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Today in school I showed some of the autobiographical stuff that I have written so far to Mr Wood in order to get an idea of how I am progressing and to see whether I'm heading for a reasonable grade or a fudge grade.³ Mr Wood looked at my work for about half a millisecond, snorted a bit at something that he blatantly found amusing and then said, 'It's a good start, Charlotte, but rather than rambling on in an unstructured way, you need to concentrate more on one particular episode.'

Mr Wood and I are not close personal friends, which is why he calls me Charlotte. Mind you, he wouldn't call me Lottie even if we *were* friends because Mr Wood doesn't like abbrevies.

I said, 'What kind of particular episode?'

Mr Wood said, 'Something which has had an important effect on your life. A pivotal moment, perhaps. A watershed after which nothing has ever been quite the same again.'

I have to be honest. I've had conversations with Mrs Rowlands the Welsh teacher which have made more sense

³ A *fudge* grade is basically what Gareth Stingcombe is going to see when he opens his exam results. He'll have an E, a U, maybe a D and so on. *Fudge* grades are not good.

– and she hates me. After school, I tried asking Goose if she understood what Mr Wood was on about. We were sitting in my kitchen and we were both feeling a bit the worse for wear because we'd just had a race to see who could eat an entire family bag of marshmallows the fastest. Goose had won. She always does. When I'd finally managed to stop feeling sick I said, 'Woody wants us to base our coursework on a watershed. Do you get it?'

With her little finger Goose hooked a piece of marshmallow out from the inside of her upper lip, wiped her mouth on a tissue and then said, 'I'm not being funny, Lotts, but I tend to find any conversation on the topic of coursework really discombobulating. Do you know what I mean?'

I didn't but I nodded my head anyway and then Goose started telling me about her band, *Goose McKenzie and the Tribe of Pixies*, and I just sort of let the subject drop. When Goose went home, I looked up the word *discombobulate*. It said:

dĭscomböbūlāte (*verb*) disturb, disconcert.

Goose is one of those people who are pretty AND clever. I still like her though. After that, I looked up the word *watershed* and it said:

wa'tershĕd (*noun*) 1. a line of high land from which streams flow down on each side; 2. a turning point in the course of events.

I really don't see what high lands and streams have got to do with anything. Whitchurch is fairly flat. If you want to go anywhere near any high land and streams, you need to go up the road to Taff's Well or Caerphilly; they've got hills but they haven't got much of anything else. I don't think they even stretch to streams. Which means that Mr Wood must have been talking about turning points. So why couldn't he have just said that rather than banging on about watersheds and pivots?

Anyway, I have decided that I am going to write about two very important things which have happened to me in my life so far and made a definite impact upon it. The first important thing was becoming best friends with Goose. The second important thing was my introduction to the world of artificial hair colorant. Both these key events are closely related.

Before I became friends with Goose, my hair was brown. I'm not talking sexy brunette; I'm talking more of a mongrel-dog-colour or what my Nan would describe as beige. Yes. Before I was friends with Goose I had BEIGE hair. How I survived with beige hair for fourteen and a half years is a mystery to me, but it probably explains why I am not smiling in any of my school photos.

And then, one day not long after I'd started Year 10, I got moved up into the same English class as Goose. I don't know why. It's not as if I'd grown a new brain or anything. Probably it was just an excuse to get me out of the same group as Samantha Morgan. Me and Samantha Morgan used

to be friends in Year 9 but then we stopped being friends and now her mum likes her to keep away from me. Anyway, I'd gone along to my usual English class and my teacher had told me I was being moved up into the top set. Everyone else in the group looked a bit fed up when they heard this, and Gareth Stingecombe called me Brainbox Biggsy which is hardly very original or mature but the best that he could manage without having had several years to think about it beforehand. Even so, I didn't want to appear too blatantly chuffed with myself so I huffed and puffed a bit and said, 'Oh, do I have to?' a couple of times and then left the classroom fairly dramatically without picking my feet up properly.

When I got to Mr Wood's class, I was told to sit down next to Goose as she was the only person who had a space next to her. I don't mind admitting that this was a little bit scary because even though Goose is really pretty, she can look a bit stropy sometimes. I'd seen her around in the corridor and in the school yard but I didn't know her name or anything and I'd certainly never bothered to speak to her. She only started at my school at the beginning of Year 10 and I don't tend to talk to new people much unless I'm forced to by a form tutor or something. On this occasion, Goose was wearing a padlock round her neck and had purple hair and industrial strength mascara and when Mr Wood said she needed to move her things up to give me some room, she made a hissy noise. When I sat down she whispered, 'Let's just get something clear. I don't mind you sitting there so long as you respect one rule.'

‘What’s that?’ I whispered back.

‘Never *ever* refer to me by any name other than Goose.’

‘*Goose?*’

Goose looked me straight in the eye and nodded firmly.

‘Goose. I don’t respond to ANYTHING ELSE. Even the teachers call me Goose.’

‘OK,’ I said with a shrug. ‘Whatever.’

At just that moment Mr Wood stopped writing on the board and turned around and said, ‘Charlotte Biggs. Gail McKenzie. Can you both desist from chatting, please?’ And then he turned his back on us again and continued writing about apostrophes.

