

TRIBE

Jonno

Joins

day one of the summer term

You never know what's round the corner. My mum says that all the time.

When I was small, I used to think she was giving me a warning. I thought she meant that you should watch out in case you turn a corner and get caught up in the middle of an army of purple aliens clambering back on to the mother ship, and disappear FOREVER. Even though I thought it was unlikely, I would find myself slowing down *e v e r s o s l i g h t l y* at corners until I had a proper view ahead. As soon as I saw the coast was clear, I'd speed up again. I don't do that now of course, because I understand she means that you never know what's going to happen next. It's not about luck or un-luck because Mum says it when someone's won the lottery *and* when

TRIBE

someone's died. It's just a fact.

And the fact of my story is that something's come round my corner and all of a sudden I'm part of it, and it feels important, so I'm keeping a record of how it started.

Actually it began with a kind of alien – a new boy. I expect our teacher (she's called Miss Walsh) introduced him and told us to be nice and all that, but if she did, I didn't take any of it in. Don't get the wrong idea, I'm actually a bit of a nerd, but I only listen to the interesting bits. The in-between stuff that teachers like to say but *I* don't need to hear gets separated off and binned, like junk mail. I don't even know where Newboy sat that first morning, except that it wasn't anywhere near me.

At break my mates and I raced outside to get on with whatever it was we were going to get on with. Our territory is in the corner by the netball court where the trees hang over. It's a scrubby bit of dirt really – the shade kills all the grass – but it's ours so it's good anyway.

There are four of us. I'm Keener. There's Copper Pie (funny name, I know). Next there's Fifty and, last but definitely not least, there's Bee. (Not a cool thing to admit but yes, I am friendly with a girl.)

The four of us didn't exactly *choose* to be mates. But when you've known someone since you were four years old, they sort of stick whether you like it or not.

It was sticking that I first remember us doing. Fifty's mum had come in to school to help us make papier-mâché balloons. Bad idea. Fifty's too-sloppy newspaper kept sliding

Jonno Joins

off. Copper Pie burst at least three balloons by pressing too hard. Bee knocked over the glue diving to save the slippery balloons. By tidy-up time, there was more goo on them than anywhere else. (None on me though – I borrowed the yellow rubber gloves meant for wash-up time because I didn't like it.) I remember all the laughing and thinking that school was nice, which it was in Reception.

We've been put in the same classes ever since and never bothered to make any other friends. We don't need anyone else.

We *especially* didn't need anyone else in our patch. At breaktime Fifty was the last of us to step under the tree, followed by someone else. The sun stopped me seeing who it was. I wasn't worried. Other kids *are* allowed to come and talk to us, although hardly anyone does. But as the boy-shape moved forwards into the shadows, I could see it wasn't someone I knew. And strangers were NOT welcome. Without saying anything, we all turned away and tried to carry on as usual, but he didn't leave. We could all feel him watching us.

Copper Pie spoke first. 'D'you want something?'

The shape shrugged.

He tried again. 'I said, "D'you want something?"'

'Not especially,' said the shape.

'Go away then.'

We're not meant to speak to people like that at school. There's a motto: We don't all have to be friends, but we all have to be friend-ly.

TRIBE

'I'm fine here,' said the stranger, who I worked out must be Newboy.

I really wanted to get rid of him but I didn't know what to do. Most people we know would have scuttled away if Copper Pie told them to. (He can be a bit of a thug.)

Fifty tried next. 'Listen, you're new so you don't know, but this is *our* area.' He used the I'm-so-charming smile that works with the teachers. He practises it in front of the mirror, in every window, and on the back of shiny spoons.

'Says who?' said Newboy.

'Says me,' said Fifty, looking straight into Newboy's armpit.

I could see that a midget telling him to get lost wasn't going to work. But Newboy seemed *so* unbothered it was difficult to think what *would* work.

Bee put one hand on her hip, pointed at the stranger and tried her favourite saying – with the American accent and *all* the actions.

'*You're* invading *our* personal bubble.' She drew an imaginary line round the four of us with her finger, then put her hand back on her hip and flicked her very long black fringe out of her eyes so she could stare at him.

