



I AM
(NOT) THE
WALRUS
ED BRIANT

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First e-book edition © 2012

E-book ISBN: 9780738732794

Book design by Bob Gaul

Cover design by Ellen Lawson

Cover images: Guitars © iStockphoto.com/Leontura

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Flux
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.
2143 Wooddale Drive
Woodbury, MN 55125
www.fluxnow.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

1

Wednesday

Horoscope: April 14, Aquarius:

Wear something nice today as you may well find yourself in the middle of a group of friendly people. Even if you have nothing to say, you will be warmly welcomed. Lasting relationships will be formed in a moment.

Frosty lowers his head like an offended buffalo, then blows a long blast on the whistle for kickoff. Even though it's a loud peep, it's swallowed up by the sudden gust that blows in off the ocean. The wind flattens the grass, blasts up inside my rugby shorts, and rocks the trees along the edge of the playing field.

"Hey, Toby." A familiar voice from just behind me. "Your lace is undone."

"Zack! I didn't know you were here." I look down at my laces, meandering across the grass, then over my shoulder at my friend. "Bloody things never stay fastened."

"Last-minute substitute," says Zack, in what looks like a brand-new blue shirt. "Ka-chang!" He strums an air guitar. "Hey, guess what?"

"Silence for the kickoff," yells Clive Wadman, the team captain.

"Who's talking?" barks Frosty.

Twenty yards in front of me, on the other side of the halfway line, Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair pushes up the sleeves of his red shirt, exposing arms that are bigger than my legs. He holds up a finger to test the wind, then launches himself toward the ball.

"I'm not sure this is the ideal moment for guess what," I say to Zack. "I think I have about three seconds." I drop to my knee, gather the ends of my laces, then glance up just in time to see Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair swing back a treelike leg,

and boot the ball skyward. “I don’t know,” I say. “You’re getting married.”

“Nah, you bungle,” says Zack, shuffling from one foot to the other. “I’ll give you a clue. We’re going to have to think of a name.”

“A name?” I study the trajectory of the ball as it arcs upward. It brushes the bottom of a low cloud, hovers for an instant, then begins its descent toward the right-hand side of the field. I’ve only played this game a couple of times before, but I think this means that the ball isn’t heading in my direction.

With lightning-fast moves, I twist my laces into a knot just as another blast of wind knocks me sideways. “Are you telling me you’re pregnant?”

“Nope,” he says, then opens his eyes wide and points at a spot just in front of me. “Heads up, Toby!”

I spring to my feet just in time for a brown object, about the size of a small wombat, to slap into my hands.

I take a second to examine the object.

It is a rugby ball. Why would anyone bring a second rugby ball onto the pitch? As I think I mentioned, I am no expert at this game, but I thought it was supposed to be played with one ball.

There’s just enough time for it to dawn on me that there is only one ball, and this is it, before Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair grasps the collar of my shirt. He lifts me right off the earth’s surface, swings me around, then slams me back into the mud.

Lights flash as I gaze up at the stratocumulus clouds and listen to the thunder of boots drifting away toward our goal area.

“We need a name for the band, Toby,” says Zack, “and we need it pronto.”

I take a moment to examine my once-blue shirt, which is now brown, and look up to see Zack shuffling away from me toward the rest of the pack.

“Pronto?” I haul myself onto my hands and knees. “Wait. You don’t mean—”

“I do mean,” he says, hopping sideways. “We have a gig.”

“Get out of town!” I spring into a sitting position. I scan the oddball group of spectators along the sideline. My stomach knots. Right at the end are two girls. One of them is tall and blonde, and looks a lot like my ex-girlfriend, Katrina.

I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. I always think every tall blonde girl is Katrina.

Besides, why in God's name would Katrina be watching an under-seventeens rugby match?

Come to think of it, why would any girls be watching a rugby match?

For a punishment?

For a dare?

Probably Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair's fan club.

Oh well, even if she's not Katrina I'd still better make this look good.

"Hang on a minute." I roll back onto my feet and stumble after Zack. "How did you manage to swing a gig?" I say when I catch up with him.

"My wit, charm," Zack steps over a red winger who's lying in a fetal position, "and winning ways." He mimes a drum roll and cymbal crash—Ba-ta-ta-ching! "Thank you!"

"Mark a man," yells Clive Wadman.

Frosty blows his whistle again, and raises his right arm. It's a set scrum.

Steve Parsons and Gregg Lester throw their arms around my shoulders, lift me off the ground, and then the three of us lower our heads and slam into the red front row. The second row lock their heads between our hips, then finally we're joined by the number eight, and the flankers, of which Zack is one. It's dark in here. And smelly. But on the plus side, it is out of the wind.

