

ART & CREW

by Charles Sarland

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For Lloyd
In memory of Tim

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Chapter 1 - The Fight

“Give them back!” yelled Art as he ran, stark naked, across the dormitory floor. Colin Sneerswell, the children’s home bully, held Art’s pyjama trousers up in the air, taunting him.

“Come and get them, blackie!” he yelled, and ran out of the door. Art chased him out into the corridor.

“Come back, the girls’ll see you,” shouted Jamie, one of the other boys, but Art was too angry to care. Colin raced down the corridor and into the loo. By the time Art got there he was locked in one of the cubicles.

“Come and get me, blackie,” he taunted, and Art battered on the loo door.

“Give them back here you bastard!” he yelled, really mad by now; then he saw them sailing over the partition and landing in the next door cubicle but one. He ran in to retrieve them. Luckily only one leg trailed down into the water. And luckily the chain had been pulled, but still when he put them on one leg was soaking below the knee. Colin slammed out of his cubicle and charged up the passage, and cannoned straight into the back of Big Ken Jones, the house parent. By the time Art had squeezed the water out of his trouser leg and had got back Big Ken had Colin in a vice like hold on the back of his neck.

“What’s the hurry?” asked Ken, smiling gently.

“Let go you big poufter!” yelled Colin defiantly, but Big Ken only squeezed harder.

“What was that, I didn’t quite catch?”

Colin wriggled like a worm but he couldn’t escape. “Nothing Ken, sorry Ken, I didn’t mean it.” Big Ken relaxed his grip - just a little.

“And you can stop wriggling, you’re not going to slip away that easily. Now then, what’s all the fuss?”

Colin tried another tack. “It was Macdonald, Ken, he ran down the corridor with nothing on and I went after him to stop him, else he’d’ve been seen by the girls.” Big Ken turned to see Art, and a trail of drips leading down the corridor behind him. Art glared at Colin but said nothing.

“What’s the matter Art?” asked Big Ken.

“Nothing Ken,” he said, but he still looked angry and upset.

“Colin here tells me you’ve been exposing yourself to the elements, not to mention the girls! However you seem to be decent now, if a bit wet.” Big Ken turned his attention back to Colin. “Your eyesight seems to be in need of testing, Art looks perfectly decent to me. You have a lurid imagination Mister Sneerswell, that’s your problem.” Big Ken let go of him, but managed to leave his foot in the way so that when Colin made a dash for safety, he tripped and went sprawling. All the boys who shared the dormitory laughed, they didn’t like Colin any more than Art did.

“Now boys, into bed, and lights out in five minutes,” Big Ken commanded. He gave Art a friendly punch on the arm. “Alright Art?” Art managed a half smile back at him.

When lights were out and Big Ken had gone the row started up again. “You just wait,” Art hissed across the room at Colin. “I’ll get you back.”

“You and whose army?” came the sneering reply. “You going to get big poufter Ken to hold your hand? I’ll get him too after I’ve finished with you.”

“Oh yeah, how you going to do that, he’s bigger than you. Don’t you normally pick on people smaller than you?” That angered Colin so much he leapt out of bed and made a rush at Art. Art was quick and agile, and was out of bed in a flash. They faced each other across the room:- there was plenty of light coming in from the street outside.

“Come on then bully boy, or are you scared,” Art taunted him.

“Not of you, blackie!”

“Come on then, or am I too big for you?” Colin made a rush for Art, who danced aside.

“Come on white pig, can’t you do better than that!” Colin made a wild swing and caught Art on his side. Art saw his opportunity and hit Colin a stinging blow on the cheek. Colin made another rush at Art, knocked him over backwards and sat astride his chest. Art felt the floor boards scraping the skin off his shoulder blades.

“Give up?”

“Not for you, bully!”

Colin grabbed Art’s head by the hair banged it on the floor, hard. Pain exploded in Art’s head like a rocket burst. “Say, ‘I’m a filthy blackie and I’ll do everything Sneerswell tells me to!’” Art drew back his fist as far as he could, and smashed it into Colin’s ear. Colin gave a howl of pain and loosened his hold on Art, enough for Art to push with his stomach and wriggle out from underneath. Colin got up more slowly, but he was not finished yet. He grabbed for Art, caught him by the arm, pushed him up into a corner and started smashing

blows into his chest and stomach, knocking the breath out of him. When Art was bent double Colin got an arm lock round his neck, and put on the pressure. Art could hardly breathe.

“Say it,” Colin hissed in Art’s ear, and for extra persuasion brought his knee up hard into Art’s left kidney. The whole dormitory was gathered round. They had been intensely silent, they didn’t want anyone to hear.

But now Jamie broke the silence. “Kick him!” he yelled. Art brought his heel up with all the force he could muster, and felt it sink home right in Colin’s crotch! Colin cried out in pain, let go, and Art whipped round and smashed him on the nose. As Colin crumpled into the corner, blood spurted out over his chin and down onto his chest. Art stood over him to see if he had any more fight left; but he obviously hadn’t. He made his way back to his bed, the others whispering excitedly around him.

“Well done Art!”

“He deserved it!”

“About time too!”

“Watch out for him in the morning,” Jamie whispered. “He’s mean, and he won’t forget it.” They watched Colin slink back to bed. Jamie was right about Colin, he was mean, and it wasn’t going to end there, not if he could help it. He may not be able to beat Art up but he would find other ways of getting his own back. And that went for that big poufter Ken too. Colin had friends. He’d get them to help. That black kid had better watch out. He’d just better wait and see.....

Chapter 2 - The Dare

The next morning was a Saturday so there was no school, and Art and his mates went down town. There was Tracey, a tall, athletic, white girl. She was as strong as Art and was a better athlete. Art had won the gymnastics cup at school, but Tracey could run faster and jump higher and further.

“You’re as good as a boy,” Art had once said in an unguarded moment.

“Huh, who wants to be as good as a boy, I’m as good as a girl and you boys can get stuffed for all I care!” You didn’t pay Tracey compliments by comparing her with boys!

Then there was Jamie, Art’s friend from the night before. Jamie was a gentle thoughtful boy with fair hair, who seemed very quiet till you got to know him. He stuck by Art through thick and thin, and would always leap to his defence when Art got into one of his many scrapes

Finally there was Sharon, a big strong girl with a temper. It didn’t pay to get on the wrong side of Sharon, and any kid at school who called her a black bitch had ended up with a bloody nose.

They all had some shopping to do and so they agreed to meet by the fountain in the shopping centre when they had finished. Tracey was the first to arrive. She’d got a birthday card for one of her friends at school and a teenage magazine with a sexy picture of her favourite pop star on the front, and she was avidly reading all about him when Sharon turned up. She’d got some felt tips and a horror book from Smiths. She sat down and pulled up the magazine that Tracey was reading to look at the picture on the cover. “Cor, I really fancy him, don’t he look great!” and they were both drooling over him when the boys arrived.

“Not another of your pop stars,” jeered Art

“Well, what’s wrong with them?” said Sharon, “I bet you just got sweets, or wasted your money in that amusement place, and that he just got a model.”

She was right on both counts. Jamie was mad keen on models of old aeroplanes, and had got a Meschersmitt.

“Ah well,” said Art, all secretive, “I bet none of you did what I did.” He paused expectantly.

“Well, tell us then,”

“Well, you see these?” and he pulled from his pocket 4 packets of Polos.

“Well, what about them?”

“I never paid for them. I just took them while his back was turned.” and proudly he handed them a pack each.

“You never!” Jamie was admiring but Sharon was scornful.

“Huh, it’s easy to nick sweets like that, they’re just on the counter in front of you. I bet you couldn’t nick nothing difficult.”

“Bet I could then!”

“Well go on then!”

“What about you? You couldn’t even nick sweets.”

“Huh, who wants to nick sweets? You want to nick something interesting.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Tons of things.”

“Well go on then, I dare you.” While Sharon and Art were having this argument the other two watched with interest. Eventually Tracey joined in.

“You’re just trying to get her into trouble.”

“No I ain’t,” retorted Art.

“Yes you are. What happens if she gets caught?”

“She’s just scared, and you are too,” said Art.

“Yeah, you couldn’t nick nothing,” piped up Jamie loyally.

“You can shut up, pipsqueak!” exclaimed Sharon. “No-one asked you to join in.”

“You’re both scared, you wouldn’t neither of you nick nothing,” shouted Art coming back into the attack.

Tracey repeated herself, “But what happens if we get caught.”

“That’s the whole point, dummy. You have to avoid getting caught.” Tracey was beginning to waver so Art pressed home his advantage. “Go on, I dare you. We will if you will. Something’ really unusual or different.”

“Shall we?” said Tracey to Sharon. She was obviously excited by the idea.

“Yeah, why not. Sounds like a good laugh. But it’s got to be something different, or expensive, something we wouldn’t normally buy.” Sharon too was interested.

“Right, where will we meet?” asked Tracey.

“Not here,” said Art. “The security guards might catch us. How about that bit of waste ground behind the post office.”

“Yeah, okay,” agreed the girls. “In about half an hour.”

* * * * *

The girls were in Boots. “What shall we get?” whispered Sharon. They were just passing the cameras.

“What about one of them?” suggested Tracey. They looked at the rows of cameras sitting invitingly under the glass counter and behind glass doors on the back shelf.

“Nah, too difficult,” said Sharon. “Anyway, what do we want a camera for?”

“Them then,” Tracey suggested. ‘Them’ were huge suitcases, big enough for one of the girls to get into! This made them both giggle, and they gradually became more and more hysterical. First Sharon picked up a large metal tea tray that clanged the moment you touched

it, then Tracey tried a huge teddy bear. Finally Sharon shoved a kettle experimentally under her coat leaving the spout sticking out so that it looked vaguely obscene! Both girls burst into shrieks of hysterical laughter and got a number of disapproving glances from some of the assistants. One of them, a snooty looking man, came up to them and demanded that they should leave if they were only going to fool around.

“Snotty nosed git!” shouted Tracey once they were safely outside the doors, still laughing - and still empty handed.

* * * * *

The boys meanwhile had got into the furniture department of a big store. After they'd been told off twice for bouncing on the beds they wandered through into the lighting department. Art picked up a large lampshade and placed it experimentally over Jamie's head. “You could always put me in a big plastic bag and pretend I was one of them big lamps.” suggested Jamie, and they too started to giggle. But then Art became serious again.

“I bet we could nick a lampshade if we organised it proper,” he suggested. “That would be something to show the girls.”

“How?” Jamie asked.

“Well I could shove it under my coat, and you could walk in front of me so that no-one couldn't see the bulge.”

“But supposing someone stops us and asks us what we're doing? I mean we'd look a bit suspicious wouldn't we.”

“Okay, let's do a dummy run and see what happens,” suggested Art. So they did. Art shoved his hands down into his coat pickets and pushed his coat out so that it bulged suspiciously, and Jamie stood close in front of him so that from the side it looked as if they were attached. Then walking in step they paraded down the shop. They looked pretty stupid and one or two of the assistants gave them funny looks, but no-one said anything. Then they came to the escalator. That was tricky because if they were to stay joined they both had to stand on the same step, as well as both getting on and off at the same time. At the bottom of the escalator an important looking manageress stopped them. “What are you two children playing at? Show me what you have under your coat immediately,” she commanded. Art came the innocent, smiled sweetly at her and said,

“Nothing. Look.” and he opened his coat to show her. “We was just playing, honest.”

The woman gave him a nasty look. “You coloured boys are all the same, quite untrustworthy, and I don't like you in my shop. And as for you,” she added turning to Jamie, “I should be careful about who your friends are. They'll lead you into bad habits if you're not careful.” Both boys were so angry they couldn't speak. Instead they turned and walked away from her. The woman turned, and Art aimed a “V” sign at her back.

“Come on, “ he said to Jamie. “We’ll show that bloody cow!” And they went straight back up to the lampshade department . . .

“Keep watch!” commanded Art.

Jamie looked around. There were no assistants looking their way so he whispered, “All clear.” Art picked up the nearest lampshade and shoved it under his coat. Then, as they had rehearsed, with Art tucked in well behind Jamie, they marched down the shop. The shop assistants paid even less attention this time, some of them even smiled secretly at what they assumed to be some silly game the boys were playing. They got down the escalator alright though it was even more tricky standing on the same step. The lampshade pushed into Jamie’s back and he nearly fell forwards down the steps, but Art grabbed him just in time! When they reached the bottom there was no sign of the manageress and they made their way to the entrance doors. They just thought they were safe when suddenly a door opened near the entrance and out came the manageress again. When she saw them her face flushed with anger and she made straight for them. The boys froze.

“What shall we do?” whispered Jamie in a panic.

“Nothing. Leave it to me,” Art whispered back. He was still angry with the cow and it made him greatly daring. Before she had time to say anything he said. “You gonna pick on us again? I’ll report you to the race relations board and they’ll come and close the shop down. You wouldn’t like to see that in the papers would you? I can just imagine the headlines, ‘Manageress picks on black kids and tells them she doesn’t want them in her shop’.” The woman was clearly taken aback by this, and before she should say anything Art pressed home his advantage. “Do you want to see what we’ve got hidden, like last time?” Jamie gasped. He could feel the lampshade pressing into his back and there was Art almost offering to show the woman! But his trick had worked.

“No thank you,” the woman sneered. “I’m not going to get caught like that again. Just get out of this shop and don’t let me see either of you here again.” Jamie couldn’t believe his ears! They’d got away with it! The moment they were out of earshot of the store they both let out a great cheer and ran jubilantly on down the shopping centre.

* * * * *

By now the girls had calmed down outside Boots. “There was a smashing make-up set on the make-up counter, did you see it?” asked Sharon.

“No,” said Tracey.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” said Sharon, and they went back into the shop, keeping an eye out for the snooty man who’d told them off before. The make-up set sat temptingly open on the counter. It had everything in it, eye liner, lipstick, nail varnish, the lot.

“It’s ever so expensive,” said Tracey in awe, and indeed it was.

“How are we going to get it?” asked Sharon, for both girls had silently agreed that this was what they must have.

“I know,” said Tracey, “I’ll get the assistant to show me some stuff, and then while her back is turned you can slip it into your bag with the book and stuff. They went up to the counter. “Excuse me,” said Tracey in her poshest voice. The assistant turned and smiled at them.

“Yes, can I help you,” she said.

“Yes,” said Tracey. “I want to look at some nail varnish.”

The assistant looked at Tracey appraisingly. “Yes, you’ve got lovely colouring, I’m sure I could find something that would suit you. And what about your friend here? I’ve got just the thing for her.”

‘Oh, no,’ thought Tracey. ‘This is going to be difficult.’ The assistant picked two colours, and offered one to Tracey and one to Sharon. She was right too, the pink that she offered to Sharon set off her dark skin beautifully. Both girls were tempted to actually buy some varnish, and had almost forgotten what they were there for. But Tracey pulled herself together just in time, gave Sharon a meaningful look and turned back to the assistant. “What about that up there?” she asked, pointing to some high up in a display cabinet behind the assistant, and she leant over the counter to shield Sharon so that even if the assistant did turn round she wouldn’t see her. The assistant turned her back on the girls and reached up to where Tracey had pointed.

“No, not that one, the one next to it,” said Tracey leaning over even further. The assistant had a little difficulty disentangling the one that Tracey wanted, but eventually got it and turned back to face the girls. Tracey gave a quick glance at Sharon, and almost gasped in surprise. Sharon was leaning casually with her back to the counter and the make-up set had disappeared! Tracey managed to smile at the assistant, “Oh dear, I’m afraid that’s too much money. We’ll have to come back when we can afford it,” and trying as hard as they could not to run or to giggle, the two girls made their way out of the shop.

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Both the girls and the boys were on their way to the rendezvous behind the post office when both groups realised that they had only got one thing each.

“But what about you, you ain’t got nothing,” said Sharon to Tracey.

“But what about you, you ain’t got nothing,” said Art to Jamie.

“Hang on, I’ve got an idea,” said Tracey to Sharon.

“Hang on, I’ve got an idea,” said Jamie to Art.

When Tracey got back to Sharon she smiled a secret smile, but wouldn't say what she'd got; and when Jamie got back to Art he smiled a secret smile, and wouldn't say what he'd got.

* * * * *

The boys got to the bit of rough ground behind the post office first and sat and waited for the girls, and it was while they were there that Art noticed something. On the other side of the place was the back of a row of shops, and in particular the back of Happy Days Amusement Arcade where Art himself spent a lot of time, and wasted a lot of money! As he watched idly, a white van with 'Electro-Games' written on the side, drew up and two men got out and started unloading one of the machines that they had in the arcade. They put it onto a trolley and wheeled it into the back of the shop. After a bit they came back out again with another machine and loaded it on the back of the van. There was something odd but Art couldn't work out what it was. The van didn't drive off immediately, they seemed to be waiting for something. Then the door opened again, and this time Art did get a big surprise, for out of the back of the shop came Colin Sneerswell with a packet of something which he handed to the men. They drove off and he went back into the shop. What was Sneerswell doing in the back of Happy Days Amusement Arcade? Art didn't have time to answer this question for just at this point the girls came up and they started to examine each other's prizes.

