



PÁDRAIG KENNY

Chicken House

Scholastic Inc. / New York



Copyright © 2018, 2019 by Pádraig Kenny
All rights reserved. Published by Chicken House, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.,
Publishers since 1920. SCHOLASTIC, CHICKEN HOUSE, and associated logos are
Trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.
First published in the United Kingdom in 2018 by Chicken House,
2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility
for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,
recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information
regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions
Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the
product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or
locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available
ISBN 978-1-338-27755-5


10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, April 2019
Book design by Maeve Norton



CHAPTER 1



Snow was falling from the night sky, and all the world was cold and hushed except for the regular metallic squeaking of Jack's joints. Christopher glanced at Jack, but the mechanical looked straight ahead, oblivious to the sound. Absalom was walking a few feet in front, his thin black coat billowing around him.

Squeak squeak.

Christopher willed the sound to stop.

Squeak squeak.

Absalom wheeled around, raising his tall, spidery frame up to its full height.

"I thought I told you to oil him before we left the yard," he said, glaring down at Christopher.

"I did, Mr. Absalom."

The truth was, in all the panic of their hurried departure, Christopher had completely forgotten to oil Jack's joints.

Absalom scowled at him.

"He did. He even checked me for loose rivets," said Jack.

"Fix your hair," said Absalom, flapping his hand at Jack,

who pulled down the edges of his wig and grinned at Christopher. Christopher smiled weakly in response. Ever since Absalom had informed them that there might be the possibility of an actual sale in Aylesbury, he'd felt an awful, cold sinking sensation in his chest.

Absalom hadn't made a real sale in quite a long time, except for his scarecrows, which were frankly embarrassing concoctions. The most recent had walked out of its field and was found three months later, ten miles away, facedown in a river.

But this time, Absalom had told them, "the stars were aligning." A sale was most definitely in the cards, and after a bit of gleeful capering around his office he told Jack to replace his regular red hair with a brown wig "because nobody buys gingers, awful sickly-looking things." Jack didn't mind. He was secretly delighted at the possibility of being sold, although Jack being Jack, he was too hardheaded to show it. Even so, Christopher had caught him grinning to himself on the way over in the truck.

Christopher stole another anxious glance at Jack as they walked along the street. He was grinning to himself again, but this time he noticed Christopher watching. Christopher looked away quickly.

"What's wrong?" said Jack.

"Nothing," Christopher replied.

Absalom's mood was improving. He looked up in amazement at the falling snow. "Beautiful. I couldn't have planned it better if I'd arranged it myself."

He signaled them to stop halfway along a row of redbrick houses, clasped his hands together, and grinned at the two boys.

"Here we are. Number ten is the abode we require. Remember what we practiced, Jack."

“Yes, Mr. Absalom.”

“Christopher.”

“Yes, Mr. Absalom?”

“Stand up straight, look smart. Remember, you’re assistant to the greatest engineer in all of Britain.”

“Yes, Mr. Absalom.”

The door they faced was dark green with a dull brass knocker. Absalom straightened himself up, took the knocker, and gave it three confident raps. He spoke to the boys without looking at them:

“Smile, lads.”

There were a few moments of silence broken only by the soft fizz of falling snow, then the sound of a bolt being thrown back. The door opened, and Absalom smiled his broadest smile.

A man in his thirties with a curly mop of hair poked his head out.

“Yes?” he said.

Absalom gave a small bow.

“Mr. Chapman, allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr. Gregory Absalom, a creator of rudimentaries, mannequins, mechanicals, and machines of varying sentience, variety, and vivacity.”

He snapped his wrist and a business card appeared in his hand. Before Mr. Chapman knew what was happening, he’d taken the card and was looking at it with a dazed expression. He looked up, his head bobbing, eyes blinking, as if he’d just been punched.

“I’m . . . I’m sorry, what’s this about?”

Absalom clasped his hands together in a gesture of prayer and took on a somber cast.

“Word has reached me, sir, of your personal tragedy. Please accept my sincerest condolences, late though they may be.”

The man's face whitened. "Who told you? How is that any of your . . . who told you?" he demanded.

Christopher felt suddenly nervous. He tried to catch Absalom's eye, but the engineer was too busy fixing the man with a look that was both sympathetic and predatory.

"I have friends in the village, Mr. Chapman. They came to me out of the kindness of their hearts, and they told me of your predicament."

Mr. Chapman looked at him with wide eyes, resting his hand on the frame of the door as if he was trying to steady himself.

"How long has it been, Mr. Chapman?" asked Absalom, his head tilted, eyes soft and moist with well-practiced compassion.

Mr. Chapman trembled for a moment. "Six weeks," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse with grief.

"And he was your only child."

Mr. Chapman nodded.

Christopher felt blazing hot spots on his forehead and cheeks. He'd presumed that this was just a normal sale. He hadn't realized what the circumstances were, and now he was furious with Absalom for trying to take advantage of this man. He was about to step forward and say something, but Absalom, without even looking at him, deftly raised his right hand and put just enough pressure on his chest to halt him in his tracks.