"When did this all come about?" The side of my head presses against the ear of one of the red prop forwards, and for a second our ears are like two suction cups. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"I only found out at lunchtime," says Zack, through the grunts and gasps. "I was down at Harry's trying out one of the new guitars he's got in, when Harry himself runs up the stairs and goes, 'Sounds good. You still in a band?' I go, 'As a matter of fact I am,' and he goes, 'What sort of stuff do you play?' So I go, 'We do cover versions of Beatles songs,' and he says, 'You want to play a support gig?' I go 'Yeah, I suppose. Why not?' And he says, 'Don't go overboard with the enthusiasm.'"

"Silence in the scrum," yells Clive Wadman.

"Who's talking in the scrum," barks Frosty. "Be quiet and concentrate."

The whistle blows, and the ball rolls in. This is my moment. I lash out, and get my foot around the ball, but at almost the same moment Paul Hammerton, the

red hooker, lashes out and kicks me right on the shin. Pain sears up my leg.

“Heave!” shouts Clive Wadman.

“Push,” barks Frosty. “What are you? Men? Or mice?”

“Squeak, squeak,” goes someone behind me.

The scrum lurches forward. I kick out and get my foot on top of the ball, but the other dude kicks it out from underneath me again, and it’s in the reds’ possession. The air is filled with shouts. Once again I’m in daylight, and once again we’re stumbling backward toward our own goal.

I almost trip over Steve Agar, who’s on his hands and knees, then catch up with Zack. We struggle to make a defensive line. “So, who are we opening for?” I say.

Once again the ball slaps into my hands.

“Move it out,” shouts Clive Wadman.

“Play up!” barks Frosty.

Fine. I turn. I’m just about to throw the ball to a player with a blue shirt, when I realize that the player is Zack, so I turn to pass it to the other side. My hands strike something that feels more like concrete than a person. It’s neither a red shirt, nor a blue shirt. It’s a tweed jacket.

“Pull yourself together, you scallywag,” yells Frosty as he swipes the ball out of my hands. He tucks his head down. “This is what you need to do.” He lays into the red forwards with his leather-patched elbows. Even Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair staggers backward with a look of horror, as if Frosty really is a charging buffalo.

“What did Frosty do before he was a teacher?” I say, over my shoulder.

“He was a Commando, or a Marine.” Zack points at the other team. “Or something like that. He probably thinks they’re Germans.”

“Pretty impressive,” I say as Frosty is swallowed up into the mob. “He’s got to be fifty years old or something.”

“Anyway.” Zack slaps me across the back. “We’re supporting the Disappointed Parents. Harry’s band.”

“The Disappointed Parents!” I turn and grab two handfuls of Zack’s shirt. “They’re famous!”

“Well ... ” Zack straightens out his lapels as if he’s wearing a fancy dinner suit

instead of a rugby shirt. “They’re famous in Port Jackson at any rate.”

“I wouldn’t mind being famous in Port Jackson,” I say.

Red players rush past us, putting us offside, so we jog backward. I’m getting good at the running backward part of this game.

“Listen,” says Zack. “You have to do something about your bass guitar.”

“What do you mean?” I say.

Zack speeds up so I almost have to break into a sprint to get in front of him.

“I think you should take it down to Harry’s and trade it in for another one,” he says. “Something is seriously wrong with it.”

Another whistle. “Line out,” shouts a red player.

We arrange ourselves, puffing and panting, in order of height at the touch-line, the tallest players in the middle. This leaves me at one end of the line, and Zack at the other, us being about the shortest players on the field.

“But it’s not my bass to trade,” I say, in between gasps for air. “Shawn’s letting us use all his stuff out of the goodness of his heart. It’s a bit inconsiderate to repay his kindness by selling his bass.”

“Silence in the line,” yells Clive Wadman.

“Who’s talking in the line?” barks Frosty. He jerks his head from side to side, then blows the whistle yet again.

The ball flies up. We all jump, but a red player gets his hands on it. The ball makes its way out to the fast runners on the red wing, and the blue defense falls apart.

“Look. I think I can fix it,” I say to Zack. “Shawn has a soldering iron somewhere.”

“Can you do it this evening?” he says. “If we’re going to play a gig then we can’t have it making crackling noises and cutting out in the middle of the songs, or maybe even completely self-destructing.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean,” I say. “The bass does seem to have a mind of its own. It always seems to go on the blink at the worst possible moment.”

“Bummer,” says Zack, as the red winger crosses our twenty-five yard line, with the ball securely tucked into his armpit. “Looks like we’re going to lose again.”

I make a lame attempt to tuck my shirt into my shorts. “I’ll do it this weekend,

though. Be easier to solder in daylight.”

