

A Decision Made Easy

Tommy didn't sleep much that night. In fact he barely slept a wink. His mind was a confused mess; all he could think about was the Pen. That and everything associated with it. About visiting his memories, about dark and dangerous strangers, but above all about him having the power to affect history itself.

He lay there looking at his alarm clock, watching the minutes tick by, praying that sleep would finally come for him. He remembered looking at the clock at 3:24am before finally drifting off into what he thought was a long and deep sleep, during which he dreamt of large shadowy figures chasing him across the town. He managed to escape the dream just as they'd backed him into a corner of the Little Millbrook fort, and he faced the choice of surrendering to them or falling sixty feet onto the rocks below. He'd looked at his clock then and saw that it was 3:27am. The dream had lasted just three minutes! It had officially been the longest night ever.

The problem was that he'd got himself worked up on the bike ride home from Mr Wiseman's house. Everything he'd been told went round and round his head. He'd decided against waiting around Harbour View for Grandpa to get

home. It was too dark, and the streets didn't seem as safe anymore, not after what the old man had told him. Instead he'd pedalled home as fast as he could, looking over his shoulder more times than ever before. Every shadow sent a tingle down his spine. Every dark corner potentially hid a member of the Cult who lay in wait, ready to jump out at him. And was it his imagination or did every single person in Little Millbrook wear a long, black coat? Maybe he was just being paranoid.

After finally reaching the safety of his house, he'd spent the remainder of the night in his bedroom, locking the Pen securely in his keep-safe box and hiding it behind a stack of wrestling magazines under his bed. No-one would find it there.

School that day was a struggle.

As a result of the appalling night's sleep, he drifted through the morning drowsy-eyed and stifling a yawn every minute. He was totally shattered. If it wasn't for Ben's constant chattering in Geography, he was sure he'd have fallen asleep. Yet despite his exhaustion there was still that underlying paranoia; a kind of fear that there were people out there, most probably in his own little town, who wanted to harm him.

But he couldn't help thinking about the other stuff too. The exciting stuff. About the Pen's *other* power. Being able to actually change the past – it presented so many possibilities. So many *wonderful* possibilities!

Looking at Ben, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

So obvious that he was shocked he hadn't thought about it before. He could use the Pen to go back to when Ben had been hit by the car – he could stop it! Ben would no longer have his limp, and he'd be just as he was before the accident. No sooner had the idea entered Tommy's head, though, than he'd quickly put it out of his mind. Mr Wiseman had specifically warned him against using the Pen for that sort of thing. What had he called it again? The butterfly effect? Tommy daren't use it to do anything to interfere with history too much.

He was snapped sharply out of his daydream by the sound of the dinner bell. That and Ben glaring at him with a look of frustrated disappointment.

'What you playing at?' Ben said. 'Are you trying to ruin our chances of a decent lunch?'

Tommy jumped to his feet, realising his mistake. He should have been on his toes and chasing down their turkey burgers as soon as the bell had gone.

'Sorry, mate, I was miles away.'

'Just go!' Ben said dramatically, the thought of an empty stomach adding fuel to his annoyance.

Tommy, trying desperately to make up for lost time, burst out of the classroom, trampled over a couple of classmates and disappeared around the corner and out of sight.

Ben threw his and Tommy's bags over his shoulder and limped as quickly as he could out of the classroom, fighting his way through the crowds and beating a path towards the

Dutch Barn where the game of football had already started. He dropped the bags behind one of the posts and shouted across to the nearest goalkeeper, the burly Gareth Savage, whose face was screwed up into a concentrated frown. That, along with his freckles and bright ginger hair, gave him the look of a confused orangutan.

‘Alright, Sav? What’s the teams?’

