

THE  
10 PM  
QUESTION

KATE  
DE GOLDI

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

# One

Tuesday, February 14

Tuesday the fourteenth of February began badly for Frankie Parsons. There was no milk for his Just Right. There was no Go-Cat for The Fat Controller, so The Fat Controller stood under the table meowing accusingly while Frankie ate his toast.

The newspaper hadn't arrived, which meant Frankie couldn't take a headline and article for Current Affairs, and so would earn one of Mr A's sardonic looks; nor could he check the weather report for humidity. Humidity levels were important to Frankie, and for two reasons: one, a cricket ball swung rather trickily and lethally when the air was heavy, which was a good thing. Two, ants appeared in droves when the temperature was warm and the atmosphere thick, which was a very bad thing. Frankie nursed a special hatred for ants.

So, Tuesday the fourteenth began badly, and continued that way. Frankie's sister, Gordana, had swiped the last muesli bar and the only crisp apple; there were no water bottles; the Cling Wrap had run out; there was no bus money in his mother's wallet so Frankie had to search for a nail file in order to prize out ten-cent pieces from the emergency pink china pig.

A nail file was always hard to find in Frankie's house and today was no exception. He located one finally in the yellow Click Clack First Aid container which lived in the laundry with his carefully arranged earthquake kit: (twelve 2-litre water bottles, two sets of spare batteries, enough baked beans, tuna, toilet paper and Go-Cat for a week). By which time it was 8.05 a.m. and furthermore the pink china pig was ominously lightweight. Someone had been there before him. On Saturday, when he'd last checked, the pig had been quite heavy. (Frankie shook her regularly, an almost involuntary but comforting gesture whenever he passed the hall bookcase, which was where the pink pig lived, beside the *National Geographics*.)

Frankie suspected Louie. His brother lived away from home now, but he came for dinner and laundry several times a week and was always on the hunt for small change. There were no stray coins lying on shelves or bedside tables after Louie had been around.

Nothing made Frankie madder than a lightweight pink china pig. He relied on that pig. Experience had taught him that precisely when he needed it most, his mother would not have cash in her wallet. Nor would his father. But the pink pig — the repository of everyone's unloved ten-cent pieces — generally had a bellyful of coins.

Except today, February the fourteenth. Today there was only one dollar and thirty cents: fifty cents short of Frankie's bus fare to school, which meant he would have to borrow from his friend, Gigs. Who wouldn't mind, but that wasn't the point.

'This house doesn't work!' Frankie called up the stairs. He stuffed his exercise books, lunch bag and sneakers into his backpack. Then he stood very still and mentally perused the school day. This was his habit each morning. It was so he wouldn't forget anything. He was really very organised.

Maths (protractor, calculator, yes). Reading (*Hicksville*, yes).

Language arts (*Concise Oxford*, yes). PE (shorts, sneakers, yes). Cricket at lunchtime (bat, ball, box, yes). Lunch (*soft* apple, cheese and peanut butter sandwich, carrot, lemon cake, secret-chocolate-hidden-behind-the-rice, yes). Art (pencils, ink, sketch book, yes). Science project (glue gun, statistics sheet, black paper, double-sided tape, Stanley knife, yes, yes, yes, yes, *yes*).

‘A bad workman always blames his tools,’ said Gordana. She came thumping down the stairs in her flat-footed, truculent, morning way. Gordana maintained she wasn’t a morning person. In Frankie’s private view his sister was a no-time person, not morning, afternoon nor evening. The less he saw of her the better.

‘Whadda you mean, a bad workman?’ he said, and instantly regretted it. He really didn’t know why he ever responded to Gordana. It always ended badly. Every day he told himself to ignore her, and every day he ignored himself instead.

Face it, Gigs had told him. You hate her. It’s official. And mutual. Your sister is your enemy. Stop consorting.

‘It may be *your* fault if the house doesn’t work,’ said Gordana.

‘How could it be?’ said Frankie. ‘I’m the *child*.’

‘And there you have it,’ Gordana snapped. ‘A *child* is precisely what this house doesn’t need any more.’

‘No bickering, please,’ said Ma. She said this automatically, whenever she came into a room containing Frankie and Gordana. It was usually necessary, she said.

‘We need cat food,’ said Frankie. ‘And *human* food.’

‘And food for Frankie,’ said Gordana, with a smirk.

‘And money,’ said Frankie. ‘And new batteries for the smoke alarm.’

‘Oh good *God*,’ said Gordana, ‘not the smoke alarm thing again.’

‘I’ll ring Uncle George,’ said Ma. ‘He’s shopping for the Aunties.’

The Aunties. A sudden and familiar heaviness settled over Frankie. It was as if someone had fastened large marbles to his entire body. Of course. Why not? Tuesday the fourteenth began with no cereal and it would end with a surfeit of aunts. Perfect.

‘Oh good *God*,’ said Gordana. ‘Count me out. I’ll be at Ben’s.’ Ben was Gordana’s boyfriend. He had a buffed body, a nifty wrist action, and absolutely no aunts. It all seemed quite unfair to Frankie.

‘Bye,’ said Frankie funereally. He kissed Ma on the cheek. She smelled morningish, a mixture of Coal Tar soap and toast. After school she smelled of baking: a fusion of melted butter, toasted almonds, nutmeg and vanilla essence. He liked both smells.

It wasn’t Ma’s fault about the Aunties. The entire American military couldn’t have kept them away. They came every second and fourth Tuesday and stayed for dinner and cards. Sometimes it was too much for even a reasonable boy.

