

MESSAGE TO GONZO

Listen, G—this is important and there isn't much time.

I want you to know what really happened, because things weren't supposed to end like this.

I blame Marcel Duchamp, but he's dead, so there's not much anybody can do to him now. When he drew a moustache and a goatee beard on a copy of the *Mona Lisa*—which is probably the most famous painting in the world—he said he did it because he wanted to challenge people's perception of what art could be.

He was lying.

He did it because it was funny.

Moustaches are funny.

End of story.

Except in this case, G—it was just the beginning.

THE BEGINNING



G MINUS 245

ONE

DOING A PETE TAYLOR

Do you know what my loving mother said as she dropped me off outside Crawdale High School? Not, *Have a nice day, darling!* Not even, *Good luck*. No, what she said to me was:

'Now, Marcus, remember—first impressions last—so don't be cocky.'

She's right about one thing though, G—when you start a new school, you have to make the right first impression. Not like Pete Taylor. He arrived at the beginning of Year Five, and in the first hour of his first day, peed himself in class. Pete was funny, clever, and brilliant at sport. But when I left Hardacre four years later, he was still known by everyone as Wee Pete.

Now, don't get me wrong, G, I wasn't worried about losing control of my bladder as I walked into school that morning, but there are more ways than one of doing a Pete Taylor.

'This is Ryan. He'll show you the ropes.' The Head of Year Nine smiled and gestured towards the figure that had appeared in the doorway of his office. The kid seriously

needed a haircut. You could barely see his eyes for the mass of brown curls falling over his face.

'Welcome to the school!' Ryan's arm shot out towards me and I realized he wanted to shake hands. 'I'm Ryan.'

'Oz.' We shook and I smiled. See—friendly, not cocky.

'I'm your buddy,' said Ryan. 'To help you settle in. So if there's anything you want to know, just ask.' His accent was so strong I had to concentrate hard to understand what he was saying.

'OK.'

'The school was built in eighteen seventy-five and opened with a class of twenty-three pupils,' he said, as I followed him up a flight of stairs. 'It now has over seven hundred.' Ryan sounded like a museum tour guide, and I wondered if he had been told to give me this information, or if he actually thought I might be interested.

'The school motto is, *libertas a scientia venit*, which is Latin for . . . *from knowledge comes freedom*, or something like that.' He shrugged. 'Is there anything you want to know? Or shall I just keep going?'

'Don't worry. I doubt I'll be staying long,' I said. 'Once my parents wake up from their delusion that moving here was a good idea, we'll be back to civilization—shops and pavements and roads with white lines down the middle!'

Ryan frowned. 'Where is it you're from then?'

'Hardacre—just outside London.'

'So why d'you move here?'

'No choice. My mum got a job at the college up here. Apparently she and Dad always wanted to live in the country. They didn't even ask us!'

'Us?'

'I've got a sister. Not important. The point is we weren't even consulted. It was just—*pack your stuff, we're moving.*'

I shook my head. 'I mean, I bet your mum and dad wouldn't do that to you.'

'They died when I was five,' said Ryan.

'Oh . . . sorry.'

He shrugged. 'I don't really remember them. But I don't think my grandad would do anything like that, not without asking me first.'

'Exactly!' I said. 'And the place they bought—*Scar Hill Farm*! It's like something out of a horror movie—all creaking floorboards and boarded up windows—it's a dump. It even smells like someone died in there . . .' Too late I realized what I'd said.

I blundered on hoping Ryan hadn't noticed. 'I mean, there's holes in the floor and the roof leaks . . . there's not even any heating.'

We turned into a long corridor. Halfway down, Ryan stopped outside a door marked 9F. 'This is our form room,' he said. 'Registration's at eight-forty and two-fifteen, except Tuesdays and Thursdays, when we have assembly in the main hall.' Then he opened the door and every face in the room swung towards me.

I don't know what I was expecting. Rows of long benches with kids clutching chalk, hunched over slates perhaps. In truth the classroom didn't look all that different to the ones at my old school, but that just made it feel even more alien somehow.

I could sense everyone in the room sizing me up. They'd already been back a couple of weeks. I was something new, a diversion from the mundane. Fresh meat.

'Marcus Osbourne, isn't it?' said the teacher, a round woman in square glasses who introduced herself as Mrs Pike.

'Yeah, but most people call me Oz.'

Someone sniggered at the back of the room and Mrs Pike grimaced. 'I think we'll stick with Marcus, thank you.'

I didn't say anything, but inside my head a voice was protesting, *but . . . I'm Oz.*

'I believe you've just moved into the area, Marcus. Where are you living?'

'Um . . . some place called Slowleigh.'

More snorts of laughter. I guessed some of them had seen the place.

The teacher nodded. '*Slowel,*' she said. 'Round here, we don't always pronounce words how they're spelt, I'm afraid.' Mrs Pike smiled. 'But don't worry, you'll get used to it.'

I wasn't planning on sticking around long enough to get used to anything.



Looking back now, I can see how everything that day was leading up to the moustache, pushing me towards it like arrows painted on the ground. I was just a spoke in the Wheel of Destiny as it rolled towards its inevitable conclusion. What I'm saying, G, is that it wasn't entirely my fault.

My first lesson that morning was Art, which is how I came to find out about Marcel Duchamp and the moustache on the *Mona Lisa*. Had it been English, or French, or History, maybe none of this would have happened.

I found a seat at the back of the room, next to a super-sized kid called Gareth, and watched as everyone began pulling pencil cases and sketchbooks from their bags.

Now you remember how I said there are more ways than one of doing a Pete Taylor? Well . . . opening your

rucksack and having your sister's bra fall out onto the table is definitely on the list.

It took me a few seconds to register. I mean, it made no sense for there to be a bra in my bag. But there it was—black and lacy—curled up like a dead bat on my desk.

Unfortunately, this was long enough for Gareth to notice and nudge his mate. Who, by the time I had grabbed the offending article and crammed it back into the bag, had texted every kid in Year Nine, including an internet geek called Mark Edwards. He posted the information to five social networking sites, circulating the news to over thirty countries around the world, all before Mr Henson looked up and asked what was going on.

I opened my mouth, but the words refused to come out, obviously too embarrassed to be associated with me.

'He's got a load of bras in his bag, sir!' said Gareth. There was a noise of grating furniture as everyone in the room turned in our direction.

Meanwhile, my brain was frantically scrolling back to the moment Mum had dropped me off outside school. I saw myself grabbing one of the rucksacks from the pile of bags in the back of the van—bags of washing that Mum was taking to the launderette.

'I must have picked up the wrong bag . . . by mistake.' My cheeks were so hot, I was surprised my hair hadn't ignited.

'That's unfortunate.' The teacher was struggling not to laugh. 'I don't suppose there's anything useful in there? Like a pen or a pencil, perhaps?'

I stared at him, unable to move. It felt like my body had shut down from shame.

'Maybe you'd like to have a look?' suggested Mr Henson.

I nodded and unzipped the rucksack again, even though I knew it was pointless.

Gareth leaned in for a closer look. 'Hey! There's kecks in there an' all! Are they clean?'

I knew I should say something. Something funny and clever. Something Oz would say, but my mind was suddenly blank.

'Perhaps you could lend Marcus a pen for the day, Gareth,' said Mr Henson.

Gareth placed a biro onto the desk with a flourish. 'There you go, Kecks!' he said, and the laughter poured down like hailstones.

It was funny. I knew it was funny. So why didn't I feel like laughing?

I tell you, G—Pete Taylor had nothing on me.