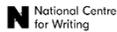


# A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by  
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CHAPTER 1  
GORDON

INN  
CROWD





## A Very Important Party

Gordon Doyle starts the morning as he usually does. At seven o'clock on the dot, his brain switches on, his eyes flutter open and he sits himself up, swinging his aching legs over the side of the bed and sliding his feet into his slippers. He makes his way downstairs, his knees creaking in protest, and flicks the kettle on. Five minutes later, with a cup of milky tea and a slice of buttery toast in front of him, he sits at his little table by the window overlooking the garden, and begins to think.

He has quite a lot to do today. He runs through the list in his mind: go to church, take the bus to the supermarket, make a chicken pie. It's quite the agenda, and

with his legs being the way they are, he'll have to set off soon if he wants to make it back in time to start cooking. He should get up now, really; go and have his wash and make sure his shirt is ironed. He sometimes forgets things like that, sometimes goes to pull a vest out of his drawer and realises they're all in the washing machine, wet, and have been for quite a few days.

By the time Gordon has finished planning out his day, the tea and toast are long gone. At this point, he'd usually stand up - especially with such a lot to do - but today he stays where he is. The truth is, Gordon is feeling a bit fed up. Every day seems to go the same way, and it has suddenly dawned on him that a trip to the shops isn't very exciting at all. Back in the day, he would wake up early, go for a jog and then work for eight hours, and he'd *still* have the energy to come home and cook dinner. He used to go to The Shoulder of Mutton every evening, too, but he feels too old for all of that these days. Now, he only

## A Very Important Party

goes in on a Tuesday, when it's quiet and the young and energetic people don't make him feel quite so... boring.

Gordon sighs and shakes his head; this kind of self-pity is getting him nowhere. He shakily places his mug on top of his plate and goes to stand up - but a movement catches his attention. He turns to look out of the window, and sure enough, something is moving near the fence in his back garden. Something black and shiny, right near the hole he's been meaning to patch up since last summer.

He leans forward, pressing his face against the glass. Whatever it is is wriggling around, covered in mud. A cat, perhaps? Gordon's sight isn't what it once was, and he leaves the table, making his way to the back door.

'Stupid eyes,' he mutters, fiddling with the key. He opens the door.

The wriggling shape is bigger now, and it isn't black, either. Well, the top of it is black, the bit furthest

away from the fence, but the rest of it is neon pink and yellow, and the arms are-

‘Can you help me, please?’ The black bulb at the top of the shape turns, and Gordon realises that he is looking at a child. A child with straight, black hair, stuck in his broken fence panelling and asking him for assistance.

‘Help you to do what?’ Gordon is a little lost for words. He’s only been awake for twenty minutes, after all.

‘Help me to sneak into your garden!’ The girl says, as if this is all very obvious and normal.

Gordon doesn’t really know what to say, so he does the only thing he can think of. He shuffles into the garden and grabs hold of the two pink arms, pulling the little girl with great effort through to his side of the fence.

‘Thanks!’ She stands up and brushes flakes of dry mud off her ruined jumper. ‘I’m Aisha.’ She sticks out a small, brown hand.

## A Very Important Party

Gordon blinks. Perhaps he's dreaming. That has happened before. But usually his dreams are muddled and messy, and they never start with toast and tea and creaking knees. Aisha waves her hand at him. 'Well, are you going to shake it? It's rude if you don't.'

Gordon shakes her hand. 'I'm Gordon.' He says, out of habit more than anything.

'Hi Gordon.' Aisha flashes him a huge grin. 'I like your grass.'

Gordon hasn't paid any attention to his garden for years. Now, looking at it through a stranger's eyes, he sees that the lawn is tall and weedy, like a jungle.

'Aisha!' A woman's voice sounds from the house next door. Gordon suddenly remembers that it is Samira's house. This must be her daughter; he's heard her playing in the garden before.

'Got to go!' Aisha waves and ducks down,

scrambling back under the broken fence. Gordon lifts the panel a little, and she wriggles out of sight.