‘Have a good one,’ said Ma.

‘Fat chance,’ said Frankie. But he closed the door gently behind him. He would have liked to slam it, but Gordana did more than enough slamming for everyone in their house, and it always made Ma jump.

Gigs was waiting at the top of the Zig Zag. He was leaning against the Forsythe’s fence reading a comic and pulling at his right eyebrow. He always did this when he was concentrating. There was a tiny bare patch where he’d overworked the habit.

‘Better hurry,’ he said, not looking up.

‘Financial emergency,’ said Frankie. ‘You got a dollar?’

‘Sure.’ Gigs always had spare money. His house was awash

with coins. Twenty-dollar notes spilled from his father's pocket. Or so it seemed to Frankie.

They walked slowly down the Zig Zag. It was a steep path, overhung with ferns and other greenery, which made it pleasantly cool in summer, but damp and treacherously slippery in the winter months.

Frankie and Gigs had an invariable routine on the Zig Zag.

At the third corner they gave a swift pat to Mrs Rowan's cat, Marmalade, who was always sitting on the letterbox. Marmalade was an elderly bundle of fluff and very inoffensive (just like Mrs Rowan, Gigs said; Mrs Rowan was old and kindly and had something of a beard).

At the fifth corner they took turns slamming shut number 41's letterbox lid, which was, inexplicably, always open to the heavens and the weather. They had been doing this for five years, ever since Gigs arrived in the neighbourhood and they began walking to the bus stop together. Every afternoon the lid was up again, and every afternoon they closed it once more. It was an enjoyable little game between the boys and Mrs Da Prini, who lived at number 41. At least, Frankie assumed Mrs Da Prini found the game enjoyable. He and Gigs found it extremely satisfactory.

Just before the tenth corner they prepared themselves to ambush Ronald, the bad-tempered dachshund, who lurked beside his owner's picket fence, ready to yap at unsuspecting pedestrians. Ronald's owners were nice enough, but their pet was a loser and thoroughly deserved everything he got.

'What a dumb dog,' Gigs said, bending down. He said this every day as he and Frankie crouched and inched their bodies around the tenth corner. That was the pleasing thing about ambushing Ronald. It worked every time because Ronald never learnt from the past. He seemed never to expect the two boys to

burst round the corner and let rip a machine gun rattle of fearsome boy yaps, though they'd been doing this at the same time, twice a day, for nearly three years. Ambushing Ronald never failed to make them laugh like hell.

'We'll know we're practically dead when we don't want to do old Ronald,' said Frankie.

'Does that mean we'll actually be sad when he dies?' said Gigs. He leapt up on the Ernest Burrows Memorial Seat, balanced briefly and daintily on its upright back then jumped down to the thirteenth zig. Frankie followed. They did this every morning, too. The Ernest Burrows Memorial Seat allowed a view of a cascading garden of succulents on the gentle hillface opposite, but Frankie and Gigs had never actually sat on Ernest Burrows. He was merely their launching pad for the canter down the remaining four zig zags and along the riverbank to the bus stop.

'Imagine Ronald's effect on stress levels,' shouted Frankie. He lobbed the bus stop cricket ball up over the bus shelter to Gigs on the other side.

'Sky-high,' Gigs called. He cupped his big freckled hands ready; they were like the firm but flexible petals of an aging tulip.

Stress levels were a recurring topic of conversation between the two of them just now. They had an acute and quite professional interest in stress, because it was the subject of their ingenious — and completely secret — Science Fair project. Their project would, Gigs confidently predicted, beat every other Year Eight entry: they were all wire and battery units, or plant habitats, or tidal river patterns, the usual old stuff. Their project was so novel it would enchant the judges at school, the judges at the Regionals and the Nationals, and probably the World.

They had conceived the project together over the summer but Frankie claimed the original moment of inspiration. He had been watching Uncle George in the weeks before Christmas — a period

when Uncle G's work was particularly hectic and consuming. Sometimes after dinner Uncle George would settle his substantial frame into the cushioned green sofa. He had a particular way of not relaxing when he was seated in an easy chair or sofa. His feet tapped, his arms jerked, his head was up and alert like a rotating periscope. He twitched and barked and generally disturbed anyone else's attempts to idle and lounge.

'Keep *still!*' ordered Gordana, smacking his arm. 'You're ten times worse than the Harding twins.' (The Harding twins were Gordana's regular babysitting charges. According to her they were human hurricanes. Looking after the Harding twins was enough to prostrate Gordana for an entire day.)

The only thing that ever settled Uncle George, Frankie noticed over the weeks before Christmas, the only thing that stayed his perky head and flailing limbs, the only thing that shut up his constant talk, was The Fat Controller. When The Fat Controller leapt weightily upward and planted her big body in Uncle George's lap, a strange quiet settled over them both. Uncle George's hand kneaded The Fat Controller's head, tickled her ears and played over her massive back, and The Fat Controller spread her considerable length and width over Uncle George's legs. At the same time a liquid calm seemed to seep through Uncle George's normally electric self.

'It's like a drug,' said Ma, admiringly.

'Stress buster,' said Louie, one time. Which was the moment Frankie had his inspiration.

It was Gigs who refined the idea for the purposes of the Year Eight Science Project. Gigs was a great organiser. He liked to draw up lists and charts and graphs and spreadsheets. He liked to underline. He liked to assign tasks. Their own task, he said, was to sit people down and measure their pulse rate, stick a cat in their lap for five minutes, then measure their pulse again. They would

do ten people each, he said, which would give a good range.

