JONATHAN THE © COE ROTTERS' CLUB

The Rotters' Club

JONATHAN COE

VIKING

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The Very Maws of Doom

Green Coaster 361

On a clear, blueblack, starry night, in the city of Berlin, in the year 2003, two young people sat down to dinner. Their names were Sophie and Patrick.

These two people had never met, before today. Sophie was visiting Berlin with her mother, and Patrick was visiting with his father. Sophie's mother and Patrick's father had once known each other, very slightly, a long time ago. For a short while, Patrick's father had even been infatuated with Sophie's mother, when they were still at school. But it was twenty-nine years since they had last exchanged any words.

- Where do you think they've gone? Sophie asked.
- Clubbing, probably. Checking out the techno places.
- Are you serious?
- Of course not. My dad's never been to a club in his life. The last album he bought was by Barclay James Harvest.
- Who?
- Exactly.

Sophie and Patrick watched as the vast, brightly lit glass-and-concrete extravagance of the new Reichstag came into view. The restaurant they had chosen, at the top of the Fernsehturm above Alexanderplatz, revolved rather more quickly than either of them had been expecting. Apparently it had been designed that way back in the 1960s, to demonstrate the superiority of East German technology.

- How is your mother now? Patrick asked. Has she recovered?
- Oh, that was nothing. We went back to the hotel, and she lay down for a while. After that, she was fine. Another couple of hours and we went shopping. That's when I got this skirt.
- It looks great on you.
- Anyway, I'm glad that it happened, because otherwise your dad wouldn't have recognized her.
- I suppose not.
- So we wouldn't be sitting here, would we? It must be fate. Or something.

It was an odd situation they had been thrown into. There had seemed to be a spontaneous intimacy between their parents, even though it was so long since they had known each other. They had flung themselves into their reunion with a sort of joyous relief, as if this chance encounter in a Berlin tea-room could somehow erase the intervening decades, heal the pain of their passing. That had left Sophie and Patrick floundering in a different, more awkward kind of intimacy. They had nothing in common, they realized, except their parents' histories.

- -Does your father ever talk much about his schooldays? Sophie asked.
- Well, it's funny. He never used to. But I think it's all been coming back to him, lately. Some of the people he knew back then have resurfaced. For instance, there was a boy called . . .
- Harding?
- Yes. You know about him?
- A little. I'd like to know more.
- Then I'll tell you. And Dad mentions your uncle sometimes. Your uncle Benjamin.
- Ah, yes. They were good friends, weren't they?
- Best friends, I think.
- Did you know they once played in a band together?
- No, he never mentioned that.
- What about the magazine they used to edit?
- No, he never told me about that either.
- I've heard it all from my mother, you see. She has perfect recall of those days.

- How come?
- Well . . .

And then Sophie began to explain. It was hard to know where to start. The era they were discussing seemed to belong to the dimmest recesses of history. She said to Patrick:

- Do you ever try to imagine what it was like before you were born?
- How do you mean? You mean like in the womb?
- No, I mean, what the world was like, before you came along.
- Not really. I can't get my head around it.
- But you remember how things were when you were younger. You remember John Major, for instance?
- Vaguely.
- Well, of course, that's the only way to remember him. What about Mrs Thatcher?
- No. I was only . . . five or six when she resigned. Why are you asking this, anyway?
- Because we're going to have to think further back than that. Much further.

Sophie broke off, and a frown darkened her face.

- You know, I can tell you this story, but you might get frustrated.
 It doesn't end. It just stops. I don't know how it ends.
- Perhaps I know the ending.
- Will you tell me, if you do?
- Of course.

