

There are some places only the imagination can take you

BILLY QUIZ AND THE MISSION TO MARS

An illustration of a boy sitting on a chair, looking through a large orange telescope. The scene is set on a grassy hill under a dark blue night sky filled with stars, a crescent moon, and two planets. The title 'BILLY QUIZ AND THE MISSION TO MARS' is written in white, arched letters across the top of the illustration.

CHRIS RICKABY

For fans of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *The Life of Pi*

Billy Quiz and the Mission to Mars

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One Word Press



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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organisations and events portrayed in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictionally.

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For Sue

A Note on Dialect

For readers outside the UK, Geordie is the dialect of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in the north of England. A simple way to familiarise yourself with its unique rhythms and cadences is to watch the video 'Call Me Da'lin' (a quirky cover of Carly Rae Jepsen's Call Me Baby) by local band May Arcade on You Tube. It's great. Or, as we would say in Newcastle, 'dead canny, like.' Korean Billy (You Tube) also delivers an excellent basic primer.

Noctis

Monday, June 14th 1976.

35 days until Viking 1 lands on Mars

Chapter One

Me mam's dead. It was two years ago when she went. An accident, the Newcastle coppers said. I thought about it for a long time, afterwards. Every single day, in fact. And, after a while, I realised it was the size of the cheese and pickle plate she chose that killed her.

They did a cheese and pickle plate at Walker Comrades - the working men's club she went to on Sundays, after mass at St Jude's - and she liked them. So, I suppose, that's why she stayed a little longer. I mean she wasn't a drinker like some of them. She just liked the taste of cheese when pickle was also being offered. That particular combination, like. I've thought about the plate a lot as well. The size of the plate they might have given her. A bigger plate and she might still be with us. A smaller plate and the same thing applies. It was a medium plate she'd opted for. I checked that with the steward at the club afterwards. You can fit about eight crackers on the medium plate. Four on the small, twelve on the large but a medium plate takes eight.

Then I did the obvious thing: got meself a stopwatch and did some cracker consumption tests.

They only confirmed what I already thought. It takes a normal person, like me, about 24 seconds to scoff a Ritz cracker covered in Branston Pickle and cheese. You do the maths. That's say 4 x 40 seconds for the small plate (I used 40 seconds as a multiplier because me mam had a dead lady-like bite.) 12 x 40 seconds for the big plate. And 8 x 40 for the middle. The one she actually chose. The way that all works out is this: small plate consumption time: 160 seconds. Big plate consumption time: 480 Seconds. Middle plate consumption time: 320 seconds.

That makes 160 seconds, either way, the difference between life and death. The difference between crossing Scrogg Road, on the fourth of August 1974, without a hitch, or crossing Scrogg Road and being hit by Mr Pontefract, the insurance salesman, in his 1972 Hillman Imp.

It scared me a lot, back then, when I worked that out. Made me fourteen-year-old head hurt just thinking about it. Does Destiny choose you? Or do you choose it? I don't know. I'm not certain. What it does mean though is that every tiny choice you make - every little this and that, what seems like nothing at all at the time - well, any one of them can kill you.

Chapter Two

Me bedroom door rocks on its hinges and cracks against the wall. The light switched on slaps me brain awake.

‘Come on Billy Quiz. Wakey, wakey, it’s time for worky, worky. This is how it’s going to be for today and the rest of your natural. You can think of this morning as “Your starter for 10.”’

Me dad picks up me new grey uniform off me chair and throws it onto the bed.

‘You dropped out of A Levels, and now you’re going to find out exactly what you dropped into.’

Dad does up the top button of his own grey uniform jacket, then runs a comb through what remains of his thick, dark 1950’s quiff. His smile is as white as the smiles on the Colgate toothpaste ads on the telly. And his face is all nice lines, all grinning symmetry. It’s a bit like being woken up by a working-class Hughie Green. He can certainly talk as much as the cheesy presenter on the telly.

I sit up in bed and stare at the Tin Tin alarm-clock me mam bought me when I was little. One of Captain Haddock’s arms is pointing at the six. The other one is pointing at the four.

‘It’s half-past four in the morning dad? Half-past four in the morning!’

Me dad’s grin spreads so wide it looks like the corners of his mouth might push his ears up around the back of his head.

‘I know because I’m there already. It’s called the Real World, Billy Quiz. All that stuff you’ve got stuck inside your head. All them facts about this, that and the bollocking other, they won’t help you now, son.’

He pops the comb back into the top pocket of his own grey uniform.

‘Welcome aboard Her Majesty’s Postal Service.’

Me name’s Billy, Billy Agnew, but no one around here calls me that. They call me Billy Quiz. Even me mam did sometimes. But only when she was getting a bit narky with me, like, which wasn’t that often.

It was me dad who started it really. The Billy Quiz thing. There’s a character in a comic called The Beano, I used to read when I was a little bairn. They called him Billy Whizz on account of his fast running. I can’t run fast at all. I’m rubbish at sport. Always have been. One of them that was always last picked when they sorted out the footy teams at school.

But not with facts.

Facts is another matter.

