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Opening extract from

The Legend of The Worst Boy in the World

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{chap head} CHAPTER 1
It's Not Fair

I have four brothers, and they are always complaining about something. If I ever have a problem, and I go to my mum to talk about it, there are generally at least two brothers in the queue before me, moaning about something totally stupid. I could have an actual real problem, like a hangnail or a missing sock, and there they are wasting Mum's time with silly stuff like jam on their faces or back-to-front jumpers.

My four brothers have their favourite problems that they like to moan about at least once a day. Mum calls these problems their *hobby horses*. Whenever they start whinging on about them, Dad makes horsey noises and a here-we-go-again face, but Mum listens anyway because she's our mum.

Marty is the oldest brother, and his hobby horse is that he's never allowed to do anything, and he might as well be in prison.

'Why can't I have a motorbike?' he often whines. 'I'm ten now and that's nearly sixteen. If I had a helmet on the police would never notice.'

Or another one is: 'Why can't I have a full-sized snooker table in the garage? It's only full of old tools and a car, nothing important. I'll pay for the snooker table as soon as I become a famous football player.'

Dad sometimes comes into a room just to hear Marty complain about something. He says that Marty is far more entertaining than any television show.

'Snooker table,' Dad chuckles. 'Marty, my boy. You are cracking me up.'

This is not what Marty wants to hear, so he storms off sulking. Once when Marty came back after storming off Dad presented him with a cardboard Oscar for best actor.

My name is Will and I'm the next in line. After me comes my second brother, Donnie, whose hobby horse is his hair. No matter how often Mum washes or combs it, there's always something wrong.

'It's sticking up at the back, Mum.' So Mum flattens the back.

'Now, Donnie, off you go.'

‘It’s still sticking up, Mum.’

‘No, it isn’t. You’re having hair hallucinations, Donnie. Go on now, you’ll be late for school.’

‘I can see a hair sticking up. It’s definitely there. The girls will see, and I’ll get a nickname. Sticky-Up Woodman they’ll call me. It’ll be horrible.’

And so Mum gets out a water bottle and sprays Donnie’s head.

‘Better?’

‘I suppose.’

This happens every second day. On the other days, Donnie wants his hair to stick up, because he thinks it’s cool.

Brothers three and four, Bert and HP, have invented brand-new words so that they can whinge more efficiently. Bert’s new word is ‘canniva’, as in: ‘Canniva bar of chocolate?’

‘Not before your dinner, honey,’ says Mum.

‘Canniva square, just one square.’

‘No, honey. Dinner’s on the way.’

‘Canniva bag of crisps then?’

‘I think you’re missing the point, Bert. No sweets or crisps before your dinner.’

‘Canniva throat sweet?’

‘Throat sweets are still sweets, honey.’

Mum has great patience. Dad only puts up with two ‘cannivas’ before he gets annoyed.

HP (Half Pint) is the youngest and hates being the baby. The word he invented to complain about this is ‘snoffair’, as in: ‘Snoffair. Chrissy’s mummy allowed him to get his head shaved, now he looks at least five and a half.’ He said this one afternoon after his half-day in baby infants.

‘I’m not in charge of Chrissy,’ said Mum. ‘I’m only in charge of you. And I say, no head shaving.’

‘Snoffair,’ howled HP. ‘Barry has a stick-on tattoo, like the big boys.’

‘No stick-on tattoo. We’ve talked about this.’

‘Snoffair,’ muttered HP, then: ‘What about an earring then? Loads of people have those. Snoffair that I don’t have one.’

‘Life’s not fair sometimes,’ said Mum, and hugs HP until he starts sucking his thumb. Two minutes later he is fast asleep.

Sometimes HP talks in his sleep. Guess what he says . . .

