

ANDY MULLIGAN



The
BOY
with
TWO
HEADS

'Original, emotionally-charged black comedy/thriller' *Daily Mail*

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About the Book

Who says two heads are better than one?

How would you feel if you woke up to find another head growing out of your neck? It knows all your darkest thoughts and it's not afraid to say what it thinks . . . to ANYBODY.

That's what happens to eleven-year-old Richard Westlake, and his life becomes very, very complicated.

Part thriller, part horror story, part comedy - this is one of the most riveting novels about fear and friendship that you will ever read.

The
BOY
with
TWO
HEADS

ANDY MULLIGAN

RHCP DIGITAL

To Madeleine

PART ONE
NEWCOMER

CHAPTER ONE

Richard Westlake awoke, after a night of unquiet dreams, to discover a lump in his throat. It was no ordinary lump, for he could hardly breathe, and when his mother came to rouse him for school it was obvious that he was in no condition to get up. His voice was husky, and he was sweating.

The doctor arrived. 'Probably one of those fevers,' he said. 'But I have to say, I don't like the look of the swelling, and you can't be too cautious.'

He touched it gently with a finger, and the boy winced.

'Rather tender, is it, young man?'

'Mmm,' said Richard.

'It's got a rough edge, hasn't it? Right by the windpipe. I think we'd better get you checked up on.'

'But it's . . . football,' whispered Richard. 'I can't miss . . .'

'You can't go to school in this condition,' said the doctor. 'Football or not, a lump in the throat at your age needs to be taken seriously. Let me make a call.'

'He seemed all right last night,' said Mrs Westlake. 'We were packing his bag together—'

'I don't want any delay on this,' interrupted the doctor. He put his thumb gently under the swelling. 'I can feel it moving. Yes - I think we'll get you an ambulance.'

So it was that fifteen minutes later, Richard found himself speeding through the city suburbs, siren blaring. His mother was holding his hand and there was an oxygen mask over his face. He was whisked along corridors and an

elevator took him down to neuropathology. Within minutes he was in a tube that bleeped and buzzed. A number of levers held his head absolutely still while a dozen eyes stared down at him.

'You say he was all right last night?' said the consultant. He was a large man, with enormous glasses. They made his eyes bulge, and he had the unsettling habit of hardly blinking.

'He was fine,' said Mrs Westlake.

'Happy as Larry,' said her husband. 'Out in the garden, running around.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

A door opened, and a nurse entered with a ream of papers. The consultant set them on a desk next to a file full of photographs. The door closed, and Mr Westlake sat beside his wife, grim-faced. He'd come straight from his office and his suit was crumpled.

'We're pulling the threads together,' said the consultant.

'What threads?' said Mr Westlake. 'He's a healthy boy - always has been. He was doing his homework as usual. A . . . vocabulary test, I think. We watched a bit of television, and then it was cocoa, and off to bed . . . what's gone wrong?'

'What is it, Doctor?' said Mrs Westlake. 'Why's everyone being so secretive?'

'Nobody's being secretive, my dear.'

'Mysterious, then!'

'Where is he now?' asked Mr Westlake. 'Why can't we see him?'

'A few final tests—'

'Tests for what, though? Please!'

'We have to explore all possible avenues at the moment. Believe me, your son's getting the very best attention.'

'Can I introduce myself?' said a man from the corner of the room. He had been sitting in the shadows, observing,

with his head on one side. He leaned into the light and smiled. 'I'm Doctor Warren.'

'Doctor Warren?' said Mr Westlake.

'And I understand exactly how you feel.'

'Do you?'

'This is a trying time, for everyone. It's an unsettling period—'

'All we want to know is what you've found.'

'Of course.'

He smiled again, and a zip of even teeth appeared above a neatly trimmed beard. 'I'm an associate psychiatrist here. I look at things from a purely psychiatric perspective. You've heard of the Rechner Institute?'

'Never.'

'We're a few miles out of town, specializing in neuroscience. We're always keen to assist with cases of this kind. Unusual cases—'

'Look,' said Mr Westlake more firmly, 'we just want to know what our son's got on his neck.'

