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Mark Haddon

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boom!

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1
helicopter sandwich

I was on the balcony eating a sandwich. Red Leicester and gooseberry jam. I took a mouthful and chewed. It was good but not a patch on strawberry jam and Cheddar. That was my best yet.

I spent a lot of time on the balcony. The flat was tiny. Sometimes it felt like living in a submarine. But the balcony was amazing. The wind. The sky. The light. You could see the 747s circling slowly in the stack, waiting for a space on the runway at Heathrow. You could watch police cars weaving their way through the tiny streets like toys, their sirens whooping.

You could see the park too. And on this particular morning you could see, in the middle of the huge expanse of grass, a solitary man holding a metal box in his hands. Buzzing high above his head you could just make out a model helicopter, banking and swerving like a dragonfly.

Dad has always been crazy about models. Trains,

planes, tanks, vintage cars. But after he lost his job at the car factory it became the biggest thing in his life. To be fair, he was brilliant. Give him a brick and a rubber band and he'd have it looping the loop before you could say, 'Chocks away!' But it didn't seem right somehow. It was a hobby for little boys and weird blokes who still lived with their mums.

A flock of pigeons clattered past and I heard the sound of a familiar motorbike engine. I looked down and saw Craterface's large black Moto Guzzi turn into the estate car park. My darling sister, Becky, was on the seat behind him, a grimy leather jacket over her school uniform.

She was sixteen. I could remember the time, only a couple of years back, when she tied her hair in bunches and had pony posters on her bedroom wall. Then something went badly wrong in her brain. She started listening to death metal and stopped washing her armpits.

She met Craterface at a gig six months ago. He was nineteen. He had long greasy hair and enormous sideburns with bits of breakfast stuck in them. When he

was younger he had spots. They'd gone now, but they'd left these holes behind. Hence the nickname. His face looked like the surface of the moon.

He had the brain of a toilet brush. Mum, Dad and I were in complete agreement about this. Becky, however, thought he was God's Gift to Women. Why she fancied him, I haven't a clue. Perhaps he was the only person who could stand her armpits.

The bike rumbled to a halt ten storeys below and I experienced a moment of utter madness. Without thinking, I peeled off half my sandwich, leaned out and let go. I realized almost immediately that I had done a very, very stupid thing. If it hit them I would be murdered.

The slice wobbled and flipped and veered left and veered right. Craterface turned off the engine, got off the bike, removed his helmet and looked up towards the flat. I felt sick.

The slice hit him in the face and stuck, jammy side down. For a couple of seconds Craterface just stood there, absolutely motionless, the slice of bread sitting there like a face pack. Becky was standing

beside him, looking up at me. She was not a happy bunny.

Now, normally you can't hear much from the balcony, on account of the traffic. But when Craterface tore the sandwich off and roared, I think they probably heard him in Japan.

He stormed towards the doors but Becky grabbed his wrist and dragged him to a halt. She wasn't worried about me. She'd have quite liked him to kill me. Just not in the flat. Because that would get her into trouble.

Craterface finally saw sense. He waved his fist and shouted, 'You're dead, scum!' climbed onto the Moto Guzzi and thundered away in a gust of dirty grey fumes.

Becky turned and strode towards the door. I looked down at the rest of my sandwich and realized that I no longer felt very hungry. There was no one in the car park now so I dropped this half too, and watched it wobble and flip and veer and land neatly beside the first slice.

At which point the balcony door was kicked open. I said, 'It was an accident,' but Becky screamed, 'You little toad!' and hit me really hard on the side of the head, which hurt quite a lot.

For a couple of seconds everything went double. I could see two Beckys and two balconies and two rubber plants. I didn't cry, because if I cried Becky would call me a baby, which was worse than being hit. So I hung onto

the rail until the pain died down and there was only one Becky again.

'What did you do that for?' I asked. 'It didn't land on you. It landed on Craterface.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'You are so lucky he didn't come up here and hit you himself.'

She was right, really. Craterface had a black belt in kung fu. He could kill people with his ears.