It is suddenly very quiet. Gordon looks down, and sees with a shock that he is still in his dressing gown and slippers.

*What a strange morning*, he thinks.

#

Two days later, Gordon can't stop thinking about the little girl under the fence. This surprises him, because he usually forgets things as soon as they happen. He is making his way to St Peter's Church, his stick tapping on the pavement. *What a funny little child*, he thinks. He finds himself remembering the old train set he has in his attic, and wonders if she'd like it. *Of course she wouldn't!* He scolds himself. *What would she want with an old fuddy duddy's dusty toys?*

## A Very Important Party

Gordon slows and leans against the wall for a rest.

He had been thinking so hard about his toy train that he hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings, and he suddenly realises where he is. He's outside Dolly's house.

Dolly is Ray's wife; or at least she had been, when he was alive. Ray and Sid were Gordon's best friends - they'd been thick as thieves since school, and even though Gordon had never married, he'd always been a part of their five-person circle: Dolly and Ray, Agnes and Sid and him, Gordon, bringing up the rear. Ray and Sid are dead now, but he knows that Dolly and Agnes still meet up and go to The Shoulder of Mutton a few times a week. He's seen them sitting there sometimes, when he goes in on Tuesdays, but it never feels right to approach them. Not without their husbands. It just isn't the same.

Gordon wonders whether he should ring the doorbell. He's sure Dolly will be home. He pushes himself

up off the wall and takes a few steps forward, before thinking better of it and carrying on towards the church.

St. Peter's is practically empty when he gets there, and he stoops down to pick up the newsletter from the shelf by the door, wincing as his back sings with pain.

'Let me get that for you.' A hand reaches round and picks up the newsletter. Gordon straightens and comes face to face with a young man with bright blue eyes.

'Thank you.' He leans on his stick. 'I didn't used to be this useless, you know.'

'I'm sure.' The young man smiles warmly.

'Are you new around here?' Gordon peers at him; he knows everyone in Strumpshaw, and he doesn't recognise this fellow.

'Yeah, moved in last week.' He sticks out his hand. 'Ryan.'

'Gordon.' Gordon has shaken more hands this week than he did all last year. 'Got a job, have you?'

## A Very Important Party

‘Not yet.’ Ryan’s face darkens a little. For a moment he looks quite sad. ‘Soon, I hope.’

Gordon nods. It’s not his place to pry, after all. ‘Well,’ he slips the newsletter into his pocket, ‘a pleasure to meet you. Welcome to Strumpshaw.’

‘Thank you.’ Ryan smiles again, and leaves.

#

It’s late afternoon by the time Gordon gets back from the supermarket. He unpacks his shopping and goes out into the garden; the early-summer sun is hitting the house at the perfect angle, and he isn’t ready to settle in front of the television just yet.

‘Hi, Gordon!’ A small voice calls, and Gordon looks around. He can’t see anything, but there’s a strange squeaking noise coming from over the fence.

‘Gordon! Hi! Hello!’ With every squeak comes another word. ‘Over here!’

Gordon squints and sees Aisha, bobbing up and down, her head popping over the fence every second or so. ‘I’m on the trampoline!’

Ah. A trampoline. One of these new-fangled contraptions.

‘Do you want to have a go?’ Aisha calls.

Gordon opens his mouth to respond, but the doorbell sounds from inside the house. ‘I need to answer the door.’ He waves and steps back inside, trying to hurry, his slippers shuffling quickly against the carpet. He wants to get back outside and talk to Aisha before she disappears.

He opens the door to find Bob, the landlord from The Shoulder of Mutton.

‘Hello, Gordon!’ He smiles brightly. ‘I’ve come to invite you to a party.’

‘Oh, hello.’ Gordon nods. ‘No, no thank you. I’m a

## A Very Important Party

bit too old for parties.'

'It's not a *disco*, Gordon!' Bob laughs. 'It's a get-together after the steam rally. Everyone's invited!'

