

**The All Mine Academy**

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## A Happy Couple

At the time this story was written, Mr and Mrs Smirth were already middle-aged and had no children. To tell the truth, it wasn't just that they had no children, they had also never entertained the thought they might have any.

They both hated children. They thought they noisy, whiny, needy, expensive things to look after... and were forever under your feet. On their travels around the world, they always tried to steer clear of places that families might go. In the fifteen years since they'd met and got married, they'd never felt the need to discuss the issue, content as they were to have found in each other a shared purpose and shared outlook on life.

The Smirths lived in a pretty little house on Ladbroke Road, although they spent most of their time in one of London's most affluent districts – Notting Hill – looking after their businesses. A stroke of luck had enabled them to find shops one in front of the other.

On the right side of the fashionable Portobello Road, Gregor had established his property and business empire which had an old-worldly feel and sea-green-painted shop front, while Katuscia had set up directly opposite, on the left side of the road, selling furniture and works of art in Smirth's Antiques, which had an art nouveau window display, painted a pretty shocking pink.

These delightful geographical circumstances meant they could wave to each other from their respective shop windows and blow syrupy-sweet kisses across at regular intervals. Each looked after their own trade but when lunchtime came, they would walk together to the elegant Roald Dahl Café & Restaurant at the end of the road, where they'd merrily recount the various deals they'd each concluded that morning.

Their high standard of living meant they were able to indulge their every whim. From canapés to dessert, they never skipped a course, and their favourite pastimes were travelling, counting the money amassing in the bank and in their various savings books, and reciting together the long list of properties they owned.

“Oh, and don’t forget our cottage in Nottingham!” Gregor would say, happy to add it to the list of places they loved to recall, sitting in their usual restaurant.

“Of course. Well done! I’d almost forgotten. What about our commercial fund? Might it be the right time to sell it?”

This was the nature of their conversations. Except when they were joined by Mr Rogers – who owned a small jewellery shop on the corner of the same street. Without fail, this would happen three times a week – on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. The three would sit at the same table but would all ask for their own, individual bills.

With Mr Rogers, who was always impeccably punctual, they would discuss politics, business, luxury travel and fine food, or cashmere and hand-crafted designer shoes, to which all three were partial, of course.

It could safely be said that it was the fault of the latter, Mr Rogers, that things took the turn they did. Indeed, it was at that very table in the Roald Dahl Café & Restaurant, that this story began.

Gregor looked at his watch and asked Katuscia, “Today is Thursday, isn’t it?”

“It is!” his wife replied.

“It’s now twelve minutes after ten, isn’t it?”

“It is!”

“Then Mr Rogers is late!”

“It’s not like him!” Katuscia acknowledged.

“What shall we do? Shall we go ahead and order?”

“Of course,” Katuscia agreed. “He’ll come! And if he doesn’t...”

“Who gives a hoot galoot!” they sang together, arms in the air, hands waving, like weather vanes flapping in the wind. It was a motto of theirs, a mawkish little game they had invented in the early days of their courtship.

An earthquake in Italy? Radio and television pleas for “Money. Send Money. Help needed urgently!” Their eyes would lock in a knowing look, up their hands would go, shaking by the side of their heads as they chorused, “Who gives a hoot galoot!!!!”

That said, when the waiter approached to take their order, Gregor asked if he had happened to see Mr Rogers.

The waiter looked at them, astonished, and became suddenly serious. "What? You don't know?"

"Don't know what?" the couple asked.

"The cleaning lady found him this morning, dead as a doornail. Heart conked out while he was polishing his ancient coin collection!"

"Unbelievable!" Gregor gasped, incredulous, twisting the hairs in his right ear around his finger, wondering if he'd misheard. "He's the same age as me, just forty-nine, we went to school together!" he exclaimed, a cold shiver shooting down his spine.

The waiter, a rueful look on his face, held up his hands, palms out, in a *these-things-happen* kind of way, before adding, "If you'll allow me, might I recommend the excellent roast beef with Yorkshire pudding we have today."

## A Marvellous Idea

Since the day in the restaurant when they'd learned of Mr Rogers' passage to the Other World, Mr Smirth began to consider the possibility of his own death, and not just his own, his wife's as well. An incurable illness, a road accident, a plane crash, even a terror attack – no potential end to their lives was left untouched. Standing in front of the mirror, after his shower, he caught sight of his enormous paunch and concluded that he was getting old. Katuscia, ten years his junior and as thin and brittle as a rake, was no spring chicken either. For this reason, and after giving it much thought, he decided to put his idea to her.

It was a brutal blow for his wife.

"We had an agreement!" Katuscia screamed, hysterical. "No animals, we said! No cats, no stupid dogs running around under our feet, and definitely no children!"

"But darling, try to understand, all our money, our property, our shares!" Mr Smirth explained. "You don't want the government, or someone else, to get their hands on them, do you?!?"

"I have no maternal instinct! You should know that!" she replied. "This is typical of you men. After all, it's not you who has to bear them! We're the ones afflicted with pregnancy, risking our lives, looking horribly deformed, suffering dizziness and nausea. You should have told me you were like all the rest, that you were going to want children, and I wouldn't have given you a second glance! I have no intention of contracting certain illnesses on purpose!"

"Katuscia... I don't feel paternal either. In our case, it wouldn't really be a child... that's not..."

"Oh really? What would it be, then?"

"Well, it would be an, eh... an heir! Try to see it as us producing an heir! Flesh of our flesh, who will look after our wealth when we are no longer here. Someone to teach everything we know and who will cultivate the Smirth fortune, oversee our homes, our properties, our shops..."

A sullen look on her long, equine face, Katuscia mulled it over at length, her front teeth poking out over her lower jaw, giving her the air of a rodent. She thought about it, thought against it, all the while slumped in her favourite tulip chair, arms folded, skinny long legs crossed. She thought and thought... then erupted in an enormous yell, "I'm far too old! You idiot! I'm nearly forty!"

"I've been reading about this," Gregor replied, calmly. "Science has made giant leaps, we are now living much longer. Don't worry. I have made an appointment tomorrow to see our doctor for a general check-up."

"You've made up your mind, then?!" Katuscia whimpered, beginning to grasp the seriousness of her husband's idea.

"Unless you want all our assets to fall into the hands of the state or... your sister, should we..."

"Noooooo, not my sister or her children! That miserable shrew will get nothing from me!"

