

# THE DOOLALLY KID



Wendy Milton

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Second Edition

WENDY MILTON

ILLUSTRATED BY PATRICK HAWKINS



## ONE

Billy O'Connor walked through the gates of Figtree Primary with a heavy heart. Not only was it Monday morning, but it was the Monday morning *after* parent-teacher evening. That was on Friday . . . Black Friday!

It was no use trying not to attract attention. Eleven-year-old Billy was already fifteen centimetres taller than any boy in his class. Nature had stretched him north to south, but neglected to stretch him east to west. He had an ungainly walk because his legs were long and his feet large. As for his hands . . . well, they dangled limply at his sides. They were certainly no good at catching balls or wielding cricket bats. Nor were they any good at making things. It would have been nice if he'd been able to paint a picture or play a musical instrument, but . . .

What was he good at? Billy desperately wanted to be good at *something*. He wanted people to notice him because he was doing something right, not because he was making a mess of it. He was tired of being laughed

at by the whizzkids in his class. When he wasn't being laughed at, he was being bullied. He couldn't defend himself, either, because he wasn't any good at that. He was a target for shorter, nastier boys who needed to punch and shove in order to make themselves feel big. Girls didn't do that. Oh, no! They used words. Words were worse.

'Hey, Lurch! How's your loopy aunt?' The gallery of slaves that Denise Delhunty loosely referred to as 'friends' tittered their approval. Billy ignored her.

'Aunty Addie chucked a maddie,' chanted Alison Griswald, Denise's second-in-command. Everyone joined in, even kids from other classes who didn't previously know that Billy had an aunt.

Word had spread after Aunt Addie stood in for his mum on Black Friday. She'd found the principal's invitation whilst searching Billy's backpack for his lunch box.

'You didn't tell me it was parent-teacher evening on Friday!'

'I forgot,' mumbled Billy, kicking himself for not chucking the invitation in the bin. Aunt Addie treated him well, but she was a bit weird and Billy cringed at the prospect of her coming to the school.

'Never mind, darling,' said Aunt Addie sympathetically, mistaking Billy's glumness for disappointment, 'I'll be there with *bells* on. I know how important it is to have someone at these things. I won't have you

being the only one without family. It isn't nice being the odd man out, is it?'

'No,' said Billy, who knew more about being the odd man out than Aunt Addie realised.

Aunt Addie *looked* ordinary. She was short (by Billy's standards) and she had straight, brown hair that she pulled back into a bun. Although she pretended to be severe, she wasn't. Her twinkling blue eyes and smiling face said otherwise. Indeed, Billy had no cause for complaint. But on important occasions – and parent-teacher evening would be one of them – she abandoned her ordinariness. Billy knew what would happen. She'd exchange her plain clothes and sensible hairdo for . . . He shuddered. It was too awful to contemplate.

No. Aunt Addie wasn't like other people. She wrote letters, too . . . not *ordinary* letters, to family and friends, but letters to important people. She'd written to the prime minister, the American president, the queen and, just recently, the pope. It was no surprise to Billy that she very often didn't receive a reply.

The letter to the pope was chatty and familiar. 'What should I call him?' she'd asked when she finished it.

Billy got out his thesaurus. 'It says here he's the Bishop of Rome and . . . how about "Your Holiness"? Or maybe you could use his real name? Or "Dear Pontiff"?''

'Ah,' said Aunt Addie, typing furiously. Billy's computer had been a present from his mother, but

Aunt Addie knew how to use it too. Aunt Addie could turn her hand to most things. 'How's that?' She took a sheet of paper off the printer and handed it to him.

*Dear Pontiff,*

*I was sorry to hear about the break-in at the Vatican. Hope you didn't lose much. Art treasures are such a responsibility! The people who burgle here are looking for cash . . . or things to turn into cash. They wouldn't know an art treasure if it bit them. I'd say you were done over by professionals who know where to fence the stuff.*

*Of course, you could console yourself with the fact that it might all have been fake. I was reading on the web that a lot of the paintings in museums and galleries are fakes. Perhaps you should have the rest of your collection checked?*

*I lost a Lautrec years ago, and to lose a Lautrec was devastating (unlike you, I didn't have acres of the stuff lying around). It was insured, so if I'd discovered it was a fake before it was stolen, I could have 'disappeared' it myself and made lots of money. Not that I'm suggesting you'd stoop to doing away with your over-insured valuables!*

*I've enclosed a donation to help cover your loss. I usually give to the salvos. Unlike your lot they're out on the street in all weathers.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*(Mrs) Adelaide Tomlinson*

*PS Have you tried apple-cider vinegar for your arthritis?*

'Sounds OK,' Billy had said, handing it back.

Aunt Addie also dabbled in the occult. She talked to spirits. She read tea leaves. She saw things before they happened. She had a regular advertisement in the *Figtree Courier*.

