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Thanks to Dmetri Kakmi.

Tumble Turn

Dominic is nearly thirteen years old and, according to an IQ test, a potato.

Home life is tricky. Dominic's mother is allergic to everything in the universe, including his father. His little sister Dale is a witch who does awful things with jelly.

School life is doubly difficult. Dominic is in love with not one but three people. The first is his purple-clad teacher, the divine Ms Havercroft. The second is an American girl called Elisa who is perfect in every way except five. And the third is ... well, it's complicated.

All the madness and confusion of Dominic's life is revealed through his e-mails to the mysterious Uncle Peri in Albury. Uncle Peri has a secret, as well as a house full of sheep.

Tumble Turn is a novel for anyone who has ever felt they are not quite 'normal'.

For Dart, who has the best name in the world.

Dear Uncle Peri,

Of course I remember you. You wore a purple hat. It really brightened up the funeral.

Mum doesn't realise I found your letter in the rubbish and I will not mention it, as this will worry her.

Your purple hat worried her. She said it was disrespectful to poor dead Grandpa. Although you did take it off during the funeral service. You also cried a bit, which would have worried her even more.

I wish Mum would relax. She takes tablets for her nerves, as well as her allergies. She is allergic to peanuts, petrol, bread, Chinese food and sometimes my father. I think she may be allergic to you as well, so please do not send snail mail. My secret e-mail address is Princeprism@hotmail.com.

What is it like to live in Albury? It might as well be the planet Radox, as far as Mum is concerned. We are not allowed to mention your name in this house. Even though you are Mum's brother. The name 'Albury' is like a swearword around here.

My hobbies are swimming, arts and crafts, TV and Buddhism. When I grow up, I will be a famous TV producer with a glamorous show-business wife.

I have only recently become a Buddhist. All Buddhists follow the teachings of a short fat man called Buddha. I suppose I look like him. I am a short fat boy, although I will be thirteen next year. We live in a suburb where there is a high crime rate as well as poker machines.

Mum says old people sit and play these machines until they wet themselves. This is because of the government.

I became a Buddhist because my Year Seven teacher is one. She is mystical and I am very much in love with her. She wears lime-green nail polish and nearly all her clothes are purple. She has magnificent chalk. Her name is Ms Havercroft. If the 'a' and the 'o' swapped positions, her name would be Ms Hovercraft.

I often notice things like this. I used to think this was because I was clever. However, we recently did an IQ test at school and I scored 75, which is low. I am quite good at art, but Mum believes I have learning difficulties.

Buddhists believe in reincarnation. When you die you can come back in another life, and not always as a human being. This is why it is very important not to step on a ladybird. You could be squashing Princess Di. Mum recently asked me to kill a spider in the bathroom but I refused. 'Pathetic!' she said. 'Albury!' I replied.

Buddhists also believe that whatever you do in this life affects what you become in your next life. This is called karma. I might have been a pig. I might become one. Dad says that I already am one. I don't care, I like pigs.

My little sister Dale is a witch. She is also naughty. Once she threw her underpants up into a light fitting and caused a small fire. After that, Mum and Dad refused to take us to any more restaurants. According to Mum, we are both problem children.

As you know, our surname is 'Dear'. This means my sister and I are Dale Dear and Dominic Dear. We sound more like cartoon characters than problem children. As Mum's name is Odette, if you wrote a letter to her it would start with, 'Dear O. Dear.' Dad's name is Archibald. He is losing his hair, so the last part of his name is coming true.

Our neighbours are called the Balls. The mother Ball is called Dorothy but everyone calls her Dotty. The father Ball (Rolly) is a businessman in Singapore. He is too important to come home. They have an only child called Christopher. His nickname is Crystal and he is my best friend.

I will tell you more about myself as well as Dale and Crystal when I get your e-mail address. I can't ring you because it's long distance. Our phone will only make local calls. Dad had it altered after Dale got bored one night and started ringing people in Argentina. That is all the news for now. Why did you write to me? What do you do for a living and where did you get the hat?

Yours sincerely

Dominic

P.S. When Dale and I go to bed, Mum and Dad talk about us. Usually we can overhear them. Here's last night's conversation:

Mum : Have you told Dominic he can't be a TV producer?

Dad : No. Why should I?

Mum : TV producers have to be smart.

Dad : Have you been watching TV lately?

Mum : Dominic did so badly in that IQ test.

Dad : I was never much good at IQ tests either.

Mum : You are not making me feel any better, Archy.

Dad : I have a good job, Odette.

Mum : You hate it.

Dad : It's still a good job.

Mum : Break it to him gently.

Dad : Break what to him?

Mum : That he'll never be a TV producer. It's unfair to give him false hope. Anyway, Dominic could still get a job at a TV studio. He could hold the big microphone on a stick.

Dad : I don't think Dominic wants to hold the big microphone on a stick.

Mum : Perhaps he could clean it?

Dad : The microphone or the stick?

Mum : The TV studio.

Dad : Why don't you tell him?

Mum : It would upset him. It's more something a father should do.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Howling Pumpkins

Thank you for your letter. I look forward to reading more about Crystal Ball and Dale, the witch.

I decided to use your e-mail address. It has an odd name. I like it.

The purple hat used to belong to my partner, Lu. Lu was a geologist, fascinated by volcanic rocks. It is unusual for a woman to be fascinated by rocks. Your mother never liked rocks. But Lu and I travelled the world, visiting volcanoes.

I too am a geologist as well as a teacher and a volunteer firefighter. Like you, I am also a Buddhist.

I wrote to you because I enjoyed the brief chat we had at the funeral. You seemed lonely. You told me then about your low IQ score. But I think you are complex and interesting. I'm sure you will have a wonderful career doing whatever it is you want.

Things are calm in Albury. The days are mild. But the pumpkins in my garden are howling at the moon every night and are keeping me awake. What do you suggest I do?

xxP

P.S. Why does your mother think you have learning difficulties?

P.P.S. IQ tests do not prove anything except how good you are at doing IQ tests.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Re: Howling Pumpkins

Thank you for your e-mail. And thank you for saying I'm complex and interesting. Your pumpkins are probably howling because they are lonely. Plant some beetroot nearby. They are very social vegetables.

Here's why my mother thinks I have learning difficulties.

My teacher in First Term, before Ms Havercroft, was Mr Badourian. You could tell Mr Badourian didn't want to be a teacher. He makes no effort with his appearance and often wears the same clothes

three days in a row. He has a pair of trousers with an unfortunate blue mark down the front. A leaky pen in his pocket must have caused this dreadful stain. I would be too embarrassed to put on trousers like this, but Mr Badourian simply doesn't care.

Mr Badourian can make even the most interesting thing in the world seem dull. Once he set an essay about racial prejudice. 'Racial prejudice means being prejudiced against people of different races,' he said. 'For example, if you say something nasty about a Chinese person, that is called racial prejudice, unless you are a Chinese person yourself.' He rambled on and on.

I started thinking of the beautiful actress Isabella Rossellini and what sort of soap she uses. She is quite wealthy so she probably has one of those pump-packs of liquid soap. I stopped thinking about Isabella and tried hard to concentrate on Mr Badourian. What an awful stain it was. 'You must write three hundred words on this topic,' Mr Badourian droned. 'Do not write only two hundred words as that is not enough.'

I drifted off again. Some soap is called toilet soap. I'm sure Isabella Rossellini would never say toilet soap. She would say lavatory soap. I tried to focus on Mr Badourian. 'You can find out about racial prejudice in the library as there are many books on the subject. This is a very important essay and I will be giving you a mark out of ten. Ten out of ten would be a very high mark.'

We had a week to do our essay. I wrote the heading, Racial Prejudice, at the top of the page. It looked dull. I screwed up the page and started again. This time I wrote Racial

Prejudice in big balloon letters. I have learned how to do these recently. Each letter looks like it's made from the inner tube of a tyre. Now the title was starting to look interesting.

I coloured in the letters with my highlighter pens. I used pink and yellow for Racial, then I used green and orange for Prejudice. Then I drew black shadows around all the letters to make them stand out. I added twelve stars and five half-moon shapes.

The heading now looked excellent. I still had to find out about racial prejudice. I had spent so long on the heading that now I had hardly any time left to do the essay. All the racial prejudice books in the library had been borrowed. We were banned from using the library computer because someone had downloaded nude ladies.

My best friend Crystal had got his mum to write his essay, and he said I could copy it. But I said this probably wasn't a good idea. Crystal's mother is a bit dim, so I suspected her essay would be too. (I didn't say this to Crystal.)

I had to ask Mum for help. This is what happened:

Dom : Mum, could we please discuss racial prejudice?

Mum : I am rather busy at the moment, Dominic. I don't know if you noticed but I am actually cooking tea. That is why I am stirring this pot on the stove.

Dom : It's for school. I have to write three hundred words on racial prejudice by tomorrow.

Mum : Why don't you go on the Internet?

Dom : Dad's on it.

Mum : Ask him to get off.

Dom : He's doing the banking.

Mum : He doesn't need to do the banking. There are hundreds of other things he should do. Have you seen the state of the guttering?

Dom : No, I haven't seen the state of the guttering.

Mum : It is full of dried leaves. If there is a bush fire, the house will burn down, we will all die and it will be your father's fault.

Dom : I'll take the leaves out of the guttering.

Mum : No, you couldn't do it.

Dom : Why not?

Mum : You have to climb a ladder.

Dom : I do know how to climb a ladder.

Mum : Please don't use that tone, Dominic.

Dom : I'm sorry, I just need to know about racial prejudice.

Mum : There are nettles in the backyard, too.

Dom : I'll get rid of the nettles. You don't have to climb a ladder to do that.

Mum : You have to use poison. It's dangerous.

Dom : I'll try not to drink the poison.

Mum : You are using that tone again.

Dom : I'll do anything you want if you help me with my essay. I will dust.

Mum : You do not need to dust.

Dom : The house is looking quite dusty.

Mum : I can't see the dust. If there were dust I would be sneezing.

Dom : There's some on the television.

Mum : Then I will dust it. We won't have any tea and we will all die of starvation but at least we will have a clean television.

Dom : Albury!

In the end I just handed in my heading. Crystal got seven out of ten. I got nought out of ten. 'That is a very low mark,' said Mr Badourian. Then he told my parents that I'm difficult to teach, because I don't follow instructions or complete the work I have been set.

I think Mr Badourian was also annoyed because I told him that he really should buy some new trousers.

xxD

P.S. As a teacher, do you think I'm retarded?

P.P.S. I don't know a huge amount about Buddhism so it would be good if you could teach me a few things.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Bang!

As a teacher, I would say you are not retarded. It's actually not a word I like to use.

When I was at school, our teacher once handed out a list of topics. We had to write an essay on one of them. The list went something like this:

The School of the Air

The Eureka Stockade

Market Gardens

Famous Australian Exploders

Of course, our teacher had meant to type 'Explorers' and not 'Exploders.' But I wrote a long essay about famous Australian people who had blown up. I thought it was very funny.

I got nought out of ten and my teacher told my parents I was disrespectful. My mother explained it was because I am retarded.

I have planted beetroot. The pumpkins are happy now. Thank you for your advice.

Mr Badourian is not a good teacher.

xxP

P.S. Since you asked me, I am sending you the rules that all Buddhists should obey. They are called The Five Precepts. There are more than five on my list because I added a few of my own at the end.

Do not kill or harm other living things.

Do not steal.

Do not be a sex maniac.

Do not lie.

Do not get drunk.

Do not put bees up your nose.

Do not sprinkle hundreds and thousands on a baby.

Do not wear your pants on your head.

Do not take your cat to the beach.

Do not explode.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : My Best Friend Crystal's Nose

I will try not to break any of the Buddhist rules, though last week I did accidentally sprinkle hundreds and thousands on a baby.

I think Famous Australian Exploders should be a TV series.

I'm sorry for using the word retarded. Crystal uses it, though I will tell him not to. I'll ask him to use mental instead.

Crystal is handsome. He didn't used to be. Once he was dumpy like me, but he changed. Crystal is the same age as me, but taller. His hair is straight and blond. He also has a very big nose. Mine is normal and probably my best feature.

Crystal's mother, Dotty, is a snob. Recently she had this conversation with my mother:

Dotty : I don't know if you have noticed,
but Christopher has a rather big nose.

Mum : I had noticed.

Dotty : Some people call it a Roman nose.
Have you been to Rome?

Mum : No, I haven't.

Dotty : They all have them over there.

Mum : Still, he can smell and that is the main thing.

Dotty : No, it is not the main thing, Odette. Appearance is very important if you are a stockbroker.

Mum : Is that what Chris wants to be?

Dotty : Not yet.

Mum : Dominic wants to be a TV producer.

Dotty : I don't think he has much chance.

Mum : Neither do I.

Dotty : I'm not just saying that because of his appearance.

Mum : I'm sure you're not.

Dotty : He would really need to be a fair bit smarter and also American.

Mum : I doubt there's much chance of either happening.

Dotty : Have you been to America?

Mum : No, I haven't.

Dotty : We were thinking of plastic surgery to make Chris's nose smaller.

Mum : Isn't that expensive?

Dotty : Rolly has been making a lot of money in Singapore. Have you been to ...

Mum : No, I haven't.

Some people think it's weird that Crystal and I hang out together. Crystal uses short words. I prefer long ones. Crystal barracks for the Demons. I barrack for Buddha. Crystal is good at sport. I'm good at art. Although the best artist in our school is a small boy who can draw whatever you ask for, except pigs. His name is D'artagnan and he never speaks. Neither would I if my name was D'artagnan.

Crystal and I have always been neighbours. There's a hole in the fence that makes it easy for us to visit each other. Rolly Ball fixed it once. Crystal helped his dad do it with the claw hammer. I was disappointed that Crystal was so eager to help his dad put up this barrier between us. But a few days later Crystal simply made another hole further down the fence, near the compost heap. Recently we've had to make it larger because of my embarrassing plumpness.

Crystal and I became best friends in Year Two when we realised we were the only kids in the school who liked a Japanese cartoon series called 'Prince Prism'. It was about a lost boy from outer space. Back on his home planet Radox, Prism is just an ordinary boy. But on earth he has special powers and is able to turn back tidal waves or leap over dangerous cracks in the earth.

Prism has a friendly robot called Crystal. I call Chris Crystal, even though he is not much like the robot in the show. He is taller and he cannot fire laser beams from his nose.

Nearly all the kids in our school hated Prince Prism because they thought he was daggy. He did wear an unusual costume: red gumboots and blue bathers over a yellow tracksuit. He didn't wear a cape. That would look gay. D'artagnan used to draw fantastic pictures of Prince Prism. One of them is still on my bedroom wall, next to my map of the world and a photo of beautiful Princess Di.

When we were eight, Crystal and I made our own Prince Prism costumes. Crystal's looked better than mine because his mum can afford to buy him decent tracksuits, bathers and gumboots. All my clothes come from K-Mart.

One day we were playing 'Prince Prism'. Crystal tried to leap over a dangerous crack in the earth and fell in. He broke his leg, but I saved his life by running to get help.

Dotty Ball thought it was my fault. 'My son would never be stupid enough to leap over a dangerous crack,' she said. Crystal told her that he was stupid enough. And that he had broken his leg all on his own, without my help.

I did everything I could to make Crystal better. I sat with him and made up stories about Prince Prism. I got Dale to recite spells that would help Crystal recover. I even assisted him to walk without his crutches by hiding them. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

Before long, Crystal was playing football again. I prefer swimming. It's the only sport I'm good at. Crystal hardly ever goes to the pool. The chlorine makes his blond hair turn green. I like doing twenty laps and having a private think about life, Buddha and Ms Havercroft.

I'll go for a swim now.

xxD

P.S. How old are you?

P.P.S. How did you get your scar?

P.P.P.S. What do you teach and where do you teach it?

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Snail Jelly

You haven't replied to my last e-mail yet, even though I sent it two hours ago. But I will now tell you about Dale.

She has a boy's name, which is important if you're going to be a serious witch. (It's trendy for girls to have boys' names like Glenn, Cameron and Dale. It doesn't work the other way. There are no boys called Amanda or Debbie.)

Dale likes making revolting food. Once she collected snails from the garden and put them in a bowl of lime jelly. Dale's teacher rang Mum to complain that Dale had eaten it in show and tell.

Another time, she put a curse on Dad. She wanted to punish him for not letting her sacrifice things in the backyard. He had terrible itching for several days. I was impressed.

She even put a curse on me once. Dale had made one of her witch cakes in the microwave. When she offered Mum a piece, I warned Mum to avoid the sultanas because they were flies. Mum had already taken a bite and she immediately spat it out. ‘One day you’ll end up in a juvenile prison!’ she told Dale.

Dale was furious with me for telling on her, so she cursed me. Huge tufts of blue hair would start growing out of my nose, she said. I spent a few days nervously looking up my nose with Mum’s make-up mirror to see if it was coming true. When Mum asked what I was doing, I explained that I was gazing up my nostrils for scientific reasons. ‘What is wrong with you?’ Mum complained, snatching her mirror.

That night, Mum and Dad’s conversation went like this:

Mum : He had my make-up mirror today.

Dad : What was he doing with it?

Mum : Looking up his nose.

Dad : At least he wasn’t putting on make-up.

Mum : He might one day.

Dad : I wouldn’t know about that.

Mum : I'm sure he's used my lipstick.

Dad : It was probably Dale.

Mum : And my eyebrow pencil.

Dad : I used that.

Mum : Why?

Dad : I couldn't find a normal pencil and I needed to write a phone number.

Mum : Please do not use my make-up to write phone numbers.

Dad : You're allergic to it anyway. Someone might as well use it.

Mum : Why don't you take Dominic to the car show to look at cars?

Dad : He doesn't like cars.

Mum : He should. Boys like cars.

Dad : I don't particularly like cars either.

Mum : It's something a father and son should do together.

Dad : Look at things they don't like?

Mum : Why don't you go white-water rafting?

Dad : Now?

Mum : Lots of fathers and sons do things like that.

Dad : You need a raft.

Mum : They supply that.

Dad : You also need some white water.

Mum : All right, don't do anything. Let Dominic sit around gazing up his nose all day long.

Dad : It's better than gazing up someone else's.

Dale calmed down and removed the curse before the tufts appeared. We're still best friends. I'm the only boy in the whole world that she likes. She even dislikes Crystal, though most girls think he's a punkrat.

Dale and I will always be friends. Even when we are grown up and I am a famous TV producer and she is a famous witch. We will still visit each other, unless she gets burnt at the stake, which is one of the dangers of being a witch.

You and Mum may be brother and sister but you are certainly not friends. I can't say your name or talk about Albury or even mention the Murray River. Why is this?

I'm worried about Dale ending up in a juvenile prison. That would be even worse than being burnt at the stake, because at least you would get reincarnated if you got burnt to death.

Is Dale's behaviour normal for a girl?

xxD

P.S. I just remembered that it is rude to ask adults how old they are. Please forgive me if I offended you.

P.P.S. Didn't you feel embarrassed about wearing a lady's hat to a funeral? Don't worry, it suited you. I do not mean that you look like a lady.

P.P.P.S. It is probably also rude to ask adults about their scars. Sorry. I think you have a nice scar. It makes your skin so smooth that half of you looks quite young.

From : Peri Little

To : Dominic Dear

Subject : Paranirvana Day

I do not believe Dale will end up in a juvenile prison and I think her behaviour is normal. My mum and dad were always saying that I was a shocking child and God would punish me. So far this hasn't happened, unless my punishment is living in a quiet house on the banks of the Murray and having six good friends.