‘*Gail?*’ I said in a massively loud whisper, and then I clapped my hand over my mouth to stop myself from laughing my head off.

Next to me, Gail McKenzie’s face turned totally mega-peevied purple. ‘It’s a stupid name because I was born during a stupid storm,’ she whispered. ‘How unlucky is that? Any other day of the year and I’d have been called Zoe.’ And she sat back in her chair and looked genuinely discombobulated and I decided, right there and then, that it would be best for everyone if I just respected Goose’s wishes on this blatantly sensitive matter. Even if Mr Wood didn’t. And anyway, to be fair, she does look much more of a Goose than a Gail.

There was still one thing I wanted to know though. ‘Why *Goose?*’ I whispered.

Goose sort of smiled. ‘I’ve got really weird feet,’ she whispered. ‘My dad reckons they’re webbed and I must be

descended from a duck or something. One day he called me Goose and it kind of stuck.’ For the first time ever, Goose gave me a proper big massive smile and said, ‘I don’t mind – it’s heaps better than Gail.’

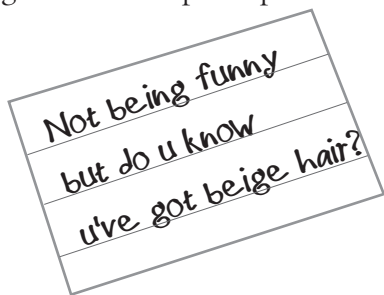
From the front of the class Mr Wood said loudly, ‘WILL YOU TWO BE QUIET?’

I’d completely forgotten about him. I said, ‘Sorry, Mr Wood, but we were talking about apostrophes.’

Goose added, ‘Yeah, they’re actually *really* interesting, aren’t they?’

Mr Wood rolled his eyes and muttered something I couldn’t quite catch but it didn’t sound good. So I put my head down and started copying out all the apostrophe stuff on the board.

I’d written about two words when Goose nudged me and slid a piece of paper over to my side of the desk.



And that was a real pivotal watershed moment in my life because up until that very second it had not even occurred to me that I had the most boring hair colour in the world. I must have looked traumatized because Goose whispered, ‘It’s all right. I can sort that out for you if you like.’

She did as well. Not right away in the middle of that English lesson obviously. But once we’d got to know each other a bit better and became proper friends and everything,

she invited me round her house and dyed my hair for me in her bathroom. Nothing too drastic that first time. Burst Conker. Which was a nice shiny brown colour and MUCH better than beige. When my mum saw it she said that it made me look like Dilwyn, our next-door neighbours' red setter. I got a bit upset then and said, 'Are you saying that I look like a dog?' My mum put her head on one side as if she was thinking extremely hard and said, 'Possibly. But Dilwyn is a very attractive dog, isn't he?'

My mum gets on my nerves sometimes.

Even so, I bet she liked it really. She was probably secretly relieved that she no longer had to live with the shame of having a daughter who has beige hair. Mind you, I reckon my mum is quite open-minded about things like hair dye anyway because she sees and hears a lot of things during the course of her working week. She works at Cardiff Police Station. She doesn't go out chasing criminals any more because she's too old and slow for that now, but she still gets to read about all the muggings and stuff on her computer screen. I reckon it would take a lot more than Burst Conker hair to shock my mum.

Be warned though, hair colorant is not without its hazards. Sometimes things go wrong. Take last Saturday for instance. When I got into work Gina was waiting for me. She didn't bother with a hello or anything polite and normal like that. She just said, 'You're late, Charlotte.'

I looked at my watch and said, 'No, I'm not. It's exactly nine o'clock. I'm bang on time.'

Gina said, 'To be early is to be on time. To be on time is to be late. And to be late is unacceptable.'

She must get these phrases out of a staff handbook.

I didn't want to wind her up any more so I moved out of her way and made a start on labelling the YOU PAYS. Gina is not really the sort of person you should aggravate. By her own admission, she has 'never known the meaning of true love'. This makes her much more touchy than the average person. To be honest, she'd probably have a bit more luck in the love department if she ditched that side ponytail and some of the bling. I didn't tell her this though. I just got on with the YOU PAYS. I'd barely been working for more than two minutes when she interrupted me again and said, 'Aren't you going to ask me where Goose is?'

I was rather surprised by this. Goose is usually a fairly punctual sort of person so I'd assumed she was already in. I put down my YOU PAYS and said, 'Isn't she out the back?'

Gina put her head even further on one side and looked at me with a smile which I can only describe as trying to be omniscient.⁴ I say *trying to be* omniscient because it is impossible to look clever when your only interests are YOU PAY stickers. But at least it meant that she had forgotten to be in a bad mood with me. That woman has the memory of

⁴This word ranks alongside *blatant*, *haberdashery* and *orang-utan* as an all-time personal favourite. It means 'knowing everything'. For example, *It's pointless trying to convince my mum that I have been working really hard in maths and science because she is omniscient*. By the way, my least favourite words are *gusset*, *armpit* and *grounded*.

a goldfish who has had its brain removed. Gina put her face too close up next to mine and said, 'Ask me where she is.'

