

LIZ NIVEN

It's Virtual Reality, but

The teacher looked at Andy McNeil. He wis hauf sleepin. His een wir hauf shut, an his shouders hung ower his desk like big sacks o coal.

"Andrew McNeil. Waken up!" she shouted.

The rest o the class jumped a mile an even Andy opened his een wide enough tae see whit aw the stushie wis aboot. The hail class wis lookin at him. He felt his face gan reid wi embarrassment.

"Whit's gan oan?" he whispert tae his neibour, Scott. "Whit's she gimin aboot noo?"

"A heard that, Andrew McNeil. An A've every right tae girm, as ye pit it. Ye wir asked tae dae a piece o hamework fir the day. Hae ye duin it?"

Andrew felt his insides turn tae a kinna meltit jeelie. He'd clean forgot. It wis thon problem wi the computer that hid fair thrown him.

"Well?" Mrs O Donnell repeatit. "We're aw waiting. Whit's yer story? Yer oral story. Dae we hae the privilege o hearing it or did ye faw asleep aw nicht an aw?"

"Naw, Miss. A've duin it. Of course," he added, sure that his voice soundit fair honest tae guidness. He caught sicht o Scott beside him grinnin fae lug tae lug.

"Ye huvnae duin it huv ye?" he whispert.

Andrew cleart his thrapple an kent that the hail class wir waiting. They'd jist be glad tae see somebodie else suffer. An oral story, indeed.

It sounded like a toothpaste advert.

"Can a stey in ma seat tae tell it, Miss?" he asked, stallin fir time an pulling his chair in tightly tae his desk.

"Ay, ye can. Mind A telt yes aw yesterday that A wanted this story tae be a wee bittie different fae yir written stories? Tellin a story *orally*," she emphasised the words again, "means that ye use *different* techniques. Get yer audience *interestit* in whit yer sayin. Draw them in, get a bit o atmosphere gan. Mak them forget whaur they ur. Right, Andrew aff ye go."

And at that she sat ahint the teacher's desk an foldit her airms. Her desk wis piled high wi jotters an buiks an Andy stared in a panic searchin fir inspiration. Yin big book caught his ee an he felt as if somebodie had slipped a wee computer disc intae his heid. PROGRAMME ON, he thocht.

"Late last nicht aboot hauf past midnight, A wis in ma bedroom playing wi ma computer. A could hear ma Mammy shouting fae the hall. *A hope you're in yer bed, ma boy. A don't want a sound oo o ye til the morn.* Sae A hid tae keep the sound doon. By this time awbodie else wis in thir beds an A kent A'd git laldie if she thocht A wis still up. A'd jist liftit the mouse tae stert playin yin o ma games when the next meenit thir wis a wee kinna squeak an it fell apairt in ma hauns. Damnit A says (sorry Mrs O Donnell). Whaur Am a gaun tae get a moose at this time o nicht. Weill! My God! (sorry Mrs O Donnell) the next thing A kent wis this almichty crash an ma bedroom door jist landit on the flair in front o me. An there's this big grey moose staunin in the doorway sayin, "Here ye are - nae problem. A wis jist passin an heard ye mention ye needit a moose. Will A dae? A'll jist come in will A? Sorry aboot the door - these things happen. In fact A could tell ye a thing or twa aboot breakages, that's naethin compared tae ma problems."

"Wait a minute!" A shouted, lowpin oot ae ma chair. "Ye cannae jist walk in here like that. An you arenae a moose. No the kin A'm lookin fir."

Suddenly, wioot onie warnin, this muckle grey moose jist collapsed intae ma chair an startit greetin! It sobbed an sobbed an A cuild feel masel gettin a bit tearful an aw. A went ower an pit ma airms

roon his shouders. The fur felt surprisingly soft through ma finngers.

"Keep the sound doon, ma Ma'll kill me - and you - if she hears this. Whit's up? Why are ye greetin?"

Between sobs, wi his big furry shouders heavin up an doon, the moose explained that he'd been oot fir a walk in the field near his hame, futtrin aboot, whistling awa picking wee floers fir a vase in his hoose when CRUNCH this muckle great plough fae a fermer jist flattened his hoose in yin fell swoop. *Jist like that. A'm hameless noo. Nae hame. As shair as neeps are turnips - nae hame.* An his souders shook an shook.