'Then we must work together,' said Dr Warren. 'What's he had on his mind lately?'

'Nothing,' said Mr Westlake.

'No? No worries to speak of?'

Mrs Westlake put a hand on her husband's arm. 'Nothing major,' she said. 'He's not a worrier, as far as we know. I mean, he's no different from any other boy. He's got things on his mind, of course he has. His exams are coming up—'

'Important ones?'

'Yes, they're for the grammar school.'

'He's cheerful enough, though,' said Mr Westlake. 'Cheerful and normal.'

'They always are,' said Dr Warren, nodding. 'They always seem to be, anyway. I find that children of Richard's age can have a lot more going on in the old brainbox than we give them credit for. Tell me about his *emotional* balance.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' said Mr Westlake. He stood up and walked to the window. 'What are you driving at, Doctor? Because I have to confess I don't have much patience with this kind of thing.'

'No?'

'No.'

'You'd describe your family as emotionally stable?'

'Yes. I would.'

'Communication good?'

'Extremely.'

'Disappointments? Trauma of any kind?'

Both parents were silent.

'There was Grandad, of course,' said Mrs Westlake, at last. 'But that was . . . that was nearly a year ago, so I can't see that's relevant. We lived with my father, and he passed on - he'd been poorly a while, and Richard was with him when it happened. It was . . . well, we talked and talked about it, and he's a sensible lad—'

'Any counselling?'

'No.'

'Pity.'

Mr Westlake closed his eyes. 'Like my wife just told you,' he said, 'we talked it through at home - all three of us. It was a terrible thing, but Richard's a sensible lad, and everything got back to normal. He misses him - of course he does. They were close. But he puts his heart into school, as his grandad always encouraged him to . . . he's trying for one of the scholarships, you see. His friends rallied round and the boy got over it - like the rest of us.'

Dr Warren nodded wisely. 'How old was Grandad?'

'What?'

'Seventy-eight,' said Mrs Westlake.

'Right.'

'All we want to know,' said Mr Westlake, slowly, 'is what's wrong with our son. It's the neck we're worried about - not

his mind! And you must have some idea, or you wouldn't be asking all these questions.'

The consultant stood up. 'Give us a little more time,' he said. 'We're talking to the whole team, and—'

'Is the lump getting bigger?' said Mr Westlake.

'Yes.'

'How big is it now?'

'It's grown considerably,' said the consultant. 'The speed of the growth is a major part of the problem, and Doctor Summersby—'

'Burst it, then!'

'Sir?'

'That's what we used to do. If it's a boil, or a . . . growth of some kind, you get a needle and—'

'Oh, it's not a boil,' said Dr Warren. 'We've taken X-rays from every conceivable angle; scans as well.'

'And you still don't know what it is?' cried Mrs Westlake. 'How can that be?'

There was a silence.

'We know a few things,' said the consultant quietly. He pulled the papers towards him and unfolded a chart. 'It's why I called the Rechner Institute. Doctor Warren here has been analysing the cranial data, so we are moving forward. It's a rare condition, as I said - but not unknown. Summersby's a neurological surgeon, based in New Zealand - she's looking at the results right now, because if we're right . . .'

The door opened again. A nurse appeared with another computer print-out, this one trailing to the floor. She was white-faced, and nodded once.

'Confirmation,' she said. 'Really?'

'Yes. The surgeon's with us by satellite - she's positive. She'd like to see the parents. At once, if you can.'

They moved to an office. A laptop stood open on the desk, and two speakers were connected. On the screen was the

head and shoulders of a serious-looking woman, with hair drawn tightly back from a thin face.

‘That’s Summersby,’ said the consultant. ‘She’s at the cutting edge of neural science, and she’s been observing Richard through monitors.’

‘Can you hear me?’ she said. She tapped at the microphone.

‘Yes,’ said Mr Westlake. He mopped his face with a handkerchief.

