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STORIES CELEBRATING HUMAN RIGHTS

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"WE ARE ALL BORN FREE..."

ARTICLE 1
UNIVERSAL DECLARATION
OF HUMAN RIGHTS, 1948

FOREWORD

WE used to have a delightful art teacher at my secondary school, who designed a joke school badge for us – of two demonic schoolgirls fighting with hockey sticks, with a special school motto underneath: *It's not fair!* He said these were the three words we used most often. We said it wasn't fair we had to wear such a revolting school uniform; it wasn't fair we had so much homework to do; it wasn't fair we had to eat such disgusting school dinners...

I whined as much as anyone – and then when I was twelve I read *The Diary of Anne Frank.* I felt so ashamed. Life truly was desperately unfair for Anne, having to hide month after month in the Secret Annexe, in fear of her life. I cried when I reached the end of the book and learnt what had happened to Anne, but although she died tragically

young, her wonderful diary is a lasting testament to her life and the persecution of so many Jews during the last world war.

So many brave writers have drawn attention to the horrors of repressive regimes, even though they've suffered as a result. The authors contributing stories to this beautiful book have given us much food for thought. Life *isn't* fair – but we can do our best to right the wrongs.

Let's all join together and live by the thirty rules of the Universal Declaration.

Jacqueline Wilson

KLAUS VOGEL AND THE BAD LADS

David Almond

WE'D been together for years. We called ourselves the Bad Lads, but it was just a joke. We were mischief-makers, pests and scamps. We never caused proper trouble – not till that autumn, anyway; round about the time we were turning thirteen; round about the time Klaus Vogel came.

The regulars were me; Tonto McKenna from Stivvey Court; Dan Digby; and the Spark twins, Fred and Frank. We all came from Felling and we all went to St John's. Then there was Joe Gillespie. He was a year or so older than the rest of us, and kept himself a bit aloof, but he was the leader, and he was great. His hair was long and curled over his collar. He wore faded Levi's, Chelsea boots, Ben Sherman shirts. He had a girlfriend, Teresa Doyle. He used to walk hand in hand with her through Holly Hill Park.

I used to dream about being just like Joe – flicking my hair back with my hand, winking at girls, putting my arm round one of the lads after a specially good stunt, saying, "We done really good, didn't we? We're really bad, aren't we? Ha ha ha!"

All of us, not just me, wanted to be a bit like Joe in those days.

Most days, after school, we took a ball onto the playing field at Swards Road and put two jumpers down for a goal. We played keep-up and penalties, practised diving headers, swerves and traps. We played matches with tiny teams and a single goal, but we still got carried away by it all, just like when we were eight or nine. We called each other Bestie, Pele, Yashin, and commentated on the moves: "He's beaten one man; he's beaten two! Can he do it? *Yeees!* Oh no! Oh, what a save by the black-clad Russian!" We punched the air when we scored a goal and waved at the invisible roaring crowd. Our voices echoed across the playing field and over the rooftops. Our breath rose in plumes as the air chilled and the evening came on.

We felt ecstatic, transfigured. Then after a while one of us would see Joe coming out from among the houses, and we'd come back down to the real world.

Joe usually had a trick or two of his own lined up, but he

always made a point of asking what we fancied doing next.

Tonto might say, "We could play knocky nine door in Balaclava Street."

Or Frank might go, "Jump through the hedges in Coldwell Park Drive?"

But we'd all just groan at things like that. They were little kids' tricks, and we'd done them tons of times before. Sometimes there were new ideas, like the night we howled like ghosts through Mrs Minto's letter box, or when we phoned the police and said an escaped lunatic was chopping up Miss O'Sullivan in her front garden, or when we tied a length of string at head height right across Dunelm Terrace. But usually the best plans turned out to be Joe's. It was his idea, for instance, to put the broken bottles under Mr Tatlock's car tyres, and to dig up the leeks in Albert Finch's allotment. We went along with Joe, but by the time that autumn came, some of his plans were starting to trouble us all.

One evening, when the sky was glowing red over St Patrick's steeple, and when it was obvious that none of us had anything new to suggest, Joe rubbed his hands together and grinned. He had a rolled-up newspaper stuck into his jeans pocket.

"It's a cold night, lads," he said. "How about a bit of a blaze to warm us up?"

"A blaze?" said Tonto.

"Aye." Joe winked. He rattled a box of matches. "Follow me."

He led us up Swards Road and across The Drive and into the narrow lane behind Sycamore Grove. We stopped in the near darkness under a great overgrown privet hedge. Joe told us to be quiet and to gather close.

"Just look at the state of this," he whispered.

He put his hand up into the foliage and shook it. Dust and litter and old dead leaves fell out of it. I scratched at something crawling in my hair.

