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**The 10PM Question** by Kate De Goldi

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**Chapter One**

**Tuesday, February 14**

[...] The bus roared to a halt. Cassino, their morning bus-driver, prided himself on a full-speed, accurate stop, the brakes singing, the air seizing, the doors sucking open precisely in front of the waiting passengers. Frankie and Gigs held their breath every time, anxious that Cassino should maintain his own high standards. In five years, he hadn't failed them.

Cassino was big and brown and had an impressive boa constrictor tattoo running the length of his left arm. Like Frankie and Gigs he was a creature of habit; every morning as he took their coins, or slotted their bus cards, Cassino said the same thing.

'And the code word is, fellas?'

They took week about inventing the code word. You could never have the same one twice, and Cassino had a phenomenal memory for repeats.

'Lorikeets,' said Frankie. He often did birds. He knew a lot of wacko bird names. Tomorrow he planned to roll out *kittiwake*, and the day after, *widgeon*. He was still debating about Friday: it would be either *lily-trotter* or *capercaillie*, which were both names that made him smile.

'Fair enough,' said Cassino, which was what he always said – even when Gigs had been on a bodily excretion theme and had worked his way from *snot* to *earwax* to *bile* to *toe-jam* to a grand finale of *faeces*.

They rolled down the aisle to their usual seat: the left corner of the long bench at the back of the bus. Frankie and Gigs had been sitting there for years and no one had ever

argued with it – except Bronwyn Baxter who'd taken it into her head last year to challenge the arrangement. They'd worn her down, though, driven her to the front of the bus by talking Chilun in a constant monotone from the other end of the bench seat.

Chilun was a code, a complicated language spoken by only two people in the world. Frankie had invented it one dull summer and taught it to Gigs. It was a mixture of pig Latin, inverted syllables, truncated words – and bits of Russian.

(Frankie and Gigs found Russian hilarious. Sometimes for a good laugh they listened to Ma's old tapes from her Russian study days. In class, Frankie could always make Gigs (and himself) crack up by whispering '*Feodor, Feodor, rastslyu menya, da po zharche,*' across the desk. It meant: *Feodor, Feodor, kiss me more passionately.*)

Frankie enjoyed languages; their different sounds and patterns interested him. His ear seemed to sort out their mysteries quickly. He was the best in the class at French, he'd picked up a bit of Italian from Mrs Da Prini, too; he knew the word for bird in eight languages. Inventing Chilun had been a doddle.

Gigs wasn't interested in languages, but after four years he too had pretty much mastered Chilun. It was the ultimate non-violent weapon, Gigs reckoned. If you talked in Chilun long enough and repeated an offending person's name at regular intervals they eventually got very fed up and moved out of earshot. Gigs used it all the time against his twin brothers and little sister. It was useful on the phone, too, Frankie had found, especially when Gordana was hanging about. (Nynodimus was Gordana's Chilun name, but, amazingly, she'd never caught on...)

'So,' said Gigs, taking out his breakfast. He always ate breakfast on the bus. He had an arrangement with Chris: he could stay in bed every morning until the last possible minute – and thereby avoid his siblings – as long as he ate a decent breakfast on the bus. A decent breakfast, according to Chris, was a BLT (with egg) and a milk drink and fresh fruit. Chris's BLTs were top heavy with bacon and avocado. Her smoothies were excellent, too. And her definition of fresh fruit encompassed canned peaches. The Parsons certainly had great baking, but Gigs's breakfasts always made Frankie a little envious.

'The Aunties,' said Gigs, through a mash of pig and vegetable. 'We should do them during the card game – they'll be super stressed. Shotgun Alma.'

Alma was the eldest Auntie and Gigs's declared favourite. Frankie who was deeply fond, really, of all the Aunties, also secretly favoured Alma. She was enormously fat and

very funny; she smoked small cigars called cheroots and drank whisky and liked to gamble on all her card games. And when she'd had quite a lot of whisky and a winning hand at Crib she sometimes demonstrated her ancient ballroom dancing skills.

For someone so hefty Alma was surprisingly light on her feet. The flesh around her middle and arms shook alarmingly when she bossa novaed; sweat gathered in the folds of her chins, and her breath came fast and rattling; but her feet tripped and darted as daintily as any slim-line ballerina. Frankie found an Alma dance routine peculiarly mesmerising.