

A person in a dark winter coat stands with their back to the camera on a snow-covered road. The road splits into two paths leading into a snowy landscape with bare trees. The sky is filled with a large flock of birds flying. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

KIM NEWMAN

Life's Lottery

"Curiously unsettling but always gripping...
like nothing else you have ever read." THE TIMES

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LIFE'S LOTTERY

KIM NEWMAN

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LIFE'S LOTTERY

Print edition ISBN: 9781781165560

E-book edition ISBN: 9781781165577

Published by Titan Books
A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd
144 Southwark Street, London SE1 0UP

First edition: April 2014

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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If Napoleon, for Tom Tunney
If Illya, for David Cross

This is the story of a man who always made the wrong choice. He could have had either of two jobs; he picked the dead end. He could have married either of two women; he picked the nag. He could have invested in either of two businesses; he picked the one that went bankrupt. Finally, he decides to abandon his old life, to change his identity and start again. He goes to the airport and finds he can go on either of two flights; he chooses the plane with the engine that explodes over the Atlantic. So, he is in mid-air, in an aeroplane struggling to stay aloft, surrounded by panicking passengers. He goes down on his knees in prayer and begs, 'St Francis, help me!' The Heavens open, and a divine light floods the cabin. An angelic voice asks, 'St Francis *Xavier* or St Francis of *Assisi*?'

DAVE ALLEN
(approx)

My friend, you have a choice. *Of course*, you have a choice. You can go this way or that. You can call heads or tails. You can have coffee or tea.

It's simple.

Except maybe you don't have a choice. Because of matters settled before your father's sperm met your mother's egg, you don't have a choice. You're set on this road. You always call heads. You must have tea.

Maybe that's the choice. To have a choice or not to have a choice. Free will or predestination.

You choose.

Think about it for a while. Use one side of the paper. Leave a wide margin. Don't skip or skip out regardless, though. Really *think*. It's important. It affects everything.

Get back to me when you've made up your mind. When you've chosen.

When you've made your choice, go to 2.

This much is certain: you make your first choices before you're born. To kick or not to kick. To turn or not to turn. In the womb, you're already a person.

Determinations are made before you have even rudimentary consciousness. Though you're the size and shape of a comma, each of your cells holds a template. The parameters within which you will grow are set.

You are male. You are white, nondescript Caucasian. Your eyes are hazel. Your hair will be blonde in childhood but darken in your teens. You'll have good teeth, eyes that won't dim until (if) you reach your late fifties, an average-sized penis.

These are the cards you are dealt. You can do little to change them. Nevertheless, you can bet on a good hand.

Other things are conditional: on diet, exercise regimen, cultural influence. For instance, were you born into certain religious groups or in certain countries, you'd be circumcised in infancy. As it is, you'll keep your foreskin into adulthood. If you're ever circumcised, for medical reasons or upon religious conversion, it'll be your choice.

You should attain an adult height of five feet eight inches. Even with poor nutrition and a childhood spent in a prison cell (unlikely, but not impossible) you will not be shorter than five five. Only under truly extraordinary circumstances (for example, being raised outside Earth's gravitational pull) will you grow more than half an inch taller than five eight. Sorry. Those are the breaks. Learn to live with them.

It is possible that your mother's pregnancy, by her choice or not, will be terminated before you are born.

In which case, regrettably, you must go to 0.

* * *

It was once a doctors' commonplace that 'The first five minutes of life are the most risky.' The saying fell into disuse because wags invariably counter-commented, 'The last five are pretty dodgy too.'

Find a pack of cards. Take a card at random. Replace, shuffle well, draw again. If you get the Queen of Spades twice in a row, you are born dead. Go to 0.

* * *

Without knowing it, you've already been lucky. You are born in the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading in 1959, to middle-class parents with a comfortable income. In earlier centuries, other countries or different social classes, your survival chance would be a single draw from a pack of cards. In some cases, a draw from only the suit of spades. In others, a draw from the face cards of spades.

Your birthday is 4 October. Your astrological sign, should you care, is Libra. The only non-living sign in the Zodiac. The Scales. There's an amusing irony there, if you're disposed to consider it. Your nationality is British. Cecil Rhodes is alleged to have said that to be born an Englishman means that you take first prize in the lottery of life.

You are delivered at a quarter to nine in the morning.

