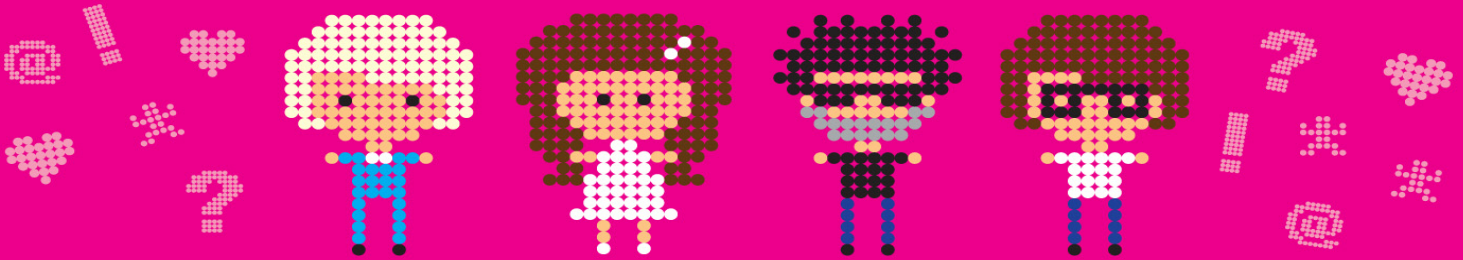


Miss

date



Love

hate

Life, love, looks.  
Lex can change them all . . .

Luisa Plaja

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## About the Book

Lex Murphy and her friends have complicated relationships. If only there was a way to avoid all the dating/hating drama ...

When Lex fills a cool new computer game with characters based on herself and her classmates, she makes some 'wishful thinking' adjustments to the profiles. Finally, everyone can be perfectly matched and happy, at least on screen. Love, Life, Looks - it's all under Lex's control in a harmless game.

After all, these changes can't come true ... can they?



*Luisa Plaja*

CORGI BOOKS

*To Isabella and Rocco*

*In memory of Rosemary Canter*

PART ONE:

**kiss**

IT'S JUST ANOTHER lunch time on the Chairs of Doom outside Mr Trench's office. I'm sort of a permanent fixture here. If the chairs weren't so wobbly, I'd probably have grown roots by now. Maybe when I finally leave school, once I've scraped GCSEs and limped through enough sixth form to make Mum (and my boffin friend Jess) happy, they'll put a plaque against the exposed bricks where my head is resting now.

*Lex Murphy woz ere!* it'll say. Or the posh, plaque-friendly equivalent: *Alexa No-Middle-Name Murphy frequented this hallowed spot. Many a luncheon time she awaited here for Sir Trench of Foot to deliver another Life-changing Speech before she was free to find Jess at their usual bench by Ye Olde Vending Machine. And Jess had better not be talking to Gemma the Evil when Lex gets there or else ... Lex will pretend everything's fine, as usual.*

Anyway, it's no big deal. That I'm here, I mean. That Jess still talks to Gemma is a pain, but I don't really want them to know that I care, so I kind of put up with it. They don't see each other much these days anyway. Our old loose group of friends-forever has pretty much disbanded lately. The boys are all in the sixth form now, and they've left me, Jess and Gemma behind, but that's not the only reason we've drifted apart. Jess is far too wrapped up in being a perfect pre-GCSE student, and Gemma is far too wrapped around Matt. *My* Matt. The exact same Matt that *she* told me wasn't right for me.

She swears she didn't plan on getting together with him after we broke up, but that's exactly what happened, so she can swear all she likes. Gemma Grant might still officially be my friend, as far as the outside world can see, but I

know the truth. She is evil. Getting into trouble in geography over my attitude to Gemma is totally worth another lunch time outside Mr Trench's office.

I know the routine by now. In a few minutes the Trenchmeister will call me in and I'll get a big dose of Trench-like disappointment, some shaking of the Trench Head, and a few minutes of Trench Speech. Trenchie recites this speech from a script he memorized about a million years ago, and he barely even pauses while he's delivering it. He booms on about RESPECTING MY PEERS and RESPECTING MY SCHOOL and how this equals RESPECTING MYSELF, though really I don't see how what I called Gemma earlier could have anything to do with the way I look after myself. (I do *that* very well, really, apart from the Great Home Hair Extension Disaster of last week. But I think the clumpy bald bit on top of my head might get me the sympathy vote with Trenchie and shorten today's lecture by several booms. It's an unexpected win.)

