

1.

Spicy Chicken Wings

I don't know why I answered the door.

It wasn't even my own door.

By then I was staying at the Children's Temporary Accommodation, but in the summer they put you with a family. They put me on a farm called Stramoddie with a family called the Blythes. It's right down near Knockbren.

When Mrs Rowland from the Temporary dropped me off, she said, 'This is Prez. He's a good boy but he doesn't talk much. He's very helpful, but perhaps best not to let him near your kitchen knives.'

'When you say he doesn't talk . . .'

'Hasn't said a word in months.'

'Just exactly what we need,' said the dad. 'Someone to balance out our Jessie. Jessie does enough talking for ten families.'

That's one good thing about not talking, by the way – you don't have to work out what to call the mum and dad. You can't call them Mum and Dad, because they're *not* your mum or your dad. Calling them Mr and Mrs Whatever would be weird. And calling them by their first names is even weirder.

'Even if you did want to speak, Prez, you wouldn't get a word in. This is the House of Blether.'

He was not joking. Mostly they talk so much and so loud, you can't tell who's saying what. Though mostly it's Jessie.

'Everyone
to the kitchen!'

'Wait
a minute!'

'No!

'I hate
baked
potatoes.'

No more minutes,
we've waited
long enough.'

'Say
hello to
Prez.'

'Who's Prez?
Oh. Hi.'

'It's
not a
restaurant.'

'I hate sitting here.'

'No phones at the dinner table!'

Then they all drop their heads and say a prayer very quietly. But the second they've said amen, they all start shouting again.

'Ray, do not reach
for the water.
Ask someone
to pass it!'

'Prez,
that big boy is Ray,
the little girl is Annabel
and this is Jessie . . .'

'He's staying
for the summer.
He normally lives with
his grandad but . . .'

'Why do you
live with
your grandad?
Why don't you
live with
your mother?'

'Prez doesn't
like to talk.'
'Why doesn't
he like
to talk?'

'He's not
allowed near
knives.'

'Some people just do live with
their grandads, that's all.
Not everyone
lives with their mum.'

'Why aren't you
allowed knives?
Did you stab
someone?'

'Jessie, it's really rude
to ask people if they've
ever stabbed people.'

Folk think that if you're not talking you're not listening. But that's not true. For instance, I was the only one who heard the doorbell the night that Sputnik came.

It was a Wednesday. Tea was spicy chicken wings, salad and baked potatoes. We'd finished eating and everyone was clearing up in the kitchen.

The doorbell rang.

The family didn't hear it because they were all shouting.

‘Why is
everyone shouting?’

‘The radio's too loud.
We have to shout to be heard.’

‘No. The radio is loud so
I can hear it over the shouting.
If there wasn't shouting,
the radio would be quiet.’

The doorbell rang again.

I never answer doors, because answering doors means you have to speak to someone, sometimes a stranger even.

The doorbell rang again.

Then I thought, What if it's my grandad?!

I used to live with my grandad, but he got into a wee spot of bother and had to be taken away. That's how I ended up in the Children's Temporary. They said that if Grandad could get himself sorted out, he would be allowed to come back and I could go and live with him again.

Maybe this was Grandad – all sorted out and coming to take me back to the flat in Traquair Gardens.

Maybe I was going home.

So I answered the door.

But it wasn't Grandad. It was Sputnik.

I have to describe him because there's a lot of disagreement about what he looks like:

Height and age – about the same as me.

Clothes – unusual. For instance: slightly-too-big jumper, kilt, leather helmet like the ones pilots wear in war movies, with massive goggles.

Weapons – a massive pair of scissors stuffed into

his belt like a sword. There were other weapons but I didn't know about them then or I definitely wouldn't have let him in.

Luggage – a big yellow backpack. I now know he more or less never takes that backpack off.



Name – Sputnik, though that's not what he said to start with.

Manners – not good. My grandad always says that good manners are important. 'Good manners tell you what to do when you don't know what to do,' he says. Sputnik put his hand out to me, so I

shook it. That's good manners. But Sputnik did not shake back. Instead Sputnik grabbed my hand with both of his and swung himself in through the door, using my arms like a rope.

'Mellows?' he said.

Mellows is my second name. So I thought, This must be someone from the Temporary coming to take me back. Maybe Grandad had got himself sorted out. Maybe the family have complained about me.

'I too . . .' he said, pushing his goggles up on to the top of his head, 'am the Mellows.' He thumped his chest. It sounded like a drum.

Oh. We had the same name.