'A boy,' your mother is told.

She smiles at you, weakly. Your delivery has not been as traumatic as the twenty-hour ordeal which three years ago, produced your sister, Laraine. Still, you've demanded all her strength. During birth

your mother thought she was enduring the most extreme physical pain you'll put anyone through your life. ~~Whether she is right is almost entirely your decision.~~

Your mother is Louise Frances Marion, born Louise Frances Mason in 1931. After school, she worked in a bank, where she met your father. Since marriage in 1952, she has been a full-time housewife and, latterly, mother. Your father is Harold Collin Marion, born 1923. He served in Burma in the war and is assistant manager of a high-street bank.

Physically, like many boys, you take after your mother. If you let your hair grow and shave your beard, you will at eighteen look much like she did when she married.

Nurses fuss around. The umbilicus is severed and tied. A great deal of mucus discharge is wiped off and tidied away. The afterbirth is disposed of. In 1959, they don't believe in leaving a healthy mother alone.

Somewhere, a wireless is playing, the Light Programme. The first music you hear is 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' by The Platters. Your first sight, upside-down, is your exhausted mum, her hazel eyes bright with tears.

All this you will forget.

Once born, you have the power of self-determination. You do not have a complex understanding of the world, but you are born with a tenacious will.

You can choose not to draw the first breath. Or the second. In which case, leave now. Go to 0.

* * *

You're still with the programme, as they will say in the 1980s. I'm glad. Nobody likes a quitter.

You're professionally slapped on the bum. You open your lungs and squeak, instinctively sucking hospital air. Oxygen tickles your alveoli, passes into your blood (you are Type O) and heads for your brain. Congratulations: you are sapient. Your thought processes are already more intricate than those of the cleverest cat that ever lived.

Your dad is allowed in, smelling strongly of Players Navy Cut cigarettes, and you are presented to him. Everyone is thoroughly satisfied with you. You are a cynosure, the object of everyone's attention and approval. Your first smile brings universal delight.

Enjoy it. This may be the last time.

* * *

Your parents have had the usual name discussions. Mum wants you to be Rhett or Melanie, after characters in her favourite book, *Gone With the Wind*. If you'd been a girl, Dad would've allowed Melanie, though his choice (for no reason he could articulate) was Morag. But your sister has a slightly recessive R and Dad doesn't want you to be Rhett in case you can only pronounce the name 'Whett'. He puts his foot down and insists you take his mother's maiden name, Keith.

Though your family are only Christmas and Easter C of E, you are Christened. Keith Oliver Marion. Gifts from historical circumstance and the National Health shower upon you: vaccinations against smallpox, diphtheria and polio. You'll almost certainly not get tuberculosis. You'll be a bottle baby. You'll live in a comparatively warm, clean house. You will not be ignored.

Again, you've been dealt a better hand than many born in other times and places. You live hundreds of years after the plague was driven from Europe, a century after infant mortality was the favoured method of contraception within many English marriages. Barbarian hordes do not descend on Reading in the early 1960s, sweeping from house to house, slaughtering men, enslaving women, tossing babies

on spears.

~~Certain elements of your future are assured. By your parents' standards, you'll be properly fed and clothed. Education to a certain standard is guaranteed. A National Insurance number has been set aside for you. You won't be conscripted into the armed forces. Unless you are declared a lunatic, convicted and imprisoned, or elevated to the monarchy, you will have the right to vote.~~

From time to time, as you sneer at a plate of spinach or struggle with long division, people – mostly your parents – will tell you that you ought to be grateful. Unless you turn into some sort of saint at an early age, which is about as likely as being made King, you won't be able to give more than a grudging admission that yes, you ought to be grateful. You not having known any other life, 'ought to be' will never translate into 'are'. Don't feel too guilty about it. It's not really a flaw in your character, nor in the collective character of your late baby-boom generation (though your parents' sensibilities shaped by rationing, think it is).

It's the human condition.

Alone in your skull, you can only imagine the outside world. You can never *know*. You can't *truly* experience – though empathy, art and observation offer approximations – what it's like to be someone else living another life. You can only be you. The sooner you get to grips with that, the less mental anguish you'll suffer over the question.

Again, unless you're some sort of saint. Do you want to be a saint? Seriously? Most saints suffer on Earth. Many villains prosper. Remember this. It will inform the decisions you'll be asked to make.