“No. No!” says Zack. “You can’t do it tomorrow. Do it tonight. I mean, how can we rehearse a set if one of the instruments isn’t working?”

“Fantastic,” I say. I slide my hands into the pockets of my shorts. “No pressure.”

A large person in a red shirt appears in front of us. It is Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair, his fingers wrapped around the ball.

“Would you mind taking that thing somewhere else,” says Zack, pointing at the ball.

“Just taking it to your goal line,” says Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair. “Seemed like the easy route would be via you two big-girls’-blouses.” With that, he shoves his free hand into Zack’s face and sends him sprawling.

Then he turns toward me.

“Look at you,” he says. “Pathetic. If your brother could see you now he would weep in shame.”

The moment he says this something flickers in the corner of my eye, like someone switching channels on a TV, and there, standing in his navy uniform with his arms folded, is my brother, Shawn. He puffs his cheeks and blows out a long breath of exasperation.

A split second later he’s gone and all I can see is a red shirt. Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair’s hand shoots up toward my face. I flex my knees and slip under his arm. I lunge forward, butt my head into his six pack as hard as I can, then lock my hands around his waist. There’s no way he can punch me in the face now; instead he hammers on the back of my skull with the ball. I hang on for dear life as I let myself drop, and then squeeze his knees together.

At first nothing happens, and I ponder the fact that I may already be dead. Then the light shifts as Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair’s upper body continues to move forward, while his boots remain anchored, by my arms, to one square foot of turf. A moment later the ground shudders, and there is a howl so profound that it might come from the earth’s crust itself.

I lie there gazing up at the cumulonimbus from between Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair’s hairy legs. I roll them to one side, and rise to my feet. Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair is stretched out right in front of our goal line. The ball rolls

over the line.

“Oh well,” I say to Zack. “They won. Let’s go and play some music.”

“No,” says Zack. “In rugby, the player has to cross the goal line, and also touch the ball to the ground to score.” He points to Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair. “He’s only dropped the ball across the line. It doesn’t count.”

“Play on!” bellows Frosty. “What is this? You look like a bunch of grannies at a Sunday-school picnic.”

I study Zack for a moment, then I study the ball. Why is nobody doing anything? Red and blue players are arranged around us in a semi-circle, as if they’re taking part in a pageant.

Then, off in the distance, I notice the two girls on the touch-line.

They are not merely watching the game.

They are watching me.

They are watching me while I do nothing.

“Bugger this.” I scoop up the ball, turn my back on our goal, and stumble into a steady run.

What the hell. Nobody lives forever.

Any second I expect to be flattened into the turf. I expect to be buried, to have grass planted on top of me, and to have generations of happy children playing tag above me. But nothing happens. Blue players stagger back to let me through. Red players stand in my path, but then melt away as I get closer.

A blast of wind hits me square in the face, almost bringing me to a standstill. I look up. Nobody is between me and the red goal. I tuck my head down and force my way into the wind. My feet fly over the rutted grass as an unfastened bootlace whips around my ankles. I glance at the sideline, and for a moment I seem to be standing still as the motley mob of spectators blur past me.

I never realized a rugby pitch was so long. I reach out imaginary tendrils from my forehead and wrap them around the goal posts, but they still don’t get any closer. Every second I expect to feel the grip of hands around my shoulders, sharp nails digging into my back, mighty fingers pulling my hair out of my scalp.

Then I’m alongside the last two spectators. It’s worse than I thought.

Not only are they girls.

Not only are they around my age.

They're pretty. A tall blonde one and a shorter dark-haired one.

Dammit. I'm going to score if it kills me.

The goal line is three paces away, then two paces, then one. And then I slam into the ground. The ball bounces forward. My fingertips are three inches away from the line. No. I scored. Surely I won the game? But the whistle blows.

I roll over and gaze at my feet. My shoelaces are twisted around both of my ankles in a granny knot.

"Ball thrown forward," barks Frosty. "Offside."

I roll back and glance over at the two girls. They look away from me. Presumably from a sense of shame.

Oh well. It's not the end of the world.

Even if I had scored a goal, they still would have been way out of my league.

2

Wednesday

“How about the Zack Lawrence Experience for a name?” says Zack as we exit the school gate. The green man is blinking on the pedestrian signal, so we cross straight to the opposite side of Portland Road. I always feel more relaxed when I have a four-lane road between me and school.

“Zack Lawrence?” I say. “Why not the Toby Holland Experience?”

“Let me ask you this.” Zack leans his guitar case against a crooked lamp post. “Would you pay good money to see the Toby Holland Experience?” Engines roar as the pedestrian

signal changes, and the traffic takes off like it’s the start of a Grand Prix race.