Art was scornful of the make-up box but when Jamie saw how much it cost he was impressed. The girls in their turn made fun of Art's lampshade. "A lampshade!" laughed Tracey. "What can you do with a lampshade?"

"Well you said something unusual, and at least a lampshade is more unusual than a make-up box." The girls had to agree to that, then Sharon said "What you got, Trace?" With a triumphant grin Tracey pulled something out from under her coat. At first sight it looked like some light brown furry object, but then it became clear exactly what it was.

"A wig!" shouted Art in delight. And so it was, a blonde wig that Tracey had snatched off a model's head while no-one was looking. They all tried it on in turn. They all laughed hysterically at Art when he perched it on top of his black curls, but on Jamie it fitted as snug as anything.

"Hey, it suits you," Sharon cried. "You'd make quite a convincing girl!" Jamie promptly started acting the part, putting his arms over his head, slanting his eyes and wiggling his bum suggestively. They all laughed at him, and then Art asked him what he'd got. If they'd all been delighted at the wig they were quite beside themselves at Jamie's prize, for out of his coat Jamie pulled an oblong packet which, upon closer examination, proved to contain nothing less than a large lady's bra! Eagerly they pulled it from the packet and the girls got their hands on it.

“Too big for you, girl!” Sharon teased Tracey, who was notoriously flat chested, then she tried it round herself. “Hm, won’t be long now!” she said appreciatively. Sharon, by contrast was quite well developed in that department. Once the boys got hold of it they really started having fun, cavorting around with it, and the wig. Jamie, who had quite a talent for drama, was particularly funny, waving a bra round over his head and wiggling his hips like he’d seen strippers do on tele.

“I know, said Tracey. We’ll put on a show for all the juniors in the home, and Jamie can do a strip!”

Chapter 3 – Money is Short and a Bum is Revealed

When they got back Art went to see Big Ken because he still had some pocket money owing to him. When he got to Big Ken's office Colin Sneerswell was already there. Art stood outside the half open door. He was in an ideal position to overhear the conversation. "Sid says he's got some more stuff for you." That was Colin's voice. Colin sounded smug, pleased with himself, as if he'd just got an advantage over Big Ken.

"Tell him I don't want any more at the moment. Tell him I can't get rid of it that quick." That was Big Ken's voice.

"Well Sid says I was to tell you that he's depending on you, and that anyway you still owes him money from the last lot." There was a sneer in Colin's voice. "Sid says you got to pay up or else," he concluded triumphantly.

Big Ken got angry. "Don't you threaten me Sneerswell. You tell Sid next time you see him that I don't like getting threats from his errand boys. Now get out before I hit you!" Colin ran out looking scared, almost bumping into Art.

"Watch it, Macdonald!" he exclaimed, as he disappeared down the passage.

Art knocked and went in. Big Ken looked up and grinned when he saw who it was. "Oh it's you Art, I thought it was that creep Sneerswell coming back, demanding money with menaces."

"What do you owe him money for?" Art asked.

"I don't owe him money. He was just bringing a message. Keep the right side of the law Art, otherwise you can get mixed up in things you can't control. Anyway, let's forget about nasty things; what did you want?" Art told him he wanted some pocket money but Ken had run out. "I'm sorry, can you hang on until I can get to the bank? I tell you what, I'll lend you a quid to see you through, how's that?" Big Ken changed the subject. "Do you fancy going down the gym for a workout this afternoon." Art did. Big Ken was a qualified instructor who'd been in the army for three years, and he could put Art through his paces round the equipment. "Tell any of the others who are interested, and I'll meet you down there at half past two, after I've sorted Sneerswell's little friends out."

When Big Ken showed up at the gym that afternoon he was in a good mood. Afterwards, in the showers he was splashing Art and the other boys and they were splashing him back. Art was admiring his muscles. "How long did it take you to get arm muscles like that?" and he flexed his arm next to Ken's. His muscles looked puny besides Ken's.

"Don't worry, you'll get there in your own way," Ken reassured him. "You're built slimmer than me, but if you keep working on the weights like you have been you'll build up just as well." Ken was broad in the shoulders and worked out regularly. As a result there

wasn't an ounce of fat on him. He was big, and well developed, and as strong as a bulldozer, hence his nickname, Big Ken. Art certainly admired him. If he'd had a big brother, Art thought, he would have liked him to be like Big Ken. But it worried him that Big Ken seemed to be in some sort of trouble. Why did Sneerswell seem to have some sort of hold over him? And why did Ken owe some unpleasant friend of Sneerswell's money?

Afterwards Art went into town to play on the fruit machines at the amusement arcade. Most of his pocket money went that way. If he won he would feed the machines with his winnings, hoping he would win again, and if he lost he would go on until he spent all of his money. That afternoon he won the jackpot on one of the machines. He managed to resist the temptation of putting it all back into the machine straight away. Instead he went and played on some of the other machines that involved more skill, and didn't pay anything out, but in the end he couldn't resist going back and seeing if he could win some more. The man behind the counter where you went for change was watching him the whole time, though Art didn't realise it. When he had completely run out of money, and was despairingly going through his clothes to see if any had slipped down into the bottom of a pocket, the man called him over. "I seen you in here a lot ain't I?"

"Yeah," Art admitted.

"D'you want to borrow some money? Pay me back next time?"

Art was uncertain. He didn't like the man, who never smiled or said anything to you. But it couldn't do any harm, he thought. "Alright."

"Tell you what," said the man. "You're at the children's home up the road ain't you?" Art nodded. "Well you could do me a little job and then we wouldn't have to say no more about paying this back. He pushed a pile of coins towards Art, but kept his hand firmly on them. "What d'you say? Is it a deal?"

"What sort of job?" countered Art

"Oh nothing much, just a little errand, there's something I want delivering." The man smiled a lopsided sort of smile at Art that he didn't like at all.

Art couldn't make up his mind. "Er ..." he said.

"Tell you what," said the man, "I'll lend you this and then you can see." The man deftly divided the pile of coins in half, and pushed one half across to Art.

'After all,' he thought to himself, 'I might win on this and repay him straight away.' But that was the last thing that happened, and within half an hour he was as broke as before. "Um," he said going up to the man, "I'll pay you back next time I come in."

"Right you are son," said the man, and gave him another crooked smile that sent shivers down Art's back.

* * * * *

The next day the girls and Jamie were preparing for the show. The children's home had approximately forty kids in it. There were the juniors, who were 9 - 13 years old or so, and there were the seniors, who went up to 16 or even older sometimes. Every now and then the oldest juniors would arrange a show which took place in an old disused shed at the back of the children's home. The shed, which was known as the barn, didn't belong to them, but although it was locked, they had found a way of breaking in so as to leave no trace. The older kids used it to go and smoke, and the juniors used it for midnight feasts and putting on shows. The shows were nothing special, they would have joke telling competitions, sing dirty songs, and do little plays they'd made up. Every one had to sneak out of the home, down the fire escape, and make their way to the barn. They each had to make a contribution to the feast, and take their torches to light up the show. All the windows were boarded up so no-one could see in, and it was far enough away from the house for them to make as much noise as they liked and still be perfectly safe.

Earlier in the day the two girls had taken Jamie up to their dormitory to practise dressing him up. Jamie himself was thoroughly taken with the idea, he'd made Art and the girls laugh, and he was sure he could make them all laugh. And it had been his idea to borrow some of the girls' clothes. First of all Sharon set to work with the make-up set on Jamie's face. When she had finished he looked in the mirror and couldn't believe his eyes! His cheeks were pink, his eyes shone brightly from their dark surround, and his lips glistened. "Give me the wig," he whispered. He put it on and the picture was complete. It was like wearing a mask. He got up and pranced around the room.

In the meantime Tracey had found a top and a skirt, and even a pair of shoes which just fitted him. "Now for the clothes," she said. "Get undressed."

"What, here!" Jamie exclaimed. "Someone might come!"

"Nah," said Sharon, "No-one ever comes up here during the day."

Jamie was reassured and took off his shirt. They padded the bra with socks and knickers and did it up at the back. "How do I get out of it?" he asked..

"You have to reach round and unhook it," said Sharon. Jamie tried. "Not there, down a bit," and Sharon guided Jamie's hands down till his fingers touched the fastening. After a bit of practice Jamie got the hang of it.

"Now the skirt. Trousers off," commanded Tracey. Jamie took his trousers off and stood there in the bra and his underpants.

"Coo, look at them legs, Trace!" exclaimed Sharon, "Real sexy!"

"I bet you've never undressed in front of girls before," Tracey teased him. Jamie said nothing. He was enjoying himself too much! They put the skirt on him, then the top, and finally the shoes - and the picture was complete. To add a ludicrous touch to the whole proceedings he perched the lampshade on top of his head ...

That afternoon Art and Tracey worked on the song they were going to sing while Jamie did his act. They were quite pleased with the result:

You wanna	take	a	trip
You wanna	see	him	strip?
You sit down	on	the	floor.
You better	lock	the	door.
In really	sex	-	y shows
He'll take off	all	his	clothes.
If he gets	real	-	ly rude
You'll see him	in	the	nude.
And now his	skirt	comes	off.
We think you've	seen	en	- ough
But if you	want	some	more
He'll have to	break	the	law,
And if he's	real	-	ly thick
We think you'll	see	his	prick!
But as he's	top	of	the class
You'll only	SEE	HIS	ARSE!

Art took this masterpiece to Jamie, and left it to him to practise his movements. Jamie didn't like an audience - not while he was practising.

That night, after lights out, all the juniors, boys and girls, made their way down to the barn. Art had spread the word amongst the boys, and Tracey had told all the girls. Jamie's act came at the end of the show. Before that a number of the younger kids did things. They had had all afternoon to practice. Two of the girls, Kate and Jaswinder did a dance to the record that was top of the pops, and three of the other girls did a fashion show. Colin Sneerswell tried to clown around, and did take offs of the staff, but only some of the younger boys thought he was funny, every-one else was bored. The twins, Peter and Paul tried to tell a 'naughty' joke but got hopelessly confused, like they always did:-

Peter	There was this woman ...
Paul	No it wasn't it was her cat,
Peter	And she was called 'Titswobble'
Paul	No, you've got it wrong, there was this woman who had a cat called 'Titswobble'.
Peter	And the postman said 'No but I'd sure like to and ...
Paul	No, and she said to the postman, would you like to see, no, um, she lost the cat and the postman said 'Can I see you ...' No ... um ...
Peter	And the cat said, no the woman said have you seen my cat, because she'd lost it, and

They got to the end of the joke somehow, (I'm sure you can work it out for yourselves!) and everybody clapped them anyway. Art had been learning 'T'was on the good ship Venus.' and knew ten verses of that, and was a great success, and then came the grand finale. Art, Sharon and Tracey got into a group on one side to sing, or more like shout the song they'd made up, and Jamie was on the other side behind two packing cases they'd used as a temporary screen. All the torches were turned on to the packing cases. The trio of singers did a warm up in the rhythm,

Da da da Dum Dum Dum

Da da da Dum Dum Dum

... and Jamie emerged from behind the packing cases. The kids all laughed and cheered, and those that could, wolf whistled. Some of the younger ones were not even sure who it was under the wig and all the make up. Just to add the finishing touch Jamie had the lampshade on top of his wig! He minced on to the stage, took off the lampshade and bowed.

You wanna take a trip

You wanna see a strip

sang the trio. The audience shouted "YEAH" at the tops of their voices and Jamie kicked his shoes off. They went flying into the air, one of them landing on Sneerswell's head - everyone cheered again.

You sit down on the floor

You better lock the door

Jamie took his top off and wiggled his bum in rhythm. The kids fell about when they saw the bra, they couldn't believe their eyes!

In really sex - y shows

He'll take off all his clothes

"YEAH" the crowd roared in unison. Jamie undid the bra and ...

If he gets real - ly rude

You'll see him in the nude

..... swung the bra round his head, wiggling his bum even more exaggeratedly. The socks and knickers that had been used to stuff the bra with went flying. Nancy, a popular, plump girl picked up a sock that had fallen in her lap, and holding her nose, flung it back.

And now his skirt comes off

We think you've seen en - ough

"NO" they shouted,

And if you want some more

He'll have to break the law.

Jamie wound himself out of his skirt and stood there dressed only in his underpants ...

And if he's real - ly thick

He'll let you see his prick

Jamie, still facing the audience, started pulling down his underpants! The girls, their eyes out on stalks, shrieked in anticipation, and the boys cheered him on, "Go on Jamie!" "Dare you!"

But as he's top of the class

Jamie pulled down his underpants a little further! Half an inch more and you'd've seen everything!

You'll only SEE HIS ARSE!

Down went his pants, but at the same time he whipped round, stuck his arse out at the audience, and with immaculate timing, let out a rip roaring fart! The audience went wild - they laughed and cheered him, and shouted at him to do it again. Jamie picked up the lampshade , and clutching it to his front to cover his modesty, turned round, faced the audience, bowed, and minced off behind the packing cases to get dressed. Afterwards the four friends congratulated each other. It had been a great success!

Chapter 4 - Interest

The next day, after school Art went back down to the amusement arcade to pay the money back to the man. It had been worrying him all day at school. He hadn't liked the way the man had smiled that lopsided smile at him, so he borrowed a couple of quid from Tracey. When he got there the man greeted him straight away. "Allo, son. Come to pay back our debts have we?" and he smiled his crooked smile once again. Art said nothing, but pushed the money across the counter to the man. "I am sorry, son," said the man, not sounding sorry at all, "but this ain't enough."

Art was surprised. "But I only borrowed a couple of quid."

"Ah yes, I know you did son but you see there's the small matter of interest."

"Interest?" exclaimed Art, "What interest?"

"Fifty per cent per week or part of a week," explained the man.

"You never said nothing about no interest!" Art was indignant.

"Ah well, you see this notice?" said the man, and pointed to a notice on the wall that Art hadn't seen before. It read:

All transactions strictly cash only.

No cheques or credit cards.

No loans.

"There, you see," said the man, pointed at the last bit. 'No loans' it says. And what I done on Saturday was break the rules, see. I give you a loan. Now I could get into a lot of trouble about that couldn't I. I mean you wouldn't want me to loose my job, would you?" The man put a confiding hand on Art's shoulder. Art squirmed but the man tightened his grip till he was digging into his shoulder like a vice. "Would you?" the man repeated.

"No," Art managed to falter out.

"Well, in that case, in order to reimburse me for the risk I'm running, I got to charge you interest, ain't I. Ain't I?" the main reiterated when Art didn't answer, again increasing his grip. Art winced in pain.

"Yeah," he reluctantly agreed.

"Well then, since we're agreed," said the man, "that'll be three quid."

"But that's all I got," Art shouted angrily.

"Well, that's all right," he smiled his sickly smile. "I'll lend it you."

'Oh no,' thought Art. Out loud he asked, "And would I have to pay more for this one?"

"You got it son." said the man. "You catch on fast don't you? Fifty per cent per week or part of a week."

“So you lend me a quid and I have to pay you back one pound fifty? The man nodded.
“That’s not fair!”

“Course it ain’t son. Who said anything about fairness?” Then the man repeated the offer he’d made on Saturday “Of course if you was to do that little job I mentioned the other day then we might find our way to forgettin’ all about it.” It seemed there was no help for it. Art gave in.

“Alright,” he said. “What do I have to do?”

“Just deliver a box of stuff I got,” and from behind the counter the man produced a small cardboard box marked ‘Chocolate. Store in a Cool Place.’ “Now then, all you got to do is to take this to your Mr. Jones and tell him it’s the next instalment from Sid.” Art gasped. So this unpleasant man was Sid, and now he, Art was running errands from Sid to Big Ken! The man looked up, “What’s the matter son, something bothering you?”

“Er .. no,” said Art, and went.

When he delivered the chocolate that evening Big Ken was angry. He was angry with Sid, and he was angry with Art. “How did you get involved with this?” he demanded. Art told him. “It’s bad enough having Sneerswell bloody telling me what to do, without you getting messed up with it too. Just wait until I get my hands on Sid. I told him I didn’t want any more.”

“It’s alright Ken we’ll eat it,” volunteered Art trying to be helpful.

