

Kaw

Charlie and me had been mates since forever, he was short and broad with a mop of straw-coloured hair and freckles and I was tall and skinny and got landed with spots. We were both eleven and neither of us were into girls yet. Although, I did sort of get this funny feeling in my stomach when Jenny Simpson smiled at me and I'd noticed that Charlie tended to go all moony when Angela, Jenny's friend, walked by. But apart from that we thought girls were a bit, well... sappy.

We were more into football, not for a team or anything like that, but we played a mean game in the park. We'd also go down to the river, mainly to throw stones at the rats. Then there was the camp in the middle of the Elderberry bushes at the bottom of the churchyard, decked out with a couple of battered old armchairs that we had humped over from the tip; we'd sometimes hang out there and down a few cans of Fanta.

But the place we used to spend most of our time at was the really neat tree house we'd built high up in one of the trees next to the big tanks at the back of the Fire Station. The tanks were used to store water for the pump engines and a crisscross of metal bars covered the open tops to prevent anyone falling in. Some of the trees overhung them and that's why we built the tree house in the first place.

It was a bright sunny day and Charlie and me were looking for something to do. We had gone down to the park, but there wasn't a game on, so we'd picked up a couple of jars and wandered over to the swamp – it wasn't really a swamp, it was just a big, smelly, muddy pond in the middle of an overgrown piece of land – it was where we used to go to hunt for Newts. We didn't find any, but did manage to get ourselves Plastered in mud and it didn't half pong. After brushing the thick off with some grass we decided to head back.

To get home we had to pass the back of the Fire Station and since there didn't seem to be anyone about we decided to jump over the wall and climb the trees – we found out later that the firemen never came into the trees, they just pulled up on the road, stuck a hose in the water, filled the pump and then drove off again. Which was great for us, we had all these trees to climb and as long as we kept out of sight when a pump came around, no one would chase us. Anyway we climbed every tree in the place and I was about to follow Charlie down from the last one when I spotted something in one of the tanks; it wasn't that big and it was thrashing about in the water.

'There's a bird in one of the tanks,' I shouted, and by the time I reached the ground Charlie was already reaching out with a long stick, trying to talk the poor thing into grabbing the end.

'Come on, little birdie, come to Charlie,' he called softly

The bird obviously didn't understand a word of it and continued to flap and circle weakly.

'That stick's no good, we need something to fish it out with, keep trying, I've got an idea.'

I raced over to an elderberry bush by the wall, snapped off a long branch and leaving a small bunch of leaves at the top stripped the rest bare. I handed it to Charlie and he slid it through the mesh and out to the bird. This time surrounded by leaves it sort of scrambled onboard and Charlie pulled it slowly to the edge.

That was the first bird we saved, then we built the tree house and it became a bird rescue centre, mainly in the early summer when the young birds were learning to fly. We fished them out with fishing nets, dried them off, fed them up and let them go again, away from the tanks. We must have rescued hundreds and every one of them flew away, except for one, a young crow that Charlie called Kaw, he had a damaged wing and couldn't fly, so he stayed with us and lived in and around our tree house. Charlie loved that bird and if you saw them together you'd say that the bird loved Charlie. He used to hop onto Charlie's hand, make his way up his arm onto his shoulder and stayed there, like a pirate's parrot, until it was time for us to go home.

Kaw was the only pet Charlie ever had; his dad had asthma really bad and wouldn't allow any pets near the house. I was luckier, I had my dog Butch, don't be fooled by the name, he was a total wimp, he didn't even bark and hid if he saw another dog, he was so friendly that if a burglar had broken into our house he'd have lick him to death. But he was my dog and he followed me everywhere, he even came to the tree house and was quite happy to stay on the ground chasing butterflies, or even playing with Kaw if Charlie took him down.

That's why I couldn't believe it when I saw what he had done. I had gone to the tree house with Butch as usual, but when I climbed up, there was no sign of Kaw. He wasn't inside or on his favourite perch just outside the window or anywhere else in the tree. It wasn't until I turned to go down to see if he had fallen that I spotted the black feathers sticking out, either side of Butch's mouth.

'Drop it, Butch,' I screamed, and Butch like the wimp he was, dropped his tail, ran off and squirmed his way into a clump of bushes.

'Charlie will never speak to me again,' I kept muttering over and over as I scrambled to the ground.

I leaned into the bushes to grab Butch but he slithered back out of reach. I tried coaxing him out, 'Good, boy, come to Gary,' but he didn't move, so I shouted at him and he dropped the bird, shot out the back and disappeared. Worming my way into the bushes I picked up Kaw; he was soft, light and very, very dead, his head flopped and his normally bright eyes were glazed. My mind raced as I laid him on gently on the ground. What was I going to do? How would I explain it to Charlie? Maybe I could get another crow to take his place, I even looked in the tanks to see if one had fallen in, but even if one had, Charlie would have known the difference.

Finally I decided to take the coward's way out, I would hide the body and tell Charlie that Kaw was missing when I arrived, well it was partly true. Having made my decision I picked up the body set off towards the farthest corner of the grounds and was halfway there when I found the hole. It was next to a small Hawthorne bush and had been dug by some kind of animal, it was just the right size, so I laid Kaw inside covered him with soil and said, a little prayer.

When I got back Butch was waiting with his ears and tail down, I couldn't forgive what he'd done to Kaw, so I ignore him and his big soft eyes. He dropped his head and slunk off into the bushes out of sight. Full of sadness I climb up to the empty tree house and waited for Charlie. Within minutes I heard him call out as he began climbing the tree. 'Are you there, Gary, I've got something to tell you.'

I'd been dreading this moment and suddenly I wanted to Climb down and run away, to be anywhere but there, it was all my fault, if only I'd left Butch at home instead of bring him with me, Kaw would still have been alive and I wouldn't have been about to lose the best friend I'd ever had. But I could stop that happening, all I had to do, was to look my best mate straight in the eye and tell him a lie. I wasn't sure if I could do it. But if I were going to do it, I'd have to do it right then and there. Suddenly, I couldn't wait any longer. As soon as his head came into sight I blurt out my story. 'Kaw's missing, Charley, I can't find him anywhere.'

His eyes and his mouth sort of started to screw up and I was sure he was going to cry, then he pulled himself together. 'Sit down, Gary I've got something to tell you.'

Oh, God, he knew what butch had done, now he was going to dump me as a mate, It was no use, I'd have to confess, tell him that it was my fault, 'I've got to...'

He held up his hand to stop me and said, 'Wait, Gary, I want to tell you about Kaw.'

I closed my eyes and waited for it.

'Kaw died yesterday and I buried him over there beside that little Hawthorne bush. Now, what were you going to say?'

I opened my eyes and manage to stammer, 'J-J-Just that I need to find Butch, I shouldn't have shouted at him.'

Fred Watson