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Cathy Cassidy

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1

Life is full of surprises – you never know what might be round the corner. Some are good surprises, like when you find a chocolate bar in the bottom of your lunch box, hidden away beneath the cheese and pickle sandwiches. Some are not so good, like when all you find is a shrivelled-up stick of celery.

Unless you happen to love celery, of course, but in my experience nobody does.

Anyhow, life is full of surprises, today especially, because it is the first day of the new school year. We stand around the playground in little clumps, talking too fast, laughing, telling each other what we did in the holidays. Willow went to Cornwall and Beth went to Majorca. I went to Eastbourne for the day, and of course, it rained. Already the summer is fading, as if it never happened at all.

'Daizy,' Willow whispers, squeezing my arm. 'Have you seen Ethan Miller? Whoa!'

I sneak a look at Ethan, who is playing keepy-uppy with a tennis ball in a corner of the playground while his mates look on. Over the summer holidays, his hair has turned blond and sprouted startling vertical spikes. He is also really, really tanned. In a faintly orange sort of a way.

'I heard he went to Florida in the holidays,' Beth sighs, offering us each a stick of bubblegum. 'He's just soooo cool!'

'Hot, you mean,' Willow corrects her.

If you ask me, Ethan Miller looks like he's been playing with his mum's fake tan,

then had some kind of an accident involving a bottle of bleach before finally sticking his fingers into a plug socket.

It's not what I'd call a good look, but Beth and Willow think differently. Their eyes have gone all faraway and dreamy, as if they are looking at a cute little puppy instead of the slouchy, grouchy boy who once dropped a worm down the back of my school sweatshirt back in Year Three.

It's very worrying.

'Be serious,' I say. 'This is Ethan Miller we are talking about.'

'I know,' Willow breathes, as if she has never seen him before. 'I know.'

So that is the first surprise of the day, and it is NOT good. My friends have a crush on the most annoying boy in the school. Scary.

'Are you feeling OK?' I ask Willow. 'You look kind of . . . weird.'

'I feel kind of weird,' she admits. 'Every time Ethan looks at me, my tummy feels like it's full of butterflies.'

'He's not looking at you,' Beth snaps. 'He's looking at me. And butterflies are nothing . . . I feel all feverish and faint. My heart is racing.'

'Perhaps it's some kind of bug?' I ask, and Beth scowls.

'Look, Daizy,' she says. 'We're Year Six, now. We're not little kids any more, we are practically teenagers.'

'We're ten,' I point out.

'Exactly,' she agrees. 'Practically teenagers. We are growing up. Our emotions are in turmoil.'

'They are?'

‘They are,’ Willow assures me. ‘We’ve got hormones too. I’ve read about them in your big sister’s magazines, Daizy. All those emotions and hormones are boiling away inside of us, like a big vat of school stew.’

‘Ewwww,’ I say.

Willow and Beth sigh. ‘You wouldn’t understand,’ they say.

They’re right – I don’t understand why anyone would go all mushy over a boy like Ethan Miller. I decide to take a look at my sister Becca’s magazines and find out more about this hormone-stew stuff. I hope it’s a temporary thing, because I’m not sure I can cope with a whole year of Beth and Willow acting all lovesick and gooey.

I decide to change the subject. ‘I can’t believe we are finally in Year Six,’ I say. ‘Just imagine! We’ve waited years for this. It’s exciting . . . like anything could happen!’

Beth and Willow tear their eyes away from Ethan Miller, grudgingly.

‘Are you mad?’ Beth asks. ‘All that’ll happen is we that have to put up with a whole year of Miss Grimwood. Torture!’

That shuts me up.

Miss Grimwood has been teaching Year Six since the time of the dinosaurs. She has iron-grey hair and wears scratchy tweed suits and nylon blouses. Legend has it that she keeps a box of tissues on her desk because when she gets cross, she makes her pupils cry. Even the boys.

Last term, she confiscated Murphy Malone’s red studded belt in the middle of the dinner hall, and when he complained that his trousers would fall down without it, she handed him a piece of string instead. Murphy said it was a violation of his human rights, but Miss Grimwood just laughed and dropped the belt in the bin, along with all the

leftover chips and cabbage and rice pudding.

I have seen Murphy this morning, and he is wearing cut-off skate shorts, red Converse trainers and a fringy skull-print scarf. I guess he is looking for a showdown with Miss Grimwood, which could be interesting.

The bell rings, and we shuffle into unruly lines along the edge of the playground. I catch sight of my little sister, Pixie, with her shiny shoes and spindly plaits, trailing a skipping rope behind her. She waves, grinning her gap-toothed smile as she lines up with the other Year Two kids.

Mr Smart, the head teacher, stands in front of us. ‘Welcome back to Stella Street Primary,’ he booms. ‘I hope you have all had a wonderful summer – and are ready to do your best in the year ahead!’

We all stand a little straighter, except for Ethan Miller, who just smirks and swaggers and checks that his hair is still vertical.

Mr Smart strides over to our line, narrowing his eyes. ‘Year Six, this is your last year of primary,’ he says. ‘I don’t need to tell you how important that is. I want you to make me proud.’

I look along the row of teachers behind him for a glimpse of Miss Grimwood, but I can’t see her. Perhaps she is already in Room 12, writing long-division sums on the whiteboard?

‘There has been a change to staffing this year,’ Mr Smart continues. ‘Miss Grimwood is taking a gap year. She is spending the next twelve months running a beach bar on the Costa del Sol.’

I nearly choke on my bubblegum. A half-blown bubble explodes, leaving strands

of pink sticky stuff all over my nose.