You did not offend me by asking how old I am. I am 298.

I cannot make much money from geology so I teach science at a local school. I got my scar during a visit to a volcano.

Your mother does not like to talk about me because she says I ruined her life. She has hated me for years. It is a sad story that I will tell you when we know each other better.

I do not think it is disrespectful to wear a purple hat to a funeral. Like you, I believe that death is not the end, so we needn't be so frightened. Buddhists even celebrate the Buddha's death on Paranirvana Day, the full moon of February.

If I am reincarnated I would like to come back as a leopard because they have such excellent dress sense.

xxP

P.S. If I decide to send you something, what would be a good postal address? I do not want my packages to end up in the rubbish.

From : Dominic Dear

To : Peri Little

Subject : Ruth Turtle

I was surprised to read that you are 298. This means you have been an old-age pensioner for 233 years.

I wish I had known about Paranirvana Day. I would have asked for the day off school. Are there any other Buddhist public holidays I should know about?

Do not feel bad about Mum saying you ruined her life. She says that about everyone.

They are putting together the school magazine this week. Ms Havercroft has been asking us to hand in contributions, but the only person who has is D'artagnan. He has drawn an entire comic strip about

two jelly babies who fall in love then get eaten and sadly end up in the lavatory together. There are no words, just excellent pictures.

Ms Havercroft was disappointed that I had not submitted any articles for the school magazine, especially as I promised to write ten things. I explained that I had been very busy with all my Buddhism.

When Crystal and I used to watch Prince Prism, we would make sure not to miss the credits at the end. Listed under 'Vocal Talent, English Language Version' were four names. The one we loved most was Ruth Turtle. We couldn't believe there was someone with such a weird name.

Crystal climbed through my bedroom window last Tuesday. He had an article he'd torn from the newspaper. It was about Ruth Turtle. She's a famous English actor and she was in town to be in a play called 'A Doll's House'.

I had an idea.

On Wednesday, Crystal and I stayed behind in class. 'We would like to interview Ruth Turtle for the school magazine,' I told Ms Havercroft. 'She's a famous actor and she's in "A Doll's House".' Ms Havercroft seemed slightly puzzled, then looked at the crumpled article. 'Why do you want to interview this person?' Before Crystal could say anything, I replied, 'For educational reasons.' Ms Havercroft thought for a moment as she

straightened a seam in the superb purple slacks she was wearing. Up close Ms Havercroft really did look stunning. ‘I will see what I can do,’ she said.

The next morning Ms Havercroft told us she had organised for Crystal and me to interview Ruth Turtle over the speakerphone. I was impressed by Ms Havercroft’s power. She must truly love me to go to so much effort. It is a shame that the age difference means we can’t get married.

Crystal and I spent the rest of the morning making up questions to ask in the interview. By lunchtime I had written fifty. Crystal had written ten but nine of them were copied from mine. The only one that wasn’t copied was, Is your name really Ruth Turtle? which I told him was probably not a good question to ask.

That afternoon Ms Havercroft had the speaker-phone out the front of the class. She dialled the number. Moments later, we heard a beautiful English accent.

Ms Turtle : Ruth Turtle speaking.

Ms Havercroft : Ms Turtle, I am Ms Havercroft from Emerald Park High School. We have Dominic Dear and Chris Ball here. They would very much like to ask you some questions about acting.

Ms Turtle : Hello Dominic, hello Chris.

Dom : Hello Ms Turtle. All the class can hear you and you are being recorded.

Ms Turtle : I will try not to swear.

(Class laughs.)

Crystal : Is your name really Ruth Turtle?

Ms Turtle : Yes it is.

Dom : It is a very wonderful and majestic name, indeed.

Ms Turtle : Thank you.

Crystal : Why are you in Australia?

Ms Turtle : I am appearing in a play called 'A Doll's House' by Henry Gibson.

Dom : You have a lovely accent.

Ms Turtle : Thank you. I like yours, too.

Crystal : How old are you?

Ms Turtle : I'm 55.

Crystal : Are you rich?

Ms Turtle : No.

Crystal : What sort of car do you drive?

Ms Turtle : A Honda.

Crystal : Do you know any famous actors?

Ms Havercroft : Dominic, perhaps you might like to ask Ms Turtle a question?

Dom : Thank you, Ms Havercroft. Ms Turtle, what is the play, 'A Doll's House', about?

Ms Turtle : I play a woman called Nora who believes she is in complete control of her life. When she loses this control her whole world falls apart.

Dom : That sounds very interesting, indeed. What do you wear in the play?

Ms Turtle : A dress.

Dom : What colour is it?

Ms Turtle : White.

Dom : Is it modern or old fashioned?

Ms Turtle : Old fashioned.

Dom : What are the buttons like?

Ms Havercroft : Chris, perhaps you might like to ask Ms Turtle a question?

Crystal : Um. What else happens in the play?

Ms Turtle : I'm afraid I'm rather a villain. I abandon my children.

Crystal : Have you ever done that in real life?

Ms Turtle : No.

Crystal : Were you in 'Prince Prism'?

Ms Turtle : A lot of younger people ask me that. Yes I was.

Crystal : Which voices did you do?

Ms Havercroft : I think Ms Turtle might prefer to answer questions about the play. Dominic, do you have a question?

Dom : Yes I do. Thank you, Ms Havercroft. Ms Turtle, do you enjoy being in this play?

Ms Turtle : Very much. Nora is a challenging role for an actor.

Dom : That is very interesting. Which voices did you do in ‘Prince Prism’?

Ms Turtle : The little boy.

Dom : Prince Prism?

Ms Turtle : Yes.

Dom : But you’re a lady.

Ms Turtle : I know.

Dom : How can you talk like a boy?

Ms Turtle : I think of frogs and snails and puppy dog’s tails.

(Class laughs.)

Dom : Can you talk like Prince Prism now?

Ms Turtle : It hurts my voice.

Dom : Please?

Ms Turtle : ‘Do not be afraid, earth girl.’

(Class is amazed.)

Dom : You sounded just like him!

Crystal : Do some more!

Ms Turtle : 'I am not like other boys.'

(Class applauds.)

Dom : You're the best actor in the whole world.

Ms Turtle : I'm afraid I have to go soon. My throat hurts a little.

Crystal : Did you do the robot voice too?

Ms Turtle : No, that was a man.

Ms Havercroft : We will have to finish there. Chris and Dominic, please thank Ms Turtle.

Dom : Thank you, Ms Turtle, for telling us all about acting and your wonderful play.

Ms Turtle : It was a pleasure. Please come and see the play if you can.

Dom : We certainly will.

That night Ms Turtle could not go on stage in 'A Doll's House' because she had lost her voice.

I still cannot believe that the bravest boy in the universe had the voice of a lady. I also cannot believe that last night I dreamed I was in a big doll's house with Crystal.

If I have any more dreams like this I shall have to accept the fact that I am a looper (mental case).

xxD

P.S. If you want to send me something such as money, it might be a good idea to send it to Christopher Ball at 16 Invermay Grove, Emerald Park.

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Dizzy

You are not a looper.

The author of 'A Doll's House' is a Norwegian man called Henrik Ibsen. His name does sound rather like Henry Gibson. It is an easy mistake to make. Names can be confusing. Henrik Ibsen has written many plays about women who are slightly mad. I often think of your mother when I read his work.

It is very pleasant in Albury at the moment. The magpies warble every morning. I went for a ride on a paddle-steamer with my friend Bernie the other day. One of the big paddle-wheels stopped working, so we spent the day going round and round in the middle of the Murray River. We're still dizzy.

xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : My Rotten Halloween

Dotty Ball would prefer I didn't see Crystal because she thinks I'm a transvestite. This is a very long word for a man who wears a dress. Here's what happened.

Yesterday was Halloween. Dale wanted to go around knocking on people's doors and saying, 'Trick or treat!' like they do in American TV shows. We knew Mum and Dad wouldn't like it, so we didn't tell them. It's quite easy for us to do things without our parents knowing. They are usually off in their own little worlds.

Dale has a terrific book about witchcraft through the ages. One of the pictures shows three witches stirring a pot full of disgusting things. The witches are from a play by William Shakespeare. They have beards and they look excellent.

Dale wanted to go trick or treating dressed as these three witches. She would be the first witch. I would be the second one. And Crystal would be the third, because he has such a big nose.

I signalled to Crystal by shining my K-mart torch through his bedroom window. Moments later Crystal snuck in. He agreed that the witches in the book looked excellent, but he didn't want to dress up like one. When I explained that we would get lollies and probably thousands of dollars from our neighbours, he changed his mind.

Dale had most of the things we needed to dress up. She had black hair spray, tubes of fake blood, rubber stick-on boils, weird jewellery and a wardrobe full of black dresses.

First, we sprayed our hair black. I put on some rings. Crystal stuck rubber boils on his face. Then he took off his shirt and put some boils on his chest. Lately Crystal has been taking off his shirt more and more. I noticed Dale looking at his chest for a moment. She is probably as embarrassed as I am about Crystal's strange new habit. I wish he'd stop it.

Crystal and I couldn't fit into any of Dale's dresses. Crystal has broad shoulders from pumping iron. I have a fat belly from eating Jam Fancies.

Then I had an idea. Dad was at the pub and Mum was out shopping for tablets. We went into Mum and Dad's room and looked through the dresses in Mum's wardrobe. She had some awful ones that she never wore.

I found a horrible tan nylon dress with plastic beads. I pulled it over my windcheater and jeans. I looked nothing like a witch from Shakespeare. I looked like a fat boy in a dress. Dale took the black hair spray and sprayed me from head to foot until the can was empty. I looked in the mirror. I was a hideous witch. I decided I would call myself Dotty.

Dale had sprayed so much of the stuff that there was a me-shaped patch on the wall, surrounded by black clouds. This would definitely get us into trouble. I ran off to the laundry to fetch something to clean the mess.

When I got back I was surprised to see that Crystal had not only taken off his shirt, but he had removed his jeans as well. He had trendy white underpants on. They weren't K-mart ones covered in frogs, like mine.

I was worried that Crystal and Dale might have been playing hospitals. But they were just caught up in turning Crystal into a witch. There were dresses all over the floor. The only one that Crystal could fit into was a stretchy black thing. Dale pulled the strange dress over Crystal. It reached to his knees.

There were some cushions on Mum and Dad's bed. Crystal grabbed one and stuck it down his stretchy dress to give him a bust. It was hilarious. I stuck a cushion down my own neckline so I had a bust too. Crystal and I looked at ourselves in the mirror. We couldn't speak, we were laughing so hard. We flopped onto the bed, howling and rolling around, kicking our legs in the air.

Then Dale said that Mum's car was just pulling into the driveway. Dale was the first to run. I knew there was no way out of this. But since I couldn't think of a better idea, I grabbed Crystal and we charged after Dale, out the back door and over the fence.

At first Mum thought robbers had broken into the house. She called the police. Then she realised it was us. (The me-shaped mark on the wall was a clue.)

I thought Dad might ground me, like he did when I put Mum's jewellery on the cat and it ran away. But he spoke to me very quietly. 'Why did you and Chris put on those dresses?' I told him that we were being witches from Shakespeare. Dad shook his head. 'What is wrong with you?'

That night my parents had this conversation:

Mum : It doesn't seem a healthy way to behave.

Dad : What?

Mum : Boys wearing dresses.

Dad : I don't want to discuss it any more.

Mum : Dotty thinks Dom is a transvestite.

Dad : I don't care what she thinks. She is a cow.

Mum : I feel sorry for her. She's all alone, apart from Chris. Rolly has been away for ages.

Dad : She's still a cow.

Mum : Rolly seems to be spending more and more time in Singapore lately.

Dad : So would I if I were married to Dotty Ball. I would move to the Antarctic.

Mum : He is such a nice man. I used to enjoy hearing him play French cricket with Chris.

Dad : You didn't enjoy it when the cricket ball went through the kitchen window and landed in your curry.

Mum : I wonder if he's ever put on a dress at school?

Dad : Chris or Dominic?

Mum : Dominic, of course. We don't know what he gets up to at school.

Dad : Go to sleep, Odette.

Mum : They'd probably tell us if he wore dresses, wouldn't they?

Dad : Yes, I think they would tell us if Dominic put on a ball gown at school.

I have no urge to wear a ball gown, so I suspect I am not a transvestite. However, it worries me that I have been thinking of Crystal in his underpants. Boys are not meant to think of things like this. Usually, I think boys in their underpants are the ugliest things in the whole world. I am trying to think of other things, like Ms Havercroft's lime-green fingernails. But I keep hearing Dad and Mum ask that question: 'What is wrong with you?'

Are you sure I'm not a looper?

xxD

P.S. I hope you didn't think it was rude of me to suggest you might want to send me money. But if you do decide to send me money, that would be quite all right.

P.P.S. Do not send anything to Christopher Ball at 16 Invermay Grove, Emerald Park. Although I trust Crystal, I do not trust Dotty. I will think of another snail-mail address.

P.P.P.S. I have nothing further to add.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : The Great Love of my Life

I am sure you are not a looper.

Your parents seem unhappy. They got married when they were very young. Perhaps too young.

When I first met him all those years ago, I liked Archibald (your dad). He seemed a gentle, honest soul. He started working at the printer when he was sixteen. He was only nineteen when he proposed to Dettol. (Dettol is your mum's nickname. It is a very strong antiseptic.) On St Valentine's Day, Archy printed a special card for Dettol, with a poem he'd written himself. It went like this:

My sweet Odette since first we met I think of you
each day, If you'd agree to marry me My heart would
fly away.

They got married three months later.

Even though Lu and I never married, Lu was the great love of my life. We were together for eight years. Sadly, Lu died during an accident while visiting a volcano on the island of Tanna, in Vanuatu. The volcano is called Yasur, which means 'Extremely Wise Old Bearded Man' or 'Bust', depending on which tribe you ask.

Your mother hates me because she believes I am a murderer. One day I will tell you the full story.

We had a minor earthquake recently which caused our postcode to disappear for a few days. Fortunately someone found it before we lost too many letters.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Ms Havercroft's Sparkly Buttons

I can't imagine my dad writing a poem. He doesn't seem to have many interests at all, apart from drinking beer and going on the Internet.

Why does Mum think you are a murderer?

I'm sorry Auntie Lu died, but happy you had such a good time together. Mum is not all that keen on Dad. She tells everyone she could have done better. They tend to agree with her.

Tonight was parent/teacher night with Ms Havercroft. My dad always hates these nights because it means he can't drink any beverage when he gets home from work. Also, Mum puts on a voice so that she sounds like Dotty Ball.

Dad had not met Ms Havercroft before and I think he was surprised that she was so beautiful and mystical. He was certainly impressed by the exquisite purple blouse she was wearing. He looked at it quite a lot. I think he must have been admiring the buttons, which were sparkly. Mum was keen to discuss why I had done so badly in the IQ test, among other things. I sat listening to her talk as though I wasn't there.

Mum : Dominic doesn't seem to have many friends.

Ms Havercroft : He and Christopher Ball are very close.

Mum : They are, yes.

Ms Havercroft : They do everything together.

Mum : They wore my dresses last week.

Dom : Mum, we were being witches.

Ms Havercroft : Well, you shouldn't wear your mother's dresses, Dominic.

Dom : I know that, Ms Havercroft. I'm sorry. We got carried away. My sister has magic powers so she can be quite persuasive.

Ms Havercroft : I wouldn't worry, Mrs Dear. A lot of boys do silly things like that.

Dad : I have never worn a dress.

Mum : We are not talking about you, Archy.

Dad : I was always very keen on football.

Mum : I wish you would play football with Dominic.

Dad : How can I? He keeps fainting.

Mum : He's just pretending.

Dad : I'm still quite fit actually. Do you exercise, Ms Havercroft?

Ms Havercroft : Yes, I try to.

Dad : I thought so. You look like you could be an aerobics teacher.

Mum : Archy, you are embarrassing Ms Havercroft.

Dad : Actually I did wear a dress once. Everyone in the school football team did it for charity. We all wore dresses with

balloons stuck up them and put on a show. We made very little money. I have never felt the urge to do it again.

Mum : You weren't on the school football team. You were the umpire.

Dad : It's an important role, Odette.

Mum : You are wasting Ms Havercroft's time.

Ms Havercroft : We still have a few minutes.

Mum : Dominic doesn't seem to be much of an achiever.

Ms Havercroft : I wouldn't say that at all.

Dom : Thank you, Ms Havercroft.

Ms Havercroft : It's true that he is not strong at maths. But he is making progress.

Dom : That is because you are such a good teacher.

Ms Havercroft : Thank you, Dominic.

Dad : I was always very good at maths. You have to be when you're an umpire.

Mum : Shut up, Archy. Do you think he should be on tablets?

Ms Havercroft : Are you talking about Dominic?

Mum : I am trying to. He doesn't seem able to concentrate.

Ms Havercroft : Dominic gets bored easily because he has a lively imagination. That is why he is good at art. I don't think he should be on tablets.

Dad : That is a nice picture over there. Did Dominic paint that?

Ms Havercroft : No, that was painted by a boy called D'artagnan.

Dad : Is it a landscape?

Ms Havercroft : No, it is two jelly babies in a toilet bowl.

Dad : Ah, yes. I see it now.

Ms Havercroft : Perhaps Dominic gets his artistic streak from you, Mr Dear?

Dad : Perhaps.

Ms Havercroft : Have you ever thought of going painting with Dominic?

Dad : Walls?

Ms Havercroft : Landscapes.

Dad : Good heavens no.

Ms Havercroft : Why not?

Dad : Well, it doesn't seem the sort of thing a father should do with a son.

Ms Havercroft : How do you feel about that, Dominic?

Dom : I think landscapes are boring.

Ms Havercroft : What would you prefer to paint?

Dom : Crystal in his underpants.

I have no idea what made me say that. I think I was just bored. I knew it would get me into trouble. My mum and dad were so embarrassed that they couldn't speak for a few moments.

Finally, Mum told Ms Havercroft that she wasn't at all happy about the way I was progressing. She didn't blame Ms Havercroft directly. She blamed it on the government. After Dad spent a few more seconds admiring Ms Havercroft's blouse, we left.

Mum and Dad didn't talk to me that night. I was in disgrace. I was also confused. Why on earth would I want to paint Crystal in his underpants? I wouldn't make any money from a painting like that.

Dale knew I was having a rough time and she felt sorry for me. 'This will make you strong,' she said, handing me a vanilla slice she had bought at the milk bar. Thoughtfully, she had stuck a dead cricket in the icing. I thanked Dale but said that I was too upset to eat and that I needed to be alone. She nodded then glided noiselessly back to her bedroom. After she

left, I pulled the dead cricket off and ate the vanilla slice, which tasted cold and hard. It was the taste of loneliness mixed with custard.

I threw the dead cricket out of my bedroom window, and hoped that it would reincarnate into something wonderful. Not a fat and troubled schoolboy. I yelled out to Buddha that I never wanted to think of Crystal in his underpants again. Dale told me to keep quiet. She was making up spells in the next room and I was distracting her.

Tomorrow I will either kill myself or go to the pool, depending on how I feel after breakfast.

xxD

P.S. Do you hate Mum?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: Ms Havercroft's Sparkly Buttons

I wish I could help you through this difficult time. I am glad that Ms Havercroft is supportive. And Dale obviously loves you too.

