

# CHINGLISH



# CHINGLISH



BY SUE  
CHEUNG



ANDERSEN PRESS

This book is a fictional account based on the life, experiences and recollections of the author. In some cases names of people, dates, sequences or the detail of events have been changed to protect the privacy of others. The author has stated to the publishers that, except in such minor respects not affecting the substantial accuracy of the work, the contents of this book are true.

First published in 2019 by  
Andersen Press Limited  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road  
London SW1V 2SA  
[www.andersenpress.co.uk](http://www.andersenpress.co.uk)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Sue Cheung to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text and illustrations copyright © Sue Cheung, 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 839 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

For my family,  
because without them I wouldn't  
have experienced life's highs and lows.  
And how boring would *that* have been?!





1984

**Tuesday 31st July**

I've just fed boiled intestines to the local stray dog, as instructed by Dad. This has been my life up till now, completely bonkers. But I'm hoping that from tomorrow everything will become normal. That's why I've started this diary. I want to celebrate my soon-to-be completely normal life. Where do I begin? Well, my name is Jo Kwan, and at the grand age of thirteen, good stuff is FINALLY about to happen!

We are moving tomorrow, it's dead exciting. Things have been crap here – *really* crap – so when I found this empty diary while packing, I realised I could use it to write down all the good stuff that's coming. So here I am!



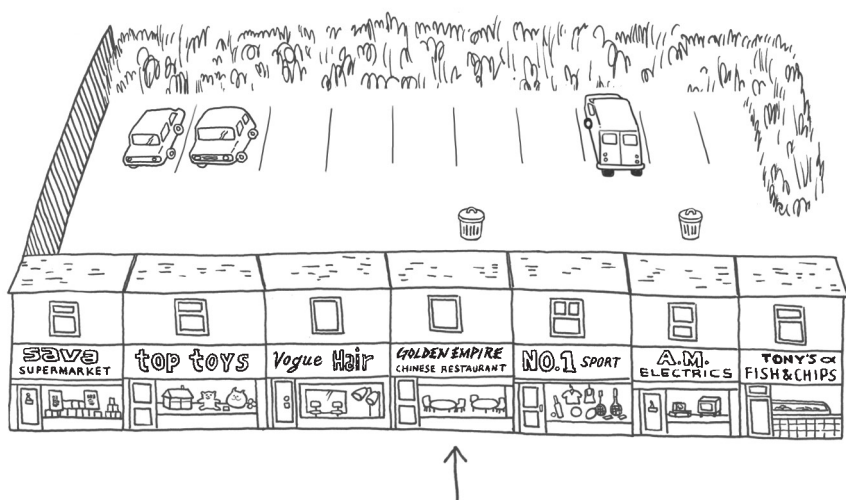
The first step to normality is to get out of this stinking butcher's shop, cos being constantly surrounded by raw offal and giblets is very unsettling.

The second step is to be with Simon again, who was sent off with our grandparents when I was eight and he was ten. It's unnatural to be apart from your big brother for so long. I mean, Mum and Dad couldn't have split us up any further if they tried. Our house in Hull is over a *hundred miles* away from where he is in Coventry AND I still have no idea why they did it (UR). Would be cool if he moves back in with us (as long as he has stopped wiping bogies on walls).

P.S. UR = Unknown reason. Think there will be lots of these.

### **Wednesday 1st August**

We are in the car and heading off to Coventry. It's really happening! Dad has bought a new Chinese takeaway, although that's all I know. Mum and Dad are, as usual, not exactly being informative about what our new home is like. But I think it will be just like the old days in Nottingham, with our posh restaurant and big house – no more poky old flat above the butcher's – hurray!



↑  
WE WERE HERE IN THE MIDDLE  
OF THIS ROW OF SHOPS

Coventry will be our *third* place! The first was the Golden Empire Chinese Restaurant that Mum and Dad owned on the high street in Nottingham. They worked long hours, so me and Simon were left on our own a lot.

Being unsupervised was the best thing ever. Me and Simon could do what we liked, when we liked, and we never got told off.

. . . Apart from that time we nearly burned the house down.

It got boring eating crisps for dinner, and we thought making chips from scratch would be easy. How were we to know that lard was highly flammable?