‘I’m sorry I’m not with you in person.’ She leaned forward and licked her lips. Two large nostrils seemed to sniff at the screen before she moved backwards and blinked. ‘You must prepare yourselves, Mr and Mrs, er . . . Westlake. You have access to the counselling facility?’

‘I’m right here, Gillian,’ said Dr Warren. ‘We’re standing by.’

‘Good.’

‘What’s wrong?’ said Mrs Westlake, more frightened than ever. ‘They’ve been testing him for hours. Can you tell us what’s wrong?’

‘I’ve seen all the results, Mrs, ah . . . Westlake – and the best thing I can do is explain the situation from a medical point of view. Your son’s at a developmental stage, experiencing what we call a *larcedontal extrusion*, traumatic or spontaneous. It’s a remarkable thing: your child has the cartilage, and the bone, of a respiratory organ, and that organ’s ancillary to existing tissue – that’s obvious. Now, as you know – as you’ve seen – it’s located in his trachea, but what we’ve established is that it’s outreaching the oesophagus, so we’ve got advanced compound cell division now. If you have any knowledge of basic physiognomy—’

‘Stop,’ said Mr Westlake. ‘Stop.’

There was a silence. Dr Summersby came closer again, and stared. ‘Can’t you hear me?’ she said.

‘Yes!’

'You said you were going to explain,' said Mrs Westlake. 'I don't understand a word you're saying.'

'Well, as I said, medical clarity's essential in these cases,' said Dr Summersby. 'In a case of exponential cellular growth, where the brain—'

'We don't understand you,' cried Mr Westlake. 'You're going to have to speak in English.'

The doctor licked her lips again, and removed her spectacles. 'OK,' she said. 'I'll try again. Your son - Richard - has been developing, for some time, it would seem . . . a second . . . nose. The nostrils, as it were, are connected to the same airway as the existing one - and that's the main reason he's been having breathing problems. I want more time to observe, and I'll be over to examine him, as soon as I can. But I can tell you already that this . . . second organ is sharing your son's lungs, or trying to. It would also appear to be attached to the embryonic form of a skull, complete with cranium, forehead and jaw.'

'A head,' said Mrs Westlake.

There was another silence.

'What are you saying?' shouted Mr Westlake. 'What *exactly* are you saying? I'm still not clear.'

Dr Summersby blinked, but she held their gaze. 'I've seen a number of these cases, sir - rare as they are. I'm off to Vietnam tomorrow, to look at something similar. Your son is having the most extraordinary cerebral crisis. He's developing a second head. Yes. And it will emerge in the next twenty-four hours.'

CHAPTER TWO

Richard was unconscious.

The lump had grown significantly. It had gone past the walnut stage, and was now the size of a fist. Sticking up out of the lump was a sharp triangle of flesh, and above that were two red pimples.

'You can see it, can't you?' said the consultant quietly. He put a fat finger under Richard's chin. 'That's the danger-zone, there,' he said.

Mr and Mrs Westlake simply stared.

'Summersby's the expert. She's encountered similar cases before, but they've been hushed up - research has been terribly difficult. There's one she's been working on in Asia, which is attracting quite a lot of attention . . . but this is a rare condition.'

'And you can't just remove it?' whispered Mr Westlake.

'Oh, no,' said Dr Warren. 'Not yet. The heads share a brain stem. Same blood supply, so it would be fatal to amputate.'

'Then . . . what can you do?'

'We leave things be.'

'But surely you can deal with it in some way?' said Mrs Westlake. 'You can't just sit back and do nothing!'

'At the moment we observe.'

'Listen,' whispered Mr Westlake. His voice was trembling. 'You're telling us that our son now has a twin?'

'No, sir,' said the consultant.

'What, then - a parasite, feeding off him?'

Dr Warren shook his head. 'No, Mr Westlake. I need to emphasize this: as far as we're concerned, the second head

will be Richard as well. A part of your boy, and we have to be ready for that.'

'So . . .' Mr Westlake paused. 'Oh, I'm lost,' he said. 'This is a nightmare . . .'

