



opening extract from
framed

written by
frank cottrell boyce

published by macmillan children's books

Framed © Frank Cottrell Boyce, 2005

please print off and read at your leisure.

You've probably never heard of Vincenzo Perugia. But we know all about him. He was a famous art thief and we used to be in the same line of work. My sister Minnie even had a picture of him on her bedroom wall. She reckons that when Vincenzo stole the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre museum in Paris on 21 August 1911, that was the most immensely perfect crime ever. The *Mona Lisa* was the world's most famous painting, but Vincenzo did such a neat job no one even noticed it was missing for two days. Then they did notice, and everything went mental. Everyone went to the Louvre to look at the empty space where the painting had been. They queued up to look at an empty space! Even Vincenzo Perugia queued up. And when they got to the front of the queue, they all looked at that empty space and thought about what used to be there. I can understand that. Sometimes something vanishes, and afterwards you can't stop looking at the place where it used to be.

And all this time Vincenzo had it in his little room – the *Mona Lisa* was in a trunk next to the bed. Sometimes he took the painting out and played it funny songs on his mandolin. He didn't try to sell it. He didn't steal any other paintings. He didn't want to be famous or rich. He just wanted the *Mona Lisa*. And that's where he went right. That's why it was the perfect crime. Because he didn't want anything else.

And that's probably where *we* went wrong. We wanted something.

SNOWDONIA OASIS AUTO MARVEL, MANOD

11 February

Cars today:

BLUE FORD FIESTA - Ms Stamard (Twix)

SCANIA 118 LOW LOADER - Wrexham

Recovery

Weather - rain

Note: OIL IS DIFFERENT FROM ANTIFREEZE

My dad, right – ask anyone this, they'll all say the same – my dad can fix anything. Toyota. Hyundai. Ford. Even Nice Tom's mam's diddy Daihatsu Copen (top speed 106 mph), which is about the size of a marshmallow so you need tweezers to fix it.

And it's not just cars.

Like the time when we were at Prestatyn and Minnie wanted a swim but I wouldn't get in the water because it was too cold. She kept saying, 'Come in. It's fine once you're in.' And I kept saying, 'No.'

Dad got up, went to the caravan and came back with a kettle of boiling water. He poured the water in the sea and said, 'Dylan, come and test it. Tell me if it's all right or does it need a bit more?'

I said, 'No, that's fine now, thanks, Da.'

'Sure now?'

'Sure now.'

‘Not too hot then?’

‘No, just right.’

‘Give me a shout. If it gets cold again, I can always boil up some more.’

Then Minnie splashed me and I splashed her and we stayed in the water till the sun went down.

He fixed the sea for us. Now that is a thing to be admired.

My big sister, Marie, never came in the water even after Dad fixed it. She said, ‘Have you any idea what sea water can do to your hair?’ And later on when we were playing Monopoly in the caravan, she said, ‘Did you really think that one kettle of water could warm up the entire Irish Sea?’

I said, ‘Not the whole sea, obviously. Just the bit we were swimming in.’

‘Yeah, like that would really work,’ said Minnie. ‘Let me explain the physics . . .’

‘Minnie,’ said Mam, ‘Euston Road. Three houses. Two hundred and seventy pounds, please.’ Typical of Mam, by the way, cleverly changing the subject like that.

Obviously I know now that the kettle didn’t warm up the sea, but that’s not the point. I got into the water, that’s the point. Dad looked at that situation and he thought, I can’t do anything about the physics, but I can do something about Dylan. So he did.

*

He's keen for us all to learn how to fix things too. That's how I came to be helping him with the oil change on Ms Stannard's blue Fiesta (top speed 110 mph). I don't know how I came to make the mix-up about the oil.

Dad said it would probably be best if I didn't go near the workshop again. Or near a car again, really. He was quite calm about it. He said it was the kind of thing that could happen to anyone. Anyone who didn't know the difference between motor oil and antifreeze, that is.

After that, Mam said I could take over the petrol log. That's the massive red book next to the till where we write down all the petrol sales so we can track supply and demand. The book is red, with gold patterns on the front. It looks like a Bible. Mam got it in a car-boot sale (Car Boot Crazy at the Dynamo Blaenau Football Club ground) for fifty pence. It's got over a thousand pages. We only use about a page a week, so it should last us twenty years. Bargain!

No disrespect to Mam, obviously, but she was probably too busy with the new baby to make the most of that job. She just wrote stuff like, '10.20 a.m. – four gallons unleaded'. Whereas I put down all the detail – the make, the year, name of the driver, anything. I'd stay on the forecourt from home time till teatime. Sometimes Nice Tom would come and sit with me,

and if he said something like, 'Mr Morgan's offside back tyre is baldy,' I'd put that down too. When Dad saw it, he said, 'Dylan, you have made a fifty-pence petrol log into a database. That is something to be admired.'

