



Growing Pains



www.quirkytales.co.uk
kay@quirkytales.co.uk



The sun shone in stripes through the partially tilted vertical blinds, bleaching zebra crossings into the papers strewn across the large conference table. Three men and two women sat around the table, each staring despondently at the files before them.

A tall man, of indeterminate middle-age, in a dark grey suit and over-tight collar tapped his pen against his notepad and sighed deeply. 'The boy is trouble,' he said with a shake of his head. 'He has no realistic prospects, and his file clearly shows that he is descending into delinquency.'

A young woman in blue trousers and a green knitted top leaned forwards, a determined look on her face. 'Mike, I know it doesn't look good,' she said, indicating a bulging buff folder in the middle of the table. 'It's true his behaviour has deteriorated of late, but I still believe he could be turned around.'

The other woman, Aggie, her face indicating too many years of these discussions, scoffed. 'Tara, you are an idealist. This boy is beyond help, we all know it. We can predict right here and now that in five years time, he will be in prison, or on the run, or serving probation. He's a hopeless case! I propose that we turn our attention to those who have a chance. I don't want to waste any more resources on this one.'

Mike looked from one woman to the other, remembering that not so long ago, Aggie had been as hot-headed and determined as Tara. The system beats us all in the end, he thought with a sad shake of his head.

'Mike, you know we can make a difference,' insisted Tara, pinning him with a stare. 'I know that it's all stacked against him, but surely that makes it all the more important that we step in.'

'Tara, I understand, and respect, your passion,' sighed Mike, swinging the file around to face him. 'But sadly, I find myself agreeing with Aggie on this one. I mean, look, the boy's father is halfway through a twelve year stretch, his mother suffers chronic alcoholism, his older brother is currently serving a community sentence for drug offences, and his younger sister, who I remind you is only eight, has already been suspended from her school for her uncontrollable behavioural issues. He is not in education, employment, and has rejected all offers of either.'

Tara looked down at the desk, composing herself, marshalling her thoughts. At length she looked up, her jaw set, her expression cool, steely. 'You're right. Everything is against him. He's had nothing but bad examples all his life, and, without drastic intervention, he will follow his father, his mother, his brother. He doesn't know anything else, but ...'

'There is no but, Tara!' snapped Aggie, slamming her hand on the table. 'Sometimes you come up against these hard cases. They don't want to change. They don't want anything better. You have to learn to walk away and let other systems take over.'

'The penal system?' snarled Tara, glaring at her older colleague. 'You're talking about a human being, here! He's not a defective appliance fit only for the dump! Mike, it is not too late for this boy. We can still reach him. Get him on the Mentor Programme and give him a chance. Please!' she stared around the table at all those present. 'Please, give this boy a chance to make something out of his life.'

Aggie threw herself back in her chair, shaking her head furiously and staring at Mike. He gazed down the table at the small bundle of pent-up energy that was his youngest team member, wondering if what he was about to do would mark his judgement for life. 'This is somewhat against my instincts, Tara. I'm not sure what you've seen in this boy ...'

'He's a good boy, Mike,' she half-whispered. 'I've spoken with him, spent time with him. He wants something better. There is ambition there.' Aggie snorted, still refusing to look at Tara. 'You don't believe it, I get that, Aggie. But you haven't spent time with the boy, only his folder, and that's hardly a fair representation of a life, is it?'

Mike held his hands up to ward off another outraged objection from Aggie. 'Enough! Alright, I propose that if you can find him a suitable, male, mentor, then we will try him on the

programme. However,' he held up a finger, stopping Tara before she showered him with gratitude. 'One infringement, one misdemeanour, one question mark over his behaviour, and he's off. Do you understand? We cannot waste these precious placements on a no-hope.'

Tara stared at him for a beat, knowing how hard it would be to keep the boy on the straight and narrow for the duration. Eventually she nodded, in the certain knowledge that this really was the best she could have hoped for. 'Fair enough,' she said, with a tight smile.

Mike nodded, and closed the file, then turned to the man on his right. 'Good, one down. Now then, Stuart, your case please.'

The boy looked around the allotment, grimacing at the sight of the battered old sheds and enormous pile of rotting compost. He shivered as the wind felt its way through his thin jacket, chilling him to the core. The old man just watched him, his eyes crinkling in amusement.

'Think I'm funny, do you!' snarled the boy, wrapping his arms around himself.

The old man regarded him a moment longer, then chuckled. 'Aye lad. I do that,' and then he turned away, shuffling into the small greenhouse with its neatly arranged shelves of pots and plants.

The boy scowled. He could be at home right now, watching telly, drinking with his mates, working on his high scores on the Playstation, instead of which, thanks to that interfering busybody 'call me Tara' he was out here, in this dump of a place, being sniggered at by a very old man. He ought to deck somebody.

