

The Milky Way

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An extract

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The Suggestion

My brother kept using the word ‘shite’ every other sentence. He just couldn’t stop saying it. He kept on kicking Gina’s foot too, over and over.

Gina refused to react. Firstly, because she’d been smart enough to bring along a book, a big book that was taking her a long time to read. Secondly, because it was hard to wind up Gina, even if you went on kicking her harder and harder, like Bossie was.

So I spoke up for her.

‘Bossie, stop it.’

He stopped and gave a deep sigh and then he said that word again: shite, shite, shite. Anyone would have thought it was his own word. But you could hear that it wasn’t and it never would be. He’d picked it up from the newspaper. There’d been an article about this Irish man who’d suddenly started swearing overnight and then there was no stopping him.

‘Hey, why don’t we call this place Our Clubhouse?’ Bossie said suddenly.

Gina looked up. ‘Our Clubhouse?’ she said. She rolled her eyes. ‘This place here? I’ve never been inside a clubhouse without a roof before.’

‘They have buildings without roofs in Italy,’ said Bossie.

It gave me a shock when he mentioned Italy. That’s where Mum was.

‘The buildings there have walls at least,’ said Gina.

Bossie pretended he was deaf.

I couldn’t do that. I always heard everything. And I remembered a lot of stuff too.

Bossie repeated his suggestion: that the three of us were a club, but we'd just have to imagine the clubhouse for ourselves.

Gina and I looked around. We tried to picture a proper building. It was a tall order. There were no walls to put posters on. There was no dartboard, no table. We had no chairs, no fridge with cans of pop in, no clubhouse cat, no special club emblem, no name, no radio, no club song to sing.

Our Clubhouse was one of the walls of Any Old Iron.

The flat warehouse roof stretched out on one side. Petra and Priit worked down below in the warehouse. The old metal was laid out in the yard, sorted by type.

On the other side was the street: it was officially called Melkweg, but we always called it the Milky Way. If we leant forward and looked down, we didn't exactly see any adventures coming our way. All we could see were scraggy bushes up against the wall, and the grey pavement running alongside.

'Fine,' I said.

'Great,' said Gina, with her nose back in her book.

'What?' said Bossie, hugging his chest. 'Is it my fault we're bored?'

'You're the eldest,' I said. 'You're the one who gets to decide stuff.'

'Tickle bruv,' said Bossie.

'Brother,' I said.

I noticed that Gina was watching us with a straight face. She could have laughed, but she didn't. Her eyes went from Bossie to me and back, but to my surprise they soon returned to her book and didn't look our way again.

Bossie slumped. 'Hey,' he said, spreading his arms wide. 'What do you think this is? The royal court? And I'm supposed to be the jester? Is that it?'

I looked up then and so did Gina. We both had frowns on our faces. I was thinking about the burning hot sun. Maybe Bossie hadn't had enough water to drink and that's why he was acting so weird.

'So I have to keep you entertained, huh?' he said.

'You don't have to do anything,' I said. 'But if you... um... build a clubhouse, you've got to make sure there's something to do there.'

'Whatever,' said Gina, because she had her book to read.

'Don't just say whatever,' I said to Gina. 'Are you with us or not?'

Gina blinked. She was looking for a good answer. For the past few weeks, she hadn't been spending all of her time with us, day in, day out. She sometimes went off to visit her aunt instead. Her aunt was probably going to die.

Slowly, she closed her book and said, 'Of course I'm with you.'

'Well, there you go then,' I said, looking at Bossie.

'What? Where?' said Bossie.

'If this is Our Clubhouse, we'll have to act like a club from now on,' I replied.

Gina raised her eyebrows and looked like she was about to open her book again.

'How can I act like a club?' she said, pointing at herself. 'Me? A club? I'm not a club. I'm all by myself.'

Sam

Bossie leant forward and pointed with his chin at Nancy Sinatra's dachshund, who was walking past beneath us.

'Hey, Sam! Sam the Sausage!' he called.

We watched the creature pass by beneath our feet at the same time every day, but now it seemed as though the dog coming past was the same colour as yesterday's dog, but with a different head and legs.

'Hey, Sam! Sam the Sausage!' we called together.

The dog didn't look up at us. He wheezed and stumbled along on his stubby little legs. His claws scratched over the paving slabs. He walked like he was learning to skate.

Bossie and Gina and I watched him to see if he'd make it to the end of the Milky Way.

Sam shuffled along, right up against the bushes.

In my head, I cheered him on, like it was some kind of contest. As he went around the corner, I moved my shoulders along with him, as if that might help to propel him forward.

The dog had to make a supercanine effort to swing his bum around the corner, even though his front end was already in the next street.

I gave him a round of applause when he got there. I just stopped myself from jumping up and running along the wall to the corner to make sure I'd really seen it.

Around the corner, there was a small square that belonged to a church we never went to. Sam always went for a walk around the shrubbery before beginning his return journey.

‘That dog,’ I said.

‘You really feel sorry for him, don’t you?’ said Gina.

‘Yeah, I always cheer him on in my mind, give him a bit of strength,’ I said.