Gregor sniggered to himself, happy he'd pressed the right buttons and proud of his wife's fighting spirit. There was just one more thing to be resolved.

"Of course, you don't have to give birth yourself. If the idea frightens you, we could always adopt someone else's snotty brat... there are hundreds nobody wants."

"Over my dead body! If it's an heir you want, an heir you shall have, and it shall have our blood, even if I die making it. No one but our own child will ever get their hands on our money!"

They embraced.

One month later, Mrs Smirth announced to her husband that she was pregnant and felt crummy, but the deed had been done.

## The Heir

Oblivious to her bump, which looked like an aberrant excrescence on Katuscia's skinny frame, the expectant mum went about her work and everyday life as normal, until early one mid-August evening, when her child decided it was time to make an appearance. Its path into the world was aided by its mother's willowy girth, a skilful physician and an impeccable Caesarean section.

After dashing to the hospital, the new parents found themselves without a name for the newborn. The decision was thus taken to call him First. "And last!" a frazzled Katuscia shrieked, convinced she would remember the experience as one of the most wretched and unpleasant of her life.

"Yes," Gregor agreed. "We will call him First because our son will come first in everything he does, and he must never forget that, first and foremost, he must always think of himself, and only later, much later, of anyone else!"

Arriving home with their tiny bundle, tucked underarm like a Sunday newspaper, the couple very quickly realized there were not in a position to take care of it.

"Nursing is out the question!" Katuscia proclaimed. Either of them remembering to buy baby food and nappies was even less likely. The very idea of it turned their stomachs.

That being so, they placed an ad in the newspaper, of a kind not seen since the last century. It read:

*URGENTLY SEEKING WET NURSE to suckle snotty brat. Fitting stipend offered along with board and lodgings in select quarter of London. Time-wasters, pilferers, scruffy or malodorous individuals need not apply.*

Exactly twenty-four hours later, Enrichetta Stevenson knocked on their door, straight from the country. She was a young, rubicund woman with an unsophisticated but wholesome air and a smile so warm and friendly it would have put Saint Christopher in the shade.

The woman had just weaned her youngest child and, through necessity, had entrusted it to her sister, left her farm and rushed into the city to take up service with the Smirths.

Her arrival was a genuine stroke of luck for Gregor and Katuscia. Very soon, they'd be able to forget all about the child, having handed him over, lock, stock and barrel, to the tender, loving care of the young woman whose cheeks were as rosy and plump as a Cox's Pippin, her cap lily-white and hand-embroidered apron always as crisp and white as freshly laundered linen.

Obviously, the wet nurse was put to the test. During her first week, the Smirths planted coins, banknotes and silverware around the house, even in the bathroom, and plotted the position of each on a detailed map. They were amazed to discover that the cheery daughter of the soil touched nothing.

Gregor and Katuscia Smirth agreed that she was obviously of simple mind. Honest, but of limited intelligence. They felt able, therefore, to put their complete trust in her and to settle the "what to do with the snotty brat" issue, once and for all.

Their relationship with First was thus limited to one of mere supervision. They watched him grow, looking on curiously, as if he were a large toadstool, and commented on how much he was costing them.

"He eats so much, the snotty little thing! He's costing us a fortune!" Katuscia complained.

"Darling, you know as well as I that we must think of him not as a cost, but as an investment in the future!"

When the Smirths were at work, Enrichetta, who yearned desperately for the children she'd left in the country, lavished the full force of her love on baby First. The two would spend many a happy day together in the most peaceful of pursuits, from milk feeds and burps to lullabies and nursery rhymes, playtime and baby baths. The child grew quickly and healthily, and it wasn't long before his face was permanently lit up by the most blissful of smiles. Enrichetta carried a tiny camera with her everywhere and never missed an opportunity to snap a picture of First, although only when his parents weren't around for fear of incurring their

wrath. By the time he reached his first birthday, First was walking and his wet nurse was allowed to take him to the country on the weekend, to play with her other children.

Gregor and Katuscia were happy to find themselves with Saturdays and Sundays free, and happier still that they no longer had strangers in the house. Indeed, their happiness was so great, they did not complain when the visit to the country lasted longer than the weekend, and stretched from one week to the next. With the excuse of the clean air, other children to play with and milk straight from the farm, they had managed to rid themselves of the brat. First was officially entrusted to Enrichetta Stevenson's care. According to their calculations, the exchange also allowed them to make substantial savings on electricity, heating and food costs. As soon as the boy was old enough to understand something of the world, they would take him back and give him the education he needed to fulfil the purpose for which he'd been created.

In the meantime, First had turned two and loved chasing the barnyard animals, riding the pigs, patting the cats and playing with all the children on the farm, exhibiting a very kind and plucky disposition.

By four years of age, the child could speak proficiently and on the few occasions he saw his parents, he addressed them with impeccable manners.

With no specific effort on his part and without him realizing it, by age five, First had become the undisputed leader of the group of children, and he threw himself enthusiastically into all their breath-taking adventures in the rolling pastures and oak woods.

At age six, he started attending the little country school and proved to be an able pupil.

When First turned eight, seeing how he'd grown and was now able to read and write, Mr and Mrs Smirth had to face facts. The time had come. Now that the child could be reasoned with, it was they who should look after him. Enrichetta was duly fired and First fetched back from the farm.

Amid floods of tears and countless promises to stay in touch, Enrichetta and First said their goodbyes. It was a heart-breaking separation, since it was more like a child being torn

from his mother's bosom and, by implication and no less distressing, also from his brothers and sisters.

The farewell was completed under the watchful gaze of his biological parents, who were more irritated than embarrassed. Enrichetta offered to continue taking care of First for free and although they were sorely tempted by the word "free", in the end they agreed the inevitable – it was up to them, now, to take over the thing's, or rather the child's, education.

### At Work with Mummy Dearest

First wasn't particularly tall but he was a robust, strong boy, with two big, inquisitive blue eyes, a broad, kind face and two rosy, plump cheeks that were squeezed upwards by his frequent smiles. Having never been harshly scolded, much less smacked, First had the utmost faith in life.

He had only ever received cuddles from the people on the farm and in the village, and had no reason to think it wouldn't be the same in the city, with his wonderful parents who'd allowed Enrichetta to raise him.

"So... boy!" Mr Smirth said. "Hmm, or rather... son..." he corrected himself.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"No more country for you! Now that you can read and write, you will go to a real school in September. Until then, you will come with myself and Katuscia, eh, your Mu... Mummy, to the shop, where we will teach you the meaning of life and business. Are we agreed?"