“Would you pay anything at all to see the Zack Lawrence Experience?” I say. A van clatters past with a dog hanging out of the window. “Why don’t we use both our names, Holland and Lawrence?”

“Sounds more like a hemorrhoid ointment than a pop group,” Zack growls. “Quick. Run out and get me a tube of Holland and Lawrence.” He pulls his little round John Lennon glasses out of his jacket pocket, and props them on his nose. “If our whole set is Beatles songs, then maybe we should do something with a Beatles reference.”

“Hey listen. What do you want to do now?” I point at his guitar case. “Seems like we should run through some new songs.”

“Nah. You’re right,” says Zack. He plays a couple of chords on his air guitar, ba-chang!

“We should get cracking then,” I say. “After we play I’ve got to do the soldering on the bass, and then read four chapters of *Fahrenheit 451*.”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to be writing to Bethany later on anyway.” Zack picks up his guitar case and rests it on his shoulder like it’s a rifle. “Lead the way, Batman.”

We march westward along Portland Road. Only a line of parked cars separates us from the endless stream of traffic hurtling in the opposite direction, as if they know something we don't.

"How about the Paperback Writers?" I say.

"It's not bad," says Zack, "but I don't think we can just name ourselves after a Beatles song title."

A squeal of tires makes me turn. A black car peels out of its parking spot just behind us, and slots into the eastbound traffic.

"John, Paul, Zack, and Toby," I say.

Zack blows out his cheeks. "I like it," he says. "But it's a bit weird if there's only two of us."

"It's surreal," I say.

We move to opposite sides of the pavement so a mom with a double stroller can pass us.

I shove my hands in my pockets. "The Beatles did a lot of surreal stuff."

"Cereal?" says Zack. "Like breakfast cereal?"

"Surreal, like Salvador Dalí," I say.

"Like sitting on a cornflake," says Zack.

"Whoa," I say. "That went over my head,"

"It's a line from 'I Am The Walrus,'" says Zack.

"We don't do 'I Am The Walrus,'" I say.

"Maybe we should." Zack stops and turns around to look at the mom with the stroller. "I think I'm getting old."

"With just the two of us?" I walk on a couple of paces, then stop. "Me doing bass and vocals, and you on guitar? I think that particular song needs an entire orchestra."

"We should try it," says Zack, rubbing his chin absent-mindedly. "You never know."

"What? Just so we can call ourselves Sitting on a Cornflake?" I take a couple of paces back. "What makes you think you're getting old?"

Zack is still rubbing his chin. "I'm starting to find young mums attractive," he says.

“Come on.” I start walking backward. “We need to get going.”

Zack continues to watch the departing mom for a moment, then seems to have to wrench himself away. “Didn’t you think she was pretty?” he says as he catches up with me.

“To be honest, I didn’t really look,” I say. “I was trying to think of names.”

“Toby. I can’t believe you,” he says. “A woman like that passes you in the street and you don’t even notice. I mean she was gorgeous.”

“Okay,” I say. “Maybe I did look for a second, and she looked nice, but I mean, what’s the point in working myself up into a frenzy of desire? Firstly, she’s married, and secondly, a female that pretty is never even going to look at a dude like me.”

“First,” says Zack, “you don’t know that she’s married, and second, I bet that if you just smiled and said hello she would melt into your arms.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” I say.

“Bet?” says Zack. “Yeah, I’ll put a bet on it. The next pretty girl we see, you just smile and say hello and she’ll smile back.”

“Wait a minute,” I say. “What are we betting?”

“If she smiles and says hello,” says Zack, “then we call the band Sitting on a Cornflake.”

“Fine,” I say. “I think I’m completely safe there. You are bound to lose.”

We both stop at the curb to let a van pass.

“We’ll see,” says Zack. He steps off the curb and scuffs his feet as he crosses the asphalt of Maple Street.

I shove my hands into my pockets and look toward Memento Park and the big monument of the World War II pilot. There’s a dark silhouette on top of the monument. I don’t even see it until it moves. For a second I think it’s a cat, but then it lifts its wings.

I don’t know much about birds. In fact, I don’t really know a lot about animals. I used to try to watch nature programs on the TV, but Mom always seemed to come in just as the rhinos were having sex. Anyway, I can’t take my eyes away from this particular bird, and as I stare I can see that it is kind of blue-gray, but with a black-and-white striped stomach. It’s not so much that it’s big, but more that it’s wide, a little like a pigeon that’s been lifting weights. As I

watch, the bird shuffles forward and steps into space. It plummets straight down the front of the monument. My insides lurch. Is this bird going to kill itself right in front of me? But just before it hits the concrete, it splays its wings and shoots forward, parallel to the ground, straight toward me. A moment later it rockets over my head, giving me a clear view of its striped underside and two eyes staring at me like tiny lasers.

