

HITLER AND OTHER MINOR PROBLEMS

Our town is as white as a winter postcard snow scene, and I'm not talking about the weather. You'd think it wouldn't be possible in this day and age to find a place so empty of dark faces, but except for a handful of Asians it's just whites everywhere you look. That's why it wasn't surprising Ebony's arrival stirred things up. Changed things, even.

I couldn't help staring at her, the first few weeks of school. Ebony was that kind of person anyway— you'd have stared no matter what colour she was. She sat to the left and slightly in front of me in history, her bushy hair splaying out over the desk of the person behind her. She was tall and thin, but not quite as dark as her name suggested. She seemed to be making tiny movements all the time. You had the feeling she might jump up

all of a sudden and yell something.

Lou Davis sat behind Ebony, and her air space was being invaded by the black girl's hair. That day Miss Willbeck was droning on about some war or other, and I knew I'd better listen because this was the Big Year, the Year that would Decide Our Future, etc. etc., which we'd been hearing from parents and teachers for ages until we were either bored to tears or scared out of our tiny minds. Still, we had a good eight months before exams hit, so I figured I could waste a day or two staring at a black girl.

Except now it was Lou I was staring at. She was a petite girl with carefully shaped and sprayed hair in a fake shade of intense auburn. As I watched she casually removed a bottle of white correcting fluid from her pencil case. More than once I'd been on the receiving end of Lou's anger, expressed by flicking white blobs all over her victim. She belonged to a gang, the kind you didn't want to cross if you could help it.

Ebony tossed her head, and the back of her hair bounced up and down like a bundle of little snakes, right in Lou's face. Lou unscrewed the lid of the bottle. I wondered if Lou would go for the black girl's hair or just for the bright blue blazer. It would be easier to get that white stuff out of hair than off a school blazer.

"Star Smith!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Yes, Miss?"

"I asked you a question, Star. What were some factors that contributed to the rise of Hitler after World War I? I'm sure you covered it last year; this is only review."

"Yes, Miss." I thought furiously and dredged up a couple of points from the bottom of my memory slush pit.

"Very good. Can anyone add to that?"

Miss Willbeck turned towards the other side of the room. I suspected that she saw Lou take out the bottle and was choosing to ignore it. A lot of teachers were like that with

Lou. She could get away with all kinds of things, like obvious make-up and bright nail varnish in spite of school rules, when the rest of us would be told off.

I kept my face turned towards the teacher but with my left eye I saw exactly what Lou was doing. She gave a tiny shrug like maybe she thought it was beneath her even to bother with this black creature, then she started painting over her long silver nails with the white fluid.

I thought it was dumb to paint over the silver with white, but then I saw she was drawing some kind of pattern on each nail.

It wasn't until she got to her thumb that I could see she was decorating each nail with two angular "s" letters crossing one another. A swastika. I had a feeling Lou wasn't painting swastikas on her nails just because we were about to study World War II.

LIFE ON CRAZY STREET

After school I walked home by myself as usual, but for some reason I decided to go through the park. Normally I walk about ten minutes out of my way to avoid it.

Just past the narrow park entrance stood a large clump of kids, talking and laughing. They had shed ties and blazers, and the girls had their grey skirts rolled up so high you could almost see their knickers. In the centre of the group were Lou and her boyfriend Matt; the rest of the gang clustered around them like bees on pollen. They blocked the park entrance every day, sharing cigarettes or joints and acting like they owned the world. The only sensible way to get past them was to put your head down and butt through the middle.

“Look at that, it’s our Star!”

“Star light, Star bright—”

“Maybe I’ll get to Hollywood, then I can be a Star!”

I just kept up my pace, not looking anyone in the eye, ignoring the silly taunts. At least they weren’t in a shoving mood today. Please God, don’t let them find out Star is only my middle name!

I made it through and started to cut across the grass. Behind me there was an unexpected sudden silence. In spite of myself, I hesitated and looked back.

The gang stood firm, not leaving an inch of space for anyone to enter the park. In spite of that, the black girl was forcing her way through their midst, head high and a look on her face that would scorch water. It was dead quiet until she popped out the other side and clumped away on her ridiculous high heels. Then they burst out with laughter and jeers. “You stupid Paki!” was the nicest thing I heard them say.

