

## The Telephone Box

'I've washed your shirt and sewn that button back. It's by your backpack, H.'

Mum hummed in a happy sort of way as she began to clear away the tea things. I'd noticed how she seemed to be more relaxed when H. was around. He sat at the kitchen table now with Robbie. They were engrossed in designing some sort of vehicle for Robbie's school project. I'd never seen Robbie concentrate for so long on school work before – as if he really was enjoying it.

Two months earlier, Robbie was using the window sill as a race track for his dinosaurs, accompanied by all the noises that boys make whilst steering a diplodocus around a plant pot. It was irritating, but after fourteen years I was used to it. Mum was making a smoothie to take to work – she was on one of her healthy eating diets, again.

'Mu-u-u-m, there's someone in Dad's 'phone box.'

Mum, blitzing the smoothie in the Nutri-Bullit, didn't hear him. I ignored him - because that's what big sisters do with younger brothers who have an over-active imagination. Besides I was trying to do the German homework I had forgotten to do last night.

'There's someone coming out, look! Mum, look!'

'Now Robbie - ,' Mum started to say, 'Oh my goodness, there really is someone there!'

She joined Robbie at the window, peering down to the end of the garden where Dad's telephone box sat. It was a little knocked about, but still glowed bright red in the morning sun. To be honest, it was a bit of an eye-sore, but we all agreed we should keep it there in memory of Dad, who had rescued it when he saw a small crane and grabber loading it onto the back of a lorry. Dad had been recovering at home after another chemotherapy session and had gone out in his PJs to talk to the men in the lorry. I can still remember how pleased he was when we got home from school and he showed us the red box squatting between the bean sticks and the lean-to shed. Robbie had wanted to paint it blue so it could be a Tardis, but Dad was adamant that it remained red to preserve a bit of British history. I think it was a symbol of the years he had spent digging holes in roadsides for British Telecom. A monument to the common man, worked to the bone by the capitalist elite .... although if British Telecom was nationalised was it the Tory government who were supporting the capitalists? I asked Mr Digby at school next day for an explanation. He got very excited when I told him we had a telephone box. Are all men nerds?

I wandered over to see what the fuss was about: 'Is it a tramp?'

'I hope not. Whoever it is, they have no right to be in there.' Mum was by the back door, shaking off her slippers for some shoes.

I thought about the prospect of someone sleeping in the box. 'Can't have been very comfortable, you'd have to sit on the floor and be hunched up all night.'

'Don't think there is any room on the floor, what with Mum's seed trays and my footballs,' Robbie added.

Mum's hand was on the back door handle when a cry from Robbie stopped her.

'Oh! Oh – it's – it's him! It's the Hooded Hero.'

It was true. I'd seen pictures of him in Robbie's comic. Striding up the garden path towards the house was a man wearing a yellow balaclava, yellow T-shirt and dark jogging

bottoms with a yellow zig-zag down the side. He was carrying something large in a holdall in one hand, and a back pack in the other. Mum looked confused. 'Who?'

'You know, the Hooded Hero, he's like a – a –', Robbie was jumping from foot to foot in excitement.

'A modern day Robin Hood – helping the poor, doing good – that sort of thing,' I finished for him.

'Oh – have I read about him in the paper?' Mum sounded vague, shrugged, unlocked the door and stepped out to meet the man, the two of us crowding behind her.

To be honest, he wasn't quite like I had expected. His T-shirt was on back to front for a start. I could see the M&S label sticking up under his Adam's apple. There were wisps of brown hair sticking out from the balaclava and the jogging bottoms were spattered with mud. He had nice eyes though, sort of hazel colour with long lashes, and a kind smile. He gave a small bow to Mum.

'Good morning. Please forgive me for not asking permission to use your splendid telephone box. I didn't want to disturb you and I have an urgent errand to carry out in Maida Vale.'

Mum rose to the occasion: 'Do you have time for a cup of tea before you leave, there's some in the pot, Mr - er - ?'

He paused for a fraction of a second, beamed and said: 'Oh well, a quick cuppa would be very nice, Mrs - ?'

'Proctor, Deidre Proctor, and this is my son Robbie and daughter, Charlotte. Do come in.'

He grinned at us and followed Mum into the kitchen, putting the holdall down by our pile of shoes.

'Just call me H., like it says on my T-shirt.' He looked down, 'Oh, drat! Must have got it round the wrong way. There's never much room in a telephone box -'

'You haven't got your cape either,' Robbie observed.

'Ah, no – that's because it gets in the way. I always carry it with me, of course. It's in my backpack.'