I do not hate your mother. When we were very young, your mum and I were best friends. We used to play together and sing. Your mother has a good voice and was always singing love songs. Sadly, she fell in love with someone who did not love her back. This can sometimes make a person bitter.

Things are still fine in Albury. The sheep frolic happily. I really shouldn't let them in the house.

xxP

P.S. Please don't make jokes about killing yourself.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Dad's Doll

So far I have not turned bitter but it is only Thursday. I have also not killed myself. I'm sorry I made such a bad joke.

Dad hates it that he is losing his hair. He has obtained a toupee or 'gentleman's hairpiece'. It is not a very good toupee and it looks like it's made of wombats' hair. I think my mum is allergic to it. She sneezes when Dad gets too close to her. No matter which way he wears it, it seems to be on backwards.

Dad has not paid for the toupee yet. The company allows you to wear it for four days. If you're not completely satisfied in that time, they will refund your money if you return the toupee. Mum wants Dad to return it immediately.

I had no idea that Mum could sing. Last night we had lambs' tongues for tea, which I hate because I get nightmares about little lambs that can't say 'Baah!'

I asked Mum if she would like to entertain us with a song after tea. She looked at me as if I had just asked her to lick a rhinoceros. ‘Don’t be stupid!’ she said. ‘Why would I want to sing a song?’ I didn’t want to mention our e-mails.

‘Your father should sing a song,’ said Mum, ‘since that wig he bought makes him look like a middle-aged pop star.’ Dad sighed, ‘I haven’t bought it yet. I’m going to put it through a series of rigorous tests before I decide.’

‘If one of the tests is making you look like a baboon then it has passed with flying colours,’ said Mum.

‘Oh, be quiet and eat your tongue,’ said Dad.

This afternoon Dad came with me to the pool. We have never been to the pool together. We both felt embarrassed when we got changed. Fortunately, Dad is not one of those men who likes to strut around the changing rooms with no clothes on. But he tried to get changed far too quickly and ended up hopping on one leg. Then he lost his balance and crashed into the lockers.

Dad wanted to see if his toupee would stay on underwater. Unfortunately, it passed the test, so he’s one step closer to buying it.

There were two pretty young women in the spa, which is alongside the pool. Dad said he had a sore back and that a spa was just what he needed. So he joined the women in the fiercely bubbling water. He tried to talk with them but they seemed incredibly shy.

Then a handsome man in green bathers stepped into the spa, too. I've seen him at the pool before. He's always in the advanced lane and he can do brilliant tumble turns. I've been watching him closely so I can copy his style.

The young ladies in the spa were no longer shy and started talking with the man in the green bathers. Dad climbed out of the spa and returned to the changing room.

When I finished my laps I walked into the changing room to find Dad drying off his hairpiece under the hand-blower. He looked sorry for himself. 'You don't need to wear a toupee, Dad,' I told him. 'You look all right without it.' Dad just gazed at his balding head in the mirror and said, 'I know what I look like, Dominic. The evidence is there in the mirror.'

xxD

P.S. Mum refuses to be in the same room as Dad's toupee. She says it is making her puff up. Dad has put it back in its box and left it in the hall. He's taking it back first thing on Monday.

P.P.S. Tonight I heard this coming from my parents' room:

Mum : What are you doing now, Archy?

Dad : These are called burpees. You're supposed to squat and then you kick your legs out like so.

Mum : Are you also supposed to kick the side table over like so?

Dad : I've hurt myself.

Mum : Why are you doing these burpees?

Dad : I have let my body go, Odette. My muscles are no longer well-defined. I found this out at the pool this afternoon.

Mum : I could have told you that and saved you four dollars fifty.

Dad : How could I have become like this?

Mum : It is a complete mystery to me, Archy. Though your love of beer and hatred of exercise may have something to do with it.

Dad : Dominic is quite a good swimmer.

Mum : I don't believe it.

Dad : I saw him.

Mum : Then why don't you and Dominic go swimming together?

Dad : We are not dolphins, Odette.

Mum : That is true. Nevertheless, it might be nice for you to do some physical activity with your son. I have only mentioned this ten thousand times so the message might not have sunk in yet.

Dad : From now on I intend to do a hundred burpees a day.

Mum : Well I hope you and Dominic don't do that together or the house will fall to bits.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : The Hazards of Helping People

It's Saturday morning.

After I e-mailed you last night, I went to sleep and dreamed that I was a dolphin swimming with another dolphin. The other dolphin turned into the man with the green bathers. I'm sure this is a bad thing to dream.

I suspect I will probably never get married. Therefore I have decided I will devote my life to helping the poor and the sick and the orphans, just like the Dolly Llama.

My first good deed was to make Dale a cardboard box. Dale likes it when I make boxes for her dolls. She buries them in the garden then digs them up after a few days. This turns them into zombies.

After giving Dale the box I went to Emerald Park Shopping Plaza to continue my good work. There were no sick people, poor people or orphans, unless they were in disguise.

In the carpark a lady was loading groceries from her shopping trolley into her car. She didn't seem sick or poor or orphaned, but the grocery bags looked heavy. I offered my assistance. She said she was all right and not to worry. But I helped her anyway. I picked up the biggest bag in her trolley. It was heavier than I expected and I dropped it. Dozens of tins of dog food went rolling under the cars.

I had to crawl under several cars before I found all the tins. When I returned them to the lady, I offered to take her shopping trolley back for her, but she told me to go away. Being helpful can be a thankless task.

I tried to think of other people to help. Then I remembered that I knew a handicapped person. This cheered me up and I headed straight for D'artagnan's house.

I had never seen D'artagnan's mother before and I was surprised that she looked so normal. After all, she has a strange pixie-like son who never speaks a word. I wasn't expecting her to be deformed, but I thought she would at least have eerie hair. However, D'artagnan's mum looked like mine. She was mum-shaped. 'Can I please see D'artagnan?' I asked. D'artagnan's mum called out to her strange son. He appeared at the doorway a few moments later, wearing his usual

blank expression. ‘Hello, D’artagnan,’ I said. ‘Can I come inside?’ His mum replied, ‘I would prefer it if you both played outside.’

Could this be why D’artagnan never spoke? Was there some evil secret within the house? As we went round the side of the house I kept peering through the windows to see if there were any evil secrets. All I saw was a very ugly green settee. It wasn’t evil enough to stop someone speaking.

There was a swing in the backyard that was designed for young kids, but D’artagnan could still fit in it, even though he is in Year Seven. It was one of those horrible swings that doesn’t have chains, but steel bars. I was embarrassed to see that D’artagnan wanted to play on it, but I realised that if I was going to devote my life to helping people I would have to get used to embarrassment. So I pushed him on the swing. As I did so, I asked him a few questions in an effort to make him speak. ‘How are you today?’ I asked. D’artagnan said nothing. ‘I notice you have a green settee,’ I said. Once again D’artagnan said nothing as he swung higher and higher. I caught his mum looking through the kitchen window at us. There was definitely something mysterious about the house. I should probably inform the police.

D’artagnan got bored with the swing and hopped off. He kept looking at me, then at the swing. I realised he wanted me to sit on it. Helpfully, I did so. I got stuck. The stupid swing was too small and I got jammed between the two steel bars. D’artagnan’s

mother appeared. She told me to sit still, then she grabbed hold of the bars to steady the swing. After some pulling and shoving we managed to release me. I thanked D'artagnan and his mum, then explained that I had to be off to help some other people.

When I arrived home I wandered into the kitchen to look for Jam Fancies. Mum saw me and asked me what I had been doing. Before I could answer she marched me straight into the bathroom. I saw in the mirror that I was covered in grease from crawling under cars to fetch the tins of dog food. Mum said I had ruined a perfectly good pair of K-mart pants and I was an idiot. No wonder D'artagnan's mum wouldn't let me in the house.

My first day of helping people has been a disaster.

xxD

P.S. My father has changed his reading habits lately.

Mum : What is that magazine you're reading?

Dad : It's called Men's Health.

Mum : What is it about exactly?

Dad : Boiled cabbage and trombones.

Mum : Don't try to be funny.

Dad : Well, what do you think a magazine called Men's Health would be about?

Mum : I'm just surprised to see you reading something like that.

Dad : It is educational. It's also how I learned to do burpees.

Mum : I notice it has a naked man on the cover.

Dad : He is wearing shorts, Odette. And he is in black and white so that makes it tasteful.

Mum : They do that with a computer.

Dad : What?

Mum : All those bulges and things.

Dad : No, Odette, that is the natural male form. He is just a very fit man. And if I do all the exercises in this magazine I could look like him one day.

Mum : Will you be attending the Gay Mardi Gras?

Dad : I expect so. Now please stop reading over my shoulder.

Mum : Goodness! There is an article about how to make your lady happy.

Dad : Yes, but otherwise it's quite a good magazine.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: The Hazards of Helping People

It is difficult to assist people if they do not want or require your assistance. Don't help old ladies cross the road unless they really want to.

Some people think they are being helpful by knocking on your door first thing in the morning and teaching you about Jesus. But the Buddha says you must not try to teach people anything unless you are invited.

Sometimes the most helpful thing you can do for a person is leave them be.

I would not be worried by your dream about the dolphin turning into the man with the green bathers. It might even help you with your tumble turns.

Have you thought of a snail-mail address where I can send you something?

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : The Pickle of Doom

My parents have gone to visit Great Auntie Joy. She has been in hospital for a while now, because she slid on a hamburger pickle that someone had thrown onto the footpath. Poor Great Auntie Joy had to get an artificial hip, just because someone didn't like their pickle. It's probably one of the most serious hamburger-related injuries you can get.

Mum and Dad would not let us come with them to the hospital. Last time we went, Dale stole a bag of blood. She stuffed it down her shirt and it burst in the car on the way home.

Just before Mum and Dad left this morning, they told us to stay out of trouble. Dale and I are both nearly adults but we're treated like kids. King Tutankhamen was only twelve when he ruled Egypt. I told this to Dad. He replied that King Tutankhamen probably didn't go round bursting bags of blood all over the car.

I wanted to visit Crystal but he had gone to church. He's the only boy I know who does this. He used to go with his dad, before Rolly started working in Singapore. I know what Crystal prays for, but I can't tell you.

There is a statue of Jesus in our garage. We don't pray to it. We have the statue because the church made my dad buy it.

One morning at Sunday school our teacher was running late. I took over the class because some of the younger kids were messing around. I decided to act out a story from the Bible for them. I got on my knees and pretended to be a leper. I hobbled towards the statue of Jesus so that I could be cured and the class would see a miracle being performed. Unfortunately, I knelt on a drawing pin. It hurt so much that I jumped up and knocked Jesus over. His head came off.

Since the church made us pay for a new statue, Dad insisted that we keep the old one. He stuck the head back on with glue and put it in the front garden with a gnome, until Dotty complained and Mum made us put Jesus in the garage.

Thanks for your advice, but I am still determined to help people. After I made a few more burial boxes for Dale's dolls, I decided to do my good deeds elsewhere.

I went to Burridge's Hotel to help the poor old people who play the poker machines until they wet themselves. The inside of the hotel was dark and miserable. There were only four poker machines and not one old person sitting at any of them. I waited patiently for the old people to arrive but they never did.

Finally, the barman came over and asked how old I was. I said eighteen, but that I had stunted growth because of passive smoking. He told me to get lost.

When I got home from Burridge's Hotel, Crystal and Dale were in the front garden. Crystal had his shirt off and he'd just finished digging a hole. Dale solemnly lowered a box into the hole and Crystal started to fill it up again.

'Hi, Dom,' said Crystal. 'Where have you been?' I explained I had been to the pub. 'Chris has been helping me,' said Dale. 'We've made six zombies.' I looked around the garden

and saw that there were little piles of freshly dug earth everywhere. Crystal must have spent most of the afternoon with Dale. I felt jealous. They had also been playing with the hose. Dale's clothes were soaked.

It was getting dark so Crystal went off home. He pulled on his shirt and climbed through the hole in the fence. Moments later my parents returned from the hospital.

Dad demanded to know what had happened to the garden. Dale explained that Crystal had dug the holes so she could bury her dollies. Dad yelled over the fence, 'This is a public announcement. Christopher Ball is a silly bugger.'

Later on, Dotty Ball knocked on our front door. My father answered.

Dad : Hello, Dotty. This is a nice surprise.

Dotty : Archibald, I would prefer it if you would not yell obscenities over the fence.

Dad : I did not yell obscenities, I merely yelled that Christopher Ball is a silly bugger.

Dotty : That is an obscene word.

Dad : I cannot help it if you have an obscene word for a surname.

Dotty : I was referring to the word 'bugger'.

Dad : Have you seen what your son has done to my garden?

Dotty : Dale asked him to do it.

Dad : Oh well, that's all right then. If I asked Christopher to hack off his head do you think he might do that too?

Dotty : Perhaps it would be better if I have a word with Odette, since I am here on a serious matter?

Dad : I think my wife is still alive. Ah yes, here she is now.

Mum : Hello Dotty.

Dotty : Odette, you're limping.

Mum : I'm all right.

Dotty : What happened?

Dad : There was a hole in the garden and she twisted her ankle.

Dotty : Oh, I am sorry.

Dad : I can't think where the hole came from. It wasn't there this morning.

Mum : Be quiet, Archy. Would you like to come in, Dotty?

Dotty : No, thank you.

Dad : Please do. I'm afraid we don't have an Italian toilet like yours. Still, I expect you'll manage.

Dotty : I will come back later when Archy is in a better mood.

Dad : I will never be in a better mood.

Mum : Is there a problem, Dotty?

Dotty : I'm afraid I have some grave news. Your son Dominic went to the pub today.

Mum : What?

Dotty : Christopher told me that Dominic went to the pub.

Dad : That isn't like Dominic.

Dotty : I am glad to hear it.

Dad : Normally he goes on Saturday.

Mum : Archy, this is very serious indeed.

Dad : Of course it isn't. She's making it up. She's trying to get Chris off the hook.

Dotty : I do not tell lies, Archibald. I suggest you ask Dominic what he was doing all afternoon while you two were off enjoying your day.

Dad : We were not enjoying our day, we were visiting an old lady with an artificial hip.

Dotty : It might not hurt to keep a closer eye on your children.

Mum : Thank you for telling us, Dotty.

Dotty : I will leave now.

Dad : I do hope you manage to get home without falling down a mineshaft. And if I see Christopher in my garden again I will punch him in the nose. It's a very large nose. I'm sure I wouldn't miss.

The door slammed shut. Mum said to Dad that she hoped he was happy. Dad replied that he had certainly cheered himself up.

xxD

P.S. If I do not become normal soon I may have to become a Buddhist monk. You must shave your head but this does not bother me, since I have problem hair. You are also not allowed to eat anything after midday, so I would probably have to pig out on Jam Fancies all morning.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Dad's Wig Disappears

You have not replied to my last e-mail yet, but I have some important news.

I did not go to school this morning as there was a slight emergency. Dad is supposed to take the toupee back today or he has to pay for it. When he looked for it he couldn't find it anywhere. He'd left it in the box in the hallway, and somehow it had disappeared.

We soon realised that Crystal and Dale had been so busy burying dollies in boxes yesterday afternoon that an unfortunate mix-up must have occurred.

Dad hammered on Dotty's door and demanded to see Crystal. Dotty slammed the door in his face.

Dad could get no sense out of Dale in relation to the toupee. She is practically unconscious, as she has a terrible cold from wearing wet clothes all yesterday afternoon. Furiously, Dad started digging up the garden. I offered to help and he handed me a spade. It's the first time I've ever done anything physical with him.

Mum came out every few minutes to remind us that the toupee was worth a thousand dollars, just in case we forgot. Dad snapped at Mum that we wouldn't be in this mess if she hadn't been allergic to every bloody thing in the universe. Mum replied that Dad should have a word with me about a certain matter that Dotty had brought up last night.

We unearthed another box. This one contained a teddy bear but no gentlemen's hairpiece. If I went to school and spoke with Crystal, I might find out where the toupee was buried. But I was enjoying staying away from school and helping

Dad with his dilemma. I told him I was sorry that all this had happened. I should have been around to keep a closer eye on Dale. That was when he brought up the certain matter.

Dad : Dominic, did you go to the pub yesterday?

Dom : Yes, I did.

Dad : I'm very disappointed in you.

Dom : I'm sorry.

Dad : Did they serve you alcoholic beverages?

Dom : I didn't go there to buy alcoholic beverages. I went to help the old people who play the poker machines.

Dad : Oh, I see. Does this have anything to do with your Buddhism?

Dom : Yes, it does.

Dad : Do you think you could ask Buddha to find my toupee?

Dom : I already have.

Dad : He's taking his time about it.

Dom : He has a lot of people to help.

Dad : I'm sure they are not as desperate as we are.

Dom : Perhaps we should pray to Jesus in the garage as well?

Dad : I don't think there's much point. It's never worked for me before.

Dom : Dad, why do you go to the pub?

Dad : It's a magical place, Dominic. A wonderland.

Dom : It smells.

Dad : You will understand when you're older.

Dom : Buddha says it's bad to drink too much beer.

Dad : Buddha does not have a mortgage or Dotty Ball for a neighbour.

We dug up six boxes. None of them contained the toupee. I had never seen my dad look sadder. Mum said that I would have to go to school or the police would come around. She wrote me a note to hand to Ms Havercroft:

Please excuse Dominic's lateness today. He had to spend the morning trying to dig up his father's wig.
O. Dear.

At school I asked Crystal if he could remember burying the toupee. He said he had used the toupee box for a teddy bear, but he had not buried the toupee

– he'd stuck it on the statue in the garage. If Dad and I had gone into the garage to ask Jesus for help, we would have found the toupee.

At the end of the day, Dad was happy to get the money back. But unhappy to realise that Jesus looked better in the toupee than he did.

xxD

P.S. Please send all parcels to D'artagnan's house. He lives at 7 Brien Court, Emerald Park. I have explained to him that he may soon be receiving an important package from Albury and that he must bring it straight to me. I think he understood, though, of course, he didn't say anything. I wonder why his parents called him D'artagnan? It's the worst name in the world, except for Dotty.

P.P.S. I went for a swim tonight. You're right. My tumble-turns are better.

P.P.P.S. Is it all right to pray to Jesus and Buddha? I told Crystal he should use Buddha as a back-up, in case Jesus doesn't give him what he wants.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Stress Relief and Chickens

Your life seems quite stressful. Buddhist meditation might help. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing. Do not do this while you are riding a bike.

When you are older you might find that living in the country is more relaxing than city life. I certainly would recommend it over going to the pub. Despite what your father says, the pub is not a wonderland, especially on karaoke night.

It probably isn't a good idea to pray to both Jesus and the Buddha. That is being greedy. Crystal has chosen Jesus and that is perfectly fine. One day I hope you will tell me what it is that Crystal prays for.

Meanwhile I am making a present for you. I know you will like it.

The daffodils are out. There are plenty of cod in the river. The chickens on the Luxmores' farm have been riding mopeds through the haystacks.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : ELISA!!!!

I have a girlfriend!

I have learned what I know about girls from Crystal. He has seen five hundred ladies in bathers, so he is quite experienced. They are on a computer diskette that came with a sports magazine. His mum doesn't know he has it. I was amazed you could fit so many ladies on one diskette. Crystal loves looking at the diskette, although I usually get bored and start playing with my hair. That's because the ladies don't look mystical or dignified like Ms Havercroft.

