



## Gabberers, and how to avoid them

“It’s true!”

“It *isn’t!*”

“It is!”

“Nuh-uh, it isn’t!”

“It is!!”

“Uh-uh. No way.”

Y’know, I get bored easily.

It’s not a fantastic personality trait, I know. I have some nice ones (I think), and I guess getting bored easily is better than being mean to little animals or being a compulsive liar or a serial killer or something.

But whatever; right now I was bored. Bored of the annoying *yabbering* going on behind me in the living room.

I gently wiggled the TV remote control out from under Clyde, our house rabbit, who gave a cute, surprised squeak, blinked his huge, long-lashed bunny eyes – and then bit me. (It’s pretty



nice having a rabbit hopping about the house. It's just a pity that Clyde's worst personality trait is being mean to humans who dare to wake him up when he's snoozing.)

"Yeah!!"

"No WAY!!"

"*Definitely!!*"

Sigh. . .

That was yet *more* yabbering, coming from the direction of the sofa.

I shuffled closer across the carpet towards the TV. Not just to get away from the yabbering, but to be in with a chance of actually *seeing* anything on the TV, since it was the size of a cereal box. One of those weeny "fun-size" cereal boxes you get cellophaned together with a bunch of other midget-size boxes in variety packs. (Well, *practically* that small. And yeah, so exaggerating might be another of my not-so-hot personality traits.)

"No WAY!!"

"Yeah! Check it out!"

"Uh-UH!!"

I gritted my teeth and pressed the on button.

*Ping!* I pressed a random couple of digits on the remote and found myself at a shopping channel.

Great – I *loved* watching shopping channels.



Not because I had a deep longing to own any of the dumb stuff they sold on there, but because I was fascinated by the amazing talents of the presenters, and their ability to witter on endlessly about how truly incredible the truly dumb stuff was.

*“ . . .this genuine diamondesque, oval-cut piece of, well, art, has a stunning intensity about it, and could grace, well, any one of your fingers!!”*

(Translation: it’s a ring.)

*“ . . .and look at this! Wow! Isn’t that an absolutely exquisite presentation?!”*

(Translation: it’s in a box.)

“Like, *yeah*, it’s true!” That wasn’t a shopping-channel presenter. That was Yabberer No. 1, my twin brother, Sonny.

“You’re MAD!!” That was Yabberer No. 2, his best mate, Kennedy.

“No, I’m not. I’m just *saying*. OK?” Sonny muttered, sounding sort of apologetic.

“But HOW can you say that?!” Kennedy gasped, sounding outraged.

It was no use. No matter how much I tried to bust my boredom by watching telly, the yabbering was going to win out.

How I wished that my almost-stepdad, Will, wasn’t madly Hoovering upstairs, so that maybe the



yabbering could go on in Sonny's room instead of on the sofa.

"Well, 'cause I *can*!" said Sonny.

"Wait a minute – so you're saying that HE'S better-looking than ME?" gasped Kennedy.

For a boy with a face like a plate, Kennedy really, really fancied himself.

I turned around and saw Sonny – holding a magazine open in his hands – shrug his shoulders. "But look . . . he *is* kind of cute!"

Now, it's not every day that you expect your thirteen-year-old brother to come out with a comment like that. But Sonny wasn't flicking through *Girls Like Us!* magazine and comparing the cuteness factor of singers for his own personal enjoyment.

Oh, no.

This was war.

Boy-Band War. . .

"Hey, what do YOU think, Sadie?" Kennedy yabbered some more, snatching the magazine from Sonny and holding it up, so a full-page poster of a fabulously furry guinea pig was cheek-to-cheek with his, er, cheeks.

"Wrong page," I droned, and Kennedy – never the smartest plate-faced boy on the planet – quickly flipped a page forward and resumed his



pose, now comparing his head to that of an ultra-handsome boy in a baseball cap, who looked maybe about fourteen or fifteen.

“See, Sadie? Cute – right?” said Sonny, pointing to the ultra-handsome face, trying to prove his point.

OK, I need to say right here, right now, that my stage-school-brat brother and a bunch of his stage-school-brat mates had somehow managed to land a real live contract with a real live record company. (Before anyone gets all impressed, I have to *also* say that it wasn’t as remotely cool as it might sound. It was deeply corny. Their outfits were deeply corny, their dance routines were deeply corny and their songs were *brilliant*. Only joking! They were deeply corny too.)

The band even had their own mad stalker mega-fan (Mel) – or at least they *used to*, till our own mad grandmother shooed her away from outside our house not so long ago.

But here’s the most important thing: the bratty stage-school band’s first real live single was coming out in eleven days’ time, and something had gone *badly* wrong in their plan for world domination. (Er, by that I mean of course the world of little kids and grannies, ’cause even though Sonny would never admit it, *that* was the



target audience for a cutesy junior boy band like his.)

And here's what had gone wrong: The Twist, a *rival* boy band. . .