They had borrowed a digital sphygmomanometer from Gigs's dad: as well as blood pressure readings it had a pulse rate counter. That was the best part — attaching the sphygmomanometer cuff to people's arms and watching it balloon when they pressed the start button, listening to the rising whine of the machine. It sounded like a light plane taking off. So far the statistics were 80-20 in favour of a cat's beneficial effect on adult stress. The only person who disproved the hypothesis was Gigs's stepmother, Chris. Her pulse rate went stratospheric whenever anyone put a sphygmomanometer cuff on her.

'You'll have to put that in the experiment,' she said. 'That's a margin of error, or something.'

'No problem,' said Gigs. He had a special column on their spreadsheet for this sort of thing: people who got asthma from cats; people who got scratched in the course of the experiment; people who freaked out at sphygmomanometers.

'You should be an accountant,' Frankie told Gigs. 'They like spreadsheets.'

'Or a General,' said Gigs. 'They use spreadsheets to deploy troops. They just feed instructions into the computer and bingo. They don't even really need to be there.'

That was the thing about Gigs. He could imagine being a General and not worry in the least about army training, or war, or getting wounded. Or ants in the hot countries. Gigs saw the bright side of everything. It made him a good person to be around.

'Come over after school,' Frankie called, as the bus rounded the hospital corner. He lobbed a last ball over the shelter. 'It's Aunties.'

'Hot damn!' said Gigs. Hot damn was his latest phrase. He'd picked it up from some country song. 'Will there be brandy snaps?' According to Gigs they never had cake or biscuits because Chris was too busy with the little kids.

‘Probably,’ said Frankie.

‘You stress-tested the Aunties?’ said Gigs. He dug in his pocket for money and dribbled one-dollar coins into Frankie’s open hand. ‘Don’t spend it all at once,’ he said, just as his father did.

‘No,’ said Frankie, stepping up to the bus stop pole. For some reason he’d entirely failed to set upon the Aunties with the sphygmomanometer. He felt minutely cheered. Testing them would be a laugh, especially if Gigs was there; he had a way with the Aunties. Frankie had admired it often.

The bus roared to a halt. Cassino, their bus-driver, prided himself on a full-speed, accurate stop, the brakes singing, the air seizing, the doors sucking open precisely in front of the waiting passengers. Frankie and Gigs held their breath every time, anxious that Cassino should maintain his own high standards. In five years, he hadn’t failed them.

Cassino was big and brown and had an impressive boa constrictor tattoo running the length of his left arm. Like Frankie and Gigs he was a creature of habit; every morning as he took their coins, or slotted their bus cards, Cassino said the same thing.

‘And the code word is, fellas?’

They took week about inventing the code word. You could never have the same one twice, and Cassino had a phenomenal memory for repeats.

‘Lorikeets,’ said Frankie. He often did birds. He knew a lot of wacko bird names. Tomorrow he planned to roll out *kittiwake*, and the day after, *widgeon*. He was still debating about Friday: it would be either *lily-trotter* or *capercaillie*, which were both names that made him smile.

‘Fair enough,’ said Cassino, which was what he always said

— even when Gigs had been on a bodily excretion theme and had worked his way from *snot* to *earwax* to *bile* to *toe-jam* to a grand finale of *faeces*.

They rolled down the aisle to their usual seat: the left corner of the long bench at the back of the bus. Frankie and Gigs had been sitting there for years and no one had ever argued with it — except Bronwyn Baxter who'd taken it into her head last year to challenge the arrangement. They'd worn her down, though, driven her to the front of the bus by talking Chilun in a constant monotone from the other end of the bench seat.

Chilun was a code, a complicated language spoken by only two people in the world. Frankie had invented it one dull summer and taught it to Gigs. It was a mixture of pig Latin, inverted syllables, truncated words — and bits of Russian.

(Frankie and Gigs found Russian hilarious. Sometimes for a good laugh they listened to Ma's old tapes from her Russian study days. In class, Frankie could always make Gigs (and himself) crack up by whispering '*Feodor, Feodor, rastsluy menya, da po zharche,*' across the desk. It meant: *Feodor, Feodor, kiss me more passionately.*)

Frankie enjoyed languages; their different sounds and patterns interested him. His ear seemed to sort out their mysteries quickly. He was the best in the class at French, he'd picked up a bit of Italian from Mrs Da Prini, too; he knew the word for bird in eight languages. Inventing Chilun had been a doddle.

Gigs wasn't interested in languages, but after four years he too had pretty much mastered Chilun. It was the ultimate non-violent weapon, Gigs reckoned. If you talked in Chilun long enough and repeated an offending person's name at regular intervals they eventually got very fed up and moved out of earshot. Gigs used it all the time against his twin brothers and little sister. It was useful on the phone, too, Frankie had found, especially when Gordana

was hanging about. (Nynodimus was Gordana's Chilun name, though, amazingly, she'd never caught on. Chilun just brought her out in a rash, as the Aunties would say.)

'So,' said Gigs, taking out his breakfast. He always ate breakfast on the bus. He had an arrangement with Chris: he could stay in bed every morning until the last possible minute — and thereby avoid his siblings — as long as he ate a decent breakfast on the bus. A decent breakfast, according to Chris, was a BLT (with egg) and a milk drink and fresh fruit. Chris's BLTs were top heavy with bacon and avocado. Her smoothies were excellent, too. And her definition of fresh fruit encompassed canned peaches. The Parsons certainly had great baking, but Gigs's breakfasts always made Frankie a little envious.

