

# **SUNNY**

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Published by  
Strident Publishing Ltd  
22 Strathwhillan Drive  
The Orchard  
Hairmyres  
East Kilbride  
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Published by Strident Publishing, 2018  
Text © Paul Murdoch, 2018  
Cover art & design by Andrew Forteath  
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-910829-20-2

Typeset in Lucida by Andrew Forteath | Printed by Bell & Bain

BORN IN Helensburgh, Scotland, Paul began writing songs while studying Zoology at Glasgow University, playing rock guitar in the UK, Holland and America.

He worked in wildlife reserves and had a successful career in sales and marketing in the UK and abroad, before resurrecting his writing in the form of poetry, short stories and eventually his first novel, *The Magic Scales*.

Paul now has a series of picture books for younger children which explore wildlife and encourage counting. He is also the author of the acclaimed eco-thriller, *Windscape*, which was nominated for the Grampian Children's Book Award - a children's adventure which impartially explores the controversial topic of wind farms. Paul is also the author of *The Peck Chronicles* - a fantasy series for children of all ages.

# Author's note 1

This story is set in 1973, and reflects some of the attitudes of the time.

# 1 Minstrels

“Sunny’s on first,” said Gertie.

They had dressed me in a pair of starched black pedal pushers and a white shirt that was far too big for me. A pair of bright red braces held up my trousers and, of course, just like all the ‘men’ in our troupe, I had to wear a tightly curled wig. It was itchy, jabbed my scalp and made my hair flat with sweat.

“Am I doing the same song as last time?” I asked, knowing fine-well that I was, because I only knew the one song. It was a kind of nervous question that spilled out of my lips before I could stop it.

Billy MacDonald, Gertie’s husband and the leader of our troupe, was fitting a new reed to his clarinet. He balanced a lit cigarette on his bottom lip and eyed me through his bleary half-shut eyes. “Play *Kumbaya*, like you always do, Sunny. Stick to the script.”

Unlike Gertie, who was full of cheer and bursting with confidence, Billy had a dour voice. It was like someone pulling out one of those plastic stoppers that you get on water wings. All joy would simply hiss out of you and disappear up into the sky. “You’re on first,” he continued. “And remember, don’t move from your spot until you’ve finished or you’ll feel the back of my—”

“Now, now, Billy,” interrupted Gertie. She smiled at me and said, “You’ll be fine. All blacked up, singing yer wee heart out. The auld dears will love it.”

I was glad she’d interrupted him. Billy had a pair of big, beefy hands, more suited to a butcher than a clarinet player. I could tell that he wanted to cuff me one. I could see it in his puffy eyes.

I couldn't really tune in to Gertie's encouraging words. I was still too busy watching Billy, wondering what he would do next.

He was yawning into a mirror surrounded by a row of white light-bulbs, smearing another layer of dark-brown boot polish over his unshaven face. His cigarette still dangled magically from his bottom lip. It must have been hard trying to put that stuff on with an upside-down waterfall of smoke belching over his face.

A half-empty whisky bottle sat on the dressing table next to a set of tangled banjo strings and the keys to our minibus.

He snapped at Gertie, "Where are those useless brothers of mine?"

Gertie pointed to the other side of the stage and then began straightening my jacket. "It's going to be fantastic tonight," she continued. "It's a sell-out." She always tried to counterbalance Billy's meanness with a blast of cheer. She took hold of my chin with her left hand and daubed me with some more of the cold, brown polish. It made me shiver when it touched my face, but then it dried in tight and stretched my skin until it felt like it would tear open.

I could hear the crowd somewhere behind the safety curtain, shuffling into their seats. They sounded like a pack of wild animals getting ready to devour their prey.

I was terrified, and Gertie could tell.

She gripped my chin a little tighter, looked me straight in the eye. Then, in a manic whisper, she said, "What have I told you? What have I told you about your confidence? You are the...?"

