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opening extract from

The 10pm Question

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The 10PM Question - extract

Tuesday the fourteenth of February began badly for Frankie Parsons. There was no milk for his Just Right cereal. There was no Go-Cat for The Fat Controller, so The Fat Controller stood under the table miaowing accusingly while Frankie ate his toast.

The newspaper hadn't arrived, which meant Frankie couldn't take a headline and article for Current Affairs, and so would earn one of Mr A's sardonic looks; nor could he check the weather report for humidity. Humidity levels were important to Frankie, and for two reasons: one, a cricket ball swung rather trickily and lethally when the air was heavy, which was a good thing. Two, ants appeared in droves when the temperature was warm and the atmosphere thick, which was a very bad thing. Frankie nursed a special hatred for ants.

So, Tuesday the fourteenth began badly, and continued that way. Frankie's sister, Gordana, had swiped the last muesli bar and the only crisp apple; there were no water bottles; the cling film had run out; there was no bus money in his mother's wallet so Frankie had to search for a nail file in order to prize out ten-cent pieces from the emergency pink china pig.

A nail file was always hard to find in Frankie's house and today was no exception. He located one finally in the yellow Click Clack First Aid container which lived in the laundry with his carefully arranged earthquake kit: (twelve 2-litre water bottles, two sets of spare batteries, enough baked beans, tuna, toilet paper and Go-Cat for a week). By which time it was 8.05 a.m. and furthermore the pink china pig was ominously lightweight. Someone had been there before him. On Saturday, when he'd last checked, the pig had been quite heavy. (Frankie shook her regularly, an almost involuntary but comforting gesture whenever he passed the hall bookcase, which was where the pink pig lived, beside the National Geographics.)

Frankie suspected Louie. His brother lived away from home now, but he came for dinner and laundry several times a week and was always on the hunt for small change. There were no stray coins lying on shelves or bedside tables after Louie had been around. Nothing made Frankie madder than a lightweight pink china pig. He relied on that pig. Experience had taught him that precisely when he needed it most, his mother would not have cash in her wallet. Nor would his father. But the pink pig — the repository of everyone's unloved ten-cent pieces — generally had a bellyful of coins.

Except today, February the fourteenth. Today there was only one dollar and thirty cents: fifty cents short of Frankie's bus fare to school, which meant he would have to borrow from his friend, Gigs. Who wouldn't mind, but that wasn't the point.

"This house doesn't work!" Frankie called up the stairs.

He stuffed his exercise books, lunch bag and trainers into his back-pack. Then he stood very still and mentally perused the school day. This was his habit each morning. It was so he wouldn't forget anything. He was really very organised.

Maths (protractor, calculator, yes). Reading (Hicksville, yes). Language arts (Concise Oxford, yes). PE (shorts, trainers, yes). Cricket at lunchtime (bat, ball, box, yes). Lunch (soft apple, cheese and peanut butter sandwich, carrot, lemon cake, secret-chocolate-hidden-behind-the-rice, yes). Art (pencils, ink, sketch book, yes). Science project (glue gun, statistics sheet, black paper, double-sided tape, Stanley knife, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes).

“A bad workman always blames his tools,” said Gordana. She came thumping down the stairs in her flat-footed, truculent, morning way. Gordana maintained she wasn’t a morning person. In Frankie’s private view his sister was a no-time person, not morning, afternoon nor evening. The less he saw of her the better.

“Whadda you mean, a bad workman?” he said, and instantly regretted it. He really didn’t know why he ever responded to Gordana. It always ended badly. Every day he told himself to ignore her, and every day he ignored himself instead.

Face it, Gigs had told him. You hate her. It’s official. And mutual. Your sister is your enemy. Stop consorting.

“It may be your fault if the house doesn’t work,” said Gordana.

“How could it be?” said Frankie. “I’m the child.”

“And there you have it,” Gordana snapped. “A child is precisely what this house doesn’t need any more.”

“No bickering, please,” said Ma. She said this automatically, whenever she came into a room containing Frankie and Gordana. It was usually necessary, she said.

“We need cat food,” said Frankie. “And human food.”

“And food for Frankie,” said Gordana, with a smirk.

“And money,” said Frankie. “And new batteries for the smoke alarm.”

“Oh good God,” said Gordana, “not the smoke alarm thing again.”

“I’ll ring Uncle George,” said Ma. “He’s shopping for the Aunties.”

The Aunties. A sudden and familiar heaviness settled over Frankie. It was as if someone had fastened large marbles to his entire body. Of course. Why not? Tuesday the fourteenth began with no cereal and it would end with a surfeit of aunts. Perfect.

“Oh good God,” said Gordana. “Count me out. I’ll be at Ben’s.” Ben was Gordana’s boyfriend. He had a buffed body, a nifty wrist action, and absolutely no aunts. It all seemed quite unfair to Frankie.

“Bye,” said Frankie funereally. He kissed Ma on the cheek. She smelled morningish, a mixture of Coal Tar soap and toast. After school she smelled of baking: a fusion of melted butter, toasted almonds, nutmeg and vanilla essence. He liked both smells.

It wasn’t Ma’s fault about the Aunties. The entire American military couldn’t have kept them away. They came every second and fourth Tuesday and stayed for dinner and cards. Sometimes it was too much for even a reasonable boy.

“Have a good one,” said Ma.

“Fat chance,” said Frankie. But he closed the door gently behind him. He would have liked to slam it, but Gordana did more than enough slamming for everyone in their house, and it always made Ma jump.