Spending part of lunch break here on a regular basis is getting a bit boring, though. I'm so glad it's nearly half term. There's not much to see at the dead end of the darkest corridor, right by the posh main entrance that we're never supposed to use unless we've had a doctor's appointment or something and we're supremely, legitimately late and have to sign in. You can't even watch the school go by from here because no one who isn't part of the species named 'Teacher' is allowed to enter the Corridor of Power. Oh, unless you're part of the species nicknamed 'Improver' and you're here for a lecture, of course.

'Improvers' are students who are either: 1) generally a bit rubbish at keeping out of trouble, 2) never actually at school, or 3) totally brainless. I seem to have been an Improver for ever, and quite honestly I think it's a bit late for me now. Chances are I'm never actually going to 'improve'. Mr Trench can try out his theories all he likes,

but I seem to be firmly dis-en-Trenched. I am a *disprover*. I mostly only turn up at school to make Mum happy, and because if I wasn't here I'd have no one to hang around with, which would be even more boring than school. I spend enough time in my own world as it is.

I shift in my chair and it squeaks horribly in protest, but it's not as bad as the chair next to it, which I know from last week is in danger of terminal collapse. I'm busy pondering whether I should bring my own non-broken chair to school, just for the purposes of sitting here - I could get one of those folding canvas ones that people take to music festivals, with a little net drinks holder in the arm - when a boy lands in the broken Chair of Doom next to me.

'If I were you,' I say helpfully, 'I wouldn't sit—Oh.'

There's a crash, and then he's in a heap on the floor, long limbs sprawling, which means I get to sneakily check him out for the two seconds before he picks himself up.

Because he's not just *any* boy. He's Drew Ashton, Jess's wicked Scottish step-cousin, who was sent to live with Jess's family at the start of this term. He's just about the only boy in the school who doesn't know the entire *Who's Who* of past dating and dumping dramas between our friends. This makes spending time with him absolutely refreshing. He's like a clean slate.

He's also a total bad boy. The official story is that he's here because he had nowhere else to live - his dad got some foreign work placement and took his mum and little brothers and sisters along, but because of something to do with exams, Drew stayed in Scotland with his nan. Then, in the summer, his nan died, and Drew moved in with his nearest relative, Jess's stepdad.

The unofficial story, though - the one I've made up with the help of bits and pieces that Jess tries not to tell me - is that Drew has been sent to live with the Hartfords because his parents hope she'll be a good influence on him. I reckon Drew's mum looked at her little brother's new wife, noticed

the perfection of his new step-child (Jess) and thought, *Right, well, your woman can sort out this one too.*

Drew could never be anything like Jess, though. Jess is glossy and groomed and studious, and Drew is ... well, the total opposite. You can tell instantly by his hair and his stubble and his eyebrow piercing. (He's Year Twelve, so he gets to wear what he likes. And, wow, I like what he wears.) You can also tell by the way he walks, like he has no respect for anyone, let alone the inhabitants of the Corridor of Power. He's in the same year as all my other male friends, but he is nothing like any of them. He doesn't play football like Matt and Hayden and Cam, and he doesn't hang around the library like George. In fact, I almost never see him at school at all, except outside Mr Trench's office, like today.

Drew is clearly a Type Two Improver, or 'Non-Attender', as Mr Trench sometimes calls the guys who spend school hours down the arcade. They get pulled into his office the minute they show their faces at school. (No wonder they rarely turn up. Teachers really need to think that one through.) It's not so bad when you're a sixth-former and you're actually allowed to escape sometimes, but if you miss certain parts of the school day, then it's still frowned on, and Mr Trench does love a good frown.

Oops, I've been staring at Drew for ages. He's put the broken chair back, ready for someone else to sit on - that's the kind of rebel he is - and he's staring right back at me. Correction: he's staring at the signs of hair-extension disaster on top of my head.

'You OK?' he asks me.

I think he means the bald patch but I choose to ignore it. I pull at my hair and make sure my ears are covered. 'You're the one who just got friendly with the ground,' I remind him. 'Are *you* OK?'

He brushes himself off, shrugs a bit and grins at me. Then he tells me that he's most displeased that he has to

visit Mr Trench today. Course, he says it a whole lot ruder than that, and it makes a passing teacher glare at us and tut. We catch each other's eye after that and stifle laughs.