Crystal says he woke up one morning and couldn't stop thinking about girls. Perhaps this has happened to me, but in a more complex and interesting way?

A new girl came to our school this week. Her name is Elisa Flett and she comes from America, from a city called Punxsutawney. It's famous for its groundhogs, furry burrowing creatures with big teeth.

Elisa has very, very blue eyes. She is thin and has teeth like a groundhog and loves horses. She is not deeply mysterious like Ms Havercroft, but she is American, and that makes her interesting.

I talked to her at morning recess. I'd already worked out what we would discuss. First, I would impress her because I knew how to spell Punxsutawney. We would then move on to the hole in the ozone layer, then shopping for furniture and getting married.

Because I had planned the whole conversation, I surprised myself by saying Om. (As you probably know, Buddhists say Om to relax. Ms Havercroft once explained to me that Buddhists say Om so that they can reach a hire plane. I told Mum she should try saying Om. She told me to shut up.)

After I said Om to Elisa Flett she looked at me as though my nose had exploded. 'I'm a Buddhist,' I explained. 'We go Om. We can't help ourselves.' Elisa obviously thought I was insane. How could I prove I was actually complex and interesting? 'Buddhists believe people can turn into horses,' I said desperately. 'If you're a good person, you can turn

into a good horse.’ Elisa was fascinated, so I added, ‘I’m sure you will be an excellent horse, and not just because of your teeth.’

‘I would like to be an Arab,’ she said.

I gathered this must be a type of horse. ‘So would I, definitely!’ I nodded. ‘More than anything I would like to be an Arab.’ Elisa’s eyes really were the deepest blue, and one of them had tiny flecks of purple in it.

That night I spent ages on the Internet, finding out as much as possible about horses. Dad was desperate to get on the Internet and do the banking. That’s what he says he’s doing. It takes Dad an hour a night to do the banking. This is too long, as we don’t have any money.

The next day at school my head was full of the stuff I’d learned about horses. I couldn’t wait to show off to Elisa Flett. I’d memorised that horses were introduced to Mesopotamia from Asia in 2000 B.C., although this would be difficult to work into a conversation.

At lunch I sat next to Elisa. I didn’t go Om. I spoke about strangles and other horse diseases. I told her I intended to devote my life to curing sick horses. Because of this, she invited me round to her place on Tuesday after school. I think about Elisa every time I see a picture of a horse, even an ugly one. I’m sure this means I’m falling in love with her.

You wrote that Auntie Lu was the great love of your life. I would like to know what the symptoms of true love are. So far I have had a dry throat and dizzy spells, though this also happens when I'm made to play football.

xxD

P.S. Today it was quite warm. Crystal came to the pool with me. I saw him put on his bathers and I didn't experience any peculiar feelings at all. This must be because of my enormous love for Elisa.

P.P.S. Crystal's hair is now green. It suits him.

P.P.P.S. I will tell you what Crystal prays for if you tell me why Mum thinks you are a murderer.

P.P.P.P.S. What is a moped?

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Dale's Evil Eye

Although you have not replied to my last e-mail yet I have more news.

Dale is angry with me. Now that her cold has gone she's planning a witch picnic in the local cemetery. She has been busy making refreshments, such as snail jelly and other disgusting food to eat on the graves. Because Dale has no close friends apart from me, I promised I would come with her. I invited Crystal as

well, but he said that, unfortunately, he had football training. And also he didn't want to eat awful food in a place full of dead people.

This evening I told Dale I would not be able to come because I would be having a love affair with Elisa Flett on the day of her witch picnic. Dale has not spoken to me since, though she has given me the evil eye. She does this by closing one eye and glaring at me with the other. Now she has a headache.

Tonight my parents' conversation went like this:

Mum : Archy, what about fishing?
Dominic might like fishing.

Dad : He will hate it. You have to whack the fish on the head. He will cry.

Mum : I was speaking with Dotty recently.

Dad : I wish someone would whack her on the head.

Mum : She says that Rolly and Chris quite enjoyed fishing together.

Dad : I'm not taking Dominic fishing!
Can you imagine us stuck together for hours in a boat? What would we talk about? Japanese cartoons? Princess Di? Settees?

Mum : You could talk about girlfriends.
Find out if he's got a crush on someone.

Dad : Dominic and I have already talked about this.

Mum : When?

Dad : At some stage in the last year or so. He said he's in love with Ms Havercroft. I can't say I blame him.

Mum : I beg your pardon?

Dad : Nothing.

Mum : Have you told him the facts of life? He used to think babies come from K-mart.

Dad : I told him they don't.

Mum : Why are you making a face?

Dad : Because I have terrible back pain.

Mum : It's probably from digging all those holes in the garden.

Dad : Good heavens, do you think there might be a link?

Mum : At least it's good to see you doing something physical with Dominic.

Dad : Yes it was wonderful to spend all those hours with him, digging up dolls.

Mum : Did you ask him about the pub?

Dad : He said he went there to help people.

Mum : Well, I suppose that's better than being a junior alcoholic.

Dad : Now that I've spoken with Dominic, do you think you might speak with Dale?

Mum : What about?

Dad : Oh, I don't know. Why don't you ask her to stop being a witch? Yes, that would be a good thing to talk about.

Mum : I have tried.

Dad : Try harder. She gave me a biscuit last night. It had earwigs in it.

Mum : I hardly think Dale is as big a problem as Dominic.

Dad : You aren't the one who ate the biscuit.

xxD

P.S. What is a crush?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Crushes

A crush is when you think you have fallen head-over-heels in love with someone but you really haven't. It's easy to do when you're young and complex and interesting.

A moped is a small motorbike.

I will be brave now. You may not be truly in love with Elisa. It may be just a crush. Mind you, I have been known to be wrong. I hope your visit to Elisa's house goes well.

I am sorry your parents are still not getting on. Your grandparents (my mum and dad) would argue so much that they couldn't bear to be in the same room as each other. They would pretend to forget each other's names and call each other 'Thing'. Your parents are not as bad as this, but I think they might need some help to work out their problems.

Yesterday I was shopping with Bernie. We wanted to buy a colander. In the department store, a rude woman swore and pushed by us on the escalator. She got part of her dress caught on the escalator step and it ripped right off. Sometimes karma works very quickly.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Re: Crushes

Your e-mail gave me an idea for a TV movie:

Escalator of Horror!

Why are people mysteriously disappearing from K-mart? Don't go down to the bargain basement!

I don't think anyone will be able to sort out my parents' problems. Mum still keeps on at Dad to do physical things with me. He says there's no point, because all

I want to do is watch TV or look up horses. He meant on the Internet, but I suspect Mum now thinks I am a horse pervert.

In one of my earlier e-mails I wrote that Buddhists go Om in order to reach a hire plane. This is wrong. I should have written 'higher plane'. Please tell me when I make mistakes or I will never be a TV producer. I also wrote Dolly Llama instead of Dalai Lama, but that was supposed to be a joke.

I'm in love with Elisa Flett. This is not just a crush. I'm very nervous about my romantic encounter on Tuesday and probably won't be able to sleep tonight.

xxD

P.S. Last night Dad told Mum that he wants to arrange another meeting with Ms Havercroft. He obviously still thinks I'm mental. Here's a conversation my parents are unlikely to have:

Mum : Dominic is wonderful.

Dad : He is wonderful, isn't he?

Mum : I really appreciate the way he is so smart with words.

Dad : I like his clever comments about TV shows.

Mum : One day he will be famous.

Dad : I wouldn't be at all surprised if he marries a glamorous film star.

Mum : Possibly several.

Dad : Good heavens, here are Isabella Rossellini and beautiful Princess Di.

Isabella Rossellini : Hello Mr and Mrs Dear.

Dad : Hello, Isabella. Hello, Your Late Royal Highness.

Princess Di : I hope you don't mind us dropping in like this.

Mum : Of course not, Your Highness. I am sorry about the dust on the television.

Princess Di : Oh don't worry about that. We are not here to watch television.

Isabella Rossellini : We are here to meet your son, Dominic.

Princess Di : We have brought quite a lot of Buddhist monks with us.

Mum : So I see. They are everywhere. I hope there are enough Jam Fancies to go around.

Dad : Why are they here, Your Highness?

Princess Di : They believe that Dominic may be the reincarnation of a great Buddhist teacher from Bhutan.

Mum : That is quite likely.

Dad : Why are the monks pointing at me and laughing?

Isabella Rossellini : They believe you may be the reincarnation of a garden slug called Sharon.

Mum : That is also quite likely.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : The Worst Date in the World

My date with Elisa Flett was stressful.

I wanted to buy a present for her as it is possible that we will soon be engaged. At Emerald Park Shopping Plaza I looked at several diamond rings. The young sales assistant

let me try on one of the rings. Then he had to use soap to get it off. An older sales assistant appeared, frowned, then told me that the ring was worth three thousand five hundred dollars. I nodded and said I would return later.

My price limit was ten dollars. I bought a small box of chocolates with a horse on the lid.

Mum was in the kitchen sneezing from her latest allergy – oxygen – when she saw me creep in with the chocolates. She asked me why I had bought them and I told her that I was head-over-heels in love with a girl. Mum wanted to know more about this girl. Was she normal? Was she human? Did she exist? I told Mum she was American, that her name was Elisa Flett and that I deeply loved everything about her, although I hadn't made my mind up about her teeth yet.

Ten minutes later I snuck into Crystal's bedroom to get some advice on how to have a successful date with Elisa. (I must be growing fatter because it is getting harder for me to climb through his bedroom window.)

Crystal told me that the most important thing is appearance. Before he became handsome, girls didn't notice Crystal. Now, they are jumping onto him out of trees. Crystal's idea that I become handsome was excellent, but I was seeing Elisa Flett at four o'clock, and I probably wouldn't get handsome in the next half-hour. Crystal said I had to wear the right clothes. Elisa is from America. She wouldn't be impressed by K-Mart clothes.

Crystal suggested I wear trendy jeans, a baseball cap and a denim jacket. I didn't own any of these things. But Crystal said I could borrow whatever I wanted from his wardrobe.

I tried on several pairs of Crystal's jeans until I found some that fitted perfectly, provided I breathed in very deeply and left the top button undone. I chose a red tee-shirt with the number 66 on it. This is the number of the first highway to go across America. Crystal didn't know that. He might know about girls, but at least I know about highways.

The shirt smelled friendly. It had never occurred to me before that Crystal had a special smell, and one that I liked. I started to worry that I might be

having peculiar feelings about Crystal again. Then I remembered Elisa's pretty blue-and-purple eye and felt better.

Crystal lent me a baseball cap with the words 'Red Sox' written on it. For such an advanced race, it's amazing how bad Americans are at spelling.

I gazed in Crystal's bedroom mirror. I looked pretty good. Now all I needed was a denim jacket. And there in Crystal's wardrobe was the perfect one. It even had a horse on it! I put it on, then stuffed the little box of chocolates in one of the deep pockets.

When Crystal saw the box he wanted a chocolate. I owed him for helping me and it wouldn't hurt if he ate one. So I held out the box and he ate three. Because I was feeling nervous about seeing Elisa, I also ate one. And Crystal ate another one. The chocolates were now becoming slightly sticky so I thought I should set off for Elisa's house.

As I walked up Invermay Grove, Crystal's jeans felt tight again. I undid the second button. If I kept the jacket buttoned up tight and pulled down no one would realise my fly was half-open.

I heard Elisa call out my name. Because she is American, she pronounced it 'Duminic.' She was walking her big pet dog. Elisa said, 'Duminic, I didn't recognise you in all those clothes.' 'This is how I normally dress when I am not at school,' I said. 'I own twenty jackets with horses on.' Elisa said, 'Duminic, this is my pet dug. His name is Muffy.'

Because of Elisa's accent I wasn't sure if the dog's name was Muffy or Moffy. So I just said, 'Hello, big dog.' 'Muffy likes you, Duminic,' said Elisa. 'Please call me Dom,' I replied. 'Okay, Dum,' said Elisa.

Suddenly, the big dog jumped on me. Muffy (or Moffy) had huge teeth. Elisa said, 'He doesn't bite. Don't be nervous.' It's hard not to be nervous when a huge dog is about to eat your face. Elisa yanked the dog's choke-chain and Muffy/Moffy jumped down. Crystal's jacket was covered in monster paw prints. I bribed the stupid dog into liking me by throwing it a few chocolates when Elisa wasn't looking.

'Aren't you hut?' asked Elisa. It took me a moment to translate. 'I don't feel the heat,' I replied, sweating. 'I'm like an Arab.' Elisa's eyes lit up, especially her left one. 'Do you want to see my riding school photos?' I nodded and accidentally flicked some sweat at her.

Elisa's house wasn't like proper houses. The outside was modern and black. Elisa warned me not to fall in the reflecting pool in the front garden. I had never seen a reflecting pool before, but I told her that we also had one at home.

Inside, the walls were white and modern, and so was the carpet. We had to take our shoes off. I wished I'd borrowed a pair of socks from Crystal. Mine had little elephants and were definitely not modern. They had been a present from Great Auntie Joy who had slipped on the pickle.

A shadow fell over me. I looked up and nearly fainted. Towering over me was the most glamorous woman I had ever seen. This was Elisa Flett's mother. Ms Havercroft may be dark and mystical, but Elisa's mother was like a film star, in an amazing long white dress. 'Well, hello, Duminic!' she said, extending a perfectly manicured hand.

I staggered to my feet and remembered the chocolates. I took out the box and presented it to Elisa, quickly putting my hand back into my pocket to hold my pants up. 'Chuckolates!' said Elisa's mum. Elisa went crazy about the horse on the box. Apparently it was a rare breed. I nodded, and this time I flicked sweat onto Elisa's mum. 'Excellent fetlocks, aren't they?' I said.

When Elisa took the lid off the box she was surprised to find nothing in there except a few bits of foil. I realised I'd given the last of the chocolates to Muffy/Moffy. 'Elisa, thank Duminic for the lovely bux,' said Mrs Flett.

For the next two hours I sat on Elisa Flett's bed and looked at 1,00000000000000000000 photos of Elisa sitting on horses. Even though I was boiling hot I couldn't remove the baseball cap because I knew my hair would look even worse than Dad's toupee. I told Elisa I thought her mum was beautiful. It was easy to see where Elisa got her looks, especially her eye. Elisa told me that people said she looked more like her dad, who has big buck teeth. I said, 'No, no, not at all.'

When it was time for me to leave, I thanked Elisa and beautiful Mrs Flett for having me. Elisa's mum said, 'Oh please, call me Pamela!', which I immediately started doing. 'Thank you, Pamela. You have a very nice house indeed, Pamela,' I said. As I pulled on my shoes, I thought I might kiss Elisa romantically on the cheek. But I stood up too quickly and I knocked her chin, so it wasn't the right time to be romantic.

Full of dreamy thoughts about Elisa and her glamorous mum, I stepped out into their modern front garden. I fell headlong into the reflecting pool. Moments later, a man with very big buck teeth appeared, complaining that some idiot had fed the dog 'chuckolates' and it was throwing up.

This experience proves it's impossible to die from embarrassment. I keep thinking of Elisa Flett. She hasn't tried to contact me. She's probably in shock.

I haven't given Crystal his clothes back yet, either. I hid them in a garbage bag as soon as I got home. I didn't want my parents to see me wearing wet clothes that belonged to Crystal.

When Crystal asked how my date went, I said that it had gone very well indeed, except he would have to wait to get his clothes back.

xxD

P.S. Do American Buddhists say Um? You don't have to answer this.

P.P.S. I have a terrible feeling Muffy/Moffy might have vomited into the reflecting pool.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: The Worst Date in the World

I am sorry to read about your unfortunate experience with the reflecting pool.

At the moment I am looking after my friend Bernie, who has been injured. This is what happened.

I caught some yabbies yesterday afternoon and brought them home in a bucket. As I boiled the water to cook them, I felt guilty about trying to kill the poor creatures. Night had fallen so it was too late to return them to the Murray. The bucket was too cramped for the yabbies, so I decided to run the bath and put them in the tub. I would return them to the river the next morning.

Bernie dropped in later and ended up staying the night. He has bad eyesight, owing to a strange childhood accident. The next morning he stepped into the bathtub to take a shower. Moments later he leapt out with two yabbies attached to his feet. Trying to get them off, he slipped backwards onto a shampoo bottle. We had to call a doctor.

Anyone can be clumsy. It does not necessarily mean you are in love. I tripped over the cat once but we are just good friends.

xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : An Unfixable Problem

Thank you for your wise advice.

Crystal and I went to the pool today. When he changed, he did it under his towel. So did I.

Even though it has been a stressful time, I'm sure that I am nearly normal now, and still in love with Elisa.

My dad is doing a hundred sit-ups a day, along with press-ups and burpees. He spends a lot of time looking at himself in the mirror. I hope he does not start taking off his shirt like Crystal.

This is the conversation my parents had tonight. I'm making a special effort to listen to them now. I'm hoping I will find out why Mum thinks you are a murderer, since you won't tell me.

Mum : Dominic says he has a girlfriend.

Dad : Oh, good.

Mum : You don't sound excited.

Dad : It's not Isabella Rossellini again?

Mum : He says this one's real.

Dad : Well, that's an improvement.

Mum : She's American.

Dad : Oh, dear.

Mum : Did you organise a meeting with Dominic's teacher?

Dad : What?

Mum : You said that you were going to arrange a meeting with Ms Havercroft.

Dad : Ah, yes. I spoke with her on the phone.

Mum : Good. I'm tired of being the one that does everything around here.

Dad : She was very worried about Dominic. She had a pained expression on her face.

Mum : I thought it was a phone call.

Dad : She told me on the phone that she had a pained expression on her face.

Mum : What else did she say?

Dad : About Dominic?

Mum : Yes, of course about Dominic.

Dad : She said he was a bit of a problem.

Mum : Were those her very words?

Dad : Yes, they were.

Mum : So when are we going to have the meeting?

Dad : We didn't organise one. She said there was no need.

Mum : But I thought she said Dominic was a bit of a problem?

Dad : Yes, but there are some problems that are unfixable.

I'm devastated that Ms Havercroft thinks I'm an unfixable problem. It certainly doesn't sound like the sort of thing Ms Havercroft would say. But why would my father lie about something like that?

xxD

P.S. Please tell me more about Bernie, especially the strange childhood accident.

P.P.S. Have you sent me anything yet? D'artagnan has not given me anything except pictures of dinosaurs that he has drawn. They are quite good, especially the iguanodon.

P.P.P.S. I asked Dad what a colander is. He said I didn't need to know and not to ask him questions like that again. Is it rude?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: An Unfixable Problem

A colander is not rude. It is a large strainer.

Your experience with Elisa may be helpful to you when you become a famous TV producer.

To help you find true love I am sending you a gemstone called an amethyst, which I tumbled myself. The ancient Romans believed that wearing an amethyst would make people fall in love with you. They also

believed that watching lions eat people was a pleasant way to pass the afternoon, so they might have been wrong about the amethyst.

Your mother thinks I am a murderer because she is bitter.

Bernie is my best friend and he is all the things a best friend should be. He is a good talker, he is a good listener, he is interesting and funny. He is also slightly cross-eyed because a cockatoo dropped a pine cone on his head when he was a boy. We don't believe the cockatoo did it deliberately.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : My Sister is a Moron

Here is my latest idea for a TV show:

Lights, Camera, Whoops!