His wife took over, forcing herself to be calm. 'You're telling us that the second head will be . . . functioning, aren't you? That was the word you used. The new one - it will be able to think? It will have a brain - a mind of its own?'

'For sure.'

'It will have eyes? It will be able to see?'

A nurse leaned in. 'I think one's opening at the moment, Doctor. There's a growth-spurt, you can see from the monitor.'

Sure enough, the machine by the bed had started to bleep quietly, and a flashing light turned from green to red. The parents stared, and the right-hand pimple burst gently, the crater opening to reveal a tiny eyeball.

'Oh, Lord,' said Mrs Westlake. 'This isn't possible.'

'It won't speak, will it?' said her husband. His voice was faint, and he held his son's hand gently. 'I mean, that's not possible, surely—'

'Both heads will speak,' said the consultant.

'In fact speech may be quite a feature,' said Dr Warren. 'The second tongue is well developed. Disproportionately large, in fact, so I would hope it's going to be quite a little communicator. We could all learn a very great deal.'

'It will feel things, then? It will have . . . emotions?'

'Yes. Absolutely.'

'How?'

'Well,' said the consultant. 'We don't understand the phenomenon as well as we'd like. But we suspect it's rooted in trauma. Latent trauma - buried and repressed.'

Dr Warren leaned forward. 'What we do know is that you're looking at an extra dimension of your son, Mr Westlake. The second head will share many of the likes and

dislikes you're familiar with. It'll have Richard's memory, or parts of it - the memory's likely to be quite selective, depending on what's being ignored. You'll find that different things come to the surface at different times, so I'll need to work hard. What will be interesting is to see how the separate brains align themselves. Richard will need to stay at home for a while, but I would hope things will stabilize quite quickly and normal life will resume.'

'Normal life?'

'Yes. He won't be an invalid.'

'But . . .' Mr Westlake looked at his wife. 'He's got two heads.'

'And it's a rare condition,' said Dr Warren. 'Rare, but not unknown, and - as I said - it won't prevent him leading a totally normal life.'

'He's just finishing Year Six!' cried Mr Westlake. He stood up, and pressed his hands to his eyes. 'He's in the last year of primary school, eleven years old! He can't walk around with two heads on his shoulders, can he? Are you suggesting he goes back to school?'

'As soon as possible.'

'He'll be a laughing stock.'

'He'll need care, of course. We'll talk to his teachers—'

'Please,' said Mr Westlake. 'Cut the wretched thing off, now. Lop it off, now, before it gets a hold! One cut and this whole nightmare—'

'No, sir,' said the consultant. 'Death would be instantaneous - I can promise you that.'

'But he's a monster. Look at him . . .'

'Mr Westlake. That second head is Richard, as much as the first.'

'This can't be happening,' said Mrs Westlake quietly. There were tears running down her cheeks. 'I don't want this - look at him, look at our son . . .'

Mr Westlake drew his sobbing wife into his arms, and they stood helpless at the bedside. The little eye was now

wide open, and it gazed up at them, sadly. The pupil was black, gleaming like a jewel. There was a crease of skin below the nostrils, and even as they watched it started to stretch slowly, and split. In seconds, two purple lips were forming, and a bubble of spit appeared. When it burst, the lips opened to reveal a line of delicate teeth. Between the teeth they saw the tip of a tongue.

Mr and Mrs Westlake stared. The second head turned slightly, and the first moaned in its sleep. The new mouth exhaled, and the eye blinked slowly, gazing up at its parents for the very first time. Minutes later, the second eye was open too, as wet with tears as the first. Richard writhed for a moment, and the alarm announced yet another growth-spurt.

Mr and Mrs Westlake were led gently from the room, bewildered and numb. The eyes followed them as the first, as the familiar head slept on, dreaming its dreams.

The transformation continued all night.

Fine hairs sprouted, and became eyebrows. By morning there was a black fuzz over the whole scalp, and the chin was sharper. The features were still close together, but they were expanding, taking on a marked resemblance to those by their side. The mouth was soon identical, and it smiled and frowned, as if practising different expressions. A junior nurse overheard the mumbling just before daybreak, and called the ward sister. Dr Warren arrived moments later.