Drew might be the opposite of Jess but he's also so far away in personality from someone like Matt that sometimes I'm amazed I like him so much. Not that Matt doesn't swear, but he sort of restricts it to his male friends, and I think he, Cam and Hayden would die if they thought a teacher had overheard them. Plus those boys are generally a bit rubbish at talking to girls. Gemma and I have both been out with Cam and Hayden, but back when we were so young that it was all about holding hands for five minutes and then dumping them. (And actually, I think I dated and dumped them both before she did.) Matt was different. Matt was this year and Matt broke my heart, even if all my friends think it was the other way round.

Except Gemma, of course. And she seems to have brought out a side of Matt that I never knew existed. He's turned into a devoted boyfriend-type, glued to Gemma's side. I have no idea what they talk about.

Drew, on the other hand, is a total free spirit. He doesn't really hang around with anyone, or go out with anyone, and it's such a contrast to my usual crowd. It's always a highlight for me when he joins me in the Corridor of Power. He has these amazingly expressive eyebrows, and we've had some good chats out here about nothing much - mostly stuff that Drew remembers about going to Jess's mum's wedding to his uncle four years ago. He actually met me that day - I was giggling with Gemma for most of the time, on a bit of a sugar high - but I don't think he remembers me and my eleven-year-old dorkiness, which is probably a good thing. He remembers lots of other people, though, and we've had laughs about Jess's mad extended family, which is now even more extended and even madder - except for the fact that it includes supercool Drew.

Today he doesn't mention Jess or her family. He just waggles those eyebrows, gives me another grin and asks, 'So what are you in for this time? Been giving poisoned apples to teachers again?'

I made that up a couple of weeks ago when he asked me why I was here. I like thinking up ridiculous crimes that make Drew laugh. But today his eyebrows have made my mind go blank, so I opt for the boring truth.

'I had a fight with another girl in the middle of geography.'

The eyebrows display intrigue. 'A punch-up or a wee bit of verbal?'

I love the way the words curl round his mouth. I mentioned this casually to Jess once and she said it's just the way all Scottish people talk, but I'm not so sure. I think Drew has really interesting lips. I also love the way he doesn't say 'Mee-OW!' or make sexist comments about cat-fights, or do anything remotely feline at all. Normal boys would totally get their cat on, given a chance like this. They did it in geography earlier, which is why Ms Cosgrove called me 'disruptive'. It's so unfair. That lot should be in trouble, not me. My remark was private, and I didn't even think it was all that loud, not until the mewling boys broadcast it. Ms Cosgrove, our Geography teacher, is supposed to be a feminist. She should know better than to blame a *girl*, even if I might technically have started it.

'Just words ...' I think about it. 'Unfortunately.' It's sometimes tempting, but I could never do anything physically violent.

Drew nods seriously. He probably *would* - goes with the bad-boy territory. There are rumours that he has a string of ASBOs and everything, even though Jess claims that's not true. 'He *wishes*,' she says, allowing herself a good eye-roll.

Drew balances himself on the slightly-less-broken Chair of Doom on the other side of me. 'Well, I bet she deserved it,' he says. He looks at me expectantly.

'Gemma definitely deserved it,' I reply. I don't want to tell him why. I mean, I suppose Jess might talk about her friends at home, so he could have heard things about Gemma. He might even know that Gemma's boyfriend is my ex. But Jess says she barely sees 'that delinquent' - i.e. Drew - so probably not.

His eyebrows definitely say: *Tell me more.*

I'm not exactly sure why I don't want to tell him. Maybe it would feel weird to talk about my ex-boyfriend, and how miffed I am (to put it mildly) that Gemma is going out with him. But *why* would it feel weird? It's true that I'm trying to keep these feelings a secret from my friends, because our group's falling apart enough as it is. But Drew barely talks to any of them - not even his cousin Jess. (Or *especially* not his cousin Jess.)

And it can't be because I fancy Drew. Because I don't - not really. He's not like Matt. I appreciate Drew's gorgeousness and the lovely way he talks to me, but as a distant bystander, you know. The way people admire pictures of fit filmstars at premieres. I don't go hot and cold when I see him, like I do when I see Matt. Matt's always surrounded by people (and now by Gemma), always the centre of attention. He's Mr Popular, everyone's friend. Drew's always on his own, if he's here at all. I think most people are a bit scared of him.