A database is very useful. For instance, when Dad read, 'Mr Morgan: offside back tyre baldy,' he sourced a new tyre and offered it to Mr Morgan. So a job that would have gone to Acres of Tyres in Harlech came to us instead. It saved Mr Morgan time and it made us money. That's market research, and I did it. 'And that,' says Dad, 'is how the Hughes family operates. Everyone has his job to do and everyone does it well. The Hughes family is an unbeatable team. We are the Brazil of Snowdonia.'

And the team sheet is: Dad – Captain; Mam – Team Manager, and Acquisitions (at car-boot sales); Me – Market Research; Marie – she's very pretty so I suppose you'd say Presentation; and Minnie, well, general Brains really. Oh, and the baby. His name is Max and he doesn't do much at the moment, but in seven years' time he will be able to play football.

Because I put so much detail in the petrol log, I only have to look at it now and I can remember anything about that day. For instance, in this entry for 11 February, I remember Ms Stannard buying that Twix, because she's my teacher and I thought, 'Oooh, Ms

Stannard eats Twix.' And I remember that the blue Fiesta is hers because it's the car that the mix-up happened to. And the Scania 118 low loader is this immense eight-wheel truck with the beaver tailgate, lifting tackle and an intercooler engine. It came to take Ms Stannard's car away.

Like I said, Dad can fix nearly anything.

Ms Stannard's Fiesta is the exception that proves the rule.

15 February

Cars today:

BLUE BARRACUDA MOUNTAIN BIKE - man in a balaclava (parked by the Alta Gaz)

GREEN DAIHATSU COPEN - Mrs Egerton (parked right up against the car vac, didn't buy petrol - tiny 659cc engine, not a big drinker)

Weather - raining

Note: BALACLAVAS ENCOURAGE CRIME

This one is the petrol log for the day of the robbery. The robbery was the first time any of us had seen a criminal in action up close. So it was probably a major influence on our later work.

A man came into the garage with a balaclava over his face and a big sledgehammer and shouted at Dad to empty the till. Dad knew who it was right away - it was Daft Tom. He knew because Tom's mam had knitted me a very similar balaclava for my birthday. Also Tom had customized the eyeholes himself, and the wool was starting to unravel around the nasal area so you could nearly recognize him. Anyway, Dad pretended to empty the safe. 'It's a time lock, see,' he said, 'so it'll take a couple of minutes. You stay calm and help yourself to whatever you like from the sweet rack.'

‘Just move it, Mr Hughes.’ That was another bit of a clue, the robber calling Dad ‘Mr Hughes’.

The final clue, by the way, was the big blue mountain bike, which was the only big blue mountain bike in town and which everyone remembers Daft Tom winning in the Christmas Lights raffle.

He was also wearing a Ninja Turtles cycling helmet, and everyone knows that Daft Tom is obsessed with the Turtles, which is unusual in a grown man. Daft Tom got into the Turtles when they first came out, same as everyone else. But when everyone else grew out of them, he carried on liking them. He was always buying Turtles T-shirts, videos, collectors’ cards, the original Turtle Lair, with extra sewage piping, Ninja Choppin’ Pogo ’Copters, Sewer Sledges, Shell Subs (with Torpedos) . . . He had a boxed set of super-poseable models of Donatello, Raphael, Leonardo and Michelangelo, with sixty-seven points of articulation each, and even a full-size strap-on Turtle shell.

Anyway, back to the robbery. Obviously we haven’t actually got a safe. When Dad said he was opening the safe, he was actually texting Daft Tom’s mam, and she came round in her little Copen. Daft Tom didn’t hear or see the car pull up because the engine is so small you can only hear it if you’re a bat or a shrew or something. So when she walked in, he nearly choked from shock. And when she walloped him across the back of

his legs with her unnecessary Krooklock, well, he shouted, 'What the Shell!' (another giveaway) and then, well, he just keeled over really.

Daft Tom's mam wanted to report him to the police, but Dad was dead against it. 'The town of Manod,' he said, 'has the lowest crime rate in the United Kingdom. We're not going to spoil that for one mistake.'

And he offered him a job.

'You come and work in the garage for a few weeks and we'll say no more about it. I can't pay you, mind.'

His mother was upset. She said, 'We have no way of knowing what our deeds will lead to. Look at me: I was just trying to keep my son's ears warm, like a good mother, and where did that lead? If I had not knitted him a balaclava, he might never have been seduced into criminality.'

The good thing about Daft Tom was that he could work the photocopier, which no one else could because when Mam bought it (Snowdonia Mountain Rescue Charity Shop, £20), it didn't have a manual. Daft Tom crouched in front of it and kept pressing buttons until he had it all worked out. By the end of the week, the Snowdonia Oasis Auto Marvel had become the Snowdonia Oasis Auto Marvel and Copier Centre. And Daft Tom had become Nice Tom (except to his mam).

So there's another thing that Dad fixed – he fixed Daft Tom. That was the end of his Life of Crime.

Which is funny when you think about it. Because it was probably the start of ours.