Gina nodded. ‘I noticed,’ she said. ‘And I’m sure it helps him.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said Bossie. He poked his tongue out, tapped his forehead and crossed his eyes.

Gina and I both turned to stare at Bossie.

‘How old are you?’ she said.

I just tutted and said, ‘Bossie,’ like Mum would.

Nancy

Over a minute later, Nancy Sinatra shuffled past beneath us. As always, she was miles behind her dog, because her feet were often a bit uncertain.

Bossie and Gina and I had seen her every day all summer long, just like her dog, but it hadn’t ever occurred to us to make jokes about her. We’d never even really laughed at the boots she wore, even though they were so ridiculously short.

I always fell silent whenever I saw Nancy. I just couldn’t imagine anyone getting that old and still taking their dog out for a walk.

‘Look at that,’ said Bossie.

‘Who’s taking who for a walk?’ I said.

Nancy was walking over the same ice as her dog.

As had happened a few times before, she suddenly stopped. She obviously didn’t dare to go any further. For over a minute, she just stood there, as if she’d run up against some obstacle that was too high for her.

Her head stuck up out of her collar like a tortoise’s head from its shell, as though she was on the lookout for cars or bikes that might send her flying. There was hardly ever any traffic on the Milky Way though – she should have known that already.

She lifted her foot high and then very carefully set it back down, a little further on.

Bossie leant forward and opened his mouth to shout something, but stopped himself. He watched Nancy walk past, the same way I'd just watched Sam. He moved the top part of his body, turning his shoulders, like he was going around the corner himself.

As soon as Nancy had disappeared from sight, the three of us heaved a sigh of relief.

She'd made it again.

The Bet

Nancy always stopped on the square in front of the church to watch Sam take his walk around the shrubbery and make his brief excursion onto the grass, before they walked back together.

'Hm,' said Bossie. The corners of his mouth were turned down.

'What?' I said.

'Give it a few days and Nancy won't be able to move another step. She'll just come to a complete standstill.'

'Stop that,' said Gina. 'You shouldn't wish people dead before their time.'

Bossie clicked his tongue, as though Gina had interrupted him in the middle of a good thought that he wanted to finish. He said he hadn't used the word dead.

'Coming to a complete standstill is the same as dying.' She put her book down beside her, swung her legs onto the street side of the wall and leant back with her hands on the warehouse roof.

'Sam the Sausage is eighty,' she said.

'So's Nancy,' said Bossie. 'Or near enough.'

'Eighty human years, for a dog,' said Gina. 'Eighty's really ancient for a dog.'

'Isn't it ancient for a human too? I don't know anyone who's eighty.'

Gina was silent for a moment and looked away.

'You're sounding a bit dumb there, Bossie,' she said. 'An eighty-year-old dog's going to die sooner than an eighty-year-old human.'

'The oldest dog in the world is 140 in human years.'

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ said Gina. She blew the sweat from her face. ‘A dog dies more easily than a human. Look at Sam. He’s so keen to lie down that his stomach’s almost dragging on the ground already. His little legs are going to give way any moment. It’s the tiredness.’

‘Tiredness?’ said Bossie. ‘Tiredness doesn’t mean anything. If tiredness means something, we’ll be dead by the end of the week too.’

I had to laugh.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘If being tired is a sign you’re about to die, then bury me now.’

‘Don’t talk like that,’ said Gina. She meant that death can come sooner than you think.

Then Bossie’s face cracked into a smile.

‘Listen,’ he said, holding out his hand to Gina. ‘Want to bet on it?’

‘Bet?’

‘On who dies first.’

Gina shook her head violently. ‘No, no, no.’

‘What do you mean: no, no, no?’

‘In the book I’m reading, someone promises he’ll never do something again, but then he has to break his promise.’

‘What are you talking about? Promising is different than betting,’ said Bossie. ‘I’m just asking a question: who’ll die first? Nancy or the dog?’

I laughed nervously and said, ‘What’s the prize?’

‘Good question.’ Bossie quickly thought about it. ‘Whoever wins gets to be in charge for a day.’

‘Oh,’ said Gina. ‘So this is the royal court and I’m the queen? It’s a deal. The winner gets to be in charge for one whole day.’

‘Agreed,’ said Bossie. ‘The winner rules the roost for a day.’

‘I’m the witness,’ I said.

All three of us held our breath, because we could hear someone wheezing along the pavement, down beneath us.

It was Sam and Nancy, together.

They’d started the return journey. They were still shuffling along side by side, but Sam was slowly moving into the lead.

Gina looked down. 'Sam's going to die first,' she said.

'Nancy,' said Bossie. 'One hundred per cent certain: Nancy.'

They held up their hands and slapped them together. It made a loud noise and it probably hurt, but neither of them flinched.

The noise startled Nancy though. She looked up anxiously and put a hand on her chest when she saw us up there.

'Hello, boys,' she said in a trembling voice.

We looked at one another.

'Boys?' we said.

Gina frowned. She leant forward and nodded at Nancy.

'Hello, Mr Sinatra,' she replied.

And the three of us just cracked up.