

# Freckles

## Introduction

*I said, 'Hi! Donna, this is Jack. Jack, this is Donna.'*

*Donna gave him a big smile. Her smile usually makes men weak in the legs.*

Susie has freckles, and she hates them! 'When I'm older they'll be one BIG freckle, all over me!' she thinks. And Susie has problems with boys. 'Great legs, but I don't like the freckles,' one boy says about her. Her best friend, Donna, never has problems with boys. Donna has pretty hair, nice teeth and blue eyes — and she hasn't got freckles! Boys fall at her feet. But now there's a new boy at the school, and Donna wants him too!

Will Jack fall at Donna's feet? Will he laugh at Susie's freckles? In this story, Susie and Donna learn an important lesson about life.

Andrew Matthews was born in Wales in 1948. He taught English for many years, but he also wrote more than forty books for children and young people. Two of his books for teenagers are *Writing in Martian* and *Seeing in Moonlight*. He wrote this story for Penguin Readers.

Andrew Matthews now lives in Reading, England, with his wife and their cats. The cats sit on his books and push his pens on to the floor.

## Chapter 1 My Big Teenage Problem

I hated my freckles when I was young. Every day I looked in the mirror and thought, 'Look at them! They're getting bigger! When I'm older they'll be one BIG freckle, all over me!'

At school, the other little children in my class laughed at me and my freckles. 'Hello, Freckle-face!' they shouted.

But when I was a teenager, it all got worse. My freckles were my Big Teenage Problem.

Why did I think that? Because one lunch-time, I went to the school library and started to look for a book. Suddenly, I heard a conversation between two boys.

'So who do you think is pretty?' one said.

'Donna Marshall?' said the other boy.

My ears went - DING! - because Donna's my best friend.

'Yes!' said the first boy.

'Susie Carpenter?'

My ears went — DING! — again, because that's me.

'Great legs ...' began the first boy.

I thought, 'That's a good start, but don't talk about the freckles! Please don't talk about the freckles.'

'... but I don't like the freckles.'

'Oh, no!' I thought. I wanted to run away and cry. 'Perhaps that will wash my freckles away,' I thought.

Donna is pretty, of course. She has it all: pretty hair, blue eyes, nice teeth — and no freckles! Boys fall down at her feet when she walks past them. She can go out with *any* boy — and she goes out with a lot of them! When she gets bored with somebody, she says goodbye to him. Then she turns to the next boy.

That was Donna's life. A lot of young men, and they happily did everything for her. I only had freckles! I was very unhappy in those days.

But not now. Now I'm quite happy with my freckles. So what changed things? I'll tell you ...

It was lunch-time in the Dining Room, and I was with Donna. Suddenly, Donna said, 'A boy over there is looking at us.'

'Looking at *you*, *you* mean,' I said. 'What boy?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I never saw him before now.'

I started to turn my head.

'Don't look!' Donna said quickly. 'He'll see you! Look at him when he's not looking.'

'Donna, I *have* to look at him,' I said. 'Or how will I know when he's not looking? What's wrong? Will he run away when he sees me?'

'OK, look at him,' said Donna. 'But be careful. We don't want him to think, "So they're interested in me!" Go and get a glass of water.'

'I've got some water,' I said.

'Go and get *another* glass!' she said. 'You can look at him on the way. He's sitting alone, near the door.'

I went for some more water and looked at the boy. He smiled at me. I smiled back and he blushed.

When I got back to the table, Donna nearly pulled me down into my chair. 'Do you know him?' she asked. 'His name's Jack,' I said. 'He came to the school at the beginning of term. We're in the same class for History.' 'He's got a nice face!' said Donna. Her eyes were excited.

Did he? Did Jack have a nice face? I thought about it. I said, 'But he's not *handsome*. Is he?'

'No,' said Donna. 'But he *isn't* handsome in a really nice way. Do you know him well?'

'Not very well,' I said. 'I say hello to him.'

'Who's he going out with?' asked Donna.

'Nobody!' I said. 'He only came here at the beginning of term!'

Donna's brain started to work — fast. 'You've got History last lesson today,' she said. 'Talk to him after the lesson. Give me time, and I'll find you.'

I said, 'Wait a minute! Excuse me? Aren't you Donna Marshall? Aren't you going out with Steve Bridges?'

'Not really,' said Donna.

I said, 'Last week you said, "Steve's wonderful, Susie!"'

'That was last week,' said Donna. 'I like Steve, of course, but ...'

I knew two things: Donna was bored with Steve ('Goodbye, Steve!'). And Jack was next, because ... well ... Donna *always* got her man.

So after the history lesson, I put my books in my bag slowly. And when Jack went past my table on his way out, I went after him. I said, 'Jack?'

He turned and saw me. He blushed again.

I thought, 'He's very shy.' I said, 'Hi, I'm Susie!'

