


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



What I Love About Cricket

Sandy Balfour

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Acknowledgements

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About the Book

What I Love About Cricket is the story of a summer when a 'master' cricket obsessive teaches his novice 'pupil' the wisdom of the game. Sandy Balfour is cast as the supposed master and his sixteen-year-old daughter's new boyfriend – the skateboarding boy wonder – is the reluctant pupil.

This beginner's guide to the infuriatingly perverse game of cricket is a love letter addressed both to those who utterly fail to understand it and to those who need reminding why they fell in love in the first place. What unfolds is wonderfully observed, very funny and as much about fathers and daughters, love and life, as it is about cricket.

About the Author

Sandy Balfour plays and watches a lot of cricket. In his spare time he is a journalist, author and social activist. He is chair of the UK's leading Fairtrade chocolate company and has written four previous books including the critically acclaimed *Vulnerable in Hearts* and *Pretty Girl in Crimson Rose (8)*. He lives in London with his girlfriend and their three children.

What I Love About
CRICKET

SANDY BALFOUR



EBURY
PRESS

For Meg

This is a romance. At least half of it is true.



The companionship of the long-distance run chase

IT'S THE MOST basic cricket equation. One hundred and forty-six runs to win with 40 overs and ten wickets in hand. That's three and a half and a bit per over. Easy. And it's a perfect day for it. The pitch is a little soft and the grass a little long, but who cares? The sun is shining, the cows across the hedgerow are lowing and all is well with the world. We're playing on a field on the far northern edge of London. I think it's Hertfordshire, but I could be wrong. London's county fringe always confuses me. When do the 32 boroughs become Essex? The field is one of those you find dotted between the northern fringe of London and the M25. In the war it would have been an airfield. You can imagine the hangars, a few Spitfires, a wooden hut with a telephone. A siren on a pole. The pilots on standby. It would have been a day like today. A few light clouds in the pale blue sky. A gentle breeze tickling the leaves of the oak, chestnut and hawthorn trees that surround the field. Sorry, landing strip. The chaps - fighter pilots were always 'chaps', weren't they? - sit on wooden chairs and read the papers or play cards. They swap cigarettes and write letters. From time to time they scan the sky to the east and pretend not to care. Nowadays we can hear occasional

traffic, but back then it is quiet, too quiet. And then the telephone rings...

Our changing room looks as if it hasn't been touched since 1940. Once leather flight jackets would have hung on the cast-iron hooks that line one peeling wall. The door creaks wearily on rusted hinges. Where the pilots once ran, grabbing their kit before reaching for the skies... now it's our opening batsmen. They strap on their pads and tuck their boxes into their jockstraps. Some of them have helmets. They grab bats and gloves, inners and thigh pads. We pat them on the back.

'Have a look,' says the skipper, meaning 'Don't do anything stupid'.

'Good luck,' we say. I'm standing with the skipper, a tall, gangling football fanatic called Rob. We watch the openers take guard. We look up at the sun. We check our watches.

'Should be alright,' says Rob. Rob hates losing almost as much as he hates Tories, which is a lot.

'Not many teams can match our attack,' I say.

This is true, at least in the league in which we play. Our attack consists largely of a 40-something man we call The Undertaker. The Undertaker can land his military medium pacers on a penny and that's what he does, for over after over. They land just short of a length and just outside off stump. Sometimes they cut in. Sometimes they hit the seam and move away. They're never very fast and they slow down the longer he bowls. It drives batsmen to distraction. The Undertaker's bowling looks as if it should be easy to hit, but somehow it isn't and so batsmen play stupid shots and get out. As an attacking formula it works a treat. Which is why we're chasing only 146 to win.

'I see no problem,' I say as the problems begin. Ells edges his first ball to the slips and, in a flagrant flouting of all we hold dear, the fat guy in the Hush Puppies catches the thing and - to add insult to injury - makes it look easy. He holds the ball to his belly the way you sometimes see a

drunk cradling a pint. Next up is Ben. Ben is one of the colts just making the transition into the senior teams. One day he's going to be very good. He has movie-star looks and a text-book technique. Unfortunately there are no cameras and we don't play on text-book grounds. He strides forward to his first ball, but it is held up a little by the pitch. It pops off his bat and is neatly pocketed by the bowler. Two down... One hundred and forty-six to win. Simple maths, really.

