enormous stomach. It was about as effective as a diplodocus trying to hide behind a pea. ‘Excuse the chaos,’ he said. ‘We were burgled last night. Thankfully, they don’t appear to have taken anything valuable apart from my sherbet lemons. Could have been worse,’ he chuckled, ‘they could have swiped my gummy worms, too.’

Mr Menton placed a storage container on his desk with Digs’s mum’s name written on it.

‘How old are you now?’

‘Thirteen, sir.’

‘And you’ve lost your mother, stepfather and sister in a plane crash,’ he shook his head sadly. ‘And all this on top of what happened to your birth father, my heart goes out to you.’

Digs forced his lips into a tight smile.

Mr Menton took the lid off the storage container. 'Right, to the matter in hand, your mother's will. In 1717, your mother's grandmother, twelve generations removed, received this package.'

Mr Menton lifted out a dusty parcel bound in unkempt string.

'It came with a letter which asked your mother's great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother not to open the package but to pass it on to her first born, who was asked to pass it on to their first born, and so on and so forth until it reached your mother. With me so far?'

'Yes, sir, I think so, sir.'

'The letter also instructed that in the event of your mother's death, the package should be passed on to you.'

'Me?' Digs blinked.

'Are you "Jack Digby? Formerly of Fourteen Stanley Gardens, Gridbury, Devon"?'

'Yes, sir, I am, sir.'

'Then as directed by your mother's will, I now pass on ownership of the package to you and ask you to open it.'

Dust tumbled to the floor as Digs untied the string and pulled away the ancient paper, revealing a red tin. Stencilled on the lid, in faded writing, were the words, *Fine Christmas biscuits, handmade by Arthur Bunsen, your local baker.*

Digs frowned. Why would anyone want to give him a tin of three-hundred-year-old biscuits?

Mr Menton's eyebrows scrunched together. 'Go on, then. Take a look inside.'

Digs opened the tin and pulled out a wooden soldier. It was twelve inches long with a bushy moustache and wore a navy-blue uniform with a matching top hat.

'I think it's a Russian nesting doll,' Mr Menton said. 'Open it, see if I'm right.'

Digs had seen a TV show once about Russian nesting dolls. They were sets of dolls of decreasing size placed inside one another.

Digs inserted his fingernail in the gap that ran around the middle of the soldier and pulled it apart. Inside was another identical soldier, except this soldier's uniform was purple, and held a folded note in its arms. But then the strangest thing happened: the first doll, lying in two pieces on Mr Menton's desk, vanished.

'Where did the first doll go?' Digs asked, looking around.

'It was on the desk,' Mr Menton said. 'Perhaps it's rolled onto the floor.'

Digs searched under the desk. It wasn't there. Where had it gone?

'Never mind that now, 'Mr Menton said. 'See what the note says.'

Digs took the note and unfolded it. The first three words sent a chill through his body.

My dear Digs. . .

Digs grasped the ancient wrapping paper to see if there was a postal date. There wasn't. How did the person who gave the doll to his ancestor in 1717 know his nickname was going to be Digs?

'Read it out loud, then,' Mr Menton prompted. Digs began.

'My dear Digs, it's very important you don't read this note out loud.'

'Ah, best not to read it out loud, then,' Mr Menton chortled.

Digs read the rest of the note to himself.

You're about to embark on an incredible adventure. An enterprise so petrifyingly terrifying it would make most boys your age quake in terror if they knew what was ahead of them. Thankfully, you don't, which is a HUGE bonus.

A gulp the size of an otter slithered down Digs's throat.

You must be wondering who I am. I'll tell you one day, but not now. In total there are sixteen soldiers, each one has a message telling you what's about to happen before it happens and what to do when you need help. Let me give you an example. Today is May 18th. . .

Digs's eyes darted to the Rolodex calendar on Mr

Menton's desk. It was indeed May 18th. How did the letter writer in 1717, know the exact date he was going to be reading this note? It was baffling. He read the next bit.

It is exactly 4.13 p.m.