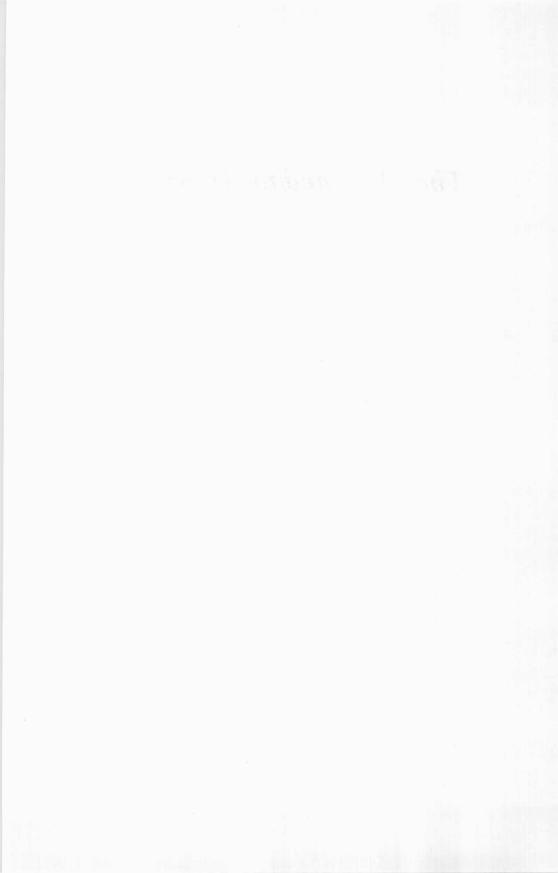
They smiled at each other then, quickly and for the first time. As the crane-filled skyline, the ever-changing work-in-progress that was the Berlin cityscape unfurled behind her, Patrick looked at Sophie's face, her graceful jaw, her long black eyelashes, and felt the stirrings of something, a thankfulness that he had met her, a flicker of curiosity about what his future might suddenly hold.

Sophie poured sparkling mineral water into her glass from a navy-blue bottle and said:

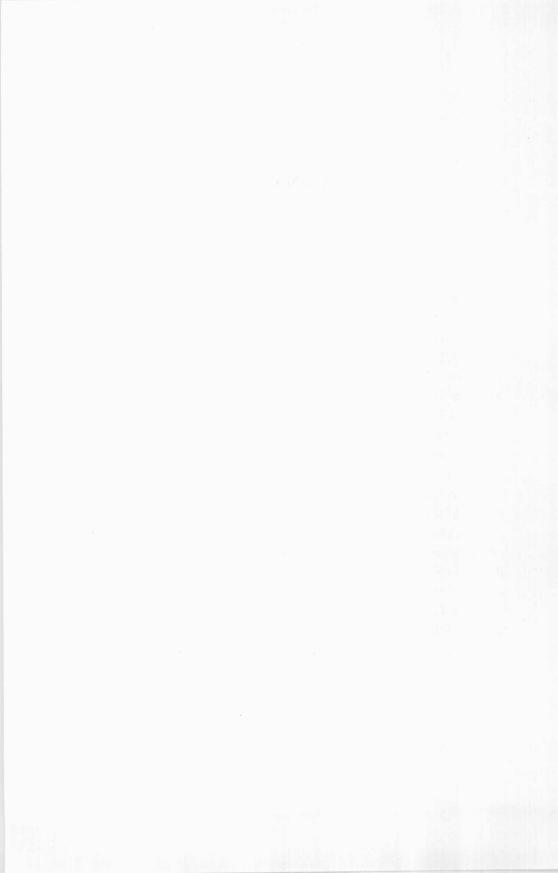
- Come with me, then, Patrick. Let's go backwards. Backwards in time, all the way back to the beginning. Back to a country that neither of us would recognize, probably. Britain, 1973.

- Was it really that different, do you think?
- Completely different. Just think of it! A world without mobiles or videos or Playstations or even faxes. A world that had never heard of Princess Diana or Tony Blair, never thought for a moment of going to war over Kosovo or Iraq. There were only three television channels in those days, Patrick. Three! And the unions were so powerful that, if they wanted to, they could close one of them down for a whole night. Sometimes people even had to do without electricity. Imagine!

The Chick and the Hairy Guy



WINTER



Imagine!

November the 15th, 1973. A Thursday evening, drizzle whispering against the window-panes, and the family gathered in the living room. All except Colin, who is out on business, and has told his wife and children not to wait up. Weak light from a pair of wrought-iron standard lamps. The coal-effect fire hisses.

