

Book Week

a story

by Chris d'Lacey

First Assembly

It was Book Week at Northfield Primary School, and Rosie Clement was very excited. Rosie loved reading books, and writing stories, and *hearing* stories. So when Mrs Applewhite said in assembly:

“Children, we have a special visitor today...”

...and an author walked to the front of the hall, Rosie nearly bit through the neck of her jumper! An *author*. A man who actually *wrote* books.

“Hello, Northfield!” the author cried.

“Hello, Mr Author!” the school cried back.

“Tell me,” he said. “Who’s ever wondered what an author looks like?”

Rosie looked at her best friend, Hannah. They had never seen a proper author before.

Thomas Prewitt said *proper* authors had beards. Even the lady ones. But no one believed him.

“Right, here you are, then!” the author shouted. He stood up straight and stretched out his arms. “Front view!”

All the children laughed.

“Back view!” The author turned (and wiggled his bottom!).

Rosie sniggered into her palms. She thought she saw Mrs Applewhite blush.

“Side view!” The author jumped to one side. “Handsome, aren’t we, us author types?”

“You’ve got a big nose!” Danny Humble shouted.

Everybody laughed really loudly at that.

The author jumped to attention. “Shall I tell you why I *really* did a twirl?”

“Why?” the school bellowed.

“To show you that authors are *ordinary* people. To prove that you don’t need nineteen fingers or a gigantic brain to be good at writing. Anyone can make up a story, can’t they? Anyone at all. That’s what you’ll be doing this Book Week, won’t you? Reading stories, hearing stories, making them up - and lots of other brilliant things besides.”

“Will YOU tell us a story?” Rosie begged, forgetting in her excitement that you weren’t supposed to shout things out in assembly. She bit her lip and glanced at Mrs Applewhite.

Mrs Applewhite smiled and put a finger to her lips.

“I’ll be here all week,” the author replied. “I’ll be judging your competitions, helping you with your writing and being ... a bit of nuisance, really! But I promise you this: every afternoon at half-past two, I’m going to sneak into somebody’s class - and tell a story...”

Rosie punched the air and nearly clouted Danny Humble. “Oh, please,” she chattered, welding her hands together in prayer. “Let it be our turn this afternoon. *Pleeze...*”

“Oh, before I sit down,” the author said, “there’s one more thing I need to do.” He looked at Mrs Applewhite, who opened her hands and invited him to continue.

Rosie thought she saw the author grin mischievously. “If I met you lot at an author party, we’d do something called an air kiss. Do you know what that is?”

Rosie looked at Hannah. Neither of them were really sure.

“Shall I demonstrate?” the author said. “I’ll need a volunteer.”

A forest of hands went up.

“Not one of *you*,” he said to the children, making them laugh. “It will have to be a teacher...”

That started a good deal of shouting out. Fingers were aimed at various teachers. But

most of them pointed to Rosie's teacher, Miss Beatty.

Everybody cheered when Miss Beatty stood up. She had long brown hair that she wore in a pony tail. Rosie thought she was very pretty.

The author beckoned Miss Beatty forward. "Who's this?" he asked the school.

"Miss BEATTY!" they yelled.

Miss Beatty gave him a wary look.

"What's your first name?" he asked her.

"Emily," she said.

"Sorry?" he asked again, tilting his head.

"Emily," she repeated, a little louder this time.

"Emily," he immediately announced to the children.

They burst out laughing. Some put their hands across their mouths. Everybody knew that you weren't supposed to say the first names of the teachers. Miss Beatty crossed her arms and tapped her foot. She frowned at the author, pretending to be cross.

But if saying her name was naughty, things were about to get worse! He said, "If I met Miss Beatty at an author party, it would go like this." He turned to face her and in a posh voice he said, "Oh, Emily, dahling. How soopah to see you!"

And then *Mwah! Mwah!* They both made kissing noises next to each other's cheeks!

Miss Beatty trotted back to her chair. She went 'ooh' and fanned her face with her hands.

Rosie and Hannah both giggled like mad.

But that wasn't the end of it.

Now the author turned to the children and said, "So, to get you all into the mood for Book Week, I think you should turn to the person next to you and give *them* an air kiss!"

"Oh, no..." went Miss Beatty. She covered her eyes.

And well she might. There was UPROAR! Northfield had never heard such a noise!