It had all come out today. Hal – one of the other lads in Sonny's band – had brought his fourteen-year-old sister's magazine into the stage school and flashed around the article about The Twist. Sonny, Kennedy, Marcus, Hal and Ziggy were so incensed that it was a wonder *Girls Like Us!* magazine hadn't been ripped into tiny pieces and set on fire.

So, here I was: bored, and being forced into giving my opinion on whether Kennedy and his plate face was cuter than the boy in the photo (hey, Kennedy Watson would have to wait a *long* time – like slightly longer than for ever – to hear *me* call him cute).

Uh-oh, I'd just noticed that the boy in the photo – according to what was printed under his hundred-watt grin – was called *Benjii*, for goodness' sake. . .

"That's a *dog's* name, isn't it?!" I said with a shudder. "I mean, calling your band The Twits is bad enough!"

My rubbish yet semi-funny joke got Sonny semi-smiling, but Kennedy was frowning like he didn't get it.



“They’re called The *Twist*, Sadie! Not The *Twits*,” he corrected me, the big idiot.

At least Sonny had the sense to roll his eyes at his best friend.

Speaking of jokes, my brother’s band was called (get this) “Sadie Rocks”. Which was a joke in itself, or at least using “Sadie” had started out that way. If I’d thought that Sonny and the other boys were seriously going to use it, I’d have changed my name from Sadie Bird to something far less embarrassing, like Brangelina Bob Sidebottom.

“Y’know, maybe I should’ve called myself Kennii, with two ‘I’s. . .” Kennedy added thoughtfully, or at least as thoughtfully as someone with two brain cells can manage.

The bosses at the stage school were to blame for suggesting he switched from Kenneth (which was on his birth certificate) to Kennedy (which was plain pretentious). Just like they’d suggested Alan should be Hal, Mark should be Marcus, and Gordon should become Ziggy. They seemed to think that Sonny was groovy enough as it was. (Please . . . don’t give him *another* reason to be big-headed.)

“What’s this?” asked a sing-song voice from the living-room doorway. It belonged to one of my grandmothers. Not the sane one, unfortunately.



“You boys aren’t still fretting over this other band, are you?”

*This* grandmother was Nonna (Italian for “granny”, though she was about as Italian as Clyde, my rabbit). *This* grandmother was getting building work done on her retirement home in Spain, and was staying with us temporarily. She was driving my entire family mad, possibly permanently.

Ever since Nonna had arrived a few weeks ago, my mum had been bashing her most angry-sounding classical favourites out on the piano (imagining every key was Nonna’s head, I suspected). What’s more, my stepdad Will’s slight obsessive-compulsive tendencies were becoming more obvious (though maybe he was just doing extra housework – and extra-*meticulous* housework – to keep himself out of Nonna’s way). And Gran (my sensibly named Irish grandmother) had taken to phoning up first, so she could time her visits for when Nonna was off swanning around the art galleries of London.

The only two members of my family who got along with Nonna were a) Sonny, mainly because Nonna was completely starstruck by her talented grandson, and b) Martha, but I think that had a lot to do with the fact that babies like spangly things, and Nonna liked a bit of older lady bling.



“But, Nonna, it says here that The Twist’s single is coming out this week!” whined Sonny, pointing at the feature on the other side of the page from Benjii’s sugar-coated smile. “*And* they’ve got publicity in this magazine. Where does that leave us?”

Nonna breezed over to the sofa, her shortish, immaculately styled, silvery-gold hair glinting as much as her pearly pink loose-wrap cardie. She had on a huge necklace made out of a whole pinky-white shell. I wondered what kind it was, but there was no point asking her. Knowing Nonna, she’d instantly make up a whole new type of shell, previously unknown to marine biologists, and swear blind that it was for real.

“Sonny, I’m *sure* there’s room for both your bands in the charts,” Nonna murmured soothingly, putting on the glasses that had been dangling around her neck on a gold chain, clanking up against the shell pendant as she walked. “And, boys, you really *should* smile! It’s meant to be fun!”

Actually, what Nonna said made sense (amazingly). I mean, *I* might think singing deeply corny songs and doing even cornier dance routines was horribly naff, but it was supposed to be what Sonny and his mates really wanted to do.



At Nonna's words, Sonny and Kennedy looked at each other and shrugged, trying a slight smile on for size. Not that it lasted long.

"So anyway, *this* one is the lead singer, same as *you*, Kennedy?" asked Nonna, studying first the band photo on one page, and Benjii's mug on the other.

"Yeah." Kennedy nodded, hands gripping the pages of the magazine tightly, as if he'd like to squash Benjii's head just as hard.

"Hmm . . . actually, I see what you mean now! This boy does have a *very* appealing smile. And *beautiful* eyes. The girls will certainly adore him!"

Her clunky words splattered over Kennedy like a bucket of ice-cold gloop.

"You've certainly got some competition there!" Nonna laughed blithely.