The black girl halted as if jerked back on a string. She whirled around and stared at

them, one hand on her hip. She didn't look angry, just annoyed that they were wasting her time.

“Honey,” she said in a syrupy accent, “if you think I'm a Paki, you better get glasses!”

I grinned. One point for Blackie! What kind of accent was that? I'd assumed she was Jamaican, but she sounded more like something out of an American film.

When I reached my street about five minutes later I could see our neighbour Mrs. Hinkeldorf leaning on her bedroom window sill, watching the kids walk home. If I hadn't seen her I probably would have called 999, because Mrs. H. was a woman of routine, and staring out the window at half past three each day was part of her daily pattern.

Mrs. H is from Germany, as she keeps reminding us, but I don't hold that against her country. Germany has moved on since Mrs. H's day. But God has a sense of humour, putting my family and Mrs. H in two halves of the same semi-detached house.

I turned into the paved area in front of our half. (We gave up on grass a long time ago.)

“Hello, you!”

Mrs. H. had opened her window and was leaning out. Her face framed in tight curls of short grey hair was just visible over the tops of the row of bushes she planted soon after we moved in, to divide our front garden from hers.

“My name is Star, Mrs. Hinkeldorf,” I called back. She knew my name but she called all of us kids “you” and I figured telling her my name over and over was better than yelling “you” back at her.

“You, Star,” she said, “there is a pair of shoes on your roof!”

“Oh right, Mrs. H. I’ve just left them out to dry in the sun.”

Mrs. H. sputtered wordlessly and shut the window. I wondered how far she’d had to lean out of her window to see onto the little strip of roof over our front porch. I

didn't know about the shoes but they were sure to belong to Cass, my older sister. She probably took them off before she climbed in our bedroom window in the middle of the night and forgot about them.

I stepped onto the porch and stuck my key in the front door. Our house looks fairly normal from outside, but I never let anyone I know cross the threshold. Maybe I lose friends that way, but I figure I'd lose even more if they saw the inside of the house and met my family. Better to stick to acquaintances than try for a close friend.

I stepped into the hall, kicking aside the pile of school bags and shoes dropped there by my three brothers. A din of excited barking echoed from the kitchen and a ball of black and white fur shot through the door and whacked into my legs, nearly knocking me over.

“Mopsy!” I yelled. “Get down!”

I tossed my own bag onto the heap and let our mongrel give me her version of a

hug, complete with face bath. Wiping my face on my sleeve I went into the lounge where my three brothers sat with the curtains drawn, staring like zombies at a cartoon.

“I want the telly at four!” I said loudly.

Perse and Jase, the twins, didn't even register my presence. Six-year-old Baldy gave me his heart-melting grin before turning his eyes back to the flickering screen. Behind the sofa above their heads hung two large Greek masks, one smiling and the other crying, menacing in the dim wavering light.

I sighed. Why couldn't we have a painting of a woodland scene over our sofa like most normal people? Why did we have to have a mother who was so crazy about ancient Greece that she even named her children after heroes of mythology? And that was only tip of the iceberg, of all the reasons why I couldn't have friends over.

I wandered into the kitchen, which looked

like the set of a film about life in a houseful of university students. The sink was stacked with greasy pots and boxes of cereal were still sitting out from breakfast. In other words, for the Smith household, completely normal.

I rummaged through the cupboards for the chocolate spread, but couldn't find it. I was sure there was a nearly full jar somewhere. I finally located it underneath a pile of pieces of cloth on the counter. The jar was open and a chocolate-covered knife rested on top. The bottom piece of cloth had blobs of chocolate clinging to it, but I figured that was Mum's problem, if she wanted to leave bits of her work lying around the kitchen.

There was one last clean saucer in the dish cupboard. Mum had forgotten to buy bread again, so I cut the blue spots off the last piece and spread it with chocolate, poured a glass of milk and headed upstairs. Kicking open the door of the room I shared

with Cass, I squinted my eyes nearly shut and held my breath while I scooted through her part of the room as fast as I could without tripping over any scattered items of clothing.