By the time everyone had giggled their way through an air kiss or decided it wasn't for them, the author had quietly slipped out of the hall.

Miss Beatty clapped her hands for attention. "That author is very naughty!" she said. "If this assembly is anything to go by, we're in for a very interesting week."

And she dismissed the rows of excited children.

Some of whom were still air kissing all the way back to their classrooms...

Monday

Where's that Bear?

By twenty past two that same afternoon, Rosie had an even better reason for hoping the author would visit her class first: she wanted to show him her brilliant painting. All that morning, Year 4 had been in the art room with Miss Beatty. They were busy making things for the Roald Dahl collage that was going on display in their classroom on Friday. Rosie liked Roald Dahl. His stories made her laugh. Her favourite was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. She had made some fantasy sweets from cardboard and string and glossy, coloured paper. But her painting of Augustus Gloop was the best. She had drawn him really fat with custard stains all down his jumper. Miss Beatty had said it was very 'life-like' and given her one gold star for her book. She told Rosie to sign her name on the painting then hang it up to dry.

While Rosie was over by the sink, clipping her painting up with some pegs, the door creaked open and the class went, *Hhh!* Rosie whipped round, hoping to see the author. Instead, there was ... Mrs Block, the school lollipop lady.

Miss Beatty clapped her hands. "Find a seat, children. Quickly."

Rosie sat down in a chair near the front. "Mrs Block," she whispered, "what are *you* doing here?"

Mrs Block rested her lollipop against the wall. She sat down next to Miss Beatty's desk, wheezing gently and swinging her legs. She took off her hat and laid it on aside. Her curly hair stuck out like rolls of butter. "I've come to tell you a story, pet."

"A story!" Rosie's surprise echoed all around the room.

Mrs Block was going to tell the class a story?

Mrs Block hunched forward, gripping her knees with her wrinkly hands. Her bright white skirt was straining at the seams. Her yellow plastic uniform creased and crackled. "It's all about something that ran across my road once. I'll give you a penny if you can guess what it was."

The children glanced around. For a moment, everyone was too shy to guess. Then Danny Humble shouted, "Was it an alien?" Danny Humble liked aliens.

"Ooh, no," said Mrs Block. "Though I did stop a nice flying saucer once. It gave me a lift home, with my shopping."

Everybody said Mrs Block was fibbing!

"I am," she admitted. "Have another guess."

"The Queen?" said Tessa Peacock, who had visited London and seen Buckingham Palace.

Mrs Block shook her head. "No, dear. Not the Queen. Her Majesty doesn't *run* anywhere. Unless she's training for the London Marathon, of course. One more guess before I tell."

"A herd of zebras!" Thomas shouted.

Mrs Block pushed her glasses further up her nose. "That's possible, I suppose. They could have sneaked round my back while I wasn't looking. But this other thing I saw *was* easy to see. Shall I tell you?"

"I think you'd better," said Miss Beatty.

Mrs Block leaned forwards. "It was a small brown bear."

Rosie sat up straight. "Like a teddy, Mrs Block?"

"Exactly like a teddy bear," Mrs Block replied. "It was brown and furry with big soft ears and a red and green bow tied round its neck."

"Why was it running across the road?" asked Hannah, twirling her fingers in her hair. "You're not supposed to run, are you, Mrs Block?"

Mrs Block raised a finger. "Quite right, pet. You should always have a good look before you cross the road. But this poor bear didn't know much better. It was being *chased*, you see."

That started all manner of mutterings and splutterings. Miss Beatty had to clap her hands. She said if people weren't quiet they would never get to know what was chasing the bear.

"It was a boy," Mrs Block continued. "His name was Gerald Stamp. He was a proper little monster. It all started one Christmas morning. Gerald wanted a special present – something expensive called a Robot Rover."

"Aw!" yelled Danny. "They're brilliant, they are!"

Mrs Block frowned and wagged a finger. "You might not think so when you've heard this story. Now, Gerald's parents weren't very rich, but they liked to spoil him a bit at Christmas. So they put lots of parcels for him under the tree. On Christmas morning, Gerald tore them apart. He tossed aside jigsaws, and a train set, and a new pair of slippers. But he couldn't find a Robot Rover. Well, as you might imagine, Gerald wasn't happy. Not happy at all. He jumped on the sofa and beat the cushions. But there was still one present he hadn't opened. It was red and green with a bow on top."