*Genuine CLAIRVOYANT, PSYCHIC and CHANNELLER with reliable spirit guide. Want to trace missing relatives? Speak with someone who's 'passed over'? Predict your future? Prevent catastrophes? Need advice on health, meditation, divination, levitation?*

*Ring 03 7528 1645 for appt.*

Aunt Addie wanted to build a reputation as a serious psychic . . . someone who helped the police find missing persons and retrieve stolen property. She'd written to the police commissioner, but so far he hadn't accepted her offer. She had to content herself with reading palms and holding séances.

If Aunt Addie was doolally, she'd been doolally for years. It had got worse, according to Billy's mother, when she lost Uncle Wally. Billy's mother told people that Aunt Addie 'never recovered from losing her husband', which sounded terribly sad. Actually, Aunt Addie had misplaced Uncle Wally in a Turkish bazaar. She never managed to find him again, though he wrote fairly frequently. The last postcard came from Alaska.

Billy's mother, an actress, toured the country with a theatre group and needed someone to look after her son. Having Aunt Addie live in kept the child protection people off her back. Unlike Aunt Addie, Billy's mum was tall, exotic, slender and beautiful. It surprised many people that she and Aunt Addie were sisters.

On the Thursday before Black Friday, Billy had dialled his mother's mobile. He could never speak to her for long because calls to mobiles were so expensive. 'Mum, she says she's coming to the school! You've got to *do* something!'

Billy's mother had made light of the situation. 'It won't be so bad, darling,' she said. 'It's only for a couple of hours.'

Billy sighed. 'What if one of the teachers dobs? They know she's the only adult in the house. Couldn't you tell her not to go?'

'Stop worrying, Silly Billy. You're letting your imagination run away with you. I know Addie's a bit eccentric, but her heart's in the right place. She loves you, too. Family should stick together, you know. Blood's thicker than water.'

Billy gave up. 'OK, but don't say I didn't warn you.'

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Aunt Addie's appearance at parent-teacher evening was as memorable as Billy had feared. Other adults

stuck to the rules: no way-out gear, no talking above a whisper. They glided, like swans on an educational pond. They wore casually elegant clothes.

Aunt Addie flew into their midst like a bird of paradise, her hairdo supported by what looked like an entire feather duster and several hibiscuses stolen from Mr Crabtree's garden. (Mr Crabtree was their next-door neighbour in Wraith Street. He disapproved of Billy and harboured deep resentment towards Aunt Addie after an incident involving one of her clients. He spied on them, too. Billy knew, because he often saw Mr Crabtree's lounge room curtains twitch.)

It wasn't just Aunt Addie's hairdo that drew stares. When she said she'd be there *with bells on*, that's exactly what she meant. She'd decorated her favourite outfit, a long, red lace affair, with small to middling bells. They hung around her neck and dangled from her belt. Everyone whispered and stared.

Every time Aunt Addie moved there was the tinkling of bells. It added to Billy's distress when he realised, too late, that his aunt intended to dance at the end-of-evening concert. First onto the stage was the choir performing the school song, *I Left My Heart in Figtree Primary*. Then they sang *I Still Call Australia Home*. Next was Helen Schumacker, who played *Für Elise* at breakneck speed. Evan Owen did *Advance Australia Fair* on a gum leaf and Emily Delhunty, younger sister of the dreaded Denise, performed a

cutesy tap dance accompanied by Miss Missenden on piano. Emily's bobbing curls, elastic smile and bouncing tutu produced approving murmurs.

When it was over, Aunt Addie applauded and rose from her seat. To Billy's horror, she walked towards Miss Missenden. The music teacher was about to shut the piano when she received Aunt Addie's request to 'play something up-tempo'. Miss Missenden sat down, hands hovering over the keys. She couldn't think of anything to play. Aunt Addie produced sheet music from her handbag. Miss Missenden, with a professional nod, began a spirited rendition of what Billy later learned was *Let's Face the Music and Dance*. That's just what Aunt Addie did.

Billy knew that his aunt could tap, but he never dreamed she'd do it at the school. She was good, but that wasn't the point. The parents, like Miss Missenden, were in shock. They stared open-mouthed at Aunt Addie's flying feet. Her bells almost drowned out the piano. Hibiscus petals and feathers flew in all directions.

When the music stopped, Aunt Addie stood erect, flushed with exertion. Beside her, a feather floated gently to the floor. There was an ominous silence. Billy saw the expectant look on his aunt's face and stood. He began to applaud. Mr Morrissey, the maths teacher, was sitting a few seats away. He glanced at Billy's flushed face, then he, too, stood and began to applaud. At first only a few parents joined in but

eventually the assembly hall resounded as Aunt Addie was given a standing ovation.

'Thanks heaps, Mr Morrissey,' Billy whispered on his way out.

'Don't mention it,' said Mr Morrissey.

Aunt Addie was waiting for him, pinkly triumphant. 'Well,' she said with satisfaction, 'that's one parent-teacher evening *they'll* never forget!'

'I think you're right,' said Billy.