My part of the bedroom was like the bottom of an L. I nudged aside the large sunflower bedspread I'd bought with my savings and hung as a curtain between the two sections of the room. As always, when I made it to my little kingdom, I let out my breath in a sigh of contentment. It was but clean and neat, my private pale blue sanctuary in the midst of chaos, like the eye at the centre of a hurricane.

I set saucer and glass on the nightstand and sat down on the bed, giving my hands a quick check for chocolate smears before I touched anything. Then I arranged the cushions and leaned back.

Adam's smiling face beamed at me from the photo frame as I reached for my snack, and I smiled back at him. He was a boy I

knew from school – one I hoped to have a special friendship with someday. I'd taken the photo myself on a field trip last year. Even though the quality was poor the blue of his eyes still sparkled.

As if in echo, a pair of bright brown eyes topped by curly dark hair appeared around the corner of my curtain.

“What is it, Baldy?”

Normally I snapped like a vicious dog at any intrusion into my space, but Baldy could get away with it, so he was usually appointed messenger if anyone wanted me.

“Dad’s asking where you are, Sissy.”

“He knows where I am! I can be found in this very spot at this exact time after school every day.” But I gulped the rest of my chocolate bread and went looking for Dad.

I found him in the study, which was a small room off the kitchen. It was meant for a laundry room, but Mum did her sewing there and the washer was out in the garage. The room was mostly taken up with sewing

machine and a kaleidoscope of material scraps, with a tiny corner free for a small desk with telephone and computer. Dad was a travelling sales rep so he didn't use his desk that often anyway. Mum was gone at the moment, probably at some meeting to protest something, knowing her. I hoped the meeting wasn't at our school.

“How's my Star?”

“Fine, Dad.”

“Good day at school?”

“Average. They're already trying to wind us up about our mock exams, though.”

“I don't think you need to worry—you've always been a Star pupil!”

I smiled even though I'd heard it from him for the zillionth time. I guess it didn't bother me because I always felt like he meant it—like for him, I really was a star. Physically Dad was a small man with curly dark hair and bright brown eyes, just like Baldy. I was nearly as tall as he was, but I felt I'd always look up to him, if that made

sense. Sometimes I wished—oh well, things were the way they were.

“You want something?” I asked.

“Just wondered if you’d seen this.” He tossed me a copy of our local paper, and I shook my head.

The front-page headline screamed, “NEO-NAZI HATE. ARE OUR SCHOOLS NEXT?”

I scanned the article. It suggested without giving exact details that militant neo-Nazis were planning to infiltrate local schools by recruiting children at the school gates. It quoted an Anti-Nazi League spokesperson as saying that neo-Nazis would do everything possible to scare off black people.

“But we don’t even have any black people around here,” I said, although just then the image of *Ebony* popped into my mind. “Or only a few.”

Dad’s eyes clouded over. “You know that doesn’t mean just people whose skin is dark. It means anyone who isn’t of pure white race.

“Have you noticed anything like that going on outside your school?” he asked. “Anyone passing out leaflets or trying to talk to the kids as they leave?”

“No, I haven’t, and I’m sure I would have seen it. Don’t worry about it.”

He smiled and gave a little shrug, then turned back to his computer.

I knew why Dad was worried. It had to do with the Family Secret. But I wasn’t going to think about that now. I was going to go back up to my peaceful haven and chill out.

Wrong! Just as I started up the stairs the front door flew open, crashing into the wall. Cass was home early.

THE ROCK STARTS TO ROLL

“Hi, everybody!” Cass yelled at the top of her lungs, in spite of the fact that I was standing three feet away from her.

She was still blonde which was how she left the house that morning, so she'd had a good day. On bad days at the hair salon where she was a trainee and hair-washer, she'd usually spray on some other colour during her lunch break. Her hair stood out in feathery spikes all around her head, which I thought made her face look even rounder. Add to that a ton of black eyeliner, black clothes and so much jewellery that she clanked when she breathed, and there you have my older sister!

At college, Cass was training to be a hairdresser. In life, she was training to be noticed, and doing a good job of it. Sometimes I couldn't believe we came from

the same parents and were only a year apart in age. I guess I just didn't want to admit it.

