SOCKS ARE NOT Enough

...IF THAT'S ALL YOU'RE WEARING



MARK LOWERY

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Who is Michael Swarbrick?

And why is his life in ruins?

Read this extract to find out. . .

Outside the Leisure Centre

I spent at least twenty-five minutes by the vending machines with Paul. I always buy the same thing after training. A straightforward milk chocolate bar. There is no messing about with stuff you do not need inside it – just chocolate and nothing else. Money in. Press D3. Reach down. Eat. Same every week.

Paul, however, does not go to the vending machine with a plan. He puts his money in, *then* starts to think about what he might buy. The whole time, he commentates on the choices on offer. This is stupid as it wastes time and is seriously annoying for the people behind him. Soon a queue developed. A few of them were checking their watches and muttering to themselves as he started saying things like, "No, not wine gums, I've had them three times this week, never liked Murray Mints, not a *big* fan of nuts, water is just out of the question. No fruit pastilles left, I knew I should have got them before I came in. Got to strike while the iron's hot." When I told him about the people behind, he started getting red-faced, punching buttons angrily and at random.

Outside, he was moaning, as usual. "Why did you start rushing me? I didn't want bacon-flavoured crisps *and* fruit gums."

"That's as close to a balanced breakfast as you get," I said, sarcastically.

Paul sniffed. "Yeah, I suppose it is. Meat and fruit. Hey.

Isn't that your brother?"

My heart sank. Paul was right. Leaning against the side of his car (which was parked in the disabled space even though he is not disabled) was my older brother Ste.

"D'you reckon he'll give us a lift?" Paul said, spraying me with bacon-crisp crumbs.

I snorted. "Paul. Even if you had the crisp crumbs jet-washed off you and you were shrink-wrapped inside a giant plastic bag, he would not let you inside that car. It means more to him than life itself."

This is absolutely true. One time Ste was at our house with one of his many girlfriends. She cut her finger on a tin of beans and was bleeding really badly, and I mean *gushing* all over the place. She started freaking out and told him that he *had* to get her to hospital straight away. So do you know what he did? He drove her to the hospital but made her hold her hand out of the window the whole way there so no blood got on to the seats. Then he dumped her for "almost staining his car".

"Hey hey hey, losers!" called my brother, removing his sunglasses.

"Oh brilliant. He has seen us," I groaned.

Reasons why I hate my brother:

1. He has a goatee beard. I hate beards, especially ones that look like slugs clinging to people's lips. This has

nothing to do with the fact that he can grow a beard and I cannot.

2. Whenever he gets a spot, he uses ladies' make-up to cover it. He thinks no one can notice it but sometimes, when you get up close, you can see all these orangey-pink crusty bits on his face.[10]
3. Four years ago, he and his friends blew cigar smoke into my hamster's cage when my parents were out. This was "hilarious". However, I am certain that this caused Humphrey to develop breathing problems. After that fateful day, the poor little thing would wheeze like an old man after just a few minutes in his spinning wheel.[11]
4. He owns a car. Not just any car, either. A VW Golf GTi with 1.6 litre engine, alloy wheels, leather interior, personalized plates (C00L S13 – with illegal screws on either side of the 1 to make it look like a T), a five-hundred-pound stereo system with bass bins that could burst your eardrums, a sticker in the back which reads "the passion wagon" and a fluffy Eeyore toy hanging from the rear-view mirror "for the ladies". I would estimate that ninety per cent of his time is spent cruising around in his car, honking his horn at girls. He once told me that, if I were on fire and there was a smear of

10 Paul suffers from a similar problem after they serve apple pie and custard at the school canteen.

11 When Humphrey died two years later, Mum said it was from old age. To this day, however, I remain positive that it was lung disease. May he rest in peace.

grease on his windscreen, he would not even consider using the windscreen washers on his car to extinguish me. The car was paid for after Ste broke his leg playing football a few years ago, then claimed that he had tripped on a dodgy paving slab. He sued the council for over six thousand pounds. The rest he paid for through the protection fee he charged me throughout Years 7 and 8, and money he wangled out of Mum and Dad. Somehow, he still has enough money that he is planning to go to Australia for a year after his A levels.

5. Girls in our school seem to find him good-looking. I have lost track of how many times I have been stopped in the corridors by giggling girls and asked stupid things like, "Are you Sexy Ste in the sixth form's brother?" One girl asked me if I had any holiday snaps of him in his swimming shorts and offered me ten quid for one. When I asked her why she thought I would carry one round with me, she stamped on my foot and called me "an ugly little hobbit".
6. When I was five, I was on a donkey ride at the beach. Ste ran up behind the donkey and whacked it on the bum. The donkey went crazy, sprinting off across the sand before skidding to a halt and hurling me over a fence. I still have a scar under my chin and a mortal fear of donkeys.

