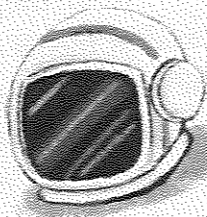


MY VISIBLE FRIEND



There were about ten million meetings and letters home about my 'peculiar and disruptive' behaviour at school assembly. Mrs Sass decided that the problem was I had 'poor social skills' because I was an only child. 'He doesn't mix with the other children. He's an isolated figure on the playground.'

Wouldn't you be an isolated figure if people followed you round shouting, 'Sir, sir!' or 'Wolverine!' or yelling, 'Hello up there!' a million times a day? I mean, what did they want me to do? Shrink?

Dad said, 'You need to try and make some friends.'

'I've got loads of friends. I've got twenty guild members just waiting to do my bidding.'

'I'm talking about real life, not computers.'

'I don't accept that distinction.'

'That's exactly my point, said Dad. 'You need a friend who is visible to the naked eye.'

The point about World of Warcraft is that the other players don't know how tall or short or fat or thin you are, they just accept you for what you are – namely, in my case, a highly skilled Night Elf with healing powers.

This wasn't enough for Mum and Dad. So they sent me to the Little Stars drama group. Every Saturday morning. Lisa – the girl who ran it – didn't seem impressed with my poor social skills. She sucked her teeth and looked me up and down and said, 'We're really a children's theatre group.'

'He's twelve,' said Dad.

'What? Mental age?'

'No. Physical age. And mental, I suppose. He's twelve – mentally, physically, emotionally, the lot. He's just a bit tall. And stubbly.'

'Oh!' She looked like she didn't believe him. I showed her my passport.

'He's a clever lad,' said Dad. 'He's in Gifted and Talented.'

'He's not exactly a *little* star though, is he?' said Lisa. 'I suppose if we did *The Big Friendly Giant*,

he'd be perfect. So –' she smiled – 'why don't we do that then?'

So we did. Florida Kirby was already a fully paid-up Little Star. Lisa gave her the part of the giant's little friend, Sophie.

'The Sophie in the play,' Florida said, 'was named after Sophie Dahl, the supermodel. So when I play Sophie, I'm playing a young supermodel.' Florida always has to be a celebrity. When Lisa made us do a role play in which we had to act like we'd seen a ghost, Florida saw the ghost of Britney Spears. When we had to pretend to be a dog, she was Madonna's dog.

As we walked home through the Strand the first day Florida kept practising her lines on me. The lines were mostly things like, 'You're huge!' 'Goodness, you're tall!' or 'You're proper gigantic!' and she said them all in her best Little Stars loud-and-clear voice. I sat down on one of the benches by the water feature, just to be a bit less tall for a while.

'If we sit here,' said Florida, 'Security will come and chase us. They hate kids hanging round this bench. They hate kids really.'

But Security didn't come and chase us. In fact,

one of them walked past us and nodded at me.

'What's going on?' said Florida.

'They think,' I explained, 'that you are with me. And that I am your dad.'

'No. You're kidding! Do they? Do they, honest?'

'Yes.'

'But this is brilliant.'

And she was right. We could do anything, so we did. That Saturday and every Saturday from then on we played on the lifts, messed about in the photo booth, went into Total Games and tried out all the new releases. We even went into Newz and Booze, which is 'Strickly no unaccompanied children under eny sercumstance's.' Florida loved it in there because she could browse through all the celebrity magazines while I bought a newspaper to make myself look more dadly. Sometimes she used to give me a pound before we went inside so I could buy her chocolate.

I said, 'Buy your own chocolate.'

'Girls do not buy their own chocolate when they're out with their dads. Dads buy it for them.'

She even tried to get me to buy her cigarettes.

'Dads don't buy their children cigarettes.'

'My actual dad would. He'd do anything for me.'

He's going to buy me a pony.'

'Ask your actual dad then.'

Once I went in there without her and the woman behind the counter said, 'Where's your little princess today then?'

How much did Florida love *that* when I told her. 'Princess is brilliant. You have to call me Princess.'

'I don't think so.'

'Why not? My dad calls me Princess all the time.'

'We'll talk about this another time,' I said.

'Whoa, you really sounded like a dad when you said that.'

'Thanks.'

Another time she brought her little sister Ibiza with her. 'Oh, another one,' said the woman in Newz and Booze. 'I didn't know you had two. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but it's lovely to see a young dad spending time with his girls the way you do. And they're both a credit to you. Aren't you lucky girls to have such a good dad?'

And she gave them a Chomp bar each.

It was a golden time and maybe we should have stopped there. But if you play a lot of games, then the moment you get good at something, that feels

like Level One. You start itching to level up.

One day Lisa had to finish early because her dad was ill. We could have spent the time in the Strand doing all the usual things. Or we could have used the extra time to look for Level Two.