I hesitated for a moment before, full of embarrassment, mumbling, "King".

"Louder," boomed Gertie.

"I am the King," I said. My voice was still weak and

unconvincing.

“You have to be the King of that stage,” she whispered, about an inch from my ear. Her breath was hot and she smelled of dried lavender. “When you’re up there in the spotlight, no one in the whole world is more important than you.” She drew back and beamed, wiggling her fingers in mid-air while staring up at the ceiling. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you, Sunny?”

I nodded, having no clue whatsoever.

She began to tack a piece of fluffy material to the hem of her skirt. Then, without looking up, she mumbled, “And if you’re the King, what does it mean?”

I squinted up at the ceiling, hoping to see the answer somewhere in the flaking paintwork. “Eh...”

“You are in charge,” she said. “Invincible. A God.”

“A God?” I echoed uneasily, thinking this was taking it a bit too far.

Billy shook his head disdainfully. “You shouldn’t fill the boy’s head with junk like that.”

In a false, smiling, sing-song tone, Gertie replied, “It’s not junk, Billy.”

“It’s junk,” he repeated, matter-of-factly. I watched his big beefy fingers grind his cigarette into dust.

“You are in command,” she continued, giving me a knowing wink. Gertie picked up a brush with long, fine bristles that tickled my nose, and outlined my lips in white.

“You may only be eleven,” she said, “but you have to be in command. You need to *own* that stage, and remember...” She caught Billy’s gaze. “What should he remember, Billy?”

Billy handed me my guitar. “That you are a member of the best Black and White Minstrel troupe in Glasgow,” he slurred. “People have paid good money to see you – so, no bum notes,

no wrong words and keep a smile on your face the whole time. Or...?"

He wasn't going to stop staring at me until I returned his stupid grin and gave him an answer. I knew the answer but there was no way I was going to say the words in case he took them as a sign to thump me one. So instead, I forced a tight-lipped smile and nodded, hoping he'd retreat or take another draw on his stupid cigarette.

"Or you'll feel the back of my hand," he reminded. He said the word 'hand' this time before Gertie could stop him.

My smile instantly slipped into a worried frown.

Gertie waved a finger of warning at Billy and moved the whisky away from his groping, white-gloved hand.

The safety curtain slid up into the mishmash of lights and gantries overhead. I felt the tap on the shoulder that meant I was on.

Wendy Stitt, the prettiest girl in our troupe, gave us our cues, timed everything. She gave a 'thumbs up' sign and the rest of the minstrels filed into the changing room beside Billy and Gertie. The air was soon thick with cigarette smoke.

I could hear the man behind the curtain giving me a big build up, "All the way from the Bonnie banks... the mini minstrel with the big voice... the one all the mummies want to mammy..."

I found my spot, a chalked cross on the stage, and stood still. "...Sunny Wilson!"

Shaking with nerves, and barely managing to hold my guitar, I heard the band strike up the song, *Mammie*. The greasepaint on my lips tightened as the curtain swished open. The arc lamp cast a blinding beam of light into my eyes.

The crowd cheered and whistled until eventually the last clap was clapped and the audience settled back into their seats. The



notes of *Mammie* tailed off, and soon there was nothing but an all-consuming silence.

I held down the 'G' chord and froze, my right hand stuck to the strings. I glanced to my left and saw Gertie waving frantically and mouthing the word, "Go". Billy clenched his big, meaty fists and widened his baggy eyes in warning.

My throat was as dry as sand but my hand, almost with a mind of its own, strummed down over the strings and I heard myself begin the song.

Moments later the crowd was clapping again. I'd finished, but I couldn't even remember what I'd done.

Gertie ran on and led me off stage just as they began playing *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*.

Billy and the rest of our troupe marched past me, out into the lights, singing and stamping their feet.