'The Aunties,' continued Gigs, through a mash of pig and vegetable. 'We should do them during the card game — they'll be super stressed. Shotgun Alma.'

Alma was the eldest Auntie and Gigs's declared favourite. Frankie who was deeply fond, really, of all the Aunties, also secretly favoured Alma. She was enormously fat and very funny; she smoked small cigars called cheroots and drank whisky and liked to gamble on all her card games. And when she'd had quite a lot of whisky and a winning hand at Crib she sometimes demonstrated her ancient ballroom dancing skills.

For someone so hefty Alma was surprisingly light on her feet. The flesh around her middle and arms shook alarmingly when she bossa novaed; sweat gathered in the folds of her chins, and her breath came fast and rattling; but her feet tripped and darted as daintily as any slim-line ballerina. Frankie found an Alma dance routine peculiarly mesmerising.

Alma'd had dozens of boyfriends in her time but none of them, she maintained, had been good enough dancing partners to marry. It was Frankie and Gigs's private view that all Alma's

boyfriends had run off for fear of being squashed.

When he was in the mood, Frankie found Alma a riot.

On the whole he really wasn't in the mood today.

'Okay,' he said, 'you can do Alma and I'll do Nellie and Teen — but we'll have to factor in who's winning and how much they've had to drink. And, hopefully it won't prejudice the judges.' (Ms Oates, the Junior Dean, was one of the school judges and Frankie knew for a fact that Ms Oates didn't approve of alcohol.)

'Man, your Aunties put it away, don't they?' said Gigs, in perfect imitation of Uncle George.

Put it away they certainly did. Uncle George had said to Frankie once that the Aunties were the last great lady drinkers in the Western World. And he was all for it. Uncle George loved the Aunties. It was a match made in heaven, Frankie thought. They were all four of them boisterous and loud and optimistic, and with big appetites for food and fun.

He sighed and stared out the window at the river, at the ducks, gliding, apparently happy, on the lit-up surface. Food, fun, and fast hands of cards were great and, really, he liked them as much as Uncle G, but there was so much else to think about, and no one except him seemed to bother doing the thinking.

Worms, for instance. Frankie was pretty sure The Fat Controller had worms, which meant that he, Frankie, probably had worms, too, since The Fat Controller slept on — and often *in* — his bed at night. Frankie found the idea of worms almost as revolting as ants. He'd mentioned the worm possibility several times to Ma but she insisted The Fat Controller was fine. He'd have to deal with it himself, he supposed: get money from Uncle G, buy the worm tablets and make everyone in the house take the dose along with himself and the cat.

Then there was the smoke alarm. The batteries had passed the use-by date and were certainly flat by now; he'd asked Uncle

George a thousand times to get new ones but, as usual, Uncle George kept forgetting. So Frankie would have to do it himself.

Also, school camp was coming up and he just knew the house would go to rack and ruin if he went away: no one would remember rubbish day; no one would get the right groceries; no one would vacuum or wipe the table properly and ants would foregather, for sure; Gordana would stay at Ben's too much and Uncle George would work late and Ma would have no one to talk to or run errands.

Also, there was a strange rash on his chest that was starting to greatly preoccupy him. He'd ask Ma about it tonight but he knew pretty much how the conversation would go:

'Honestly, Frankie, I'm sure it's just heat or something, or a tiny insect bite — definitely nothing serious...' And then Frankie would lie in bed trying to believe Ma but dwelling on all the things the rash could be: scabies, ringworm, flea infestation, meningitis, dengue fever, malaria, cancer, Ebola virus ... the list was potentially endless... And then, he would have to ask Ma again the next night, and the next, and finally she would say, 'Would you feel better if you asked the doctor?' and he would nod sheepishly, and Ma would feel bad that she couldn't take him, but she would ask Uncle George and Uncle George would say he couldn't till Friday week because he was up to his eyeballs and it looked exactly like a heat rash to him, anyway, so Ma would ask Gordana and Gordana would say, oh, good *God* was he *always* going to be such an incredible *freak*?

The bus was picking up speed now, down Memorial Avenue, past his grandmother's old house, past Centennial Park where he and Uncle George had bowled thousands of balls, past Bava's where they'd always bought their ice-creams. Those were the days, Frankie thought; when Uncle George had time to bowl two hundred medium pacers and eat a three-scoop cookies 'n' cream

afterwards. He sighed again. Maybe he'd just go to the doctor by himself. Why not? He was twelve. He didn't need a minder.

'Want some?' said Gigs, offering him half an apricot.

Frankie chewed the fruit slowly, enjoying the plump sweetness, and mentally added apricots to the ongoing grocery list in his head, which frankly — ha! — he was rather tired of having to compile on behalf of everyone else.

'You watch any *Get Smart*? Gigs asked. *Get Smart* videos were their favourite thing just now.

'Tried to,' said Frankie, 'but Gordana was practically having phone sex with Ben right beside me on the couch.'

'Really?' said Gigs.

'No, not really, just kissing crap. And loud.'

'Nothing new.'

'No.'

And that was another thing: Gordana. Frankie didn't really care that his sister was habitually rude and mean to him, but he did care that she never did *a thing* round the house. All the work fell his way these days — getting the groceries, delivering stuff for Ma, picking up library books, buying birthday presents for the relatives. It was so *unfair*. And, as far as he could see, extremely unlikely to improve. Gordana'd leave home next year, he just knew it. Like Louie. She'd go flatting with Ben or Christa or Tamara or one of her forty-seven friends (she'd counted them) — but she'd swan back home for laundry and dinners. He sighed yet again.

