

ROS ROBERTS

DIGGER

AND

ME



LITTLE TIGER

LONDON



*For Nicholas,  
always*





## Monday 4th June

What do I *like*?

I can tell you what I *don't* like.

I don't like Philip's bogey. He's just wiped it on the back of his chair. It's stretched out, staring at me, green and squishy.

Mr Froggatt bounces past, tapping the tables.

"Who wants to start?" he says, spinning round. He leans over my desk and looks at the name on my English book. "James, yes?"

I nod and sit up a little.

"Well, James? What are some of the things you like?"

So I tell him.

Well, I tell him the version he wants to hear.

"My dog." That one's the truth, of course.

"Cool," he says. "Anything else?"

"Football," I say. Which I don't really. I play, of course. Because you kind of have to. Or need to.

“Do you like defending or attacking, James?”

Philip sniggers.

I’m not sure what to say. Uncle Bobby taught me how to play in goal and I always go there so I say, “Um, in goal, I suppose.”

“OK. Goalkeepers are vitally important.” He looks at the ceiling and taps his feet, jigs a little. He’s thinking hard. “That’s it! Guillermo Ochoa. Mexican goalkeeper in the 2014 World Cup. Outstanding!”

I nod as if I know what he’s talking about. Uncle Bobby would have known.

“Look him up,” says Mr Froggatt, and he spells out his last name O–c–h–o–a and I can see Tomaz writing it on the back of his hand.

Mr Froggatt makes a move as if he’s saving a goal, diving across the room.

“Brilliant. Right, James, anything else?”

Wow, he wants more. So I think for a second.

“YouTube,” I say. “Burgers, swimming ... school.”

He kind of jumps back and looks at me. “School? You like school? Well, that’s amazing. I love that! Do you really?”

He smiles as if I must be having a laugh.

Which I am, of course. No one likes school.

Philip turns round, his lip pulled, eyes narrow.

“As if,” he says.

“And you, my friend?” says Mr Froggatt, moving to Philip’s table. “You seem to be surprised.” He leans to look at Philip’s book. “Mr Davies, Philip Davies, what things do you like?”

Philip folds his arms. “Not much,” he says.

“Gardening, peas,” says Mr Froggatt. “Bearded dragons, making sandcastles, trampoline parks... There must be something. The world is full of things to like, Philip.”

Philip shrugs. “I like killing things.”

Mr Froggatt tilts his head and looks puzzled.

“On computer games,” adds Philip.

“Well, that’s a relief,” says Mr Froggatt. “I had you out in the playground swatting flies, Philip, which would not be good. Even flies deserve to live.” He twists his bow tie. I’ve never seen a teacher wear a bow tie. “What games do you play?”

Philip jerks up a little. This is fun, watching him squirm. “I play with my brother,” says Philip. He sits back and flicks his hair the way he does when he’s bothered. Then he slumps down and taps the desk with his pencil. “Just aliens and stuff, you know.”

Mr Froggatt nods. “You’ve been honest, young man. A lot to be said for that.”

Curveball.

Philip was honest. Philip told the truth.

Was I honest?

Not completely.

I stare out of the window at the school field and goalposts and I think of Uncle Bobby and my tummy aches a bit.

“Anyone else?” says Mr Froggatt.

India’s hand goes up and we are now on very, very safe ground. You can feel it round the room. Go, India. He won’t be able to stop India listing the things she likes.

“Yes?” says Mr Froggatt.

“I love dance, sir, and jewellery and my cat and my rabbit and seeing my grandparents and going to the beach and I love making sandcastles. And,” says India, glancing round the room, “school and my friends and this great kit I’ve got at home for making wooden animals.”

“Cool,” he says. “Do you need tools to use the kit?”

India grabs a curl and twists it.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I haven’t opened it yet.”

“Well,” says Mr Froggatt. “Let me know when you’ve found out.”

India nods and smiles and says she will.

He asks us to open our exercise books. He wants us to write a poem about things we like. It can be any length, it can rhyme or not, it can be in any form.

“I’m going to write one too. Keep it simple if you want. Food, weather, TV shows. Just think of things that are important to you.”



Tomaz makes a face like it's the last thing he wants to do. Jack puts his hand up and says, "I don't do poems, sir."

