

## What We Did in Our Summer Holidays

Kate Walker pushed open the double doors and stood aside to let the children, their backpacks and books in hand, scramble out onto the tarmacked playground. She'd been back at work for a couple of weeks now, and she was surviving pretty well. The grief didn't get to her very often, not even when she got back to her silent house in the evenings. She let out a long breath. This was a good time of day: the children, happy now that they were going home, a little older and a little wiser than the day before; the feeling of a job well done; and time to rest. Of course, that wasn't quite true. Not all of the children were happy, and not all had grown wiser; and the "time to rest" would be limited to waiting for the kettle to boil before hurrying off with a coffee to do some prep. But still, the feeling persisted.

She watched as the children and parents found each other, gathered themselves, said goodbyes to their friends, held hands – or held pushchairs – and filtered out onto Wear Street. Ah, there he was: the black-jacketed man with a slight stoop, and curly hair already shot with grey. Now, let's think – what was his name? Not the same as Chloe's – ah, yes . . .

She raised a hand to attract his attention. 'Er, Mr Ambrose?'

He was crouching down while Chloe showed him something in her book. When he heard Kate's call he looked up, and a frown crossed his face. Then he ushered Chloe towards the brightly-coloured, well-worn play equipment, where she climbed onto a bouncy caterpillar and proceeded to rock vigorously.

The frown was still there as he approached. He looked tired, and his coat hung loosely around his shoulders. 'Everything all right? She been behaving?'

'Oh, yes, Mr Ambrose. Chloe's a very good girl.' And, anticipating his next question, she added: 'And she's well-liked by the other children.'

'Oh.' He relaxed a little.

'I just wanted to ask you about something.'

'Right . . .?'

Kate produced a work-book, Chloe's name carefully written across its front, and turned to a page adorned with bright colouring. How, she wondered, can I put this?

'You see,' she began, 'I asked the children to write about what they did in the summer holidays. What they *really* did. We're doing descriptive work, you see . . .' She passed him the book, and pointed at a whole page of neat writing, next to a creditable sketch of vast yellow sand-dunes and a row of camels disappearing into the distance.

Mr Ambrose read, and as he did so, a smile flickered across his face. 'I keep tellin' her to use her imagination, like,' he said, half to himself. His voice was deep, and rich. Kate liked it.

'She writes that she went to the Sahara Desert,' she went on, 'and she rode on camels, and then she came to a great wall, and had to leap across it . . .'

'Yeah,' he said, grinning. 'And she's got *me* in the story . . .'

'Oh, you're "Lijah"?''

'Yeah. Name's Elijah, really. Chloe doesn't get on with first letters.' He raised his eyebrows. 'So, is there a problem?'

Kate licked her lips. Why was this so difficult? 'There's more,' she said, nodding him to continue. Now the picture was of a green-covered jungle, with a great striped tiger and two colourful birds. 'And, you see here, she says that you went to the jungle, and met fierce tigers, and look – some birds that were fighting.'

He looked sidelong. 'So you're sayin', she didn't really do these?'

Kate blushed. 'Well – I know that–'

'We're too poor to afford holidays like that?'

'No, no,' said Kate. 'Of course I didn't mean that. But I know that your job – you don't get many holidays–'

He chuckled. 'Ah, well, you're right. It's been hard since her mother died. We can only just make ends meet, so, yeah, no holidays. But if yer must know, the warehouse 'ad to shut for a fortnight, 'cos of Covid. So I 'ad a bit of time off.'

'That's good . . . ?'

Elijah was grinning as he studied Chloe's drawings. He glanced up, to where she was now whizzing down the slide. 'This is good. This is really good.'

'It was just that I asked for real, true things. Not imaginary ones . . .' Kate felt like she wasn't on top of this conversation any more. 'I know it's been hard since her mother – I mean, I don't want other children making fun of her. I'm very fond of her.' *Stop!* She told herself. What on earth are you saying?

Elijah hadn't noticed anything. 'Look,' he said, tapping the book, 'these things did happen, for all we couldn't afford 'em.' He held up a hand to stop her interrupting. 'They did, and they didn't.'

Kate gave him a quizzical look.

'We had some builders on site back in June, and they left a couple of planks and a few bags of sand. So I made Chloe like a little sandpit thing.'