"Are we agreed?" Katuscia replicated, wrinkling her nose and sticking out her rabbit's teeth.

First loved his school in the country, where the elderly teacher, Mrs Sullivan, let him and his six classmates sing nursery rhymes, play number games and go on walks to look for leaves. But, not to be rude, he replied, "Yes, Mummy dearest. Yes, Daddy-pops!"

First's reply sent shivers down Gregor and Katuscia's spines. They quickly conferred, muttered in each other's ears, and nodded in agreement.

"Listen ch... child..." Mr Smirth said, embarrassed. "Your mother and I would rather be called Mr Smirth and Mrs Smirth. If you don't mind. We know we are related. We don't need to repeat it to each other all the time. And we will call you First. Are we agreed?"

"Agreed, Mummy dearest and Daddy-pops!" First bubbled.

"First! Perhaps I didn't explain myself properly!" Mr Smirth tried again, repeating his explanation and ending with, "Are we agreed?"

“Agreed, Mr Smirth Daddy-pops and Mrs Smirth Mummy-dearest.” First beamed.

*He’s an intelligent boy, Mr Smirth thought, astonished. Slowly but surely, he’ll learn. We’ll take it one step at a time.*

With that, they started out for their respective shops. No one in the street had ever seen the Smirths’ heir, not since his birth so, one by one, both young and old filed into Mr Smirth’s estate agents to shake his hand, and First was kind and polite to them all. Indeed, he threw himself at everyone, wrapping them in an enormous hug, the way he’d done with Enrichetta. But his father, embarrassed, gripped him by the collar after the first two hugs and explained that they were in London now, not the country, and that a handshake was enough... and preferable.

They left the estate agents and went to Katuscia’s shop.

“You see,” Mr Smirth explained as they went in, “all of this is ours, and it is yours, too. Do you understand?”

The boy looked around, astonished, then nodded.

When Mr Smirth went away to take care of his own business, First was left alone with his mother. “Now, First,” Katuscia said, “sit down on that chair and be good.”

Some customers came in to look at a vase and Katuscia wrapped up the sale, showing off her technique to First. Or she would have done, if First hadn’t been more interested in a fly buzzing around the ceramics.

“Come here, First!” she shouted, to attract the boy’s attention. “Give the gentlemen their change!” She indicated which buttons to press to open the till.

Such grievous recklessness was to have consequences that would be revealed very soon after, when Katuscia left the shop to tell Mr Smirth about the sale. She instructed First not to move because she would return shortly. Unfortunately, Mr Smirth was on the phone with a customer when she got there and it took longer than she had expected for him to finish.

Back in her shop, Mr Hurp, one of the local vagrants who occasionally wandered into Portobello Road in search of a few coppers, had come in. He found the child on his own.

“Hello, anyone there?” he asked, poking his head and flea-bitten cap around the door, resigned to the idea that he’d be asked to move on.

“I’m here!” First replied, without moving from his chair.

“And who are you?” the vagrant asked, patting down the threadbare collar of his shirt before he finally spotted the top of First’s head behind the cash register.

“I’m First, the owner!” the boy replied, smiling. “With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“Mr Hurp is the name!” the man countered, with an aggrandized air. “Are you the only one here?”

“Yes,” First replied, naively.

“Well, Mr First,” Mr Hurp commenced. “I have just had the misfortune of being robbed in the street – we live in dangerous times! What dangerous times are these! So, I was wondering, would you, kind sir, have ten pounds to lend me for a taxi, to enable me to get home to my villa? Naturally, I will bring the money back to you tomorrow!”

“Of course, sir!” First answered and, without stopping to think, tinged open the cash register.

Hurp edged closer, greedy eyes bulging.

“Eh, you wouldn’t have twenty, would you? I... I live so far away, you know!”

“I only have a fifty-pound note,” First confessed, disconsolate. “I’m afraid you’ll have to make do with that!”

“Never mind, better than nothing. Fifty will do fine!” the man said, snatching the note out of First’s hands and thanking him profusely. For fear the child might change his mind, though, he made straight for the door, just in time to intersect Katuscia on her way back in, fingers pinching her nose to shut out the smell.

“Who was that? What did he want?” she barked, alarmed. “Did he take something?”

“Not all all!” First replied, calmly. “It was Mr Hurp! A nice gentleman who had just been robbed, Mummy dearest – I lent him fifty pounds for a taxi! To get home to his villa!”

“What?” Katuscia shrieked, the noise literally lifting up her son’s hair. “But, but... well, it wasn’t your money to give away!”

“Yes, Mummy dearest, it was, Mr Smirth Daddy-pops explained it to me, what’s yours is also mine!”

Not stopping to answer, Katuscia rushed outside, screaming, “Thief! Thief!” She called her husband and, together, they gave chase. The street was scoured, inch by inch, but not a trace of the vagrant was found. In the end, they gave up and decided to go to the police station to report the crime.

An hour later, when they returned, furious, to the shop, they passed an elderly lady who was crossing the road with a Ming vase tucked under her arm.

“Look, darling!” Katuscia said. “That vase is just like one I have in the shop!”

The old lady climbed into a taxi and drove away.

When the couple arrived at Smirth’s Antiques, First was waiting with fifty pounds in his hands.

“Look, Mr and Mrs Mummy and Daddy-pops!” he exclaimed, triumphantly.

“Did that rogue bring the money back?” asked Katuscia, incredulous and still disgusted by the malodorous traces of the vagrant, lingering in her nostrils.

“No!” First said, bursting with pride. “Mr Hurp is coming tomorrow, I sold a vase to earn this!”

Katuscia’s head twisted left and right.

“And the rest?”

“No rest, the woman had the right change.”

“Where’s the rest of the money, you idiot?” Katuscia yelled.

“The woman only had a fifty pound note, only two zeros short, and, well, a zero is worth zero, I thought. She’s now a loyal customer, though, Mummy dearest, and she’s promised to come back soon!”

But Mummy dearest was no longer listening! She’d collapsed into the arms of Mr Smirth, who in turn collapsed onto the couch, which in turn tipped up and hit a priceless Louis

XV cabinet, which in turn fell back and knocked over a blown glass Tiffany lamp, which banged into a marble caryatid, causing it to fall to the ground.

When this expensive series of “in turns” finally came to an end, the only sound to be heard was that of the statue’s head rolling to a stop at First’s feet.

