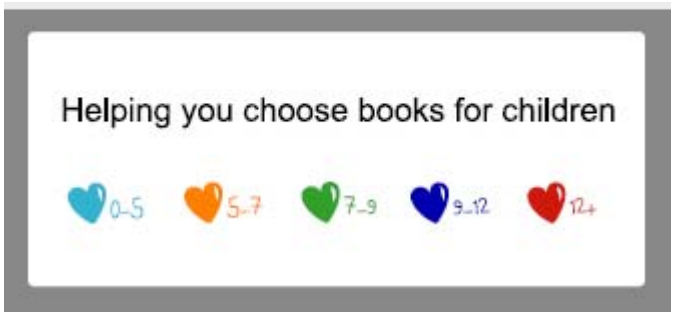
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The Middle of the World

She started with The Universe. Then she wrote The Galaxy, The Solar System, The Earth, Europe, England, Felling, Our House, The Kitchen, The White Chair With A Hundred Holes Like Stars, then her name, Margaret, and she paused.

'What's in the middle of me?' she asked.

'Your heart,' said Mary.

She wrote My Heart.

'In the middle of that?'

'Your soul,' said Catherine.

She wrote My Soul.

Mam reached down and lifted the front of Margaret's T-shirt and prodded her navel.

'That's where your middle is,' she said. 'That's where you were part of me.'

Margaret drew a row of stick figures, then drew concentric rings growing out from each of them.

'Where's the real middle of the world?' she said.

'They used to think the Mediterranean,' said Catherine.

'Medi means middle. Terra means world. The sea at the middle of the world.'

Margaret drew a blue sea with a green earth around it.

'There was another sea at the edges,' said Catherine. 'It was filled with monsters and it went right to the end of the world. If you got that far, you just fell off.'

Margaret drew this sea. She put fangs and fins for monsters.

'There's no end, really, is there?' she said.

'No,' said Catherine.

'And there's no middle, is there?'

Catherine laughed.

'Not really.'

Mam prodded Margaret's navel again.

'That's the middle of the world,' she said.

Later that day we went to the grave. Colin rushed home from Reyrolle's on his Vespa for lunch. He bolted his food and rattled away again. We heard the scooter taking him on to Felling Bank and down towards the square.

When it faded, Mary said,

'Should we go to the grave today?'

We hadn't been for months. We thought of the dead being in Heaven rather than being in the Earth.

'Good idea,' said Mam. 'I'll make some bara brith for when you get home.'

We were on the rocky path at the foot of the street when Dandy ran after us. He was a little black poodle that was never clipped and had horrible breath.

'Go home!' said Mary. 'Dandy, go home!'

He yapped and growled and whined.

'Dandy, go home!'

No good. We just had to let him trot along beside us.

Margaret fiddled with her navel as she walked.

'When I started,' she said, 'what was I like?'

'What do you think you were like?' said Mary. 'Like a gorilla? You were very very very little. You were that little, you couldn't even be seen. You were that little, nobody even knew you were blinkin there!'

'Daft dog,' said Catherine, as Dandy ran madly through a clump of foxgloves and jumped at bees.

Soon we saw Auntie Jan and Auntie Mona ahead of us. They wore head scarves and carried shopping bags on their arms.

'Bet you can't tell which is which,' said Mary.

'Even when they're talking to me I can't tell which is which,' said Margaret.

The two aunts hurried into Ell Dene Crescent.

'Did they look the same when nobody knew they were there?' said Margaret.

'Of course they did!' said Mary. 'Everybody looks the same when they can't be blinkin seen!'

The aunts waved and grinned and we all waved and Dandy yapped and then they hurried on again down into Ell Dene Crescent.

Mary picked daisies from the verges as we walked.

She said, 'Dad once said that daisies were the best of all flowers. I think I remember that.'

'You do,' said Catherine. 'You do remember. He called them day's eyes. Awake in the day and closed asleep at night.'

Further on, Daft Peter lay in his greatcoat under a tree on The Drive.

'Not him!' said Catherine. 'We'll never get away from him!'

We sat on a bench on Watermill Lane.

'How far is it?' said Margaret.

'You know how far,' said Mary.

