

BOBBIE ALLEN

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## *Sunday Sunday*

The Sunday that Little David almost died was just like any other Sunday deep in 1978. My mother, Liz Drury, Christie Next Door but One, who was up the pole with her third child, and Elaine Next Door the Other Way were in the Drurys' kitchen for their usual Sunday morning chat around the table while the various Sunday joints were roasting, salted potatoes in pans of water waiting to be put on to boil and dried peas soaking in bicarb of soda. I was in the dining room off the Drurys' kitchen with Rachel Drury, who was trying to get me to go outside to play Relego with the other kids from the estate, but I knew Stephen Next Door the Other Way was out there, and he was a bully, so I didn't want to go. I had a new Famous Five to get through. Besides, Liz Drury had just launched into a snippet of gossip about Jinny down the road again and I wanted to know what the latest was.

"Did you hear about her down the road again?" Liz emptied the kettle into the pot for the second time that morning. My ears had pricked up at this point, but Rachel chose that moment to drift into the kitchen, which immediately prevented Liz from saying anything else.

"Oy, Dinah," said Liz, "get yer thumb out yer mouth."

"Can I have a biscuit?" asked Rachel.

"No. You'll be having your dinner soon. Now sling yer hook."

Rachel disappeared immediately. Liz was a fearsome woman who snarled like a poked dog. I stayed where I was, but inched a bit closer to the kitchen.

“What’s she done this time?” asked my mother.

“Who?” said Christie.

“Jinny, you tool,” said Elaine.

“Her old man’s been done for breaking and entering.” Liz lit up.

“She went past my house with a telly yesterday,” said Christie, reaching across the table to scav one of Liz’s cigarettes.

“Cathy’s been storing the stuff at hers,” said Liz, pushing the pack closer to Christie, who was having trouble bending forwards with her enormous belly getting in the way. “When are you going to pop, girl?”

“Yeh, well, she should spend less time carting stuff down the street, and more time looking after them kids of hers.” The sound of my mother’s voice made my ears tingle. I loved listening to her in conversation with the other women from the estate. They always talked about interesting things, like Jinny down the road, who cropped up in those conversations regularly, but never took part in them.

“Be hard doing that from prison,” said Liz.

“He won’t go to prison,” scoffed Christie.

“They’ll lock ’em both up for good if they finds out what’s really been going on in that house,” said my mother, knowledgeably. “Letting a complete stranger sleep with her Charlie.”

My mother let this settle into the room and waited for the righteous outrage to emerge. Elaine was on the case first.

“What d’you mean, sleep with Charlie? In the same bed, like, or, you know, have...sex with her?”

“Probably, for all we know.”

“Oh, now, hang on, was it that party they had?” asked Christie.

“That’s the one,” replied my mother. “And she let a complete stranger kip in Middle Charlie’s bed. Well, it’s no way to bring up kids, is it? What’s that poor girl’s gonna grow up like, thinking that it’s OK for strange men to just come in an’ kip in her room, and goodness only knows what else?”

“I been down the school,” said Liz, pulling hard on her cigarette. She was obviously bored of the goings on at Jinny’s place.

“They been picking on Shara, again?” asked Christie.

“Yup,” said Liz.

I felt my face go red. My teacher had called me back last week as I was on my way out to the yard for play time, and asked me about some kids picking on Shara. I don't know why he was asking me; Shara was in the year above me, but then again, everyone knew I hung around the Drurys' place, so in their eyes, I suppose we were joined at the hip. I couldn't tell him anything even though I knew who was picking on Shara, and why. I just clammed up.

"Shame that. She's a lovely girl, your Shara," said Christie. "What's the school gonna do about it?"

"Nothing they can do really." Liz shrugged philosophically. "Keep an eye on her. You know kids. It's gonna happen."

"You still planning on sending Robin down St Hilda's, Pam?" asked Elaine. My mother nodded. I was suddenly on red alert. This was new. We'd all been given forms at school but St Hilda's wasn't on the list of schools we would all be going to. All I knew about St Hilda's was that they all had to wear hats. In my head, it was a bit like Malory Towers.

