

Emily had offered to cook us a thick vegetable broth as a first course on the Tuesday evening. She was stirring it on the cooker and I was mixing the pancake batter when Gordon arrived and came into the kitchen. He gave Emily a kiss on the cheek and said hello to me. He'd been even more generous with his aftershave than he was on his first visit. Presumably he liked the smell of it, but it made me think of a dead muskrat, not that I've ever smelt a dead muskrat. To be honest I'm not sure I even know what a muskrat is, but I was certain a dead one would smell like his aftershave did.

There were two large frying pans in each flat, and in preparation for the party I'd borrowed another two from the flat below. I was a bit disappointed when Emily and Freya said they'd want only half a pancake each, but it was understandable given the size of the pans. However, this did mean I only had to make four, so I was able to start cooking all four while we made a start on Emily's broth. It was so tasty! Robert had bought some traditionally baked bread, and the two together were truly scrumptious.

Once the first course was over I got up to turn the pancakes and cook the other side.

"Watch, everyone!" I called. Feeling daring I tried to toss the first one in the approved manner. Oh dear! Half of it ended up on the floor. There were ironic cheers.

"Never mind. I'll eat this one," I offered. I returned the part I'd dropped to the frying pan and replaced it on the stove to finish cooking. Then I picked up the second frying pan. "I'm not going to be defeated. I think I've got the hang of it now. Here goes."

I tossed the second pancake. This time proper cheers rewarded my effort. The pancake turned over in mid-air and just about landed back in the pan. Phew!

It had been fun, but I didn't want to land another one on the floor, so I used a slice to turn the last two. Thanks to Florence's expert tuition they were cooked perfectly. The two girls put lemon juice on theirs, and I joined the men in spreading mine with golden syrup. It was yummy! Freya made a proper pot of tea to finish off our meal. I promised to cook a second batch of pancakes later in the evening.

We cleared the table, and Robert sat down to explain the rules of 'The Game of Life'.

"We take it in turns to spin the pointer and move the number of squares it stops at - any number from one to ten. On each square there's an instruction to follow. Sometimes you have a choice of buying something like house insurance or shares, or else you might win some prize or get the chance to gamble if you want to."

"I won't want to," Emily muttered.

"Buying shares sounds like a good idea though," Gordon said.

"Aren't shares simply another form of gambling?" Freya questioned.

"Does it tell you what the odds of winning a prize are?" I asked.

"Shut up, Natalie," Robert hissed. "I want to keep that a secret."

"Anyway," he continued, "when you reach retirement you'll have two options. The first is to live in a retirement

home and receive a pension every time it's your turn, based on your final salary."

"Those were the days!" Gordon interjected.

"Aye. An' t'other option is to move on to a millionaire's mansion, where your income each turn will come instead from any status symbols you've chosen to purchase, like renting out a luxury Mediterranean villa.

"That sounds good," said Gordon.

"It is if you are one of the first to finish," Robert explained. "Otherwise you'll have spent your money on some very expensive items with nowt in return for them."

"I think I'll just opt for a peaceful retirement," I said.

"You'll have to see how it goes. Life's unpredictable, i'n't? Anyhow, the game carries on until the last player finishes, then we all tot up our dosh, and the one with the most is the winner."

"That'll be me," declared Freya. "It's bound to be."

"Not if I can help it," I said.

Gordon chimed in. "May the best man win. Which means Robert and I have a fifty-fifty chance."

"Hey!" Emily punched him in the ribs. "This game may have belonged to Robert's grandparents, but we're not living in their generation now."

We all spun the pointer to decide who was to start, and it was me!

"I want to go to university," I said.

"So do I," said Emily.

"I don't," said Gordon. "I'm going straight into business. So far as I can see it will give me a head start on you lot."

“True, but your starting salary won’t be as great as ours will be when we graduate.”

“Does that matter? It wasn’t much to start with for Steve Jobs, Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg when they dropped out of university.”

It certainly was an old game, ‘cos pretty soon we found we all had to get married. And then of course we started having kids! They were in the form of little pink or blue pegs which we stuck into holes in the plastic cars we were driving around the board. Not long after my marriage my car landed on a yellow square.

“Goody!” I cried. “It says I’ve got a baby girl, and you all have to give me £1000. Cool! Now if I can only get a boy as well it will be perfect.”

“Is that what you’d like to have in real life, Natalie?” Emily cheekily asked me. “A family with a boy and a girl?”

“Er... I suppose I would. When the time comes,” I added hastily.

To tell you the truth I’d never thought about it, but now she asked me it did seem like a good plan. To have a proper family life in which I could give our children all the love and security that I myself had missed - it was a wonderful idea. That was a purpose I could live for!

“Yes, Emily, that’s just what I’d like. What about you then? Would you like to have a family?”

It was Emily’s turn to look flustered. “Um, I think it’s a man’s turn to answer that question next,” she stuttered. “What do you think, Gordon?”

Gordon puffed out his cheeks while he searched his brain for a diplomatic reply. “It’s getting expensive to have

a family, I believe,” he began ponderously. “Time-consuming too, I understand. That’s not to say I would never want children of course,” he added, just as hastily. Gordon didn’t strike me as particularly sensitive, but even he must have spotted the disappointment on Emily’s face. Interesting, I thought. It looks like Emily is Cupid’s latest target.

I decided to rescue her from having to answer. I turned to Robert.

“What about you, lover boy? Do you hope to be a family man one day?”

Judging from Freya’s startled expression it was obvious their relationship hadn’t reached the point of discussing such issues. Dear old Robert however was completely unaware of the importance of his reply. He was very lovable, but he didn’t have a clue about women.

“Oh aye, I’ll want a family,” he said. “That’s what life’s all about, i’n’t it? Four or five kiddies, enough to play cricket together in t’ rec, or mebbe field a five-a-side team when they’re older. Aye, I’d love that. And the sooner the better I reckon, while my wife an’ I are still young enough to enjoy them. That’s how I feel.” He looked cheerfully in Freya’s direction. “You an’ all?” he asked.

There was a pregnant pause. Actually ‘pregnant’ was totally not the right word.

“Let’s say it would be affa’ hard to compete in karate when one is expecting a bairn,” Freya replied at last.

“Ah.” Robert’s face dropped. He looked puzzled.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Freya told him. “Whose turn is it next?”

Although I was still learning about weather forecasting I could foresee stormy weather on the horizon.