“Zack.” I reach over and grab his arm. “Look.”

But Zack isn’t paying any attention. “Bingo,” he says.

His gaze is focused on the other side of the street. I follow his eyes. Two girls are headed toward us on the opposite side of Portland Road. Unless I’m very mistaken, they’re the ones who were watching the rugby game.

I glance overhead and scan the skyline, but there’s no sign of the bird. So much for that.

I look back at the girls.

They’re talking loudly as they walk.

I can hear their voices, but not loudly enough that I can make out what they’re saying. The one farthest away from us is tall and very thin, with light blonde hair. She’s walking with her arms folded. As for the girl nearest to us, she’s facing away from us so I can’t see her face, but she’s much shorter than the blonde one, not so thin, and has darker hair. It must be an important conversation from the way she’s waving her arms about.

“There you go,” says Zack.

“What do you expect me to do?” I say. “Just walk over there and say hi?”

“Exactly,” says Zack.

“But there’s two of them,” I say. “Which one do I say hi to?”

“Whichever one you want.” Zack comes to a full stop and turns to face me. The expression on his face sends chills down my arms. It’s a little like that movie, *Psycho*, where the detective spins the old lady’s chair around, and it turns out to be a skeleton wearing a wig and a dress. Only in this case, the shock comes from seeing Zack being completely sincere.

“But we haven’t got time now,” I say. I walk past Zack in the direction of my house, but he makes no move to follow. “We have to go and rehearse, remember?” I wave my hands in front of his face. “I have to fix the electrics on

my bass, and then we have a gig in just five days.”

“Toby.” Zack shakes his head. “I can’t believe I have to tell you this, but the whole point of playing rock and roll is to make yourself more interesting to girls.” He puts his guitar case down and shoves his hands into his pockets, as if to emphasize the fact that he is not going to move. “If you have to pass up an opportunity for romance in order to work on your set, then you’re not just barking up the wrong tree, you’re barking in the wrong bloody forest.” Zack turns and studies the girls. The shorter one still has her back to us. “If not merely barking mad.”

“Point taken,” I say, “but now is not the time.”

“When it comes to love, my friend,” says Zack, patting his chest, “now is always the time.” He waves me back to where he’s standing. “You are going to cross the street and talk to them.”

“On my own?” I glance across the street. I have never seen such scary-looking girls. I would rather try to strike up a conversation with a pack of hyenas. “There’s two. Why don’t you come as well?”

“But I already have a girlfriend,” says Zack. “What if Bethany found out?”

“How’s she going to find out if she’s in Norway, for God’s sake?” I turn my back on the girls and face homeward. “Anyway, it’s beside the point,” I say. “Let’s just go and play some music.”

“Look. Get over there.” Zack grabs my shoulders and spins me back to face them. “Remember the time you stood on the edge of the top diving board and you couldn’t jump, and then you did jump, and it was fun?”

“I didn’t jump,” I say. “I climbed back down the ladder.”

“Well, there’s no ladder this time, Toby,” he says. “Just do it.”

“All right,” I say. “All right.” I let a bus pass by, then step off the curb and look both ways. I’m going to need to cross at a forty-five degree angle. A red VW is heading toward me, but it’s far enough away that I’ll be across before it gets here. I mutter silently to myself as I cross.

They are just girls. They will not do me any physical harm. By the time I’m halfway across, I’ve halfway convinced myself. I fine-tune my trajectory so I will arrive at the opposite curb about ten yards ahead of them.

I’m so close now that I can eavesdrop on their conversation, and at that

moment it strikes me that I have no idea what I'm going to say to them. I need to focus on what they're talking about.

"Eight out of ten," says the shorter one, still turned away from me.

They must be talking about the results they got for a test.

"I don't know," says the tall one. "Seven at the very best." She catches sight of me, and furrows her brows as if she knows exactly what my plans are.

"How about seven and a half?" says the shorter one.

"Well, that's half a point for charity." The taller one keeps her eyes on me, then the shorter one turns. I freeze mid-stride. She has eyes so big she almost looks like a manga character. She shakes her head from side to side. *No*, she seems to be saying, *Not a good idea*.

I am in complete agreement, and I'm about to beat a retreat when a car honks. I swivel to the left, just in time to see the VW hurtling toward me. It's going much faster than I've ever seen anything move on Portland Road, and the driver has no intention of swerving out of my way.

Bastard!

Without looking, or even thinking, I lunge forward and flatten myself against the door of a parked car. I spin around just as the VW passes. The gust of wind rips my shirt out of my waistband. The car doesn't slow, or even swerve. I try to see the driver, but all I get is a glimpse of a bony fist gripping the steering wheel. "Bloody lunatic!" I shout.

