



1. HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BLUEBELL JONES

I'm carrying my birthday cake through Penkerry fairground when I hear the first scream.

There's screaming all around me, obviously. It trails above my head as the Whirler Twirler spins, fighting with chopped-up old pop songs. It crashes through the doors of the Ghost Train. Penkerry people like being frightened. Now I'm thirteen, I expect I'll start to like being flung in the air and shaken till I'm sick, too: the tacky lights, and that fried onion smell. I don't yet. Maybe it takes a few days to kick in.

Those are happy screams, though. This one is pure panic.

There's another. And another.

The bright lights keep flashing, the waltzers keep spinning – but it feels like everything stops. Everyone

turns. And then I see it: the Red Dragon roller coaster, Penkerry's number one attraction (it says in my *Top Ten Things To See and Do* leaflet from the Tourist Information). Twelve scaly red cars, with a spiked tail and an evil fanged head. Its eyes burn yellow. It pumps out clouds of smoke. It flies round the highest three hundred and sixty degree loop in all of Wales, and its party trick is to stop, at the peak of the loop, and hang the riders upside-down while a plume of flame shoots into the air. Wales's ultimate thrill-ride.

It's stuck. Upside-down, in the very centre of the loop. The flames have shot up, screams earned. But instead of flying on down the tracks, it's stopped.

I can see a girl's loose hair hanging down, framed against the cloudy grey of the sky. One mad boy is letting his arms dangle. Everyone else is clinging on to the safety bars across their chests, and screaming, and screaming.

"They're going to fall, oh my god, they're going to fall!" breathes a woman on to my shoulder, as the crowd I'm suddenly in surges closer, all elbows.

No, they won't, I think, clutching my cake box tighter. There are rules to stop that. Safety precautions. The world doesn't let dodgy-looking boys with invisible moustaches take your three quid and send you breathing fire a hundred metres high and upside-down without there being rules. The world wouldn't let that happen. Not on my birthday.

The lights go out. Not across the rest of the fair – but the Red Dragon goes dark. First the booth, then slowly all along the tracks by sections: off, off, off. Then the Dragon itself; mean yellow eyes burnt out to black.

I can smell petrol.

I keep on thinking, it's OK, it must be all right – but there's a new scream piercing the air, impossibly high, and I see her.

The girl with the dangling hair is trying to climb out.

That's why there are rules: she's too small, too young, there's a "Taller Than Me To Ride!" sign at the gates, but no one's checked her and she isn't – I can see that from here – she's a slippery little eel person of six or seven, popping her narrow shoulders out from under the U-shaped safety bar across her chest like soap in wet hands. There's someone bigger in the next-door seat – a man: dad, grandad maybe – and his arm is outstretched, trying frantically to block her in.

Her shoulders slither all the way out. Her hanging hair blows around her face. Knees still held fast under the other safety bar, she bends double and reaches up with both bare skinny arms towards the rails above. Like she's on monkey bars at a park. Like she doesn't understand the danger.

There's screaming, and screaming.

Hold on; no, no, please, please, don't. . .

One butter-yellow sandal drops off her foot, all the way down. I follow it with my eyes, and as I jolt my head back up, she slips.

She screams.

It's impossible, how time cheats. It waits long enough for us all to see her small hands clutch and catch nothing. It holds its breath as we watch, her scream one endless piping note.

The man – dad, grandad – clamps his arm across the seats and pins her in place.

He saves her.

He rescues her.

The lights flicker back on, one by one. Her other sandal topples to the ground, forgotten as the crowds cheer.

I drop my birthday cake on the ground, splat.



“Oi!” says Tiger, poking me with a hairbrush. “Stand still, will you? I’ve got to do mine yet.”

Tiger draws long fat slugs of eyeliner above my lashes, with flicks at the end.

“You like?” she says, spinning me round in the tiny Pavilion bathroom so I face the mirror.

I look like her.

Well, ish. My big sister Tigerlily has white-blonde dreadlocks and the sort of blue eyes people write poems about. I know it’s my birthday but still: it’s eyeliner, not magic.

Tiger puts frosty pink lipstick on me in two quick sweeps, smoothes my fringe, then pushes me out of the bathroom for inspection.

“Bloody hell!” says Mum. “No, no, in a good way,” she adds quickly, seeing my face. “You look. . .”

“Offensively cute,” says Dad, peering in through the backstage curtains, “even if I am biased. Also shockingly grown up. In fact, go away, you’re making me feel old.”

“You are old, Mr Grey Hair,” shouts Tiger from the bathroom.

“That’s Mr Just For Men Espresso Coffee Deluxe, thank you,” Dad shouts back, smoothing a hand over his shiny slicked-back quiff.

“Grey grows back, honey,” says Mum. “You’d better get used to people calling you ‘Grandad’.”

She strokes her hand over her bump. Her stretched-out T-shirt says ROCK-A-HULA BABY with an arrow pointing to where Peanut is. That’s my baby brother or sister in there, inside my mum. I’ve had six whole months to get used to the idea, and it’s still creepy and horrifying.

