

Rescuing Dad

Pete Johnson

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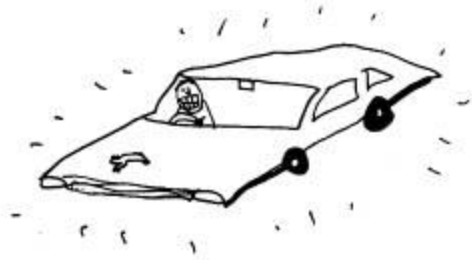
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Also by Pete Johnson
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About the Book

Joe and Claire can see why Mum chucked Dad out. He looks a mess, he can't cook and he's useless around the house. Something must be done: they're the only ones who can help transform him into 'Dad Mark Two'. And when they unveil this new, improved dad, Mum will be so impressed she'll take him back on the spot!

But then disaster strikes - Mum starts seeing the slimy and creepy Roger. And Joe and Claire's plans take an unexpected turn - with hilarious results.

Pete Johnson



Rescuing Dad

RHCP DIGITAL

*Dedicated with special thanks to Janetta,
Linda, Robin, Bill Bloomfield, Rose Jewitt
and my two nephews, Harry and Adam*



Chapter One

IT WAS FAR worse than I'd expected. I mean, I knew it was going to be bad. But my school report was nothing short of tragic.

I'll spare you the gory details. It'll only upset you. Let me just say that I've never seen so many Ds and Es on one page in my entire life.

Actually, I think I'm pretty intelligent but not when it comes to school subjects. I'm clever in other ways, though. Like I'm very observant. I notice things. I'm sure I'd make an excellent detective or private eye. I started imagining myself solving all these mysteries. I really cheered myself up.

Then I glanced down at that dire report and it was back to reality. My mum was going to take one look at this and start charging about like a rhino with a sore head. To make matters worse, Claire, my younger sister, is adored by all her teachers and her last report was more like a love letter.

If only I could lose this report or say it had been snatched away by a passing Alsatian. One boy in my class really did get his report chewed up by a gerbil. The trouble is, I don't know any gerbils. And it's too late to improve my social life now. Anyway, schools have copies of everything, don't they? They've probably got the report of Joe Miles - yes, that's me - up on the noticeboard so staff can throw darts at it.

So what can I do? I could try and alter it. The trouble is, I'd have to change just about every line. Or I could just forget to show it to my mum. That was very tempting. Only there's this silly slip your parents have to sign to prove they've read it. And anyway, my mum always knows when reports are due. It's as if she's got special antennae.

Mum arrived a few minutes later with Claire, who'd just had a music lesson. I smiled merrily at them.

'Did you have a funky day, Mum?'

'A very tiring one,' she sighed. 'Will you set the table, Joe?'

'Sure, no problemo.'

I set the table for tea quite superbly. And all the time I was waiting for a question that never came.

It was incredible. Mum had forgotten all about my report. This was a moment for the record books. I think she must have been very flustered about her work. She shares a job at a bank with this other woman. Only the other woman has been away ill so all her work has come to Mum. This was pretty horrible for Mum, but it got me off the hook, temporarily at least.

The evening rolled on. I was sweating now, just dreading the moment when Mum's memory came rushing back.

About half past seven Dad came home. He put his case in the hall, went upstairs, got changed, read Claire a bit of a story and then came downstairs again and sank down into his chair in the sitting room.

Mum brought him in his nosh on a tray. She used to talk with him while he was eating. And Dad was always full of funny stories about the people he'd met. He'd even mimic their voices. But now he hardly says anything to her. And she usually goes back into the kitchen and listens to a discussion about the state of the economy or something equally depressing on the radio, while Dad chomps away watching television.

He chats with me though. He'll tell me about his day - he's a salesman for an office supplies firm. But much more interestingly, Dad also partly owns a shop called Fantasy Adventure. It's pretty small but absolutely crammed with old comics, books, videos, model kits and posters. And sometimes Dad will drop into the shop after work - it really is his pride and joy - and bring back something for me.

He did that night. He gave me one of the American comics which I collect. I started reading it but all the time I was waiting for my moment.

You see, I had a plan: to get Dad to read my report and sign that annoying slip thing when Mum wasn't looking. Now, of course, Dad wouldn't be thrilled by my report either. He'd sigh and suck his teeth a bit, but then he'd forget all about it, as he's nowhere near as bothered about school as my mum.