The nurse washed the whole face gently, and patted it dry.

‘Thank you,’ said the head softly.

The ward sister stood back. ‘That was speech, sir. Definitely.’

Dr Warren drew his chair closer. He produced a tiny recording device, mounted on a silver tripod. He checked the focus and started to film.

‘Can you hear me, Richard?’ he said.

The eyes blinked. 'Yes. I think so.'

'Good boy.'

Dr Warren peered into the eyes. He checked the temperature on the monitor above, and wiped a bead of spittle from the lips. 'You're perfectly safe, young man. Perfectly safe.'

'Am I? Where?'

'You're in hospital.'

'Oh.'

'You're in good, capable hands,' said Dr Warren. 'You've got nothing to worry about.'

'What's happened then? I don't recognize anything . . .'

'Right now you're in the neurology ward, Richard. How do you feel?'

'Warm.'

'Yes? Comfortable?'

'Yeah. Wow . . .' The second head breathed out, and closed its eyes.

Dr Warren checked the camera again. 'I'm going to ask you to lie nice and still,' he said. 'You need to take it easy, OK? You've had a quite a shock and it's exhausted you. Can I get you anything?'

The second head smiled. 'I like the bed,' it said quietly. 'It's good to be still - I'm feeling pretty strange, though. I'm feeling . . . hungry.'

Dr Warren chuckled. 'You want food already? That's a good sign - that's interesting.'

'What's it a sign of?'

'It suggests you're healthy.'

The forehead creased for a moment. 'You're filming me.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Oh, just for the records. Can I ask you a question? How old are you? Do you know your age?'

'Have a guess, Doctor. Check my file.'

Dr Warren laughed again. 'I know the answer, Richard,' he said. 'Of course I do. What I'm wondering is if *you* have access to basic personal information. It's been a sudden arrival, so to speak. Do you know your full name, for example?'

'Westlake, Richard Arthur. Eleven and two months. A hundred and forty-two centimetres, thirty-seven kilos, just over. Holder of the Green Cross School long-jump record, and inside right for football. Bus monitor, too, I think. I know who I am, Doc.'

'Good.'

'Who are you? Because I'm not meant to talk to strangers.'

'Who told you that?'

'Everyone.'

'I'm a friend.'

The second head stared. 'I can read your badge,' it said. 'It doesn't say "friend".'

'Think of me as a counsellor.'

'So I need counselling, do I? Why is that, Counsellor?'

'We need to observe you, Richard. Run a few tests, check everything's working—'

'I'm not sick, you know. I'm fine. And another thing, before we go any further: I don't think I'm a Richard. That's not me any more.'

'You're not Richard?'

'No.'

'Who are you, then? You're Richard on the forms—'

'I think I'm a Rikki.'

'OK. That's cool.'

'Cool?' The Rikki head smiled. 'Everything's cool and fine, huh? - everything's safe. What's *he* like, by the way - sleeping beauty on the old shoulder . . .?'

'He's a good boy. Don't you know what he's like?'

'I know he's polite. Please, thank you, how can I help you? He does all the right things, yes? We were in some

school-debate team too.'

'Yes.'

'That might have to change.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm not a Richard. I just told you: I'm a Rikki.'

'What's going to change, though, Rikki? Tell me.'

The second head rose off its pillow slightly and the eyes narrowed. 'Doctor Warren, huh?' it said, squinting at the badge again. 'Psychiatric consultant, neurological team - wow. You think I'm of neurological interest?'

'I'm sure you are.'

'And you're here to help me.'

Dr Warren nodded. 'I'm with you all the way, Rikki, yes. I know we'll be friends and we're going to make discoveries, too. We're going to learn a lot together.'

'Friends? You and me?'

'I hope so.'

'I'm not sure I have any friends. We don't need any, Richard and me - we're pretty much independent now.' The head paused. 'Where are my parents?'

'They'll be back soon.'