“You left your shoes on the roof last night,” I said. “You better bring them in or Mrs. Hinkeldorf will have a fit. I told her they were mine, but I'm not bringing them in for you.”

“Thanks, luv,” she beamed at me. “I'll return the favour some day, when you go out with your Adam!”

“Cass,” I said, “he is not my Adam—I just happen to have a photo of him! And if we ever do go out, I'll have enough sense to let myself in the front door with my key, instead of being hoisted up onto the roof!”

“I've got some time, I could do your hair,” she offered, ignoring my comment.

“No, thanks— not today!” I said quickly.

I raced upstairs, my emotions on a low boil. Why did she always think she had to mother me? “Luv” indeed! I was getting so fed up with her acting like the worldly wise older sister. There was no need for her to

poke and pry into my personal life, either! I didn't remember mentioning anything about Adam—she must have been snooping around and seen the photo.

She didn't have to climb in at the window last night— Mum and Dad probably wouldn't have made a fuss if she'd rung the bell, no matter what time it was. But that was Cass for you. She'd joined a local drama group recently and I thought it was making her even worse.

Back in my room, I glanced in the mirror over my dresser. My hair probably did need help. It was a pathetic dull colour somewhere between brown and blonde and hung straight and limp, except where it frizzed over my forehead. It didn't do a thing for my thin pale face. Maybe I should get Cass to curl it and dye it red or something, but I just wasn't that adventurous.

I tried to recapture the peace of my sanctuary, but it had gone for good. I

turned up my radio as loud as it would go, flopped down on my bed and did my best to concentrate on some homework.

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We were reminded first thing at school the next day that our parents were invited that night for Open Evening. I'd completely forgotten, and my emotions took a roller-coaster ride downwards. I knew my whole family would come, probably even Cass. There was no way I could avoid being seen with them, since I was on the list of greeters.

I was leaving the assistant Head's office after getting our instructions for the evening, when I passed the black girl on her way in. Her head was cocked to one side and her high cheekbones looked like they were chiselled out of chocolate. I got a clue as to why she was sent there when I noticed how short her skirt was rolled up, and she hadn't even bothered to let it back down to see the assistant Head. Was she trying to get sent home?

“Hi, Star,” someone said in my ear.

“Oh... hi,” I replied. My heart slowed nearly to cardiac arrest and beads of sweat broke out on my upper lip. It was Adam, who fell in step with me. He grinned down at me, his straight brown hair falling over one eye the way it always did. I felt all watery inside whenever his hair did that.

I turned my head and pretended to cough. Actually I was wiping the sweat off my lip. Then I gave him a big smile back. We didn't have any lessons together so getting to see him up close was something special.

“What do you think of the Tall Black One?” he asked, with a nod towards the office where Ebony had just gone inside.

“She's hopeless, isn't she?” I said with a laugh. “Did you see her skirt just now?”

“Maybe we'll be lucky and she'll get herself expelled,” Adam said.

“Maybe,” I said, smiling up at him. At that point he could have said anything and I would have agreed.

“I don’t see you very often,” he said, echoing my own thoughts. “Are you coming tonight?”

“Have to—I’m one of the greeters.”

“I’m selling plants for business studies. Well, see you tonight,” he said, as he turned away to head for his lesson.

See you tonight, see you tonight, I heard his voice say over and over as I walked in a daze outside and down the path towards the languages building. It was a cool but sunny autumn day and the leaves were starting to turn. Actually it could have been raining little puppies for all I cared. Adam noticed me! He actually wanted to spend time with me!

But then I remembered that my whole family would be there tonight as well. An evil fate might decide that the moment at which Adam saw me would be the exact time that the Smith clan showed up. So far I didn’t think he connected me with Cass, who had earned quite a reputation when she was at

our school. I wanted to keep it that way.

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That night my worst fears about Open Evening were confirmed. I stood with several other pupils inside the school entrance, dressed in full uniform, handing out blue leaflets to arriving parents.

