

NICKING TIME

T. TRAYNOR



Kelpies

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for Livi and Abby
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1

“This one’s for Midge,” says Bru. “The ship’s going down and you can only save one person. What’d you choose: to save Skooshie or to save Hector?”

“I can’t answer that!” I protest. Skooshie and Hector look at me, interested, waiting.

We’re in the den: Bru, Skooshie, Hector, Lemur and me. It’s the night before the last day of school. Tomorrow – at long last – the summer holidays start. So we’re playing a celebratory round of Skooshie’s Game. Well, I say “Skooshie’s Game”. Skooshie didn’t really invent it, not as a game. He just kept asking questions that gave us a choice: “What’d you choose: to eat a raw egg or eat a raw sausage? What’d you choose: to play football for England or never play football again? What’d you choose: to be an ancient Roman or a Martian?” He was just genuinely interested in knowing. We got tired of always answering, so we made it into a game. This way we get the chance to think up some questions too. It’s called Skooshie’s Game in his honour.

“You’ve got to answer,” says Bru. “That’s the rules.”

“It is the rules, Midge,” Skooshie agrees, like I don’t know that.

“Let’s think,” I say. “Well. Hector did promise me a loan of those old Victor comics over the holidays, so I’m thinking maybe him.” (Bellow of protest from Skooshie.) “But – but – I hadn’t finished – if he *did* go down with the ship, his mum knows what a big Victor fan I am, so she might *give* me the comics to keep. Ow!” (Unidentified missile hits me in the head, coming from Hector’s direction.) “It’s tricky.”

“We need an answer,” says Lemur.

“Obviously I’d save Skooshie, because Hector’s got his 5,000 metres badge – he’s going to get to the shore on his own no problem. So I can concentrate on helping Skoosh.”

“Nice one,” says Hector, and Skooshie grins his approval too.

“What if neither of them could swim?” asks Bru.

“Well, (1) they can, and (2) you’re not allowed to change the question after I’ve answered it.”

“Fair enough.” Bru prods the white paper bag with his foot hopefully. But it’s empty, as he suspected, the white chocolate mice, flying saucers and strawberry laces long gone. He settles back on the big settee cushions waiting for me to ask a question. The cushions are one of the big improvements that we’ve made to the den in the past few weeks. We dragged them out of a skip in Stanmore Road.

We’ve spent a lot of time getting the den perfect for this summer. We used it a bit last year. But it was freezing cold in the winter. And there was the risk we’d

be discovered, once the trees lost their leaves, so we didn't go there that much. Now we've managed to make it more or less waterproof. We're careful about how often we go in and out, and we never do it all at the same time – we don't want to attract any attention. It's taken a while to perfect our techniques. Now we're like spies losing a tail – I think MI6 would be lucky to have us. Or at the very least we should be in the next Bond film.

The brilliant thing about our den is how hidden it is. There are gardens on both sides, and at the other end of the gardens, houses. On the right – that's the right if you're sitting on the cushions, facing the entrance – on the right, tenements running up Stanmore Road (where Hector lives); on the left, the big expensive houses on May Terrace. At the end of both of the gardens are huge big trees and thick bushes. The Stanmore Road people think their garden backs onto the May Terrace gardens. The May Terrace people think the same. But they don't. There's a space in between. And that's where our den is.

No one knows it's there. No one knows how to get into it except us.

“OK. Hector, what'd you choose,” I say. “A pet chihuahua or a pet piranha?”

“Too easy,” says Hector. “Piranha, obviously. Who wouldn't want a man-eating fish as a pet?”

“Yes, but a chihuahua – a dog you can keep in your pocket? You could take it to school with you. Magic!”

“You would have to *remember* that you had it in your pocket,” says Skooshie. “What if you forget and you're playing football and you're in goal and you dive to save a shot and – **SPLAT!!!**”

He follows this up with an impression of a splatted chihuahua that has us howling with laughter and rolling on the ground. He's really talented, Skooshie.

Next Hector comes up with a question for Lemur. "What'd you choose: never be able to talk again or have hair like a girl?" We like the inventiveness of this one, and the fact it's so brilliantly meant for Lemur. If we ever had a competition to see who could manage to stay silent for longest (and we should some time – it would be interesting), Lemur would be first one out. Within a minute, guaranteed. He really cannot shut up.

