



As trees were being dragged into living rooms and tinsel was being wound around lampshades, Oleg and Emma sat at the back of their classroom whispering about how cold their ears were.

It was the Monday before Christmas.

A teacher was talking, and neither Oleg nor Emma was listening.

This teacher, however, was not the teacher that usually taught form 6Y about dead kings, exploding stars, and how to tell a million from a billion, because that teacher had fallen off a horse three days earlier. He wasn't supposed to have been on top of a horse at all and how he had managed to:

A. find a horse

and

B. get on it

were mysteries that remain unsolved. All we know for sure is

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that he did fall off a conker-coloured horse and did break three semi-important bones in his left leg. Consequently, on that first day back, Mr Owen was drinking watery tea on a robotic hospital bed, and not taking the register or asking Scott Ballantine to kindly remove his finger from inside his belly button.

In his place, the students of 6Y had been gifted with that most mythical of creatures: a substitute teacher.

This substitute teacher was named Mr Clay. He wore sandals over bright socks, smelled faintly of milk, and seemed intent on foraging for snacks in his earholes.

‘Good morning, class 6Y!’ he gleefully called as he entered the room, leaning forward with one hand cupped around his ear.

No replies came. It was an achingly cold morning and no one was interested in being part of a pantomime. They were too busy trying to keep warm, stay awake, or stare longingly out at a playing field covered with a duvet of snow. Only a few sets of footprints broke the perfect sheet of white. It was snow that was waiting to be picked up and thrown.

‘Let’s try that again, shall we?’ Mr Clay said, whipping the air with his hands. ‘GOOD MORNING, CLASS 6Y!’

Still, no one replied.

Mr Clay’s enthusiasm lasted an entire fifteen seconds. He clicked on the flickering lights, kicked a mumbling old radiator,

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and wrote his own name in unreadable handwriting on the whiteboard.

Every member of the class was then issued with a piece of paper on which they were instructed to write a short essay introducing themselves and detailing what they'd done during the sub-zero weekend.

Form 6Y erupted into a loud mess of whispers, giggles, and pens scratching on paper.

Oleg and Emma decided to play a game that they'd been playing since the start of the year. It was a game that had landed them in trouble numerous times: inventing a new classmate. The reason for the game was simple: there were three musketeers, three little pigs, three French hens, but only two of them. There had been three of them until their third friend had been plucked out of their lives by her mother, who thought that Sarah Tuppet would have a nicer time growing up in a forest carpeted with bluebells. Both Oleg and Emma missed Sarah Tuppet. None of the other people in their class could take her place.

Ryan was too serious and too interested in the inner workings of trains.

Ora wanted to be friends with the teachers more than her classmates.

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Tom talked so slowly that he never had time to reach the end of a story.

Scott Ballantine's main hobby was kicking things.

Callie never said anything that wasn't a lie.

And Elissa Goober was mean to anyone happier, sadder, or quieter than she was.

As a result, Oleg and Emma had been reduced to a two since the start of the school year, and they'd spent their free time imagining the kind of friend that could fill Sarah Tuppet's place. Of course, no one could really take her place, and the best thing that could happen would be for Sarah Tuppet's mum to decide she hated both bluebells and forests, but Oleg and Emma were starting to realise that wasn't going to happen.

'Quick,' said Emma. 'Write your essay then we can make someone up.'

'But ours should be good,' Oleg whispered. 'To make a good first impression.'

Emma waved away Oleg's concern. 'He probably won't read them anyway.'

'But what if he does?'

'Sir!' called Elissa Goober, thrusting her hand into the air. 'Oleg and Emma are talking!'

Mr Clay sighed and lifted his head. 'Do we have a problem?'

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'They were talking,' said Ora. 'I heard them too, Mr Clay.'

'And they were picking each other's noses,' blurted out Callie.

'We really weren't, sir,' said Emma. 'Callie always lies.'

'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

'Don't.'

'Do.'

'Please ...' said Tom Runkle, tremendously slowly. 'I ... am ... trying ... to ... work ...'