He shrugged and stayed exactly where he was.

And so did we.

We hung around and talked in quiet voices but it was totally fake because all the time HE was leaning against the trunk of OUR tree working his heel into the ground,

Jonno Joins

making a hollow. I'm sure all the others felt like me: mad. I wanted to shout 'Go away' but I didn't dare.

Usually break is too short but on that day it was too long. We couldn't leave our patch and play somewhere else because we had to protect it. We couldn't carry on as normal because of *him* lurking. I suppose we could have shoved him off but me and Fifty aren't like that, and Copper Pie *is* like that but is trying not to be. And Bee, well, she's used to people doing what she says, but Newboy didn't know that.

At last, the bell went and we lined up.

'What did he think he was doing?' I asked.

'No idea. Must be a weirdo,' said Copper Pie.

'Well, let's hope he decides to be weird somewhere else,' I said.

'We'll make *sure* he does,' said Bee.

Bee's always like that – definite. She's never 'not sure' or 'can't decide'.

'How are we going to do that?' I was thinking force fields, trip-alarms, perimeter guards.

'Make him not *want* to come near us,' she answered, with a mean look.

'Scary. I like it,' said Fifty. 'It's time to make Newboy's life a living hell.'

getting rid of Newboy

It didn't take long for the campaign to start. In history (we're doing Romans), Fifty was sitting in front of no-name Newboy. He put up his hand. 'Please Miss Walsh, I'm finding it difficult to concentrate because someone behind me keeps kicking my chair.'

Lies. *Good move*, I thought. Unless Lily had grown stilts, there was only one pair of legs that could be guilty. Newboy didn't get a full-blown telling off – after all, it was his first day – but it showed him we meant business.

At lunch, I was confident Newboy would decide we weren't worth the bother. We demolished sausage, peas and jacket potato and headed for our spot and can you believe it? He was there. Sitting cross-legged on the ground with his back to us, picking at the bark of the biggest tree – our bark, our tree.

Jonno Joins

An open declaration of war if ever there was one.

I'd like to say we were up for it but I think we were all a bit . . . not scared but . . . confused . . . about what to do next. Generally kids don't act like Newboy – they find someone who doesn't *mind* playing with them.

We hovered for a minute nearby. Copper Pie kicked the ground a few times, sprinkling dirty specks over the back of Newboy's white T-shirt.

He twisted round so that I could see one of his eyes. 'Hi.'
Not one of us answered.

I waited to see what was going to happen. Hoping there wasn't going to be a fight.

'Let's just go somewhere else,' said Bee quietly.

Phew! My thoughts exactly.

'No way,' said Copper Pie loudly. He walked round so he was facing Newboy and stopped with the toe of his trainer actually touching the skin of Newboy's knee. Newboy did nothing.

'Let's show the newbie —'

'No. Let's not show anyone anything,' I said quickly.

'Same,' said Fifty. (He can't say 'I agree' like normal people.)

Bee yanked Copper Pie's arm and dragged him away. We all try and keep him out of trouble. It isn't always easy.

'Go find yourself some other kids to hassle,' she shouted.

'Loser,' Copper Pie added on the end.

Newboy didn't look up. He didn't even stop flaking the lumps of loose bark off the tree. I couldn't help thinking

TRIBE

that if there was a loser round here, it wasn't him. Although leaving didn't seem right, none of us wanted to spend another breaktime with the limpet boy.

'He's probably got something wrong with him,' said Fifty. I hadn't thought of that. I glanced over to check. It was almost like he knew I was studying him because he shifted round a bit and we accidentally locked eyes (or glasses in his case). And he smiled a big friendly smile. It was almost impossible not to smile back but, by whipping my head back quickly, I managed. It was very creepy. I had expected a glare.

'What's wrong with him is the fact that he's a cling-on,' said Bee, leaning against the wall by the loos. 'We need a plan to lose the stalker, and the first part of it has to be to get outside before him.'

'Agreed,' said C.P. 'Then we'll have the advantage.'

'But we need to stop him from following us ...' said Fifty.

'A blockade,' I said.

'Made of what?' asked Fifty.