"Wait here," said Gertie. "Don't move an inch." She dived out onto the stage, swirling her thick, silk skirt, her arms flapping like a bird. The minstrels looked fantastic. They were different people when they took to the stage. The lights and the glittery costumes, the music thumping out, all happy and bouncy... I loved it.

I noticed that the whisky bottle was empty and that Billy had left another cigarette burning on the edge of the dressing table. I coughed and wafted the smoke away from my face, but no matter where I moved to, the smoke always seemed to find me.

An hour later I was dragged out for the encore, which was always a big medley featuring, *I Wish I Was in Dixie* and *Polly Wolly Doodle*. All I had to do was mouth the words, skip about after Gertie and then take a bow. I never got to see the audience. Thankfully the lights were too bright. But you could hear them, and tonight they clapped and clapped and clapped. They roared

like a massive, over-excited animal that might eat you if you strayed too close, so I hid behind the swirling dresses and stamping minstrels.

By eleven o'clock, we'd all changed back into our normal clothes and packed our things.

I wasn't sure why, but I felt nervous about getting on the minibus that night. It was snowing and Billy was arguing with Gertie about a lady who had asked for a lift into Glasgow.

"She's a tinker," he said, slamming the van door in the woman's face.

I didn't know what a 'tinker' was, but I felt sorry for the old lady. She'd listened to the show from outside, in the snow, waiting patiently until we'd finished.

Apparently, she'd gone up and down the line, while the people were queuing up to get into the show, doing magic tricks with playing cards and telling their fortunes.

The woman, her face tanned and wrinkled, begged Billy to give her a ride in the van, but Billy swatted her away as we loaded up our equipment and told her to 'get lost'.

It was then that Gertie asked me to ride in the back with the equipment. As she ushered me in the rear doors of the van however, she let the old tinker-lady jump in beside me.

"Sunny," Gertie whispered, "keep her out of sight. We'll let her off in the town when we have a toilet break."

"God bless you," the tinker-lady whispered. She gave us both the sign of the cross by moving her thumb from her head to her chest and then from one shoulder to the other.

I smiled at the tanned lady. Even though she smelled of stale towels and garlic, I felt sorry for her. She smiled back and wedged herself in between the double bass and a costume cabinet.

I sat on a pile of banjo cases right next to the back doors.

I could still see out of the front windscreen from there, over everyone's heads.

Gertie looked older than the others. About fifty without her makeup. She was stout, no more than five feet tall and by this time, after hours in the dressing room with Billy and his cronies, stank of cigarettes. But she was the *real* leader of our troupe, no question.

Gertie and Wendy Stitt were niggling at each other.

Billy pulled Wendy across the big front seat so she could sit nearer to him, then he started the engine.

One of the other men, Jimmy Flynn, asked Billy if he wanted him to drive instead. "I can take the wheel if you want, Billy."

"Get lost, Flynn. You just want to keep the van to drive your squallymoggies to church tomorrow. Do you think I'm daft?"

Jimmy Flynn began to protest but Billy waved him away, telling him to get in the back with "Archie and Dave - those useless brothers of mine".

We almost hit a white car as the bus pulled away from Cumnock Town Hall. Billy rolled down his window to swear at the driver, but the car had already zoomed away.

It was then that I heard Jimmy Flynn muttering to Archie and Dave: "He's not fit to drive. Can't you do something? He's had a full bottle."

But it was too late. The minibus pulled away and the cigarette smoke began to filter through to the back of the bus.

Someone produced another bottle of booze and soon we were all singing *Old Man River*.

The streetlights died away and all I could see through the seats and the bobbing heads was an endless, strafing swarm of snowflakes bouncing off the front window. We didn't slow even when the back wheels spun and skidded, so I just focused on

the snow and imagined I was on *Star Trek's* S.S.Enterprise. The snowflakes were the stars and the band were my crew.

Then there was a bang, a terrible shudder, and the stars disappeared.

