

Winning The Pools

‘Go and bury that cat,’ Gary’s mum said.

It was outside their door it died, but he didn’t want to – he was upset she wasn’t telling Julie, who was the one saying it was bad luck and making him be the one to get rid of it.

It wasn’t even a black cat. It got knocked down in the wet and crawled on to the pavement and stopped in front of their door with its mouth broken and its ear cut off, and its legs stretched out stiff in front like it was pushing something away.

‘I’m not touching it,’ he said.

‘Get a shovel and take it up the bomb site,’ Julie said.

‘You do it,’ he told her. Gary was waiting for their mum to go so he could thump her, but she was holding on to her mum’s arm and getting ready to cry, so he had to look at us and say, ‘Who’s got a shovel?’

Manus pushed up the front and said, ‘I’ll do it.’ He wanted to be in Gary’s gang because they were older than him and had metal studs on their shoes that clicked as they walked down the road. They could strike sparks on the pavement, Manus said. ‘Let me.’

Gary’s mum went in to get a shovel out the backyard and everyone crowded closer, but the door was left open and Julie didn’t back down, ‘You think you’re it,’ she said, ‘and you’re scared of a cat.’

'I'll do it,' Manus said, and they looked at him like he was getting in the way. 'I don't mind.'

'You haven't even told him,' Julie said, 'you just let him do it. You don't care about anyone but you. Just like your dad.'

Gary's mum came back out with a shovel that was rusty and had a short handle, hollow on the inside. She said it was a coal shovel that she didn't need any more and Manus could leave it there when he finished.

'It's your own fault,' Connor said, because Julie and her mum went in and shut the door, and everyone else followed Gary up the road because he had long hair and was letting it grow.

Manus was on his own with the cat. Me and Connor were the only ones standing there to watch what he was gonna do. 'I don't care,' he said, 'it's not fair on the cat.'

He bent down and started trying to scrape it up on the shovel, poking it and trying to get it on, but the cat wasn't helping, only curling up as he prodded because its body was stiff. He dug in but it only skidded on the pavement, with its legs stuck out. Its fur looked wet and spiky, and one eye was only half closed.

'Wait a minute,' Connor said, and got an empty milk bottle by the door to keep the cat still. I moved back in case it flew off the shovel when Manus lifted it, but it wasn't like that, it was heavy. Connor dropped the bottle as the cat slid towards him. It clattered and didn't break, and Manus had to use both hands on the shovel to stop the body slipping off. He got hold of it but the tail flopped over on his fingers making him wobble until he could get it steady again.

'Where we going?' I said.

'Get out the way!'

I wasn't in the way, I was walking up behind him. Connor was coming up the other side by the kerb. Manus was holding out the cat in front with people getting out the way in case he wanted to give it to them. But they were slowing down as well, as though what we were doing was grown-up and important. 'Mind out!' Connor was saying, and I started saying, 'We're going to bury it!'

'Where you going with that?' The old lady up the top of the street was leaning out her window with her cats on the sill beside her. I dropped back, dodging puddles to go round on to the road, and I didn't look up again till we got to the corner. She was looking out with her grey hair hanging down.

'Where you going?' It was my friend Brian. He ran up behind me and kept up to see what was going on.

'We're going to bury the cat,' I said, 'up the bombsite. You coming?'

Connor looked at us like we shouldn't be there.

'Which one?' Brian said.

I looked at Manus to see where he was going and ran up beside him, 'Can we come?'

'Just get out the way!' His face was scrunched up and his arms were shaking, like it was gonna drop and he couldn't help it.

'What about this one?' Brian was pulling back the corrugated iron on the bombsite that was blocked off round by the pub. We didn't play in there because it was dangerous and could fall in on top of you. Manus rested the shovel up on the metal fence to get his grip, but the cat's head got squashed and he had to lift it off again. Brian pulled the corrugated iron back

a bit more to show you could get in.

‘All right, in there,’ Manus said.

I didn’t look at Connor in case he stopped us, I helped Brian pull the fence back and keep it open.

Connor pushed in and went first, Manus went in backwards, lifting the shovel over the wood across the bottom. Brian held it open for me and it banged back into place as he stepped through.