**GOOD THING  
ABOUT PARENTS  
NOT BEING HOME**

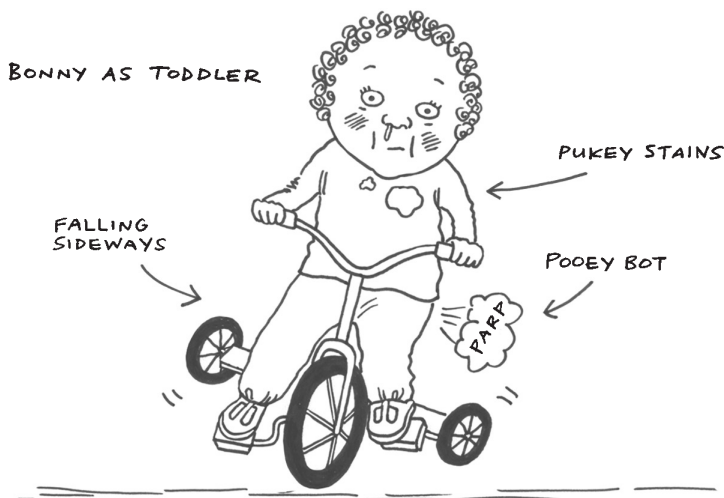


**BAD THING  
ABOUT PARENTS  
NOT BEING HOME**



After that, Dad drafted in Grandma and Grandad, to make sure we didn't incinerate the whole place. Nothing changed much when they moved in, except we had home-cooked meals every night and a bath on Sundays.

Then my little sister Bonny came along, with her puking and pooing and crying. Grandparents must have got fed up of looking after her, as well as me and Simon, cos they moved out a couple of years later . . . and that's when Simon went with them.

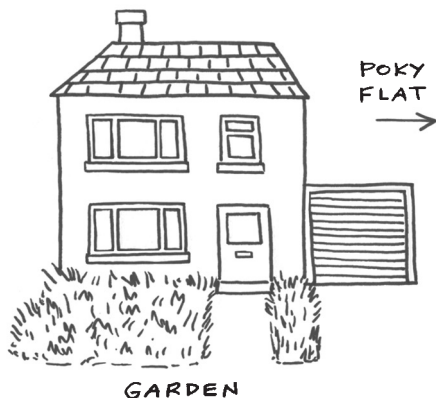


The rest of us moved and ended up at that bloody butcher's in Hull (UR). I've hated every second. Never made any real friends either.

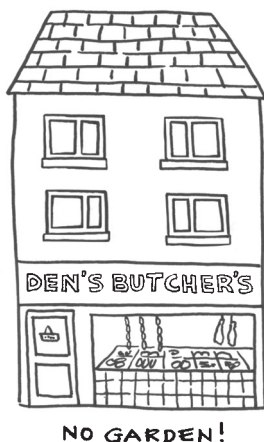
Don't think any of us liked the butcher's really. So it's probably a good idea for Dad to go back to doing what he knows best, which is cooking Chinese food. Hopefully it will help him snap out of his bad moods. The less I say about those, the better.

I am strictly sticking to the good stuff in this diary.

NOTTINGHAM HOUSE



HULL BUTCHER'S



Anyway, I don't care about all that now cos we're off somewhere better and it's going to be **TOTALLY ACE!**

2.30 pm: We just took the road into Coventry. Nearly there!

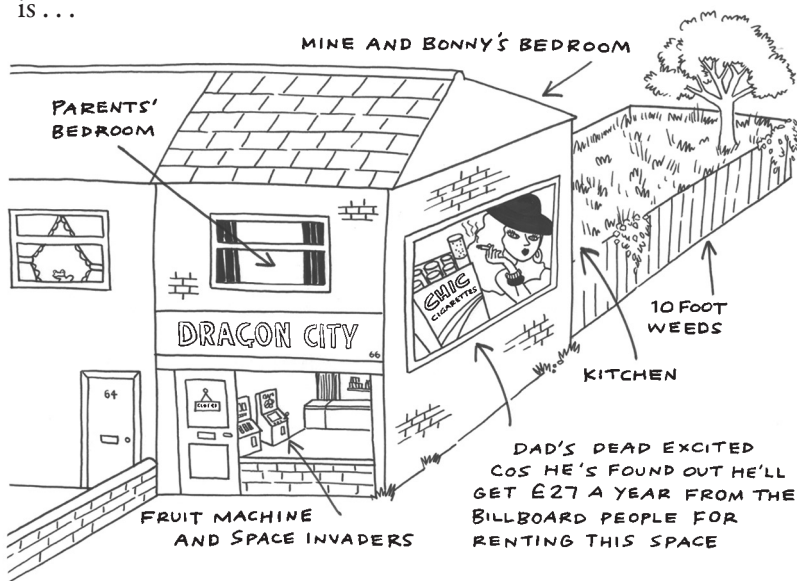
3.05 pm: Arrived at new home. Have gone upstairs to take a look. It's a ONE-storey flat above the shop (UGH NO!), with only TWO bedrooms. That means I will have to share with Bonny. This must be some kind of mistake.

3.07 pm: Hold on, just found out there is no living room either! OK, don't panic – it's probably just a temporary arrangement till we get the big house.

7 pm: Everything unpacked. Wonder how far Simon lives from here?

## Thursday 2nd August

Why has Dad bought a takeaway? Why not another restaurant? (Best not to ask while he's frantically untangling utensils). Not sure if a takeaway is any better than a butcher's, but at least it's giblet-free. It only took five minutes to have a proper look around our new home, cos this is how *tiny* it is...