Mr Froggatt moves to Jack's desk and looks at his book for his name.

"Well, tell me, Jack – what *do* you like to do?"

"Play football," says Jack.

"I'd like you to make a list," says Mr Froggatt. "Your ten favourite players and the five best games you've watched. Write them all over the page and make some of the letters link up. Like a piece of art."

"Really?" says Jack.

"Really," says Mr Froggatt. He has his own book, with his name on the front. He sits down at his desk with a pencil and starts to write.

I open the book and write 'What I like' on the top line.

I should start with Digger.

India's pencil steams across the lines. She's halfway down the page already. Flo asks for a word that rhymes with bear. Tomaz snaps his lead and then sharpens it over and over until it breaks again.

Philip flicks his pencil across the room. It rolls near Mr Froggatt's desk but Mr Froggatt keeps writing. Then he underlines something and stands up.

We all sit, very quietly, waiting to see what happens. He leans down and picks up the pencil. He walks over to

Philip's desk and puts it very gently on his page.

"Whoops," says Mr Froggatt, and then he walks back to his seat, sits down and picks up his book. "I think I'm nearly there," he says. "Anyone else?"

A few hands go up.

"Couple more minutes," says Mr Froggatt.

Tomaz and I share a look. He holds up his empty page. I show him mine.

And then I think about what I like and I start to write.

### WHAT I LIKE

*I like beans and sausages and my dog Digger  
I like swimming and YouTube and American football  
That's bigger  
Than football  
My dad went to America  
Bought me a cap  
Digger sits on my lap  
I like my room  
I like to sweep up leaves with the garden broom*

Mr Froggatt stops us.

“Anyone want to share?”

“We haven’t really done this before,” says Margo.

“Good time to start,” says Mr Froggatt. “But also, fine not to. Poetry can take you either way. Tell you what, I’ll share mine. Is that OK?”

He waits for an answer. As if someone is going to say no.

“Have you really written one, Mr Froggatt?” asks Flo.

“Of course,” he says. He stands up and walks in front of his desk. “I’ll read it to you.”

**I like to teach  
I like the beach  
I like three sugars in my cup of tea  
Crunchie bars  
Moonlight and stars  
Driving with a view of the sea  
TV soaps  
Climbing ropes  
A steaming hot bubbly bath  
Feeding my cat  
A ball and bat  
Making a stranger laugh**

The bell rings out.

“It’s funny,” says Margo. “I like it.”

“Well, that’s my small offering,” says Mr Froggatt. “Time for break.” We jump to our feet. He claps his hands very loudly and we stop. “But chairs under, desks tidy.” And then Mr Froggatt turns away, as if he doesn’t have to check whether we will do it or not.

We push the chairs under and start filing out. India stops by Mr Froggatt’s desk.

“What’s your cat called?” she asks. We stop and listen.

“James Bond,” says Mr Froggatt. “He’s black and white, like James Bond in his suit.”

“My cat’s ginger,” says India.

“I bet he’s called Marmalade,” says Mr Froggatt.

“No,” says India. “He’s called Ginger.” She runs to catch up with Flo.

“Completely logical,” says Mr Froggatt, to no one in particular.



“How is he?” says Mum.

“Who?”

“The new teacher.”

“Oh.” I cut my chicken into tiny pieces. “Yeah, nice.”

Wacky.”

“Wacky?” says Dave.

I shrug.

“What do you mean?” says Mum.

“He wears bow ties and jumps around and wants us to write about things we like.”

“Oh, not one of those,” says Dave.

“I like him,” I say. Which is true. He’s got Philip sussed. He saw the bogey and made him clean every chair in the room.

Digger scratches at the utility-room door. His big brown eyes stare through the glass. It’s Dave’s new thing. No Digger under the table while we eat. Dave found one golden hair in his roast beef and that was it. Digger was chucked out. It’s not Digger’s fault he moults. Digger has always been under the table. He was there before Dave knew what this table looked like.

“Well, let’s just hope this one stays,” says Mum.

She probably feels the same way about Dave. Let’s hope this one stays, not like Russell, her last boyfriend, who didn’t stay very long at all.

“How many teachers have you had now?” she asks.

“Three,” I say.

