

## Bing, bing, bing

by Sho Botham

Racer charged round the corner at top speed. He narrowly missed colliding with a smartly dressed woman holding the lead of her equally, smartly dressed dog.

Chatty and Snail were sitting at the wooden table in the window of the Bluebird Café when Racer rushed past in the street. Chatty ran out to call after him but he was long gone. Snail looked as if she was wondering why Chatty moved so quickly to the door. She could never understand moving at speed.

Within two or three minutes, Chips strolled past and stopped to wave at the two women before deciding to pop in and say hello to them. It was almost lunchtime and an opportunity to have something, anything, with chips.

“How the devil are you Chips?” asked the two women.

“Always, good, girls, always good.”

“Are you joining us for lunch?”

“If you don’t mind. I could fancy a few chips.”

“Don’t you always? What are you going to have with your chips today?”

Chatty put her knife and fork down breathing a sigh of satisfaction. “That goat’s cheese quiche was lovely. Homemade I would say.”

Snail, paused with her cutlery hovering in mid-air. “Mine is still lovely. Don’t you eat quickly?”

“Just because you’re slow, my dear snail, doesn’t mean we all have to go at your pace.”

Chips was busy scoffing the last of the extra-large portion of chips that had accompanied his two fish fingers and spoonful of garden peas. He said nothing but gave his friends a vigorous thumb’s up between mouthfuls.

Snail sat back in her chair. The other two were deep in conversation, Chattys’ dulcet tones, prominent, of course. Snail looked around at the seaside scene painted on the walls in vivid pinks and blues dotted with yellows here and there. She liked the brightness of the café but had often wondered why it was called Bluebird. Just as the thought slowly made its way across her brain she spied an elegant blue bird perched on top of a tall mirror behind the counter. Ah, she thought to herself, the blue bird. Her thoughts were disturbed in that same moment by a voice. Chatty’s voice. Where have you gone, Snail? Chips is just saying that we could go for a stroll down by that new paved path that leads to the river. Do you want to? I’m going, will you join us?”

Snail came to from her thoughts about seasidey café walls and agreed to a stroll.

“Bing, bing, bing – sorry guys, that’s my phone,” said Chatty as she pulled it out of her jacket pocket and raised it level with her face to answer the call. The three friends stopped. Chatty was talking faster and faster. Chips and Snail waited for her a few paces away. There was something in Chatty’s voice that the other two recognised as her serious tone.

“OMG guys, you’re not going to believe this. Racer’s in hospital. Hit by a car on the Crossing on Anterton Street.

“Is he okay?” asked Chips, his eyes getting bigger and bigger.

“Snail took her time. Before saying, “yes, is he okay?”

Chatty, looked at the other two through tears and said, he’s in surgery. He’s got a broken leg and there’s something to do with his spine.”

Five days later, the three friends visited Racer at the hospital for the first time. This wasn’t their usual Racer. He was lying very still looking pale and unwell. Racer heard Chatty’s voice and knew the gang had arrived. Trying to be brighter than he felt, Racer tried a philosophical approach. He took a breath and aimed his words at the ceiling above his bed. “The wonder is that you could start life with nothing, end with nothing, and lose so much in between.”

“Racer, that’s not funny,” said Chatty, “you’re frightening me. How are you? Do they know what’s happened? Are you going to be okay?”

“Come on Chatty,” said Chips, “give the man a chance. One question at a time.”

Snail stood back letting it all happen around her.

“I’m okay guys. I’m okay. I’ve broken my leg and badly bruised part of my spine but it will be okay in a few weeks, or so they say. I will need to slow down and take it easy for about six months. Maybe you will have to give me a temporary nickname of Snail 2 until I can get back on my feet properly as Racer, once again”