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Maskmaker

Jane Johnson





1 JAMIE WAVE

Dreams.

Everyone dreams, they say, even babies and dogs. Often you can just catch hold of a wisp of a dream – a lucid, shining fragment that stays with you when you surface from sleep: a leaf turning in a breeze, the cry of a strange bird; a car passing silently, its wheels a foot above the ground. Sometimes dreams can become so vivid, so intoxicatingly real, that you can remember them long after waking up. And some dreams can seem more real – and far more enticing – than your own life. These are the dangerous ones. They insinuate themselves like false friends. Like a will-o'-the-wisp, a flickering flame hovering over boggy ground, they will lead you away into strange dark places and then abandon you to your fate.

Cawstocke was in the grip of a plague of dreams.

*

One day Jamie Wave arrived at school to find everyone chattering excitedly.

"What's going on?"

"We're comparing dreams," said Jinny Briggs, a twinkle-eyed girl with hair the colour of the orange heart of a flame. "We all had really good dreams last night. Johnny was in a band, singing to hundreds of people in a club—"

Everyone laughed again, since Johnny's voice was rasping and awful. The music teacher, Mr Doherty, chastised them for laughing at him. "Leave him alone, his voice is breaking," he would say, and someone was bound to chorus back, "I think it's already broken, sir!"

"And Linda dreamed she was swimming in the sea at night."

"Yeah, that's proper skinny-dipping!" someone sniggered. Linda was painfully thin.

Linda pretended not to hear this. "It was gorgeous," she sighed. "The water was all silver and sparkly, and there were dolphins leaping in and out of the waves."

"I was a pirate, all dressed in black," said Jack Cole. "I had sword fights and climbed the ship's rigging with a cutlass between my teeth." This was hard to imagine, because Jack looked as unlike a pirate as you could imagine: he was, if you were being honest, a bit fat, and he was hopeless at sport. No one could imagine him climbing the

rigging: he could barely get off the ground on the ropes in the school gym but would hang there, flailing and wailing like a fly trapped in a spider's web.

Wayne had dreamed of finding buried treasure in a big, dark cave, and Tessa had been transformed into a cat. "I always wondered what Minkie did when Mum shut him out at night. Well, now I know. It was great: I spent the whole night running around with him and his mates. We chased some mice and knocked over Mrs O'Shea's bin, and sang to the moon."

Pete topped that. He had *been* to the moon.

"How did you do that?" asked Jamie Wave, curious. Jamie was curious about everything: he saw wonders in the world where other people only saw the ordinary. But flying to the moon was certainly not ordinary; it sounded exciting. Except that you would have to fly through the night and Jamie was afraid of the dark; not that he would ever admit it to anyone but his mum. "Were you in a rocket ship, or a flying saucer or something?"

"I just . . . flew," grinned Pete. "I put my arms out and soared into the air. First of all I zoomed around the room; then I flew out of the window and all around the estate, looking in through people's windows. And then I flew all the way up to the moon!"

"A dream like that's wasted on you, you manky little

runt!'' a posh voice interrupted. ''If I'd had your dream I'd have flown up to look through Cadence Wave's window and watched her getting undressed.''

It was Michael Rose, the class bully. He belonged to a gang of older boys who liked to pick on anyone they regarded as different to themselves. They picked on Pete because his dad was in prison, they picked on Tessa because her frayed uniform had belonged to her older sister, and from time to time they picked on Jamie because, well, Jamie didn't really understand why they picked on him.

Jamie was about to open his mouth to object to this disrespect to his sister, but it was Jinny Briggs who fixed Michael Rose with a steely gaze and said, ''Oh, do grow up.'' She turned to Jamie. ''What about you, Jamie, what did you dream about?''

''Yeah, Benefits Boy, what did *you* dream about?'' mimicked Michael Rose. He turned to his mate, Mouth. ''Probably getting his skin whitened, eh? Like Michael Jackson?''

Mouth, whom nobody called by his real name of Freddie for fear of being thumped, had a face like a weasel, little mean black eyes and wide lips like a pair of chipolata sausages. ''Nah. He dreamed he had a dad!'' joked Mouth. ''And his dad was the King Under the Hill!''

The King Under the Hill was a shadowy figure in local folk tales who stole children from their beds or lured them into his caves in order to populate his fairy kingdom. People often touched wood when his name was mentioned: if you didn't he might get you.

No one said anything; they all knew that Jamie Wave's dad had disappeared and that no one knew where he'd gone.

"Don't pay any attention to them," Jinny said, smiling kindly at Jamie. "They're just ignorant." And she glared at Mouth and Michael Rose, her cool blue eyes sparking defiance. The two bullies glared back, then sloped off.

For such a tiny girl, Jinny was very brave, Jamie thought.