'Could you *stop* that,' said Gigs. 'You're just like Chris. She's always sighing, she doesn't even know she's doing it. She sighs when she's eating, when she's reading, when she's looking something up in the phone book ... the phone book especially. The minute she gets it out of the drawer she starts this massive sighing campaign.'

Gigs had finished his breakfast now. He tidied away his plastic containers and bottles and settled back to read his comic book. Frankie surveyed his best friend's freckled face with fondness, and envy.

Gigs *never* seemed to worry. His life was a steady, tidy progress from one activity to another. He would have a task (breakfast, say; or getting his watch fixed; or doing his trombone practice; or buying an ice-cream; or finishing a maths project) and he would just *do* it. He didn't think about the nutritional value of the breakfast or the ice-cream; (Gigs never worried about fat intake). He didn't stress about his maths ability, or his chances for Boys' College next year, or his batting average, or whether blowing a sustained forte passage on the trombone might accidentally trigger a brain haemorrhage.

There were no detours or distractions, nor interruptions by any of a catalogue of pressing problems. Gigs didn't worry about his household, his parents, his health, his safety, his future, the probability of earthquakes, terrorism, global warming, or McDonald's taking over the world. He was a funny guy, and a smart one — and the smartest thing about him, in Frankie's view, was that he never, ever, *ever* worried.

Frankie dreamed of having such a disposition. If only you could win a temperament like that in Lotto, or get it through mail order, or bid for it on Trade Me.

The bus came to another precisely judged stop outside the mid-town terminal where a number of the kids at Frankie and Gigs's school boarded. Cassino had a comment or a quip for everyone — except, of course, the Kearney twins, Seamus and Eugene. They'd been getting the cold shoulder from Cassino for nearly a year now

— ever since they'd set fire to the seat nearest the back door.

Cassino was a kind and easy-going guy, everyone knew; he let kids eat on his bus and sing loudly and even get physical; he let people on for free if they'd mislaid their cards; he often waited for kids in case they were running late. But even Cassino had his threshold, and damage to his bus was something he neither tolerated nor forgave. Gigs and Frankie reckoned it'd be a cold day in hell before Seamus and Eugene cracked even a faint smile from Cassino. Earning Cassino's permanent wrath, Frankie thought, ranked as one of life's least bearable punishments.

'Wasim Enegue arcnarum multiplicatum et feralum?' Gigs muttered. (*Eugene Kearney's spots are growing in number and size and repulsiveness.*)

'Gigantum Saccum et maladits personalitonium,' said Frankie. (*Too much McDonald's combined with an evil personality.*)

Frankie slumped in his seat as an alternative to sighing. He didn't really feel like analysing his schoolmates in Chilun. Usually it was a great way of passing the last half of the bus ride to school, but this morning his litany of worries was causing an irretrievable gloom to settle on him, heavy as a saturated beach towel.

It was strange the way this happened. He'd noticed it before. One week he'd be bouncing along relatively happily, only a couple of minor problems bothering him. A week or two later the problems would have burgeoned and multiplied until the list of matters to solve dominated his thoughts and none of his usual pleasures could give him a scrap of comfort.

He sank lower in the seat and frowned at the semicircle of rolled up bus tickets describing the wide arc of the seat-back in front of them. There were hundreds, jutting like white porcupine quills from the gap between the seat leather and the aluminium frame. He and Gigs had been building the quills for four years now and it was quite a sight. It was another example of Cassino's

extreme tolerance; he'd never mentioned the bus ticket stash, but he'd never interfered with the display either.

'February the fourteenth,' said Gigs, suddenly. 'Hot damn, it's Valentine's Day. We might get cards.'

'Fat chance,' said Frankie with infinite pessimism.

'Norbo B, Norbo B,' whispered Gigs. This was their Chilun name for Bronwyn Baxter. Gigs was convinced that Bronwyn Baxter had her eye on Frankie.

'Shuddup,' said Frankie. 'I don't believe in Valentine's Day. Loada crap.'

Months later, remembering that moment, Frankie would smile to himself. He liked to go back over that little exchange, drawing it out, remembering his bleak mood, enjoying the before and after. Having declared his disgust with St Valentine he was just preparing to submerge himself fully in his slough of despond when the new girl got on the bus.

Months later Frankie liked very much to remember that February the fourteenth had began badly and shown every sign of becoming a real horror, but — as the benefit of hindsight proved — it marked, ultimately, a turning point in his mood and fortune, because at 8.36 a.m. the new girl boarded Cassino's East-West school bus.

The new girl tripped up the steps in her beige Ug boots, popped a bus card, gave Cassino a wide smile, tossed her long, hefty dreads — *dreads!* — and strolled down to the rear of the bus where Gigs Angelo was ruminating on the possibility of valentines and Frankie Parsons was prostrate and maudlin on the brown bench seat.

The new girl was smallish and round and had a very tanned face. She wore jeans and a bright red T-shirt, saying *you gonna? I'm gonna*. She wore gold sleeper earrings and a tiny diamond stud in her left nostril.

‘Is this the dormitory, or can people actually *sit* here?’ she said to the slumped Frankie. Her voice had the faintest of accents.

‘I’m Sydney,’ she added. ‘Can you believe this is my fourth school in nine months? No? I’m having trouble with it myself. Want a salted liquorice?’ She held out a small brown paper bag and the bangles on her hand made a brief musical rattle.

