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Rockoholic

Written by C. J. Skuse

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From the Chicken House

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

Rockoholic

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Chicken
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For my sister Penny. Forever in debt to your priceless advice.

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*I know someday you'll have a beautiful life,
I know you'll be a star, in somebody else's sky,
But why, why, why, can't it be,
Can't it be mine?*

PEARL JAM, 'Black'

1

F-unreal

To our local newspaper, my grandad's death was 'a shocking accident that brought Bristol city centre to a standstill'. To my mum, it was humiliation beyond words and a week's worth of whispers from her colleagues at the bank. To me, it was a sadness that could fill a dry sea.

And now it's the funeral and everything's wrong. My grandad didn't want people wearing black. He wanted his mourners to come in saris, or wetsuits, or grass skirts and hula gear. He wanted a big lavish send-off too, with female body-builders carrying his gold coffin and, to round off the day, cannons firing his ashes into the sky.

'And I don't want it called a funeral either, Jody. Invite people to my Body Barbecue. That sounds much more fun.'

My mum's all grey skirt suits and polished shoes and anything Grandad ever did embarrassed the hell out of her. The

announcement in the paper just read, 'Funeral of Charles Nathaniel McGee. Donations to Cancer Research, no flowers please.' Everything had to be funereal. F-unreal. That's how I've felt all day.

And now we're at the snooty Torrance Lodge for the wake, and Mum and my sister are mingling with Scottish relatives we haven't seen for decades and trying desperately to find reasons for not being in touch. Several soap-smelling old women have delighted in telling me how I've grown up since the last time they saw me, which was probably before I was conceived, and now I'm hiding on the staircase out of the way. I'll let Halley take the brunt of it. She loves the attention. They all think she's the superstar in the family anyway, with all her sporting medals and Duke of Edinburgh Awards and Olympic hopes. I've had enough of it. And as my grandad used to tell me . . .

'If you can't find anything useful to say, get the hell out of the way.'

He'd once played drums in a band and had nipple rings and smoked weed and went to Glastonbury. He used to moonbathe naked on the roof of his house, and he'd done a bungee jump and gone skinny-dipping at the Great Barrier Reef. He loved 'Bohemian Rhapsody', and used to dance around the lounge with the mannequin he'd nicked from a skip outside Debenhams. He'd wanted heavy metal music and sushi and chocolate fountains at his wake. Not James Blunt and cheap Lidl sausage rolls.

I huddle into the banister, iPod earphones in, hood up, looking like a problem page picture for teen angst. I close my

eyes and imagine Jackson is singing to me, like I do when I'm trying to get to sleep at night. I imagine he's lying next to me, his breath on my face as he sings, that he's stroking my hair. When I open my eyes, Mum's throwing me one of her disapproving 'Why don't you join in?' glares from the function room where everyone is chowing down on jelly and ice cream. In the bar next door five kids, apparently my third cousins, roll balls up and down the snooker table.

Feet approach. Nike high tops with blue ticks. Black skinny jeans. Wallet chain. White graffiti T-shirt. And one of my grandad's bluest waistcoats. I pluck the earphones out.

'All right, Presh?' says Mac, settling a glass of Coke down next to me on the stair. 'Sorry, I got sidetracked by this old bloke telling me about his prostate. Here you go.'

'S'OK, I had Jackson,' I say. He rolls his eyes. Mac's more into show tunes and Lady Gaga than rock, but he knows The Regulators are the soundtrack to my life so he keeps a few of their songs on his iPod, just for me. I don't have my own and any cheapo MP3 players I buy usually get knackered or dropped down drains, so I borrow Mac's. I wind the earphones around it and hand it back to him.

'Hang onto it for a bit,' he says. 'There's barely room for my arse in these jeans.'

'Why d'you wear them then?'

'Because, because, because because, because . . .' he sings. It really bugs me sometimes how he can't give straight answers. I wonder if that's a gay thing.

'I've sexed up your Coke,' he says, 'thought you could do with a perk.'

I shake my head. 'I'm not drinking today.'

'Why? Because of Jackson Gatlin?' he whines sarcastically. Mac doesn't appreciate my obsession with Jackson. He calls him my 'fictional fix'. Because he's my hero. Because I choose to support Jackson's new-found teetotalism. Because I spend nearly all my wages on Regulators T-shirts, CDs and limited-edition DVD box sets of all their South American concerts. Because they're my band, my sanctuary. Because, because, because, because, because . . .

'You need something to get you through the day,' he says. 'Might freshen you up a bit.'

'I don't want it. I want my grandad.' I take the moon rock from my hoodie pocket. I rub it, as though the Grandad genie is going to plume out of it. But all I see is him in my head on that last day, sitting in his wheelchair.

