**# 19 Armless Confusion**

A light summer breeze ushered cotton-wool clouds across a blue sky towards distant hills.  Nearer to the ground, disturbed air teased an abundant leafy canopy where Harry was sat wondering.

Not why he liked climbing trees or why his pee was sometimes yellow. Or why Alison Moffitt, a seven-year-old in his class, kept pinching him.

No— this was about what Aunt Madge had shouted at breakfast.

He’d been daydreaming, so didn’t know what he was doing until he’d jumped.  But the telling off that had followed gave him answers to two very important questions:  why he wasn’t doing well at school and what was now perched on the tip of his finger.

He leaned forward to focus on the slimy bogey he’d just picked from his nose.  It was identical to the one he’d retrieved at breakfast but because his Aunt had startled him, he’d quickly wiped that evidence on the underside of their kitchen table.

“Harry!” she’d shouted.  “No wonder you're not doing well at school.  If you keep picking your nose like that, you'll have no brain left.”

He squinted at the bogey.

‘Was that what his brain looked like?  More importantly, how much of it was left? He’d been picking his nose for as long as he could remember.  But loads of kids did it— some even put the retrieved items in their mouths.

He gazed at the passing clouds and wondered some more.

‘Was your mouth a passage back to your brain? Did the bogey slither to where you’d picked it from?’

Harry moved his finger towards his mouth but gagged.  He couldn’t do it, not even for a wayward brain cell.

‘But was the edge of your brain really that close?  If that was true, a sudden sneeze could blow out loads of cells. No, that couldn’t be right.  His Aunt must've got it wrong— but could your nose be an overflow from the brain?’

Now that would be more like it.

If that was true, the cell on his finger was obviously surplus to requirement.  A worn out critter, well past its sell-by date.  So removing it had done his body a favour.

Suddenly a piece of wood went whistling past his head and crashed into the branches just above him.

“Oy— what’re you doing up there?” a voice shouted from below.

Harry looked down and saw his best mate.  “You silly bugger, Jacko, that nearly hit me, you daft sod.”

“Good shot, wann it,” came the chuckled response.

Harry wiped his bogey on the branch and wondered if it might give the tree intelligence but then thought about that for a moment.  His school report said he was a bit short on that commodity, so the tree might not benefit after all.

Safely on the ground, he punched Jacko hard on the arm before running off into the woods hooting and hollering.  His mate followed behind shouting primitive expletives.

Moments later Harry plonked himself on a large rock next to a stream.  “So, what shall we do today?”  he asked as Jacko arrived at his side.

Their sudden intrusion into the undergrowth disturbed a rabbit.  It jumped the stream in two bounds and sprinted towards a huge tree twenty meters away.

Instantly the boys were in hot pursuit.  Jumping the stream with ease, the downhill slope accelerated their run, enabling them to see the animal dive into a large burrow close to the tree.

Jacko looked up at the Oak.  “This must be a thousand years old,” he said confidently.

Harry wasn’t going to argue— his mate was doing much better at school than he was.

They’d joined elementary at the same time but from different primary schools, just after they’d turned six years old.  Now they were both seven and four months but Jacko was the older, his birthday was earlier in the month than Harry’s.

Jacko was a Harry Potter fan, as was Harry, but Jacko looked a bit like the kid in the films.  This was enhanced by a pair of round reading glasses he’d got hold of. Unfortunately, the lenses were for bad eyes, so made his look huge.  This had caused hysterical laughter whenever he’d worn them but after a while, they hurt his eyes, so his Dad had taken the lenses out.

Harry walked around the tree.

It looked very old because its branches were all twisted and the bark felt gruesome. Also, the ground around it was springy, as though it had never been walked on before.

Jacko stuck his head close to the rabbit hole.  “I wonder how far that goes?”

“I wonder how many rabbits are in there?”  Harry added.

Jacko got up and wandered around the tree a couple of times.  “There’s no more ‘oles, Harry. Only one way in and out.”

Harry stood with his hands in his pockets looking at his mate, waiting for the bright idea that would follow.  This would probably get them into trouble.  Most of Jacko’s plans ended that way.

Jacko took off his glasses and pretended to clean the glass.

“Let’s flood the buggers out,” he said with a chuckle.

“How do we do that, you daft sod?” Harry asked.

“We use sharp sticks to scrape a channel in the ground from up there,” pointing the way they’d come.  “Divert the water into here,” he added, before wiping his runny nose on his sleeve, distracting Harry’s mind.

