

According To Their Peacefulness

By Ed Broom

As usual, all of the shady spots had been taken by the girls. Manny sat on the wall, trying and failing to cover his eyes with a Fruit Shoot bottle. He was staring at a faded and folded magazine article.

Adam shot past, knocking the purple plastic from Manny's hand and sending it spinning into the goal circle of the netball court. Round and round it went before being squashed underfoot by Vijay's size 8s. Richmond Junior always did well in the school athletics competitions, largely thanks to Vijay. If he was chasing you, there was only one outcome. Adam stopped and turned.

"Fatty-fatty Rooney, fatty-fatty Rooney!"

Vijay put his head down and charged into Adam's chest, knocking him into the air. Down they went, slapping and rolling at Manny's feet. Other children raced to gather round – scrap! – yet Manny retained the grandstand view. Slap, punch, slap.

Manny's knuckles whitened as he gripped the shiny paper ever tighter. His eyes widened. His mouth opened. He screamed. When the screaming didn't stop, the children, even Adam and Vijay, all turned to face the shrieking boy sitting on the wall.

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From the study – that was what Mrs Vickers called her office – Manny could see his crumpled bottle resting against the base of the netball post. I should have put that in the bin, he thought.

"Manny?"

From her swivel chair, Mrs Vickers faced him. Manny wished she would straighten that hairclip. Everyone in the school knew that Ofsted were due next week.

"Yes, miss?"

"Your mum will be here soon, Manny. Now, I realise you're the innocent party here. What was all that noise about?"

"Miss, they were fighting. I don't like the fighting. They can't help it, miss."

She frowned. "They can't help it? What do you mean?"

"Well..."

Manny took a deep breath. He remembered this sofa from last time. It was more comfortable than the one in his living room.

"Adam's dad is from Iraq, and that's fourth bottom in The List. And Vijay spends his summer holidays back in Pakistan, only about six places higher. You know, miss, The List."

He handed her the article. Mrs Vickers exhaled.

"The 2013 Global Peace Index. Manny, not again. I thought we'd gone over this? Are you aware why Adam and Vijay were fighting?"

“Football, miss?”

“That's my understanding too. Blood... blooming football. Excuse my language. You realise, Manny, that two silly boys arguing in the playground doesn't constitute a war? There'll always be ignorant people squabbling over stupid things. The rest of us just have to do our best to get on with it. Does that make any sense?”

There was a knock at the door.

“Come.”

Manny's mum edged into the room. A headscarf covered most of one eye. She steadied herself against the desk.

“Ah, Mrs Quinn. Are you quite OK?”

“Dandy. Just dandy.”

“Super. I've been telling Manny here not to take things quite so seriously. Perhaps you'd be good enough to take him home? I'm sure we could all do with some TLC.”

Mum adjusted the scarf and held out a hand for Manny to take.

“Manny, say sorry to Mrs Vickers.”

“Sorry, Mrs Vickers.”

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Manny clunked his seatbelt as Mum finished applying her make-up.

“Mum. What happened to your eye?”

As Mrs Vickers had done earlier, she turned to face him.

“Your dad. He's back.”

Manny let out a wimper and reached for Mum's hand.

“Don't worry, though. Stick close to me.” She stroked his fingers. “Oh, and Dad was talking about the three of us maybe going away next half-term. How do you fancy popping over to Euro Disney?”

“Euro Disney, Paris? In France? That isn't even in the top 50! It's not safe!”

“Manny, enough!” She fiddled with the rear-view mirror. “My head's bad enough as it is. Let's get ourselves home. We can talk about this later with your Dad.”

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“Blast, I forgot about this effing diversion! It's gonna take hours to get home!”

Manny held on tight to The List. STOP, said the board ahead. On the inside lane, the number 31 bus pulled away. Manny didn't know this part of town and began to read the shop names in the distance. Boots. Sports Direct. What was that next one? It couldn't be, could it?

“Mum, mum! Over there!”

“Not now, Manny!”

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Twenty minutes later they pulled in to Copley Road. Parked outside was dad's big black BMW.

“Go on, go in and say hello. You'll be fine.”

From the back room came the sound of gunfire and German voices. Dad loved those films. Manny guessed it was *The Dirty Dozen* or something similar.

“Sally, that you? Got the kid? When's tea? I'm starving!”

Not stopping, Manny raced upstairs two at a time. Taking his school rucksack, he pulled out his PE kit and replaced it with a packet of Polos, his torch, a fleece and some clean underwear.