‘Ta,’ said Frankie, raising a languid arm and digging in the bag. He looked at the black pebble sweet then put it in his mouth. It was as odd as its donor, but he quite liked it.

‘You?’ said Sydney, passing the bag over Frankie to Gigs, who was staring a little defiantly at her.

‘No thanks,’ said Gigs. ‘Hate that stuff.’

Sydney sat down and Frankie slid up the seat until he was quite straight again. Gigs gave him a look.

‘Nogis golody callistus freakano. Dispatchio presto,’ he said. (*What a colossal cheek. Have to get rid of her fast.*)

‘My dad sent me this stuff,’ said Sydney. ‘From Holland. You can get it here but I don’t like to rain on his parade. Not a bad breakfast substitute, if you’re in a hurry. Which I usually am.’

‘Nollis gannat negey comadonatus,’ said Gigs, staring straight ahead at the bus ticket quills. (*Lordy, she’s a talker.*)

‘Good *scheme*,’ said Sydney, pointing to the quills. ‘A bus installation. I like it. Urban art.’ She leaned into the seat, examining the quills. Then she sat back and rolled up her own ticket, correctly fashioning the point in the particular way Frankie and Gigs had pioneered years ago. She wormed the new quill carefully into the seat gap and smiled round at Frankie.

‘Nozdoreeshna!’ said Gigs. (*Oh my God!*) His voice had a distinct tone of outrage.

Frankie looked at Sydney and back at Gigs.

‘Glasnostov aginwia plovik? (*Are you going to answer me, or what?*)

‘Is he actually speaking Russian or just being an idiot?’ asked Sydney. She pulled a Shuffle and earphones from her bag. Her bag, Frankie noticed, was covered in drawings and words. It looked old and well worked-over and loved. He looked up at the bag’s owner.

‘So,’ she said, ‘he’s speaking Russian or something and you’re completely mute. Once again, I hit the jackpot. Why is it I never end up at schools with *normal* people? Could you even tell me your name?’ She bulged her eyes at Frankie. They were black eyes, with dark lashes. Her raised eyebrows were thick half-moons.

‘Frankie Parsons,’ he said, and surprised himself by holding out his hand. He could feel Gigs stiffen beside him.

‘Frankie Parsons,’ repeated Sydney, taking his hand. She gave him the trademark wide smile. ‘Sounds like a country and western singer. Or a mafia boss. Or a famous tennis player.’

‘Nozdoreeshna!’ said Gigs again.

Frankie let go of Sydney’s hand and tried a small smile. He felt suddenly and inexplicably cheerful.

‘So,’ he said, and picked up Sydney’s Shuffle, surprising himself once more. ‘Nice machine. Wouldn’t mind one of these. My brother’s got one, too. Are you planning to stay very long at this school?’

‘A fruitcake,’ was Gigs’s judgment, as they walked into school.

He had been heavily silent for the remainder of the bus ride, his silence louder and louder, it seemed to Frankie, the more he and Sydney had chatted. Silence was the major indicator of Gigs’s fury, Frankie had found over the years, though Gigs Fury was, in fact, a rare thing and Frankie himself had seldom earned it. Gigs reserved fury almost exclusively for his siblings. He’d been silent

for more than a week when Dr Pete and Chris had announced, a couple of years back, that they were having another baby.

Frankie threw the cricket ball towards the ceiling of the locker room and caught it one-handed.

‘Throw downs?’ he said.

Gigs walked towards the door, cupping a hand behind him. Frankie threw.

‘Let’s hope she’s not in our class,’ said Gigs, taking the ball expertly.

But of course she was. When Frankie and Gigs came into Room 11 Sydney was standing beside Mr A at the top of the classroom, surveying her surroundings with open interest, smiling broadly at kids as they came through the door.

Frankie was rather admiring. Most kids would have been restless and nervous on their first day in a new school. Most kids would have looked a little pinched and shy. Most kids would have been staring at the floor, or at a vague point in the distance, avoiding the eye of anyone in particular.

‘Okay, Friends and Romans,’ said Mr A in his customary way, when everyone was more or less seated and the noise subsiding. ‘Lend me your ears, please. Shut up and listen up. This is Sydney Vickerman. Please make her welcome. Show her the ropes. Ask her sympathetic questions. Tell her about yourselves —’

‘If you can get a word in edgewise,’ muttered Gigs.

‘Sorry, what was that, Gigs?’

‘Nada,’ said Gigs.

‘Try not to interrupt the teacher when he’s in full flow, there’s a good fellow. As I was saying — tell Sydney about yourselves,

share your books where necessary, and your lunch if you feel so disposed...'

He thrust his hand towards Sydney. 'Bienvenue à Salle Onze, Sydney.'

'Merci beaucoup,' said Sydney, in a faultless French accent. 'C'est bien.' She shook his hand with vigour.

'Très bon,' said Mr A, grinning. 'A rival for Frankie.'

'Oh, mervil yerks,' said Gigs, in his ridiculous French accent. 'Just what we don't need. A foreign language expert.'

'You seem to be suffering from an uncontrollable urge to express yourself this morning, Gigs,' said Mr A. 'Could I offer you some gaffer tape? A small gag?' Gigs looked stony.

He was no happier a few minutes later when Mr A directed Sydney to the seat beside Frankie at the Pepys Table where Frankie sat with Gigs, Solly Napier, Esther Barry and Vienna Gorman. It was the obvious place for a new person; there'd been a spare seat at the Pepys table since Fletcher Armstrong had left at the end of last year.

