

He Would Have Given Us Wings

‘What’s wrong with trains? I like trains.’ Peter looked up from his yoghurt, concerned and defensive.

‘I didn’t say there was anything wrong with them,’ said his mother as she loaded the plates into the dishwasher, ‘it’s just they’re, well, they’re not very popular with most boys your age.’ She did not say most ‘normal’ boys his age, but it was there, unspoken, all the same. Peter was ten and he had been crazy about trains ever since he got to ride in a steam engine on his sixth birthday. And it wasn’t just the trains themselves that fascinated him, but everything to do with them, from timetables and photographs of derelict stations to model railways and, of course, trainspotting. Unsurprisingly, this fanaticism had not earned him many friends - any, even - but that didn’t matter to Peter. He wasn’t sure he wanted any friends.

‘I don’t want to go bowling,’ said Peter, ‘or go to the cinema. It’s boring!’

‘Well, Michael Jenkins has been kind enough to invite you to his birthday party, and I think it would be better than sitting at home playing with your trains. His mother told me he’s only invited children from school, so you’ll know everyone else there as well.’ Sometimes his mother despaired that Peter would ever be like the other, more typical boys. She was aware he was bullied a bit at school and that very few of the other children wanted to spend time or hang out with him. Until now, that is. He hadn’t been invited to a birthday party since he was he moved up to junior school. Surely this was a good thing. It could only help him to fit in a bit more with other children and hopefully, in time, become a bit more like them.

‘You can’t make me go!’

‘That, Peter,’ said his father, carefully folding his newspaper and placing it on the kitchen table as he delivered his decree, ‘is where you are wrong. You’re going and that’s an end to it.’ Peter knew then he had lost, knew that his attendance at the stupid birthday party was inevitable. He felt powerless and angry, but as he was ten he refused to cry - he would not let his parents see how

upset he was. He quickly snatched up his Trains magazine and his copy of the National Rail Timetable and, biting his lip to keep the tears back for just a little longer, he stomped out of the room. As a last act of defiance he went to slam the door, but accidentally dropped his magazine as he did so and ended up pulling the door into his foot.

In his room, Peter sat on his bed wrapped in the duvet, with its train print cover, rubbing his bruised toe. He stared at the little engines pulling the carriages around his model railway without really seeing them. He had allowed himself to cry a little, here in the comfortable seclusion of his own room, but he was still angry. He hated bowling. He hated the cinema. And he hated horrible Michael Jenkins, who was certainly not his friend. And tomorrow he would have to put up with all three, together with the others from school who were also not his friends. All in all, dinner this evening had not gone well.

‘It’s your go, Peter. Come on! You’re holding up everyone else.’ Michael and his friends did not even try to disguise their looks of scorn and dislike. It had come as an unpleasant shock when Michael’s mother told him he would have to invite Peter. She was a friend of Peter’s mother and so Michael’s protests had fallen on increasingly irritated deaf ears. In the end she had grounded him for a week for calling Peter a ‘freak’, but had then relented and reduced the sentence to a couple of days. After all, her son had a point - there was something odd about that boy.

‘I did say you could take my go if you want.’ said Peter, whose disinterest in bowling had not been diminished by taking part in the game, despite his mother’s insistence that it would. The balls were all too heavy and hurt his fingers, and no matter how hard he tried to aim for the pins the ball kept bouncing from bumper to bumper on its way down the lane, raising a chorus of sniggers from the other children.

‘I already took your go once,’ said Michael, ‘and I got told off. Just take your stupid go and get out of the way.’ Peter had his two throws, scoring a four with the first ball, but nothing with the second despite the fact he only hit the bumper once. Then he wandered off again on his own, finding the

flashing lights of the arcade machines and the teenagers playing pool far more interesting than watching the bowling.

Eventually all ten rounds had been completed and the game was over. Miraculously Peter had not come last, but had managed to beat Michael's best friend, Paul Davies.

'Didn't he do well?' said Michael's mum, as they left the bowling centre, trying to get her son to say something nice to Peter.

'Can we go the cinema now?' Michael asked, ignoring her. She didn't bother trying to push it.

'Come on, then. And stick together, please - this is a car park.'

'So how was it?' called Peter's mother from the lounge as he closed the front door behind him.

'Was it as bad as you thought it was going to be?'

'Oh mum.' He said, leaving his shoes on the mat and entering the lounge. 'You should have seen it - it was amazing!'

'You enjoyed the bowling?'

'Not the bowling - that was rubbish. The cinema, mum. The film. It was... amazing!'

'What was it about?' she asked, silently praying that it was something a bit more, well, normal than trains.

'Superman.' He breathed, and the excitement on his face was evident - it was a joy to see. Then, hardly pausing to breathe, he went off into a lengthy and somewhat disjointed synopsis of the film.