Sheila Trotter is reading the Daily Mail: "To have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health" – these are the promises which do in fact sustain most married couples through the bad patches."

Lois is reading Sounds: 'Guy, 18, cat lover, seeks London chick, into Sabbath. Only Freaks please.'

Paul, precociously, is reading Watership Down: 'Simple African villagers, who have never left their remote homes, may not be particularly surprised by their first sight of an aeroplane: it is outside their comprehension.'

As for Benjamin . . . I suppose he is doing his homework at the dining table. The frown of concentration, the slightly protruding tongue (a family trait, of course: I've seen my mother look the same way, crouched over her laptop). History, probably. Or maybe physics. Something which doesn't come easily, at any rate. He looks across at the clock on the mantelpiece. The organized type, he has set himself a deadline. He has ten minutes to go. Ten more minutes in which to write up the experiment.

I'm doing my best, Patrick. Really I am. But it's not an easy one to tell, the story of my family. Uncle Benjamin's story, if you like.

I'm not even sure this is the right place to start. But perhaps one place is as good as any other. And this is the one I've chosen. Mid-November, the dark promise of an English winter, almost thirty years ago.

November the 15th, 1973.

Long periods of silence were common. They were a family who had never learned the art of talking to one another. All of them inscrutable, even to themselves: all except Lois, of course. Her needs were simple, defined, and in the end she was punished for it. That's how I see things, anyway.

I don't think she wanted much, at this stage of her life. I think she only wanted companionship, and the occasional babble of voices around her. She would have had a craving for chatter, coming from that family; but she was not the sort to lose herself in a giggling circus of friends. She knew what she was looking for, I'm sure of that; already knew, even then, even at the age of sixteen. And she knew where to look for it, too. Ever since her brother had started buying *Sounds* every Thursday, on the way home from school, it had become her furtive weekly ritual to feign interest in the back-page adverts for posters and clothes ('Cotton drill shirts in black, navy, flame-red, cranberry – great to team with loons') when her real focus of attention was the personal column. She was looking for a man.

She had read nearly all of the personals by now. She was beginning to despair.

'Freaky Guy (20) wants crazy chick (16+) for love. Into Quo and Zep.'

Once again, not exactly ideal. Did she want her guy to be freaky? Could she honestly describe herself as crazy? Who were Quo and Zep, anyway?

'Great guy wishes groovy chick to write, into Tull, Pink Floyd, 17-28.'

'Two freaky guys seek heavy chicks. 16+, love and affection.'

'Guy (20), back in Kidderminster area, seeks attractive chick(s).'

Kidderminster was only a few miles away, so this last one might have been promising, if it weren't for the giveaway plural in parentheses. He'd definitely blown his cover, there. Out for a good time, and little else. Though perhaps that was preferable, in a way, to the whiff of desperation that came off some of the other messages.

'Disenchanted, lonely guy (21), long dark hair, would like communication with aware, thoughtful girl, appreciate anything creative like: progressive, folk, fine art.'

'Lonely, unattractive guy (22), needs female companionship, looks unimportant. Into Moodies, BJH, Camel etc.'

'Lonely Hairy, Who and Floyd freak, needs a chick for friendship, love and peace. Stockport area.'

Her mother put the newspaper aside and said: 'Cup of tea, anyone? Lemonade?'

When she had gone to the kitchen, Paul laid down his rabbit saga and picked up the *Daily Mail*. He began reading it with a tired, sceptical smile on his face.

'Any chick want to go to India. Split end of Dec, no Straights.'

'Any chick who wants to see the world, please write.'