'A gap year?' Willow blurts. 'Isn't that what students do?'

'A beach bar?' Beth echoes. 'In the Costa del Sol?'

'Miss Grimwood had hidden depths,' Murphy Malone says, impressed. 'Obviously.'

I try to picture her in a leopard-print bikini, sipping cocktails on the beach, but my imagination fails me. I'm kind of glad about that.

'This is your new teacher,' Mr Smart booms. 'Miss Moon . . .'

Beth, Willow and I are wide-eyed. We haven't had a new teacher at Stella Street Primary since . . . well, since forever.

Miss Moon steps forward, grinning. She is young and pretty, with glossy auburn hair, green eyes and a mouth that seems to be smiling all the time. She is wearing dangly earrings and a green tunic dress over pale jeans. None of our other teachers ever wear jeans.

Miss Grimwood taking a gap year in the Costa del Sol . . . that's a surprise. But a new teacher who wears jeans and dangly earrings? That's more of a miracle, really.

'Pleased to meet you, Year Six,' she says, and her voice is soft and kind and clear. 'I think this year is going to be fun!'

Suddenly, I do, too.

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Room 12 has had a major makeover in the school holidays. The desks are no longer in neat rows but clumped together in groups. A library corner has appeared from nowhere, with rugs, beanbags and a bookcase full of bright, brand-new books.

The shelves above the sink area are stacked with rainbow poster paint, glitter, glue and coloured paper. There are fairy lights draped along the windows, big leafy plants ranged along the sills, and soft, swishy music playing in the background.

Music. In class. Seriously.

'Interesting,' Willow whispers. 'Think she'll let me play my Ting Tings CD tomorrow?'

We grab a table next to the library corner, and Beth looks around for Ethan Miller, fluttering her lashes. 'There's lots of room here,' she tells him. 'I can help you with your long division . . .'

'I can help you with your spelling, Ethan,' Willow offers. 'Sit next to me!'

I look at my friends in horror. Are they serious?

'Tempting, girls,' Ethan says. 'Tempting. How about you, Daizy? What can you help me with?'

'I can't help you at all,' I snap. 'You're past help. But I'd get my money back on that fake tan, if I were you. You look like you've been rolling around in custard powder, or onion gravy.'

Ethan just laughs. 'You're funny, Daizy Star,' he says, flinging his bag down at a neighbouring table. 'Sorry to disappoint you, girls, but I'm gonna sit with my mates . . .

don’t want to distract you from your work!’

I breathe a huge sigh of relief, but Beth and Willow are not impressed. ‘You could have been a bit friendlier!’ Beth says. ‘What was all that stuff about onion gravy?’

‘Yeah, Daizy!’ Willow chips in. ‘He might have sat with us!’

‘I know,’ I say with a shudder.

In the end, Murphy, Tom and Luka slide into the remaining seats. Miss Moon turns off the music and we all snap to attention. ‘This is a big year for all of us,’ she announces. ‘I just know we’re going to get along. Why don’t we start off by getting to know each other?’

She hands out star-shaped pieces of card, sheets of sparkly paper and pots of glitter, then asks us to draw ourselves in the star-shape. Around the edges, we are supposed to write about our hopes and dreams.

‘We all have things that make us special,’ Miss Moon explains. ‘Skills, hobbies, interests, character traits. Those are our star qualities, and they are just as important to me as SATs and the Literacy Hour. Dreams are special. Don’t ever let them slip through your fingers!’

What if you have more than one dream, though? Sometimes I want to be a rock star, and other times I think it’d be cool to be an actress. Then I change my mind completely and decide to be a famous artist, living in a crumbling mansion by the sea, with paint stains on my fingers and llamas in the garden. It could get very complicated if you tried to follow every single dream. One week you’d be miming to rock songs in front of the mirror or planning your dress for the red-carpet premiere of your first-ever movie, and the next you’d be painting masterpieces and reading up on how to look after exotic

pets.

How are you meant to decide?

Next to me, Willow draws herself singing, with glitter-encrusted notes floating around her picture. Around the edges, she writes about her ambition to be a singer. Beth sketches herself in a sparkly pink tutu, dancing a pirouette. Her ambition is to be a famous ballerina, and then retire to run her own ballet school. I look around.

Murphy draws himself as an artist, Tom as a mad inventor and Luka as a doctor. Ethan, on the next table, is drawing himself as a striker for Man U Football Club.

I pick up a pencil, and draw a round-faced girl with ringletty brown hair, big brown eyes and sparkly hair slides. That's me, Daizy Star.

I like to draw, I like to sing, I like to dance . . . but I'm not especially good at any of those things. I'd like to play the guitar, and learn how juggle and how to do a perfect cartwheel without ending up in a heap in the corner, but those things aren't looking likely, either. My mind is a blank.

Miss Moon pins a huge star-shape snipped from sparkly gold card on to the wall.

'Every week,' she tells us, 'We will pick out one special star pupil – our Star of the Week. Perhaps someone who has worked extra hard, achieved something special or just helped a friend in need . . . I hope as the year goes on, all of you will have a turn at being Star of the Week. In my class, you will all have your chance to sparkle!'

Miss Moon has the whole class spellbound.

'Cool,' I breathe. Miss Moon starts to pin up our finished pictures, a whole constellation of silver stars clustered around the big gold one. I race to finish mine. I still can't think of my skills and talents, so I add glittery question marks on each point of the

star.

I don’t know my star quality just yet, but one thing’s for sure, I’m going to find it – and when I do, I’m going to shine!