There was a big hole in the ground, with a pile of rubble up against the wall on one side. You could see where a room was at the back with a fireplace, and a fireplace above it. It was two rooms with different wallpapers stuck to the wall in layers, separated by a part of the ceiling that had wires dangling down like a jungle. Bricks poked out from the house next door that shared the chimney.

‘Don’t fall in there,’ Connor said. Manus had one foot down the slope into the hole like that was where he could bury the cat. ‘Bury it in the rubble.’

The ground was wet and Manus had to step up twice to get his foot back from the edge where the earth was giving way. ‘I can see that,’ he said, but it sounded like he wasn’t in charge.

‘Put it down,’ Connor said, using his hands to pull some broken bricks out the pile. Manus was standing there with the cat on the shovel and wasn’t moving. Brian put his hands in his pockets and looked away into the hole. Manus was stuck with the cat and wasn’t letting go.

‘What’s the matter?’ I said. ‘Manus?’

‘I say where it goes.’

Connor sat back on the rubble, and wiped the mud off his hands and knees. ‘It’s your cat.’

Manus lowered the shovel on to the ground between puddles where it was flat and looked round at the bombsite with his hands empty like he wasn't sure what to do.

'Get the shovel,' Connor said.

Manus looked at him, 'You get it.'

The cat was sprawled out and no one was moving. I looked back at the fence in case I could get out quick if they had a fight. I could push it with my shoulder, but that would leave Brian.

'I'll get it,' I said.

'Go on, then.' It was Connor daring me, he chucked a stone into the hole so it made a splash in the muddy water at the bottom.

I didn't want to. The cat was looking out its bloody eye. The muddy tail was flopped down by the handle, its hair splashed out like a puddle.

'See?' said Connor. 'I'm the only one you got.'

Manus bent over and put his hand on a chunk of brick, but Brian was already swinging the shovel loose and letting the cat fall over itself backwards into a puddle, its leg clawing up at the air. It came down with its mouth open in water, a look on its face of not wanting the taste, and a hiss of bubbles coming out.

Connor stood back off the rubble like the cat was gonna wake up and shake off being dead over his feet.

'Gis it here,' Manus said, grabbing the shovel off Brian, and slid down the slope into the hole and started digging in the side.

We crowded round the edge but it didn't feel safe, so me and Brian sat down with our legs hanging over and Connor went round and crouched over the other side to watch what he was doing.

He dug in and shifted the earth into the big puddle behind

him. His sandals were getting splashed. His foot went backwards into the mud. The backs of his legs got spattered. 'I can help,' Connor said, but Manus ignored him.

'Shall we have a funeral?' said Brian.

'No, we're just gonna bury it,' Manus said.

He dug in some more and pushed a big lump of earth rolling down into the ditch, splashing up to his shorts. It didn't stop him, he went on whacking into the wall of earth like it was gonna open up and swallow him.

'Look at that,' Brian whispered, leaning his arm on my shoulder so I could feel myself falling in. I held the back of his jumper and told him don't push me.

Manus looked up at us and scowled as he took a swing but this time he hit a stone and it hurt his wrist. He dropped the shovel and held his wrist up till the pain went.

'Why won't you let me?' Connor said.

Manus looked up at him like it was his fault there was a stone there, 'Why should I?'

'Because you let 'em walk all over you!'

That was it, I scrambled back from the edge and tried to drag Brian but he pulled away from me and nearly fell in, shouting 'Oi!' Then he fell in, and landed up to his feet in the muddy puddle. His hands and bum were muddy from the slide, he had splashes up to his knees, and a splash in his face. He looked up at me like I'd pushed him.

'Gis that shovel out the mud,' Manus said, looking at him. 'See what we gotta put up with?'

Because Brian laughed and gave Manus the shovel, I went round to Connor to be on his side, but that felt wrong because then Manus tapped to see where the stone was and there was

the metal sound of a clunk. He did it again, and it was a clink. He dug round, scraping away, and there was something metal stuck in the mud.

‘What is it?’ Connor said.

Manus dug some more where it was wedged in to get it loose. It started to come out, he dropped the shovel and started pulling side to side. As he tugged it looked like a metal tray stuck upside down, but then the whole thing slid out into his hands, and he was looking down at a rusty, muddy box.

