

### **The Seagulls have landed**

The pier gates were closed: Firmly shut tight. I shook them to make sure, but they didn't budge. I couldn't believe it.

Here I was, Connor King, celebrating my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, meeting my mates on the pier for unlimited free rides followed by as much food and drink as we could eat from any of the food outlets on Brighton pier.

It was my uncle's present to me. Making up for 13 years of no presents at all it's true, but a brilliant gift all the same. Uncle Jack had turned over a new leaf, he said. He wanted to make up for never coming to see me, for all those wrong turnings he'd made over the last few years.

I was surprised he'd found it so difficult to find our home, even though it was tucked away in the woods, on the edge of Brighton, but I guess he didn't have google maps on his phone, probably because he didn't have a phone.

So here I was, with just a few minutes before my mates were meant to turn up, stuck outside the pier looking through the bars to see why nothing was going on. Midday, it said on my ticket. From midday until 3pm I was supposed to have the pier to myself. Well, me and Gemma, DJ and Sparks. They were my three mates who were coming to my birthday party. I began to worry that I should have listened to my mum, who'd told me not to listen to my uncle, who wouldn't know a straight and narrow path if he walked along it. This seemed a weird thing to say. The path to our house isn't straight, though it is quite narrow. It really didn't help with the directions.

A seagull was watching me from the gate post. He screeched, launched himself into the air and flew over to land on top of the security guard's hut, which seemed empty. The gull looked around and more screeching. It seemed to be aimed at the other seagulls – I now noticed there were at least ten of them – who seemed to be watching me. They all answered in turn. Strange. Perhaps they were singing happy birthday to me!

At that moment, I spied movement in the security guard's hut. A short bearded guy appeared, huffing and puffing, as if he'd just climbed up a long flight of steps, which was odd as the only thing below us was the sea.

He waddled out of his hut with a large set of keys, a scanning device and a huge syringe filled with a luminous green liquid. I backed away. Whilst I'm all for keeping safe in this day and age, this was scary.

The security guard, Gloria, according to the name badge on his oversized jacket, shuffled over to the model police bike, a children's ride, stuck just in front of the pier. He opened the petrol cap and squeezed the green stuff into it.

Gloria sniggered at me.

“That got you worried didn’t it? Just have to keep the sound muffled and this does the trick. Them seagulls get a bit loud, a bit fractious. They don’t like the sound of sirens”

I noticed that Gloria nodded at the birds, who appeared to nod back. I also noticed that Gloria’s nose looked remarkably beak like. Weird. He grabbed the envelope that Uncle Jack had given me – ‘Pier Party Pass’, it said in big letters.

I hadn’t read any of the small print because it seemed to be in some foreign language. Uncle Jack said it was Portuguese, but I’m not sure I believe him.

“So you’re Jack’s nephew.” He looked me up and down with the eyes of a sparrow-hawk, one of my favourite birds.

“And these must be the other ones.” His gaze turned to take in my three party guests, Gemma, Dj and Sparks who were hurrying up the forecourt of the pier.

“Excellent. Let’s get on shall we?”

Gemma smiled at me. My stomach did the usual forward twist with a half turn and then I smiled back.

“Happy birthday”, she said. DJ and Sparks may have mumbled something too, I didn’t really notice. Gemma passed me a small package wrapped in glitzy paper. A present! For me! That really hit the spot.

“Yo” I said.

“Yo-yo” Gemma replied. We both laughed. It was a standing joke. I’m never without a yo-yo.

“Bit quiet today, ain’t it?” DJ was looking round and it was true that whilst there were loads of seagulls, there were no people around.

Gloria’s sharp eyes landed on DJ. “Only kids allowed out today. Didn’t you hear the news?” I dragged my eyes away from Gemma and glanced at DJ and Sparks. They shrugged and my adrenalin levels went from 0 to 60 as Gloria unlocked the pier gates with 3 clanky keys and let us in.