The phone rang. I was sure that it was my nan. She often rings about this time. And she'd be chatting to my mum for ages. So here was my chance. 'Dad,' I said, 'could you assassinate some people for me, please?'

He put down his mug of tea. 'Like who?'

'Like all my teachers for a start.'

Dad grinned. 'What have they done now?'

'They've all got together and cooked up this nasty report.' Then I added casually, 'Want to take a quick butcher's?'

'I think I'd better.'

I leaned forward confidingly. 'I'll warn you now, it's not a pretty sight.'

'I think I can take it.'

But Dad put the report down, a shaken man. 'This is just awful,' he pronounced.

'I know, but don't let it spoil your evening. The sun's trying to shine and there's a great football match on - well, any minute actually. So if you would just autograph the little slip here we can move on to happier topics, like who's going to win the ...'

'Just hold on a moment. Has your mum seen this?'

'No, she was looking really hot and tired so I thought it would be best not to worry her at the moment ...'

'How very considerate of you,' murmured Dad. But I could tell he was trying hard not to smile. 'This report says you're not working. Honest answer now. Are you working?'

‘I really mean to work but when I get to school it all seems so grey and boring. And I just can’t get into it somehow.’

To my surprise Dad was nodding, as if in agreement. ‘I’m very much afraid,’ he said, ‘you’re a chip off the old block. Reading some of this is just like looking at one of my old reports. Especially that part about you spending too much time being the class clown. I had exactly the same comment.’

‘So it’s not really my fault. It’s just something in my genes,’ I cried.

‘Ah, now I’m not saying that.’ But then he started time-travelling again. ‘You got 25% in your maths exam. Well, I can top that. I got 18% and ...’ Dad smiled at the memory, ‘my mum was so worried about my stepfather seeing it that she sat down herself and changed that 18% to 48%.’

‘She just sounds the best,’ I said. ‘I wish I could have met her.’

But she died when Dad was twelve – the same age as I am now. I think about that sometimes. Right now, though, I was thrusting that slip right in front of Dad.

‘You know, we’ll have to tell Mum about this eventually.’

‘Yeah, sure. How about in five years’ time?’

‘No,’ laughed Dad. ‘Soon. Very soon. But maybe tonight isn’t the right time.’

‘Not with European football about to start.’

‘That wasn’t what I meant,’ replied Dad.

‘But still, we don’t want to miss that, do we?’

Dad didn’t answer but he was smiling all right. And he was actually signing my report when something truly bone-chilling happened. Mum appeared in the doorway.

It turned out that she hadn’t been talking to Nan at all. Rather she’d been called by someone from work. So she wasn’t in a great mood anyway.

But then she saw Dad signing away and something in her mind must have just clicked, because she blurted out,

'Joe's report is due today.' Then she came over and asked in a voice which was too polite, if you know what I mean. 'Might I be allowed to take a look at Joe's report?'

Dad did his impression of a confused hamster and said, 'Oh yes, of course. We - or rather I - thought we'd wait until you'd had a stiff drink.' He laughed. Mum didn't.

Instead she started reading, and I averted my eyes. I hate the sight of blood, especially my own. But instead, it was Dad, not me, who Mum was glaring at, which I thought was a bit odd. And she said to Dad, in this really icy tone, 'Can we have a word in private?' So they went off to the kitchen, which is where they usually go when a row is about to break out.

Other people's parents shout and throw things when they argue. Not mine. Instead, their voices go very quiet. And all you can hear is this hissy whispering.

I was still a bit puzzled, though. I got the rotten report. Yet Mum has a go at Dad, not me. What was all that about?

At last they came back. Dad slumped down in his chair. He looked like someone who's just been told off by the headteacher.

Mum's attention turned to me. She had a distinctly hurt expression on her face. 'I'm very sorry you didn't want me to see your report. Now, I'm not going to just laugh about this with you.' She gave Dad a truly chilling glare. 'That might get me some easy popularity, but I know you're worth much more than this. And you do too, don't you?'

'Yes I do, Mum.' Always agree with your parents when they're stressed out. Basic rule of survival.

'You haven't done tonight's homework, have you?'

'Well, not yet ...'

'I want you to go upstairs and do it now. And in future when you come in from school, you'll have a drink and then go right upstairs and do your homework. You'll be fresher and you'll get it over with, won't you?'

I nodded solemnly.

‘Now, off you go.’

