

FRANCESCA  
**MARTINEZ**

WHAT THE \*\*\*\*  
IS **NORMAL?**!



## PROLOGUE

\*\*\*\*

**B**ut I'm not normal!' I looked at him defiantly, standing there in the middle of a pub in Soho.

'What do you mean?' His hair was the colour of dragonfly wings and his eyes, pale blue, stared at me and saw more than I wanted them to. I smiled to break the tension that was creeping slowly up the back of my neck. Tension that he seemed to embrace while waiting for me to speak, his eyes watching me with faint traces of amusement. I decided to go for it.

'I'm brain damaged.' The words shot out of my mouth, clumsy sounds that halted awkwardly in the air between us. After twenty years, they still made me jolt inside, and that annoyed me. Dylan's eyes didn't flicker.

'What do you mean?' His words sounded soft, calm, sensible, in stark contrast to the ugly ones I'd uttered that were still hanging, like dirty clothes, in front of me.

'I mean... I meant what I said. I didn't want to say it again. Once should be enough. It wasn't.

'I mean... my brain was damaged. At birth... so... The words couldn't even fall out awkwardly now. They just clogged up my throat like pieces of wet tissue. A few strands of the dragonfly hair fell in front of his eyes and a hand swept them away. I noticed then, suddenly, that he was beautiful. Astoundingly so. His beauty hit me in the stomach and I gulped.

'Who said your brain was damaged?'

'Er, the doctors?' Uncertainty had crept into my mind and was crouching there. An unwanted predator.

'The doctors.'

'Yes. They said I was... brain damaged.' I nodded as if to clarify the statement but I was unsure where this was going. 'And that caused my cerebral palsy.' I added this to try and sound as if it was no big deal, as if the rug was still firmly under my feet. Dylan took a sip of his beer. I looked at his lips. They were glistening.

'They're only words made up by other people. Sounds. Words that don't mean anything. You're not "brain damaged". You don't have "cerebral palsy". Those words are vague attempts to try and define you. Your brain is your brain and you are perfectly you.'

I let those ideas into my head one by one, each gingerly walking in with hesitant steps. All the people and the chatter and the grey smoke around me faded away and all I could see was Dylan. I fumbled for an answer in the new space I found myself in.

'But I'm... different.'

'Everyone's different.'

'I'm not normal.'

'Nobody's normal.'

'But people think I'm different.'

'How do you know what they think?'

'I don't. But I think they're thinking it.'

'But what you think they think is coloured by your own perception. Therefore, it's a pointless exercise. It will never lead anywhere.'

'But I want people to accept me.'

'Do you accept yourself?'

Silence.

'No.'

'Then you can't expect anyone else to.'

'So I shouldn't care what anyone else thinks?'

'The only opinion of you that matters, is yours.'

This hit me hard. In the gut, in my legs, in my arms, my feet. For the first time, I hated myself for hating myself.

'You mean, I can just... choose how to see myself? I don't have to be "disabled" or "brain damaged"? I can choose to be... me?'

Dylan drank more beer.

'If you want. The only power we have in life is the power to choose what to think.'

I laughed without wanting to, a bubble of joy escaping from me.

'So, I'm just... me.' I felt invigorated, as if I could see everything all at once.

WHAT THE \*\*\*\* IS NORMAL?!

'If anyone else wants to call you another label, that's up to them. But you choose how you see yourself. And that should be all that matters to you.'

I looked at his face, delicately marked by time, and glanced quickly at his eyes, which stared back at me calmly. He spoke once more.

'You are Francesca. Full stop.'

And that was the moment everything changed.

## CHAPTER ONE

\*\*\*\*

**M**y first boyfriend was called Clint. I've always gone for the older man and he was nearly six. Scandalous, I know. Clint, as far as I could tell, was *hot*. There'd been several contenders for my heart but he'd won and we were now a proper couple. One of our favourite activities was playing with his He-Man Castle (not a euphemism), which impressed me greatly and which, I'm embarrassed to admit, was probably the main reason I chose him. When you're four, you don't need much more than a pair of sweet brown eyes and some way-cool action figures to knock you off your already shaky feet. Those He-Man sessions were great fun, always climaxing when we'd stop rattling our plastic figures at each other, rise on to our knees, lean over the top of Skeletor's lair, and kiss each other firmly on the lips, declaring 'I love you.' It took me many years to encounter that kind of romance again. But I'm getting way ahead of myself.

