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Kiss

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Extract

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1

I hated lunch times. I always missed Carl so much.

When we were in middle school we spent all our time together. We'd rush off the moment the bell went, shovel down our school dinners in ten minutes flat, and then we'd have a whole hour just being *us*. We'd sneak off to one of our special favourite places. When it was sunny we'd sprawl by the sandpit or sit kicking our legs on the wall near the bike sheds. We'd lurk in the library most of the winter. It didn't really matter where we were, just so long as we were together.

Some days we didn't talk much; we just read our books, chuckling or commenting every now and then. Sometimes we drew together or played silly paper games. But *most* days we'd invent another episode of Glassworld. We'd act

it out, though we couldn't do it properly at school the way we could inside the Glass Hut. The other kids thought us weird enough as it was. If they came across us declaring undying love as King Carlo and Queen Sylviana they'd fall about laughing. We'd mutter under our breath and make minute gestures and the magic would start working and we'd be whirled off to the glitter of Glassworld.

It was always a shock when the bell rang for afternoon school, shattering our crystal crowns and glass boots. We trudged back along the pizza-smelling corridors in our shabby trainers, wishing we could stay in Glassworld for ever.

I still kept the Glassworld Chronicles up to date in our huge manuscript book, and Carl occasionally added notes or an illustration, but we didn't often act it out nowadays. Carl always had so much boring homework. Sometimes he didn't come to the Glass Hut for days and I'd have to go calling for him.

It didn't always work then. He'd follow me down through the garden and sit in the hut with me, but he'd be all quiet and moody and not contribute anything, or he'd be silly and mess around and say his speeches in stupid voices, sending it all up. I could generally get him to play properly eventually, but it was very hard work.

'Maybe you shouldn't keep pestering Carl to play with you,' said Mum.

'But he's my best friend in all the world.

We always play together,' I said.

'Oh, Sylvie,' said Mum. She sighed. Nowadays she often sighed when she talked to me. 'You're too old for this playing lark now, making up all these secret imaginary games. It's not normal. You're thirteen, for God's sake. When are you going to start acting like a teenager?'

'You don't know anything about it,' I said loftily. 'They're not little kids' games. We're writing our own series of books. You wait. They'll be published one day and Carl and I will make millions, what with all the royalties and the foreign rights and the film deals.'

'Oh well, you can maybe pay off the mortgage then,' said Mum. She sighed again. 'Who do you think you are, eh? J. K. Rowling? Anyway, Carl doesn't seem quite so keen on this playing – sorry, *writing* lark nowadays. You're both growing up. Maybe it's time to make a few new friends. Isn't there anyone you can make friends with at school?'

'I've got heaps of friends,' I lied. 'I've got Lucy. She's my friend.'

That was true enough. Lucy and I had made friends that worrying first day in Milstead High School. I'd known her in first school and middle school, but I hadn't ever needed to make a proper best friend of any of the girls because I'd always had Carl.

It was hard trying to make friends now in Year Nine. Nearly everyone had been at our middle school so they just carried on in the

same twosomes or little gangs. There were several new girls in our form, but they palled up together. There was also Miranda Holbein in the other Year Nine form, but she was way out of my league.

It was a great relief when Lucy asked if I'd sit next to her and acted friendly. She was a giggly girl with very pink cheeks, as if she was permanently embarrassed. She sang in the choir and was always very *good*. She had page-boy hair and always had a shining white school shirt and never hitched up her knee-length skirt and wore polished brown lace-up shoes. She looked almost as babyish as I did. So we sat next to each other in every lesson and shared chocolates and crisps at break. We chatted about ordinary humdrum things like television programmes (she liked anything to do with hospitals and wanted to be a nurse when she grew up) and pop stars (she loved several members of boy bands in a devoted little-sisterly fashion, knowing off by heart their birth signs and favourite food and every single number one on their albums, in order).

Lucy was fine for an everyday friend. I would never ever count her as my *best* friend, of course. She lived just round the corner from school so she went home at lunch time. I lived too far away. Anyway, my mum was busy working at the building society, not home to cook me egg and chips like Lucy's mum. I was stuck for company each lunch time. We weren't

allowed mobile phones at school but I mentally sent Carl text messages: I MISS U. TALK 2 ME. C U IN G H 2NITE?

We used to pretend we were so in tune with each other we were telepathic. Maybe our psychic brainwaves weren't wired up for new technology. Nothing went *ching-ching* in Carl's head. If he ever tried to send me similar messages I didn't pick them up, though I waited tensely enough, eager and alert.

I asked Carl over and over what he did during his lunch times at Kingsmere Grammar but he was unusually uncommunicative. He ate. He read.

'Oh, come on, Carl. Tell me everything,' I said. '*Elaborate*. I want detail.'

'OK. You want me to describe my visit to the boys' toilet in elaborate detail?'

'Stop being so irritating. You know what I mean. Who do you talk to? What do you do? What do you think about?'

