

Discovery - A Tom Sharpe Adventure (The Adventures of Tom Sharpe Book 1)

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AUTHORS NOTES

There were a lot of times that I didn't think I would ever finish this book, and there were long layoffs along the way, and many other things (family, life, jobs) that meant it take longer to finish it. However, in their own small way, each event and occasion added to the depth of the book and Tom became as familiar to me as though I knew him personally.

However, here we are now and I'd like to add a big thank you to everyone who has supported me in their own way and provided feedback, reviews and encouragement along the way, I'm sure you know who you are!

Please enjoy it, and if you do, watch out for Book 2: The Gold of San Pedro, which will be along sooner than it took me to write this one.

Thanks,

Pete

Chapter 1 – The Discovery of Something Special

It was Thursday morning; nearly the end of the school week in early May. The sun was shining through the curtain cracks in Tom's room.

'Thomas! Thomas!'

Tom Sharpe lifted his head, pushed back the hair from his face and groaned. He knew he had heard something, but wasn't sure what. Just before his head could collapse back onto the pillow, he heard it again.

'Thomas, get up, or you'll be late again!'

There was no doubt this time; Mum was definitely shouting up the stairs. Tom rolled over and looked at the clock – 7:36. The numbers seemed to glow defiantly at him as they changed to 7:37. As he conceded defeat that there would be no more sleep, he sat up in bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Little did he know that today his life would change forever in ways that he couldn't yet imagine.

He returned his mother's shout with one of his own: 'I'm up, Mum! Be down in a minute!'

'Mum, he's not up yet!' Tom's seven-year-old sister, Susan, yelled down the stairs. 'I haven't seen his door open yet. He's lying!' Generally, she and Tom got on with each other, but there was no sibling loyalty when it came to obeying their parents, or playing grass. Come to think about it, 'getting on' was perhaps too favourable; mutual tolerance he decided was more appropriate.

'Well, he'd better hurry up or there'll be trouble!' His mother said to Susan from the hallway, loud enough for Tom to hear.

That was it! Tom hauled himself out of bed. Last night had been a late one as he had gone to the cinema with his girlfriend, Polly. She'd persuaded him to go and see the latest romantic comedy starring teen idol Paul Brandon. Tom didn't like him much, being jealous of his good looks and Hollywood star money as most teenage boys would be. However, his co-star, Terri Trumane, was a different matter. Tom liked her all right, so from his point of view, she made the film very watchable. They had gone on a Wednesday as it was '2 for 1' at the local cinema and Polly had been desperate to see the film. It was an acknowledgment of responsibility that Tom's parents had recently let him go to the cinema without having to be accompanied by a parent. And so, how could Tom say no? An evening with the real Polly and of course a virtual Terri Trumane. Of course he'd said yes, resistance would have been futile after all. Tom was thirteen, well, nearly fourteen. In fact, it was his birthday today. Not his real birthday, though; just his one-month-exactly-to-go birthday, and the countdown was fully on. Polly Ann Watkins was fourteen already. She was three months older than Tom, but he didn't mind. How long had they officially been boyfriend and girlfriend now? In his freshly woken state, thoughts were a little slow forming. Oh yes, five months, three weeks and...five days. Polly had informed him last night that it was their six-month anniversary on Saturday. Note to self: remember Saturday! There was a chance he would forget, a pretty good chance at that, but at least the thought was logged.

Throwing back his Arsenal home colours duvet cover, he got out of bed and noticed that last night's clothes were strewn on the floor and not in the laundry bag where they should be. Quickly, he rectified that. His mother constantly urged him to put his dirty clothes in the bag. Sometimes he remembered, but most times not.

Tom was struggling to think about the morning and what he should do. Oh yes, shower! He groaned for a second time and hurried from his bedroom, across the hallway. Thankfully, the bathroom door was open, and more importantly, was free. He rushed inside and shut the door with a bang. Pausing to take stock of himself in the mirror, Tom admired his reflection, his mousy brown hair, the scattered freckles across his cheeks and nose, the blue eyes staring back at him and the crumpled Arsenal Gunners pyjamas. He liked football, but wasn't in the school football team. He only really followed Arsenal because of his father; that and the fact that he just had to have a different team to his brother. Edward was aged ten, but sometimes going on thirty – he was

an avid Liverpool supporter and could readily quote any team statistic from the last two seasons if asked; and he like to be asked, as long as the statistics were favourable of course.

Momentarily daydreaming despite himself, Tom aimed an imaginary penalty, beating the Manchester United goalkeeper, but as he did so, he stubbed his toe against the sink upstand.

'Ow, that hurt!' Tom yelped, hobbling around the bathroom for a few seconds. As no one was there to offer sympathy, it seemed pointless to extend the matter, and so he shook himself out of his pyjamas, leaving them on the floor and turned the shower on. However, it still didn't stop him complaining to anybody that might possibly hear through the noise of the shower and the closed door about how much his toe was hurting. But the hot water was invigorating and Tom soon forgot his pain and finally started to wake up, even half singing. The good mood evaporated like the steam from the hot water and he was brought back down to earth as his mother rapped on the bathroom door.