Clumsy people are given difficult tasks such as cake decorating or brain surgery with hilarious results.

Thank you for the package you sent. D'artagnan gave it to me today. I thanked him and patted him on the head. It's hard to communicate with someone who doesn't talk.

Thank you also for the beautiful purple gemstone. It's now inside my father. This is how it happened.

I checked on the Internet and you're right about the amethyst stone. (I know you don't make up stuff, I was just curious.) The Romans believed that, apart from making people fall in love, amethyst stones could stop people getting drunk.

I told Dale about the amethyst and its special powers because I thought a witch should know this. That night Dad got a surprise when he gulped down his beer. He'd swallowed something odd. Dale finally admitted to me that she'd put my amethyst in Dad's stubby. I'm furious with her.

Later that night Dad was drunk and so far no one has fallen in love with him, so the Romans were wrong. I'm sorry that the amethyst is in Dad, especially as you tumbled it yourself. (What does this mean, exactly?) My dad does not realise he contains a small gemstone. Should I tell him? Will it make him sick? Will he die? I will wait patiently for your answer.

Ms Havercroft is still the most mystical and wonderful lady in the whole world. This morning she asked D'artagnan and me to come out to the front of the class and draw a mural on the blackboard. We are studying coal so we drew a picture of an old-fashioned coalmine. It's very difficult to draw something that's black on something that's also black. There were so many different coloured pieces of chalk that I was tempted to draw some beach umbrellas to brighten things up, but I knew that old-fashioned coalmines didn't have beach umbrellas.

Ms Havercroft keeps her chalk in superb condition. It's neatly arranged in its box like the colours of the rainbow, from dark purple through to red. I have seen her spend a lot of time doing this. She is almost as proud of her chalk as she is of her magnificent clothes.

The mural took us ten minutes to draw. D'artagnan and I work well together. As usual, D'artagnan did a better job than I did, but Ms Havercroft said we were both good artists and she made everyone in the class clap. I turned and saw Elisa Flett in the front row, clapping with her exotic American hands.

I'm definitely still in love with Elisa Flett and possibly even her mum. Pamela Flett is the most romantic name I have ever heard. I wish I hadn't made their dog vomit. xxD

P.S. Dad was obviously fibbing when he said that Ms Havercroft called me an unfixable problem. She adores me.

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Pam Flett

'Tumbling' is a way of smoothing the rough edges off a gemstone so that it can be worn as a brooch or, in the case of your amethyst, swallowed.

I do not think the stone will make your father sick, as it was a small one. However, keep an eye on him. As the Buddha says, all actions have consequences. Though I don't think the Buddha has ever said anything about what happens if your dad swallows an amethyst.

I confess I do not think Pamela Flett's name is terribly romantic. I wonder if she realises that she is a pamphlet?

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Heartbreak

Things are very bad at the moment.

Today we went on a school excursion to look at coal. Unfortunately, Ms Havercroft didn't come. I could have talked to her about Buddhism or where she buys her nail varnish. Instead we had Mr Badourian.

As we boarded the bus, I gave Elisa a meaningful look. She didn't seem to notice. (I must work on my meaningful looks.) Perhaps she was too embarrassed to speak to me after the reflecting pool nightmare? I hoped to see a horse on the trip so that I could impress her with my knowledge of horse care and fetlocks.

I sat next to Crystal on the bus. As usual he kept the space free for me. He didn't even complain when I told him that Dad had accidentally put the green bag containing his damp clothes out for the garbage collectors.

I knew that at some stage Crystal would take off his shirt. You could never get a job in a bank with a habit like this. Customers don't want topless people handling their money.

On the bus Mr Badourian told us 1,000000000000 times that black coal is better than brown coal, because it's superior. I don't think he knew the reason why, he just kept repeating it. He didn't even tell us that if you put coal under great pressure it turns into diamonds, which is the only interesting thing there is to know about coal.

We had been travelling for about half an hour when I caught Elisa looking at me. Perhaps she had noticed my meaningful look and this was a delayed reaction? I was feeling better about the world now. Even the hole in the ozone layer seemed littler.

On the way to the coalmine, we had to complete a question sheet that Mr Badourian handed out. The first question was: 'Which type of coal is superior?' I wrote Diamonds. Crystal copied my answer. He hadn't been listening. He'd been looking at Elisa. I felt disappointed. Elisa had probably been looking at Crystal, not me. She would have been impressed by his boy-band good looks, just like all the girls. Crystal never has to work hard to impress anyone. Even the teachers give him an easy time. If he calls out in class, they just ask him to stop. If I do, they have a mental attack and go on as if I'd broken wind in a deliberately loud way. (Though the divine Ms Havercroft is always gentle with me and never breaks wind.)

‘Elisa Flett keeps looking at you,’ I said to Crystal, sadly. ‘She’s supposed to be my girlfriend.’ Crystal could see I was upset. ‘If you want Elisa,’ he said, ‘I won’t stand in your way.’ Crystal picks up some rubbish from the TV, but I felt happy all the same.

The bus eventually arrived at the open-cut coalmine. We hadn’t passed a single horse on the way.

We walked around the open-cut, which was just a big hole in the ground. Mr Badourian told us we were not allowed to touch the coal. He made it sound like it was illegal. ‘Coal is very dirty,’ added Mr Badourian. ‘So do not get it on your clothes or you may dirty them.’

Then we were shown the trucks that were used to transport the coal from the open-cut mine to the nearby briquette factory. ‘They have been especially designed for the job,’ said Mr Badourian. ‘That is why they are so large. Normal trucks would simply be too small.’

At one stage, I lost sight of Crystal for a few minutes. Elisa had also disappeared. I thought nothing of this at the time. Not after what Crystal had told me on the bus. Crystal and Elisa reappeared when we lined up to go to the briquette factory. I gave Elisa another meaningful look and she gave a meaningful look back. I was relieved. The whole disaster with the reflecting pool was in the past. She was still in love with me.

Then something caught my eye. There was black stuff on Elisa's hands. She had touched coal! She was the only person in the group who'd done it. Was this the sort of person I wanted to marry? A coal-toucher?

On the bus home I couldn't stop thinking of Elisa's coal-hands. Could I really love such a dirty little girl?

Suddenly, I saw a horse pulling a cart on the side of the road. I cried out to Elisa, 'Look at that Clydesdale! Look at those fetlocks!' I was talking Elisa's language.

'Isn't it horrible how people make horses work so hard?' Elisa said. I nodded sadly and added that when I grow up I intend to build holiday resorts for horses. Elisa's eye twinkled. She loved me and I almost certainly loved her. She was beautiful and she could probably get her teeth fixed. We would have a big show-business wedding. I gave Elisa one more meaningful look, but I had some briquette dust up my nose and I sneezed violently.

When the bus dropped us off at school, Crystal and I walked home together, with our arms around each other's shoulders. We play a game where we see how low we can walk like this without falling over. I was too mature to play this game as I had a serious girlfriend, but I did it to keep Crystal happy.

When we finally got home I asked Crystal if he'd like to sneak into my house for some refreshments. But Dotty Ball was in the front garden next door. She told

Crystal that he was to take out the bins. I knew that she didn't want him hanging around with Dominic, the dangerous transvestite.

As Crystal walked off to gather the bins, he took off his shirt. And there, all over his bare back, were black handprints.

Uncle Peri, I have been betrayed by Crystal and Elisa. I can forgive Elisa because she is foreign. But can I forgive my best friend?

xxD

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: Heartbreak

I was very sorry to read about Elisa Flett's handprints all over Crystal's back. I'm sure Crystal wouldn't have done this if he had known how upset you would be. A best friend doesn't behave like that. You'd better have a word with him.

You may not believe this, but I feel you may get over Elisa Flett fairly quickly. Of course, you should still remain friends. The Buddha says you should be friendly to everyone, starting with yourself.

Don't be too hard on Elisa and Crystal. They are only human.

I am attaching a picture of Avalokitesvara, the Buddhist bringer of kindness. He has a thousand arms with which to help people. I hope he can help you with at least one of them.

I still miss Auntie Lu. For a long time, I thought I would never find another friend. But these days, Bernie helps me to get a few chuckles out of life.

xxP

P.S. You are right about coal (or carbon) turning into diamonds. People contain carbon. When someone dies, you can take their carbon and make diamonds out of them. You could wear your Grandpa as a nose-stud.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Ponch????

Thank you for your educational e-mail. I wonder if someone will wear me in their nose one day?

Thank you also for the picture of Avalokitesvara. (Why can't these Buddhist characters have easy names like Jeff?) It must be very difficult for him to keep his nails trimmed.

It's midnight but I can't sleep. I tried to meditate by closing my eyes and concentrating on my breathing. In the end my breathing drove me mad because one of my nostrils is blocked, due to the briquette dust. If I lived in America I could take the school to court and sue them for millions of dollars.

Anyway, all the meditating in the world will not make me handsome, so I will probably never get a girlfriend.

Mum and Dad had this conversation about an hour ago:

Mum : I don't know what's the matter with him. He's been in a terrible way since the trip to the coalmine.

Dad : It's just one of his moods.

Mum : He doesn't want to watch TV.

Dad : Good. The cricket's on.

Mum : He hardly touched his tongues tonight.

Dad : I don't blame him. I wish you would stop buying them. They're worse than brains.

Mum : Why don't you talk to him, Archy?

Dad : He never listens to a word I say.

Mum : His teacher must be worried. She rang before.

Dad : When?

Mum : This afternoon.

Dad : Here?

Mum : Yes.

Dad : Ponch Havercroft rang here?

Mum : I'm beginning to understand why Dominic doesn't listen to a word you say.

Dad : What did she talk about?

Mum : She wanted to make sure that Dominic arrived home safely from the coalmine.

Dad : Did she think they'd lose him?

Mum : Perhaps she was concerned he might run away.

Dad : Did she ask to speak with me?

Mum : Why on earth would she do that?

Dad : I think I might have a Jam Fancy.

Mum : Where are you going, Archy?

Dad : I want to get up and have a walk and have a Jam Fancy.

Mum : Dominic ate them all.

As you can see, my mum blames me for everything. Although it's true that I did eat all the Jam Fancies.

xxD

P.S. I'm flattered that Ms Havercroft is concerned about my safety. Even though my heart has been broken by recent traumatic events, I can rely upon Ms Havercroft's mystic wonderfulness.

Though I'm disappointed to discover her first name is Ponch.

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : (no subject)

You do not have to be handsome to get a girlfriend. You have charm and you are not ugly at all. The Buddha says true beauty comes from within. xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : (no subject)

Buddha would say that. He's fat.

But thank you for writing that I am not ugly and that I have charm.

xxD

P.S. Why do people put these bits at the end of e-mails, when computers make it easy to shift stuff back into the main part of the e-mail? Is this interesting, or just something Mr Badourian would say?

P.P.S. You have still not told me the reason Mum thinks you are a murderer.

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : A surprise

I finally got to sleep at 2.00 a.m. and had horrible dreams about Elisa Flett with a thousand dirty black hands. In spite of this I think I'm still in love with her.

This morning I found Dale reading a magazine with a boy-band on the cover. I was surprised. Usually Dale reads about walking corpses or two-headed babies. The boy-band magazine was called Boyz4yu! (Judging by the spelling it's American.)

I've just discovered something amazing about Dad. As you know, he has been on the Internet quite a lot lately. He forgot to erase HISTORY and I clicked on some of the sites he's been visiting.

They were all about Buddhism! I can't believe that my father is trying to find out about something that interests me. One of the sites has all the proper Buddhist words, like Dharma (the teachings), Sangha (all the Buddhists in the world) and Bhikki (a biscuit).

I may have misjudged Dad. I will try to be a better son.

I will start by lighting incense in his bedroom and leaving surprise Jam Fancies under his pillow.

xxD

P.S. You haven't replied to my last e-mail yet. Perhaps you are building up the courage to tell me why Mum thinks you're a murderer?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : An Accident

I am glad your father is taking more interest in your life. In answer to your question, your mother thinks I am a murderer because I was once involved in a terrible road accident. Someone died but it was not my fault.

I have only just started driving again. Bernie made a yellow diamond-shaped sign for the rear window of my car. It says BUDDHA ON BOARD. I think Bernie is as nervous about my driving as I am.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Kidneys of Sorrow

I'm sorry to learn about your road accident. It must be traumatic for you, so I will not ask you any questions about it. D'artagnan still hasn't spoken. He has been drawing more pictures and leaving them in our letterbox. They are of monsters, birds, cars, lions and pigs. They are all excellent, except for the pigs.

Tonight at tea I boldly asked Mum, 'Why do you hate Uncle Peri?' Everyone went silent for a moment. Mum finally said, 'Because he's a sad, sick man.' And then she told me to pass her something that she wasn't allergic to.

You do not seem sad or sick to me.

We continued to scrape the food off our plates. It was kidney stew, which made Dale very happy. She asked if the kidneys were human and Mum said they

might as well have been, the price she had to pay. Dad doesn't like kidneys. Neither do I. It's odd that Mum isn't allergic to horrible food like brains, tongues and kidneys. And yet wonderful food like ice-cream makes her puff up.

I watched Dad pushing the kidneys around on his plate. 'I notice you are studying the Dharma,' I said to him. He said nothing, but blushed. 'Will you join me in the Sangha?' I continued. Mum gave me an odd look. 'Why are you saying these peculiar words, Dominic?' she asked. 'Are you sick?' Dad looked embarrassed, and still said nothing. I explained to Mum, 'Dad's been on the Internet finding out about Buddhism. We will vada together.' Mum stabbed one of the kidneys. 'I knew you weren't doing the banking,' she said angrily.

I thought Dad would be pleased by my remarks. Instead he told me never to click on HISTORY again because it was none of my business. And we certainly wouldn't vada together.

What have I done wrong? Sometimes I think that the printing ink at work is damaging my dad's prajna (wisdom).

I'm still not over Elisa Flett. I see her face wherever I look, even in a bowl of kidneys.

xxD

P.S. My mother is allergic to the incense that I lit for my father. She says the bedroom reeks of it. She has opened all the windows and gone to spend the night at the Balls' house. I suspect Dad is not happy about this because Mum will come back raving about what wonderful Italian bathroom fittings Dotty has.

P.P.S. Who died in the accident?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: Kidneys of Sorrow

Sometimes life is not as mysterious as we think. You can probably guess who died in the accident.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Love and Mattresses

It's Saturday morning.

Mum said she slept very well at the Balls' house because they have expensive non-allergenic mattresses. Dad said she could sleep there every night.

Feeling guilty about neglecting Dale, I asked her what her plans were for the day. I was happy to visit cemeteries with her if she liked. Dale said that she wouldn't be able to visit cemeteries because she was going somewhere secret with Dad. Dad gave Dale a cute little wink, and I am amazed she didn't throw up.

You are wrong about Elisa Flett. I have not got over her quickly at all. It has been days now and I am still in love with her.

xxD

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : A Question

Have you spoken with Crystal about Elisa?

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Nude Ladies

I crept over to Crystal's house to have a word with him about Elisa, as you suggested. 'Did you pash Elisa Flett in the open-cut?' I asked. Crystal said that of course he hadn't. I made him swear on his mother's grave, which was wishful thinking. Crystal promised. He had not pashed Elisa. I didn't tell him that I had seen Elisa's handprints all over his back.

Crystal had other things on his mind. He'd borrowed a diskette from one of his football friends. This one was ruder than the other one. There were more ladies and they were entirely completely absolutely in the nude.

Dotty Ball walked in just as Crystal popped the diskette into the computer and the first nude lady came up on the screen. Crystal looked scared. Dotty

was not happy. She asked me what I was doing there. I said Om. She didn't accept this as a good enough explanation. She also wanted to know where Crystal got the diskette from. Crystal said, 'It belongs to Dominic.'

Dotty Ball marched me straight back home. Dad was just getting his 1,000000000000000th can of beer out of the fridge when Dotty led me into the kitchen and threw the diskette on the table. 'Dominic has been showing naked women to Christopher,' she said. 'Please keep a closer eye on your son in future.' Then she left.

Dad was too startled to say anything for a few moments. Finally he asked me, 'Where did you get this diskette?' I told him I had found it in a shrub. This is far too stupid to be a lie, so it doesn't count. 'Don't do it again,' Dad said, putting the diskette in his pocket.

I should forgive Crystal. But I blame him for stealing Elisa away from me. She will probably never marry me now. I don't care so much that Crystal lied about the diskette. Dotty already thinks I am a transvestite. Who cares if she thinks I am also a sex maniac?

Am I becoming bitter?

xxD

P.S. Dale has started playing netball. This is the secret that she and Dad share.

P.P.S. I've just found out that Buddhist monks are forbidden to sit on comfortable seats. I could never be a Buddhist monk. I'm far too fond of settees. Perhaps I should be a hermit instead?

P.P.P.S I have been trying to guess who was in the car with you. Was it someone famous?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Happiness

I do not think you are becoming bitter.

It was not good of Crystal to lie about the diskette and get you into trouble. A best friend should not do that.

You cannot be a hermit as well as a Buddhist. The Buddha says it is important to have friends because we are all social creatures.

I am sending you another stone. This one is called jade and it is supposed to bring happiness. The Native Americans also use it as protection against venomous snakes. I think the idea is to throw the stone at the snake before it has a chance to bite you.

xxP

P.S. I have never been in a car with someone famous.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : My Big Bust

I have not yet received your jade stone. I need it desperately, but not for snakes.

I'm ashamed to write this, but I decided I would put a curse on Crystal. (Not a serious curse. Just something like itchiness or rough, dry elbows. Something that would teach him not to be mean to his best friend.)

I figured that Dale would know how to do it. But she wasn't in her bedroom. I was surprised to see that her room was starting to look girlie. Her dollies were sitting happily on the bed with all their limbs in the right places.

On Dale's bed, I found a piece of art paper with stars and glitter all over it, and a love heart. Written in the love heart in orange highlighter pen was the name of a boy band called GuyzluvU! This was not witchcraft. This was something weird and unnatural.

Later in the afternoon I was watching Japanese cartoons and eating a bowl of refreshments (corn flakes with golden syrup, since there were no Jam Fancies left). An unusual-smelling girl with blonde hair wandered in and said, 'Hi Dominic!' I got a shock and ended up with refreshments in my lap.

The strange girl turned out to be Dale. 'What are you doing?' I gasped. 'I went to the hairdresser,' said the Dale thing. 'Mum took me to put headlights in.' I think she meant highlights.

When I was in the kitchen wiping the refreshments off my pants, Dale came in and asked what I'd been doing in her bedroom. I told her I had placed a small nuclear bomb under her pillow. The old Dale would have accepted this as a perfectly good answer. The new Dale said, 'Please don't go into my bedroom without asking.' What has happened to the nice little witch that made snail jelly and fly cake?

I decided I didn't need Dale's help to put a curse on Crystal. I'd seen enough movies to know that to curse someone, you must get hold of something that belongs to them. It can be their hair or toenails, or an item of clothing. It would be difficult pulling Crystal's hair out or removing his toenails without him noticing. I would have to get something else. A shirt would probably be easiest.

I suggested to Crystal that we go to the building site on Southern Road, to steal some interesting building materials. (We'd often done this, before I turned Buddhist.) I could tell that he thought it was childish, but I managed to talk him into it because I have charm.

There was nothing there worth taking. And Crystal wouldn't take off his shirt. I had to keep pretending how hot it was, fanning myself with a scrap of masonite. But Crystal remained fully dressed.

