



Oddball

On Monday a new boy arrived at Squarehead's school. His name was Square Brian and that was all anyone knew about him. When the teacher asked Square Brian to stand up in front of the class and introduce himself, poor Brian shook his head, went red in the face and looked like he wished the ground would swallow him up.

"Alright," said the teacher, **"we can do that later."** And she asked Squarehead if he would look after Square Brian for his first week. Square Brian sat silently at the desk next to him and didn't say a word for the rest of the morning.

During lunch break, Squarehead asked him if he'd like to come and meet his friends in the playground. Square Brian shook his head and then he went to the farthest corner of the school yard and sat on his own playing with ants.

It wasn't long before the children began to think that Square Brian was a bit odd. He didn't speak and if anyone so much as looked at him, he went as red as a beetroot.

"What's he hiding?" Asked one boy.

"He thinks he's better than us." Said a square girl with her nose in the air.

"He's an oddball!" Said another boy.

"Oddball! Oddball!" Sang the children. They liked the sound of the word.

"I think he's just a bit shy." Said Squarehead, who felt a bit embarrassed for Brian.

At the end of the day, Squarehead's mum came to collect him and asked him about Square Brian. She had been talking to Brian's mother outside and they had arranged for Square Brian to come round for tea.

"What's the matter?" Asked Squarehead's mum, when she saw the look on Squarehead's face.

"He doesn't speak." Said Squarehead. **"He hasn't said one word all day."**

"He's shy, that's all." Said his mother.

"I know that," Said Squarehead, **"but he's so shy he makes me feel shy as well. I don't know what to say to him."**

"Just make him feel welcome." Said his mum.

When teatime came, the doorbell rang. Squarehead and Hairy Scary (the monster who lived under Squarehead's bed) peeped through the curtains and watched Square Brian and his mum standing on the front door step.

Squarehead's mum opened the front door and smiled at Square Brian's mum.

"Hello again." Said Square Brian's mum. **"This is...."**

She looked down at where Square Brian should be – but he'd vanished.

"Oh..." Said Square Brian's mum.

Hairy Scary and Squarehead could see Brian disappearing down the road in the direction of the park.

"Why's he done that?" Asked Hairy Scary.

"I'm so sorry." Said Brian's mum. **"He's very shy and sometimes the thought of meeting new people is too much to bear."**

Squarehead and Hairy Scary said they would go and look for Square Brian. It didn't take long to find him. They went into the park and saw him sitting under a tree on his own, staring at the ground. They walked over and sat down beside him.

"I know how it feels to be shy." Said Hairy Scary.

"I used to be so shy, I could hardly breathe." Said Hairy. **"My shyness got so bad, I thought I would faint."**

Square Brian snatched a quick look at Hairy Scary and then stared hard at the ground again.

"I used to wish the ground would swallow me up." Said Hairy Scary.

Square Brian, gave a little nod.

"And then," said Hairy Scary, **"someone gave me this."**

Hairy Scary took something off his face and, for a fleeting moment, he looked timid and scared. He held it up for them to see.

Squarehead and Square Brian stared...

“I can’t see anything.” Said Squarehead.

“Of course you can’t,” said Hairy Scary, **“it’s invisible.”**

Square Brian was beginning to forget about his shyness. He was fascinated by this invisible thing.

“What is it?” He asked, very quietly.

Hairy Scary smiled.

“It’s an invisible mask - can you see?”

Both the boys stared even harder, but of course they couldn’t see.

“I feel afraid, like you.” Said Hairy, **“So I put on this mask every day. It doesn’t make the fear disappear, but it makes me feel a little better. It helps me feel brave enough to face the world. And now it will help you, too.”**

“Try it,” he said to Square Brian, **“it’s magic.”**

Brian took the mask from Hairy Scary and put it on. His anxious expression melted away and, for the first time, he smiled.

“But what will you do?” he said to Hairy Scary.

“I’ll make another one.” Said Hairy, and he waved his arms in the air as if he were doing a conjuring trick.

“Here it is.” He said, and popped it over his face. **“Now we both have magical masks, but no-one would know we were wearing them.”**

The next day at school, Square Brian stood up in front of the class and told them all about himself. He even told a joke which made everyone laugh. He played squareball in the playground and chatted to everyone like they were old friends.

After that, the children thought Square Brian was really quite nice and not odd at all – well maybe a little odd but not in a way that mattered. After all, we’re all a little odd in our own way, aren’t we?

One night, just before they went to sleep, Squarehead asked Hairy Scary about the masks:

“Are they...are they really real?”

Hairy Scary smiled: **“That depends,”** he said, **“on whether you’re wearing one, or not.”**

*We didn’t make this story up. It was first told by a man called Paul Magrs about a childhood friend, who once met David Bowie (a famous singer, song writer and actor). Bowie gave his invisible mask to the boy saying that, like the boy, he often felt afraid, but the mask helped him feel better.