Then again, there are many definitions of 'suffering' and 'prosperity'.

* * *

In 1964, your mother has another child, James. He is born with a slight harelip. You are delighted, at least at first. You were afraid you would have another sister, who would gang up with Laraine, whom you think of as 'bossy', against you. A brother, you feel, will reinforce you in the undeclared war with your sister. This is an emotional, not intellectual, perception. As soon as James develops a character of his own – you – and Laraine – grow out of it.

You have many toys. Two teddy bears, Acorn and Big Ted. A wooden fire-engine. A clockwork train. A box of lead soldiers passed down from an uncle. Lego bricks enough to build a Great Wall. Slightly later, spaceships and dinosaurs will invade the toy-box, joining faithfuls whose popularity peaked years before you were born. The toys of your parents' childhoods are still familiar objects to you. Decades later, it might strike you that you were of the last generation to take equal delight in tin spinning tops and plastic Daleks.

You, James and Laraine have books and are told stories. *Teddy Bear Coalman*, *Upside-Down Gonk*, *Circus*, *Little Noddy Goes to Toyland*. Later, as you start to recognise letters and words, Mum reads *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Winnie the Pooh* to you. Your sister reads Enid Blyton's Famous Five books, and you are impatient to catch up. Soon, you start on Tintin and Biggies.

You and Laraine learn *The Big Book of Riddles* by heart and madden your parents and other grown-ups by chanting, 'What's big, red and eats rocks?' or, 'Where do policemen live?' until they wearily (and mendaciously) reply, 'I don't know.' Then you scream, 'A big red rock-eater,' or 'Letsb Avenue,' and collapse in helpless laughter.

* * *

Your favourite book, which you read until its covers fall off, is *The Buccaneers Annual*, a collection of illustrated stories about Captain Dan Tempest, an adventurer who has sworn allegiance to the Crown.

and preys only on Spanish rogues. It also has articles about real-life pirates like Blackbeard and Captain Kidd, with black-and-white pictures (which you colour with crayons) of their exploits and fates. It takes you a while to realise the annual is based on a television series which finished before you were born.

During the pirate craze, you plead with your indulgent parents for model galleons and cannon. You prize Herge's *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure* above the other Tintin books. Dad reads a heavily abridged *Treasure Island* to you and helps draw maps on graph paper. The two of you construct an imaginary Caribbean archipelago, pinpointing the location of buried booty on each island. As you grow older, you and your dad won't often have the time or the inclination to share enterprises or interests. Later, if you keep them, the maps will be worth more to you than treasure would have been.

You have a pirate outfit: a hat with the Jolly Roger on the crown, an eyepatch, a plastic cutlass. Your favourite game is boarding the dining-room. Mum worries you'll hurt yourself (and the curtain swinging from the rigging. Once, you are caught prising up loose floorboards under the bathroom mat. You tell Mum you are looking for treasure. Eyepatch, hat and cutlass are confiscated for a week. You feel like Dan Tempest during his months of unjust confinement in a Tortuga dungeon, and rejoice at the freedom of the high seas when your pirate accoutrements are ceremonially returned to you.

* * *

Unlike many of your contemporaries, you do not remember a time when your family did not have a television set. The first Kennedy assassination makes no impression on you, but you vividly remember the first episode of *Doctor Who*, in which two teachers learn that one of their pupils is from another planet and that her white-haired grandfather has a time machine disguised as a police phone booth. Possibly, you later discover *Doctor Who* started the weekend Kennedy was shot and wonder how you can remember one but not the other.

In your childhood, *Doctor Who* is a more important figure than John Kennedy. William Hartnell will regenerate as Patrick Troughton before you learn that Harold Wilson, who has the same name as your dad, and Lyndon Johnson, whom you think of as the regenerated spaceman who was once John Kennedy, are the prime minister of Great Britain and president of America. Jon Pertwee, on a new colour TV that is the envy of your schoolfriends, is the Doctor by the time you think you understand the difference between Labour and Tory. Tom Baker is in charge of the TARDIS when you hear Peter Cook on the wireless, explaining that 'In America, they have the Republicans, who are the equivalent of our Conservative Party, and the Democrats, who are the equivalent of our Conservative Party.'