Savage, who was still a good foot taller than Ben despite being bent at the knees, didn’t turn to look at him. His eyes were fixed on the ball, which was flying in his direction. Plucking it out of the air with one shovel-like hand, he shouted, ‘It’s our half of the year against theirs. Where’s Parker?’ he added, throwing the ball out effortlessly to a team mate. ‘We’re two nil down already. You’re hardly gonna change the game with your dodgy leg, are you?’ Savage pointed a large index finger at the other end of the barn. ‘Just get up front out of the way until Parker gets here.’

Now Ben wasn’t usually one to take such insults, especially about his leg. Normally, had someone offended him like that, he would have swung first and talked later. But Savage wasn’t your ordinary schoolboy. He was one of the few boys in school that he and Tommy were wary of. He was a brute. Even most of the older boys gave him a wide berth, and it was for that reason that Ben ignored the uncomplimentary remarks and jogged gingerly over to the other end of the pitch, as far away from him as he could get.

After a few short minutes of playing outfield, Ben realised why he’d become so accustomed to playing in goal since the accident – he was completely off the pace. Twice

he'd found himself with an opportunity to score only to be caught by a defender at the last minute. He just wasn't anywhere near as fast as he used to be. And if his confidence wasn't low enough, each time he made a mistake he had to put up with Savage shouting insults at him from the other end of the pitch. 'My nan coulda scored that one, Campbell,' and 'You're kift, Campbell! You play like a girl!' And then, of course, there was his personal favourite, 'Well played, hop-a-long!' What an idiot. If he wasn't twice his size, Ben would have stopped and gone over to sort him out. If.

It was during one such barrage of abuse that Ben watched as Savage jogged back towards his goal, the opposition bearing down upon him. Ben crossed his fingers, hoping that his mistake wouldn't cost his team a goal. He watched on as Savage settled himself, preparing for the shot, but then he saw something to Savage's right that looked oddly out of place in a football match: Art. He was walking slowly across the field of play, his head down as he read a book. He was in his own little world, totally oblivious to the game going on around him. Ben had a horrible feeling that something was going to go terribly wrong.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion. The opposition took a shot at goal, and Savage leapt to his left, using every inch of his frame to stretch for the ball. Flying through the air, his hand edged closer and closer to it, but just as he was about to pluck it out of the sky, he dived straight into Art who had walked into his path. Both of them ended up in a heap on the floor leaving the ball to go sailing through the goalposts. The goal scorer wheeled away in celebration

leaving Savage and Art on their backsides; Art rubbed his head, his glasses hanging at an angle from his ears. Savage jumped up in a flash, his face turned a deep shade of purple, making his head look like a giant beetroot.

‘What the hell you doing, pip squeak?!’ he yelled at Art, who still sat winded on the floor.

A crowd had begun to gather around them. Ben made his way over, fearing the worst, arriving at the outer circle of pupils in time to see Art heave himself up to his feet and dust himself down.

‘Why don’t you look where you’re going, nerd? Aren’t four eyes enough for you?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Art replied calmly, straightening his glasses, ‘I must have tripped over your knuckles.’

Thankfully, Savage had missed the insult. A witty comment like that would have to be broken down and explained to him at a later date.

Ben hoped Art would quit while he was ahead and just walk away, but his hopes were to be dashed.

‘He’s mocking you, Sav!’ shouted a faceless voice from the crowd.

Great! It was too late for Art now; Savage would have to save his reputation. A fight between these two would be the biggest mismatch since David versus Goliath (ignoring of course the fact that David had won that one – there’d be no upset here).

‘Is that right, four-eyes? Are you mocking me? You really are the weakest link, you know that?’ Savage quipped, looking around the crowd for approval. He’d heard that

put-down on a television show once and thought he'd use it to impress the onlookers. Only those smaller than him laughed. The noise was deafening.

Yet still Art stood his ground.

'Then I presume that would make you the *missing* link?' he responded instantly. Again, the insult was lost on Savage, but not even he could mistake its tone which suggested it wasn't intended as a compliment.

Ben slapped his forehead in anguish. Why, Art? Why? Why couldn't he just walk away?

'Hit him, Sav!' a voice said.

'He just called you a monkey!' said another.

