

*i don't want  
that in my  
ice cream!*



George  
Fratton

# **I Don't Want That in My Ice Cream**

By George Fratton

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## The Desisted

Sophie, now all grown-up and professional, was on her way to a sales conference in Albania. She paid off the taxi, wheeled her trolley into the terminal building, and scanned the displays for her flight. A few yards away, she saw a female figure swathed in black. Suddenly, her blood froze. She told herself not to be so silly. She saw the profile of the black-clad figure, who bent down to adjust the labels on her cases. As she straightened up, their eyes met. The black-clothed figure managed a faint smile. Sophie felt afraid...very afraid and hoped their paths would not cross. But their paths did cross. The passport formalities and security checks over, Sophie ordered a drink and sat at a table hoping that she would not be noticed by the woman in black. She spread out a magazine on the table, but her reading was interrupted by a chirrupy ‘Can I join you?’

Yes, they did know each other. Yes, she had moved away from the area. No, she did not go into detail about where she had been living. No, she didn’t go to university, but she did some courses. Yes, she was married: a lovely man from Albania. No, she no longer lived in UK. ‘Besides, the weather’s so much better.’ Yes, she was working. The black-clad figure checked her watch and said ‘Oh!’ She rose quickly, handed her a business card and hoped that they would keep in touch.

Sophie felt that April Fool’s Day had come late that year.



**Beryl Kufomë**  
**Funeral home**  
**112 Pyramid Scheme Way, Shkodër, Albania**  
*Don't phone us; just turn up with the desisted.*

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<b>WAY TO GO FOR PEACE OF MIND</b>	<b><u>PËR QETËSINË TUAJ</u></b>
<b>FOR FORGOTTEN <u>CADAVRES</u></b>	<b><u>PLANIFIKONI SHPENZIMET FINALE</u></b>

Desperate for company, Sophie sat on the swing and looked around the empty playground. The sky was dark grey and the threat of a thunderstorm hung heavily in the air. Apart from the distant sound of a delivery van going along a nearby street, all was quiet. The air was thick and still. Even the birds had stopped singing. It was as if sultry weather kept kids indoors. Sophie had known that her best friend, Jessica would be going away “up to Yorkshire” for a week during the summer holidays. When Jessica mentioned in passing that she would be leaving, Sophie did not listen, hoping that the parents of her ‘frienemy’ would change their minds and not go. She wondered how she was going to while away the rest of the afternoon until teatime. She was bored. Boredom and thundery weather make people do strange things.

The slide offered no excitement. The spider-web shaped roundabout was not going round. The babies’ swings hung listlessly like corpses on gibbets. A rain puddle reflected the uneventful grey sky. Even the grass playing field felt grey. Nothing was going to stir, as if the world was refusing to move and stimulate Sophie’s senses. The pathway to the street that ran alongside the allotments, from where a faint reek of manure wafted across the playground, brought not even a dog walker.

How she wished she had someone to talk to. Leaning back and holding tightly to the chains, Sophie jerked the swing up and in seconds maintained a steady rhythm. The hinge in the crossbar squeaked and ground with each oscillation. She noticed something black in the corner of her eye. A black figure moved slowly from behind the swings. Sophie brought the swing to a stop with her feet on the tarmac. She squinted at the tall black figure. A girl with jet-black hair that hung in rats’ tails over her shoulders stared into the distance with her back to Sophie. Suddenly, she heard a heavy, angry rumbling. Startled, she looked in the direction from where the sound had come. Was it a peal of thunder? No. An empty rubbish skip had been delivered to the front of one of the houses in the nearby street. She turned back to examine the figure in black, but it had vanished. The lorry that had delivered the skip roared off. Its engine noise faded into oblivion. She decided to resume swinging. The black figure was standing right beside her. Sophie let out a little yelp. The dark-haired girl stood staring at the allotment. She was wearing a little black dress that looked three sizes too large for her. Over her shoulder was a black battered handbag. Her black attire accentuated the whiteness of her complexion and her bare legs.

Beryl stared blankly at the path by the allotment. Her lips moved slightly as if she were talking to someone but did not wish to be seen or heard. At school, everyone – including the teachers – thought Beryl a little weird. During playtime, she could be seen whispering to imaginary friends and giggling conspiratorially with unseen persons. Her features spelt melancholy. No one had ever seen her parents. It was rumoured that she had poisoned her parents and their corpses were laid out in the master bedroom. Some said her family were gypsies who had found her somewhere and abandoned her because she was so odd.

She once came to school wearing lipstick. Only the head teacher had the courage to tell her to remove it. Another time she wore a black floppy hat, which was deemed unacceptable for school. On another occasion she turned up barefoot. She seemed to delight in telling anyone who would listen that she had been attacked by a strange man who had taken away her shoes. Of course, she was sent home. She returned an hour later with suitable shoes and socks, which was unfortunate, since most of the staff and her classmates found Beryl disturbing. They had been hoping that she would not return that day. Sophie told her mother the story. Mother was as helpful and as reassuring as ever.

‘Now you know why you should never speak to strangers,’ she said off-handedly without taking her eyes off the magazine that she was studying.

But Sophie did want someone to play with, even if that someone was wearing a black dress two sizes too big for her. Sophie glanced at Beryl, who was still staring blankly in front of her and mumbling to herself.

‘D’you wanna play a game?’ Beryl muttered to no one in particular. Sophie wondered if this was an invitation.

‘Do you want to come to my house?’ asked Beryl.

‘Who? Me?’ said Sophie.

‘Yes, you. I’ve got a nice game.’

Images of Monopoly, Ludo, snakes and ladders flashed into Sophie’s mind. She saw herself and Jessica giggling and generally enjoying each other’s company. Jessica was suddenly substituted with weird Beryl. The giggling stopped. How could you enjoy a board game with someone you felt ill-at-ease with? What about her parents—

Beryl walked a few paces away, stopped, and over her shoulder asked if Sophie was coming. Sophie visualized herself saying ‘no, thank you’ because it was nice to be nice, even if you think the other person is a bit strange. However, Sophie, longing for company, jumped off the swing and caught up with Beryl, who had resumed walking away from the playground. But what about her parents? Upstairs in... Sophie dared not complete the mental sentence, but followed Beryl, whose house was a few minutes away.

They turned into a road where all the houses had pristine front gardens, either sown with lawns and flowers, or concreted and graveled over to accommodate the family vehicles. Their window- and door frames usually received a new coat of paint in respectable, conservative colours every three years or so. The windows were like bright eyes looking cheerfully over the street. Wheelie bins arranged with almost military precision stood sentry on the pavements outside. Beryl’s house was like none of these dwellings.

The front garden gate had been black, but most of the paint had peeled away, leaving flecks of black on a weather-beaten background. Besides, the gate was permanently half open since couch grass and brambles had taken over most of the surface behind the crumbling brick wall that must have been home to spiders and wood lice. The privet hedge was dead like a prehistoric forest. The front door loomed uninvitingly in front of the girls. It, too, had once boasted of black paint. Now the bare boards were exposed. The front door window looked like a grimace of distaste at the very thought of occupants, let alone visitors. Wordlessly, Beryl inserted a key in the lock and, with difficulty, turned it. The door yielded with a plaintive creak. Beryl went in first and climbed the stairs. Sophie followed, holding her breath. The threadbare carpet smelt as if it had not been cleaned since it was laid. Wallpaper with a dark purple leaf motif with a velvet-like texture clung desperately. A large triangle of paper had come away from the wall at the top of the stairs. On the sill of the window by the stairs, some broken sea shells were home to household dust and tiny red eggs of an unidentified insect.

The girls turned the corner onto the landing. Sophie caught a glimpse of the bathroom. She swore that the toilet pan was cracked. A piece of string hung from the cistern in place of a chain. Had the toilet been flushed this year? Sophie felt that she had to use a lavatory, but she would prefer to wait until she got home.

Beryl stopped suddenly and turned around, her index finger to her lips.

‘Mum’s asleep!’ she whispered.

Sophie guessed that they were outside the master bedroom, of which the door was ajar. The smell of putrefaction wafted onto the landing.

Once in Beryl’s bedroom, the door was blown by the draft and closed itself with little noise. The room was dark because of the cardboard that covered one of the four panes of the sash window. The view out of the other panes was obstructed by a film of brown dust. There were no pictures of superheroes on the walls. Only the wallpaper with a dark purple leaf motif with a velvet-like texture stared at her. A dust-covered bookshelf was home to two dog-eared ‘Bunty’ comics and a book about horses, as suggested by the torn dust-jacket. The odour of a chamber pot that had not been emptied for a day or two pervaded the room. Sophie was hoping to see a Monopoly board and planning her escape at the same time.

Beryl knelt and drew out a black shoe box from under her bed and put it on a chair. She pulled out some soft toys to which balls of fluff had attached themselves. She brushed off the fluff to reveal a one-eared rabbit, an earless teddy bear, a dog minus its plastic nose and one foreleg, a limbless, featureless dirty pink woolly blob, and a small threadbare panda with raincoat buttons for eyes. She carefully arranged these sad playthings under the chair. She looked mischievously at Sophie.

‘Put this on,’ Beryl ordered, handing Sophie a faded black dress. Sophie looked doubtful as she held the garment against her chest.

‘It’s part of the game,’ Beryl hissed. Sophie slipped the dress over her own clothes. It reached the floor.

Beryl then got down to business. She handed Sophie a toy mobile phone, went through a script, and told her to take up a starting position by the bedroom door. Sophie giggled. Her host glared at her.

‘Play properly. Now, go on. Phone me up.’

‘Hello. Beryl Funerals?’

‘Hello. Has someone just died?’ inquired Beryl in a parody of professional grown-up phone talk.

‘Yes. Teddy.’

‘Oh, I *am* sorry you lost. Bring him to my shop and we’ll have a look at him.’

Sophie seemed unsure about what to do next. She had a fit of giggles. She noticed Beryl's baleful look. She picked up the earless teddy bear, composed herself, and walked with short paces across to the 'shop'.

'So this is the desisted,' Beryl said.

'What's "desisted"?'

'You don't say "dead". That'd be rude. Instead, you say "desisted".' Beryl resumed her role saying, 'We'll wrap the desisted up in this and place him in this.'

She wrapped the teddy in a smelly hand towel and placed it gently in a black shoe box.

'Now we sing, but I don't know all the words,' Beryl announced. She hummed the first bars of 'Abide with me' and sang the title line. She nudged Sophie and ordered her to join in. Sophie was finding it increasingly difficult to keep a straight face.

The singing over, Beryl picked up the other soft toys and accompanied each pretended handshake with the words 'I'm *so* sorry you lost.'

Beryl gave a running commentary about the gathering, how they should sit and watch over the coffin.

'Coffin?' said Sophie.

'The thing Teddy's in, silly!' barked Beryl. 'Now you must look sad.'

Sophie could restrain herself no longer. She cackled loudly.

'Don't! My mum's asleep!' Beryl hissed.

Sophie stuffed her hankie in her mouth, but still snorted.

'It's my game and it's my house!' the gloomy girl spat. Sophie nodded, covering her mouth in a bid to suppress a grin. All the while, Beryl glared at her like one for whom nothing is going the way they want it to. Suddenly, her face lighted up, as if she had had a bright idea. She stooped and conspiratorially whispered the question that Sophie was expecting.

'Do you want to see my mummy?'

The question extinguished Sophie's grin. Beryl brushed passed her gently and blocked the bedroom door.

'C'mon. She won't do anything to you.'

'Can't we play something else?' Sophie whimpered.

'Don't you like playing desisted people?'

‘I want to play Ludo...I want to...go home now.’

Sophie struggled out of the black gown, lifted it over her head and cast it in a heap behind her.

Beryl opened the door and showed her guest out to the landing.

‘Go in and say hello. She won’t hear you, mind,’ said Beryl in a challenging tone.

‘I want to go home.’

‘You scared?’

Beryl pushed the door of the main bedroom wider. The smell of putrefaction made Sophie feel queasy. Putting her handkerchief to her mouth, she ran along the landing and down the stairs. She tried the front door. It did not open. She felt something warm rise inside her. She tugged at the front door several times. After a few attempts, the door flew open but was caught by a worn-out doormat, over which Sophie tripped. She lay sprawled among the brambles and ivy on the path that led to the front garden gate. Without heeding the thorns in her forearms and shins, she picked herself up, still holding the hankie to her mouth, and ran to the junction of Beryl’s street and the main road, where she was sick. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she glimpsed over her shoulder to make sure that Beryl was not in pursuit. She ran home, where her mother perusing a magazine featuring ladies in little black dresses.