'We could rope off our area, tie one end to the branches and put the other through the wire fence.'

There was a general lack of enthusiasm for my idea. Not unusual.

'He'd climb under,' said Fifty. 'What about a fire?'

We always ignore anything he says that's to do with fire. It's an unhealthy obsession (according to his mum) and scary (according to us).

'We could make a really bad smell,' said Copper Pie.

Jonno Joins

'You don't need us for that. You could do it on your own,' said Bee.

'Sandbags,' I said.

'Get real, Keener.' Bee has lots of expressions she uses to diss people.

'Right, everyone think. It needs to be something *we* can get past but stops *him*,' said Fifty, spelling out the problem.

'Bodies,' said Copper Pie.

Fifty made an excellent you-total-idiot face. 'What?'

Copper Pie said it again. 'Bodies. We've got four. He's got one. We make a human wall, like in football.'

Fifty quickly changed it to a you're-not-as-stupid-as-you-look face. 'You're not as stupid as you look,' he said. 'What does everyone else think?'

'It *might* work,' I said, not very keenly. I didn't fancy getting into a scrap.

'Right, morning break tomorrow, we'll make sure we get out there first, lock arms and stand tall. There's only one way in to our patch so he'll have to break us down or give up.' Bee has a habit of stealing other people's ideas and making them seem like hers. Luckily Copper Pie didn't care.

'Newboy's done for!' He made two fists and did a job face. It wasn't much different from his regular face.

'Same,' said Fifty.

'Four against one. What's he gonna do?' said C.P.

I couldn't help thinking that he'd find some way round our plan. Newboy was definitely *not* your average kid.

the human wall

Mum comes straight from work to pick up me and my sister, so although it's not very far, we go home in the car. I'd like to walk with Bee and Copper Pie but Mum says, 'I have to get Flo so I may as well take you too.' Fifty's not allowed to walk either.

Why don't mums get it? How are we meant to grow up and get a job and buy things on the internet and drive a car and shave and all the other things men do if we don't start practising basic skills like road-crossing now?

In the playground, Mum waits with Fifty's mum and his baby sister, Probably Rose. (They couldn't decide what to call her, so when anyone asked her name they said, 'Probably Rose', and it stuck.) Our two mums convince each other that they're bringing us up with the right amount of independence

Jonno Joins

– none. They're a bad combination: a doctor (my mum) and a pay-me-and-I'll-make-your-life-better therapist (that's what Fifty's mum is). When she asks you a question she stares into your eyes – it makes you blink and it's impossible to lie.

'How was your day, darling?' Mum asked.

Always the same question. Always answered by Flo before I have a chance. Even if I manage to start my first word before she does, she says her words anyway and mine get pulped.

'Mummy, Mr Dukes says we need a packed lunch and a raincoat.'

'Is that for your trip, darling?'

'Yes. It's not the day after, it's the day after the day after.' Flo has a problem with *tomorrow*. 'And we need five pounds for the shop.' She also lies.

The conversation went on and I thought about Newboy. I wondered whether we should have been a bit nicer to him the first time he came over. Then he'd have realised we weren't cool and moved on to some other kids instead and we wouldn't have to do the human barricade. It was worrying me already and it wasn't even tomorrow yet.

At home, Flo and I had toasted buns and apple juice and then I went up to my room. I took off my school sweat-shirt, hung it over my desk chair, washed my hands and then settled down in my favourite place – my hammock (which hangs across the corner of my room next to my bookcase) – to finish *Stig of the Dump*. Reading took my

TRIBE

mind off the head-to-head planned for morning break. If we weren't such good friends, I'd have been working out how to avoid it altogether. But it wasn't an option. Buddies are buddies.

KEENER'S FACT FILE

- Likes reading, building models
- Likes ALL computer games
- Is good at ALL computer games
- Brilliant skimboarder

- Doesn't like sticky things
- Doesn't like surprises
- Doesn't like sloppy food
- Doesn't like hair cuts (true surfboy)

FAMILY STUFF

Mum – doctor

Dad – something boring with a briefcase!?!)