'No, thank you.' He says again. 'I'll be in on Tuesday as I normally am. Goodbye.'

He closes the door, silencing Bob's protests. As he's making his way back up the hallway, a leaflet slithers through the letterbox. He squints; he can just make out the word PARTY. He leaves it where it is.

When he gets back out to the garden, the trampoline is silent. Gordon sits down on the bench under the window. He's surprised by how disappointed he feels; he's never really liked children, never felt like he was missing out by being alone. But now everything in his garden seems bland and boring, and the idea of another night in front of the television on his own makes him feel hollow and sad.

‘RAAAH!’ A shape suddenly lunges out of the long grass, and Gordon jumps, clutching his chest.

‘What the-’

‘I’m a tiger and this jungle is my home, there’s a snake in here and he’s my friend too...’ Gordon’s heart rate slows enough for him to realise that it’s Aisha who has leapt at him from the weeds. She talks at him for five whole minutes, telling him all about her jungle friends.

‘Is there a bear, too?’ Gordon asks. He’s not very good at talking to children; he never knows if he’s saying the right thing.

‘Of *course!*’ Aisha looks delighted, and he realises that he’s only said a word or two to her before. She tells him all about the big brown bear that lives in the jungle - unfortunately, Gordon can’t see him because he’s too old.

Gordon chuckles at this. ‘Aisha, does your mum know you’re here?’

‘Nope!’ Aisha dances in the grass, swishing her

## A Very Important Party

arms around her head. ‘She’s too busy.’

Gordon stands up and hobbles over to the fence. He peers over. He can see Samira in the kitchen, tapping away at her laptop. ‘Excuse me,’ he croaks, and coughs. ‘Excuse me!’

Samira looks up and waves, holding up a finger to signal that she’ll only be a minute.

Gordon turns around. Aisha is glaring at him. ‘Why did you *tell* on me? Are you kicking me out?’

‘I’m not telling on you.’ Gordon shakes his head. ‘You can stay as long as you like, your mum just needs to know where you are.’

‘Sorry!’ Samira has appeared behind the fence. She spots Aisha. ‘Aisha! What are you doing? Get back here right now. Come on.’ Aisha drags her feet over to the fence and Gordon lifts the panel for her.

‘She can stay if she likes-’

‘No, no, I’m so sorry.’ Samira pulls Aisha to her feet at the other side. ‘Don’t bother Mr Doyle again, OK? Say sorry.’

‘Sorry,’ Aisha pouts.

‘Really, it’s fine-‘ Gordon starts, but Samira has already gone, dragging Aisha back inside.

#

It’s Saturday, and Gordon is sitting in front of the television. He can hear people laughing as they make their way down the road to the pub, giddy from the steam rally. He looks down at the leaflet in his lap. He’s too old for all this, far too old. He’s not going, and that’s that.

His mind wanders, and the television blurs. He wonders whether Ryan will be there. He seemed like a lovely young lad. It’d be nice for him to make some new friends. Gordon unfolds the leaflet and then folds it back

## A Very Important Party

up again, smaller this time. Perhaps Dolly and Agnes will go. And what about Samira and Aisha? Will they be going? Gordon lets his eyes focus on the TV again. He's perfectly fine here. He's far too old for all that nonsense.



# A Very Important Party

In Strumpshaw, six characters are living their lives. Gordon is starting to feel his age. Samira is struggling to balance parenthood and a new business. Katie absolutely does not want to start work-experience at the local farm. Sam and Leah are trying to have a baby. Ryan has maybe had a breakdown and fled London for a new life. And Farmer Jones is grieving his departed wife.

Everything just seems so much harder when you're doing it alone.

But there's a big party being held at The Shoulder of Mutton to celebrate the Steam Rally and everyone is invited.

Will any of them go? Over seven weeks, each character's story is revealed. Characters weave in and out of each other's lives, becoming immersed in the stories of their fictional neighbours and discovering that the community of the local pub is very powerful indeed.



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