"That doesn't sound like a robot," said Danny.

Miss Beatty put a finger to her lips. "Let's wait and find out, shall we, Danny? Go on, Mrs Block."

Mrs Block shuffled her bottom. "Gerald picked up the present and shook it. He tried tearing it apart like all the others. But this present was sort of furry and squashy. Gerald tugged at the bow. It wouldn't untie. So he hurled the present down and was going to kick it, when all of a sudden he saw a zip."

"A zip?" said Rosie.

Mrs Block nodded. "Zzzziipp! Gerald undid it. He tipped the present up, but nothing fell out. So he stuffed his hand through the hole he'd opened. The present felt just as furry inside. Gerald grabbed a fistful of fur and pulled. Slowly, the present began to change shape. It grew legs and ears and a smiley face."

"It was a teddy bear!" gasped Rosie.

"A *talking* teddy," said Mrs Block. "'Happy Christmas!' it shouted. 'I'm the Inside-Out Bear!'"

"Gosh, how exciting," Miss Beatty said.

Mrs Block nodded again. "It was a very special present indeed, Miss Beatty. But Gerald Stamp couldn't see that. He really was a mean little boy. 'I don't like bears,' he said rather nastily. And he chased the bear into the kitchen."

"He's horrible," Gemma Newbon said.

"I agree," said Mrs Block. "I wouldn't give him toothache for Christmas, never mind a talking teddy bear."

"Was it frightened?" Shamoona Darep asked.

"Very frightened," Mrs Block said. "It decided to hide. It had a trick or two up its paws, that bear. It could turn itself into things when no one was looking. It was especially good at brown-coloured round things. When Gerald came running into the kitchen he couldn't see the bear anywhere at all. 'WHERE'S THAT BEAR?!' he shouted at his mother. 'What bear?' said Gerald's mother. She was cooking the Christmas dinner. Imagine her surprise when she turned to talk to Gerald and saw a Christmas pudding on the table! 'Ooh,' she went, 'where did that come from? I'll put that in the oven!' But that pudding wasn't a pudding at all..."

"Was it the BEAR?" asked Hannah, her eyes big and wide.

"It was," said Mrs Block. "And it didn't much fancy being put into the oven! So it changed into a bear again and off it ran. Gerald chased it into the next room. His dad was there, reading the paper. 'WHERE'S THAT BEAR!?' Gerald shouted at his dad."

“‘What bear?’ said his dad.

“‘That bear that turns into things!’ Gerald growled.

“Gerald’s dad folded his paper. He told Gerald there was no such animal. Gerald looked around the room. There was a funny-looking globe on his father’s desk. It was *brown* with a bow on top. Gerald walked over and gave it a whack. ‘Ouch!’ cried a voice. The globe whizzed round ... and turned into a bear again! The bear was dizzy, but it ran away fast. Gerald chased it into the garden. It was quiet in the garden. Gerald hated quiet. So in the loudest voice he could possibly manage what do you think he shouted out?”

“WHERE’S THAT BEAR?!” the children yelled. Miss Beatty had to cover her ears.

“Well, a bird twittered,” Mrs Block said quietly. “And next door’s dog began to bark. But no one said anything about a bear. Gerald Stamp was very annoyed. He hadn’t got a Robot Rover for Christmas, and he couldn’t find that pesky bear. There was a football on the garden lawn, though. A nice big brown one ... with a bow on top.”

“Oh, no! That’s the bear, hiding!” cried Rosie, biting her lip and bouncing up and down.

“It was,” said Mrs Block. “Gerald ran up and gave it a kick. ‘Ouch!’ cried a voice as the ball sailed over the garden fence. It bounced on the pavement, rolled into the gutter and...”

“Turned into a BEAR again!”

“Yes,” said Mrs Block. “It ran away as fast as its little legs could carry it.”

“Did it escape?” asked Gemma.

Mrs Block stretched a leg. “Almost, pet. Gerald chased it into the local Scout Hut. The Scouts and Guides were having their Christmas bazaar. A big jolly Santa was handing out presents. He handed one to a girl in pigtails. It was red and green – with a bow on top.”

“It’s the bear,” said Rosie. “It’s turned back into a present!”

“Indeed,” said Mrs Block. “But this time, Gerald had seen it. ‘That’s mine!’ he shouted. And he tried to pull the present off the little girl. The Santa wasn’t having any of that. ‘There’s a present for everyone,’ he said, red-faced. And he handed Gerald a long shiny box. Gerald tore the box open. Guess what was in it?”

