

Shenandoah

By Frank Cottrell Boyce

Mum and me are writing this whole thing down because we don't want anyone to get into trouble. By the time anyone reads this, we will have vanished. But don't worry about it. We vanished ourselves.

It's not like anyone ever noticed we were there to start with. For instance, because I like to get the same bus as Mum – and because her shift starts at 7.30 – I always get to school before anyone else. Before the Breakfast Club opens. Before Mrs Teague even gets there, which is at 7.45. She never notices me sitting on the wall near Reception because she's always on her phone. I wasn't the first to get there last Monday though. Last Monday, there was already a big old minibus with foreign plates and millions of bumps in the bodywork, like it had been caught in an asteroid storm. It was parked right across two parking spaces. And one of them was Mrs Teague's. When she saw this, she pocketed her phone for once and stared really hard at the driver. But the driver was asleep and staring didn't wake her up.

Then Mrs Teague noticed me for the first time ever.

'What's this?' she said.

I had actually been thinking what it might be so I said, 'French Exchange maybe?' French Exchange is when some students from a school in France come to stay and then some of us go back with them to France.

'There's nothing in the diary. Where are you from?'

'From here.'

'No, no, no. What. Country. Are. You. From? What school? There's nothing in the diary.'

'From this school. I'm from this school.'

'I don't think you understand. And sadly I don't speak French. Well, well, *quelle domage*. Mrs Grady speaks French. Because she's the French teacher ...'

'I know.' Mrs Grady is my French teacher.

'She'll be here shortly. She'll sort out the details. You. Are. Very. Welcome to our school.'

'Thanks.'

The fact that Mrs Teague thought I was with the French kids somehow made me feel that I should wait with the minibus instead of going to Breakfast Club. After a while the French kids got out of the minibus, swung their arms, stretched their legs, ran on the spot and smiled at me. They didn't look one little bit French. Maybe it had been a long journey but their hair was really messy, and they were wearing bright blue tracksuit things and carrying massive backpacks. Then Mrs Grady showed up, looking like she was going to disintegrate from stress. She was soooo sorry, soooo sorry, she said, because there had been some sort of mix-up. The French girls weren't expected until June.

All the French girls stared at her and then stared at me, like I was going to translate for them. Then one of them said 'June' and they all said 'June' and then they said it again a few times and Mrs Grady said, '*Oui, oui, mais pas de problème. Vous êtes toujours bienvenus a notre école.*'

The French kids stared at her again and their stares were absolutely blank. 'Oh dear,' said Mrs Grady, 'Maybe it's my accent.' Then she looked at me and said, 'Please. Come. With. Me. To. My. Class.'

'I always come to your class. I'm in your class. I'm Shania.'

'Yes, yes. My class. Come. This way. *Suivez-vous.*'

The French kids seemed to like the French class. Every time Mrs Grady asked us to repeat something in French, they repeated it. And kept repeating it. All morning. No matter what the lesson was. And mostly in unison. In Geography, when Mr Norman turned round to write the word 'solifluction' on the white board, they all went, '*Bonjooooouuur*'. He dropped his sharpie in surprise then he said '*Bonjour*' back. And they said '*Bonjooooouuur*' back to him and he said '*Bonjour*' back and it did look like that

might go on all morning. But then the bell went for break and everyone piled out. Except the French kids who stood there smiling at me. Apparently I was in charge of them now.

I was already beginning to suspect that they weren't French. Maybe if I took them to the library I could show them an atlas or something and they could show me where they were from.

I said, 'Let's go to the library.'

'*Bonjooouuur,*' they said.

I showed them France in the atlas but it didn't seem to interest them. Neither did Germany. Neither did Europe. Neither did the northern hemisphere. The only thing they liked was the index. They ran their fingers down the tiny printed place names saying, 'Addis Ababa' and 'Minsk' and 'Shenandoah.'

Then they got distracted because Olivia was playing *Labyrinth* on one of the computers. They stood there watching for a while as the little Greek soldier went running around, bumping into walls, falling over and being chased by the Minotaur. Finally, the Minotaur got him and they all burst into tears. Not sparkly little sniffy tears, by the way. Big bawling howling tears mixed with mucus. They hugged each other, shuddering with sorrow. I tried to explain that it was alright – Olivia still had nine lives left.

'Look,' I said, 'The soldier's back. He's back at the beginning.'

Somehow that just made them louder and more grief stricken. The librarian came and tried to tell them off but they couldn't hear her over the sobs and woe, so she sent for Mrs Grady. Mrs Grady said it was nothing to do with her because they weren't French. At which point one of them looked at the screen and cried, '*Au revoir!*' and they all shouted '*Au revoir!*'

'They're speaking French,' said the librarian.

'But if I speak French to them they don't understand.'

'It's probably your accent.'

Mrs Grady looked at me and said, '*Quelle est le problème?*'

I said, 'I'm not French, Miss.'

'There,' she said, 'What did I tell you. They're not French. They're not French so they're not my responsibility. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got netball.'

In the end, Mrs Teague came and said maybe it was best if they had an early lunch.

