

I NEARLY SHAVED MYSELF TO DEATH



Even though I could barely see the Premature Facial Hair, once I knew it was there, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was ticklish and it was tempting to stroke it. Stroking it made other people notice it and when other people noticed it they tended to shout, 'Wolverine!' and worse. Which is why I decided to get rid of it.

I slashed at the brown candyfloss with Dad's razor, which did get rid of it. Sadly it also got rid of a lot of blood.

Sheets of blood just sort of fell out of my face. I wasn't quite sure what the procedure was so I squashed a towel into my chin, prayed that I wouldn't die and carried on squashing and praying for about an hour. I was starting to think that maybe I was already dead when Mum called me for supper. When I went down she said, 'What happened to you? You look like you've boiled your face.'

Dad said, 'He's been shaving.'

'What?' said Mum. 'He can't shave! He's too young to shave! He's *much* too young to shave.'

'Well, he's definitely too young to have a beard,' said Dad. And he showed me how to shave in a less life-threatening manner.

'The only thing is,' he said, 'now you've started, you'll have to carry on. The hairs will get harder and harder the more you shave them.'

So I don't get wisps of candyfloss any more. I get this stuff that looks like

naturally occurring toilet brush.

Mum said, 'Liam, you've got to stop growing so fast. I'm not ready to lose my little boy yet.'

Mum got so worked up about all this that she took me to see the doctor. The doctor said there was nothing to worry about. That made Mum really worried. She asked to see the specialist.

'Specialist in what?'

'Well, you read about these people, don't you, who grow up too fast? Their hair starts falling out when they're teenagers, then they get wrinkles and they look like old men but they're only twenty.'

She'd never mentioned these people to me before. She must have noticed my look of absolute terror because she said, 'They're very rare. But they do exist. You read about them on the Internet, don't you?'

I was relieved when the doctor said, 'No, I don't think I have read about them, to be honest. I could send you to see a bone specialist at the children's hospital.'

At the hospital they gave me scans, blood tests and an 'I've been brave' sticker.

They took me to see a specialist, then a special specialist. They both said that I was normal. Completely normal. Extra normal. Abnormally normal.

But tall.

'He's just a little boy,' said Mum. 'He's growing up too quickly.'

'We all feel like that about our children, Mrs Digby. The important thing is to remember that he is still a child. Even though he looks like a grown-up. Just because he can't shop in the children's clothes section any more, that doesn't mean his childhood is over. Boys grow at different speeds. Particularly at this point in their lives. You might go back after the summer, Liam, and find that everyone's had a bit of a spurt and you're not even the tallest in the class.'

'D'you know, that makes sense,' said Mum. 'His dad was tall at primary, and now

look at him. He's well below average height.'

'In fact,' said Dad, 'I'm slightly above average.'

'In fact you are not.'

'Only very slightly – but very very definitely – I am above average.'

'We'll talk about this another day,' said Mum, which is what she always says when she wants you to shut up.

The special specialist was partly right about the growing spurts. Nearly everyone had one over the summer.

Including me.

When Mum wanted to mark my height on the See How I Grow chart in the kitchen, she had to get a chair to reach the top of my head. 'Oh,' she said, 'you've had a spurt!'

And Dad said, 'Seven inches is not a spurt. Seven inches is a mutation.'

On my very first day at Waterloo High, I was the tallest person on the lower-school site.

The new uniform Mum had bought at the beginning of the summer didn't fit any more and they had to send off for an extra-large lower-school blazer. I got a special dispensation to wear my own clothes for the first half-term.

When we went to get my travel pass for the bus to school, the woman in the office wouldn't believe I was school age so we had to go home and get my birth certificate. And then the next morning, when I showed it to the bus driver, she wouldn't believe it was mine, and I had to get off the bus and text Mum, and she came down and explained to the driver of the next bus that I was unusually tall for my age.

'It's not the height, love,' said the driver. 'It's the stubble.'

Mum said, 'Am I going to have to do this every morning?'

'Only till we all get used to him.'

In the end, Mum sent off for a passport for me. I kept it in my pocket in case I got

questioned again. Dad said, 'That'll keep you out of trouble.'

How wrong can a person be, by the way?

