

The Ninnies

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Chapter One

Mum wouldn't believe me when I told her Dad had been taken away by the Ninnies.

She thought he'd left us of his own accord. She thought he'd taken his bucket, ladder and chamois leather on his window round that Monday and simply never came back because he'd gone off us. Or that he'd imagined a better life somewhere else.

'He could never stand any pressure,' she sighed, eating another handful of Flying Saucers. 'He was never any good with stress.'

But I knew. I knew he'd never just up and leave us. Not with Squoosh, my little sister on the way.

I knew what had really happened.

He had been taken away by the Ninnies.

Though Mum would not listen to a word of it.

'You're too fanciful,' she told me, cramming another load of Flying Saucers into her mouth as she sat there at the kitchen table. 'You get it from him. He was always dreaming. Making daft things up. All about the things he saw through people's windows!'

I could tell that Mum herself was making stuff up as she ranted. She was making herself believe that we would be better off without him.

We both knew that wasn't true.

Anyhow. Let me back up a bit. I need to explain a bit more about us, and who we are, and where we lived, and how things were before Dad disappeared. Then I can get onto why Mum was always eating Flying Saucers, and how Squoosh was born, and the antique oldster couple upstairs and the desolate Bonnidays Zoo and then I can get on with telling you about Krispies, and about the Ninnies.

Ok. Back to the start.

My name is Alan Slater. I'm fourteen and I live with my Mum and my little sister, Squoosh, who wasn't born when this adventure started. She was still a huge bump in my Mum's belly and it seemed like she was never going to arrive. All that winter in the new flat it seemed like the wait went on forever. (Mum points out that the wait went on even longer for her!) It was like when you phone for a takeaway and they say it'll be forty five minutes and, even if it's no longer than that, it still seems to take forever? Anyway, bad analogy. My little sister was nothing like a takeaway when she arrived. For one thing, we never got any poppadums with her. Just loads of nappies and baby equipment stuff. Since she's been here she's really taken over the whole place. But that's fine, cause I guess she's okay really, for a baby. And we very nearly didn't have her at all!

See how I mentioned takeaways there? That's because, when we first moved here, to the ground floor flat of this house, we had a real craze on ordering up takeaways. It was a novelty because the High Street across the other side of the railway lines has about a million different takeaways on it. One from every single country on the planet, it seems like.

When Mum was MASSIVE with Squoosh she never felt like sweltering over a hot stove (as she put it) so she let me have free reign, ordering up meals from all over the world. Even though we really couldn't afford to be doing it. Especially after Dad disappeared and there was no more money coming in from his Mr Squooshy Woosh window cleaning round.

Mam only ever picked at the takeaways. She has never liked savoury things, she says. Only very, very sweet things, like the Flying Saucers she was addicted to when she was heavily pregnant. Oh, those flying saucers! They were sherbet-filled and made out of rice paper and came in a hundred different pastel colours. She would buy them in huge plastic bags from the Weigh-your-Own produce shop. Any other kind of sweet with sherbet she would go mad for, too. Sherbet dib-dabs, especially. When Squoosh was eventually born she was, like, convinced that the kid was going to be *fizzy* or something.

Mum was in a trance that whole time, waiting for Squoosh to be born. It was like she was listening to a voice far, far away. She moved around our new flat and got on with doing all sorts of things to make it liveable in – painting doors, hanging curtains, putting up shelves. But it always

seemed that her mind and thoughts were elsewhere. She would sit in her favourite high-backed chair at the pine kitchen table, munching and crunching on sherbety sweets, and she would be listening to that distant voice.

Squoosh calling, as she made her way towards us. That's what it felt like to her.

Chapter Two

Dad, meanwhile, was busy being Mr Squooshy-Woosh. He was pretending that being a window cleaner was something he had always wanted to do. He was going round saying that he was so fed up with working in an office in the city and having to get all smarmed up and dressed up each day. It was making him lazy and unfit, working at a computer all day, punching silly numbers in and trying to make them make sense. And, he went on, weren't we all sick of that big house we'd been living in? Why, it had been miles away from the town. Not like here, in our new place. Here we were in a much cosier place – this two bedroom ground floor flat – much closer to the centre of the city! Just a five minute train ride away! Wasn't it all so much better?