## 2 Aftermath

The wailing *Star Trek* theme tune drew us towards the black and white TV in the corner of the ward. It was a Saturday night, quarter past five, and we'd all picked our spot on the thin, blue nylon carpet.

"What have they done with *Doctor Who*?" moaned Donny.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't really care. Captain Kirk is much better."

"Too right he is," said Hugh.

Gary Sutherland sighed deeply and said, "Shut it, I cannae hear what Spock's saying." He punched me on the arm but then grimaced and began blowing on his knuckles. "Ya wee..."

He'd smacked my plastered arm.

I mouthed 'sorry', even though it was Gary who had hit me. He was a bully, and nasty with it, so a wee apology never went amiss.

Some of the other boys began to snigger, but Gary gave them one of his glowers and they all refocused on the screen.

We sat mesmerised - apart from Donny who was still in a huff with the BBC for bumping *Dr Who*.

An older boy, John Munro, sat to my left. "Spock's my favourite," he whispered.

"Mine too," I whispered back.

Spock was cold and calculating, yet still likeable. The fact that he was a pointy-eared Vulcan didn't matter, he was still the best character on the show.

Donny Murray must have tuned into our conversation because he said, "He's a freak."

"Well, they'd probably think *you* were a freak on planet Vulcan

too," said Hugh.

Everyone chortled without taking their eyes off the screen.

I'd got to know the boys on the ward quite well during my time in hospital.

Hugh Gowrie, a skinny kid with a pronounced overbite and a face crammed with freckles, was cheeky to the nurses, but only when Gary was around to hear him perform.

His dad was the local baker, which meant we all gave him lots of leeway. Hugh could get you free doughnuts and iced buns if he liked you. His dad would sneak them in at visiting times. We all helped, taking turns to distract the nurses while Hugh tucked the loot into his bed pan.

Gary Sutherland, unlike Hugh, was someone to avoid. He had a similar build to me but was two years older and an outright bully. Any slight chink in your armour and he'd have you.

He'd conjure a fight out of thin air sometimes. "What are you looking at?" he'd say, even when you weren't looking at him at all.

Of course, you'd turn round to plead your innocence, but by then it would be too late. He'd punch you in the face or steal your sweets. Minimum.

He poured his used bed pan over Donny Murray one time just because he wouldn't give him a comic he wanted, then told the nurses that Donny had peed himself.

Although that was totally uncalled for, most of us had a good laugh because Donny was such a moaning git. He'd moan about the food. He'd whine about the state of the ward. He'd even slag off his mum and dad after visiting times. And that was the main reason that I didn't like him.

His mum was thin and drawn-looking. She seemed fragile.

But as soon as she'd left the ward Donny would tell us how she was addicted to pills and useless about the house.

And then there was John. John Munro was very quiet. He barely said a word. But when he did, it was usually worth listening to. He was overweight and had undergone an adenoids operation that had gone wrong. It had made his voice low and gravelly, like a gangster's.

John and myself had been in the ward the longest.

As the credits for *Star Trek* spooled up the TV screen, I asked John when he was getting out.

He shrugged and looked straight over my shoulder. He screwed up his eyes. "Isn't that your mum and dad?"

I turned to see the staff nurse leading them into the ward. It was only 5 o'clock; still two hours before visiting time.

Dad had a stern look. What were they doing? Were they going to tell me about the bus crash?

I had never really found out what had happened to the rest of the minstrel troupe, but the boys in the ward, mainly Donny Murray, had given me their best guesses: beamed up by aliens; formed a new group called the Black and Blue Minstrels. Wisecrack stuff.

John Munro had pointed out that the minstrels on the telly should really be called the Red and White Minstrels, as the Black boot polish didn't film right. "Their skin is red," he'd protest. But that just gave the rest of the boys the excuse they needed to slag me off about my singing.

John nudged me out of my thoughts. "Your parents?"

I tightened the cord of my dressing gown and waved across the ward. "Mum...? Dad...?"