Yes, even tinier than the flat in Hull! OK, breathe. It's going to be fine... who needs a mansion anyway? I'm just glad we're back together again.

Simon and Grandparents came over for dinner. Simon's changed! His voice has gone all deep and he has faint stubble on his upper lip. He said, 'All right, Pongo, all right, Snotface.' He's been calling Bonny Snotface for ages but I

don't know why he calls me Pongo (UR). Maybe it's a term of affection?

Mum was chuffed to see Simon after so long. You could tell by the way she was putting all the best bits of food into his rice bowl. (The bits without gristle basically.) She said, 'Eat up, mao nga lao,' and Simon cringed cos that means 'no tooth man' in Chinese. She's been calling him that since he lost his two front teeth at the age of six (UR), but he has a full set of adult teeth now.

'You two have grown so much I hardly recognise you,' Grandma said, squinting at me and Bonny. At least, it was something like that. We vaguely understood and smiled back cos we didn't know how to answer. It's difficult trying to talk in our family cos:

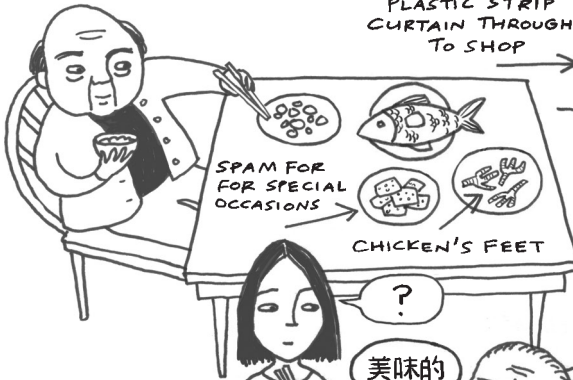
- 1) Grandparents don't speak English at all
- 2) Mum hardly speaks any English
- 3) Me, Bonny and Simon hardly speak Chinese
- 4) Dad speaks Chinese and good English – but doesn't like talking

In other words, we all have to cobble together tiny bits of Chinese and English into a rubbish language I call 'Chinglish'. It's very awkward. Plus we are the only ones in our family to speak Hakka – a dialect hardly anyone uses! All our relatives speak Cantonese cos that's what most other British Chinese people speak, so I don't understand ANYTHING they say.

# DINNER AT THE TAKEAWY



GRANDPAD



ME



GRANDMA



MUM'S EVERYDAY OVERALLS

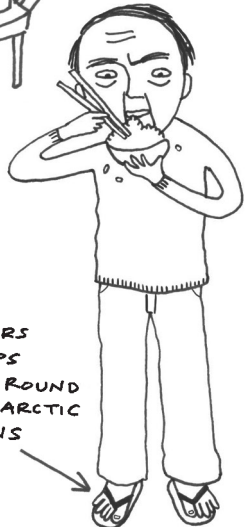
SIMON



BONNY



PAD WEARS FLIP-FLOPS ALL YEAR ROUND EVEN IN ARCTIC CONDITIONS



Simon and Grandparents didn't stop long after dinner. Perhaps cos they have a house of their own to go back to now – with a comfy *living room* to sit in. Not jealous or anything!

### **Friday 3rd August**

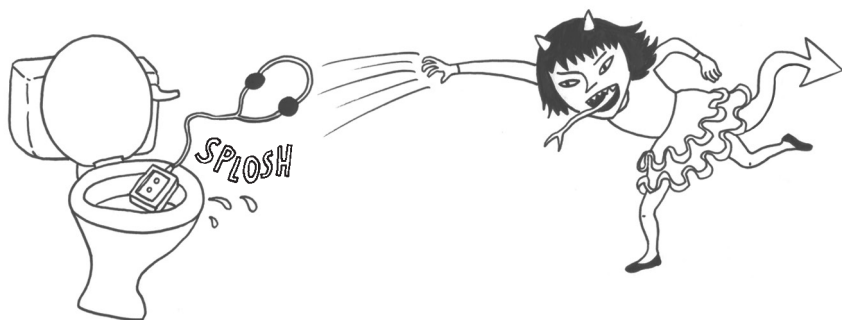
It's ace seeing Simon, but it will never be the same as before. For a start he doesn't live with us, and he's suddenly turned into this weird kind of grown-up – not how I remember him at all. I'm stuck with Bonny now. All right, she is eight, so there's less of the pooing and puking, but she is still complete DEVIL SPAWN. Last night she snapped all my pencils' tips by pressing too hard then put them back in the tin, as if still intact – *pure evil!*

Our bedroom is cramped (personal space = non-existent), and the only way into the bathroom is to go through our bedroom (UR). This is proving to be very stressful *and* there's a whole month left of summer holidays. Wonder if I will survive without strangling Bonny? At least I can look forward to being at the same school as Simon, the more agreeable sibling.