'Jesus,' says Rob. He has put me at number eight and himself at seven. He didn't think we'd be needed. Now suddenly...

'Christ,' he says.

The fielding side are enjoying this. Third ball of the innings and their bowler is on a hat-trick. You can hear them chirping and whooping. The skipper signals the field to come in. He's got six catchers within ten yards of the bat. Plus the keeper and the bowler. The other three fielders are positioned for mis-hit slogs. One at mid-wicket, one at cover point and one somewhere between third man and fly slip. Not that anyone in our team would be that stupid. When the opposition bowler is on a hat-trick, what you do is block the next ball. Even if it's a slow full toss. You block it, the fielders all clear off to the boundary whence they came, and the game goes on. Everyone knows that.

Except for Nick. Every club has a guy like Nick. Mind you, every club has a guy like Rob. Nick has a fine resonant frame, a cheerful smile and a penchant for the slog sweep. He arrives half awake and plays half asleep. His socks don't match and his trousers don't fit. But he can hit that ball. Nick's eye is so good he sometimes forgets to take guard. One time he forgot his bat. But not today. Today he is fully equipped (pads, box, bat, gloves, helmet, fags) and properly briefed. No room for misinterpretation. None of this 'have a look' nonsense. Nick and Rob have known each other a

long time. The skipper cuts right to the chase: 'Don't do anything fucking stupid,' he says. 'Don't get out. Don't try to hit the skin off good balls. Don't...'

Nick's first ball is neither good nor bad. It doesn't have time to be. It's barely left the bowler's hand before Nick is charging down the pitch. I don't know. Maybe he's remembered he only drank half his pint and wants to get back before some other bugger finishes it. Or maybe he thinks there's a war on. Maybe he sees German fighter planes coming over the hill. This is death-wish cricket. In the Great War he would have been first over the top. Nick meets the ball halfway down the pitch, slightly in front of the guy fielding at silly mid-wicket. He opens his shoulders, turns his body and takes aim at the phantom Messerschmitt he's spotted over square leg. Only he doesn't quite catch it right. He's through the shot too early and the ball flies off the top edge of his bat towards the sun.

'Mine!' shouts the bloke who has come in from third man for just such a shot.

He too makes the catch look easy. Our opponents swamp their bowler in a delighted heap.

'Our Lady of Infinite Mercy,' says Rob. So early in the innings and already he's running out of deities. He watches Nick make the long, slow walk of shame back to the Pavilion. Nothing on *The Weakest Link* can compare with what a batsman endures as he leaves the field after getting out to a shot he should never have played. Not with the score the way it is.

Which at the moment is nought for three. Or, as the Aussies would say, three for nought.

'Mother of Buddha,' says Rob, which throws me for a moment. Did Buddha have a mother? They never taught us that in catechism.

We survive the rest of the over unscathed. And the one after that. But something happens to a team when they lose early wickets. Think of those cartoon lemmings following

each other over the sea cliff. An LBW here, a clean bowled there, a silly run out for good measure and we're 32 for six off ten overs when I join Rob at the crease. The sun is still shining. The magnificent oaks still stir in the breeze. The cows continue to chew their thoughtful cud. But the day is unaccountably darker and more gloomy.

And we're 114 runs short of our target.

We pretend to back up. When Rob's batting I walk a little way down the pitch in case he calls me for a quick one. He does the same for me. But we both know it's a con. We're only going to run the slowest of slow singles. For a few overs anyway. We're going to 'have a look', like grown-ups. We're going to get our eyes in. And then we're going to win. Also like grown-ups. At the end of the first over we meet in the middle and punch gloves, like comic-book professionals. I am Frasier to his Niles. He is all nervous energy and swooning enthusiasm. I am effortlessly superior incompetence. He pats down an imaginary fault in the pitch the way Niles cleans his seat in that coffee shop in Seattle.

'Doing anything after?' Rob asks. He's only being polite. He knows I have children and therefore, in his eyes, have no life. I shrug.

'Some people are coming over.'

'The boy wonder?'

'Him too.'

Rob chuckles. I've told him before that my daughter has a boyfriend. And that said boyfriend doesn't play cricket.

'You'd better make some runs then. Give yourself something to boast about.'

'I can always lie.'

'Again?'

We block out another over. The opposing team have sensed our nervousness. They bring on a leg spinner who bowls with uncanny accuracy and prodigious amounts of turn. I have to watch every ball like a hawk. We each score a single and meet again in the middle.