The 61 stops right outside the parish hall and goes all the way to Liverpool's celebrated city centre. So there it was. The way to Level Two.

Being a grown-up in the Strand was fun. Being a grown-up in Liverpool's celebrated city centre was totally cosmic. The moment we got off the bus a woman in a white miniskirt and a red sash came up, said hello, and gave me a free sample of a new yoghurt drink. 'Here,' she said, 'have a couple more for your little girl.' We hadn't even finished drinking them when another woman gave me a free newspaper and another one – in a trouser suit – asked me if I had five minutes to answer some questions.

The questions were mostly about how we had got to town and what our favourite shops were. Then there were a few about what year I was born and what I did for a living. I gave her my dad's birthday and told her I was a taxi driver. She said, 'Would you like to come in here with me and taste a new sandwich spread we're developing and on

which we'd value your opinion?'

She took us to a really nice room and gave us free sandwiches and fizzy water. Afterwards we had to fill in questionnaires and we were allowed to keep the pens. Florida asked for more sandwiches. The woman in the trouser suit laughed and said, 'I guess that's all the feedback we need.'

'So can we have some more then?'

'No.'

Which is how we ended up near the world-famous waterfront, looking in the window of the Porsche showroom. Florida said, 'That would be going too far, wouldn't it?'

'Let's find out.' I was getting that Crispy New World feeling again.

It was my first time in a car showroom. I'd never seen a car on a carpet before. It was like being in the living room of the Posh Car Family. The cars looked smaller and glossier than they usually do. A man in a suit saw us come in and said, 'Be with you in a minute, sir. Help yourself to coffee.'

There was a coffee machine and a plate of biscuits – disappointingly mostly plain digestives. Florida nabbed the only Bourbon. Then she walked

around dropping crumbs on their carpet. There was one really nice, sleek-looking car. Florida said, 'Take a picture of me with your mobile.'

'Why?'

'That's what dads do.'

So she leaned on the bonnet and smiled while I took her picture. Straightaway the man in the suit was standing next to us. 'I admire your taste,' he said.

Florida said, 'This is the Boxter. Wayne Rooney's got two like this, in red.'

'He has indeed,' said the man in the suit, 'and he bought them both here. You're a very well-informed little girl.' Then he asked me how old she was.

I said, 'She's eleven.' Then I thought I should say something grown-up so I said, 'I'm not sure about this colour.'

'There's a red one like Wayne's over here. Come and have a look.'

So I did.

'I've got to agree with you. A car like this was born to be red.' It was nice of him to agree with me even though I didn't remember saying that. 'She costs a bit . . .'

'I know.' The price was written on the windscreen.

It took up most of the windscreen.

'... but she's worth it.'

'Yeah. Oh. Yeah.'

'Are you looking to buy or just looking?'

Yes, I know what I should've said. But 'to buy' sounded older.

'Would you be bringing your old car in, in part exchange?'

'No. No, I like my old car. I'll probably keep my old car. It's a good car.'

'I know the score. The other one's a family car. That's for when you're being a proper grown-up dad. This is for when you're playing racing cars. Isn't that right?' He winked at Florida. 'Men, eh? We never grow up, do we?'

'He definitely hasn't,' said Florida.

'Well,' said the man in the suit, 'let's pretend we have grown up. Just for a minute. What's your income?'

'I'm not sure. Varies really.'

'You're right. You are so right. I'm too nosy. I mean you haven't even said you want her yet, have you?'

'No. No, I haven't.'

'I'm always giving it the hard sell. A car like

this, you should let it sell itself.'

That's when Florida said, 'Can we sit in it then?'

He looked at her for a second and she said, 'Please?'

'Go on then.'

We both got in. She whispered, 'You should've told me to say please.'

'You did say please.'

'Yeah, but you should've told me before I got the chance. That's more dad-like.'

'OK.'

The man in the suit looked in, winked at Florida and said, 'Comfy?'

'Yeah,' said Florida.

I said, 'Yeah, what?'

'Yeah, thanks.'

And then the man handed me the keys. 'Go on,' he said. 'You know you're dying to. Just nudge her out on to the forecourt. See how she handles.' Before I could say anything he was asking the other salesmen to move the other cars out of the way and open the big doors so I could take the car outside.

'I'll need to push the seat back a bit for you. You're a big lad, aren't you?'

I could've said, Yes, I am a big lad but that doesn't

mean I'm old. I didn't say that. I said, 'Thanks,' and added, 'mate.'

'Have you got your licence on you, Mr . . . ?'

'Er . . . Digby. No. No, I haven't.' I tried not to sound too happy about this.

'That's all right, Mr Digby. I trust you. Thousands wouldn't.'

He crouched down next to me and gave me a guided tour of the dashboard – 'There's your MP3 player, your ergonomic seat thing, your satnav, in case you actually want to go somewhere.'