10.32 am: Bonny whinged about my Walkman taking up all of bedside cabinet. She said she had nowhere to put her signed photo of Gary Kemp (guitarist from Spandau Ballet). I told her he is the ugliest member of the band, and has worst perm known to man. We ended up drawing

a line down the middle of the cabinet with the rule that if any item goes over, the aggrieved person can hurl it across the room.

10.48 am: Bonny hurled my Walkman across the room. (Apparently it was 'half a centimetre over'.) It flew through the open bathroom door and landed down the bog and broke. I was SO ANGRY! But had to keep it down cos Dad was in one of his moods.



BONNY BEING TOTALLY  
AND UTTERLY EVIL!

12.03 am: Bonny fast asleep but I was still seething. I decided to chuck my cup of water over her head to teach her a lesson.

12.04 am: Bonny shrieked and sat up looking confused.

It is now 12.25 am. Can't get to sleep for laughing.



## *Saturday 4th August*

Bonny told me she had a nightmare, which caused her to knock a cup of water over herself and now she has an itchy rash from sleeping in a damp polyester nightie. I said that was unfortunate and quickly changed the subject by pointing at an imaginary spider on the ceiling. This is justified revenge in my opinion; that Walkman cost two lots of birthday money. She swore she'd replace it and so I said, 'How? You don't have any dosh.'

'I'll get a paper round or something.'

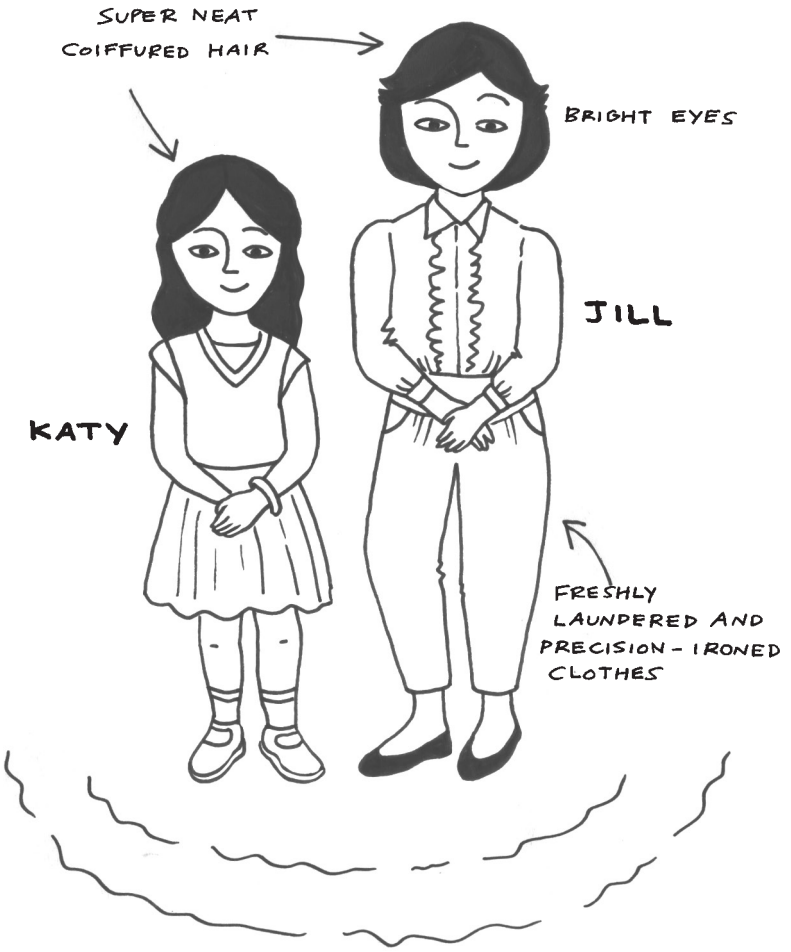
'Er, hello? You're not old enough,' I pointed out.

Then Mum came up the stairs and said our auntie had just called, and did we want to go round and see our cousins.

They live down the road from us. Jill is the same age as me and Katy is a year older than Bonny. Their dad is our dad's older brother. Last time we saw them was four years ago at a wedding. I remember cos Mum kept saying, 'Jill and Katy speak perfect Chinese, why can't you?' And, 'Jill and Katy dress so nicely, why can't you?' So since then me and Bonny have called them our 'posh cousins', or 'Poshos' for short, cos they're sickeningly perfect. They're basically us in a parallel universe if our family had been normal.

We walked to theirs, which is one street over from Grandparents' place. Posh cousins' parents also own a takeaway but they don't live above it, instead they have a separate house like we used to.

I knocked on their spotless white front door and Jill and Katy answered in what looked like their best clothes, but was probably their everyday wear.