“Eat it?” said Ken, as if he couldn’t believe his ears. And then, “Oh I see. It’s not what you think it is Art, it’s not chocolate.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s better you shouldn’t know,” said Big Ken. “Look, as far as you’re concerned it’s chocolate, right. Sneerswell think it’s chocolate. He’s too stupid to think it’s anything else.” Big Ken was silent for a moment. “God I wish I’d never got involved. Now look, if you can manage it, you keep away from Sid, keep away from the arcade, and above all for Christ’s sake don’t borrow any more money off him.”

“All right Ken,” Art promised, though he doubted that he would keep away from the amusement arcade for very long!

Big Ken smiled wearily, “I’m sorry, Art,” he said, “I didn’t mean to shout at you. I’ll have to go and sort it out once and for all with Sid. And if you’d bugger off for the moment, I’d appreciate it.” Art ‘buggered off’.

Outside he met Colin Sneerswell. “You been running messages for Sid, ain’t you?” he challenged.

“What if I have? It’s got nothing to do with you Sneerswell.” Art was defiant.

“Just you keep out of it blackie. That’s my job and I don’t like no blackies taking it over.”

Art clenched his fists. “I’ll do what I like. It’s none of your bloody business anyway, what I do.”

“Well I’m just warning you, that’s all,” said Colin, “And don’t expect your friend Jones to help you out. I know a thing or two about him and all. So just you watch it. I’m going to get even with you blackie, and with him.”

Art was just about to hit him when Big Ken opened the office door. “Alright you two, break it up. Sneerswell I want you. Come into the office a minute. I want you to take a message for me.” Colin went into the office with Big Ken, and Art went angrily on his way.

The next afternoon after school the four friends were walking back together, when the twins, Peter and Paul caught them up. The twins were unreliable, trouble makers, you never knew which side they were on. This afternoon they were being friendly ... for a price. “D’you want to know what Colin is planning?” Peter asked Art confidentially.

“I ain’t bothered,” lied Art.

“Might as well,” said Tracey.

“How much it is worth?” Paul asked.

“Tell us or I’ll bash you!” Sharon threatened and grabbed hold of him.

“Ow, let go,” Paul whined, and wriggled out of her grasp.

“Two quid.” Peter demanded.

“You must be joking!” Tracey exclaimed. “I bet you don’t know nothing worth that.”

“Bet we do then.”

“20p.” Tracey offered.

“Okay, shan’t tell you.”

“Okay, 50 then, but you ain’t getting no more.”

“Each.” said Paul, ever cunning.

Tracey was about to tell them to get lost when Sharon said, “Half now, and half when you’ve told us.” Tracey handed over the 50p. They all gathered round in a huddle.

“Colin’s going to close the children’s home!”

“Get lost!”

“Don’t be stupid!”

“How’s he going to do that?” asked Art.

It was Paul who answered, “He says he’s got something on Big Ken that’s going to get him in trouble with the law, and Big Ken ain’t going to be able to do nothing about it.”

“You’re making it up.” Tracey accused them.

“We ain’t,” said Peter, “honest.”

“We ain’t giving you a quid for that lot,” said Sharon.

“What’s he got on Big Ken then?” demanded Art.

“He says that Big Ken is buying sweets that are rejects from the factory, and selling them off at a profit and that he’s using our pocket money to do it.”

“Sweets?” Tracey exclaimed.

“Yeah,” said Peter, “chocolate and that.”

“Don’t be stupid!” said Sharon. “In any case, if he’s using our pocket money, how come we always get it every week?”

Again it was Paul who was informative. “Nah, not just pocket money, all the money he gets from social services and that to buy us our clothes and that.”

“I don’t believe it.” Tracey was scornful. “I reckon you’re just making it up. Anyhow, how’s Sneerswell going to prove it? He’s only a kid, like us, and no-one would listen to him!”

“He says he’s got some friends ...” said Peter, but Paul interrupted him. “Shut up, we ain’t supposed to say!”

Sharon caught hold of Paul’s arm. “Tell us, or I’ll twist your arm off.”

“I can’t. He’d kill us!” Peter meanwhile had skipped out of the way. Sharon twisted Paul’s arm harder.

“Ow! Gerroff you cow!” he shouted, and kicked back at Sharon’s shins. Then with a sudden twist he was free, and joined Peter at a safe distance. “What about our other 50p?” he asked. Sharon made a threatening move and they scarpered. All this time Art had been silent. When the twins had gone he told the others about Sneerswell’s running messages from Sid to Big Ken, about the chocolate that wasn’t chocolate and about Big Ken’s comments about wanting to have nothing more to do with Sid.

“I wonder what’s going on,” said Tracey.

“Do you think Colin Sneerswell can really close the home?” Jamie asked.

“I hope he don’t,” said Sharon. “I don’t want to be fostered again.” Sharon’s parents had been killed in a fire when she was three and she’d been fostered twice since then. She hadn’t got on with either lots of foster parents. “Them last lot I was with was awful. She was a right old cow and he never had no money. He lost it all gambling.” Then suddenly she had an idea. “That’s it” she said, “dogs!”

“Dogs?” they all exclaimed.

“Yeah, dogs. The bloke I was fostered with was always losing money on the dog racing, and there was always some bloke coming round and threatening him if he didn’t pay up. I bet that’s what this Sid is, a bookie.”

“But he works in the amusements,” protested Art.

“Well, it’s still gambling ain’t it. It’s the same thing. I bet that’s what it is.” Art wasn’t sure, but the other three were inclined to agree with Sharon. After all it was the best explanation they could think of. The next day, Wednesday, something was to happen to confirm Sharon’s suspicions, and make them wonder if at least part of Sneerswell’s story was right.....

Chapter 5 - An Unusual Competition, an Odd Conversation, and a Row

Big Ken was responsible for all the financial side of the home, and the girls had to approach him, rather than Lorna Williams, their house parent, when they wanted any money. So it was that Tracey and Sharon found themselves at his office door on the Wednesday evening, to see if Tracey could have some money for a top she'd seen in the shops the previous week. Normally, once he knew what the girls wanted money for he gave it them without any problem. This time it was different. "Come in," he called when they knocked at the door.

Tracey came straight to the point, "Can I have some money, Ken?"

Ken immediately looked worried. "What for?" he asked.

"I seen this smashing top down the shops, really smart it is and it's only twenty quid."

"Well it's a bit difficult at the moment," said Ken. "We're rather short of money in the account because Social Services are being a bit stingy at the moment."

"They can't keep our money," said Tracey. "It's ours!"

Sharon chipped in. "That's right. It's ours by right. They can't hang on to it."

"Well I can't help that," said Ken.

"Tell you what," said Tracey, "you give us the money and get it back off social services. You tell them they got to pay."

Suddenly Big Ken lost his temper. "For Gods sake don't argue!" he shouted. "I haven't got the money and that's that. Now get out before I do something I shall be sorry for."

Outside the door the girls were indignant. "It's not bloody fair. I need that money for that top. Anyway it's my money."

Sharon was sympathetic. "Hey, I bet he's nicked the money, like the twins said."

Tracey was inclined to agree, "If he has I'm going to get him. How could we prove it?"

"You could always ring up social services and find out."

"Hey that's a brilliant idea Sha. Lets do it now." After trying rather fruitlessly to find the number they gave up, realising that in any case it was rather late and that there wasn't anyone likely to be there. They decided to try the next day in the lunch hour. That way they could ask their form teacher for some advice about how to go about it. She was one of the nicer teachers, and providing they caught her in a good mood they thought she might be some help.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Art was preparing himself for the big event of the evening, and he was doing it by drinking gallons of water! That night was the monthly peeing competition! One of the senior boys, a rather unpleasant character with spots called Jeff Spurgeon, was the organiser and he turned up after lights out with tape measures and stop watches to judge the winner. The peeing competition took a variety of forms. There was the height competition. The

winner of that was the boy who could pee the highest up the wall of the urinal. The older and taller boys had a natural advantage at this. Then there was the accuracy competition. The target was generally one of the green corroded bolts that held the urinal to the wall. Both these competitions were strictly no hands, or any other support from clothing come to that! Finally there was the timed pee. The record holder was Guiseppi Lombardi who had managed to sustain a pee for no less than two minutes five seconds! He had prepared himself by drinking four and a half pints of water in the previous two hours, and had been almost bent double in agony before the competition started that night! He had even written to the Guinness Book of Records, claiming it as the world's longest pee, but he'd never had an answer!

This evening was a height competition. Art was the favourite, though his biggest rival was Guiseppi once again. Art had won the previous accuracy competition, and had been practising for the height competition. The secret was to drink enough to build up the pressure. Then, when the time came, you had to get your feet well back, your hips well forward, and bend over backwards so that the pee shot almost vertically upwards and came down in an arch. You then had to position yourself carefully so that it hit the wall at the top of its trajectory. This evening the boys had drunk gallons of water around bedtime. The trouble was you never knew when Spurgeon was going to come round. He had to make sure the duty staff were well out of the way for one thing. If he was late, like he was tonight, some of the boys found it difficult to hold on. "Cor, I'm dyin' to go!" Peter's voice eventually emerged out of the darkness. "I hope he hurries up."

"Me too." That was his brother.

"You'll have to tie a knot in it," advised Guiseppi Lombardi, and this made the twins giggle.

"Don't make us laugh, we'll wet ourselves!" Paul pleaded.

It was always a good idea to weed out the competition early, so Art chipped in with, "Then you'll be piddling all the way down the corridor!"

There was a shout of laughter from Peter immediately followed by a cry of dismay, "Oh no, I'm doing it!" There was a fluffle of blankets as he flung back the bed clothes, raced for the door, flung it open, and scampered down the passage, clutching himself to hold it in! Paul followed close on his heels. They came back with seraphic grins of relief on their faces, but they were out of the competition for this time. By now some of the others were getting a bit desperate too but they hung on. There was a cash prize for the winner which could sometimes be as much as three quid, that Spurgeon dug up from somewhere, and they all wanted a chance of winning. At last he turned up, and they belted for the loos. Art came down much more slowly. He didn't dare go any faster for fear he'd lose control! Thus by the time he got there, there was already a row of boys standing, their pyjamas round their ankles, with their backs to him. There wasn't room for everyone at once in any case.

Suddenly, at the sight of all these behinds Art had an irresistible idea. Forgetting this competition, the money, and everything, he decided to give in to it. So while the unpleasant Spurgeon was lining them up, and getting ready to start them off, Art himself dropped his pyjamas and got into position behind them. He leant over backwards slightly, and taking careful aim, let rip just as Spurgeon was saying "Ready" Colin Sneerswell was the first to receive the full force of Art's attention, right up his arse! He gave a cry of surprise and turned round just as Art changed his aim. With devastating accuracy, and the fullest force at his command Art sprayed each of the seven bums that were facing him in turn! The chaos that followed was indescribable. Cries of indignation and anger, followed, in most cases, by guffaws of laughter. And if you can imagine a loo full of boys, all dying to pee, laughing fit to burst, it will not surprise you to learn that a number of them did so - burst that is. In the 'water fight' that followed very few escaped a wetting. And the floor didn't long remain dry either. Only one boy didn't join in, and that was Colin Sneerswell. It was exactly the sort of thing he wished he'd done. Trust Macdonald to think of it first. So, suddenly, at the height of all the fun he called out, "Someone's coming!" It was a false alarm of course, but they weren't to know that, and gathering themselves hastily together, they fled. Only Sneerswell and Spurgeon were left.

"Bloody hell, we're going to have to clear this up," said the older boy. "Here, Col, I'll give you the prize money if you'll stay and help us." Colin did not return to the dormitory for some while... After tonight he was even more determined to get even with Macdonald. First of all he'd been beaten by him in a fight. Then he'd found he'd started muscling in on whatever racket was going on between Sid and Big Ken. And now this.

* * * * *

The next morning Art and Jamie told the girls all about the events of the night before. "You should've seen Spurge's face," Jamie said. "He didn't know what had hit him! There was fresh laughter at this and then a pause.

Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, Tracey said, "I bet he doesn't write it."

"Who?"

"Write what?"

"What you talking about?"

Tracey explained, "The author, the writer bloke what's writing this story."

The others look puzzled. "What you on about, girl?"

"Listen dumbo, we're all in a book ain't we."

"Suppose so." They hadn't really thought about it.

“Well, if we’re in a book, someone must be writing it, right?” They agreed. “So what I’m saying is, I bet he don’t put it in, about the peeing competition and that. I mean they never put things in like that do they?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” suggested Art.

“Alright:- hey mister!”

Authors voice: “Who me?”

“Yeah you. I just said I bet you ain’t put in about the peeing competition.”

Authors voice: “I have, you’ll see. When you come to read it you’ll find it’s all there.”

“It better be. I mean it’s just the sort of thing readers like us like to read about, but it ain’t never normally there.”

Authors voice: “Don’t worry about it. I thought it would be fun to read about so I put it in.”

“Good,” said Tracey.

* * * * *

By lunch time that day the girls had worked out what they needed to do to find out about the money. Miss Farmer, their form teacher had suggested they ring County Hall and ask for the Treasury Department, Social Services Division. They hadn’t told her the real reason; they’d said they were doing a research project on the funding of the children’s home for their humanities project. So armed with a good supply of 20p’s they’d gone out and found a phone box. Much to their surprise they got put through to the right department with no difficulty. They decided to stick up their cover story.

“We’re pupils at Alfred Tennyson School,” Tracey explained in her poshest manner “and we’re doing a project on how the children’s home is paid for.”

“Yes. What do you want to know?” The lady on the other end sounded helpful.

“Well we want to know how much money the children are supposed to get for their clothes and things.”

“Let me see, ah yes, here we are: ‘The clothing allowance for the present year: Two hundred pounds per child, payable in four instalments of fifty pounds.’” The lady sounded as if she was reading something official.

“And can you tell me,” said Tracey “whether there has been a recent reduction in the amount?” (She was so pleased with her last sentence that she nudged Sharon in the ribs, and Sharon mouthed ‘recent reduction in the amount’ back to her. They both nearly spoilt it by giggling!)

“Oh no.” said the lady.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite certain. In fact the last instalment went out only three weeks ago. I signed the cheques myself.”

“Thank you, said Tracey. “That’s all we want to know at the moment,” and put the phone down. She told Sharon what the woman had said.

“So Ken was lying!” exclaimed Sharon. “Maybe Sneerswell’s right then and he is nicking our money.”

“It certainly looks like that. But what’re we going to do about it?”

“We could always tell on him.”

“Yeah, but who to? I ain’t goin’ to the police. They wouldn’t believe us for one thing.”

“Nah, anyway you can’t trust them.”

“We’ll have to see what the others think,” said Tracey.

Sharon agreed. “Except you know what Art’s like about Big Ken. Won’t hear a word said against him. Thinks the sun shines out of his arse.” Sharon was right about Art, as the girls were to discover.

* * * * *

Though Art had made his promise to Big Ken about keeping away from the arcade in all good faith, he’d always know he’d soon give in. Thus that afternoon, after school, he found himself back down there. He’d won some money on the fruit machines and was playing a video game where you had to bomb targets before you got shot out of the sky.

There was a gap to one side of the machine, with wires trailing out of the wall, and a small number 4 on the blue peeling paint, and the machine on the other side of him had ‘Out of Order’ stuck on it. The game beeped at him, and a caption came up. “Well done! You have just scored your personal best. Do you want another game? Art was just about to hit the ‘Yes’ button when the two men he’d seen last Saturday came in from the back. They had with them a small trolley on which was the machine they’d removed last time. They wheeled it across to the gap next to Art. “Number five this time?” asked one of them.

“And number six,” said Sid, who’d been propping up the counter as usual. The men unloaded the machine, attached it to the wires and pushed it into position. Then to Art’s surprise they turned to the machine he was playing on.

“But there’s nothing wrong with this one,” Art protested.

“Shut it son, if you don’t want to get hurt.” He gave Art a nasty look. They unplugged the machine and pulled it out, revealing a little figure 5 on the wall, hoisted it on to the trolley and wheeled it out. Art moved on to another machine, but kept half an eye out for what was going on. The men came back for number six, which turned out to be the one with ‘Out of Order’ on it.

“Christ almighty, what you got in here? Weighs a bloody ton,” one of the men complained.

“That’s special delivery,” said Sid. “Take it gentle. Don’t want to damage the cargo.” Sid gave Art a glance and then looked at the man as if to say ‘I can’t say no more with the kid here.’ The men manhandled the machine on to the trolley and set off with it. As they were going out one of them said, “Nine o’clock on Saturday, right. The boss says you got to keep turnover high, he’s got a new assignment come in.” All this time Art had been listening hard, trying to make sense of it all. Then he suddenly remembered what had puzzled him last Saturday. The machine they’d taken away them, number four machine, had been perfectly alright too. He’d only been playing on it the previous day.