Gloria returned to her hut and called out to us. “I’m letting the boss know you’ve arrived for your, erm, birthday bash. Look out for General Gully. He’ll be sure to give you the full treament.”

We walked hurriedly along the left hand side of the pier. It was cool and a little breezy and my biggest worry was that some of the rides might not be operating. I could already picture myself on the ghost train with Gemma, comforting her.

Sparks and Gemma kept going on about whether to have burgers or hot dogs, doughnuts or icecream, or whatever.

I guess DJ was unusually subdued. He's normally the one climbing on roofs and somersaulting off. He's really good at Parkour, although he's also got a frequent flier pass for A & E, when things go wrong.

We were going past the fortune teller's caravan when he spoke.

"Hey guys, have you ever watched The Birds?"

I thought that was a stupid question. DJ knows that I'm mad on bird watching. It comes from living in the woods.

I gave him a look. "The film, Connor," he said to me. "Alfred Hitchcock. It's in black and white. This place reminds me of it."

We all paused. There were a lot of birds, seagulls all around. Most were perched on a roof top or a pillar. But they weren't looking at us and I wanted to get this party going.

At that moment the music started. Bob Marley singing 'Don't worry about a thing' started blaring out of the speakers on posts dotted along the pier. The gulls seemed to rise in surprise, then drift effortlessly towards another perching point where they settled again, looking out to sea.

Gemma laughed and grabbed my hand, pulling me forward.

The music seemed to be a signal for the big rides to swing into action. The tinny screams from the ghost train mixing with the chugging of the roller coaster ride pushing the empty carriages up a slope. I didn't notice Bob Marley telling us about the three little birds outside his window as we ran towards the rides at the end of the pier. Not that it would have made any difference. I was in shock because this guy stepped out of the helter skelter – and he looked more like a pirate than Jack Sparrow.

General Gully had the dreadlocks and the goatee beard. He also sported a Viking style helmet, a patch over his right eye and a seagull sitting on his shoulder. He spoke like a Nordic Captain Bird's Eye and I half expected him to hand out fish fingers. Instead, he welcomed us rubbing his rather hairy hands together and saying something about it being a very special day for us all.

He unlocked the doors of an electric blue kiosk to reveal the controls for the waltzer. A dashboard, circular like a dartboard, lit up as multi-coloured lights chased each other round and round. Above it a lever said 'pull'.

I knew Sparks would be all over it. But she wasn't quick enough. The general's hand came down firmly over hers as she tried to pull the lever. He shook his head and signalled for us to get on the waltzer.

Sparks made do with playing with the carriages on the ride. Pulling one, pushing the next, spinning them round. She has to know how everything works, Sparks does. And that's not always a good idea, like with the fire alarms. But that's another story.

The General whistled at us. He was waiting. So we sat down, DJ and Sparks in one carriage and Gemma and me in another and dutifully fastened our seat belts. Then the general pulled the lever and the ride slowly started to move.

“Faster” I yelled, and he pulled the lever down a little further. The waltzer started to speed up.

Then General Gully pointed at the poster on the control box, waved at us and walked away out of sight. Only then did I notice that there were even more seagulls all around, and the only humans we’d seen, General Gully and Gloria, had vanished. A familiar song started to play as the ride picked up a little more pace, but the words were a bit different.

“I feel it in my fingers,

I feel it in my toes.

Seagulls are all around me

And so the feeling grows”.

Was I going mad or were the seagulls screeching along to the music? It was hard to hear Gemma’s screams over the racket they were making. They seemed to be getting louder and louder as the ride went faster and faster. We were flung back against the back of the carriage and whizzed around at dizzying speeds.

With difficulty I searched for the bright blue waltzer control box. As we flashed past every second, I realised there was a seagull standing on the lever. Then I remembered what the poster had said. ‘Screech if you want to go faster’.

And as my senses seemed to fade to black, that’s when I began to wonder if this birthday party was going to be the best ever – or maybe the worst and the last.