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Charlie – A School Bus Goes

Haywire

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1.

If anyone could take corners at breakneck speed, it was Freddie.

Every morning, the caretaker dashed across the expansive grounds of the Threestone Boarding School in his little silver Golf, distributing loo rolls. Actually, all he did was hurl them at the pretty little red-brick houses with the red tiled roofs; Freddie was the kindest, but also the laziest caretaker in the world.

He was now at that point in his morning tour where he was heading for Dormouse House. Will was standing in the doorway, completely unaware that this grey autumn morning would be the beginning of the adventure of a lifetime. He was running his hands sleepily through his strawberry blonde buzz cut, yawning so much that his jaw was cracking. Which meant he only just managed to duck in time as a loo roll flew out of the driver's door of the bright yellow bus that was shooting round the corner, flew right past his nose and landed on the door handle.

He stood there open-mouthed, scratching his head and wracking his brain. Or rather, trying to. But he couldn't seem to come up quickly enough with an answer to the question on his lips: why on earth was Freddie not doing his rounds in his little Golf this morning? But in a bright yellow bus? A bus, by the way, that looked pretty beaten up, and with a dangerously dangling bumper. So Will called out, "Hey, Freddie, why are you driving round in this bus and not in your little Golf?"

But Freddie was already busy getting the next loo roll ready for take-off (it was destined for Hibernation House next door) and had no time to explain himself. As he hurled the loo roll, aiming right for the door handle, he called back, "Jump on, if you want to know!"

Will of course really wanted to know what was going on, but Freddie's loo roll round was bound to take much longer than the footpath over to the classrooms. Which for Will would mean being late again and another note in the register – the third this month. He was just considering whether it was really worth the hassle, when the decision was taken out of his hands. The door of Hibernation House opened, and right at that moment the dense clouds cleared. The sun rose. And there stood Maisie, bathed in its rays, beautiful Maisie with her long blonde hair, glistening like gold in the bright morning light. She craned her neck, yanked her square-framed glasses straight, walked resolutely towards the bus and got on, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. "Stop!" cried Will, who had now finally awoken from his morning stupor. He waved his arms around frantically. "I want to come too!"

Unfortunately, Freddie had already set off, so Will had no choice but to run after the bus, coughing and wheezing in the foul, black clouds emitted by the noisy exhaust. But Will didn't let that bother him. He was thinking of Maisie. Not that he was in love, but he thought she was nice, in fact really nice.

The bus turned a few corners, dashed past the sports ground, and then slowed down at Sleepyhead and Sleepwalker. Will was still running after it. After each brief stop to launch a loo roll, the bus would drive off just as he came within a hair's breadth of it, even though he was going flat out. Almost as if it was jinxed.



But at the next stop, Maisie was standing at the door – it was in front of Nightmare House –, and she even smiled when Will finally managed to heave himself into the bus. Totally out of breath, he sank into the seat behind the driver. The door shut with a dull thud behind him.

“Why ... a bus ... today?” he panted. Now he did want to know.

Freddie turned halfway round towards him, at which point the bus lurched and almost ended up in one of the many pretty flower beds. He had a big grin on his face. “Morning, Will. Don’t say you haven’t you heard yet? This is the latest school service. So our tired pupils don’t have to walk the few hundred metres to the classroom anymore.”

“Oh, thanks, that’s really kind,” said Will politely.

Behind him, Maisie was giggling. While he was trying to work out what was so funny, she leaned down towards him and whispered in his ear, “You don’t seriously believe that, do you?”

“Erm ... course not,” claimed Will, surreptitiously rubbing some sleep out of his eyes before turning to her with a broad grin. “What do you think’s going on, then?”

Maisie leaned back in her seat, shrugged her shoulders and twirled a strand of her blonde hair. Will was still grinning. He was secretly thinking that today was definitely going to be a particularly good day. Now he only had to keep the conversation going somehow. Still turned round towards her, he desperately tried to come up with something cool to say. Perhaps something about a film? He’d heard that Maisie’s parents were well-known actors.

But he could have saved himself the effort, for Maisie had leapt up and was shouting, “Freddie! Stop!” And now she was already standing at the door, which was squeaking open, holding out her hand with a beaming smile, to Frank.

Frank du Bois! As always, his black curls were gelled back, and his dark eyes twinkled as he whispered something in Maisie’s ear. This morning he was wearing dark brown needle cord trousers (with a front crease!), a white shirt, a dark jacket and a tie with a gold tie pin. Tie pin! Who wore things like that? And on a bog-standard Thursday morning at that. Totally ridiculous! But that didn’t alter the fact that all the girls in the boarding school adored Frank du Bois. Because he was, quite simply, devastatingly good-looking. Allegedly, he even had a recently-formed fan club, and Will had been wondering the whole time whether Maisie might be a member too.