They all four met that evening and discussed the day’s discoveries. Art told them about the mysterious goings on with perfectly good machines being taken away for servicing. “I mean why would they want to waste money repairing machines that didn’t have nothing wrong with them?”

“I dunno Art.” Tracey and Sharon were impatient with him. “I expect they just do it on a rota. They take each one when it’s its turn. Don’t matter whether it wants repairing or not. Anyway,” said Tracey, “I’m sure it ain’t got nothing to do with Big Ken,” and she went on to tell the boys what had happened about trying to get money for clothes, and about their phone call to the treasurer’s department.

“So Ken was lying,” Sharon concluded triumphantly. “I reckon he’s into this Sid bloke for what he owes him on the dogs or the horses and that, and that he’s pinching our money to pay him.”

Art was on the defensive immediately. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?” Tracey demanded to know.

“He just wouldn’t, that’s all. He’s not that sort of bloke.”

“Look, Sneerswell tells the twins Ken’s been nicking our money, right.” Patiently Sharon tried to explain to him. “You go to get some pocket money off of him right, and he ain’t got none. We go to get some money for clothes off of him, right, and he still ain’t got none.”

“And he lies about not getting it from social services,” Tracey chipped in.

“Yeah. And he’s into this Sid for something ’cause of what he said to you, and ’cause we know Sneerswell’s been running message between this Sid and Ken, right. So it all adds up don’t it. Sid’s into Ken for his money, right, and Ken’s got short so he’s nicked it.”

“Yeah. And the question is, what we going to do about it?” Tracey finished off.

It did all seem to add up but Art wouldn’t have it. “You’re just wrong, that’s all.” he said in desperation.

“Just ’cause you’re his favourite, I knew you’d stick up for him.”

“It’s not!” Art was almost incoherent with frustration and anger. “Just ’cause you want to wear fancy clothes so as you can show off in front of everyone don’t mean Ken’s nicked your money. Social Services could be lying for all you know. What about that treasurer person, I bet she’s nicked it.”

“Don’t be stupid. What’d she want to nick it for? Anyway,” Tracey continued, “what about that motorbike he bought last year. I bet he nicked the money to buy that and all.” (Big Ken had surprised them all the year before by turning up with a gleaming new bike.)

“It was second hand, so there,” Art yelled passionately. “That just shows how much you don’t know. Anyway he’d saved up for it.”

“Yeah, out of our money,” Tracey yelled back.

“It wasn’t, it was his own. Anyway it just shows what a cow you are even to think that!”

“Don’t you call me a cow, black boy! Just ’cause you’re his favourite, black pigswill!”

“Sod off. I ain’t never going to bloody talk to you again so you can just get stuffed!” and Art swung on his heel and stormed out of the room.

There was a long pause after he’d gone out, then ... “Told you,” Sharon said quietly. The row effectively brought an end to the meeting, and they were no further forward. Jamie knew Art of old when he got into a mood like this, and decided to leave him be. And the girls had temporarily lost interest in trying to solve their problem. Art meanwhile went off on his own to let his temper cool down, and to think. He knew in his bones that the girls were wrong about Ken. The trouble was how to prove it. Art admired Ken, and trusted him implicitly. The only thing was to go and ask him. Ken wouldn’t lie to him, Art knew. The girls had been wrong when they said that Art was Ken’s favourite. Art didn’t get any special treatment. It was just that Art liked Ken, and he felt that Ken liked him back. Just because someone was grown up didn’t mean they couldn’t be your friend. He went in search of Ken then and there, but it was his night off, and he was nowhere to be found. He would have to wait till tomorrow.

Chapter 6 – Where's Big Ken?

The next morning Big Ken was still not there and the rumour quickly spread that he had disappeared. Lorna Williams, their house mother, was obviously very harassed at breakfast, and she gave curt answers to the many questions she was asked. "I don't know where he is. All I know is that he should be here and he isn't."

Events moved swiftly after that. By lunch time the police were there, and all the children were brought home from school to answer their questions. Tracey and Art were still not speaking, but the girls told Jamie what they had decided to say, and Jamie told Art. What the girls had in fact decided to say was as little as possible. Initially Tracey had been for telling the police everything, all their suspicions and everything, but Sharon rapidly talked her out of it. "Look, for one thing they're grown up, right. And that means they won't pay no attention to what two kids have to say will they. They'll think we're making it up. And for another thing they're cops, right. And that means you can't trust them. One minute they're all nice to you, just 'cause they want to get something out of you, and the next they're telling you off for something you ain't done." Sharon had had experience, and Tracey had to admit the justice of her arguments. "In any case," Sharon concluded, "they'll only want to know when we last saw him, and where he was going and that."

Art has his own reasons for keeping quiet. He was convinced Ken was in some kind of trouble, and if the police got any inkling of it, it could make things worse for him. In fact Sharon had been right. All the police wanted to know was when they had last seen Ken. And at the end of the interview the sergeant asked each of them in turn if they had anything to add, and each of them said no. Colin Sneerswell however had no such feelings, and when the sergeant asked him if he had anything to add he had plenty.

Art was in the loo later on when Sneerswell and the twins came in. He slipped quickly into one of the cubicles before they saw him, in the hope of picking up some useful information, and he was in luck. Colin was mouthing off as usual. "Hey fans, guess what I told the fuzz."

"Hey, what?" Peter's voice.

"I really done old Jonesey this time. I told them he'd nicked all our money and had run off with it."

"Cor Col' you never." The twins were impressed.

"And I told them where he went with it, 'cause I saw him yesterday afternoon."

"Weren't you in school?" Paul asked.

"Nah. Bunked off didn't I?"

"You didn't tell the fuzz that did you?"

“Course not!” Colin was scornful. “I told them I was running a message for the headmistress didn’t I? Any way I saw old Jonesey going in the back of Happy Days Amusement Arcade didn’t I? He’s done a bunk, and taken all our money with him.”

“Will he get done?” one of the twins asked excitedly.

“Course he will. He won’t be coming back here.”

“That’s what” Art didn’t hear any more as the three boys went out. Now it was urgent to find Ken. If the police believed Sneerswell’s story then Ken could be in even more trouble. And obviously the place to start was the arcade. Art made his plans secretly. There was no point in telling the girls, they weren’t interested in protecting Ken anyway. And Jamie, although Art knew he would be loyal, was clearly not convinced of Ken’s innocence either.

After they left the toilets Colin and the twins made their way to the barn. Colin had nicked some cigarettes from the corner shop and was planning to sell them to the twins at 20p a fag. Colin had only just started smoking himself, and the twins didn’t smoke at all, but little matters like that didn’t worry Colin. He had unpleasant methods of persuasion all his own. On the way over to the barn, however, Peter made a fatal mistake. “We told Macdonald and them you was going to do Jonesey.” Paul tried to shut him up but it was too late.

“You what!” Colin exploded and grabbed hold of Peter round the collar.

“I we” Peter spluttered.

“You told Macdonald!” Colin kneed Peter in the thigh with considerable force, giving him a dead leg. “What you wanna tell him for!” Colin made a fist with one finger joint protruding and punched Peter full force, producing an lightning flash of pain all the way down his arm. Paul made a half hearted attempt to pull Colin off his brother and Colin flung back with all his might, his fist still clenched, catching Paul smack across his eye and down the side of his nose. Paul was knocked down by the force of the blow and lay whimpering on the ground. In the meantime he smacked Peter against the barn wall and pushed his clenched fist into Peter’s throat. “Don’t never go running off to that poufter Macdonald, got it?” and he applied pressure with his fist. “Got it!” he shouted again. Peter managed to croak something. Colin relaxed the pressure a bit. “You do what I tell you, and nothing else right, or I’ll smash you. Got it?” Peter gulped and managed to nod.

“You as well!” and he lashed out with his foot at Paul, catching him a glancing blow.

“Yeah, Colin, honest,” Paul cringed.

“Right, I want 50p for these fags.” Without a word the twins handed over the money and made their escape. Peter with a couple of extremely painful bruises coming up on his arm and his leg, and Paul with a rapidly developing black eye.

That evening Art made his plans quietly. If he was going to explore Happy Days Arcade he was going to have to break in. In his imagination he thought he might find Ken there, in a drugged sleep, tied up and lying in a bundle in the corner of some back room. So he took a

knife and a torch, and a screwdriver to force the door with. He planned to wait until everyone was asleep, and then raid the kitchen for something to eat and drink in case Ken needed reviving. He sorted out an old army knapsack to carry everything in.

That night everyone seemed to take years to get ready for bed. Art hid his clothes down his bed along with everything else. It looked a bit lumpy but he untidied the blankets to hide it. Then he himself got ready for bed as normal. Once lights were out he sat up in bed in order to stay awake. He didn't join in the talk that went on between the others, but listened as one by one they fell asleep. Finally only Guiseppi Lombardi was left awake apart from Art.

"Hey, is anyone awake?" Guiseppi asked quietly. There was no answer from the others, and Art himself kept quiet. At last Art heard gentle snores coming from Guiseppi's direction too.

"Guiseppi?" Art asked quietly.

No reply

"Pete? Paul? Colin? Jamie?" he asked in turn.

No reply.

Art felt free to start moving. He disentangled his clothes from the bottom of the bed and got dressed. He sorted out his knapsack and, under cover of his bedclothes, switched on his torch and looked at his watch. It was 11.30 - still too early. He planned to move at 1 o'clock. He lay back against his pillows and set himself to wait. It was almost a fatal move. Art heard the church clock across the road strike a quarter to, then he heard nothing more

He woke with a start. What time was it? It was still dark at least. He was stiff from having fallen asleep half sitting up, and his mouth felt dry and parched. He scrabbled around and looked at his watch. 2.15! He'd have to move. In a moment he was out of the bed and putting on his trainers. He tiptoed down to the kitchen, grabbed half a pint of milk from the fridge and swigged it down; found a couple of cans of Coke on the side and slipped them into his bag; found a tin full of biscuits and grabbed two or three handfuls, and let himself out the back. He'd chosen dark clothes - black trousers and sweater - only his trainers showed up pale so he smeared some dirt on them. He set off down the road.

Art kept to the dark patches between the streetlights. Even at this time in the morning there were one or two cars about but they paid no attention to him. Only once did he have a scare as a police car went past. Luckily he'd seen it from a fair distance and slipped into an alley way. After 20 minutes or so he was near the shopping centre. He kept his eyes skinned for more police. Now he had to be really careful. Here was the post office. He slipped down the alley at the side of it into the welcoming dark. Then on to the waste ground behind it. The uneven ground created great pools of darkness. Art daren't use his torch for fear of drawing attention to himself. Straining to see where he was putting his feet, he stumbled his way across the waste ground towards the back of Happy Days Arcade. 30 yards to go... 20 ... 15 ...

There was a stretch of ground brilliantly lit between him and the dark back wall of the arcade. Just at that moment he saw another police car on the road beyond the arcade. He dived for the nearest dark patch and crouched there trembling. The police car went past. Drawing himself together he made a final dash across the brightness and flung himself, panting and safe, against the back wall of the arcade. He regained his breath, and then started to explore.

There was a back door to the arcade, it was the door the men had moved the machine in and out of. Art soon found it, and risked using his torch to see how it was fastened. There was an ordinary keyhole and a yale lock. Art got his screw driver and knife out of his bag and set to work. First he tried slipping the knife in beside the yale lock, but he couldn't get it in far enough. Then he tried the screwdriver. He could get more leverage with this, but still the door didn't shift. He examined the frame, passing the torch light round it. There was one place that looked possible and he used the screwdriver again. This time he managed to lever out a bit of the frame that was rotten and it fell with a light thud to the ground. He froze, but there was no-one about that he could hear. He set to work again but the frame was now solid. He used the knife to try and cut the frame but he only managed to cut little chips of wood out. He began to realise that he was going to be a long time if he went on working at the door. He stepped back from the building and looked at it to see if there was any other way.

The arcade was a single storied building with a flat roof, but it was on the end of a row of shops all of which had two stories. If he could somehow get onto that roof perhaps he could get in. Then suddenly he remembered - there was a skylight. Now he knew he must get onto that roof. The trouble was he could see no obvious way up. He looked around for a drainpipe, there was none at the back. He peered round the side of the building, there was the drainpipe, right at the front and in full view of the road. He couldn't risk that. He looked at the next door building that was joined on to the arcade. Yes, there was another drainpipe, but at the wrong side. However he reckoned if he could get up on to the upstairs window ledge of the shop next door, he might just be able to make a jump for the flat roof. It was worth a try anyway. He grabbed hold of the drainpipe and gave it a pull. That was firm enough. With his bag over his shoulder he shinned up the pipe - it was easier than the ropes in the gym - until he was level with the upstairs windows. If he could just get his foot across on to the window ledge Yes!! Then reached across and up with his hand for the top of the window frame - would it give him a secure handhold? It did. He inched his way across, and reached the second window. He stretched first his foot, then his hand, and he was on to the second window, and across that. Now was the most difficult part. He had to swing himself out and jump round the edge of the building onto the flat roof. He pushed himself out until he was just hanging on by his finger tips and toes. Then with an almighty spring he leapt ... and was safe on the flat roof!

He immediately realised he was fully lit by the nearby street light, and dropped on to his stomach. He worked his way over to the skylight and examined it. It was like an upside down V – a ridge sticking up - and on each side of the ridge there was a window that could be opened with a long pole from inside. One window was tight shut but the other was loose. Art peered through it to see if he could see how it fastened. The catch looked simple enough. Getting out his knife he worked it between the window and the frame. Keeping as low as possible he peered over the top to see where the knife blade had got to. If he just moved it along a bit he would be up against the catch. There! That was it ... now push. Art pushed but nothing happened. He moved around to get a better leverage and pushed again. This time he felt a movement. A bit harder ... the catch suddenly gave, the window lifted, and his knife fell down with a clatter inside the arcade. Quickly he opened the window, swung his legs over, and, grabbing the edge with his hands, dropped down until he was dangling, his feet kicking around trying to find some purchase. He felt something, presumably the top of one of the machines. He let go and half fell and half slid on to the floor. He was in! He picked himself up, found his torch, and switched it on, rescued his knife and started to explore. Some light came through the front windows from the street so he used his torch sparingly. In any case he didn't expect to find anything in the front where all the machines were, he was interested in exploring the rooms at the back. He went round the back of the counter - there was nothing there, and opened the door that led through to the back.

If Art was hoping to find Big Ken through there, bound and gagged, he was sadly disappointed. There was a short empty passageway that led to the back door. One door led off one side into a loo and another led in to a room that contained a rickety old table, a chair, a sink, a kettle, a couple of dirty cups, several dirty milk bottles beginning to smell, and a three quarters empty jar of coffee. And that was all. No Ken. No body. No cupboard even in which you could hide a body, nothing. Art was in despair - all that energy and work for nothing. He collapsed on to the chair and wondered what to do.

Chapter 7 – Where’s Art?

When Jamie woke up the first thing he noticed was that Art was gone. When he hadn’t turned up at breakfast he quickly got together with the girls. “Art’s disappeared,” he told them.

“What d’you mean, disappeared?”

“Gone,” said Jamie. “He wasn’t there when I got up this morning, and now he hasn’t turned up at breakfast.”

“I bet he’s run away,” said Tracey.

“But why would he do that?” Sharon asked. “Anyhow, where would he go?”

“He’ll have gone after Big Ken.” Tracey said suddenly, and the other two realised she was right. At that point Colin Sneerswell came up.

“I bet I know what you’re talking about,” he jeered. “You want to know where Macdonald is don’t you?”

“Well... So... What’s it to you?” said Tracey.

“I bet I know where he’s gone, and I ain’t telling you.” Before they had time to react he was off.

“What’s he know?” said Jamie scornful. “He’s just all mouth as usual.”

“I don’t know though,” said Tracey. “He might just know something. I wonder how we can find out.”

“I know, the twins!” they all three said at once.

They found the twins in the junior’s room, a room that they all used as a common room. When the twins saw the three of them bearing down on them they looked apprehensive. Paul’s black eye had come up a treat, and he wasn’t anxious to get another one, and Peter was feeling decidedly sore after the beating up Colin had given him. Tracey decided to be nice to them to see how far that got her. “Hey, how did you get that black eye?” she asked Paul.

“I ain’t going to say.”

“Why? Did Sneerswell give it you?” Jamie guessed.

“How did you know?” Peter asked “And he got me too,” and he pulled up his sleeve to show them the bruise.

“What did he do that for?” Tracey asked.

Peter, ever ready to spill the beans, told her. “It’s ’cause we was talking to Macdonald, and you lot. He says we’re not to tell you nothing else or he’ll do us.”

“Nothing else about what?”

“About Jonesey...” Peter started, but Paul interrupted.

“We ain’t going to say.”