I'm not scared of Drew, but maybe I'm a bit freaked out by the way he doesn't seem to care what anyone thinks of him.

One thing's for sure: Drew is not Matt.

Drew's still waiting for me to reply, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He tips his head back so that I can't see his gorgeous mouth any more, but I can see his body leaning dangerously back in the rickety chair with his arms behind his head. I wonder if he knows how hot that makes him look.

The way a film star on a red carpet might look hot, I mean. From a distance.

Drew straightens up, looking right at me. 'I said, what did she do?' He doesn't seem annoyed that I totally missed his question because I was gazing at his body. (Though he can't have known that's what I was doing. I hope.)

I don't have to think of a suitable reply because the door beside us opens and Mr Trench appears in all his tweedy, teacherly glory.

'Andrew Ashton and Alexa Murphy!' he bales, even though we're the only people here and there is seriously no need. No one in the world could have any trouble catching Mr Trench's words. 'Step this way, please!'

'Both of us?' I ask, startled, not looking at Drew. 'Together?'

'Yes. Together. Come ON, I haven't got all DAY!' Mr Trench booms. 'I'm asking you to step into my office, not hold hands and dance a jig!'

'Shame,' I think Drew mumbles as we walk in, which gives me a delicious kind of feeling that I like slightly too much, considering.

Though he probably means it's a shame he has to spend his lunch break going into Trenchie's den with his step-cousin's dorky mate. Or maybe he's secretly into dancing jigs.

So we go in and, within minutes, Trenchie has boomed his ultra-cruel and unusual punishment at us.

And it is the *worst* idea ever.

\* \* \*

'It is the *best* idea ever!' George enthuses a few hours later, going so far as to drop his Nintendo DS on his *Lord of the Rings* duvet cover in excitement.

George Richards is probably the main boy in my life right now, if you can call him a boy. I mean, he's definitely

male, and he's in the year above me at school, so still technically a 'boy', possibly even bordering on a 'man'. But he's not like a proper boy (or borderline man). He's not the kind you can lust after. He's a friend. In fact, he's probably my *best* friend right now, what with Jess being in love with her schoolwork and Gemma being in love with my Matt.

George's status as my best friend is a bit worrying, though, for a couple of reasons. The biggest one is that his dad and my mum went out together for a while when we were younger. They fell out big-time, and now my mum assures me that their relationship is 'civilized' and they can 'converse like adults'. But I haven't seen any evidence of it myself, and anyway I'm not sure I've ever heard Mum converse with anybody like an adult. She's a nurse and she treats everyone the same - like a slightly exasperating patient who needs sorting out as quickly and efficiently as possible. She especially does that with me, even now, four years after I had my big scary brush with an illness called meningitis. I ended up in hospital for a while, and since then I sometimes think she actually does see me as a patient and not her daughter.

Anyway, George and his dad moved in next door a few years before all that. George's dad met my mum and they bonded over tea, biscuits and a love of moaning about single parenthood. For a while George's dad and my mum became sort-of-a-couple. Now, of course, they are very-much-not-a-couple. This means that George and I were briefly sort-of-brother-and-sister, and now we probably shouldn't get on any more, out of loyalty to our parents. But we do, and it can be awkward, especially because George and his dad live so close, and Mum doesn't exactly approve of me spending time with them. I've learned an important life lesson out of this: don't ever go out with anyone you can't escape from easily when it all goes wrong. This also applies to seeing people from school, obviously: e.g. Matt. Ouch.

Jess would never, ever date anyone from school, not if he was the last guy on earth - not because of the potential post-breakup trauma, but because she says all the boys at school, even the ones in the sixth form, are 'incredibly immature'. She's not completely wrong about that, but still. This is Worry Number Two: George is madly in love with Jess, and has been for years. So the guy who's now probably my best friend (George) fancies the girl who all the world thinks is my best friend (Jess), who would never look twice at him in a million years. I can't pretend this is not occasionally a problem.

The final reason it's worrying that George is my best friend is because he's, well, a really strange person. And I mean that kindly, I swear. I love him like a brother. But like a slightly embarrassing brother that you might take a few steps away from and cringe a bit if someone really cool saw you together in public.

