Bad Influence

William Sutcliff

Chapter one

I know what it is you want. You want to know who's to blame. You're trying to figure out if any of it was my fault. So here's a new theory for you. It was Olly's aunt's fault. All of it. She started the whole thing. I've never met her and I don't know where she lives or what she looks like, but that doesn't mean she can't be to blame. If you look at it logically, she's the one you should be going after.

On the day it began, she got ill. Or maybe it was divorced. Or married. It was something like that anyway, and Olly had to go off, leaving me on my own.

If Olly's aunt hadn't done whatever it is she did that Sunday, Olly wouldn't have gone, and if Olly hadn't gone I never would have met Carl, and if I'd never met Carl, everything would still be OK. I wouldn't know who you are, you wouldn't know who I am, and we'd both be spared your boring, boring visits.

I should have known from his clothes that he was going to be taken away. He's not in jeans but grey trousers with a crease down the front, and he isn't wearing a T-shirt, but a proper grown-up shirt, buttoned right to the top. It looks wrong with all the buttons done up, and I would have undone the neck if I'd been made to wear it, but Olly isn't very good at figuring out things like that.

He often looks a bit funny, Olly. He has a knack of tucking things in that should hang out, and of doing things up that should be left undone. And he always dresses for two months colder than it really is. Every time he comes round, he leaves at least one jumper behind. When I go over to his, I usually have an armful of clothes to deliver. But I don't mind any of that. It's part of what makes him Olly. The section of his head a more normal person uses thinking about clothes, he uses for strange ideas and facts no one else knows.

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'What are you wearing?' I say, when he walks in.

'Check this out,' he says.

Slowly and elaborately, as if it's a magic display he points to a flap of material he's got on each shoulder. Waving his fingers around like he's showing off to an audience of fifty people, he carefully unbuttons them, one after the other, then he wiggles his shoulders, making the flaps flap.

'You will never,' he says, 'you will never guess what these are.'

'Yes, I will,' I say.

'Go on then,' he says.

'They're flaps,' I say.

'Wrong!' he says, hitting the word like a bell.

'It's not wrong. I can see them. They're flaps.'

'They're more than flaps,' he says, narrowing his eyes to try and look mysterious.

I never fall for his mysterious look, specially not when he's wearing a shirt buttoned all the way to the top with stupid flaps sticking out from his shoulders, so I say nothing and cross my arms to show I'm not impressed.

'They're hat flaps,' he says.

'Cat flaps?'

'Hat flaps. Flaps for hats. For soldiers' hats. In the navy. If it was green, instead of yellow, it'd be a proper uniform.'

'Don't be an idiot.' I say 'They don't have soldiers in the navy. They have sailors. And they don't wear green. They wear navy. That's why navy's called navy.'

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'No it isn't. If navy was navy because of the navy, green wouldn't be green. Green would be army.'

Talking to Olly is like swimming. At any moment you might just sink.

There's an owl on the floor of my bedroom that isn't really an owl any more. I made it at school, and originally it had eyes and nose and mouth and feet, but even then it looked more like a football than an owl, so it got kicked around all the time, and first the feet fell off, then the nose, then the mouth, then one eye. Now it's just a football with an eye, but I still call him Owl.

I pick it up, wedge it under one of Olly's hat flaps, and do up the button. Olly watches, all cross-eyed because it's too close for him to see. Owl's just the right size, so I get a bear from the back of my cupboard and button it under the other flap.

We walk to the bathroom so Oily can see, and he looks a total idiot, but he seems to like it, and we run all over the house doing different moves to see if the owl and the bear will fall out, but whatever we do, they just stay there, jiggling around. After a while, the running around turns into other things, and we end up playing the game where I chuck Cluedo men up from the patio and Oily tries to catch them from the bedroom window, and he almost falls out, which is really funny. After that Olly chickens out, so we start a proper game of Cluedo, and all along he's still wearing the animals. I can't even tell if he still realises.

I bet you think you know all about Olly, but you don't. There's nothing wrong with him. If I was given the chance again, I'd still want him to be my best friend, exactly how things were. When you've got a best friend, you don't need anything else in the world. It's like armour, or one of those force-fields you get on computer games that make a wailing sound, and you glow orange, and for as long as you're orange, bullets and missiles just bounce off you.

Olly's been my best friend for so long, I don't even notice the force-field any more, because it's become permanent. When he goes off, it's like a layer of me has been peeled away. I don't know what to do. I can't settle. Even if I'm busy, or having fun, in my head I'll be imagining telling Olly about it later.

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Once, when I was trying to phone home to get picked up, I rang Olly's house by mistake, and I had to tell his mum it was a wrong number. She thought I was mad. It happened without me thinking.

By the time his mum arrives to take him off to his aunt's, I've still not got round to asking why he's dressed up, so I'm totally unprepared for him getting whisked away. There's no warning or anything. It's like someone walking in and confiscating your legs.

It's not really like that. If someone pulled your legs off, you'd bleed to death.

She doesn't ask Olly why he's wearing an owl and a bear on his shoulders, she just pulls them out and leaves them by the front door. I was hoping he'd walk out with them still on, which he almost does.

When the door closes behind him I look at my watch, and there's still the whole of Sunday afternoon to go.

You wouldn't think it'd make much difference that it's a Sunday when it's the holidays anyway, but it does. Everyone's about. The house always feels too full on a Sunday, but also too empty. If you want the telly, or the kitchen table, or the sunny bit of lawn, chances are someone will have got there first. But even though all the good bits of the house are taken, I sometimes feel as though my family are just wandering around, lost, without any real idea of what to do with themselves until the day's over and everything can return to normal on Monday. It's as if Sunday always takes them by surprise, as if each week they don't quite believe it's going to happen, then it does and they're not prepared and all they can do is stagger round waiting for it to be over.

For hours I'm good and I look after myself and do stuff in my room. I even try to finish off our game of Cluedo on my own, but it doesn't work, and I end up cheating to find out who did the murder. It's Professor Plum, which is unusual. Playing a board game on your own is like talking to yourself. You're embarrassed in case someone comes in and finds you doing it. Also, it's no fun.

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Eventually I have to go and annoy Donny.

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