I knew he was just trying to jolly us along. Mum would look at him blankly and eat some more fizzy sweets. I know she didn't like our new flat. She didn't find any of it exciting or better at all. And she blamed Dad for all the changes.

Dad would put on his old clothes and go out with his new ladders and bucket and become Mr Squooshy Woosh. It was a whole new persona for him, I found, as I went with him on his rounds in those early weeks. I'd hold his ladder sometimes, and knock on doors to ask for fresh soapy water. I don't think he really needed my help, but I think he liked me to be there.

Dad loved being Mr Squooshy Woosh. He would come back down to earth and tell me things like, who left their house in a dreadful, untidy state when they went out to work! Who was throwing a sickie and was home when they should be out! And who was misbehaving and being where they shouldn't with someone they oughtn't! Dad would tell these stories in the evening as we helped ourselves to our latest takeaways, opening up the foil dishes and breathing in the heady aromas of the Orient. Mum would look a bit disgusted by Dad's gossip.

'You're meant to be cleaning their windows,' she'd snap. 'Not spying on them!'

'But I do!' he laughed. 'Mr Squooshy Woosh doesn't mess about. He cleans their windows in a flash!'

Those were the nicest days around the new flat. When Dad was making the best of it and even Mum's sadness couldn't bring the whole thing down. But then Dad disappeared.

I was late joining him on his round that day. I was late getting in from school because I had been kept back, for some reason or another – nothing bad. I often get in a bit of trouble, but it's never my fault. Not really. I've just got one of those faces, you know? The kind of face where you always look a bit guilty. Anyway, when I got home Dad had already gone off with his silver ladder, bucket and chamois leather, whistling the theme to the A Team, as he often did. Mr Squooshy Woosh had left the building.

Mum was on a ladder of her own, painting the ceiling a creamy white. She was in quite a temper because the old couple in the flat upstairs were playing their records too loudly again. We'd hear them almost every night, playing their James Last-and-his-Orchestra albums, dancing around thump-thump-thump on our ceiling.

'You'd think they were too old to dance around like that!' Mum gasped. 'They're crackers! Bananas! They'll do themselves a mischief, old folk like that!'

I ran out of the house after Dad. I knew the route he always took on his round. If he'd been gone for twenty minutes, as Mum said, then he'd be finished the houses the other side of the railway lines and he'd be passing under the railway bridge about now...

And sure enough, as I raced down that way, to the end of our street and past the bare horse chestnut trees I could see right down the railway tunnel and the light at the other end. And there was Dad. Unmistakably Dad. He had his ladder over his shoulder. He was swinging his bucket at his side. Whistling the theme to the A Team, a TV show from years ago that he still loved.

I waved and shouted and he waved back.

And then a large dark car swept round the corner behind him. It moved almost silently off the main road and into the railway tunnel, blocking his way. It was so quiet it must have been the poshest kind of car.

The doors came open and there was this really strange noise.

Like someone walking on crispy autumn leaves, though autumn was long gone. It was nearly spring. But the noise was just like that: krunch krunch krunch. And above the crunching noise, there was a giggling. High-pitched and stifled, as if the gigglers didn't want to be heard.

Heeee heee heheheheeee

Two, three, four figures emerged from the car.

Well, the light in the dank tunnel was all at the ends so I just saw them in silhouette. Four very skinny figures. Weird figures with big heads. Hardly like real people at all. Crunching and giggling.

I could see that they had stopped Dad. He was talking with them. They were taking his ladders off him, and his bucket.

'D-dad?'

I could see. I could see that he didn't want to go with them.

Whatever Mum says.

But he did go with them. Those tall skinny men put his Mr Squooshy Woosh gear in the back of their car. And then they bundled him into the back, as well.

'Dad!!'