I'm wobbly. That's how I describe myself. Because the words 'cerebral' and 'palsy' are as attractive as an ingrowing toenail. With a fungal infection. The former evokes something cold, clinical, distant; the latter sounds like Shakespeare: *God's mercy! I have a palsy! The devil feasteth upon my face!* Or something like that. In short, 'cerebral palsy' is as far away from sexy as Rupert Murdoch is from a social conscience. (Okay, maybe not quite *that* far but you get my drift.) Does the medical world hold secret competitions to see who can concoct the label most likely to impede one's sexual relations forever? It's as if a party of highfalutin consultants take turns to pick words out of a tombola brimful of polysyllabic sibilants designed to induce pant-wetting dread at the very sound or sight of them. Disease, disorder, syndrome, dystrophy, sclerosis. (Not just one sclerosis: *multiple* sclerosis.) And I'm sure Mr Down was a really nice guy, but it's Sod's Law that he had such a bloody miserable name. Rainbow Syndrome would have been so much nicer.

So I'm not best pleased to have had this charming label stamped on me when I was just two years old. Athetoid Cerebral Palsy with Myotonia and Ataxia. I was a cute little girl with golden ringlets who had been branded a Doctor Who monster. Or a yoghurt drink '... NOW with added Myotonia and Ataxia!' I'm impressed that my parents, when gravely informed of my condition, didn't faint at the sheer awfulness of those words.

They were very much in love when my mother discovered she was pregnant. They were young students at university

and, luckily for me, were delighted when I turned up one day in my mum's womb. I assume I was a happy foetus. I don't remember much about it. I guess that nine months of sleeping was pretty agreeable. My parents got married shortly before I was born, so as not to upset God. (Not true but it makes me laugh to think it.) On 6 August 1978, my mum went into a London hospital to give birth. She is a warrior woman (why didn't I get that gene?) and elected to have no drugs. Whatsoever. She was just nineteen and my dad was twenty-one, but they found themselves alone in a room with neither doctor nor nurse to be seen. It was a Sunday and the hospital was short-staffed because, as is well known, nobody is born on a Sunday. By this point I'd clearly had enough sleep and Mum went into labour while my poor panicking dad ran around the hospital to find someone – anyone – to help. (Perhaps the medics were busy coining new horror-names for disabilities.)

Eventually, he located a midwife and hurried her back to my mum who was trying desperately not to push. She immediately told Mum to start pushing, which she was more than happy to do and, miraculously, medical folk suddenly appeared everywhere. Within a few minutes, I was born. I'm sure my parents were very relieved to see me but the doctors looked nervous. I wasn't breathing and they whisked me away. I didn't take a breath for seven minutes. This is pretty impressive – now I can only hold it for about two minutes. Tops. The doctors got me breathing and I was handed back to my emotional parents who held me for the first time. Apparently, I looked just like my dad



but bald, which, as a first image, is a tad disappointing. The only way is up, surely.

My mum was kept in overnight because they wanted to observe me. No specific reason was given and nothing out of the ordinary was said. Apparently, the only sign that something was up was when the doctor who tested the newborns' reflexes came back and did the test on me again. And again. And again. Clocking this but not knowing what to make of it, my mum pushed it to the back of her mind. A day later, the doctor handed me over and my parents could take me home, blissfully unaware of any 'complications'. Over the next few months, they noticed that their cute little girl (the 'bald geezer' look disappeared quickly, fortunately) was also, well, a bit floppy. I had trouble holding my head up and, as a one-year-old, I still couldn't sit up without being buttressed on either side by a mountain of pillows. At fourteen months, I was still crawling and shuffling around and nothing indicated that my nappy-clad bum would be leaving the floor any time soon.