"Would *your* dads let *your* hedge get into a mess like this?" he said.

"No," we answered.

"No. It's just like he is. Crazy and stupid and wild."

"Like who?" whispered Frank.

"Like him inside!" said Joe. "Like Useless Eustace!"

Mr Eustace. He lived in the house beyond the hedge. No family, hardly any pals. He'd been a teacher for a while but he'd given up. Now he spent most of his time stuck inside writing poems, reading books, listening to weird music.

"We're gonna burn it down," said Joe.

"Eh?" I said.

"The hedge. Burn it down, teach him a lesson."

The hedge loomed above us against the darkening sky.

"Why?"

Joe sighed. "Cos it's a mess and cos we're the Bad Lads. And he deserves it."

He unrolled the newspaper and started shoving pages into the hedge. He handed pages to us as well. "Stuff them low down," he said, "so it'll catch better."

I held back. I imagined the roar of the flames, the belching smoke. "I don't think we should," I found myself saying.

The other lads watched as Joe grabbed my collar and glared into my eyes.

"You think too much," he whispered. "You're a Bad Lad. So *be* a Bad Lad."

He finished shoving the paper in. He got the matches out. "Anyway," he said, "he was a bloody conchie, wasn't he?"

"That was ages back. He was only doing what he believed in."

"He was a coward and a conchie. And like me dad says – once a conchie..."

"Don't do it, Joe."

"You gonna be a conchie too?" he said. "*Are* you?" He looked at all of us. "Are *any* of you going to be conchies?"

"No," we said.

"Good lads." He put his arm round my shoulder. "Blame me," he whispered. "I'm the leader. You're only

following instructions. So do it."

I hated myself, but I shoved my bit of crumpled paper into the hedge with the rest of them.

Conchie. The story came from before any of us were born. Mr Eustace wouldn't fight in the Second World War. He was against all war; he couldn't attack his fellow man. He was a conscientious objector. When my dad and the other lads' dads went off to risk their lives fighting the Germans and the Japanese, Mr Eustace was sent to jail, then let out to work on a farm in Durham.

He'd suffered then; he'd suffered since. My dad said he'd been a decent bloke, but turning conchie had ruined his life. He'd never find peace. He should have left this place and started a new life somewhere else, but he never did.

Joe lit a match and held it to the paper. Flames flickered. They started rising fast. Tonto was already backing away down the lane; Fred and Frank were giggling; Dan had disappeared. I cursed. For a moment, I couldn't move. Then we were all away, running hunched over through the shadows, and the hedge was roaring behind us. By the time we were back at Swards Road, there was a great orange glow over Sycamore Grove, and smoke was belching up towards the stars.

"Now that," said Joe, "is what I call a proper Bad Lads stunt!"

And no matter what we thought inside, all of us shivered with the thrill of it.

Next morning I went back to the lane. It was black and soaking wet from the ash and the hosepipes. The hedge was just a few black twisted stems. Mr Eustace was in the garden talking to a policeman. He kept shrugging, shaking his head. He caught my eye and I wanted to yell out, "You're useless! What did you expect? You should have started a new life somewhere else!"

Joe was nowhere in sight but Fred and Frank were grinning from further down the lane. Neighbours were out, muttering and whispering. None of them suspected anything, of course. They knew us. We were Felling lads. There was no badness in us. Not really.

That was the week Klaus Vogel arrived. He was a scrawny little kid from East Germany. The tale was that his dad was a famous singer who'd been hauled off to a prison camp somewhere in Russia. The mother had disappeared – shot, more than likely, people said. The kid had been smuggled out in the boot of a car. Nobody knew the full truth, said my dad, not when it had happened so far away and in countries like that. Just be happy we lived in a place like this where we could go about as we pleased.

Klaus stayed in the priest's house next to St Patrick's

and joined our school, St John's. He didn't have a word of English, but he was bright and he learnt fast. Within a few days he could speak a few English words in a weird Geordie–German accent. Soon he was even writing a few words in English.

We looked at his book one break.

"How the hell do you *do* it?" asked Dan.

Klaus raised his hands. He didn't know how to explain. "I just..." he began, and he scribbled hard and fast. "Like so," he said.

We saw jagged English words mingled with what had to be German.

"What is it?" said Tonto.

"Is story of my *vater*. My father. It must be..." Klaus frowned into the air, seeking the word.

"Must be *told*," I said.

"*Danke*. Thank you." He nodded and his eyes widened. "It must be told. *Ja!* Aye!"

And we all laughed at the way he used the Tyneside word.

After school Klaus talked with his feet. Overhead kicks, sudden body swerves, curling free kicks: the kind of football we could only dream of. He was tiny, clever, tough. We gasped in admiration. When he played, he lost himself in the game, and all his troubles seemed to fall away.