Sharon, rightly judging that Peter was the weak link, grabbed him. “Oh yes you are! Now which arm was it that had that nice bruise on it?” she asked, clenching her fist. Peter

capitulated, and soon told her all he knew. About how Colin had told the police all about Big Ken nicking the money, and about how he'd seen Big Ken going in to the back of Happy Days Arcade on Thursday afternoon. When they were satisfied that the twins had no more to say they let them go.

"Right," said Tracey. "We're going to have to go down that arcade." And the others agreed. It was a little while before they were able to get away however. It was Saturday morning, and every one had to do their share of the chores, and Lorna wouldn't let them go before they'd finished. They got away at last and raced down town as fast as they could go. When they got to the arcade there was a surprise in store for them, it was shut!

"But it's the middle of Saturday morning," Tracey protested.

"Can't help that," said Sharon, "it's shut. There ain't no-one here."

"Let's see if there's anyone round the back," Jamie suggested. They went round the back but the back door was shut and locked too. There was no sign of anything except a beat up old Bedford van just pulling away. They paid it little attention till it passed them. Then Jamie suddenly exclaimed, "Sneerswell!"

"What?"

"Sneerswell! In that van! Sneerswell! I saw him!"

* * * * *

A lot had been going on in the amusement arcade since we left it. Art, if you remember, had drawn a blank in the room at the back. In order not to waste his torch battery he went back into the front where there was some light coming in from the road. He sat down to think. He dug some biscuits out of his bag, and opened a can of coke. He knew from the conversation that he'd overheard, that Big Ken had come into this place on Thursday afternoon. Since then, so far as he knew, no-one had seen him. So Sid and his mates must have done something to him, or smuggled him out in some way. But how? Art looked gloomily around. Was there some clue amongst these familiar machines standing silently in the gloom? One was already pulled away from the wall ready for collection next morning. Number seven this time it should be. Art finished his coke, and wandered over listlessly to see if he was right. He was, he could vaguely see the number on the wall. As he bent down to look at the number he accidentally knocked against the machine, and it rang hollowly.

Now he remembered having seen the back off one of them when it was being repaired. All the electronics were up in the top of the machine. The bottom halves were empty. There was tons of room to put anything in them. Even a body the size of Big Ken. And then he remembered the workmen last Thursday after school complaining that one of the machines weighed a ton. And Thursday had been the day that Ken had disappeared. Art was suddenly convinced that somehow Sid had overpowered Ken, and hidden his body in the back of that

machine. Well, if he was going to find out where Ken was, he was going to have to go the same way.

Using his torch sparingly he rapidly glanced at the back of the machine. It was secured by four screws, one in each corner. In a moment Art removed them. His screwdriver was coming in useful. He prized the back off and peered inside. There was plenty of room if he sat sideways with his knees up. He gathered his belongings up and piled them in beside him. Then he realised he had a problem. How to secure the back on to the machine with him inside. He examined the back with care. There was a little ventilation grill cut into it. If he could tie something round that he could perhaps hold it, or fix it to something. Using his torch he peered up into the innards of the machine. It was a mass of wires and circuit boards. If he could pull one of those wires loose perhaps that would do the job. Selecting the longest wire he gave it a tug. It was fixed pretty firmly. So getting out his knife he sawed away at it steadily. It was a slow process, and he was going to end up with a very blunt knife, but it couldn't be helped. Eventually one end of the wire gave, and he set to work on the other end. That took longer, but in the end that too gave, and he had about half a metre of wire. He pulled the back up onto the machine, tied one end of the wire around the ventilation grating and the other around the electrics above his head. He gave the back an experimental nudge and it didn't move. Now, so long as they didn't find the screws, he should be safe. He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to 5. He sat himself to wait and eventually dropped off into a fitful sleep ...

He was wakened by someone whistling tunelessly. Light was filtering in through the ventilation grill and he could just see the time - 8.30. He was cramped and sore and cold. Slowly he worked his muscles one by one, wriggling his toes, and massaging his hands to try to bring some life back in to them. Then he heard a voice, Sid's voice, "That's funny. Where'd that come from?" Then there was the noise of a boot against an empty can, and sound of the can rolling across the floor. It was Art's empty coke can that he'd forgotten! He froze. Was Sid going to guess where he was? But Sid gave no sign, and Art relaxed again. It wasn't long before he heard the sound of other voices. It was the two men come to change the machines. Art heard the clump as the first machine, number five, was put down and the scrape along the floor as it was pushed back into place. Then number six machine clumped down nearer to him, and that too was pushed into place. Now if his calculations were correct it should be his turn.

"Number seven is it this time?" he heard one of the men ask.

"Yeah, I pulled it out didn't I." That was Sid's voice.

Art suddenly felt a movement as his machine was pulled further out. Then, "Hey Sid, what you left the screws out for?" Oh no! They were going to find him. Art kept stock still, but his heart was going like a steam hammer. They must be able to hear it, he thought.

"Screws out? What screws out?" said Sid.

“On the floor here. The screws out the back.”

Art heard footsteps coming over, and through the ventilation grill saw the pocket of a coat as Sid bent over to look. “That’s funny. I put them in.”

“Well they ain’t in now.”

Art was convinced that the next thing would be that the back would be ripped off and he’d be discovered. Instead there was another sound he couldn’t understand, up by his right ear. Then he realised the screws were being put back. He was being screwed in! He fought back the rising panic. At least this way he still hadn’t been discovered. And perhaps when they got wherever they were going he would be able to break out. Nonetheless it was an unnerving experience to hear each of the four screws being put in turn and to realise that he was trapped. The next thing, he felt the machine being lifted on to the little trolley, and the movement as it was wheeled out of the shop. He had a brief glimpse of daylight, then he was hoisted on to the back of the van, heard the rumble of the roll up door being pulled down, and then darkness.

After the van had pulled away Sid turned around and was still puzzling about the four screws when through the front of the shop in walked the police. Sid thought it was wise to keep on good terms with the police - if you didn’t antagonise them they’d leave you alone, and there were even a couple of times when he’d been quite glad of their help when his customers had got a bit threatening. This time there were two of them, a sergeant whom he knew, and a plain clothes man who was a stranger to him.

“Well good morning Mr Shaw. What can I do for you on this lovely morning,” Sid smirked.

“Well now Sidney,” the cop was wise to him, “it seems we have a little problem. Does the name Kenneth Jones mean anything to you?”

Sid pretended to be puzzled, “Kenneth Jones?”

“Known to his friends as Ken. Works at the children’s home.”

“Can’t say as I know the name Mr Shaw.”

“You got a licence for this place?” the CID man asked him.

“Course I have governor.”

“Due for renewal is it?”

“Couple of months, governor.”

“Tricky things licence renewals,” said the CID man.

“The thing is Sidney,” said Sergeant Shaw, “a little bird has linked your name with this Kenneth Jones, who, as it happens has disappeared. Now if you don’t want no trouble with renewing your licence next month I think you’d better rack your memory about this Mr Jones we’re looking for.”

Sid suddenly 'remembered', "Oh yes, him! Well his kids come down here don't they, and he sometimes comes down here looking for them. But I ain't seen him in a couple of weeks now. Gone missing has he?"

"Not a couple of weeks ago Sidney: last Thursday. He was seen coming in here last Thursday."

"Oh no Mr Shaw, you must've been misinformed. I certainly ain't seen him in a fortnight or more."

"You wouldn't object if we was to search the place I suppose would you Sidney."

"Help yourself Sergeant I ain't got nothing to hide."

"Hmm, thought not," said the sergeant.

The CID man leant forward. "A word of warning to the wise, Sidney my friend. If we find you have been bending the truth in this little matter then you will suddenly find that this place closes down around you. And that's not a threat, that's a promise!" And with that both policemen turned on their heels and were gone.

"Phew." Sid breathed a sigh of relief. This was serious. The boss was going to have to be told. And in the meantime he was going to have to deal with that kid who'd been running messages between him and Ken Jones, what was his name... Colin something, that was it. Sid decided that the matters couldn't wait and shut and locked the front door. The arcade was going to have to be shut for a couple of hours for all that it was Saturday morning. He was just leaving by the back door, when coming across the rough ground he saw Colin Sneerswell. Colin had been unable to keep away and was hoping to see some of the action. In particular he was hopeful of seeing Macdonald in trouble.

Sid waited until he came over. "Right, you're coming with me!"

Colin was amazed as Sid grabbed him by the arm, and half lifting him and half dragging him, pulled him across to a beat up old Bedford van that was parked a little way away. Sid flung him into the passenger seat, slammed the door on him, and drove off without a word. As they passed the back of the arcade Colin caught a glimpse of Jamie, Tracey and Sharon trying the door. "That was ..." he started.

"Shut it!" snarled Sid. "Keep it for the boss."

Tracey, Sharon and Jamie had drawn a blank. They couldn't follow the van. Sneerswell had disappeared along with it. All they could do was make their way back to the children's home and wait for Sneerswell to return. It was clear that they were going to have to put the pressure on him when he did.

Chapter 8 – The Vicar!

Colin and Art arrived at the same destination within about an hour of each other, though neither of them knew about the presence of the other. All Art knew was that after about half an hour of being jolted and jiggled in the back of the van he was aware of it stopping. The back was rolled up and once again he caught a glimpse of daylight. Then his machine was hoisted down and he was wheeled in to what seemed like a large building of some sort, to judge from the way the noise echoed around. He was dumped on the floor and heard the footsteps of the men move away. He heard a noise as if some heavy door was being slid shut and then he was in gloom again, though it was not completely dark. He listened hard. He heard footsteps moving around some way away and then the sound of someone climbing stairs in the distance, then a door slam, and then silence. He set to work immediately to try and escape from his prison.

While Art was struggling to get out of the machine, Colin Sneerswell was being driven across the town. At first he cowered down in the passenger seat, too frightened to say a word while Sid drove in a threatening silence. Then he began to wonder what sort of trouble he was in, and how he could get out of it. He started to look, watching to see if he could escape. Sid was wise to him. “Don’t start thinking of making a run for it, kid. You won’t get away. I’ll soon catch up with you.” In any case the luck was all against Colin. Every set of traffic lights they approached seemed to turn green, and the van hardly slowed at all. They were travelling down the river; Colin could see glimpses of it, broad and brown, between the houses. Finally they were into dockland. ‘EASTERN DOCKS’ announced a signpost and Sid swung the wheel over and they were between large warehouses. Rusting cranes and empty railway trucks littered the place. Finally they pulled up in front of a large door way with ‘Littlewoods Dock Co. Ltd’ written over it in very faded letters. Colin had no time to notice anything else before Sid pulled back one of the heavy doors across the entrance, and pulled him inside.

Meanwhile Art, still trapped, had not had a lot of success. The back was made of metal and there was no way that he could break it, as he might have been able to had it been made of hardboard. His only alternative was to see if he could loosen or bust the fastenings in some way. With the piece of wire still threaded through the ventilation grill he pulled and pushed at the back in the hope that one of the screws would work loose. This made a little noise, and he had to stop every few seconds to listen in case there was anyone about. On top of everything he had little room for manoeuvre and it was difficult to make any impression. He had worked away for some time and was just beginning to think that the top left hand corner was going to give when he heard the noise of the big door being slid back again. It was Sid arriving with Colin, though of course Art couldn’t see them. All he heard was two sets of

footsteps, one heavier and one lighter, that made their way in the same direction as the other two men had gone earlier. He heard them disappearing up the stairs and again he heard a door open and shut in the distance. He set to work once more. After a lot more pulling and tugging there was no doubt. Art had loosened the screw in the top left hand corner. He wrapped a handkerchief around his fist and banged the corner softly. It gave a little more, and then with a tinkle the screw fell out, and on to the floor, One down, three to go. Art could now get his hand out but there was no way he could reach round to any of the other three screws. He tried pushing and tugging some more. He tried banging with his fist in the other corners but he made no impression. At length, completely exhausted, he stopped and rested for a bit while he wondered what to do next.

When Sid pulled him inside the sliding doors Colin found himself in a large warehouse, dimly lit from dirty skylights high up above. In one corner there were a number of machines like the ones in Happy Days Arcade, one standing on its own a little apart from the others. Next door to them was a work bench with a number of tools on it. At the other end was some stacked timber and a large bandsaw. Along one side of the warehouse were a number of doors leading into offices and storerooms and above these, up some stairs, there was a balcony with another set of doors leading off it.

Sid grasped Colin by the elbow and propelled him firmly in front of him, down the warehouse, up the stairs and into a first floor room, locking the door behind them. "Wait here," he commanded, and went through another door into an adjoining room.

Colin tried the door, but it was well and truly locked. There was a window that looked down inside the warehouse, but that didn't open, and another on the opposite side of the room looked outside on to a twenty foot drop. Colin heard angry voices from the next room, somebody saying something about 'incompetent fool' and then a lot more talk, but he couldn't hear the details. Then Sid came out. "Come on," he said and grabbed him and pulled him through the door.

The room resembled the one he'd just come out of. There were some chairs and a table, and apart from himself and Sid, three other people. There were the two men he'd seen moving machines in and out of the arcade, they were sitting at the table. But the third man almost made Colin gasp with surprise, for standing by the window complete with his dog collar and cassock, was a vicar! Sid said, "This is the kid, boss."

"Come here boy." The vicar had a soft oily voice. He crooked a forefinger and beckoned Colin over. "I'm very partial to boys, particularly boys who tell the TRUTH." This last word was shouted at the top of his voice. At the same time his hand shot out and grabbed Colin by the upper arm. Colin had never felt so powerful a grasp. The vicar's fingers seemed to penetrate Colin's flesh right through to the bone. He was sure he would have a bruise there the next day – and he was right, he did. "Now then," the voice was oily and soft again, but the

grip on his arm tightened even further, “you and I are going to be friends, aren’t we. Let me see, what’s your name.”

Colin, who was by now nearly shitting himself, told him.

“Colin. Ah yes of course. Well now er... Col, we seem to have a little problem. Although I am, as you see, a perfectly respectable man of the church, my friends here and I run a little business on the side. Now some of my parishioners might be a little sensitive if they discovered their vicar was also a business man, so we like to keep the business private you understand. You understand!” he shouted when Colin didn’t answer, giving his arm a jerk that nearly pulled it out of its socket.

“Yes”, Colin said rapidly, even though he hadn’t the faintest idea what the man was talking about.

“Now it seems that our privacy has been threatened by the arrival of our friends the police.” Light began to dawn for Colin and he began to do some rapid thinking. “Only this morning,” went on the Vicar, “my colleague Sidney here received a visit from two of their number making enquiries as to the whereabouts of a Mr Jones. Someone, it seems, had connected Mr Jones with an amusement arcade that my colleague here runs. Are you following me Col...?”

Colin was.

“Well now the thing that I wonder is, who could have told the officers of the law that Mr Jones had some connection with my colleague here. I suppose you wouldn’t know anything about it would you?” the Vicar asked, at the same time reaching out with his free hand and picking a small heavy looking metal weight off the table.

Colin played for time, “I er... dunno,” he mumbled.

“You what? Speak up boy! Don’t mumble!” The Vicar closed his fist around the small weight.

Colin cleared his throat nervously, and repeated himself, a bit more loudly this time. “I don’t know.”

The Vicar’s fist moved so fast Colin never saw it coming. All he knew was that there was a crack and he was suddenly bent double, gasping for breath, and that waves of pain were spreading from a point on the left hand side of his chest until they engulfed him completely. For a moment everything went dark, and there was a roaring in his ears. Then he came to and realised the Vicar was still talking to him.

“Dear me,” he was saying, “that sounded like a rib!” And then, just as if nothing had happened he went on, “I don’t think you fully understand me dear boy. You have been doing the odd job for my friend Sidney here haven’t you.”

Colin still had no breath, but managed to nod.

“Well now, in so far as you have been working for him, you have been working for me. And as I think I mentioned before, the one quality that I require from my employees is absolute honesty. And I don’t think we’re quite telling the truth are we.”

Colin had by now regained his breath, and his brain was starting to work. “Wasn’t me,” he blurted out. “It was Macdonald, he told them.”

The Vicar was still not convinced. He put down the weight and lifted his hand. A diamond ring glinted dangerously on his middle finger.

“Macdonald - he knew him.” Colin indicated Sid.

“Does the name Macdonald mean anything to you Sidney?” the Vicar asked.

“Never heard of him Guv.” Sid grinned maliciously. He knew what was coming. The Vicar brought the back of his hand down and hit Colin a glancing blow across the face. Colin felt a searing pain as the diamond ring cut a gash across from just below his ear to his chin.

“Oh dear,” said the Vicar, “you’re going to have to get that seen to. It looks a very nasty cut. Now then you were saying.”