With my chest pounding, I stagger backward to the pavement, trying to get a look at the license plate. I lift my foot, but I trip over the curb. As I turn, I instinctively reach out for something to break my fall—a slender pair of shoulders wrapped in a soft, blue sweater.

It's not quite the tackle I did on Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair, but it slams the shorter girl into her tall friend.

"Bloody hell," I cry. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

She recovers her balance and turns on me. Her eyes, which were already about twice the size of a normal human's, now cover about two-thirds of the surface of her face. Even so, I think I see the ghost of a sympathetic smile. It's all going to work out. Zack was right after all.

"What are you? Five years old?" she says. Her face turns from peach to brick-

red. "Why don't you sodding well grow up?"

Blood pounds into my cheeks as well. "It wasn't my fault," I say. I point to the street. "It was that car!"

The taller girl straightens her top. "Shelly, are you okay?"

Now both of them glare at me.

"We were just giving scores out of ten to all the boys we know." The shorter one rolls her shoulder as if it's gone stiff. "I think I'm going to give you nought out of ten."

"The car," I say, waving my hand at the street. "Didn't you see the car?"

"Oh, come on, Shelly," says the taller one. "I know he's a total clown, but you could give him one out of ten."

"It was going at ninety miles an hour!" I say. "I'm sorry."

"Nope," says Shelly. "Nought out of ten."

"We need to go." The taller girl pulls on Shelly's sleeve. "Give him a half a point out of ten."

"No. Nothing. Zilch. Bugger all." Shelly glares at me for a moment as if she's about to say something more, then she swivels and follows her friend.

"But the car," I say to their departing backs. "Didn't you see the car?"

They don't turn around.

"I guess that's the end of Sitting on a Cornflake," says Zack. He must have snuck across the street without my noticing. As he steps up onto the curb he pretends to stumble. "We could call ourselves the Day Trippers."

"Very funny," I say.

I look back at the two girls. They stopped about half a block away, and are chatting with an older woman. All three of them turn and scowl at me at the same time. "Let's get out of here," I say.

3

Wednesday

Up in Shawn's room I plug Shawn's bass into Shawn's amp.

"Why don't we run through 'Ticket to Ride'?" says Zack. He lifts his guitar out of its case and strums a couple of chords to test the tuning. "She was pretty nice, actually."

If it hadn't been for my brother, Shawn, being in the Indian Ocean, and blowing his Navy pay-packet on a ton of musical equipment that he hardly ever used, then the band would not have existed.

"Good idea." I perch on the edge of Shawn's bed, place Shawn's Beatles's Fake Book by my feet, then flick through the pages until I find "Ticket to Ride." "Who was pretty nice, actually?" I say as I scan through the chords.

There's a hum as Zack plugs his guitar in. Zack's guitar is just about the only thing we use that isn't Shawn's, but he still has to plug it into Shawn's amp so we can hear it.

"Your little friend from earlier," says Zack. His guitar pings as he tests the harmonics. "You know, the one you bumped into on Portland Road."

"Ha. Bumped into. Very funny. She was pretty, I'll give you that." I turn the tuning keys of the bass and strain to hear the tell-tale throb that lets me know I'm in tune. "She doesn't seem to have the most civil way of communicating, though."

"Pretty face and a potty mouth," says Zack as he twiddles his machine heads. "Some people find that quite disarming."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean rude in a sexy way." I place the open book at my feet where I can see the words and play at the same time. "I meant more in a personally insulting kind of way."

"That's too bad." Zack plucks an "E" harmonic. The high-pitched ping hovers over our heads like the magic "E" fairy who has to attend all occasions where

two or more guitarists come together. “I thought you two were getting on like a house on fire.”

“More like a house of pain,” I say. “Come on. Let’s play.”

Zack uses one of Shawn’s pens to scrawl the guitar chords onto a napkin, which he then props on the amp where he can see it. He could have used the music stand but, as he’s often pointed out, music stands are not rock and roll.

“You fit?” he says.

“Close enough for jazz,” I say. “Let’s run through a couple of choruses without the vocals.” I tap my foot to get the rhythm. “One ... two ... three ... four ... ” The song lumbers into motion. It sounds like a dirge, so I up the tempo. Zack catches up with me, and then shoots ahead, but by the time we get to the end of the first chorus it’s starting to rock, and as the end of the second chorus approaches, it’s beginning to sound fairly presentable. Now it gets tricky, because in order for it to be something we can play at the audition we have to add the vocals.