Scott Ballantine sent a kick into Tom Runkle's chair.

'Quiet!' bellowed Mr Clay, banging a fist on his desk. The eighteen members of class 6Y all flinched. 'You each have work to do and I'd appreciate if you got on with it, please. It may have escaped you, but I have my own pair of ears and am perfectly capable of hearing what is going on for myself.'

'I just thought you should know, sir,' said Elissa Goober.

'And I just think you should get on with your essay, Miss Goober.'

Elissa Goober scowled and returned to chewing on her pen.

Hurriedly, Oleg and Emma dashed their own essays off.

Emma wrote about trying sushi for the first time, describing it as 'tasting like something you'd have to eat as a dare'.

Oleg wrote about finding a five-pound note on the floor, downing

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a litre of milk, and trying to catch a cricket in his bare hands.

Once they were done, they slipped another sheet of paper off the pile, and set about coming up with a third friend.

‘What shall we call her?’ Oleg whispered.

‘It was a *her* last time,’ said Emma. ‘Let’s do a *him*.’

‘We could call him Tony.’

‘No one’s called Tony. What about Brian?’

Oleg wrinkled his nose. ‘He’s supposed to be our age.’

‘Then Sebastian?’

‘Right,’ said Oleg, thinking that the name sounded unusual but not unbelievably so. ‘Sebastian what?’

‘Sebastian Winklevoss?’

Oleg shook his head. ‘No one’s going to believe that.’

‘Sebastian Smith, then.’

‘That doesn’t sound right either.’

Emma thought and thought and finally came up with Sebastian Cole, which both of them agreed was perfect.

At the top of the blank page, Oleg wrote ‘My Weekend’ and the date, and, in handwriting that was trying its best not to look like his own, he added ‘Sebastian Cole’.

Over what was left of the lesson, the two of them set about transcribing the weekend’s adventures of a boy who didn’t exist. It went like this:

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My Weekend by Sebastian Cole

Hello, my name is Sebastian Cole, but you already know that. Well oh well I certainly did a lot of things this weekend, such as going on a boat to Australia and going on a plane to China. My family, as you may have guessed, are mind-blowingly rich, though we don't like to flaunt it. Our money comes from my great-grandfather, who invented ...

Oleg and Emma turned to look at each other. His idea came first.

... the cheese grater in 1856. Before he invented the cheese grater, people had to chew cheese off the block like an apple or an ice-cream but thanks to him we can make it into little bits to go on top of pizzas or lasagnes or spaghetti bolognese.

Emma let out a howl of laughter.

'Is something funny?' Mr Clay snapped.

'No, sir,' said Oleg. 'I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

Mr Clay tutted. 'No,' he said. 'It won't.'

Emma took over the writing.

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But the best part of my weekend was when a snake attacked my mother. Don't worry, it didn't bite her. I put my hand into my bag, which is old but has everything I need inside, and I pulled out a baguette. If you don't know, a baguette is a type of bread that they use to fight each other with in France. Anyway, I whacked the snake with the baguette and it ran off and ...

'Snakes don't run,' Oleg pointed out.

~~ran off and~~ crawled off and everyone was so happy that they bought me a small personal spaceship which aren't actually out yet but I have one. They said I was the bravest and that the snake was the most poisonous currently in existence. One single drop of its venom could kill one elephant and one tiger. Was I scared of the snake? Yes, but not as scared as I was of losing my mother, or my baguette for that matter.

By the end of first period, Emma had her entire hand in her mouth trying to keep from laughing and Oleg was biting down so hard that his jaw was beginning to ache. He held himself together just long enough to finish the essay.

That was my weekend. And it was truly magical.

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As they handed in their papers, Sebastian Cole's hidden between them, Emma noticed that Elissa Goober was eyeballing them. Whenever anyone was having more fun than her, Elissa Goober would eyeball them until they stopped having so much fun. She was that kind of person.

Oleg and Emma fled the classroom, hands pulled up into their sleeves for warmth.