Colin, his cheek throbbing, his eyes full of tears, ploughed desperately on. “It’s the truth, I’m telling you. He’s a black kid what’s at the home. He’s Jones’ favourite, and when Jones went missing he told the cops about the arcade. He’s always down there. And he’s run messages for Sid, I know ’cause I seen him. And when he was talking to the cops I listened outside the door ’cause I thought he might say something about Sid, and I was coming down this morning to warn him when he grabbed me and brought me here.” You had to hand it to Colin, his story made sense. He sniffed back the tears to add the finishing touch. The Vicar looked at Sid.

“Makes sense Gov. There is a black kid what comes down regular. And I might’ve used him once. I was wondering whether we could use him so I thought I’d try him out.”

“So where is he now, this black kid?” asked the Vicar.

“I dunno,” said Colin “He’s disappeared too. I thought he might be down the arcade looking for Jones.”

The Vicar’s oily voice and manner suddenly disappeared, and he became completely business like. “If this other boy’s gone missing the police will be back. Sid, get back to the arcade. Keep the law at bay. If this boy turns up, find out what he knows, and come back to me. We may have to shut down the whole operation.”

Sid went.

“Kells,” he said to one of the men at the table, “you can return this one. He’s got no more for us. Blanchard,” this to the other one, “you stay here. Meanwhile I shall have to prepare a retreat. This place will have to burn if necessary.”

The Vicar turned back to Colin, and his oily tone came back. “Now then Colin let me have a look at you. You look a little rough. Let’s just examine you.” He pulled Colin’s T shirt off and prodded his ribs. Colin jerked back in pain. “Yes, you have, I suspect, a

cracked rib. But the rest of you is in good shape it seems,” and he ran his hands over the rest of Colin’s shoulders and chest. Colin shuddered at his evil touch. “And that cut on your face will soon heal I am sure. Now just let me make one or two things clear to you. I am going to use you, and you will do exactly as you are told. We are going to let you go, and when you get back you will tell them that you ran into the road without looking and got hit by a car. Do you understand?” and he pinched Colin hard to drive home his point. Colin flinched, but nodded to show that he understood. “Now if they ask you to describe the car you will say that it drove off before you could get up and see it. Do you have the picture?” Colin nodded. @Now tell me what you’re going to tell them.”

Colin repeated the story.

“Excellent. You learn fast boy. We shall be seeing lots more of each other.” The Vicar’s voice became even more insinuating. “Once a boy like you comes in to my possession he is mine for life, and there is no backsliding.” As if to emphasise the point the Vicar ran his hand down Colin’s neck and back. “Any backsliding and I shall part this fine soft flesh from the brittle bone beneath it. The flesh I shall feed to the fish in the river, the bones I shall snap like twigs and scatter to the four winds. Understand boy?” and the vicar turned a hypnotic gaze on to Colin that seemed to burn into his brain like a red hot skewer.

Colin shuddered, and nodded. “Yes Sir,” he said.

The Vicar smiled triumphantly and nodded at Kells.

“Come on kid.” Colin put on his top, and followed Kells down to the van. Once out of earshot Kells offered him some advice. “A word of warning, kid. That Vicar, he’s the nastiest piece of work I know, and I’ve met some I can tell you. You keep the right side of him and you’ll do fine. But cross him, and you’re a gonner!”

* * * * *

Art sat quiet for a long time. In the end he hunted in his bag and found a couple of biscuits which he munched greedily. He was just summoning up the energy to get to work again to try to free himself when he heard the door upstairs open. Someone came down and went out. About five minutes later more people left, one after another. Art heard the main door slide shut again and there was a long silence. Art realised that, unless he did something, he was going to be trapped there until he died of starvation, so he set to work with somewhat more force. Using his torch, he examined the innards of the machine above his head to see if there was anything he could use as a hammer. Immediately above his head there was a small, but very solid looking transformer. He pulled at it to see if it was loose and luck was with him. The fixings that held it to the casing had worn loose over the years and with one sharp tug it came away in Art’s hand. It was now only attached to the rest of the machine by its wires and he soon yanked those free. Then, grasping it firmly he proceeded to bash away in

the top right hand corner. The banging echoed around the building but he wasn't worried about that anymore. He was convinced they had all gone, and if he managed to attract the attention of some passer by, all well and good. So he banged away with a will. He soon made an impression. At first the metal sheeting bulged, then he realised that if he kept on, it was going to tear around the screw. He hit it even harder, and there was a definite crack. One further blow and it gave. Art pushed the metal back and it came away at the top. He was free! He bent it over and was just scrambling through the gap he'd made when a hand reached down, grabbed him by the arm and hauled him to his feet! It was the man, Blanchard, that the Vicar had left guarding the place, He'd heard the banging and had come down to investigate.

"Who the hell are you, and what the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded of Art. Then he got a good look at the boy. "Oh! Black kid. Your name wouldn't just happen to be Macdonald would it?"

"What if it is?" Art admitted nothing.

"Well whether it is or whether it ain't, the Vic'll want a word with you. You better come with me where I can keep an eye on you," and he led Art up the warehouse to the upstairs office. "How did you get here then? Back of that machine? I thought it was a bit heavy. And that explains the screws! Of course. You're a cunning little bugger ain't you?" Art made no reply to any of this, since none seemed to be needed. "Hm, silent too. You'll talk to the Vic. Very persuasive he is, the Vic. You'll talk to him alright."

By this time they were in the upstairs office. "Right! Sit on one of them chairs. Don't try and make a break for it, you won't get nowhere." The man pushed him down on one of the chairs and Art looked around and began to take stock of the situation. In the first place he had been cramped up in a very constrained position for seven hours and he was very stiff. In fact Blanchard had had to half pull him up the stairs because his muscles weren't working properly. He massaged his legs to get the blood flowing properly, and had a couple of minutes agony with pins and needles! Blanchard laughed at him. "That'll teach you to get yourself trapped in the back of one of them machines!" Once he was sure that his limbs would work properly Art began to wonder about how he could make his escape. Apart from anything else he needed to go to the loo rather badly. That gave him an idea.

"I need the loo," he said.

"Oh, it does speak does it. Well now, if it wasn't for the fact that you've been cooped up in that machine for several hours I might suspect you was having me on. But I suppose you might just be telling the truth. Come on them," and the man put down Art's bag, which he'd been going through, and took Art back out. With a sudden twist Art slipped out of his grasp, and raced down the stairs. Blanchard gave a roar of rage and pounded down after him, three at a time. Art just beat him to the bottom and was away down the warehouse like greased lightning. Blanchard was well behind him as he reached the sliding doors and threw his

weight at them. They started to move, but oh so slowly. The gap was just big enough to squeeze through when Blanchard was upon him.

“Oh no you don’t, you little bastard,” he said as he seized him. “I can see we’re going to have to forcibly restrain you,” and he propelled Art back up to the office, sat him back on the chair, pulled his arms behind him, and rapidly bound some strong cord round his wrists, attaching the other end to the back of the chair. When Art was firmly bound to the chair the man stood back. “Right, that’s got you sorted.”

Art tried again. “I still need to go.”

“Well you’re going to have to bloody wet yourself, ain’t you!” was the only response he got. “Now just you shut your mouth, or I’ll bloody shut it for you!”

They waited in silence, Blanchard read a Daily Mail, and ate some sandwiches. Art’s mouth watered as he watched him, he had had nothing to eat since the previous evening, apart from a few biscuits, and he suddenly discovered he was hungry. The man looked up and saw Art watching him, and laughed cruelly, but he didn’t offer Art any.

Time passed.

After a long wait, that seemed to Art like hours, there was the sound of a step outside, and the Vicar came in to the room. Art was just as surprised to see him as Colin had been earlier.

“Right, we can move on when we need to” the Vicar said to Blanchard, then he caught sight of Art. “Who’s this,” he demanded.

“I reckon he’s the black kid the other one was on about. Smuggled himself in in the back of one of the machines. Cunning little bastard he is.”

“What does he know?” the Vicar asked.

“Dunno. Don’t say much.”

“Ah well, we’ll soon change that,” and the Vicar turned his full unpleasant attention on to Art.

Chapter 9 - Big Ken at Last

When Colin was dumped on the doorstep of the children's home at two o'clock that afternoon there was panic from the staff. The side of his face was matted with blood, and he was in severe pain from his throbbing ribs. They rushed him to hospital where he stuck to the story the Vicar had told him to. He emerged some three hours later feeling rather battered. He had two cracked ribs, and they had strapped him up firmly and told him to rest. His face had been severely cut by the Vicar's ring, and he had to have twelve stitches. He would be scarred for life. Ever the coward, he made such a fuss they had to give him a brief general anaesthetic, but when he was showing off to the twins, and anyone else who would listen afterwards, he left out that part. Rumours had spread around the children's home like wild fire and it hadn't been long before the two girls and Jamie heard them. They had to sit and bite their nails in impatience, however, until Colin got back from hospital, and even then he had been put in to the sick room for quietness and rest. So it wasn't until early in the evening that the two girls were able to sneak up to find him.

When they entered the sick room Colin was propped up in bed eating sweets and reading a comic. He smiled smugly as they came in, thinking that this would be someone he could show off to, but when he saw who it was a wary look came into his eyes. "Hi ya, come to see my stitches?"

Tracey decided to play him along. "Cor, look at these Sharon."

"Flipping hec, they're real good ain't they girl. Tell us all about it then Col."

Colin, flattered by all this attention, started to invent widely. "Well, I was robbing this car right, when this great huge lorry come along and..."

"Cor Col, how do you rob a car then?" Tracey came on all admiringly.

"It's easy, you just use a bit of wire and that," Colin answered vaguely.

"Coo you are clever Col. Fancy being able to rob a car. Ain't he clever Sha?"

Sharon agreed that he was clever.

"Hey Col," said Tracey as if she'd just thought of it, "who was that we saw you with this morning?"

"What?" Colin was caught unawares.

"You know, this morning. In the red van?"

"Oh him, he's a friend of mine," he started to boast again. "He gives me sweets and that. I do jobs for him like. And I get paid. Four quid an hour."

"Four quid an hour, you must be ..." Tracey was going to say 'joking' but caught herself just in time. "You must be awful valuable to him for him to pay you all that much. Where was you going this morning then?"

"Down the Eastern Docks," said Colin airily before he thought. Then, pulling himself together, "What you want to know for anyway? Ain't none of your business where I went." He sat up in bed and looked at them suspiciously.

The girls realised that a change of tactic was called for. "You know where Macdonald is, don't you?" Sharon demanded, closing up on one side of the bed.

"No I don't. I ain't seen him, honest!" Colin protested.

"Where'd you go this morning?" Tracey was now much more demanding as she closed up on the other side of the bed.

"Tell us the truth, white boy, or I'll open up them stitches for you!" Sharon was threatening, her fist clenched under her nose. Colin thought fast. If he sent them down the docks then with a bit of luck they'd run in to the Vicar. The Vicar would frighten them off, no trouble, and afterwards he could tell the Vicar that he'd sent them down on purpose because they were being so nosy. He pretended to give in.

"Alright, alright, I'll tell you. I didn't want to tell you, 'cause there's a warehouse down there what's full of sweets and the bloke that took me, he knows how to get in and rob them. It's a big warehouse with 'Littlewoods Dock Co Ltd' written on it.

"What about Macdonald?" Sharon asked again.

"I dunno, do I. I expect he's down there trying to rob it too, bloody thieving black bastard."

"Why you little ...!" Sharon would have hit him, but Tracey pulled her off.

"Leave it Sha., he ain't worth it, scum like him."

Sharon restrained herself. This was neither the place nor the time. "You just watch it white trash. I'll get you one day when you ain't expecting it, and you'll wonder what hit you."

The two girls left.

* * * * *

Earlier in the day, after the staff of the children's home had found that Art was missing, Lorna got in touch with the police. They questioned her closely. "Do you think his disappearance has anything to do with Mr Jones' disappearance?" the inspector asked her.

"Well it could do. Art is very fond of Ken I know," she said.

"Where might he have gone otherwise, do you have any idea? What sort of things did he do in his spare time? Where does he hang out?"

"Well he does spend a lot of time down the amusement arcade in the town, what's it called, Happy something?"

"Happy Days?"

"Yes, that's it. I know Ken has been worried recently that he's been wasting too much money down there."

"Well, well, well," said the inspector as they left. "I think we'd better give your friend Sidney another visit, don't you Sergeant? Two disappearances, and in both cases the finger points in his direction. I thought this morning that kid had sent us on a wild goose chase, but

this is too much of a coincidence to be ignored.” Sergeant Shaw agreed and they were soon in the police car and on their way.

Sid had been back from the warehouse about half an hour when they arrived. “Mr Shaw, twice in one day, this is an honour.”

“Never mind the irony Sid. This little arcade of yours keeps popping into the conversation. What do you know about a kid called Art Macdonald.

“Give us a break, Mr Shaw. I have hundreds of kids come in here. I don’t know all of their names do I?”

“This one’s black, from up the children’s home.”

“Oh him. Yeah well he comes in here a lot. Too much if you ask me. Young kids today, they got too much money if you ask me.”

“Well we’re not asking you Sidney,” this was the inspector, “we’re much more interested in the whereabouts of this kid. It seems that he too has gone missing. Two missing persons, two separate leads that point in your direction. How would you explain that Sidney?”

“I dunno Guv. I mean just ’cause a kid comes down here regular don’t mean I’ve done away with him do it Guv?”

“I don’t know Sidney, you tell me. What have you got out the back? Just a couple of rooms is it?”

“There’s nothing there, honest Guv. You can take a look if you want.”

The inspector nodded to the sergeant, who went out and had a poke around in the rooms at the back. He soon returned, “Nothing there Guv.”

“Well now Sidney. If I thought it would do any good I would take this place apart with a heavy bulldozer, but I don’t expect I’d find anything. If our birds were here they’ve moved on. Who owns this place Sidney?” This last question was spat out and the inspector brought his face close to Sid’s.

“Oh, it’s the company.” Sid was thinking fast.

“What company’s that Sidney?”

“Well it’s Happy Days Arcades isn’t it.”

“And where would we find them?”

“Well they come from down Bristol way don’t they.” Sid was making it up as he went along.

“And would they have an address?”

“Ah well,” said Sid desperately, “I dunno that do I. I mean all I know is I pays my rent to a bloke what comes around once a month, and what I makes over and above that’s my own affair.”

“Well now Sidney we’ll believe your story for the time being. But should there be an discrepancy be assured that we will be back like a shot.”

When they got back out to the police car the inspector said, "I don't believe a word of that, but we'll have to check it out. In the meantime see if you can find any local company that could be running a place like that."

"Shall we put a tail on him Guv?"

"Not yet, we haven't got enough to go on to use up a man doing that. If we get something more definite, then maybe."

* * * * *

The Vicar was being pleasant, always a dangerous sign. "Well now boy, what can we do for you? Why have you decided to honour us with a visit?" Art remained silent. "Perhaps you're uncomfortable. I'll tell you what. We'll undo the cords that bind you, and when you're more comfortable then you can confess all to your friendly neighbourhood vicar." The Vicar undid the cord that tied Art to the chair.

"Watch it, Guv, he's a runner," Blanchard warned.

"No-one runs from me. Now then boy, or shall I call you Macdonald, because that is your name isn't it? What do your friends call you - Mac? Well I'll call you Mac anyway - much more friendly. Now then Mac, two little questions for you. Firstly why are you here? And secondly what did you tell the police?"

Art still said nothing. He was trying to puzzle out how this man, and the other one if it came to that, knew his name. And, since he had said nothing to the police he was also wondering why the Vicar thought he *had* said something to them. At the same time he was looking out for the first chance of making his escape. Suddenly the vicar's hand shot out, grabbed Art by his sweater, lifted him bodily out of the chair, and brought him up, hanging by his armpits so that his face was within four inches of the Vicar's own, "I said, why are you here?" The Vicar's breath smelt of a revolting mixture of stale cigar smoke and rotting vegetables. Art raised his arms high so that he slipped out of his sweater, dropped to the floor and made a spring for the door. The Vicar was too quick for him. One hand shot out and grabbed him by the arm. In the other, which had been holding the sweater that Art had just wriggled out of, there appeared, as if by magic, the most vicious looking knife Art had ever seen. The Vicar always carried a little 'personal protection' of this sort, hidden up his sleeve. Art, who hadn't been wearing anything under his sweater, felt extremely vulnerable.

"Said he was a runner," said Blanchard, looking up from his paper.

"So it seems," said the Vicar. "Well now we'll have to do a little experimenting to see if we can persuade him of the error of his ways," and the Vicar pressed the point of his knife in to Art's chest just below his right nipple.

"Now I wonder. If I were to press home my point, as it were, into this soft black flesh of yours, could you then be persuaded to say something?" and the Vicar put a little pressure on,

just enough to break the skin. When he withdrew the knife a spot of blood glistened on the tip. Art clenched his teeth and with an indrawn hiss of breath braced himself against the pain. But still he said nothing.