Savage didn't need much encouragement. The fuse had already been lit. All Ben could do now was wait and watch the explosion.

Art regretted it the second he opened his mouth. He vaguely heard someone from the crowd shouting something about hitting him and then he suddenly went numb, realising he was likely to experience an awful lot of pain. His arms and legs didn't want to move, the only part of his body that seemed to be responding was his stomach which was doing somersaults. He focused upon the huge figure before him as it took one large step towards him, the massive hand balling itself into a tight fist.

Frozen to the spot, Art could do nothing but stare at the fist as it grew larger and larger the closer it travelled to his nose. He flinched at the last moment, closing his eyes and waiting for the pain that would follow. Surprisingly, his last

thought was for his glasses, hoping that they wouldn't break again; he'd only just got them fixed from the last time someone had picked on him.

He heard a slapping noise, flesh on flesh, followed by a painful yelp. But he was confused: he didn't feel any pain and he hadn't even said anything! So who had screamed? Art tentatively opened his eyes and saw that a different hand was now directly in front of his face. A hand that had caught Savage's fist, blocking his punch!

'Oww!' Ben shouted. 'Gerroff him!'

His hand was still stinging from the force of the punch, and for years to come he would ask himself why he'd done it. Maybe it was the fact he hated Savage's bullying ways. Maybe it was because Art was a friend of Tommy's. Only time would teach him that he had probably done it because, deep down, he actually liked Art, though he wasn't quite ready to admit that yet. Not today. Not with his hand hurting so much.

'Just leave him alone!' Ben shouted as forcefully as he could, surprised to find that he was still holding onto Savage's fist. He let go of it quickly and took a step back.

'Campbell! Did you just do what I think you did?' Savage asked him, part annoyed, part confused. This was all new to him. Nobody had ever been stupid enough to stand up to him before.

'Umm... I don't think so,' Ben replied. 'Why? What did you think I did?'

The reality of the situation now hit him hard. The

crowd's silence was replaced by a low hum of whispers, and he could almost feel the electricity that the crowd's collective will power had created. All were desperate to see some violence, urging Savage to punish somebody, it didn't matter who.

'You've asked for this, Campbell,' Savage said menacingly, cracking his knuckles.

Like a well-rehearsed dance routine, Ben took one step back for every step that Savage took forwards. Retreating, Ben found that he was hampered not only by his bad leg but also by the wall of people who now prevented his escape, none satisfied until they saw blood. Amazing how a group of schoolchildren could suddenly turn into nothing more than barbaric revellers ready to witness the thrashing of a person who only thirty minutes before they'd probably sat next to in Maths.

Then it came. The familiar tune started at the rear of the crowd, quietly at first and then growing into a choral chanting that rumbled and echoed through the Dutch Barn.

'Fi-ght! Fi-ght!! Fi-ght!!!'

In the past it had always sounded like a harmless bit of fun, but now, out here on his own, it sounded as though they were announcing his death sentence.

With nowhere left to go Ben could do nothing more than try and reason with him.

'Come on, Sav, we don't need to do this.'

'Don't tell me what I can or can't do. I can do anything I want.'

And without further warning Savage leapt forwards and

swung his arm towards Ben.

Ben managed to dodge him at the last moment, the punch whistling past his left ear. Taking advantage of Savage being off balance, he then ran to the other side of the circle, but still there was no way out. He felt completely outnumbered.

Scanning the crowd for a gap, he found nothing until... yes, a definite gap! A gap by the only friendly face in the crowd – Art. He'd managed to create a small parting for him and was desperately trying to hold it open.

Savage regained his balance and moved towards Ben again. There was no way he could keep dodging him; he wouldn't miss a second time. Savage stomped to within a few yards of him, his face even redder than before. Pounding his fist, he said through clenched teeth, 'Right, Campbell, you've got nowhere else to go, say goodnight!'