'Thomas, how many times do I have to ask you? Hurry up! Edward and Susan have been ready for ages. As usual, we're waiting for you.'

'Just coming, Mum,' Tom shouted over the noise of the water, hastily turning the shower off. He really hated being called Thomas. It always sounded as though he were being told off, which to be fair at times he was, especially this morning. He preferred to be called Tom. Thinking about it, the pet names that Polly called him were almost on a par with Thomas. When she said them in public, it always made Tom cringe, eeuurggh!

As he dried himself, it was more of a token gesture. Legs were done, and so were arms and chest, but between the toes didn't get a look in and well, as he couldn't see his back, there wasn't a lot of point in drying it was there? After all, as soon as he put his school shirt on, that would dry his back. It was a good rationale he thought. He then wiped the steam off the mirror and made a small attempt to untouse his hair. Wrapping the towel around himself, he opened the bathroom door and nearly ran straight into his mother.

'Pyjamas, Thomas!' she snapped.

Tom ducked back inside the bathroom and retrieved said articles of clothing and hurried back across the hallway into his room.

'Edward! Susan!' his mum called, letting out an exasperated sigh. 'Have you brushed your teeth yet?' She wanted to make sure that at least two out of three children would be ready if it was the last thing she achieved for the day.

While Tom got dressed in his room, he heard the thunder of his younger brother and sister coming back up the stairs and into the bathroom. Shortly afterwards, he heard the usual protests from his sister as Mum brushed her hair.

'Mum! Leave it! That hurts! Let go!'

'One day I'll cut all of your hair off, young lady, and then you won't have this trouble!'

The sounds from his sister promptly ceased. Susan was seven, and her hair was mousy brown, a similar colour to Tom and their mother's, but it was long, well past her shoulders, and so tended to get tangled easily. When tangled and when her mother was allowed near her hair, there were the usual shrieks, occasional tears, and sulky face afterwards. Of course Tom would openly laugh at this, which only served to infuriate his sister.

At first, there was very little noise from Edward until he too obviously was being attacked by the vicious hair brush, wielded so deftly and accurately by his mother. The protestations from Edward and then the curt voice from his mother led Tom to remember just how she always managed to get his hair brushed. First she would take aim, move in, then somehow as he moved his head out of the way, his mum would have somehow anticipated the move, and the brush would be there waiting. There was no escape. Even Tom the age he was, was not completely free of the dreaded brush, but luckily the occasions were few and far between now. Edward's hair was quite long, he liked it that way, completely hid his ears and for a lot of the time, his eyes as well. It was much darker in colour than either Tom or Susan's. Despite his parents insisting on it being cut, he was pretty skilful at managing to avoid it.

When Tom finished putting his shoes on, he stood up. Or rather, he tried to stand up, but his legs wouldn't let him. He felt a tingling sensation that started from the very ends of his toes and quickly travelled up his legs. It was like pins and needles, but there wasn't the numbness normally associated with that. Tom sat back down again with a thump on the bed. He didn't know what to think or say. Before his brain could compute what he was going to do next, the feeling disappeared. As he tried to stand up again for the second time, he did so without any strange accompanying effects. No tingling, no anything. What did it mean? Should he say something to his Mum, or would she tell him that he was being silly. Of course she would, he thought that himself. It sounded so daft already in just his mind, let alone trying to speak about it! Forcing his thoughts back to Thursday morning, the noises still emanating from the bathroom helped distract him from what had just happened. Leaving his room, Tom rushed past the open bathroom door and hurried downstairs for breakfast.

In the kitchen, the radio was on, playing a song by the most recent boyband, 'Hands Up to Heaven', by what was their name? New Directions or something. Stupid name Tom thought for a stupid band, but Polly liked them. His taste in music had been influenced by his parents, but he didn't think it was bad. At school, everyone was always talking about the coolest bands and singers. Those friends of Tom's that had older brothers and sisters had a real advantage, Tom thought, about being exposed to new and cool music. Maybe in a couple of years, Edward would feel the same about his older brother.

Alfie, a golden labrador, was in the kitchen under the table, where his younger brother and sister had obviously left a little something for the dog on the floor as well. Tom noticed a couple of pieces of toast crust and some Cheerios on the floor disappearing rapidly as the canine-hoover sniffed them out and cleaned up.

Pouring himself a bowl of cornflakes, Tom sat down at the table and proceeded to eat. 'Alfie, out of the way!' he said, as the dog re-appeared from under the table and dripped saliva over his left trouser leg.

'Eugh! Mum, Alfie's slobbering again and it's all over my trousers.' Of course nobody was there to hear his disgust. 'Alfie, basket!!'

Alfie was banished to his basket and lay there looking hopefully at Tom as his mother came back downstairs with Susan and Edward following behind, pushing each other, competing for the position immediately behind her.