I never really saw much of Mum and Dad, except on holidays away. They both worked late and I usually let myself in and out of the empty house on schooldays. I pretty much looked after myself.

“Sunny,” said my mum. “We just need you to chat to Sergeant Lohan for a minute.” She looked quite pale. “But only if you’re up to it,” she added.

I stopped a few yards short of a hug and looked up at the policeman. He was huge.

“When am I coming home, Mum?” I asked.

There was something familiar about the tall sergeant, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

The nurse ushered us into a quiet room and half-answered my question, “You’ll get home when you’re fit.”

“When I’m fit?” I repeated, none-the-wiser.

“Sunny,” said the Sergeant, “we didn’t want to bother you when you were still recovering from the crash, but things have moved on a bit and I have a set of questions here for you.”

The Sergeant reminded me of Spock – cold and calculating, but not as likable.

I watched him slip a battered notepad from his top pocket, then trail his fingers through his curly hair. I tried to think, but I was sure I’d never seen a policeman with curly hair before.

Dad tipped his head to one side and squinted down at my stomach. “How’s your scar, Sunny?”

I eased up the bottom of my pyjama top and showed him. “It’s nearly healed,” I said.

They’d had to remove a portion of my guts. A microphone stand had gone straight through me.

Boasting to the other kids that I was practically impaled by a spear was all very heroic, but when I tried to explain what I’d been doing that night...

“You were a Black and White Minstrel?” Gary had yelled. He looked like someone who’d just won The Pools.

I was doomed from that moment on. Relentless and cruel with



it, he made sure to make fun of me at every opportunity. He'd turn the TV up louder every time *The Black and White Minstrel Show* came on, and then tell the whole ward that I was on the telly.

That, along with the fact that I had a decent tan for a kid from the West Coast of Scotland, meant that most of them called me Darcy.

I complained that I actually had white skin like them, but Gary just said, "Fine, your full title can be Darcy The White Boy." Most of the boys on the ward laughed their heads off at this, so I learned not to make things any worse. I kept my mouth shut. Besides, this wasn't as bad as some of the other names they'd come up with.

"Your scar looks much better, Sunny," said Dad.

By the expression on his face, however, I could tell that he really didn't mean it. It was as if he was trying to smile after seeing a gory corpse on the floor with its eyes gouged out. I'd seen a dead body just like that in a film called *The Birds*.

"So," began Sergeant Lohan, "can you remember much about the night of the crash?"

I shrugged.

"For example," he continued, "do you remember if anyone had been drinking before you got into the minibus?"

This was awkward because I knew fine-well that Billy MacDonald had been drinking whisky. However, as much as I didn't like the man, I still didn't want to get him into trouble. "I'm not sure what you mean," I replied.

Mum seemed to read my mind and waved her hand to stop the proceedings. "This might be tough to hear, Sunny, but you were the only survivor of the crash."

"I was?" I felt faint. Donny Murray hadn't even *hinted* at *this*

outcome. "How could I have been? We were all in the same van and..."

"And you were in the back with the equipment," said Sergeant Lohan. "That's what saved you."

I looked to mum to see if it was the truth and she nodded.

"The back doors flew open when your minibus hit the motorcycle," explained Dad.

"...Motorcycle?" I whimpered.

"You were thrown clear before the van went down the gully," continued the Sergeant. "Everyone else was... Well, there wasn't much to work with."

Mum and Dad both looked at him as if he'd just said a bad word.

"So they're all dead?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so," said Mum.

"Even Gertie?" I said, anxiously. But I already knew the answer.

"You see," said the policeman, flushing crimson, "the family of the killed motorcyclist want to file charges."

"Charges... Against me?" I gasped.

"Not you... Not us," Mum assured me.

"But whatever you say could affect the MacDonald's estate," said the Sergeant.

"They had an estate?" I mumbled.

"Just tell the truth, son," said Dad. "It might help this other family get over their loss."