Gigs scowled anyway. And scowled further when Mr A assigned him to computer duty for the morning. A Gigs scowl was an arresting thing, Frankie thought. His normally cheerful plump face creased up like a malevolent cushion; his freckles seemed to gather and darken.

Mr A wasn't finished either. He confirmed what he'd been threatening since last year: their up-coming projects would *definitely* involve new working partners. Gigs banged his *Concise Oxford* on the desk in disgust.

Frankie wasn't wild about this development himself. He and Gigs always worked together. They did their best work that way. It was a fact. Frankie had done a French project with Fletcher last year and that had been all *right*, but not a patch on working with Gigs. He and Gigs worked like a perfectly oiled machine, a machine

powered by two different but complementary brains. They were pistols. Unrivalled. Everyone knew it. Not least, Mr A.

‘Mustn’t let you wallow in your comfort zones,’ said Mr A, over everyone’s protests. ‘You won’t be working with your mates when you’re out there in the urban jungle. It’ll be a lottery most of the time. Sometimes you’ll work with people you don’t even *like*. You have to be adaptable, you have to be ready for change and challenge, you have to be —’

The class let out a collective groan, knowing what was coming.

‘Yes, yes, *yes*, you have to be ... *counter-intuitive!*’

Before he’d become a schoolteacher, Mr A had been a probation officer and a prison psychologist. Until he’d burned out.

‘Singe marks all over me,’ he’d say, holding out a hairy forearm.

‘Can’t you see?’ He’d lift up his hair, show the weathered skin on the back of his neck.

Mr A’s hair was dead white and shoulder length, cut like a Roundhead soldier’s. (That was how Uncle George had described it after he’d met Mr A at the first parent-teacher meeting two years ago; he’d shown Frankie a picture of Oliver Cromwell and Frankie could see his point.)

‘Looks pretty battle-hardened, too,’ said Uncle George, reporting to Ma. He meant Mr A’s scar which was the most startling thing about him; it was like stuck-on Plasticine, bleached and leathery, snaking diagonally down the left side of his face, from eye to earlobe.

There were many stories circulating Notts School about the origin of Mr A’s scar: he’d been in a motorcycle accident; he’d fallen through a window; his wife had thrown a broken plate at him; a deranged prisoner had gone for him with a knife...

‘Maybe he just had cheek cancer,’ Gigs suggested once. (Frankie hadn’t even known there was such a thing; he’d added it to his long list of terrifyingly possible diseases.)

‘The simple truth,’ said Mr A, ‘is that I fell out of an apple tree when I was fifteen, and onto a nasty piece of corrugated iron, which meant thirty stitches. And a face like a recovering pirate.’

Somehow, Frankie and Gigs doubted it. They favoured the deranged prisoner story, though Mr A said deranged prisoners were generally a figment of the lurid collective imagination. He talked like this a lot.

‘Offenders have nothing on the pre-adolescent,’ he said to Room 11, from time to time. ‘Take your average school — a cess-pit of deviousness. You guys demand all my counter-intuitive skills.’

Being counter-intuitive was something Mr A had brought with him from prisons and probation service. It meant: going against your immediate and natural instincts. Thinking cleverly before you acted. *Acting, not reacting*: that was Mr A’s mantra. Being counter-intuitive was practically his religion.

‘You know, he’s not a Mormon or a Catholic or a Muslim, he’s a Counter-Intuitior,’ Frankie said to Gigs.

‘Or, a Counter-Intuitivist,’ said Gigs.

‘Or, a Counter-Intuitivationist.’

‘Or, a —’ but here they ran out of steam.

According to Mr A, his job was to enlarge their vocabularies and teach them how to get on with people — with the whole of the rest of the world, in fact. Even the people they didn’t like. *Especially* the people they didn’t like. If it killed him, he said, they were all going to leave his classroom knowing some words longer than two syllables *and* how to think their way through tricky relationships.

Of course, how to sing a lot of songs from start to finish was

important too, he added. Also how to write a coherent sentence, how to research history, speak another language and throw a ball well. These things undoubtedly made for the completely rounded person, said Mr A, but vocabulary and counter-intuitiveness were the first two commandments in his classroom.

Frankie thought a spot of counter-intuitiveness might come in handy just now with Gigs. What he *felt* like doing was fashioning a paper dart with ‘What’s wrong with you, knob-shine?’ written on it, and aiming it at Gigs’s chest. But it would probably aggravate his mood.

Instead, he sketched a comic strip of Seamus Kearney trying unsuccessfully to spell knob-shine and Bronwyn Baxter trying to strangle him. A magpie dive-bombed the two of them. Underneath he wrote: *B and S: a marriage made in hell*. He folded the strip into a dart and sent it gently across the table to Gigs.

Gigs opened the dart and gave a glimmer of a smile.

Sydney giggled. ‘Good drawing,’ she said. ‘Do you do art elective?’

‘Yeah,’ said Frankie, pleased. ‘What’re you doing?’ He watched Gigs drawing something to send back.

‘Writing,’ said Sydney. ‘I’m pretty good at writing.’

‘Love yourself, why don’t you?’ said Solly, from across the table.

‘Just stating the facts,’ said Sydney. ‘I’m hopeless at everything else — changed schools too often.’

‘How come?’ said Frankie. ‘Your dad get shifted round?’

‘He lives in Holland,’ said Sydney. ‘Nah, my mother’s a nomad. She gets a rash if she stays in the same place too long. But, she’s promised to stay here at least a year. She’s promised on my grandmother’s grave. My sisters can start school and I can finish at least one project.’