Basically, apart from his fascination with computer games and consoles, and his love of films about elves and orcs, George was born into the wrong era. I think he would be the first to agree with this statement, so I'm not being mean. He dresses like some kind of Victorian gentleman - all proper trousers and ironed shirts and blazers and stuff - and he talks like an old person. This isn't so bad at school, although George always looks like he's still wearing uniform despite being in the sixth form, and he's a bit too polite to teachers. But he looks and talks the same on Saturdays and Sundays, which is unlikely to attract Jess. Or any girl, ever.

'I'm delighted that you'll be on the same course as me and Jess,' he says in his proper way, which is so far from cool that it practically sizzles.

I give him a stern look. 'You make it sound like you and Jess are going *together*.'

'In my dreams,' George sighs. 'In my dreams, Lex, we are.'

I really don't want to know about George's dreams. 'Anyway, I haven't agreed to go yet,' I tell him. I explain that Mr Trench suggested the Digital Media (aka film-making) course as a punishment. Though Trenchie called it an 'opportunity' and went on and on about the 'level playing field of the visual arts' and how it would present 'the right kind of environment for students like you two' - meaning me and Drew. Apparently it would 'enable' us, and help us to 'fulfil our potential'. Or something. So much for Trenchie insisting that the school didn't believe in giving any student 'special treatment', which is what he told my mum when I came back to school after my meningitis scare and I'd missed a ton of school stuff that I've never really caught up on. My regular meetings with Mr Trench seem pretty *special*, even though the word that gets used in our school, at least at my age, is 'transitional'.

Anyway, whichever way Trencharony dresses it up, it's obvious that he's really giving me an elaborate form of detention, seeing as it will rob me of my entire half-term holiday and deprive me of any chance of a lie-in for five whole days. I think it has to be a government bid to keep Improvers off the streets, as Mr Trench went on and on about how perfect it was for me and Drew. Then he told us to 'strongly consider it', in a tone of voice that suggested we had no choice. But I bet Drew won't turn up. It's essentially just another thing for a Non-Attender not to attend.

George is looking at me, all shocked.

'Yeah, I probably won't go.' I enjoy forming those words.

'But ...' George never understands how I can get into trouble at school. He has never been told off in his life. Come to think of it, that's one thing he actually has in common with Jess. 'But, Lex, doesn't Mr Trench mean that you *have* to go?'

Yes, probably. 'No. I think he just needs to tell the local authority he's made an effort to get some Improvers on the

course to balance out the boffins like you and Jess.'

'Jess is very intelligent,' George says dreamily. 'And beautiful too.' He snaps out of it and adds quickly, 'And so are you, Lex.'

I roll my eyes. Jess is the main reason George is on the course, even though he does love film. He loves Jess more, though. She was the first person to sign up, because she goes to a Gifted and Talented group run by Mr Trench, and apparently he told her that a course like that would help her 'look well-rounded' on her CV and she could 'still do GCSE work in the evenings'. She's forever quoting Mr Trench as if he's some kind of celebrity life coach instead of just an extremely annoying teacher. And ever since the start of this school year, Jess has been totally single-minded about her Future with a capital F. She even gave up her dance classes, which used to be her favourite thing in the world, because she said the after-school lessons clashed with her homework schedule, and Lady Gaga routines weren't really helpful for her Future. I don't really understand Jess any more.

Then Matt signed up for the film course because it's what he does - he's always been a total joiner. This meant Cam and Hayden signed up too, because they're Matt's sidekicks, and Gemma had to follow, because she can't take a breath without Matt these days. After that, I had no choice, even though out of all our gang I'm probably the most interested in film. There is no way I could stand a week of Matt and Gemma all over each other.

Not that any of my friends will even miss me.

'It would be wonderful to have you there,' George says.

Except faithful George.

'In a different environment like that, it could be my chance with Jess,' he adds. 'You can put in a good word for me.'

Not necessarily faithful to *me*, though. 'I've put in thousands of excellent words for you ever since we were six

and you made me propose to her for you with that ready-salted Hula Hoop ring,' I remind him.

'It was cheese and onion,' he corrects me wistfully. 'And I still can't believe she jilted me at the playground altar. She'll learn the error of her ways, though, sooner or later —'

Or never. 'George, listen, I'm not doing it. I'm not wasting my half-term cooped up in a classroom with Mr Trench, with you mooning over Jess.' *And with Gemma drooling over Matt*, I don't add.