“You obstinate little sod! Do you know what I do with obstinacy? Do you?” the Vicar was shouting now, almost beside himself with rage. “I cut it out!” he yelled into Art’s face, and he made a couple of sudden and vicious movements with the hand holding the knife. Two long cuts appeared across Art’s stomach and chest. The pain was excruciating, and Art nearly cried out in agony.

“Steady Vic,” said Blanchard from the other side of the room. “We don’t want a gonner on our hands.”

The vicar controlled himself - just. But he was still screaming at Art. “You see this!” he yelled, wiping blood from the two cuts and waving his bloodied hand under Art’s nose. “You see this? Next time I’ll split your stomach wide open, spill your guts all over this floor, then force you to crawl around on all fours in the mess and eat it! You understand!” He wiped the blood off on to Art’s face and shoulders. “In the meantime,” he said, calming down a bit, “we’ll lock you up and let you think about it. Then perhaps you’ll talk!” He turned to Blanchard. “Put him in the lock up.”

Art was handed over to the man. At the door, slowly recovering, Art turned, and finally did say something. “I ain’t going to tell you nothing, you sadistic pervert! You’ll have to kill me first, and then I still won’t ’ve said nothing’ to you, so you can just forget it!”

Blanchard pulled him hastily through the door before the Vicar had time to do anything. “You don’t value your life to you kid? You want him to put you away, you carry on making comments like that. That’ll seal your fate for sure.” He led Art down the stairs and round under them to a room with a heavy metal door that was securely locked. He used three separate large keys to open it up, and pushed Art roughly inside. The door slammed behind him and Art heard the keys turn one after the other.

The only light in the room came from a dim 40 watt bulb that hung from the ceiling. There were metal shelves around the side of the room but Art paid no attention to these, for in the corner, bundled up in a couple of blankets, lay a body. Art went over to it, his heart beating in apprehension. Was it dead? There was a hand showing out of the blankets and Art gingerly reached out and touched it. It was warm. Art breathed a sign of relief.

“Hey wake up,” he said.

The body rolled over, gave a groan, sat up, and the blankets fell away from its face. Art gave a gasp of surprise. It was Big Ken.

Chapter 10 - Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire

After Tracey and Sharon left Colin in the sick room they met up with Jamie and had a discussion about what to do. "Well I reckon we ought to tell someone," said Tracey.

"What we going to tell them?" Sharon asked.

"Well ... " Tracey started, and then stopped. They didn't have much to go on, it was true.

"All we've got is Sneerswell's story about a warehouse. We don't even know whether he was having us on or not."

Jamie, who was keen not to tell anyone anyway, just in case it got his friend into more trouble, said, "I vote we go and find the warehouse he was on about, and see if we can find Art. Then once we've rescued him, then if we find anything else then we can tell someone."

"I reckon Jamie's right, Trace. It's all we can do," said Sharon, coming in on Jamie's side. So it was agreed, and the trio set off once more down town. They pooled their money, and found that they had enough for bus fares, so they went to the bus station and caught a bus that was heading for Eastern Docks.

"Keep a watch out," said Sharon. "We don't want to go past the stop."

It was Jamie who saw the sign first. "There it is!" he yelled.

The three clattered down the stairs on to the footplate and, as the bus slowed at the junction, they jumped off. The driver shook his fist at them as the bus pulled away, and Tracey gave him a cheerful V sign in return. They turned down the road that led to the docks, and soon they were amongst warehouses, tall and gloomy on either side of them. They wandered round aimlessly for a bit but found nothing. "This is hopeless," said Jamie. "We're going to have to search systematically. I mean, we don't even know what we're looking for, and this place is a maze of little alleys and things."

"What was it Sneerswell said?" said Tracey, trying to remember, "Little something?"

"Littlewoods Dock." Sharon remembered the name.

"That's it. Littlewoods Dock that's what we got to look for. Littlewoods Dock.. Okay then let's split up. You go down there, Jamie, and I'll go down here, Sharon can go down there." She pointed in three directions. "Go right round the block and we'll meet back here in twenty minutes." They set off.

Sharon worked her way up beside a huge brick wall, the side of a warehouse without any windows in it at all. When she was about half way along a door suddenly opened. She froze. Two men came out. Sharon prayed they wouldn't look in her direction. She was in luck. They turned, walked away from her, and disappeared round the corner of the building. She heard a lorry start up, saw it pass across the end of the building and disappear out of sight. She breathed a sigh of relief and went on down the building. When she got to the end she discovered she was up near the main road. There was a little hut standing on its own and she went over and peeped through the windows. A man suddenly appeared from round the back. "What are you looking for, love," he asked her.

Sharon nearly jumped out of her skin, but she pulled herself together rapidly. "I'm looking for my friend," she said, "and I ain't your love in any case."

"Alright," said the man. "Keep your hair on." And then he added, "There ain't been no-one here and you ain't supposed to be here neither, so you better just disappear before you gets into trouble."

Sharon 'disappeared' up towards the main road, glancing back as she did so. When the man's back was turned she slipped down around the other side of the warehouse, out of sight of the hut. There were grimy windows down the side and Sharon peered through. All she could see were piles of boxes from floor to ceiling. There was nothing saying 'Littlewoods Dock Co.', or anything remotely resembling it. The other two had similar stories to tell. Jamie had seen someone in the distance, and Tracey had seen no-one at all.

"We haven't explored in this direction yet," said Jamie, so off they went again, all together this time. They didn't find what they were looking for, but they did find the river. Jamie dug a packet of chocolates out of his pocket and they ate them hungrily while they decided what to do next.

* * * * *

Big Ken was groggy. It took him some time to collect his wits. "Art," he croaked eventually. "What are you doing here? Have they got you too?"

Art quickly told him his story. Then he said, "But I don't understand, Ken. What's it all about? Why are you like this?"

"Well Art, I guess I owe you an explanation, since you've taken so much trouble to find me, I better start at the beginning. I don't think anyone at the home knows, because I like to keep my private life private if you know what I mean. The thing is, I like to smoke a little dope with my friends, you know, marihuana." Art nodded, he knew. "Well it doesn't do to let the authorities know, because if I were to get busted it would be the end of my job with you lot. I wouldn't be considered a 'fit person' to associate with young people. Anyway the problem was that the supplier was your friend and mine at the amusement arcade, Sid. And the next problem was that his supplier was the Vicar. Now the Vicar is big. He's not the biggest, but he handles a lot of drugs of one sort and another. Hard and soft. Coke, heroin, speed, ecstasy, you name it. And Sid is only one of his outlets in town. The trouble was that the Vicar got to hear that I was working in the children's home. So he started to blackmail me, saying he'd tell the authorities unless I co-operated with him. He wanted me to act as a distributor too. Well I didn't like it, and I told him I wouldn't handle any of the hard stuff, only the soft. And for a while that was alright. I sold dope to my friends and acquaintances, and passed the money back to the Vicar via Sid. I didn't make a penny out of it. Then the vicar started getting greedy. He wanted me to push heroin and I refused. Then he started

blackmailing me and I got very short of money. I had to borrow from your allowances, your pocket money account, I was in a hell of a mess. And Sneerswell got involved, just as a messenger boy. I don't think he knew it was drugs. I certainly didn't tell him, and I don't think Sid told him either."

"But what was all that business with the machines?" asked Art. "Or ain't that nothing to do with it?"

"Oh yes, that's got everything to do with it. That was their cover. The drugs would be hidden in the back of the machines here at the warehouse, and then removed when they got to the arcade. It was the perfect cover. Any questions and Sid just said it was part of the regular service contract."

"But how did you end up here?" asked Art.

"Well the final straw came when he sent through some heroin. That 'box of chocolate' Sid got you to deliver for him last Monday was the first consignment. Well, like I said, I wasn't going to have that so I sent a message down the Arcade to Sid saying I wanted to see the Vicar, and that either Sid had to get the Vicar down the arcade so I could meet him there, or else Sid was going to have to take me to him. Well Sid did take me to him, but not quite in the way that I had intended." Big Ken smiled grimly to himself.

"When I got there," he continued, "Sid took me through to the room at the back, the one you found." Art nodded. "Well there must've been someone hidden behind the door who must've knocked me out because the next thing I remember is waking up and discovering I was folded up like an old coat and trapped in the dark inside a very confined space. At first I thought they'd buried me alive, then I realised I could breathe. Then the next thing I knew they were letting me out and I was in the warehouse here. Well I tried to struggle, but you know how cramped you get inside the back of one of those machines, because that's where I was." Art nodded again. He knew exactly what it was like!

"And there were three of them," Big Ken continued, "so they soon overpowered me and took me up to see the Vicar. He's a very nasty and dangerous man, Art, don't antagonise him. There's no telling what he'll do. Anyway I told him that I wouldn't handle the heroin and that he could tell who he wanted about my smoking dope, and that if I lost my job it was too bad. I don't expect I shall keep it much longer anyway, what with the cuts and everything. And I told him that if he went on putting pressure on me I would go to the police and risk the consequences. Well that wasn't a very wise thing to say. He doesn't like threats, doesn't like the Vicar, and I think he nearly killed me then and there. Instead they've filled me full of something to knock me out while they decide what to do with me." And Big Ken rolled up his sleeve and showed Art needle marks from injections. "Look!"

Upstairs in the office the Vicar smiled grimly to himself. On the table beside him there was a little loudspeaker. In the downstairs room, where Ken and Art were, there was a

microphone hidden behind the shelves. The Vicar had heard every word. Ken knew too much, and now that interfering little black kid knew too much too. He was going to have to dispose of both of them. He sat there listening to their conversation and making plans. Once he had decided what to do he found a piece of paper and an envelope. He had a letter to write.

Back downstairs Ken had been silent for some time. Art looked around at the shelves. They were full of cardboard boxes with the names of sweets and chocolates on the outside. "But it's all sweets and chocolate" he said to Ken.

"Don't you believe it," said Ken. "Take a look."

Art opened a box marked 'Extra Strong Mints'. Inside were little polythene bags full of white powder. Art held one of them up. "This heroin is it?"

"I expect so," said Ken. "I reckon there's a hundred thousand quid's worth in here. No wonder they need a strong door."

The Vicar finished his letter, put it in the envelope, sealed it, addressed it to the social services department, and wrote 'To Whom it may Concern' across the top. He had just finished when there was a clatter of feet on the stairs outside and Sid came in, all breathless. "I reckon we're going to have to move Guv." he panted. "The old bill was round again this afternoon, asking all sorts of questions. They wanted to know who owned the arcade, and I told them it was a firm in Bristol. It was the best I could do."

"Fuck it!" said the Vicar. "It won't take them long to sus that one out. It might take them a bit longer to find a link with this place. By which time we shall be clear. And this," he said, tapping the letter he had just written, "together with the two bodies I intend leaving down here should throw the police off the scent quite nicely. The other two are due back here in ten minutes or so, then we shall move."

* * * * *

Eastern Docks consisted of something like a mile of wharves and warehouses. It was going to take the two girls and Jamie some time to cover the whole lot. "It's going to take us hours," complained Tracey.

"Well if we're going to find the place we're going to have to go on looking girl. Ain't no help for it," said Sharon.

"We've just got to find him," said Jamie.

"But what if he ain't there?" said Tracey. "What if Sneerswell was lying, eh?"

"Well I don't care what you two do," said Jamie doggedly, "I'm going to go on looking till I've found the place. Art's just got to be there."

"And if he ain't?"

“Then I’ll look somewhere else, won’t I?” and Jamie set off determinedly up the next gap between the warehouses.

“Come on Trace,” said Sharon, “we can’t leave him to do it all by himself.” The girls set off in pursuit. They slowly worked their way up the length of the Eastern Docks, around warehouses, up railway lines, behind rows of trucks, keeping close to the walls so that no-one should see them and order them off. They had got about half way, and dusk was beginning to fall when they all met for a breather and another round of chocolate.

“That’s the last of the chocolates,” said Jamie, chucking the screwed up packet as far as he could into the river. He turned back to face them and idly watched a white van appear from the riverside, and then disappear again. Suddenly something clicked. “That van!” he yelled.

“What van?” the others turned, but it was too late, it had gone.

“I’ve seen it before. Outside the back of the arcade.”

Tracey was sceptical. “What colour was it?”

“A sort of dirty white,” said Jamie, “come on.”

“There must be hundreds of dirty white vans about the place, how do you know it’s the same one?”

“I’m not saying it is, I’m just saying it could be. If it is it’ll have ‘Electro-Games’ written on the side. Come on, before it disappears!” Jamie waved his arms in frustration and impatience.

“Come on Trace, it’ll be dark soon, and it just could save us a lot of time,” said Sharon. Jamie hadn’t waited, he’d already set off, the girls set off after him.

The van that Jamie had seen had indeed been the van that Blanchard and Kells were in. As soon as the two men got up to the office the Vicar gave his orders. “Right, Sidney, you’re going to clear the merchandise out of the lock up downstairs. You two can help me with our prisoners. We’re going to have to dispose of them both. Kells, have your shooter handy in case they kick back.”

Art and Big Ken heard steps outside and the door was opened. Behind the Vicar stood the man, Kells, with a gun. Big Ken had been going to make a fight for it, and Art would have followed suit, but the sight of the gun put such things out of the question.

“Well now,” said the Vicar, all smarmy as usual. Sit down you two while I tell you just what is going to happen to you. You see, hidden in this room, there is a microphone,” and the Vicar pulled a box to one side to reveal a little microphone sitting on a shelf. “You should have kept your mouth shut, Mr Kenneth Jones. This boy here is about to bring the police about our ears as it is, and now that he knows so much he cannot be allowed to live. The same, needless to say, goes for you. Come, let me show you something.” He turned to the three men behind him. “Bring them out.”

Sid grabbed Art and the other two men held Big Ken. Ken was strong, but they were big tough men, and he knew that he would be lucky if he could overcome both of them. He waited his time. They were led out into the main warehouse.

The Vicar collected something off the shelves and followed them out. "This warehouse," the Vicar informed them, "is stocked with all sorts of useful things. There are for instance cans of paraffin conveniently stored down the far end. If you just wait there for a moment I'll go and get one. Oh I forgot, you could hardly do anything else could you?" And laughing manically at his own joke he went down the warehouse and came back with a couple of cans. He went over to a large machine that stood by the wood piles. "Now this," he said, patting it evilly, "is a particularly powerful band saw. 10 kilowatts. It cuts through tree trunks just like that," he snapped his fingers. "Let me show you how it works." He picked up a plank of wood and fitted it by means of some semicircular metal clasps to the flat metal table. "There are two buttons. When I press the first it sets the saw revolving, and when I press the second it moves the table slowly but surely past the saw, so that whatever is on it is cut down the middle. Let me demonstrate."

He pushed the first button and the saw started up. There was a low rumbling which grew until it was an ear-splitting whine, which in its turn settled down to a steady roar. He pressed the second button. Art watched, fascinated, as the 100mm thick plank was inched towards the shrieking blade. When it touched, sawdust flew into the air and the blade tore through the wood as if it had no more resistance than a slab of soft cheese. The Vicar leaned casually against the machine, his hand on the controls, watching. When the plank was cut through he switched off, reset the table, and came over to them.

"Let me put it this way." He addressed Art. "Your friend Mr Kenneth Jones here is going to meet with a nasty accident while under the influence, and you are going to be extremely cut up about it! I have here," he continued, turning to Big Ken and producing the letter, "a letter, anonymous of course, which will inform the authorities of your unfortunate drug habit. The letter also suggests that you are interested in getting some of your young charges hooked as well. They will gain the impression that you specifically inveigled our young black friend here down to the warehouse in order to introduce him to the habit. If they recover your body from the remains they will find that you are chock full of this little Molotov cocktail of drugs that I have prepared for you." The Vicar produced a hypodermic syringe full of an amber liquid and waved it under Big Ken's nose. "When I have finished my little experiment in pain and fear with our young friend here, I shall leave you dumped over his remains. In the meantime, this place, well soaked in paraffin, should burn like the proverbial funeral pyre, and we shall post our letter and be clean away." The Vicar turned to the two men who were holding Ken. "Right hold him tight while I administer the drug."

Ken decided to make a last desperate attempt to escape. He flung himself sideways and managed to knock the gun that Kells was holding spinning over the floor. He flung himself

back and wrenched himself free of Kells' grip completely. He turned his full attention to Blanchard, swinging his free fist and catching him a beauty just under the eye. The Vicar in the meantime had not been idle. In a trice he had picked up the gun and had it pressed against Art's temple. "One more move from you and the kid gets it," he yelled.