'Nowhere's far in Felling,' said Catherine.

We watched Daft Peter.

'Move,' said Catherine. 'Go on. Move.'

'Is Felling very small?' said Margaret.

Mary stamped her feet.

'Yes,' said Catherine.

'Is it the smallest place in the world?'

'Is this Daft Question Day?' said Mary.

'Yes!' said Margaret.

'It's very small,' said Catherine. 'But there's smaller places.'

'Where?'

'Places in the desert,' said Mary. 'Rings of huts in the jungle. Villages in the Himalayas.'

'Yes,' said Catherine. 'And places like Hebburn or Seaton Sluice.'

'Not Seaton Sluice,' said Mary. 'It's got that big beach. It's got to be bigger than Felling. And Hebburn's got that big new shopping centre.'

Catherine sighed.

'Windy Nook, then,' she said.

'That's not fair,' said Mary. 'Windy Nook's a part of somewhere else.'

'Where, then? And make it somewhere we know.'

'Bill Quay,' said Mary.

No one said anything, even though we all knew Bill Quay was part of somewhere else as well.

'Thank goodness,' said Catherine. 'Bill Quay.'

Daft Peter didn't move. In the end, we walked on. Dandy snarled as we drew nearer to the man.

'Dandy!' said Catherine.

Daft Peter smiled and rubbed his eyes.

'Here's me thought I was dreamin,' he said. 'And all the time I'm just wakin up.'

He leaned against the tree.

'What would ye say if I knew how to turn swimmin fish into flyin fowl?' he said.

'Take no notice,' whispered Catherine.

'Nowt much at all, I see,' said Peter. 'But what if I said I could take you girls and show you how to fly aroond this tree.'

'I'd say you couldn't!' said Mary.

'Aha!' said Peter. 'Just let me look inside this bag, then.'

He dug into a brown carrier bag. He took out a sandwich, something bright red and black hanging out of two dried-out slices of bread. He held it out to Mary as we approached.

'Take a bite of that,' he said. 'Gan on, take a bite of that and see.'

Dandy jumped up at him, barking and snarling. Daft Peter flailed and kicked and the sandwich flew into the road.

'Daft dog!' he shouted. 'Look what ye've done to me dinna!'

We hurried past.

'What would ye say if I turned a daft dog into a nice meat pie?' yelled Peter.

'I'd say it would be very hairy and it would stink!' said Mary.

We arrived at the high steel graveyard gates. Just inside, withered flowers and broken wreaths were heaped in bins. Wasps and flies hovered and crawled. We held Dandy back from jumping at them. We all agreed that simple daisies were the best idea. We walked in single file on the narrow path between the graves. We murmured the names, the familiar and the unknown. At the far edge, just beyond the spiked fence, traffic thundered on the bypass.

We stood before our grave: *Barbara, beloved sister, 1959; James, beloved father, 1966; Neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels*; and the empty area for other names. Mary placed the daisies by the headstone. We hung our heads and said our prayers. We said the prayers that Mam and Colin would have said. I imagined the two crumbled coffins and bodies, their intermingled dust. I imagined the new coffins being placed there, the new names being written, the new dust mingling. Not enough room to take all of us, not enough space for all of our names.

'What did she look like?' said Mary, as always.

'She was lovely,' said Catherine, as always. 'She looked a bit like all of us.'

'I love her,' said Margaret. 'And I never even saw her.'

'You remember Dad, though,' said Catherine. 'You can both see Dad.'

'Yes,' they said.

We dried our eyes and wandered among the graves. The untouched ground between the graves and the bypass was narrowing.

'Where will they *put* everybody?' said Mary.

Nobody knew.

'Maybe they go back to the start,' said Catherine, and we looked across the neat rows towards St Mary's church a quarter mile away, where the trees and the tilting faded gravestones were.

'It must have been lovely once,' Mary said. 'The little church and a few graves and none of the noise.'

As we walked back towards the gates, Margaret said,

'Are all the people here in Heaven like Dad and Barbara are?'

'Lots of them,' said Catherine.

'Heaven must be very big,' said Margaret.

'It must be blinkin enormous,' said Mary.