"Very sad, very sad indeed," said Absalom, sighing and shaking his head—Christopher saw the sly glimmer in his eyes. "What would you say, sir, if I told you I could alleviate your pain and grief in some small measure?"

Mr. Chapman's eyes grew wide and defenseless. Christopher knew the poor man was now right where Absalom wanted him.

Absalom flourished theatrically in Jack's direction.

"May I present a top-of-the-range model. One of my finest creations, if I may be so bold."

Jack stepped forward and smiled at Mr. Chapman. He tilted his head, just as Absalom had taught him, and gave Mr. Chapman a hopeful, humble look. Christopher felt sick.

"Jack, we call him, but of course his appellation is a movable feast, should you make the decision to purchase. He comes complete with all the attributes of a boy of his apparent age. A sense of fun . . ."

Jack smiled and gave a little jig while he rocked his elbows back and forth like a music hall comedian.

". . . an intelligence far beyond that of his contemporaries . . ."

Jack put his hand to his chin and squinted sagely into the sky. "Three hundred and ninety-five times six hundred and seventy-two is two hundred and sixty-five thousand four hundred and forty."

". . . along with splendid mobility and articulation."

Jack did a cartwheel followed by a handstand. His joints squeaked, and Absalom took the opportunity to give Christopher a sour look. Christopher glared back at him, and Absalom's expression disappeared as he once again turned and smiled at a stunned Mr. Chapman.

"As you can see, sir, he is a most estimable model, a miracle of engineering, and I can assure you, a most affordable price should you make the decision to purchase."

"Thomas, who is that?" A voice drifted from inside the house. "Who's at the door?"

There was a long wintry silence before a woman appeared from behind Mr. Chapman, her hair straggly, her eyes vacant and shadowed with lines of sleeplessness.

“Who is it, Thomas? What do they want?”

Mr. Chapman looked anxious. “Nothing, Ruth. Go back inside. It’s no one.”

Absalom moved with the whiplash speed of a rattlesnake. “Mrs. Chapman,” he said as he moved toward the threshold. “I was just offering your husband my most sincere condolences. From what I’ve heard from our mutual friends, your son, William”—Christopher saw Mr. Chapman flinch; his wife’s hand went to her mouth—“was a most eminent and decent young man.”

Absalom finished the sentence with a crack in his voice and dabbed at his eyes with his hankie before continuing.

“I was just showing your husband our latest model, one that I hope might offer a suitable approximation of your son, one indeed that might give some small measure of emotional fulfillment and sense of family at this most auspicious time of year.”

Jack was walking around on his hands. Mrs. Chapman looked at him with a kind of nervous astonishment. She bent down to have a closer look.

Jack flipped back onto his feet and looked at Mrs. Chapman for the first time. He walked toward her, a look of genuine sincerity on his face.

“This is Jack, Mrs. Chapman,” Absalom said gently. He ushered Jack forward by the shoulders.

A great hush descended again. In the background, Christopher could hear the low murmur of a mournful wind.

“Ruth . . .” said Mr. Chapman.

His wife didn’t seem to hear him. Her head was quivering, and she bent even lower as Jack approached.

“One of my finest creations, Mrs. Chapman. A very subtle mechanical approximation of humanity both in form and content. Jack can be a worker, a friend, a companion . . .”

Absalom paused as Mrs. Chapman's eyes widened.

". . . a son."

She gave the smallest of whimpers. Mr. Chapman lowered his head and let out a plaintive, "Ruth, please . . ."

Jack stepped closer, and Christopher's heart lurched when he saw the look of agonized hope in her eyes. Absalom spread his arms wide and said:

"As the snow falls, think on this; how good and proper and right it would be to have a family together at Christmas. The putting up of the tree, the smiles, the anticipation, the scent of orange and spices in the air, the melodious comfort of carols. And who better to share all of this with than one's own progeny, to be together as a family unit, bound by love, by joy, and the anticipation of a visit from Father Christmas himself."

Absalom began to casually fire off his prices, outlining various options for renting or buying. Christopher tried to dampen the hot, sickening anger he felt. He looked at Mrs. Chapman's eyes, brimming with tears and hope and pain. Mr. Chapman had his head bowed, as if he'd already surrendered to the inevitable. Absalom's voice was becoming more high-pitched, like he couldn't quite believe what was about to happen. His nostrils were flaring, as if he could smell money about to change hands. The sight filled Christopher with disgust.

It took one word to bring it all crashing down.

Jack stepped forward and smiled hopefully.

Just one word.

"Mummy?" he said.

It was as if the snow around Mr. Chapman had suddenly turned into a violent spinning vortex. Christopher had never seen rage like it.

"No!" Mr. Chapman screamed.

He kicked Jack full in the chest, and Jack hurtled backward into the snow, hitting the ground with a metallic clatter.

Mr. Chapman pulled his wife inside and slammed the door in Absalom's face. In the silence, the snow hissed down around them.