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Waiting for Gonzo

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MESSAGE TO GONZO

Listen, G—this is important and there isn't much time.

I want you to know what really happened, because things weren't supposed to end like this.

I blame Marcel Duchamp, but he's dead, so there's not much anybody can do to him now. When he drew a moustache and a goatee beard on a copy of the *Mona Lisa*—which is probably the most famous painting in the world—he said he did it because he wanted to challenge people's perception of what art could be.

He was lying.

He did it because it was funny.

Moustaches are funny.

End of story.

Except in this case, G—it was just the beginning.

ONE
DOING A PETE TAYLOR

Do you know what my loving mother said as she dropped me off outside Crawdale High School? Not, *Have a nice day, darling!* Not even, *Good luck*. No, what she said to me was:

'Now, Marcus, remember—first impressions last—so don't be cocky.'

She's right about one thing though, G—when you start a new school, you have to make the right first impression. Not like Pete Taylor. He arrived at the beginning of Year Five, and in the first hour of his first day, peed himself in class. Pete was funny, clever, and brilliant at sport. But when I left Hardacre four years later, he was still known by everyone as Wee Pete.

Now, don't get me wrong, G, I wasn't worried about losing control of my bladder as I walked into school that morning, but there are more ways than one of doing a Pete Taylor.

'This is Ryan. He'll show you the ropes.' The Head of Year Nine smiled and gestured towards the figure that had appeared in the doorway of his office. The kid seriously

needed a haircut. You could barely see his eyes for the mass of brown curls falling over his face.

'Welcome to the school!' Ryan's arm shot out towards me and I realized he wanted to shake hands. 'I'm Ryan.'

'Oz.' We shook and I smiled. See—friendly, not cocky.

'I'm your buddy,' said Ryan. 'To help you settle in. So if there's anything you want to know, just ask.' His accent was so strong I had to concentrate hard to understand what he was saying.

'OK.'

'The school was built in eighteen seventy-five and opened with a class of twenty-three pupils,' he said, as I followed him up a flight of stairs. 'It now has over seven hundred.' Ryan sounded like a museum tour guide, and I wondered if he had been told to give me this information, or if he actually thought I might be interested.

'The school motto is, *libertas a scientia venit*, which is Latin for . . . *from knowledge comes freedom*, or something like that.' He shrugged. 'Is there anything you want to know? Or shall I just keep going?'

'Don't worry. I doubt I'll be staying long,' I said. 'Once my parents wake up from their delusion that moving here was a good idea, we'll be back to civilization—shops and pavements and roads with white lines down the middle!'

Ryan frowned. 'Where is it you're from then?'

'Hardacre—just outside London.'

'So why d'you move here?'

'No choice. My mum got a job at the college up here. Apparently she and Dad always wanted to live in the country. They didn't even ask us!'

'Us?'

'I've got a sister. Not important. The point is we weren't even consulted. It was just—*pack your stuff, we're moving.*'

I shook my head. 'I mean, I bet your mum and dad wouldn't do that to you.'

'They died when I was five,' said Ryan.

'Oh . . . sorry.'

He shrugged. 'I don't really remember them. But I don't think my grandad would do anything like that, not without asking me first.'

'Exactly!' I said. 'And the place they bought—*Scar Hill Farm*! It's like something out of a horror movie—all creaking floorboards and boarded up windows—it's a dump. It even smells like someone died in there . . . ' Too late I realized what I'd said.

I blundered on hoping Ryan hadn't noticed. 'I mean, there's holes in the floor and the roof leaks . . . there's not even any heating.'

We turned into a long corridor. Halfway down, Ryan stopped outside a door marked 9F. 'This is our form room,' he said. 'Registration's at eight-forty and two-fifteen, except Tuesdays and Thursdays, when we have assembly in the main hall.' Then he opened the door and every face in the room swung towards me.

I don't know what I was expecting. Rows of long benches with kids clutching chalk, hunched over slates perhaps. In truth the classroom didn't look all that different to the ones at my old school, but that just made it feel even more alien somehow.

I could sense everyone in the room sizing me up. They'd already been back a couple of weeks. I was something new, a diversion from the mundane. Fresh meat.

'Marcus Osbourne, isn't it?' said the teacher, a round woman in square glasses who introduced herself as Mrs Pike.

'Yeah, but most people call me Oz.'