Digs looked at the mahogany clock ticking on the wall. His eyes bulged. It was indeed 4.13 p.m. Back to the note.

There is a knock on the door.

Digs's eyes flew to the door. At first, nothing happened, but then there were three sharp knocks, and the door opened. Back to the note.

It's Mrs Tulip, Mr Menton's personal assistant. She asks if anyone wants a cup of tea.

'Just me,' Mrs Tulip chirped. 'Does anyone want a cup of tea?'

Digs returned to the note.

Both you and Mr Menton say, 'No, thanks.'

'No, thanks,' Mr Menton and Digs chimed in unison.

But then Mr Menton changes his mind and asks for a cup of

tea and a plate of biscuits, too.

'Oh, go on, then,' Mr Menton said. 'I'll have a cup of tea, and a plate of biscuits, too.'

Mrs Tulip closed the door behind her.

I hope you've started to trust me, Digs, because without my help life will become very difficult indeed. Let's begin. Instead of Mrs O'Malley, your old housekeeper, bringing you up, as you probably expected, you're being sent to an orphanage. The name of the school is Cyril Sniggs's Correctional Orphanage for Wayward Boys and Girls.

Digs's heart tightened. Mrs O'Malley was a friend of the family. Surely, she should be the one to bring him up. He'd known her practically all his life. When his mum was at work she'd been like a second mum to him. One time, she'd even built him a tree house. Digs returned to the note.

Cyril Sniggs's is a school founded on discipline and order. Many think it is the most unspeakable place on earth. Try not to worry, though.

P.S. Don't open the next doll until you hear a clap of thunder.

Digs peered through the window. It was sunny. Certainly no sign of thunder. Why couldn't he open the next doll

now? No time to worry about this now. He needed to find out what was in his mum's will.

'Mr Menton?' Digs asked. 'Can you open my mum's will and tell me who's going to bring me up?'

The solicitor flicked through the will's papers. 'Mr Swipe prepared your mother's will before he retired, I'm not familiar with it myself.' He flicked through several pages. 'Ah, here we are. . . The will instructs you are to be sent to Cyril Sniggs's Correctional Orphanage for Wayward Boys and Girls. Don't you have an aunt? Who's the lady in the waiting room?'

'That's Mrs O'Malley, she's not a relative, though. She used to be our housekeeper. I stayed with her when my mum, and everyone went away and then afterwards until everything got sorted.'

Mr Menton stroked one of his three chins. 'I wonder why your mother's sent you to an orphanage for wayward boys and girls. He tilted his head quizzically. Are you wayward?'

'No, sir!'

'Ever been expelled?'

'No, sir.' Digs bristled.

'Then why on earth are you being sent to an orphanage for wayward boys and girls?'

'I didn't think orphanages even existed any more,' Digs said, changing the subject.

'They don't,' Mr Menton replied. 'Not in England, anyway. Well, apart from this one.'

Mr Menton passed across a glossy school brochure he pulled from the will. Digs flicked through the pages. The school uniform looked like no school uniform Digs had ever seen. The boys at Cyril Sniggs's wore black knee-length frock coats with ornate buttons, white shirts and black satin ties with three yellow stripes, dark trousers, and top hats with small clocks on the brim. The girls wore ankle boots, black tights, and black-and-yellow gothic open-front ruffled skirts that were long at the back and ruched up at the front, with jackets – and fedora hats also with clocks resting on the brims.

Digs turned the pages. One photograph was a school corridor with a sign that said, *No laughing in term time*. Other photographs had grimacing pupils clambering up exercise walls like they were in the army.

Digs glanced down the teachers list. Even their names were terrifying. Enid Greb, Horatio Spit-Ripping, Peregrine Kruger, Mavis Moriarty, Derek Mildew, William Bleary. . . This was too scary to read. Digs closed the brochure.

'Have you any idea why your mother's sent you to a school such as this?'

Digs didn't answer. There could only be one reason he was being sent to a school such as this but he was in no hurry to share that with Mr Menton. He was in no hurry to share it with anyone. It was his secret and his secret alone.

Well, not quite.

One other person knew his secret, too.