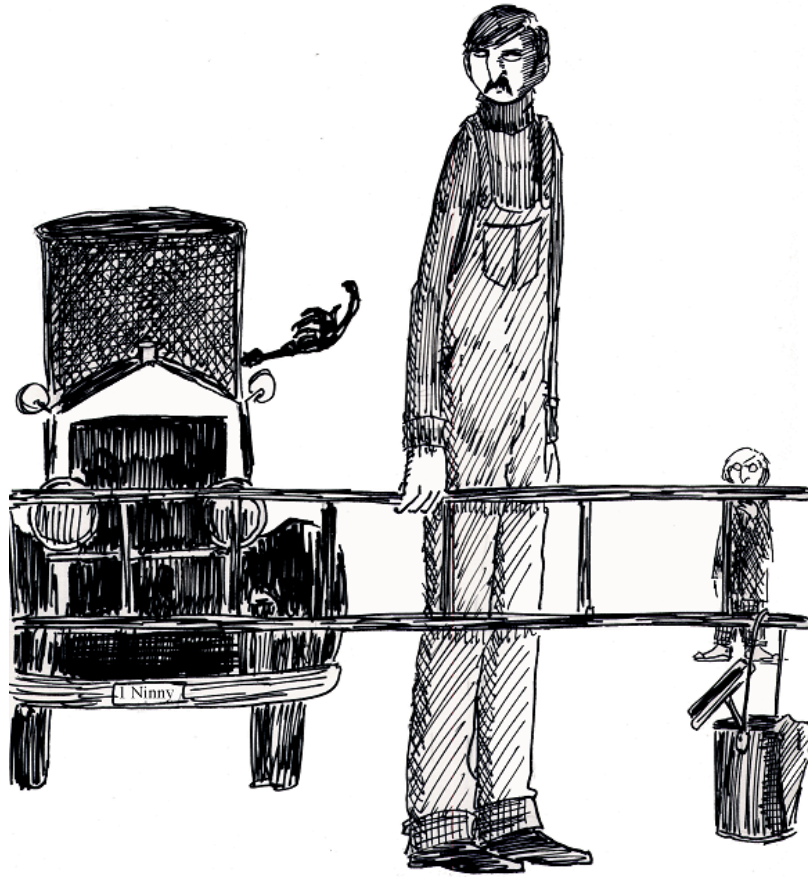
Then they got into their car, taking no notice of me as I shouted, rooted to the spot at the other end of the tunnel.

I came running far, far too late. Running and pounding after their car as it reversed violently and sped off back to the High Street.

Taking Dad with them.

And none of us saw him again.

For a very long time.



Chapter Three

Mum simply wouldn't believe me.

She thought that I had invented the story of the Ninnies kidnapping Dad as a coping mechanism for dealing with the fact that he had walked out on us! As if! I knew what I saw!

But she didn't listen that night, or the next day when she reported his absence to the police, or in the coming weeks. She wasn't having any of it.

'Giggling? Crunching? Skinny little men? What kind of car did you say?'

'It was some sort of limousine. I don't know.'

'You've got an over-active imagination,' she scowled at me. 'And it's not funny, you know. You shouldn't make things up. I was embarrassed when you started telling the police.'

'But it's true!'

She sighed and shook her head. Just like the police had done.

But I knew what I had seen. It had been just for a few moments. But I knew that the people who had taken Dad away were weird and like no people I had ever seen before. They had looked wispy and skinny. Not like ghosts, though. Nothing like that.

I dreamed them in more detail in the nights to come. I woke up shouting. Mum came in to see me, to check that I was all right.

I had remembered seeing their hands. The skin was cracked and flaky. It looked burned. Just for a second I had seen that terrible flesh. It had come back to me in my dreams.

'There, there,' Mum tried to console me. 'I could kill your father. Leaving us in the lurch like this. Leaving us alone.'

We hugged each other in the middle of the night. I could tell that she was upset and scared, too. She was huge by now. The baby was just about due any day.

I knew Dad had not left us of his own choice.

'Oh, look, just drop it, will you?' she shouted, more than once. 'I don't care any more! I'm sick of hearing about him! I'm sick of talking about him! I'm sick of wishing he was here!'

Dad's parents – my grandparents – were both dead. He had one sister – my Aunty Carol – in the North East, but he hadn't been in touch with her for years. To all intents and purposes he had just wandered off the face of the Earth. And that was an end to the matter.

Mum and I simply had to get on with things by ourselves.

'You will have to be the man of the house now, Alan,' she told me. 'It's a big responsibility, and I'm sorry.'

I took a shopping list to the High Street and picked up the things we needed each day after school. When I was walking around with carrier bags from the green grocers or the freezer shop, I kept my head down. I didn't want any of the kids from school to see me doing the shopping. I felt sure they'd mock me about it. I hadn't made any friends at the new school, not really. They were still at the point where they thought I was a stranger, and weird. I wanted to keep a low profile.