Someone sniggered at the back of the room and Mrs Pike grimaced. 'I think we'll stick with Marcus, thank you.'

I didn't say anything, but inside my head a voice was protesting, *but . . . I'm Oz*.

'I believe you've just moved into the area, Marcus. Where are you living?'

'Um . . . some place called Slowleigh.'

More snorts of laughter. I guessed some of them had seen the place.

The teacher nodded. '*Slowel*,' she said. 'Round here, we don't always pronounce words how they're spelt, I'm afraid.' Mrs Pike smiled. 'But don't worry, you'll get used to it.'

I wasn't planning on sticking around long enough to get used to anything.



Looking back now, I can see how everything that day was leading up to the moustache, pushing me towards it like arrows painted on the ground. I was just a spoke in the Wheel of Destiny as it rolled towards its inevitable conclusion. What I'm saying, G, is that it wasn't entirely my fault.

My first lesson that morning was Art, which is how I came to find out about Marcel Duchamp and the moustache on the *Mona Lisa*. Had it been English, or French, or History, maybe none of this would have happened.

I found a seat at the back of the room, next to a super-sized kid called Gareth, and watched as everyone began pulling pencil cases and sketchbooks from their bags.

Now you remember how I said there are more ways than one of doing a Pete Taylor? Well . . . opening your

rucksack and having your sister's bra fall out onto the table is definitely on the list.

It took me a few seconds to register. I mean, it made no sense for there to be a bra in my bag. But there it was—black and lacy—curled up like a dead bat on my desk.

Unfortunately, this was long enough for Gareth to notice and nudge his mate. Who, by the time I had grabbed the offending article and crammed it back into the bag, had texted every kid in Year Nine, including an internet geek called Mark Edwards. He posted the information to five social networking sites, circulating the news to over thirty countries around the world, all before Mr Henson looked up and asked what was going on.

I opened my mouth, but the words refused to come out, obviously too embarrassed to be associated with me.

'He's got a load of bras in his bag, sir!' said Gareth. There was a noise of grating furniture as everyone in the room turned in our direction.

Meanwhile, my brain was frantically scrolling back to the moment Mum had dropped me off outside school. I saw myself grabbing one of the rucksacks from the pile of bags in the back of the van—bags of washing that Mum was taking to the launderette.

'I must have picked up the wrong bag . . . by mistake.' My cheeks were so hot, I was surprised my hair hadn't ignited.

'That's unfortunate.' The teacher was struggling not to laugh. 'I don't suppose there's anything useful in there? Like a pen or a pencil, perhaps?'

I stared at him, unable to move. It felt like my body had shut down from shame.

'Maybe you'd like to have a look?' suggested Mr Henson.

I nodded and unzipped the rucksack again, even though I knew it was pointless.

Gareth leaned in for a closer look. 'Hey! There's kecks in there an' all! Are they clean?'

I knew I should say something. Something funny and clever. Something Oz would say, but my mind was suddenly blank.

'Perhaps you could lend Marcus a pen for the day, Gareth,' said Mr Henson.

Gareth placed a biro onto the desk with a flourish. 'There you go, Kecks!' he said, and the laughter poured down like hailstones.

It was funny. I knew it was funny. So why didn't I feel like laughing?

I tell you, G—Pete Taylor had nothing on me.

TWO
KECKS

When I got to the next lesson, I had to explain all over again why I didn't have any of the things I needed. Gareth kindly supplied the details I missed out—such as the fact that my bag was full of girls' underwear.

I had to get rid of the rucksack. It was like a beacon of shame hanging off my shoulder.

At break time I found the locker I'd been issued. I was expecting it to be empty, or maybe contain a pair of old trainers or PE socks, but what I saw inside made me stop. In the very centre of the metal box was a pen. One of those fat, smelly markers, standing on end. Now when I say centre, I mean exactly that. I was fairly sure that if I measured the distance from the object to each of the four walls, the numbers would be equal. For some reason it made me think that the pen had been put there on purpose, for me—which was ridiculous, of course. The marker had been left like that as a joke. So slipping it into my pocket made no sense at all. But that's what I did.

Then I stuffed the rucksack into the space and slammed the door.