'Thomas, if you're not able to get up in the morning when you're called, then we'll have to review whether or not you can stay out later at nights. You know that don't you?'

Ignoring the sniggering of his siblings, Tom groaned once again.

'Yes, Mum, but I will be ready. See ... there's plenty of time left.' A hopeful glance at the kitchen clock showed that not quite to be the case.

His mother was also not so convinced. 'Where's your tie then? And look at that mess on your trousers. Go get a cloth and wipe it off.'

'But, Mum, it's from Alfie. It's horrible! Do I have to? Can you do it?'

'No, I most certainly can't, young man! And don't forget to put your tie on and brush your teeth either!'

Dragging his feet over to the sink as slowly as he could, Tom did as he was told, and the subsequent cleaning left an embarrassing wet patch on one trouser leg. Rummaging through his school bag upstairs he found his tie, which had clearly not been untied properly before he had taken it off the previous day, and probably for every day that week. It looked very sad and tired. His younger brother and sister still got some help from his mum in tying their ties, but Tom had to tie his on his own. So whenever he could get away with making life easier, he did. Taking the tie and going to the bathroom, a half-hearted attempt at making it look presentable round his neck was made. Finally, it was teeth brushing and then a smile to himself. He'd managed to get ready in time; of course it had been planned to perfection, and would have been perfection if the little incident in the bedroom hadn't happened.

Everyone met downstairs with his mum breathing a sigh of relief. At 8.29 a.m., all three children were ready for school.

The walk from their house on Wytchgrove Crescent to Elmbank School took on average around fifteen minutes, sometimes longer, sometimes shorter, depending on which child had it their mind to drag their feet on a given day. This morning Tom looked up and down the street as they left the driveway of their house. Where was someone to walk to school with when you wanted them? He really didn't relish the idea of walking all the way with Susan and Edward; he was so past their bickering, and then there was also the whole walking to school with Mum bit as well!

As Tom walked slightly behind his brother, sister and mother, a thought hit him from right out of nowhere and he looked at his mum in a different light for the first time. He was actually trying to imagine how Polly would look when she was grown up. His mother was taller than his father, but Tom was taller than Polly, and he was pleased at that. Furthermore, she had blonde hair, straight usually, but curly if she forgot to straighten to it, which came just past her shoulders. She had piercing blue eyes and freckles, a little like Polly, but his Mum's nose had an ever so slight crook to it: the result of a childhood hockey injury. Hearing his name shouted shook him out of his daydream. "Wow, that was too weird," he thought to himself, "I'm waay too young to be thinking like that!"

Tom's best friend, Steven Tomkins, shouted again and ran over.

'Ready for science first thing?' Steve asked chirpily. 'Finished your homework? Morning, Mrs Sharpe,' he added before Tom had a chance to answer.

'Good morning, Steve. How's your mother today? Will you let her know this afternoon please that I'll pick the children up this evening at the usual time.'

'She's good thanks Mrs Sharpe and yes, will do,' replied Steve, as he and Tom headed away from the other Sharpe family members.

'Bye, Mum!' Tom shouted before turning into conversation with his friend as they left the others.

'Perfect timing. I just couldn't face walking to school this morning with Miss Tell-tale and Mr Know-it-all!'

'All harmonious and loving in the Sharpe household then huh? So, anyway, c'mon, spill the news, tell me about the movie date then, full gory details accepted. Just saying "it was okay" will not be allowed and will most definitely result in a punch!'

'It was okay,' Tom replied. 'Ouch, I hadn't finished! Polly really enjoyed it, but you know what? It was no Iron Man or Spider-man. Now those are films you should see in the cinema!'

'True enough,' his friend agreed and with solemn faces, they walked in silence for a few moments, lost in their thoughts of superheroes and the cinema. In fact, Tom wondered what it would really be like to be a superhero; after all, doesn't every teenager dream of being one? Maybe they do he thought, but how many does it actually happen to in real life? His answer to himself was of course nobody, but then again Tom didn't know that what was going to happen to him that very day and the days to follow, would forever change his life.

Not far from the school gates, Tom caught sight of Polly, and so it seemed, she had also seen him. She ran over.

'Tommy, hello my sweetie!' she cried, grabbing his hand and squeezing it.

Tom cringed as she spoke, but half returned the squeeze. With his face rapidly reddening, he managed a return 'Hi,' to his girlfriend.

'Is that all I'm worth, Tom Sharpe? Sometimes I wonder about you!' And with that, she skipped away to her friends and through the school gates.

'Slick, Rick! Slick!' taunted Steve. 'I wish I could handle women as well as you!' Steve bluffed his repose to Tom. The stiffening of his body and the way he phrased his last words, in an almost abrupt tone had gone unnoticed by Tom as had the subtle change in tone of his voice. There was one thought he didn't want to keep to himself, but how could he ask Steve? And so he kept quiet for now.

Tom shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant manner, attempting to give off a not-caring look, but not succeeding. Spying friends up ahead rescued Tom from his potential dilemma and so the pair also rushed through the school gates to meet up with their pals.

