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Would You Rather?

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Amy and I have been messing about in my room all afternoon. We've gone through our favourite playlist, prancing along in front of the full-length mirror, me singing into my hairbrush, Amy wailing into the hair straighteners. We've run through our old dance routines and tried out some new ones and now we've moved on to practising our flirting technique.

Actually, Amy is practising *her* flirting technique. She's keen on a boy at school who's a bit slow on the uptake. Me, I'm not too sure if I want to flirt at all. I don't think I'm ready to be *in lurve*, not since I've seen what it's done to Ezzie. Like Mum says, it's a messy business, romance, because it involves men.

Even flirting is complicated. Amy is explaining to me how she thinks Mitch likes her but he won't make the first move.

'You do it then.'

'What? Like me put my arm round him?'

'Yeah.'

'No way!'

'OK, be a bit more subtle. Say something to make him put his arm round you.'

'Right. Good idea.' She thinks for a minute then her face lights up. 'OK, I'm ready, let's give it a go.'

'What?'

'You be Mitch and I'll be me.'

'I'm not putting my arm around you!'

'I'm not asking you to! Well, I am, but as Mitch, not you. Come on, Flick, it's known as acting! Improvisation! You're good at that.'

'All right.' Amy always knows how to get around me. Flattery works every time. She beams at me, then strikes a pose, body hunched, shivering, arms wrapped around herself. Oh dear. She's such a ham actor.

'I'm freezing . . .' she whimpers.

'Put a jumper on then.'

'You're not supposed to say that!' she barks, falling immediately out of role.

'Why not? That's what Mitch would say!'

'No he wouldn't!' She thinks about it for a second and then says, honestly, 'Well, even if he would, you're not supposed to! You're supposed to be helping!'

'I am helping! Stay in role.'

She groans and collapses on to my bed, throwing her arm over her face, the picture of despair. 'There's no point,' she wails. 'It's not going to work. He doesn't even know I exist.'

'I thought you said he was just too shy to make the first move?'

'Oh, I don't know. Men!' She sighs deeply then rolls over and props herself up on her elbows. Her face breaks into a grin.

'Daddy or chips?'

'Chips!' This is the signal to play our favourite game. It came from a TV advert for oven chips. There was this really cute little kid with an older sister and an annoying dad. The dad kept pinching the cute kid's chips so the older sister says to her, 'Daddy or chips?' meaning, which one do you like best, and the cute kid thinks about it and answers truthfully, 'Chips.' Ezzie and I used to love this advert, because the dad in it was just like our dad and he used to pinch our chips too.

So we started up this game that is all about choices. They can be serious choices or silly ones, but the rule is, you have to think about them carefully, even if they're so ridiculous they make you roll about on the floor, shrieking with laughter.

But Ezzie hasn't felt like shrieking with laughter for a while so I've started playing it with Amy instead.

I have to admit, she's pretty good at it. Better than at acting, anyway.

'I've got a good one!' Amy sits upright. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

'Would you rather . . . have one huge eye in the middle of your forehead or three small eyes?'

'Nice one!' I consider it carefully. 'Can I have two eyes at the front and one at the back?'

'No, they're all at the front.'

'Pity. Not so useful.' I think about it for a while, weighing up all the implications. 'I'd still be able to see more though. And I could rest one if it was tired.'

'You'd need a massive pair of sunglasses though.'

'A massive trio of glasses, you mean. That would be cool!'

'Hmm.' Amy's not convinced. 'Don't know if Specsavers do them. And anyway, what would you do if one of your eyes needed glasses and the others didn't?'

'Easy, I'd wear a contact lens. Or a monocle.'

Amy giggles. 'A monocle! That's funny. But think about it, you'd take forever getting ready to go out. You'd have three eyes to make up . . . eyeshadow, highlighter, liner, mascara . . . that's expensive too.' She thinks for a moment then says, 'No, I'm going for one. It's easier and cheaper.'

'I'm going for three. Then if anything happened to the other two I'd still have one left. And it would be useful for driving.'

'You can't drive.'

'I know, but I will one day. Ezzie's learning.'

'Is she? Is your dad teaching her?'

'No, he thinks she should have proper lessons to get her started. He and Mum booked her ten lessons for her seventeenth birthday. She's having one right now.'

'Lucky thing. I can't wait to learn to drive.'

Amy can't wait for anything. She lives life in the fast lane and she's always miles in front of me. Music, hair, fashion, gossip, she's up there in the know because she spends her life reading all the mags, watching TV and checking out the net. It's like she's programmed to Fast Forward and I'm programmed to Play.

Oh no, I sound really boring! I'm not, honest! I love doing stuff. I'm really good at acting and improvisation – everyone says so – and I love writing stories. One day I'm going to be a journalist or work in television, like Aunty Libby. But Amy will be the celeb and I'll be the one interviewing her.