It took some effort and several broken sticks but ten minutes later, they had a trickle of water flowing into the rabbit hole.

Jacko put his head close to the opening, then laughed as he looked up at his mate.

“Ow, sounds good, but we need more water.  Then as the furry buggers pop out, we can beat ‘em to death with our sticks.”

“Oh!  Rabbit stew for dinner then?” Harry yelled.

Enlarging the gully increased the flow like a bath tap full on.  It gurgled as it plunged into the hole but not a rabbit appeared.

Jacko pulled a disgruntled face.  “Let's see if there’s ‘oles further down the bank,” he grumbled but Harry shook his head.

“I’m going to make the gully deeper,” he said as he got to work.  Jacko reluctantly walked further up the bank and started scraping.

Minutes later they were chuckling because of the amazing gurgling sound, coming from the bowels of the earth.

“OK, that should do it— let's bugger off and see if there’s rabbits escaping further down,” suggested Harry.

Zigzagging down the slope, they found a few burrows but no rabbits or water.

“Jacko— where’s all that water going?”

“Maybe there's a cave under that tree.”

“Yeah, one full of treasure and stuff.  Could be why the ground’s all springy up there,” Harry suggested.

Ω

After following the stream a few hundred meters, they stood above a clearing where a small cottage and barn stood.

Recognizing their location, Harry’s body gave an involuntary shiver.  The adventurers turned and glanced at each other as Harry whispered, “I’m not going down there again.”

Months ago they'd been exploring and had come across this place from the other direction.  As they’d moved closer through the trees, a van had left in a hurry.

“What’s Reality Ammunition then?” Harry had asked, as they’d wandered on.

“What are you talking about?”

“It was on the side of that van. Well, I think that’s what it said.”

They’d walked on in silence for a while before Harry asked again.  “So come on, brains, what’s it mean?”

Jacko took off his glasses and pretended to clean the glass again, then stood with his hands on his hips.  “Reality Ammunition - you sure you read it right?  You know what you’re like.”

Harry nodded.  “You saw the van, it were dirty, wan it, but I’m sure that’s what it said.”

“Well, Reality means it bloody real, don it. So the barn over there is probably filled with guns and bombs.”

The barn double doors had been secured by a shiny lock and chain, looped through rusty iron loops.  Fortunately, the building’s wooden sides had tiny gaps in a few places allowing for internal investigation.

They’d been able to see a rusty wheelbarrow and two bicycles leaning against the back wall.

One corner was piled high with loads of boxes of different shapes and sizes but all this was irrelevant.

In the center, laid on a bloodstained workbench, was a headless body, wrapped like an Egyptian mummy.  To make matters worse, a large stained knife stuck point first into the bench, just above the wrapped severed head that lay on the floor.

Wide-eyed, both boys had glanced at each other. Then thought they’d heard something move, followed by a deep gurgling breath.

They’d taken off at lightning speed and never looked back.  So they missed the child hanging from the gallows and the baby impaled on the iron spike.

An hour later in the comfort of Jacko’s bedroom, they’d reassured each other they weren’t scared, but almost jumped out of their skins when his mum had suddenly knocked on the door.

Now looking down at the cottage again, they decided to head back the way they’d come. But what happened next made them tear home without stopping.

Climbing back toward the Oak tree, Harry noticed their feet were making a squelching noise because the ground was soggy.

Then both boys saw the ground up ahead rushing towards them.

They’d screamed in unison and scampered sideways but Jacko was flipped off his feet by the avalanche and carried away.

He screamed like a pig being slaughtered but stopped when his ride came to an abrupt halt ten meters further on.

Diverting the water had saturated the earth. Up by the Oak, a huge chunk of the bank was missing, exposing long twisted roots that stuck out like a witch's arms and fingers.

The waterlogged ground had travelled thirty meters, tearing a wide path through the undergrowth before coming to rest near the stream.

Harry found his mate lying on his back covered in slimy goo but giggling.

“Bloody hell, Jacko, what a terrible smell!  Did you shit yourself or something?”  Harry scoffed.

His mate screwed up his nose at the stench, then sat up.

Harry suddenly screamed and backed away as he pointed.  Jacko scrambled to his feet as best he could. Then noticed the small pale arm and hand he’d been lying on.

Sticking out of the sloppy quagmire, the arm turned slowly and pointed its finger at them.  The boys gawked for a millisecond, then raced home as fast as their legs could carry them.