Chapter 2 – Morning Lessons

Meeting up with their friends playing football against the wall of the sports hall, Tom and Steve threw their bags into an existing pile near them and joined in for the last few minutes until the school bell rang for lessons. Bags were then collected and slung over the shoulders of already dishevelled boys, with ties askew and shirt tails mostly fully out.

Once seated in their classroom, Tom and Steve had registration with their form tutor, Mr Parkney, who was also their science teacher. On a Thursday, the first lesson of the day was double science, so the pair of them would stay there until morning break. After registration had finished those pupils who had lessons elsewhere got up from their desks and left, while those from other classes joined Tom and Steve in room 2A.

Polly was in the same science class and entered the room deep in conversation, mixed with giggles, with her best friend, Mary Miller. Upon hearing the noise, Tom and Steve turned around to see them and Tom smiled at Polly, mouthing a silent 'Hi.' Steve, at this point, turned red as he and Mary caught each other's eyes, and bashfully looked away. This fact didn't escape Tom and indeed provided him with an excuse to return the teasing that Steve had given to him about Polly earlier.

'So, come on then, why the beetroot face Steve, you fancy Mary, don't you?'

'N-n-no, I don't. Why do you say that?'

'Because every time you see her you can't speak and you blush; you know you do, look at it now. It's so scarlet, I can almost feel the heat from here! It's so unbelievably, massively obvious to anyone!'

'Look alright, maybe I do a little, but I've no idea whether she likes me or not. Has Polly ever said anything? I'm rubbish at this sort of thing. Can you ask her for me?'

'Ask who, Polly or Mary?'

'Polly of course, if Mary likes me, maybe just a little? Oh, don't worry about it, it's okay!'

'No, it's okay; sure I will. I'll have a quiet word with Polly the next time I get a chance to, and then maybe we can get rid of this blushing all the time once and for all!'

'Not sure about that,' Steve mumbled as Mr Parkney asked the class to settle down.

Tom looked at Mr Parkney as he was speaking and wondered how old he was, at least in his thirties he guessed. That just seemed too old for Tom to comprehend. Of course his mum and dad were older than that, but they had to be; after all, they had a teenage son. In fact, they pretty much have to be old, and so the rules are different. "Did Mr Parkney have a girlfriend, Tom wondered? He certainly didn't wear a wedding ring. Did he live alone with a cat or a dog, he wondered, or maybe still with his parents? Would Tom still be living with his parents when he was that old? He really hoped not, as that would probably mean that Susan and Edward would still be there and Tom really didn't think he could handle that as well. He decided that being old and living on his own might not be such a bad idea, but really wasn't sure about the possibility of having a cat or a dog to look after as well as himself." Add to that one of life's big questions for a teenager; "who would do the ironing and cooking and cleaning? Did Mr Parkney have a cleaner? Now that would be very useful!" Tom thought.

There were twenty-four pupils in the class, arranged in pairs on high chairs with a large, fixed desk for each pair to work from. Around the walls were the usual pictures you might find in a science room: a picture of the universe and planets, the human body (cut away of course) and the periodic table to name but a few. The topic they had started on last week was all about 'Passengers in a Bacterial Body.' The homework from the previous lesson had been to discuss what bugs the children were aware of and what those bugs did to people; whether they were beneficial or caused harm. Both Tom and Steve had done their homework and when they were asked to share their

findings, Tom put forward Salmonella, while Steve volunteered E. coli. Other answers from within the room included Lactobacillus casei (expertly read from an empty bottle of active yoghurt brought in from home by Mark Bonds), and cyanobacteria from Jennifer Brown, which is responsible for the production of oxygen within the earth's atmosphere. Other volunteered answers included blood sucking bed bugs, and head lice, which caused a mass 'eurrggh, sir, that's gross,' from the class.

After everyone had volunteered their homework answers, the class were taught that the human body contains over one hundred trillion bacteria and what just some of those bacteria do. At the end of the lesson, homework was set for each pupil to decide what bug they would like to be; either a benefit or detriment to the human body and why.

At 10.30 a.m., the school bell rang for break time. Suddenly, as the pupils left the room, excitedly talking about which bugs they would like to be, Tom felt a strange sensation, similar to the one he had experienced earlier in the morning. It felt as though his feet were walking on something soft rather than the hard floor he knew was beneath his feet. It felt like pins and needles again, but he knew he hadn't been in any kind of position to get them, so why was he feeling like this? He put his hand out to steady himself against where he knew the top of the desk should be, but it had moved to a different position. Impossible! The desk couldn't just move; his mind must have been playing tricks on him. And then, as quickly as the thoughts entered his mind and his brain sought to process them, the feeling passed and the firm re-assurance of walking back on the shiny tiled floor returned.

'Tom, are you okay?' Steve asked, aware that his friend had stopped talking mid-conversation.

'Yeah, of course, just felt a little dizzy, but okay now, honest. Let's get out of here,' was the reply, and Tom thought nothing more of the incident for the next thirty minutes or so.