'The same name!' He flung his arms around me. I don't know much about hugs, but if a hug is so fierce it makes you worry that your lungs might pop out through your nostrils, that's a big hug.

I didn't know what to do. The Blythes were noisy, but I was pretty sure they'd notice if I let a stranger in goggles and a kilt into their front room. They seemed easy-going enough, but it had to be against the rules just to let any old stranger walk into the house.

'Stranger!' he said, as though he had heard what I was thinking. 'Stranger! Where's the stranger?! We have the same name. We. Are. Family!'

He strolled right past me, pulling his goggles back down.

The mum was in the living room about to turn the TV on, with her back to the door. Mellows put his hands on his hips and yelled, 'I. Am. Starving! Take me to your larder!' The mum spun round, dropped the remote, stared at him, then stared at me. I thought she was going to scream. But she didn't.

She smiled the biggest smile I'd ever seen her smile and she said, 'Ooohhhh, aren't you lovely?!'

'Yes,' said Mellows, 'I *am* lovely. Let the loveliness begin for the lovely one is here!' Then he actually sang, 'Here comes the Mellows!' to the tune of The Beatles' 'Here Comes the Sun'.

The mum looked at me and said, 'Is he lost?' She didn't wait for me to answer. 'Everyone, come and see!' The entire family avalanched into the living room.

'Amazing!' yelled Jessie. 'Did Dad bring him?'

'No. Prez did.'

'Prez? Really?'

'Nice one, Prez.'

Maybe I'd done the right thing.

Mellows strode over and shook Jessie's hand.

Jessie shouted, 'Whoa! Did you see that? He shook hands with me!' She seemed to think shaking hands was a rare and unusual thing, like walking on water or having hair made of snakes.

Annabel waddled past Jessie, saying, 'Me now, me now.' She shook hands with him and they all clapped.

Don't get me wrong. When Mrs Rowland brought me down to Stramoddie, they were all really nice to me. The food was way better than in the Temporary, Ray let me have the top bunk, they gave me my own pair of wellies for walking around the farm, but nobody actually clapped. There was no fighting over whose turn it was to shake hands with me! And no one did what Jessie did to Mellows. She called him a 'bonnie wee man' and she rubbed noses with him!

The mum asked him if he was hungry.

'Got it in one!' roared Mellows. 'That's why I said, "Take me to your larder!" Do it now before I starve to death before your very eyes!'

He flung himself on to the floor as though he was dying there and then. The mum ran into the kitchen and came back with the leftover spicy chicken wings. If you're going to eat food, it's good manners to get a plate and a knife and fork and sit down. Unless it's

chips. You can eat chips in the park. But the mum did not give Mellows a knife and fork or a plate or a place at the table. No. She held a spicy chicken wing up in the air. Mellows looked up at it. Then she dropped the chicken right into his mouth. He chewed and sucked at it, then pulled the clean bones out of his mouth.

Not good manners.

I think if I'd done that people would have complained. When Mellows did it, they didn't complain. They clapped again.

The mum said he was a clever boy!

'No doubt about that,' said Mellows. '*I am* a clever boy. I'm a chuffing genius if the truth be told.'

When the dad came in and saw Mellows sprawled on the couch, Jessie said, 'Can he stay? Can he stay? Please can he stay?'

'I suppose so,' said the dad with a big sigh. 'But just for tonight.'

'Shake hands with him!'

The dad shook hands with Mellows and asked him his name. Then he asked him his name again, like, 'What's his name? What's his name? What's his name?'

Mellows pleaded with me to make him stop.

‘Please tell this joker my name before he shakes my hand off!’

Before I could stop myself I said, ‘Mellows,’ out loud.

Everyone stared at me.

‘Yes! I am Mellows,’ said Mellows. He pointed at me. ‘Two merits for listening skills.’

No one looked at Mellows. They were all still staring at me.

‘Mellows?’ said the mum. ‘Like you, Prez? That’s lovely. Well done, Prez.’

I knew she meant, Well done for talking.

Until the night Sputnik came, I used to lie on the top bunk in Ray’s room every night, looking at the ceiling and worrying about Grandad. When Grandad used to go off on his big long walks, for instance, I always went after him to make sure he didn’t get lost. Who would go after him now? Maybe he wasn’t even allowed to go off any more? Maybe they locked him in?

But after Sputnik came I didn’t have time to think about anything but Sputnik. That first night, for instance, I was thinking . . . Sputnik rang the doorbell. But there is no front doorbell at Stramoddie.