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House Hunting

A new baby! What was there to celebrate in that?

There were many other things twelve-year-old Edwin Robbins would much rather have celebrated—digging a swimming pool in the back garden, for instance. His parents had raised the subject of a pool quite often over the past year, and Edwin had already secretly drawn a plan of how one could be made to fit into the modest space available. He was going to invite his closest friends, Joe and Dom, round every day during the summer holidays, to splash about in it.

So much for promises and dreams.

“Of course, Edwin is thrilled to bits,” his mother said with sickening regularity. “He almost jumped for joy when we broke the news to him.”

How could she tell such lies? He hadn't smiled once since that black afternoon when they sat him down and told him that his longed-for little baby brother or sister was about to arrive in July—a whining, pooing, demanding creature that was far less fun than a pet.

THRILLED. My armpits! he wrote in giant letters in his diary. The “armpits” phrase was doing the rounds at school at the moment, and it seemed the only word which could begin to sum up his lack of enthusiasm for what was going to happen in three months' time.

Edwin's family celebrated the good news by visiting lots of relations, where the “thrilled to bits” lie was paraded around for everyone to admire. “You'll have to help look after the baby,” said an aunt he now hated. His despair turned into a lump of lead in his stomach when all four grandparents told him he'd have to take a back seat and be a good brother. They never knew how close he was to shouting, “My Armpits!” at them. It wouldn't have done any good, so he just shrank into himself and planned how he could improve his tennis backhand.

At least he could take out his annoyance by hitting tennis balls as hard as possible at Joe and Dom. His parents had always wanted another child, he knew that, but they should have given up the idea when he was six or seven and not waited until he was a near-teenager.

Edwin tried to punish his father by saying, “You're nearly forty, Dad. I'm worried the baby's crying might send you deaf or round the bend.”

Mr Robbins laughed. “Thanks for your concern, Edwin. I survived your constant howling, so I'm sure I'll be all right.”

The visits and congratulations over “the wonderful news” eventually died down, and then there was the second bombshell. They were moving! It was, apparently, vital for this new intruder to have a bigger garden and it couldn't grow up anywhere near a main road.

“I don't want to move,” he told his parents.

“Don't be silly, Edwin. Of course we have to move. The traffic's dreadful these days.”

“But I'm exactly the wrong age to change schools. I heard an expert say so on the TV.”

“You'll still go to the same school. We won't be moving that far away. You'll just have to get up earlier, that's all.”

“Like, about four o'clock in the morning,” he replied sulkily.

Moving house was obviously as set in stone as the birth of the baby, but Mr and Mrs Robbins tried to make Edwin feel better about it by involving him in the choice of their new home.

One Saturday breakfast, Mrs Robbins said, “Dad's going to see some houses this afternoon, just to check the outsides and locations. If there's one that looks really promising, we'll all go and look at the inside next week. I need you to do the groundwork for me and take notes, there's a good boy.”

Edwin and his father set off in the car sometime after two. It was a sultry afternoon, with a storm building, and the heaviness made Edwin irritable before they even drove away. He sat beside his father, with the pile of house details on his lap. Sweat ran down between his fingers and dampened the paper in the shape of his palm. This was swimming-pool weather, and they were going to have a baby instead. The sheer injustice of it made him silent and unresponsive, as his father chatted. But at least they agreed about the unsuitability of the first eleven houses they saw.

“Good thing Mum wasn’t with us,” said Mr Robbins. “She wouldn’t have appreciated all these wastes of time. Shall we just cut our losses and go home, or is number twelve worth a try?”

Edwin knew his mother was hoping for good news on the house front. “Twelfth time lucky,” he said. “It’s called the Beanery and it’s in Duck Pond Road. I’m surprised that didn’t put Mum off. It says, ‘Empty for the past year. Modernization required, but will repay sensitive attention.’ What does that mean, Dad?”

“It’s probably a ruin and the picture’s a lie. But Mum was rather taken with the details, so let’s give it a whirl.”

Soon they were standing outside the Beanery, not knowing what to make of it. With two or three of its neighbours, it was probably all that was left of a village from before the town expanded beyond it. As no one currently lived there, Edwin and his father had no compunction about entering the wild garden and peering through the windows.

“I wonder,” said Mr Robbins when they went around the back, “if... Yes, it is. That’s lucky.”

The padlock on the back door came away in his hand. Well, it gave, after he had twisted it for a bit, and, with no feelings of guilt at all, they went inside.

“I like what I see,” said Mr Robbins as soon as they entered the kitchen, with its red-tiled floor and a chunky beam across the centre of the ceiling. “It has what they call ‘potential’, wouldn’t you say? I can feel myself getting excited, Edwin, and that hasn’t happened with any of the other houses.”

They went round checking what they could see against their printed details. The floorplan turned out to be nowhere as neat as the details suggested, and Edwin had to admit that there was the possibility of fun in a house with two staircases and cupboards in unexpected places.

Mr Robbins paced up and down checking measurements, which Edwin had to write down in a notebook, and he looked all over for traces of rot and woodworm. From time to time he yelped. Edwin thought this was probably a dangerous sign. When Mr Robbins decided on a second tour, yelps still included, Edwin stayed behind in the brightest of the downstairs rooms, writing his own comments to show his mother later. No furniture had been left by the last owner, but Edwin found a comfortable seat on the broad stone hearth.