Chapter 3 – When Gym Became Very Eventful

Tom liked gym. He was in the school badminton team, which he really enjoyed. Furthermore, he'd competed for the school on several occasions and for the first time last year had been a part of the team selected for the local county championships. In fact, he had done well for his age group and was hoping to be selected again for this year's championships, which were coming up in three weeks. The timing was good as well, as they would be over before exams came. It still meant he would have enough time to fit in some decent revision, or so he reckoned. It was definitely a cause to be excited about, and Tom was feeling really confident about representing his school and doing well. This year, they were being held in the town of Wolverlode, which was a forty-five minute drive away in its grand sports arena. Last year, the event had been held in nearby Porchester, and the event hall there was nowhere near on the same scale as Wolverlode, so that also excited Tom. Who exactly would be representing the school wasn't yet decided, but Tom knew it was obvious that Paul Stewart and James Micklegrass in the upper sixth, who were the present school and county under-19 champions respectively, would be chosen, but who the other eight would be was anyone's guess at the moment.

For school badminton, there were two age groups; the first was 12–15-year-olds and the second was under-19s. Tom had practice in gym class twice a week and after school on a Tuesday and Friday. The after-school classes were spent with all the pupils in the school badminton club and so he would play against younger people and also be shown a master class from the likes of James and Paul, whom he really aspired to be like. His father would usually collect him from school at

5.30 p.m. after the sessions had finished and take him and Polly, who was also in the school team and very much hoping for a trip to Wolverlade this year, home. She only lived a couple of roads away from Tom in number 17 Godalming Close, so it was no problem.

Gym on a Thursday took the year nine children up to lunchtime, which usually gave Tom a really big appetite and an excuse to have a big lunch. After he had changed, Tom entered the sports hall and went over to the trampoline in the corner of the gym hall for a little warm up. He was joined by Steve, who also played badminton, but hadn't managed to be selected for the school team; Polly and several other friends. The gym assistant, Mrs Watson, would supervise them while Mr Wesson, the gym teacher, finished putting out the badminton nets.

Polly was first onto the trampoline and began bouncing, her long, strawberry-blonde hair flailing everywhere so she couldn't see where she was going. Stopping to tie her hair back, she giggled, her face already a little flushed, and Steve joined her. As long as they remained on their own half of the trampoline, there was plenty of space for two. Tom stood at the side, watching his friends bouncing up and down and trying to execute full somersaults. He laughed at them as their first attempts resulted in arms and legs going everywhere and no somersault even coming close to being achieved. However, at second attempt, success prevailed to a rapturous round of applause from Tom.

As he stood there watching his friends, Tom once again felt the same tingling in his feet as he had earlier. However, this time it was a lot stronger and he could feel the tingling sensation travelling up his legs from his feet. It was almost like some kind of energy flow. He thought it very strange though that his mind apparently had enough time to separate out that feeling and yet allow another thought, that of "this is what happens to super heroes isn't it?" to also be present. It didn't feel bad, more strange more than anything else, but he couldn't understand why it was occurring. To be honest, he was beginning to feel awkward and a little concerned as this was the third time that morning, all in the space of a few hours. Nothing like this had happened to him before and he wasn't sure what to do. If he spoke out loud, what would everyone say? 'Oh, don't be silly, Tom! What you on about? It's nothing!' Instead, he kept quiet. He was aware of his friends enjoying themselves on the trampoline and the others stood to the side waiting for their turn, all chatting excitedly, but it was as though he were hearing them through a tunnel. The sound was there, but muted. His mind was somewhere else and where that place was he didn't know, but he did know that he didn't like it.

As before, almost as immediately as the sensation entered through Tom's legs, it disappeared, leaving him really confused and momentarily disorientated. He sat down suddenly to collect his thoughts and compose himself again. However, his friends saw something slightly different; Tom actually collapsed to the floor. Catching sight of their friends rushing over to Tom, Polly and Steve stopped their acrobatic manoeuvres and climbed down off the trampoline.

Completely embarrassed at all the attention, Tom stood up stiffly and pulled away from his friends, telling them that everything was fine and there was nothing to worry about. Joining the developing throng of friends at the side of the trampoline, Mrs Watson asked Tom if he was all right and if he needed to go and see the school nurse.

'No, I'm okay thanks Miss, honestly. I just felt dizzy for a minute, but I'm okay now.'

'Well, if you're sure, dear. I know it's a little hot in here today.'

'Yes Miss, it must be the heat'. Tom quickly seized on this as an excuse. 'It just got to me is all.'

Mrs Watson left the matter as it was for the time being.

Polly took Tom by the arm and led him away a little distance so they could speak in private. Her face was really flushed from the efforts on the trampoline and her hair was not in its usually well-presented state.

'Are you okay, Tom? It's okay, you can tell me, you know.'

'Yes, I'm fine. I actually feel really fine now; just didn't for a couple of minutes back there, that's all.' He used the same excuse as with Mrs Watson. 'It's just hot in here.'