With that he took one almighty swing just as Ben sidestepped to his left, and made a dash for the gap. Had he moved a split second later, Savage, without a doubt, would have broken his face. As it was, though, for the second time in a minute, he had found himself swiping at nothing but thin air.

Ben ran for all he was worth towards Art. A few more yards and he would make it. But, just as he was about to dash through the gap, one of Savage's cronies threw a bag on the floor, right in his way. The bag itself wasn't that big, but it was certainly enough to throw Ben off his stride, especially with his limp. He shifted his stride in an attempt to hurdle the bag, jumping off his good leg to maximise his

chances of clearing it. He jumped with every ounce of spring that he could muster but his trailing leg hadn't lifted high enough, and his foot caught on the bag's strap, causing him to tumble forwards and land in a crumpled heap on the ground. He was helped to his feet rather too quickly by Savage, who grabbed him by his jumper and hauled him skywards so that they came face-to-face. Savage was angry, *really* angry.

'Try to make a fool outta me?' he said, dropping Ben to the floor. Ben landed hard on his bad ankle, and it twisted from under him causing him to cry out.

'This'll teach you!' Savage shouted, taking a few steps back before running up and kicking him hard to the ribs.

The crowd groaned as one as Ben doubled up in pain and struggled for breath. Savage then grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and punched him straight on the nose.

Ben's eyes watered freely and he could taste blood in his mouth. He closed his eyes, hoping it would end, but he wasn't that lucky. He felt another swift kick to his body, which hurt just as much as the first. Struggling to see through the tears he could just about make out Art as he was being held back by two of Savage's foot soldiers – then everything went fuzzy, and he couldn't focus properly.

It was then that he heard something. A voice that had managed to cut through the ringing in his ears. A voice that was audible even over the shouts of the baying crowd. A voice clearer and more welcome than any other sound he had heard before.

'SAVAGE!' it said. 'Leave him alone!'

Tommy's lunch run had ended in success, having managed to lay his hands on two fresh turkey burgers *and* two packets of bourbon biscuits – a pretty good haul. He'd hot-footed it to the Dutch Barn, keen not to miss too much of the game, but upon his arrival there wasn't a game of football anywhere in sight. Instead, he saw a large group of people gathered by one of the goal mouths. He could see the tall and unmistakable frame of Savage over all of the other heads, standing in the centre of the crowd and facing another person. A group like this, encircling someone like Savage, could only mean one thing – someone was about to get hurt.

Tommy walked over to the group, taking a bite from his burger and looking around for Ben so he could get the low down on who was involved, but he couldn't see him anywhere. Just as he reached the outside of the circle, he heard Savage shout, *'Right Campbell, you've got nowhere else to go, say goodnight!'*

A bit over-dramatic, Tommy thought, *even for Savage*. But then he did a double-take. Did he just say *Campbell*? Tommy stood on his tip-toes, looking again at the person facing Savage. It was. It was Ben! How on earth had he got himself into this?

Tommy shouted his name, but he wasn't heard over the din of the group. He saw Savage swing a punch, a powerful one that Ben thankfully managed to avoid. He willed Ben on silently, praying he'd find a way out before Savage finally caught up with him. It was looking good, he'd almost got to a gap, but then Savage's mate, that idiot Bogeys, had

thrown his bag right in Ben's way. Tommy's heart sank. He could do nothing but watch helplessly as Ben feebly tried to jump it but failed and fell to the floor. Tommy knew that Ben would never have fallen over that bag before he'd had his accident. He'd have easily hopped over it and been a hundred metres away before Savage had even noticed he'd gone. But that was the old Ben.

Tommy fought his way through the crowd, continuing to struggle forwards, only able to look on helplessly as Savage rained kicks and punches down on his friend who lay helplessly on the floor. It was brutal. Finally, Tommy managed to force his way to the front of the group, just as Savage was lining up another damaging kick.

'SAVAGE! Leave him alone!' he shouted as courageously as he could.