'You?'

'There's someone.'

'A date?'

Rob looks at the pitch. I look at the sky.

'Keep going,' he says and battle resumes.

We manage not to get out for three overs. It's very hot. The pitch is hardening up a little. The opposition are wilting. The bowling becomes more ragged. In his third over the leg spinner lobs up a full toss on leg stump. It's only polite to hit it into the fields beyond the trees. A straight drive (well, straightish; no one in my club will believe it if I say I hit a *straight* drive) for four and things are looking up. The 50 comes and goes and with it the drinks break. Often the drinks break will bring a wicket. The fielders feel rejuvenated and the batsmen lose their concentration. But we manage to survive it.

Between overs Rob and I pump gloves.

'Anyone nice?' I ask.

He shrugs.

It's a funny business, falling in love. My girlfriend and I did it so long ago we sometimes forget. And now my children? Earlier in the year my daughter fell for a boy. When I told Rob about it, he laughed.

'Just be glad,' he said. 'Women can't date men who play cricket.'

Why?

Well, the time for one thing. Saturday nights become unpredictable. 'I'll see you when the game ends,' is not much of a promise when the game can end anywhere between 5 and 9 pm. Focus, for another. People on dates like your undivided attention. During the cricket season my attention is always divided. Dennis Norderm made his gentle joke about it. 'A funny month, October,' he mused. 'It's when the true cricket fan realises his wife left him in May.'

Their new young bowler pops one up outside off stump. I slash it straight to point. He drops it and Rob calls me through for a single. Now we're in the ascendancy. Ten overs left, 50 to get and they're dropping their catches. The fielders have stopped chirping at us. There's always a couple in every team, the ones who make a noise and yell at their teammates between balls. But the rest of the team have fallen silent. They just want to get this over with. One of them, a young guy with floppy hair, looks a lot like my daughter's boyfriend. At least I think he does. You can't really see his face. But he has the same kind of body. Sort of long and gangly. Like he's done all his growing, and the body weight is only now catching up. Same sort of shyness. When his skipper tells him to move he does it without comment. When his hair hangs down in front of him it's hard to tell what – or even if – he's thinking. With Rob on strike I have time to watch him. Now that I look at him, he is the spitting image of the boy wonder. Something about the way he holds himself. The way he keeps his athleticism in reserve. And he's coming on to bowl.

A change of bowler always creates a moment of interest. In Test cricket you know what to expect. Bowlers don't surprise you. They may bowl badly or well, but essentially they do what they did the week before. At our level, though, you don't know what you're getting until the first ball is bowled. Will it be some hopeless kid who's only there because they were short of numbers, or some guy who's made the London Schools side for the past three years and whose uncle used to play for Worcestershire? Only the first ball will tell.

Rob and I meet in the middle of the pitch.

'Have a look,' he says. The kid is bowling a few practice balls to a teammate. He has a nice action, straight, high arm, looking over his left shoulder.

'Change of bowler,' says the umpire. 'Right arm over.'

For form's sake I take guard again. Make it look like I know what I'm doing. The kid is waiting to bowl. He fiddles with something on a chain round his neck and then tucks it inside his shirt. It's a gesture I've seen a lot in recent weeks. The boy wonder does it. My daughter gave him someone on a chain. Now the bowler starts his run up. An easy loping stride. At meals my daughter's boyfriend sits and touches it. I don't even think he knows he's doing it. He gets a kind of wistful look on his face and rubs his thumb across its soft surface. And then he sees her watching him and tucks it back inside his shirt. He looks down at his plate, his hair falls in front of his face and he disappears from sight the way his love token just has. Like a tortoise withdrawing into its shell. Now I'm watching the ball. Seam up. I'm watching his hand and the end of his tall, straight arm. I'm watching the ball again, which is coming at me faster than I expect. I'm thinking about the way his hair flows back to reveal his face. I'm thinking about his hands. I'm wondering what people mean when they say they're in love. Too late I realise the ball has left his hand. I take a big step forward but I'm a second – an eternity in cricket – too late. The ball cuts between my bat and pad and sends my middle stump cartwheeling across the grass.

'Got 'im,' says the guy in Hush Puppies.

'No luck, old man,' says the kid.