He pulled a face and wished Frank du Bois would go back to where he came from – allegedly some castle in France –, or at least take a hike, far far away.

Frank du Bois was the only one who hadn’t taken the entrance exam. One of the things you had to do was look at a panel of photos and work out which teacher taught which subject. This was perfect for Will, who had always liked solving difficult problems. Unfortunately, he’d been so nervous that he’d only scored 62 out of 100 marks – which still annoyed him a bit. Frank, on the other hand, was admitted with an exemption certificate because his father was allegedly well-acquainted with the headmaster. Will, who was generous in



this respect, would actually have been okay with that.

But unfortunately, he thought Frank du Bois was terribly arrogant, and besides that, far too interested in Maisie. And now, to make matters worse, the two of them were sitting next to one another, looking like they belonged together.

Filled with curiosity, Will watched Frank take something out of his trouser pocket and offer it to Maisie.

“It’s real Australian chewing gum,” he heard him say. “Best not ask how much a packet like this costs.”

“Hi,” mumbled someone just then, tapping Will on the shoulder. He turned around.

With an apologetic smile, Luke let himself down into the seat beside him. He must have managed to jump quickly onto the bus in Frank’s slipstream. No sooner had he shoved his rucksack and sports bag under the seat than he pulled out his mouth organ from the breast pocket of his checked lumberjack shirt and started letting rip. The thing was blaring right into Will’s ear.

Will pressed both hands to his ears. He surreptitiously turned his head and peeked at Maisie, who was just putting the chewing gum in her mouth; then she burst out laughing, bright as a bell. All of a sudden, he was in a really bad mood, and this wasn’t only down to the mouth organ.

“How about playing it a bit quieter?” he grumbled.

“No problem,” said Luke with a shrug of his shoulders, and put the mouth organ away. He thought for a moment, then pulled his maths book out of his school rucksack and starting drumming on it with his hands. Which grated on Will as much as the mouth organ. On top of that, he could also hear Frank’s loud voice. He was talking about his sailing yacht and the fact his father really wanted to buy him an aeroplane.

“Hey, are you okay?” asked Luke, concerned. Will nodded.

Poor Luke – it wasn’t his fault. He only wanted to play a bit of music. Luke dreamed of becoming a musician. But his parents – they owned a fish factory somewhere in the north – wouldn’t allow it, and they’d sent him to Threestone instead. Because at Threestone you studied only the most important subjects and didn’t waste your time messing about with music. But Luke had been crafty enough to smuggle out his mouth organ, and he played it really well. Unfortunately, though, he played it all the time, and everywhere. Will wasn’t the only one who sometimes tried to escape.

“Erm... Are you going home in the holidays or staying here?” Luke asked.

Will pretended he hadn’t heard.

“Oh, sorry,” whispered Luke, lowering his head in embarrassment. “I forgot that you ...”

Will just nodded. He wasn’t the only one who would spend the summer at Threestone. But he was the only one whose parents had disappeared years ago without a trace. Everyone knew he never talked about it.

“I like spending the holidays at Threestone – the food’s so fantastic.” Will grinned, then pulled a face in



disgust. “I’d really like to know which horror cookbook they get their recipes from. Sausage cake with sprouts. Who invents things like that?”

Luke grinned, relieved. It was clear Will wasn’t angry with him. “By the way, what happened to the hedgehog you found the other day?”

“He had a broken leg. But the vet thinks he’ll definitely pull through.”

The hedgehog was the reason why Will had been a whole three hours late to school the week before. It had taken half an hour just to walk to the vet’s, and then he’d had to wait an eternity. But he’d known that would happen. In the spring he’d brought two young blackbirds to the vet. They’d fallen out of the nest, and Will had rescued them from a stray cat at the last minute.

Luke nudged him. “Do you happen to have any idea why Freddie is driving around in this bus today?” he asked, underscoring his question with a slick drumroll on his maths book.

All of a sudden, before Will had a chance to reply, the bus lurched violently. Will was hurled forwards, where Freddie was just raising his hat, greeting someone amicably. It seemed it was one of those rare days when the headmaster was not sitting in his office trying to work out how to increase the cleverness of the pupils at the boarding school. Instead, he was running across the lawn straight towards the bus, waving his arms in the air as if trying to shoo away an enormous swarm of hornets. Freddie was still smiling and tilting his hat. Because you can never be friendly enough to a headmaster.