'I know you are,' said Jack. 'Did you want something?'

'Do you like it here?' I asked, because I couldn't think of anything more interesting. 'Is it difficult at a big school when you don't know anybody?'

'It's OK,' he said. 'Everybody's friendly. And it smells right.'

'What?' I said.

Jack smiled — a nice smile! He said, 'My last school was near a farm. The smell was bad! We had to shut the windows, summer and winter.'

'So you're a country boy?' I said.

'No,' he said. 'My school was in Basingstoke.'

'Oh, Basingstoke!' I said.

'You know it?' he said.

'No,' I said. 'Is it a nice place?'

'It's OK.' He looked at me strangely, but I couldn't stop now. Where was Donna?

I said, 'Are there any cinemas in Basingstoke?'

'Er, yes,' he said.

'Did you see the film -?' I began.

Then I saw Donna. She came to us and smiled. She said, 'Hi, Susie!'

I said, 'Hi! Donna, this is Jack. Jack, this is Donna.'

Donna gave him a big smile. Her smile usually makes men weak in the legs.

Jack put out his hand and said, 'Hello, Donna. Nice to meet you.'

*Usually* makes men weak in the legs. But not this time!

After a minute, Donna tried again. She gave another smile and put her hand in Jack's hand. I thought, 'Why isn't he falling at her feet?'

I left them. She could do the work now.

Donna phoned me at six o'clock. She wasn't happy. She said, 'That Jack - really!'

'What's wrong with him?' I asked.

'I could only get about six words out of him!' she said.

'He was all right when he talked to me,' I said. 'Perhaps he was shy.'

'He's slow,' she said. 'I want to go out with him but he didn't ask me.'

I thought, 'Donna was alone with a boy for more than five minutes, and he didn't ask her out! What's wrong with her!'

I said, 'I think he's shy. He blushes easily.'

'I'll try something different next time,' said Donna. 'What does he like to do? What doesn't he like?'

'I don't think he likes farms,' I said.

'Farms?' said Donna. 'Who wants to talk about farms? Does he I like dancing? Does he like the cinema? You'll have to ask him.'

'Why don't *you* ask him?' I said.

Donna did this big sigh down the phone. She said, 'Oh, Susie! You don't know anything about boys.'

She was right, I didn't. And it was because of the freckles.

## Chapter 2 Cats and Poems

Next day, when we had lunch in the 'Dining Room, Donna watched Jack all the time. When he was ready to leave, Donna said, 'Now, Susie! Go after him, quickly!'

'But I'm having my lunch,' I said.

'Forget lunch!' she said. 'Food makes you fat.'

I said, 'OK, OK! I'm going!'

Can you think of a better friend than me? Do *your* friends go without their lunch for you?

I found Jack near the tennis courts. I said, 'Jack! Hi!'

'Hi, Susie,' said Jack, and he blushed again.

I said, 'So what do you like, Jack?'

'Pardon?' he said.

'Do you like sports? Tennis?' I said.

Jack laughed — a nice laugh! He said, 'No, I'm not very good at sports. I like reading, or computer games.'

'Do you like dancing?' I asked.

'Sometimes,' he answered. 'When I'm dancing with the right girl.'

We didn't speak for a minute. Jack looked at me. 'His eyes aren't brown, they're green,' I thought.

After a time, I said, 'What other things do you like?'

'Cats,' said Jack. 'We've got three. They're good for stress.'

I didn't understand. I said, 'Cats give you stress?'

A nice laugh again. Jack said, 'No. They stop it.' He smiled at me for a minute. 'And what does Susie like?'

I wasn't ready for this. I had to ask Jack questions. I said, 'Oh, you know. Reading, music. I write poems —'

'You write poems?'

'Yes,' I said. 'When I was young, my school teacher told me, "That's a good poem, Susie! ". After that, I never stopped writing them.'

Jack's eyes were open wide. He said, 'That's strange! I write poems too!'

'A lot of people do, Jack,' I said. 'The library's got a lot of books of poems in it.'

Nice laugh Number Three. Jack said, 'You'll have to show me yours one day.'

Conversation with Jack was easy, so I talked. And talked. Then I saw the time and said, 'Sorry, are you bored?'

'No, I'm not bored,' he said. 'I enjoyed listening.' His face went red again. He looked at the floor and said, 'Can we do it again some day?'

I said, 'Yes, of course! I'll see you.'

'See you,' he said.

I was nearly late for my class. Donna wasn't happy. She said, 'Where were you?'

'With Jack,' I said.

'All this time?'

'It was a long conversation,' I said. 'He's interesting.'

But Donna didn't want to know that. She said, 'Tell me about him. What does he like?'

'He doesn't like sports,' I said. 'He likes cats, he writes poems —'

'Poems?' said Donna.

'Yes,' I said. 'You know — poems — a lot of words ...'