Floppy or not, I was an incredibly happy baby. I was completely adored by my Spanish grandparents, Yaya and Yayo (the Catalan names we called them by), whose home in London we shared. For those unfamiliar with Spanish culture, *abuelas* and *abuelos* worship their grandchildren to the point of idolatry. If love was water I'd have drowned in an instant. If my mum had let them, they'd have whisked me off to Barcelona, had my ears pierced and paraded me around Las Ramblas like a floppy goddess. They hung on my every smile, gurgle and jerk.

I was so bloody loved, in fact, that I feel guilty now just thinking about it.

After the first eighteen months, in which they rarely left my side, my young parents were persuaded to have a romantic weekend in Paris. I waved them off, wedged happily in Yayo's solid arms. Apparently, I held court at a big party thrown in my honour and spent the evening surrounded by doting adults who hung on my every sound. While my mum cried all the way to Paris.

After months of assurances by various experts that I was fine, my parents were at last given a diagnosis in a bland hospital room when I was two. Apparently, my brain had been starved of oxygen at birth and part of it had died. The consultant not only walloped them with the Doctor Who moniker but also declared, with unshakeable certainty, that I was mentally retarded. This has proved not to be the case, as I have never watched *Top Gear*, read the *Sun*, or voted UKIP. But at the time, as you can imagine, it was a shock for my parents to hear their beloved only daughter diagnosed as physically and mentally disabled.

They left the hospital in a daze, trying to make sense of it all, while their little girl, ignorant of the verdict just pronounced on her, laughed and played all the way home. That evening my parents and grandparents decided that the doctor didn't know what he was talking about and that I was perfectly responsive and intelligent. The cloud that had loomed now lifted and my family were convinced that, while I might have the new name of a sci-fi monster, my intellect was intact. A return visit to the hospital for

a second opinion confirmed their hunch. But this new doctor pronounced that I would still ‘never lead a normal life.’ Just what my young parents needed to hear.

I’m not quite sure what a normal life is. Surely everyone’s life is normal to them? What I am sure of is my bemusement now at the ease with which these professionals make such weighty pronouncements. Words that take seconds to utter and decades to cast off. Unknown to me then, they disappeared into the ground around me and, over time, would emerge as the bars of a cage, hemming me in from the outside world. I would no longer be Francesca. I would be... different, faulty, an error, wrong, abnormal. A chain of negatives that would drag me down and make me flinch internally when I spoke them or even thought of them. I was also... wait for it, brain damaged! Yes, my brain, the most important part of me, is cock-arsed, crappy, mangled, blemished. If you’d received it from Amazon, you’d ask for a refund. Fab.

When I was old enough to understand it, I took an instant dislike to the word ‘disabled’. It was a bodily thing, this resentment, a feeling somewhere deep in my bones that whoever I was and whatever I did would be overshadowed by this ugly tag that stuck to me like a label on a fruit, clumsily applied with thick stubborn glue. Eventually, I managed to peel it off, bit by bit, scratching at each piece until it was finally gone.

Of course, at the time, I wasn’t aware of how terribly palsied my cerebrum was because I was too busy being a two-year-old, indulging in the joys of life, guzzling puréed apple and posing for the camera as I pooped in a potty. In

fact, I felt anything but faulty, thanks to the shower of love that rained over me every day from my dotting family. I don't want to blow my own trumpet but I was also devastatingly cute, with a killer combination of blonde ringlets, big smile and floppy limbs.

I didn't walk until I was three, which didn't bother me at all. Instead I filled the time reading books and doing jigsaw puzzles. I became so good at these that I could do them upside down, even without a picture to guide me. (We should have called Mensa.) Eventually, I struggled up off my behind and decided it was time to have a crack at this standing lark. I tottered across the living room to the delight of everyone in general and my mum in particular, whose back was relieved at the prospect of not having to lug me around any more. To this day, my relationship with gravity remains capricious, but those tottering steps opened up a new world to me and I felt indestructible. I thought I was capable of anything. My family had done such an incredible job of making me feel like the most cherished being on Earth that my self-confidence soared to ridiculous heights.