Playing a musical instrument and singing at the same time is no simple matter. A lot of people have compared it to patting your head while you rub your stomach. Playing and singing in harmony is even trickier, and I count down the beats to the start of the vocals as if I’m about to start riding my skateboard down a flight of stairs while juggling chain saws.

I clear my throat, take a long breath, and nod to Zack. We mouth the first “I” in perfect timing, then I get my tongue twisted around “think,” Zack misses a beat, and then I get the tingle in the back of my neck. The surge of electricity that lets me know it’s all working, and once it’s working everything seems to slot into place, and it’s almost like it’s better not to try to think too hard about it, but just let the music almost play itself.

Trouble with letting the music play itself is that my mind tends to wander, and that’s exactly what happens. One moment I’m listening to Zack play the guitar chords, I’m concentrating on the beat, and I’m plucking the strings, and then the next moment the walls of Shawn’s room disappear and I’m back on Portland Road.

I step off the curb, I let the bus pass, and as the VW roars past, I hammer on the roof with the side of my fist. The VW squeals to a halt. The driver jumps out.

He looks a lot like Jasper Hamilton-Sinclair. He swings a fist at me. I slip under it, slam a left hook into his ribs, then a right uppercut to his chin. He hits the front wing of his VW as he tumbles back, and somersaults over it onto the asphalt.

I dust my hands off then turn to the girls.

The taller one looks puzzled, but the shorter one just beams at me. I still can't think of anything to say, but I don't need to.

"Hiya," she says. Her smile gets even wider.

"I'll see you around," says the tall one, and just keeps walking.

"Hiya," says the shorter one again. She slides her fingertips between my arms and my ribs, then pulls me toward her.

"Hey, Toby," yells Zack.

Not now, Zack! I think.

The girl—Shelly, yes, that was her name—stands on tiptoe, turns her face up toward mine, opens her lips, and vanishes with a loud electrical crack. At exactly the same moment my bass goes dead, and I'm back in Shawn's room as abruptly as I left it. The transition is so sudden I feel like I've been dropped through the ceiling and I have to make an effort to stay on my feet. I keep singing, and for a few beats I keep plucking the strings, even though no sound is coming out.

"Bollocks." Zack stops playing and throws his hands in the air.

Just for good measure the bass makes a final pop.

Zack shakes his head. "Come on, Toby, you have to fix that thing otherwise you're going to make us look like a couple of dingbats." He lowers his head and checks his tuning even though he's about as in tune as he can get.

I give the instrument a sharp thump with the heel of my hand, then try the strings. The notes boom out of the amplifier. "See. All better," I say to the pattern of hair on the top of Zack's head.

He looks up like a crocodile that's just spotted a wildebeest, a look that lets me know that it's anything but "all better," and as if to underline the point, the bass emits a final pop!

I jiggle the cable until the interference stops, and then I count us in again.

"Wait up, wait up," yells Zack over the boom of my bass. He reaches over and puts a hand on my strings. They go clonky-clonk with his hand damping them.

“Let’s just keep going,” I say. “I mean, we can live with it just for this evening. I promise I’ll fix it after we finish.”

“It’s not so much the bass.” Zack frowns. “Could you sing that last line again without the music?”

“I think I’m gonna be sad,” I sing, and then I stop singing. “I’m pretty sure they’re the right words?” I point to the Fake Book. “It is unofficial,” I say. “I mean, the words could be completely wrong.”

“No, they weren’t the wrong words.” Zack uses his guitar pick to tap his teeth.

“So ... ” I say. “Was I off-key?”

“No,” says Zack, but his pained expression doesn’t change. “Your voice is great. I really like the way you’re even copying the Liverpool accent a bit. You almost don’t sound like a cockney at all.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ve been working on that, but—”

“Your bass playing is fine too.”

“Okay.”

“I might even say it’s pretty good,” says Zack.

“So ... ?”

“There’s your problem.” Zack points his long index finger at my face.

Right away I think, nought out of ten.

“Are you telling me I’m too ugly to play Beatles music?” I say.

Zack shakes his head. “Blimey, mate.” He gives me one of those grimaces that hair-metal guitarists pull at a climactic point of their guitar solos. “I mean if it came down to that, then we’d all be back to playing Bach minuets.”

“So,” I say. “What, then?”

“It’s your expression,” says Zack. “You just look so ... ” He glances around the room as if he’s searching for the right word. “Bummed out.”

I gaze down at the Fake Book by my feet. I read through the first lines of “Ticket to Ride” as if they might have a solution to this problem. I mean the Bible was once supposed to have solutions for all human problems. Maybe the Beatles’s Fake Book is the new Bible. Maybe the solution to all our problems is concealed within the lyrics of the Beatles. “I have a naturally bummed-out expression,” I say. “It’s who I am.”