By this time A'd taen oot a couple o Kleenex fae ma drawer an A wis tryin tae dite his face wi it. It wis a richt sin. Then suddenly, A thocht o something. "Thir wisnae anybody in yer hoose at the time. Wis there?"

"It's funny ye should say that," he replied, "because there wisnae. Bit there nearly wis fir ma weans hid jist gan aff tae a mowdie's pairty in the next field. A close shave richt enough, eh?"

"Ay," A said, "ye're richt, it could of been worse, A suppose."

Suddenly oot o the nicht cam a wee voice that said, "Could of been worse? A close shave? Ay, ye're richt. That's whit A wis jist thinkin."

An intae ma bedroom (stampin oan ma bedroom door on the flair, in fact) cam a wee boy. He wis dressed in funny kinna clothes an carriet a stick in his haun. A bit like thon shepherd's crook that ye used tae see in auld picters.

"Hello," says the moose. "Whit's up wi ye?"

"A wis oot aw nicht, the lee-lang night, in fact, watchin ma sheep, when an unco tyke lapped ower the dyke," replied the wee boy. His face wis pure white an he'd big black circles unner his een.

"Whit's an unco tyke?" A askt.

"A dug," said the wee boy, impatiently. "A strange dug. Dae they no teach ye oniething at the scuil?"

"An whit did the dug dae?" askt the moose an me at the same time.

"It went strecht fir ma wee favourite lamb, that's whit it did. A wis fair feart. In the backgrun houlets wir cryin an A could hear a tod ower the hill. A jist legged it. Left ma wee hoggie an made a run fir it an here A'm ur," an he looked aroon wi outstretched hans an added, "an a

nice wee place ye hae here, if ye don't mind me sayin, that is. Except fir that door. Ye're needin that fixed."

At that A mindit whit had happent an how the moose hid crashed intae ma room followed by a strange wee boy that looked like a refugee oot o a BBC serial. The three o us wir aw starin at this door wi different expressions oan wir faces when suddenly framed in the empty doorway padded a wee lamb. White an cuddly an makin kinna squeaky noises. It padded intae ma room, its hooves gettin caught in the nylon pile o the cairpet. A jist watch dumfoonert.

The wee boy spoke furst. "Hoggie, ma wee hoggie. Ye've fun me. A thocht the tyke had mibbe got ye."

"Naw, ye're aw richt son. A made a run fir it," replied the lamb, settling doon oan the carpet beside the boy. "How're ye daein?" he addit, lookin at the big grey moose.

By this time ma bedroom wis gettin quite crowded. There wis a lamb curled up oan the flair, squeezing in as near tae its maister as it could get, next tae them wis an enormous grey moose an there wis me in the middle o it. It wis pure dead amazin so it wis bit A didnae think ma Ma wid be awfie pleased if she'd come in. As weel as that A took a right hairy when the wee lamb stood up an says, "A wee, A need a wee ..."

Suddenly, Mrs O Donnel interrupted. "That'll be enough, Andrew, ye've covered the right number o minutes. Ye can stop noo."

At this, shouts an skreichs went up fae the class.

"Aw miss, let him finish."

"Ay Miss, it's guid isn't it?"

"Hey Andy, whit did the lamb dae?"

Mrs O Donnell opent her mooth bit naebodie could hear whit she wis sayin fir the class wir makin that much o a racket, askin about the dug, the lamb an the wee boy.

Bit Andy felt like magic. He'd nivver hid such attention fae that many folk in his life. He wis quite warmin tae his story, keen tae fin oot whit happent next himsel.

"Oh alright, Andrew, carry on, bit dinna mak a meal o it."

A meal, thocht Andy, right. He cleared his thrapple an stertit again.

"Well, there wis me, the wee boy, his lamb an a big fat moose aw

sittin in ma bedroom an this wee lamb says he wants a wee bite tae eat."

A soun o disappointment came fae the class. They'd hoped the wee wis somethin else nae doot.