There’s lots of stuff inside me big, daft bonce you see. “A great wide universe of useless information,” is what me dad says. I learnt most of it in an old red brick Victorian building, which is Walker District Library. I’m estimating there are about 12,000 books in there and I’ve probably read about 90% of them by now. Which isn’t that impressive when you consider how many Saturdays and after-school nights I spend reading. Science books are me favourite but if I can’t get me hands on something about Michael Faraday and electromagnetism, or Alessandro Volta and batteries, I read lots of other stuff. That’s why I’ve read all the comics, periodicals and magazines in there, as well. Acquiring all them facts,

over the years, is why I'm good at answering questions. And being good at answering questions is why me dad started calling me Billy Quiz.

That's all there is to it, really.

Except, maybe, for me and him and me mam – when she was still alive – being so different. There's an expression that people say a lot. A cliché is what you call it. This expression is rubbish from a science point of view. Makes no sense at all. It goes like this: "as like as two peas in a pod." Now when you first think about that saying you might feel like – no there's definitely something in it! I mean peas are all round and green and, when I've looked at them in a pod at the SPAR grocers on the Coast Road, I'd be the first to admit that they do look quite similar.

The thing is they're not.

And if you look a little closer you would see it. An Austrian bloke called Gregor Mendel discovered that in Victorian times.

He looked at lots of peas did Mr Mendel. 29,000 to be precise. And being arsed to look at that amount of vegetables – and let's be honest lots of people wouldn't be – he saw something. Observed it, like. Peas in a pod aren't alike. At least, not always. Five might well be a bit similar: perfectly round, perfectly green. Two more might be a little less symmetrical, a little less green. A bit rougher around the edges, like. And one might be all battered, almost square; hardly green at all.

It made me think about me and me mam and me dad on that day in the library when I first read about Gregor Mendel and all the years he spent observing *Pisum sativum*. Because, as a family, we're like that. I mean me mam was pretty and dark, all symmetrical, like me dad. And I'm all crooked-faced, spotty and me hair's ginger or, as I like to think of it, Martian red. I think that's why me mam bought me this telescope by the window. She understood that I was always going

to be different to her and Dad but she really wanted me to know that she loved me just the same anyways.

I put me eye to the lens of me telescope and then twist the focus. I can still hear Dad whistling up a storm in front of the bathroom shaving mirror but now I've left him, the stab of first-day nerves in me belly, and everything else behind. I begin to peer back through time. Back through the darkness of space. Little dots of light are everywhere. Other stars. Other galaxies that may contain planets just like this one.

There's something else out there too - Viking 1.

The unmanned space probe is twelve months into its mission. Approximately 233 million miles from where I am sitting, and 35 days away from NASA's scheduled Mars landing. It will be the first U.S spaceship ever to get there. But, right now, it's just a small hunk of tin hurtling through space.

Chapter Three

This big, twenty-storey tower block that me and me dad are standing in front of is called Windsor Mansions and was built by the council about fifteen years ago on an estate called Faversham Hall. It looks like the handle of a big, concrete dagger, that's what I'm thinking. A great, big dagger that some passing giant has stuck right into the ground under the cover of darkness.

There's a sign that reads Windsor Mansions in gold plastic letters on a black plastic panel stuck near the doors of the building. It has some other writing, "PAKIS FUCKOFF HOME," spray-painted over it in white. You can see why even the people who live around here don't like walking around the estate too slowly. Especially at night.

Me dad leans over and slaps me on the back. It hurts a bit when he does that but I like that he does it. Because it's not a nasty slap but a nice one. The kind of slap that tells me he's watching out for me, like.

'There she blows, son, Windsor Mansions. Postman's hell. Toe-rag's heaven. Twenty floors of pain. I've been walking them stairs for fourteen years.'

He gives me a second back-slap, just for good measure.

'Now, it's your turn.'

It's hot today. Very, very hot. The British Meteorological Office has made an announcement in the papers. They say the summer of 1976 is all set to be "The hottest summer since records began," and I believe them. I raise me armpit up and sniff. Ughh! Me pits are minging. Me right shoulder's already sore from the weight

of a big, red canvass bag that holds loads of letters and parcels. I start walking towards Windsor Mansions with me dad. Then I stop.

I recognise the two skinheads straightaway.

One day in school, the teacher made us stand in front of all the others and talk about something you liked. The girls all said Donny Osmond and David Cassidy and daft pop stars like that. And the boys all said Malcolm McDonald, who was Newcastle's centre forward at the time, and Muhammad Ali. But not me. I said someone different. I mentioned Sir Isaac Newton's Second Law of Motion, instead. Everyone laughed and the teacher said I should watch out because I was in danger of getting ahead of meself. If he had understood anything about the Second Law of Motion, he would have realised that me "getting ahead of meself," was actually impossible. But I was too embarrassed to say anything. So, I just said nowt.

Things went really bad for me for a little while, after that. Some of the older lads heard about it and started calling me "Sir Isaac," all the time. Not because they had any respect for me knowing Sir Isaac's Laws of Motion you understand. But because they saw me as being a bit different. Not one of them.

