

# Happy Birthday, Pauly!

A N D R E W M C D O N N E L L

**Y**OU ARE THIRTEEN years old today and you can't wake your brother up.

It is the school holidays and you and your little brother Adrian like to watch the girls through the fence playing in their swimming pool.

The girls appeared one day in July and were unaware of the infrequent visitors at the perimeter, peering through the fence. The family had planted leylandii as an attempt to further screen their house from the footpath that ran between the summerhouses.

You have to cycle four miles to get to the house with the swimming pool. You discovered it by chance on Monday, when you had walked back from town with your mother. You are used to these walks. They're not for pleasure or for exercise; they are an economic necessity.

You were loaded down with shopping bags and it was one of those days where the sky is white and the heat squats on you. Adrian was mostly upset by small storm bugs that were clinging to his skin in their dozens, whereas you Paul, being older, felt acute self-awareness, fearful that other boys from school might see you.

After the three of you had crossed the long fly-over, you took the footpath across the fields that led to the village. It was

at the first stile that you heard the voices of the girls in the swimming pool behind the fence. You and Adrian were desperately trying to see over the fence. Your mother walked in front, lost in her own thoughts – she’s always lost in her thoughts isn’t she, Pauly?

You made plans to return the next day. That night in bed, all you could think about was the house and the girls: who can blame you, Pauly? The whole thing is an adventure, right? Village life is dull; it’s either the smell of perm lotion from the old ladies who come to have their hair done, or the bollard challenge – how many can you make it across before falling? The other children in your little village are hidden on private tennis courts or on long holidays in countries you can’t say, let alone spell. You used to go away, when Dad was alive, to Pontins. There’s a lovely photo of you all in the Pontins t-shirts with inflatable crocodiles for the swimming pool. You met a girl there Paul, all the way from Liverpool. Her name was Tessa and she showed you how to hear the sea when you hold a shell up to your ear. In the shop they had one that held a pen and you bought two, one for her and one for you. After the holiday you would take it down from the shelf and listen, imagining Tessa floating in the sea. You wrote letters to each other for a short while until you stopped responding. Her handwriting was always difficult to read.

You made sandwiches that morning, eking out the jam that was left at the bottom of the jar. You spilt a bit and when you came back with your bag there was already a trail of ants journeying past each other. You watched them a while before wiping up the splodge with your finger and dabbing it into your mouth. A little curious thing: you apologised to the ants. Then you loaded comics for reading and dug out a disposable camera left unopened in the bottom of the sideboard. Your mum wasn’t up. You made her a coffee and a piece of toast. You took it to her room, do you remember? She was awake but didn’t say anything. Her curtains were orange; they seemed to make the room warmer. That morning they hung still. There was no breeze. She lay in her nightie on top of the duvet. You

spoke to the tattoo of your names on her right shoulder blade. It shrugged in response.

The girls were there again. You found a spyhole for Adrian who had to watch on tiptoe, and one where you had to stoop a little. Through your tiny apertures, another world presented itself. The three girls were obviously triplets. The three girls sat on sun loungers. The three girls talked about boys at school. They talked about someone called Heath Ledger and how he had ‘tragically’ died (“Spelt t-r-a-g-a-c-a-l-l-e-y”). Adrian kept notes and you would sometimes summon him back to the spyhole. The girls wore bikinis and they were pale white. When they swam it was *elegant*, (“that’s spelt e-l-l-i-g-e-n-t”). How old were they, Pauly? A few years older than you; it made you sad. How would you even engage in conversation with girls like these? Would they even notice a scruffy boy about to turn thirteen and his epileptic stump of a little brother, who cross fly-overs with frozen food fast defrosting? No, that’s why you liked to watch; it made you both feel something, like a voice calling on the summer air, something deeper within you was being awoken and it was both confusing and strangely addictive, but you could only move within its edge lands, along the canals and train lines that skirted the centre of a fast growing city. A voice called them in.

“Girls, come in now, we have to go to town!”

After the house had fallen silent, you and Adrian retired to the remnants of the cricket pavilion and went over what you had seen and heard. Adrian read aloud from the notebook, and you, like some Arctic explorer with the taciturn strength of a leader, stared into the distance as if the landscape was a library in which your thoughts could not only be stored, but also indexed, archived and stamped with approval.

Overhead bulbous clouds raced in, like a quilt being pulled across the closing day. Neither of you had ever seen clouds like these ones. Adrian felt afraid. There was something almost apocalyptic about them (“spelt a-p-o-k-o-l-y-p-t-i-c”). You tried to reassure Adrian that all was A-O-K, but you knew then, didn’t you, Pauly? Life is deeper and stranger than you could have ever imagined.

There was a huge thunderstorm in the night.

