

## **A Long Line of Plastic Straws**

Carter, a nine-year-old who had recently moved to 4 Woodland Road compensated for everything by trying to connect the longest line of plastic straws in the world. The obsession started at McDonald's, where his grandma took him every Saturday. She sat Carter down at a booth while she queued for the Happy Meal. It was a box of food and a boring toy; what was Happy about that? He did like his frosty chocolate milkshake, but not as much as the paper-covered straws. He blew the wrappers across the room. Grandma couldn't ask Carter to pick them up, so she did it herself and tottered to the bin. Carter scrunched one end of a straw and inserted it into the other.

He started the project in the garage, which smelled like cardboard and dust, on a long folding table – judging by its rickety groaning joints it had been unloved since Grandpa had died. On a hot day there was even a lingering hint of his musky aftershave.

Each week, Carter picked up more and more straws, grabbing them from the McDonald's dispenser while Grandma Chrissie supported his arm. She never told him to stop stuffing them into his hoodie pouch.

Their house was the first of a three-house terrace, right at the edge of the village. Their garden was overgrown now Grandpa wasn't there and had a low-lying fence separating them from the neighbour. The garage soon became too small for Carter's venture; he asked Grandma Chrissie to help by taking the straws outside.

Carter tucked his good leg underneath him and stretched the other out. He missed being able to feel his foot and sometimes woke at night, thinking he still could, but then he remembered. Working in the garden, it was too easy for his mind to wander. He tried to focus on other things, like the dampness of the grass and the rustling sound from a hedge, which was trimmed neatly on the neighbour's side.

‘Quite a project you have there,’ his grandma said, shielding her eyes from the stark cloud-filtered light.

And then she returned to the house. She hardly left it, apart from to check on Carter. She didn’t do her own food shopping now; what was the point when the Tesco delivery service was so obliging? Carter had to ask what obliging meant. She said, ‘Obliging is when people make things good for you.’

He glanced at the house. His grandmother was obliging, and calm. She never talked about any of it.

‘Hello,’ came a voice.

Carter jumped. The voice came from the next garden, the direction of the sun. All he could see through looking at the light was a shadow above the neighbour’s fence and the red specks and dark patches in his own eyes.

‘Hello?’ Once Carter had shielded his eyes with his hand, he could see a boy about his age who was leaning on the fence, making it creak and groan.

‘What are you doing?’ the boy asked.

He felt silly when he told him. ‘I’m...I’m making the longest line of plastic straws in the world.’

But Billy didn’t seem to think it was silly. ‘Cool. How long does that have to be?’

‘Erm, long. Really long.’

‘Why don’t you do it underground?’ Billy suggested.

Carter bristled. ‘I can’t, it’s plastic. That’s bad for the earth.’

Billy climbed over the fence, landed softly, and darted over to where Carter sat. He joined him, mirroring his position, with one leg stretched out in front and the other tucked under him.

‘What happened to your foot?’ Billy asked, in the matter-of-fact voice that no one else used with Carter. ‘I’ve seen you...’

‘It was trapped in the car.’ Carter touched one of his crutches.

‘Okay...’ Billy nodded slowly. ‘You know, my mum has a big box of straws in the cupboard for when we have parties. I could ask her?’

Billy’s mum was a nice lady called Tara. She smelled like roses and felt soft and plump when she hugged him, which she did as soon as Billy made the introduction at the doorway of their house. Carter’s own mother had always been a hugger too and helped him with his homework and took him to play football at the Green, back when he had two proper feet to use and...but he didn’t have to worry about that at the moment because the adults decided he should have time to ‘process everything’.

Tara was happy to help and presented a box of straws that were a mixture of colours, to make a change from the white ones with thin coloured lines.

‘Actually,’ said Carter, holding the box of straws. ‘I think I’ll stick with the McDonald’s ones.’

Billy’s mother just smiled and told them to have fun.

Billy began to help Carter connect the straws. It was not long before the line stretched over Carter’s whole garden and under the fence. Tara provided cans of Fanta and Grandma came to say hello, perhaps checking if Billy was ‘suitable company’.

‘Where are your parents?’ asked Billy, dragging a chipped terracotta pot to pin down a section.

‘I’m living with Grandma.’

‘Oh.’

‘Where’s your dad?’ asked Carter.

‘Mum says he scarpered when I was little.’

‘What’s scarpered?’

‘Ran away cos he didn’t want us.’

Carter tried to imagine what this would be like. ‘Oh...’

‘Yeah.’

Carter’s dad hadn’t ‘scarpered’. He’d held his mum’s hand and his whenever he could. Dad said it was to make sure no one got lost, but Carter didn’t think that was it; he just liked them being connected.

The straw line progressed quickly; Billy’s kind mother started taking Billy to McDonald’s at the same time as Carter and his grandma, doubling the number of straws they were able to sneak out.

‘We really shouldn’t let them,’ said Chrissie, on their second visit.

‘No, we really shouldn’t, should we...’ Tara chomped into a Big Mac and put her hand under her chin to stop the trickle of sauce in its tracks.

The two women smiled at each other and said no more. They had never really talked before Carter came to stay, but now they often had a cuppa and chat together, initially over the garden fence. Then they started going inside, especially on rainy days. Grandma and Tara would sit downstairs while Carter and Billy played in each other’s rooms – video games, mostly, though they also liked to construct big Lego towers. Yet their ‘great big straw line’, as Tara called it, was their favourite thing to do together. The plan had been going so well; they had nearly reached the other side of Billy’s garden.

Then one Saturday, everything changed. Carter knew something was wrong the moment he felt the straws at McDonald’s; they were lighter, flimsier. He unwrapped one, slowly, put it into his Coke, and after only a few minutes, the straw began to soften and his heart thumped harder.

‘Billy,’ he whispered. ‘Billy, look.’

He drew out the straw, which made a screeching sound as it left the claws of the plastic lid. It was limp and starting to break.

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Carter's crutches swished through the overgrown grass until he was just a couple of feet from Billy's neighbour's fence. They had discussed only earlier that morning how they would knock on the old man's door, ask if he would let them carry on in his garden, but now it wasn't possible: McDonald's had changed their straws from plastic to paper.

'I guess that's it then,' said Billy.

'Yeah.'

'How did your foot get trapped in the car?' he asked, suddenly.

This time, Carter gave the real answer. His parents had told him many times not to squeeze his leg between the seat and the door.

'And then the lorry hit us. And then I woke up in hospital. And then...'

They would never tell him off again.

'Your parents died, didn't they?'

It was the first time Carter had cried about it; it was the first time anyone had said 'died'. 'And now my foot doesn't work. And I can't do the straws anymore because of stupid Maccies.'

Billy threw his arms around Carter. It knocked the crutches out of his hands, but with Billy gripping so hard, he didn't fall. Billy didn't smell of roses like his mother and wasn't soft; he was sticky and skinny.

'It's okay...' Billy didn't sound like he believed himself. 'At least the paper straws won't hurt the earth. You know?'

Carter nodded, banging his chin on Billy's bony shoulder. He broke the hug, squatted to the floor on one leg, and wiped his nose, leaving a trail on his sleeve. 'I guess so.'

‘It’ll be okay.’

‘You’re obliging, Billy.’

They sat there, silently. Carter glanced towards the house and wondered what the adults were talking about – maybe Grandpa, the car accident, or Tara’s man. Or maybe they were talking about plastic straws. All that potential.

‘Billy,’ said Carter.

‘Yeah?’

‘I’ve been thinking about towers...’

**Word Count: 1498**