All this complaining means that by the time Marty and I get home from school with our troubles there is usually a little brother perched on each of Mum’s knees, moaning about their baby problems. And even if, miracle of miracles, there is a free knee, Mum is usually on auto-nod by then anyway. Auto-nod is when grown-ups don’t really listen to what a child says; they just nod every five seconds or so until the child goes away.

So Marty and I decided that we had to target another grown-up to talk to about our problems. Dad was the next target, but sometimes he works so late that we don’t even see him before bedtime. Marty reckoned that Dad only had time for one set of complaints, and that set should be his. So I had to pick someone else. Somebody who was a good listener and had a lot of spare time. I knew just the person.

Grandad.

{chap head} CHAPTER 2

Grandad

Every weekend, Dad loads us all into the car and we drive thirty miles down the coast to *his* mum and dad's home. Our grandparents live in the seaside village of Duncade, which is on a headland that sticks out into the sea like a Stone Age arrowhead.

Grandad is one of the two Duncade lighthouse keepers and he lives with our Gran in an apartment on the ground floor. When I grow up, I plan to take over Grandad's job and live in the lighthouse apartment. I will hang a sign on the door that says NO LITTLE BROTHERS ALLOWED. There won't be any girls allowed either, except my mum who can come in to make dinners and do washing and stuff.

Grandad has already started training me for the job. Every Saturday we climb the 116 steps to the very top of the lighthouse to polish the lighthouse lenses in the lamp room. Grandad wears a special canvas belt with pockets for polishing cream, rags and a water bottle. For my ninth birthday Grandad made a belt for me too.

'I learned to stitch in the merchant navy,' he explained that day, buckling the belt around my waist. 'Now you are my official helper.'

I like being Grandad's official helper because it is something just for me. Marty won't help because there is no money involved, and my little brothers are not allowed to climb the narrow spiral staircase because it's too dangerous.

So Grandad and I climb the steps together. I count every one just in case some have gone missing. But the number is always the same – 116 – if you count the giant first step twice.

'That's Peg Leg Byrne's giant step,' Grandad told me once. 'All the steps used to be that big, until Peg Leg Byrne, a lighthouse keeper with a wooden leg, chiselled them all down, starting at the top. It took him thirty years, and unfortunately he died before he could do the last one. All that because the steps were a little high for him.'

It seems as though each step has a story, and sometimes Grandad tells me them all before we reach the top. But finally we make it, and the first thing we do is take a long drink from our water bottles. Not too long though, because there are 116 steps between us and the nearest bathroom.

The lamp room has glass all the way round, so that the light can get out. This means that anyone in the lamp room has a fantastic view of the sea and the headland. In front of us, lines of white waves roll in from the horizon, and behind us the headland cuts a grey line through the sea.

'People in America would pay big money for a view like this,' says Grandad. He says this every single time, and he is probably right.

After a moment admiring the view, we climb up an old wooden ladder into the lamp itself. This is like climbing inside a giant glass vase, and when you are in there you get an idea of how the world must look to a goldfish. The lenses magnify everything until even a fly sitting on the glass looks like a giant bug-eyed monster.

One Saturday while we were inside the lenses, I told Grandad about my problem. 'I have a problem, Grandad,' I said, pouring some polish on to my favourite rag.

'What would that be, Bosun?'

Grandad calls me Bosun, which means second in command.

'My problem is . . . problems. I have no one to tell my problems to. Mum and Dad are always too busy.'

'That *is* a problem,' said Grandad, spreading a blob of polish across one of the lenses. 'Everybody needs someone to talk to.'

'So, I thought, maybe you could be my someone. Gran says that you don't do much except polish the lenses.'

'Oh really? Is that what your gran says?'

'Yes. She says the lighthouse computer does all the work, and you just hang around up here pretending to be busy.'

'I see. So you reckon I would have plenty of time to listen to your problems?'

'I reckon so.'

Grandad stopped polishing. 'OK, Bosun, I'll make you a deal. I'll listen to your sob stories, if you listen to mine.'

This sounded fair to me, so I stuck out my hand.