He's torn.

"Would I have to *wear* it like a girl?" he asks. "I mean, if it's long, would I have to wear it in those bunch things they have on the sides of their heads? Or could I just have it long and messy, you know, like a pirate or a wild man?"

"Oh, I never thought of that," says Hector. "Glad you asked. I'm thinking *definitely* bunches."

"And ribbons," chips in Skooshie.

Lemur looks like he's in pain.

"Pink ribbons," says Bru.

"Or never talk, ever again," I add helpfully. "Not a word."

There's a mumble from Lemur.

"I beg your pardon?" says Hector, leaning towards him. "I don't think we heard that."

"Girl's hair!" Lemur roars.

As we whoop and laugh, Skooshie tries to grab a bunchful of Lemur's hair to see what he'd look like. The game's a bogey until Lemur manages to fight him off.

“I’ve got one for all of you,” says Lemur. “What’d you choose: family or friends?”

“Friends,” says Skooshie firmly.

“Friends,” echoes Hector.

“Friends.” Bru thrusts his arm out and one by one we slap our hands on top of his.

“Friends,” I say. And as mine is the hand on top, I start us off on a chorus of *The Flashing Blade* theme tune. It feels like a good way to almost kick off the holidays.

When we can hardly see each other inside the den, we have to give in to the fact that it’s time to go home. It doesn’t feel as bad as it might because we know that from tomorrow we’ll have time to do whatever we want. Hector reminds us to get here as soon as possible after school.

“We’ve a lot to plan,” he says. “Cathkin,” he adds meaningfully.

“Definitely,” says Lemur. “Definitely Cathkin this holiday.”



We separate on Prospecthill Road: Hector and Skooshie to head down Bolivar Terrace, Lemur to double back along May Terrace, and Bru and me to cross the road to the flats.

“See youse later,” says Skooshie as he leaves us.

“Youse? What do you mean, *youse*? There’s no such word,” says Lemur. Lemur likes to be right.

“Well, there is, actually,” says Hector. Hector likes to be right too. “If you’re talking about a lot of female sheep...”

“Is that what you’re saying, Skoosh? You’re telling us about your plans to watch farm animals? *Baaaaa!*”

“It’s a thingummy,” says Skooshie, aiming a good-natured kick in Lemur’s direction. “A... plural. *You* for one person, *youse* for more than one. Otherwise it would be confusing. I mean, if I say, ‘*You*’re an eejit’, I want *youse* all to know I mean *you*, Lemur, not all of *youse* at once.”

He’s got a point.

“I’m really looking forward to the holidays,” says Bru, as we walk slowly down the hill.

“Me too.”

We don’t talk about why. We know it’s more than just an ordinary summer and that we’re expecting great things to happen. It has to be the best summer we’ve ever had because we’re all scared it’s going to be the last one. That at the end of it secondary school will swallow us up and make us different and everything might change between us.

But secondary’s miles off. The summer stretches ahead as far as we can see, six totally endless sunny weeks.

2

“Are you planning to leave that there?”

My mum points at my uniform, in a pile on the floor, with an accusing finger.

“But I won’t need it again.”

“So we can just step over it every day for the next six years, until you drop the next one on top of it? Pick it up!”

Can she not see that I’m in a hurry? I think about mentioning this but she has a habit of making this kind of discussion go on and on. Quicker just to do it. I bundle the clothes into the dirty-washing basket. My tie sneaks out again, like an escaping striped snake.

“Be back at 5 for dinner!”

“I will!” I pull the door shut behind me. I run down the stairs, all twelve flights, because it will take too long to wait for the lift. It does mean I have less puff to get up the hill – I manage to make it to the end of the fencing round the car park. Not bad. My aim is to make it all the way to the top without stopping. I reckon I’ll be able to do it by the end of the holidays.



They're already waiting for me in the den. When I come in, they give me a "Hey" and a wave and continue what sounds like quite a time-consuming conversation about how little time we've got to do everything. Hector has a scrap of paper in front of him and a well-chewed pencil in his hand.

"We've got a lot to fit in," Bru's saying.

"Time is always against us," Hector adds.