"You'll have to watch out she don't come out queer!" Christie winked at my mother. Elaine looked puzzled. Christie went on. "You know. Like her ladyship up the top end. St Hilda's is all girls."

Elaine grimaced.

"Wants to be a teacher," confided my mother. "Don't you Rob?"

"Is she still in there?" asked Liz. "Oy! Dinah!" I froze. My mother, having blown my cover, came to my rescue.

"She's alright. She's not doing no harm, Liz. You know what she's like. Rather be reading than playing out."

"Aye, you won't find Craig reading!" said Christie. "All he goes on about is this action man tower thing he wants, like what your Duane got off your Jeannie."

"Just tell him he can't have it," suggested my mother.

"He don't listen to me," said Christie. "All he knows is can I have can I have. He's costing me a pigging fortune."

Rachel Drury strode back into the kitchen.

"Aunty Laine," she began. "Can you tell Stephen? He's throwing stones at us."

"I'll be out in a minute," said Elaine, lighting up a cigarette. "Go on. Bugger off."

Rachel Drury disappeared again. I was glad I hadn't gone outside if Stephen was up to his usual tricks. Liz looked at Elaine with raised eyebrows. Elaine sucked on her cigarette.

"It'll have been enough that she come and told me. He'll have stopped by now."

There was a thud on the front door and an agonised wail from Rachel Drury. Elaine rolled her eyes and stubbed out her cigarette, but she still didn't move. There was another thud on the door, and Liz roared.

"Stephen Crosby, you better hope you're not still outside my door by the time I get out there!"

An uneasy silence followed. The letterbox was rattled and the sound of a raspberry being blown through it drifted into the kitchen. Liz pounded up the stairs to the front door and slammed it open.

"SLING YER HOOK!" she bellowed. I could hear Stephen Next Door the Other Way laughing his head off as he skittered away from the danger zone of Liz's sharp tongue and the threat of a lamp round the earhole.

"Little David's got asthma," said my mother. "He had to go in an oxygen tent. They was down the hospital last week on my shift."

Christie snorted and rubbed her belly. "I could do with one of them for Glen, oxygen tent. I'm surprised I'm in the state I'm in, the state he's in, wheezing through the night."

"Did David have an attack, or something?" asked Liz, coming back into the kitchen. "Elaine, your Stephen is beyond."

"I know. I'll have to ask Derek to have another word."

My mother continued.

"Jinny said he'd been wheezy for a couple of days, and then last Tuesday he woke up in the night and he couldn't breathe properly, so she called the doctor out. Well, Little Jinny did, anyway. I think Jinny was too pissed to dial. Some people shouldn't be allowed to have kids, the way they treats them. She spends half her time wandering up and down the street or smashed out of her head with some wierdos in her living room."

And then the peace was really shattered. There was a hammering on the front door and several voices were calling for their mothers. Liz yelled at them to sling their hooks but then Rachel Drury took

command of the situation and shouted through the letterbox that Little David had had an accident. I had never seen four women move so quickly. They all simultaneously stubbed out their cigarettes, my mother told me to stay put, and they went bombing out of the door, almost trampling their children gathered on the doorstep. I dropped my book and followed everyone outside, nicking a biscuit from the pantry on my way out. Why would I stay put when all the drama had shifted from the kitchen?

Outside, it was chaos. There were the mums, the people from the car, kids everywhere, and underneath it all, the inert form of Little David half on the road, half on the pavement. I could see blood, and then Shara Drury puked up, and all the kids went mad, including me, making noises of disgust, except for Stephen Next Door the Other Way, who thought Shara's sick was hilarious, and he even made as if he was going to lick it up, which set us all off again. I began to regret nicking the biscuit, as a little gob of my own sick threatened to rise up into my throat. My mother took charge of the situation and all the other mums let her. She was a nurse, and therefore knew enough about accidents and emergencies to convince them to stand aside. The fact that her actual job was as an auxiliary on the old people's ward had no bearing. She directed Liz to go back inside and call an ambulance and the police but the people in the car said that they would take Little David to the hospital. My mother was having no truck with that. They'd been driving irresponsibly, she said, and there was no way she'd let Little David in the car with irresponsible drivers. Next, she leant down low next to Little David, and spoke to him sternly and then put her ear to his mouth.