Normal lunch is this: you queue up, you look in the big metal trays to see what there is, then you give the dinner lady your plate and she serves you. That's not how the 'French' did it. They queued up and then started tasting things from the trays. When the dinner lady tried to stop them they all said, 'Shenandoah' or 'Belarus'. Then they took a big tray of chips over to a table, and ate them in big handfuls. After that they opened their enormous backpacks, took out sleeping bags, lay down in a corner of the hall and went to sleep. They snored loudly.

'What's going on here!?' said the chief dinner lady.

'They're from Europe,' said Mrs Teague. 'They have to have a siesta. It's part of the culture. Quiet, everybody. The French are sleeping.' A little bit later I found out that they'd left a wad of money on the table 'as a tip'. Two hundred quid apparently.

Mrs Teague spotted me and said, 'Normally during these exchange visits, the visiting school goes out for the afternoon and takes a look around the city.'

'You want me to go out with them for the afternoon?'

'Very much so.'

So. I knew that if I walked out to their minibus when they woke up, they'd follow me. Which they did. I thought it might be nice to pick Mum up from work (she finishes about two) and give her a lift home or maybe even go for a day out. I'd like to say I was a bit surprised that one of the girls got into the driving seat and started the engine, but I was beyond surprise by then. I pointed the way to the Children's Hospital, and we got there just as Mum was arriving at her bus stop.

'Very nice to meet you,' she said as she climbed on board. 'Where are you all from?'

Replies ranged from Minsk and Addis Ababa to Shenandoah.

'Oh, Shenandoah I long to see you,' sang Mum. 'I love that song. It's so sad. Although I can't really tell what it's all about. I mean is Shenandoah a river or a girl. And is he going home or leaving home?' She sang a little bit more: 'Far away, you rolling river! Oh Shenandoah, my heart is near you ...' She had to stop though because the girls all burst into tears again.

‘They’re very emotional, aren’t they?’ whispered Mum. ‘Where are they from?’
I said, ‘They’re French.’

‘They don’t look French. Their hair’s too messy.’

‘I can’t figure out where they’re from.’

‘I’m sure I can figure it out,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve met people from every place under the sun working in the Children’s Hospital.’ She listened while they talked and wrote down the odd word.

‘I’m supposed to take them somewhere interesting, show them our culture but I can’t think of anywhere.’

‘Safari Park, obviously,’ said Mum. Which was exactly the right answer because we always wanted to go there, but you need a car to go there and we don’t have one. Also because it’s quite expensive and they’ve got loads of money. But most of all because it’s full of large grazing animals that poo a lot and it turned out that the French kids thought that poo was the funniest thing on earth. Every time a buffalo or a gazelle lifted up its tail, they pointed and started laughing and shouting, ‘Minsk! Minsk! Ha ha ha ha ha.’

I loved the Safari Park. The monkeys climbed all over the car and wrenched the windscreen wipers off, which was hilarious. The only bit that troubled me was the lions. The lions crowded round the car, with their massive heads and their heavy paws and their eyes which didn’t show any expression, as though they were invisible. I was so hypnotised by them that at first I didn’t notice the ‘French’ were climbing out of the van and going for the lions. I saw them fanning out and holding their arms wide, yipping and yowling. I couldn’t look after that. I didn’t want to see them being ripped limb from limb. I covered my face with my hands. I heard lions roaring. Then I heard French girls laughing. I suppose that meant that one of the lions had done a poo. Then we drove on. There didn’t seem to be any dismembered limbs or severed heads in the car so I suppose that somehow they got away with it.

Normally during French Exchange, each French student stays with an English family. No one had sorted this out. Maybe they would all have to stay with us. But no. They stopped outside our house and when we looked round, they’d gone.

‘They must have made other arrangements for overnight accommodation. It’s a

shame. They would have been very welcome,' said Mum. 'They seemed very cheery. I've written down loads of the words they said. Tomorrow I'll ask around the hospital and see if anyone recognizes any of them. I'm betting on Finland. Or Hungary. Finnish is not related to other European languages.'

I found out what their 'other arrangements' were the next morning.

When I got up, Mum was just sitting at the table with her phone in one hand and the list of words she'd made in the other.

'Let's go,' I said.

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Mum, still staring straight in front of her.

'Why?'

She pushed the phone across the table towards me. She'd been sacked. By text.

'Twenty-three years, I've worked there,' she said. 'They didn't even spell my name right.'

I didn't want to leave her. But it would have been a bit weird, I suppose, taking your Mum to school. 'Maybe the Finnish girls will want to go out again,' I said. 'We'll come round at lunchtime. You think of somewhere nice.'

If you were worried about how the Finnish or French or Whatever kept warm and dry overnight, don't be. They built themselves a massive shelter out of branches with leaves for the roof. It looked amazing. Like a South Pacific longhouse. Everyone loved it at first. Then someone noticed that all the trees were missing from the school playing fields.

'Who would steal ten birch trees and a clump of sycamores?' said Olivia. Then she looked at the shelter and said, 'Oh.' and 'I see.' The visitors had chopped down all the trees from around the school and built a bonfire out of the ones they hadn't used for their longhouse.

'Bonjour!' they said when they saw me.