Striding (metaphorically, you understand) into infant school, aged four, I quickly won the admiration of the boys by marching across the playground to the forbidden bush, the one with the poisonous red berries, and plucking one as they looked on in awe.

'These can kill you if you eat them.' I paused, relishing the mix of fear and excitement in the wide eyes that peered back.

‘Well, let’s see about that!’ And I popped the berry dramatically into my mouth, chewed it aggressively and swallowed it with a satisfied gulp. The boys stared intently, waiting for me to drop to the ground and writhe in agony. When it was clear that I had cheated death, they broke into cheers and I was their hero. I have since lost that strain of bravery/stupidity. In fact, if something in the fridge is a day over its best-before date, I have to call my mum, relay a detailed visual description of said product, and await her expert pronouncement. How times have changed.

The berry episode cemented my popularity with the guys and I became a tomboy. I promptly had my girly locks cut short and tried to adopt the swagger of a young lad. I must have been successful in my attempts because, once, in the local park, a man referred to me as ‘sonny’. The grin didn’t budge from my face for the rest of the day.

In my head, I was a tough, dungarees-wearing kid ready to climb any tree or perform any other scallywaggery. I know what you’re thinking and you’re right. Cerebral palsy and tree climbing are poor bedmates. Getting up was no problem but gravity seemed a lot more real when it was time to come back down. I had to be rescued more than once. The truth is, I forgot my physical limitations. As far as I was concerned, I was an intrepid explorer or a private detective or the survivor of a shipwreck. My imagination was far more real to me than the distant memory of some palsy or other. Really, I never considered it, mainly because there were better things to think about. Like boys. I started fancying boys probably about the same time I started

eating solids. Boys were brilliant. They had no truck with annoyances like doing up buttons or tying shoelaces or any of that boring and unimportant stuff. And so I met Clint.

Clint was a great boyfriend. We were very committed to each other. So much so that, when he broke his ankle in PE one day and had to be taken off to hospital in an ambulance, I wept like a forlorn wife. I begged to be taken with him, pleading with the paramedics that I had a right to accompany him as I was His Girlfriend. My entreaties fell on deaf ears and, as the ambulance sped off, the tears flowed copiously while my teacher tried in vain to reassure me that a broken ankle was not life threatening. I can't remember why or how Clint and I broke up but it remains one of my less dysfunctional relationships and we remained friends, which, given that we were each barely half a decade old, is rather mature, I think.

For me, infant school had nothing to do with learning and everything to do with having fun. I had *no* desire whatsoever to sit down and be educated. I just wanted to play and I routinely made this abundantly clear to my despairing teachers. I discovered that flirting with the boys was a highly enjoyable pastime. I also wanted to put on plays and act. And that was it. Don't waste my time with maths and writing, teachers! I'm not interested. That was all too passive and boring and *rubbish*. Imagine my utter delight, then, when my teacher announced that the school play was to be Goldilocks and, thanks to the ringlets, I would be playing the lead! My joy quickly dissipated, however, when I found out that the eponymous character had only one

line in the entire play. One line?! That changed everything. I marched up to my teacher and told him that I was not happy. Not Happy At All. With a sigh, he led me into an empty classroom where I sat on a table and crossed my arms defiantly.

‘Why don’t you want to be Goldilocks, Francesca?’ His tone tried to mask his annoyance.

‘Because she only has one line!’ said I, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

‘But it’s a very important line.’ He smiled to placate me. He failed.

‘I don’t care. I want more lines!’ I looked him right in the eyes. No negotiating. He proceeded to offer me every other role apart from the two main ones. I turned them all down. Unequivocally.

‘I want the main part.’ He stared back at the wobbly diva sat in front of him.

‘Francesca, we’ve already given those two parts to other people so we can’t give them to you. That wouldn’t be fair, would it?’ Annoyingly, my sense of fairness made my head shake.

‘The thing is, Goldilocks is still the star of the show. The whole play revolves around her.’ My eyes flickered at the word ‘star’.