"Nice wheels, Ste," said Paul, stroking the front of the car.

Ste slapped his hand off. "Hey hey hey, half-ton man. Don't touch what you can't afford. Keep your sticky fingers off the passion wagon."

Ste is always saying things like "hey hey hey", and "don't touch what you can't afford". Sometimes he even calls himself "The Stevenator". As I think I have mentioned before, he is an idiot.

"What are you doing here?" I sighed.

"The Stevenator is here to pick you boys up. Thought you might want a lift."

"Really?" said Paul, a bit too eagerly.

Ste grinned widely. "Of course not. The only reason I'd let you two lame-o's in the back of The Beast is if you were strapped up to two hot ladies with massive . . . *hey hey hey*, gorgeous!"

I followed Ste's eyes, which were suddenly looking over my shoulder. Skipping down the steps outside the leisure centre, her hair all tousled from the pool and a big smile plastered across her face, came Lovely Lucy King.

What was she doing?

Ste gave her this soppy little wave and then growled under his breath. "Get out of here, you pair of winnets. You're obstructing the mysterious forces of human attraction."

I struggled for breath. "What are you. . ."

He was not. . . She *was not*. . .

My voice trailed off as I realized he was completely ignoring

me. Lucy bounded over to him and do you know what he did?

He kissed her right on the lips. The lips. *In public.*

My ribs turned to ice and froze my heart. Paul's mouth was open and he was quite brazenly drooling all over his chin.

After about five seconds (way longer than was necessary), I gave a loud cough. The two lovebirds slowly turned round and stared at me. Ste narrowed his eyes like some kind of angry reptile. Lucy looked really puzzled by my presence.

My face started to burn and I felt a tickle at the back of my throat. "How . . . long . . . have. . ."

Ste gave a smile that would easily have won him the world's smuggest man contest. "Well, me and the lovely Lucy hooked up last week, and when she told me her name, I thought she must spell it L-U-C-K-Y cos that was the luckiest day of my life."

At that moment I genuinely could have puked. If I had not been scared of getting killed for splashing Ste's car, I would have done, too. And do you know what Lucy did when she heard this sickening rubbish? She wrinkled up her nose, put her arm round Ste's waist and made the kind of noise most people only make when they see a deformed kitten.

Ste ruffled my hair. "And these little champs are my brother Mikey and his mate Paul."[12]

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12 Whenever Ste is trying to impress a girl, he pretends to like me and puts on this whole caring big brother act. One time – and this is a fact – he squashed me into my old pushchair and pushed me round the park all day while he chatted up girls because, apparently, "women love babies". I was ten years old.

Lucy pursed her lips like she had just had to swallow down some stomach bile. "Oh yes. I know these two."

I made a pathetic whimpering sound.

Ste's eyes flicked towards the front of the leisure centre. "Right then, guys. Love to stay but we're going to get off. Lucy's trying on new swimming costumes this afternoon and she needs an honest opinion on what fits."

Lucy playfully slapped him on the arm. I wished she had smacked him in the face. As he manoeuvred her into the car, do you know what he did? He touched her.

On the bum.

The swine.

I could have cried, and not just because it reminded me of when he slapped the donkey on the backside.

As he closed the door behind her, he looked up to the front of the leisure centre again. His face suddenly went pale and he quickly hopped into his car and roared off, leaving a cloud of aftershave and exhaust fumes behind him.

I turned around and looked up to where Ste had been staring. Dave King was standing, hands on hips, glaring at my brother's car as it disappeared through the gates. No wonder Ste had rushed off. It was the kind of glare that could maim someone.

Looking back now, I guess I quite liked that look on Dave's face. It made me feel really relieved. Maybe he would do something. If anyone could keep my brother's greasy mitts off Lucy, it was him.

Why I Really Do Not Like Surprises

After my brother had driven off, Paul and I left the leisure centre. Usually on a Saturday I would go into town after training and put some of my pocket money into my bank account. I feel that it is never too early to think about the future. However, until now I have never told anyone that I am a regular saver.[13] As I did not want to have to either explain to Paul where I was going or make up a lie, I decided to just go straight home instead. I could always leave the money in my piggy bank until the following Saturday.

I did not realize it at the time, but this decision would mean that I arrived home several hours earlier than expected.

This was to lead to devastating consequences.

When we turned the corner into my road, Paul was jumping up and down like a Labrador puppy. "Can you believe your brother's probably snogging Lucy King right at this moment?"