"He's breathing, it's OK," she announced. "Elaine, give me your cardy."

Elaine obeyed immediately and my mother put it over Little David's skinny body.

"Don't you have to put him in recovery or something?" asked Christie, nervously fingering her cigarettes, which she had taken out of her pocket.

"He might have a neck injury or a back injury," said my mother, knowledgeable. "Best not to move him. It's OK, he's breathing. He's just knocked out, I think. He'll probably come to before the

ambulance gets here.” She spotted me lurking off to one side and gave me a Look. “Oy, Looby Lou, I told you to stay put!” Then she tutted and told me and Rachel Drury to go and get Jinny. Rachel and I shot off, glad to have a part to play in this drama. However, we hadn’t got very far, when we saw Cathy marching down the street towards us yelling for Jinny at the top of her voice. Jinny came out of her house carrying a box and a can of Breaker, and we stopped dead. Cathy closed in on us, Jinny was coming the other way, and I suddenly realized I didn’t have a clue about how I was going to deliver the news about Little David. Luckily, the ambulance arriving put paid to any fumbling explanations and Jinny soon caught on and started wailing as loudly as the ambulance siren. My mother gave her a verbal slap and Jinny looked astounded for a moment before she took up again, having noticed the people from the car who were standing shocked and bewildered by the roadside. She directed a tirade of expletive-ridden ranting in their direction, while my mother explained to the ambulance driver what had happened, and what she had done for Little David. The ambulance crew took over from there, putting Little David into the ambulance and bundling Jinny in after him. Jinny yelled, “Liz, feed my kids, will you!” and Liz rolled her eyes.

We were left in the road watching as the ambulance set off, siren blaring even though there was next to no traffic about. Still, it all added to the drama. Stephen Next Door the Other Way wandered off and Elaine told him to be back by three for his dinner. In the relative silence that followed, the four mums lit cigarettes and waited around for the police to arrive. I began to wish I had stayed in the little room off the kitchen reading my book. I was feeling distinctly unwell after all the blood and the sick and the biscuit was definitely not wanting to stay put in my stomach. Elaine offered the couple from the car her cigarettes but they declined.

“Don’t think I’ve moved so fast since Shara fell off the wall down by the shop!” Liz took a long drag on her cigarette.

“God, poor Little David!” said Christie. “Jinny was hysterical. Lucky you was there, Pam. You done all the stuff!”

My mother tried to look modest, and failed, so she went for passive chastisement instead.

“Yeh, well. I’ve never seen someone sober up so fast. Maybe this’ll teach her a lesson. She’s lucky David wasn’t killed.”

“Well, I better put on some more veg,” said Liz, throwing her fag end on the ground and grinding it with her foot. “I got to feed Little Jinny and Middle Charlie.”

“Surely Pete can do his own kids’ dinner?” my mother piped up immediately.

“You’re joking! By the time Pete gets back from the Leather Bottle, he’ll be more steamed than my cabbage.”

Liz lit another cigarette and started walking back to her house.

“Come on, Dinah.” She clicked her fingers at Rachel and Shara.

“They should put barriers across all these steps, you know, like they got down the end by the post box,” said Elaine. My mother nodded.

“Well, it’s about time they done something. Some kid died up Pentwyn, running straight out into the road, my sister said. They got barriers, now.”

“Oh, Elaine, can I lend yer whisk again?” said Christie. “I might make a trifle for later.”

“I’ll send Stephen round with it. Second thoughts, I’ll send Debbie,” said Elaine.

“Ta.”

All was tranquil for a moment, and then, in the far distance, a police siren sounded.