‘Really?’ I said, not yet convinced.

‘Yes, she’s the heart of the play and you’re the perfect person to play her.’ The compliment was duly noted and accepted with a momentary smile.

‘So, I’ll be the star of the play?’

‘Yes, Francesca, you’ll be the star.’

‘Okay, I’ll do it.’ I slid off the table and shook his hand. I think he shook his head. Where this barefaced ambition came from, I cannot say. (Such levels of self-belief are not supposed to be found among the palsied.)

I could hardly contain my excitement in the lead up to the week of performances. I was disappointed to discover that the costume consisted of a sparkly dress and some bright red ribbons in my hair but even this sartorial display of femininity didn’t dampen my tomboyish spirits. The prospect of speaking in front of all those people made my heart beat faster and I couldn’t wait to deliver my (one and only) line. On the night of the first performance, I counted down the minutes to my big entrance. A transformed school hall was packed with parents and siblings who sat on benches surrounding the centre, which was now a stage where dragons and monsters and fairies traipsed in and out. Finally the big moment arrived and I walked on, full of focus and having (like any actor worth their chops) worked out exactly what my motivation was. I savoured the electricity that the audience generated with their eyes before I delivered my line. *The line.*

‘I...’ – the pause was dramatic and I held it, knowing it would allow me to remain in the spotlight a little longer – ‘... ate all the tarts.’ And then it was over. But I was hooked. I had not a single doubt that I was going to be an actor. I declared this to my parents shortly afterwards and, because they come from families of writers and artists, this was greeted with a wave of enthusiasm.



Once I'd made my decision, I became even less inclined to engage in academia, proclaiming to my teacher a loud 'oh, no!' whenever he announced that maths would follow lunch. I apologise to any mathematicians reading this but I had and still have no interest in numbers. None whatsoever. To this day, I am baffled by the five hours of maths a week that I had to endure. Beyond the simple arithmetic that I felt I'd clearly mastered by four and a half, I couldn't understand this numerical obsession. There were some (weird) kids who did seem to enjoy this ludicrous subject and I was more than happy for them to indulge in their peculiar fetish. They could do it all day and all night for all I cared. I just didn't want to be in the vicinity when they did it. I thought (and still do) that unless you want to be a mathematician or scientist, the amount of maths we are forced to endure is completely out of proportion to its usefulness in most people's lives. I doubt David Beckham is very familiar with Pythagoras or his blasted theorem but *he* seems to have done all right. It's not that I lacked interest in all learning, it's just that I was absorbed by people and nature and play and laughing and all those things which the doing of maths seemed to murder ruthlessly. I loved reading, no doubt because I'd had a lot of time to do it in my three years of not walking.

Once my career choice had fallen into place, it was patently clear that playtime was the sole logical reason to attend school. These golden breaks were opportunities to further my acting talents in hurriedly produced plays in which, by remarkable coincidence, I always had the main part. With my group of friends always willing to throw themselves into these

epic productions, it was delightful to be able to scratch my performing itch every day. Once, I was so enthralled that I refused to go back to class at the end of playtime.

'I'm not going in!' I looked up at the teacher, who towered over me.

'Why not?' his eyes appealed to me.

'Because it's boring and I want to play.' My honesty could not be faulted. He looked unsure of what to say.

'But it's time for class. You have to come in.' I didn't move.

'Nah. I'm gonna stay here and play.' He stared at me.

'Okay.' And he walked away followed by my class. The empty playground stared back at me like a thrown gauntlet. I couldn't believe my luck. Wow, that was easy, I thought. Determined to make the most of my suddenly eerily silent situation, I tried to play on my own. It was a lot less enjoyable than I'd expected. I lasted ten minutes perhaps, before reluctantly admitting that a crucial aspect of play was having other people to do it with. Somewhat disheartened, I headed back to the classroom and opened the door. Everyone turned around and the teacher looked up with the vaguest intimation on his face of a smile of victory.