Dad was for Clement Attlee in 1945, but has voted Tory ever since. Nevertheless, he admires Wilson's 'get-up-and-go'. Mum, clinging to politics passed on by her father, has voted Liberal in the last two elections but will vote for Wilson in 1970. You should be old enough to cast a vote in the 1979 election, and may choose between Margaret Thatcher, James Callaghan, David Steel and Screaming Lord Sutch.

* * *

A year after James is born, Dad is (finally, according to him) given a managership, of a branch in Sedgwater, a market town in Somerset. The Marion family, which is still the universe to you, moves house. At the time, it seems the end of the world. How will you live without your familiar room without your friend Gary Black from across the road, without the pirate's cave in the cupboard under the stairs?

Within a week, you feel you've lived in your new home for ever. In the new house, which seems as huge as a mansion, you have your own room. You soon forget you ever had to share with your sister Laraine, who alternates indulgence and hostility, is old enough to be jubilant at a safe haven free from the invasions of her baby brothers.

The vast back garden becomes a whole island, which you constantly explore. Dad tells you to stay out of the shed where he keeps his tools, frightening you with stories of poisonous spiders lurking in shadowy cobwebs that are spun faster than he can clean them away. Laraine has a horror of spiders which you don't want to admit you share. The one picture in *The Buccaneers Annual* you can't look at shows Dan Tempest tunnelling out of a dungeon, surprised by compound eyes shining behind a curtain of black web.

Staying well away from the arachnid-haunted shed, you mount a serious surveying expedition, drafting in James as First Mate, and bury a tin of marbles – unpitted glassies, with swirls of colour – in a foot-deep hole, putting a dried bird-skull and a dead shrew on top of the tin before replacing the earth. You draw a map, marking the secret location of the treasure with a big cross. Somehow, despite the map, you never find the tin again. The treasure is lost, maybe for ever.

* * *

Dad would like a finned car like the ones in American television programmes, but buys a sensible made-in-Britain family Austin. He drives into town every day. Your house is on the Achelzoy road, at the edge of Sedgwater, almost in the wild country. Mum learns to drive so she can do the shopping on Saturday mornings.

The family owns a washing-machine (Gran, Mum's mum, still uses a mangle), a fridge, a three-piece suite, an electric oven, a 'hi-fi'. Laraine lobbies for a transistor radio of her own, but you prefer a cabinet-sized valve set, which is put in your bedroom. The living-room contains a thin oval coffee table low enough for you to climb on and repel boarders, the kitchen has formica-topped work surfaces, all cushions and pillows are filled with foam not feathers.

* * *

Choices are made for you. Mum decides what to serve at meals, though as an infant you have a choice of whether you eat happily or reject with tears. Dad decides the family will move from Reading to the West Country. Your parents think you and your brother and sister should have separate rooms.

Mum resists her mother's ideas of what children should wear and kits you out for kindergarten with what she describes (in a mocking tone that horrifies Beatle-mad Laraine) as 'fab mod gear': a black bobble-hat, a tiny dufifel coat, yellow wellingtons. Since you can't wear your pirate outfit to kindergarten, you make sure to carry your eyepatch in your pocket, so that you are secretly a buccaneer, if outwardly the image of Paddington Bear.

Disputes between you and your sister, about what to watch on telly or what to call the stray cat that has been accepted into the family, are settled by your parents. (You get your own way about the cat, which is called Phones after the puppet on *Stingray*.) Your parents pick which seaside you go to for your holidays: Falmouth or Scarborough in the '60s, Ibiza or Knossos in the '70s. You are sent to kindergarten, as you will soon be sent to Big School.

For a long time, without thinking about it, you assume you never have a choice. Sometimes you get your own way, sometimes you don't. There's nothing you can actually do about it, no higher court to which to plead your case.

It is possible you'll go through your whole life this way, allowing others to choose for you

following the path of least resistance, unable to decide a preference. If asked 'Heads or tails?' you have a hard time giving an answer. If pressed, you say one or the other, favouring each about evenly. You see no difference between Superman and Batman, Labour and Tory, pease porridge hot and pease porridge cold. Between life and death.

Such people are not rare.

If you are one, **go to 3 and 4 and 5** and all subsequent possibles. But don't get involved. It can hurt you, but it can't transport you to raptures either.