'And another thing,' she hissed. 'His name is Terry.'

'Actually, I've heard his name is Florian. He just pretends to be called Terry.' I stepped backwards to avoid the second punch but it never came. Instead, Becky went very quiet, leaned against the railing and nodded slowly. 'That reminds me,' she said, in a sinisterly pleasant way. 'There's something I've been meaning to tell you.'

'What?'

'Amy and I were in the staff room the other day, talking to Mrs Cottingham.' Becky took a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of her leather jacket and lit one very slowly, as if she were in a black and white film.

'Smoking's bad for you,' I said.

'Shut your ugly mouth and listen.' She sucked in a lungful of smoke. 'We overheard Mr Kidd talking about you.'

'What was he saying?'

'Bad things, Jimbo. Bad things.' This had to be a

wind-up. But she wasn't smiling. And it didn't sound like a wind-up.

'What bad things?' I pulled nervously at the rubber plant and one of the leaves came off in my hand.

'That you're lazy. That you're a nuisance.'

'You're lying.' I slid the leaf of the rubber plant down the back of the deckchair.

'According to Mr Kidd your work is rubbish. According to Mr Kidd – and this is the really good bit – they're thinking of sending you to that school in Fenham. You know, that special place for kids with problems.' She blew a smoke ring.

'That's not true.' I felt giddy. 'They can't do that.'

'Apparently they can.' She nodded. 'Jodie's brother got sent there.' She stubbed out her cigarette in one of the plant pots and flicked it over the railing. 'Jodie said it's like a zoo. You know, bars on the windows, kids howling all the time.'

The glass door slid open and Mum stepped out onto the balcony holding one of her shoes in her hand.

'Hello, you two,' she said, wiping the sole of the shoe with a wet cloth. 'Honestly, the mess on this estate. I just trod on a half-eaten sandwich, of all things.'

I turned round so that Mum couldn't see my face, and as I did so I saw, in the distance, Dad's helicopter clip the top of a tree, burst into flames, spiral downwards

and land in the gravel of the dog toilet, scaring the living daylights out of a large Dalmatian.

Dad threw the control box to the ground and lay face down on the grass, hammering it with his fists.

2
bad things

The atmosphere over supper was not good.

Becky told Mum it was my sandwich. Mum tore me off a strip for wasting good food. Becky said wasting food wasn't the point. The point was dropping it on Craterface. So Mum said you could drop a piano on Craterface and it wouldn't make much difference. At this point Becky swore and stomped off to her room.

To make matters worse, Dad had forgotten to take the chicken out of the freezer. He'd forgotten to buy more washing-up liquid. And he was sulking about his helicopter, which was now lying in the hall, burned, broken and covered with bits of gravel and dog-do.

'It's only a toy,' insisted Mum, halfway through yesterday's left-over lasagne.

'It. Is. Not. A. Toy!' shouted Dad.

It got very noisy at this point, so I slipped off to the kitchen and earned some Brownie points by doing

the washing up. Unfortunately I had to use the lemon-flavoured soap from the bathroom, which made everything taste funny for the next few days.

When I'd finished I went out onto the balcony for some peace and quiet. Dad joined me five minutes later. He leaned on the railings beside me and gazed out into the darkness.

'Life's a cowpat sandwich, Jimbo,' he sighed, 'with very thin bread and a lot of filling.'

'You can mend the helicopter,' I reassured him.

'Yeah,' he said, 'I know.' Then he went all sad and silent. I knew what was going to happen. We were going to have one of those conversations about how he didn't feel like a real man any more. I wouldn't know what to say. He'd tell me to work hard at school, because I needed good exam results so I could get a job because there was nothing worse than being unemployed.

I didn't want one of those conversations. Not now. I particularly didn't want to think about school and exam results and jobs.

'I don't know how you lot put up with me,' he ploughed on mournfully. 'I can't cook. I can't clean. I forget the shopping and I mope around the house all day.'

'You'll get another job,' I said. 'And anyway, I think lasagne's much nicer than chicken.'

