

Melt Down

It started as a joke because we were so exhausted after the birth of the triplets. One day, leaving my husband in charge while I dashed to the doctor's, I dug out a notebook and wrote, 'Don't forget to eat!' next to a doodle of a knife and fork. That was how communicating via the book began.

Twelve years later, as I picked up the car keys, I glanced at Matt's sketch of a rugby ball wearing spectacles next to, 3.30pm Mr Burke, St Paul's. That drawing flashed into my mind when Mr Burke shook my hand. *Is his head particularly narrow, or are his glasses too wide?* I thought. We all sat around a table in his office, and a drop of spit on his bottom lip wobbled as he spouted his approach to literacy.

Leaning forward he said, "Our Year 9 reading focus is seabed methane. Do you know what scientists are saying about that?"

Aggrieved at being patronised, I scanned the reading sheet on his desk for clues. "It says here that it'll be released if the permafrost thaws."

"What will that mean?"

I shifted in my seat. "Do tell."

"Boom!" His eyes widened. "It'll be the end of life as we know it."

I blinked twice. Beside me sat Matt and our triplets, Liam, Ryan and Ollie. St Paul's was an exclusive school for boys, which Matt had spent months trying to convince me was the best place for them. Unsure of how to follow Mr Burke's doomsday prophesy, I decided to side-step it.

"And how do you teach maths?"

Mr Burke proudly produced lists of timed tests he believed made his pupils activate their *super brain* which, he claimed, all teenagers possessed. I glanced at our triplets. Ryan was picking his nose, Liam scratching his head and Ollie was gazing up at the ceiling. At that

moment there was not a hint of super brain between them, but then their thirteenth birthday wasn't until next month.

Matt mentioned I'd home-schooled the boys and closed with, "They'll need support integrating into school."

This was not news to Mr Burke. The day before I'd spent half an hour on the phone to him.

"We've been unable to get a diagnosis," I'd said. "The boys have been challenging from birth. We didn't pick up the problems until a friend brought her baby over when the boys were toddlers. Only then did I realise our boys' lack of eye contact and smiles were abnormal. They've developed their own language, but communicate with others via pictures and notes."

"Are the boys particularly good at anything — sport, music?"

"They're amazing at art. Liam always draws in red, Ryan blue and Ollie green."

"And you said they only attended school for one day?"

"Yes. It was horrible. They need routine; for example, I prepare set food each day. Friday is pizza night, Saturday spaghetti, and so on; it helps them feel safe."

"I see. I believe the next five years are vital for your boys. We don't mollycoddle here at St Paul's."

That remark had stung me.

I sat listening to him rattle on about homework and then he dropped the bombshell.

"We have eight Year 9 classes. Splitting the boys up is essential if they're to reach their full potential."

As if an electric current had run through him, Liam snatched the paper and pen and wrote *No Way* in large red letters, circling it three times.

“Well, that’s been very informative, Mr Burke,” I garbled, scraping my chair on the wooden floor in my rush to leave. “Thanks for your time.”

Mr Burke extended a hand to Matt, and for a moment I thought he was going to ignore me, but he turned and said, “A month in our school will put your boys on track.”

As soon as the triplets reached the car, Ollie kicked the back bumper.

“Pack it in!” Matt yelled. “We were just looking.”

Back home, the boys disappeared into their bedrooms.

“That went well,” I said, flopping onto the sofa.

Matt switched on the jug. “We have to do something, Deb. We can’t go on like this.”

“It’ll end badly if we send them to that school.”

“Listen to yourself! They’re not babies; they’re taller than you are, for Christ’s sake.

What’s going to happen when they hit eighteen?”

That evening Liam gave me a note; a drawing of a bunch of flowers beside the words, *Mum, please don’t make us go. We can’t be separated.*

Later I showed it to Matt.

“What do you expect? They run rings around you. They can bloody talk. I’m sick of all these friggin’ notes. St Paul’s would be the making of them.”

“What would you know?” I hit back. “When do you ever spend time with them?”

“One of us has to work!”

“So home-schooling isn’t work?”

“I didn’t say that, but what would you do with yourself if they went?”

I stormed out, and we tiptoed around each other for the rest of the week. On Friday evening, over pizzas, Matt suggested to the boys they give St Paul’s a week’s trial.

“Think of all the things you’ll be able to do. The art room’s amazing, and the technology will be right up your street.”

Liam pulled out his pad and wrote, *We would rather die.*

“No need to be dramatic, mate.” Matt stretched out his hand to touch Liam’s shoulder, but he flinched.

“Remember when you wouldn’t try pasta?” Matt gave a little laugh. “Now it’s your favourite. This time next year we’ll be wondering what all the fuss was about.”

Liam underscored the word *die* three times, picked up his plate and left. The others followed.

Matt gave me a withering look. I shrugged and began clearing the table. As I loaded the dishwasher, I said, “Why not do something with the boys this weekend? It might help thaw the ice. Maybe then they’ll be willing to try school?”

“Do you think?”

“Well, nothing will make St Paul’s appeal, but some quality father/son time is long overdue; kick a ball with them in the garden, go fishing.”

He came up behind me and gave me a squeeze. “We’re on the same side, Debs.”

I relaxed and sank back into him. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d had a moment like this.

The next morning Matt was in a grump. “Have you seen my blood pressure meds?”

I looked through the bathroom drawers; they’d gone. “Bugger, it’s Saturday – you’ll have to go to the emergency surgery to get another script.”

Matt chewed his lip. “Blow that, I’ll go to the docs on Monday.”

I detected a note of uncertainty in his voice. Since his heart scare last year he’d taken his pills religiously.

“Do you still want to take the boys out?”

“Sure. We need to have some fun. I thought we’d have a game of footy today and I’ll take them fishing tomorrow.”

“Great,” I said, squeezing his arm. “I’ll go wake them.”

It was lovely watching them in the garden, the only problem was the boys repeatedly kicked the ball on the roof. Ollie got the ladder for Matt to climb. When it happened the third time, I heard yelling and dashed outside. A rung had sheared off near the top causing Matt to fall a couple of metres. It could have been nasty, but fortunately he’d landed on the lawn and had only winded himself. I helped him inside.

“Bloody ladder!” he muttered. “It’s supposed to have a lifetime warranty.”

After some sweet tea, he took it easy for the rest of the day. Getting ready for bed that evening, he stuck his head around the bathroom door. “I can’t help feeling the boys deliberately kicked the ball on the roof.”

“Don’t be daft,” I said, putting my arms around him. “I know their empathy is poor, but they wouldn’t do something like that.”

Later, I sensed Matt lying awake. Was he also wondering how a metal tread on a new ladder could fail?

The next morning, Matt loaded the fishing gear into the car while I made a pile of sandwiches. I was out of sorts because the sharp knife was missing and the cheese had been difficult to cut. Waving them off, I decided to take the opportunity to air Liam’s room. I opened the curtains and was greeted by *Star Wars* figures meticulously lined up along the windowsill. Flicking a duster around them, my attention was caught by magazine cuttings on the desk beside the notebook. I opened it and saw a carefully snipped out photograph of a pill bottle glued alongside an image of a ladder with one top tread snipped off. A green arrow pointed from the container to the ladder. A blue one led to another picture. This time it was a drawing of a sharp knife.

It had a green handle.

A blue blade.

And on its tip, a frenzied scribble of scarlet.

THE END