SUPER NEAT  
COIFFURED HAIR

BRIGHT EYES

KATY

JILL

FRESHLY  
LAUNDERED AND  
PRECISION-IRONED  
CLOTHES

ANNOYING AURA OF PERFECTION

Their house was like a show home inside; modern, light and free from loose toenail clippings. I noticed they had two living rooms (as opposed to our none): one for watching telly in and the other for ‘best’, whatever that means.

Posh Auntie gave us strawberry milkshakes and cheese and pickle sandwiches, which we never get, and there was no shouting, talking with mouths full, loud slurping or bits of food splattered over the table like there is at ours. There was just nice conversation – sometimes in Cantonese, but mostly in English as they know we understand that. There was a bit of Chinglish – not the rubbish sort we get at home, but the sort that makes sense. It was ever so polite and civil.

When we got back, Mum and Dad were arguing over what was a safe amount of monosodium glutamate to put in the food without poisoning customers. The takeaway is opening tomorrow and there may be dead bodies on our hands. It is an utter madhouse.

A man came to put up new signage on the shop front. It is now called ‘The Happy Gathering’. I will look up the Trade Descriptions Act. I think we may be breaching it.

## *Sunday 5th August*

Takeaway opening today. Dad said it will be open 364 days a year with one day off for Christmas – bonkers! The butcher's closed Sundays and the Golden Empire every Monday. 'So why aren't you having a day off this time?' I asked Dad. 'Ha!' he laughed bitterly, and walked off (UR). He is stressed already and we've not even opened yet.

Dad is going to be cooking in the kitchen and Mum is serving in the shop. That's a bad arrangement cos Mum's customer service skills are dire, i.e. she can't speak the lingo and she also has a habit of burping audibly in public. Well, good luck to everyone, that's all I can say.

Before opening time, some relatives came to visit and brought gifts of fermented cabbage (traditional I think). Auntie Yip is Mum's younger, nicer and educated sister and Uncle Han is Dad's younger, jollier and approachable brother. Auntie lives in Wolverhampton and Uncle in Derby, and both work as waiting staff in Chinese restaurants. (Why do all Chinese people work in restaurants or takeaways? Why can't they be teachers, plumbers or bus drivers? When I grow up I am getting a normal job.)

'Are you excited about your new home?' Auntie asked in Chinese.

Mine and Bonny's eyes glazed over cos we didn't know how to answer.

'You like it. New house?' said Uncle, helping us out in English.

We cringed and nodded. We don't really. We wish we had separate bedrooms.

Mum and Dad's bedroom doubles up as the living room. There's a bed, drawers, wardrobe, sofa, and a chair and table with a telly and video recorder on top. There's just about enough space for me to draw, which is lucky cos otherwise I'd go mad. I love art, it's the only thing I'm good at. I'm hoping to be as good as Yoko Ono one day.

6 pm: Takeaway opened. The extractor fan and woks were so noisy I had to come upstairs to draw in peace.

6.05 pm: Bonny barged in and turned the telly on loud.

6.15 pm: I turned it down.

6.17 pm: Bonny turned it up – aargh.

6.25pm: Am now in our bedroom, but the racket is even worse here cos we are directly over the kitchen . . . *and* I can smell gross garlic fumes. I can't even block it out with a pillow over my head!

## *Monday 6th August*

Grandparents and Simon have started to come round every evening for dinner, which is nice. But whereas Simon goes home afterwards, Grandparents have to stay and help prep in the kitchen before the takeaway opens. Surely it's not fair making dodderly old people work? They are ancient as hell!

Then tonight I saw Grandad sling a sack of rice over his shoulder like it was nothing and I remembered he used to be a farmer. I only know cos I found Mum and Dad's birth certificates back in Nottingham, when I was snooping about. On them it said that Mum's dad was a fisherman and Dad's dad was a farmer, in China. I guess Grandad must have had to pull cows out of ditches and grind corn with his bare hands (or whatever), so that's why he's so strong.

Grandma is pretty tough too. I swear she could chop veg, stir soup and scrub the floor at the same time. She is a proper Jedi Master in the kitchen and weirdly enough, looks exactly like Yoda. She is always criticising Mum and Dad. But they never talk back to their parents like me and Bonny do to them.

When Simon came over for dinner, he told me that when Grandparents lived in Communist China, they had to eat mattresses to stay alive and that's why their kids respect them so much. Wonder if it's true?

Tuesday 7th August

Mum made char siu and asked me and Bonny to take some over to Grandparents. We hadn't been round theirs yet, and I wanted to see where Simon was living anyway. They have a narrow terraced house like Poshos'. The door wasn't locked, so we went straight through to the back garden where Grandad was scattering prawn shells on the soil. It reeked in the heat.

'What you doing?' I asked, shielding my nose.

