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**THE SLIGHTLY  
SKEWED  
LIFE OF TOBY CHRYSLER**

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**PAUL COLLINS**



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*To all the Tobys of the world - you know who you are*



## **Always make the best out of a mad situation**

It wasn't even five o'clock and Milo had already murdered Mrs Appleby. Twice.

Privately, Milo blamed his mother, not just for Mrs Appleby's death but for everything that followed as well. If his mum hadn't run off with the postman four weeks earlier, none of it would have happened.

There had been no warning. One morning, at breakfast, his mother simply wasn't there. Milo said nothing that first day. His mother often went to work before he got up and came home after he was asleep (though occasionally he was woken by his mum and dad arguing). But when nearly a week of absentee mornings had gone by, still with no sign of Mrs Chrysler, he finally asked his father, 'Where's Mum, Dad?'

‘What? Oh, she’s . . . er . . . out,’ said Mr Chrysler, riveting his attention on the frying pan in front of him where he was burning sausages and eggs.

‘Out where?’

‘Out . . . out –’ Mr Chrysler seemed unable to go on. He scowled and said, ‘Just finish your breakfast, Tobes.’ Mr Chrysler always used Milo’s real name, and not the one he’d acquired, rather perplexingly, at school. ‘You’ll be late for class.’

‘Dad, it’s Saturday.’

His father turned to stare at him, blinking. ‘What? Saturday?’

Milo nodded, wondering how you could not know what day of the week it was. He could tell by the altered traffic noises from the main road two blocks away, and by the cries of children from across the street. Milo noticed his dad’s eyes were red-rimmed, as if he’d gotten something in them, and his normally neat hair was greasy and unwashed. Milo wondered why he hadn’t noticed this before. Suddenly his father’s face seemed to melt and he hurried from the room.

‘When’s she back?’ Milo asked before Mr Chrysler was completely out the door.

‘She’s not coming back!’

Milo thought that was a very silly thing to say. Then he noticed his dad hadn’t finished cooking

his breakfast. He called after him. ‘Can I have your sausages?’

There was no answer so Milo helped himself, remembering to turn off the gas ring when he’d finished. As he’d once burned down the kitchen, this was on his special checklist of things to do.

While chewing his sausages his father’s words drifted around and around inside his head. What had he meant, ‘She’s not coming back’? He felt a tiny spasm of alarm and stopped chewing. He reached into his mouth, took out the shapeless lump of food that he hadn’t yet swallowed, placed it neatly on his plate next to the remaining egg, and went up to his mum’s bedroom.

He stopped outside the door. Despite what his father had said, he knocked. There was no answer. Cautiously, he opened the door and stepped inside, looking about. The room seemed pretty much the same as it always did. Neat, slightly bare, smelling faintly of his mum’s favourite perfume. Maybe it was a little too neat, the perfume a little too faint. On an impulse, he looked in the wardrobe.

Some of her clothes were there and some weren’t. Lined up neatly in a row at the bottom were several pairs of his mother’s beloved shoes.

Milo was closing the wardrobe door when he felt his heart jolt. He leant down and peered at

the last shoe in the row. It was a beautiful red shiny shoe with a long thin heel and sparkles – but that wasn't what puzzled Milo . . .

The problem was, there was only *one*.

Which wasn't right. Shoes came in pairs, like conjoined twins. It didn't even make *sense* to talk about single shoes, though he'd sometimes wondered if there was a special shop someplace that sold such things to people with only one leg. But this . . .

This upset him. Half of a pair wasn't a pair. It wasn't *anything*.

Twos were fine. Twos were quite neat really. Homey and comfortable. Reassuring. And ones were . . . well, ones were simply beautiful. Everything was made out of ones (and zeroes too, of course).

But *halves*? He felt a quick surge of anger and loathing. Halves were *ugly*. Halves were – *orphans*.

Milo started to hyperventilate and had to fumble out his asthma pump. He took a big gulp of chemical spray and waited for the constriction in his chest to ease.

Then, still wheezing, he searched for the shoe's partner but without any luck. Suddenly he threw the remaining shoe on the floor and stamped on it. A great ice-like lump formed in his stomach.

Afterwards, he felt guilty.

It wasn't anywhere near five o'clock, which meant it wasn't his 'angry time'. He put the red sparkly shoe back in place and went downstairs to watch re-runs of his favourite television show, *Third Rock From The Sun*. He liked this show because the people in it were like him: not quite in sync with the rest of the world.

But it was a long time before the shoe stopped worrying him.

After two weeks, Milo gave up asking his dad when they would see his mum, and why he couldn't visit her, wherever she was. Dad said he couldn't and *that was that*. Milo's chest hurt when Mr Chrysler said such things. It felt like a giant's fist was squeezing him. He'd take a shot of asthma spray and mutter an old rhyme, over and over: 'When in trouble or in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout'. And that's just what he wanted to do: run in circles, scream and shout. He thought it might help.

One day, whilst watching TV with his best, and only, friend, Fluke, Milo suddenly sat up straight. Fluke was playing his Nintendo DS and not paying attention to the TV screen where the man and the woman in the movie were going through a divorce. Fluke was small for his age, skinny as a rake, but with very wise eyes. He'd been Milo's friend since first grade.