Sisters – Flo (small and bad) and Amy (big and bad)

It happened just before Flo woke me up. I was in a dream, and so was Newboy, except he was huge and wearing a yellow waistcoat and a bow tie (yes, seriously weird). He was heading straight for me with his extra-large boots and every

Jonno Joins

time they hit the ground, the earth trembled. I wanted to run away but I was stuck to the ground with the strongest glue ever. I couldn't escape. Newboy grabbed me with a hand that was so big it went right round my middle and tried to pull me up but the glue was stronger than he was so my feet shot out of my purple (?!) shoes. He swung me round and round and threw me like a shot-put and I went flying. Suddenly I was on the ground . . . and there was blood. (I don't do blood. I am officially a wuss when it comes to pain.) He was standing over me about to finish me off when . . .

I felt Flo burrow into my bed for the daily cuddle. She thinks I like it but it's more that I'm so asleep I can't make my mouth say the words I need to say to get rid of her. By the time I'm on full power, she's gone to annoy Amy, my big sister. (Caution: avoid at all costs.)

Mum noticed my mood at breakfast. The worry had grown larger overnight.

'Is there something up?'

'No, I'm fine.' I did a fake smile and she carried on buttering the toast. Fifty's mum is much harder to convince. Her questions are the sort you can't answer yes or no to. Questions that start with 'how' and have the word 'feeling' in the middle.

In English first thing, Bee had another go at Newboy.

'Please, Miss Walsh. Can you ask him to stop rocking on the back legs of his chair? I keep thinking he's going to fall.'

TRIBE

Good one, Bee. It's Miss Walsh's pet hate. You get a warning the first time. Second time: straight detention. No question. Miss Walsh looked up from her desk. Newboy was sitting perfectly still on all four legs, like he had been all morning.

'Jonno, chairs are made with four legs for a reason,' she said, far too nicely. She was still being soft on him.

(*Jonno – what sort of name is that?* I thought.)

I didn't dare look at him. I looked at Copper Pie instead. He was leaning back on two legs, almost overbalancing, with a grin so wide it squashed his freckles together. I saw Fifty do a quick thumbs up.

But me, I was getting a bad feeling about it all. I kept my head down until break, trying to finish my story about an incredibly powerful sea creature wrecking all the fishing boats and poisoning the waters with its toxic waste.

We'd agreed to sprint straight outside to our territory as soon as the bell went. I was there second, behind Copper Pie. No one ever gets anywhere before him unless he's not going that way. He's the fastest in the school.

Between panting, I tried to abort the mission. 'How about we let him hang out with us for a bit? He'll soon see we're no fun.'

'Keener!' Copper Pie gave me the look he's used many times before. I'm *always* the one trying to stop the others from doing risky things. Most of the time Fifty feels the same but he relies on me to be the wimp. That's how it

Jonno Joins

works in groups. You all have a job, like leader, ideas person, dangerman, Mr Responsible (that's me), funny one . . . Fifty's job is smooth talker. Bee is boss. Copper Pie is secret weapon.

'Take your positions,' Copper Pie shouted. He stood bang in the middle of the way in, with the wire fence of the netball court one side and the trees the other. I went to the right, blocking the gap that side. Fifty and Bee took care of the rest. We fidgeted a bit to get a tight fit and linked arms. Wedged into the space, we waited. I kept swallowing something that wasn't there.

I glanced behind at the tiny triangle of land with the rotten tree stump that we call our patch. It's always dark and often damp and even more often smelly. *Why did it matter so much?* I asked myself.

'He's coming,' said Bee.

'Time, my noble friends, to defend our homeland from the wretched Gauls,' said Fifty.

'Someone will lock you up one day, freak,' said C.P.

Fifty lives half in the real world and half in some other made-up universe but at least he'd answered my question: it mattered because to us it was a kind of home.

We all grew a bit taller as the enemy drew nearer. I stuck my chest out, but it made the butterflies in my stomach seem worse, so I tucked it in again.

What do you think Newboy did?

Ran at us like a snorting bull? No.

TRIBE

Karate-chopped our arms to break up the line? No.

Walked off? That would have been ideal but . . . No.