By the way: if this is you, I'm sorrier than I can say. Believe me, you will die having never really been alive. You riffle through all the possibles but in the end you **go to 0** having been **0** all along.

* * *

Still with me, Keith? Good man. You're not yet seven and you've successfully walked a tightrope over a chasm. You've chosen life over death, at least for the moment. And you've resisted the comforts of indifference.

Soon, shockingly, you'll be confronted with a choice. The first of many.

Perhaps it's better not to weigh choices too long. If you consider all sides of the argument over and over before doing anything, you often make a decision after the time for decision has passed and, by default, choose inaction over action. That might be a subtler way of riffing through life, thinking too much instead of not enough. But the end result is, again, a life not lived.

Some choices truly are meaningless, even on a macrocosmic scale. The fate of worlds may rest on whether you have tea or coffee. Equally, nothing at all of consequence can come from a decision to live or die.

* * *

Deal with it. Everybody else does. Somehow.

* * *

Anyway, here's how it happens.

In September 1966, you have to go to Big School. Some of your friends from kindergarten – Michael Dixon, Barry Mitcham – go at the same time. Laraine has been going to Big School ever since you moved to Sedgwater, but orders you not to hang around her or her friends. Without anyone really telling you, you've got the idea that as a six-year-old boy you aren't supposed to play with girls. Especially older girls.

Ash Grove County Primary School is like Denbeigh Kindergarten, except in a bigger room with more children. Your teacher is Miss Slowley, who takes Class One. In the morning, she asks everyone in turn to stand up and say their name and what their father does.

'Keith Marion,' you say, when your turn comes. 'My dad is a bank manager.'

Shane Bush, whose dad works in the jam factory, laughs. There's a girl in class called Marion Halsted. Shane thinks it's funny that you have a girl's name.

Miss Slowley doesn't think it's funny. She tells Class One you are born with your name and it doesn't mean anything.

'Keith isn't a girl, Shane isn't a bush and I don't always do things slowly. Though sometimes I do.'

'So is Keith sometimes a girl?' Shane asks.

Everyone laughs. You feel bad, hearing the laughter. Close to crying. You feel especially bad because Miss Slowley almost laughs too. You hate Big School. Everyone here laughs at you.

After the whole of Class One has told Miss Slowley their names and everyone except Maxwell Lewis, who says he doesn't know, has told what their dad does, a bell goes, and Miss Slowley says you can all go out in the playground. When the bell goes again, you have to come back to the classroom. Laraine has already told you about this. It is morning break.

In the playground, long-legged and towering Class Six boys play football, using bundled-up jumpers as goal posts. Middle children hang from a climbing-frame, playing 'Off-ground Touch'. You see Laraine skipping with her friends and think better of talking to her. You don't want to have to tell her Class One laughed at you, anyway.

'Girl,' someone says.

It is Shane. He has others with him. Maxwell Lewis, Paul Mysliwicz, Ivor Barber. And a girl, Marjorie Yatman, whose dad is a policeman. They are Shane Bush's gang.

'I'm not a girl,' you say.

You don't want to cry but know you might. When you have bad dreams about being chased by scuttling giant spiders, you can wake up crying and Mum will soothe you. If you fall off your tricycle and scrape your knee bloody, you can cry. When your pirate hat was blown overboard while you were on a boat trip at Lyme Regis in the summer, you were inconsolable for days. Mum and Dad got you a new hat (actually, a better one, with a silvery skull-headed pin) but it wasn't the same, and you haven't worn it as much.

You are close to crying now and realise it. If Shane keeps calling you a girl and if his gang join in, there's a danger you will cry.

You can't think ahead at six. You're a *young* six. You don't know that, if you cry now, you'll always be the boy who cried, always be a girl. But instinct – a powerful, not-to-be-underestimated force – tells you crying would be a disastrous thing to do.

You wish you had your lost-and-gone-for-ever hat. Then you could face up to Shane as bravely as Captain Kidd or Blackbeard, or even a lowly privateer like Sir Henry Morgan. Now, you worry that you will snivel like Israel Hands or any other scurvy swab.

'You got a tellyvision?'

This surprises you. It's not the question you expect from Shane. You nod a yes.

'You watch *Man From U.N.C.L.E.*?'