“That school’s got problems,” says Dave. He sits back and scratches his bald head.

Dave has never set foot in my school.

“Three teachers in nine months isn’t great,” says Mum. “But it’s not Mrs Jenkins’s fault she had a baby. And Mr Bradshaw... Well, he’s better with the infants really, isn’t he, James?”

I shove a piece of chicken into my mouth. How should I know?

“Our Sean’s school,” says Dave, “was a flagship compared to this wreck. Turns out right clever kids.”

Dave’s son Sean is twenty-one. The only thing I’ve seen him do is drink beer. Which he does a lot. And the only clever thing I’ve seen him do is spin the beer bottle twice in the air, then catch it.

“Maybe we should look at moving him,” says Dave.

I flick a loose pea off my plate. In the direction of Dave. Dave has lived here since Easter and he thinks he can *move* me. First Digger was moved to the utility room and now me. Shipped off to Sean’s old school on the other side of town. I’d like to move Dave. I’d like to move Dave to another country and stick bogeys all over him. Dave could be a bogey sculpture.

People could buy tickets.

*Bogey Dave, Bogey Dave, come and see him if you’re brave...*

I lean down and pick the pea up off the floor, forcing my smile to lie low. I line it up with the others, my little troop of pea rebels.

“There’s only seven weeks left,” says Mum. “Then he’s off to high school.” She lays her hand on Dave’s arm. “Sweet of you to be concerned though.”

“We could ask my cousin Clare too,” says Dave. “They’re looking at loads of schools right now for their little ‘un.”

Did you not hear, Dave? Seven weeks left? Think you might need your ears cleaning out.

“I think we’re sorted, love,” says Mum. “But we must have Clare and her family over soon. How old’s Jake? Three?”

Dave nods.

“You’d like to meet Jake,” says Mum, “wouldn’t you, James?”

I can’t imagine anything worse so I just say, “Can I get down?”

Mum looks at me and I can tell she’s disappointed but she nods.

Dave sits back in his chair and sips his beer.

“Want to watch the footie?” he says to me. “Big game tonight.”

“No thanks,” I say. “I have homework.”

“Wow, homework,” says Mum. “I like it. What’s the teacher called?”

“Mr Froggatt,” I say.

“Great name,” says Mum.

I go to fetch Digger. He stands up when he sees

me coming and his tail goes crazy. I take Digger by the collar and lead him to my room and give him the treat I saved in my pocket. He lies down on the rug and I lean on him and reach over to my bag and take out the homework. Mr Froggatt gave us all an envelope. One each, sealed.

“Find a quiet space,” he had said as he handed them out. “And have a go.”

I open it and pull out a postcard-sized piece of paper. There is a little note attached to it.

Hello!

Mr Froggatt here.

Can you draw me something in your home that makes you smile?

It doesn't have to be a drawing. It could be a photo or a collage.

Have fun! It will be great to see your ideas tomorrow!

I find a pencil from my bag and start to draw. I draw Digger with his long golden fur and his velvet ears and chocolate eyes. And then I need colours so I get my wooden box out. Uncle Bobby gave it to me the Christmas before he died. It has a pull-up section with two layers of pencil crayons. There are shades of every colour and they all have



great names like loganberry and ultramarine. The card he wrote is still stuck to the inside of the lid.

Dear James,  
Always see colour in the world.  
And always go back to the future.  
Love Uncle Bobby xxx

The card makes me smile. We used to play that game where you draw something and your team has to guess what it is. Me and Mum were on his team and he had to draw *Back to the Future*, which was one of his favourite films. He drew the mad professor's hair and Mum got it in a second and we won the game. We ran round the lounge screaming with joy, Digger darting from one person to the other, trying to work out what was going on. Dad and Gran didn't believe Mum had got it just from the spiky hair.

That was a long time ago and it's odd because Uncle Bobby was Dad's brother and Dad can't draw a thing.

I only need four colours. Goldy-yellow for Digger's fur, red for his collar and brown for his eyes. Choosing the fur colour is hard. I go for Aztec gold. And then I add a bit of black for his whiskers and his nose. When I'm done, I slide the drawing in the envelope and put it in my bag and I wonder what Mr Froggatt will do with our postcards.