I liked Kennedy about as much as I liked a) Sonny's boy band, and b) Nonna staying in my bedroom (i.e., not a lot), but it wasn't exactly fun watching her destroy his and Sonny's dreams in one fell swoop of tactlessness. I wasn't *that* bored, *or* mean.

Plus, when Nonna was in full swing, she was just as likely to casually toss a tactless, cutting remark to anyone else unfortunate enough to be within range.



I was *out* of here.

“Got some homework to do . . .” I mumbled, jumping to my feet and scooping Clyde up with me.

My favourite secret(ish) hideout is the clump of trees down at the end of the garden. One wiggle through the bent railings and I’d be in the shrubbery, settling down in the spot under my pet Christmas tree (I’ll explain later) and staring out at the old, rambling Victorian cemetery that our house backs on to.

But I wouldn’t be going there today, since it was drizzling and grey outside, which pretty much matched the drizzly, grey mood I was trying to escape in the living room.

So my Trash Pad it was. Will couldn’t Hoover in there, since it had black bin bags for carpet (I’ll explain that later too).

PLINK!!

The thumping music coming from the piano in the hall stopped dead the second I went to escape up the stairs.

“Tea won’t be long!” Mum said in a strangely manic way, her hands frozen in a hover above the black and white keys.

Mum was mostly dreamy, not manic. Except when she was suffering overexposure to Nonna.



Had Nonna been particularly irritating to her since she came home from work today?

“Um, fine,” I said with a shrug, wiggling my fingers at Martha, who was *boing, boing, boing*-ing in her bouncy chair at Mum’s feet, keeping time with the music that had paused. “I’ll just be in my room. Well, the spare room.”

I corrected myself because Nonna was currently the tenant of *my* bedroom, and I was holed up in the Trash Pad. Which was a joy and not a torture, for sure. A girl can only take so much snoring and old lady potions and perfumes strewn around the place.

“Will’s made something very special for tea!” said Mum, still with a manic glint in her eyes. “And Gran’s coming!”

“Is that a good idea?” I asked Mum. Never mind boy-band wars; the Granny Wars had raged only a couple of weeks before.

Though I have to say that things had got a little better since Gran and Nonna had bonded over their shared excitement about Sonny’s imminent superstar status, and Gran was carefully managing to overlap as little time as possible with Nonna.

But tea together? Was Mum crazy? Or had she turned into a bit of a gambler overnight and put a bet on with my dad about which of their



mothers was likely to start sniping at the other first?

“It’ll be fine!” Mum insisted, pushing back a clump of dark, wavy hair that was escaping from the clips she had it pinned up with. “Will and I just thought it would be lovely to have a, um, lovely, special family meal together!”

Yeah . . . we *really* needed a lovely, special family meal with two potentially feuding grannies on a Tuesday night. Big wow.

Just as I put a foot on the bottom stair, I felt myself being watched, and not just by Mum.

*PHEN-yewwwwwwwww* . . . went the Hoover, as Will flicked it off up on the top landing.

He smiled down at me, all nervous. As if he’d maybe hoovered up the cat by accident and wasn’t looking forward to telling me.

“All right, Sadie?” he said, overly brightly, as I came up past him.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied warily. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dog – our cat – padding out of the Trash Pad, now that the Hoover racket had stopped. OK, so she wasn’t inside the drum of the Hoover, scabbling to get out, then.

“Cool!” said Will, using his favourite-ever word a little too enthusiastically. “Did Mum tell you that we’re all having a lovely—”



“—special family meal together,” I finished for him. “Yep, she did.”

*BING-BONG!!*

“That’ll be Joan!” gasped Will, at the sound of the doorbell.

“I’ll get it!!” yelled Mum, scurrying towards the door, even though Joan (otherwise known to me, Sonny and Martha as Gran) would have her key in the door any second, and would be calling out a cheerful “Yoo-hooo!” to whoever happened to be in.

Mum and Will – they were in what’s commonly known as a tizz.

I had no idea what that was about, but I was obviously going to find out soon, if my grandmothers resisted bickering long enough to let anyone else get a word in edgeways during our “lovely, special family meal”.

But for now, I’d go and chill in my yabbering-and tizz-free Trash Pad.

Last night, Sonny had given me a printed-out copy of a new publicity photo of his band.

I was sure I could pass a few happy minutes blacking out all the lads’ teeth with a felt pen. . .





## The joy of the Trash Pad

“Miaow!” miaowed Dog.

I can’t remember exactly how old I was when I’d insisted that our new pet kitty cat be called – confusingly – Dog. But I do remember that it was ‘cause I just fancied being awkward at the time.

Dog – who’d seemed perfectly happy and unconfused by her name all these years – padded back into the Trash Pad, picking her paws up awkwardly as the bin-bag “carpet” rustled underfoot.

She was so busy watching her paws that she walked head first into Dad’s old filing cabinet, which I was using as a very huge chest of drawers.

“Erpp!” she squawked.