'It's a deal.'

Grandad shook my hand. 'Just one story a week though. I don't want to be crying myself to sleep every Saturday night.'

‘One story a week.’

‘And if they’re only small problems, exaggerate a bit, just to keep things interesting. I like stuff with jungle animals.’

‘OK, Grandad,’ I said, although none of my complaints had anything to do with jungle animals. There was a cat next door that always hissed at me, but that probably didn’t count.

Grandad finished polishing, and stuffed the rag back into his belt.

‘Right then. Round one next Saturday. I hope something really bad happens to you, because I have stories that I’ve wanted to get off my chest for years.’

And, funny as it seems, I kind of hoped something bad would happen to me too. Something with jungle animals.

{chap head} CHAPTER 3

Tinfoil

I could not wait to get down to Duncade the next weekend. I was bursting to tell Grandad what had happened to me in school. Even as it was happening, I was thinking that it would make a great story for Grandad. The only thing missing was a gorilla, or maybe a screeching monkey.

Grandad would not let me start until we had started polishing the lenses.

'OK, Bosun,' he said then. 'Let's hear it. Your face is red from trying to hold it in.'

'It's so embarrassing,' I said, scrubbing a large circle in the dusty lens. 'There's no way you're going to beat this.'

'We'll see, Bosun. We'll see.'

And so I told Grandad the story of that week's problem.

'Nothing much happened all week, and I thought I would have nothing to tell you. Then Thursday came along.'

'As it often does,' said Grandad.

'So there I was. In class. Being a brilliant student, as usual.'

'What a nightmare,' said Grandad.

'No. That's not it. The embarrassing bit happened about two o'clock. When I had to ask our teacher – our *female* teacher – if I could go to the bathroom.'

Grandad stopped polishing. 'Is that it? Tell me there's more.'

'Yes, there's more. I went into the toilet and there was no paper. But I didn't notice this until after I had been. If you know what I mean.'

'Oh,' said Grandad. 'This could be nasty.'

'So I had to shout to the teacher to bring some in,' I said, covering my face with my hands. 'Everybody heard. I was super embarrassed. It was terrible. You have no idea.'

It felt good, sharing my story with Grandad. Just talking about it made the memory less embarrassing.

Grandad snorted. ‘That’s nothing. You want an embarrassing toilet story, listen to this. When *I* was young, we couldn’t afford toilet paper. So my mother used whatever was lying around. First we used newspaper, then crisp bags, then bits of cardboard boxes. Once I even had to use tinfoil.’

‘Tinfoil?’

Grandad nodded sadly. ‘Yep. My bottom was magnetized for a week. Everywhere I went, compasses and drawing pins followed me. I learned to check before sitting down.’

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Yep,’ said Grandad. ‘Now that’s an embarrassing toilet story. Are you sure you want to go on with this swapping complaints thing? Because, to be honest, I was nearly nodding off during your story.’

‘Yes, I want to keep swapping stories. I’m sure something really terrible will happen to me next week.’

Unfortunately, the worst thing that happened the following week was that I lost my pencil. When I told Grandad about this he responded with a tale about having his entire schoolbag stolen by a badger who had mistaken it for another badger.

The week after that I was certain that I would win. The barber had slipped when he was trimming the back of my head with electric clippers and had shaved a bald strip right up to my crown. Grandad took a long look at the bald strip, then took off his flat cap and showed me where a shark had bitten him on the head.

‘That’s a good one,’ I admitted, then asked if I could borrow his cap.

It was no use. Whatever happened to me, something a million times worse had happened to Grandad. He just reached into the past and pulled out these brilliant stories. I had no chance. He was seventy and I was only nine, so he had a lot more memories to choose from. Anyway, nothing really terrible had ever happened to me. Nothing that could compare with a shark bite on the head. Or if something had happened, it must have been when I was really young. Something that I couldn’t remember.