'Oh, you've decided to join us, have you?' I could sense a thin veil of disappointment descending over my classmates as it dawned on them that the maverick who had taken on authority and won had been beaten.

'Yeah, I got bored,' I answered, as nonchalantly as possible in an attempt to recover the shreds of my reputation.

In keeping with the tomboy outlook, I begged my parents to give me a brother. Not a baby, you understand. A

brother. I was desperate for a partner in crime, a constant companion who wouldn't have to go home when it was time for bed. But I also wanted someone who would be a focus for my maternal feelings. Yes, despite framing myself as one of the boys, I was also ridiculously empathetic. This trait had revealed itself on a visit to London Zoo. Five hours after returning home, I was still crying my eyes out at the memory of all the animals locked up in their cages.

'What if I had to live in a cage? I'd be so sad!' I keened to my mum, the tears running down my face. Mum, a vegetarian, clearly felt my pain.

'Yes. I'd be sad too.' Her candour was appreciated but did little to ease the turbulent emotions racing around my body.

'I wish we could let them all out. I'd like them to be able to run free even if I never saw them. Especially the poor cheetahs...' And off I went again. The thought of those cheetahs being unable to run wild – which I'd been told they love to do – was too much to bear and I sobbed freely in my mother's arms. Needless to say, the zoo was off limits for years. It was from this highly emotional core that I yearned to have a baby brother to care for and, no doubt, to cry over when the time called for it. Happily, my parents wanted another child too. Indeed, they would have had one sooner had they not figured that a sibling would all-too-quickly overtake me in the walking, buttoning and shoelace-tying department. One day, my dad, just twenty-six at the time, stopped by the bathroom door.

'Guess what, Chessie? We have some news.' I stared at him, smiling. I loved surprises.

'What?' Excitement reared its head in my tummy.

'Mummy's pregnant.' I turned to look at my mum who, at twenty-four, was beaming and beautiful.

'YESSSSS!' The happiness pushed the word out before I'd even realised.

'Are you happy?' asked my mum, despite knowing the answer.

'YES! Will it be a boy?' I gazed up at them, hopefully.

'We won't know until it's born,' my dad answered. I pondered this for a moment.

'It will be a boy. I want a brother.' And that was that.

Understandably, given the experience that had attended my arrival, mum opted to have her second baby at home. Again, with no drugs. On 22 September 1983, I was given the choice between coming home after school and being there for the birth or going to play at my best friend Nancy's house. I opted for Nancy. Nancy lived up the road and I happily went off with her after school. That afternoon, my mind occasionally deigned to wander over to what was happening back home before I yanked it away and got back to the important business of play. When the doorbell rang, I rushed to the stairs and began to bump-bump down the steps on my bottom. I was halfway down when Nancy's mum opened the door to reveal my dad grinning widely. Beating me to it, she asked him if it was a boy or a girl. Catching my eye, he told us it was a boy. Nancy's mum started crying and I started laughing.

'I knew it!' I bumped the rest of the way down and rushed over to him.

‘Do you want to meet your baby brother?’ he offered, with a hug.

‘Yes!’ I squealed.

We left Nancy and her mum still in tears, jumped into the car and rushed home. I crept upstairs, aware of a new and delicate presence in the house. The bedroom door was open. I walked in slowly and saw my mum, tired but glowing, lying on the bed with a blue bundle in her arms. It was so peaceful. Suddenly feeling self-consciously big, I walked up to the bed and climbed carefully on to it.

‘It’s a boy!’ I said, thankfully, as I peered at the little crumpled face that stuck out of the blanket. He was perfect.

‘What’s he called?’ I asked my mum.

‘Raoul,’ she said with a smile.

‘Raoul,’ I said, for the first time, letting my mouth get used to the sound. ‘Raoul.’

‘You didn’t call him Mickey after Mickey Mouse, then?’ I enquired, somewhat disappointed. Mickey Martinez had quite the ring to it, I’d thought.

‘No, we didn’t,’ said Mum, gently. ‘Do you want to hold him?’

Nervously, I took Raoul in my arms and looked into his tiny blue eyes. That was all it took for me to adore him and, to this day, it remains one of the best moments of my life.

