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one

As far as I know, Jamie Oliver has never been to Parkway College. If he ever did drop by, he wouldn't make it out of the place alive. He'd take one look at what was being served up in the canteen and pass out. And if the shock didn't kill him, a couple of weeks of eating the stuff would finish him off. It's Fat Bastard City round here.

I'm halfway along the queue in front of the serving hatches, pushing my tray along the metal runners. My plate's already filling up nicely. Decent sized portion of chips. Two sausages. Couple of bits of bacon. Big spoonful of baked beans.

Right behind me in the line, my mate Rakesh is getting stuck in. He's got the chips and the bacon and the beans but he's gone for three sausages, and he's got some mushrooms too. I don't know where he puts it all. He's about the same height as me, five eight, but while I'm quite broad, he's built like a pipe cleaner. I carry on along the line, grabbing a bread roll and a foil-wrapped pat of butter, a jam doughnut and a can of Coke.

Without looking up, the woman at the till totals up the items on my tray, picking up my bread roll and checking underneath.

"One ninety-five," she says. She couldn't sound any less enthusiastic if she tried.

I fish in my pocket, get out two pound coins and collect my change.

"Thanks."

She still doesn't look up.

I stand by the wall waiting for Raks and then we scan the dining area for somewhere to sit.

"Not looking good, Tom," he says.

I puff out my cheeks and glance down at my watch. Twenty-five to one.

"We've hit the middle of the rush hour. Seems to be worse on Mondays."

The people who were behind us in the queue are filing out into the hall. They don't appear to be having any difficulty finding somewhere to have their lunch. Everyone seems to know everyone else.

"Ever get the feeling we're missing out on something?" Raks says.

I nod. He's read my mind. It wouldn't be so bad if it was just the older kids who were sorted, but it's the Year Tens too, people our age. Everyone seems right at home. Everyone except Raks and me.

Most of the other Year Tens have come to Parkway from schools here in Letchford. Me and Raks haven't. Everyone's a bit sharper than us.

We've lived out in Thurston since the start of primary school. It's eight miles out in the sticks. Not many kids from Thurston opted to come to Parkway. It's the 'didn't fill your form in on time' option. There are a few familiar faces here, but they're not really what you'd call mates. At least Raks got put in the same tutor group as me or we'd really be struggling. Most of the people we used to knock around with have gone to Letchford Grammar or Townlands or Alderman Richard Martin. That's where Zoe's gone. Right on the other side of town. I miss Zoe. I still get to see her two or three nights a week, and in the mornings before the school buses leave Thurston,

but it's not the same.

Two girls brush past us, trays in hand. As if by magic the group at a table on our left reorganise themselves and two places miraculously appear. The girls sit straight down, crack open their cans of drink and start eating. Simple.

Raks smiles.

"That's the way to do it, then," he says.

We set off across the polished wooden floor. Out in the middle of the hall, we stop again. I can see people from our tutor group dotted about, but nobody's beckoning us over. Nobody's even noticed us.

"This is doing my head in, man," Raks says.

I'm about to say something back, but then I'm almost knocked flying by a big lad in an army jacket jostling past. He stops, turns and looks me in the eye. He's got shaggy hair and bad skin. Still looking me in the eye, he pinches one of my chips and wanders off.

I shake my head.

"Bastard."

There's a flash of movement over on the far right side by the double doors leading to the foyer. A couple of girls have finished eating. They're taking their plates and cutlery back to the stacks by the serving hatches. It's what we've been waiting for. Raks hasn't noticed. I nudge him and we head for the two grey plastic chairs and unload our trays.

I open my can and nod at the bloke across from me. He's in our year. Tall thin black geezer with braided hair. The kids call him Snoop. I recognise him from Business Studies and ICT. If he recognises me though, he's keeping it to himself. He puffs out a breath and gets up, closely followed by the other three lads at the table. All of a sudden we've got the whole place to ourselves.

I laugh and shake my head.

"Have we got BO?" I sniff my armpits. Nothing to report but the smell of Lynx Africa.

Raks stuffs a forkful of mushrooms into his mouth, flicking his eyes around the dining hall.

"Everyone seems to belong to some sort of group, don't they?" he says. "The indie lot, the popular ones, the swots, the townies, the chavs. It's like a safari park here. All sorts of different species."