I would have to ask Dad, I decided. He would remember if something horrible had ever happened to me as a baby. Something that even Grandad couldn’t top.

{chap head} CHAPTER 4

Jelly Baby

I managed to get Dad on his own the following Wednesday. Generally Marty would latch on to our father as soon as he walked in the door, but, as luck would have it, Marty had an abscess on his tooth and was upstairs in bed.

I waited until Dad had put away his carpenter's belt, and was at the kitchen table with a cup of tea before nabbing him.

'Dad, I need to ask you something.'

'Have you cleared it with Marty?' joked Dad.

'Marty can't talk today. Whenever he opens his mouth, the cold air hurts his abscess.'

'OK, good. I mean bad. It's bad that poor Marty is sore, but it's good that we can talk. So, what do you want to talk about, Will?'

I climbed up on a chair. 'Me and Grandad are having a sort of competition. Every Saturday, I tell him about my main problem of the week, and then he tells me one of his from ages ago.'

'That sounds great,' said Dad. 'It's good to have someone to talk to. And you *are* the Bosun, so who better than your grandad?'

'That's what I thought, but . . .'

'But what?'

'But Grandad's stories are so much better than mine. He has sharks and badgers and tinfoil. All I have are clippers and toilet paper.'

Dad nodded seriously. 'Sharks are better than clippers.'

'I can't remember one terrible thing ever happening to me. Not one.'

Dad scratched the stubble on his chin. 'Well, there was *one* thing. You were only two at the time, so you probably don't remember it.'

My eyes opened wide. 'Was it terrible?'

'Oh yes.'

'And dangerous?'

'Absolutely.'

‘Tell me, Dad. And don’t leave out any details. I need the dangerous, terrible truth.’

So Dad told me this story. It was dangerous and it was terrible, but, best of all, it was true.

Six years ago, there were only four brothers in the Woodman house as HP hadn’t been born yet. Donnie and Bert were still babies who spent most of their time getting their nappies changed and trying to escape from the playpen. Only Marty and I were free to roam around the house. I don’t remember any of this; I’m just taking Dad’s word for it. But one thing I do remember, even after seven years, is the weekly jelly baby.

Every Friday, Gran drove in from Duncade to visit her grandsons. When she came through the front door, Gran always sang the first line of a made-up song.

‘Who’s the best boy in the world?’ she sang, dancing a little jig. And whoever could finish the song with the words ‘I am’ would get a special prize. A red jumbo jelly baby, big enough to suck on for an entire afternoon.

Marty had always claimed the precious prize because he was the only one able to talk. He began speaking at age one and a half, whereas I didn’t say much until I was nearly three. Gran had normal-sized jelly babies for the rest of us to suck on, but we were all jealous of the red jumbo, even Bert, who just mashed any sweets he got into his hair, then wondered why bees were following him around.

Marty was very proud of his jumbo jelly baby. It was one of the things that marked him out as leader of the pack. Every Friday, after he had the jelly baby safely in his hand, he would seek me out and play a mean little game.

‘What’s this?’ he would ask, holding up the jelly baby.

‘A baby,’ I would snivel, knowing what was coming.

‘And what is Will?’ was always Marty’s second question.

‘Will baby,’ I would answer, knowing this was what Marty wanted to hear.

‘Then this must be you,’ Marty would conclude and viciously bite off the jelly baby’s head.

‘Blaaaaah,’ I would blubber in shock. If Marty was in an especially mean mood, he would squeeze the jelly baby’s body, until red jelly oozed from the neck hole.

‘That’s your guts,’ he would declare, at which point the two year old version of me would run squealing to Mum and tell on Marty.

Unfortunately I only knew about thirty words at that point, so all I could say to Mum was, ‘Marty ate jelly baby.’

Which doesn’t sound that serious, does it?