'OK, OK! I know about poems!' said Donna.

'And he likes dancing,' I told her.

Donna smiled. It wasn't a pretty smile. Cats and poems weren't very useful to her, but dancing ...

'Does he?' she said. 'Now *that's* interesting!'

Next day, Donna wanted to look for Jack. She took me with her. We found him outside the English classroom.

Donna said, 'Hello, Jack!'

Jack said, 'Hello ... er ...?'

'Donna,' said Donna.

'Sorry!' he said. 'I can never remember names!'

Strange — Jack didn't blush when Donna talked to him.

Donna said, 'Susie tells me you like dancing.'

'Er ... well ...' said Jack.

'There's a disco at school on Friday night,' said Donna. 'Are you going to it?'

'Er -'

'I'll be there,' said Donna.

'Will you?' said Jack.

'I love dancing,' said Donna.

'Oh?' said Jack.

This wasn't easy for Donna. 'Perhaps I'll dance with you. Ask me nicely,' she said.

'That's very kind of you,' said Jack. 'But I think my parents are planning something for Friday.'

Was Donna angry on the walk home? She was! She said, 'Is it Jack, or is it me? Am I suddenly ugly?'

'No,' I answered. 'Donna, he's shy.'

'He's not shy with you!' she said.

'I'm not the beautiful, famous Donna!' I said. 'Listen, give him some time.'

'I can't,' she said.

'Why not?' I asked.

'I finished with Steve last night. Who am I going to go to the disco with? I can't stay at home when my friends are having a good time. You have to help me.'

'I do?' I said.

'Yes, you do,' she said. 'Tomorrow, Jack will have to ask me to the disco. Say that to him. And you think I'll say yes.'

I said, 'Why don't *you* ask *him*? It's easier.'

'No!' cried Donna. 'That's no good. Perhaps he'll say no!'

'So what's the problem?' I asked.

'Well, then I'll be unhappy and he'll think, "Oh, she likes me!"' she said.

'But you *do* like him!' I said.

'Yes, but I don't want him to know that,' she said. 'Please, Susie!'

'All right,' I said.

You can't say no to Donna. When you say no, she's angry and unhappy for days! It's easier to say yes, OK.

I said, 'You don't usually try as hard as this, Donna. Why this time? Why with Jack?'

Donna sighed and said, 'I like to win.'

### Chapter 3 The Phone Call

When I got home, I went up to my room. I started my homework. After five minutes, I heard the phone. I thought, 'Donna! What is it now? Doesn't she like Jack now? Are the colour of his eyes wrong?'

But when I answered the phone, it wasn't Donna.

Somebody said, 'Can I talk to Susie, please?'

'You're talking to her,' I said.

'Oh, hi, Susie! It's Jack.'

Really? What did Jack want?

Jack said, 'I hope you aren't angry. I found your number in the phone book.'

'That's fine,' I said. 'Do you want to talk to me about something?'

Then I thought, 'Of course he wants to talk to me! He's on the phone! Why did I say that?'

Jack said, 'Yes. Er, I'd like your advice.'

This was new. People didn't usually ask for my advice.

I said, 'OK, what is it?'

He didn't speak for a minute. Then he said, 'There's a girl at school. I like her very much, but I can't tell her. I talked to her two or three times. I think she likes me. But am I right? How do I know?'

I thought, 'Donna! It has to be Donna. He *does* like her.'

I said, 'Do I know this person?'

'Er, yes,' said Jack.

I said, 'What's the problem? Tell her.'

'I tried,' he said. 'I can't say the words. I wrote some poems about her, but I didn't give them to her.'

'Give Donna a poem and she'll put it on her bedroom wall. Then she'll laugh at it,' I thought.

I said, 'Jack, don't be shy. The girl likes you very much. I know it. See her and tell her.'

'Can't I do it on the phone?' he said.

'No!' I said. 'You have to see her and tell her. Don't be afraid.'

'OK,' he said.

Jack wasn't happy about the idea. I could hear that, so I tried to help. I said, 'That disco — *can't* you go?'

Jack sighed. 'Yes, I can. I said all that about my parents because —'

I said, 'Ask her to go with you. Tomorrow. She'll say yes. I know she will.'

'Susie, I -'

'Sorry I have to go now,' I said. 'I'm really busy. See you tomorrow, and don't be afraid. OK?'

'OK,' he said. 'Thank you for your help. Goodbye!'

'Goodbye!' I said.

I put the phone down quickly, before I started to cry. 'Oh, Jack!' I thought. 'Why Donna? Why is it always Donna? Why does she *always* get the boys?'

I didn't phone Donna then. I didn't tell her about Jack and the disco. I didn't want to talk to her.

Suddenly, I understood something.

When I went out with Donna, boys didn't see me. They looked at Donna and they talked to Donna. They smiled at Donna. And me? They didn't see me.