'It's good Chinese fertiliser,' said Grandad in Chinese.



'It stinks,' said Bonny.

'You stink,' said Grandad.

At least it was prawns. Back in Nottingham, Grandad used his own wee! When I shared a bedroom with Grandparents, I used to hear Grandad get up in the middle of the night to pee into an empty Dandelion and Burdock bottle. I thought it was cos he was too lazy to go to the bog, but one day I saw him tip the wee into a watering can and water the cabbages with it.

'UGH, we've been eating those!' I told Simon.

When Grandad served cabbage for dinner that night, we refused to go near it. So Grandma tried to end our hunger strike by giving us her dreaded spaghetti with golden syrup, which was even worse.

I gave the marinated roast pork to Grandma, then me and Bonny went upstairs to see Simon. He was untangling electrical cable but stopped to show us his brand-new, wood-veneer version Atari 2600, which I was completely uninterested in. His ambition is to be a computer engineer. He is a proper geek.

'Hey, do you know what happened to the bikes we had in Nottingham?' I said, wishing we could ride off like old times and forget about crappy computers.

'Dunno,' said Simon. 'Anyway, you were always falling off yours.'

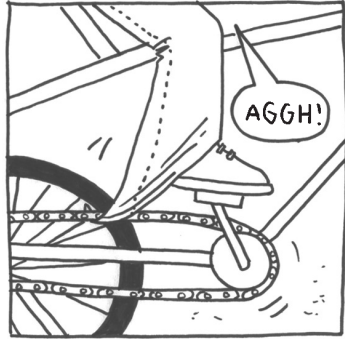
'That wasn't me, that was the flares,' I said.

Yeah, not everything was amazing back then. Flared

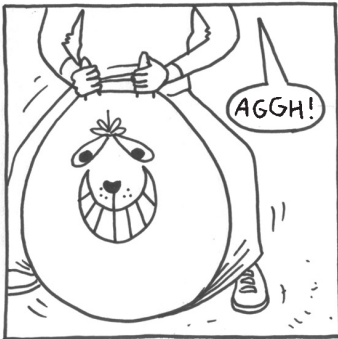


trousers were death traps due to the excessive material getting caught in everything like your bike chains, under your Spacehopper, even on hedges!

HEALTH WARNING:  
FLARES KILL MORE PEOPLE  
THAN FALLING COCONUTS  
(BRIAN THE BRAIN AT  
SCHOOL ONCE SAID)



Beware Bike Chains



Beware Spacehoppers



Beware Hedges

I prefer eighties skin-tight jeans, even though I read in *Mizz* fashion mag recently that they are the number one suspected cause of urinary tract infection.

Simon started swearing at the cables and Bonny looked

bored, so we left. As I opened the front door, Grandma shouted from the kitchen, ‘Tell your mother this char siu’s drier than a camel’s fart. What’s she trying to do, choke us?’

She might not know much about Western food, but when it comes to Chinese food, she is definitely the expert. ‘OK, I’ll tell her,’ I sighed, then forgot on purpose.

### *Wednesday 8th August*

9.25 am: I can forget about hanging out with Simon. I mean, he’s almost got a moustache and does boring stuff with microchips. Wonder if I can forge some kind of friendship with Jill? Even though she is posh and perfect, she is still related so there must be *something* we have in common.

7.40 pm: Took Bonny with me to see what Poshos were up to earlier. Katy was practising the recorder and Jill was trying on a new school uniform, which her mum had bought from the most expensive department store in town. While waiting for them to finish, we went and gawped at their school photos. Bonny only noticed their goofy smiles but I thought they looked like Crufts’ Best in Show dogs, with their bright eyes and coiffured hair. I doubted I could ever be Jill’s friend cos I felt like a scruffy mongrel compared to her. I was overcome with inferiority complex, so I dragged Bonny home after our milkshakes.

‘Why did we have to go so soon?’

‘Just *cos*,’ I replied.

When we got back, I wanted to remind myself how we looked in our school photos, so I asked Mum where they were.

‘What do you want those for? You look feral in them!’ she said, without once looking up from de-gibleting a chicken. Agree, we were never photogenic, especially as:

- 1) We always looked like we’d just crawled out of a skip
- 2) We probably *had* just crawled out of a skip