This went on for ages. And as long as Marty got the jumbo and the rest of us got normal-sized jelly babies, our big brother was happy. But every Friday I longed to be the one who could finish Gran’s song and claim the jumbo before Marty could tease me with it.

My chance came one Friday morning when Gran arrived early. Marty was in the kitchen when the front door opened. Donnie and Bert were in the playpen and I was positioned perfectly in the front hall.

Gran came in singing. ‘Who’s the best boy in the world?’ she sang.

I was so excited that I couldn’t say the words. ‘Myemam,’ I blurted.

Gran tickled my chin. ‘Did you say something, little Will?’

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and said clearly, ‘I . . . am.’

‘Well,’ said Mum who was passing through on her way to the kitchen. ‘It looks like you will have to bring two jumbo jelly babies with you in future. We have another big boy here now.’

And so Gran took a tissue from her handbag, and unwrapped the jelly baby inside it. It lay on her palm, red and juicy and perfect. I took it carefully, as though it were the most precious jewel in a pirate’s collection.

The jumbo was mine.

I licked it once, to make sure it was real, then jammed the whole thing into my mouth, in case a certain someone tried to steal it.

Marty came out of the kitchen just in time to see a big, fat, red dribble roll down over my chin. For a moment he didn’t know what was going on, then he saw Gran and the empty tissue in her hand.

‘My jumbo,’ he said. ‘But I’m the big boy.’

I was expecting fireworks. When Marty lost his temper it could be really spectacular. But there were no fireworks that day. Marty simply turned and walked out of the room without another word.

If I had known what was coming, I think I might have preferred some fireworks.

{chap head} CHAPTER 5

Up the Jumper

When Marty saw me sucking on the jumbo jelly baby, he made a decision. This decision was that there wasn't enough room in the house for two jumbo-jelly-baby eaters. One of us had to go, and it wasn't going to be him. Marty decided that it would be better if I went off to live somewhere else, but the trick was how to get me to leave. He knew that I was quite fond of Mum and Dad, and that I might not like the idea of moving out.

Marty thought about this for a while. He was a big fan of nature programmes, so he decided the best way to find out how to make me leave was to watch me the way birdwatchers watch birds. Marty built himself a little tent behind the sofa with a blanket and three pillows, then crawled in with some supplies to spy on his baby brother. My gran thought this was hilarious and extremely cute, but she didn't know what was really going on.

Marty stayed in that tent for at least twenty minutes, which was the longest he had ever stayed in one spot. Even in bed Marty shifted about as though he was plugged in. Marty often went to sleep in one bed and woke up in another.

In those twenty minutes, my big brother discovered three things about me. One, I dribbled a lot. Two, I wasn't potty-trained yet and had to get my nappy changed quite often, and three, I loved to walk on straight lines. This last thing is something I still do. Whenever I see a straight line on the path, road or carpet, I like to walk along it and pretend I am a circus tightrope-walker. I am never happier than when I am walking on a straight line.

Marty thought about the straight-line walking for a while, and came up with an idea. If he could find a really long straight line for me to walk on, then I would leave home and walk along the straight line until I came to a new house to live in. This doesn't sound like a particularly brilliant plan, but for a little kid it's not bad.

As it happened, Marty knew exactly where to find such a straight line, but it was somewhere we were forbidden to go. Somewhere extremely dangerous that Marty had seen from the car. He decided that it was worth any risk, for a weekly supply of jumbo jelly babies.

Marty waited until Mum and Gran were in the kitchen, then he crawled out of his tent and across to where I was dancing to the music in my head, the way two-year-olds do.

'Hey, Will,' he said, knocking on my forehead to see if there was anyone in there. 'Wanna play a game?'

I rubbed my head, but I wasn't upset. Marty knocked on my head so much that I thought this was how kids said hello to each other.

'Play game,' I said, nodding. Marty hardly ever offered to play with me. In fact he viewed playing with his little brothers as punishment, and would beg to be sent to bed instead.

'OK,' said Marty. 'Let's play walking the line.'