'What was the problem? Shall we go and see the nurse?' Polly asked.

'No, really, I am okay,' said Tom, shaking himself free of Polly, and as if to try and prove it beyond doubt, he walked back over to the trampoline as if on a mission to prove everyone wrong about what had happened. Unfortunately, by then it was already occupied by another two pupils.

Before he could do anything else, Mr Wesson shouted over to the class to say that the badminton courts were ready and they should finish up what they doing and head over. Tom and Polly, still in the vicinity of each other, turned and headed over, closely followed by Steve; all of them picking up their rackets on the way.

Two courts had been set up at the far end of the gym hall, away from the trampoline. While the three friends were heading there, another five pupils from their gym group were already sat on benches at the side wall behind one of the courts. It seemed a shame to be inside on such a sunny day and most of the other pupils were outside practising for the upcoming school sports day. If the weather was acceptable, the pupils were only allowed one indoor gym session a week. The other, they would all be outside.

'Thank you for being so prompt, ladies and gentlemen!' boomed Mr Wesson in his best announcer's voice. 'Let's see who is going to play together first then shall we?' He consulted his list of pupils. 'Sharpe and Watkins against Jones L and Wessex.'

Paul Wessex wasn't in many of Tom's classes, but the pair knew each other and got on well together. Lisa Jones, on the other hand, Tom didn't like. He thought she was stuck-up and liked to look down her nose at people. She didn't help herself at times either, by playing up to that attitude and carrying an air of snootiness and superiority. He was glad that he wasn't paired with her.

Mr Wesson carried on, 'Tomkins and Jones W against Chenrabathy and Edwards.'

That was it; players were allocated to both courts and so they went off to play. While Tom and Polly ran around to their side of the court, Lisa and Paul began a little argument about who would stand to the front of the court. Tom and Polly, being quite comfortable playing together, went to their usual positions of Polly taking the front and Tom covering the rear. Luckily, the argument across the net was settled quickly and their opponents served first. Lisa served her first shot deep and high above Polly's head, but Tom was equal to it and returned quite easily back over the net. He was feeling absolutely fine now after the episode a few minutes ago. Focusing on the game, it was all forgotten about.

Several rallies later, Tom and Polly had taken a 7-2 lead over their opponents. They then swapped around on the court, with Tom serving for their eighth point of the game; he held the shuttlecock in his left hand, feathers facing away from him, and began to swing the racket in its serving arc. As

he did so, the tingling sensation followed instantaneously by pins and needles, flowing up his legs at an incredible speed. This time the effect sent the whole of the lower half of his body into spasmodic shaking. Fouling the serve, the shuttlecock trajectory was straight into the net, where it remained, trapped in the mesh. As the shout of 'What a rubbish serve!' came across the net, Polly rushed forward to Tom, seeing him shaking and trembling, not knowing what on earth was going on with his body. His opponents finally realised that something more serious was wrong and so they shouted for Mr Wesson to come quick. Hearing the shouts, the players on the other court immediately stopped their game to hurry over.

As everyone gathered around Tom, asking if he was okay and what the matter was, Tom suddenly began to feel as if the commotion around him was somewhere else. He was in the tunnel again, but this time it felt different. He didn't feel afraid of it; it was welcoming and above anything else he just wanted to get away from the noise around him. He closed his eyes as tight as he could. The welcoming sensation calmed him, relaxed his body, and the tingling and pins and needles dissipated. As it did so, he felt as though the calming feeling was flowing outwards from within him and once more he felt in control of his body and emotions again. It was all becoming too much for him. Surely someone else in the gym hall was feeling it as well, it was too big for him to just feel it, surely? As he thought this, a sudden silence descended: no tunnel sound, no nothing sound; it was quiet. It had only been a matter of seconds since the incident, yet to Tom it felt like minutes had passed, possibly longer, he couldn't tell. But why was there no sound at all? Why had everyone suddenly stopped? He opened his eyes.

It didn't make sense! It couldn't be! For his age, Tom was of average height, standing a little over 1.5 m tall, and he knew that Mr Wesson was an awful lot taller than he was. Why then was he now looking down on his teacher?

He promptly shut his eyes again and shuffled his feet, because they must still have been on the floor. Where else could they be? As he did so, he remembered the feeling he had had in the classroom, when he had reached out to the desk to steady himself. It had felt lower than he knew it should have done, but how? His feet couldn't have left the floor, could they?

Once again, forcing his eyes to remain open this time, Tom looked around him and then down at the faces of his teacher and his friends. Down? How could he be looking down? Somebody was playing tricks on him and when he was dizzy, he had been put on a stool. That was it. Steve was playing a joke. Ha ha! Good one Steve, he thought to himself. And then he looked down at his feet. There was no stool.

'Excuse me,' a voice in his head spoke, at least Tom assumed it was in his own head. 'Excuse me, hello!' said the voice again. This time Tom listened. 'Something very strange is happening here. What's going on?'