Well, it was. Not now I’m thirteen. Thirteen-year-olds are comfortable with all forms of lady business.

Thirteen-year-olds are supposed to keep secrets from their parents, too.

I haven’t told them about the girl on the Red Dragon. I don’t know why. By the time I got here they’d heard the fire engines, the local gossip about who would be blamed and who should be sacked, and she was already a story: the little girl who didn’t fall. They laughed when I opened the cardboard cake box and they saw the smeared blue icing. HA PU BIRT LAY BLUBL. Then Tiger was wrapping my fringe around a hot roller, and somehow there wasn’t any time to say I was there too and I saw it happen and I was scared.

I’m being silly, anyway. It’s my birthday, my big day. No reason to spoil it.

Dad starts tap-tap-tapping on the wall with Mum's drumsticks, impatient, excited.

There's a buzz outside. The main doors are open. Their audience is here.

It's opening night for the summer season, and *Joanie and the Whales* are the main attraction at the Penkerry Pier Pavilion. Mum is the band's founding member (she's Joanie, not a whale, as Dad likes to helpfully point out) and drummer – at least until Peanut decides she or he doesn't like being squashed in behind the drum kit any more. The others come and go: right now it's Janice on bass and Woody on keyboards. Dad's the frontman: vocals and guitar. They do rock'n'roll covers from the 1950s, rockabilly and a little swing, plus whatever the crowd in the pub or at the wedding reception yells for.

My parents aren't full-time rock stars; Mum says a fifties band doesn't pay the twenty-first-century bills. But they're both teachers, so this summer is theirs. They're going to play the Pavilion every Friday and Saturday night. They'll be the opening act for the Fifties Fest later in the summer, when apparently a bunch of retro obsessives flood Penkerry from all over the country, in ancient cars with fins, dressed up in dead people's clothes off eBay.

Dad's been fizzy with anticipation all day, like it's his birthday too. He grew up in Penkerry. Playing the Pavilion stage is sort of his lifetime ambition.

I can't spoil it. The little Red Dragon girl is fine. The man held her in until the power came back on – a minute, no more – and they rolled back down to earth. It didn't

happen to me. I don't know why I'm thinking about it at all.

Dad tap-tap-taps the drumsticks again, and I dip into the guitar case stacked against the wall.

"Made you a present," I tell him, pressing a neatly printed page into his hands.

"A set-list!" he says. "And it's . . . laminated!"

"So you can reuse it all summer," I explain.

"Oh, baby girl, you are *so* rock'n'roll," Mum says, planting a big kiss on the top of my head.

The backstage lights flip on and off. It's show time.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart. This one's for you," says Dad with a wink, as he hands Mum her sticks and pulls her through the curtain.

Tiger tells me to stop fiddling with my ponytail, and drags me out through the back door. We run out into the drizzle and on to the pier, down the wet wooden planks of the narrow passageway alongside the Pavilion.

The tide's coming in. I can see the sea far below my feet, in the gaps between the planks.

My shoes are too big. My heels keep slipping out.

It smells like chips and candyfloss, salt and sick. Back on the shore, beyond the promenade, there's a POLICE INCIDENT sign propped on the pavement. The funfair is gloomy and dark, locked iron gates criss-crossed with strings of blue and white tape. No bright lights. No screams. No entry. It's getting late, but with the fair closed there's nowhere to go, so the beach is still dotted with families; kids with buckets and spades, even though

the beach is made of pebbles not sand and that's just not practical.

We reach the front entrance of the Pavilion, right in the middle of the pier, and skid up the steps, back into the dark. It's like an old theatre inside, only with a dance floor instead of rows of chairs. The windowless walls are like one of those old-fashioned cinemas: fake marble pillars, golden angels. On the ceiling there's a glitter ball, throwing white loops across the angels' faces.

I can see Mum behind her drum kit, shouting something to Janice, laughing. Then there's a sudden hush. Out of the darkness a single spotlight flicks on: Dad, framed in white light on his stage. I can see this glow on his face as he straps on his guitar and steadies the mike. Like he knows, he just *knows*, that tonight will be everything he's ever hoped for.

I push the girl on the Red Dragon firmly to the back of my mind, and let it bubble up in me, too.

Birthday girl.

This is my moment. This is it. I've been watching thirteen happen to everyone else all year. The day Monique ordered plain black coffee, double shot, instead of frothy milk and vanilla syrup. Grace's pocket money transforming into a "monthly clothing allowance" to be spent on tiny dresses that show your pants. Being friends with boys, as if they're people.

Now it's my turn.

I know what everyone thinks of me. Boring Bluebell Jones: the shy girl with the practical ponytail who gets her homework in on time and never breaks the rules.

That girl's about to vanish. It's time for teenage Bluebell to come out to play. She is brave, and fabulous. She doesn't follow her friends meekly: she strikes out on her own, and they follow her. She's not afraid of anything, or anyone. She is the Very Hungry Caterpillar, she has eaten all her plums and her slices of salami, and tonight she's going to burst out of me like a beautiful butterfly.