"Yes," I said. My heart was pounding. Even if he *was* dead, I was still scared of Billy MacDonald.

Everyone waited.

"They always drank whisky and stuff before a performance," I said.

Sergeant Lohan began scribbling in his grubby notepad. "I

see. What about the driver that night?" he asked.

"Billy?" I answered.

"If that's who it was," interrupted mum.

"It was...and yes...he'd drunk lots. I was a nervous wreck before I even got on the bus," I explained. I felt a wave of nausea wash over me. I could see Billy's face in my mind's eye, his forehead scrunched up in anger, his big beefy hands scrunched into a fist. But then I imagined Gertie and Wendy and everyone else screaming as they hurtled down a cliff.

I couldn't stop myself.

I lunged for the sink and threw up.

It hurt when I was sick. It hurt when I coughed. The doctor had told me that it might always hurt.

Sergeant Lohan fussed over his notes for a second, flicking back a few pages before saying, "How many were on the bus that night?"

"Twelve," I said, without missing a beat. My face was still hovering over the sink, a big strand of drool linking my mouth to the porcelain like one of those cords that attaches a baby to its mum.

I turned on the tap to wash away the mess.

"Including you?" pressed the Sergeant.

I thought about this for a moment and said, "No. Thirteen, including me."

"But there were only a dozen in the troupe, including you," said Mum. "Gertie told me that when you first started."

"Maybe they hired someone else," said Dad.

Mum glared at him.

Dad flushed scarlet. "Or maybe they didn't..." he added, quickly.

Sergeant Lohan closed his note pad. "You can't really be

sure, though," he said, "can you, Sunny? You've been through so much."

"I'm sure," I said. "There were definitely thirteen of us on the bus. Billy and the rest of the troupe didn't know, but Gertie gave a tink—" I paused, unsure whether *tinker* was a bad word. "I mean, an old lady," I corrected. "We gave an old lady a lift." I could still see her grateful face in my head.

The old lady had gone down in my estimation, however. She was supposed to have been a fortune teller. *Faker*, I thought. Why had she jumped aboard a doomed bus?

"Think carefully, Sunny," said Lohan, as if I wasn't quite right in the head. "Sometimes people think they see things before they die. It's called a 'near-death incident'. Ghosts, bright lights..."

"Tinker-ladies who pretend they can tell the future and smell of stale towels?" I asked.

"Sunny!" scolded Mum. "Sergeant Lohan is only trying to help."

"Well, he's not," I snapped, "he's calling me a liar." I could feel myself begin to cry, so I dug my thumbnail into the back of my forefinger to stop myself.

Dad looked concerned. He began to say something, perhaps intending to stick up for me, but Mum gave him one of her death-glances and he shut his mouth like a big goldfish.

Sergeant Lohan flicked through his notes again and shook his head dismissively. "You've been through a lot, Sunny," he said, shutting his notebook.

I saw the page as he closed it. He hadn't written anything.

I brought a small, off-white towel up to my face.

"There were only eleven bodies recovered from the scene, Mrs Wilson," he said. "Twelve if you include the motorcyclist."

# 3 The Contract

“So, the bus burst into flames?” asked Hugh.

I caught Hugh’s gaze. “You listened in to the whole thing, didn’t you?” I’d seen him do it before: press his ear against the office door when there was something important going on and relay a whole conversation, word for word, to Gary. There were no secrets on Ward 4.

Hugh grinned.

I shut my eyes as I tried to remember falling out of the back doors of the minibus, but I couldn’t. “That’s what the policeman said,” I answered vaguely.

“It just seems a bit weird, that’s all,” said Donny, “like he didn’t believe you.”

“Or he doesn’t *want* you to remember,” added John.

The boys had formed a semicircle round me on the carpet. Gary had turned the volume down on the TV.

“You see,” continued Donny, “we can’t figure out why this deadly bus crash of yours wasn’t on the news...”