“There you go!” I muttered, bending down to rub her furry forehead better. I wasn’t too panicked. Dog hurting herself was pretty much the norm. For instance, on the day she got the all-clear from



the vet over her torn cruciate ligament, Sonny managed to set her tail on fire (accidentally, honest). Dad once suggested that the vet should name a cage in the hospital room in her honour, since she was such a regular there.

“So, Dog . . . what do you think’s going on with Mum and Will?” I muttered some more to her, now that I could see she was OK.

At the same time, I kicked off my Converse trainers (easy to do, since I always wear them with the heels folded down) and deposited Clyde on the squashy surface of the low-down, blow-up bed.

Dog purred, which was soothing – and proved she didn’t have a catty concussion – but it wasn’t really a very useful answer to my question.

So I picked up the marker pen and got ready to black out some teeth in the picture that I had taped to my wall, till I studied it and realized the band looked fine as they were, with the beards and spots I’d scribbled on them earlier.

Instead, I decided to press my computer into life and email Hannah and Letitia – my best buddies, who don’t much like each *other*, sadly – some idle rubbish.

Moving the wooden picnic chair out from under the wrought-iron garden table (meet my



lookalike desk, etc.), I heard plastic rip. Ah, well, another hole in the “carpet”, but that could easily be fixed with a bit of parcel tape, I thought, gazing at the zigzag pattern of wide, shiny brown tape across the floor.

I gazed some more at the rest of the room. It wasn't likely to be featured in any glam interiors magazines, that was for sure.

I mean, the fairy lights were nice, but the torn, peeling wallpaper wasn't. The clothes that weren't stashed in the filing cabinet were dangling in a tangle of mismatched hangers on the rail that Will had found in the street not so long ago (classy). My trainers were jumbled in a mini trainer hillock, alongside a teetering mountain of CDs and magazines. Actually, I think they'd all sort of merged together now that I was looking at it again. Not that it mattered. Unless I was particularly dozy one morning and tried to put the first Kings of Leon CD on my left foot instead of my trainer, I guess. . .

“It looks like one of those nuts art installations you get at Tate Modern,” Hannah had said, grinning, last weekend when she, Letitia and me had finished our personalized drawings on a wall each.

We hadn't peeked at what we were doing while we were doing it. Oh no. We'd just squeaked away



with our markers till we were all happy and finished, and then checked our handiwork out. On my wall, behind the bed, I'd drawn a grand, twirly headboard, with fat angels swooping overhead. On Letty's wall – the one with the window – there were now two extra windows drawn on either side, complete with flowerpots and a cross-eyed person waving in. Hannah had done her version of the skyline of London, though the dome of St Paul's Cathedral *did* look a bit like half an onion.

Being the kind, considerate sister I am (yeah, right!) I'd even let Sonny have a go on the last wall, by the door. But all he'd come up with was a squiggle that said "Sadie Rocks *rocks!*" on it (whoa, very imaginative!) and I'd since covered it up with a poster of The Drop Zone – the band I went to see with Dad, Will, Sonny and, of course, Cormac.

As for this room, well, once upon a time, the Trash Pad had been my old bedroom.

And here beginneth a short history lesson: in the days before I had taste, the walls were lemon yellow, with pink-painted shelves heaving with soft toys and Barbie dolls.

Then I got to about ten, and painted the walls a sort of mauve shade, and sold off all (well, *nearly*



all) the Barbie dolls and soft toys and baby books at a table sale outside our house.

That was around the time that my mum and dad split up, though it was pretty hard for anyone on the outside to spot that fact, since my parents still got on all right-ish. The only difference was that Dad moved out of their bedroom and into his home office above the garage, where he turned into a forty-something-year-old teenager overnight, blaring music and surviving on delivery pizza.

It was only meant to be for a few weeks, till he got his own place, but three years later, Dad was *still* there, blaring out his old records and eating pepperoni pizza practically every night.

What *did* change in those three years was a) Mum meeting Will at the school where they both worked, b) Will moving in, c) baby Martha putting in an appearance and d) Dad's stomach getting ever bigger from his exclusively pizza-based diet.

Dad finally moved out a couple of months or so ago, to his new bachelor pad above the undertaker's (a real magnet for new girlfriends – not!).

Then back at home, there was a sudden game of musical rooms, with Sonny shifting into the office room above the garage, me switching to Sonny's vacated, much bigger bedroom, while *my* old room was left empty – ready to be transformed



into a lemon yellow, soft-toy-infested den all over again, for *Martha* this time round.

Of course, the way things worked out, I had all of about two seconds(ish) to enjoy my new space, and then Nonna arrived, laden with endless suitcases, and instantly transformed my bedroom into a home-from-home for herself. Seeing what was going on, I was all set to camp out in my old room, till – sploosh!! – the water tank right above it went and burst, and the soggy plaster of the ceiling made its acquaintance with the carpet. . .

I tried bunking in with Nonna, but her road-drill snoring drove me nuts.

I tried bunking in with Sonny, which was (amazingly) all right for a while, till he started singing the deeply corny lyrics of his band's single in his sleep. (*"Ooooooh, Momma, you always looked after me, and Dad, you're the man I wanna grow up to be, 'cause we are – yeah! Familyyyy!!"*). Bleurgh. . .