Bad dreams had woken both boys that night.  Their disclosures the following morning prompted a trip to the local police station.

Ω

“If the boys have described the cottage correctly, it sounds like Cartwright’s land,” Sergeant Davis informed Jacko’s Dad.  “We’d best go take a look.”

Davis led the three-car convoy.  Bill Smithers in plain clothes, drove the CID car, followed by Jacko’s Dad.

As Jacko led everyone into the woods, Harry took a quick peek in the barn.

“The body’s gone,” he whispered as they climbed the slope.

Minutes later they reached the spot but the arm wasn’t there.

Harry glanced at his mate and made a face.  “This is the spot, innit?”

Jacko nodded his head sheepishly because his Dad and the police were glaring at them.

“I hope you aren't wasting police time, boy,” Bill Smithers barked.  “That's a serious offence,” he’d added, wishing he’d worn his wellington boots.

Suddenly everyone turned toward the noise of breaking twigs and rustling coming from their right.  Nothing could be seen due to thick undergrowth but it sounded like someone running.

Sergeant Davis took up the chase and was quickly lost from sight but over the noise of breaking twigs, he could be heard cursing.

This was suddenly superseded by a howl of pain, followed by an abrupt silence.

Moments later he emerged, bedraggled with blood on his shirt and a look of thunder on his face.  He’d fallen into a hole and that had put paid to any thought of continuing the chase.

As the small group arrived back at the barn, a white van came down the drive and pulled up next to the police car.

“Can I help you?” the driver asked as he got out.  He was a thin gangly man with receding grey hair and a prominent hooked nose that supported round gold-rimmed glasses.

“Who might you be, sir?” the officer asked.

“I’m Doctor Herbert De’ath.  I rent this land.  So what’s the problem here?”

Both boys glanced at each other as Harry whispered from the side of his mouth.  “Shit, Doctor Death.”

“The boys here thought they’d found a dismembered body in the woods.”

“A body you say,” De’ath responded with a sneer, glancing at the boys.

“Well, to be factual, they said it was a severed arm,” Davis added.

De’ath stared sternly at the boys for a moment then opened the van door and pulled out a small arm with a hand and pointy finger.

“Something like this?” he asked, pointing the finger directly at the boys, who both nodded sheepishly.

“You shouldn’t be on this land, its private property— there are dangers here,” he stated in an ominous tone before quickly turned and winked at the officer.

Then he pointed the finger at the sign on his van.

“What does that say?” he asked addressing the boys.

‘Reality Animation,’ Jacko replied, then added under his breath.  “Not ammunition, you daft sod.”

“I make things for TV and Films,” De’ath said.  “They look real but are not, but if I catch you boys on my land again, I’ll turn you into one of them— understood?” He snapped.

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison.

He then leaned close and whispered, “If you come back on Friday afternoon I’ll teach you how to make some scary stuff,” then stood back and winked discreetly, before adding in a tone of authority.

“Now, I think you’d better clear off before I change my mind about pressing charges for trespassing.”  Turning to the officer, he added in a low voice with a hint of a smile, “That should minimize the paperwork, sergeant.”

Ω

“So what did the Doctor Death whisper to you guys,” Jacko’s Dad asked as they drove home.

“He said that if we go back,” Harry said from the back seat but his response was cut short by his mate.

“He’ll make us disappear like one of Harry Potter’s bad guys,” Jacko said firmly staring directly at his friend, which meant, keep your gob shut.

Harry grinned and winked.

Jacko’s Dad noticed the reaction in his rearview mirror and smiled inwardly, remembering the troubles he’d gotten into when he was seven.

**# 20 The Glitch**

My old computer had been playing up for a while.  Sometimes it wouldn’t start, then if it did, it shut down without warning.

Being a tinkerer, I took the side off and blew out all the things that had taken up residence. After the dust had settled, I unclipped and refastened all the little cables, just in case corrosion was upsetting things.

Ten minutes later with a good deal of trepidation, I turned the power on and waited.

The computer buzzed for a few seconds, an odd light flashed and flickered but sadly— that was it. I stared at it glumly. Money would have to be spent.

⇋

Next morning before calling my friendly computer geek, I crossed my fingers and gave the old girl another try.

It buzzed for a moment then— Hey-Presto! There was the BBC News, which was probably the last thing I’d looked at before everything had gone haywire.