“...or in the papers,” added Hugh.

John looked thoughtful, the nails of his left hand scratching at his scalp. “Unless there’s some kind of cover up,” he suggested. He shook his long ginger hair and a cloud of dandruff drifted onto the carpet like a mini snow storm.

“Hey!” snapped Gary. He nudged Donny and Hugh out of the way as he shuffled nearer to me.

Now he was within striking distance. “So, Darky,” he began, “eleven people were burnt to a crisp after plunging down a ravine, but you survived.”

“There should have been twelve, even without me and the motorcyclist,” I said.

“Yeah, we forgot about your ghost,” sneered Hugh.

“The ‘fortune teller’,” laughed Donny.

Gary eyed me suspiciously. “How come you escaped the crash, Darky? You’re keeping stuff from us, and you’re doing it on purpose.”

This whole thing was turning into another interrogation and I didn’t like it. “I’m here, aren’t I?” I said. I stared at Hugh again. “Didn’t you *tell* Gary how I managed to escape?”

Gary clenched his fists. “I’m asking *you*, Darky. Cat got your tongue?”

I traced the wound with my fingers, through my pyjamas, and winced. It wasn’t that sore at the moment, but I wanted Gary to think it was. He had his angry face on and I didn’t want punched or knocked over.

He moved in even closer and, with horrible, stale breath, whispered, “I don’t think you were meant to live.” He smiled and began to lift my pyjama top.

I backed away, but his muscle-bound arm hooked round my elbow and dragged me back again.

His little henchman, Hugh, examined my scar. He nodded. “It seems real enough. In one end and out the other,” he confirmed.

“Real enough?” I blurted. I was getting angry now, outraged and confused.

The freckles on Hugh’s forehead formed brown streaks as he backed off a little. “There *was* no ‘fortune-teller’, was there?”

“He was just a bit mixed up,” said John.

“Or a bit thick,” added Donny.

“Darky cannae count,” hissed Gary. He snatched a packet of MacDonald’s crisps from Donny and threw them at me. They hit

me in the stomach and I winced.

On seeing this, Hugh held his packet a little tighter, but Gary ripped them free of his grip and bounced them off my shoulder. "How many was that?"

"What? Crisps or packets?" I snapped.

Gary growled and pushed himself to his feet.

I stood up and straightened my pyjama top. "I'm not thick and I'm not a liar either," I snapped. "It's the police that have got it wrong, not me."

Gary drew back his fist.

"It's all pretty strange," said John, in a calm voice, "but it's hardly Sunny's fault." He moved between us.

Gary froze, his mouth lolling open, his clenched fist still hovering at his side.

This wasn't the first time that John had stuck up for me. And he was still the only one who called me by my real name.

John shook his big head and grinned. "So, where's this all going? What's the story?"

Gary was shaking with rage. "Darky's in big trouble," he said. "He wasn't supposed to live."

"I reckon," continued Donny, "that the Sergeant who came here today is in on the whole thing."

"What thing?" I blurted. Donny was the boy on the ward who annoyed me the most. "Don't be stupid."

"What if someone on that bus was a gangster?" said Hugh. "What if the whole thing was a hit?"

"That's right," I replied sarcastically, "the West Coast Black and White Minstrels had it coming." I instantly regretted saying this. Gary had edged past John and was closing in on me again.

Still focused on John, Gary frowned and said, out of the side of his mouth, "Don't be a smart-alec, Darky-boy."

“And we all know what will happen if Darky knows too much,” said Donny excitedly.

I felt another surge of anger towards Donny. He only called me ‘Darky’ when Gary was beside him, when Gary said it first.

“That’s right, Donny, if Darky knows too much,” said Gary, “they’ll put a contract out on him.”

My neck suddenly felt wet and hot at the same time.

Donny let out a high-pitched yelp of delight. “Yes! Just like the ones in those Mafia films?”