“It’s quite clear!” Mr Smirth declared when he came to. “We have been too hasty. The child knows nothing of the world! He was raised among country folk, chickens and pigs! He’s a simpleton who knows no malice. We must explain the ways of the world to him. I’ll take him to the office with me tomorrow and give him his first lesson.

Katiuscia, as white as a sheet and propped up on the counter, in front of her beloved cash register, was still gasping from the shock. Blood vessels popping in her eyes, she screamed, “For all our sakes, do it! Get him out of my sight and out from under my feet!”

First, who’d been distracted by a Persian rug depicting knights chasing a peacock, heard nothing of what was said. When he eventually looked up, he gave Katiuscia a besotted smile. His parents must be very tired to have dropped off to sleep like that. Very diligently, he gathered up the statue’s head and, looking his mother in the eye, reassured her, “Don’t worry, Mummy dearest. I’ll stick it back on for you!”

### At Work with Daddy-pops

Katiuscia had to fight tooth and nail to get the insurance company to reimburse her even just a fraction of what she'd lost, and her nerves were somewhat jangled.

"You wanted the thing... what do you call it... an heir! Well, here it is, it's all yours!"

"First, he's called First..." Mr Smirth clarified as he filled his pipe, relaxing with his feet up on a mildew-green footstool.

"Yes, him, First, or whatever the devil he's called. You wanted him, and I produced him. It's up to you, now, to look after him. He's a boy like you, so you can see to his education..." she raged, all in a lather. "But most of all, I repeat, most of all, he is not to set foot in my shop ever again, at least not before he's twenty years old and has been educated, do you hear me? Is. That. Clear?"

"Of course," Mr Smirth conceded, phlegmatically, blowing two rose-scented smoke rings of his favourite pipe tobacco into the air.

"After all," his wife insisted, "at least all those papers in your office, however valuable they may be, are not breakable!"

Needless to say, never was a more reckless comment made by a woman.

The first thing Mr Smirth did was march First straight to a tailor to have a pinstripe suit made to measure in record time, along with a black tie and white shirt, like a proper businessman.

"Like my father used to say, dear First – if you really must be a child, try not to look like one or behave like one. It's the least you can do. My childhood couldn't have been further from ridiculous things likes kites, toy soldiers and other useless pursuits. I was required to work hard at all times, and whatever my father said was fine with me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand, Mr Smirth Daddy-pops."

Mr Smirth rolled his eyes. He was beginning to doubt his son's mind. He refrained from correcting him yet again and, the next day, introduced First to his agency. The window was

brimming with announcements about houses, warehouses, land and offices for sale, as well as privately negotiated rates on stocks and share packages and all nature of investment deals. Some were marked in red pen with the words GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY, which in Mr Firth's mind meant simply ALMIGHTY RIP-OFF.

The interior of the shop presented a classic 19<sup>th</sup>-century England feel. Bundles of files lay piled up on a large oak desk, behind which hung an oil painting of mediocre quality, depicting two hunting dogs chasing pheasants and whose sole purpose was to hide an old and solid Rottermeier safe.

On the right, obscured to a degree by a sea-green lampshade, was a photo of Katuscia. The image had been somewhat distorted by the wide-angle lens on Mr Smirth's old Kodak, making her look fatter and terribly like a hamster. On the left was a photo of Mr Smirth as a young boy, dressed in a pinstripe suit and standing beside his father, to whom Gregor, many years later, now bore a strong resemblance.

Around them were more announcements, solid wood bookshelves laden with box files and a dusty computer sitting on a table which also bore an enormous, three-dimensional scale model of an urban development project that looked very like a shopping mall with some gardens, car parks and houses scattered around it.

"We are here today, First, to sign the biggest deal of the year, a deal put together and negotiated by yours truly!" Mr Smirth announced, his chest puffing up as he pointed to the scale model. "If we pull it off, boy, we will be even richer!"

First stared at him in wonder, eyes wide.

Encouraged by the interest his son seemed to be showing, Mr Smirth embarked on a series of fulsome explanations.

"We are selling the land and the plans. The land is worth nothing and what's more, no shopping mall could ever be built there," he said, smugly. "But the customer has money to invest, he wants to do it quickly, and he knows this is an opportunity not to be missed. Unluckily for him, he wasn't quick-witted enough to have any surveys done so is completely unaware that the land is like Swiss cheese, riddled with holes, water-logged and thick with clay soil.

Building on it would cost the earth as the foundations would have to exorbitantly deep. But I am selling the land and the plans, and only after that, a long, long time after, I will be deeply sorry that I knew nothing about the geological state of the ground. Do you understand?"

First understood well; he felt his head spinning, and said, "But won't the gentleman who buys the land be sad when he finds out that he can't build anything? Wouldn't it be better to tell him straight away?"

Mr Smirth, who hadn't been expecting such an objection, gave an embarrassed cough and continued in a more sombre, pensive tone, placing his hands on his son's shoulders and looking him straight in the eye. "Yes, yes, my dearest First, you are quite right, but you also quite wrong! Your reasoning would be absolutely spot on, if only things in the business world, the one in which we live, weren't entirely different. *Mors tua vita mea!*" he pronounced, not realizing that an eight-year-old child couldn't possibly understand Latin. "If I was able, of course I would tell Mr Johnson that the land he is about to buy is no good, not even for growing radishes. But I can't, my world is a business one! Who am I to stand in the way of the dreams of a shamelessly rich man, to stop him from throwing a little of his money away on a lousy deal?"

First's face fell; he understood his father was acting in good faith and was sad to see him dragged into such an unfortunate affair.

"Let's go, you can watch how I handle these clients. One day it will be you in my place, when all this is yours and you are a fully-fledged member of the business world!"

"I want to be a farmer or a beekeeper!" First exclaimed, remembering how happy he'd been on Enrichetta Stevenson's farm and at the tiny village school.

"Ha, ha! What a lark you are, my boy! A farmer!" Mr Smirth echoed, laughing heartily. "For what it's worth, as a boy I wanted to be a painter! Imagine that! You will do what you were born to do, dear First. Right?"

"Right, Mr Smirth Daddy-pops! What I was born to do! Absolutely!" First chanted, happy to have such an understanding father. A smile lit up his face, from cheek to cheek, just as the

shop door tinkled, signalling the arrival of Mr Johnson, accompanied by his lawyer and secretary.

Mr Smirth rushed over to shake their hands and invited them to sit down.