Dad also gave me his old mobile phone, so that if he ever lost me again – like in Enchantment Land – he would be able to find me. His phone's got DraxWorld on it. In case you don't know, that's this cosmic application that shows you your present location, directions to anywhere from anywhere, and also live satellite photographs of anything in the world. You can use it to look at volcanoes erupting. Tidal waves. Forest fires. Anything. Dad uses it to make sure the traffic is flowing smoothly on the bypass.

That first day at Waterloo High, I was on DraxWorld all the way to school on the 61. I used it to look at theme parks and thrill rides. I found Oblivion in Alton Towers, Space Mountain in Eurodisney, the Terror in Camelot, Thunder Dolphin, Air . . . all of them. As the bus was crawling along Waterloo Road I typed in Waterloo, wondering if I'd be able to get a satellite view of me on the bus. Instead the screen filled up with ten thousand options. There were Waterloos everywhere. Waterloo Station in London. Waterloo the port in Sierra Leone. Waterloo in Belgium. You could go round the whole planet, just jumping from Waterloo to Waterloo.

I found Waterloos with waterfalls, Waterloos in the jungle, Waterloos in snowy mountains and Waterloos with sandy white beaches. I couldn't figure out why anyone who wanted to live in a Waterloo would think – yes, Waterloo, but not the one with the big beach, or the one in the limitless white wastes of Siberia; no, the one with the flyover, handy for the New Strand Shopping Centre.

DraxWorld gives you directions to anywhere, so it's not like it would be hard. If you were a proper grown-up and not just a stubbly boy – if you were my dad, for instance – all you'd have to do is fill your car with petrol, turn left, turn right, go straight on and next thing you know: white beaches, snowy mountains, coral reefs. Truly, grown-upness is wasted on grown-ups.

mountains and Waterloos with sandy white beaches. I couldn't figure out why anyone who wanted to live in a Waterloo would think – yes, Waterloo, but not the one with the big beach, or the one in the limitless white wastes of Siberia; no, the one with the flyover, handy for the New Strand Shopping Centre.

DraxWorld gives you directions to anywhere, so it's not like it would be hard. If you were a proper grown-up and not just a stubbly boy – if you were my dad, for instance – all you'd have to do is fill your car with petrol, turn left, turn right, go straight on and next thing you know: white beaches, snowy mountains, coral reefs. Truly, grown-upness is wasted on grown-ups.

When I got to school, Mrs Sass (the head) saw me in reception and said, 'Ah . . . Tom?'

'Liam.'

'Yes, of course. I'm Lorraine – come this way.'

I remember thinking, Fancy her telling me her first name. Isn't that friendly? Mrs Kendall never told us her first name when we were in Joan of Arc.

So 'Lorraine' took me off to the staffroom and started telling me the names of all the teachers. They all shook hands with me and said they were pleased to meet me. I was thinking, What a polite school! I wonder if they do this to every new kid. It must take ages. Then Lorraine said, 'Everybody, this is Tom – sorry, Liam – Middleton, our new head of media studies.' And she was pointing at me.

I know I should've put her right there and then, but someone gave me a mug of coffee and a custard cream and sat me down in a nice big easy chair. So I thought, I'll tell her later when I've eaten the biscuit.

Then Lorraine said, 'We've got assembly this morning. I'll bring you up on to the stage and introduce you to the whole school. Do you have anything you'd like me to say about you – like what football team you support, or any special interests?'

I suppose that would have been a good time to say, 'Very interestingly I'm not a teacher. I'm a Year Seven.' But she just seemed so happy, so I said, 'I like massively multiplayer online computer games.'

She looked a bit blank.

'Like World of Warcraft. You know, where you have an avatar, and your avatar has skills and goes on quests?'

'Ah,' said Lorraine, 'skills. We are great believers in promoting skills here at Waterloo High.'

'I've got a lot of skills,' I said. 'Of course, some of them aren't that useful in real life – like dragon taming. Some of them are illegal – like knife-throwing. I think that's illegal.'

'I think it probably is.'

'I did try to persuade the head in my last school to start a World of Warcraft club, but she just looked at me like I was an idiot.'

Lorraine looked at me like I was an idiot.