He strolled up to us with his hands in his pockets, a half-smile on his face, his glasses slightly too low down his nose so he looked like a professor.

‘Is it the beginning of a dance?’ he said, making a puzzled crease down the middle of his forehead. ‘Do you join arms and waltz round the playground?’

Nobody tells Copper Pie he’s doing the waltz. Before any of us had a chance to think of a clever reply (not that I can *ever* think of one until I’m in the bath three days later), Copper Pie’s arm disengaged from Fifty’s, shot out and wrapped itself round Jonno’s neck forcing his head down, ready for —

Sheesh! I had to do something.

Copper Pie tried to free his other arm — the hand was already shaped into a fist — but I held it firmly, squeezed between my elbow and my body. Getting another kid in a headlock was one thing but a full-blown assault was a whole lot worse. Copper Pie tried to shake me off but I wasn’t going to let go. He’d have to punch me first. (That would NEVER happen. He’s been my protector since nursery when Annabel Ellis used to bite me.) I held on long enough for Fifty and Bee to peel his other arm from around Jonno’s neck and for Bee to whisper the magic word ‘detention’, followed by the other magic word ‘suspension’. Copper Pie doesn’t need any more trouble. He let Newboy go.

Jonno Joins

You've got to respect Jonno: he didn't hit Copper Pie, he didn't say something mean, he didn't cry or even do the wobbly bottom lip. I don't think he did anyway. I didn't look too closely – I was too ashamed. But not ashamed enough to actually help. Help came quickly enough from another direction.

'Are you all right? It's Jonno, isn't it?' Miss Maggs, the playground monitor, was by his side in a flash. Any hopes the attack hadn't been witnessed vanished. I let Copper Pie have his arm back and watched him head for the back entrance, because we all knew what was coming next.

Miss Maggs shouted after him, 'Wait outside the Head's office.'

Bee rolled her eyes. 'Another fine mess. Copper Pie will end up Prisoner Pie if he carries on like this.'

She's right. The last thing Copper Pie needs is another roasting from the Head. Why did Newboy have to get in the way?

Copper Pie cops it

The thing about Copper Pie is that he's the best friend you could ever have in some ways, and a total disaster in others. He'll always stand up for you, lend you money, borrow money to lend you, eat your unwanted lunch, lie for you *and* would even lend you his brother, Charlie, to torture – not that anyone wants to. The trouble comes when someone annoys him. He doesn't seem to understand that other people think differently. No, that's not it. He doesn't understand that other people are *allowed* to think something different. But he *is* getting better . . . slowly.

The three of us discussed what we thought his punishment would be. He's had an essay on 'Using words to resolve issues' – I did that for him. And loads of lunchtime detentions for: being rough, unsportsmanlike behaviour (he kicked his

COPPER PIE'S FACT FILE

- Bright ginger hair
- Very freckly
- Awful at anything to do with dividing, timesing, spelling or school
- Good at everything sporty
- Loves football and food
- Likes war and weapons
- Very loyal

FAMILY STUFF

Mum – runs a nursery

Dad – lazy, according to his mum

Brother – Charlie, aged 3, snotty,

stinky, sticky, stupid, absolutely

not allowed in Copper Pie's room

goalie for letting in a pathetic shot), not sitting still in class (he was jumping on his desk because it wouldn't shut) and bringing a weapon to school (a catapult isn't really a weapon, is it? It's practical exploration of the basic mechanism of the Roman ballista).

Bee said, 'This time it'll be exclusion. A Year 6 getting a new kid in a headlock for no reason. Exclusion, for definite.'

'It was hardly no reason. He accused us of waltzing.' I sounded ridiculous. Bee started jogging on the spot (none of

TRIBE

us know how to waltz) and giggling, and then me and Fifty joined in (the laughing, *not* the dancing).

I was last in the line-up for lunch, and still chuckling, when Jonno came along with an ice pack pressed against his neck. I shut up and turned to study the back of Bee's head, praying he wouldn't speak to me, or worse, punch me.

He didn't.

Copper Pie's punishments were: a talking to from the Head and Miss Walsh, an apology to Jonno, to stay in every lunch break this week and, worst of all, a letter home.