They took their seats around the desk. The lawyer was small and fat, the secretary skinny but with a gigantic head and two sticking out ears, so wide they would put even Prince Charles' in the shade. Mr Johnson was very old, his hair was long and white, and he looked at everything with two inquisitive blue eyes which had an almost child-like quality about them. When he saw First, a friendly smile spread across his face.

"And who might you be?" he asked, leaning over to the boy.

"My son First," Mr Smirth swiftly intervened. "Allow me to introduce my son, here with me today to learn about the business."

Mr Johnson looked at the child, completely taken aback. They shook hands. But First, forgetting how things are done in the city, lunged forward and embraced the businessman in all earnestness. Amused, the latter returned the hug and, laughing wholeheartedly, said, "Well, this is a warm welcome!"

Mr Smirth grabbed First by the collar and, apologizing profusely, pulled him away.

"What an affectionate child!" Mr Johnson remarked. "I wasn't aware you had a son, Mr Smirth," he continued, seemingly stopping to ponder something. "How old is he?"

Mr Smirth had to think for a second; he couldn't remember how long ago they'd produced him, so turned to First and hastily bid him reply, "Come now, there's a good boy. Tell Mr Johnson how old you are!"

"Eight! I'll be nine soon!" First gushed.

"Oh, now that is priceless. I've never heard anything sillier, learning the ropes at eight years of age!"

The lawyer and secretary hurried to concur with an obsequious laugh. The millionaire glared at them with the weary expression of someone tired of being pandered to.

"It's never too early to learn, don't you think, Mr Johnson?" asked Mr Smirth, removing the picture from the wall. He started to fiddle with the safe.

“Quite the opposite!” Mr Johnson fired back. “It is never too late, you mean! Children should be allowed to play, have fun, fly kites! Run after spinning tops! Go to school. I did all that until I was thirty!” he sighed, a dreamy look in his eyes. “Then my father died, and I had to take over his business affairs.”

Mr Smirth smiled, muttering, “Of course, of course...” He laid out the contract on the desk, ready to sign. The secretary opened the briefcase and pulled out a cheque book. The lawyer peered over the document, nudging a pair of glasses up his nose.

“Aren’t you going to offer us anything, Mr Smirth?” Mr Johnson asked, winking at First.

“Oh yes, of course, I do apologize, a deal of this calibre requires a toast! I have an excellent vintage sherry that is just right for the occasion!”

“Children can’t drink sherry and on such a hot day, even I would prefer an ice cream,” the man said, enjoying himself and winking again at First, who smiled back.

The lawyer and secretary immediately seconded the idea of an ice cream and Mr Johnson looked up to the ceiling, rolling his eyes in resignation.

“I’m sorry,” Mr Smirth mumbled, somewhat disoriented. “Obviously I don’t have any ice cream here, but I could make a quick visit to the ice cream shop on the corner while you read and *sign* the contract.”

In truth, the ice cream shop was two blocks away but Mr Smirth was willing to go to any length to get them to sign the contract.

“Excellent! I’ll have strawberry and chocolate!” Mr Johnson said. Orders started to fly but Mr Smirth had no difficulty remembering them as the secretary and lawyer declared that strawberry and chocolate were also their favourites, and First chose pistachio and hazelnut. Mr Smirth hurried to fetch the ice creams, the lawyer read the contract, the secretary re-read it, the cheque was signed and placed on the table.

Mr Johnson took the top off his fountain pen and was about to put the tip to the paper when he stopped, hesitating briefly before signing. He looked at the lawyer, who nodded solemnly; he looked at his secretary, who did the same, more humbly. Finally, and for what reason you might ask, he looked at First, whose head gave an almost imperceptible shake.

Intrigued and somewhat taken aback, Mr Johnson asked, "Why not?"

### An Ice Cream with Mr Johnson

Mr Smirth returned shortly after, carrying the ice cream sundaes on a cardboard tray, just in time to see Mr Johnson stand up and prepare to leave the shop with his entourage.

“Here I am! Here I am!” he panted. “You have my word, this is the best ice cream in England!”

Mr Johnson returned to his seat, calmly picked up a sundae and passed one to First, who started wolfing it down. Bewildered, his two deputies took their ice creams, too, and began to eat them.

“I see you haven’t signed yet,” Mr Smirth noticed, a tad confused. A strange sense of foreboding was making him feel hot and sweaty.

He sensed something odd in the air. Mr Johnson was smiling as he ate his ice cream, eyes on Smirth. He ran a hand through First’s hair, gave him a gentle caress, then pulled the cheque out of his pocket. He showed it to Mr Smirth, but instead of handing it to him, he ripped it in half, wiped his mouth with it, rolled it into a ball and threw it in the bin.

“Wh... what?” Mr Smirth screeched.

Mr Johnson pushed the contract over to his secretary and the lawyer. They each took half and ripped their respective bits into two, wiped their mouths with the pages then threw them away.

“Really! What is the meaning of this?” an incredulous Mr Smirth demanded.

“It means two things, Smirth,” Mr Johnson commenced, close to laughing and enjoying the last few spoonfuls of ice cream. “Well, three actually. The first is that your son First is probably the only honest person left in the whole of England and the only person able to tell me the truth which, I am led to believe, was impossible for you because it’s ‘just the way things are in the business world’. The second is that the only reason I am not going to phone the police is because I feel sorry for you.”

When he reached the end of his sentence, under Mr Smirth's dumbfounded gaze and First's contented smile, he headed over to the door, lackeys on his tail.

Mr Smirth gathered himself together and, insanely, as if it were of vital importance, demanded to know, "And what's the third thing? You said three things!"

Mr Johnson stopped in the doorway, turned around and, very solemnly, added, "You were right about one thing!"

"What?"

"That was the best ice cream I have ever tasted!" He dipped his head kindly towards First, adding, "I owe you one, child. I will be in touch soon!"

When the door closed, Mr Smirth turned to First, bulging with rage, face crimson and screaming at the top of his voice, "You are the blight of my life! But I will teach you how to behave in this world!" He set upon the boy, who took flight with feline agility, sensing imminent danger. Mr Smirth gave chase and backed him into a corner. Realizing he was trapped, First used the bookcase like a ladder and climbed up to the top shelf, although not quite quick enough. His father managed to catch his foot and pulled on it to yank the boy down. It was a terrible idea – First clung to the bookcase, which keeled over on top of Mr Smirth while First flew over his head and landed, unhurt, on the leather armchair behind him.

An eerie silence followed.

