

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXTRACT FROM 'BILLY CHRIST' A NOVEL
BY THE GHOSTWRITER, SET IN THE LATE 60S.

CHAPTER ONE

I have a strawberry milkshake and a wimpy and chips.
She has wimpy and chips with a coke.

We sit at the small greasy table and I can feel some
old, squashed chips on the floor, under my foot. People
are V. V. messy. It is, "the curse of the modern age," as
my Mum would say. "Dirty little B's want to remember the
poor B who has to clear-up after them!" My Dad would say.

I hate dirtiness and things like squashed chips. It
is one of the reasons why I hate going into towns and why

I hate coming into places like this, full of smelly people eating their smelly chips and dropping their rubbish on the floor.

In fact the more I think about it and look around me at what I can only describe as UTTER SQUALOR, the more I wonder why on earth I have come here with this girl? I was happy in the woods and fields and I had a really nice day planned, on my own in the places that I love, under the blue sky, with my pack of sandwiches in the fresh air. God's air!

What I am doing here? That is what I am asking myself. What am I doing here?

She smiles at me over her Wimpy, which is half way to her mouth, with a little bit of grease dropping off the end of it and a Dill Pickle poking out from the edge, and her blue eyes glitter under the light of the fluorescent tubes and her freckles look dead nice and it is then that I sort of understand why I gave up my day to be with her.

I cannot really explain it but there is something in her smile that makes it almost OK to be here, despite my hating the place and the people and my fear of it all.

She makes me feel calm again. It is not like the calm I have when I have said a prayer really well, that I know God has heard and really understands, but it is something like it and it is an EXPLANATION for what I can

only call my v.v. erratic behaviour in coming out with her in the first place.

"You don't say much." She says, wiping the grease off her lips with a little paper napkin from the silver holder on the table.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. It does not look too elegant, I think, but it is better than risking an INFECTION from one of the paper napkins, the origin of which and who has handled them, we have no idea.

"I don't speak a lot unless there's something to say." I explain. Which is true and quite rational I think.

"I like that." She says and she squirts some more ketchup into her bun from the repulsive plastic tomato, that is encrusted with old sauce.

"You meet some boys who just never shut up." She says and flicks some of the crusty ketchup off the green spout thing - which is really gross!

"They spend their whole lives," she goes on, "telling you how clever they are or how strong or how tough.. you know?"

I don't actually, because the truth is that not a lot of boys who are clever or strong and tough bother to speak to me; so I don't know what they might say.

She is definitely describing, I reckon, those sort

of boys who are in the OTHER WORLD the NOT MY WORLD.

As I don't know what to say at this point, I ask her if she has been out with a lot of boys then.

"You've got a cheek!" She says. "Do I look like a slag or something?"

I'm not sure what a slag is, so I say. "No. I suppose not."

"Thanks!" She says.

I think she looks a bit offended but she may be joking. I'm not sure, though and I don't want to upset her.

I have done that before and it is not a nice thing to do and also I am still embarrassed at calling her a B. when we were by the stream and.. and a terrible thought occurs to me:

If I offend her I won't see her again and she might storm off and if she does that A) I will never find my way home on my own, having never travelled alone on a bus or on anything else for that matter and B) I will not see her Mother again and the thought of that makes me feel v. v. miserable.

I think fast. I can usually make a quick decision when required and get myself out of any spot of bother, like being caught kneeling to say my prayers in a public place. (I either plead a stomach ache that has made me collapse or I do up a shoe lace).

"Can I buy you an ice cream?" I say, remembering the pound note I keep in my rucksack.

"I would really like to. You know to say thank you for looking after me by the stream and giving me your hanky when I needed it and also for having the idea of coming here. It's brilliant. I like to get out into town. But it's no fun on my own."

This is probably the most I have said to her so far.

In fact, as it goes, it is one of my longest speeches, ever, to anyone, anywhere, outside of God and the Blessed V. M.

The fact that it is full of lies worries me quite a lot but I realise that it is necessary to lie in this URGENT situation and I am pretty sure that I will be forgiven, in the circumstances.

She immediately brightens up and smiles at me.

"Why Billy," she says. "That's so nice. What a nice thing to say. I'd love an ice cream. Thank you."

So I go and get her a glass dish of dead brown chocolate ice cream with a wafer stuck in it and I put it down on the table in front of her and for good measure I pick up one of the manky paper napkins and flourish it in the air and flap it open, like I have seen waiters do on the telly and I spread it out in her lap.