'Thanks for stating the obvious. Tell me something I don't know,' Tom retorted. Now he was sure it was in his own mind. 'This can't be happening to me. How is it happening to me? Why is it happening to me? What's happening to me?' Tom had never had a conversation with himself before and if there were to be any future conversations in his head, he wished that they would never again be on a topic like this.

Any answers to these questions would for now have to go unanswered as Tom again heard Mr Wesson's voice. This time the sound of his teacher speaking to him silenced the bickering inner voices. The words penetrated his mind like a speeding train and then stopped at the gates of mind, which were busily trying to register what was going on. At the point of registering, Tom crumpled to the floor. The next thing he knew, he had opened his eyes for a third time and people were now looking down on him.

'Ah, that feels better! This is more normal,' murmured Tom.

As the previously silenced cacophony of voices returned around him, he closed his eyes once more. However, this time, the voices had an added excitement to them, confusion and disbelief at what they had just seen. But what was that? What had they just seen? Tom didn't know. Mr Wesson didn't know either, but it was his job to look after the pupils as best he could and so he was trying to do just that. Some of the pupils that had been gathered around Tom had ran outside, excitedly spreading the news of what they had seen to their friends and probably anyone else within earshot.

Some seconds later, and for the fourth time, Tom opened his eyes and as his eyelids rose, bringing what was in front of him to clear vision, he hoped that it would be normal. Well, perhaps hoping for normal was too optimistic. He half sat up, resting on his left arm for support, and could see Polly crying a little distance away; Steve was stood watching him, looking confused. Lisa and Paul were talking to Mr Wesson and from the snatches of conversation he could pick out; it was obviously related to him. He heard 'floating in the air', but didn't believe it. He had seen far too many action and adventure films to know that that was exactly where stories like that belonged, on the screen, not in a secondary school gym hall. In real life, it was impossible. Tom could see other pupils running in all directions, and the crowd in the hall getting larger by the second. He couldn't clearly see faces or expressions, but he could tell by the excited chatter that they all knew something really strange had happened and it was caused by him. As well as Polly's crying there were shocked faces, and curious faces; who they belonged to he didn't see clearly nor at this precise moment did he care. Why had this happened to him?

As Tom came around fully, Mr Wesson tried to concentrate on him, deflecting the questions from the others at this point as best he could. Tom sat up.

'Sharpe, what on earth were you playing at? What were those shenanigans? How did you do that?'

There was a definite tone of uncertainty in his teacher's voice, as though he himself knew that he had borne witness to something inexplicable. Tom also thought about the word 'shenanigans'. It sounded so strange to hear at this time, and he almost wanted to ask his teacher what 'shenanigans' were, then thought better of it. He was probably in enough trouble without adding sarcasm and cheekiness to the situation.

'I-I-I d-don't know, s-s-sir!' stammered Tom. 'The last thing I remember is feeling a little funny and then, and then, a really strange sensation came over me and something happened I think, and now, and now I don't kn-know, sir.'

'Tom, you were up there, up there taller than Mr Wesson. You ... your feet were here.' Steve had awoken from wherever his mind had been for the last couple of minutes and stooped down to speak to his friend. He was pointing to his chest. 'They were up here!' His voice rose as he described the last statement and he could barely get the words out.

On hearing Tom's voice, Polly rushed over and agreed with his friend. Struggling to get her words out coherently through the tears, she too pointed to her chest.

'I know that it's impossible; there must have been a trick, but how, Tom? How? It looked so real!'

"That's because I guess it was," Tom thought to himself. "So now I know why I felt like I did, but what does it mean? I'm certainly no Dynamo or the other one, whatever his name is? I'm just Tom, and he can't do things like that!" He closed his eyes once more.

Chapter 4 – What Happened After Gym?

With all of the confusion surrounding the incident, Mr Wesson had to make some decisions. Most of the pupils who had been outside were now inside the sports hall, and making quite a lot of noise with all of the excited conversation. In the middle of it all wishing that he could be anywhere else at all on the planet or otherwise, was Tom Sharpe, still sitting on the floor. He now had his eyes open, but was still looking lost and confused.

'Mrs Watson, can you take young Mr Sharpe here away from this and to the treatment room. Miss Watkins, you and Mr Tomkins can accompany your friend.'

They both nodded as Tom was helped to his feet and led out of the sports hall.

'Right then, everyone who's in here that shouldn't be, back out to where you should be!' There was no mistaking the authority behind Mr Wesson's voice. There would be time for him to reflect later, but right now he had a responsibility to his pupils and he was going to make sure that they at least had some physical education that morning.

'Those of you who are meant to be in here, let's get back to playing some badminton. Everyone else who is not playing badminton, outside please. Now!'

All of a sudden, the crowd rapidly dissipated, chattering noisily as they went. Rumours were no doubt spreading like wildfire as a snippet of conversation left one child's mouth and was reinterpreted as it entered another's mind, exiting from that person with a further twist and embellishment.

Walking towards the sports hall exit, Tom spoke to Mrs Watson.