First jumped down from the armchair and shouted, "Mr Smirth Daddy-pops!?"

"Ugh, agh, ugh..." was all that could be heard from under the mountain of box files, folders and papers.

"Don't worry, Daddy-pops, I'll run for help!"

When the ambulance arrived, Katuscia shut both shops and climbed in, forgetting all about First. On her return from the hospital, she found him waiting on the step outside her shop, back against the shocking pink shutter.

“Oh, there you are!” she said when she spotted him, before furiously listing the various injuries his father had sustained – twenty days in hospital, head bandaged due to concussion, and a break in the leg at the femur bone, which would have to be immobilized for two months.

First was so sorry that he started to cry but she still refused to say a single word to him for the rest of the evening.

As if this weren't bad enough, two weeks later a letter arrived from the bank, announcing that Mr Johnson had set up a trust fund for one hundred thousand pounds, in First's name and untouchable, by anyone, until he turned eighteen. There was also a signed note, which said, *Thank you, this is to help make your dreams come true!*

“At the end of the day, it's more than you would have earned in commission,” Katuscia pointed out, perched on her husband's hospital bed.

“That's not the point!” Mr Smirth answered, aching all over. “It's a matter of principle! Honesty does not make money. And it's his, not mine, untouchable until he turns eighteen!” he blubbered. “I have to find a way of straightening out that boy!” he concluded, menacingly, scratching inside the plaster on his right leg with a long ivory hand.

“Of course, my poor darling. We can neither give the Thing back or ask for a replacement, so we have no choice but to straighten it out!” Katuscia concluded, planting a kiss on her husband's forehead. “And, cheer up,” she added. “When he turns eighteen, that money will be ours, too.” Her lips pulled back in an evil smile, like a curtain parting, to reveal her enormous incisors.

## Chapters 7–10

*A birthday party for First turns into riotous series of mishaps involving the neighbours and a group of vagrants, who First invites into the house in lieu of any real friends. Mr Hurp returns with his “associates”, who run rings around First and steal most of the family’s silverware and possessions!*

## Desperate Measures

For the next three days, Gregor and Katuscia could think of nothing else. They had shut their shops on account of the serious calamity they had suffered and barricaded themselves inside the house, ringing the police three or four times every hour to know if there had been any news of the robbers or the stolen goods.

“My collection of ancient clocks!” Mr Smirth groaned, bursting out sobbing.

“My Tiffany lampshade!” Katuscia chimed in, following it with a loud “Waah!” as she, too, burst into tears.

And so it continued, Gregor and Katuscia taking it in turns to *Waah* as they ran through the list of things they’d lost, in much the same way they’d once loved reciting all their possessions over lunch.

“The insurance will pay!” they consoled themselves regularly, exchanging a diabolical look. “Oh yes, how it will pay!”

If all this had happened just a few months earlier, Katuscia would have yelled at her husband that it was all his fault, he and his brat, and that it had been his stupid idea to have the thing in the first place... but none of that occurred to her now. Her husband would also have accused her of coming from a family of lily-livered benefactors or whatever else, but for some inexplicable reason, even he didn’t dare to speak.

As if that weren’t bad enough, they hadn’t smacked or punished First, and had forgotten to scold him the way they had over the cat incident. To tell the truth, they hadn’t even explained to him what had happened, so shattered were they by the whole catastrophic series of events.

So, why hadn’t they scolded him? Were they really so incredibly debilitated and demoralized? That is one possibility, although the truth was actually much worse and a far more terrifying prospect than any burglar. The fact is, for some time, there had been something in the thing... in First... that had caused them to experience a rather unusual sensation. When

the boy looked at them so radiantly, his big, bright eyes full of trust and gratitude, a feeling of unease, quite similar to an emotion, jingled on the outer edges of their souls.

How insufferable! Were they going soft in the head?

This unease was accompanied by feelings of guilt over their failures as parents, which they'd only just begun to comprehend. They had discussed it at length for three whole days and nights, and had come to a conclusion.

Two weeks later, after yet another phone call had been made to the police, Mr Smirth hung up the receiver and said, "Come to think of it, we have never spent much time, not that we have any to spare, on the boy's education. Perhaps this is why First is so ingenuously generous."

"And why don't you add so sickeningly sweet it would make a saint vomit!" Katuscia barked, hanging on her husband's every word.

"But I know whose fault it is!" Mr Smirth said, deflated.

"Whose?" his wife snapped, hackles up, fearing an accusation was coming.

"That farmer woman, Enrichetta Stevenson, who corrupted him from an early age!"

"In effect," Katuscia admitted, mulling it over, "First has grown up as dim-witted and generous as her. Perhaps we were wrong to send him to that woman in the country – worse still, to let him stay there so long."

"Yes, how could we have known it was such a delicate age for the boy? He understood nothing, couldn't even speak. And wasn't yet reading or writing! He was there for only eight years, what are eight years? But yes, perhaps we underestimated the importance of his education, and now we are paying for it."

"We should sue her!" Katuscia hissed. "Her and that country school!"

"Bah! One thing's for certain, we must act as quickly as possible. The way he's going, if we don't, he'll destroy everything we own, our life and everything we've worked hard to build up over the years. We have proof that he is capable. He's no heir, he's the Scourge of God!" Mr Smirth concluded.

Katiuscia's mind flashed back to the few clothes she'd managed to recover and sent to the drycleaner's three times without managing to remove the smell of the "lady" who'd tried them on in her house. She sighed.

"There's no getting away from it!" Mr Smirth acknowledged, dramatically. "We must change him! And until then, until he has changed, we cannot keep him with us. He must be treated and transformed, re-programmed in other words!"

Katiuscia looked at him, slightly scared and struggling to understand. "Of course, change him. You're right, but how? If we haven't managed so far, what makes you think we'll have any more success in the future?!"

"That's easy," Mr Smirth mumbled, a note of hesitation in his voice. "We will enlist the help of specialists!"

#### *Remainder of Chapter 11*

*The Smirths arrange for First to attend "All Mine Academy".*

### A Warm Welcome

One afternoon in late September, the little pink van with the words *Smirth's Antiques* written on shocking pink bodywork made its way down a mountain. Sitting inside at the wheel, paying close attention to the road, Katuscia couldn't stop tearing up and sneezing. The cause of her confused state of mind and strange hiccups and sneezes was, she believed, the large trees populating the school grounds. She would never admit to herself that what she was experiencing was something vaguely similar to an emotion.