Then a week or so ago, the ceiling of my old room got replastered. And even though the carpet had been ripped out and the wallpaper was falling off the walls, it seemed like an oasis in the middle of my madhouse. So I moved in, Blu-tacking bin bags to the floor to solve the problem of splinters



from bare floorboards interfacing with my bare feet.

My temporary hideout horrified Nonna. When she first saw it, she had tears in her eyes, and mumbled stuff about how she couldn't *bear* to think of her sweet granddaughter (that's *me*, by the way, in case you were confused by the description) living in a hovel like this.

But I was already getting kind of fond of my hovel.

It was going to be tough to move back into all the neatness next door once Nonna finally packed up and went. (Whenever that happy day would be. . .)

"Sadie, Mum says you've got to come downstairs now for tea," Sonny announced, suddenly bursting into my room without knocking. As usual.

"SONNY!!" I yelped at him.

"Oh, sorry, Sadie!" said Sonny, shuffling back outside and uselessly knocking. The big nerker.

"Come in. . ." I sighed. He came in. He grinned a slightly less full-on version of his usual chirpy grin, presumably still reeling from the shock of another teen boy band being on the scene.

"So are you coming?" he asked.

"Yeah, in a second," I muttered, looking around for my roll of parcel tape to fix the bin-bag carpet.



“Sonny, d’you know what Mum and Will are up to? What this whole ‘lovely, special’ family meal’s about?”

“Nope,” said Sonny, looking mildly surprised at the thought that it might be in any way unusual. That was *always* the way with Sonny; if something wasn’t anything directly to do with him, he was oblivious to it.

“Just seems weird, that’s all,” I muttered, rifling hopefully for tape in a pile of random stuff.

“Hey!” exclaimed Sonny, as if a light bulb had pinged above his head. “Maybe they’re going to announce they’re getting married!”

I hadn’t found the parcel tape, but I *had* found a clean sock not yet filed away in the drawer in the cabinet marked “KNICKERS & WHATEVER”.

I balled up the sock and chucked it at Sonny’s head.

“What?” He blinked, acting all stunned, as it unravelled and flopped limply on his shoulder.

“Well, *think* about it!” I sighed. “How can Mum and Will get married when Mum and Dad aren’t even *divorced*? *Duh!*”

I knew I’d found myself calling Will my stepdad recently, but it was only because calling him my *not-quite*-stepdad took an awfully long time.

“Ahhhh. . .” murmured Sonny, my point



penetrating his thick skull.

Two minutes later, surrounded by grannies and a table heaving with particularly great food, Sonny was “ahhing” again.

“Ahhh!!!!!!”

The multiple exclamation marks after this particular “ahhh” were because (cue my shocked expression) Mum and Will had just announced they were getting *married*. . .

“Oh, Nicola!” gasped Gran, all teary-eyed, jumping up from her seat to hug Mum and then Will.

Little Martha – getting jiggled in Gran’s arms – started slapping her chubby fingers together and giggling, though she hadn’t a clue what was happening.

“Darling! How lovely!!” shrieked Nonna, clasping her hands together. She was probably planning her mother-of-the-bride outfit already. “Oh, I *do* love weddings!”

“Yes, we know,” I heard Gran mutter under her breath.

Nonna liked getting married so much she’d done it three times. The first time to my granddad Bernard, who’d died before me and Sonny were born; the second to Alejandro, a restaurant owner in Spain (a marriage which lasted about as long as



a summer holiday); and lastly to Jack, a fellow retired Brit settled in Nonna's adopted hometown of Mojacar, who died when I was little, of either extreme old age or as a cunning way of avoiding listening to Nonna's endless wittering – I'm not entirely sure which.

"So when's the big day?" asked Nonna, oblivious to Gran's mumbled aside.

"Well, that's the amazing thing – it's happening in less than two weeks' time!" Mum smiled, all fluttery and flappy with happiness.

"What?!" both grans squeaked in tandem.

"I know!" laughed Mum. "Will and I had been talking about getting married recently, but we hadn't planned on it happening so soon. It was just that Will went to Islington Town Hall last week to look into possible dates, and found out there'd been a short notice cancellation."

"I booked it straight away, but we didn't want to make it definite and tell you all till I checked with my dad that he could come," Will joined in, stretching a hand across the table to hold Mum's. (His fingers tidied away a couple of crumbs on the way. A bit of romance didn't get in the way of his obsessive-compulsive tendencies, I noticed.)

"Ted just got back to Will today to say he's



managed to get someone to look after his farm, so . . . well, it's all systems go!" Mum said brightly. "And of course, I thought since *you'd* still be here, Mum, it would be perfect, really!"

"Oh, Nicola, darling! That is the *sweetest* thing!!" Nonna said, holding her hands to her chest and looking genuinely moved.