Your bedtime is seven o'clock, but you are allowed, as a special treat, to stay up and watch *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* on Thursdays. You follow the adventures of the suave American Napoleon Solo and the unsmiling Russian Illya Kuryakin, heroic spies who save the free world every week. Spies are almost as fascinating to you as pirates.

Shane's gang all wear triangular U.N.C.L.E. badges, with the number 11. You wish you had a badge like that.

You nod again. 'Yes'.

'Who do you like?'

You don't know it yet, but you have been asked to make a choice. You're relieved Shane doesn't seem to want to make you cry. But you have a feeling in your tummy that you can't put a word to. Although you might be sick, but not really. You might also do something good, like when your treasure map drawings got gold stars in kindergarten.

You just don't know.

'Who do you like, girl?' Shane asks again. 'Napoleon Solo or Illya Kuryakin?'

If you like Napoleon Solo, go to 3. If you like Illya Kuryakin, go to 4.

Who do you like, girl?' Shane asks again, 'Napoleon Solo or Illya Kuryakin?'
 You think about it. Napoleon Solo has a number 11 on his badge, like Shane's gang. Illya Kuryakin has a number 2.

Maybe that's why you say, 'Napoleon.'

'Do you want to be in our gang?' Shane asks.

Shane Bush's gang gathers around you in a half-circle, accepting you.

'For a girl, you're okay,' Shane says.

'For a bush, so are you,' you reply.

Shane laughs and calls you daft. The gang join in. For the rest of the morning break, you play *Mo* *From U.N.C.L.E.*, shooting THRUSH agents with finger guns, escaping from deadly death-traps, saving the free world.

Big School is all right.

At dinner break, you quietly scrape the horrid custard off your jam roly-poly and give it to Shane who, unbelievably, likes the vile yellow slime. With two helpings of custard in him, Shane admits you're a good lad.

* * *

For six years at Ash Grove, you are in Shane Bush's gang. Ivor moves to a new town in Class Three but Paul, Max and Mary stay all through primary school. Others join the gang, including Barry Mitcham, whom you knew in kindergarten, and another girl, Vanda Pritchard. You like Vanda more than Mary, who occasionally hits you when she feels mean. Paul and Max wonder why Shane wants you in the gang; sometimes, they are nasty to you.

When Mary or Paul or Max picks on you, you go crybaby, which makes things worse. Still, you can't help it. Despising your weakness, you work hard to overcome it, proving your bravery to yourself and the gang. Sometimes, you go further than is sensible, taking a fall from the climbing frame or one of the trees in the copse at the far end of the playground, earning the right to leak a few tears, holding in your impulse to throw a sobbing fit.

Shane is clever but naughty. He gets away with things by being charming, amusing grown-ups enough to avoid punishment for offences which would get you or Max sent to the corner for the rest of the lesson. Later, you understand why Shane prefers Napoleon to Illya: like Robert Vaughn, Shane has something funny to say when he's in trouble, always seems cool-headed, never takes anything seriously; in shorts and a cardy, he gives the impression of being well groomed, though he also takes knocks falling off the climbing-frame.

In Shane's gang, you're Illya Kuryakin. Faithful sidekick, shyer than the hero, more sensitive, never at the centre of things. It doesn't occur to you until Class Six that you're cleverer than Shane but less willing to take a chance. When the class is asked a question, you often don't put up your hand even if you know the answer. Shane always puts up his hand: if he doesn't know the answer, he makes a joke. If he's not right, he can be funny.

You wonder why Paul and Max don't really like you. Once in a while, when the mood takes him, Shane sides with them against you. If the gang plays *Doctor Who*, you have to be the Doctor so the rest can be Daleks, wheeling about the playground with arms stuck out, squawking, 'Exterminate!' This sometimes ends with you crying. Paul and Max, and especially Mary, are contemptuous when you cry, but Shane usually comes out of his mood and sticks up for you.

Shane also sticks up for Mary. There's something not quite right with her. Even teachers notice

though they pretend not to. Shane says Mary is a proper hardnut, and admires her wildness: she's the one who suggests in Class Three that you take slates from the school roof to build your own clubhouse, an escapade which gets you all sent home with notes from Mr Brunt, the headmaster. Shane also tries to calm her down when she gets angry. Mary has rages the way you have crying fits. She loses control. Where you become pathetic, Mary becomes terrifying. It is Shane who makes up her inevitable nickname, Scary Mary.