I had a thought. 'I've got DraxWorld on my phone. Can I hook that up to the satnav?'

He was impressed. He said, 'Not sure. Give it a go.'

I got DraxWorld up on my phone and chose a Waterloo.

'Waterloo,' said the man. 'No, this doesn't work. Waterloo's about fifteen minutes from here. This is showing a journey time of three days.'

'Actually,' I said, 'that's Waterloo in Sierra Leone, Africa.'

He looked at me like I was talking pure poetry. 'Wow,' he said, 'Africa. And it's in your favourites? What would you do? Shoot down through France?'

Over the Pyrenees . . .' He was gone, imagining the whole journey in his head – the rivers, the mountains, the ferries, the desert. 'Mr Digby,' he said, 'you DESERVE this car. If I could, I'd give it you.'

So I turned the key in the ignition. The car made a sound like a cat purring. The man stepped aside and pointed to the bonnet. 'Engineering perfection.' He smiled.

It is at the moment, I thought. But in five minutes' time it might well be a load of scrap metal. The thing about Level Two of course is that it has new and unexpected dangers. So you stand a much better chance of being killed.

I looked down at the pedals. I knew one of them was the accelerator. I just wasn't quite sure which one. One lesson that World of Warcraft teaches you is that if you want to succeed on the next level, you need to acquire new skills. Don't level up until you've skilled up. Sadly this was a lesson I had forgotten. I was pretty sure though that the accelerator was the one in the middle. I had my foot on it when the door on the passenger side opened and a very familiar voice said, 'You. Out. Now. Come on.'

I probably didn't mention this at the time, Dad, but, on balance, I was pleased to see you.

*

When I climbed out, you were shouting at the man in the suit, telling him that I could have been killed and asking him why they don't check ages.

'How was I supposed to know?' wailed the man.

'By checking his licence.' Good point, Dad.

'He didn't have one.'

'Of course he hasn't got one. He's twelve years old.'

'Look, mate,' said the man in the suit, 'don't go blaming me because your son's a freak.'

I thought Dad was going to hit him then. He growled, 'He is not a freak. He is normal. But tall.'

'It wasn't just his height. It was the fact that he seemed to have a daughter.'

Dad's got this little statue of St Christopher stuck to his dashboard. When he was shoving me into the taxi on the way back from the town centre I bumped against it and it rolled on to the floor.

'Pick that up,' snapped Dad.

'OK, OK. You've knocked the baby Jesus off his back.'

'Just don't talk to me, Liam.'

I said OK, but there was something I wanted to

ask him. I waited till we were on the Dock Road, then I said, 'How did you know where we were?'

'I'm your dad,' he said. 'If you act funny, I notice. If you get on an unexpected bus instead of going home, I follow you, even if that means turning down fares and having the boss bawling at me on the radio. I'm your dad. It's what dads do.'

Thinking about that now makes me wonder if you're out there, somewhere behind us, charging after us through the wastes of space in your taxi. But no. No taxi would be able to generate the necessary escape velocity.

In case you are interested, by the way, this is how Dad located us that day. When he gave me his old phone, he bought himself a new one but he kept his old number. So there were two phones – phone one (Dad's) and phone two (mine) – with the same identity. So, if he was ever worried about me, he could fire up DraxWorld and request 'present position of phone two', and that would tell him where I was.

So my phone looked like a phone but it was really an electronic tag.

*

Because we shared a phone number, I used to get all Dad's messages from Pine Planet, telling me that my new kitchen units were ready for collection, and Dad used to get messages from members of my World of Warcraft guild saying stuff like, 'Been attacked by dragons – need yr healing powers now!' and 'Captured fifty goblins. Kill? or hold for ransom?' A nervous person might've thought, Blimey, we're being invaded by mythical creatures, and maybe gone and hidden away in the woods behind the golf course. Dad just thought, This phone's gone funny. I'll turn it off and turn it on again.

That's Dad's solution to any technological problem. Microwave, satnav, computer, dishwasher – turn it off and back on again and it'll be OK. To be fair, it usually works. I'd try it now, but I'm not sure this rocket has an Off switch.

MY PLANET PANDA POP



The school-assembly incident was bad. The Porsche Showroom Incident was like being killed and sent back to Level One with no spare lives. 'All we wanted,' said Mum, 'was for you to learn some social skills.'

'Social skills?' said Dad. 'Well, let's see – he got a little girl to pose as his daughter, and he persuaded a salesman to lend him a Porsche. He's got social skills. He's got TOO MANY social skills. We asked him to learn some and he learned too many. That's the problem.'

It turned out that Dad was right about visible friends being different from cyberfriends. If someone doesn't turn up on Warcraft, you can always just recruit someone else. But when I walked through the New Strand Shopping Centre on Saturday