He laughed and we stared out into the dark. After a

minute or two I found myself thinking about the school thing. Mr Kidd and Fenham and the bars on the windows and the howling. ‘Dad?’ I asked.

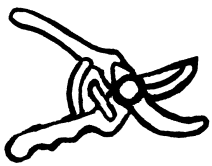
‘What?’

I wanted to tell him how worried I was. But it didn’t seem fair. He had enough on his plate. And the possibility that I was going to be expelled wasn’t going to cheer him up.

‘Oh, nothing,’ I said vaguely. ‘Look, I’ve got to go and do some stuff.’

‘Sure.’ He ruffled my hair. ‘Catch you later, pardner.’

I grabbed my jacket, slipped out of the front door and headed down the stairs.



Becky had to be lying. If she was telling the truth then she was being helpful. Warning me what was going on. Giving me a chance to pull my socks up. And Becky had never been helpful to me in her entire life.

Plus, she had a Nobel Prize in winding people up. Last year I went into hospital to have a squint in my eye put right. Before I went in, she kept telling me about all the things that could go wrong. The anaesthetic might not

work. I'd be lying there, wide awake, unable to move, watching them cutting my eye open. They might give me too little oxygen and damage my brain. They might mix me up with someone else and amputate my leg.

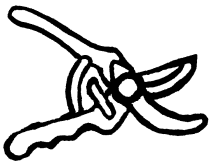
I was so terrified that I was wheeled into the operating theatre holding a large piece of paper on which I'd written: PLEASE MAKE SURE I AM PROPERLY ASLEEP. The nurses thought it was hilarious.

On the other hand, I did muck about in class. I was in detention every other week. And I was not Albert Einstein.

In fact, getting chucked out of school would be pretty much par for the course. Everything seemed to have gone wrong over the past six months. It wasn't just Dad losing his job. It was Mum getting a job that paid double what he'd ever earned at the car plant. She did a part-time business course at the College of Further Education, came top and ended up with a job at Perkins and Thingamy in town.

So, while Dad slouched around all day feeling sorry for himself, circling job adverts in the paper and gluing bits of balsa wood together, Mum zipped back and forth in her new red Volkswagen, dressed in natty suits and carrying a briefcase with a combination lock.

Some days it seemed as if the whole world had been turned upside down.



In ten minutes I was standing in front of Charlie's house. It was a big posh job, four storeys, garage, an actual drive. Dr Brooks, Charlie's dad, was a short, wiry man with monumental eyebrows, who spoke as little as possible. He worked as a police surgeon. He was the guy you see on the TV, standing over the dead body, saying, 'He was killed by a blow to the head with a crowbar at approximately four a.m.'

Mrs Brooks, Charlie's mum, was completely different. She was a professional cook who did wedding receptions and conference banquets. She had a kitchen the size of an aircraft hangar and a fridge the size of our flat. She had a temper like a flame-thrower and talked pretty much constantly.

I walked through the gate and up to the front door, wondering why someone had ripped up the flowerbed in front of the lounge window. I was about to ring the bell when I heard a fake owl-hoot from above my head. I looked up and saw Charlie leaning out of his bedroom window. He pressed his finger to his lips and pointed round the side of the house. I kept

my trap shut and followed the direction of his finger.

As I stood in the dark passage next to the garage, Charlie's other window creaked open and I saw a rope ladder falling towards me. 'Come up,' whispered Charlie. I started to climb, trying very hard not to fall off or put my foot through a window.

'What's all this about?' I asked, sitting on his bed and getting my breath back.

'I'm grounded,' he explained, rolling the rope ladder back up again. 'Level Ten. No going out. No friends round. No TV. Nothing.'

'What for?'

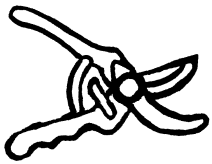
'I decided it was time I learned to drive,' he said.

'Why?'

'Driving is a very useful skill to have, Jimbo,' he said, turning on the radio to cover the sound of our conver-sation. 'It seemed like a good idea to start early. So I took the keys from the fruit bowl and got Mum's car out of the garage while she was at the hairdresser's. Did a bit of first gear and reverse up and down the drive. Then it all went a bit pear-shaped.'