"No," I said, grinding my teeth together. I had thought of nothing else since we left the leisure centre. It was making me feel quite sick.

"You know, me and your Ste have got a lot in common," he said.

"Like what?" I groaned.

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13 Paul would call me a geek. My brother would try to steal my bank details. Then call me a geek.

I was genuinely expecting him to reveal that Ste loved bacon-flavoured crisps and stealing scuba equipment to spy on young athletes too.

Paul sniffed. "We're both a hit with the ladies."

I stopped in the middle of the road. "Ladies? What are you talking about? Have you even met a lady without harassing her?"

Paul stuck his bottom lip out like a sulky three-year-old. "I've had a girlfriend, I'll have you know. She was. . ."

"French, I know," I said. "She was deeply impressed by the fact that your uncle invented the mobile home."

"Caravan," scowled Paul.

We walked on in silence right to the end of my street, then he suddenly said, "Hey! Can I look at that book up in your bedroom?"

That book is called *My Body is Changing*. It is by a silly person called Floella Rampazzo. It is one of those awful books about growing up that you get. My mum bought it for me and left it on my bedside table last year. It is full of chapters with titles like "Hair Today, More Tomorrow", "Low Down on Lice", and "B.O. – It's the Pits". Paul loves it because it is full of cartoon pictures of naked people. He is a very sad boy.

When we got to my front door, I noticed that the curtains were shut.

I should have turned around then. I really should have done. It should have been obvious that something was wrong.

I mean, who has their curtains closed in the middle of the day? Murderers? Gangsters? Members of sinister cults?

The truth, it turned out, was far worse.

The Absolute Worst Moment of My Entire Life (Until Then, Anyway)

A simple plan of my house: the front door opens into the hallway, which has three doors off it. One is at the end of the hall. It goes into the dining room. The one on the left goes into the little toilet under the stairs. This is my favourite of the two toilets in the house as Ste does not use it. This means there are no pots of hair gel by the sink, no gloopy blotches of the ladies' make-up he uses to hide his spots on the carpet, and no goatee trimmings blocking the plughole. On the right-hand side of the hall there is a door into the front room, which is always, always open.

On this day, the door was closed.

This was another sign that not everything was hunky-dory. If my brain had not been full of the thought of Ste snogging Lucy King, I would have realized that something was seriously wrong.

"Can I go and look at the book now?" said Paul, already kicking off his shoes and sprinting upstairs three at a time.[14]

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14 I do not like to keep on about Paul's weight but last month he was given an exercise plan by his doctor. He never did any of it. I think the doctor should have just hidden a load of slightly rude cartoon pictures at the top of a block of flats. Paul would have run up thirty flights of stairs every day without question.

I looked at the closed door of the lounge. From inside I could hear muffled voices. Wearing a puzzled frown, I opened the door.

I was not prepared for what I saw.

My mum and dad were in the front room. Mum was sitting down. Dad was standing up, pouring her a cup of tea from a teapot.

They were both nude.

Nude.

Naked. Unclothed. Without even a stitch. Everything on show. All pink and plump and bare like two Christmas turkeys. Dangly bits dangling. Wobbly bits wobbling. Tufts of hair sprouting up everywhere. Lumps, bumps and saggy rumps all quivering as the two of them stared back at me, open-mouthed. Dad's pot belly and the teapot were thankfully blocking out my view of Mum's you-know-whats.

It was disgusting. Foul. Weird. Indescribably horrible. I had never seen them undressed before. They looked like two badly shaved chimpanzees. The sight of their underwear on the washing line is enough to make me queasy. This was preposterous. I thought my head would explode.

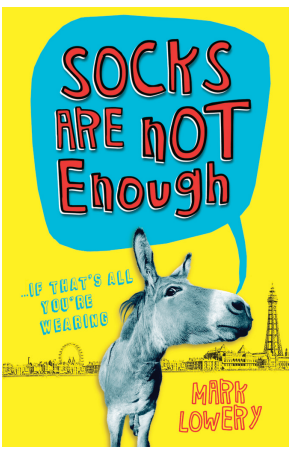
There was a splashing sound.

The tea was overflowing Mum's cup. Dad let out a yelp and jumped backwards with everything bouncing everywhere as the scalding tea poured on to his foot. I noticed at this point that he was wearing socks. . .

Q. Could Michael's life get any worse?

A. Yes.

Read his full story. . .



Publishing in October 2011

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Scholastic Children's Books
An imprint of Scholastic Ltd
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London NW1 1DB, UK
Registered office: Westfield Road, Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0RA
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First publishing in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2011

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ISBN 978 1407 13104 7

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from the British Library.

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