The noise from the crowd seemed to stop instantly, silenced by Tommy's unexpected show of bravery. His body shook uncontrollably, but he was surprised to find that it wasn't through fear but through anger. Watching his best mate get beaten up like that made his blood boil. Savage stopped his attack and turned slowly, rage etched on his face.

'What did you say?' he spat.

Tommy stared right back at him, taking a firm stride forwards. 'I said leave him alone.'

'You wanna choose your friends better, Parker. This cripple has just got you into a hiding.'

Savage walked towards him, his fist cocked, its target now changed, but Tommy didn't move an inch. First

Shakey, now Savage. How many more times was Ben going to get him beaten up?

As Savage approached, Tommy raised his arms to defend himself, just like the boxer's did. This was it.

'Quick!' a voice from the crowd shouted, interrupting them. 'Haynes is coming. LEGGITT!'

Savage stopped in his tracks. Not even he was stupid enough to fight in front of this teacher. Mr Haynes was old school. The sort of teacher who wore socks *and* sandals and who'd bring back the cane quicker than you could say 'detention'.

Savage looked to Ben and then back to Tommy. 'It's your lucky day, Parker!'

He then ran off with a group of friends, away from the approaching teacher, the rest of the crowd dispersing in every direction. Ben was left on the floor holding his ribs, his face bloodied and tear-stained. Tommy ran over to him, Art doing likewise from the opposite direction.

'What happened here?' Mr Haynes demanded.

Silence.

'Campbell, look at me boy. Who did this to you?'

Ben remained slumped on the floor, wiping the blood from his nose with his sleeve. 'Huh? Oh, I just fell over, sir, playing football.'

'Really?' the teacher replied sceptically. 'Parker. Ford. Do you want to try telling me the truth?'

They looked at each other awkwardly, neither wanting to take the lead. Ben's eyes pleaded with them not to say anything.

To everyone's surprise, it was Art who spoke first.

'It's like Ben said, sir, I saw it all. He fell over the ball, it was quite funny really.'

Tommy nodded enthusiastically. This was the first time he'd heard Art lying to a teacher. He was so proud.

'Well it doesn't look too funny to me!' Mr Haynes snapped. 'Get him off to the nurse this instant and then straight to class!' he added, storming off in search of another pupil to harass.

Ben pulled himself gingerly to his knees, attempting to stand, but his bad ankle buckled under his weight. Tommy went to help him, but Art stood in his way.

'No. Let me do it,' he said, holding his hand out for Ben to take. 'Thanks, Ben,' he added.

Ben looked at him hesitantly, apparently deciding whether his pride would allow him to accept Art's offer of help. He then held his arm out, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet. 'Don't worry about it, Fart,' Ben said. 'It was nothing.'

'What's up with you two?' Tommy asked, confused by how friendly they were being all of a sudden.

'Nothing, mate,' Ben said, 'I'll explain later.'

Tommy and Art gave Ben their shoulders, and together they hobbled down to the nurse's room, Ben moaning constantly about the pain in his leg.

Tommy couldn't help but feel guilty about it all. Ben would never have been caught before his accident. Savage wouldn't have got near him if not for his limp. Tommy felt as if it was all his fault. Now more than ever, he felt to blame

for Ben's condition, and he just wished that there was something he could do about it.

What am I thinking?! I can do something about it!

Of course he could, he had the Pen; he could change anything he wanted!

To hell with what Mr Wiseman had said. Surely it wouldn't hurt to change just one little bit of history? Besides, it would only affect Ben – what harm could it do really? As far as Tommy was concerned, this qualified as a pretty 'extraordinary situation' as Mr Wiseman had put it. And even though he could hardly say that it was for the 'good of mankind' it was certainly for the good of Benkind, and that was close enough for him.

It was at that point that he decided. He would use it as a one-off, just a little something to help his best mate. It was the least he could do to make him normal again.

In between dramatic groans Ben tugged on Tommy's arm and tried to mouth something to him.

'Tom... Tom...' he said, barely coherent.

'Yeah, Ben, what is it?'

'...did you get my turkey burger?'