The arrival of my new brother had to be shared with anyone who would listen. I decided that it warranted a formal announcement during school assembly and waited with bated breath for the head teacher to introduce me, experiencing the same buzz of anticipation that I’d felt

before my recent debut. I stood up and addressed the hall.

'I have a new baby brother and he's called Raoul.' The pride flowed out of me like rays of sunshine. The hall began to clap. I could get used to this, I thought. I went home and asked Mum to have another baby, possibly three or four more. She looked at me through sleep-starved eyes and told me that I should be happy with Raoul. Deflated, I realised I'd have to find other ways to take the spotlight and bask in applause. Ways that didn't include the creation of a human being. Back to the drawing board.

Hope glimmered when it was announced that there was to be a school concert given by those students who played the recorder. Despite the level of manual dexterity required to play this 'instrument' (a twig with notions, if you ask me), I had enthusiastically taken it up. By which I mean, I'd blow heavily into it as my fingers flailed about without rhyme or reason. Spare a thought for my poor parents, tortured daily by the cacophony of squawks and squeals. Discordance doesn't come near it. I was vaguely conscious that my fingers weren't up to the task but I did manage to bash out something not too far removed from Frère Jacques. And that was enough to satisfy me. I fricking loved that tune. So what if it was the only one I could 'play'? Who needs more than one tune? Especially when playing the recorder meant that you got out of class. That sealed the deal for me and I threw myself into concert practice with gusto. The new tunes were more complex but a small thing like piss-poor coordination wasn't going to get in the way of my confidence. I never thought about having to

play in tune. No. All I saw was the being onstage bit. How cool! A month of intense practice followed in which we all played our little hearts out in a vain attempt not to emulate the strangling of a pack of cats. It paid off though, because, as I sat and listened to the group the day before the concert, I thought they sounded brilliant. That I wasn't joining in, had momentarily escaped my attention.

The following morning I turned up, sporting a special outfit for the musical extravaganza. Our teacher led us through the songs once more and finished with a stirring speech to inspire us and combat any nerves. Why would anyone be nervous, I thought. It's going to be amazing! I was the last in line as we filed out of the music room when, as I reached the door, the teacher put his hand on my arm.

'Francesca.' Something in his voice made me feel uneasy. I stopped.

'What?' I gripped my recorder tightly with both hands.

'Erm... the thing is, you can't be in the concert today.' His eyes flashed away from me.

'Why not?' I asked. My lower lip wanted to tremble but I stopped it. Just.

'Well, your fingers aren't fast enough to play the tunes properly.' He looked sad.

'But I can play Frère Jacques.' He looked unconvinced but let that go, which was magnanimous of him.

'We're not playing that today, though, are we?'

I thought this over and shook my head. I didn't want to say anything because I knew I would cry if I opened my mouth.

'Are you okay?' he asked quietly. I nodded.

'Would you prefer to stay here during the concert?' I nodded again, and sat down. The floor turned blurry and I blinked out a tear. Maybe I could persuade my mum to have another baby after all.

I quickly recovered from the devastation of Recorder-Gate and soon forgot that there was anything slow about my fingers. Aside from the ongoing battle to avoid maths (usually climaxing with an impassioned 'but that's what calculators are for!'), I couldn't have been happier. I'd decided that Raoul was objectively the most beautiful baby ever born. I decided also that it was my duty as his big sister to protect him from life's dangers by carrying out such brave acts as carefully diverting a woodlouse that had unwisely chosen to venture within thirty centimetres of him. Raoul was a constant source of delight to me and I could not understand my friends who were sometimes jealous of their new siblings.

'Why would I be jealous of him? I love him!' I would tell them.

'Because they get all the attention!' they would reply with serious faces. I didn't share their worries or resent Raoul's existence. Not the tiniest bit. I don't attribute this to any innate wisdom in me but to my Spanish grandparents who, despite now living a few streets away from us, were close enough to smother me with enough love and attention to stem any potential pangs of jealousy. In return for their unwavering devotion, I worshipped them back. I loved spending time with them. Yayo and Yaya left the



discipline stuff to my parents and spoiled me rotten. I could eat chocolate any time of the day and I was even given something called Coke, which was brown, fizzy and disgusting. I loved it.