I can't wait.

"Good evening, Penkerry," says Dad into the mike, his smile echoing into his voice. "We're Joanie and the Whales, and we're here to throw a party in the county jail."

He strums the first two chords, Mum whacks the drums twice like she's answering back: repeat, thrum thrum, whack whack, and they slam into "Jailhouse Rock".

No one's dancing. No one ever does at the start of a gig. But Tiger flings herself out on to the dance floor anyway, gradually sucking lurkers off the sidelines like a whirlpool.

I hesitate on the brink – then decide to wait this one out.

And the next. I can watch the band much better from the shadows, in the corner. And my shoes really are too big.

The men at the bar are all talking over the music, moaning about rain and beer in plastic cups. I ignore them and watch, taking imaginary photographs: the pretty elf girl with a nose ring and lots of silver bangles, joining Tiger on the dance floor, matching her moves; a huddle of people about my age, hanging around at the coat-check.

There's a Chinese girl wearing purple lace-up boots, a chubby guy in what looks like a pirate outfit, and a tall, skinny, eyelinered boy wearing a top hat with a dead red rose tucked into the brim. He's trying to look bored, but the girl with the lace-up boots is totally into the gig, singing along with a huge grin on her face, and she knows all the words.

I want to go over there. It's like I'm *supposed* to go over there: as if they're waiting for me.

It'll be easy.

I could ask her if her parents are weirdly obsessed with the 1950s too.

I could ask about the pirate outfit.

I could ask Top Hat Boy why he's wearing a top hat, or where the rose came from: confident, a little bit flirty; like Monique, like Grace.

I could just say, "Hi, my name's Bluebell, it's my birthday today."

But there's a lull between songs, and I hear *fairground* and *accident* from the voices at the bar.

Should close the whole bloody place down.

Nah, was the kid's own fault.

Me, I blame the parents, letting her on that thing in the first place.

A howl of feedback pours from the speakers, piercing like a scream. I stick my fingers in my ears. I clamp my eyes shut. The high-pitched whine drops out, and Joanie and the Whales kick into "Great Balls of Fire", the piano and the bass line rumbling through the floorboards – but I feel

like I've been turned upside-down. It's as if I'm dangling high above, waiting to fall in the middle of the dance floor, splat.

That's when it hits me. This is what thirteen means: danger, change, the world turned upside-down. And it's scary, because I'm not a butterfly yet. I'm still a caterpillar girl, not big enough to ride the roller coaster.

Not ready to be thirteen at all.

No. That can't be right. There are rules; there have to be, even about birthdays.

I start to run – out of the Pavilion, back along the wet boards, into the safe warm shadows of backstage – not because I'm running away from anything; definitely not that. I need some air, some fresh air and to check my make-up (that's what teenage girls do, they do that loads, this is fine). Then I'm going straight back, and the butterfly will shoot right out of me. Somehow. Definitely.

My squashed white and blue cake is there on the dressing table.

HA PU BIRT LAY BLUBL, it says, sadly. Mum said we'd get a new one tomorrow, one that looks less like mashed potato, but she's already pushed in one skinny blue candle for me to blow out later.

There's a matchbox on the table, waiting.

It goes quiet onstage as I sink into a chair, wiping raindrops off my face. Then Dad's muffled crooning floats through the wall.

Every day, it's-a getting closer

Going faster than a roller coaster

I tap out the handclap-rhythm on the edge of the table, automatically. I've heard him sing this a thousand times. A cutesy little love song, sweet like sugar icing.

I look again at the candle, and the matchbox, and once the idea pops into my head I can't escape it. It's ridiculous. All I want is to be grown up, a real teenage girl, like Tiger, like Grace. But I don't feel thirteen yet, so why shouldn't I grab my chance to act like a little girl, one last time?

I fetch a big glass of water, because we've done the fire triangle at school and even wishes ought to be made in an appropriately safety-conscious environment. I fumble one match from the box and strike it (away from me, obviously). The shadow of my hand lunges huge and craggy, like a monster's, across the wall as I light the skinny candle. I stare into the flame, listening to Mum's drumbeats tapping. I shut my eyes tight, and whisper it:

I wish. . .

I have to get the words right.

I wish. . .

I think of the girl on the roller coaster; the girl who was saved.

I wish someone would rescue me.

There's a sighing sound, and my fringe ruffles like someone's opened a window.

Then someone *laughs*. It must be Tiger. Or maybe someone from the bar?

I scabble for an unrelated-to-birthday-wishes excuse for me to be sitting in the dark in front of a candlelit cake

with my eyes shut, but there aren't any, and the laughing happens again, so I crack open one eye.

It's not Tiger.

It's *me*. Brave hair. Fabulous grin. As different from me as possible. But it's undeniably me, another me, standing in the doorway with a daft excited look on my face.

"Happy birthday, Blue!" says the other me.

And she blows out my birthday candle.