He listened as Mum came upstairs and shut her bedroom door. A short nap usually cleared her head. Fetching his toothbrush from the bathroom, he heard the noises that Mum made when she slept. Not snoring, she'd always insisted. Downstairs he crept.

Their front door was far too squeaky. One of those little jobs that never quite got done. Manny eased open the back door, fetched his scooter from the shed and freewheeled past the black and blue wheelie bins.

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Three different buses had come and gone before the number 31 appeared. Manny had explained to the driver that Mum wasn't feeling well and that he needed to buy something for tea. The bus driver had been really kind and dropped him off right outside the retail park. There it was, no mistake.

“But best get a shuffle on, son. They'll be shutting soon.”

Being very careful in the car park – Mum would have been proud – Manny folded his scooter and entered the shop. Not quite as expected but quiet and peaceful all the same. No tinny music and a handful of people ambling around.

Ketchup on offer by the entrance. Tea and coffee, plus some Nesquik. He liked the strawberry one. Chinese takeaways, Indian takeaways, ready meals. Manny picked up a packet: *Mighty Mick's Cajun Turkey Dips*. Number 134 on *The List*, Turkey.

Scouring the aisles, Manny noticed just one lady left at the tills. To the far left, near the mushy peas and canned peaches, was a little alcove. Manny glanced around and checked nobody was looking, then tucked himself in next to the scooter. He pulled in some baskets to make a protective wall, leaned back against his rucksack, and waited. Such a long day. Nice and safe and warm in here, though.

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Manny awoke into darkness. Where was he? Ah, yes. The brief panic evaporated. He pushed away the baskets, stood up and stretched everything. There were pools of dim

light from the streetlamps outside. Nevertheless, he reached for his torch. His tummy rumbled.

He had those mints, but what sort of tea was that? Besides, there was so much food in here. Hang on, though: no tin opener, no microwave, no oven. A picnic tea it would have to be.

Around the shop he strolled, torch in hand. One packet of ham, a loaf of bread, a Penguin bar and some orange juice. He'd been tempted to have a fizzy drink. Mum wouldn't have liked that. He made sure to note down the price of each item in the back of his English homework book. Even Dad had said it was wrong to steal.

That ham sandwich wasn't a patch on Mum's spag bol. Manny unfolded his scooter, held his torch on the handlebars and explored some more. Staff room: locked. Same with the manager's office, probably very much like Mrs Vickers' study. No toilet. Not a worry for now.

Full of energy, Manny began to do laps on the super smooth floor. Past the roasts, picking up speed by the sweets, sailing past the toilet rolls, he heard himself laughing. This felt good. Faster and faster he went until, like Vijay hurtling into Adam, he mistimed a corner and slammed into an aisle display of instant BBQs. Manny scrambled to find the dropped torch.

One AA. Two AAs. Back in and rescrew. He turned it on. Standing there in the uncertain beam was a pair of scruffy trainers.

"Good evening, little boy. I'm Deena. And yes, it rhymes with cleaner." She squirted some polish into the air. "Are you making my floor dirty?"

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Deena wore some sort of apron and seemed about the same age as Mrs Vickers. She bent down to help him up, her face beaming. Manny couldn't help but smile back.

"Deena?"

"That's right. And you are?"

"Manny. Short for Manfred. Mum calls me that when she's angry."

Deena smiled. She seemed to smile a lot.

"Mum says it's rude to ask, but where are you from?"

Deena laughed. "Me? Round the corner. About fifteen minutes walk."

"No, sorry. I mean, which country?"

"That's a very different question. Have you heard of Sri Lanka?"

Manny gasped. "Sri Lanka? Number 103?"

He tried to explain about The List and how it had brought him here. Deena listened hard, nodding at all the right times. She waited until Manny had finally finished.

"It's true we've had some trouble and that we decided to leave when I was small. But things are improving all the time. Someday I hope to go back. In the meantime I'm happy enough here, and so is my daughter. Talking of children and their parents..."

Deena pulled out a battered old mobile, the kind you daren't have at school. "Can you dial your number, please?"

Mum answered before the second ring.

"Mum?"

"Manny! I've been worried sick! Your Dad was no help. He's gone again already, thank goodness. Where are you?"

"Mum. It's fine. Everything's fine. And I've made a new friend. She's called Deena and she's from Sri Lanka."

"Darling, that's lovely, but where on earth are you?"

"Mum, I've made it. This is the number one place on The List. I'm in Iceland."