I patted myself on the back and felt very pleased with myself but then noticed the information was weeks out of date. I tapped the refresh button, then wished I hadn’t. I’d just noticed the date on my computer was wrong as well.

I could remember the article I’d just seen about Trump having one of his outbursts, next to a ‘Brexit’ update.

Moments later the screen went opaque, which meant the computer had frozen again. After pushing the restart button, I dashed to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

I arrived back to find my computer working but annoyingly, it had refreshed to the same page, three weeks out of date the same as the computer date.

I wondered how that was possible.

Had my device stored the information?

I quickly located the BBC website via Google but oddly the information that came up corresponded with what I already had, which was very confusing.

I sipped my coffee thoughtfully, then called my computer geek.

The tiny battery that keeps the computer date correct needed replacing.  My device was probably using stored data, from the last time I’d done a reset.

His advice: Get a new battery and reset as normal.

Not having the said battery to hand, I decided to do a reset anyway and this is when things started to become more confusing.

I reset the date but, mistakenly, put the month first as they do in America, pushing the date further back than before.

After refreshing, what came up was more peculiar.

The French were just going to the polls and President Macron had not yet been elected and the info date corresponded with the computer.

I sat back and began to think the problem through.

It could have been my vivid imagination, or the strong coffee I was drinking but I came up with a great idea.

Perhaps my antiquated computer had given me a way of looking back in time!

Yes— I know what you’re thinking. Get real, or maybe, what brand of coffee are you drinking?

But this was the only credible answer to my glitch I could come up with. By some strange anomaly, I was delving into the archives at the BBC.

I took another swig of coffee. The thought of having a spyhole into the past was intriguing but— was it possible to look forward in time?

After dashing back to the kitchen to replenish my drink, I delved into the workings of my computer to change its date, as my energized mind, agonized over one detail.

Would my meddling give the computer brain fade, forcing it to shut down, never to work again too?

Amazingly it didn’t.

But there was an astonishing result!

After pushing the refresh tab, my screen flickered then showed the news headlines.

*Trump’s Assassination Attempt Thwarted.*

*Boris out of May’s Cabinet.*

*BitCoin Crashes.*

*Driverless Car Leaves Supermarket and Goes Home Without Owner.*

I suddenly felt elated, like a kid opening birthday presents, hurriedly I closed the page because my mind was now whizzing.  If the horse racing or football results were published I could—

Then instantly, my mind focused.

“The Lottery.”

I glanced quickly at the calendar on my desk. Then did a date reset to the following Monday.

A moment later, I sat with my finger hovering above the refresh button.

Where would I live?

What car would I buy?

In only days, life would become an astonishing fictional reality.

I took a deep breath as my finger pushed the button. This was going to be amazing.

⇋

Thirty seconds later I sat forward glaring at the screen.

Nothing.

I reached for the refresh button but at that moment the screen turned opaque, making my heart sink.

“Oh! God, please come back,” I muttered.  “Please, please— I was on the verge of making a fortune.”

As seconds ticked by, I itched to do a restart— but all ideas vanished suddenly because the screen turned black and a small yellow emoji appeared.

One of those round emoticons you add to messages. But I could only see half, because it was looking at me around the edge of the screen, with an inquisitive impish expression.

A moment later it travelled slowly across the screen but its eyes never left mine.

Then as it disappeared, my machine resonated with a loud *‘Ping’,* which is impossible, I don’t have speakers.

Seconds later, Smiley reappeared struggling to tow a long string of words.

*‘You have three wishes, but there must be no reward for you, your family or associates.’*

Another loud *‘Ping’* sounded as he vanished.

Moments later he was back with a grimace and beads of perspiration, this time towing a rectangular box that he left center-screen. Then words appeared as though someone was typing.

*‘Enter your wish here.’*

*‘Ping.’*

I smiled and nodded as the penny dropped. Someone was trying to make a fool of me. They’d taken control of my computer and were now—

That thought dissolved due to a tense face appearing towing another message.

*‘You now have one minute and fifteen seconds to respond.’*

*‘Ping.’*

Oddly even though I knew it must be a hoax, I felt anxious.

Then a sad emoji returned pulling more words.

*‘You will lose this wish in sixty seconds.’*

*‘Ping.’*

My mind was blank.  If this was real, you’d say win the lottery but I couldn’t.

Moments later, a glum face was back.