I can see what he means. We've all got roughly the same outfits on, the same dull greys and blacks, but already people have started accessorizing and adapting school colours to show which gang they're in. The hip-hop lot with the hoodies sticking out of the back of their pullovers, the big trainers and the low waistbands. The townies mixing in expensive gear and designer labels. The emo kids, the Goths, with dyed-black hair and studded belts, big built-up boots with three-inch soles, pewter bangles and necklaces.

"Question is," I say, "what species are we?"

Raks shrugs. He picks up his Coke and leans back in his chair.

"Dunno mate. Never had to think about it before. It wasn't like this back in Thurston, was it? Thurston's The Village That Style Forgot."

I butter my bread roll and make a chip butty. As I'm shoving it into my mouth I catch sight of our reflections in the glass of the double doors. Slouched on either side of the table, same nondescript black shoes and trousers, same nondescript grey jumpers, same nondescript hair, Raks's black and mine brown. Maybe I'm being a bit hard on us, but the overall package isn't exactly screaming *Top of the Pecking Order*. We're not nerds. I wouldn't go that far. We just look a bit *insignificant*.

During the first week of term there was a tutor group meeting. Mr Green sat us all down in a circle. We each introduced ourselves, said a bit about the sorts of things we were interested in. I went first. Told people about my Thursday paper round, football training on Tuesday nights and how me and Raks go fishing on the canal. Nobody said anything. A few people laughed. A couple of girls shook their heads. Everyone else was into music or gaming or clothes. I'm fifteen in just over a month, but seven weeks at this place and I feel like I'm five all over again.

We carry on eating. All around us groups are coming and going. Laughing, joking, playfighting. Raks and me are like outsiders, staring through a window at other people having a good time.

I mop up some juice from my baked beans with the half-eaten end of a sausage, looking around again at the wildlife. Over on the far side of the hall, next to the noticeboards and the disabled toilet, two tall white lads with blond crew-cuts are sitting hunched over a bulging Nike rucksack. As I watch, three black lads walk up to them. Money changes hands, and then something DVD-shaped appears from out of the rucksack. In the blink of an eye, it's disappeared again, inside the jacket of one of the black lads.

To our left, there's a bunch of emo kids — big black coats, facial piercings and dodgy eye makeup. Judging from the guitar cases propped against the edge of the table, they're in a band. They're having a discussion. Apparently the band needs a new name. Two of them want Nocturnal Emission, but the other two are going for Prolapsed Colon.

I look at Raks.

"Tough one."

Raks laughs. He's started eyeing up two girls sitting by the fire exit. He's always fancied himself as a bit of a ladies' man, and I suppose he is quite good looking. He's got a sort of Amir Khan thing going on, minus the sticky-out ears. Good skin, strong jaw, white teeth, straight nose, big doe eyes, long eyelashes. Bit of a pretty boy. A couple of Zoe's mates fancy him. I give him a kick under the table.

"I know what your game is."

He laughs again, then turns his attention back towards the girls. They're both blonde and pretty, taking it in turns to check themselves out in a handheld mirror, touching up their hair and their make-up. Popular types. Me and Raks wouldn't even register as a blip on their radar.

"They're right out of our league."

Raks shakes his head.

"Speak for yourself, man," he says. "Anyway, what do you mean *our* league? You're spoken for. Under the thumb big-style. Mr Faithful."

I tut.

"I'm still in the game." I'm trying to convince myself more than anything else, but he's right. I've known Zoe since the infants, and we've been together since the start of Year Eight. I'll window-shop but I'd never go behind Zoe's back and Raks knows it.

"Still in the game?" he says. "You announced your retirement long ago, you sad bastard."

I laugh. There's no point in arguing.

"Wonder what she's up to at the moment?" I say.

Raks shrugs.

"Busy getting to know some of the Sixth Formers." He's grinning. "You know, the big ones with their own cars."

I know he's only pissing about, so I laugh, but I'm

not as laid back about it as I make out.

"She *might* be hanging out with Sixth Formers though," I say.

Raks shakes his head.

"Give it a rest man. Stop talking about her. You'll just end up making yourself miserable."

I smile, embarrassed. He's right again. I *should* stop going on about her, but it's easier said than done. We spent virtually every day together in the summer. Last week was good too. October half-term holiday, the sun shining, like August all over again. Now though, winter's coming. I'm stuck in this place and it all feels like a thousand years ago.

I pick my doughnut up and start scanning around the hall again, trying to find something to focus on, something to take my mind off negative thoughts. There's a lad sitting at a table over to the right. He looks familiar but I can't quite place him. Tall, white kid with short dark hair. Blue zip-up tracksuit top and jeans. Not a big fan of dress regulations by the looks of it. Feet up on a chair, black Adidas Samba trainers. He's on his own, but you can tell he's not bothered. He's eating a hot dog and reading a magazine, listening to music on an MP3 player.