'Walking the line,' I agreed.

Marty put a finger to his lips. 'This is a secret game. No telling Mum.'

I put a finger to my own lips and blew a wet raspberry.

'Secret game,' I said, attempting a wink. When I was very young, winking and whistling were the two things I thought I could do, but I couldn't. What I was really doing was blinking and humming.

Marty wiped the raspberry dribble from his face with my left ear. Not my actual ear, the ear of the blue bunny jumpsuit I was wearing. I can still remember that bunny jumpsuit. I wore it until I was four, even though it was for age twelve to eighteen months. Eventually Mum had to cut the feet out of it so I could squeeze myself in. I loved that bunny suit, especially the woolly hood that protected my ears from the wind, and the two bunny ears that flopped when I ran. It was like an all-over security blanket. Marty used those ears to wipe up anything he spilled, and was forever grabbing my head and dragging me off to mop up stuff.

'I know where the biggest, best straight line in the world is. Wanna see?'

My eyes were wide. 'Yes, please.' I have always had excellent manners.

'OK. Then you have to go up the jumper.'

Up the Jumper was a game we often played, when Marty could be bothered to play with any of his smaller brothers. It was an easy game to learn. You simply stuffed yourself up Marty's jumper, wiggled your head and arms through the holes, and then

waddled around the house screaming like a two-headed, four-armed monster. Mum and Dad always enjoyed watching us play Up the Jumper, unless Marty was wearing his good jumper.

What I didn't know was that when we were playing Up the Jumper, the second person in the jumper was hidden from anyone behind. Gran and Mum could only see Marty now, and must have thought that I had climbed into the playpen with Donnie and Bert.

Marty knocked on the back of my head, and because my arm was in his sleeve, I knocked on my head too.

'Stand on my feet,' he ordered.

'Feet, Mary,' I agreed and put my blue boots on his trainers. I was not always able to pronounce Marty properly when I was two, so I often called him Mary, which he didn't like very much.

'Marty! Mar-tee! Yes, walking the line. We have to go through the gates.'

I was horrified. 'Gates?'

'Yes. Through the gates. Now are you coming or not?'

'Coming.' I said. Even though we were not allowed through the gates, I didn't want to miss out on the best straight line in the world.

'Good. Well shush then. This is supposed to be a secret game.'

I shushed. Everyone knew that secret games were the best ones. Even a two-year-old knew that.

So Marty walked out the back door, into our yard. From there he went around the side and used a stick to open the safety gate. Five years later, HP would use that same stick to open the gate. It was a sturdy stick.

Once he had the safety gate open, Marty pulled up his jumper and I spilled out.

'OK, blue bunny,' he said. 'Run after Marty.'

'Run after Mary,' I said, climbing to my feet. I was getting quite excited. The best straight line in the world was nearby. In my two-year-old brain, I imagined a glowing white line in the sky. It tied itself up like a shoelace, but instead of a double bow, it had a face.

'Hurry,' said Marty, aware that Mum might discover our jailbreak any second.

I trotted after Marty, bunny ears jiggling, down the drive to the front gate. This was the edge of my daily world. I had never been past the front gate without a grown-up.

'Gate,' I said nervously.

'Gate,' agreed Marty, wrapping both hands around the sprung catch. He swung on that catch like a monkey, until his weight dragged it down. This was a valuable skill indeed. Who knows how long Marty had been escaping to the outside world this way.

The gate swung open, and it seemed to me that the noise from outside suddenly got a lot louder.

'Mummy,' I said, lip quivering.

Marty knew he was on the verge of losing me and had to think fast.

'Look!' he shouted, pointing. 'The line!'

'Line!' I squeaked in delight, and followed Marty through the gateway, into the forbidden zone.

Our house was in a brand-new estate, in the middle of a brand-new part of town. All around us were mini-mountains of sand and giant cubes of blocks.