'Maybe you'd like to follow me around with a webcam,' said Carl. He suddenly grinned, and switched to manic TV-presenter mode. '*Here is our unwitting suspect, Carl Johnson. Let's hone in on him. Ah! What is he up to now? He's lifting a finger. Has he spotted us? Is he about to remonstrate? No, he's picking his nose. Let's have a close-up of the bogey, guys.*'

'Yuck!'

'*Oh, Carl's close friend Sylvie is making a pithy comment. Let's focus on little Sylvie. Smile*

at the camera, babe,' he said, sticking his squared fingers right in front of my face.

I stuck my tongue out.

'*Keep it out, keep it out, that's the girl! We're now switching to our all-time favourite Live Op Channel. Ms Sylvie West has suffered all her childhood from Sharp Tongue Syndrome but the eminent ear, nose and throat specialist, Mr Carl Johnson, is about to operate. Scissors please, nurse!*'

'*Yes, here are the scissors*,' I said, snip-snapping my fingers. '*But we've switched to the Mystery Channel now and I'm playing a scary girl driven bonkers by her mad best friend so she decides to – stab – him – to – death!*'

I made my scissor fingers strike Carl's chest while he shrieked and staggered and fell flat at my feet, miming a bloody death. He did it so well that I could almost *see* a pool of scarlet blood.

I bent over him. He lay very still, eyes half open but staring past me, unblinking.

'Carl? Carl!' I said, giving his shoulder a little shake.

He didn't stir. My heart started beating faster. I crept closer, hanging my head down until my long hair tickled his cheeks. He didn't flinch. I listened. He didn't seem to be breathing.

'Stop it, Carl, you're frightening me!' I said.

He suddenly sat bolt upright so that our heads bumped together. I screamed.

'*Ah, I'm glad I'm frightening you because*

we've switched to the Horror Channel now and I am a ghost come back to haunt you. Be very afraid, Sylvie West, because I am going to get *you!'*

His hands clutched my neck but I wrestled with him. I was small and skinny but I could fight like a wildcat when I wanted. We tussled a bit but then Carl's fingers started tickling my neck. I creased up laughing and then tickled him in turn. We lay flat on our backs for a long time, giggling feebly. Then Carl reached out and held my hand in the special best-friendship clasp we'd invented way back when we were seven. I held his hand tight and knew that we were best friends for ever. More than best friends. We'd played weddings together when we were little. Carl used to make me rings out of sweet wrappers. Maybe he'd give me a real ring one day.

How could I ever compare my bland little conversations with Lucy to the glorious fun I always had with Carl?

There weren't really any other girls to go round with at lunch time. I got on with nearly everyone, but I didn't want to foist myself upon them. One time when I was sitting in the library Miranda Holbein sauntered in and waved her fingers at me. I was so startled I looked round, convinced she must be waving to someone behind me.

'I'm waving at you, silly!' said Miranda.

I waggled my fingers back foolishly and then gathered up my books and rushed for the door. I

didn't want to annoy Miranda. We'd only been at the school a few weeks but she already had a serious reputation. She could make mincemeat of you if she didn't like your looks.

I didn't like my looks. I was so tiny people couldn't believe I was in Year Nine at high school. I looked the youngest of all the girls in my class. They all called me Little Titch. I didn't exactly get teased. I was looked on as the class mascot – quite cute, but not to be taken seriously.

Everyone was in total awe of Miranda. She looked much older than me, much older than any of us. She seemed at least sixteen, even in her bottle-green school uniform. She had bright magenta-red hair, obviously dyed, though this was strictly against school rules. She cheerily lied to Miss Michaels, swearing that every startling strand of hair was natural. It swung down past her pointed chin but she often plaited it in little rows, fastening each end with tiny beads and ribbons.

When her form teacher complained about their gaudiness she came to school the next day with green beads and ribbons to match our uniform. This was preposterous, but Miss Michaels let her get away with it!

Miranda seemed born to break every rule going. She was the girl everyone longed to look like but she wasn't really *pretty* and she wasn't even ultra-slim. She didn't seem to mind a bit that she was a little too curvy. In fact she

seemed particularly pleased with herself, often standing with her hands on her hips, showing off her figure. The girls in her form said she never hid under her towel after showers. Apparently she stood there boldly, totally bare, not caring who stared at her.

She was clever and could come top in class if she bothered to work hard, but she generally messed around and forgot to do her homework. She knew all sorts of stuff and apparently chatted away to the teachers about painting or opera or architecture, but no one ever teased her for being a swot. She didn't even get teased for being posh, though she spoke in this deep fruity voice that would normally have been cruelly mimicked. It helped that she swore a great deal, not always totally out of earshot of the teachers. She told extraordinary anecdotes about the things she did with her boyfriends. She was nearly always surrounded by squealing girls going 'Oh, Miranda!'

I wandered into the girls' toilets this lunch time and there was a huddle of girls goggling at Miranda. She was perched precariously on one of the wash basins, swinging her legs, her feet in extraordinary buckled boots with long pointy toes.

She was in the middle of a very graphic description of what she had done with her boyfriend last night. I stopped, blushing furiously. The other girls giggled and nudged Miranda, who hadn't paused.

'Shut *up*, Miranda. Look, there's the Titch.'