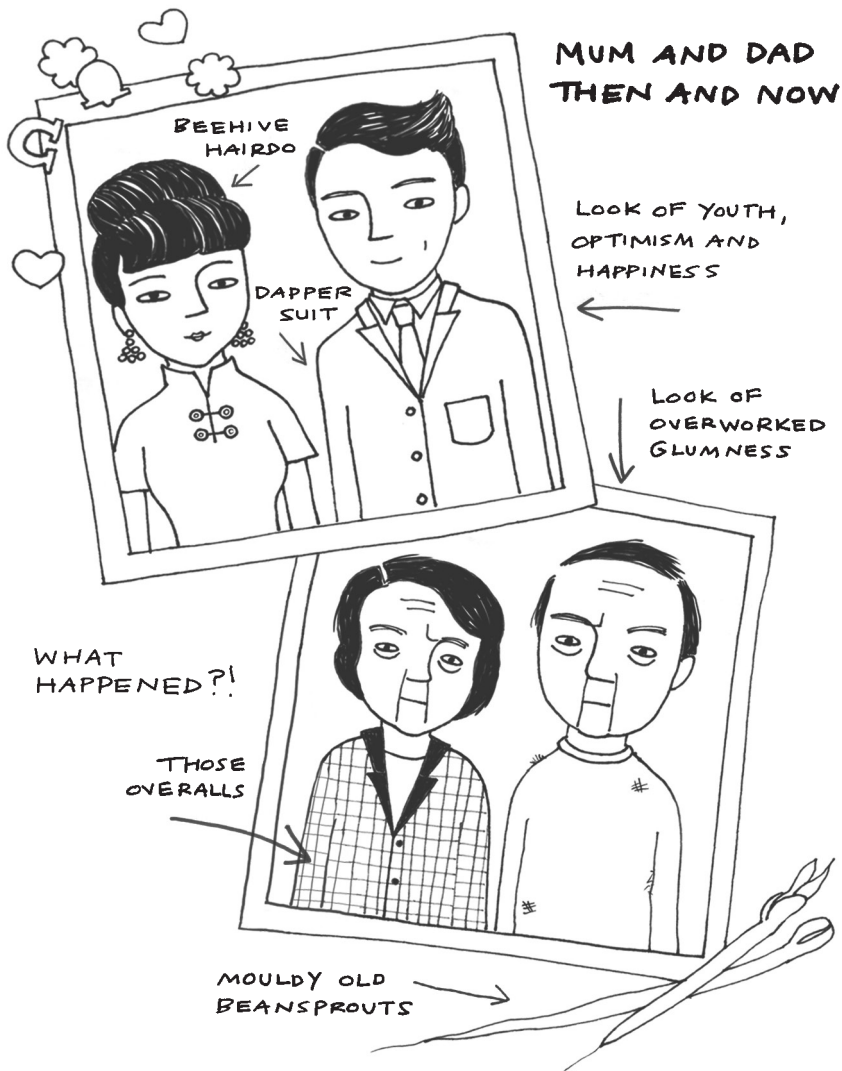
I could tell Mum wasn’t going to co-operate. She never does when her hand’s up a chicken’s bum. So I went into her bedroom and eventually found the photos on top of the wardrobe in a battered biscuit tin. There was a picture of me and Simon with scarecrow hair, and one of Bonny with her mouth all wonky from where she sucked her thumb too much.

‘Mum was right, we do look scary,’ said Bonny, peering over my shoulder.

As I chucked them back in the tin, I spotted some crumpled black and white photos at the bottom. ‘Hey, what’s this?’ I said. The faces looked familiar and it took a second to click. ‘Oh my god, it’s Mum and Dad!’

I showed Bonny. They were wedding photos from the 1960s. We hardly recognised Mum *cos* she was wearing one of those lovely cheongsams (traditional Chinese silk

dress thing), and Dad was handsome in a slim-cut suit and Brylcreemed quiff, like a Chinese version of a young Cliff Richard. They looked so different. So . . . happy. What the flip happened?



## Thursday 9th August

Went to inspect jungle-like weed growth in garden. It was exactly like our garden in Nottingham before Grandad moved in and mowed it. Wonder if he'll do it again for us, cos Mum and Dad won't ever.

Met an old lady taking aprons off her washing line next door. She told me her name was Mrs Burke. 'I've lived here thirty-nine years,' she said, 'and I've had half a pint of ale every day of my life. That's how I keep so young.'

She couldn't have had ale as a child, as surely it wasn't allowed? Plus she had more wrinkles than Grandma Yoda, who is virtually prehistoric.

'It gets very noisy in your shop,' she said, jabbing her finger at me as if it was my fault. 'I need my beauty sleep you know.'

'Errrrr, OK, I'll tell my parents,' I replied, wondering if woks could be tossed quietly.

I told Mum about Mrs Burke. (I try not to speak to Dad if I can help it as too much bother trying to guess what mood he's in.) She gave me a deep-fried chicken leg and raw tomato in a carton (UR), and instructed me to go round and give it to her as a form of apology.

'My mum said she'd give you this every week, for the noise,' I said, handing over the peace offering.

'It's not any of that foreign muck is it?' she asked.

'It's chicken . . . *English* chicken,' I replied. 'And a tomato,

but I don't know where that's from.'

Then – didn't see this coming – she smiled and invited me in. Wish she hadn't though cos I had to spend half an hour listening to stories about her piles, while she crocheted an antimacassar.