When Vanda joins the gang – because she's Shane's next-door neighbour – Mary treats her worse than Paul and Max treat you. Shane has to look out for Vanda: if left alone with Mary, she'll be tormented to tears. Mary hates Vanda because she's a girl.

'Why do we have to have girls in the gang?' Mary whines.

Once, off your guard, you say the obvious thing: 'Mary, you're a girl. We have you.'

It's the worst beating of your primary-school experience. Mary slaps you until you're crying, then kicks you in the shins, barrels punches into your chest and face. Shane needs Paul's help to haul her off you.

'I'm *not*, I'm *not*, I'm *not*,' she screams at you. 'Say I'm not a girl, Keith! Say I'm *not*!'

You've lost it too and are crying too hard to say anything. Mrs Newcomen, the Class Three teacher, breaks it up.

Next day, Mr Brunt comes to Class Three while Mary is sent off to see someone. Mr Brunt talks to the whole class about Mary, explaining that she has problems and you should try to help her, to understand that she doesn't always mean the things she does. Like Shane and you, and unlike Paul and Max and Vanda, Mary sits on the Top Table. She reads better than you and can do sums faster than anyone in Class Three. She isn't stupid like Timmy Gossett, who is on the Bottom Table and can't get through *Janet and John*, but she has problems. You and Shane look at each other, knowing no grown-up will ever really understand Scary Mary's problems. Sometimes, a monster comes up behind her eyes and everybody had better look after themselves. Even Robert Hackwill of Class Six, the official School Bully, knows better than to pick on her.

After Mr Brunt has talked to you, Mary comes back to class. At break-time, she says she was taken to a lady named Dr Killian, a psychiatrist, who asked her questions about herself and why she gets angry so often. For a while afterwards, Mary doesn't have her monster spells. Eventually, when Vanda has her hair done in Indian plaits, Mary (out of boredom, you suppose) starts tugging them, pulling harder and harder, turning yelps to cries, not stopping until she is stopped. Even when you get to Class Six and start having your eleventh birthdays, Mary's monster comes out from time to time. She isn't as bad as she was: not because the monster has gone away, but because she's got better at hiding from grown-ups. Likewise, you don't cry so often, but inside are still the same boy who could burst into tears at the slightest prod.

At Ash Grove, you learn to read and do sums. You have a head start on other children, because you already knew your letters and numbers in Class One. You get to the Top Table in Class Two and stay on it all the way up to Class Six. You have Painting, Music and Movement, History, PE, Stories and Sums. You draw better than most, though not as neatly as some of the girls. In Stories, most boys write about football or the war, but you write about pirates (the old craze dims, but the interest is still there), spies, robots, monsters from space and jungle explorers. Teachers indulge your interests, but you sense they'd prefer you to be more normal.

Dad, who fought the Japs in the war, buys you comics and stories about it: you like Biggies and Sergeant Rock, but prefer Doctor Who and Superman. Laraine, who goes to the Girls' Grammar and wears a straw boater and a bottle-green blazer with a badge on the top pocket, moans that you only like horrible things, like robots and pirates, but you discount her opinion because she is only interested in clothes and pop music. Her favourite song is 'White Horses' by Jacky, which drives you mad if you

hear it.

* * *

Sometimes, Shane Bush's gang expands to take in almost all the school. In Class Four, everyone plays a game called 'Timmy's Germs'. At break-time, someone rubs his hand on Timmy Gossett and then touches someone else, saying, 'Now you've got Timmy's germs.' The victim, choking and coughing, runs around and passes on the deadly touch. Timmy's germs spread rapidly. Everyone falls wriggling on the grass behind the school. Only Timmy is left standing, blinking stupid tears as he walks through the writhing dead.

One day, Timmy Gossett isn't in school and Mr Brunt comes to talk to you all, like he talked about Mary. He says that it's not Timmy's fault he's a bit dirty and that he is very upset about the way you treat him. While Mr Brunt speaks, you feel hotly guilty. But the next day Paul sticks his hand in Timmy's bird's-nest hair, picking up Timmy's germs, and comes after you, to pass them on. Paul slaps you harder than he needs to and says, 'Now, you've got Timmy's germs.'

What do you do?

If you chase Vanda and give her Timmy's germs, go to 109. If you shrug and tell Paul you don't want to play, go to 128.

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