Will recovered himself, rubbed his forehead (he’d probably get an enormous lump there) and crept back to his seat.

“It’s going to be a wonderfully beautiful day today!” he heard Freddie call out cheerily. He must have given it full throttle, because the bus accelerated and turned sharp right. And then left. And right again ...

Will wasn’t the only one yelling. A wonderfully beautiful day? It certainly didn’t look anything like that as things stood. By now, they had raced crisscross through the magnificent rose beds – resplendent on the front page of the Threestone Boarding School’s glossy brochure – and were heading straight for the headmaster. With arms outspread and a resolute look on his face, he had planted himself in the middle of the gravel path. Will gulped and closed his eyes. Early-morning action films weren’t really his thing ...

When he took a cautious peek, he saw that the headmaster had taken a courageous leap to safety – into the goldfish pond.

“Damn it!” railed Freddie, putting his hat back on.

He’d probably just realised that tilting his hat was not helping anymore. “I have to get this darned bus back under control.”

In the rear view mirror, Will could see drops of sweat on his forehead. Freddie clutched the steering wheel with both hands and bawled, “Hold on!”



And finally, after swerving into the newly planted box hedge, and with brakes squealing, the bus came to a halt right in front of the entrance road.

“When I get my hands on the guy who left this damn bus for me on the school grounds!” snorted Freddie.

He was white as a sheet – quite in contrast to the headmaster, who was standing outside, his face bright red, his suit dripping wet, hammering on the bus door with his fists. And yelling something. It was probably something unfriendly, for his face was distorted with rage. But apart from “impertinence” and “insolence” and “fired”, Will couldn’t make out anything he was saying because the engine kept on revving.

Will heard Freddie say something that sounded like calm down, calm down. He couldn’t tell whether the caretaker was talking to himself or to the headmaster, who was trying to prize open the door with both hands.

Now the engine was giving off a peculiar chortling sound, almost as if it was giggling. Freddie took his hat off, wiped his forehead and neck with a handkerchief, and put his hat back on. Then he climbed out and proclaimed aloud, “Now I’m going to sort this damn engine out!”

But he didn’t get a chance to, for all of a sudden, the bus gave a tremendous jerk and Freddie dived to the side. The last Will saw of him was his black and white checked hat being propelled by a gust of wind across the lawn and finally sinking into the goldfish pond.

As the engine went on revving louder and louder, the bus picked up speed rapidly. It raced through the entrance road, which was lined with huge oak trees, shot along the grey country road, running a dead straight course past fields and meadows, and went faster and faster ...

Someone screeched. Maisie ...? Frank ...? Or Luke, who was clinging tightly to Will’s arm? It took a Will a moment to realise that he too was screaming loudly. He vaguely thought he could hear Maisie’s voice, full of panic. And Frank bellowing “Stop, stop!” over and over again. Which of course was of no use at all. Quite the contrary! It seemed to Will as if the bus was accelerating now more than ever. What if there was a junction somewhere ahead? A red traffic light? Oncoming traffic?

Will felt queasy. Something had to happen, and it had to happen now. But what? He hastily released himself from Luke’s grasp, pulled the mouth organ out of his breast pocket, and pressed it into his hand. “Play something!” he shouted. Perhaps that would actually calm Luke down. He made his way past Luke, towards the front and onto the threadbare driver’s seat, where he stared helplessly at all the levers and buttons on the dashboard. The rev counter needle was trembling around the red area, as was the temperature gauge, and then there were a few little lamps flashing in a frenzy of red, but he didn’t know what they meant. Only one thing was clear: this really was a red alert!

Tentatively, he turned the steering wheel a little to the right, but steered back again as soon as he saw they were going off the road and heading straight for a birch forest. So, he had to brake. Probably the easiest thing in the world. So easy, it almost made him laugh. Why didn’t he think of that before? Clutching the enormous steering wheel tightly with both hands, he slammed down the second of the three pedals with all his might. The bus juddered a little, as if it had swallowed something that had gone down the wrong way. And



then it seemed to slow down.

While Will was wondering what Maisie would have to say about him bringing this infernal thing to a standstill, a deathly silence fell across the bus ...

But only for a moment. Then Will heard a strange sound. Something like a loud caterwauling reverberated in his ears, and an even stronger force than before pinned everyone to their seats. A fraction of a second later, the bus took off, and it wasn't long before it had lost itself in the clouds.