"Yeah," says Skooshie. "It's always either going too quickly or much much too slowly, don't you find?"

"Wouldn't it be great," says Lemur, "if you could bank time?"

"What d'you mean?"

"If you could save time that wasn't wanted, then use it when it was."

"I get it," says Bru.

"I don't," says Skooshie.

"Well, let's say your mum makes you go to the shops with her on a day when she's buying *everything* and it takes forever," says Bru. "That's an hour you're never going to get back. But say you could. Say you could take that hour – move straight from the first shop to the minute when she's putting everything away in the kitchen cupboard and giving you a biscuit for being helpful. You could take that hour and stash it for a time when you want to use it. For example, if we were playing a really exciting game of rounders and it was getting dark and we all had to go home. But, oh ho, here's that

spare hour I squirrelled away earlier. I've been keeping it just for this very thing – I'll use it now, so let's finish the game."

We're impressed. We like this idea.

"So it's like a time piggy bank," I say.

"Yeah – but not one of those annoying ones you have to break to get at the money."

"So you actually get the time for playing rounders *and* the biscuit for helping with the shopping?" Hector looks doubtful. He's got a point.

"Yeah," says Skooshie. "That's not likely, is it?"

"What if you *didn't* get the biscuit but you *didn't* get told off for not helping?" I suggest.

"Your mum just... forgot?" says Lemur.

"Yeah."

We're happy with this as a compromise.

"So, do we put 'Invent Time Bank' on the list of things we want to do this summer?" asks Skooshie.

"Might as well," I say.

"OK," says Hector, scribbling. "That's number 7."

"Read them out, Hector," says Lemur.

"In no particular order – apart from the first one:

1. Cathkin."

"Even if we do *nothing* else," says Skooshie, "we do that. I would underline it, Hector, just so that's clear."

As if we're going to forget that one. This has been our ambition forever, to get into Cathkin. Cathkin's the derelict football park that is right next to the flats – I mean, *right next* to them. It was abandoned before the flats were built – otherwise we could've seen all the games for free from my living-room window. You might

have heard of it – it used to be the old Hampden Park, before they built the huge one. Scotland even played England there once: that’s how brilliant it is. (1–nil to us – **YAAAAAAAARGH!**) Anyway, now Cathkin’s all boarded up: big, corrugated metal sheets nailed across the entrances, mesh fences running right round the park, the works. As if that wasn’t enough, we’re also completely and totally forbidden to go in there. To us it looks like a giant Christmas present, tied up with barbed wire: our name’s on the gift tag, but it’s just never stopped being November... Until now. Now we’ve decided it’s Christmas Eve. Now it’s time. This holiday we’re going in.

Hector continues his reading of The List.

“2. Football

3. Tennis

4. Queen’s Park

5. Scavy hunt

6. Games/Competitions.”

“Are you not listing the games, Hector?”

“Too many. You know the kind of thing: Hospital Tig, hill-rolling, Kick the Can, water fight, etc, etc, etc.”

“Sounds good.”

“And 7. Invent Time Bank. Have we forgotten anything?”

Head shakes all round.

“Wait a minute,” says Hector, scanning the list. “This is all sunny-weather stuff. What if it rains?”

“If it rains we’ll have plenty of time to make another list.”

“Anyway, it’s not going to rain.”

“So, when are we going to Cathkin?”

“Tomorrow! Tomorrow!”

“It’s more complicated than that. It all depends on Midge’s mum.”

“Is she coming as well?”

“Oh, ha ha, Bru. No, we need to do it at a time when there’s no chance she’ll see us.”

“Which is when?”

“Well,” says Hector, who’s been thinking strategically. “It’ll have to be an evening, because the sun will be shining directly on Midge’s side of the flats at that time of day.”

“So?”

“So everybody will have their blinds drawn!” Hector’s particularly pleased with this bit of reasoning – he worked it out the other week. “That means there’s much less chance of being spotted by neighbours who’ll tell Midge’s mum what we’ve been up to.”

“OK, so an evening.”

“Then we have to bear in mind Midge’s dad.”

I’m suddenly the focus of attention, and not in a good way. Everybody except Hector is looking at me. I can tell they’re wondering if we’re going to be working through my entire family, each person presenting a different and annoying problem.