After that visit, Beryl disappeared. It was rumoured that she had been put in a home or hospital. Sophie had nightmares about the ‘desisted’ for many months after.

## Granny Smith

Sophie was in one of her black moods. When she was in one of her black moods, everything for her was stupid and she felt like hitting people for the stupid things they said and did. Sophie never knew why she had black moods. Her mother used to avoid her more than usual when her daughter scowled at the world. Her father would look at her and wonder what might make his little princess so angry. To be sure, she was not spoiled. Father would reassure himself that the black cloud would pass and she would be whispering little jokes in his ear again.

But today, the black mood was the blackest black. Not even her ‘best-est’ friend in the whole world, Jessica, could approach her. The rest of the class ignored Sophie as usual. Only twenty minutes to the end of the school day and the class settled down to be read to. Mr Larkspur hoisted himself on to his table, flipped through the little volume in his hand and settled on a page, where the story of Hansel and Gretel began.

By the time Mr Larkspur had finished reading the story and snapped the little book shut, the bell rang. Chairs on tables. The class filed out of the room. The smell of floor polish attacked nostrils. The cleaning staff had already started zealously shining up the corridor floor. The children issued from a side door and into their various ways home. Sophie and Jessica paired off and walked briskly homeward. After a grey silence, as opaque as the overcast sky that afternoon, Sophie spoke for the first time that day.

‘What a stupid story!’ she growled.

Jessica knew what was coming next.

‘What a load of rubbish!’

And so on until they reached their cul-de-sac. Jessica mumbled something about calling for Sophie later. Miss S. offered no encouragement.

Sophie passed by the open door of the living room where her mother was fantasizing about a lime-green sequined gown in the latest edition of *Flashy Fashions*. Her mother heard movement in the hall and up the stairs. She made no attempt to rise and greet her daughter.

‘Sulky little thing,’ she thought and promptly re-focused on the lime-green sequined gown. Sophie entered her bedroom and sat heavily on her bed. She wondered what she would do next. Her soft toys on the bed seemed to look at her accusingly.

‘How dare you!’ said Teddy.

‘Why are you in such a bad mood?’ demanded Paula Panda.

‘What’s upset your apple cart?’ snapped Gloria the glamorous doll.

‘Shuddup, all of you!’ Sophie shouted back. She felt silly for a moment for scolding soft toys.

She decided to go out. She was not going to say that she was going out because her mother would call out after her and ask lots of stupid questions. She would creep downstairs, taking care to miss the fourth step from the bottom which creaked, and slip unnoticed through the front door. In a second she would be out of the front garden and sprinting hidden by the privet hedge. When the front door closed softly behind her, she was shocked, surprised and deeply puzzled.

Instead of the tarmac of her cul-de-sac, there was a beaten path. Where there had been pavements there were grass verges covered in bluebells. There were no more houses except for the one which Sophie had stepped out of. And that house had a thatched roof and blue window frames. She was no longer wearing her denim trousers with the colourfully embroidered waistband. Instead, she found she was wearing a drab grey skirt and a dark brown bodice with cross-lacings, just like the ones you see worn by Cinderella and Snow White. The ground felt unusually knobbly. To her horror, she discovered she was barefoot. As she turned round to go back into the house she bumped into her mother, who was wearing the lime-green sequined in the magazine she had been reading.

‘Where d’you think you’re going, you little snake?’ said her mother. She had never called her daughter a “little snake” before. Her features looked as if they had been carved in stone. She looked angrier. Sinister. Evil. Sophie felt a bony hand grip her left shoulder propelling her faster out of the house and into the forest. The foliage was so thick that most of the afternoon sunlight was refused entry. Mother and daughter followed a beaten track that was flanked by grass-covered banks. A waft of wild garlic turned Sophie’s stomach. Her mother had released her grip on the girl’s shoulder, but the same bony hand delivered the occasional blow on the back of the daughter’s head.

‘Get a move on, you little snake!’ the mother hissed. Sophie dared not look back at the mother, whose normally steely grey eyes had turned into coal-black buttons. Sophie shivered,

suspecting that the woman in the lime-green sequin dress was not really her mother. Even so, this ill-tempered woman might have been her mother in a fouler mood than usual.

Sophie tripped on an exposed tree root in the middle of the path. She fell headlong and grazed her palms. The big toe on her right foot hurt terribly. She sobbed.

‘Serves you right! Should’ve been looking where you’re going,’ her mother growled as she stood over the sobbing world. Arms akimbo, she scowled at the distressed little heap at her feet.

‘I’m going back now. You stay put! Don’t you dare show your face in my house again, you little snake!’

She turned on her heel and started walking briskly in the opposite direction. Sophie tried to get up, but her skirt had tangled round her ankles. The smell of wild garlic was overpowering. A woodpecker rapped a hasty tattoo on a distant tree trunk. A wood pigeon tussled with a rival in branches some ten feet above Sophie’s head. Eventually she rose to her feet. She watched the mother walking away. Suddenly, the mother turned around.

‘Don’t you dare follow me!’ she shouted, her raucous voice echoing through the clearing. She brushed through some ferns and disappeared moments later.

By now, Sophie’s toe hurt less, but her anguish at being left alone in the forest made the tears well up. But would she relish the prospect of being reunited with that shrew in the lime-green sequined dress? She sat up watching a squirrel scamper up a tree. She stood up and brushed her skirt straight. She arranged her bodice as best she could, brushed the hair away from her face, and resolutely strode towards goodness knows where.

Sophie was beginning to feel hungry. She had been walking with difficulty now that her feet were cut and bruised. She felt that sunset was not far away. Through the dark foliage she could make out a light, which she decided to head for. Maybe someone would give her a little food and show her the way home. Yet she was no longer sure if she wanted to go back home to the creature in the lime-green sequined dress.

A half-timber cottage gradually took shape as she approached. A soft ruddy glow could be seen in a ground floor window. A thin wisp of smoke rose from the grey stone chimney. She came up to the front door, which smelt sweet. Usually front doors in Sophie’s experience smelt of old paint and a hint of dry rot. This one, however, had the fragrance of cake icing. Without

knowing why, she reached up to the canopy and broke off a piece of wood. It splintered and cracked with a squeal, disturbing a few dozen woodlice. Just then the door opened to reveal a pair of angry, bulging eyes, which were wider than her mother's. These eyes were light blue. The tiny blood vessels reminded her of one of her father's road map. The tip of her nose almost touched her chin. The face was thoroughly wrinkled like crumpled brown parcel paper. Her downturned mouth looked as if an artist had drawn an 'n' in pencil and left it at that. She noticed a black-pointed hat hanging from a hat stand along with a black cape that smelt of mothballs. Her grey hair was tightly permed like silver wavelets in a moonlit stream. An unseen bird chirruped in a cage somewhere inside the house.

'Let her in! Go on! Let her in!' the bird chimed in.

The old woman looked her up and down. She looked at the girl's dirty, bruised feet. Wordlessly she let the girl into the house and led her into the kitchen. The flagstones felt warm and welcoming to the girl's feet as she stood still for a few seconds to take in her new surroundings. A blazing fire crackled with new logs. Water boiled playfully in a kettle with the promise of a comforting brew. In one of two rocking chairs drawn up close to the fireplace was a huge green apple that was well-preserved since the September harvest. In front of the fruit were a ball of wool impaled by a pair of light grey knitting needles, a half-finished sleeve of a pullover and a crumpled knitting pattern.

'That's Granny Smith,' the old woman announced. 'She always turns into an apple when things don't go her way, don't you, dear?'

Not for a moment did it appear strange that an old woman was addressing a piece of fruit. In fact, nothing struck her as odd in this bizarre world of forest, lime-green sequined dresses, long skirts and bare feet. Not any more, at least.

'Well, missy,' goaded the old woman, 'Curtsey to Granny Smith and then we'll sit down to a nice cup of toad tea.'

Sophie did as she was told, just like she did for a class play. Then, she felt sillier curtseying to Philip Blobbe, the tiniest, smelliest boy in class, than she did to a large apple. Sophie was wondering if the old woman meant to say 'toast and tea', but it came out as 'toad tea'.

'No dearie,' her hostess corrected. 'It's toad tea today. Sophie shuddered at the thought that the old woman could actually read her mind.'

‘You missed a treat yesterday, dearie,’ the old woman went on. ‘We had toasted squirrel with clotted cream and gnats pee tea, didn’t we, Granny Smith?’

Granny Smith was still a large light green apple on a rocking chair, so no reply came. Nor was there any prospect of her changing into a person, or giant insect.

‘Tea pee?’ mumbled Sophie.

‘No, dearie. It was native Americans who used to erect teepees on their hunting and gathering expeditions.’

The old woman went on to explain that gnats pee tea was the most delicate brew she knew with a hint of ammonia.

‘But a sprig of dried wild garlic takes the edge of the urine smell,’ she added. She told the girl to draw up a footstool and sit by the rocking chair that accommodated the hitherto unchanged Granny Smith. The old woman handed Sophie a cup of toad tea, on the surface of which a tiny scaled-down toad was doing the breast-stroke. Sophie watched the intricately formed creature.

‘I make them myself,’ the old woman said. ‘The ones in the shop are too crunchy for my liking.’

The old woman offered her little guest a digestive biscuit. Sophie, not wanting to appear ungrateful or revolved, accepted, hoping that she might enjoy her toad tea without the tiny amphibian frolicking around in the light brown liquid as she drew the cut towards her mouth.

‘Thank you...erm...’

‘Granny Smith.’

Sophie chuckled, thinking that she had misunderstood about the apple in the rocking chair.

‘Oh! I thought the apple—’

‘Aye. She’s Granny Smith, too.’

‘Oh.’

‘It’s all right, dearie. Everybody makes that mistake, don’t they?’ said the old woman, addressing the toad in her tea.

‘Oh, look! He’s waving back! You understand English, don’t you?’

By now, Sophie was feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

‘If you’re thinking of going home, dearie, I shouldn’t bother if I were you.’

The old woman flashed a menacing look at her little guest.

‘You stay with me, dearie, and don’t worry, I shan’t turn you into a toad or anything. I’m not that kind of a w—’

The old woman rose and shuffled into the kitchen. Sophie saw her chance to empty her toad tea into the fire. A quick sizzle was followed by a barely audible scream. She felt sleepy.

‘That’s right, dearie, you have a wee nap now and later you can have a bath,’ the old woman crooned.

When Sophie awoke, she was fully clothed and swimming in a yellow liquid that smelt of ammonia and wild garlic. She was finding it hard to do the breast stroke in a long skirt and a bodice that was becoming unlaced. She felt a current push her to the side of the bath, which was, in fact, a giant teacup. A light breath issue from a large pair of elderly lips, of which the topmost was fringed by a feminine moustache. The breath formed ripples, against which Sophie fought.

‘It’s all right, dearie,’ said a quavering elderly voice several decibels louder than the one that addressed her before she fell asleep.

‘Just a couple of sips and it’ll all be over,’ the voice assured. ‘don’t cling to the broken filling as you go down...’

Sophie awoke. Her father looked down at her and brushed a wisp of blond hair from her eyes.

‘Just a couple of sips and it’ll all be over,’ her father whispered. He put a cup to her lips. She drank a bitter-tasting mixture of water and aspirin.

‘Good girl,’ he encouraged. ‘Hey, I’ve got a little something for you.’ He took up a shallow box from the foot of Sophie’s bed. He opened it and showed her the contents.

‘You can put it on after tea.’ There was a lime-green sequined dress.

‘And there’s something else,’ he added, handing her a small brown paper bag. Sophie pulled out a piece of card two by three inches on which was safety-pinned a tiny silver-plated toad.

‘For your charm bracelet,’ he said.

## Language

One bright, breezy Saturday morning, Sophie was sitting at the kitchen table and colouring a picture of a house with a pointed roof. The trees beside the house looked like huge green lollipops on thick brown sticks. The sky was white except for a band of cobalt blue at the top of the sheet, a yellow circle for the sun and some letter 'v's' with strokes curving downwards. Sophie's mother came in from the back garden. She was carrying a plastic laundry basket piled high with clothes that were fluffy after drying in the wind and sunshine. She set the basket on the counter top above the washing machine and closed the kitchen door. Then she looked over her shoulder and saw Sophie's drawing.

'That's nice, dear,' she remarked. 'Those are birds, I suppose.'

'These things here?' Sophie said, pointing to the curvy 'v's'.

'And what's that you've written there?' Sophie's mother asked, narrowing her eyes as she tried to make out the words. Then she read out aloud, 'Nippy...kiptop...woofy...nokkle...bl—'  
' Sophie hurriedly covered up the strange words and said "Nothing".