The old man looked up and waved him in. 'Come on lad!' he called. 'There's no wind in here, 'cepting what I generate m'self!' he said, with a wry grin.

The boy rolled his eyes and huffed his way along the thin grassy path to the greenhouse. He glared at the old man, with his moth eaten old jumper and shaking hands, but stomped inside anyway. The old man was right, it was warmer in here. It didn't smell particularly nice, though.

'We're potting on these beans today, lad,' said the old man, placing two trays on the bench. 'I'll do one, you can do t'other.'

The boy watched as the old man slowly filled a tray with compost, levelling it off and tamping it down, then adding more until he was satisfied. Then he took a wooden peg and began drilling small perfectly even holes. The boy sighed, then, seeing he had no real alternative, began filling his tray from the pile of compost.

He shovelled a load in and started pressing it down with his hands, but the old man stopped him, holding up a grubby hand. 'Nay lad! Don't press it. You squeeze out all the room and the beans can't grow. Just pick the tray up and tap it down on the bench.'

The boy bit back a retort and picked up the tray, slamming it down on the bench. The compost jumped up, most of it landing in a foot radius outside the tray. The old man chuckled. 'Don't know your own strength, lad,' he murmured, and shuffled away to collect a seed tray with tiny seedlings poking out.

The boy scooped up more compost and gently tapped the tray down, smoothing it down the way he had seen the old man do it. Then he topped it up so the compost was level with the top of the tray and snatched up the wooden dibber. Spacing the holes was frustratingly difficult, though the old man had made it look simple. The boy found that his holes were not evenly spaced, and certainly not perfectly formed. He growled in annoyance and was about to reset the tray, but the old man stopped him again.

'That's fine, lad,' he said. 'The beans'll be happy enough in there.'

'It looks crap!' grumbled the boy, comparing his tray with that of the old man.

'Well that'll be the compost,' said the old man with a twinkle in his eye. The boy smiled in spite of himself. 'It don't need to be neat. Beans don't care about that. As long as they've got room to grow, and food to eat, they're happy.'

Half an hour later, when the two trays were filled with the fresh seedlings, the old man and the boy sat drinking coffee from the old man's thermos. The boy regarded his mentor. He was astonishingly old, his face leathery and more wrinkled than any he had ever seen before. He had hair of the purest white, sticking out from beneath a battered old cloth cap. His eyes were milky, watering, though he wore no spectacles. The boy shuddered as he noticed the hairs sticking out from the old man's ears, wondering if they were an inevitable part of growing old.

He looked away, preferring to look at the plants, until he spotted his untidy, pinched and battered seedlings. 'They're rubbish,' he muttered.

The old man looked up, surprised. 'Well, they're a bit battered, but they'll grow out of it! You did well, lad. For a first attempt, you did very well,' he said softly. 'Now then, can't sit here sipping coffee like prim little ladies wi' nought better to do. There's weeding to be done.'

The boy returned the next day, dropped off at the gate to the allotments by 'call me Tara'. His back ached and he hadn't been able to get the soil out of his fingernails, despite a long soak in the bath. What he wanted, more than anything else, was to stretch out on the sofa and watch DVDs all day. 'Call me Tara' wouldn't hear of it. She seemed surprisingly unmoved by his suffering. Maybe she wasn't such a soft touch after all.

The old man was already hard at work, digging over the heavy soil, his face placid and relaxed as he slowly worked his allotment. The boy watched him for a few moments, wondering what it was like to be an old man, with nothing in his life but this tiny patch of earth. Eventually he thrust his hands into his jacket pockets and sauntered over.

'You decided to come back then,' said the old man, without looking up. 'There's another hoe in the greenhouse. It's an oldun, but it still works.'

The boy looked at the greenhouse, then back at the old man, bent over his hoe. 'My back's killing me after yesterday,' he moaned.

The old man smiled. 'Aye, it would be. Takes some getting used to, this kind of work.'

The boy frowned, indignant that no-one seemed to care that he was in pain. He stomped into the greenhouse and retrieved the hoe, taking a sneaky look at his seedlings as he passed. He was disappointed, but not surprised, to see they had not changed since yesterday.

The old man and the boy worked for the next two hours, digging, and weeding, preparing the soil, feeding it, tending it. Only the old man knew what for, the boy simply dug and plucked as he was told, wishing he could be home, like normal.

At last the old man straightened up, wincing slightly as his spine realigned itself, then nodded to the boy and shuffled into the greenhouse to fetch his thermos. He poured two coffees, then pulled a box from his wheelbarrow. He looked up as the boy joined him and winked.

'Audrey next door did some baking yesterday,' he said, conspiratorially. 'She makes the best lardy cake in the world, even better than my Lily's, Lord rest her.'

He opened the box and passed a large piece of cake to the boy, who took it with some trepidation. 'What is it?' he asked, turning it over in his hand cautiously.