Mr Smirth was bent over by her side, stern-faced and lost in thought.

They had paid for one term in advance and deposited First there with his enormous suitcase, sidestepping any kind of farewell or embrace, and avoiding kisses or compliments, given that, as they had explained to the child with an enormous sigh of relief, such displays were strictly forbidden there, and quite rightly so.

"We'll see you in June, son! The school rules don't allow Christmas or visits home," Mr Smirth had explained, still trembling at the sight of his old headmaster, now an octogenarian. They practically sprinted to the car, leapt in and sped away.

Mr Smirth struggled to admit it, but a disturbing sense of anxiety had gripped him when he'd seen the place. It had changed very little since his own childhood. It had taken him so long to forget the large, gloomy building, and now he'd gone and left First there, his son, flesh of his own flesh.

The headmaster, as thin and lanky as ever, had run his leaden eyes over Gregor, his vulture-like expression seeming to say, as he had done back in the day, "What an idle boy, good for nothing, that's what you are!" For a second, Mr Smirth had almost been tempted to take his son back, to take back the still pure and uncontaminated soul, and flee. But he hadn't, he had to safeguard his fortune. And his marriage.

On the way back, Mr Smirth glanced at Katuscia, blubbing beside him. He mopped his sweaty brow with a handkerchief and struggled to strike a resolute tone. "That's that, then! What's done is done! Right?"

But Katuscia wasn't listening; she didn't reply.

"Right?" Mr Smirth asked, raising his voice to rouse her.

"Eh? What?" the woman asked, annoyed.

"What's done is done! Right, my darling?"

This time, instead of replying "Right!" as she would normally have done, Katuscia said, "I hope so, I truly hope so, my dearest" and threw the car into fourth gear.

In complete silence, the car stole across the ridge of the mountain, like a tiny bar of pink soap, sliding through the dazzling green spruces which sparkled like Christmas trees, kissed by the sun.

Back at the school, First was struggling to work out what had happened to him, and why, if children from London all went to primary schools in London, he had been taken out to the suburbs, across fields, to the middle of nowhere, with only infrequent flocks of sheep breaking the blanket of nothingness, up over a rugged mountain that didn't seem to belong in Old England, and down the other side into a village with a strange name that was so far away from the capital.

The village of All Mine was dominated by a large manor house that had once been home to the local nobility, the Marquises McPear, and which now housed the school.

The school was called All Mine, like the village, but no one could remember which of the two had given its name to the other. Had the village been named after the home of the All Mine's, as the McPears had been known throughout England, on account of their selfishness, or had their home been named after the village, whose inhabitants were equally renowned for the very same virtues as the lords of the manor?

First, who had been left waiting outside the building while Katuscia and Gregor completed his enrolment in the headmaster's office, had said goodbye, trying to hold back the tears, and not long after, had watched them drive away down the approach road to the school.

His enormous suitcase by his side, First had stared at the car until all that was left was a tiny, pink dot on the edge of the grounds before it disappeared completely through the mighty wrought-iron gates that a giant, gangling janitor, with a face like an ogre, was hastening to shut and triple deadbolt.

He'd waved his tiny hand in a timid farewell the whole time. When he finally turned around, he found himself about twenty metres from the broad staircase up to the entrance, at the top of which was the school's forbidding main door and, towering above it, the same coat of arms that Katuscia had seen on the leaflet. A large owl, carved out of the dark stone, held incalculable banknotes and coins between its feet. The famous Latin motto that we encountered earlier – *Mors tua vita mea!* – curved above the owl's head while, below it, engraved inside a ribbon which was also held between the bird's feet, were the words *ALL MINE* in Gothic lettering.

First didn't speak Latin and, like the first time he'd heard his father pronounce the words, he didn't understand what they meant. It wouldn't be until his first lesson that someone would tell him that All Mine was the noise owls make – *All Mine! All Mine!* – and explain that the Latin translated to "*your death is my life!*"

The boy looked around while he waited for someone to come and get him. The building was of gargantuan proportions, with fake Gothic features that the rain had blackened, causing lichens to sprout in large patches, blotching the surface and making it look anything but reassuring. It had to be cold in these parts in winter; even in summer, thick, swirling fogs were known to fall. The extensive grounds, despite being somewhat neglected, were surprisingly luscious and green, filled with centuries-old trees, fountains that had seen better days and numerous pathways, along which noble dames must have strolled centuries earlier, holding parasols and arm-in-arm with gallant knights. First had no time to notice anything else, as a hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around, gruffly.

The Smirths' heir found himself looking at a man dressed in office attire, with the kind of green visor once worn by accountants to lessen eyestrain when working over gas lights, and black sleeve garters that First had no way of knowing were used in the olden days to keep shirt sleeves from being soiled while working with quill and inkpot.

The man was as stiff and thin as a ramrod, with a bald, lightbulb-shaped head, two big flappy ears and a pointed nose, perched on which was a pair of pince-nez glasses. "Mr Smirth," he commenced. "I am Mr Buster Curmudgeon, bookkeeper and personal secretary to the Headmaster, Mr McPear, who you will meet shortly. Follow me please!"

First smiled and held out his hand. "I'm First, Mr Curmudgeon, you can call me by my first name if you want!"

The man forced himself to look at the boy, his thin lips conveying his evident disgust and a hand going up to his polka-dot bow tie to fiddle with it nervously. Notwithstanding the baldness and his thin, ashen face, it was clear that the man couldn't be more than forty years old.

"I could not give a tinker's hoot! Mind your place, boy. I am Mr Curmudgeon, whereas you are no one... is that clear?" he barked, dispensing with his initial courtesy.

"That's not true, Mr Curmudgeon. I am First, not No One. No One must be someone else!"

Mr Curmudgeon rolled his eyes at First's reply then took a closer look at him. Was this brat trying to make a fool of him?

First's face was so joyful and happy that he could see no sign of malice. Mr Curmudgeon told himself he must be dealing with a dimwit and concluded no reply was needed.

"Follow me and be quiet!"

First took hold of his suitcase and pulled it behind him, catching up with Mr Curmudgeon. "Is someone sleeping or feeling poorly?" he whispered.

Mr Curmudgeon stopped, exasperated. "No, why?"

“You told me to be quiet. Usually one has to be quiet if someone is ill, sleeping or reading...” First started to reel off a long list of situations in which silence was required. “You have to be quiet in church, in the library, at the cinema...” and so on.

“Quiet, I say!” Mr Curmudgeon roared, and set off again down the pathway, striding out. First struggled to stay by his side.