*Ahem.* Hold it with the party atmosphere, I thought to myself. Weren't they all ignoring a teeny, tiny HUMUNGOUS problem?!

"Mum. . ." I said, aware that I was the only one not about to faint with the excitement of the whole spontaneous wedding announcement. "Aren't you and Dad still technically *married*?!"

Everyone turned to look at me, as if I was a real party-pooper, I swear. Well, *excuse* me for being boringly practical.

"Well, that's the brilliant thing!" Mum said, brightening up again. "Your dad and I did all the paperwork *ages* ago and sort of forgot about it. But I checked with the solicitor and it turns out the divorce becomes final next week, so it all fits together really nicely!"

Hmm. How "brilliant" and "really nice", indeed.

"Ooh, isn't that wonderful, darling?" Nonna crooned some more. "Though it must be strange for *you*, Joan, dear. . ."



Nonna had turned to Gran, who had been happily bouncing Martha on her knee till she saw Nonna tilt her head to the side and throw her a condescending look.

Uh-oh.

Nonna had several personalities (funny, kind, tactless and mad for starters), and the tactless one was just about to surface again, I was sure.

“Why is that, *Muriel*?” asked Gran, warily.

Nonna winced. She hated being called “Muriel” as much as she hated being called “Granny”. She endlessly tried to get everyone to call her Bunny – the nickname her friends in Spain called her – but Gran wasn’t having any of it.

“Well, because once my Nicola is officially divorced from your Martin—”

“*Max*,” said Mum and Gran at the same time.

Nonna swept away their correction as if it was as irrelevant as a fly at a rubbish dump. “I just mean that once Nicola and *Max* are divorced, you won’t be part of the family any more, will you?”

“Of course she will!” Mum practically yelped, a giant smile plastered on her face, as she tried not to show how embarrassed she was by her own mother’s tact-free comments. “Joan will *always* be part of the family!!”

“Hey, maybe my band could play at the wedding



reception!” Sonny jumped in, saving the day with his suggestion. “Our single’s called ‘We Are Family’, remember!”

As everyone let themselves be sidetracked (to avoid an escalation of the Granny Wars), I sat back and thought of someone who wasn’t here.

A someone who might not think the current happy, clappy news was either “amazing”, “brilliant” or even just “really nice”.

And that someone was called *Dad*. . .





## Romeo and, er, Nicola. . .

Dad and Mum, Mum and Dad. . .

They were like Romeo and Juliet: a mad, crazy love that was destined never to be. (Well, if you replaced the teenage, tragic Juliet with Nicola, an airhead music teacher, and handsome young Romeo with Max, a middle-aged paper-plate wholesaler.)

The thing was, when they split up, Mum moved on – to Will, to be precise. And let’s face it, Dad didn’t move on at *all*. He didn’t even move out of the *house* till it was getting to be an embarrassment.

Which seemed to me, if I pretended to be a smart psychologist-type person, to mean he hadn’t had “closure”.

Oh, yep, I was pretty sure that underneath his collection of loud Hawaiian shirts, Dad’s heart still beat for his one true love: his own airhead, classical-music-obsessed version of Juliet. . .



“I can’t believe this!” said Dad, shaking his head.

I bit the rag-nail on my finger and gazed at him, standing in his first-floor living room above the undertaker’s, hovering by his stereo, staring into space.

I’d worried all last night in bed about telling him *The News*.

I’d worried all day at school, getting Letitia nearly as stressed out as I was with the, er, stress of it all.

I’d worried *after* school, sitting under our pet Christmas tree. I got all maudlin too, remembering how Dad had planted it here in the copse behind the house when Sonny and me were just two, and had been in floods of tears at the idea of our branch-covered buddy being chucked out with the post-festive trash.

Huddled under the Christmas tree late this afternoon, I got to thinking about the years Dad had tried to educate me and Sonny in the history of popular music (well, *his* version) by playing us endless ancient albums and not-so-ancient CDs in his hideout above the garage.

I remembered too all the fun (well, as much fun as you can have with Sonny in the room) we’d had watching movies and comedy DVDs together,



with a stash of pizza (of course) and vats of ice cream to keep us company.

Ah, my sweet, thoughtful, kind dad.

Wow, I loved him.

Um, *mostly*.

I mean, I really *didn't* love the way his very loud Hawaiian shirt was missing a button and his round, slightly fuzz-covered belly was currently peeking out. And I really wished he'd stop it with the sandy-brown Elvis quiff and sideburns look he'd been rocking recently.

Still, poor Dad. . .

I stared at him now, as he carried on with the head-shaking, his quiff wobbling with the effort.

Me and Sonny came here for tea most Wednesdays, and most Wednesdays, I really looked forward to it. But not today, 'cause of The News I had to break to him, since everyone else was too giddy with imminent wedding fever to spare him a thought.

"Sadie, you're honestly telling me –" he stopped and rubbed his face, aghast – "that I've *never* let you hear one of the *best* sixties records ever?!"

"Nope," I said, wishing Dad would shut up about music for one minute and let me say what I had to say.