We ignored shiny new playground swings and roundabouts, heading straight for the mysterious and wonderful line. All the way across the grass, the imaginary line in my head was calling me on.

Faster, faster. I'm waiting for you.

Soon we came to the edge of the estate. This was new territory for me. The only thing separating us from the rest of the world was a steel fence, and, looking back, I can see how someone like Marty was never going to be beaten by a mere steel fence.

Sure enough, my big brother found a spot where we could wriggle underneath.

'Dogs go this way,' he explained, pulling me through by the bunny ears. He was right. My bunny jumpsuit smelled like dog. Now Mum would have to wash it again, and I would hang around by the dryer until it was ready to wear.

We were now at the side of a huge road. Roads were the most forbidden places in the world – places where speeding cars and giant trucks roared past, with grilles like dinosaur teeth, ready to gobble up any little boys silly enough to put a toe on the tarmacadam.

'Road,' I said, in a wobbly, worried voice.

‘This is a special road,’ said Marty. ‘Look! No cars!’

Marty was right. There were no cars. Not a single one. To prove this point, he danced out into the middle of the black road, waving his arms and screeching like a monkey, daring the cars to come and get him.

I know now that there were no cars because the road was not finished. It was part of the new highway that would connect our town to Dublin.

Marty pointed at the ground. ‘Here’s the line. Look!’

My eyes followed his finger. There, running down the middle of the road, was the most beautiful white line I had ever seen. It was fat and speckled with sparkles, and I was immediately under its spell.

Walk along me, Will, said the line. *Walk along me forever.*

And the line did seem to go on forever, stretching off into the distance.

‘You walk along the line,’ said Marty, urging me on with a little tug on my left ear.

I tried to resist. I tried really hard to turn around and hurry back to the house, but the call of the line was too strong. I know now that I was mesmerized by its straightness and sparkle.

I walked out to the middle of the spotless new road, and put one blue foot on the line. Nothing bad happened, so I put the other foot in front of the first one. Heel to toe. That was the proper way to walk a line.

Marty was delighted. ‘See! Now, just keep walking the line. On and on and on, forever. If you come to a house with people in it and dogs and a canary and stuff, then you can live with them and eat *their* jumbo jelly babies.’

I didn’t hear anything after the first bit.

Now, just keep walking the line. On and on and on, forever.

I took one baby step, then another. Everything else left my tiny baby brain, except the wish that I could walk this line forever. It really was the best line in the world, because you could feel it as well as see it. It pushed up out of the road like a fat stripe of plasticine. I forgot about my mum and dad, I forgot about my brothers and jelly babies. The only thing in my head was this wonderful line.

‘Bye bye, Will,’ called Marty. ‘I hope you find a nice house, far, far away.’

‘Bye bye, Mary,’ I replied, and set off down the wonderful line.

It worked, thought Marty, squeezing under the fence and racing home, hopefully before Mum realized that he was gone. Marty could really run when he was in a hurry, and he timed himself from the fence. He was never a great counter, so Marty timed himself by singing ‘Little Drummer Boy’ and seeing how far he got. It only took him as far as ‘I am a poor boy too, pa rum pum pum pum’ to reach the back door.

Meanwhile, I was happily walking the line. I really was an excellent line walker, and my feet hardly ever landed on the tarmacadam. Which was just as well, because the fresh tarmac was still wet and sticky in spots, and whenever I touched the road, a black rubbery string stuck to my foot and stretched out behind me like a trail of chewing gum. But even these rubbery ropes tugging at my feet could not ruin my enjoyment of this wonderful line.

On and on I went, heel to toe. After a while, I came to a gentle bend in the road. I was a bit disappointed by this; a line going around a bend cannot really be a straight line. But I decided to forgive it and keep walking. After all it did straighten out again after the turn. In fact, by the time it reached the orange traffic cones, where the new road joined the old road and where all the traffic was, the line was as straight as an arrow.