'What does that mean?' he mother asked.

'It's a secret!' Sophie replied.

'You're mad.'

Sophie's mother took the laundry basket upstairs to do the ironing. The phone in the hall rang. Sophie rushed to pick up the receiver.

'Goopy nop-nop, Sophie!' the caller said.

'Goopy nop-nop, Jessica,' Sophie answered in a low voice, partly covering the mouthpiece. Jessica giggled.

'Nibby hig-hog klooper dip-dup hicky-nocky?'

'Klooper dip-dup hig-hog nibby nibby,' Jessica replied.

This strange conversation went on for about three minutes until Sophie's mother came down the stairs. She frowned. She was convinced that her daughter was mad. Sophie felt the frown and, without looking up, brought the weird exchange to an end with the words 'Nop-nop gluggy-kip.' She put the receiver down heavily and ran back into the kitchen to finish off her colouring.

The girls met in the park after lunch. They had the place to themselves. They sat on the swings chatting.

‘Glag-kiff noff-higgy lolliop stiggy stoomag,’ said Jessica.

‘Nobby plooty-nucky nick nock blutty wag,’ replied Sophie.

The girls burst into laughter at the absurdity of their dialogue. They were enjoying their giggling fit when another girl they did not like very much because she smelt a bit sat on the roundabout. Her mouse-coloured hair hung in rats’ tails over her shoulders. Her T-shirt had the stains of food she had been eating during the past week. Her denim trousers were frayed at the bottoms. Her trainers were scuffed and the laces were undone. She had wide brown eyes that always looked sad. Linda watched and listened to the pair on the swings speaking their strange language.

Sophie whispered to Jessica, ‘Linda’s over there. Let’s talk to her in our language!’

‘Koggy magoob-hick!’ Sophie called out to Linda. Linda looked up and asked if Sophie was talking to her.

‘Koggy magoob-hick!’ Sophie repeated, pretending to sound a little impatient.

Linda got to her feet and walked warily to the girls on the swings.

‘Dib-doff mippy-stippy,’ Sophie said, encouragingly, as if to reassure Linda that she was doing the right thing in coming over. Now she was standing before the girls and looked puzzled, yet she wanted to join in whatever the other two were doing. But she was not sure of what she would be joining. Jessica then spoke to the newcomer.

‘Goopy hip nop kog-nug drib-gug?’ she asked.

‘What are you talking about?’ Linda inquired.

‘Goopy hip nop kog-nug drib-gug?’ Jessica repeated.

‘Goopy hip...What?’ Linda said.

The two girls on the swings looked at each other and grinned. Jessica said, ‘Hoody-poody nobby soopy hip nop kog-nug drib-gug.’ The pair chuckled. Linda glanced at one girl, then the other.

Linda felt left out of this game.

‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ said Sophie.

‘What?’ said Linda.

‘We just make it up,’ Jessica explained.

‘You’re talking rubbish?’

‘Well, it’s not rubbish,’ Sophie said, ‘It’s our secret language.’

‘Yeah. But what does it mean?’ Linda asked. ‘Is it a language like French or something?’

‘No. Not really,’ Jessica said. ‘Like I said, we just make it up. You can join in if you want.’

‘You’re stupid, you are!’ Linda moaned. She walked off across the wide expanse of grass towards the park gate.

‘And you smell. Gloppy tip-tap loopy-loopy gick!’ Sophie called out after her. Linda took no notice of them.

‘Backi-nip-nop wong-wangy klop-klip,’ said Jessica. The girls giggled. They turned on the swings to twist the chains, and let them unwind, sending the girls spinning and giggling for a few seconds. Then they went into a dream. They looked up into the clear sky, where an aircraft was flying very high up, much higher than an ordinary passenger plane.

In a top-secret office – so top secret that it was the toppest secretest office in the whole world – in Washington, a huge man in an army officer’s uniform was looking at some papers – boring stuff that adults talk about all the time. The man was as bald as a billiard ball and his nose looked as if it had been flattened in an accident with a door that closed in his face. His eyes were narrow and cold. His mouth looked like a line that had been drawn on his face with a thin, black marker pen. He had his name ‘Colonel Frank Jupp’ on a piece of wood on his desk, which was empty except for a little American flag and a telephone. Someone knocked on his office door. A soldier opened the door, came in and snapped it shut behind him. He took five steps to come to Colonel Jupp’s desk. He saluted and handed over a light brown folder with more boring stuff that adults love to talk about all the time.

‘Urgent, sir,’ said the soldier. He was about to turn and leave when Colonel Jupp told him to wait. He did not really know why he told the soldier to stand stiffly in front of his desk. Maybe he wanted to tell someone to do something without saying ‘please’ as we are taught to do and show how powerful and strong and great and important...and...all the boring things that adults think they are in those war films on the telly.

‘At ease, soldier,’ the colonel said. He opened the folder and found a piece of paper. He read it very quickly.

‘Can our spy planes really pick up what people are saying down on the ground?’ he asked.

‘Oh, yessir! They have the most advanced technology that can pick up a snail sneezing from 40,000 feet,’ the soldier replied. The colonel looked up at him and glared.

‘I wasn’t asking you. I was just thinking out loud,’ he snarled.

‘Beg pardon, sir,’ the soldier said.

The colonel relaxed a little and called the soldier to come around the desk and look at what was written on the paper in the colonel’s hand.

‘Tell me, am I reading this right?’ Colonel Jupp asked. ‘Just read aloud what it says.’

‘Top secret. For your eyes only, sir,’ the soldier read.

‘Not that! This bit!’ the colonel showed the sentence with a fat finger.

‘”And you smell. Gloppy tip-tap loopy-loppy gick! Backi-nip-nop wong-wangy klop-klip.” Is this some kind of code, sir?’ the soldier ventured. The colonel reached for the phone and punched a number on the pad.

An hour later, the people from newspapers and television channels waited, chatted and doodled on their note pads as they waited for the White House spokesman. However, he did not come. The president of the United States himself strode in and took his place behind the podium. The president coughed and the waiting reporters fell silent. The president said good morning and unfolded a piece of paper. The president looked deadly serious.

‘I have here in my hand a piece of paper which will change the history of the world. I am going to tell you what this paper says and then I shall go away to do what I have to do. There will be no time for questions,’ the president announced. He did not speak again for a few seconds. The reporters scribbled a few notes on their pads and then looked up at the president, a large man with white hair and blue eyes. He wore a red tie, white shirt and black suit.

‘A spy plane picked up a transmission from a country that wants to destroy us,’ he went on, glancing at the paper in front of him. He read, ‘Gloppy tip-tap loopy-loppy gick! Backi-nip-nop wong-wangy klop-klip.’ Some of the reporters found it hard not to laugh. The president continued, ‘It may sound like gibberish to you, but our code-breakers worked on this, separated the letters into groups of five, substituted the letters for numbers, subtracted the numbers they first thought of, and found that those numbers correspond to letters in the language of the country

that wants to destroy us.’ The president paused to let the reporters note his words and stop giggling.

‘You won’t be snickering when I tell you what this message says,’ the president said. The reporters were quiet again and felt that something really serious was coming.

‘Translated from the language of the country that wants to destroy us, the message says, “Launch nuclear attack on the United States within the next three hours”. Remember, this message was received three hours ago, which means we only have two hours to prepare ourselves for an attack. As we speak, our missiles being made ready for launch,’ the president assured.

And he was right. Across the nation, missile silos were being opened and army officers were looking hard at computer screens.

‘Yeah, this is going to be the big one!’ the president said, with a slight smile. Sirens sounded across the country and television announcers were warning the American people to seek shelter, even though they were told that the US would win and everyone would be safe.

‘The country that wants to destroy us will itself be no more. Tomorrow morning, there will be a gap on the world map where that country once existed,’ the president said. He nodded and thanked the reporters in the room. Some reports tried to ask questions, but the president had left.

Little girls love writing little messages to each other in class. This little message was not like the others about meeting you after school at my house or Pauline Chivers is horrible like a fat elephant. Mrs Teale was telling the class that when the window is open, carbon dioxide goes out the top and oxygen comes into the room at the bottom because oxygen is cooler. That was all very well and good, but little notes to your friends was much more interesting. Sophie was about to finish the last word when she felt Mrs Teale glaring down at her. The teacher snatched the slip of paper from under Sophie’s hand. Sophie froze and looked hard at her desk top. Mrs Teale read the note aloud to the class, ‘Goopy nop-nop... Dib-doff mippy-stippy.’ How the class chuckled! How Sophie’s face went as red as a beetroot! Mrs Teale crumpled the slip of paper in her hand and tossed it into the waste paper basket. During playtime, a dozen children formed a circle around Sophie and chanted, ‘Goopy nop-nop. Dib-doff mippy-stippy.’ Other children who heard this in the playground smiled and sniggered. Sophie felt the hot tears coming. No one noticed a high-flying aircraft directly above the school.

Somewhere in the middle of the United States, a family was sitting in the basement of their house and watching the television. Tinned food was packed on the shelves. Doors had been removed from upstairs rooms and leaned against a wall in the basement to make a nuclear shelter. Blankets and pillows were piled high inside and outside the shelter. The family truly believed that cotton wool and plastic foam would protect them from the blast of a nuclear explosion. But people will believe anything if a man wearing a red tie, white shirt and black suit told them. And that same person wearing the selfsame clothing appeared on television.

‘My fellow Americans,’ the president began, ‘we can all breathe a sigh of relief.’ The family in the basement breathed a sigh of relief. One of the children asked what they were going to do with all that tinned food. The father sushed the questioner and told them to listen to the president.

‘Another message was received from the country that wants, or rather, wanted, to destroy us. This is what it says,’ the president said, picking up a slip of paper. He read, ‘Goopy nop-nop. Dib-doff mippy-stippy.’ The family in the basement burst out laughing.

‘This was decoded and translated and it means,’ the president went on. ‘Call off nuclear attack on the United States. We cannot possibly win.’

At the end of the school day, Jessica caught up with her friend by the school gate. Sophie was looking very upset and humiliated.

‘What’s the matter?’ Jessica asked. Sophie was too upset to answer. Jessica tried a few more times to find out what had made her friend so sad. She gave up. Then she had an idea: she would make Sophie laugh.

‘Gloppy tip-tap loopy-loppy gick! Backi-nip-nop wong-wangy klop-klip,’ said Jessica, smiling. Sophie stared back. She sulked. Jessica repeated what she thought was a funny sentence.

‘Shuddup, you!’ Sophie said.

## Presenters all

Sophie was suddenly struck by how fed up she was with school. Lessons had no longer any meaning for her. Working in groups only lent a platform for the show-offs in the class to impose themselves. And teachers. Yes, teachers. How Sophie wished they would all shut up. From the time you arrived until your walking through the school gate at the end of the day, teachers were ever-present. If they were not lecturing the class on a boring topic, they were telling someone off for not listening, or laying down the law about acceptable behaviour. Otherwise, their talk was a long-winded answer to a silly question. Have you ever wondered how sweets are made? Sophie's answer would have been 'no', but rhetorical questions allow no debate and offer no introduction to a discussion. How Sophie wished teachers were controlled by something like the television remote. Sophie's would have the 'mute' button pressed permanently. And how she wished she could shut teachers' voices out of her head.

At 3:45 p.m., Sophie, along with 499 other children, were liberated from their teachers' tongues. Having packed away their books and stationery in their desks and left the room in an orderly fashion, they spilled out of the door and out into the playground. She saw Jessica, her best-est friend in the world, at the school gate, waiting for her.

'Don't you get fed up with bloomin' teachers?' Sophie snarled.

Jessica said she got fed up with them too and promptly changed the subject. Otherwise, she would be drawn into a moanfest by Sophie that would last all the way home. Jessica suggested they go out on their bikes that evening.

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Sophie arrived at her front gate. After some tea and digestive biscuits, she adjourned to an armchair and switched on the television. She watched a close-up of a slightly trembling hand cut out a circle out of a piece of white card.

'Now stick this to the end of the toilet roll insert,' the presenter said. Sophie sighed impatiently. She turned to another channel that was showing 'You'll never believe this!' featuring a man banging a tin tray on his head while singing about Andy the Wonder Ass. She turned back to another close-up of a quivering hand squeezing transparent glue out of a tiny tube.

‘By now, your kaleidoscope should be taking shape,’ the presenter said, reaching out of shot to bring on a near-completed kaleidoscope.

‘I made this one yesterday. Now, all you need is some acrylic paint, proper eye-protection, rubber gloves and an environment-friendly boiler suit.’