The second head looked from side to side. 'I heard what they said, you know,' it whispered. 'About cutting me off - about parasites. But I think that is an understandable reaction, don't you? I'm not going to be hurt by that . . . I mean, I *am* a complication. I guess we're in for a rough, tough journey, but I can deal with rejection. I don't want you thinking I'm unbalanced, Doctor Warren.'

'You mustn't worry, Richard.'

'Rikki.'

'Everything's going to be OK. I promise.'

The Rikki head blinked, and stared. It licked its lips and grinned. A snigger emerged from the throat, and Richard moaned again in his sleep.

'Everything?' Rikki whispered.

'You're in good hands.'

'Oh, you're a liar . . .'

Dr Warren frowned. 'I hope I never lie to you, Rikki Westlake. I hope I tell the truth, always.'

'Then you'd better start over, because you just told me a bare-faced monster, didn't you? How can you possibly know anything for sure? According to probability based on evidence gathered so far, "OK" is the one thing life will never be. The world is not an *OK* kind of place, Doctor Warren - not any more. If it was, I wouldn't be in it. Do you understand that?'

'No.'

'You're not as clever as you think, then - are you? You need to work harder.' The black eyes narrowed again, and the smile turned to a snarl. 'We're all alone, man,' said Rikki. 'Every damn one of us.'

CHAPTER THREE

Time passed.

Richard and Rikki were moved to a small residential centre on the south coast – a division of the Rechner Institute for Neurological Studies. It contained just a handful of patients, who shuffled slowly along the corridors. Dr Warren visited as often as he could, and made careful notes. The second head continued to grow, and whilst a pair of physiotherapists worked on muscular control and movement, it was immediately clear that speech therapy wasn't necessary.

Richard's headmaster wrote to reassure the family that his place at school was being kept open. His best friend, Jeff, sent the most beautiful Get Well card. Richard loved aeroplanes, so he got every pupil in the class to draw one and sign it. 'See You Soon!' ran the caption, in puffs of clouds under a burning sun. Richard put it on his bedside table, and began to feel stronger. He wrote a letter thanking everyone, and he even dared to say that he hoped to be returning soon.

'By the end of the month,' said Dr Warren. 'I think you'll be ready.'

'I want to go home,' said Richard.

'Of course you do.'

'Has it changed at all?'

'I doubt it. Why would it change?'

Rikki smiled. 'You're lying again, Doc. Everything changes.'

Mrs Westlake bought new T-shirts, and made careful adjustments to them. She found a coat with an extra-wide hood, and a skilful tailor adapted the Green Cross school uniform. Mr and Mrs Westlake collected their son together, and soon he was walking up the familiar garden path.

It had been his grandfather's house, originally. Richard had been a baby when they moved in, and it had all made sense. His grandad could still manage stairs, if he was careful, so he'd had rooms on the first floor, overlooking the vegetable plot at the back. Beyond that was the lawn where his father had set up goalposts, and beyond that was the dangerously high tree house, with the swing . . .

Richard and Rikki breathed in familiar smells, and made their way up to the bedroom. They drew the curtains and covered the mirror.

The next day, a text from Jeff came through. 'We're waiting!' it said. 'We're keeping your locker tidy - nothing's been taken: DON'T WORRY!!'

'OK, thanks,' wrote Richard. 'What else is happening?'

'Football tournament. We need you!'

He visited, then: twice. Mrs Westlake apologized, but kept him at the door. Richard was still too self-conscious, she said, and Rikki was settling. She was hopeful that things would improve.

Towards the end of the next week, Richard felt brave enough to pick up the phone.

'Hi, Jeff,' he said, after a pause.

'Richard! Is that you?'

'Yes.'

The second head said nothing.

'How are you, man?' said Jeff.

'I'm almost ready. I'm getting there. Do I, er . . . sound the same?'

'Exactly the same! When are you coming in?'

'Tuesday,' said Rikki. There was a pause, and Richard said, 'Tell me what I've missed.'