'I'm fine now, Miss, can I go back in, please? It's all okay. Can't we just forget whatever happened and go back in?'

'Sorry, Tom,' Mrs Watson said kindly. 'I think we should take you to the treatment room so the nurse can have a look at you and then we need to get in touch with your parents.'

'Oh no!' Tom mumbled quietly, lowering his head and walking the rest of the way in silence alongside the gym assistant.

Behind, both Steve and Polly exchanged looks of puzzlement and confusion, but they also said nothing. Words escaped them for the time being. Some sort of miracle had just been witnessed, but both of them were utterly shocked and bewildered to speak out loud about it.

Reaching the treatment room, Mrs Watson retrieved a key from her left pocket and unlocked the door, letting the three friends in. The first thing to notice was the bed along the wall that the door opened onto, and two chairs to the left as you entered the room and a desk with a chair straight ahead beneath the window. Although the vertical blinds were drawn, there was no escaping from the shafts of sunlight penetrating the gaps in the blinds, spreading their golden glow around the room. The last decorations in the room were a medicine cabinet in between the desk and the two chairs, and a built-in sink and a high-level cupboard on the wall with glass sliding doors.

'I have to leave you here for a minute or two while I go and get Mrs McCluskey,' she said. Mrs McCluskey was the school nurse: an elderly woman with a matronly manner and rather rotund appearance. Moreover, she also worked in the school library and that was where Mrs Watson headed off to, shaking her head as she left the room.

As soon as she did, two voices in unison assaulted Tom's ears. Already battered from the previous onslaught, he reeled from this one.

'Stop! Stop! Please!' he pleaded.

They did as they were told then began again, but quieter this time.

'Tom, what happened? How...why...it was unbelievable!' Polly was first with the questions.

Suddenly, Steve followed with more basic questions. 'Wow, man! Whatever you did, it was pretty awesome! That. Was. The. Coolest. Thing I have ever seen!! How the bloody hell did you do it?' And seconds later, 'Ouch!' as Polly hit his arm.

'Steven Tomkins behave yourself! This isn't funny; it's really serious,' she said.

'Sorry! Go on, mate. Why did you that?'

'What exactly did happen?' asked Tom in a quiet and definitely subdued meek voice. 'I think I sort of know a little, but not everything, so please can you fill me in?'

'How can you not know?' asked Polly.

'I just don't, okay, so please tell me exactly what occurred from the start.'

'Okay. I was behind you on the court and you were about to serve--'

'I know that much,' Tom interrupted.

'As I was saying,' continued Polly, 'I have never ever seen anything like it in my life, and I bet nobody else has either! You were about to serve and suddenly you dropped the shuttlecock and began sort of shaking, your entire lower half was just moving and ... and sort of shaking or-or vibrating.'

'I felt that,' Tom said, 'I couldn't control it; it was so weird and strange. And then?'

'And then you lifted into the air, like you were levitating or something, as though someone were pulling you up on a rope, but there was no rope. You were floating, Tom, just hanging there in mid-air!'

'She's right, Tom. It was like you were Iron Man, except without the big metal suit and the rockets coming out of your feet, you know, just as he starts to take off, but apart from that ...' As a rule, Steve liked to link what he had seen in real life to the big screen. Sometimes it worked; on other occasions, it was a pretty slim comparison. This was one of the latter occasions and for this, he received another punch on the arm for it from Polly.

'It felt really strange ...' began Tom, but he got no further as Mrs McCluskey entered the room, opening the door wide and announcing to the audience within not to worry because she

would sort it out. In fact, her first deed was to banish Polly and Steve from the room. They didn't like it, but mumbling and grumbling, said, "Yes, Mrs McCluskey" in near perfect stereo and left the room. Finally, Polly gave one more final, worried, backwards glance to Tom as the door was shut behind her.

'Now then, Mr Sharpe, or shall I call you Thomas?'

Annoyingly, there it was again – Thomas! It was as if he were being told off, but this time he really couldn't understand why. Indeed, the brain of a teenage boy is a fairly simplistic beast; however, this morning, Tom's brain was being asked questions that it just couldn't answer and so Tom was floundering at this point.

'Please, Miss, call me Tom if you don't mind. I don't really like Thomas,' he replied.

'All right then, young Tom, what is all this I hear about you floating in the air in the school gym?' her voice was questioning, but kind, and also really down-to-earth as though it wasn't some kind of freak occurrence, which of course it was, but Tom felt a little better nonetheless, and he answered readily. *

Welcome to the world of Tom Sharpe

Tom Sharpe is just your average teenage boy, until one day he realises that he has phenomenal abilities which are part of the Sharpe family secret.

Join Tom on a voyage of discovery

Having discovered this, what will happen at the local badminton championships and how will his best friend Steve and girlfriend, Polly react? What is this mysterious family secret that he shares with his Grandpa Willy, a hero of the First World War and part of an elite crack squad?

And lastly, who is the mysterious and illustrious L dG, and what does he want with Tom? Whatever happens, Tom Sharpe will never be the same again.....

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