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opening extract from

Desirable

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You won't believe this but I used to be a loser. Like one time it was my birthday and Mum said, "Let's have a bit of a party, George. Ask anyone you like." And I couldn't get anyone to come. Not one person. I did ask Tiny Biggs, from the Warhammer Club at school, because he's a loser too. He said, "Will there be food?"

"Loads of food. Chicken wings. Pringles. Birthday cake."

"Sounds good."

"So you'll come?"

"Can't. Sorry."

"Why not?"

"Social suicide, isn't it? If anyone found out I'd been to your house, I'd be a joke. No offence."

Tiny won't sit with me at lunch time for the same reason. The only time he talks to me is during Warhammer Club. That's because there are only two people in the Warhammer Club – me and him. Tiny thinks that things are going to be different in the future. "Girls are obsessed with fashion," he says, "And celebs. All we need is for Kylie to say she likes Warhammer, and the next thing you know, we'll be fighting the women off."

So far, Kylie has not got into Warhammer, so it's still just the two of us.

There's a girl who gets the same bus as me called Daniella. I thought about asking her to my party too. I thought about it in detail in fact. I knew I wouldn't be able to ask her just like that. I haven't spoken to a girl since Year 5, except in self defence. But I did work out a plan. If I dropped my bag just as I was getting on the bus, she might spot the birthday card that I'd carefully left sticking out of the side pocket and she might say, "Oh. Is it your birthday? Are you having a party or anything?"

And then I'd say, "My Mum's gonna cook a big tea – chicken wings, birthday cake, stuff like that."

And she'd say, "Stop, stop. You're making me hungry."

And I'd say, "Come and get some if you like. There'll be plenty to spare."

And she'd say, "Brilliant!" and come home with me. And we'd all live happily ever after.

I wrote the whole thing down on a piece of paper and learnt it off by heart, so I'd be ready.

And it nearly worked too. The bus did come. I did drop the bag. But then Daniella didn't look down and see the card. She just stepped over the bag, and got on the bus. That slowed me down when I was

picking things up, so by the time I stood up, the bus was moving off with her on board and I got left at the bus stop.

So my birthday sit off was just me and Mum and Dad and Grandad. Mum said, "Well this is cosy."

"It's great," said Grandad. "Can we do the birthday cake now?"

Dad said, "We haven't even had the chicken wings yet!?"

"I know," said Grandad, "But I've got to go in a minute. I'm having my hair cut."

Even my own Grandad didn't want a sit off with me on my birthday. Mum lit the candles. Grandad said, "Do you remember your Patrick's birthday and you said he could have five friends and fifty turned up!?"

Patrick is my big brother. He's at uni. He's very popular. And clever. And good at football. And drawing. And piano.

"And then when it was time for the cake, he took a napkin, put it in front of the cake, blew and then ... the whole cake vanished!"

He's also good at magic tricks.

"How did he do that!?" asked Grandad.

And he's good at maths. And fixing things. And talking to people. I don't know how he does it. Any of it. I don't know how he gets top

grades, scores goals, makes friends. These things are all as weird as vanishing cakes to me.

“I got you a present,” said Grandad, passing me a little parcel.

“Go on, open it. My haircut’s not going to wait forever.”

I opened it. I’d been hinting like mad for some extra Warhammer figures so it was a big surprise to find that the parcel contained a bottle of aftershave with a pair of “free designer” cuff-links stuck to the lid. Grandad said, “I hope you like it. Got to go.” And went.

“Nice cuff-links,” said Dad, “Just what every boy needs.”

The aftershave was called “Desirable”.

Mum said, “I bought him that aftershave when I was a little girl.”

“And they’re still making it? It must be good then. It must be a classic,” said Dad.

“I don’t mean I bought him that brand. I mean I bought him that bottle. Look on the back.”

On the back was a sticker of a man with big hair. Under that it said, “This aftershave best before end of: August 1982.”

Mum said, “Give it to me. I’ll put it in the recycling.”

I said, “No. Don’t. Maybe it’s like wine or something. Maybe the longer you leave it, the better it gets.”

“I wouldn’t risk it if I were you,” said Dad. “Here’s our present to you.”

And they gave me the exact Warhammer figures that I’d always wanted.