I read my stories to Grandma Liz. She's my biggest fan. I've got two grannies, Grandma Liz and Grandma Fizz. Ezzie was named Elizabeth after Grandma Liz who's Dad's mother and I was named Felicity after Grandma

Fizz who's Mum's mother. We don't see much of Grandma Fizz because she lives in Scotland but Grandma Liz and Grandpa Bert live nearby so we see a lot of them.

We don't see anything of Aunty Libby though. She's my dad's older sister. She went off to university when my dad was little and never came back. I don't think I've ever met her and Dad can hardly remember her himself. She's really big in television now, though she's not a face you'd recognize. You see her name on the credits, she's a director. It must be so interesting, though personally I'd rather be in front of the camera. She worked her way up, Grandma says, and now she's really important.

It's a shame we don't see her. 'She's too busy,' Grandpa says and looks a bit sad. I don't think I'd ever be too busy to see my own mum and dad. Or my annoying little brother and his wife and their two amazing daughters. But then I'm not famous.

Yet.

We do get some seriously expensive birthday and Christmas presents though from Aunty Libby and Uncle Jay (he's American) and their kids, Sam and Ellie. Mum always feels she has to match them. I heard her moaning about it last Christmas as she wrapped up presents.

'Forking out for kids I've never even met,' she complained.

'Don't do it then,' said Dad, matter-of-fact as ever.

'Don't be stupid,' she muttered, tearing off Sellotape with her teeth. 'She's your sister!'

'She doesn't mean anything to me,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'I wouldn't know her if I bumped into her in Tesco's.'

'That's not the point,' said Mum crossly. 'Anyway, I bet she wouldn't be seen dead in Tesco's. She's more of a Selfridges person.'

'Is she?' I asked with interest.

'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'I've never met her.'

I'd love to meet her, my famous Aunty Libby.

I'd love to be on the telly too.

Fat chance.

'Your turn.' Amy prompts me back to the present. 'Daddy or chips?'

'OK.' I wander over to the window for inspiration and look down into the street. A car pulls up outside, with a Driving School sign on the roof. I watch as Ezzie gets out awkwardly and stands upright, rubbing her back.

'Would you rather . . . have a baby in your teens or a baby in your forties?'

'I'd rather not have one at all,' says Amy. 'I hate babies.'

'You've got to choose,' I say. 'It's the game.'

'I know that. When I'm in my forties. Definitely.

There's no way I'd want one now. I can't think of anything worse.'

Me neither.

'Yeah, forties,' I say emphatically. 'No contest. Come on, let's go downstairs. Ezzie's back.'

In the kitchen Mum and Grandma Liz are sitting at the table, drinking tea and flicking through a pile of holiday brochures showing pictures of wide stretches of white sand dotted with stripy parasols and impossibly blue seas. Mum's always doing this, it's a hobby of hers.

'Don't know why you bother,' I say, sitting down beside them. 'We never go anywhere.'

Mum looks up. 'I can live in hope. It's not for lack of trying. It's your dad's fault.'

'He never wants to go on holiday,' I explain to Amy. 'He says he does, but then he always makes excuses. Like he's got too much on at work. Or, when Buster was alive, he wouldn't put him into kennels.'

'Well,' Mum consoles, 'at least he hasn't got that excuse any more.'

After a moment's silence for Buster, our recently departed and deeply missed mongrel, I resume the attack. 'No, but now he says we can't afford it. Didn't stop him getting himself a season ticket for the footie though.'

'Martin's a home bird,' says Grandma fondly. 'Always has been.'

'It's not fair. I'm the only person in my class who's never been abroad,' I grumble. OK, I don't actually know if this is true or not. But most people do seem to go on foreign holidays and I've never even been to London!

'Never mind, Flick. When we leave school we can do a gap year together before uni. Go round the world,' says Amy.

'Yeah! We can backpack round Australia!'

'Go to America and swim with the dolphins!'

'Go to Peru and follow the Inca trail!'

'Can I come with you?' asks Mum.

'Whatever next!' laughs Grandma.

'We can be beach bums in Thailand!' I shriek, getting carried away.

'Or in the Caribbean! I've always wanted to go to the Caribbean.'

'We can visit Cambodia!'

'Where's Cambodia?'

'Next to Vietnam,' a voice says quietly. Ezzie has slipped in beside me like a wraith in a fog. Too late I realize it was her dreams I'd been shouting out. Silence falls across the table.

'Any tea left?' she asks and stretches forward to pick up the pot, her T-shirt riding up to display her back, still tanned from last summer's sun, and the elegant, tightly knotted line of her spine.

From behind you can't see the round, swelling mound of her stomach.

'I'll make some fresh,' says Grandma and takes the teapot gently from Ezzie's hand with a small, painful smile.