‘*You now have 30 seconds.’*

*‘Ping.’*

Without much thought, my fingers quickly worked the keyboard.

As I pushed enter, the screen transformed into a kaleidoscope of vivid colours for several seconds before the BBC News headlines returned.

*‘Boris Johnson becomes UK Prime Minister and*—

I glanced at the date— this would happen in three months’ time.

*‘Ping.’*

“My God, what have I done?” I uttered. “And how can we stop that terrible noise?”

I couldn’t think of anything to wish for, so typed: ‘Bring Boris back into government.’

A sad face trundled past towing a large thumb that pointed downwards, emulating my thoughts exactly.

*‘Ping.’*

The penetrating repetitive sound made me cringe but as the screen faded and cleared, I noticed another headline.

*New Driverless Car takes Couple Hostage*—

Seconds later, Smiley was back towing a box with a large figure 2 sitting on top.

“My God, what if I’d really changed the future?”

*‘Ping.’*

Promoting him to the UK’s top job was ludicrous; we’d then have Trump, Putin and Boris!

I couldn’t have that on my conscience. I’d have to correct it.

True to form, Smiley arrived towing another message.

*‘You have forty-five seconds.’*

“Oh! Shit, is there a shortage of time in there?”

*‘Ping.’*

“That bloody noise is driving me mad,” I yelled but quickly typed as another message arrived.

*‘You have seven seconds.’*

As the *‘Ping’* resonated, I hit send and crossed my fingers.

The screen went into colour over-load, lifting my anxiety level another notch.  If I’d made another mistake and had to correct that, I’d better focus on my last wish because the time allocation would probably be shorter.

Suddenly the BBC was back in full colour and I had to force myself to look.

But the bold headline proclaimed.

*‘Disillusioned Boris Joins the Labour Party.’*

Relieved, I slumped back in my chair. This tinkering with the future was risky and maybe I should just —

But that thought was cut short by a beaming yellow face, with beads of perspiration on its brow, pulling a large thumbs up sign.

‘Yes, Smiley, you and me both,’ I thought.

*‘Ping.’*

Oddly that shrill penetrating sound brought focus this time. My yellow nemesis would be back in seconds and I needed to think quickly.

He arrived with a slight grimace on his face, the number 3 rocking precariously on the last box.

As ideas raced through my mind, more words arrived.

*‘You have forty-five seconds.’*

“Bloody hell, nothing like putting me under pressure.”

*‘Ping.’*

My mind hurtled around what to write but suddenly another message appeared.

*‘You now have twenty seconds.’*

“Yes, I know, you stupid yellow freak!”

*‘Ping.’*

I glanced at the newspaper on my desk but was distracted by a jogging yellow face.

*‘You now have ten seconds.’*

*‘Ping.’*

“Please, please, stop that friggin noise,” I shouted, as my fingers quickly typed. I just hoped there wasn’t a spelling mistake that could change my wish into a disastrous event.

A moment later, colours exploded across the monitor and I realised I’d probably wasted three chances to change the world.

Well, I’d definitely blown two but then I smiled because the yellow peril arrived pushing a big red throbbing heart and towing a thumbs up sign.

*‘Ping.’*

The screen flashed a couple of times before the BBC News reappeared. I gawked in disbelief but sat closer to the screen.

I’d asked for the world's children to be saved from famine and persecution and what I read was mind-blowing.

*Ten of the world’s wealthiest individuals have each donated one billion dollars to the ‘Save the Children Fund’.  In response, governments around the world pledged to do the same and give the organization great powers.*

My eyes filled with tears.  I suddenly felt exhausted but in the end, I’d managed to do some good.

⇋

Months later, newspaper headlines carried the amazing message. News teams were dispatched around the world to show where the money was being spent, beaming back TV pictures of smiling children.

For me, in that intervening period, life hadn’t changed much. I’d read my computer instruction manual twice and replaced the coin-sized battery, but that odd sound issue could not be explained.

My friendly geek said without speakers it was impossible. So the noise was either generated by my imagination or the strong coffee.

But it doesn’t take a mind reader to know ‘*what you’re thinking.’*

Have I tried resetting the computer date to a future again?

Yes, of course— but without success.

I guess it was one of those ‘once-in-a-lifetime-opportunities.’

In some shape or form, they arrive at everyone’s door, appearing suddenly without warning.

An offer.

A chance.

A meeting.

Opportunities materialising abruptly make them appear accidental, rather than an opportunity to grasp.