Big Ken paused in mid hit and looked at Art. "Go on Ken," shouted Art, "don't worry about me." But Ken couldn't risk it. Slowly he unclenched his fist and relaxed. In a moment Kells and Blanchard had him securely held. The Vicar handed the gun to Sid, who kept it firmly pressed to Art's temple. Kells pulled up Ken's sleeve, the Vicar advanced with the hypodermic, found a place, pushed the needle into the flesh and pushed the plunger firmly home. Art saw Ken's eyes flicker as the drug hit him.

"Hold him there," the Vicar commanded. "It will take about five minutes for him to lose consciousness. In the meantime he can watch. It will be good for his soul, stand him in good stead when he meets his maker in about half an hour's time!" The Vicar then emptied one of the cans of paraffin over the pile of wood, and left the other standing ready. "Now for you, my little black friend," he said turning his attention to Art. "When I've finished with you and we have cleared all our merchandise from the little storeroom, I shall empty the rest of the paraffin over you and your friend here and put a match to the lot. In the meantime I have a little experimenting to do. I came across the idea in a film I saw, and I've always been intrigued to try it out in real life. Now when I cut you up with the knife earlier this afternoon you didn't cry out, in fact you showed little sign of pain and none at all of fear. What I propose is a little experiment to find out the limits of your pain and fear barriers. Hold him tight," he commanded Sid.

Sid held Art with his arms pinioned to his sides, while the Vicar, with one deft movement removed Art's trousers and underpants. "You're more vulnerable this way," the Vicar gloated, "and besides we wouldn't want the material to rip, and clog the machinery would we?"

Big Ken, watching all this going on struggled weakly, but the drugs already had too much hold. Art himself, now naked except for his shoes and socks, still refused to be intimidated. He repeated his insult from earlier in the day, "You sadistic pervert!"

The Vicar lost his temper. "Yes boy, yes!" he shouted. "Just see what I'm going to do and you'll know how right you are! On the table with him," he shouted at Sid.

Between them Sid and the Vicar picked up Art by his arms and legs and slammed him down on his back on the table with the bandsaw. Within moments Art's shoes and socks were removed and his ankles and wrists were secured. The Vicar looked down into his face as he lay spread-eagled and vulnerable. "Just say that again," he hissed.

"You sadistic pervert," Art whispered. The Vicar almost hit him; Art saw his face convulse in temper. Then the man became deadly calm.

“Right boy, look!” Art raised his head and looked down his body to the band saw gleaming between his feet. “You just keep watching that saw, because when I start this machine up your legs will move down either side of it until it finally reaches you. Your softest parts should be the first to feel its ripping teeth! They are the most painful I am assured! I shall be watching you to find out when you cringe in fear, when you yell for mercy, and when the blood starts spurting. Then we just might stop and have a final conversation, before I finish you off.”

Art looked despairingly across at Big Ken, whose eyes were flashing with anger, but whose body was slumped. He tried to say something, but no sound came out, he only dribbled.

“Not long now,” said the Vicar, and taunted him by waving the letter at him. Big Ken finally lost consciousness, and they let him drop to the ground. “Right you three, start on the merchandise and leave this one to me.” The Vicar turned his attention back to Art. “First we start the table moving.” He pressed the button and Art felt the jolt as the table started moving him towards the saw. The Vicar pressed the other button and Art watched the teeth begin to move and then become a gleaming blur as the noise and the speed built up. The Vicar leaned against the machine, the letter in one hand, the other on the controls. Art could hear nothing above the roar but could see that the Vicar was laughing like a demented hyena. He lifted his head and saw with a shock that the whirring blade was already between his knees.

Even with all this going on, however and despite his predicament, another sensation was also distracting Art, for in all this time he had never had the opportunity to get to the loo. And what with all the milk and coke he’d had earlier he was well nigh ready to burst! He looked again at the maniac face, the hand on the controls, and whirring blade. And the beginnings of a desperate idea began to form in his head. It would require split second timing, and nerves of steel. He shifted his bottom experimentally, yes he could move, would it be enough? The Vicar saw him wriggling, mistook it for fear, and began to gloat. He was going to break this boy after all, he thought. But his smile faded as Art lay still one more. Slowly the whizzing blade crept higher between Art’s legs. Art tried not to think of it. He concentrated instead on just two things, aim, and timing. Two inches more and the blade would start ripping him apart. One inch, three quarters. Art could feel the wind of it. He concentrated - just an eighth of an inch more.

NOW!

Art let go and peed with all his might. The Vicar laughed when he saw what was happening, the boy was so scared he’d wet himself! But his laugh changed to dismay as he watched the pee rise up and then start to fall on to his hand and from his hand on to the controls. Too late he realised what would happen. There was a bang as the liquid reached the electrics, and with an almighty flash the 10 kilowatt motor burned itself out. The saw could not withstand such a violent slowing down and broke into dozens of pieces. The Vicar

watched horrified as a flying piece of toothed metal embedded itself into this arm. Then the electric shock hit him. Even Art heard the scream, as the Vicar's hand, glued to the metal, started to blister and burn. Finally, loosing consciousness, he was flung away from the machine, crashing into the remaining can of paraffin. The letter fell about half a metre away, soaking up the paraffin as it glugged out of the can. The dying band saw sent up a shower of sparks and one landed in the paraffin. With a roar it caught alight, and a burning river snaked its way toward the wood pile. Within seconds that too was well alight.

The moment the band saw started to break up Art had shut his eyes to protect them. Now he slowly opened them. His leg was bleeding where a piece of flying saw blade had sliced through but miraculously it hadn't cut too deep.

He was alive, relatively unhurt, but his troubles weren't over yet.

When they'd heard the bang, the three men who'd been loading the drugs into Sid's van came rushing back in. They were just in time to see the wood pile catch fire. "Let's get out of here," shouted Sid.

"But what about them?"

"The Vicar's dead by the looks of it, and the kid and the other one know too much. Let them burn!" The other two men took one last look and then, along with Sid, they fled. They were going to be a long way away by morning.

As smoke filled the warehouse Art watched the three men turn on their heels and run. He had escaped a particularly nasty death only to end up being burned alive!

Chapter 11 - The End

In the meantime the three friends had not been hanging around. Jamie had been racing down the dockside, the others chasing after him. He tried to keep his eyes on the point where the van had disappeared. He got to where he thought was the right place and there was no sign of it. The others caught him up. "Well," said Tracey, "Where is it?"

"It was here," said Jamie, "Or the next one."

"Alright," said Tracey, "you go round that way, and we'll go round this. We'll meet up the other side."

"Okay," said Jamie. "Keep hidden. We don't want them to see us." Keeping close to the wall the two girls set off round the warehouse. There was no sign of anyone, and no white van. They crept around the back.

"What's that?" said Tracey. The two girls listened. From around the corner it seemed there came a noise.

"Sounds like a saw mill," said Sharon. In the gathering gloom they peered around the corner. The noise stopped, but about 20 metres away they saw the white van. Sharon could just make out the lettering on the side, 'Electro-Games'. "So Jamie was right!" she breathed. They looked down the side of the warehouse and saw that Jamie had come round the other end and had seen the van too. About half way along there were three railway trucks. Jamie pointed to indicate he was going to make a dash for it and hide behind them. The girls signalled at him to show they understood. Keeping a sharp look out they made a dash for the shelter of the trucks. They arrived breathless and panting, and crouched down behind the trucks.

"Look!" said Sharon, pointing. They peered through the gap between the trucks at the entrance to the warehouse opposite them. Above it, in fading letters, was written 'Littlewoods Dock Co. Ltd'.

"And there's that little red van we saw Sneerswell in this morning," said Tracey. The van had been hidden behind the other one and they hadn't seen it before. "What are we going to do?"

"Go in," said Jamie. "Come on!"

"Don't be stupid," said Tracey, restraining him. "You don't know who's going to be in there. You could walk straight into a trap, then we'd be no better off."

"Let's wait and see if there's anyone about," said Sharon. "Then if it's quiet we can go and explore. We'll give it five minutes." They agreed to that, though it was the slowest five minutes of Jamie's life.

"Right," he said when it was up. "Let's go." They were just creeping clear of the trucks when the door slid back. They dived for cover behind the railway truck just in time, and between the wheels they watched as Sid and the two others came out and started loading boxes into the back of the little red van.

“That one’s the one that runs the arcade,” Jamie whispered indicating Sid, “and the other two I’ve seen moving machines out the back.”

Then the noise of the saw started up again. “That’s that saw we heard before,” said Sharon.

“Yeah, I heard it too,” said Jamie. “I wonder what’s going on in there.” Then suddenly they heard the bang, then the noise of the flying metal, and then a horrific scream. They watched the men run to the doorway, turn, and run back to the vans. Sid got into the red one, and the other two got into the white one. With a revving of engines and a screech of tyres they were away, disappearing round the corner as if all the devils in hell were after them.

Smoke began to seep out of the warehouse door.

“Come on!” yelled Jamie, and they all three rushed across to the door and pushed through it.

“There’s the fire!” shouted Sharon, pointing at the burning wood pile.

“And there’s someone on that saw thing!” shouted Tracey as she caught sight of Art through the smoke. They rushed across to Art.

“Let me free!” he yelled. “There, the clasps on the side.” Quickly they found the clasps and struggled to turn them. Sharon turned hers and went to help Jamie who was struggling with his. All the time they could feel the heat increasing as the flames gained hold. At last the clasp gave and Art was free. Coughing and spluttering he scrambled down off the table. “Get Ken,” he shouted, and they turned to the slumped body lying on the floor just half a metre from the leaping flames.

“Who’s that other one?” shouted Tracey.

“The Vicar! Get Ken out first!” Art shouted back. They gathered round Big Ken, who showed no signs of life. “We’ll have to carry him!” shouted Tracey. Grabbing hold of his arms and legs they half dragged him and half carried him across the look to the door. There was a crash as the wood pile started to collapse, and flames shot up to the roof. “Let’s get out of here! The whole place is going to go!” Pulling and heaving they got Ken out of the door, and across to the trucks. They went back to the door but the place was rapidly becoming an inferno.

“It’s no use,” yelled Tracey, “We can’t go back in there!”

“I think he was dead already!” shouted Art. They finally tore themselves away from the sight of the roaring flames and went back to where Ken was slumped against the wheel of one of the trucks. They began to realise that they weren’t safe, even there, trapped between the two buildings. Frantically they tried to bring Big Ken round so that they could move to a safer position.

“Slap his face,” Sharon suggested. “That should help.” They slapped his face, pulled and pushed at him, shouted at him. Eventually a combination of their efforts and fresh air revived him slightly. He groaned.

“He’s coming round,” cried Tracey. “Ken wake up! We got to get out of here before the whole lot collapses.”

“What...?” said Ken, then he slumped down again.

“Come on, Ken, you’ve got to walk!” She turned to the others, “Help me!” Between them they lifted him up, and with Tracey on one side of him, and Art on the other they started to move. Big Ken, semi-conscious between them seemed to realise that something was required of him, and half stumbled, and was half dragged along.

At last they were clear of the high walls with the flames licking out of the windows and were finally able to collapse in the comparative safety of the open space by the river. It was only then that Art finally realised that he was still quite naked! “My trousers!” he exclaimed, getting up and making a move as if he was going to go back and get them.

“Don’t panic,” Tracey said. “I saw them lying there and I thought you might be needing them sooner or later, so I grabbed them!” She handed them over, and laughed.

Art suddenly came over all modest. “Don’t look!” he said, and turned his back on them and pulled on his trousers. Jamie lent him his coat so that he was now both decent and warm. They turned their attentions back to Ken but he was by now out cold. No matter what they did they could not bring him round. They had just decided that two of them should stay with him and two of them should go for help when there was a wail of sirens and a couple of fire engines and police cars arrived. While the fire brigade started to work on the fire the police came over to them. They fired off a barrage of questions.

“Did you lot start this? What are you kids doing here anyway? Is there anyone in there? What’s the matter with him?” This last questions referred to Ken, and it was the one Art chose to answer first.

“He’s been pumped full of drugs.”

“Drugs, what drugs? You been taking drugs kid?” Two of police turned their attention to Ken and realised that he was in a bad state. They got on to their radio for an ambulance. “You lot better come down the station and answer some questions.” The four friends were bundled into the back of a police car and whisked down to the central police station. They were put into a bare room with a window high up one wall, and a hard bench to sit on. “You lot wait there. There’ll be someone along in a minute.”

“What’s going to happen do you reckon?” Sharon asked.

“I dunno,” said Tracey. “Anyway Art, what happened?”

“Yeah,” said Jamie. “What happened?” It was the first chance any of them had had to question him.

“I ... I ...” Art seemed to be having difficulty in getting the words out.

Suddenly Tracey said, “What’s that wet on your leg?”

Art looked down. A large dark stain was seeping through his trousers. He put his hand down and when it came back up it was covered in blood. “I ... don’t feel too good. I

...” He said no more. He had been bleeding steadily from the wound in his leg and finally lost consciousness. It was amazing that he hadn’t passed out earlier. The girls rushed out to find somebody. Art was briefly examined then he too was rushed to hospital. The police, meanwhile, convinced that the four kids were in some way responsible for the fire, questioned Tracey, Sharon and Jamie for some time. Then they questioned them about the drugs that Art had mentioned, but since the three of them knew neither how the fire had started, nor anything about the drugs they were finally taken back to the children’s home.

* * * * *

Both Art and Ken spent some time in hospital. Art had stitches put in his leg, and though the cuts across his stomach proved not to be so serious, that had to be attended to as well. He would carry the scars for life. Finally he was allowed home, but even then he had to rest up. His dreams were full of fiery terror, flashing saw blades, and above all, the monstrous leering face of the Vicar. And when Ken was released they saw little of him, he was hardly ever in the home, and they had to get a relief in to do his job. Most strange of all, the police left Art and the others well alone. They only began to understand the reasons when Ken invited them all round to his place about a fortnight later, and they were able to put together the whole story. First of all Art asked him about the police.

“Why haven’t they been near, Ken?”

“Yeah, why’ve they left us alone?” asked Sharon.

“Because I did a deal with them,” said Ken.

“What you mean, a deal?”

“Well I promised to tell them all I knew about the gang, and the drugs, so long as they kept you out of it and left you alone. After all the only reason you were there was because of me, and you didn’t know anything I didn’t know. They said they would keep you out of it if they could, and so far they have. They still want to know how the fire started, and how you escaped from the saw. So do I if it comes to that.” So they told him about the rescue, and Art told him about how the Vicar had been electrocuted. The others laughed at the bit about the peeing.

“Well I admire your cool,” said Ken. “What about the fire?” None of them had actually seen the fire start, but Art told him about the paraffin, and the sparks from the machine as it blew apart. It wasn’t difficult to imagine how the fire must have started.

“Anyway, Ken,” Tracey asked, “why ain’t we seen you in the home?”

“Well I’ve spent a long time with the police for one thing. For another I’ve been back to hospital for check ups a couple of times. But you’re not going to be seeing much more of me at the home anyway, because I’m resigning.”

“What? You mean leaving us?”

“Why?”

“Does that mean we won’t be able to see you again?”

Ken laughed. “Yes of course you can still come to visit me and everything, but it wouldn’t do for a house parent to be a chief witness on a drugs trial now would it. I thought I could keep my private life and my work separate, and I ended up leading you all into the greatest danger. You could all have been killed, and the only reason I’m still alive is because of your rescue. So now I have to take the consequences.”

They were all upset at this news to start with, especially Art. “Don’t worry,” Ken said. “It’s much better I go now, then when the trial comes up I shall be well clear. If I stayed I could well end up getting the sack, and then you would probably be forbidden to visit me. This way leaves you free to come if you want to.” And they had to make do with that. They soon cheered up.

“I’m certainly glad you lot turned up when you did,” said Art. “I nearly lost my balls!” They all laughed. “And you know, when I woke up in hospital I couldn’t believe it was only Sunday. I thought I’d been trapped in that machine, then locked up in that warehouse for days. But it was only 24 hours.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Tracey, “and that 24 hours took five and a half chapters, nearly half the book. That’s how it’s done ain’t it mister?” she suddenly shouted.

Author’s Voice: “That’s right Tracey, you’ve got it in one!”

“What?” said Ken. He didn’t understand.

“Oh she’s got this thing about us all being in a book,” said Jamie “Stop going on about it Tracey, and give us some cake.”

Tracey passed Jamie some cake and then she turned to Art. “D’you know,” she said, “when I saw you lying there on that saw I really fancied you!”

“Of course,” said Art, not a bit abashed. “That’s ’cause I’m a real sexy boy!”

“Hark at him!” said Tracey. “Swell head! Anyway I bet you still can’t run faster than me.” Tracey was out of the door in a flash, with Art on her heels. And as to whether he caught her or not, well that, as they say, is another story....

THE END