I took one lingering look at the European football and at my dad.

He never said a word, just winked at me.



Chapter Two

ONE WEEK LATER my mum and dad were waiting for me when I got back from school.

That gave me a shock I can tell you. Dad was never home this early. Immediately I thought, I'm in trouble again. But then they both gave me these really big, welcoming smiles as if I'd just got back from a war or something. I nearly turned round to see if someone had crept in behind me. My parents hadn't smiled at me this much since the day I was born.

Then Dad asked me if I'd had a good day at school. And Mum bustled around getting me a drink and a massive slice of chocolate cake. They know I'm broke so they can't want to borrow money, I thought.

I sniffed. I could smell cooking. 'Yes, we've got roast chicken for later,' said Mum.

Now, we only ever have meals like that on Sundays or at Christmas. Never on a Wednesday.

'You're not trying to butter me up before telling me I'm being packed off to boarding school or borstal or the local zoo or ...?'

'Now, stop being silly and come into the sitting room,' said Mum.

Claire was already there, sitting on the sofa, taking little, delicate sips of milk. Mum plonked down beside her, then said, 'Come and sit next to me, Joe.'

So I joined the team on the sofa, wondering if Dad was going to squash beside us too. But he didn't. And he didn't sit in his usual chair either. Instead, he hovered by the door as if he was waiting for someone to invite him inside.

I decided my dad had got promotion and it meant we were going to have to move away. That's why Mum and Dad

were being so creepy to us. But then I watched Dad again. He certainly didn't look like someone who's just got promoted.

All at once this icy feeling ran through my stomach and I thought, I know what you're going to tell us. Well, it wasn't any big deal. It had happened to practically everyone in my class, including Lee, my best mate.

Parents break up: that's what most of them do these days. Only not mine. I didn't want it happening to my mum and dad. I really didn't. But now Mum was saying in this slow, careful voice, like a teacher trying to explain a particularly difficult maths problem, 'Lately your dad and I haven't been very happy together. I wonder if you've noticed anything?'

Parents really insult your intelligence sometimes, don't they? Of course I'd noticed. How could I not notice scenes like ... well, the other morning I was munching my breakfast in the kitchen and Mum was putting the toast under the grill, when Dad appeared in the doorway and muttered, 'So how does one get a button sewn onto a shirt in this place?'

For a moment I thought Mum was going to fling one of those pieces of toast at him. But she didn't. Instead, she turned round very slowly and said, in a very tight, controlled voice, 'Well, you've got three choices, haven't you. You can either sew it on yourself, get one of your many fans at work to sew it on for you, or you can throw the shirt away and buy another one. The choice is yours.'

Without another word Dad shuffled off, while Mum stood there shaking for a moment. I'm not often quiet. But I decided this had better be one of my rare, silent moments. So I just carried on chomping.

I never said a word about that early-morning encounter. But of course I remembered it.

Here's something else I'd noticed. Dad never seemed to make Mum laugh any more. In the past he had. In fact,

Mum would often explode with laughter at something he'd said. Now they were hardly ever in the same room for longer than about seven seconds. Except sometimes Mum would go into the sitting room and start picking up shoes and patting cushions and saying, 'Someone has to make this a pleasant place to live.' While Dad would just grit his teeth and rustle his newspaper about.

Anyway, there was silence now while Mum waited for us to answer her daft question. In the end I just nodded. Claire didn't say a word.

'Now, your dad and I have been together for a long time.' Mum's voice shook slightly when she said that. But then she returned to her speaking clock tone. 'But now we need to look afresh about where we're going next, and to do that, we need some space.'

I found that a bit puzzling as they were hardly ever in the house together anyhow. Surely they had plenty of space already.

'So we are separating,' announced Mum.

'Is Dad moving out?' I asked at once.

'Yes, I am.' Dad spoke from the other end of the room and already it seemed as if he was floating away from us.

'But can't you separate in the same house?' asked Claire, suddenly coming to life. 'That's what Anne Macey's parents did. They each had two rooms ...'

'No, I'm leaving,' said Dad.

'But you will come back?' called Claire.

At the same time I was asking, 'But you're not divorcing?'

'No, we're not divorcing,' said Mum. 'Your dad and I just need to see where our relationship is going.'

How could my parents split up over something so vague as to where their relationship was going? What exactly did that mean anyhow?

And then my spine gave a little shiver. That stunt I'd pulled last week about my school report had certainly set