I realised there was only one thing to do, and it made me feel queasy. I would have to guide by example. Complaining about the heat, I took off my own shirt. This was like a challenge to Crystal, as I knew it would

be. He slipped off his shirt in record time. Normally he tucks it into the back of his jeans. If he did that, I'd have no chance of stealing it. So I tossed my shirt aside. And Crystal tossed his shirt alongside mine.

I tried to be deeply interested in some plastic tubing and a wing-nut. Meanwhile, Crystal wandered off to have a pee. I ran back to our shirts. I snatched up Crystal's. I'd hide it and tell him it had been stolen. Then I realised this was a stupid plan. Why would anyone steal one shirt and leave the other behind? I would have to make it look like both shirts had been stolen. But where would I put them? If I stuck them down my jeans I would look like I had a genetically modified bottom. I threw both shirts into the garden next door. I would come back for them later.

I told Crystal the terrible news. Some dangerous maniac had stolen our shirts. I pointed to the spot where our shirts weren't, as proof. It was starting to get dark. I would have to walk home shirtless, otherwise Crystal would know I was up to something.

As we walked up the hill from Southern Road, I kept my arms folded across my chest. Because I am so pudgy, this probably made me look like I had a bust.

We were minutes from home when we saw someone with a big dog approaching. Elisa Flett and Muffy/Moffy were heading straight for us.

The girl I still possibly loved (even though she didn't love me) would now see me topless. With a bust. Elisa said, 'Hi Chris! Hi Dum!' We both said, 'Hi!' back.

‘Where are your tups?’ she asked. There was a brief pause while we worked out what she’d said. ‘They were stolen,’ said Crystal. ‘By rubbers?’ asked Elisa. Crystal was stumped. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘By robbers.’ ‘Gush!’ said Elisa. Crystal was puffing out his chest to show off to Elisa. ‘I bashed them up,’ he said. What a stupid lie to tell. ‘The rubbers?’ said Elisa. Crystal nodded. ‘Yep. The rubbers.’ Elisa looked thoughtful. ‘Then how come you didn’t make them give back your tups?’ Crystal couldn’t think of an answer. ‘As punishment,’ I said, ‘we forced the robbers to eat our shirts!’ ‘Gully!’ said Elisa. ‘Well, I mustn’t stup lung. Bye.’

Elisa went off with Muffy/Moffy, peeing on all the lampposts. (The dog, not Elisa.)

‘What do you think of Elisa?’ I asked Crystal. ‘She’s got big teeth,’ Crystal replied. ‘Are you sure you didn’t pash her?’ I asked, giving him one last chance to tell the truth. Crystal shook his head. ‘You’re weird sometimes, Dom.’

I waited till Crystal went into his house, where he would get into trouble for staying out half-naked till it was dark. Especially if Dotty found out he’d been with the fat transvestite of Emerald Park. Then I ran back to the house next to the construction site to retrieve the shirts. I pulled on my own to hide my disgustingness.

I'm now holding Crystal's shirt. It smells like him. I can't put a curse on him. How could I? He's still my best friend.

I've decided I'm not normal. I don't think I'm even a Buddhist. If Buddha loved me, he would not have made me like the smell of Crystal's shirt. He would also have given me better hair. And no bust.

xxD

P.S. Here they are again:

Dad : I think Dominic might be developing a healthy interest in you-know-what.

Mum : No, I don't know what.

Dad : Women of the opposite sex. Our boy is becoming a man.

Mum : Dominic?

Dad : We do have only one boy, Odette. Unless there is another one you haven't told me about.

Mum : So you've finally spoken to him?

Dad : No.

Mum : Have you played football with him?

Dad : No. And I haven't gone fishing with him or hunted for wild rhinoceroses. I just happen to know that Dominic enjoys looking at naked ladies in the nude. He's completely normal.

Mum : How do you know?

Dad : He's got a computer diskette and it's literally crawling with them.

Mum : That isn't normal!

Dad : Well, it's better than wearing a dress.

Mum : Have you seen this diskette for yourself?

Dad : Only briefly.

Mum : Where do you suppose he got a diskette like that?

Dad : He said he found it in a shrub.

Mum : And you believe that?

Dad : I was so relieved, I didn't think to question it.

Mum : I am ringing Ms Havercroft about this.

Dad : It's ten-thirty.

Mum : Not now, you idiot. Tomorrow. I will inform her that boys in her class are looking at pornography.

Dad : It's quite tastefully done, judging by the very brief glimpse that I had.

Mum : Why are you wriggling around like that?

Dad : I'm not comfortable. There's something odd in the bed.

Mum : I will not say anything.

Dad : It's a squashed Jam Fancy.

Mum : So it is.

Dad : Here's another.

Mum : Some idiot's filled our bed with Jam Fancies.

Dad : I will speak with him tomorrow.

P.P.S. I'm afraid I can't guess who died in the car accident. I know it was not Auntie Lu because she died in a volcano. So who was it?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : The Little Prince

The volcano did not kill Auntie Lu. We had a car crash on the way there. I was driving. It had been raining and the roads were slippery. To make matters worse, rocks had fallen onto the road. I lost control of the car and we ran into a tree. Lu was killed instantly.

Yesterday I posted you a book called *The Little Prince*, which was a favourite of mine when I was young. It is about a boy who leaves his planet to travel round the universe. (Like *Prince Prism*.) This is very brave of him as it would be much easier to stay at home and do nothing. It would also be rather dull.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Re: The Little Prince

I'm sorry about Auntie Lu.

Thank you for *The Little Prince*. It's the best book I've ever read.

Thank you also for the jade. It's almost as green as Crystal's hair. You did not tell me the jade is carved in an unusual shape. What is it, exactly? It has a handy little hole, so I will wear it around my neck on a bootlace.

When D'artagnan handed me your packages I patted him on the head again. He patted me back. I hope I haven't taught him a bad habit. If he goes around patting people all over the place he might be arrested.

My latest idea for a TV show is this:

The Little Prince. A series based on the book.

I especially like the beginning where the Prince asks the stranded pilot to draw a sheep. The Prince doesn't like any of the sheep that the pilot draws. Finally the pilot draws a box with three holes and says there is a sheep inside. The Prince is happy.

Dale seems to be planning another witch picnic, so there is still hope for her. Today I saw her take one of her creations out of the microwave. It was a cake that smelled strongly of bananas. There were banana slices on top of it. I asked Dale what it was and she said, 'A banana cake.' I gave her a knowing look and said, 'Yes, but what's in it?' 'Bananas,' she said. 'What else?' I asked. 'Leopard slugs? Slaterbugs?' 'This is not a witch cake, Dominic,' she said. 'It's just a banana cake.' She was obviously saying this so that I would eat it and end up with a mouthful of wildlife. I'd fallen for that one before. I'm glad Dale is her old self again, and that things are returning to normal.

I've not seen much of Crystal lately. Perhaps he's avoiding me? I still have his shirt.

xxD

P.S. Here they are again:

Mum : Your clothes smell funny.

Dad : It's the new ink we're using.

Mum : Does the whole factory smell like this?

Dad : Yes.

Mum : I rang you at the factory today.

Dad : Could you smell it over the phone?

Mum : Of course not.

Dad : Just checking.

Mum : They said you were at lunch.

Dad : Good heavens! Then I suppose I must have been.

Mum : The receptionist said you went to lunch with a woman.

Dad : Yes, we have women at the factory. We have all the modern things. In fact I believe the receptionist is a woman.

Mum : Apparently the woman you had lunch with was wearing very nice clothes.

Dad : They have to wear clothes or they're sent home.

Mum : Why did you go out to lunch when I made you perfectly good sandwiches?

Dad : Because they were not perfectly good sandwiches. I don't like the bread you use.

Mum : It's free of gluten.

Dad : It's also free of taste.

Mum : I can't help being allergic. You know I have to be careful about these things.

Dad : Then perhaps you should stop sniffing my clothes.

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : Help!!!

It's six o'clock in the morning.

Things are not normal at all. I have not given Crystal back his shirt. Last night I went to bed with it.

Do I have a crush on Crystal's shirt? Am I a looper after all?

xxD

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Re: Help!!!

Your jade is carved into the shape of a lotus flower that is about to bloom.

The Buddha once saw the human race as a garden of lotus flowers. Some of them were still in the mud, others were just popping out, some were about to bloom, and others still were magnificent flowers.

Most people are stuck in the mud. You are beyond that. You are

about to bloom. You are not a looper. You should give back Crystal's shirt because it does not belong to you.

What do you think is the best thing about Crystal?

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : The Best Thing About Crystal

I hate Friday afternoons. That's when we have to play football or cricket or musical head-butts, or whatever stupid game the sports teacher Mr Grimmins comes up with. I used to pretend to faint on Friday afternoons. Once I even died of a heart attack. It was such a good performance that Mr Grimmins rang for an ambulance. When I came back to life he forced me to clean the showers. He's such an idiot, he doesn't realise I would prefer to clean the showers than play football.

Mr Grimmins has a nasty way of dividing the boys into two teams. He selects the two best athletes to be the team captains. Then the captains have to choose their own teams from the boys lined up. The strongest boys are picked first. Of course, Crystal always gets picked early on. I'm used to being picked last, unless one of the other boys is missing a foot or a head or something.

Once, when Mr Grimmins' favourite team captain was away, Crystal took his place. Boys as well as girls like Crystal. They all wanted to be picked by him. I knew I wouldn't be. I couldn't expect Crystal to choose me just because I'm his friend.

But Crystal did choose me. There was a groan from the others and a terrible look from Mr Grimmins. Part of me wished Crystal hadn't done it. He should have waited till the very end. Another part of me felt proud to have a friend like Crystal.

I played very badly and hurt my elbow with my other elbow, but Crystal said I'd done a good job.

Mr Grimmins was fuming. In the change room, he made Crystal and me run under the cold showers. 'Let's get all that muck off you,' said Mr Grimmins. 'Let's clean you up, you two little girlfriends.' Then he made us shake ourselves dry in front of the other boys. They all laughed, except for D'artagnan.

'You're a fat little miss, aren't you?' Mr Grimmins said to me. 'You look like you're pregnant.' Then he said to Crystal, 'You won't choose Dominic first next time, will you?' Crystal replied, 'Yes I will, you big bastard.'

That's the best thing about Crystal.

I found out that somebody has already made a movie of *The Little Prince*. I borrowed it on DVD, but haven't watched it yet.

xxD

P.S. You were right about Elisa Flett, after all. She has lost her allure. I wish I hadn't bothered to learn so much about horses.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Rude Things

Mum found Crystal's shirt in my room. She asked me what I was doing with it. I told her that it had blown over the fence while drying. She was not convinced. Dotty uses a tumble-drier.

Then Mum noticed your jade lotus flower around my neck. She was deeply disturbed. 'Where did you get that disgusting thing?' she asked. She believes that it's in the shape of a man's willy. I told her that they sold them at the milk bar and that all the kids at school are wearing them. I know it's wrong to lie. But when your mother thinks you are wearing a green willy around your neck, it's easy to forget you're a Buddhist.

Mum walked me to Crystal's place to make sure I returned the shirt.

Mum : Hello, Dotty.

Dotty : Hello, Odette. I would invite you in but the carpets have been steam cleaned and I know you are allergic to the chemicals.

Mum : Dominic would like to give Crystal his shirt back. He borrowed it.

Dotty : He has also borrowed a pair of jeans and a baseball cap and a denim jacket with a horse on it. I would like those returned too.

Mum : Is this true, Dominic?

Dom : Yes, it is.

Mum : Where are these clothes?

Dom : Dad put them out for the garbage collectors.

Mum : Even your father is not that stupid.

Dom : It was an accident. Could I please speak to Crystal?

Dotty : Not now, Dominic. Christopher is busy doing his homework.

Mum : Dotty, I wanted to ask you something.

Dotty : Yes?

Mum : Does Christopher wear things around his neck?

Dotty : He has some puka shells. His father does not approve but he is in Singapore, so what can you do?

Mum : Does he ever wear ...rude things?

Dotty : How do you mean?

Mum : You may have noticed that Dom is wearing a green object.

Dotty : Yes. It's quite unattractive. Is it from K-mart?

Dom : It's a piece of jade carved into the shape of a lotus flower that's about to bloom.

Mum : Dotty, do you think it looks ... rude?

Dotty : Possibly.

Mum : Do any of Christopher's friends wear things like this?

Dotty : Of course not.

Mum : Oh, Dotty. What am I going to do with him?

xxD

P.S. I watched the movie of *The Little Prince*, and I didn't enjoy it much. It's not a proper movie. It's a musical. Every few minutes somebody sings a song for no reason. There should be a big label on the cover, warning people.

P.P.S. I got the bootlace for my jade pendant from one of Mum's high-heel boots. She's just asked me if I've been wearing them.

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Re: Rude Things

If your mother thinks that your jade looks like a willy, there is something very wrong with your father.

Thank you for writing about how loyal Crystal was to you when he was the football captain. He behaved like a true friend.

xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : More underwear

I no longer have your beautiful present around my neck. Mum insisted I take it off. Dad didn't think it looked like a willy either.

Dale says she's going off witchcraft. I reminded her about the itching curse she put on Dad. Dale replied that she simply sprinkled bathroom cleaning powder in Dad's underwear drawer. What a shame.

xxD

P.S. Why is my life full of underwear? Is yours?

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Lex Unger

My life is full of rocks, rather than underwear. Your mother, Dettol, and I used to be members of a group called The Field Naturalists' Society. We joined because our father preferred fossils to people.

The most handsome member of the Society was Lex Unger. He was very tall and his hair looked like obsidian. (Obsidian is a black glassy volcanic rock.) Lex was mad on geology, especially igneous rocks. These are rocks that are produced by volcanoes.

Dettol was so in love with Lex that she learned about every sort of igneous rock there is, from basalt to pumice. She announced that she would marry him and they would name all their children after rocks.

Once we went on a week-long summer camp with the Society down at Wilson's Prom. On the way to the camp, Dettol sat up the back of the bus with Lex, talking about basalt. I could see that Lex was hating every minute.

On the first day of the camp we went looking for fossils. Dettol kept wandering off and calling out to Lex to come and look at a rare jumping rock she had found, or something equally amazing. On one of these little side trips, Dettol walked right off a cliff. She broke her arm and a helicopter flew her to hospital. I remember Lex gazing up at the helicopter as if it were an angel.

Lex knew that Dettol fancied him and he felt guilty about being so happy when the helicopter took her away. When we got back to town, he gave Dettol a

souvenir of the visit to Wilson's Prom. It was a fossil called a coprolite. Dettol told her friends that Lex was madly in love with her because he had given her a rare and precious fossil.

After she boasted to everyone, Dad told her that a coprolite was fossilised poo.

Lex had not intended to be mean. As a geologist he was genuinely interested in coprolites. But Dettol told him that he was sick in the head for giving her a stone jobby, and she didn't want to see him again.

She never did.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Stone Poo and the Truth about Crystal and Elisa

It's good to know more about the history of you and Mum. I will use the word 'coprolite' in conversation as soon as possible.

After writing to you about Crystal's loyalty, I felt guilty. Like a proper Buddhist, I decided to forgive him. I told him that I had seen Elisa Flett's handprints on his back. I knew what had happened, even though he'd denied it. Crystal said that Elisa had made him do it. He hadn't wanted to kiss her, because of his promise to me.

I want to buy Crystal a present to show him how sorry I am for doubting his friendship.

Do you have any suggestions?

xxD

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : A Suggestion

Don't buy him underwear.

xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : Greg Farino

There's been a disaster.

Yesterday we had a school activity. We all gathered in the library to hear a famous children's author speak. I hoped that it might be the one who wrote *The Little Prince*. But it was Greg Farino.

We sat eagerly in the library. Crystal had kept a seat free for me. Mr Badourian introduced Greg Farino by saying that to most people children's writers are quiet women with glasses, but Greg Farino wasn't, because he was a man. Mr Badourian said he hoped we would learn a lot from this interesting session, which he was sure would be very informative. Then he sat down and went to sleep.

Greg Farino is young and good-looking. He has charm. He read one of his poems, which was about his house being crushed by a giant bum. Crystal laughed as though this was the funniest thing in the world.

D'artagnan wasn't laughing, of course, and neither was Elisa Flett. Maybe she is quite smart and I am wrong to give up on marrying her? Then one of the girls whispered something to Elisa, and she burst into hysterical laughter. Being American, she thought the poem was about a house being crushed by a giant homeless person, which isn't as funny.

Greg Farino read a few more poems, and most of the kids calmed down. But Crystal still laughed and laughed. I pretended to as well.

Then we had questions. Crystal was the first person to put up his hand. Greg pointed to him, and Crystal asked, 'How much money do you make?' The librarian, Ms Teh, grunted as if to say, 'You stupid boy. I told you not to ask questions like that.' But Greg Farino answered anyway. He wanted to show that he sided with 'the kids' against the teachers. He was very poor, he said. All authors are poor.

I put my hand up to ask a question. I wasn't particularly interested. I just wanted Crystal to think that I was also a Greg Farino fan. I asked if any of his books had been made into television series. Ms Teh grunted again and Greg said, 'No.'

Greg Farino also does the illustrations for his books. He is better at drawing than writing. Toward the end of the session, he drew a fairly good picture of a lion on butcher's paper. We all clapped. I looked across at D'artagnan, sitting silently. It seemed unfair that Greg Farino should get all the attention. 'D'artagnan is a good artist too,' I called out.

Greg Farino asked D'artagnan to come out and draw a picture. D'artagnan took the texta-pen but didn't draw anything. 'You have to tell him what to draw,' I explained. Greg told D'artagnan to draw a picture of a crocodile riding a surfboard. In about a minute, D'artagnan drew the most fantastic surfing crocodile you ever saw.

I think Greg Farino was surprised by how good D'artagnan was. 'Can D'artagnan please draw something else?' I asked. 'Can D'artagnan draw a lion?' 'We've already had a lion,' said Greg Farino. But it was too late. D'artagnan always draws what you ask for. Of course, his lion was better than Greg's.

The kids clapped like mad. 'Can D'artagnan draw a pig?' I asked. 'No he can't!' said Greg Farino, taking back the texta-pen.

When the session was over, the famous author and celebrity told us that he would be signing books at The Page of Innocence bookstore at 4.30. The kids wanted him to sign little bits of paper, but Greg said the teachers wouldn't let him.

As we went back to class, everyone was talking about what an excellent artist D'artagnan is. D'artagnan didn't look proud or embarrassed, he just accepted the compliments in his usual detached way.

But Greg Farino's poems had also been a huge hit. The kids were all reciting the rude bits and cackling, especially Crystal. Now I knew what to buy for him.

'To whom shall I inscribe this?' asked Greg Farino. I had just bought a copy of his latest book *Elizabeth the Farting Girl*. 'Crystal,' I replied. Then I added, 'Please write that it is a present from Dominic.' Greg remembered me from the library. 'Your friend D'artagnan is a very good artist,' he said. 'He's not really my friend,' I replied. 'He is now,' said Greg Farino.

Then he scribbled in the book, handed it back to me and moved on to the next kid. When I saw what he'd written above his autograph, I nearly fainted: 'To spunky Crystal with love from Dominic.' He'd obviously thought Crystal was my girlfriend. I suppose it is a rather girlie name.