'Don't dream it, be it,' he says. Then he's gone. Down and down and down. The tray of drinks falls to the pavement. Our foot soles thump down the street. My screams. My fault.

I feel the rush of tears coming, like water surging up a broken pipe, but Mac sees it coming and kneels down before me, placing one black-fingernailed hand on my knee.

'OK, maybe alcohol's not the best idea,' he says, in his serious voice. 'It's OK, come here.' I don't like Mac's serious voice. He sounds like a solicitor or something. A solicitor with spiky black hair with a shock of magpie blue flashed through one side. It smells like lemons and hugging him is like hugging a warm summer tree.

'He'd have really hated this, Mac,' I sniff, pulling back from his shoulder. 'Every second.'

'You're right. You know what I can hear him saying? "Where's my bloody sushi?" "Why'd you let your mother pick Valium FM? You canny dance to that!" he says in a near-perfect imitation of Grandad's Scottish accent.

I smile, wiping my eyes. Some opera woman mourns over the buffet-room speakers. 'I'm not going back in there. I swear, if one more hairy-lipped granny kisses me on the cheek and asks me how school's going, they're going to be booking the next wake here.'

He sits on the stair beside me. 'Well, it's nearly over now, isn't it?'

'Yeah. And I've done nothing towards it. I've done nothing to make it better for him.'

'Well, at the end of the day, your mum gave him a respectable send-off. She probably can't afford to do more, Jode. It all went smoothly, didn't it?'

And then it comes to me, like it's been stapled to my forehead.

'That's the problem, Mac,' I say, getting up off the stair and taking up my vodka-kicked Coke. 'It's all gone way too smoothly.'

'Woah there, what are you going to do?' he says as I glug the Coke down, wincing at the huge injection of vodka lurking at the bottom of the glass. 'Where are you going?' he calls after me.

'I'm going to change that bloody music.'

Picture this: huddled groups of old people chatting over

paper plates; the reek of Lily of the Valley and the rank smell of prawns. The quiet warbling of Katherine Jenkins comes to an abrupt end as I fix Mac's iPod to the docking station behind the bar, find 'Bedlam' by The Regulators and lock the volume control. Speakers crackle in all four corners of the room. The chattering stops.

Sunlight breaks through the metal-grey clouds outside and floods the room like honey. A guitar noise kicks in on the sound system.

Crank, crank.

More guitars, louder than bombs.

Crank. The loudest voice in the world screams . . .

'This is a warning motherfuckers! You gotta deal . . .'

A huge grin splits my face. It's Jackson's voice.

'Surrender your weapons. It's gonna get . . .'

Crank, crank, crank, crank, crank.

'Reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeal!'

Before I know what my own hand is doing, it's sinking straight into a crystal bowl of pink blancmange, grabbing a handful and hoying a large wet splodge straight at the vicar's face.

I see Mac heading towards me, all serious face. He's coming to hold me back, talk me down, but I'm too hyped, I'm too riled, and some random kids (possibly the third cousins) are joining in.

Jackson's screeching through the speakers that surround me. He's cheering me on. One of the cousins lunges for the cherry pavlova and shoves a handful in my mouth. He laughs and I laugh and shower him with a plateful of French fancies,

rubbing them into his hair. Another cousin grabs a fistful of chocolate mousse and flings it at an old lady in a green hat. More second and third cousins run in from the games room, squealing in delight and grabbing handfuls of sandwiches and vol-au-vents and hurling them at us and each other.

I catch sight of Mac, just outside the function room. He's given up trying to stop what's happening. He's standing beneath a pink-and-white floral umbrella.

The barman shouts and gets a face full of fish-paste sandwiches. Old women squawk and flap and wheel out of the way. The crabby old man from the post office gets a Victoria sponge smack in his mouth. A waitress skids on the mandarin jelly. Custard splats against the walls. Quiche plasters the windows. Light fittings drip with shredded lettuce. Multicoloured squidgy lumps rain down as cheese footballs pellet the air like machine-gun fire.

'Give me what you got, don't hold back.'

The air is thick with egg mayonnaise, salmon sandwiches, mini kiev's and fairy cakes; the floor is a battlefield of bodies felled by jelly and ice cream, all crawling and ducking out of the firing line. It is not a funeral anymore. It is a buffet blood-bath.

'This is my war, this is my waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrr!'

With Jackson's help, I destroy that function room. It is five manic minutes of loud music, helpless laughing, screaming, shouting, mayhem, magic and mess. By the time me and the cousins have come to our breathless truce, it is a no-man's-land of sweet gunk and mangled pastry. I'm going to pay, we all are. My mum is going to go into rage overdrive with no shock

absorbers and a double exhaust. But for these brief minutes, all is as it should be.

And I just know that somewhere in the universe my grandad is laughing his head off.