

Fifty-Six Minutes of Freedom

My arm hurts. Jason Sweeney is twisting it behind my back and calling me a fat little fucker. I hand over everything I've got, then I piss off home like he tells me to, running all the way; gasping like my sick goldfish before it turned on its side and floated to the top of the tank.

I'm scared alright. I fly in through the front door and breathe the sweet, damp air which tells me Mum is ironing. And there she is, standing in the living room, curtains closed against the afternoon sun, hypnotised by the rhythm of the iron and the tennis on the telly. It's Rafael Nadal, her favourite. She doesn't even look up. Just a vacant: 'Nice day, love?'

'S'alright.'

I always give the same reply. Who knows what she'd say if I told the truth?

Upstairs, my bedroom is roasting. I change into jeans and t-shirt and pull on my trainers. In the bathroom I splash cold water on my face. I'm calmer now because something has changed. I'm ready to start planning.

'Can I go round Ritchie's?' I shout, already half way through the front door.

'Make sure you're back for your tea at six. Beefburgers tonight,' she says, as if I'm in for a special treat. She only really cooks two teas – beefburgers and frozen pizza. Other than that it's chinese and chips or Bovril toast. I read in one of her magazines that if you're the mother of an only child, you have to be careful not to spoil them. My mum is pretty careful.

Ritchie is in his back garden, playing in a paddling pool with his little sister. He looks embarrassed to see me, and I know why. Eleven is a bit old for paddling pools.

‘This is boring,’ he says to his sister, punching a beach ball into the brambly flowerbed. ‘I’m going inside with Sam.’

I follow him through the back door into the kitchen, side-stepping his grassy wet footprints.

‘What happened after school then? Did he catch up with you?’ He speaks in a low whisper, but there’s no need because his mum is in the garden.

‘What do you think?’ I say. ‘Nearly twisted my arm off because I only had 18p. Said tomorrow he’s going to kick my head in. Oh yeah, and thanks for running off.’

‘Sorry.’

I can’t really blame him. When it comes to Jason Sweeney and his mates, you’re on your own. Well, *I’m* on my own.

Seems to me that Ritchie has it made. His mum works at Tesco Express, and she’s always coming home with doughnuts and sausage rolls and stuff which she says would only go to waste. His dad’s a policeman, always joking. He ruffles my hair and takes the mickey because I support Palace and they’re all Chelsea.

Ritchie only has two problems. One is his ginger hair, which means he gets called Ginger Twat. The second is being friends with me - Sumo Sam.

We go up to Ritchie’s bedroom. It’s tiny but it feels cool. The walls are plastered with Chelsea posters and the ceiling is criss-crossed with blue and white plastic bunting. The little flags flap in the breeze from his open window. I sit on the end of the bed and flick on Ritchie’s old Game Boy while he changes out of his trunks.

‘Jason Sweeney is a complete headcase,’ I say. ‘If he gets me tomorrow, I’m dead. So I’m going to run away. Tonight.’

‘You what? Your mum’d kill you.’

‘Doubt she’d even notice. And Dad’s not exactly going to miss me, shacked up with his new girlfriend.’ I know that isn’t strictly true. Dad’s always telling me how much he looks forward to our weekends together. Popcorn at the cinema. Hot dogs and Kit Kats at Selhurst Park.

‘Where y’gonna go then?’

I switch off the Game Boy. ‘Up to our camp on the Downs I s’pose. You’ll bring me food won’t you? But you have to swear to keep your mouth shut.’

Ritchie stares down at the carpet. His cheeks are already red and freckly from the sun, but suddenly they flash scarlet.

‘I’ll come with you,’ he says. ‘Count me in.’

The beefburgers are congealing on the breakfast bar by the time I get home. They sit on the plate like flat turds, next to a dollop of luke-warm baked beans. Mum is back in the living room watching the tennis. Her voice drifts in through the serving hatch.

‘What time d’you call this? Your tea’s been ready twenty minutes.’

‘Sorry. Forgot to take my watch.’

‘Don’t they have clocks round Ritchie’s house?’

My stomach is fizzing with nerves but I manage to force the food down.

Afterwards I sit on the sofa with Mum and watch the repeat of *Britain’s Got Talent*. Mum

laughs along at all the freaks who think they can sing. When the adverts come on I yawn and say I want an early night.

‘Not like you. You feeling okay?’ She balances her Silk Cut in the ashtray and feels my forehead with the palm of her hand.

‘Yeah fine, just tired. Night then.’ I give her a kiss and go into the hall, closing the living room door behind me.

An hour later I’m back downstairs, creeping along the hall, clutching my rolled-up sleeping bag to my chest. I shut the front door as quietly as I can. It’s still light and warm as I walk down our street, batting away the midges swarming round my head and hoping the neighbours won’t notice me.

The further I get from our house, the better I feel. Free. I smile as I imagine school assembly the next morning. Jason Sweeney scowling when the head announces Ritchie and I have gone missing. Asking does anyone have any idea why they would run away?

Ritchie’s waiting for me in the alley near his house. He’s brought a bag of croissants and a bottle of lemonade. We swig the lemonade then walk through the maze of alleys towards the main road, burping and giggling all the way. On the other side of the road is the Downs car park and from there it’s only a short scramble up to our camp.

It’s nearly dark as we cross the dual carriageway. In the car park a man is shooing his dog into the back of his Ford estate. He turns and looks at us. Ritchie grabs me by the arm and says ‘Bollocks’.

The man walks towards us, smiling. ‘Is that you, Ritchie? You’re out late.’

‘It’s my dad’s mate from work,’ hisses Ritchie. ‘I can’t just ignore him.’

I keep my head down. Now my stomach is scrambled and my legs feel like giant wobbly earthworms.

‘Alright Bob? We just felt like some fresh air,’ says Ritchie.

Bob is smiling still, but he can tell something’s up.

‘I’ll drop you both home if you like,’ he says. ‘I’m sure your mum’ll be wondering where you are.’

There’s nothing for it. We climb into the car, meek as mice. I check my watch. We haven’t even been gone an hour. Fifty-six minutes to be precise. Fifty-six minutes of freedom.

Bob takes me home first. He insists on coming up the path and ringing the doorbell. It’s gone ten, and I know Mum will be dozing on the sofa with a vodka and tonic. She answers the door with the chain on, peering half-asleep at the stranger on her doorstep. Then she sees me standing behind him.

‘Sam! What’s going on? I thought you were in bed.’

Bob tells her he’s an off-duty policeman, and that he found me up on the Downs with Ritchie.

‘Planning a bit of an adventure, by the look of it,’ he says. ‘Still, no harm done.’ He pats me on the shoulder then saunters back to the car. Ritchie smiles weakly through the dusty window.

Mum stops being cross when I burst into tears and start blubbing about Jason Sweeney.

‘I had to run away, Mum,’ I sob into my duvet. ‘If I go to school tomorrow he’s gonna to kick my head in.’

Next day is Thursday, but Mum says I can have a day off school. After lunch she has a meeting with my form teacher.

‘I don’t think Jason Sweeney will bother you any more,’ she says when she comes home.

For tea that night she cooks my favourite - shepherd’s pie. There’s mushy broccoli on the side.

‘No more secrets?’ Mum says, as we sit down to eat.

I notice she’s smiling. Really looking at me.

‘No more secrets,’ I say.

I doubt Jason Sweeney will take any notice of my mum. But I enjoy the shepherd’s pie anyway.

For pudding she’s made trifle with Flake crumbled on top. That’s when I know she really cares.

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