Sometimes, with some people, it's best just to play along. I said, 'OK, Gina. Where is Goose?'

'She 'ad to go 'ome.'

Now this really did surprise me. Gina might have all the brain capacity of a particularly thick goldfish, but actually, if the truth be told, it was me who did the best impression of one right then. I looked at her all confused with my mouth open for a second or two and then said, 'What? You mean she's been in and out again already. It's only –' I checked my watch – 'six minutes past nine.'

Gina's eyes twinkled so that they matched her gold jewellery and she started stroking her ponytail as if it was a small fluffy animal. I could tell that she was really enjoying herself. 'Ask me why she 'ad to go 'ome already?'

This was getting more and more pointlessly random. I said, 'OK, Gina. Why has Goose gone home already?'

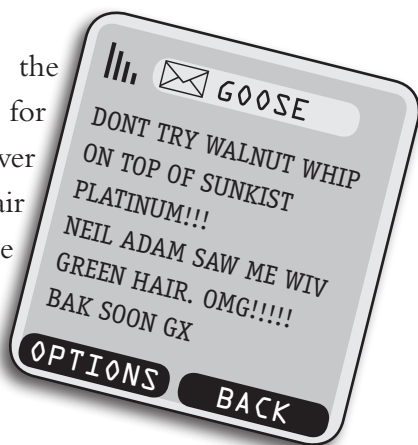
Gina said, 'I'll tell you why she went 'ome. Her hair was khaki!'

'*What?*'

'I'm telling you, Lottie. She came in. Looking fairly normal. Well, as normal as you two girls ever look. But when I put the strip lighting on, it reflected off her 'air and – I'm telling you – she had khaki-coloured hair. Almost green! Dionne had to send her 'ome to sort it out. We couldn't 'ave 'er in 'ere looking like that. She would 'ave frightened off the customers. She looked like a Brussels sprout!'

She and Emily started laughing then, which annoyed me because I guessed that Goose was going through a very traumatic and upsetting experience. I tried to ignore them, but when I couldn't bear it any longer I left the YOU PAYS and went out the back to sit and think. The stockroom is a very good place for sitting and thinking. Even when we are really busy, it's possible to sit and meditate for quite some time if you know what you're doing. The trick is to climb up the highest stepladder and sit on the platform at the very top. Often it takes Gina ages to realize where you are and then, when she does see you, she thinks that you are getting shoes down for a customer.

I sat and contemplated the colour of Goose's hair for seventeen minutes. I've never seen anyone with khaki hair before and I couldn't quite imagine it. Then my phone beeped. I pulled it out of my pocket. Goose had written:



I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing and revealing my hiding place. Even though Goose is my very best friend, the idea of Neil Adam witnessing her at a moment of heightened hair-dye disaster was strangely satisfying. Goose can be far too pretty. Everyone fancies her because she has naturally good bone structure. I, on the other hand, have the bone structure of a Cornish pasty.

I was just about to dial her number so that I could get all the horrible details when I was interrupted by a familiar, irritating voice.

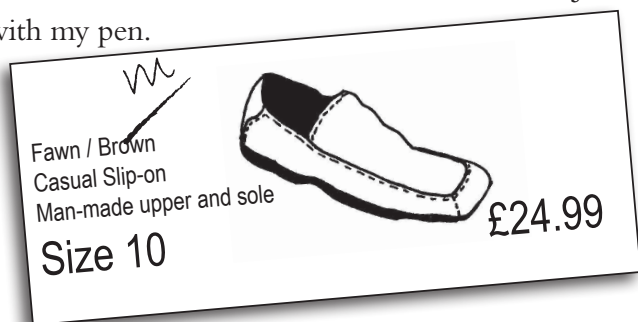
‘What you doing up there, Missy Biggs?’

I looked down. Gina was looking right back up at me. ‘Oh, I’m trying to find SHANE in size ten in fawn,’ I lied.

Gina wrinkled up her brow suspiciously. ‘Oo for? There’s no one in the shop.’

I gave a big noisy sigh. ‘Oh, he must have left. Nice of him to let me know he doesn’t want them any more.’

Gina’s eyes went all narrow and she looked at me a bit dubiously. ‘Yeah, well. SHANE should be there just next to the NIGEL slip-ons, innit. Don’t be up there all day.’ She stared at me for a few seconds more with her scary eyes and then turned and wandered off. Breathing a sigh of relief, I busied myself with my pretend search for SHANE and pulled a box off the shelf just by where I was sitting. Opening the lid, I took out the shoes which were inside and examined them. They were a nasty cream colour with dark brown stitching down the outer edges. My grandad would have described them as loafers, but I doubt if even he would have worn them. Goose would have described them as putrid. I looked at the label attached to the front of the box and then made an adjustment to it with my pen.



Placing the box back on the shelf, I couldn't help smiling. No lover of mine would ever be seen dead in a pair of man-made fawn and brown SHANE shoes. Neil Adam, for example, is most definitely not a SHANE type of man. Come to think of it, he's not a khaki-hair-colour type of man either.