‘It’s treasure,’ said Brian.

Manus wiped away the mud, and as the metal came out his face changed and his eyes shone.

‘Why can’t we come?’ I said.

Manus folded his arms round the box and gave me the same look he gave Connor up out the hole, like he’d been right all along and it wasn’t dirty. But now we were out on the street, they weren’t letting me and Brian go with them.

‘Cos you can’t keep your mouth shut,’ Connor said.

‘You can’t come, you’re not old enough,’ said Manus, ‘they won’t let you in.’

Me and Brian had gone up the Imperial War Museum before. There were two giant World-War guns outside that weren’t working. We tried to climb up but a guard in a uniform came out and chased us off. Maybe he’d recognise us, but how would he know how old we were?

As soon as he got hold of how heavy it was, Manus scrambled up out the hole with the box and we all had to chase him out the bombsite to see what was inside.

‘You can’t take it home,’ Connor said.

‘Why not?’ said Brian.

‘I found it,’ Manus said.

‘We helped,’ I said.

‘Oh yeah?’

I could see what he meant about me. What about Brian?

‘Take it up the War Museum,’ Connor said. ‘Let them give you the reward.’

‘Open it up,’ said Brian.

Manus stopped like he wasn’t sure what to think. He stood still looking into himself like he didn’t deserve it.

‘We gonna be rich?’ I said.

He unlocked his eyes and stared at me, ‘Don’t you tell anyone. This is mine, I’m doing it.’ He turned to Connor and said, ‘All right, come on.’

Brian didn’t try and help me stop them. Manus and Connor walked off like they’d had a fight but were friends again, and it was only Brian left with mud all over him. But it was me who was left feeling dirty because I’d brought him.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t know, they give rewards up the War Museum?’

‘Lucky it wasn’t a bomb,’ Brian said, and shrugged.

‘A bomb?’

‘It’s a bomb site.’

It took a while to sink in. A bombsite was a playground, a rough place you could play in between the houses – when you could get in past the corrugated iron. I didn’t know it was the place where a bomb fell. No one told me there was a bomb under there. Until it burst in my head, and the ground went out under my feet.

It was raining again when I left Brian to go home to his mum and say he'd fallen over playing football. He was looking like it didn't matter, but it did and I was gonna get him some of the reward, so he could go on telling me where the ground was. My mum was home in the kitchen, marking the pools. I was bursting to tell her, but I couldn't. She was going across and down in columns.

'How does that work?' I said when I'd got out my wet clothes and she was still doing it.

She looked up like I'd stopped her working it out. 'It doesn't,' she said, 'but I do it anyway.'

'What's it for?'

She put the pencil down, and did a big sigh and shook her head, like what did I want? But she tucked my vest in for me and said, 'For you. To give you things I can't.'

There was the smell she had when she wasn't feeling well. She leaned back to have a look at me. I wanted to give her the news but I couldn't. I could have told Busola but she was staying over with Nana.

'I'd have to win, though,' she said, 'and that doesn't always happen.'

You could win the pools? Doing marks with a pencil? That didn't sound likely to me. 'What happens if you win? Do you get money?'

'You all get your own room, and everyone gets a bicycle,' she said.

I jumped up and laughed, and clapped my hands. I felt like I'd won already, because we were rich and she didn't know, even though she was watching me. The door went downstairs and I rushed to get it. My dad was coming in shaking out his jacket from the rain.

‘Hello, Daddy, Mummy’s doing the pools!’

He looked up like he wasn’t interested. But he didn’t know either. I was going to get a bicycle. I waited for him as he closed the front door and came swinging his work lamp up the stairs after me.

‘Mrs Brown of Luton,’ he called out, ‘has never in this world done well. Millionaire and can’t care. Where’s the food? And what’s all this mud on the floor?’

I’d trailed it in, but I couldn’t tell him I’d dug up treasure. Or Manus had. I had to get my mum to tell him about the pools, ‘Come and see,’ I said.

He looked in over my shoulder at the kitchen door and saw my mum with the pools spread out on the table. He held up his lamp to see even though it was off, ‘Poor man’s problem solved. The more you play, the more you pay.’