‘Oh, everything!’ said Jeff. ‘Eric’s in trouble again, and Bra-low’s going crazy. We get tests every day, and Salome asked after you – so did Mark and Carla. You’re really coming back? Let me call for you? We’re dying to see you, buddy.’

‘I’m not sure. Dad was going to drive us . . . Hang on.’

Jeff pressed his ear to the receiver, and heard anxious voices.

‘That would be great,’ said Richard, at last. ‘We’ll walk together, yes? Like it was.’

‘Eight-ten, Tuesday. I’ll knock for you – just like it was.’

‘Can’t wait,’ said Rikki.

‘What?’

‘I’m looking forward to seeing you,’ said Jeff. ‘You nervous?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t be nervous, Richard. It’s going to be good.’

The next Monday, the headmaster called a special assembly in the dining hall. All the children sat in rows on the floor, and a number of parents sat on chairs around the walls. Dr Warren was on the stage – a special guest – sitting quietly to one side. He stroked his beard and stared at his laptop. The headmaster gazed at his audience.

‘We have many things to be proud of at Green Cross,’ he said.

The children were silent, cross-legged and straight-backed. Mr Prowse was a strict head teacher, who stood for hard work and self-discipline. They knew what was coming.

‘I’m proud of you,’ he said. ‘And I hope you’re proud of each other. As far as I’m concerned, there is no other school where children are as polite and tolerant, and I believe we are a genuinely happy community. Turn round, please, Eric.’ He paused. ‘One of the most important things in that community is the tradition of support and care. Any

pupil here can expect support and care when things go wrong. Is that true, children?’

‘Yes, Mr Prowse,’ murmured the school.

‘I hope so. Because my chosen theme for today’s gathering is a proverb. A difficult word, that – can anyone tell us what it means?’

A hand shot up.

‘Damien?’

‘A famous saying,’ said a small boy in the second row.

‘A famous saying. Yes. A proverb is a famous saying that usually contains words of wisdom. And the proverb on my mind is one you may have heard before: “Two heads are better than one.” Why have I chosen that self-evident truth? Because – as you are no doubt aware – Richard Westlake is coming back tomorrow, and I want us to be ready.’

He nodded to Dr Warren, and the lights dimmed. A large slide-photograph of Richard and his recent addition was thrown up onto a screen. There was an audible gasp.

‘An unusual picture, children – I know. That’s why I wanted to show it to you without embarrassing Richard. It was taken a few days ago, by his mother – and she sent it to me in the full knowledge that I would be sharing it. Er, number two, please.’

The photograph changed to a close-up. The two heads stared at the assembly, with blank expressions.

‘Number three.’

There was a shot of just the second head, slightly thinner in the face than the Richard everyone remembered, with fiercer eyes.

‘You’ll notice something unusual on Richard’s shoulder.’ Mr Prowse paused, and the children stared. ‘That is Rikki. Rikki, I can assure you, is Richard. Richard and Rikki are the same person, though they do, I’m told . . . have some little differences in character, some of the time. It’s an unusual situation – I’d go so far as to say *rare*. But I have a feeling we’re going to get used to it very quickly. I am

confident that Green Cross School will benefit enormously from the presence of both Richard and Rikki, because this is a school that embraces the new. Can any of you remember what special achievement Richard was so proud of last term? Hilary?’

Hilary’s hand was straining. ‘He won the long jump, Mr Prowse.’

‘Yes he did. Joe?’

‘He was bus monitor for the infants.’

‘He most certainly was. What else? . . . Nicola?’

‘He was runner-up for the *Kidspeak* prize.’

‘Right behind Aparna, you’re absolutely spot-on. And I will never forget his contributions to those meetings, because he was polite, organized and constructive, because *Kidspeak* could be rather important this term.’ He paused. ‘Rikki and Richard are going to have a wonderful time, aren’t they?’

There was a loud murmur: ‘Yes, Mr Prowse.’

‘Two heads are better than one. To solve a problem, it is always wise to consult a second problem-solver. When we feel lost or lonely, how wonderful to have someone to turn to. That is why Richard is luckier than all of us. Never will he be alone, for he has a companion right beside him – and I suggest to you that when you get to meet that companion, you will have the pleasure of getting to know not one stimulating personality, but two.’