Mr Curmudgeon stopped again, even more infuriated. “Let me explain something, little turd!” he said. “I lead the way here and you walk two steps behind. Is that clear?” he yelled again.

At this second yell, First put his fingers to his lips. “Ssh! Don’t forget we’re not supposed to raise our voices,” he said.

The man shook his head, flummoxed. When they got to the stairs, First attempted to drag his suitcase up the first step. It was obvious he was finding it difficult. Mr Curmudgeon, arms crossed, halfway up the stairs, merely stamped his foot impatiently and shouted at First to hurry up. “Get a move on or we’ll be here all night! The headmaster is waiting for you!”

“I can’t! Could you help me, please?”

A cold shiver ran down Mr Curmudgeon’s spine at the mere thought of it. But what was he to do, risk a dressing down from the headmaster for being late?

“It’s against the rules but, come on, before night falls. Time is money! Money!” he snapped, yanking the case out of the boy’s hands and pulling it behind him on the stairs. It was exceptionally heavy.

“What on earth have you got in there?” he screamed, exasperation rising. “And what is that noise it’s making?”

“Be careful, it’s fragile. There’s a radio inside and it must have switched on!” First explained, embarrassed, skipping past Mr Curmudgeon as he climbed the stairs more easily.

“Radios are not allowed! And wait for me, I’m showing you the way!” Mr Curmudgeon screeched, tongue hanging out.

Having arrived at the top of the stairs, First put his finger to his lips again. “Ssh! Don’t forget, sir. Someone’s not well!” And with four short steps, he went into the building, through

the atrium, followed the signs up the stairs, knocked on the door with the *Headmaster's Office* sign on it and bounced inside, without waiting for a reply.

Headmaster McPear had watched the scene unfold from the enormous window in his office. Hands behind his back and a stern expression on his face, he looked on with disdain as his secretary shuffled the suitcase up the last few steps. At one point, the case slipped out of his hands and tumbled down the stairs, bursting open on the grass. Six cats of various ages and sizes sprung out from among the few clothes and scampered immediately off into the grounds. Luckily, neither the headmaster, who had turned around right at that moment, nor Mr Curmudgeon, who had run after First, alarmed, noticed.

“Good morning, Mr Headmaster!” First chirped. McPear turned around. He was old, tall, but also thin and hunched, with big, red angry eyes under bushy white eyebrows, like two diabolic light holes shining out of his dark profile, which was silhouetted against the enormous window. Long strands of downy white fuzz twitched around his bald head. He looked uncannily like an owl or condor.

He gave the boy a murderous look. Such a sight would have chilled the blood of anyone, but First looked at him and felt a stab of affection for the spindly old man who'd been his father's headmaster and who, despite his age, kept doing his job with the same passion as ever. Without hanging around, he rushed to the other side of the desk and threw his arms around the headmaster's waist, the way Enrichetta had taught him, and hugged McPear tight. Wearing an enormous smile, he bubbled, “Thank you so much for accepting me into your school, Mr Headmaster Pair! I'm so happy to go to primary school here!”

The old man was thunderstruck. Never in the last sixty years had someone tried to hug him! And his name was McPear, not Pair! He threw his hands up in the air, as if the child were a hot coal to be dropped, and roared, “What has got into you, boy? For heaven's sake!” Then, feeling extremely at unease, he screamed repeatedly, “Help! Help! Get him off me! Curmudgeon, come here and help me!” He looked like a swimmer, about to go under. First wouldn't let go, so intent was he on expressing the full force of his gratitude.

Mr Curmudgeon came charging into the office and, aghast at what he saw, grabbed First by the shoulders and prised him off Mr McPear. The headmaster stumbled back, quivering, onto his chair, dangerously close to passing out, and the secretary and teachers who'd rushed to his assistance had to administer brandy to bring him round. Two hours later, he was still in a state of shock and only fully regained consciousness in the early afternoon.

Mr Curmudgeon scolded First savagely. "Are you mad? Are you out of your mind? Touching the headmaster? Touching him! What on earth were you thinking, hugging him of all things! In twenty years of honourable service, I have never laid as much as a finger on him, no one has!"

Mortified, First didn't know what he'd done wrong. In the meantime, word had spread around the school and, as news passed from desk to desk and ear to ear, the details were greatly inflated until the story had entered the realm of legend – the new arrival had strangled the headmaster and if he hadn't been prised off, would undoubtedly have killed him with his bare hands. The other pupils had roared with laughter, fiercely and with wicked delight, and were now dying to see the boy who, at just nine years of age, three minutes after arriving at the school, had almost killed old McPear and was now locked in his room.

Vinicio, from Year 5, the biggest, broadest pupil in the school, hated McPear with a vengeance for the way he constantly humiliated him in front of everyone. At break, he said to the others, "Listen up, this First is a hero, an example for all of us. Let's give him a true hero's welcome, whatever it costs!"

"Stuff that, who gives a hoot, you'll not get a penny from me, whoever it is!" said a skinny boy with a gentle face, vacant blue eyes and curly, pale blond hair, who was none other than Baronet Von Hausen – so titled not because the queen had appointed him baronet but because he was the son of a real baron.

"Yeah, you'll get nothing from us either!" the other boys echoed, ready for yet another clash between Vinicio and Von Hausen. The two had been bitter rivals from Year 1 – a family tradition, people said – and their feud was one of the few interesting things that happened at the school.

Meanwhile, First's suitcase had been recovered and the boy had been shut in his room. Devastated, he couldn't think of anything better to do than stare out of the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of his cats.

The ear that Mr Curmudgeon had used to drag him to his room was still throbbing, bright red and sore.

No one had ever hurt him before. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find a reason for such a violent reaction. It hadn't been like that with Enrichetta Stevenson, the well-mannered and much-loved Enrichetta, who had always taught him to greet people warmly. He knew his parents and London shopkeepers preferred a handshake, but in the country – and they were in the country here, for heaven's sake – it was normal to greet people with a warm embrace, otherwise you were better off not doing anything at all! Why McPair, because Pair sounds just like Pear, no doubt about it, with or without the Mc in front of it, didn't like hugs was a mystery.

And that Curmudgeon, pulling him by the ear like that, making it hurt so much — that was crazy!

First lay down on the bed and fell asleep with his clothes on, thinking that Mr Curmudgeon would no doubt apologize the next day for having lost his temper and First would, of course, magnanimously forgive him.