Andy went oan, "Oot the corner o ma een A kent somethin hid appeared at ma bedroom door, or whit wis left o it. There wis somethin big an derk an shadowy fillin the doorframe an it rolled across aw tapsilteerie an heelstergoudie an ended up stapped in front o me wi its twa een starin intae mine. Its een wir lik amber beads an aw. Bit suddenly it boomed in a huge voice. "Fair faw yer honest sonsie face" it shouted at the tap o its voice. The moose took a fit o the giggles at this point.

"Keep the soun doon, please, if ye don't mind," A said. A kent ma Ma wid gan gyte if she looked intae ma room. A also felt this latest veesitor had a bit o a cheek shoutin an bawlin sae loudly. It wis almaist as if he wiss . . . ay he wis drunk!

"Are you drunk?" A askt him, noticin that his beady wee orange een wir kinna watery an no focussin right.

"As a matter of fact A um. Legless. In fact literally legless. Nae legs. Never hid any." An at that he burped loudly an fell ower ontae the cairpet narrowly missin the wee lamb who wis fair dumfoonert at this latest veesitor.

"Ye canna faw asleep in here" A shoutit. "Waken up!"

Aw we could hear wir loud snores fae the broon craitur. He wis oot fir the coont.

"Hoo are we gan tae waken him?" A said.

"A've got an idea," said the wee boy who'd been watchin the hail shebang wi great interest. An he cam ower tae whaur the broon blob wis lying, stood up as tall as he could aside him, an in as lood a voice as he could muster he shouted "His knife see rustic Labour dight, an cut ye up wi ready slight."

At that the broon blob's een opent an he let oot the loodest skraich ye've ivver heard.

"Help, help," he shouted tryin tae get upright, bit wi nae legs it wis gey difficult. He gave a wee kinna roll an the neist meenit he wis oan his feet headin fir the door. "A'm aff, here wis me lookin fir a safe place tae hide an ye're jist as bad here as the rest o thaim. Aw they ivver want tae dae is cut me intae pieces an shove me oan a plate wi neeps an tatties. How would you like tae be washed doon wi a glessfu o

whisky every January? Ye've nae idea whit it's like." An at that he burst intae lood tears which rolled doon his face in a kinna pale gowd colour.

"We cannae shove him oot like that," said the wee shepherd an puttin oot his crook he cacht the haggis roon the tap o his heid an brocht him birlin back ontae the cairpet wi a thud. Yince mair the broon blob rolled aboot at thir feet.

At this point A wis beginnin tae realise hoo crazy the hail thing wis. An further, hoo wis A gan tae get rid o them? By noo they wir aw settlin doon in a corner o the room chattin an commiseratin wi each ither. The big grey moose hid his airm roon the haggis an his lang tail wis neatly curled up at the lamb's feet. The wee shepherd boy wis strokin awa at the lamb's curls an sayin "Nivver you mind, we're aw safe noo."

The moose gied a wee squeak an says "Whit's fur ye'll no gan by ye - A'll soon get a new hoose."

"A frien in need is a frien indeed" slurred the haggis, shakin the moose's paw wi virr.

"A burd in the haun is worth twa in the bush" piped up the sheep.

The shepherd's lad startit tae say "Dinna cast a cloot til . . ." when A cut in wi "Ay an the best laid schemes o mice an men" an they aw jyned in wi "GANG AFT AGLEY" an then stared at me wi worrit faces.

"Ye'll hae tae gan" A shouted, forgettin aboot ma Ma. "Ye cannae stey here."

"How no?" shouted the haggis. "Ye've plenty o room" an he burped loudly. "Aw go on, jist til we get wirsels sortit oot."

"We could dae jobs fir ye," cried the rest an they aw stertit scratchin thir heids tryin tae figure oot whit they could dae tae keep in ma guid books an no be thrown oot.

Ye havenae mibbe got a wee bit hamework fir the scuil the morra?"

"Ay!" They aw startit clamourin at this idea. "We could dae yer hamework fir ye. That wid be a great help wid it no?"

A thocht aboot this fir at least hauf a second an said, "Ay right, ye're on. If ye dae ma hamework A'll let ye stay."