"Well, wrap your ears around this – 'The Tracks



Of My Tears', by Smokey Robinson. Unrequited love never sounded so good!"

Urgh . . . not only did Dad sound like the corniest DJ in the universe there, but he'd just rediscovered a song that couldn't be more appropriate. Unless, of course, there was a song around called "Nicola, I Wish We'd Never Split Up".

As soon as the "*Doo-doo-doo-doo, doo-do-doo-doo!*" backing vocals began, Dad closed his eyes and started swaying. It wasn't the ideal time to go blabbing The News, but let's face it, *no* time was going to be a *good* time. . .

"Dad, I've—"

*CLATTER, CLATTER, CLATTER, THUNKETTY, CLATTER, THUNK!!!*

That wasn't the chorus of "The Tracks Of My Tears". That was Sonny and Cormac bouncing down the metal staircase outside the living-room window, coming from the flat above. They bounded into Dad's flat like a couple of overenthusiastic dogs, through the glass-panelled fire-escape door.

Nice timing, lads.

"Check it out!" yelled Sonny, tapping the bowler hat on his head. "Kyle lent it to me!"

"Well, Kyle doesn't *know* I've lent it to you yet – but I'm sure he'll be fine about it," Cormac chipped in.



Cormac McConnell. How do I explain him? Well, he was Dad's upstairs neighbour, along with his big brother, Kyle, and he worked in McConnell & Sons Funeral Directors, which was downstairs from Dad's flat. Yep, he was your average, normal, seventeen-year-old trainee undertaker who had a sideline in stand-up comedy. He was also my friend Letty's Fantasy Boyfriend (not that Cormac had any idea about that).

Anyway, I'd seen that bowler hat before. It had been hanging off an antler, which in turn belonged to a fake stag's head (*please* let it have been a fake head) upstairs in the boys' flat. It was amazing I'd even remembered seeing it, since Kyle's hobby of furnishing the place with strange theatrical props and kitsch second-hand stuff meant your eyeballs sort of melted when you tried to take it all in.

"So?" I said with a shrug, watching as Sonny began doing a dance routine to "Tracks Of My Tears", tipping the hat off his head and holding it over his heart. "What's the point?"

"Part of a new stage costume, Sonny?" Dad asked with an amused smile, turning the volume down.

"Exactly!" Sonny replied, plopping it back on his head at a rakish angle. "We've got to film our



video on Saturday, and we need a new look. We can't dress in T-shirts and baseball caps if The Twist are wearing that same sort of stuff!"

Thank goodness. I'd witnessed the awfulness of the baseball caps, fitted T-shirts and neon cycling shorts (*bleurgh!*) at close quarters, and it wasn't a pretty sight. Especially the time Kennedy did a kung-fu-style jump at rehearsals with dire consequences, thanks to a pair of overly tight shorts and a weak seam. (Yuck – I might need several sessions of therapy to forget that flash of Spider-Man pants. . .)

"You mean, you're all going to be wearing *those?*!" I asked, wondering where Kennedy was going to find a bowler hat big enough to fit on his bowl-sized head.

"Maybe," said Sonny, shrugging. "It's just something to suggest to Benny tomorrow. Him and Angie have got a meeting with the video director tomorrow afternoon."

OK, Benny I knew. He was the lecturer from the stage school who a) looked like he wanted to burst into song at any minute, as if he was living his life like it was an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, and b) had put the band together and was now managing it.

"Who's Angie?" I asked, racking my brain.



Dad suddenly burst out coughing.

“She’s the publicity girl from the record company,” Sonny reminded me, as he helpfully thumped Dad on the back.

Oh, yeah. At the party the record company threw – when the lads had signed their contracts – Angie had been stuck with Dad, listening to him listing his favourite all-time records in alphabetical order while she smiled bravely and looked over his shoulder for someone more interesting to talk to.

“Oooh, what’s going on in here?” came a down-to-earth Irish voice, as my gran bustled into the room and headed straight for the kitchenette with a carrier bag full of vegetable-shaped knobbles in it.

By the way, what was it with my grannies? *Neither* of them seemed to be planning on moving back to their actual homes any time soon. It wasn’t just Nonna and her Spanish apartment; it was also Gran and her bungalow in Barnet. She was currently staying in Dad’s spare room (spare *cupboard* more like), to “help him settle in”, and had made herself indispensable, cooking meals with actual *vitamins* in them, and adding a few homely touches, such as ornaments on top of the boy-toy speakers and sleek black



gadgets and gizmos Dad that had filled the living room with.

(Yeah – as if living above an undertaker’s wasn’t bad enough, try luring potential new girlfriends to a bachelor pad with a resident sixty-something-year-old *mother* in it. But there you go – psychologically speaking, maybe Dad *didn’t* want to attract any girlfriends, since he was still pining for Mum. . .?!)