We walked through the stink of the flowers. Daft Peter waited outside against the graveyard wall. He swigged something from a black bottle.

We crossed the road and kept away from him.

'Have a sip of this!' he yelled. 'This'll get ye flyin!'

We heard the shuffle of his feet behind us as we turned on to The Drive. Dandy kept pausing, turning, snarling. Margaret kept on fiddling with her navel.

'Here!' yelled Peter. 'What would ye say if I said I knew where the entrance to Hell is?'

'I would say you were Daft Peter,' whispered Mary.

'What's that?' yelled Peter. 'What would ye say? Eh? Eh?'

Catherine sighed. She turned around. Dandy stood at her side, snarling.

'I'd say you were wrong and you don't and you should think more about the way up to Heaven. Now go away.'

Peter swigged from his bottle.

'Aha!' he said. 'Ahahaha! And what would ye say if I said if you went to Felling Square and went to the fountain and looked doon through the cracks in the pavements that ye'd soon get to feel the heat and smell the sulphur and see the fire and the Devil hisself waitin to welcome ye?'

Dandy snarled.

'Nowt much, I see,' said Peter.

We walked on.

'Cat got your tongues, eh?'

'That dog got me dinna!' he yelled.

Margaret giggled.

'Aha!' yelled Peter. 'And what would ye say if I said the top of that fountain's shaped just like a little lass's belly button?'

Margaret snapped her T-shirt down.

'Get him, Dandy!' said Mary, and Dandy rushed at Peter again. Peter kicked and flailed and his drink sprayed and splashed out of the top of the bottle. The dog trotted proudly back to us.

'There now,' said Mary. 'That's fettled him.'

'That dog got me dinna an me drink!' yelled Peter.

We giggled and sighed.

Auntie Mona came out of Ell Dene Crescent carrying her shopping bag.

'Just popping down for some bread for the tea,' she said. 'And are you all all right?'

She saw Peter.

'Daft soul,' she said. 'Has he been pestering you?'

'That dog got me dinna!' yelled Peter.

Auntie Mona giggled.

'Is that right?' she said.

'Aye!' said Peter. 'What would ye say if I said that dog got me dinna?'

Auntie Mona took out her purse. She held out some pennies to him.

Peter shuffled meekly towards her and took the coins.

'There,' she said. 'Get yourself a pie from Myers and stop pestering people.'

Peter closed his lips tight and shuffled away towards Felling Square.

'Poor daft soul,' said Auntie Mona.

'Aha!' he yelled. 'And what would ye say if I said the best pies is from Dickmans?'

Auntie Mona laughed and said she had to get off. They'd soon be back for their tea. She hurried away.

'Which one was that?' said Margaret.

'Auntie Jan,' said Mary.

'No,' said Catherine. 'Auntie Mona.'

Beside the rocky path, Dandy chased the bees again.

'What *would* you say if Daft Peter knew those things?' said Margaret.

'I'd say it was Daft Question Day,' said Mary.

We looked back over the hundreds of houses towards the graveyard.

Catherine said, 'Maybe Heaven doesn't have to be so big. They said at school that sometime soon the number of people alive will be more than all the people who've ever lived.'

We pondered this while Dandy rushed madly through the foxgloves.

'It's nice to think they're there together, isn't it?' said Mary.

'Yes,' we said.

Dandy trotted home and disappeared. At the gate we smelt the bara brith baking.

'Did you say a prayer for me?' said Mam.

'Yes,' we said.

'And I put daisies on the grave,' said Mary.

'They'd like that.'

She took the bara brith out of the oven and laid it on a wire rack to cool. I sat on the back step with Catherine and we looked out at the immensity of the sky. Margaret sat on the White Chair With A Hundred Holes Like Stars and drew herself and Catherine and Mary flying around Felling's trees. Mary told Mam about Dandy, Daft Peter, Auntie Mona and Auntie Jan. We heard Colin's scooter rattling up Felling Bank and turning into the street. He roared into the garden, and pulled his parka and his helmet off as he came into the house.

Then we all sat at the little table in the bright kitchen. We ate huge slices of the warm bread, sighed at the sweetness of sultanas, caught the melting butter with our tongues, squeezed in tight at the middle of the world.