"Who's he then?" I ask, nodding towards him.

"That's Ryan. Ryan Dawkins I think his name is." Raks takes a gulp of Coke. "He's in a few of our classes. English Lit. French. I think he's in Business Studies and Art and Design too."

I've got him now.

"That's right. He's in Sankey's tutor group. Hardly ever turns up though, does he?"

Raks shakes his head.

"No. It's just the odd lesson here and there. I heard he's a bit of a nutter. Lives up on the Blue Gate

Fields Estate. You know what it's like up there."

I nod. I don't know much about the Blue Gate Fields Estate, but I know the reputation. The Bronx, it's known as. I've been through there in my dad's car once or twice. It's on the other side of Letchford. All concrete roads and derelict cream and grey council houses with brown metal shutters on the windows to keep the crackheads out.

"They call him ASBO Boy."

I laugh and stuff the last bit of doughnut into my mouth.

"Who's they?"

"Just people. I was talking to that Bradley Ellis at registration last week. He went to the same school as Ryan Dawkins last year. The teachers didn't know what to do with him."

"Do you reckon he has got an ASBO then?"

"God knows, mate, " Raks says. "There's loads of rumours about him though. He had to retake a year, and they reckon it was because he'd been in a Young Offenders place."

It's nearly ten to one. I reach into my bag and find my timetable. Monday afternoon. Biology and ICT. My heart sinks. I look up and see five lads making their way across the hall. They're older than us. Year Elevens. Three white kids and two Asians. The haircuts and low-slung trousers mark them out as part of the hip-hop fraternity. Budget variety, judging by the cheap-looking trainers.

Raks has seen them coming. He grins.

"Check it out," he says, flicking his eyes in the direction of the hip-hop crew. "Hanging With The Homeboys."

"Straight Outta Letchford, muthafucka."

We clench our fists and knock them together, Fifty

Cent-style. We laugh, but it doesn't last long. The gang are heading for our table.

"You two are done here, right?" one of the Asian lads asks, pushing his tray against Raks's elbow. He's got facial hair that looks like it's been drawn on with a felt tip.

It's a rhetorical question. Raks and me both know it's time to go. It's one thing making smart-arse comments about people, but they aren't much use in situations like this.

"Yeah, we're just on our way," I say, taking a last swig of Coke and piling things back on my tray. I stand up, trying my best to act casual.

The biggest white lad pushes past me, hooking my chair round with his foot and sitting down. Making himself at home. Raks is getting the same treatment from one of the Asian lads. Ten seconds ago we were just letting our dinner go down nicely, and now here we are standing around like a pair of fools. I can feel my face going red. I look at the kid who shoved me out of the way. He's got a pudgy, freckly face and lines cut into his hair. Around his wrist there's a bracelet. A pair of jewel-encrusted handcuffs. It looks like the sort of thing you get for 20p in a plastic egg from a lucky dip machine in Wilko's. He's the most unconvincing gangsta I've ever seen. He's about as likely to bust a cap in a brother's ass as my gran. The thing is though, he's just made us look like idiots. And there's nothing we can do about it.

Raks leads the way back towards the canteen to dump our trays, then we head for the exit doors, past the table we'd been sitting on. The lads who chucked us off certainly don't look like they're suffering any attacks of conscience. They're stuffing their faces, paying no attention to us at all. A couple of them are

squinting at the screen of a phone, watching a video clip of a bloke getting his head cut off.

"Wankers," Raks says, keeping his voice low.

We're just about to push through the doors to the foyer when it occurs to me that the lads didn't need to kick me and Raks out. There were five places going spare on Ryan Dawkins' table. There still are. It's like he's got some sort of invisible exclusion zone around him. Just as I'm looking across, Ryan glances up. He raises his eyebrows in acknowledgement, and nods in the direction of the lads at our old table, circling his thumb and forefinger and cranking his hand backwards and forwards in the air.

My stomach flips over. ASBO Boy's on our side. I'm shocked, but I'm slightly chuffed too. It's like the feeling you get when a big dog runs up to you and licks your hand instead of chewing your arm off. I laugh and nudge Raks.

"He agrees with you," I say, jerking my thumb in the direction of Ryan Dawkins.

By the time we look back across though, he's stopped the hand gestures and he's reading his magazine again.