We lost, of course. Not badly, but still, a loss is a loss. All out with three runs needed. Rob undefeated somewhere in his forties. The changing room is a mess of sweaty clothes, frustration and deodorant. Nobody's happy with the outcome, but we also know it's early days. There's always next week. Rob comes through half dressed. He's in a hurry to get our match fees and head off for his date.

'You were batting OK,' he says. 'I was surprised to see you go.'

I shrug. I don't feel like talking. Over the years I've become used to getting out. I've learned not to mind so much because mostly I get caught and mostly it's my fault. But getting out to a good ball is different and, oddly, feels worse. Because, just when the team needed me to, I didn't pay enough attention.

'It's like your mind was elsewhere,' says Rob. 'What were you thinking?'



Clearing the field

LET ME TAKE you back.

'Dad?' says my daughter.

'Yes?'

'You busy?'

'Not especially. Why?'

'No reason.'

'Oh, okay.'

Of course I know that's not true. There's always a reason and sooner or later it will come out. Sooner or later she will judge the moment right and ask whatever it was she was going to ask. Could she do this? Could I pay for that? For the moment I smile and let it go. I like the fact that she calls me Dad. There were times, when she was small, when she experimented with my first name. Trying to sound grown up, I suppose. Trying to be one of the big people. She would roll it on her tongue the way she tried new foods, but, like spinach, she found it wanting and spat it out. She's older now, almost one of the big people. Entering a new phase. The third of Shakespeare's seven ages. An actor trying on new clothes. Like those repertory players in the theatre move between roles. Hamlet one day; Romeo the next. Today's too, too sullied flesh is forgotten in the sweet sorrow of tomorrow's parting. In real life it's not so easy. In real life we have our seven acts on the stage and

we follow dutifully. One after the other, never to return. Mewl as a baby, whine like a schoolboy and sigh like the lover you hope to become. Do it like it's always the first time or always the last. And then move on, slipping pleasantly to nothingness.

'Dad?' she says.

'Yes?'

'Oh... nothing.'

'Oh, okay.'

If she's just about entering the third act, what about me? Shakespeare didn't say anything about men of a certain age gradually slipping down the pecking order of their cricket club's team sheets, but he would have had my number if he had. I suppose I am hovering somewhere short of the fifth age, the time of the justice 'in fair round belly', the time when 'desire doth outrun performance'. Just the inevitable consequence of slowing muscles and calcifying joints. Just what happens when you carry a few extra pounds around your midriff. Time was, I could play an off drive as elegantly and effectively as the next man. Time was, my brain said 'jump' and my body soared. Time was, I strolled down the beachfront and girls turned to look. Those were the days! Not any more. Nowadays my mind says 'run' and I walk. It says 'leap' and I fall. Nowadays I am more of what we in the cricketing fraternity call a mid-wicket specialist. Belting the ball is easy. You just swing your bat and see what happens. Playing a proper stroke is much harder. You've got to keep that elbow up. You've got to move your feet. You've got to keep your balance.

You've got, I suppose, to care. There are those cricketers who become fussier with age. They worry about their technique. They throw a strop, the full double teapot with expletives undeleted, when they're given out leg before to a ball that in their view (though nobody else's) was going a yard down leg. They protest long and loud that the catch they were adjudged to have given was in fact nothing more

than the ball brushing the top of their pad. Even though everyone on the field heard it. And the people in the Pavilion. And the deaf old guy buying tobacco three streets away. They stand at deep mid-on and practise cover drives that will never see the light of day. All that elbow high, front foot well forward, knee bent nonsense that goes out the window the minute a ball is bowled in anger. They study their averages and dream of the day when they will, once more, reach the halcyon heights of the season seven years ago when, three matches in a row, they were twelve not out at close of play.

‘Um, Dad?’

The ‘um’ means she’s getting serious. Probably going to ask for money.

‘Yes?’

‘Oh, um, nothing.’

And then there are people like me, those for whom the delight of leather on willow, of cream flannels against green, of the soft hum of bumblebees in the uncut outfield are the source of true delight. We don’t much mind that our game is slowly, surely going to pot. We’re not that fussed when some recently retired county circuit player smacks us over our head for three or four or five sixes in a row. We don’t mind when an eight-foot teenage dynamo who’s clearly not getting enough – or any – sex clatters us in the ribs three balls out of six before castling middle stump with the first ball of the next over.