2

THE SECOND WORST DAY EVER

May rain pummelled Mr Menton's ancient Bentley as it thundered along the hedge-lined road, the engine purring, wipers dragging, as late evening folded into darkness.

The orphanage, Digs had learned, was set in an old monastery overlooking an estuary that fed into the English Channel.

Mrs O'Malley sat in the front, in her bright blue anorak – the one she'd worn at the funerals – knitting a tea cosy. Digs sat in the back and stared out of the window. His reflection stared back. His head was a forest of untameable blond hair, his eyes a twinkly green and part of his left eyebrow was missing, thanks to a sparkler accident when he was seven; it looked a bit like an apostrophe that had tripped up. He was five-foot two although when he pinched his stepdad's hair gel, he could get to five-foot-three. Pinching his stepdad's hair gel wouldn't be something he'd be doing any more.

They travelled in silence, with just the muted sounds of the radio burbling away. Digs didn't pay much attention

until a song came on called the 'The Worst Day of my Life,' and he remembered what he'd once considered the worst day of his life. It wasn't the worst day of his life any more, of course, but at the time, it seemed like the end of the world.

Digs had been standing in the women's department of Barrett's Department Store, while his mum paid for a dressing gown, when Noah Brighouse went past. Noah Brighouse was Digs's nemesis. In his last term at Gridbury Grammar, he'd given Digs a doorknob wedgie because Digs didn't support Torquay United. He'd given Digs a helicopter wedgie because Digs had bowled him out in cricket when he was on 99. Worst of all, he'd given Digs a flagpole wedgie for something Digs hadn't even done!

It all started when Orville Plumber stole Brighouse's zombie silhouette stencil. The zombie stencil had made Brighouse famous at Gridbury Grammar as one break time he'd snuck into the art room and covered all the paintings pinned on the walls with silhouettes of the living dead. 'Skipping Through Flowers' by Primrose Pinkerton was one of the victims. A young girl danced through a field of daisies. That was until Brighouse, with his silhouette stencil, added five zombies, arms outstretched, lurching after her.

Even the Year 4 potato print, 'Birth of Jesus', had zombies shuffling up behind the three wise men and an oblivious Virgin Mary. Also, the end-of-year school photo in the school entrance hall, acquired three brain-eaters behind Mrs Marsh on row two.

Brighouse got suspended for a week.

But then Orville Plumber stole Brighouse's zombie silhouette stencil which was bad news for Digs because the back of Digs's head looked exactly like the back of Orville Plumber's head. One minute, Digs was reading a book about the feudal system in the Quiet Space room and the next he was being hoisted up the school flagpole by his underpants. What was worse, this happened at the exact same time as the girls' marching band stomped past playing, 'I Will Survive, Take Me Higher.'

Brighouse got suspended for two weeks, but as Digs reflected later, it could have been even worse. Sometimes Brighouse would hang boys on coat hooks and walk off. Some of his victims hung there for hours screaming to be let down. Shorty Dawson got a coat-hook wedgie and wasn't found until the cleaners came in the following morning. And Shorty Dawson was the music teacher.

Brighouse got suspended for four weeks.

A month later, after more indiscretions and a rumour some parents complained, Brighouse was expelled. Digs was not sorry. And neither were his underpants who'd been to places they'd never wanted to go.

Once Brighouse had been expelled, Digs thought he was rid of him but here he was, smirking at him through the shop window. Digs looked around.

Where was his mum?

Without his mum, it looked as if Digs was in the

women's lingerie department all on his own. What could he be doing there, apart from buying ladies' underwear for himself? Embarrassment rocketed up his body as Noah Brighouse whipped out his phone and aimed it through the shop window.

Digs had to do something.

But what?

No choice. He ducked behind a rack of bras for fuller-figure ladies and buried his face in one of the bra cups.

Genius move.

Even Albert Einstein would have applauded that one. No one could see you while your face was buried in a giant bra cup. Almost a minute went by before Digs emerged to check if Noah had gone.

Big mistake.

HUGE ENORMOUS MASSIVE MISTAKE.