I'd had that sort of thing a lot before - what with me spots and me hair being Martian red. But this time it got a lot worse. These two - Blue Tear and Bino - the ones standing about 200 yards in front of me and dad now, grabbed me in the yard and took me up on top of the PE block. They said they were going to do an "experiment" with "gravity". But instead of an apple, like what the real Sir Isaac used, I could see they were going to use me instead. I didn't think I was going to die or anything. Well, not unless I landed on me head. I did a bit of quick calculation in me mind while they were dragging me up there and realised that since I only weighed five stone and the drop from the roof of the PE block was

about fifteen feet that, according to the First Law of Motion, I would only be travelling at about seven miles an hour when I hit the ground and so was unlikely to hurt meself too bad, like. But the way they were with me then: all snarling and sniggering and bared teeth made the whole day one that I don't like to remember. Mr Roberts, the geography teacher, stopped them in the end. But, all in all, it wasn't very nice.

The two skinheads are standing next to an upturned packing case near a bairns' climbing frame that's close to the door of Windsor Mansions. They've already seen me. I turn back around.

'You're coming with me right, Dad? I mean I'm not supposed to do this on me own yet. That's what your gaffer at the depot said. And it's only me first day.'

Me dad takes out his comb and runs it through his quiff.

'Dad?'

He stops doing his hair and puts the comb back in his pocket.

'Yes, Billy Quiz. How can I help you?'

'The tower block, you're coming with me aren't you?'

'You're not scared are you, son?'

Me dad points at the two lads.

'Scared of them two?'

I am scared. I'm shitting meself. Me dad doesn't seem bothered though.

He's all relaxed in the face of danger, like Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry.

'Don't worry, son, this is where I tell you about the secret weapon.'

'Secret weapon?'

Dad looks round all sneaky, like.

His voice becomes a low whisper.

'The postman's secret weapon.'

'What the crap is that you're whistling, Billy Quiz?' says Dad.

'It's Pink Floyd, Dark Side of the Moon.'

'Pink who?'

'Floyd, Pink Floyd.'

'Chirpy, you idiot, the postman's secret weapon doesn't work unless the whistling is chirpy.'

Me and Dad are walking slowly towards the skinheads and Windsor Mansions.

'I don't know anything chirpy dad.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake, IQ of God-knows-what but thick as pig-shit. I'll start, you join in.'

Dad puts his lips together and bursts into a dead over-the-top un-tuneful whistle.

'Blimey, Dad, that's awful. What is it?'

'It's a life-saver, that's what it is son. The chirpy equivalent of an A-bomb. Chirpy, chirpy, cheap, cheap by Middle of the Road.'

'I can't stand that, Dad. Can't you try something else?'

He thinks for a second.

'What about this then? Your mam always liked this one.'

'Da-de-da-de-da-de-de,' he whistles. 'Da-de-da-de-da-de-do.'

I recognise it straightaway. It's a Billy Holliday jazz-type song called Eeeny, meeny, miny mo. One him and me mam used to dance to sometimes – they'd roll up the carpet in our hall and put our Sony Music Centre on full blast.

Me dad cranks up the decibel level another couple of notches. We are right close to the skinheads now and they look up. They've got an Alsatian dog with them and it begins to bark and strain at the leash.

Up close, they look even scarier than they did before. It's them, alright. The ones from the school roof. All the kids around here know Blue Tear and Bino.

The bigger, older one is Blue Tear. He's about nineteen. His hair is cropped so tight that I can see the blue veins above his temples popping and pulsing. His eyes are all wild and popping too. This close, they look like two small, hard, black berries. His nose is all small and twitching like a weasel's or a stoat's. The tattoo on his left cheek is where he gets his name from. It's a small tear drawn in dark blue ink.

His mate, Bino, is thick-jawed, a bit fat, bald and super-white. I know that this dead white whiteness he's got comes from a genetic condition called Albinism. Albinism means your skin doesn't have any dark pigment so you end up being as white as a snowman. Bino doesn't look friendly like a snowman does, though. He's got two big, hooped earrings stuck in the lobe of his left ear. And his checked shirt is unbuttoned at the neck so me and Dad can see the thick black cross of a giant swastika that he's drawn on there.

When me dad sees the swastika, he stops whistling.

When me dad stops whistling so do I.

'Da-de-da-de-da-de-de,' Dad gives it one more go.

'Da-de-da-de-da-de-do.' I try and help him but it sounds a bit half-hearted.

Blue Tear smiles. He twists the dog's leash and his Alsatian snarls into life. I step back behind Dad because I've always been dead scared of animals. But, just as the dog starts barking, something happens. A curtain draws back at an open

window on about the fourth floor of the tower block. Dad looks up. Blue Tear and Bino look up too. The woman at the window stares back down at us.

‘It’s her,’ says Bino, his voice sounds a bit nervy, ‘that old wife all the little bairns call the Windsor Witch.’

Dad looks across at me and nods at the door of the flats. Me and him start to walk towards them. Blue and Bino just keep staring up at the woman. As I’m walking away, I look back up at her over me shoulder. I sense it immediately and so, I can tell, do the other three. She is beautiful is this lady in the window. All perfect symmetry.