He turned, smiling broadly.

‘Children. I want to introduce you to our guest. This is Doctor Warren, and Doctor Warren is a very important man – the Rechner Institute does ground-breaking work studying the human brain. He’s agreed to help us, and you’ll be seeing him around the school from time to time. Please make him feel welcome.’

‘Thank you,’ said Dr Warren, standing. He clasped his hands in front of his chest. ‘It’s really nice to be here, so thank you for having me. One thing I want to say is that

Richard's first day could be the most important one. Does that make sense?'

The children stared at him. Some nodded.

'Richard's been a good friend to many of you, by the sound of it. So he - and Rikki - are hoping that those friends will make a difficult time easier.'

He paused, conscious that his audience was scarcely breathing.

'My advice is, don't stare. After all, he'll be feeling a little self-conscious. Speak of him in the singular, and not in the plural - that means "he" rather than "they". Let's treat him as we would any other boy, and when you chat, look him in the eye in the same way as you would anybody else. He may not want to talk about his recent experiences, because . . .' He stopped and looked at the photograph. 'Because he's got so much to get used to.'

Nobody spoke or even twitched. The silence was absolute.

'Rikki's brain, you see, is newly formed, and has inherited only parts of Richard's memory. It's a fascinating situation. We will need to be understanding, and help him adjust. Shall we do that together? Let's make the resolution now: we're going to help Richard and . . . Rikki feel comfortable and secure. Is that a cool thing to do?'

'Yes, sir,' said the children.

'I do agree - absolutely,' said the headmaster, stepping forward. 'That's a first-rate idea, and I tell you now: this is going to be a test for all of us. A test to see how open and adaptable our community can be, and how we can all work with one another. Are we going to make sure Richard and Rikki are happy?'

'Yes, Mr Prowse.'

'Then let's say it with conviction. Will this boy be made welcome tomorrow?'

'Yes, Mr Prowse!' chorused the children.

‘Very well. Good. Excellent. We will turn to page seventy-two and all sing together: “One More Step”. And we have the usual end-of-assembly treat: Aparna, here, is going to play the piano. As you know, Aparna achieved grade two just last week, so we’re very lucky to have such a talented young pianist playing for us. Aparna, take the stage! A round of applause, please . . .’

Aparna was a slim, nervous girl of eleven. She made her way to the piano-stool, cringing with embarrassment as the children clapped. The words of the hymn appeared on the screen, and everyone sang with gusto. Her hands danced over the keys, hammering out the chorus as the school gazed at the faces of Richard and Rikki, staring from under the text.

One was thinner, with back-combed hair and eyes that seemed harder than ever. The other was the face the children remembered, and he looked very slightly mournful.

The heads stared at their audience, as if they were listening to the music but unable to sing.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning, Richard's mother laid out her son's school uniform.

It was a simple set of clothes: grey trousers, a blue jersey and a blue shirt. There were two blue-striped ties. The shirt and jersey now sported two collars, and two V-necks.

'I can't wear that,' said the second head.

'Look,' said Richard patiently. 'We have to go to school. We tried it on yesterday, and—'

'I don't remember what we did yesterday.'

'Of course you do.'

'I'm adapting, all right? And this is the wrong style, totally.'

'It's the uniform, Rikki. It's what we have to wear.'

'It's baby stuff.' He peered at the jersey, with its golden trim. 'It's infantile, pseudo-military, identity-sapping baby stuff - you're letting them infantilize us. It's for kids.'

'I am a kid,' said Richard.

'I'm not,' said Rikki.

'It's what everyone wears, dear,' said Mrs Westlake gently.

'I know it's what everyone wears,' snapped the second head. 'I am not retarded. But if you think we're dressing up like a moron, you are mistaken. This is what I've been trying to get through to you people for the last month: we've moved on now and we're no longer morons—'

'You're going to have to mind your language,' said Mrs Westlake.

'Why?'

'You can't use words like that.'