'Superman saved loads of people, because he can fly and he's really strong.'

'Superman flew all around the world really, really fast.'

'Superman could fly and had a red cape and everything.'

'Superman defeated all the baddies, even the really tough ones, and he could fly.'

'Well,' said his mother, when the torrent of words had finally started to subside, 'it sounds like you had a lovely time. Did you get on alright with Michael and his friends?'

‘Superman is the best.’ said Peter, still caught up with the wonder of what he had seen. ‘I want to be just like him. I want to wear a cape and a big ‘S’ and all the other stuff - even glasses like when he’s pretending to be Clark Kent. Do you think I could?’

‘It would certainly be an improvement on dressing up like a train driver.’ said his father, rousing himself from his afternoon nap. He always pretended he did not actually fall asleep during these times, but his snoring usually gave him away and sometimes, to Peter’s amusement, he would dribble as well. On this occasion, however, he had been awake, listening to Peter and his mother’s conversation. ‘I used to like Superman when I was your age too.’ Peter thought this was unlikely since his dad was obviously far too old, but he decided not to comment.

‘I’ll ask around,’ said his mother, ‘and see if anyone has a Superman costume you could borrow to dress up in. Would you like that? And in the meantime, I’m sure we could at least make you a nice red cape.’

‘Ah, yeah!’

Peter and his dad went up to the spare room to take down one of the red curtains. It wouldn’t be missed for a while, after all no one had stayed in the spare room since Aunt Phyllis visited at Christmas, and then all she had done was complain about the state of the room - especially the dusty boxes Peter’s father had left under the dressing table. There were a lot more dusty boxes in there now and his dad used them as a platform to stand on as he fiddled with the curtain, lifting it off the plastic hooks. He nearly lost his balance at one point and swore under his breath, but it didn’t bother Peter - he was enjoying this brief adventure with his dad. And the curtain was just the right shade of Superman red.

Downstairs in the kitchen, his mother had brought out her sewing box, which was, if anything, more dusty than the boxes in the spare room. In amongst the tangle of cotton, lace, zips and, for some reason, a bent spoon, she managed to unearth a needle, some burgundy thread (well, it was a type of red at least) and a length of elastic. She had finally managed to thread the needle when Peter and his

father came in with the curtain. It did not take long for the elastic to be sewn on and then unstitched and adjusted so it would not actually cut off Peter's blood supply. As his mother tied off the last knot and helped Peter to put it on without it slipping down over his shoulders, she realised that this was the first time, in a long time, that they had done something like this together - enjoying themselves as a family, rather than two parents wondering what to do with their train-mad son. For a moment, she thought she might start crying, when suddenly Peter let out a whoop.

'Look at me!' he said, running into the hallway, around the lounge and back into the kitchen, 'I'm Superman! I can fly!'

'Well, Superman,' said his mum, smiling at seeing her son so happy and excited, but also suddenly aware of the time, 'I'm afraid it's past your bedtime.'

'Even superheroes have to get some sleep, you know, to keep up their special powers.' said his dad, placing a hand gently on Peter's shoulder. 'We can do some more Superman stuff tomorrow. Fly off upstairs and get ready for bed, and we'll be up to tuck you in in a few minutes.'

Making a great whooshing noise, that sounded more like a train than anything else, Peter began to rush back out into the hallway, returning briefly to thank his dad and to kiss his mum for making him the special, red, Superman flying cape. Then he was gone again and a few moments later they heard his bedroom door slam. His mum smiled and his dad shook his head as if to say, 'That boy!'

Upstairs in his room, Peter looked at himself in the mirror, pleased with the effect of his new cape. It didn't matter that the rest of his clothes were just normal, everyday things - a plain, blue T-shirt tucked into his dark trousers - somehow it only added to the effect, as though he was Clark Kent caught in the middle of a transformation. He felt powerful - quick and strong. He leapt onto his bed and looked out of the window, his imagination populating the village with burglars breaking into houses and bandits with guns holding up the local shop. He could stop them all. It didn't matter how strong or fast they might be, or what weapons they might have. He was indestructible.

He lifted the handle and the window swung outwards easily, letting in the delicate warmth of the late-August evening. Peter placed his foot on the radiator, then slowly climbed onto the window sill. He was tall enough that he had to duck, even to crouch slightly, to get his head and body through the opening, but then he stood up, his hands holding tight to the window frame, his feet steady on the ledge. He smiled as the orange sunlight bathed his face, and with his right hand he smoothed out the folds of his special, red cape. He knew then - knew for certain - that he could fly, just as he knew without any doubt that Superman could also fly. He was certain because, there on that window ledge, as the soft breeze ruffled his hair and rippled his cape, he knew that he was Superman. And then for a moment, if only just for a moment, he really did fly.