Yes, she did want to see the world, now that she thought of it. The slow awareness had been growing inside her, fuelled by holiday programmes on the television and colour photos in the *Sunday Times* magazine, that a universe existed beyond the confines of Longbridge, beyond the terminus of the 62 bus route, beyond Birmingham, beyond England, even. What's more, she wanted to see it, and she wanted to share it with someone. She wanted someone to hold her hand as she watched the moon rise over the Taj Mahal. She wanted to be kissed, softly but at great length, against the magnificent backdrop of the Canadian Rockies. She wanted to climb Ayers Rock at dawn. She wanted someone to propose marriage to her as the setting sun draped its blood-red fingers over the rose-tinted minarets of the Alhambra.

'Leeds boy with scooter, looks OK, seeks girlfriend 17-21 for discos, concerts. Photo appreciated.'

'Wanted girl friend, any age, but 4 ft. 10 in. or under, all letters answered.'

'Finished.'

Benjamin slammed his exercise book shut and made a big show of packing his pens and books away in the little briefcase he always took to school. His physics text book had started to come apart, so he had re-covered it with a remnant of the anaglypta his father had used to wallpaper the living room two years ago. On the front of his English book he had drawn a big cartoon foot, like the one at the end of the *Monty Python* signature tune.

'That's me done for the night.' He stood over his sister, who was sprawled across both halves of the settee. 'Gimme that.'

It always annoyed him when Lois got to read Sounds before he did. He seemed to think this gave her privileged access to top-secret information. But in truth she cared nothing for the news pages over which he was ready to pore so avidly. Most of the headlines she didn't even understand. 'Beefheart here in May.' 'New Heep album due.' 'Another split in Fanny.'

'What's a Freak?' she asked, handing him the magazine.

Benjamin laughed tartly and pointed at their nine-year-old brother, whose face was aglow with amused contempt as he perused the *Daily Mail*. 'You're looking at one.'

'I know that. But a Freak with a capital "F". I mean, it's obviously some sort of technical term.'

Benjamin did not reply; and he somehow managed to leave Lois with the impression that he knew the answer well enough, but had chosen to withhold it, for reasons of his own. People always tended to regard him as knowledgeable, well-informed, even though the evidence was plainly to the contrary. There must have been some air about him, some indefinable sense of confidence, which it was easy to mistake for youthful wisdom.

'Mother,' said Paul, when she came in with his fizzy drink, 'why do we take this newspaper?'

Sheila glared at him, obscurely resentful. She had told him many times before to call her 'Mum', not 'Mother'.

'No reason,' she said. 'Why shouldn't we?'

'Because it's full,' said Paul, flicking through the pages, 'of platitudinous codswallop.'

Ben and Lois giggled helplessly. 'I thought "platitudinous" was an animal they had in Australia,' she said.

'The lesser-spotted platitudinous,' said Benjamin, honking and squawking in imitation of this mythical beast.

'Take this leading article, for instance,' Paul continued, undeterred. '"That precise pageantry which Britain manages so well keeps its hold on our hearts. There's nothing like a Royal Wedding for lifting our spirits."'

'What about it?' said Sheila, stirring sugar into her tea. 'I don't agree with everything I read in there.'

"As Princess Anne and Mark Phillips walked out of the Abbey, their faces broke into that slow, spreading smile of people who are really happy." Pass the sick bag, please! "The Prayer Book may be three hundred years old, but its promises are as clear as yesterday's sunlight." Pukerocious! "To have and to hold, for better for worse—""

'That's quite enough from you, Mr Know-All.' The quiver in Sheila's voice was enough to expose, just for a second, the sudden panic her youngest son was learning to inspire in her. 'Drink that up and put your pyjamas on.'

More squabbling ensued, with Benjamin making his own shrill interventions, but Lois did not listen to any of it. These were not the voices with which she longed to surround herself. She left them to it and withdrew to her bedroom, where she was able to re-enter her world of romantic daydreams, a kingdom of infinite colour and possibility. As for Benjamin's copy of *Sounds*, she had found what she was looking for there, and had no further use for it. She would not even need to sneak down later and take another look, for the box number was easy to remember (it was 247, the same as the Radio One waveband), and the message she had seized upon was one of perfect, magical simplicity. Perhaps that was how she knew that it was meant for her, and her alone.

'Hairy Guy seeks Chick. Birmingham area.'