I tried to tell Greg Farino that he'd made a mistake. He would have to sign another copy of the book. Crystal was a boy, and you don't call boys 'spunky' if you are a boy, too. You certainly don't say you 'love' them. But a shop assistant moved me on. I had got an autograph, there were other kids waiting, Greg Farino is a famous and popular children's writer.

There was a huge book about volcanoes in the bookstore. The volcano on Tanna was bound to be in there. But the book was wrapped in plastic. When I asked the shop assistant if I could have a look, she said, 'It costs eighty-five dollars.' I told her I had a credit card but she didn't believe me.

As I walked back to Invermay Grove, I passed the Marshall Reserve, where some of the older kids hang out. Three boys with their shirts off were playing football. One of them was Crystal. There was a group of girls sitting on the grass nearby, giggling. Now would not be a good time to give Crystal the present, so I just kept walking.

I left the book in the Balls' letterbox. I planned to explain Greg Farino's mistake when I next saw Crystal.

xxD

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : The Problem with Parents

As usual, my parents have no idea of what is going on. Here's the conversation they had tonight.

Mum : Dotty thinks Dominic's in love with Chris.

Dad : Dotty is a foot infection.

Mum : I knew Dominic was gay!

Dad : He can't be gay.

Mum : Why not?

Dad : Because he's been looking at naked ladies in the nude. And he hated that musical he borrowed.

Mum : He'll never be happy. They never are. This is all your fault.

Dad : Why is it my fault? I don't remember telling Dominic to go out and be gay all over the place. And why does Dotty think he's in love with Chris anyway?

Mum : He gave Chris a book.

Dad : Oh, dear.

Mum : He wrote 'To spunky Crystal' in it. Dotty is fuming. She thinks Dominic should see a psychiatrist.

Dad : Dotty Ball's the one who needs her head examined. And you're a prize prawn for having anything to do with her.

Mum : If you're going to be like that, I'm not going to talk with you any more.

Dad : What sort of book was it?

Mum : Poems.

Dad : Oh, dear.

Mum : At least Dale is normal. You have me to thank for that.

Dad : Excuse me, I'm the one who introduced her to netball.

Mum : And I'm the one who introduced her to highlights.

Dad : I wonder if Dominic will put highlights in his hair?

Mum : You must talk with him.

Dad : Yes. Highlights would not look good. I will suggest a frizzy perm instead.

Mum : Sometimes, Archy, I don't understand you.

Dad : I don't understand anyone.

Mum : I've read about people like you in magazines. You are what they call 'a life-denier'.

Dad : I deny that.

Mum : That's not funny.

Dad : I deny that too.

Mum : Oh, shut up.

The writing in Crystal's book was an accident. I wasn't and am not in love with him. He's just a friend. I love glamorous women, like Pamela Flett and Princess Di. But why bother telling Mum and Dad? They would never understand. They probably don't even like me. They certainly don't like each other. Even Dale's gone strange on me.

It's a shame the pool is closed. I need a very long swim. I will try to meditate instead.

xxD

P.S. I cannot meditate. I will read *The Little Prince* again.

P.P.S. Do I need to see a psychiatrist?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Buying Volcanoes

You do not need to see a psychiatrist.

You are just having a rough time because of your parents and some disappointments with your friends. This will change because everything does. The Buddha says that nothing in life is certain, except that computers always break down.

In your life you will have friends because of all your good qualities. You will meet girls and boys and leopards and pigs and aliens, if you are particularly lucky. You might have other friends right now and not even realise it.

I am sending you money so that you can buy the volcano book.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Very Disturbing News

Thank you for the money. D'artagnan handed me the envelope today. You're very kind.

I don't think I will bother to tell Mum and Dad that Greg Farino made a mistake signing in Crystal's book. I have given up on adults completely.

You might as well know the truth. Crystal's dad, Rolly Ball, is not in Singapore. For the last six months he has been living in Geelong with his personal assistant, Courtney. She's twenty, which means she's half his age. I'm not supposed to know this. Dotty made Crystal promise not to say a word to anyone. But I'm his best friend so he told me. Dotty is sure that her husband will come home soon, and doesn't want all the neighbours to know about Rolly's love affair. Dotty is not fooling anyone. Lately, Dad has been asking her far too often about how Rolly is doing in Singapore.

Crystal used to talk about his father all the time. Now he hardly mentions him. Before Rolly Ball became a businessman, he used to be in the army. He was incredibly strict; never, ever drank beer. And he used to go running around the Marshall Reserve with Crystal every morning before breakfast – even in the middle of winter. I'm surprised that Crystal likes his dad so much.

Crystal told me that when he goes to church, he prays for his dad to stop being in love with Courtney.

Yesterday my parents had the most disturbing conversation ever.

Mum : Dotty asked me if we'd taken Dom to see a psychiatrist yet.

Dad : Oh, good. I'm glad you've been spending more time with Dotty. You don't see anywhere near enough of her.

Mum : What should we do?

Dad : Kill her.

Mum : Archy, could you be serious for just one moment?

Dad : I'm being perfectly serious.

Mum : Dotty is my friend. She is concerned about the welfare of this family.

Dad : Perhaps she should consider the welfare of her own family, since everyone in the neighbourhood knows that her husband is currently shackled up with a girlie in Geelong?

Mum : That's cruel.

Dad : It's true and I intend to broadcast it on television.

Mum : We should speak with Ms Havercroft.

Dad : I'm sure she already knows about Rolly Ball.

Mum : About Dominic! I'll ring her tomorrow.

Dad : She won't be there. She's at an in-service.

Mum : I beg your pardon?

Dad : Ms Havercroft will be at an in-service tomorrow.

Mum : How do you know?

Dad : Because she told me.

Mum : Why did she tell you?

Dad : Because I've been having a mad passionate love affair with Ms Havercroft ever since I first laid eyes on her at the parent/teacher night.

Mum : God you talk rubbish sometimes.

Dad : It stops me going mad.

Mum : I can't say I agree with you, Archy.

Even though Mum thought Dad was talking rubbish, I wasn't so sure. So I went through Dad's old e-mails. He's so bad with computers, he doesn't realise you have to delete e-mails twice. Dad has not been doing the banking. He has been sending love poems to someone called Ponch.

This is horrible. My dad is having an affair with the divine Ms Havercroft, and it's Dale's fault. She's the one who made Dad swallow the amethyst stone and now it's woven its magic on him. Why else would a mystical beauty like Ms Havercroft fall in love with a coprolite like my father?

I will now swim 1,0000000000000 laps to calm down.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Karma

I did more than 1,00000000000000 laps.

I couldn't stop thinking of Dad and Ms Havercroft pashing each other, then suddenly bursting into song for no reason. I'm amazed I didn't mess up my tumble turns and crack my head.

I don't know how I will be able to face Ms Havercroft again.

When I climbed out of the pool, I was surprised to see Mr Grimmins swimming in lane three. He shouldn't have been swimming in the advanced lane. His technique is poor. He rolls and he kicks too hard.

In the changing room I sat on a bench for a moment, to get my breath back. Under the opposite bench was Mr Grimmins' swimming bag with his clothes. Seeing the bag with GRIMMINS written on it in texta-pen made me realise that there is a worse name in the world than Dotty.

The cleaners sometimes leave containers of bathroom cleaning powder on the high window ledge in the toilet. It isn't safe and they should take more care. Anyone could climb onto the toilet seat, and sprinkle the stuff in Mr Grimmins' swimming bag.

Perhaps I shouldn't have done it, but sometimes you need to give karma a helping hand.

xxD

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : : (

I am saddened by your news.

The Buddha says that our lives are always a struggle. We cannot change the things that happen to us. But we can change the way we respond.

Nothing that is happening to you is your fault, any more than killing Aunty Lu was my fault. Terrible things can happen, but in the end everything changes. That is the only certainty.

You are a kind soul and you do not deserve to have such bad luck. But your bad luck will not go on forever. You must continue to be your usual inquisitive, sensitive, open-minded self.

Please let me know what I can do to help.

I have been trying to ring you, but your phone is often engaged because you and your father spend so much time on the Internet. If I manage to get through, your mother hangs up on me. I know you cannot ring me from home. Please buy a phone card and ring me from a public booth. I would like to talk with you.

Take care.

xxP

P.S. You probably shouldn't have put the bathroom cleaning powder in Mr Grimmins' swimming bag, but I'm glad you did.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Running Away

I have decided not to spend your money on the volcano book. Instead, I've been working out the cheapest way to run away from home. I will take public transport.

I've printed dozens of maps and timetables and other information, such as tourist attractions. I'm running away to Albury.

Last night Crystal paid me a visit for the first time in ages. I was studying my maps and timetables when he snuck in through my bedroom window.

'Hi!' said Crystal, very loudly. I told him to keep quiet or Mum and Dad would hear, and Dale was in the next room. When I asked him what he thought of Greg Farino's book, he said it was excellent. Unfortunately Dotty had confiscated it because of what Greg Farino had written in it. 'He made a mistake,' I said. 'I am not in love with you.' 'I know that,' said Crystal. 'Don't be stupid.' But I thought it was important to make it clear. 'I have no wish to call you "darling" or buy furniture with you or play hospitals. To me you do not look glamorous or mystical. You look like a boy.' Crystal didn't say anything. He just scratched the tiny

hairs that had started growing on his chin. 'In fact, you're starting to look like a man,' I continued. 'But I still like you, Crystal. And I hope you still like me.' 'Dom,' said Crystal, running his hand through his hair. 'Please don't call me Crystal. My name is Chris.'

Just then there was a knock on my bedroom door. I knew it was Dale because she used the top-secret knock we'd invented years ago : three short knocks followed by a pause then three more knocks then a little tiny knock then two kicks then a head-butt.

'Hi Dominic,' she said. 'I was just wondering if I could borrow your stapler?' When she saw Chris, she giggled. 'What a surprise!' she said. 'Yes,' Chris replied. He was surprised to see her too. Fancy bumping into Dale in her very own house.

Dale said that she wanted to show Chris something artistic that she had made in her bedroom. I thought of warning Chris not to go in there, because of the diabolical things Dale had been doing with cardboard, glitter and highlighter pens. But judging by the look on Chris's face, he would have gone into Dale's bedroom even if it had been on fire. 'I'll see you later, Dom,' said Chris. Even though I knew Dale didn't really want it, I handed her the stapler and said, 'See you later, Chris.'

I will be running away from home on the Albury bus, departing at 6.00 p.m. tonight.

I will take The Little Prince with me.

xxD

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Urgent

Please do not run away from home. Promise me.

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Very Urgent

Please e-mail me to say you are all right. It has been nearly an hour since I sent my last e-mail and you have not responded.

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Extremely Urgent

I think you might be angry with me because I rang your mother. I'm sorry, but I had to. I didn't tell her about our e-mails. I didn't tell her any more than I had to.

I did not mean for you to spend the \$100 note on running away from home.

Please e-mail me.

xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : A House of Lies

I'm all right.

Mum called the police after you rang. They remembered her from the time we had dressed up as witches and she reported a burglary. Mum told the police I was a missing person and that I had escaped to Albury. They told her it was not a police matter and she ought to ring the bus company. You're only a missing person if no one knows where you are. They added that if I was on the bus, then the driver would be able to find me, especially if I was wearing a dress.

There were about twenty people on the bus. At one stage, the driver received a call, then pulled over. He turned around and asked if anyone on the bus was called Dominic Dear. After a few moments I put up my hand, as if I had just remembered that this was my name. 'You have to get off the bus at Seymour,' the bus driver told me. 'But I'm running away to Albury,' I explained. He said that I had to wait at the motel at Seymour because my parents were coming to collect me.

The people at the motel were very helpful and gave me some pamphlets about Seymour to read while I was waiting. There is a huge army base at Seymour and also some wineries. It's a good place to go if you want to blow things up or get drunk.

When Mum and Dad arrived, I was especially happy to see Dale with them. I thought she didn't like me any more.

Mum gave me a brief hug then told me that I was an idiot. Thank goodness Dad did not try to hug me. I think he has been very mean to Mum.

Meanwhile, Dale busily collected all the squashed insects on the windscreen. She and I climbed into the back seat and Dad started the car. For a few minutes we drove in silence. Then Dale produced a bag of vanilla slices. Carefully, she put insects in the icing and handed them to me. As I ate them, I asked Dale why she'd decided to go back to being a witch. Wasn't she falling in love with Christopher Ball?

Dale explained that when Chris went to her room, they had a pash, but she didn't like it at all. She has decided to have nothing more to do with boys for the time being, except for me.

Here's the conversation we had in the car:

Mum : You stupid boy, you're lucky to be alive.

Dom : Mum, I caught a bus. They are not deadly.

Mum : Why did you try to run away to Albury?

Dom : Because I'm not happy at home.

Mum : But why? Is it because we don't have a wide-screen television?

Dom : Wide-screen televisions don't bring true happiness.

Dad : The one in the pub does.

Dom : I can't live in a house of lies.

Mum : You're making no sense, Dominic.

Dom : Neither is Dad.

Mum : He never does. I'm talking about you.

Dom : Dad's done something awful.

Mum : I'm not at all surprised. What's he done?

Dom : I can't tell you. Dad, you have to tell Mum.

Dad : I'm driving the car. I can't be expected to drive and talk at the same time.

Dom : You're doing it now.

Dad : Oh look, there is a kangaroo.

Mum : You pointed at that before, Archy, and it's still dead.

Dale : Can we take it home?

Dad : No.

Mum : Dominic, did you run away to be with Uncle Peri?

Dom : Of course not.

Mum : How did he know you were running away?

Dom : He must be psychic.

Mum : I will be very annoyed if I find out you have been communicating with Peri. Promise me you will never do this.

Dom : I promise.

It seems everyone in the world tells lies, except for you, Uncle Peri.

xxD

P.S. Tonight I had a few words with Dad in private. I asked him if he was really and truly in love with Ms Havercroft. He denied everything, until I told him I'd found his e-mails. Finally, he said to me, 'Dominic, when you are older you will understand these things.' I said, 'Do you understand these things?' He said, 'No.' Then he told me not to tell Mum. He would tell her himself when the time was right.

P.P.S. His Holiness the Dalai Llama says that the secret of life is to be happy. But Buddha says that life is all dukkha. This means pain and suffering. What are they on about?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Buddhism and Pigs

I am so relieved that you are all right.

I can understand your confusion about Buddhism. The Buddha says there are four Noble Truths. Here they are:

1. Life is tough.
2. The reason life is tough is that we all want things that we can never have.
3. We must learn to stop wanting so much.
4. Once we have learned that, we can be happy by practising the wisdom that the Buddha teaches.

If that all seems like gobbledygook, here is a story for you.

One of my neighbours is a pig farmer. He always had to repair his fences because the pigs would keep pushing them down. Everyone thought the pigs pushed the fences down because they were stupid and fat and clumsy. But my neighbour developed a theory. His pigs were landrace pigs, a special breed with long floppy ears that cover their eyes. The reason they pushed the fences down was that they liked to jump up and rest their fore-trotters on the fence-posts. When they did this, their long ears flopped back allowing them to see the world. The pigs wanted to know what was going on. They weren't stupid, just curious.

So my neighbour built a special reinforced pig-perch in the centre of the paddock. Now the pigs hop up on that, and he doesn't need to fix his fences any more.

Sometimes we can solve our problems by looking at things in a different way.

You show good taste in liking pigs, Dominic.

Bernie sends his best wishes. I have just planted tomatoes. The sheep have taken up ballroom dancing.

xxP

P.S. I hope you like my latest present.

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

*Subject : What Happens When You Eat Things
that aren't Food.*

Thank you for your e-mail and for sending me the beautiful, blue sapphire, which D'artagnan gave me yesterday. It's the best thing anyone has ever given me. In return I'm sending you a picture that D'artagnan drew. Can you recognise who it is?

For the last two days I have been going to a place called The Clinic. It's at an old building in the city. This is a special type of school where the teachers are all psychiatrists and the students are all mental. The psychiatrist responsible for me is Mr Panayotis. He's nice enough, but he smokes heavily and bites his nails.

I'm at The Clinic because I did something appalling to Ms Havercroft. I can hardly bear to look at her now that I know she has been pashing my father.

Last Friday, Ms Havercroft asked D'artagnan and me to draw another mural on the blackboard. D'artagnan got to work doing brilliant space monsters. But I was

too upset to draw. Ms Havercroft didn't realise I knew the awful truth about her. 'We are all waiting for you, Dominic,' she said.

I grabbed a handful of Ms Havercroft's precious chalk. Right in front of everyone, I ate as much of the chalk as I could, crunched it all up with my teeth. Ms Havercroft tried to stop me but I was determined to swallow every colour of the rainbow.

As you once wrote to me, all actions have consequences. You cannot eat your teacher's favourite chalk without paying the price. The principal recommended to Mum and Dad that I be sent to The Clinic for a week 'for observation'. D'artagnan has also been sent here, but he's a regular visitor apparently. We've spent most of the two days doing art.

D'artagnan still can't draw pigs but he's getting better at drawing everything else, even me. (Yes, that's me in the picture.)

I have been making attractive pots by coiling long snakes of clay. These could be used to store pens or just as an ornamental feature on a mantelpiece. They could also be sold at markets for hundreds of dollars.

This morning I noticed that D'artagnan was drawing brilliant patterns by holding a texta-pen in each hand. Normally he draws with his right hand only. I didn't realise D'artagnan is ambiguous.

I decided to try an experiment. I asked D'artagnan to draw a pig with his left hand. He got a fresh piece of paper and drew a box with three holes. Either D'artagnan had opened your parcel, or he already knew the story of *The Little Prince*. I told him I didn't ask for a sheep, I wanted a pig. D'artagnan burst out laughing. It's the first sound I've ever heard him make. He stopped when Mr Panayotis walked in.

I spent the rest of the morning with Mr Panayotis, finding out why I'm not normal. He made me do an IQ test like the one I bombed out on at school. I remembered what you wrote in your letter and asked him what the point of these tests was. Mr Panayotis said he wasn't here to answer my questions. Then I asked him, 'Why are you here?' and he answered, 'To help you. Stop asking questions please.' 'All right,' I said. Then I asked, 'Does D'artagnan do these tests?' 'Sometimes,' said Mr Panayotis. 'Now, I'm afraid I can't talk to you any more about D'artagnan.' 'All right,' I said. Then I asked, 'Does D'artagnan do as badly as I do?' Mr Panayotis told me that D'artagnan got the highest score of anyone. That was one of the reasons he was here.

After the IQ test, we played a game called 'Inkblots'. I'm sure you've seen TV shows where the psychiatrist shows the mental patient an inkblot, and they have to say what the inkblot looks like. The psychiatrist runs through them quickly and the patient says, 'Dog,

house, mother, two people pashing, etc.’ At The Clinic, the game isn’t like that. Mr Panayotis has only one inkblot. Maybe he can’t afford any more?

After staring at this stupid blot for ages, I said whatever came into my head. ‘Dog with a steering wheel, armchair riding a tricycle, me and a pig in outer space, etc.’ Mr Panayotis kept saying, ‘What else?’ Then I said, ‘My parents exploding.’ I should have known this would get me into trouble. We talked about why I wanted my parents to explode. Was I angry with them? Was I jealous? Mr Panayotis wouldn’t stop asking questions.

At the end of this week, Mr Panayotis and the other psychiatrists will put together a report on me. They know about my bad behaviour in class and that I’m a runaway. They don’t know that Dad is having a love affair with Ms Havercroft because every time I try to tell them, I feel like I’m about to throw up coloured chalk.