Jinny smiled at him. "Tell me what you dreamed about last night, Jamie Wave."

"Nothing."

"You can't dream of nothing!"

Jamie grinned at his best friend. "I didn't dream."

"What, you mean you can't remember what your dream was about?"

"No, I just didn't dream. I don't really dream at all."

"You must dream: everyone dreams."

"Not me." He gave a shrug. "Why, what did you dream about, Jinny?"

Jinny was just about to answer when the school bell rang for the start of lessons and everyone started to pile into the classroom and they were swept along in the tide.

"I dreamed of you, Jamie Wave," Jinny said quietly. But her words were lost in the din.

At morning break, Jamie Wave was minding his own business out in the playground when someone came up behind him and kicked him in the back of the knee so that it buckled and he fell down like a complete idiot.

"Hey, Benefits Boy, what you got for us today?"

When he looked up it was to find Mouth and Michael Rose staring down at him.

"Get his bag," said Mouth.

"Here."

They unzipped it and upended it so that its contents spilled over the tarmac. Mouth kicked the books and pens away so that they ended up in a puddle. Then he snatched up Jamie's battered CD player.

"Hey!" cried Jamie. "You can't have that." It had been a gift from his mother to celebrate his winning a scholarship for Cawstocke's only private school. "Sorry it's not an iPod, love," his mum had said with a wry smile. And he'd laughed because she hadn't known an iPod was no use unless you had a computer, which they didn't.

Mouth levered the CD player open and examined the disc inside. "Ugh, Blue Flamingos – they're rubbish!"

"No!" Jamie scrambled to his feet, but he was too slow.

Mouth sent the CD spinning across the playground like a flying saucer, a rainbow of colours reflecting off its silver surfaces. Grimly, Jamie scooped up his school bag and looked for his books. One of them had fallen in a puddle, its red cover darker by the moment as it soaked up the muddy water; he'd have to copy out his English essay again. His beloved sketch book had fallen face down. Jamie had brought it in because it was art with Miss Lambent this afternoon and they were working on a project that he'd been making sketches for all week. If they opened it they'd make fun of them or tear out the pages. His knees began to tremble. He was such a coward! Why was he such a coward? He gritted his teeth. "No!"

Mouth leered at him. "What did you say, Benefits Boy?"

"Give me my stuff back."

"What'll you give us in return?"

Jamie thought fast. He had nothing to give them. "I . . . er . . . I'll make you laugh."

Michael Rose snorted. "Looking at your ugly face makes *me* laugh."

"Shut up." Mouth stepped in front of his lieutenant. "Go on, then, Benefits Boy. Make me laugh."

Jamie cleared his throat and out popped the first joke that came into his head, which was a pity because it wasn't one of the better ones. Jamie had hundreds of jokes stashed away in his head: jokes and riddles and wordplay and other pointless bits of nonsense. It was probably why he didn't dream: imagination needed room to roam, and his brain was full to bursting, like an attic stuffed with boxes and bags of old rubbish.

"Two p-parrots are sitting on a perch. One turns to the other and says, 'It really smells fishy around here.'"

Mouth looked expectant. "Go on, then," he said at last. "What's the punchline?"

"Sitting on a perch," Jamie said. "It's a sort of fish."

They didn't laugh.

Michael Rose made as if to stamp on the CD player. Jamie gabbled: "OK, OK, what do you call a fish with no eyes?"

They eyed him as if suspicious that he was trying to make them look stupid. But they didn't need his help to do that: they were really good at looking stupid all on their own.

"Go on then," said Mouth at last. "What do you call a fish with no eyes?"

"Fsh."

It took a while but then Mouth's lips twitched. "That's quite clever, that is. A fish with no *i*'s. But I'm not laughing, Benefits Boy, just smiling. Smash it, Rosy."

Jamie trawled desperately through his array of jokes. "There are t-two g-goldfish in a tank."

"What did he say?" Michael Rose frowned.

"Something about g-g-g-goldfish in a tank," Mouth said cruelly.

"Two goldfish in a tank," Jamie repeated, swallowing his stutter. "One of the goldfish turns to the other and says, 'You got any idea how to drive this thing?'"

For a brief moment puzzle-lines appeared between Mouth's eyebrows, then his lips quirked into a smile, and then he was laughing, throwing his head back and guffawing with all his might. He punched Michael Rose on the arm. "A tank," he said, grinning and gripping an imaginary steering wheel. "A fish driving a tank! Geddit?"

"Oh, yeah." Michael didn't look as if he'd got it at all.

"Brilliant!" Mouth shoved Jamie matily on the shoulder. "You're lucky, Benefits Boy: you made me laugh. Just as well or we'd have had to beat you up, right, Rosy?"

For a moment, Michael Rose looked disappointed. Then he yawned. "Yeah, right."

And they walked off to pick on someone else.