Then the bell went. 'We'd better go through to assembly. Maybe you should just introduce yourself. Don't worry about being interesting.'

So that's how I ended up on the stage, standing just behind Lorraine while she talked to the whole school. There were about eight people in the front row who knew me because they'd been at Joan of Arc Primary too, including Florida Kirby who kept waving and making faces. Lorraine said everyone was welcome and she hoped everyone had had a good summer and then something about a new registration procedure and then she said, 'And now I'd like to introduce you to a new member of staff. He's going to be teaching media studies and he'll be form tutor for Class Nine Mandela. This is Mr Middleton . . .'

And she pointed at me.

I stepped up to the microphone and said, 'Thanks, Lorraine – sorry, Mrs Sass.'
But everyone in the hall was already muttering, 'Lorraine . . . her name's Lorraine . .
' and Lorraine was looking cross.

All these faces were looking up at me. Part of me was thinking, I really should think more about the consequences of my actions. Then this wouldn't happen to me. But another part of me was thinking, This is good.

I said, 'Morning, everybody.'

And everybody said, 'Morning, sir.'

Sir!

I said, 'Has anyone here been to Waterloo near Liverpool?'

Twelve hundred hands shot up and waggled in the air like a salute. Looking out at them, I felt like the bad emperor in *Star Wars*. I took a breath and said, 'Has anyone been to Waterloo in Belgium, scene of the original Battle of Waterloo in 1815?' No one. I said, 'Siberia. Siberia is as big as Europe. It's got the largest freshwater lake in the world. A lake so big it has its own species of dolphin. The ice is so thick that the railway runs over it. It's also got a town called Waterloo. Has anyone here been to Waterloo, Siberia?'

No one put their hand up.

'Why not?'

No one answered, but they all squirmed in their seats, as though going to Siberia was homework and they hadn't done it.

'Waterloo in Sierra Leone?'

No one had.

'Sierra Leone has lush rainforests and amazing history. Anyone?'

No one.

'Why!?'

They all squirmed again. 'Why have we all been to the Waterloo with the bypass and the shopping precinct when none of us has ever been to the Waterloo with the waterfall, the Waterloo in the jungle, the Waterloo by the frozen lake? Why? These places – they're not in Narnia. You don't have to find a magic wardrobe to get to them. They're not in Azeroth. You don't have to create an avatar and climb inside a computer. They're real places. You can go there by bus. Sometimes it'll take a lot of buses. But they're just there. They're part of your world.'

Someone shouted, 'Yes!'

I was amazed to see it wasn't one of the children; it was Lorraine. I realize now that she thought I was being a bit metaphorical. She thought I was going to say something about how education opens up new worlds for you or something. But I didn't. I said, 'Let's go!' No one moved. They all thought I was being metaphorical too. I said, 'Come on. What are we doing here? Let's go. Come on. Follow me.'

I don't know where that last bit came from. It just came out. It was part of the flow of the thing. I walked out down the middle of the hall towards the doors at the back. It took a minute, but somebody followed me. Then someone else. Then someone else and someone else and everyone followed me out of the hall, through the lower-school exit and into the playground.

The sun was shining. The birds were singing. I walked up to the gates and pushed. Nothing happened. Waterloo High is a high-security school. The gates are locked at 9 a.m. and no one can get in or out without a swipe card. That's why there was a man in a leather jacket standing on the other side of the gates, talking into the intercom.

'I'm the new head of media studies,' he was saying.

And over the intercom the secretary was saying, 'I don't understand. You're already here. You're taking assembly.'

By then Lorraine was at the gate. She looked at the actual new head of media studies. Then she looked at me and she hissed, 'Who are you?'

I did try to explain it all to her. I said, 'I'm really sorry, Lorraine.'

'Don't call me Lorraine any more. It's Mrs Sass.'

'Yes, Mrs Sass.'

'Why didn't you tell me your real name?'

'I did.'

'But . . . well, you should have more sense, a big lad like you.'

When I got home Mum said, 'So how did it go? First day at big school?'

I said, 'All right.'

'Is that all you've got to say? All right?'

'No.'

'What else?'

'I'm starving.' Sometimes it's better not to go into too much detail.