Cut to attractive elder sisterly presenter in the above-listed get-up. Another presenter, a younger female, comes on set to remind young viewers to cordon off the work area with yellow-and-black health-and-safety tape.

‘And always have two adults with you at all times: one to do the risk assessment and pass tools to you; the other to keep a carbon-dioxide fire extinguisher on hand and a roll of light gauze in case anything goes horribly wrong with your kaleidoscope.’

Sophie scowled and hollered at the television, ‘You make me sick!’

The television switched off, she threw the remote across the room. She rose and stomped out of the house. Seconds later she was outside Jessica’s front door. She found her best-est friend cross-legged on the floor in front of the television watching *that* programme. Yes, the one with the presenters talking down to the nation’s youth.

‘Ready?’

Jessica did not answer. She was enthralled by the presenter with the boyish good looks. He was shouting into the camera about how fizzy drinks are made. Behind him, rows of empty bottles jostled for position on a conveyor belt before being fed into a machine that would sterilise them. Sophie trod heavily out of the room, even though the offending programme had another 12 minutes to run. But a dozen more minutes was not worth the torture.

She mounted her bicycle and pedalled furiously to the junction of the cul-de-sac and the main road. She wondered where she could go on her own. The enthusiasm drained away quickly. She dismounted and wheeled her machine to the sweet shop a few yards away. The bell tinged heartily as she pushed the door open. A woman in a light-blue shop coat took up her position behind the counter in front of a row of large glass jars containing selections of boiled sweets in garish wrappings. Mrs Grundy, the shop woman, seemed tense, as if she were waiting for her cue to speak. Sophie asked for a quarter pound of sherbet lemons. Mrs Grundy smiled broadly and said, ‘Have you ever wondered how sherbet lemons are made?’

Dumbfounded, Sophie looked at the woman.

‘Let’s consider the ingredients: sugar, corn starch, colouring, saccharine and the flavouring, which is a secret known only to the manufacturer.’

Sophie could not believe she was being subjected to this lecture. Meanwhile, Mrs Grundy hoisted a television set from under the counter and switched it on. On the screen, Mrs Grundy was wearing a factory over and a paper hat. She spoke into a microphone enunciating her words to compete with the factory noise in the background.

‘The word “sherbet” is from the Turkish *şerbet* and ultimately from Arabic *shariba* which means “he drank” as sherbet lemons were originally served in goblets and drunk at parties during the Crusades. Behind me is a vat into which all the ingredients are boiled before being piped...’

‘A quarter of sherbet lemons, please,’ Sophie butted in.

‘Shh! This is educational!’

Sophie flounced out of the shop; slamming the door behind her. The bell nearly fell off. A car pulled into the kerb outside the shop. The driver wound down the passenger side window and beckoned to Sophie, who hesitated because of her mother’s warning her not to accept lifts from strangers, even women.

‘It’s all right, sweetie!’ the motorist reassured her.

Sophie went up to the car and peered down into the open window.

‘Is there a cinema near here?’

Sophie told the driver that the last cinema in the town had closed about three years before.

‘As I expected,’ the motorist began. ‘You see, as cinema had been in serious competition with television since 1953, when the Queen’s coronation was televised and TV sets in their millions had been purchased in anticipation of that historic event, the decline of cinema as mainstream entertainment was inevitable. Compounded with the rising popularity of home video and later DVD players, it was only a matter of time before the wholesale closure of cinemas in Great Britain.’

Although Sophie let this speech wash over her, she was stunned by the fact that a complete stranger would deliver a media studies lecture from inside her car.

‘Oh, shut up!’

Sophie began to walk away.

‘No, don’t! It’s very interesting,’ the motorist persisted. ‘Especially when we get to the bit about the emergence of the multiplex and spectacular shows offered by Imax.’

Sophie walked away. The speech about the decline of British cinema and attempts to revive Ealing Studios faded into the increasing distance between the motorist and the fed-up girl.

Meanwhile, a middle-aged woman was supervising her dog doing number twos by someone’s front gate. The woman sensed Sophie’s passing. She straightened up and, having made sure that her dog’s waste product had been picked up in a blue polythene bag, she began to follow the girl, brandishing the doggie poo.

‘I expect you’re wondering what goes into this,’ the dog woman said.

Sophie turned around, saw the woman and the dog, and tried to get on her bicycle. The woman caught up with her before the girl could build up speed.

‘If you analyse this, you’ll find out what Roby had for dinner today. You can also check if he has any disease.’

‘Just go away,’ Sophie shrieked.

‘Really!’

The shocked woman took herself, her dog and the bag of canine faeces away. The dog cocked its head as if to ask what had got into his owner. Sophie dared to look at. The woman frowned scolding.

A few yards up the road, the automatic doors of a neighbourhood supermarket whipped open and Sophie stepped as unobtrusively as possible. No one noticed her entry. She joined a queue of four people whose plastic baskets contained an average of six items each. She scanned the rows of confectionery and decided to pick up a coconut-filled chocolate bar. No one volunteered to lecture her about cocoa beans and the history of chocolate, from regal Mexican beverage to eating chocolate with sugar, emulsifier and cocoa paste.

Phew!

Sophie was outside the supermarket. A chime of the kind used by ice cream vans filled the street. Sophie pressed her hands tightly to her ears. The sound came from closed white van with questions on it in various fonts, sizes and colours. On the roof were four loudspeakers in a vintage design resembling apparatus that would have been fitted to private vehicles used for election campaigns in the 1950s. Sophie could not blot out the noise from the speakers.

‘I expect you’re wondering what happens when humans perceive sound,’ boomed a woman’s fruity voice from the speakers. As the woman launched into descriptions of rarefaction in the air and the inner ear, the rear doors of the van flew open and out jumped pairs of buck-toothed teenaged girls in white coats and inordinately large, black-framed spectacles. Once on the pavement they erected stands and boards bearing diagrams of canals, stirrup-and-hammer and the auditory nerves. The white-coated wench moved pointers over the diagrams in time with the substance of the commentary. Now Sophie was prone on the pavement as if she were expecting an explosion. Her arms quivered slightly as she pushed her palms over her ears. Then she passed out.

When she regained consciousness, the van and the displays had gone. She felt someone leaning over her. a dog snuffled at her waist.

‘Stop that, Roby!’

Sophie turned over and sat upright on the pavement.

‘You can’t sleep there, dearie.’

Sophie was about to tell the woman to shut up, but it was not the woman who was speaking.

‘I expect you’re wondering what happens to the human body when you sleep,’ the dog began. ‘Basically, your functions continue, albeit more slowly than during your waking hours. Your heartbeat slows and your temperature drops one or two degrees, which explains why you feel cold when you are suddenly woken up.’

‘Why don’t you dry up!’

‘Young lady, do hear me out,’ the dog implored. Sophie repeated her command several times. She lay on her stomach and pounded the pavement with her fists.

‘Don’t take on so, dearie,’ the dog said.

‘Do listen. He’s a very clever dog,’ the woman chimed in. ‘He’s got a chemistry set at home.’

‘Yes,’ Roby said, ‘Look, this won’t take long. Besides, I’ve got to be brief as I must hurry home.’

‘He’s got to do his poo analysis while it’s still warm and fresh.’

Sophie shouted several words that she never thought she would ever utter – at least not to another person. The net curtain in a window across the street was drawn back. The woman jerked the

dog's lead and proceeded down the road, leaving Sophie with a tear-streaked face and a voice made rough with loud cursing.

I expect you're wondering what 'end' means. In literary terms, it is an arbitrary point at which the conflict is resolved and, as they say in the formulaic style of fairy tales, "and they lived happily every after". In Sophie's case, we will never be sure whether her life will be happy ever after this point. In fact, the tear-streaked face and raucous voice may mark the beginning of a positive narrative, or at least a story with a happy ending. However, a newspaper headline might read 'Narrator axed by girl, 11—'

'And you can shut your gob an' all,' said Sophie.

## Railway view cottages

Although she would never admit it, Sophie was excited, relieved and a little apprehensive over the prospect of staying with her Grandma for a few days. Sophie was excited because her Grandma had a set of oil paints, a monopoly, and some dolls that had belonged to her mother. Sophie was relieved because her Grandma was much more easy-going than her mother. Besides, Grandma used to tell stories about how naughty Sophie's mother used to be when she was a little girl. However, Sophie was apprehensive because she had heard from Jessica, who had heard from a friend, about a series of disappearances by the level crossing near St Denys railway station which lay near Grandma's house. Someone had written to the local newspaper to say that people had been abducted by aliens from that particular spot. Also, some of the plants and flowerbeds in nearby front- and back gardens had been scorched and were unlikely to recover. As her parents drove Sophie to Railway View Cottages the girl pushed such eerie thoughts to the back of her mind.

Next morning, Sophie awoke with a start. Where was she? The curtains did not have the same pattern as the ones in her bedroom at home. There was no picture of a Chinese junk on the opposite wall. The wardrobe did not have a mirror on the door like hers at home. A second later, Sophie realized that she was at her Grandma's, Railway View Cottages. On her bedside cabinet a cup of weak tea in delicate china had gone cold. It could always be re-heated in the microwave. Wait a minute. Grandma did not have a microwave oven. Nor did she have a fridge, or a washing machine. Her cylindrical vacuum cleaner must have been new when Sophie's mother was a baby. At breakfast, Sophie tucked into triangles of toast that were pale brown; not black the way her mother did them. She spread real butter – not the tasteless margarine that her mother insisted on buying. She spread a layer of Grandma's own marmalade, which, compared to the cheapest shop-bought variety her mother plonked on the table – was ambrosia. The tea was weak; not coffee-brown and stewed. Grandma prepared half a grapefruit with a light sprinkling of sugar and half a cherry on top.

Sophie looked around the living room where they breakfasted. She scanned the photographs on the sideboard: her mother as a baby, her mother with her school class, her mother graduating from university, her mother beside her first car and tearing up L-plates, and her

mother newly-married. There were a couple of group photos of her mother and a gaggle of gawky adolescent girls in skimpy tops, hot pants and Scholl sandals. Sophie wondered how anybody got away with dressing like that in the olden days.

Grandma told Sophie to get ready to go shopping. This was an adventure since Sophie's mother shopped for the month and was in a bad mood for several days afterwards, swearing that the credit card company or the supermarket had overcharged her.

'What would you like for lunch, dear?' asked Grandma as they approached the level crossing. The red signal lights at the crossing started to flash at that moment. The gates came down. Sophie noticed a pair of Scholl sandals with red uppers and rusty clasps abandoned on the line, as if the wearer had kicked them off and walked away.

'How about some ham, chips and peas?' Sophie said.

A passenger train rumbled over the level crossing making the ground shake slightly.

'Sounds nice, dear.'

The train passed and the barriers went up. Sophie looked for the abandoned wooden sandals, but they were no longer there. The grandmother and granddaughter stepped over the crossing heading towards the nearest parade of shops.

Lunch over, Sophie went into the back garden with her Grandma, who showed her where the lawn mower was kept. Sophie loved mowing her Grandma's lawn, even though the machine was a manual type with a T-handle and simple mechanism. The mower must have been new when Sophie's mother was a little girl. Grandma went back into the house, leaving Sophie to set up the mower and choose a spot to begin cutting the grass. In the corner of her eye she detected movement. Looking up she saw another girl of about her age on a swing in the garden next door. She was wearing an old-fashioned Paisley-patterned frock of the sort Sophie's mother would have worn when she was at junior school and a beige cardigan. Her legs were bare. She was wearing Scholl sandals with red leather uppers and rusty clasps.

'Hello. I'm Lulu.'

Sophie introduced herself. Lulu carried on swinging and chattering about her school.

'I'll be in Standard Five next year.'

Sophie had no idea what "Standard Five" meant.

'What about that air raid last night?' Lulu said.

Air raid? What on earth was she talking about?

‘I thought we weren’t going to have a house left this morning,’ Lulu added. ‘Mind you, they re-built those two down the end of the road pretty quick, though.’

Sophie was about to say that she knew nothing about any air raid when Lulu unexpectedly stopped swinging and slipped off her sandals. Picking them up by the uppers, she offered them to Sophie.

‘I don’t like them that much.’

Sophie thanked her and watched Lulu go back into her house. Then she mowed the lawn and, savouring the scent of freshly-cut grass, closed her eyes.

She felt herself floating yet somehow standing firm in a space that was completely white. She could hardly see her hands and feet, as if they were shrouded in some kind of misty vapour. The whiteness and the silence around her were so loud she almost screamed in panic. She did not know what was up or down. She could have been hanging upside-down for all she knew and she felt a rush of blood to her head. Suddenly, she was back on what she expected to be a freshly mown lawn. She found the wooden sandals and slipped them on. She felt very tired as if she had been mowing lawns for a week. However, the lawn was now paved over and a border of white chippings invited the occasional weed. Sophie thought of cemeteries. The swing in next-door’s garden was no more. For a moment, Sophie felt as if she was being watched. She turned and saw a woman’s smiling face.

‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’ the woman asked.

Sophie was not sure, but shook her head. Everything seemed so different, yet familiar, in a peculiar way.

‘I’m Lulu,’ said the woman, dressed in denims and a cream top. She looked down at Sophie’s feet. ‘Never did like those sandals.’

‘I like them,’ Sophie replied, not knowing why and wondering why Lulu would make such a strange statement.

Sophie went into her Grandma’s house, which no longer smelt musty. The paintwork was brighter and cleaner. All the clutter had been cleared away. She saw a young woman breeze into the kitchen without a care in the world. She started when she saw Sophie.

‘Where’s my Grandma?’

‘Grandma? There’s no grandma here,’ the woman answered.

‘This is her house!’ Sophie persisted.

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘My Grandma, Mrs Stewart. Anne Stewart.’

The young woman stared at Sophie as if she were a visitor from an alien world.

‘You mean the Mrs Stewart who lived here until she died a few years ago? Was she your Grandma?’

## Got away with it

They were black. They were shiny. The toes were pointed. The stiletto heels were four inches high. Sophie wanted them. She so wanted to slip them on and clip-clop into womanhood.

'I haven't finished with that yet!' warned Sophie's mother, who was referring to the magazine *Flashy Fashions*. Sophie handed the magazine obediently to her mother, who snatched it back. On the front cover was a half-page photo of an A-list celebrity and her daughter, stepping out of a Manhattan restaurant. The model's daughter was only ten and she was wearing shiny black heels like her mother's. Sophie wanted a pair like those for parties. She might even risk going downtown in them. Who would notice? Who would care?

On Saturday afternoon, her parents had gone out. Sophie had the house to herself. Still in her night clothes she entered her parents' bedroom heading for the wardrobe. She inspected her mother's footwear. Wedges. (Ugh!) High-heeled strappy sandals! (Interesting.) High-heeled mules. How on earth did her mother keep those on her feet? Then, bingo! They were not as shiny as the model's daughter's and the heels were considerably higher. She lifted the shoes out and placed them almost reverently on the mat by her parents' bed. Sitting on the bed, she eased her bare feet into the shoes, which were half a size too big for her. Then she attempted to stand in the shoes. She fell over back onto the bed. She stood up again and with very careful steps positioned herself in front of the full-length mirror and admired herself. Her ankles were as shapely as those of the celebrity's daughter's. She gingerly stepped across the bedroom steadying herself on furniture. She wondered how the celebrity daughter seemed so confident in her heels. Well, she was only ten, whereas Sophie was coming up to 12, so she was invincible. She kicked off the shoes and went to her room to dress.

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She did not wear the heels to the bus stop because someone like Mrs Grimshaw, the nosiest person in their street, would be bound to notice and blab to her mother. She wore denims and trainers, and carried her mother's shoes in a carrier bag. She rode the bus as far as the park a mile from the town centre. On a bench in the park, Sophie took off her trainers and peeled off her

socks. She looked around to make sure that no one was watching her. an old lady was by the edge of the duck pond and feeding the ducks. She was oblivious to the girl who was sliding her left foot into her mother's shoe. A white cairn terrier came up to her and sniffed the right shoe. The dog snorted with disgust. The old lady whistled and the dog trotted across the grass towards the pond. The creature let out a jealous bark that frightened the ducks, sending them up in the air with a clatter of wings.

Sophie hastily put her trainers and socks in the carrier bag. She looked around again and then carefully stood up. She took a few steps. The noise of the metal tips on the heels seemed to ring out across the park. She suddenly remembered to fold her trouser bottoms to cover her feet, leaving only the pointed toes and part of the heels exposed. She walked out of the park with tiny steps. She came to the gate and realized how silly her gait was. She imagined her mother's confident striding in these heels and aimed to follow that example. She seemed so self-assured for the next three hundred yards that she almost forgot about her flashy footwear. Then disaster struck. One of the heels was caught in a crack in the pavement. A shoe detached itself from her foot and was sent skittering off towards the entrance of a large department store. A crowd of shoppers were leaving as Sophie desperately tried to retrieve the shoe and put in back on. She felt as if everyone was looking at her. Confidence regained, she straightened herself and strode purposefully towards her favourite shop where she might buy some colour for her toes. Then she might try on her mother's high heeled strappy sandals for another foray into town. Her daydream was broken by a pair of middle-aged women smelling of mothballs and indignation as they heard the sound of the girl's shoes on the pavement.

'Some parents have no idea, do they?' said one of the cardiganed crones.

'The very idea!' the other tutted.

Sophie looked at their boring brogues and went 'tsk'. However, the shoes were beginning to hurt. Blisters were beginning to form on the balls of her feet. Now she was staggering awkwardly into knock-kneed womanhood. She heard a bus pull up on the other side of the high street. She tried to kick off the shoes. Only one came off. She lost balance. She fell over. The shoe was in the path of an oncoming car. Horrified, Sophie watched the front wheel of the car roll over the shoe. The heel crunched off. The car disappeared towards the end of the high street. Tearfully, she picked up the wrecked shoe and made her way barefoot towards the bus. She felt she was being

observed. She looked up and caught sight of Mrs Grimshaw, the nosiest person in her street. Mrs Grimshaw must have seen everything. Sophie would not be allowed to go out ever again, or at least until she was married. She thought it best to get on the next bus and leave Mr Grimshaw to formulate the story she would tell Sophie's mother.

Sophie hoisted herself onto the plastic posterior holder in the bus shelter and watched Mrs Grimshaw's bus shrink in the homeward distance. Sophie considered her options regarding her mother's shoes. Throw them away? No. Her mother would notice them missing from her wardrobe. She passed two scenarios past herself. Either, she could hide the broken shoes in her room and say nothing. But her mother might decide to tidy up her bedroom. No, she could not live with the constant worry. Or, she could confess. Her mother would explode, threaten to cut off her pocket money until she was married.

Sophie brushed the dust off her left foot with her right and vice versa. She felt she had forgotten something. Then she noticed the shoe repair shop across the road. They could stick the heel back on. She felt a bound of excitement in her stomach. Then her heart sank. She only had 30 pence left from her pocket money, which would not cover the cost of repair. Pocket money day would not be for another week. Even so, she could hide the shoes in her room and smuggle them to the repair shop next week.

The bus shelter was beginning to fill up as the time for the next bus came near. Middle-aged and retired shoppers festooned with polythene bags full of cheap frozen foods and sundry items from pound- and charity shops, jostled for position. Sophie's bare feet drew a few stares, some curious, others disapproving. Finally the bus arrived and Sophie was the last to board.

'It's 45 pence to Cambridge Road since last Monday, Lulu,' the driver-conductor said. Without thinking, she re-pocketed her money and alighted. The folding doors of the bus clumped shut and the bus pulled away smugly. Sophie decided to buy some sweets to cheer herself up a bit after that awful high-heeled expedition. She walked back towards the park she suddenly remembered that she had left her socks and trainers on the bench. The bag was no longer there.

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Her feet sensed every crack in the pavement. Carrying the damaged pumps in her hand, she popped into a newsagent's where a woman who reeked of disinfectant sorted out newspapers into fluorescent bags for the delivery boys and girls. She did not look up when Sophie approached the counter.

'A quarter of sherbet lemons, please.'

'Can't you see I'm a bit busy?' snapped the woman as she tussled with a women's magazine. The front cover tore. The woman swore. She hoped that the girl had not heard.

'Oi! Hand me that magazine off the rack there, will you?'

A couple of seconds passed before Sophie realized that the woman was addressing her.

'Give us a copy of *Flashy Fashions*.'

Sophie turned around and found the required publication. On the front cover was the high-heeled A-list celebrity and her ten-year-old daughter leaving a Manhattan restaurant. Sophie almost spat on the cover. The newsagent snatched the magazine from her and spirited it away in the fluorescent bag. Sophie chose a couple of crispy chocolate bars, paid for them and left the shop.

As she unwrapped a chocolate bar a juicy raindrop plopped on the wrapping paper. Within minutes the air took on its characteristic odour as the water struck the paving stones. She resumed her journey home. Her trouser bottoms were dark blue with dampness. She grizzled. She felt lonely and foolish. She loose heel rattled in the wrecked shoe.

Eventually she reached home. She felt less lonely and less foolish after she had dried her hair. Then she had a fantastic idea. She would repair the shoe herself. She had watched her grandfather often as he insisted on hammering studs into his old army boots, which he swore were the most comfortable items of footwear he possessed. She imagined herself wielding a hammer and nailing the heel from the inside of the shoe. Easy-peasy, she thought. She was excited at the prospect of salving her (guilty) conscious by her own physical skill. Such astuteness would be rewarded with a kiss and a cuddle under normal circumstances. Borrowing her mother's shoes without her permission and trashing them were not normal circumstances.

She found a claw hammer in her father's tool box and rested the shoe on the heel. She found it hard to hold the little nail in position since the back area of the shoe was too small to accommodate her hand. Several times the nail fell out of the grip of her forefinger and thumb.

Finally, the nail was in place, ready for the first hammer blow. The nail popped out. She screamed with frustration as she tossed the hammer and the shoe across the workbench.

Twenty minutes later the first taps drove the first nail home. And a second. And a...oops!...the nail bent 80 degrees...a third. Sophie smiled as she folded the insole back over the nails. The heel still wobbled like a milk tooth about to fall out of a young gum. No sooner had she place the shoes back where they belonged between the wedges (Ugh!) and the high-heeled strappy sandals (No fear!), the front door opened. There was a loud crackling of tall hold-alls containing an evening tress and a patent leather handbag.

‘Get me a cup of tea, will you?’ Sophie’s mother said as she pushed the front door closed behind her with her foot. Sophie looked sheepishly down at her from the top of the stairs. Minutes later she brought her mother tea on a tray with two digestive biscuits on a doily on a plate. Her mother had kicked off her shoes and was flexing her toes. Sophie went back up to her bedroom, took out her drawing book and coloured pencils. Soon her mother ascended the stairs with the crackling carrier bags and went into her bedroom. Sophie heard a key in the front door. Her father stepped in.

‘Up here!’ called out her mother.

Heavier footfalls came up the stairs. Sophie was colouring a girl’s dress in her drawing book. She heard the noise of a kiss from her parents’ bedroom. Then she heard her father say, ‘Very nice.’

‘Ha! You’d say that even if I was wearing a sack!’

‘Very nice as well.’

‘What bout this to go with it?’

‘Very nice.’

Sophie hear the unpoping of a handbag and a rustling as the tissue paper was removed from inside it. Someone rummaged in the lower part of the wardrobe.

‘Shorten that strap, will you?’

The wardrobe door creaked open with a moan.

‘What’s happened to this shoe?’

Sophie froze. The red pencil stopped mid-stroke.

‘Bit loose,’ said her father, who seemed quite concerned.

‘Seen these nails?’

‘Can’t wear those, then.’

Someone rummaged in the wardrobe again.

‘Where’s that other pair?’

‘Got another pair like those?’

‘S’pose these’ll have to do.’

‘Very nice.’

‘Mystery about that shoe, though.’

Sophie unfroze but the red pencil did not resume its work. She anticipated an interrogation. She would deny everything. She could imagine her mother’s hard features searching her daughter’s face and tones for the slightest hint of a lie. But the interrogation never came.

Instead, Sophie heard a comb being pulled through hair. Twice her mother said ‘ouch!’ and mumbled something about “that useless conditioner”. A lipstick was opened, then its top was snapped shut. An aerosol spray was used liberally. A sickly sweet-smelling vapour wafted onto the landing and into Sophie’s room. A zip was fastened. Fabric was smoothed and patted down. Feet were forced into shoes. Her parents left the bedroom. Her mother looked in on Sophie.

‘Bye! Expect you’ll be asleep by the time I’m back, so night-night,’ her mother chirruped. Sophie was dismayed by the slight smile that sketched itself on her mother’s freshly lipsticked mouth. Or was it a smile? Sophie could not be sure because a split second later her parents were going down the stairs, leaving a trail of pungent perfume behind them.

‘Don’t go talking to any strange men’ her father joked as they approached the bottom of the stairs.

‘Chance’d be a fine thing. Lunatics the lot of them!’

‘Well, you’re the boss, aren’t you? Go on! At least once a year you can be nice to those lunatics in your department.’

‘Nice? Ha!’