The trick is— realise what’s happening and react instantly.

As my Grandfather always said. Don’t think, go with gut feel.

I’d squandered two chances but my third had hit the nail squarely on the head, giving me the desire to do more.

So now I donate to an orphanage and help out at a local hostel for a few hours each month.

And once a week without fail, I do a date reset on my old computer— and if by chance—

*‘****Ping.’***

**# 21 Joey’s Grandma**

*As I was wandering along the deserted beach, Max my five-year-old ran ahead. Suddenly he squealed with delight. A plastic bottle washed ashore, raced back to the water's edge with him in hot pursuit, transporting me back thirty years.*

⇼

At age seven, I was known in our seaside hamlet as a ‘bloody nuisance’ by Miss Wilkins. The ‘doddery old spinster from the black and white cottage’, as my Dad called her.

‘Not the sharpest knife in the drawer’, said Aunt Winny. Who smoked so many cigarettes her fingers were a funny orange colour, as was her prickly mustache.

But Grandma Johnson, who lived a mile further around Bishops Bay, thought I was ‘the best thing since sliced bread’. And it was to her house I was heading, one cloudy summer’s day, when I had one of those mysterious moments that captured my imagination.

The thunderstorm that’d woken me last night had moved up country but its blustery effects were still being played out along the beach as waves crashed ashore.

Walking slowly towards Gran’s, I inspected, then dissected, with my long wooden stick, all sorts of things the high tide had washed up.

Pulling the slimy internals out of a large stranded jellyfish made me smile with satisfaction. Then with a triumphant cheer, I flicked its giblets high into the air but seconds’ later evasive action was needed.

Due to their rapid upward speed, they’d broken apart and now gravity had come into play— just above me.

“Take cover!” I screamed. “Women and children first!”

Unfortunately, as I stumbled backward, my stick became entangled between my legs, upending me.

A moment later gruesome alien guts landed on my face and neck, just as a wave smashed into me.

In the intense battle that followed, I managed to free myself from the cold grip of *Slime-Ball* but was soaked in its salty bodily fluids.

Then sensing my right hand was empty, I glanced in every direction. Fortunately, the next wave carried my trusty weapon to my feet. Could this be a sign?

Due to my success over *Slime-Ball*, was this a warning of further tests to come?

Running along the beach I kept close to the water's edge. That's when I noticed a bottle rolling back towards the sea, twenty metres ahead.

My first thoughts, *Booby-Trap*. Or, *Alien Invader*.

I dropped to one knee and watched the next wave rush the bottle back up the slope. Moments later, it raced back with the receding water.

Now on hands and knees, I edged to within a few metres, fortunately totally unnoticed by the rolling device.

Gripping my stick, I prepared to sprint towards the moving target. *Not ideal*, I told myself. *It would be touch and go— but for the safety of the world, it has to be done.*

As I was about to move, the sun broke through the clouds, changing everything. Now as my target raced back to the water’s edge, it flashed and sparkled with all the colours of exploding fireworks.

I lay flat on the sand, mesmerized.

Had I been spotted by the alien device? Was it now about to transform or explode or— or was it trying to hypnotize me?

I liked option three, so covered my eyes— but was the device activated by the sun’s powerful rays?

Suddenly the sun disappeared and the device stopped glowing.

I was on my feet in an instant, running toward the alien. This was going to be close but I timed my attack to perfection.

As the sun burst back through the clouds, I’d thrown my body over the moving target, successfully neutralizing it.

Overjoyed at not been blown to bits, I stuffed the gadget under my wet t-shirt and raced up the beach, eager to solve my newly found puzzle.

It was a glass Coca-Cola bottle but oddly the normal steel cap had been replaced by a faded blue plastic one, fitted so tight I couldn’t remove it. Also, the bottle didn’t contain fluid, only what looked like silver paper.

So that’s why it had glittered so much. Then as I shook the bottle, I could feel something rattling inside.

Placing my prize on the sand in front of me, I wondered what to do next.

*Smash the glass with a rock?*  I thought. *No, no, that was too easy.*

What would an adventurer like Indiana Jones do?

Suddenly I sniggered.

Indiana would heat the cap by sticking the bottle up a camel's bum. After the plastic was warmed, he’d tear the cap off with his teeth without wiping the bottle.

Still sniggering, I jumped up to see if an animal was close by but sadly only a large seabird was on offer.