The last shop I'd go to was Mr Aziz's Weigh-Your-own-Produce Emporium. The whole shop was filled with tall metal drums, with flip-up lids and little scoopers so you could put as much or as little as you wanted into plastic bags. He sold allsorts of stuff – herbs, spices, dried fruit, cereal, sweets. I loved the smells of Mr Aziz's Emporium, with everything mixed up and exotic all blended together. Of course, what I was there to buy every day was Mum's supply of sherbety sweets, which she was even more addicted to as the day of the baby's arrival came nearer and nearer.

Every day I was shovelling up trowel-fuls of Flying Saucers and Sherbet Fizzers and Exploding Raspberry Bonbons, filling up plastic bags to take home. Mr Aziz's daughter was at the till most tea times and she noticed me buying so many sweets. She commented on this and I blinked at her.

'But they're not for me!'

'Yeah, right.'

'No, seriously. My Mum, she loves really sweet things.' I didn't say anything about the pregnancy. For some reason I didn't like talking about it to other people my age.

'Whatever,' she laughed, waving her laser gun thing from the till, and weighing up my purchases. It was then that I realised that I actually knew her. She was Amy, from my chemistry class. She was in a work pinny and her hair was down, so I hadn't recognised her at first. She saw the sudden recognition in my eyes.

'So you know who I am now then, do you?' she said, all challengingly. 'Great job, eh?'

I didn't know what to say. It was no worse than doing all the groceries for my Mum. And at least she'd be earning wages. I said this to her.

'Huh, don't you believe it. Dad doesn't pay me a penny. I'm just helping out with the family business, he says.'

I tutted and shook my head in a kind of generalised way, as if agreeing that all parents were pretty sick and annoying.

'So you don't like sweets then?' she laughed, bagging up the last of my things.

'Nah, I like savoury stuff more. Gimme a sausage roll any day.'

She laughed at this, and I realised I'd sounded daft. 'Crisps?' she went on. 'Do you like crisps, then?'

I shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

'Try these.' She reached into a box on the shelf behind her. 'We've just got them in. Have them for nothing. A free gift for being a good customer! Go on!'

'Thanks,' I mumbled, taking the bag. It was a sickly orange colour. I read the front. 'What's this? Artichoke and zebra flavour?'

Amy nodded and grinned. 'I know! Sick, isn't it?'

'But it can't really be...'

She shrugged. 'Look at the ingredients on the back. It actually says, 'Contains Real Artichoke and Genuine Zebra.'

And so it did. Krispies, the front of the packet said, in jagged writing.

'Go on, take them!' Amy told me. 'They're delicious.' She smiled at me, and she seemed a bit shy. I paid for my stuff and wandered out, back onto the High Street.

She was right about the Krispies. I ate them thoughtfully all the way home, under the railway bridge and through the streets where the trees were just starting to bud for spring. I couldn't tell you whether the flavour really was artichoke or zebra or not. I didn't even know what an artichoke was. But they were the crispiest, crunchiest, tastiest crisps I'd ever had.

They were more-ish. Do you know what I mean?

So that when I got to the end of the pack I stopped and reached right into the corners of the packet, trying to get every last morsel out. Every tiny scrap of flavour. I set down my bags and tipped the packet up, dropping the last few crumbs into my mouth. There was no doubt about it. Krispies were sensational! They tasted like nothing I'd ever had before!

I finished the packet and stuffed it away in my pocket, picked up the bags, and dashed the rest of the way home. Here was something else I'd have liked to tell Dad about. It was just the kind of thing he would have loved to try for himself, too. Mum wouldn't be bothered. All she'd want to know is whether I got her fizzy sherbety Flying Saucers and all the rest of the stuff she'd written down.

When I arrived home, letting myself into our ground floor flat, I knew something was up, straight away.

Mum was yelling. She was in the kitchen at the end of the hall and she was yelling her head off. Oh my god! I thought. She's gone into labour while I've been out!!

But she hadn't. She was in the kitchen, banging the broom handle off the ceiling and hopping mad. 'Just listen to them! Listen to their racket! Those blummin' oldsters upstairs!'

And it was true. The ancient people upstairs were playing their Easy Listening Disco music louder than ever before.

'Stop them, Alan! Make them stop!' Mam screamed at me. She looked fit to burst. 'Go up there and tell them to give us some blummin' peace!!'