The old man stared at him, stunned that anyone could not know what lardy cake was. 'It's lardy cake, lad! Good honest stodge! Just what the working man needs! Audrey always makes one for me when she bakes,' he leaned forwards and winked. 'I think she reckons I can't look after m'self since Lily died. If it means getting lardy cake, I'm happy to let her think it!'

The boy watched as the old man tucked into his cake happily, taking greedy slurps from his old chipped mug at the same time. After one tentative bite he could see what the old man meant. The cake was delicious, soft, with crunchy sugar, and chewy raisins, and just the right amount of grease. He grinned at the old man, and devoured his piece in minutes, licking every scrap from his fingers, heedless of the ingrained soil.

They were quiet over coffee until the boy plucked up the courage to speak. 'So, your wife? Lily? When did she, you know ...' he asked nervously.

'Die? Three years back now. Cancer took her in the end,' said the old man, busying himself by arranging the pots on the shelf. 'She put up a fight, though. She was always a fighter, my Lily.'

The boy nodded. Death was something that stalked his estate, though few died of cancer. Few lived long enough to develop it. 'My mate, Jonjo, he died last year,' he said, feeling for some reason that he should offer this information. The old man turned back to him. 'Overdose.'

The old man nodded sadly. 'How old was he?'

'Sixteen,' said the boy. He stacked some pots he had spotted lounging beneath the bench as he fought for control of his emotions.

'You take drugs?'

'No!' snapped the boy. 'They're for mugs!'

The old man nodded. 'Right enough. World has plenty enough ways of killing you, without you looking for more.'

The boy was suddenly angry. It was one thing for him to have decided against the common path, it was another for someone from outside to pass comment on it. 'My brother does drugs! It's not his fault. If you don't do them, you get beaten up.'

'You've been beaten up?' asked the man, his voice gentle.

'No. I can take care of myself. Just, don't judge us, just coz you think you're better than us!' To his surprise the old man started to chuckle. 'What? What's so funny? You think my family's funny?'

'Steady lad!' said the old man, his voice firmer than before. 'I might not be so very different to you, you know.'

The boy scoffed and waved his arms around. 'Don't talk soft! You've got this place, you've got a house in this village. You had a wife! I live on a council estate. We don't even have a window box! Even if we did, my mother would just keep her hooch in it. You don't know what it's like!'

He slammed his mug down and crashed out of the greenhouse, storming away across the allotments, vaulting the gate, and jogging off down the road towards home. The old man watched him go, then tidied up the mugs and returned to his work.

The old man tended his allotment alone for the next three days, contentedly going about his business, watering the beans he and the boy had planted, fussing over every little weed. If he cared that the boy had not returned he gave no sign.

On the fourth day he was working at the compost heap with one of the other men when he became aware of a presence behind them. He glanced at his friend and winked. 'Give us a hand here, lad,' he said. 'Could do with some young muscle to turn this lot.'

The lad hovered for a moment, radiating uncertainty, then he shrugged and took up a fork that was propped against a barrow and waded in. He grimaced as the stench of rotting vegetation wafted maliciously outwards, but carried on.

The old man stepped back, shaking his aching arms, smiling softly. 'Nice to see you back, lad.'

Later he showed the boy the beans, which were now sprouting tiny new leaves. The boy studied them minutely, comparing those in his tray with the ones the old man had planted. Unsurprisingly the old man's beans were doing better.

Over the coming days the old man made no reference to the boy's tantrum, merely accepting his return and putting him to work, turning soil, digging in manure, weeding. The boy grudgingly worked, knowing that come coffee time there would always be some little reward, lardy cake from Audrey, a piece of apple pie from Freda, a large slice of heavenly fruit cake from Trudie. He came

to understand that there was a small army of ladies in the village who baked for the old man. He wasn't at all sure why.

He once asked the old man where he had come from. The old man had turned and pointed a shaking hand across the fields to a crumbling ruin of a building, little bigger now than a coal bunker. 'I was born in that house. Not much left of it now, not since it got hit by a bomb. Five of us kids grew up there.'

The boy had squinted at the ruin, trying in vain to imagine a whole family living there. 'So you've never lived anywhere but here?'

'Nope. Raised there, married in the church, then built me and Lily our place just down the road.' The boy shook his head, wondering how anybody could stay in the same place their whole lives.

The boy arrived home that night to find his mother unconscious on the stairs, a bottle of whisky clutched in her left hand. He stepped over her and went up to his room. Stepping over his unconscious mother was nothing new for the boy.

He flopped down on his bed and closed his eyes, sighing as his aching muscles slowly relaxed. His door banged open, hitting the bottom of his bed. He groaned. 'Where've you been?' demanded his sister, her hands on her hips. Eight years old and she already acted like a domineering wife.