I liked the idea of warming it. But due to my battle with *Slime-Ball*, the safety matches in my pocket were now a roll of soggy mush.

So how to get to the treasure map? I mean, what else could it be?

Glancing back at the seabird started me giggling again. I had a vivid picture of the bird running and flapping like crazy, as it tried to take off, with my bottle sticking out of its bottom.

Pulling myself together, I grabbed my treasure and ran along the beach towards Gran’s— she’d definitely have a knife or a hacksaw.

Rummaging through Grandad’s old wooden garage was always fascinating. I loved the smells of oil and paint but sitting in his old car with its leather seats and big steering wheel, was a joy.

I loved my Grandad. He’d take time to show me stuff and explain how things worked. He even let me drive his car a couple of times, which was amazing— but I had to promise not to tell anyone.

He said, if I could keep that secret, we’d go to the disused aerodrome and I could take the old Wolseley up to top speed.

Only weeks late, he didn’t wake up one morning.

Gran said he’d died peacefully in his sleep, probably thinking of you two silly beggars racing around in that old car, hooting and screaming.

Suddenly surprised, I gawked at her. “You know about me driving, Gran?”

She looked over her glasses with that serious face she puts on, as though she’s thinking of what to say.

My mum says, when she does that, she’s sizing you up. I’m not really sure what that means but suddenly her face exploded with a big smile, then she hugged me so tight her boobs almost suffocated me.

“Remember, Joey Middlewich, Gran sees and hears everything,” she said, opening up her biscuit jar. “And I have a secret about that car too,” she’d added, passing me a homemade ginger biscuit.

“Is it a secret you can share, Gran?”

She nodded her head seriously but I noticed her eyes shone excitedly.

“After you drove the second time, your Grandad said to me— ‘when the time comes, the car’s Joey’s’. So when you're out there messing about, don’t go scratching it.”

Chuckling she opened the big wooden dresser that stood behind her and pulled out a big bundle of cloth.

“I stitched two old bed-sheets together. You can cover your new car with these. After you've cleaned it of course,” she said with a grin.

For the next hour, Gran and I had washed the Old Girl, as Grandad called her. And Gran made a great job of polishing the big chrome headlights with some special stuff called Brasso, which she’d found on one of the packed shelves in the garage.

Later that evening as we sat watching telly, I noticed Gran kept wiping her eyes with a tissue.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

She turned and smiled, then took my hand.

“Not to worry, Joey, I’m just being a silly old softy. Cleaning your car brought back memories of my courting days with your Grandad.”

Then kissed the top of my head and gave me a hug.

That night I dreamt about racing my car along the beach, with Gran and Grandad sat in the back. We were all singing and laughing. It was crazy.

⇼

With my Coke bottle held steady in an old wooden vice, I set about removing its cap with half a hacksaw blade I’d found. After a bit of sawing and tugging the top came off more easily than I’d thought. Now peering through the small round opening, I tried to make sense of what I could see.

The inside had been carefully coated with silver paper; after retrieving a tiny piece I found it was thick, like the tinfoil my mum uses for our Sunday roast.

This foil kept the contents secret and protected from the sun’s harmful rays.

I knew a lot about these because my mum went on and on about them after I’d said I was going to the beach, usually while smothering me in sunscreen.

“And make sure you wear a hat, Joey.” Those words always followed me out the house.

My mind flashed back to the first encounter with this sparkling bottle. Was it designed to attract attention? If so, whatever it held must be important?

But all I could see was a white six-inch tube. Surely a rolled up treasure map would be much thicker and bigger?

A sudden voice behind made me jump in fright. “Tea’s ready, Joey.”

“Gosh, Gran— you almost made me pee myself!”

“What have you found this time?” she asked, with a big grin.

“It's a treasure map in a bottle, but it's hard to see because of all this tinfoil.”

“Well, it’ll have to wait— your tea’s ready and your mum’s just phoned. You're allowed to stay here tonight— if you like?”

“Oh! Great— is that OK with you, Gran?”

I got that over-the-glasses look again— so I just threw my arms around her and hugged as hard as I could, which made her laugh.

Half an hour later with my beans on toast in my tummy, I was back in the garage but with strict instructions from Gran.

“When it starts to get dark, you’re to come in and watch telly with me. You're just like your Grandfather, you treat this place like a hotel, I hardly ever see you.” Then she’d winked and shooed me off with her hand.