At this news loud cheers went up an A had tae tell them again tae keep it quiet. It widnae mean a thing tae Ma that A wis gettin ma hamework done. The opposite in fack. She'd definitely fling them aw oot. Cheatin that wid be callt. Noo if it wis her hoosework that wis

gettin done that wid be a different fettle o kish.

"Okay," says the moose in a business like fashion. "Whit's yer hamework?"

"Well," A said, "A've tae finish ma sums fir the morra."

"Sums? Naw we widnae be onie use at the sums. It's aw chynged since we wur at the scuil," said the moose rubbin his nose. "An A wis nivver very guid at the coontin."

"Geography," A said. "A've tae finish pittin in the place names in a map."

"Geography? A map?" they aw shouted. "Whaur is the map o?"

"It's a world map," A answerd. "Places aw ower the world."

"Aw naw then. We couldnae dae that," said the moose.

"It his tae be Scotland. We dinna ken oniewhaur else."

"An A specialise in field maps," said the moose. "Especially Ayrshire and Dumfries fields."

"This is hopeless," A said. "Ye promist tae help me."

"Whit aboot yer English hamework? Huv ye no got any stories tae write or something?" askt the lamb. "A'm awfy guid on that kinna thing. In fack ma cousin wi the fleece as white as sna is brilliant on stuff like that. He used tae gan tae scuil wi a lassie cried Mary an . . ."

A jist interruptit at that point fir A wis beginnin tae realise that this crowd wir timewasters. They wirnae the least bit helpful an it wis time they did somethin.

"A'll tell ye then, A hiv got English hamework. A've tae tell a story in class the morra. Could ye dae that fir me?"

At that they aw startit clamourin an speakin at the yin time, makin a right racket again.

"Okay, okay. Noo A'm gan aff tae ma bed an A'll leave you lot tae dae ma story. Alright?"

An at that A sclimbt intae ma bed an pulled the covers richt ower ma heid. A could hear them whisperin fir ages till eventually A must o fell asleep fir the next thing A kent, ma Ma wis shooglin ma covers an sayin it wis time tae get up. A bell wis ringin an aw - ma alairm clock gien it laldie by ma bed."

"Andrew, stop. That's the bell fir French," Mrs O Donnell wis shoutin. "Ye're aw near hauf asleep. A'm afeart we've nae mair time fir Andrew's story. Ye'll jist hae tae feenish it yersels. In fact A'm gien ye that fir yer hamework. Make up an endin fir Andrew's story. Ye've certainly got a remarkable start!"

Folk in the class wirnae pleased at aw. They wir aw mutterin an

girnin.

"Whit a cop oot" said Scott sitting beside Andrew. "Nae endin. Mak yer ain up. Whit kinna story telling's that?"

"The best kind" said Andrew wi a muckle grin oan his face. The boys heidit fir the classroom door tae gan tae the French class.

"A'm gan tae the shops efter the scuil fir a new moose. Dae ye want tae come wi me?" asked Andrew.

Afore Scott could answer, Mrs O Donnell shouted, "Andrew, a word."

Andrew's heid jerked roon tae see Mrs O Donnell liftin the big *Collected Burns* fae her desk. She lookt at him wi a wee smile oan her face an said, "You'll no have any hamework, will ye Andrew? Seein as how ye telt yer story awreadie the day?"

"Ay A suppose so, Mrs O Donnell," said Andrew, kinna fudgetting wi his hauns in his pockets.

"An dae ye like the poems o Rabbie Burns?" she asked. "Better nor thon computer o yours?"

"Ay, they're great, Miss. Jist great." He kent that if he wis Pinnochio he'd hae a neb the length o Nessie's neck fir the lees he wis tellin.

"Well, tae save ye repeatin the same hamework, you can come in the morra and be able tae recite tae me three poems fae this book. An ye'll no need me tae tell ye which yins. Will ye Andrew?" an she haundit him the big book wi Rabbie's face keekin oot o it.

"Naw, Mrs O Donnell" said Andrew, takin the book an heidin fir the door. He could see Scott's face grinnin at him fae the corridor.

"Nae luck, eh? Still gan tae the shops fir a moose?"