'You know where I've been,' he murmured, his eyes still closed.

She snorted and slapped at his legs. 'Mum's drunk herself stupid again, there's nothing to eat, and the collector's coming this evening. Why weren't you here? You're mad, spending all your time with some old geezer and a bunch of plants.'

He growled under his breath and sat up, glaring at her. 'I have to go, stupid! They'll take me away if I don't! Now, bugger off, you little squirt.'

She glowered at him, then spun on her heels and stalked out of the room. He lay back down, but could not relax. Secretly he agreed with her. He did not want to spend his days with a smelly old man who had never been anywhere or done anything. But what choice did he have?

The next morning 'call me Tara' rang the bell at half past eight as usual. His sister glared at him as he strode out. The collector had called last night. There was no money to give him, so he'd taken the Playstation. His mother had screamed at them later when she came round and realised what had happened. Then, to console herself, she had finished off the whisky. The boy had no idea where she was now and could no longer bring himself to care.

'Call me Tara' dropped him off at the gate, then drove off to perform heroic deeds elsewhere. He gazed across the allotments, expecting to see the old man bent over his spade. He wasn't there. The door to the greenhouse was still closed, the roof lights still buttoned down for the night.

He frowned and started along the carefully mown paths to the greenhouse, wondering where the old man could be. Unsure what else to do, he opened up the house and lifted the roof lights, then set about watering the busily growing plants.

By coffee time the old man had still not arrived. The boy had finished the watering, clipped the edges of the paths around the old man's lot, and was about to start on the never-ending weeding when 'call me Tara' appeared by the greenhouse.

He stood up, brushing the mud from his knees. She looked edgy, nervous, unsure. 'What?' he demanded. 'Look, I haven't done anything wrong, alright? The old man didn't show so I just got on with the jobs,' she still didn't speak. 'Look I haven't nicked anything if that's what you're thinking!'

She shook her head and looked down. She brushed her hair from her face and looked up again. 'I'm so sorry,' she whispered. 'Mr Hodge died last night. I didn't get the message until a short

while ago.'

The world went quiet. The boy stood on the grass path, the old man's work-worn trowel clasped in his hand, his plants growing unheedingly all around them. He shook his head. The old man couldn't be dead. He was alive yesterday, his usual happy old self. He couldn't just not be there. What was the boy supposed to do now? The beans needed planting out. There were more seedlings to pot on, new seeds to sow.

'I'm really sorry,' said Tara as she walked towards him. 'I know this must be hard. I'll take you home. We can think about a new placement for you.'

He shrugged away from her reaching hand. 'No! I don't want another placement! I never knew what this was all about anyway! He was just an old man! He never did anything, or went anywhere, or saw anything!' he realised he was shouting now, but couldn't seem to stop. He was so angry. 'He was just a stupid old man! You're a stupid social worker! My mum's a stupid drunk! Everything's stupid! Okay?'

He flung the trowel down and stormed away, shaking with fury. 'Just leave me alone!' he yelled.

The boy slipped into the church, standing at the rearmost, next to an enormous flower arrangement. The place was packed, every pew taken, every aisle jammed with those who couldn't get a seat. The boy wondered if he had come to the right funeral. The old man could not have known all these people, could he?

The organ suddenly stopped playing and he could just make out a vicar taking centre stage at the front of the church. 'We are here to mourn the passing and celebrate the life of Arthur Winston Hodge, a man much beloved by all in our community,' began the vicar. The boy relaxed. He was at the right funeral.

The service continued, with songs the boy did not know, and prayers he did not believe in, but the eulogies, read by several different people, caught his attention. They spoke of a man the boy had not had time to know, a man who had served in World War Two, a man who had, with his wife, raised a large happy family, a man who had worked tirelessly, helping people when their luck was down, repairing the church free of charge, a stalwart of every community event.

They spoke of a man who, in later life, had found solace in his allotment, sharing the bountiful rewards of his labours with any in the village who were in hardship. The boy listened, stunned, as the mourners told of the families who had been helped by him, even in his oldest of old age. Those beans had never been intended for the old man's table.

The next day the boy was at the allotment by eight o'clock, his battered old bicycle leaning against the greenhouse. The other men arrived to find him already hard at work, watering the plants, staking out a trough for the beans.

They watched him work for a while, suspiciously, then one of them wandered over. 'You're the lad, aren't you?' he growled. 'The lad Art was trying to help.' The boy looked up from his labours and nodded, then returned to work. 'What're you doing here, lad?'

'Beans need planting out,' said the boy, not looking up.

The man watched him for a while. Then strode over to the greenhouse and picked up a bundle of canes from beneath the bench. He walked back to the boy and placed a hand on his shoulder.

'Lad, that's not the way. Don't plant them deep, and you need to get the canes in first,' he said, gruffly. 'Here, let me show you.'