Noah Brighouse had not gone. He was still there in a state of total ungoneness.

Cl-ick!

Brighouse took a photograph of Digs then looked at his phone and howled his stupid donkey hee-haw laugh.

This was the worst, most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to Digs ever.

Except it wasn't.

The worst, most embarrassing thing that ever happened to Digs ever was about to happen to Digs next. Noah Brighouse tapped the buttons of his phone, writing,

Jack Digby buys himself a new bra for next term, then sent the photograph to all the boys in Digs's class and some of the girls, too. Even though Noah Brighouse didn't even go to their school any more.

Brighouse grinned at Digs through the shop window; explaining, in mime, what he'd done, then skateboarded off. Seconds later, Digs's mum appeared with a big pink shopping bag and handed it to Digs to carry.

'Why did you have to bring me shopping?' Digs moaned. 'Noah Brighouse took a photograph of me with all the bras. It was so embarrassing.'

'Jack, as you get older, you'll learn being embarrassed is a waste of time,' she smiled. 'So long as you're kind, who cares what people think of you? It's what you think of yourself that counts.'

'And what I think of myself,' Digs grunted, 'is that I'm a total loser for going shopping with my mum, because mum-shopping is really embarrassing. This is the worst day of my life!'

Digs sat in Mr Menton's car and groaned at the recollection. The worst day of his life? How could he have been such a brat? And why did he tell his mum he hated mum-shopping. He'd give anything to go shopping with his mum now.

Mr Menton brought him crashing back to the present. 'Nearly at Cyril Sniggs's, my boy!' he boomed. 'Not far now.'

Digs looked out of the window at the dry-stone walls and

smelt the sharp scent of salt water. The Bentley powered alongside an estuary, passing a sign that said they were entering *Smuggler's Bay*. Soon after they passed a café called *Smugs*. Even though it was late, diners were inside eating and laughing. It was the sort of place Digs used to go with his family.

Digs looked at the sky. A nosy moon peered between dark clouds. When was it going to thunder? Digs was desperate to read the Russian nesting doll's next message. Perhaps it would tell him when he was going to see his old friends again; the ones from Gridbury, the ones he'd had to say goodbye to with fist bumps and shoulder claps while ordering himself to keep it together.

'What's this?'

Mr Menton pointed to a woman standing in the road, waving her arms for them to stop.

Then, screech! Digs felt the car sag on one side, and swerve and skid to a halt.

'Drat!' Mr Menton sighed. 'Flat tyre.'

The woman ran over as Mr Menton lowered his window.

'There's some glass on the road. I thought I'd kicked it all into the ditch. I must have missed some. Now we've both got flat tyres.'

'Allow me to help,' Mr Menton said, getting out of the car into the rain. 'I'll change your wheel in no time.'

'I'll hold an umbrella for you,' Mrs O'Malley said, clambering out, too.

Digs watched from inside the car as Mr Menton and the woman spoke. He couldn't hear what they were saying. A few moments later, Mr Menton opened the car door.

'My boy, we'll need to jack up our car to change the tyre, so you'll have to get out. Take this torch and shelter in that old pub over there. 'We'll come and get you when we're done.'

Digs peered into the darkness. The night was as black as a witch's cloak. He grabbed his backpack, clicked on the torch, and ran across the car park. His left leg throbbed with all the sitting. It had been nine months since he'd broken his leg sliding down the banister at home, not realizing his mum had just waxed it. The throb reminded him of his accident, and his accident reminded him of his family. In fact, everything reminded him of his family. Digs tried to change the channel in his brain and looked at the wooden board rattling in the wind. The pub was called *Smuggler's End*. The sign claimed it'd been *Quenching travellers' thirsts since 1343.*

Digs ducked through the broken door and stepped inside. The pub smelt of stale beer and musty cellars. He walked through the gloom, shining his torch across paintings of old ships, and men carrying barrels from rowing boats into candle-lit caves. A piece of driftwood hung from the ceiling: *Smugglers beware – ghosts live here.*

Before Digs could even gulp, he heard a creak behind him and span round.