‘My mum’s run off with the postman,’ Milo said.

Fluke looked up. He thought about this for a bit. ‘How do you know?’

Milo pointed at the TV screen. ‘They had arguments just like Jenny and Martin Witherspoon.’

Fluke frowned. ‘Who?’

‘The Witherspools. See, that’s Mrs Witherspoon there.’ Onscreen, Mrs Witherspoon, a young blonde with a tear-stained face, was pouring herself a drink. It looked like a whisky. ‘Mum was drinking, too. Vodka and orange with ice.’

‘So?’ Fluke tilted his head.

Fluke was, in Milo’s opinion, a genius, but sometimes he was a very slow genius. Perhaps it was because his mother had tried to conceive for years and had several ‘misconceptions’. Fluke’s parents went on the IVF program – still no luck. It wasn’t until they had given up because it was so expensive, that Mrs Duc finally fell pregnant, hence the nickname, Fluke.

‘Mrs Witherspoon ran off with the librarian. But before that Mr Witherspoon said, “Well, if you like him so much, why don’t you go live with him?”’

Fluke looked like he was doing really difficult maths in his head.

‘My dad said that to Mum two days before she wasn’t here anymore. The postman delivered the mail and Mum smiled at him and Dad’s face went red and he shouted that she should go live with the postman, if she liked him so much.’

Fluke’s eyes widened. ‘Oh, man, Milo, you’re right! What are you going to do?’

‘Find her.’

Fluke looked interested. ‘How?’

Milo frowned. ‘I don’t know. How do people find people?’

Fluke thought again. He wasn’t the kind of boy who said the first thing that popped into his head. ‘You hire detectives.’

‘Don’t you need money?’

‘Oh, yeah. Hey, you know that show . . . what’s it called? *Psychic Detectives*. That’s what you need, a psychic!’

Milo stared at Fluke in admiration. ‘Yes. And that way we get a psychic *and* a detective!’ Milo sobered for a moment. ‘Wouldn’t they want money, too?’

‘Nope,’ said Fluke, confidently. ‘They don’t do anything. They just sit in a chair and get a dazed look and tell *you* what to do. Besides, they like to help people. Remember, I’ve seen them on TV.’

Milo grinned. If it was on TV then *that was that*.

Fluke's face suddenly fell. 'But how do we *find* a psychic detective?'

Milo's smile got bigger. He knew *just* where to find such a person.

His neighbour, Mrs Appleby, was a sick old lady who had been in bed as long as Milo had been alive, or longer. But before she'd gotten sick (and for some years afterward) she'd been a Famous Clairvoyant, at least according to Milo's mum – who'd had her 'cards' read many times. Milo didn't want his cards read, since he had some very rare ones in mint condition, but he did want to find his mother. Failing that, he needed help to locate the missing shoe. He was pretty sure that would be a bit easier for a psychic detective and he knew if he found the red sparkly shoe he would find his mum.

There was only one problem with talking to Mrs Appleby. Well, two really.

Firstly, she wasn't long for this world.

Milo wasn't entirely sure what 'dying' entailed but he pictured it as a kind of 'going to sleep' – his pet cat Maxwell had gone to the vet one day and not come back and Milo's mum had said he'd been put to sleep. This supported the theory that Mrs Appleby would also be leaving soon and not coming back, as she spent all her time in bed.

The second problem was Mr Appleby.

He and Mrs Appleby argued all the time and so loudly that the entire neighbourhood and even those on Mars could hear (according to Milo's dad); lately however they barely seemed to say a word. This didn't surprise Milo. They'd been married nearly fifty years and Milo figured that by now they must have said all of what they wanted to say ten times over. Certainly his mum and dad had run out of stuff to talk about. Besides, Mr Appleby was always yelling, 'I don't effing want to effing talk about it!' He was one of those men who had no volume control, everything coming out as a hoarse shout.

Having decided to ask Mrs Appleby where his mum had gone, or at least where the other shoe was, Milo knew he needed to act quickly, before she went to Heaven, which must be pretty soon now, as just the other day Mr Appleby had bellowed, 'Ah, go to sleep, you old bag!'

Fluke seemed to think Milo was on the right track. 'Always make the best of a mad situation!' Fluke had always had an interesting way of saying things. Maybe that's why they were friends. But he also had a concern. 'Uh . . . what about Fat Cat?'

Milo felt an uncomfortable tightening in his stomach. Fat Cat had been Mr Appleby's tabby which Milo had run over when he'd lost control of his go-cart earlier that year. It had been an accident.

Milo *had* wondered if he should tell Mr Appleby but Fluke had said, 'Rules have exemptions that were made to be broken.' Surely running over someone's pet in a careening go-cart was 'exemptionable'. It definitely wasn't an everyday event, if only because the Applebys had no more cats.

Of course, Mrs Appleby probably knew all about this. She'd no doubt 'seen' what had happened to Fat Cat, which was sort of reassuring. If she had told Mr Appleby, who looked like an ex-boxer, that Milo had murdered his cat, Milo suspected he wouldn't be happy.

'You having second doubts?' asked Fluke, peering closely at Milo's face.

'No.'

'Good,' said Fluke. 'Better to have strived, than not.'

'Not what?'

'Strived.'

'Oh.'