'Let me guess,' I said. 'You drove into the flowerbed.'

'Smashed a headlight too,' said Charlie. 'I am seriously not in Mum's good books at the moment.'



We lay around for half an hour, reading old copies of *Police Surgeon's Weekly* that Charlie had nicked from his dad's study, looking for pictures of really bad industrial accidents. Then I finally got round to telling Charlie what had been bugging me all evening.

'I'm in trouble.'

'Join the club,' he said.

'No,' I insisted. 'I mean *big* trouble.'

'Tell me.'

So I told him. He was always the right person to talk to about stuff like this. He listened properly and thought hard and when he said something it was usually pretty sensible.

Charlie looked like a Victorian chimney sweep – pointy face, beady eyes, hair going in all directions, clothes a couple of sizes too large. Not that you'd really notice him. He didn't say much in class and he avoided fights in the playground. He was the person who is always leaning against a wall somewhere in the background, keeping his eye on things.

'You know something, Jimbo,' he said when I'd finished my story.

'What?'

'You are one gullible prat. If your sister told you that the sky was going to fall down, you'd go round wearing a crash helmet.'

'But . . .' I was feeling embarrassed now. 'It could be true, couldn't it? I mean, it's possible, right?'

'Well,' he said, 'there's only one thing to do. We have to find out what the teachers really think of you.' He wandered over to the far side of the room, shoved the bed aside, lifted a loose floorboard and extracted a small black object from the hole.

'What's that?' I asked.

'A walkie-talkie,' he replied. 'And it's going to solve this problem once and for all.'

'How?' I asked.

Charlie flicked a switch on the walkie-talkie and I heard his mum's voice crackling out of the speaker: '. . . I don't care what you say, that boy has got to learn his lesson. This week he's trying to drive the car. Next week he'll be burning the house down. Now, what do you fancy for supper? I've got some of the trout left over from the Kenyons' wedding. I could rustle up some new potatoes and green beans—'

Charlie flicked the switch off. 'The other one's in the

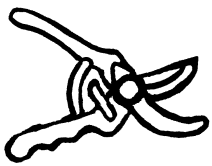
kitchen, on top of the dresser.' He put the walkie-talkie back under the floorboards. 'I use it to keep in touch with what's going on down there in Parentland. Good, eh?'

'Brilliant,' I said. 'But how is it going to help me?'

'Use your brain, Jimbo,' said Charlie, tapping his forehead. 'We put one in the staff room.'

'Isn't that a bit risky?' I said nervously. Things were bad enough already. If the teachers found me bugging their private conversations I'd be marched out of the school gates and banged up in Fenham before tea time.

'Course it's risky,' said Charlie, shrugging his shoulders. 'It wouldn't be any fun if it wasn't risky.'



I was halfway down the rope ladder when a light came on. There was an ominous thump and I looked up to see Charlie's mum looming out of the staircase window.

She was carrying the secateurs she used for clipping her roses. 'Good evening, Jim.' She smiled down at me. 'And what a pleasant evening it is.'

'Er, yes,' I croaked. 'Very pleasant.'

'Especially for climbing into people's houses uninvited,' she tutted. 'Why, Jim, I might have thought you were a

burglar, mightn't I? And if I'd thought you were a burglar, heaven knows what might have happened.'

I clambered down the ladder as fast as I could. It wasn't fast enough. And this is what I mean about the flame-thrower temper. I've seen Charlie's mum throw a breadboard across the kitchen during an argument. She just doesn't operate according to the normal rules of being a grown-up.

I was couple of metres off the ground when she cut through one of the ropes of the ladder. I lost my footing and found myself dangling upside down. Then she cut the other rope and I hit the gravel, tearing the sleeve of my shirt and scraping the skin off my elbows.

As I ran for the front gate, I could hear her bellowing, 'Charlie . . . ! You get down here right now!' I just hoped she wasn't holding the breadboard.