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Opening extract from

Monkey and Me

Written by

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If you look at something, say a telephone pole, or a house, or even a dog sitting in the drive, and you close one eye, whatever you're looking at is in a different place from when you had the other eye closed. That's called perspective. If you close both eyes then you don't see anything and that's called stupid. But if, after rapidly opening and closing each eye, the object jumps left and right, and you're doing this to Mr Peacock's dog-from-hell who's no longer sitting in the drive and is coming at you full tilt because, as everyone knows, staring at a dog is a direct challenge – then that's called suicidal.

"Jez! RUN!" yelled Mark.

He's my brother, and he had a different perspective. He was on the other side of the mesh fence on his way with his mates to try and finish off the last few remaining windows at the derelict Sweet Dreams Sweet Factory. It's a place that made

beds called Sweet Dreams, but they closed when the owner went to Thailand on holiday. I think he became what's known as a Missing Person, because the police are still looking for him. Then someone bought it and added the words Sweet Factory. Which was a clever play on words because I often dream of being locked in the school shop and never having to pay for another Swizzle Lick, Juice Fruit Chew or my favourite, Tube Suck. But then they moved their business to China and lots of people around here lost their jobs, including Mum. She was on the Tube Suck quality control line, which is why I got lots of them. She said they were rejects, but that was only because some of the lettering on the packet hadn't come out properly, like Tub Suck or Tube Su k. It still tasted the same.

"Jez! Come on! FASTER!" everyone was shouting.

The dog-from-hell was called Feather but she had a personality disorder and I think that was Mr Peacock's idea of a joke, another play on words. Peacock's Feather. I didn't think it was that clever or even funny; I just thought it was stupid. But I suppose it depends on your perspective.

Mark threw an empty dustbin – the old kind

that Mum used to have before someone in Germany invented the wheelie bin and convinced every government in the world that we all had to have one, at least that's what Dad says – as Skimp hauled me through the torn fence, which saved me from being savaged to death. And he also did Feather a favour, because the Dangerous Dogs Act would have meant that Feather would have been put to sleep. Not that she had ever, ever bitten anyone; she just liked to scare all the kids in the street. But you never know – one day she might get the taste for human flesh and then the street population of children would be shredded. Bits and pieces of bones and entrails would lead armed police to her lair next to Mr Peacock's compost bin and then…

"That was really dumb. You know you can't mess about with that fleabag!" Mark shouted at me as I sat trying to get my breath back. Big wheezing gulps that made my chest feel as though it had sandpaper inside.

"You can't come with us if you can't keep up!" Skimp said, though I know he didn't mean it.

"And stopping and doing things like opening and closing one eye," said Pete-the-Feet.

"It's called perspective," I told him.

"This gang has to be light on its feet. We have to move like a Rapid Deployment Force, responding to every danger without hesitation. Not standing around picking your nose while Peacock's Paranoid Pet attacks," Rocky said.

I tried to imagine standing with my finger up my nose as Peacock's Feather attacked. But I couldn't. Bogey picking would seriously slow down your escape.

Mark's gang always let me go along with them although I wasn't in double digits. You had to be ten or older to join and I was nine years, eleven months and seven days, so I was designated Probationary Gang Member, though Rocky said I was Tail-end Charlie. This was what anyone at the back of an army patrol was called and, as I was always bringing up the rear, it sort of made sense, even though we weren't actually in the army like Rocky's uncle.

Gangs, I discovered, are not democratic. Pete-the-Feet, Skimp and Rocky had voted against me joining, but after Mark had called an Extraordinary Meeting of the Executive Council, and took them to one side, they all came back and voted me in.

After all, it's his gang and I'm his brother, so it's always good to have a relative in a position of power. That's called nepotism.

Anyway, we broke four windows on the third floor, with the best throw going to Pete-the-Feet, who took a run at the corner of the building, threw the half brick like Freddie Flintoff on a fast wicket and bowled out the fourth floor corner window. He was going so fast he fell head over heels and tore the back of his jacket, which we thought was hilarious, but his mum would give him what-for because she paid seven pounds fifty for it at the Oxfam shop.

All in all it was a lot of fun. No one got eaten alive and we got our own back on the man who took away our sweets and Mum's job. Somewhere in an unpronounceable province of China I bet there's another boy getting reject Tube Sucks because his mum says the letter is missing. I wonder what a missing 'c' or 'e' is in their alphabet. Maybe I should learn Chinese, then I could always emigrate to the unpronounceable province, move in with the boy's family, teach him English and share his reject Tube Sucks. I'll ask Dad and see if he can't get transferred to the Chinese Post Office. Life should be an adventure,

that's what he always says, and you can't get a bigger adventure than becoming a Chinese postman.