“Would it kill you to smile just a little?” says Zack. “Even if it’s only when

we're playing in front of people."

"But it's a sad song?" I say. "See. Here." I point to the lyrics. "The first line goes 'I think I'm gonna be sad.'"

"You're going to be sad," says Zack. "You can't be going to be sad if you're already sad, and anyway you look more hostile than sad."

"Look," I say, "we have less than five days to put together a killer set. Can't we just figure out the words and the music for now? Maybe we can work on my demeanor for the next gig." I tap my foot again, but Zack unhooks his guitar strap.

"Just wait." He props the guitar against the side of the amp. "This is important, Toby. Please just try and look a little less morose."

When Zack gets an idea in his head there is no shifting it. I'm going to have to sit this one out. I tip the bass sideways onto my legs, lean my elbows on the sound board, and stretch my mouth into a grin. "How's that?" I mutter through my teeth.

"It's like Heath Ledger playing the Joker," says Zack. "Do you have something a little less demented?"

I stretch my mouth wider.

"Better," says Zack. "But it's more like Jabba the Hutt now. Show your teeth."

I stretch my mouth so much my cheeks hurt.

"No. Now you look like you're going to bite me," says Zack. "You know what I think?"

"No," I say. "What do you think?"

"I think," says Zack, "that you spend too much time tormenting yourself over what happened with Katrina."

"Katrina! I haven't thought about Katrina for—I don't know—ages." I prop my bass back up into a playing position, thump out the descending notes that lead into the first chord, and then stop. "Look. I don't think I can deal with this right now. Let's play."

"You were thinking about her when we played rugby this afternoon." Zack picks up his guitar and puts the strap back over his shoulder.

"I was not!"

"Oh really?" says Zack points a long finger at me. "The whole time you made

that long run, you were staring at those two girls on the touch-line. You were thinking about how one of them reminded you of Katrina. That's why you tripped."

"That's completely out of order," I say.

"Then ... " Zack wags his finger. "Then you were thinking the same thing when you crossed Portland Road." He spreads his arms. "That's why you almost got hit by that car."

"That's not true," I say.

"Then just now, when we were playing, you were thinking about her," says Zack. "You've got to let go. Come to terms with rejection. Move on. She's ruining your life." He scratches his chin. "Well. To be honest, it's not Katrina who's ruining your life. It's your memory of her."

"Move on to what?" I say.

"Not all girls are like Katrina," says Zack. "That girl you bumped into isn't Katrina." Zack prods himself in the chest with his thumb. "You know what? I bet you misjudged her. I think she had a soft spot for you."

"Wait," I say, "What exactly do you think I misjudged?"

"Nothing specific," says Zack. "It's just a feeling I had. I've got to admit I'm a little jealous. She was kind of fit-looking."

"You didn't hear what she said to me," I say. "They were giving points out of ten to all the boys they knew, and she gave me nothing."

"Nothing?" says Zack.

"Correct," I say. "Zero. What part of zero out of ten are you claiming I misunderstood?"

"Nothing out of ten is better than nothing out of a hundred." Zack gives me a thousand-yard stare through one eye. Kind of a five-hundred-yard stare.

"Nothing," I say, "is zero. Zero is always zero. Zero out of ten is the same as zero out of a hundred."

"Okay, so she gave you nothing." Zack absent-mindedly thrums the opening chords to "Can't Buy Me Love."

"Not one," I say.

"Not a half?" says Zack.

"Nothing." I say.

“My opinion, for what it’s worth.” Zack places the end of his guitar on the floor and draws in a long, ragged breath. “If she’d given you one or two out of ten, I’d say forget it. But zero is a bit over the top.” He slaps his hands on his knees. “I mean nobody is worth nothing. I reckon she was actually trying to pretend she didn’t like you.”

“She did a pretty good job of pretending,” I say. “She convinced me.”

“You don’t get it, do you,” says Zack. “She wasn’t trying to convince you.”

“Who then?” I say. “Her friend?”

Zack puts his face in his hands. “She was trying to convince herself.” He puts his guitar on the bed, stands up, and goes over to the window.

“So. Fine,” I say. “She’s convinced herself she doesn’t like me. It’s all the same in the end. Let’s play.” I point to his guitar.

“You don’t get it do you?” Zack leans against the wall. “She needed to convince herself because she actually did like you. If you see her again, all you have to do is un-convince her.”

“Ha. If I see her again,” I say. “I’m going to break the world land-speed record heading in the opposite direction.”

“Oh, well,” says Zack. “Plenty of fish in the sea.”

“Plenty of fish in the aquarium.” I trace the lines of the cables as they snake across the floor like railway lines on a map. “If I want a fling with a flounder.”

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