It wasn't long before my mum appeared, trailing family members behind her like a colourful mother goose with wildly assorted goslings. I cringed when I saw she was wearing one of her own creations, an oversized hot pink sweatshirt decorated with ribbons and fake jewels. She had a good business, decorating and selling T-shirts and sweatshirts, and her stuff was high quality, but it was very attention-getting. The more so because Mum wasn't exactly slender and her long wavy hair looked like something left out in the rain after the Sixties.

Why did the sight of my family all together make me want to throw up? I was about to squinch my eyes shut, hoping

they'd all disappear without greeting me, when I saw the Headmaster, Mr. Parkson, come out of his office to my right.

“Mr. Parkson!” Mum boomed over the crowd. She shouldered her way towards him, giving frantic hand waves for her brood to follow her.

They all met up next to my right elbow, and I was too hemmed in to escape.

“Lovely to see you, Mrs. Smith,” Mr. Parkson said with a professional smile. Even with over a thousand pupils in his school, I was not surprised that he knew my mother by name.

“You know my husband, Harold,” she said, pushing Dad slightly forward so that he would shake Mr. Parkson’s hand. Dad did, looking earnest and faintly embarrassed. “And our twins, Perseus and Jason.”

Perse and Jase, both wallowing in their new huge blue blazers like all the year seven kids, shook hands with the Headmaster. It was too bad the school governors always

voted for uniforms instead of letting us wear normal clothes. You'd think they would at least allow sweatshirts instead of blazers, but no, everything was strictly regulated at our school: full uniform, skirts a decent length, no jewellery, make-up or nail varnish.

“We're very glad to have you boys join us this year,” Mr. Parkson said. There was a slight pause and I thought he might be wondering if these two, with their curly ginger hair and innocent-looking blue eyes, would turn out to be like Cass or like me.

“And we'll have another coming your way in a few years. This is our little Baldur,” Mum said, and Baldy stuck out his hand and grinned at the Head. Mr. Parkson's eyes widened slightly when he heard Baldy's name.

“And Cassandra,” Mum went on, giving Cass a jerk forwards that set off a round of jangling as bracelets and earrings collided with each other.

“Cassandra, lovely to see you. How are

things at college?”

As Cass gave Mr. Parkson her reply I was trying to make myself small and disappear, but a firm hand grabbed my shoulder.

“And of course, our An— our Star,” Mum concluded, serving me up like dessert at the end of a feast. At least she was sticking to our agreement to use my middle name.

It was at that moment that I saw Adam enter the hall and make his way in our direction. Our eyes met, and he raised a hand and smiled. I saw the smile fade slightly as he took in the group around me and the fact that Mum was clutching my elbow with an air of ownership.

“One of our outstanding pupils,” Mr. Parkson said, smiling at me. “Well,” he added with the sudden air of a man with things to attend to, “if you’ll excuse me... I hope you enjoy the evening!”

“Star,” Mum said to me as Mr. Parkson vanished, “tell us where everything is!” Adam had disappeared into the Hall, which

was where the sales stands were.

“It’s all in the leaflet, Mum.” Honestly, you’d think the woman couldn’t read! Did parents take stupid pills with their breakfast vitamins?

“I know, but you could give us an idea of where to start—”

People walking past us all turned and stared. I could feel my cheeks glowing hot and red. Suddenly there was a tug at my sleeve.

“Star! Could I have a word?”

It was my P.E. teacher, Miss Cleeves. She looked odd in a dress instead of jogging suit and she seemed flustered.

“It’s Katie— she’s taken ill, and I’ve no one else who can do the badminton demonstration. Do you have your P.E. kit here?”

I nodded. “It’s in my locker.”

“Would you be willing to help? I think there are enough greeters.”

Would I! Anything to vanish from the

presence of my weird family! Without bothering to say goodbye I tossed my remaining leaflets to one of the other greeters and followed Miss Cleeves quickly to the gym.

Helping Miss Cleeves with the badminton display was a small thing. It was something I didn't mind doing because I like badminton, and it got me out of reach of my family. But I didn't realise that something very small that you do can have far-reaching consequences, like giving a rock a slight shove over the edge of a canyon, never thinking it will build up so much speed and force all on its own.