HAND-CROCHETED  
ANTIMACASSAR



SHE IS MAD  
ABOUT FROGS



SAME APRON EVERY DAY  
(HER AND MUM SHOULD  
JOIN A CLUB!)

SLIGHT WHIFF OF STALE WEE



## Friday 10th August

Had to remind Mum about my uniform today, in bad Chinese.

‘I want new clothes go school,’ I said.

‘What happened to your other clothes?’ she replied, in proper Chinese.

‘My clothes go school too small now.’

‘How much do you need?’

‘It much resembles eighty pounds.’

‘Cor, do you think I’m made of money?’ she said.

‘I need other stuff too, like pens and pencils and a bag,’ I said, in English, cos it was easier.

‘Huh?’ she replied.

Gawd.

‘What about Bonny?’ asked Mum.

‘What about her?’

‘She’ll need a uniform too.’

‘No, Mum, she’s at primary school, she doesn’t need one.’

‘Oh,’ she replied, confused.

Mum and Dad know more about quantum physics than they do about their own kids, which is sod all. Mum once told me that when she was my age she had to leave school to stay at home and look after six younger brothers and sisters, so she never really got an education. She can’t understand why we even *need* school. Dad went to school till he was sixteen, but he’s just not interested in anything we do (UR). They don’t even know I’m going to be at the same school

as Simon, as they haven't asked. If I were them I'd want to know, and be pleased me and Simon were there for company (even if it is only at school and not at home). But they don't give a jot.

### ***Saturday 11th August***

Wowser! Me and Bonny found out Dad could draw today! I wanted to know who I'd got my talent from, so I asked Mum if she could draw and she said, 'No, but your dad's a good artist, go ask him.' Got the feeling Mum knew he was OK today, so we took the risk. He was watching snooker on the telly perched on a corner bracket behind the shop counter for the customers. It's his favourite thing on the telly. Dennis Taylor was on. I know him cos he wears special upside-down glasses for better aim – plus Dad supports him. I can see why he likes snooker, it's very calming. It's one of the very few times I feel comfortable being around him. He needs more calm in his life I think.

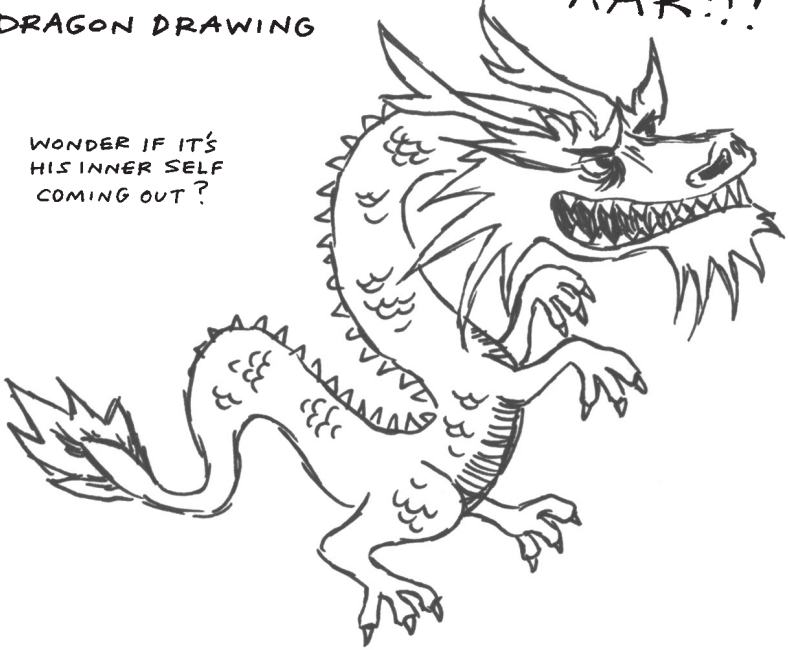
Me and Bonny waited till the end of the frame. Taylor won so I definitely knew Dad was in a good mood then. I asked if he'd doodle something on the order pad and he was up for it. He grinned as he sketched a head, some eyes, then claws and scales. And in only a minute he'd drawn an excellent Chinese dragon. Can you believe it? Me and Dad are *both* artists! Here's a copy I did of it.



COPY OF DAD'S  
DRAGON DRAWING

WONDER IF IT'S  
HIS INNER SELF  
COMING OUT?

ROAAAR!!!



He didn't ask me to draw anything but I didn't mind, it was just good to see him enjoying himself for once. I thought he'd enjoy cooking, cos that's creative, in a way, but he never looks totally happy when he's doing it.

The reasons I enjoy drawing are:

- 1) It's fun
- 2) It makes me feel good
- 3) It's something cool to put on the wall
- 4) I can escape real life

Bonny has bagsied Dad's dragon drawing. It now has pride of place next to Gary Kemp.