“Hi, Gran!” Sonny greeted her cheerfully, like the human golden retriever that he was. “Well, since you ask, *Dad’s* having a coughing fit, *Cormac’s* maybe come up with a new look for the band for the video we’re doing on Saturday, and *Sadie* . . . Sadie’s just scowling.”

I hadn’t thought I was scowling before, but I sure was *now*. Anyway, how could Sonny be so cheery after yesterday’s wedding announcement and how it might affect Dad? Well, because his mind was so vacuous and self-absorbed that he’d never think that there might possibly be a chance that Dad would take the news badly.

Help; I *really* needed to tell Dad. I’d asked yesterday at our “lovely, special family meal” if I could be the one to break it to Dad, and this was my chance. I couldn’t go home tonight without spilling the beans. He couldn’t go on being the last



to know. But with Gran and Sonny and Cormac swarming about with vegetables and stupid hats, how was I going to get the chance?

“Come with me,” I ordered my still-spluttering dad. “You need a drink of water.”

Grabbing him by the elbow, I led him out of the living room and into the bathroom, off the small square hall.

Phew: it had an overpowering, chemical, floral smell about it – which was coming from a bowl of luminous yellow pot pourri placed on top of the cistern (a Gran purchase, for sure). And Dad had been doing some home improvements in here, I noticed. There was a giant framed poster of Oasis above the toilet.

“Here,” I said, making him sit down on the loo, right under Liam Gallagher, and sip water from a flowery plastic tumbler (*another* Gran purchase, I bet).

As he drank, I took a deep breath, knowing *now* was the time. . .

“Ah, that’s better!” Dad said first, as his coughing fit eased off. “Hey, can you believe our Sonny’s going to be doing a video? I can’t wait to see it on the telly! Wonder what it’ll get shown on? One of the music channels, I suppose. . .”

Who was Dad kidding? A bunch of thirteen-



year-old boys crooning about how much they loved their mummies? The only channel that would show stuff like that would be The Saddo Channel, and as that hadn't been invented yet, it didn't seem like there'd be much of a chance of seeing Sonny and Co. dancing around in their bowler hats or chicken costumes or whatever they decided was their new image.

"We'll never be able to watch it at home anyway," I muttered instead, taking the empty tumbler back from Dad. "Not on that midget TV we've got at the moment."

"No!" gasped Dad. "Tell me you're not *still* using that! What about the big telly? All it needed was a new cable!"

Clyde was to blame. He'd nibbled through the TV cable, in case it tasted of lettuce or something equally delicious. It was just lucky that he hadn't turned himself into hot, toasted bunny. . .

Will had ordered a new cable from the tiny TV repair shop nearby, and while we waited (and waited) for the replacement to come, we'd all been huddled round Mum's ancient portable with binoculars.

"Well, the shop's still not had the right cable delivered," I told Dad, itching to tell him something else entirely.



“But you can get a cable like that at *any* big electrical shop!” gasped Dad, slapping his hands on his thighs.

“Really? What – you mean we’ve spent weeks with eye strain when there was no need?” I asked.

“Too right!” Dad laughed. “Look, I’ll pick one up myself when I’m out on a delivery this week, and set it up for you. Huh! What’s Will like? Didn’t realize your mum was marrying someone so useless!”

Um . . . *what* did Dad just say there?

“You – you *know*?!” I mumbled, stunned.

“Yeah, your gran said when she got in last night,” said Dad, still smiling. “She was in a right state, thinking I’d be all upset ab—”

The ringtone of the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ “Give It Away” trilled from the top pocket of Dad’s shirt.

“Scuse a second, Sadie, honey,” said Dad, checking the caller ID and going slightly pink. I think he was hoping I might leave, but my legs in particular seemed too stunned to move anywhere.

“HEY, HOW’RE YOU DOING!” Dad boomed, as if he was talking to a particularly deaf person with a poor signal on the moon. “YEAH – I’M



STILL GOOD FOR TONIGHT. NINE...? YEAH."

He was talking to Kemal or Daryl, I was sure. They worked together all day, sang along to the radio together all day, and if that wasn't enough, spent several evenings a week watching football matches together in the pub.

"I'M HAVING SOME TIME WITH MY KIDS JUST NOW, BUT I'LL SEE YOU THERE. LOOKING FORWARD TO IT, ANGIE!"

Angie?

My dad was going out later to meet someone called Angie?! Was this a *date*?! And if that wasn't weird enough, this person my dad might be going out on a date with had the same name as the young, trendy, bored-looking record company girl that Sonny had just been talking about. What were the chances of *that* happening?

"Angie," said Dad sheepishly, slipping the phone back in his pocket. "From the record company. Got her number at that party a while back, but never got round to calling her. Till today. Hearing your mum's news sort of inspired me to get on with it, y'know?"

Er, no, I'm not sure I *did* know.

All I knew was that I was standing in a bathroom that smelled of chemical flowers, with a man who



looked like an Elvis impersonator with bad taste in shirts, being stared at menacingly by Liam Gallagher.

I was sure I didn't remember a scene like this in *Romeo and Juliet*. . .