Just before lunchtime the fire alarm went off. I followed everyone out onto the field, looking for smoke, hoping the school might burn down and the rucksack with it. But of course it was just a drill. By the time we were allowed back inside, the queue for the canteen was longer than it should have been. If the line hadn't been so long, it wouldn't have stretched all the way down the corridor to the noticeboard with all the photographs.

There were loads of them, pictures of school teams and house captains, kids receiving awards and acting in school plays. I wasn't really interested, just trying to avoid eye contact with the group of girls from my art class who were in front of me in the queue.

'Where's your bag at, Kecks?' I pretended I hadn't heard. Then the nearest girl prodded me with a finger. 'Askin' you a question.'

'What?'

'What?' she repeated, doing what she obviously thought was a great impression of my accent. All her mates fell about laughing like it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. Then they all started up—'What? What? What?'—it sounded like a flock of seagulls.

'Look at his shoes!' said another, pointing.

I looked down at my feet, wondering for a moment if I'd accidentally come to school in Dad's plastic clogs—but I was just wearing my school shoes. Admittedly, they were slightly more pointy than most people's, and had the classic *D-tag* logo embossed on the side. All my mates had a pair back home.

'You never seen a pair of 'tags before?' I asked the girl.

She frowned and looked at her mates. 'What's he say?'

And then she said something else that I couldn't make out and they all laughed.

I didn't realize Gareth was behind me until he spoke. 'Where d'you say you come from again, Kecks?'

'Hardacre—near London.'

'Right, that explains it. Lots of blokes wear women's undercrackers down there do they?' The *What? What? Girls* thought this was hilarious.

'You know, they're actually a lot more comfortable than you'd expect,' I said, smiling at Gareth, even though my heart was playing pinball against my ribs.

He frowned.

'I like a good strong gusset though—for extra support, yeah?'

Gareth blinked, and then he laughed.

'You should try it, honestly,' I said. 'It's all about achieving a balance—comfort and style. You know, the choice of underwear tells you a lot about a person.'

Ryan was in the line behind Gareth, watching me through his hair while his jaw sagged in disbelief. I pointed to the freckle-faced kid standing next to him.

'Now, at a guess I'd say you were a traditional briefs man. Am I right?'

Gareth snorted and the kid blushed.

I noticed other people in the queue were listening now.

'Did you know that you can tell the underwear someone is wearing, purely by looking at their face?'

'Go on then,' said Gareth.

I pretended to think, frowning up at him. 'Skin colour suggests good circulation, so I'd say boxers?'

He laughed. 'See, I knew Kecks were the right name for you!'

The *What? What? Girls* giggled.

I looked around for another target and that's when the photographs on the noticeboard caught my eye. I pointed to a girl holding a trophy and squinting into the camera. 'This one looks in pain,' I said. 'G-string riding high, no question. Might need to send in the retrieval squad for that one!' That got a laugh. 'Briefs, boxers, boxers, commando!' I said, moving along the row of images. Then my eyes rested on the picture of a girl with her arms folded, staring defiantly out of the frame.

'Now *this* is not a happy face,' I said. Which is when the image of the *Mona Lisa* dropped into my head like the next slide in a presentation. 'In fact, this reminds me of someone.'

The corridor shrank back, fading as the image of the girl filled my vision and my fingers started to tingle. I knew what I had to do—what the picture was begging me to do. Then I remembered the marker pen in my pocket and realized I'd been right all along. It *had* been left there for me—for this very purpose. It was like a confirmation: *here is the tool with which to complete your task*.

I knew before I popped the cap that the pen would work. I watched it moving towards the photograph, drawn by a force I was powerless to resist—the Wheel of Destiny rocking on its blocks, anxious to get moving.

'What you doing?' I recognized Ryan's voice, but it sounded distant, like somebody shouting a warning from far away.

All my attention was fixed on the thick black line curling out from beneath the girl's nose. I drew a matching swirl on the other side, taking my time, making sure they were even. Then I filled in the outline with broad vertical strokes, the ink squeaking and glistening on the surface of the paper. For a final flourish I added a pair of glasses—and it was done.

The moment I finished, the clamour of the corridor rushed back in, and Ryan was suddenly at my side.

'You shouldn't have done that,' he whispered, his eyes wide.

'It's just a joke.'

He looked like he was about to say more, but then Gareth put a heavy arm around my shoulders and laughed.

'Now that *is* funny, Kecks,' he said. 'Dead funny.'