Her mother clattered to the front door, which her father opened for her. he hoped she would have fun. She rejoined that she would not. The front door closed, her mother click-clacked to the car. Seconds later the car engine noise faded to the end of the cul-de-sac.

Sophie was unsure as to whether she could breathe a sigh of relief or not. She was, however, prepared to stay on her toes for the next few days, but not with the help of her mother's now dodgy stilettos.

## Doll's-house

Sophie's bedroom was untidy, but she did not care. Her mother did.

'Look at this mess!' her mother said as she stood in the doorway. 'What's that over there?' she snapped, pointing at a plate on the floor. On the plate was a cake that had mould like a little green carpet on it. Sophie did not answer. Her mother darted into the bedroom and whisked the cake away, tutting all the while. However, she did not notice the cream bun that had mould like a little green carpet on it on a plate on her desk.

'You really are disgusting!' her mother hissed. Sophie knew what her mother was going to say next.

'Other little girls are neat and tidy. Not you, though! Your bedroom is worse than a rubbish tip! Why don't you put everything away like Jessica does? Jessica wouldn't leave her lovely clothes all over the floor.' (Jessica was Sophie's best friend for the moment, until the next fight.) Rolling her eyes, Sophie sat at her little desk and was colouring a picture of a house with a pointed roof and four windows in each corner of the square wall and a door in the middle with a black knob. She had the kind of face that could sulk at any time, even though everyone said she had the cutest cornflower blue eyes and curly blond hair. Her lips were pressed tight as she shut out her mother's words. She was wearing her best white cardigan with pink rabbit-shaped buttons. She was a rather clumsy girl because she was always running and falling over. Her grazed knees were for all to see under the hem of red gingham skirt. Her mother said she would trip over a matchstick. She told everyone she was 'nine and three quarters' and would soon be ten. Although it was the summer holidays, her mother insisted she wear white socks with her new white sandals. Every morning for the past week she had hoped her mother would not notice her pretty little toes and every morning her mother would send her back to her bedroom to put on her white socks.

'Are you listening to me, young lady?' said her mother, almost shouting. Sophie nodded. The only sounds were the rubbing of a green pencil shading in an egg-shaped treetop and the chirruping of a bird outside in a real tree in their back garden. Sophie could think only of her birthday, two days away. Her mother sighed impatiently and turned to go downstairs, where the

washing machine was on the spin cycle. Sophie was hardly aware that her mother had left, except when she heard the creak of the stairs as her mother went down.

‘And you can forget about presents for your birthday!’ Sophie’s mother called up over her shoulder from halfway down the stairs. Sophie did not care. Daddy would have a present for her when he came home at teatime. And sure enough he did.

No sooner had her father come through the front door, Sophie ran up to him, threw her arms around his neck and kissed his rough cheek. Her mother asked him the usual boring questions like ‘Did you have a good day at the office?’ and ‘Was there much traffic on the way home?’ Grown-ups always talk about silly stuff. Presents from Daddy are so much more fun. Her father whisked a plastic bag from behind his back and said, ‘Here you are, sweetheart.’

‘Is this my birthday present?’ asked Sophie, hoping that it was not.

‘You spoil that girl,’ said Sophie’s mother. Her father said nothing but grinned as he watched Sophie pull out the box that was inside the bag. It was a doll with complete set of clothes and shoes. But the doll was as bald as a shiny ball that you decorate the Christmas tree with. Sophie frowned. ‘Why hasn’t she got any hair, Daddy?’ she asked. Her father pointed to a row of objects on a row under the set of clothes. They were wigs. He said that the doll could have any wig she needed to match her clothes. Sophie could not wait to open her present and dress the doll up for the evening.

‘You can open it up after tea,’ Sophie’s mother warned. Sophie ignored her and scampered up to her bedroom. She could not wait to show her best friend, Jessica, her new doll.

At about 10 o’clock in the morning of the next day, a little girl in a blue T-shirt and denim trousers with fancy embroidery on the waistband skipped up the street. Her white trainers scuffed the pavement and her ginger ponytail bobbed up and down in time to her skipping. The front garden gate was open so she kept on skipping up the concrete path and stopped at the dark brown front door. She pressed the doorbell button and waited. Everyone knew that she was ‘nine and a half’ years old, which meant she was ‘older than’ Sophie, whom she could hear hurrying excitedly towards the door. The door was opened with such force that it banged against the inside wall, making the knocker rattle. Sophie smiled not because she was really glad to see her friend, but because she had a chance to show off her present.

‘Hello, Jessica. C’mon up. I’ve got something to show you!’ Sophie said, turning away to hurry up the stairs. Jessica followed and was beginning to feel a little jealous. She went in to Sophie’s bedroom and carefully picked her way through the clothes and toys that covered the floor. She noticed the plate was a cream bun that had mould like a little green carpet on it on a plate on her desk. She felt a little sick, but she put a smile on her face when Sophie showed her the latest present from her father. She held out at arm’s length a blonde, curly-haired doll, wearing a shiny green evening dress and a silver-coloured plastic necklace. Jessica thought her friend wanted her to take the doll to have a look, so she reached out for it. Sophie took the doll back with such a jerk that the blonde wig fell off. Jessica burst out laughing.

‘It’s not funny!’ Sophie yelled as she searched for the curly blonde wig off from among the clothes and toys on the floor. Jessica chuckled even louder.

‘It’s my house and my doll and if you keep on laughing I’ll never let you see my ever dolls again! Never!’ Sophie threatened.

‘All right,’ replied Jessica. She put her hand over her mouth and tried very hard not to giggle. Sophie could see that her friend still found the wig falling off the doll so funny, but she still had the best doll in the world. (Well, maybe not the world, but among her friends at school.) She showed her friend the doll’s different wigs and outfits and shoes. Jessica was beginning to feel a little jealous again until she remembered something.

‘Guess what! I’ve got a doll’s tea set and my daddy’s built this great big doll’s house. Do you want to come and see?’

Now it was Sophie’s turn to feel a bit jealous, but she nodded.

‘First, we’ll go to my house to get the tea set, then we’ll go to the doll’s house,’ Jessica said. Sophie thought it was strange that they would ‘go to the doll’s house’. Usually, people had doll’s houses in their bedroom or in the front room of their houses, didn’t they? Still feeling a little jealous, Sophie did not ask anything about Jessica’s dolls house because she was afraid of feeling even more envious of her friend. She held her doll tightly in one hand. With her other hand, she held the blonde wig on the doll’s head. Leaving the bedroom door open, because they could not close it because of all the stuff on the floor, the two girls rushed downstairs and out of the house, slamming the front door so hard that the door knocker rattled a goodbye.

A few miles away there was a school. In that school were several classrooms. In each classroom, children were writing and counting, drawing and colouring, cutting and gluing, chatting and giggling, mumbling and sulking, smiling and scowling, repeating and copying, and generally not learning very much at all. In one classroom, the teacher, Mrs Lewis, watched the children as they were finishing their projects, when she remembered she would tell them a story. However, another teacher had borrowed the story book that the class loved. She clapped her hands and the children let fall their pens and coloured pencils on their desks and listened, as they were expecting one of their favourite stories.

‘OK. I have to go to Mrs Kent’s class to get the story book. I’ll be gone only a few moments so I want you to be on your best behaviour,’ said Mrs Lewis. She looked at the children over her yellow-rimmed spectacles. She smoothed her grey pleated skirt.

‘Christine!’ she said. ‘Watch the class and make sure no one talks. If anyone does talk, write their name on the whiteboard,’ she said, handing Christine a blue whiteboard marker. ‘And there’ll be no story for anyone!’ The class groaned. The teacher left the classroom. The children began whispering. Christine stood at the front of the class and wrote nothing. Suddenly, they felt the whole building shake.

‘Nice, aren’t they?’ said Jessica, who showed Sophie the doll’s tea service. The cups, saucers and plates were arranged neatly beneath a cellophane wrapping in their box. All the pieces were white with gold rims around the edges. They looked as if they were made of china, just like the best cups and saucers at home, except these were made of plastic. ‘Daddy got them for me,’ she went on, ‘they were really expensive. They cost pounds and pounds and pounds. Look.’ She showed Sophie the price label on the box. Seven pounds and ninety-nine pence. Sophie felt a little jealous again, but she turned her thoughts to the lovely doll she held in her hand. Of course, she had to keep the wig on the doll’s head with the other hand, otherwise a bald doll would look silly and Jessica would laugh at her and her doll again.

They came to the entrance of a small park. A grey pathway curved between large patches of newly cut grass. The girls enjoyed the smell of the grass and the remains of that morning’s dew on it. The grass was so soft and fresh, but not like the mould that covered the cream bun in

Sophie's bedroom. There was a low hill with pine trees on it. They, too, had a fresh smell, like the bathroom in Sophie's house.

'There it is,' said Jessica, pointing to a little concrete building next to the path near the low hill.

'What's that?' asked Sophie.

'My dolls house, silly!' said Jessica.

'That doesn't look much like a dolls house.'

'Why not?'

'Well, it doesn't have a proper roof.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's flat. It's not red and pointed.'

'So what if it isn't?'

'And it's got too many windows.'

'I don't care. It's my doll's house and my daddy made it for me, so there!'

No one in the classroom was taking any notice of Christine. Nor was Christine keeping order as her teacher had asked her to. Instead, the children screamed and shrieked, cried and wailed, called for help and wished someone would rescue them. A few seconds later, most of the children were huddled under their desks. They thought there was going to be an earthquake. As the earth shook, terrific high-pitched noises attacked the children's ears. The youngsters put their hands over their ears, but still the sounds made the pens and pencils on their desks clatter. The books on the shelves at the back of the room jumped with every tremor and eventually fell onto the floor with a 'flup'. The children could hardly hear themselves screaming as the noises outside grew louder and louder. Suddenly, the wall where the windows were opened like a huge door. The children shrieked and wailed as the wall disappeared. They were so afraid that they thought they were going to be seriously hurt, even die, yet the children suddenly stopped shrieking and wailing when they saw a very strange thing. The enormous bald head of what looked like an immense plastic doll came into the class from where the wall had disappeared. The screaming and shrieking started again. The children came up from under their desks and scurried towards the opposite wall, which still seemed safe and solid. While all this was happening, two boys were

trying to open the door. Perhaps it was because of the earthquake the building was twisted and the door was stuck fast. The boys tugged and pulled the door handle, which came off and boys tumbled back into the crowd of their classmates. Horrified, they all turned around like one person to see the head and shoulders of the gigantic doll ploughing through the now empty desks. Some of the desks were on their sides. Books and pens and pencils and rulers and copybooks and textbooks spilled onto the floor. Still the huge head thrust its way into the room. The children were too panic-stricken to notice the doll's bare shoulders, her silver-coloured plastic necklace and shiny green evening dress. Then the deafening noises started again.

With the box containing the doll's tea set under her arm, Jessica could not help giggling as she watched Sophie try to put the doll into an upstairs room in the doll's house. She rammed the doll's head in and felt something stopping it from going in any further.

'It's too big,' Jessica remarked between giggles. 'It won't fit.' Sophie twisted the doll half a turn, thinking that might solve the problem of settling the doll in a cosy spot in the house. She looked back at her friend and scowled.

'Someone's left loads of stuff in here. She won't go in,' Sophie replied.

'No!' Jessica whined. 'Let me put the cups and saucers in first.'

'I want to put my doll in first but I can't!' whined Sophie.

'I don't care. It's my doll's house and my daddy made it for me, so there!'

Sophie felt so angry that she snatched the doll's tea service from under her friend's arm, flung it onto the ground, and stamped on it with a white sandalled foot. The cellophane cover was torn and some of the cups and plates were broken. Jessica bent to pick up the box and inspect the damage.

'Look what you did!' she shouted. 'They cost pounds and pounds and pounds! I hate you!' She stood up and took a step towards the other girl, who was scowling so hard that it would make milk go sour. Then Sophie pushed Jessica in the chest. Jessica answered with a squeal and, with the flat of her hand, thrust Sophie backwards, knocking her over. For a few seconds, Sophie grizzled.

'Serves you right, you...you silly nit!' Jessica spat.