But even better than having sugar-loaded treats always at my disposal was that they made me feel not just normal but special. I still considered both myself and my life to be normal. Yes, I knew I was wobbly and struggled with certain annoyances like buttons but these were peripheral obstacles (and I soon discovered that Velcro sorted that problem out). In fact, I brushed aside any task that proved to be physically challenging, as if it were a momentarily bothersome insect. Once it was gone, it ceased to exist because I was too busy enjoying everything life had to offer. I didn't know that I was 'disabled', in the sense that I didn't feel it or want to feel it. That word was a bad word, something ominous and depressing, so I didn't think about it. At all. I just got on with doting on my new brother, and playing football. And Knock-down Ginger. That's the game where you ring someone's doorbell and run away. Yes. *Run* away. You'd think I might have wondered whether I was cut out for it. You'd think I could have accepted philosophically that it was not designed for the likes of me. You'd think I'd have figured out more appropriate methods by which to annoy my neighbours. Instead, without the merest whiff of a doubt in my mind, I decided it was my new favourite game. And, once again, I led my loyal group of local boy friends in this exciting adventure.

As the only girl in the gang, I occupied an exalted

position. Keen to retain their admiration, I volunteered to ring the first bell. I pressed it, turned around and, only then, realised that a quick escape might be beyond my competence. For a moment, reality collided with my iron-clad self-perception and I remembered that I wasn't as fast as I wanted to be. I felt a sharp prick of disappointment. But, by the time I'd slowly but safely staggered down the road, the reality of my abilities had quietly slipped away again, obliterated by the cheers of the boys whose faces were flushed with childish excitement at my act of daring. My luck held: I rang lots of bells and managed each time to 'scarper' before an irate grown-up could tell me off.

It couldn't last. When I was nine, the family visited an old friend called Herman on his estate in West London. (Estate as in council, not Lord and Lady's.) Herman had, as always, cooked an amazing dinner but Raoul and I were itching to play outside with the local kids. Leaving the grown-ups to their conversation, we scampered out.

'I know a game,' said I, with a glint in my eye. 'Let's ring on doorbells and run away!'

Raoul, still angelically perfect in my eyes, was in the middle of a naughty phase and immediately agreed. The other two kids concurred. The location was hardly conducive to the game as it was, essentially, a small courtyard with four doors opening on to it, offering, therefore, nowhere to hide. But, true to my signature short-termism, I didn't let that get in the way. Raoul (at four already faster than me) went first, picking a door, pressing the bell and then shooting back to Herman's flat where we

all waited, giggling uncontrollably. This was *fun*. Next up, it was my turn and I picked the door right next to Herman's flat. A daring choice but that's how I rolled. I pressed the bell firmly, turned to step off the concrete doorstep and discovered with some annoyance that I was slower than expected. I even paused to wonder why my legs weren't moving faster. A second later, the door flew open and an arm grabbed me. My bravado melted and I screamed in shock. A hairy, tired-looking man stared at me.

'I'm a policeman and I work nights and YOU'VE just woken me up!' he growled.

I decided the best riposte to this was to pee in my pants. And down my leg. And on to my shoe. My parents came out to see what the hullabaloo was about and I apologised to the man. He also apologised to me, perhaps softened by the vista of the little girl standing in a pool of her own wee-wee. Game over.

I was led inside to Herman's spare room where my mum took off my wet trousers, knickers and socks. Not having anticipated a change of clothes for the dinner party, she went to look for possible options. A minute later, she returned with a pair of Herman's neatly pressed white Y-fronts. I reluctantly pulled them on. And there I forlornly stood. My mum probably realised that that was all the punishment I needed. I never played the game again.

There's nothing quite so effective as having to wear an old man's Y-fronts knotted at the waist to remind you that you that can't run fast, however much you want to.