My mum leaned a finger in her cheek with her elbow on the table. There wasn’t any food being cooked and she was gonna have to tell him. ‘Hope is a fine thing,’ she said. ‘Keep it alive.’

I looked up and he was slowly turning his eyes to me, he didn’t understand the pools.

‘We’re all gonna get our own room,’ I said.

‘And your father won’t have to go down the tunnels to work, he’ll have lots of time to spend with you all.’

‘What tunnels?’ I said.

He smiled, and put his lamp down and came into the kitchen in his work clothes. ‘Under the ground,’ he said. ‘There are tunnels going everywhere under your feet for the trains.’ He put his jacket off on the chair behind him and sat down. ‘You can feel them rumbling.’

I couldn’t, I stood still trying to feel it.

‘Listen to your teacher,’ he said, ‘and you won’t have to follow me down there.’

I looked at his lamp by the door. ‘Is it dark?’ I said.

‘There’s a whole world underneath this one,’ my mum said, ‘but I want you to stay up here in the light. And your daddy’s going to make sure of it.’

I climbed on my mum’s lap to get my feet off the ground, even though she smelt funny and her skin was clammy. I had my sandals off but my feet were still dirty with mud. My dad saw them but he didn’t tell me off.

‘When your mother wins the pools, we are going to cry for one whole week, and then we are going on the longest journey we have ever been, all of us together.’

‘Amen,’ my mum said.

I thought about it, because the ground still felt shaky and my dad was looking at me like we still might not be able to afford it.

‘Will I get a bicycle?’

It hadn’t stopped raining when I opened the door to Manus and Connor. They were drenched and didn’t have the box with them. I’d been waiting all afternoon and ran down as soon as I heard them knock to see what they’d got. The rain had washed the mud off Manus’s legs, their shirts were soaked to the skin and their shorts were wringing.

‘D’you get the reward?’

They didn’t answer and pushed me out the way, Manus with his face set and his hands empty, Connor looking at me out the corner of his eye to see if I’d told, rain dripping off his ears and dribbling down his face.

‘I haven’t,’ I said. ‘I just told ‘em you’d gone up Bedlam Park.’

My mum and dad had gone to bed for a lie-down and only two other people had knocked, the milkman with curly hair catching the rain and the man from the pools in a brown raincoat under a black umbrella. 'She says she's not in,' I told the milkman, 'she'll see you next week.' And I gave the pools man the coupon with the money clinking inside. They both gave me nice smiles and went away. But Manus and Connor were horrible to me.

I looked at the rain coming down and no one there as I held the door open, the splashes making bubbles that floated along in the gutter. The brown envelope of a pools coupon was being washed away. I stepped out to get a closer look. It was a brown baby pigeon being lifted up and put down with its wing spread in the water, and its eye open. We hadn't buried the cat.

I followed Manus and Connor out to the bathroom and watched them having their bath. They didn't say anything, and I didn't ask. There were bubbles on the dirty water as they splashed.

'I didn't say anything,' I said.

They both looked up at me with the shampoo in their hair. Connor raised his eyes at Manus, and Manus shrugged. There was steam coming off and Manus blew it away with the bubbles from his mouth.

'It was Oxo cubes,' Connor said. 'They showed us. It was a Sunday dinner for the soldiers. It crumbled in your hand, they said it was probably poisonous by now.'

'What was it doing there?'

Manus looked at me like I was asking too much, 'They said not to dig in the bomb sites.'

'And if we found anything report it,' Connor said.

I didn't want to look at Manus, so I handed the flannel to Connor to get the soap out his eyes, 'Where is it?'

'We left it there,' Manus said, telling me to shut up.

They were doing everything together and not including me, I still had mud on my feet. I waited until they were getting dry in their towels, 'Was that cat really dead? Was it breathing? Did you go back there?'

'It was raining, it was too dangerous,' Connor said, and gave me a look like he was gonna kill me.

Manus's face went the wrong way round feeling useless and ugly, like a hole inside him was filling up and he couldn't stop the cat drowning in the mud. I didn't want to hurt him, it was too late to take it back, I didn't know how to stop it. It was like he was losing hope, and Connor was putting his arm round him.

'Mummy's gonna win the pools,' I said.