Mrs Teague was annoyed. 'This is a conservation area,' she said. 'You need permission from the council to cut-down trees ...'

'Permission, yes,' smiled the biggest girl. 'We would like permission to present an assembly this morning to tell you all about who we are and what we have learned.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Teague. 'You speak English. I didn't realize.'

'You didn't ask,' said Etta.

I followed closely behind her. I said, 'Where did you learn to speak English?'

'Just picked up a bit here and there. It's all about listening,' said Etta. 'Stand at the back of the hall, near the exits, during the assembly.'

'Why?'

'Honestly, don't talk. Just listen.'

Assembly was all about Listening. Etta said she had seen many people talking, talking, talking since she came to school. 'People,' she said, 'even talk to their dogs!'

The other Finnish or French or Whatever girls laughed loud and long.

'That won't work!' said Etta. 'We listen. This is why we learn so much. So much about you all. Thank you. You should listen too. Yesterday for instance we saw a creature in the safari park and we listened to him. Here he is now for you to listen to ...'

And two of the French or Finnish or Whatever girls came yipping and yowling and howling onto the stage, driving the lion before them. The lion may have roared. I'm not sure. Like most people, I didn't stay around to listen. I practically teleported myself back to that minibus.

'Where to today?' said Etta.

'Can we pick up my Mum?'

We picked up Mum. She was still sitting where I left her, still with the phone in her hand.

'Can we go back to the Safari Park?' she said. 'This time maybe I could play with the lions.'

'No. I don't think we should do that. I think we should go somewhere quiet and calm. Like the Art Gallery.'

The Art Gallery was quiet and calm until the French or Finnish or Whatever girls got there. The moment they saw the painting *The Death of Nelson*, they were off weeping

and wailing and sobbing again. They cried themselves into a mush. *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* was worse. They screamed and pointed at the axe about to fall on Lady Jane's neck so loud that you thought the painted axe man would stop and history would change. Mum knew what to do obviously. She took them into the abstract gallery and they sat smiling calmly at a big canvas covered in yellow splodges. 'Twenty million quid that cost,' said Mum.

'Worth every penny,' said Etta.

The next morning they wanted to give another assembly. Mrs Teague didn't really want to let them back onto the school premises. It had taken two helicopters and a team of police marksmen to deal with the lion and no matter what Mrs Teague said, the police seemed to think it was all her fault.

'I think it's probably time you went home,' she said.

'We don't have a lion with us today,' said Etta.

Mrs Teague looked at Etta's backpack as if there might be a lion in there somewhere.

'We have a present for you.'

Mrs Teague obviously remembered the massive tip. She said OK.

Assembly was about being calm and only thinking about bad things. 'Just don't think about bad things!' yelled Etta. 'Stop it! It makes you bad. You have bad things on your posters – vampires and stuff – and gloomy things on your records. Stop! Listen to good things. For instance ...'

And they all started singing 'Shenandoah'. 'Oh Shenandoah I long to hear you ... far away you rolling river ...'

They sang so beautifully and it sounded so sad. Mum was right you couldn't tell whether Shenandoah was a girl or a river. But you could tell what it meant. It meant that home was far away and that the singer wished he was there. When the girls sang it, with tears in their eyes, it meant, *away, we're bound away back to the place we love*. I texted Mum and told her to get over to the school quickly.

'... Oh Shenandoah I long to hear you. Away, I'm bound away 'cross the wide Missouri...' Everyone's spine was tingling when they finished.

'Also,' said Etta, 'look at happy things.' And she presented Mrs Teague with the

yellow splodges worth £20 million. And stood smiling at the painting for the longest time while the French or Finnish or Whatever girls went outside.

‘Thanks for all your trouble,’ said Etta and handed Mum a big wad of cash.

‘You speak English!’ said Mum.

‘Un peu,’ said Etta.

‘Where are you from?’ asked Mum. Why hadn’t I thought of that!?

‘A little place. You wouldn’t know it.’

‘The thing is,’ said Mum, ‘if this is a student exchange, you should take someone with you.’

‘Hop onboard,’ said Etta. We hopped onboard.

‘This may take a while,’ smiled Etta. So we wrote this note while the engine warmed up. It did take a while. We were surprised to see the whole minibus tipping backwards onto its rear wheels. Also surprising was the fact that everyone was given an oxygen mask – for a ride in a minibus!?! There’s a big crowd on the playground watching us. We’re going to pass one of them this note and then we’re vanishing ourselves. We don’t know where we’re going but by the time you read this ... we will be dust.

NOTE – taken from the Reuters press agency: Mrs S Teague – the headmistress at the centre of the ‘lion on the hockey pitch’ incident – was today arrested for the theft of a masterpiece of modern art worth £20m. Her defence ‘It wasn’t me it was some French kids who jumped into a minivan which then just vanished into thin air’ was at first dismissed by police attending the crime. But mobile phone footage has come to light of what appears to be a minibus taking off from the playground, flying into the air and ascending into the stratosphere ‘like some alien craft.’

Shenandoah – 1

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Supported through the Scottish Government’s Edinburgh Festivals Expo Fund.