I suspect I will not get a very good report.

xxD

P.S. In the meantime, perhaps you would care to do this simple IQ test to see if you are normal or not?

1. Cat is to Cheese as Transvestite is to Japan. True or false?
2. Which of these things is best to sit on?
(A) Settee.
(B) Marmalade.

(C) Caterpillar.

(D) Isabella Rossellini.

3. A loaf of bread costs three dollars. A jar of jam costs four dollars. A sportscar costs a hundred thousand dollars. What is the capital of Peru?
4. Denise is colour blind. She has four green apples and three red apples. She puts them in a drawer and takes out two apples at a time. How many times must Denise do this before she is sure that she has one red apple and one green apple? Should Denise get a better hobby? Is Denise only pretending to be colour blind to get attention?
5. All giraffes are purple. Mildred is purple. Is Mildred a giraffe or just a peculiar girl? (Do not use a calculator for this question.)
6. Jack has three sugars in his coffee but none in his tea. Michael has two sugars in his coffee and also two in his tea. Neither of them likes sugar. What on earth is wrong with them? (Do not use a hair dryer for this question.)

7. I have a bucket and a spade. My father has a bucket but no spade. My mother has two buckets and three spades. My sister has no spade but five million buckets. Should we start a bucket shop?

8. Which of these does not belong?

(A) You.

(B) You.

(C) You.

(D) All of the above. (Do not use this page as a handkerchief.)

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : You

I am driving down to Melbourne to see you. Bernie will stay behind to keep the pumpkins company.

This will be my first long drive since the accident. I'm a little afraid. But you are worth it.

My sister (your mum) is still being stupid and refusing to talk to me. Please e-mail me a place where we can meet.

xxP

P.S. I completed the IQ test very quickly. I got one of the sheep to help me.

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : (no subject)

My final assessment will be at The Clinic in Brewery Street at 2.00 p.m. on Friday.

Please promise you will be there.

xxD

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : (no subject)

I promise. I do not have a Bible so I will swear on my own copy of The Little Prince. It is my most treasured possession. Inside it is a sticker that reads: THIS BOOK BELONGS TO LEX UNGER.

xxP

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : L.U.

Lex Unger's initials are L.U. Does this mean that Auntie Lu was really Uncle Lu?

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Re: L.U.

Yes.

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : Re: Re: L.U.

Why did you want me to think Lu was a woman?

To : Dominic Dear
From : Peri Little
Subject : Apology

I am sorry. I was worried that you would not want to e-mail back. Sometimes people can be intolerant. Even good people like you.

To : Peri Little
From : Dominic Dear
Subject : The Gay Label

I'm sorry that you felt you had to lie to me. But I think I understand.

We both admire His Holiness the Dalai Lama, but even he can seem intolerant. He once said that gay people can't be Buddhists. And he's the boss! I'd be quite upset about that if I was gay. (I suppose it's still possible that I might be, although I've just seen Queen Noor of Jordan on TV and I'm captivated by her regal dusky beauty.)

One day at school, a kid stuck a label on the back of Mr Badourian's jacket. The label said: GAY. Nobody respects Mr Badourian. He's always going around with labels stuck to his jacket. Not so long ago he spent the whole morning with TIT on his cardigan.

But the GAY label was the one that made him really angry. 'You will all stay after school until I find out who put GAY on my back,' he told us.

People do seem very worried by the gay label and I just don't get it. Gay people don't seem harmful to me. Some of them wear rude trousers, but this is not harmful, just extremely ugly and a bit sad.

I'm sure you don't wear rude trousers. You have a good sense of style and you don't live in Sydney.

Meanwhile, life at home is still tough. Dad won't tell Mum about his love affair with Ms Havercroft, and I can't bring myself to tell her, either. I haven't even told Dale. This terrible secret is probably having a bad effect on my IQ, as if it isn't low enough already!

Please don't forget to be there on Friday.

xxD

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Re: The Gay Label

It's true that I was upset when the Dalai Lama said that gay people can't be Buddhists. But he is the first to admit that he sometimes makes mistakes. You'll be pleased to know he is changing his mind. Of course gay people can be Buddhists, although not if they wear rude trousers. That seems fair to me.

I'll see you on Friday.

xxP

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

*Subject : Family Therapy and the Incorrect Use
of Furniture*

I hope you're feeling better after the ordeal of last Friday.

This is what happened before you arrived. Mum and Dad sat with me in the office of Dr O, the head psychiatrist. (Dr O looks like a Chinese version of my dad. He is also going bald.)

I was disappointed that you were not there. But I was pleased to see one of my clay pots on Dr O's desk. It had a pen in it. At last I had done something useful.

Dr O opened the file on his desk. I saw Mr Panayotis's handwriting. 'Dominic has a strong desire to blow up his parents,' is what I expected Dr O to read out. 'He will have to spend the rest of his life knitting cardigans on a heavily guarded island in Bass Strait.'

But the news was good. According to Dr O, I am fairly normal and not a looper. You're right. Getting a bad score on an IQ test does not mean you're mental. I'm highly creative and should probably pursue a career in the arts. (I still intend to work in TV.) He also said that I have difficulty relating to my parents. This would appear to be the main problem. As my dad would say, 'Good heavens!' Mum was disappointed in Dr O's report. 'Aren't you going to give him any tablets?' she asked. Dr O said there was no need. 'But he's unbalanced. He tried to run away. He ate all his

teacher's chalk,' said Mum. 'He thinks he's Buddhist,' added Dad. Dr O replied that this didn't make me unbalanced. And there aren't any tablets that stop you being Buddhist.

Mum asked straight out, 'What about him being gay?' I blushed. 'There is nothing about that in the report,' said Dr O. 'Then it is not a very accurate report,' replied Mum. Dr O said, 'Dominic is a boy.' 'I'm glad you noticed,' said Dad. 'You are a credit to your profession.' Dr O continued regardless, 'We really wouldn't be able to tell you if Dominic is gay or not. But I am concerned that it bothers you so much. Would it upset you if I told you I was gay?'

Neither Dad nor Mum spoke. I could see Mum felt very uncomfortable, as though she was in the same room as someone who was radioactive. Dad just pretended he was somewhere else.

Dr O closed the report on his desk. 'We don't believe Dominic has any major psychological problems,' said Dr O. 'Well you would say that,' said Mum. 'Since you're all gay and everything.' Dr O sighed. 'Actually, I am not gay.' Mum snapped, 'But you just said you were.' 'No,' said Dr O patiently. 'I said "Would it upset you if I told you I was gay?" I wanted to see how you would react.' 'Excuse me,' Mum said. 'We are not your patients. You are meant to be helping Dominic.' 'That's what I'm trying to do,' said Dr O. 'From everything Dominic has told us, and from my own observation, I think it might be a good idea to try

family therapy. You would all have to attend regular sessions together.’ Mum looked appalled. ‘No, thank you very much.’

And that was when you walked in.

Uncle Peri : I’m sorry I’m late.

Mum : You are not late. You shouldn’t be here at all.

Dr O : Who are you?

Mum : Go away now.

Dom : Dr O, this is my Uncle Peri. He is the only adult in the world that I trust. He is also a geologist and a teacher and a voluntary firefighter and a Buddhist.

Dad : You said he was deliberately unemployed and he lived off the government.

Mum : Shut up, Archy. Peri, I insist you leave immediately.

Uncle Peri : I’m afraid I can’t. I swore on The Little Prince.

Mum : As you can probably gather, Dr O, my brother is abnormal. Please tell your security staff to eject him from the premises.

Dr O : We don’t have security staff.

Mum : He has no right to be here.

Dad : I didn't know they allowed you to be a fireman if you're gay.

Dom : Why wouldn't they allow gay people to be firemen?

Dad : They might fall in love with the other firemen and let the buildings burn down.

Mum : Shut up, Archy. I will not ask you a second time.

Uncle Peri : You just have.

Dr O : I would like to know why you're here.

Uncle Peri : I'm a member of Dominic's family, too.

Mum : No you're not. Gay people can't be members of anyone's family.

Uncle Peri : My sister is a severely prejudiced and unhappy woman. It's not entirely her fault. Our parents also had personal problems.

Mum : No they didn't.

Dad : Yes they did.

Mum : Don't listen to my husband. He's an alcoholic.

Dad : I'm not an alcoholic. I enjoy a drink.

Dr O, please stop writing notes.

Dr O : Don't let it disturb you.

Dad : It is disturbing me.

Mum : I'm not prejudiced or unhappy. I just hate gay people that run off with your fiancé.

Dom : I didn't know Lu was Mum's fiancé.

Uncle Peri : Neither did Lu.

Mum : Lex was such a lovely man. This monster turned him gay and killed him.

Dom : I think I can explain what happened.

Dr O : I would certainly like someone to explain.

Dom : Lex didn't really love Mum, he actually loved Uncle Peri.

Mum : This is sick and disgusting.

Dad : I'm more of a social drinker. Please write that down, Dr O. I never touch alcohol before lunchtime.

Mum : No one has lunch at 10.00 a.m.

Dad : Don't write that down.

Dom : Lu and Uncle Peri were in love for ages.

Dad : Who is Lu?

Dom : Lu is Lex.

Dad : Oh, I see.

Mum : No you don't.

Dad : I stand corrected.

Dom : Lu and Uncle Peri went all over the world visiting volcanoes.

Mum : Be quiet, Dominic. How do you know all this?

Dom : But there was a terrible car accident and Lu got killed. Uncle Peri was driving.

Mum : And we all know why he crashed.

Uncle Peri : No, Dettol. I was not drunk. It was just a horrible accident.

Dad : You called her Dettol! Did you hear that? He called her Dettol. That's antiseptic.

Uncle Peri : Lu was the most wonderful person in the world.

Mum : And look what I ended up with.

Dad : I would be offended by that if I were not having a mad love affair with Ponch Havercroft.

Mum : No one's listening, Archy.

Dr O : Who is Ponch Havercroft?

Dad : She is an angel. She is wonderful.

Mum : She is Dominic's schoolteacher and she is totally incompetent.

Dom : Mum, Dad really is having a love affair with Ms Havercroft.

Mum : That's a lie.

Dom : I wish it was, but I'm afraid it's the truth.

Uncle Peri : I'm sorry.

Mum : For ruining my whole life? Please don't apologise.

Uncle Peri : Dettol, I have not ruined your life.

Dad : He did it again. He called her Dettol!

Dr O : Could you please stop for a moment, I need to get another pen.

Mum : You do not need another pen. You do not need to write anything down except that Dominic has severe learning difficulties. His uncle is a sick and selfish man. And his father is a totally useless human being who lives in a world of make-believe.

Dom : Mum, it's not make-believe.

Dad : Ponch Havercroft wears delicious perfume. You smelt it on my clothes.

Mum : Then it is true.

Dad : Yes. Ponch and I are lovers. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

Mum : Well you should be ashamed.

Dr O : Mrs Dear, please sit down.

Mum : You should also be hit with a chair.

Dad : Odette, what are you doing?

Mum : I would have thought it was rather obvious.

Then my mother hit my father with a chair.

Shortly afterwards, D'artagnan ran in and yelled at the top of his voice, 'Please stop making so much noise!'

Would you say that is what happened? I deliberately left out one bit because I thought it might be distressing for you.

Love,

Dominic

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Ow

Yes, I would say that is pretty much what happened.

I feel sorry for your mother. Nothing seems to have gone right for her. I don't know if this is because of her bitterness or if it is just plain bad luck.

She should not have hit Archy with a chair. But you cannot blame her, especially after your dad kept laughing at her like that.

I don't feel good about calling your mother Dettol. It is a nasty nickname. I invented it out of my own bitterness. Your mother's nickname for me used to be Pearl, which is perfectly lovely.

I am determined that one day your mum and I will be friends, and that she might even call me Pearl again. It will take a while. As you saw, your mother did not hit me with a chair, but she did throw a clay pot at me. The swelling has gone down now and Bernie informs me that I am not dead.

Dr O has reassured me that Odette will not try to hurt anyone again. He said that she had experienced something called a 'primal episode' (a kind of mental attack) and that it wouldn't recur. You are safe with her and you do not have to wear a stackhat. Even though your mother threw a pot at me, please give my love to her.

It would have been nice to have spent more time with you. One day soon we will get together. We will sit on the banks of the Murray River and fish for colanders.

Looking back at our e-mails, it seems that you are the only normal person there is. Now that D'artagnan has started speaking, I hope he has some interesting things to say.

Attached please find a picture. Can you guess who it is?

Love,

Uncle Peri

To : Peri Little

From : Dominic Dear

Subject : Mending Things

I'm relieved that you're feeling better.

Even though Mum threw the pot at you, I'm still glad you came to The Clinic. I think it helped to sort out a few things. Mum now sees Dr O regularly. The way adults behave, I suspect she may be having a passionate love affair, and that one day she will tell me that my new dad is Chinese and that her name is now O.O.

Mum has gone right off Dotty Ball lately. Here is the conversation she had with her last Tuesday:

Dotty : Odette, I wanted to talk with you about the hole in the fence.

Mum : Yes, we must do something about it.

Dotty : I'm glad you agree. It has been there for a long time now and I notice your children have been coming and going a fair bit.

Mum : We shall have to get someone to repair it and share the cost.

Dotty : Can't Archy fix it?

Mum : He's not a carpenter, he's a printer. He's also hopeless.

Dotty : Normally I would ask Rolly, but as you know he's in Singapore. Otherwise I'm sure he would do it and he would do a very good job.

Mum : Well, since Rolly isn't here and can't do a very good job, we must pay for a carpenter.

Dotty : It doesn't seem fair, as Rolly fixed the fence last time.

Mum : If you're having financial difficulties I will pay the full cost of the repairs.

Dotty : I'm not having financial difficulties, Odette. But since your children are guilty of using the hole more often than Christopher, perhaps you should pay the full cost?

Mum : I believe it was Christopher who made the hole in the first place. And could you please instruct him on how to wear a shirt? I'm sick of seeing him half nude. Or perhaps you think this is acceptable behaviour?

Dotty : I would be more concerned if my son wore my dresses.

Mum : I would be highly concerned if my husband were living in Geelong with someone called Courtney.

Dotty : I would be extremely concerned if my husband were having a love affair with my son's schoolteacher.

Mum : Then perhaps we should fix this fence properly?

Dotty : How do you mean, exactly, Odette?

Mum : I feel we should rebuild the fence so that it is five metres high and made of concrete. I do not wish to see you or hear you. You are an awful snob and I cannot believe I was so stupid as to be impressed by your bathroom fittings. They are not from Italy. You can get them at K-mart.

Dotty : Well, I'm sure you would know.

As a Buddhist I should have been appalled by this behaviour. But I felt strangely proud of my mother.

I have to go now because Dad needs to use the computer. He's looking for somewhere else to live. He's weeping a fair bit and telling me that he has not been a good father and that he loves me. He's going through a bad time so I'm especially nice to him.

I will now go to visit D'artagnan. Most of what he says is quite intelligent, although he doesn't see a problem with his green settee. Fortunately he has stopped patting me on the head.

Please take care of yourself and give my love to Bernie and the sheep. Thank you for sending me the picture of Uncle Lu.

You're right. He was very handsome.

Love,

Dominic

P.S. I notice the Little Prince wears a cape. Do you think he's gay?

To : Dominic Dear

From : Peri Little

Subject : Little Princes and African Queens

The Little Prince is gentle, kind and curious. I do not know if he is gay, only that he is happy.

I own a cape. I am happy, even though people were concerned that I wouldn't be. It was wonderful to find someone like Lu, and it was devastating to lose him. Terrible things like this happen to everyone, whether they own capes or not. Sometimes you find another partner and sometimes you don't. It is like this for everyone, too. Whether they are left-handed, right-handed or, in D'artagnan's case, ambiguous. (Although I think you might have meant ambidextrous.)

I will be very brave now and suggest that Crystal might not have been your best friend for quite some time. He certainly was once. But you and he have both changed, even in the short time we have been writing to each other. Your dad would probably say that Chris is becoming a man, but I think you may be more mature than Chris. Better friendships lie ahead for you, I am sure.

A lot of people will tell you there is only one way to live your life. You must have a wife and children and a car with a cup-holder. These things are lovely but they don't suit everyone.

You may end up with a beautiful wife and children and a car with a cup-holder and be wonderfully happy. You may end up living in an igloo with a Japanese string quartet and also be wonderfully happy. You may even end up climbing volcanoes with the great love of your life.

Whatever happens in your life, keep an open mind, don't stop writing and swimming, say Om, go easy on the Jam Fancies, read the odd book, don't throw pots at people, make new friendships and maintain old ones.

Meanwhile, Bernie and I are going to Africa on safari, to visit some old friends. But we will be back before long and I will be in touch.

Love,

Uncle Peri

P.S. I never wear the cape. To be honest, it looks stupid.

P.P.S. You can sell the sapphire, if you like.

Dear Buddha,

Uncle Peri has been in Africa for a while now. I received a postcard from him two weeks ago. It has a leopard on it. He's right, they do have excellent dress-sense. I miss Uncle Peri's e-mails, but I still have you.

There is a new Turkish girl down the road who looks exotic and interesting. Turkey is a fascinating country. I found out on www.turkey.com that there is a palace called Topkapi that is so big it has a forest in it. Ankara, the capital city, has many award-winning shopping centres. Tomorrow I will ask the new girl if she has been to the palace or the shopping centres.

Chris and I are still friends but we do not see each other very often. He is busy with football. Dale is busy with her netball. She has not given up witchcraft completely, and regularly puts a curse on the opposing team.

I have started developing large shoulders from doing butterfly stroke. My belly is also disappearing. I no longer look pregnant or busty.

Dale once told me my fortune with her tarot cards. According to her, I'm going to have a brilliant career, I will have 24 cats, and I will die by falling out of a hot-air balloon when I am a hundred. At the time I didn't believe it, but I suppose anything is possible.

Rolly Ball is still in Geelong, or Singapore, as Dotty prefers to call it.

My parents are having a trial separation. At the moment I'm living at home with Mum and Dale. Mum has taken up singing lessons. She has learned to sing an old-fashioned song called 'Boots' by Nancy Sinatra. Even though I hate musicals, I think it is the best song in the world. Mum found me dancing around the house to it and told me she would prefer I didn't do that.

I have finished Year Seven. I am still deeply disturbed by what happened between Ms Havercroft and my father. The love affair is over now. Dad says he doesn't know what came over him. I told him it was just a crush.

For the time being, he's living upstairs at Burr ridge's Hotel. He has been writing a lot of poetry. Greg Farino has also been busy writing poetry. His latest collection, *The Constipated Fairy*, is a bestseller.

I will never sell Uncle Peri's sapphire.

D'artagnan has the best name in the world. I call him Dart. He calls me Dom. We are at opposite ends of the IQ scale but we still like each other. He is teaching me more about art and I am teaching him to swim. Although he is quite small, Dart still looks good in bathers.

Please look after Uncle Peri in Africa. If anything fatal happens to him, bring him back in his next life as a leopard. He'd enjoy that.

And I will wear a purple hat but not a cape to his funeral. He'd enjoy that too.

Om,

Dominic

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug MacLeod's absurd verse and bizarre stories have endeared him to generations of children and have made him the most consistently anthologised Australian children's writer.

Doug is also a TV producer and writer, working on shows like 'The Micallef Program', 'SeaChange' and 'Kath and Kim'.

He has climbed active volcanoes in Indonesia, Vanuatu and Hawaii.