'I thought you lived in a flat?' Was Elijah "using his imagination" just as much as Chloe had?

He inclined his head. 'Outside. The block's got a tatty old lawn around it, with trees and that. 'Course, I couldn't leave her on her own out there, so I went and played with her.'

'You played with her?'

'Got some funny looks, right enough.' He turned the page back. 'We had some plastic horses, and a couple of dolls. Anyhow, there's yer sand dunes, and there's yer camels. And her wall, well I suppose that's one of the planks.' He shook his head, but he was smiling.

Chloe had got bored with the slide. She came running over. 'Lijah,' she pleaded, tugging on his coat, 'can we go home soon?'

He took her hand. 'Just havin' a chat with your teacher, luv. Why don't you have a go on the swing? Won't be long.'

'*All* right,' she said, looking up to heaven in such a grown-up way that Kate couldn't suppress a giggle.

'The Jungle . . .' Elijah was saying. 'We did see some birds fighting . . . oh, I've got it! I took her to Vicky Park – you know the old aviary there?'

Kate nodded. 'Lots of budgies. Horrible to keep them caged like that, I always think.'

'They've got, like, fake greenery stuff, and – yeah, I remember – there was a yellow-and-black one, and I told her that he looked just like a tiger. And yeah, there was a couple of budgies having a barney . . .' He turned the page. 'What's this one?'

'She wrote that you'd been on a pirate ship. The captain gave you grog, and ship's biscuits.'

'Yeah, and there *was* a storm,' he said, pointing at Chloe's drawing of huge waves toppling over a tiny sailing-ship. 'Remember that bad weather at the end of July? We were down at the canal basin, and she was staring at this narrowboat. Out came the old gaffer, and we got talkin'. Brought us in out of the rain, let us have a look round, gave Chloe some orange squash. She was so good. "Aye aye, cap'n," she said as we was getting off.'

Kate gave a brief chuckle. 'You're right. I suppose it did all happen, really.'

Elijah nodded. 'I told her to use her imagination, 'cause if she did, she could think about Sarah.'

'Her mother's name was Sarah?' Kate turned back to Chloe's first drawing, then put a hand to her mouth. 'Oh! Chloe wrote about the *Sarah* desert – I thought she meant the Sahara. Look, I've corrected it all . . .'

Elijah pressed his lips together, and blinked. Then he beckoned to Chloe.

'You seem very fond of her,' said Kate, watching as Chloe came dancing up.

'You say that like you're suspicious.'

Kate shook her head. 'No, no, I–'

'Because I'm just a stepfather? Listen–'

'No, it's not that at all. You – I think you look after her better than some biological fathers do. I think – I think you really love her.'

He looked Kate in the eye. 'Yeah, I do,' he said. 'She's like her mum.' Again he blinked. 'Just like her.'

'I'm sorry . . .'

'Did you know Sarah?'

'No,' said Kate, 'I was, uh, away–'

'Oh, yeah. I remember. Maternity leave, was it?'

'No,' said Kate.

'I miss her so much,' Elijah was saying. 'Could do with some imagination of my own, hey?'

Kate nodded. 'Yes, it's like a part of you is missing. And the pain's with you all the time. Still,' she added, smiling down at the girl, 'at least you've got Chloe.'

'Are we going home now?' demanded Chloe.

'Yeah,' said Elijah. 'Shall we go to Italy on the way?'

Kate smiled again. She suspected "Italy" was the Italian deli on Canon Street. As she watched Chloe walking off, holding tight to Elijah's hand and prattling away, she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. It was right, she decided, that she hadn't said anything about her own bereavement. That would have been, well, inappropriate. But there was no harm, was there, in imagining a chance meeting in town, and maybe buying them a lemonade and a coffee, and maybe having another chat. No harm.

When Friday came, and Kate was collecting the books again, Chloe said, solemnly, 'here's my work, Miss. I've been very careful this time. 'Lijah says, I have to be careful, 'cause . . .'

 She knotted her brows. 'He says, too much 'magination can be scary.'

Kate grinned. 'Chloe,' she said, stooping to her level and looking her in the eye, 'imagination's a lovely thing. You must remember that. But yes, it can be a bit scary. We just have to help other people not to be scared, don't we?'

Chloe nodded twice, emphatically, and scampered off.