'It could have been worse,' said Bee.

'Could it? Mum's gonna hit the roof.' Even Copper Pie's freckles looked pale. His mum *is* quite shouty.

'You could have been suspended.' Bee shook her head and tutted.

We were eating slowly for a change, so that Copper Pie had less time sitting outside the Head's office on the naughty chair. I had plain pasta (no sauce), cheese, sweet-corn and a muffin: one of my favourite lunches.

'At least your mum won't start wailing, "Where did I go wrong?" like mine does and suggest we schedule in more "quality time",' said Fifty.

'Your mum's nice – well, apart from all the kissing,' said Bee. 'All my mum does is feed me and buy my school shoes. At least your mum's interested in you.'

'Too interested,' said Fifty. 'Kids aren't meant to be

Jonno Joins

interesting to their mothers. Kids like junk food and danger, that's it. Like C.P. here.'

For the first time since 'the incident' Copper Pie smiled. 'Don't forget telly and football.'

Fifty smacked him on the shoulder, which meant something like, 'You're our mate no matter what.'

Eventually we had to go out. Copper Pie went to meditate outside the Head's office and the three of us headed for the tree. I had a quick peek to make sure HE wasn't there. No. No sign of him. I didn't want to see Newboy for a while. I was worried he might have fingerprints on his neck.

Tuesday afternoons are my favourite. I got top marks in the science test so Miss Walsh put my name on the board in the tick column, making me officially a keener. Copper Pie was already up there with the crosses! And I worked hard at my model in D.T. – it's a Spitfire, made from two boxes and the cardboard tube from the kitchen roll all covered in brown paper with wooden sticks attaching the wheels, clear plastic for the windscreen and a working propeller with a battery under the wing. I can't wait to paint it. I've got a picture to copy so it'll be an exact replica. Fifty's making a fire engine. It's rubbish. He says he's going to burn it in the metal bin in his room.

The bell went and I still wasn't packed up so everyone skedaddled without me. When I came out, the playground was nearly empty. Fifty was waiting with my mum, my

TRIBE

sister Flo, and (*what was HE doing there?*) Jonno. Peculiar. Unbelievably, after all that had happened, he was *still* bothering us. And where was *his* mum? She was obviously super-late.

As I walked towards them, Fifty stepped towards me doing a mini version of the cut-throat sign. He looked worried. Perhaps his mum was in with the Head who was advising her that her son should stop mixing with a certain ginger-haired ruffian. Perhaps my mum would be called in next?

‘Disaster,’ Fifty said in my ear. There was no time to ask what he meant because Mum was right behind him.

‘There you are. Honestly, anyone would think you didn’t want to come home.’

I smiled, keeping my eyes focused on Mum and not on Fifty who was making an I’m-being-strangled face behind her.

‘It looks as though we’ve got a houseful for tea today. Come on, you lot.’

I started to walk beside Fifty – he was obviously coming for tea. He comes most weeks so it wasn’t really a reason to make I’m-about-to-die faces, but he does like acting.

Mum and Flo followed . . . and so did Jonno.

He was probably hoping to be invited too, I thought. No chance!

I was about to ask Fifty what he thought Jonno the shadow was doing when Mum bent her head forward and

Jonno Joins

whispered, 'It seemed kind to offer to have him round for tea. You don't mind, do you?'

What did she mean? Why did we need to be kind to Fifty? Why would I mind my friend coming over?

Uh-oh . . . A nasty thought found its way to the front of the queue.

Surely she couldn't mean Jonno?

No. Of course she couldn't. It wasn't possible that Jonno could be coming for tea because I hadn't mentioned a new boy to Mum. Maybe Fifty's mum was ill . . . or worse, in hospital. Yes, that would be it. Be kind to Fifty while we break the news. The fact that we were all walking together was a coincidence, that's all. Or maybe Jonno was still hoping to worm his way in with us, even though we'd shown him we weren't interested.

I couldn't wait to talk to Fifty about how *completely* crazy Newboy was.

Mum leaned forward again. 'Only I met Jonno's mum this morning at the surgery. It's so hard being the new boy in a class.'