Gary gave him a dead arm with a sudden jab.

“Uh!” wailed Donny.

“Shut it,” barked Gary.

John stared at me for a moment and said, “It doesn’t look good, I’m afraid.” Whereas the others were playing up to Gary, joining in on the interrogation, John was still trying to be kind. “If someone on that bus wants the world to think they’re toast, you might be in trouble.”

Gary shook his head in sarcastic sympathy. “Your days are numbered, Darky.”

“I bagsy his comics,” said Donny, as if I was already dead.

The nurse walked down the ward towards us and we scattered. She called out after us, “If you boys aren’t back in your beds in ten seconds, I’ll cancel your visitors tonight.”

This over-used threat worked every time. None of us wanted to be alone at visiting time.

Donny tried to nab my *Beano* as he walked past my bed, but I snatched it back off him, rolled it up, and smacked him across the side of the face.

“Sunny Wilson!” yelled the nurse, “there’ll be no visitors for you tonight!”

“But, he stole it!” I protested.



“I don’t care what he did.” Without another word, she yanked the comic from my hand then whisked the curtain shut around my bed.

I boiled with rage for a few moments but soon realised that Mum and Dad had seen me already. Neither of them had mentioned anything about coming back later.

“You’re gonna get it, Darky,” Donny whispered through my curtain.

I tried to imagine him lying in his bed, his thin weaselly face still red and smarting. I smiled to myself and said, “You’ll get another one if you ever come near my comics again, Donny.”

He didn’t answer back. I knew I could beat him pretty soundly if I had to, and so did he. He was a pathetic little weakling.

Donny’s bed was on my right, but it was Gary’s voice I heard next, from my left. “I reckon Darky got you fair and square, Donny. But you don’t have to worry. Now that the gangsters have found out that he knows too much, he’ll be lucky if he makes it through the night.”

“Gary Sutherland,” said the nurse’s voice. “Do you want to see your visitors tonight or not?”

“Yes, nurse,” said Gary. He sounded just like the rest of us when the nurse told him off – a whimpering puppy with its tail between its legs.

I knew the boys were bound to wind me up after listening in to a conversation like that – the Sergeant, all official and oozing false concern; Mum and Dad, worried and awkward. I hated them for listening in and hated them for teasing me afterwards.

I lay staring at the strip-light on the ceiling while the boys’ mums and dads chattered and fussed on the other side of my curtains. I closed my eyes and imagined all the different ways I could get them back: peeing in their drinks while they were

asleep, spitting in their juice, or mixing up their medication. I had a really nasty part to me that only came to the surface when I felt trapped. I didn't like it. It wasn't honourable or brave, it was dark and malicious: nothing to be proud of.

I thought about Gary and his Mafia 'contract', and soon felt a kernel of anxiety build inside my chest. It spread over me as the lights in the ward were switched off one by one.

I lay in the dark and thought of our minibus hurtling down a snow-covered gully, Gertie and the crew all screaming as they burst into flames.

They hadn't deserved to die like that, not even Billy MacDonald.

I hadn't realised we'd hit a motorbike. I tried to feel sad for the tinker-woman, but I couldn't. I was still annoyed at her for not telling us what was going to happen.

The night of the crash was all jumbled up in my mind like two movies badly stitched together and shown back to front.

As I lay plotting and trying to reassemble the events of the Black and White Minstrel gig, I suddenly heard a man's deep voice very close to my bed. "Sunny Wilson," it said in low whisper.

Terrified, I pushed my head further back into my cold, cotton pillow and waited to see if anyone would open my curtain.

Someone moved a trolley a few feet away. I heard its wheels squeak.

Perhaps Gary had been right. Perhaps I was supposed to have been killed in the crash and now I was just a witness who knew too much.

A hand appeared from nowhere and pressed down on my shoulder.

I tried to sit up, to scream out, but now another hand was covering my mouth.

"Mmmmmmm!"