Today is your birthday; you are thirteen and the world feels still, as if time was still. You went through your routines again, breakfast for Adrian, breakfast for mum: her orange curtains still. She gave you a card with a fiver in it. "Buy a nice cake for later" it said inside. But that's a different kind of later, a later that could be in an entirely different dimension of space and time, as there's only one thing on your mind: to return to the swimming pool and log another day.

More sandwiches, more ants and we're off, Pauly; we're off, aiming at huge puddles which are quickly evaporating. Opening gates, throwing bikes over stiles and then on and on, no time to lose now you're a teenager.

But today, on your birthday, the house is silent. You peer through the holes. It is dark, no lights, no voices or anything. You feel something, a feeling that seems to arrive in our teenage years and dog us throughout our lives. You guess it's called disappointment, but like all things, language is a poor indicator for the experience. You turn to tell Adrian that you should go, that you have a fiver and if spent right there could be cake and coca-cola, (maybe even Doritos), but Adrian is halfway over the fence. Then he's gone; he's dropped down and is running across the lawn. You hide your bikes in the hedgerow and go over as well. You land heavily on your ankle and swear, before hopping to the sun loungers. There is a cover over the pool, but Adrian has worked out the winch and is winding it back.

The water looks unreal, a blue that can only be created by chemicals. There are drowning insects on the surface. A wasp is fighting to swim to the other side; you poke it with a stick, pushing it briefly under the water. It rises again and with the same persistence swims on. What if it gets out? Wasps are aggressive – it might attack you. So you push it under again and again, and each time its fight slows that little bit more until it no longer moves against the surface. There are some weird insects, things with cumbersome bodies and impossible legs. You feel sad for those ones, Pauly; they are not struggling, as if they died upon impact. Your thirteen-year-old face is reflected by the blue and you take a reflection selfie on the disposable;

later you may see the wasp that you drowned just centimetres from your warped face.

The post-storm humidity is stifling. Adrian is shouting to you.

“Look at the size of their sofa Pauly! I should write this down!” but you feel heavy and unhappy.

You lie back on a blue sun-lounger and watch as a small plane shuttles across the sky above you, its engine disturbing the stillness. You pretend to shoot it down. What if it fell, Pauly, just dropped out of the sky? You killed a wasp, so why not a pilot?

A riddle for you:

Q. Why can't you hear Adrian?

A. Because he's gone inside! Ho ho.

They haven't locked the patio doors. Everyone always thinks they have locked patio doors, but often they haven't. It is pretty tricky, Pauly; you have to push up a little arm as far as possible and turn the key at the same time. It is easy to get it wrong. Now Adrian is in there on his own. You call his name at the threshold, but there is no answer. You look around the open plan living room and kitchen. Why not look in the cupboards, Pauly? In you go. They might have left some food. Not this cupboard, it has glasses in it. This one is full of rice, spaghetti and something called 'Organic Pearl Barley'. Ah, look, this cupboard is the winner: Doritos! Why not put the television on and enjoy your birthday? It takes some figuring out, but once you find the remote controls you're away.

There are some cartoons; aren't they funny, Pauly! Adi would like these, so call him; it's his favourite, *Spongebob*, but the chair you are sitting on is breaking and you are sprawling on the floor. Get up boy, quick! Look at what you've done! Oh dear Paul Carter of Mildmay Place! The wooden chair, meant for someone smaller than you is splintered and there is no fixing it now! Your Dorito fingers have smeared the white carpet with orange trails; you rub them but it only spreads the grease. It's time to go, Pauly, time to get out! Adrian must be upstairs; you find him in one of the girls bedrooms. He is asleep on her bed.

“Wake up! Come on, Adi!” but he won’t stir; he’s had a fit and now he’s making some deep groaning noises.

The front door and voices below.

“Come on Adi *please* wake up we’ve got to go, they’re home!” but Adrian isn’t coming round is he?

Quick! Hide down the side of the bed.

“Who left the TV on?”

“Who’s been eating my Doritos?”

“Who’s broken baby Sophie’s chair?”

“Why is the door open, Mummy?”

“Did you not lock it?”

“Stupid girls, I asked you if you had locked it and you said yes. Flick, call the police NOW!”

“I can’t find the phone mummy!”

“Who’s had the phone?”

“I think it’s upstairs!”

Here they come up the stairs.

“There’s someone sleeping in my bed, Mummy!” says a voice.

Someone is hurtling up the stairs with a *clomp, clomp, clomp* and now advances on the bed, and they’re shaking Adrian.

Don’t cry, Pauly; you’re a big boy now, the big 1-3. Oh dear, Pauly, you’re peeing your pants!

*Pauly, Pauly Carter, pants wetting disaster!*

“Wake up, boy, wake up!”

Someone is shaking Adrian; the bed moves against you.

“He’s not sleeping,” says the adult voice.