‘Enough, Pepys!’ Mr A called from the top of the classroom.

‘Concentrated work for fifteen minutes, please. Usual drill: definition and sentence. Then we’ll talk book projects.’

Gigs’s dart came wafting over to Frankie. It had FYEO in black Vivid on the wing. FYEO meant *for your eyes only*. He opened it slowly, turning it away from Sydney.

‘Hey,’ hissed Sydney, ‘you want to do this book project with me? He told me about it before class.’ She gestured towards Mr A. ‘Sounds good. I’ll write and you can do the artwork.’

She beamed at him. Her eyes nearly disappeared when she smiled, Frankie noticed.

‘Um,’ he said, scanning Gigs’s message. It was a cartoon in Gigs’s primitive but distinctive style — stick figures and exclamation marks with legs harassing everyone. Everyone in his cartoons had an identifying feature. For instance, the Frankie character always wore a cricket cap; the Mr A character had a scar, jutting horizontally from his face; and the Seamus Kearney character had a head shaped like a pumpkin.

There was a new character in this cartoon. A stick figure with preposterously pointy breasts and a head of writhing snake hair. A torrent of letters was tumbling from her large, open mouth and helmeted exclamation marks were dragging her away to a police van. The Frankie stick figure was wiping sweat from his brow and muttering, *lucky escape, lucky escape*.

‘Um,’ said Frankie, quickly crumpling the paper. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Gigs smiling.

‘Um ...’ He was finding it hard to think straight.

‘Spit it out,’ whispered Sydney, loudly. ‘You want to or not? Be good.’

What *was* good, Frankie thought, suddenly clear about something, was the way she said exactly what she wanted. It was unusual. It was refreshing. She wasn’t like any girl he’d ever met before. Or any boy, come to that. She didn’t seem to care what

people would think. She spoke her mind, as they said in books.

‘Um,’ he said for the fourth time.

She bulged her eyes at him as she had on the bus.

‘Okay,’ he said, putting the balled paper in his pocket and not looking at Gigs. ‘Okay, but can it be about birds? I’m best at them.’

‘No problem,’ said Sydney, opening her dictionary and getting down to work.

Very busily not looking at Gigs, Frankie opened his *Concise Oxford* and stabbed the open page with his finger.

*Perplexed: per.plekst, ppl, involved in doubt and anxiety about a matter on account of its intricate character; bewildered, puzzled.*

It really was *uncanny*, Frankie thought, keeping his eyes resolutely on the tip of his pen as he copied the definition, it was downright odd how often the Word of the Day seemed to actually be about his life. He speculated about a sentence:

*He was extremely perplexed by the unusual behaviour of his best friend.*

He tried another stab just to see what would happen.

*Vexed: vekst, ppl, distressed, grieved, annoyed, irritated...*

Frankie banged the dictionary shut. It was too weird.

*He knew his friend was very vexed because his normally cheerful face was creased and cross looking.*

He opened the *Concise* and tried a third time lucky.

*Portal: por.tal n, an entrance to a place, or any means of access to something.*

That was better, Frankie thought. He glanced across the table. Gigs had his head down, scribbling.

*The portal to the Tower was as high as a house and decorated with ferocious gargoyles. Ravens circled overhead...*

Frankie sighed. But why was life always so complicated?

*'So,' said Frankie, 'how was your day?' He lay down beside Ma, on top of her duvet.*

*Ma put down her book. She was reading Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, which Frankie happened to know was her second favourite Russian novel. Her absolute favourite was Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy. Ma had wanted to call Frankie Leo but there was already an L in the family.*

*'Pretty good,' said Ma. 'Eight cakes, three slices and a new biscuit. Albanesi. White wine, olive oil, flour and castor sugar. Strange but nice.'*

*Frankie stared as usual at the painting hanging beside Ma's bed. It was dark and a little menacing and not at all the kind of picture Frankie would want to look at as he went to sleep, but Ma was devoted to it. A ghostly woman with long yellow hair stood, waiting, beside a four-poster bed hung with transparent draperies. The brushwork was so fine you could make out each strand of the woman's hair and the strain in her whitened knuckles.*

*'So,' said Frankie, still looking at the painting. 'We got this bird flu handout at school.'*

*'That's good,' said Ma. 'Good they're distributing information in schools.'*

*'And this house hasn't got any of the stuff we need,' said Frankie. 'Except what's in the earthquake kit.'*

*'What do we need?' said Ma.*

*'Heaps,' said Frankie. 'Practically everything. Flour, tea, tinned fruit. Surgical masks. Rice. Panadol, plastic gloves, more baked beans, medications —'*

*'We'll talk to Uncle G,' said Ma.*

*Not for the first time Frankie wondered what the ghostly woman was waiting for? Or whom?*

*'Do you think it will happen soon?' said Frankie. 'Bird flu?'*

*'Probably not,' said Ma. 'Good to be prepared, though.'*

*The bedroom door in the painting was slightly ajar; a soft light showed in the adjoining room. Sometimes Frankie thought he could detect a shadow in the light. Maybe it was the woman's husband, or her child. Or her maid. Or a highwayman. But probably highwaymen didn't come into houses; probably they stuck to the highways.*

*'Night then,' said Frankie.*

*'You really think it won't happen soon?' he said from the doorway.*

*'I really think it won't happen soon,' said Ma. She glanced at the clock on the bedside table. 'Ten-oh-two p.m. You're so punctual, Frankie.'*

*'Ha, ha,' said Frankie.*

*He closed the door quietly.*