'Do sit down, H.' Mum handed him a mug of tea. 'Charlotte, pass H. a biscuit, please.'

She poured herself a mug and settled down at the kitchen table opposite H., who was already on his second hobnob.

'Erm – do you do this sort of thing often?'

He looked at her over the rim of his mug: 'No, this is a treat. I never usually have time to sit down for a nice cup of tea.'

'No, I didn't mean that. I meant hide in telephone boxes. I presume that is what you were doing?'

I thought H. covered his surprise at her ignorance pretty well, but I could see Robbie squirm with embarrassment. Didn't she know anything?

'Mum,' Robbie said in a low voice, 'he has to go in there to change his clothes – so he can come out again as the Hooded Hero.'

'Yes, absolutely correct, young Robbie.' H. beamed at Robbie in a rather patronising way.

'You see, well - it is extremely difficult to locate telephone boxes anywhere in the country these days. I search high and low for them. I must congratulate you on the one in your garden, it is a real find. There's a couple in the Home Counties which is alright for

South London and the M25 corridor - I hope you won't mind if I use it from time to time? It's particularly convenient for work in north London, I won't disturb you. Just a quick change and then I'm away.'

I felt he was pushing things a bit. I needed to catch the school bus: 'Why don't you use a public convenience or hall, or – or a church, or something?'

'Well, *in extremis* I do, but telephone boxes are traditional of course, and it's important to hold up tradition.'

Robbie nodded: 'That's what Dad used to say.'

Mum jumped up from the table: 'My goodness, look at the time. You two get your coats on – come on, or you'll miss the bus.'

'Yes, time for me to be off as well. Thank you so much for the tea and biscuits, Deidre. May I call you Deidre – such a pretty name?'

H. and gone over to the shoe pile and collected his holdall. He smiled his charming smile at her and I'll swear she went over all silly.

'Oh yes, yes of course. Er, well, when you are next in need of the telephone box, do tap on the door and come in for a cup of tea, or something ...' Her voice sort of trailed away and they just stood looking at each other.

I rolled my eyes at Robbie and then got practical: 'It's raining outside, does the Hooded Hero have a raincoat?'

'Eh? Oh no, a little water doesn't worry me. My brother hates it, of course, but not me.'

'Who's your brother?' Robbie asked, instantly curious.

'Robbie, don't be rude.' Mum was now bustling about the kitchen clearing the breakfast things. 'Now off you go you two, and Robbie, don't forget your football boots.'

We grabbed our things and made for the front door, with H. following us. Once he was outside, he unzipped his holdall and drew out a folding bicycle. As he undid it and locked the bits into position, he looked at Mum.

'I shouldn't ask this of you, Deidre – it's such an imposition – but, well the fact is, my brother sometimes needs a telephone box for the same purposes as myself. I was just wondering - ,' he gave a small, uncertain laugh.

Mum laughed too: 'I didn't know there were two Hooded Hero's, H.!'

Oh-oh. Did she have a touch of hysteria, like the ladies always did in Victorian days, I wondered?

'Dear me, no, Deidre. My brother is Banana Man – I expect you have heard of him? Well, he doesn't get out much these days, but, if you didn't mind, I could let him know of the address of this telephone box. Just in case?'

'Of course, please do,' Mum replied.

H. had shoved the holdall into his back pack and slung the pack over his shoulders. I thought it was a good thing it covered the large H plastered all over his back. Getting on his bike he gave a cheery wave and cycled off down the road. Robbie and I legged it in the opposite direction, leaving Mum standing at the front door.

Mum and Robbie scanned the paper the next day, but couldn't find any reports concerning the Hooded Hero. Over the next few days Robbie was sullen. I discovered he had become the butt of jokes by his class mates, having bragged that the Hooded Hero had a cup of tea with him. No one believed him – why should they? It all seemed a bit bizarre and I wondered whether we had been the victims of some hallucinatory gas. But that didn't

explain the sock, button, and a tube ticket for the Bakerloo line that Robbie had found in the telephone box. Mum said she would wash the sock and keep the button to give it back to H when he next called. I was sure that would never happen – it was just a one-off.

Well, two months later and things had definitely changed. We never knew when and what time of day H. would arrive, but now it was an almost weekly occurrence. Where he spent his time during the rest of the week was a mystery, but at least he had begun to tell us a bit about what he did. The thing is, when H. was around everything seemed so normal, and yet - what is normal? Two months ago, I never would have even thought of that question. Mr Digby, my Form Tutor, said I should do philosophy in the Sixth Form. He said I'd enjoy the challenge. I reflected on our first meeting with H. Yeah, since that day we had all changed in a subtle kind of way, even me.

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