“Do he and your mum take turns looking out the window?”

“No. My dad’s on night shift. So he comes out the flats just before it gets dark. He always looks for me to make sure I’m OK and tells me to go up in ten minutes. If we’re not around for that, it’s going to raise suspicions.”

“So the plan is that we’re going to Cathkin on the 24th of don’t-hold-your-breath?”

“No, no, it’s happening. As luck would have it, Midge’s mum goes out on one of the evenings Midge’s dad is off work – Fridays!”

“So, tomorrow? Aw, yeah!”

“Ah... we can’t go tomorrow. Or at least I can’t.”

“Why not?” We’re all looking at Bru now, which is nicer for me but not so good for him.

“The Whistle-Blower thing. I’m kept in. D’you not remember?”

We groan. We remember, all too well.

“I’m lucky I got out today, to be honest,” says Bru. “Sorry.”

“We need to get her back!” says Lemur. Because although Bru was the victim, nobody is more intent on getting revenge against Mrs Whistle-Blower than Lemur.

I’d better fill you in on the whole story.

Mrs Whistle-Blower lives in the third block of flats – the one that’s not mine and not Bru’s. There are no kids in that block, not one. It’s all old folk: I mean, imagine...

Mrs Whistle-Blower’s not her actual name (there aren’t a lot of double-barrelled people round our flats) – we call her that because of her favourite hobby. She likes to lie in wait for us to go and play tennis down by the lock-ups. At the first sound of a ball bounce, she leans out her window and tells us to get lost. And she blows her whistle to emphasise her point. Or possibly she’s hoping to stir up reinforcements, other old people who’ll lean out their windows and shout at us. What

would you rather hear in the background while you're watching television: the happy plink-plonk of kids playing tennis? Or an ear-splitting whistle and shrill complaining? She's a menace.

So one day Bru's out without us, looking after his wee brothers, Kenny and Graham (also known as the Toaty Terrors). They're playing Hide and Seek, and before Bru knows it, Kenny's run into Mrs Whistle-Blower's flats. So he shoots in after him to try and flush him out. Kenny knows he shouldn't be in there, which makes the chase that much more fun for him. He starts circling the lift, running round and round the ground floor, shrieking like a girl, with Bru in pursuit, trying desperately to shush him. Then Mrs WB comes stomping down. (Not sure if she had her whistle on her – it might have burst all their eardrums if she'd blown it in that confined space.)

Next thing she's telling on Bru to his mum. Says Bru wasn't looking after Kenny and Graham properly *and* that he was really cheeky when she told him off. *Bru* says he said (to Kenny), "Stop being a brat!" *She* says Bru said, "You're annoying the old bat." (See? All that whistling – really bad for your hearing.) She gets Bru into a lot of trouble. A LOT. He's got to go up to her door and apologise – for something he hasn't even done! We all offered to go with him (Kenny wouldn't go – and he wasn't made to – wee toe rag!), but Bru's mum wouldn't let us. She said Mrs WB'd had enough noise and disruption without us all turning up on her doorstep. As if *that* wasn't bad enough, Bru's also grounded for the first three days of the holiday. No Cathkin this Friday.

“Spiteful old witch,” says Lemur, in full flow now. “Really – we can’t let her get away with this.” His eyes are glinting at the thought of who-knows-what wild idea. He takes anything that hurts his friends very seriously, Lemur.

“We’d be caught,” says Hector sadly. “We’d be in big trouble – big kept-in kind of trouble – more than three days. And then where would we be?”

He’s right. It’s not worth the risk. Even Lemur seems to accept that. For now.

“Our time will come,” he says.

“So that’s a whole nother week we’ll need to wait for Cathkin!” Skooshie’s getting so disheartened he’s starting to inflict violence on words.

Everybody feels fed up or discouraged sometimes. Even Bru, who you can rely on to cheer you up in almost any situation. But not Lemur. Lemur’s never low, not ever. When I think of Lemur, d’you know what I hear in my head? Him saying: “C’MON!” It’s his battle cry. It’s hard to resist.

“*C’mon!* We’re nearly there. It’ll give us time to get a brilliant plan together. *Next* Friday we’ll be standing on the pitch! Trust me. Are we on?”

“We’re on!”