Leaning his back against the edge of the fireplace, which was made of three more blocks of the same stone, he settled his behind into a shallow dip and made a few inexpert drawings with arrows and labels. As he sat there sketching and writing, a slight fall of soot from the chimney made him start. He looked into the deep grate. It still contained the remains of the last fire lit there, some charred logs and a handful of sheets of paper. What could these sheets of paper tell him about the last owners, he wondered and dislodged one of them with his pen. It had printing on it and was probably no more than a year-old newspaper. Curiosity made him cast his eye over it, all the same, and it turned out to be a series of advertisements, or parts of advertisements, with the charring from the fire obliterating much of what had been written.

Has proved spectacularly useful in locating those who are suspected of being lost in the mists of time, he read.

What an odd thing to write.

Green scabs peel themselves off, apologize and vanish in minutes.

That was even odder. He couldn’t make out the name of the product, but who on earth would need to buy it?

Then there were some “personals”.

If you encounter my brother, please tell him that we have forgiven the fizzing warts.

Edwin laughed. He liked magazines like this, with spoof stories and joke advertisements. He turned to the corner of the page where you could read about *Pen Pals of every taste, shape and length of nose*.

I'd like a pen pal, he thought. One I don't have to write to in French, though. That's too much like hard work.

He set about finding a new imaginary friend, from the brief list that had not gone up in flames. One description in particular caught his eye:

Young creature just learning the ways and how to make up his own mind, seeks equally positive youngster not put off by other family members with revolting habits. They are of that kind, but I'm not allowed to say too much. If all you have to do in the evenings is listen to your own animated thoughts, then drop me a line. Replies may be placed in a convenient chimney and will be responded to unless they fall into the wrong hands. In which case, look out, because I can't be held responsible. Your new friend, perhaps,

L Ghules

Edwin chuckled and tore a sheet of paper from his notebook. On it, he wrote:

Dear L Ghules, My name is Edwin and I am twelve years old. I would have liked a swimming pool, but I am going to take delivery of a baby instead. My current best friends have stopped being sympathetic. It would be very nice to have a new friend when I have got fed up with being a slave. My parents think I am thrilled to bits, but little do they know. I could tell you what I really think, if you like, and you could do the same.

He folded the piece of paper and held it out over the remains of the fire, directly underneath the chimney, meaning to throw it away with the other rubbish. Before he could let go of it, there was a whooshing sound and a brief tug on his fingers. The smile on his face disappeared in an instant, as the piece of paper shot upwards, followed by the distinct sound of machinery—*click*, then *ping*.

Edwin jumped back, and felt absolutely no temptation to look up the chimney to see where the message had gone and why. His brain said it was an unusual air current, probably, but it also said *Get out of there, before anything worse happens*, and so that is what he did.

Well, events took their natural course after that

The baby arrived on time and was called Mandoline. Edwin absolutely refused to say the name in anything but a mutter. Whatever had possessed his mother to call her longed-for second child after a musical instrument? And they didn't buy the Beanery. The “modernization required”, they decided, was far too much trouble, so they settled for a larger house in Grindling Close, a new development a few miles away. It had the big garden his parents wanted and a large, open fireplace in the lounge, over which Mandoline was going to hang her first ever Christmas stocking.

One miserable Saturday morning early in November, Mr and Mrs Robbins took Mandoline out, to display her to a new set of friends. Edwin was allowed to stay at home to “get on with all my homework”, as long as he didn’t spend hours on his phone chatting to Joe and Dom. He sat by the fire, intermittently reading his history textbook and taking in very little about the Wars of the Roses. A sudden skittering sound made him jump.

A fall of soot had dislodged itself from the chimney and landed in a dark shower on the fire. Something else had fallen too; a tiny bundle that must have been travelling with the soot, hit the edge of the fender and bounced in the direction of Edwin’s foot. He picked the object up and was astounded to see that it bore his name, written in the tiniest of crabbed scripts. *For Edwin*, it said and then, *Please read and reply in haste*.

He wiped off the traces of soot that were still clinging to the bundle and turned the object over several times. It was warm, and it also gave off a drizzly pong which he couldn’t flap away. He could have sworn that the lettering glowed—or throbbed, even—to gain his attention. Edwin’s finger found a raised edge, and he was able to prise apart the two halves of what turned out to be an envelope containing a letter. Once it had been freed from its envelope, the single page letter grew until it was about six times its original size. Edwin was both horrified and fascinated. Part of him wanted to throw the weird piece of mail into the fire and the other part wanted to read it and discover who the writer was and how they had come by his name.

He read it, of course.

Dear Edwin,

Thank you so much for your letter. I am sorry it has taken this long for me to reply, but there has been a fault in the chimneys. The wrong sort of smoke, they say. Yours was easily the most interesting letter I received. I’m sorry you haven’t got your pool. I could send you some newts if you like, but they might get burnt if they arrived when there was a fire. Do you like cooked newts? I never have.

I would like to write more but my horrible auntie is due to arrive for one of her visits and I have to find somewhere to hide. Please write soon. The smoke seems all right now.

Your pen-friend,

Lanthorne Ghules

It was then that Edwin threw the letter into the fire and ran out of the room. There was no way that he was EVER going to reply to such a peculiar letter. How could a moment’s thoughtless fun go so horribly, horribly wrong?