Sophie got back on her feet, brushed off some of the cut grass from her white cardigan, then she looked for something – anything – she could damage to get her own back on Jessica. She slammed the doll’s house shut, shaking the stuff inside it. For a second, Jessica thought it odd that a doll’s house would have glass doors on the ground floor. She drew her foot back and gave the glass doors an almighty kick. There was a tiny tinkle of glass. The doors were a few inches inside the house and Sophie had managed to make a hole in the wall. Jessica was speechless. She could not believe that anyone would do such a thing to her precious doll’s house. But before she could call Sophie ‘horrid’ and ‘mean’ and ‘kick donkey’, Jessica noticed that Sophie’s right white sock was red. She had cut her toe on the glass door. Confused, Jessica ran away. Sophie burst into tears. Feeling more humiliation than pain, she started on her way back home, walking very carefully with her injured foot. What was she going to tell her mummy? Would she think that her daughter had fallen over again? Her mother always said she would trip over a matchstick. What if Sophie got home and found Jessica’s mother there? That had happened before. That was when she got so angry with Jessica that she ran after her. But Jessica could run faster. She picked up the nearest thing she could find. It was half a wall brick, which she threw. She did not mean to hit Jessica. She only wanted to stop her from laughing at her. Unfortunately for Jessica, the half a wall brick landed on top of her head. How she wailed! But that was months, if not weeks ago. Meanwhile, she took no notice of the sirens of ambulances and fire tenders rushing along a main road in the distance.

Within minutes, two fire trucks and two ambulances pulled up outside the school. Surveying the hole where the main entrance had been, the fire chief immediately ordered a crew to bring iron supports to hold the wall up in case it collapsed. He could hear the shrieks and screams of children from the upper floor.

‘Poor kids,’ he thought. Then he saw a weird thing. Out of one of the classroom windows upstairs was a long pair of pink legs. Meanwhile, an ambulance crew made their way carefully through the hole, picking their way through broken glass and loose bricks.

In the same upstairs pink bald head of an enormous doll rested. Somehow, the head had been turned so that it was facing back to front. Its face stared emptily with wide, pale blue eyes up at the ceiling with a smile on its thin, red lips. Its arms were in similar positions to those of a

swimmer doing the backstroke. It's ludicrously long legs were sticking out of the window. The doll was wearing a shiny green evening dress and a plastic silver-coloured necklace. The children gaped with open mouths and tear-streaked faces at the strange visitor. Then the classroom door was broken open and in walked their teacher, Mrs Lewis. She looked pale and frightened.

'Look at this mess!' she began. 'I can't leave you alone for two minutes, can I? you can't be trusted to behave yourselves when I'm out of the room!' She then fainted into the arms of a paramedic. The children did not know whether to laugh or cry.

## Doppelganger

As Sophie's mother replaced her cup on its saucer, she heard the back door open and close. In walked Sophie with a tear-streaked face and blood on the toe of her sock. She stopped in the middle of the room and burst into tears?

'What's the matter now?' said her mother sharply. 'Where's that doll?'

Sophie suddenly remembered that the doll had been stuck in a doll's house, but she was afraid to tell her mother what had happened. If she did tell her mother about the fight with Jessica, her mother would only have rolled her eyes and tutted, saying 'Typical of you!'

Sophie's father, who had finished his tea and was reading the evening newspaper, lightly placed his hand on the mother's as if to tell her not to be too hard on Sophie. Even though she could be a pest – which was most of the time – she was still their lovely little girl, especially when she was asleep or busy with her colouring book. Sophie was clearly upset and in pain. Her father glanced at his wife and mumbled something about 'seeing to her'. He rose and took the little girl's hand and led her upstairs to the bathroom, where he tended to her wounded toe. Having bathed and dressed the dainty digit, he patted the bandage lightly and looked up at the still tearful eyes. Sophie managed a weak smile, whereupon her father whispered, 'Don't worry, sweetie, you'll have a lovely dolly for your birthday.' Her little face brightened a little. Her father told her to go downstairs, say hello to her mum, and have a cup of tea and one of those pretty angel cakes that were her favourite. Timidly, she entered the living room. Her mother sniffed and didn't even look up from her magazine, which had a beautiful lady in a shiny green evening dress and silver-coloured necklace on the front cover. Sophie burst into tears. Sophie's mother told her to shut her noise and go up to her room.

When she awoke the next morning, Sophie's toe hurt a great deal. (Or so she wished it would hurt a good deal.) The cut was quite deep and there were two spots of fresh blood on the sheet. (Or so she imagined, as there was only one tiny bloodspot on her bandage. You would have needed a strong magnifying glass to see it.) Her mother stood at the door, which was the only thing she could do because of all the toys and clothes on the floor.

‘You really must tidy your room, young lady!’ she moaned. ‘Get up, or you’ll be late for school.

‘Please, Mummy,’ Sophie whined, ‘I can’t go to school today. My toe —‘

‘Nonsense!’

‘B-but, I c-can’t g—‘

‘If you’re not out of that bed and dressed in five minutes, I’ll tell Daddy not to bring you a birthday pres—‘

Ten minutes later, Sophie had washed, dressed, had her breakfast, found her homework book and was out of the front door. However, all day at school, her toe hurt only when she thought about it. And she felt she deserved at least one day off school to help her toe get better.

Several millions of miles away, three aliens with one eye and four arms each were looking at a drawing of a human being. Because their planet was so far away, signals from their satellites were not very strong, so the pictures they received were unclear. The aliens blinked and squinted at the drawing.

‘Well, we could try to make this,’ began Hroxxiz, ‘but what will we use to make it move and walk like humans do?’

‘What’s that stuff they use to make their metal boxes on wheels go?’ said Frozpip.

‘Petrol?’

‘There seems to be a lot of it on their planet,’ Frozpip assured.

The third alien, Voxraz, said that the human being they would build would need somewhere to store this ‘petrol’.

‘Now,’ Voxraz went on, ‘what are we going to use for its eyes?’

‘Cameras that can send pictures back to us,’ Hroxxiz said.

‘Will the human be able to see?’ asked Voxraz.

‘Of course it will, because you’ll be controlling its movements,’ Hroxxiz said.

‘Ooh! That’ll be nice,’ cooed Voxraz.

The three aliens discussed what the human would be made of. Despite the fact that they were hugely more intelligent than humans like you and me, they did not know how to make skin, because the pictures they received from Earth were often fuzzy. They decided to use wood,

which, strangely enough, grew on their planet, which had purple skies, orange seas and wooden trees with pink and violet leaves. Indeed, this was not a planet for people who might find these colours put together a sickening mix.

‘Don’t forget the stuff they have on the tops of their heads,’ warned Frozpip.

‘Oh yes. We can use white feathers from our birds,’ Voxraz suggested.

(Yes, this faraway planet had birds that were all white.)

A few days later, the human being was tested, bundled up in the capsule of a rocket and launched into hyperspace. Seconds later, a strange wooden device with camera eyes and white feathers stuck on the top of its head dropped on the lawn in the back garden of Sophie’s house. The petrol sloshed around in its tank.

Sophie’s mother was in a tizz because she could not find her glasses. Sophie’s father had not seen them. It was no good asking Mr Jips, their cat, because he would never tell. Sophie was still in bed, hoping that her toe would be hurting. In fact, the pain had gone away during the night, but Sophie was determined to have a day off school. She heard her mother calling up the stairs.

‘Are you out of bed yet?’

Sophie did not answer, pretending to be asleep, just like real patients in hospital getting better after an operation. When her mother had one of those operations, she was sleepy and tired afterwards whenever she went with her father to visit her. Sophie knew what she was doing.

Sophie’s mother went into the kitchen and fumbled with cups and saucers to put them in the dishwasher. Suddenly, she noticed something on the lawn outside. She wished Sophie would bring her toys in from the garden. By the time she had carefully picked her way down the steps from the patio, the thing was standing up on two circular, red-painted pieces of wood.

‘What are you doing out here, young lady?’ said Sophie’s mother. The thing made no reply, but its camera eyes scanned her from head to toe. Its head moved with whirring and clicking sounds.

‘Don’t just stand there! Come on and get your breakfast,’ she said.

The badly made robot followed the female human being but found the patio steps difficult to climb. After three attempts, the robot fell on its side and the legs continued to make walking movements in the air, whirring and clicking all the while.

‘This is no time for games!’ Sophie’s mother snapped. She grabbed one of the robot’s arms and pulled it up to its feet. Then she rushed it into the kitchen, told it to get its breakfast and get off to school. The robot’s internal computer made its calculations and machinations according to instructions from millions and millions of miles away. Meanwhile, Sophie was sleeping peacefully in bed. Her mother eventually found her spectacles and hurried out of the house to her part-time job at the meat counter of the local supermarket. She wondered why there was a smell of petrol in the kitchen. She stopped wondering why there was the smell of petrol in the kitchen when her bus pulled up and she got on.

The robot caused a sensation in the playground. The children were amused at the way the robot scanned them up and down, whirring and clicking, then moving on, clacking with its round, wooden feet. Whenever it stopped, children crowded around it and commented.

‘Look at its eyes! They’re just like cameras!’

‘Funny feet, aren’t they?’

‘Hey, robot, do you want a sweet?’

‘Do you talk?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘It doesn’t talk, silly!’

‘What’s that smell of petrol?’

‘Perhaps that’s what it had for breakfast.’

The children laughed. Jessica approached the laughing group. No, Sophie was not with them. She wondered what had happened to her friend who was so rarely absent from school. And Jessica should have been working with Sophie on something for the school’s science fair, which was today, but they had not decided on what. As Jessica was thinking these thoughts, Mr Briers, their science teacher and the person who was organizing the science fair, approached the group of children. He stood upright and sniffed. The children immediately looked around and said good

morning. He said good morning back and asked, ‘What’s that thing there?’ Jessica had a bright idea.

‘It’s my – I mean, our science project,’ she said.

‘Well, Jessica, you must tell me all about it later,’ Mr Briers said. The bell calling the children into school rang. Jessica scooped up the robot and sauntered up the steps of the entrance and found her way to class. There was the stink of petrol. Meanwhile, Sophie was still asleep at home.

And three aliens on a faraway planet were looking at the pictures sent back by the robot. They blinked and remarked on the oddness of the human beings they saw for the first time in clear, colour pictures.

‘They’ve got two eyes!’ remarked Hroxxiz.

‘We were right about the legs, though. Two; not four,’ Voxraz said with a tone of relief.

‘Are you sure we were right to put feathers on the robot’s head?’ wondered Frozpip.

‘What do you mean?’ snapped Voxraz, ‘How was I to know—‘

‘Ssh! Have you noticed that most of the humans are short, but there’s one human who is taller than them?’ Hroxizz said, trying to make his colleagues focus on the display. Frozpip observed that the large human seemed to be leading the short ones and they were showing...erm...well, what were they showing?

Mr Briers was pleased with the group of boys who had made an electromagnet out of a piece of iron, a length of copper wire and a battery. The diagrams they had made were neatly drawn and the wording beautifully written. With his hands behind his back, Mr Briers smiled and told the boys they had done a good job, just as he had told the little boy who powered a raft with an inflated balloon. Then he approached Jessica’s robot, whose cameras had been surveying the entire science fair.

‘Don’t you have any diagrams or writing?’ the teacher asked.

‘N-no, Sophie was going to do them,’ Jessica lied, ‘but she didn’t come today.’

Mr Briers grunted. Jessica went on to say that her – she meant their robot drank petrol and had cameras for eyes. In fact, she told a pack of lies. Mr Briers nodded and grunted. The bell

announcing morning break rang. The children filed out of the hall, leaving the science fair exhibits.

A few minutes later, three of the most evil boys in the school, sneaked into the hall, looking for mischief. Their leader, Victor Hughes, pointed at the robot and cackled. His companions, George Terny and Larry Underwood cackled as well. Victor rushed over to the robot and, grabbing it by the middle, lifted it up.

‘Doesn’t it look stupid!’ said Victor.

‘Yeah, doesn’t it?’ the other two boys agreed.

Victor took the robot outside and tore its head off. The three boys kicked the head around. The feathers came away from the top of the head. They smashed the camera eyes. They ripped the red-painted circular feet and threw them across the playground as Frisbees. (I told you they were the most evil boys in the school.) How the other boys and girls clapped their hands and joined in the kicking and stamping and crushing and throwing and whooping and yelling! The bell signaling the end of break time tinkled and within minutes, the playground was empty.

Having spent most of the morning by his boiler under the school, the caretaker came up for some fresh air in the relative quiet after break. His eyes fell upon some rather unusual litter in the playground: two red-painted wooden disks, a burst petrol tank and fuel oozing across the tarmac, two smashed cameras, white feathers. His hands on his hips, the caretaker sighed hard and went back to the boiler room to fetch a dustpan and broom.

When the screen went blank, Hroxizz fiddled with the remote to get the picture back. Voxraz and Frozpip exchanged frowns of impatience, then watched Hroxizz frantically pressing buttons and growling.

‘I told you we should have gone to that shop that sells all sorts of electronic stuff,’ Voxraz began. ‘But would you listen? No. Of course not. You insisted on going to that shop where everything costs one pound.’

