

Walkout

GREG – *Tuesday*

‘She’s gone!’

There’s no screaming or shouting, no banging of doors, no cases flung in the hall, nothing dramatic like in films or on television to show that my Mum has walked out and left my Dad and the four of us. All there is is him, home early, sitting quietly in the kitchen, reading and re-reading the long folded pages of a letter Mum has left for him.

‘I got a message in the office so I came home as early as I could,’ Dad explains. ‘Sit down all of you, I want to talk to you.’

An alarm bell begins to trigger inside my head as we all settle noisily at the kitchen table. Dad looks so strange, so serious.

‘Where’s Mum?’ asks Lucy.

He takes a deep breath. ‘Your Mum has left, she’s ... gone away, God knows where!’

It seems as if our kitchen has become very small and the walls are tilting and falling in on us. And the next minute it is huge and empty and vast. One minute, two

minutes pass and I'm still sitting on my pine chair in the same spot.

'This letter, it tries to explain why,' Dad's voice trails off, '... but I don't really understand it,' he continues, annoyed. 'Why would she do such a thing?'

Lucy and I stare at each other. Deep inside we both know why.

Conor and Grace jump up, push back their chairs and stampede out of the kitchen and off up the stairs. I can guess where they're going. But this is no big hide-and-seek game or treasure hunt.

'I checked already,' Dad tells us, his eyes hurt and full of confusion. The floorboards creak overhead, and the wardrobe doors slam and bang. The hunt is on. In about two minutes flat my younger brother and sister are back down again, both huffing and puffing and out of breath. Eyes huge.

'Mum's shoes are gone!' Conor yells, fear in his voice now.

'Her jacket and her handbag too,' adds Grace solemnly.

'The blue case is missing.'

'Her face cream, her hairbrush and the good perfume you gave her at Christmas, Daddy. It's all gone.' Grace

makes it sound like a list of stuff some weird burglar had stolen from my parents' bedroom.

'But her nightdress is under her pillow, *so ...*' Conor points out.

'So?' says Dad.

'So, I suppose Mum will come back tonight,' Conor adds hopefully, but his voice breaks and he begins to snifle.

Lucy stares at the kitchen dresser. All the hand-painted pottery and glassware Mum collects is displayed there. 'The photo is gone.'

We all turn around and suddenly notice the gap in front of the 'little hen' plates. There is, I mean there *was* a photo of us all, well us kids, the four of us on the beach in Brittas Bay last summer. It was a roasting hot day and we were all squinting into the sun, sunburned and freckled, when Mum took that photo.

'Why did she take the photo of us if ...?' Lucy begins to cry.

Then, wouldn't you know it, Grace copies her. At six, Grace has got to be the biggest copycat I know. 'I want my Mummy back, I want her now!' she whines.

I'm never sure what to do when I see Grace cry. Usually if you give her a sweet or a biscuit she stops.

‘Come on, now! It’s not as bad as it seems. She’ll probably be back in a day or two,’ Dad says. He must be thick. It is definitely as bad as it seems, if not about ten times worse. ‘Eat your chips,’ he orders gruffly, ‘they’re getting cold.’ How can the man eat take-away chicken and chips at a time like this?

‘Greg,’ he stares at me, ‘eat up and pour out some more milk for Grace.’ I read the challenge in his face and the hidden message: Pretend that we are a normal family, eating a normal meal, at a normal time. I stuff three big golden chips into my mouth and pretend. The others dry their tears and follow my good example and we eat those rotten chips till they are cold.

Lucy and Conor clear off the table and pack the dishwasher. I make Grace go up and get changed for bed. Dad is on the phone in the hall. I make a guess that he is telling Gran just what her daughter-in-law has done. His voice rises and falls, but since Grace wants me to read her a story about a school for little witches I can’t really hear what he’s saying. Now he’s speaking so low he’s whispering.

Nobody goes into the living room all night, or bothers to watch television. Lucy tries to do her homework, but her heart isn’t in it.

‘I’ll give you a note for school tomorrow,’ Dad promises.

I have maths and science and German to do. I manage to get it all done. I definitely don’t want a note. I don’t want anyone at school to know about this disaster.

Supper is a huge plate of hot toast. It’s real late by the time Lucy and Conor go to bed. Dad looks beat.

He’s sitting on the couch watching the late-evening news. He spots me coming down the stairs. ‘Come in and sit down, Greg.’

I sit and wait for him to tell me what’s going on, but he keeps on, by the way, watching planes and trains and politicians. I guess neither of us knows what to say.

‘I don’t know how I’m going to manage,’ he says finally. ‘I do love her,’ he adds hesitantly.

‘Yeah. I know, Dad.’

‘She said it’s to be a kind of trial separation,’ he explains.

Then silence again. The empty space yawns between us. Mum is the talker of the family, my Dad has always been the Quiet Man.

I wonder what exactly a ‘trial separation’ amounts to? Before I can ask, Dad says, ‘How about a cup of coffee?’

‘I’ll get it,’ I offer. I clatter about in the kitchen. This

silence and stillness is driving me crazy.

By the time I bring in the coffee, his head is thrown back and he's snoring. Loud, exhausted snores. I leave the mug down on the table near him. Poor Dad! He has driven all over the place today selling his stuff and what does he find when he gets home – a letter!

I wish he'd show me that letter. Maybe there's something in it for me.

He should have noticed more. The fighting has been going on in this house for a long time, like a little war with lots of sniper fire and every now and then a huge explosion. Worse still is when it goes quiet ... too quiet ... and Mum and Dad don't bother to talk or say a word to each other for hours, or even days.

I saw all the warning signs, so why didn't he?

'Dad! Dad! I'm off to bed. Wake up a bit! There's your coffee.'

He half-stirs and wakes.

'Goodnight, Dad!'

The others are all asleep. I pull my quilt up to my neck and put on my walkman. The music uncoils inside my head. I know I'm too tired to listen – but it might stop me thinking.