Rob hates those guys. He’s one of those players who practise their drives in the middle of the field. Difference is, he still has some prospect of playing them properly in the future. Although curiously he checks his drive. It becomes a kind of block-drive. When Flintoff does it, it goes for four between mid-off and extra cover. When I do it, it trickles out to point.

‘These people should do more drugs,’ I say when we meet between overs.

‘How’s the boy?’ he asks. He knows me too well.

‘Early days.’ I say. He returns to practising his drives. I return to my end and wait for the teenage dynamo. In the field, players like me don’t get all antsy each time we mis-field a spinning, cutting ball through mid-wicket. We applaud the shot and then trudge off to the boundary, whence we return the ball, underarm, to the bowler’s end because it’s closer.

But I digress. I was telling you about walking down the beachfront. I was pretending those were the days. Trouble is, they weren’t. Because the girls would turn to look – and then what? Then every teenage anxiety would overcome me and I would trip over my own feet, landing face down in the remains of someone’s forgotten ice cream. And the girls would turn their faces back to the sea or the sun or wherever they were facing before I was foolish enough to stroll by. That’s the reality and if forced I can remember it all. But only if forced, because, despite all the evidence, every generation thinks it is the first. We reinvent our parents’ lives and our children’s lives and call them new. We pretend we are not like what has gone before and we fail to understand what is to come. Our parents did it and so will our children. Why should we be any different?

‘Um, Daddy?’

‘Um’ and ‘Daddy’? Both barrels, as it were, of the supplicant cannon. What? She wants to get her tongue pierced?

‘Yes?’

‘Is... is Mum in?’

Ah, the ‘Mum’ gambit. Well, that’s a relief. Mum can deal with it. Whatever ‘it’ is.

‘No.’

‘Oh, okay.’

Except, when you think back, it somehow all feels familiar. Didn’t we do this before? we ask. Doesn’t this feel familiar? Not déjà vu exactly, but, well, not new either. Like

something you saw in a movie once or read in a book. Like the first time you flew to the United States and felt as if you had been there already. Except you can't work out when it was, until you realise you saw it in the movies. Or maybe it was a story your father told you when you were young. The trouble is, you can't separate the characters from the names. You don't realise you're still in that repertory company, still touring. Still drinking cold tea in windy dressing rooms. Still fancying Ophelia, even though she's now a couple of years - decades - younger than you. Because now you no longer play the romantic lead. The blond kid, the one from RADA, has taken on Hamlet. Or Romeo. You're in the billing, but slipping down the rankings. Time was your name was up in lights. Well, not lights, but up there in large type anyway. Not now. You're more the Polonius figure these days, dispensing tired wisdom to an audience that doesn't listen and doesn't care. You could play Lear, I suppose, but frankly, who's got the energy? All that storming about. All that sound and fury signifying - well, you know what it signifies. And you know the worst part? The worst part is you watch the RADA kid and you realise he's better than you. Not better than you are now, but better than you ever were. The way, say, Nasser Hussain felt about Michael Vaughan. He has greater range, greater depth, greater appeal. And yet, somehow, there is this nagging sense that maybe, once, someone thought of you that way. Once upon a time you were the threat, even though you didn't realise it then.

And so here I am. Shakespeare's fourth age is the soldier. Not me. Not any more. Not with his strange oaths and beard. 'Sudden and quick in quarrel.' I'm not like that. Predictable and slow, that's me. I don't yell at the umpire, although I may still give the opposition a bit of lip. Tell them to walk when they might or might not have nicked one through to the keeper. That sort of thing. But mostly I

shut up. Mostly I tell my teammates to let it go. I sound like someone's girlfriend on a troubled night out.

'Leave it, Rob,' I say. 'He's not worth it.'

And Rob may or may not leave it, depending on how bad his hangover is.

I am mellow now, you see. Not old, but older. I play bridge and do the crossword. I walk in the park and read large books beneath my favourite chestnut tree. I watch ducks with a newfound curiosity. I've developed an interest in gardening. Vegetables rather than flowers, but still - I have time to listen to things growing. You could say I'm at peace with the world. Sort of.

