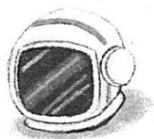


### MY VISIBLE FRIEND



There were about ten million meetings and letters home about my 'peculiar and disruptive' behaviour at school assembly. Mrs Sass decided that the problem was I had 'poor social skills' because I was an only child. 'He doesn't mix with the other children. He's an isolated figure on the playground.'

Wouldn't you be an isolated figure if people followed you round shouting, 'Sir, sir!' or, 'Wolverine!' or yelling, 'Hello up there!' a million times a day? I mean, what did they want me to do? Shrink?

Dad said, 'You need to try and make some friends.'

'I've got loads of friends. I've got twenty guild members just waiting to do my bidding.'

'I'm talking about real life, not computers.'

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'I don't accept that distinction.'

'That's exactly my point, said Dad. 'You need a friend who is visible to the naked eye.'

The point about World of Warcraft is that the other players don't know how tall or short or fat or thin you are, they just accept you for what you are – namely, in my case, a highly skilled Night Elf with healing powers.

This wasn't enough for Mum and Dad. So they sent me to the Little Stars drama group. Every Saturday morning. Lisa – the girl who ran it – didn't seem impressed with my poor social skills. She sucked her teeth and looked me up and down and said, 'We're really a children's theatre group.'

'He's twelve,' said Dad.

'What? Mental age?'

'No. Physical age. And mental, I suppose. He's twelve – mentally, physically, emotionally, the lot. He's just a bit tall. And stubbly.'

'Oh!' She looked like she didn't believe him. I showed her my passport.

'He's a clever lad,' said Dad. 'He's in Gifted and Talented.'

'He's not exactly a *little* star though, is he?' said Lisa. 'I suppose if we did *The Big Friendly Giant*,

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he'd be perfect. So –' she smiled – 'why don't we do that then?'

So we did. Florida Kirby was already a fully paid-up Little Star. Lisa gave her the part of the giant's little friend, Sophie.

'The Sophie in the play,' Florida said, 'was named after Sophie Dahl, the supermodel. So when I play Sophie, I'm playing a young supermodel.' Florida always has to be a celebrity. When Lisa made us do a role play in which we had to act like we'd seen a ghost, Florida saw the ghost of Britney Spears. When we had to pretend to be a dog, she was Madonna's dog.

As we walked home through the Strand the first day Florida kept practising her lines on me. The lines were mostly things like, 'You're huge!' 'Goodness, you're tall!' or 'You're proper gigantic!' and she said them all in her best Little Stars loud-and-clear voice. I sat down on one of the benches by the water feature, just to be a bit less tall for a while.

'If we sit here,' said Florida, 'Security will come and chase us. They hate kids hanging round this bench. They hate kids really.'

But Security didn't come and chase us. In fact,

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one of them walked past us and nodded at me.

'What's going on?' said Florida.

'They think,' I explained, 'that you are with me. And that I am your dad.'

'No. You're kidding! Do they? Do they, honest?'

'Yes.'

'But this is brilliant.'

And she was right. We could do anything, so we did. That Saturday and every Saturday from then on we played on the lifts, messed about in the photo booth, went into Total Games and tried out all the new releases. We even went into Newz and Booze, which is 'Strickly no unaccompanid children under eny sercumstance's.' Florida loved it in there because she could browse through all the celebrity magazines while I bought a newspaper to make myself look more dadly. Sometimes she used to give me a pound before we went inside so I could buy her chocolate.

I said, 'Buy your own chocolate.'

'Girls do not buy their own chocolate when they're out with their dads. Dads buy it for them.'

She even tried to get me to buy her cigarettes.

'Dads don't buy their children cigarettes.'

'My actual dad would. He'd do anything for me.'

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### Retrieval

- 1) Which game does Liam like playing on the computer ?
- 2) Where did Liam's parents send him to help with his social skills ?

### Words in context

- 3) Find and copy a word which means 'alone'.
- 4) What does the phrase 'fully paid-up' mean ?

### Inference

- 5) Give two reasons why Liam did not have friends at school.
- 6) Why didn't security chase Liam and Florida ?