And Donna always wanted me to do things for her. Get this, Susie. Get that. Tell somebody this, Susie. Tell somebody that. Say sorry to him for me, Susie. And I did it! I did it because Donna was beautiful, and I ...

... And I had freckles. It wasn't Donna, it was the freckles. Nobody looked past my freckles and saw the person under them.

I went back to my room and did my homework. You don't have to think about anything when you're doing homework.

### Chapter 4 Freckles are Great!

Next morning I didn't tell Donna about Jack's phone call. I was quiet all morning, and I tried to stay away from everybody. I had History, but I left quickly after the lesson. I didn't want to talk to Jack.

At lunch-time, I went for a walk. I was unhappy. Why? I didn't really know. I bought some fruit from a shop. Then I sat down and ate it.

When I finished it, I looked at my watch. I had to go back. 'Donna will be happy now, because she's going to the disco with Jack,' I thought. 'She'll tell me every little thing about it. She'll be so happy, and she won't see my unhappy face.'

I walked back to school slowly.

And I saw Jack! He ran across the road and stopped in front of me. His face was red, and he was hot.

He said, 'Susie! I couldn't find you! I looked —'

'Well, I'm here now,' I said. 'Was everything all right?'

'What?' he said.

'With Donna,' I said.

Jack looked at me strangely. 'Donna?' he said.

'You asked her to the disco,' I said. 'And she said yes. Right?'

Jack opened and closed his mouth. Then he started laughing.

I said, 'What's funny?'

'You thought — I mean, when I spoke to you on the phone yesterday, you — and I —' Jack stopped, then started again. He said, 'Susie, can I take you to the disco, please?'

'Are my ears playing games with me?' I thought. 'Did I hear him right?'

'Pardon?' I said.

Jack spoke slowly. 'Will you come to the disco with me?'

'But ... Donna wants to go with you!' I said.

'And I want to go with *you*,' he said.

'W-wait!' I said. 'Is this right? Donna wants to go to the disco with you, but you want to go with me?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Why?' I said.

And Jack said, 'Because I like you very much. You're pretty ... and funny. And you don't think I'm strange. You write poems too. And — and I love your freckles!'

'You do?' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'They're lovely!'

'And you really want to go out with me?' I said.

'I really do,' he said.

'Can I think about it?' I asked.

'Of course! How much time do you want?' he said.

'Half a minute. Yes!' I said.

He laughed, and I laughed with him.

Did I walk to the classroom? Were my feet on the ground? Perhaps they were. Or did I fly? I don't know.

I thought, 'He likes me! He likes me! I'm wonderful, I'm beautiful, I'm great!'

And then I saw Donna.

I thought, 'Oh, no! What am I going to tell her? How? When?'

In the end, it was easy. When we 'walked home after school, Donna said, 'It's strange. Jack didn't ask me out. Did you tell him?'

She was angry with me. She didn't *say*, 'It was your job, and you didn't do it'. But she *thought* it.

And now I was angry. I said, 'No, Donna, I didn't tell him.'

Donna made an ugly face. 'Right!' she said. 'I'll never do anything for *you*! So don't ask me!'

'I didn't ask him because he's taking a girl to the disco,' I said.

'Who?' she asked.

'Me,' I said.

Donna stopped. She looked at me, and her mouth fell open. 'Pardon?'

And I enjoyed telling her. 'Yes,' I said. 'He liked me, but he didn't tell me. He was too shy.' I smiled. 'He likes freckles.'

Donna said, 'But-but-but-!' Then she stopped and started again. 'There was something strange about that boy. I knew it!' she said.

'Why?' I said. 'Because he wants to take *me* to the disco, and not you?'

'Oh, that's not important to me!' she said. 'I didn't really want to go with him. It was only a game. I like playing games with boys.'

'Wrong!' I shouted. 'You wanted Jack!'

'No, I didn't!' she shouted.

'Yes, you did!'

Donna made an ugly face again. 'Well, go out with Jack!' she said. 'I hope you have a nice time.'

She *said*, 'nice time'. But she *meant*, 'I hope you break your legs!'

I said, 'Tell me, Donna. You're jealous! Right?'

'No, I'm not jealous!' she said. But she turned and walked away.

'Donna wants me to feel bad,' I thought. 'But I won't! Donna's not going to do that to me now. She knows something important, and I know it too. A beautiful face isn't everything! And I can't feel sorry for her because — because it's funny!'

I started laughing. And I laughed and laughed.

I *did* go to the disco with Jack, and we had a wonderful time. Now we're great friends. And he doesn't blush when he looks at me!

And Donna? Donna doesn't speak to me. When I try to talk to her, she walks away. But she'll talk to me again one day, because we *are* good friends, really. But things will be different then.

Oh, yes ... and freckles are great!