Because I get tired after an exhausting day breaking windows (well, half an hour probably) I always like going home. I think it's the toast, though Mum and Dad are also part of it. But toast always fills the house with a smell that makes my mouth water. Mark says it's a Pavlovian response – I thought that was some kind of foreign cake he was talking about. Hot toast – home – mouth-watering – hug from Mum. It's learned behaviour, says my know-it-all brother, which I think is a bit rich coming from him, because he never seems to learn things except the hard way. He's always getting thumped by Ronnie Rogers, who's bigger than him. How many times have I told him –"Don't pick fights with kids who are bigger and better fighters than you are." But every week, sometimes once a day, there he is whacking Rogers with his schoolbag and wrestling him to the ground. I don't know why he does it, and he won't tell me either. I think Mark's a bit too sensitive for his age, that's what Mum says too, while Dad just puts his arm around him and speaks quietly to him out in

the garden, then they kick a ball around for a while. Being sensitive is difficult for a twelve-year-old boy. I'm sensitive as well, but I'm only nine years, eleven months and seven days old and that must make a difference, I suppose. Besides, I've learned to ignore what Gobby Rogers and his mates yell at me. I like the way I look. I've got no choice. I wear a beanie hat all the time and that's what everyone calls me – Beanie. That's what's called a nickname but it can also be an insult – it's all about perspective again. I think it's a great beanie. It's got a nice soft cotton lining and a red, black and orange knit that makes my head look like a wasp. It keeps my head and ears warm and it muffles the insults. It's perfect. And I wear it everywhere, I mean all the time, even in the bath, except when Mum whips it off and lathers my head with soap that smells like…

"Mark! Look at this scratch on Jez's neck."

"It's nothing, Mum," I told her as I got the toast and raspberry jam in as far as it would go.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Jez. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"But you're always telling me to eat while the food's hot. If I waited it'd be cold."

"Don't be clever, it doesn't suit you." Which shows how grown-ups always contradict themselves. Mum's usually telling me how clever I am.

"He got caught going under a fence, that's all," Mark explained.

"And if Skimp hadn't pulled me through, Peacock's Feather would've…" A swift kick to the shins under the table nearly made me choke and I regurgitated a clump of soggy bread and jam. It was disgusting, but it took Mum's mind off asking any more questions. She fussed and patted my back, wiped my face and slumped in the chair between us.

She seemed a bit tired today. I wondered if it was the visits to the hospital. Mum and Dad are beginning to cause me some concern. She's a bit weepy and Dad often puts his arms around her, not at the same time as Mark, but you have to think that his arms are put to a lot of use in our house. Mark knows something, but isn't saying. I wonder if she's pregnant. She's getting a bit old for another baby and she'd never manage because she's always saying Mark and me are a handful. Though, to be fair, she doesn't say that as much any more.

She sipped her tea. "Mark, don't let Jez get hurt, all right? You promised."

He nodded and pinched the last piece of toast.

I didn't know he'd promised. It's most likely because he's older and it's the burden of responsibility that big brothers have. I suppose if she is pregnant then I'll have to do the same for the new baby. Anyway, that's something I can't even think about because by the time it goes to school I'll be too old. They'll have to hire a private bodyguard instead.

Mum smiled at me. "Come on, let's get some antiseptic on that scratch. We don't want it getting infected."

Anyone would think the Sweet Dreams Sweet Factory's fence had been contaminated with bubonic plague to keep kids out. What if it hadn't been a sweet factory? What if they used that as cover for a secret biological warfare plant? Maybe they've sold deadly germs to the Chinese instead of Tube Sucks and Swizzle Licks. The words undercover and subterfuge sprang to mind – deception and spying. Vital information that puts everyone's life in danger. Maybe Mum had inside information. Maybe she was part of a Witness Protection Programme, which

was why she's on Checkout 14 at Sainsbury's. It was a secret identity.

"Mum, were those Tube Sucks really what you said they were?"

"What?"

"Were the missing letters on the label really some kind of code? Was quality control some kind of weapons' grade inspection facility? How could the government let the Chinese have our secrets for germ warfare? Were you really on subterfuge duty?"

By now we'd reached the bathroom, and she was looking for the tube of antiseptic. "Subterfuge? How do you know words like that? Where do you get all these ideas from?"

"*Everything You Need to Know in the World*. Volume Five. Seventy-five p at the RSPCA charity shop."

She shook her head and squeezed the ointment. "This is the closest I'll ever get to germ warfare. Keep still."

That wasn't a definite no, then.