'Hi, Titch,' said Miranda, giving me a wave again. Her fingernails were bitten but she'd painted each sliver of nail black, and inked artistic black roses inside each wrist. Then she carried on with her detailed account.

'Miranda! Stop it! The Titch has gone scarlet.'

Miranda smiled. 'Perhaps it's time she learned the facts of life,' she said. 'OK, Titch? Shall I enlighten you?'

'I *know* the facts of life, thanks,' I said.

I was starting to want to go to the loo rather badly now but I didn't want to go into a cubicle with them all listening to me.

'Ah, you might have a sketchy knowledge of the basic *facts*, but I doubt you've put them into practice,' said Miranda.

'Stop teasing the Titch, Miranda!'

'As if the Titch would ever have a boyfriend,' said Miranda, rolling her eyes at them.

'I do so have a boyfriend,' I said, stung. 'You shouldn't jump to conclusions. You don't know anything about me.'

The girls tensed excitedly. People didn't usually snap back at Miranda. I was astonished I'd done it myself.

Miranda didn't seem at all annoyed. 'I *want* to know all about you,' she said. '*And* your boyfriend. Tell me all about him.'

'He's called Carl,' I said.

'And?' said Miranda. 'Come on, Titch. What does he look like?'

'He's very good looking. Everyone says so, not just me. He's fair. His hair's lovely, very blond and straight. It flops over his forehead when it needs cutting. He's got brown eyes and he's got lovely skin, very clear – he never gets spots. He's not very tall but he's still quite a bit taller than me, obviously. He doesn't bother much with his clothes and yet he always looks just right, kind of cool and relaxed.'

'Wow!' said Miranda. She was sort of sending me up, and yet she seemed interested too. 'So what's he like as a person? I find all the really fit-looking guys are either terribly vain or they've got this total personality bypass.'

'No, Carl's not a bit like that. He's ever so funny and great at making stuff up and inventing things. He's very clever, much brainier than me. He knows just about everything. He'll go on and on about some subject he's truly interested in but he's never really boring.'

'So how long have you known this boy wonder?' Miranda asked. 'Or *do* you really know him? You're the girl who reads a lot. Maybe you're making up your own story now.'

'Yeah, like, as if a boy like that would want to hang out with the Titch!' said Alison, another new girl.

'She *does* know him,' said Patty Price. 'We were all in the same class in middle school.'

'So he's only our age,' said Miranda. 'Just a little boy. I *never* go out with boys my own age, they're so stupid and immature.'

'Carl isn't stupid,' I said.

'No, he's, like, ultra-brainy,' said Patty. 'He goes to Kingsmere Grammar now, doesn't he, Titch? He got a special scholarship. He's great at art too. He painted one wall back in middle school – this Venice scene with glass-blowers, and it was just like a real artist had done it.'

'He sounds interesting,' said Miranda. 'I want to meet him. Hey, Titch, bring him round to my place tonight.'

I stared at her. She was surely joking! All the other girls seemed equally amazed.

'Yeah, right,' I said.

'No, really. We'll have a party, it'll be great,' said Miranda.

'Oh, can I come, Miranda?'

'Can I?'

'I'm coming too!'

'Hey, hey, I'm asking the Titch, not you lot. Sylvie and her boyfriend Carl.' Miranda reached out with her pointy boot and gently prodded me with it. 'Will you come, Sylvie?'

No one ever called me Sylvie at school apart from the teachers. I was so surprised I didn't know what to say.

I had to say *no*, of course. The very idea of Carl and me going to one of Miranda's parties was preposterous. But you didn't just say *No thanks* to a girl like Miranda.

'Well, that would be lovely,' I mumbled, ready to start in on some excuse.

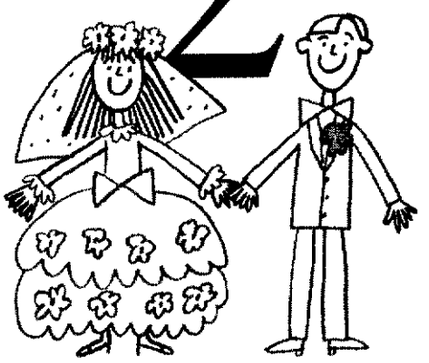
Miranda didn't give me a chance.

'Great,' she said, jumping down from the wash basin. 'See you around eight. It's ninety-four Lark Drive.'

She was off with a flounce of her short skirt before I could say another word. The others all ran after her, still begging to come too.

I was left with my heart thudding, wondering what on earth I was going to do now.

2



'Miranda Holbein's invited me to a party at her house tonight,' I told Lucy at the start of afternoon school.

'Oh yeah, like, really!' said Lucy, breaking off a finger of her Kit-Kat and giving it to me. 'I know it's mean to bad-mouth people but I truly can't stand that Miranda. She's so posey, such a show-off.'

'I know. But she really *has* invited me. And she's asked Carl too.'

'But she doesn't know Carl. She doesn't even know *you*, Titch.'

'I know. I don't get it.'

'Is it a big party? Do you think she'll invite me?' said Lucy, sounding hopeful.

'I thought you couldn't stick her.'

'I can't. And you wouldn't ever catch me going