‘How was I to know that the small human beings were going to destroy the robot?’ whined Hroxizz. Frozpip started up. He had been waiting a long time to say this.

‘Well, you’re always the expert, aren’t you? You know everything about those creatures. No use our telling you to make sure that the robot is indestructible, or, at the very least, carry on working even if it was a bit damaged!’

‘Look,’ Hroxizz said, slamming the remote on the table, ‘That robot was only a prototype. Next time we make something that actually looks like a human being.’

‘Yeah, and get parts from that shop that sells all sorts of electronic stuff an’ all!’ Voxraz sniffed.

Hroxizz tried to bring his colleagues to order by asking them what they had learned from this investigation.

‘Human beings are small, destructive and evil?’ ventured Frozpip. Hroxizz glared at him.

‘Should have gone to that shop that sells all sorts of electronic stuff,’ Voxraz mumbled.

Meanwhile, several millions of miles away, Sophie was peacefully asleep.

## Sophie matyoushka

Sophie's mother was thrusting packets into kitchen cupboards already jam-packed with similar products. This was part of putting away the month's shopping.

'Get in there, will you?' she snarled as she forced two packets of macaroni next to three other packets of macaroni. Meanwhile, Sophie was sitting at the kitchen table, a wooden island in a sea of polythene bags, some obese-looking, others rectangular according to their contents. Sophie's mother trod carefully around the kitchen.

'You going to be here long?'

Sophie looked up from her task.

'If they like this, I might get a prize.'

'Why don't you go up to your room and do that?'

'Too much stuff on the table.'

'If you took the trouble to tidy your room once in a while, young lady, you'd have all the space you need. No prizes for that.' Then Sophie's mother launched into her usual speech about tidiness and the girl always "under her feet" and not in her room out of her way, and about Sophie's having "no idea" about organising herself.

Sophie closed her exercise book, put the top back onto her pen, and slid noisily off the chair.

'Where're you going now?'

'My room,' the girl grumbled.

'And tidy it up while you're about it.'

By the time Sophie reached the kitchen doorway, her mother called her back. Suddenly, she wondered why she continually ended up talking to Sophie so roughly. She was a sweet kid, really. She just could not bear to look at her daughter, let alone take her into her arms and...all that nonsense. Her hands rested on the back of the chair where Sophie had been sitting. A tear welled up. She brushed it away briskly and blamed work. Sophie watched her mother, wondering what had got into her, or rather, what was always getting into her. Sophie's mother was aware at that moment that she was being observed.

'Go to your room, then!' she said almost inaudibly.

Relieved, Sophie moved the soft toys and the plastic building bricks from her metal-framed desk to her desk. She re-opened the exercise book and re-read what had been composed in the kitchen before her mother had invaded it and waged war with the contents of the cupboards.

#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SOPHIE WALDBEER

“My mummy calls up to me at seven o’clock in the morning. After I have my shower and get dressed for school, I go down to breakfast in the kitchen. I love the smell of coffee. Once, my mummy tried to make pancakes, but they burnt and the smoke alarm went on and on. We could not stop it. We were deaf until lunchtime. So we have cereal with milk and sugar, which is much quieter.

“I go with my daddy to school in his car. He is a very good driver. He is a much better driver than my mummy. She shouts at other drivers and she shouts at me but I haven’t done anything. She wears her dressing gown in the car. My daddy wears his black suit and red tie.

“I hop out at school at about 8.15 and my friends say my daddy’s very handsome. On Mondays our first lesson is maths. I’m not very good at maths because I get ever so mixed up with all those lines and numbers and things. My best-est friend in the whole world, Jessica, knows all the answers and she helps me a lot.

“At 9.30 we have French. I love French. It sounds so lovely when our teacher, Mr Reed – the handsomest man in school – speaks it. We have break at quarter past ten. Jessica gives me her crushed fly biscuits and I give her my cottage cheese sandwiches. My mummy makes me my sandwiches very early in the morning. Once, I bit into a cottage cheese sandwich with chocolate chips and nutmeg. It tasted horrible. My mummy must have been half asleep when she made those sandwiches. Jessica thought it was really funny, then she ate them. She’s a bit strange like that.”

After Sophie had written that last sentence, she chewed her pen. The smell of burning wafted up the stairs. Dinner was ready.

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The following evening Sophie's father was reading the local newspaper. His eyes widened with excitement as he stumbled across something surprising. He told his wife and daughter to "come and have a look at this". Sophie's mother glanced at the item in question and mumbled something about choosing a better photo than that one. Sophie squealed when she saw her day in the life story in print. She was especially pleased to see her by-line in brush script. The photo showed Sophie with a white bow in her hair and a pink cardigan. She was sitting at her desk with her legs crossed. Soft toys and recent birthday cards festooned her desk, over which hung a portrait of Harold Pinter. Harold Pinter? What was he doing up there?

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Three days later, Sophie's mother was woken by the ringing of the telephone, which was odd, because it chirruped or bleeped shrilly, according to whomever had been fiddling with the dialling tone. Besides, this was a rotary phone in black Bakelite with a brown, braided cord. She picked up the receiver and listened.

'Hello. Is Sophie there?' inquired a deep male voice.

'Who's calling, please?'

'Harold Pinter.'

Mr Pinter explained two things. Firstly, he was a playwright. Secondly, he wanted to do a fly-on-the-wall documentary about a day in Sophie's life. Explanations over, Sophie's mother asked if the playwright was dead.

'Am I dead?' he said. There was a pause. 'Should I be?' another pause followed.

'I thought,' Sophie's mother began.

'You thought?' Mr Pinter prompted. Then a pause lasting a few seconds ensued. Sophie's mother swallowed as she formed the next sentence that came to her mind.

'I thought you died in 2008,' she said.

After a silence of a few seconds, Mr Pinter replied, 'That's not for some time, is it?'

'No...I s'pose not.'

'So your daughter can do this documentary?'

'Erm...well—'

‘Or I will have to find an actress to do the—’

‘She will. For five-hundred pounds.’

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Sophie was surprised when Mr Pinter gave her the script for the fly-on-the-wall documentary. It was only three pages long. Sophie had six speeches. There were many pauses and sections of incomprehensible dialogue about Pythagorean numbers and the contents of a dead cow’s stomachs.

‘Stomachs? With an “s”?’ wondered a mystified Sophie.

‘A cow has five,’ Mr Pinter replied.

‘Oh. Just five.’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s not too many, then?’

‘They all digest the photosynthetic pathways.’

‘Is that to do with cameras?’

‘You’ve heard of “in camera”, haven’t you?’

‘Does that mean that grass can grow in cameras?’

‘In a way. You see, “in camera” means “in secret”.’

‘So, if there was grass in my camera, I wouldn’t know about it because it would be a secret.’

Mr Pinter nodded and smiled as a teacher encouraging a promising student.

‘That’s exactly the kind of speech and delivery I want in this documentary. Well done!’

Sophie had not the faintest idea what Mr Pinter was talking about. Nor did Mr Pinter.

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Sophie’s mother turned off the television from the remote control.

‘That was weird!’ she said.

Sophie and her father were stunned, until the latter ventured to compliment his daughter's performance.

'But what were all those cut-outs on the set, though?' he asked.

'Well,' Sophie began, 'They were supposed to be you and mummy and my teacher and Mrs Grimshaw.' Sophie was unable to convince herself with this explanation of the 45 minutes of rubbish they had just watched. Her mother frowned.

'What was all that stuff about grass in cameras?'

Without a word, Sophie's mother stomped out of the living room and into the hall, whence the sound of dialling echoed furiously.

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Mr Pinter poked his head diffidently from behind the door of the Programme Controller's office. Gordon motioned the visitor to a seat placed at a right angle to the enormous desk. The shelves behind the Programme Controller were overpopulated with awards. The walls were covered with photos of Gordon with a gleaming grin shaking hands with the great and the good of the media and receiving accolades and promises of a knighthood, or, at the very least, an OBE and a lifetime achievement award from Channel 4.

Mr Pinter took his seat, crossed his legs at the ankles, and placed his palms on his knees. Gordon was writing something terribly important – much too important for a minion like Mr Pinter – on a sheet of headed notepaper. That Gordon was using a quill did not strike Mr Pinter as odd. Gordon finished writing and replaced the quill in the inkwell.

'Now then,' Gordon commenced, 'While I'm waiting for the ink to dry – I don't have that stuff they have in period dramas that they shake over their paperwork – I'd like to tell you about a phone call I've just received.'

Mr Pinter's palms had grown a little sweaty. He leaned forward. Every word from the Programme Controller's lips might lead to a prestigious award for his latest fly-on-the-wall documentary.

'I've just had a complaint from a Mrs Waldbeer.'

Mr Pinter stiffened on hearing the word "complaint".

‘It’s about that fly-on-the-wall documentary about her daughter, Sophie,’ Gordon went on. Mr Pinter raised his eyebrows interrogatively.

‘Before you ask, Mrs Waldbeer said your documentary was rubbish. Worse, it made the entire family look stupid.

Mr Pinter’s head fell forward. He wiped his palms on the underside of his trousers. He then pinched his brow.

‘I thought I had reached the apogee of my career. A day in the life of Sophie Waldbeer was a milestone on my road to greatness. And now they say it was rubbish,’ he lamented.

Gordon walked round to Mr Pinter, on whose shoulder he laid a paternal, compassionate hand.

‘You can re-make the documentary. This time, you could use Sophie’s parents; not cut-outs.’

‘They couldn’t afford time off work to perform.’

‘We can’t use actors. We can’t afford them. We have to budget for the fire damage to our studios in Stoke-on-Trent.’

‘Fire? Stoke-on-Trent?’

‘Yes, Harold. Apparently some locals torched the studios in protest at our programme content. Not everyone is as broad-minded and as educated as I. Anyway, we could compensate the Waldbeers for lost earnings – a fraction of what we’d pay for actors, even rubbish ones.’

‘B-but the Waldbeers are in the wrong dimension.’

‘Wrong dimension?’

‘I’m dead in theirs.’

‘What on earth are you talking about?’

‘Before I die in 2008, can’t we use the cut-outs?’

‘No. They were destroyed in the fire.’

A few seconds later Mr Pinter snapped out of his despondency. He was seized with renewed enthusiasm. His eyes widened with excitement. He proposed bringing Sophie into a white studio with a whiteboard. He would draw stick figures on the board to represent the people in Sophie’s life and, using stop-motion photography, make a cartoon of a day in the life of Sophie Waldbeer.

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On the screen flashed an elongated ellipsoid with a laterally-inverted map of the world.

‘And now a choice of viewing on 11<sup>th</sup> Dimension Television,’ said a voice over. ‘On BBC1, Match of the Day, while on Channel 4, another chance to see ‘A Day in the Life of Sophie Waldbeer.’

Sophie walks jerkily into frame against a white background. A stick figure appears on a whiteboard to her right and presents her with a digital camera. Blades of grass spew out of the aperture of the camera. Sophie’s voice over cuts in with “My mummy calls up to me at seven o’clock in the morning.” A picture of a cockerel is pasted onto the whiteboard by a jerky human hand. The bird’s beak opens to emit the sound of an alarm clock. A hammer-wielding stick figure with a skirt flattens the cockerel into a red pulp. A speech issues from the stick-figure’s mouth, ‘Fee, fie, foe, fuse, I smell the blood of Hypotenuse’. An action hero with cape, mask and a blue right-angled triangle on his breast flies onto the set. Sophie’s voice over says, “On Mondays, our first lesson is maths. Mr Hypostenuse is my maths teacher. He’s ever so handsome. He hates circles and other conic sections. He’s a geometrical racist—’

A cut-out of Sophie’s mother approached the screen and erased it with an orange duster.

‘Rubbish!’ said the pre-recorded voice-over. ‘Pass me the speaking tube,’ Sophie’s mother’s cut-out ordered the cut-out of her father.

‘She was quite good in that,’ he said.

‘Hurry up with that tube,’ ordered Sophie’s ‘mother’. ‘I want to speak to Gordon. Now!’

‘I liked the bit about the grass coming out of the camera,’ Sophie’s ‘father’ mused. ‘Made me come all over hungry. All those photosynthetic pathways, I s’pose.’

‘Shut up, you! You haven’t been in the 11<sup>th</sup> dimension for five minutes and you think you know everything!’ Sophie’s mother spat.

Meanwhile, the real Sophie was drawing a circle with a black whiteboard marker on the floor. She hatched in shadows and gently lowered herself into the newly drawn hole. As she disappeared below the surface, she found an orange duster and rubbed out all the black lines she had just drawn.