But then again, Shakespeare has his soldier 'seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon's mouth'. That might be me. Just a little. Despite my protestations above, I still do battle with the teenage dynamos. I still play league cricket. Lower league it's true. And lower order. But nonetheless it's competitive cricket. I still make a note of my season's batting average. It's only two or three seasons since I managed 46. OK, maybe four seasons. Or five. But I remember each ball. A golden summer that was. I remember the last innings. We played on the lovely ground in Highgate Woods in London, one of those public spaces where the batsmen should be - but never are - constrained by the presence of millions of children and toddlers playing football or eating ice creams at the edge of the field. The Corporation of London puts up signs warning patrons that cricket involves big blokes hitting a hard ball, but no one pays them any attention. Kids run on the field of play and there's invariably a gang of mums 'n' prams at cow corner. A target of sorts. That season I needed to make 80 not out in the final match to average 50 for the year. I didn't make it, of course. I was brought down by a vicious inswinging yorker that hit me on my big toe when I was on 43. Me and Don Bradman. Injudiciously (aren't they always injudicious?) given out LBW by my teammate - well, I won't

name him; he knows who he is. A slow trudge back to the score box (Highgate Woods doesn't have a pavilion; you have to change in the shade of a passing oak) and a best ever season's average of 46.

Which is as good as it's got. Or ever likely to get as, season after season, desire doth outrun performance.

And I suppose I have to own up to other elements of Shakespeare's fourth age. The soldier is 'jealous in honour'. Me too, me too. I have daughters, you see, and I guard them jealously. Sorry about that. All I would say is that my jealousies pass as quickly as they arise. But then nor am I the 'slipperd pantaloone' of the sixth age. Not quite. There are spectacles on my nose, it's true, and there are times when the world seems mad to me, mostly when some lager-fuelled lout is caught on tape beating old ladies and smacking policemen on the head only for his parents to appear on TV the next day to say, 'He's a good lad, really.' No, he bloody isn't. He's a lager-fuelled, misbegotten lout. See, I could audition for *Grumpy Old Men*; I hold the prejudices of the fifth age. I feel the same imminent fading of my once average powers. But no, I'm not old, not quite. Not yet. My voice is not 'reedy' and my 'shank is not shrunk'. Just the opposite. My shank, as my son might say, is well meaty. So let's say I am in the early stages of the fifth act. I am the justice, a youngish justice, a reasonably vigorous justice, 'full of wise saws' and with 'eyes severe'. I sit on boards and chair meetings. I have a house and a girlfriend and together we have children and a mortgage. When I fill in forms I admit that people are 'dependent' on me, even if they don't think of it that way.

Nor, to be honest, do I. At heart I play cricket. At heart I'm just a child.

What do you mean, that's coming soon? The final, seventh age of 'childishness and mere oblivion'? I said a child, not childish. There is a difference, you know. A child is wide-eyed and innocent. A child is happy. A child loves to

play. But childish? Childish people need to be loved. Childish people need to win. Childish people think they matter more than other people. I'm not like that. Not at all. You'll see.

'Um, Dad,' says my daughter in the continued absence of my girlfriend, her mum.

'Yes?'

'You know you and Mum?'

I do.

'How did you, like, meet?'

Why is she asking me? Couldn't she wait to ask my girlfriend? She's the one who likes a late-night chat about feelings. She's the one who encouraged the kids to express themselves.

'How do you mean, "meet"?''

'You know, like, fall in love.'

'Oh, yes, well, that. It's a long story.'

'I have time.'

Damn.

'Well, we, um, we, well, like...'

'I mean, did you, like, know straight away?'

'Know?'

'You know, that she was the one?'

'Well, I don't know. Is she? I mean, it was... You know, well... Why?'

'No reason.'

Also not true. But like the answer to her question, I let it pass.



Preparing the pitch

NOT FOR LONG though. She was back the next day.

'Dad?'

'Yes?'

'You know my bed?'

I do. The one that creaks in the night. The one we bought her when she was too old for her cot. The one with stickers all over one end. The one she used to lie under at night and read books by torchlight because it made them more exciting. Even the ones with wizards and trains that leave from platforms that don't exist. That one?

'I need a new one.'

'Oh. Okay. I mean, why?'

'It's just not comfortable,' she says. She doesn't say for whom.

But I can't pay attention just at the moment. It's a Saturday morning in March and I have to get down to the club for a work party. There are things to be done. Leaves to be cleared. Grass to be mown. Pitches to be rolled. Trees to be trimmed.

'So can we get one?'

'Well, um, sure. I mean, not right now. Maybe...'

'Tomorrow?' The old pre-empt.

'Oh, okay, sure. I mean, tomorrow we can go and have a look.'