I took tinfoil from inside the bottle’s neck. Then after a great deal of shaking, the tip of the tube stuck its head out. It was only a fraction, but enough for my pliers to get a hold of.

I had to pull hard, which worried me. My Grandad had always taught me never to force or rush things but I was boiling over with excitement.

Once the tube lay in my hand, two things were obvious. The jaws of my pliers hadn’t damaged its surface and there was a fine line that ran around its middle. That indicated, it either pulled apart or unscrewed but neither worked.

After tightening one end in the vice, I tried turning the other with my pliers but gave up almost immediately, because I thought I heard Grandpa up in heaven, sucking air through his teeth. That always meant: “Should you really be doing it like that, boy?”

“Gosh! How do I get into it, Grandad?” I muttered dejectedly.

“Having trouble?” Gran asked.

I’d been so focused I hadn’t heard her come in; she was carrying a small bottle of ginger beer.

“I thought you might like a drink, my lovely,” she said, offering me the bottle. “So what’s inside?” she added, looking over my shoulder.

I took the ginger beer and passed over my treasure tube.

As Gran rolled it between her fingers, I took a long drink of the fizzy beer. It was cold and lush but made me belch suddenly, which started me laughing.

“Mind your manners, young man. Your girlfriend won’t like that sort of behavior,” said Gran, peering over her glasses.

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“And we can see why.” She smiled. “So what’s to do with this?” she asked, passing me the tube.

I shrugged. “I thought pulling or twisting would open it.” I shook my head gloomily.

“It might need warming up,” Gran said, then turned and looked at me. “And what are you grinning at now boy?”

“Well I know how ‘Indiana Jones’ would warm it,” I replied— sniggering.

“It sounds like something I don’t need to know,” she replied before adding, “What about putting it in hot water?”

“No, Gran, that might spoil what’s inside.”

“Mmm— you might be right— well, we’ll do it another way. Follow me!”

Moments later Gran pointed at her big kitchen cupboard.

“Bottom door on the left. You’ll find Grandad’s hot-water bottle. We’ll use that.”

After the kettle had boiled, Gran filled the rubber bottle, before placing it on top of my round tube. Five minutes later I sat at the kitchen table trying to pull the tube apart or unscrew it, but nothing worked.

Disappointed, I passed it over Gran. “Can you try, please?”

“Joey— you realize this probably contains a love letter from someone on board a ship heading to God knows where.”

“No, no, it's a treasure map, I just know it.”

“Well if you think it's that important, maybe it's a left-handed thread.”

I looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“Joey, imagine if your Grandad had made this to hold something really important. What might he have done to protect it?’’

“Unscrew it clockwise, not anticlockwise,” I whispered.

Picking up the tube I gripped it as hard as I could and twisted.

Gran laughed at the strained look on my face but suddenly my expression changed.

She told me later, my eyes were as big as golf balls because the secret tube had begun to undo.

What came out was a small handwritten note on lined paper.

I found the tiny writing hard to read, so let Gran takeover but after reading a few lines she gave me that serious look.

“What, Gran?” I asked excitedly, but she mumbled something about going to find her reading glasses. So it must have been important.

When Gran came back, she sat opposite me and began to read.

*My name is Max. I’m eight years old. We are going to live in America. My Dad said it will be a new start for us. But me and my sister are missing our friends already and we only left England four days ago. My Mum died last year, so there is only the three of us. My Grandma didn’t want us to go; she said we could stop with her. I really wish my Dad would have let us stay because she was very upset. If you find this message please make a wish that we’ll be ok. Thank you from Max and Emily.*

“Oh dear! How very sad, Joey,” said Gran. “I’m sure everything turned out well for them— but let's hold hands and make a wish just in case.”

Leaning forward I held her soft chubby hands and noticed again how tight her gold ring looked on her finger. She’d told me it was very special, Grandad had made their wedding rings from a gold nugget he’d found in Australia when he was only ten years old.

I was disappointed we hadn’t found a buried treasure map, or something else really exciting but holding Gran’s warm hands made me think how lucky *I* was.

“I could never leave you, Gran,” I said softly, which made her wipe her eyes with a tissue.

“Make sure you don’t forget that my lad,” she replied, looking at me over her glasses. Then squeezed my hands and leaned towards me with glistening eyes.

“Now, my lovely— would you like a cup of hot chocolate before bedtime?”

I beamed with delight and nodded excitedly.

Gosh! I really love my Gran. She always knows what I’d like before I do.