'It won't be a waste! It'll be excellent! You know you'll love it. It's so *you!*'

My mobile does a wild vibration dance from somewhere inside my school bag and I reach in to extract it. I came straight here after school, like I usually do when Mum is on lates at work. George's dad, Martin, works from home on some computer thing and he doesn't often surface from his basement office. When he does, he's usually quite nice to me, despite the fact that he and my mum aren't exactly speaking. Martin is OK, really, for a dumped almost-stepdad.

I press buttons on my phone while George keeps wheedling. I look at him as he says, 'Promise me you'll go, O great Ah-LEX-ah, O Gracious One, O wondrous patchy-headed beauty and person who *isn't* rude for reading text messages while I'm talking to you ....'

I turn back to the message. It's from Jess. It says: Drew def on film course! Disaster!

With George definitely still pleading in the background, I text back: No way will he turn up! I talked about this with Jess earlier. She agreed that Drew wouldn't go, and she sounded pretty relieved about it too.

She replies quickly: Has 2! Mum will make him! But glad ur going. xx.

Well, this is good. I mean, it would be good if I cared about Drew being there, and if I was going myself. Jess's

mum isn't someone you say no to. Jess's mum is Sarah Hartford, who works a lot with the hospital that my mum and Gemma's mum are nurses at. All three of our mums have been work colleagues for years. Sarah Hartford isn't a nurse, though. She runs some care homes for elderly people, ones with big links to the hospital, which is why she deals with Mum a lot - something Mum isn't very happy about. Jess's mum is apparently really fierce about getting the best for her charges. Mum says that no one disagrees with Sarah Hartford. Ever. She has this highly scary way about her.

If Jess's mum makes Drew go to the course, then maybe he really *will* be there. The course isn't school-based - it's off in some forest and you can't get there by bus, so she'll have to drive him, and there aren't exactly any arcades or whatever for him to bunk off to nearby.

'So will you go?' George says, ending his speech.

I think I might give it a go, given this new development. 'Probably not.'

George's face falls. Teasing George is always fun. I reckon this is what having a brother is all about, really.

But he is never down for long. He jumps up and grabs one of his laptops. He has about four, thanks to his dad's job, and he's named them all after his favourite film characters.

'What about if I let you try out Dad's latest game? It's exclusive, you know. I have it here, on Gollum.' He taps the laptop lid gently.

I try not to look too interested. Martin always gets these really cool computer games way before you can buy them - in fact, most of them never seem to make it to the shops at all. They're imports from exotic faraway places, and George's dad is supposed to test them out for the UK market. I think, more often than not, the games totally fail his tests, which is why no one else gets to see them.

They're Improvers, like me and Drew, and about as doomed.

Anyway, Martin spends his days trying to break the games so he can report back about how rubbish they are, and sometimes he asks George to help, which means I occasionally get to have a go too.

George smiles at Gollum the Laptop. 'Go on, Lex. It's a good game. It's a bit like those *Sims* games you were addicted to when you were twelve.'

'I wasn't addicted,' I tell him. I remember my cast of cartoon characters who all got busy dating each other and falling out and stuff. Like real life, without the heartache. 'My Sims just had more exciting lives than my real friends, that's all.' This is absolutely untrue, because my real friends were all busy dating each other and falling out and stuff, even then. And even me.

'Well, wait till you see this, then.' George fires up a game and the splash screen reads: *Life, Love, Looks*. It says it's by a company called 'Mystic Inc.', which sounds intriguing too.

'*Life, Love, Looks?* Is that the name of the game?'

George shakes his head. 'No, they're just the three main settings. The game doesn't have an established name yet. Dad says they want to call it *Pygmalions*.'

'Pig-what?'

'*Pygmalion* is an ancient story about changing people and making them be what you want them to be. This sculptor fell in love with the statue he created. Dad thinks the title's a bit long to get past Quality Assurance, though. I suggested just *Pygmas* for short.' He taps at the keyboard. 'This is all way too girlie for me, of course. I'm just trying to help Dad.'

I give him a look.

'Oh, all right, I'm thoroughly enjoying it. You can make new avatars - your Pygmas, as I call them, like Sims - from scratch, though. I have two so far—' He clams up. 'Er, oh.'