“A ROBOT ROVER!” Danny shouted.

“Correct,” said Mrs Block, sitting back in her chair.

Rosie tutted and pulled a long face. “Huh. He doesn’t deserve it, he’s *horrid*.”

“Ah, but wait a moment,” Mrs Block said. “That’s not the end of the story. The Inside-Out bear found a nice snug home with the little girl.”

“Good,” said Hannah. “I like that bear.”

“But as for Gerald.” Mrs Block stood up with a wheeze and a groan. She put on her hat

and took a piece of paper out of her pocket. "This came across my road the other day as well..."

And she showed the children a big pencil drawing of a Robot Rover crossing the road with Gerald in front of it. A speech bubble coming from the robot's mouth said, 'I AM IN KONTROL.'

"Is that real?" asked Thomas. "Did that really happen, Mrs Block?"

Mrs Block tapped the side of her nose. "Stranger things have happened on my watch, young man."

And with that she grabbed her STOP sign, gave a little wave and headed for the door.

Tuesday

A Mole in One

At breakfast the next day, Rosie told her mum about the teddy bear story. Mrs Clement said it was very ... imaginative, but Rosie shouldn't read *too* much into it. Rosie wasn't quite sure what her mum meant. But she didn't think about it for long. There were important things to do that morning before she went to school. It was book-swapping day! Rosie spent half an hour going through her cupboard and found seven old books she wanted to swap. Mum had to help her carry them down the road. On the way they met Hannah and her younger brother, Sean. They had stopped by the fire-station near Northfield School to let Sean say hello to the fire-engines. Rosie asked Hannah what books she'd brought. Hannah opened her satchel. She had a *Mister Men* annual, some *Paddington* books and a copy of *The Worst Witch*, minus its cover. Rosie didn't fancy any of those.

"I want a book by the author," she said.

Hannah nodded. She told Rosie that the author had gone into Sean's class the day before and read Year 2 a story called *Harry the Alien*.

"That sounds good," Rosie said.

"He likes *lenomade*," said Sean.

"Who likes lemonade?" Rosie's mum asked.

"Harry the *ailey-man*," Sean spluttered back.

Rosie took out her pen. She wrote *Harry the A* on the back of her hand. If anyone had it, she would definitely do a swap.

By now they had all reached the crossing place. Mrs Block was there with her big STOP sign. While they waited to cross, Rosie thanked Mrs Block for her teddy bear story.

"My pleasure," the lollipop lady said. "I could tell you a hundred stories, pet. You wouldn't believe some of the things that come across my—"

Suddenly, there was a screech of brakes. Hannah gripped Sean's hand. Two cars had come to a lurching stop. The drivers looked a bit annoyed. A large ginger cat was padding between the cars, flicking its tail as if it owned the road.

"Oh, Custer!" Mrs Block tutted sternly. She marched out into the middle of the road and plonked her sign down to 'officially' stop the traffic. The cat miaowed and brushed against her boots. "Go on, away with you," she said. "Go back home, this instant." She beckoned the children across and gave Custer a gentle nudge with her boot. Custer grizzled and

podded on regardless. Rosie bent down quickly to coo to his ears. Everyone loved Custer. He was the fire-station cat.

It was Mr Brocklehurst's turn to take assembly that morning. Mr Brocklehurst taught Years 5 and 6. He said Book Week was off to a very good start and he hoped the whole school was enjoying themselves. The school sang, *Brave are we that stand and sing!* Then a boy called Simon James came up. Simon James had written a poem. It was called *The Gull That Didn't Like Chips*. He read it out. Twice. Rosie thought it was very good, even though it didn't rhyme. She clapped politely when Mr Brocklehurst said that Simon's poem had won a class competition. She clapped like mad when the author came up and presented Simon James with a prize. Rosie wished *she* could win a prize for a poem. She wished even more that the author would come to their class that day.

Book-swapping went on for most of the morning. Everyone brought their books to the front and said what they were about and how good they were. To Rosie's disappointment no one had a copy of *Harry the Alien*. After a good hunt round she swapped her copy of *Superfudge* for something called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It didn't sound as good as *Harry the Alien*, but she thought she might as well give it a try.

After dinner, Miss Beatty showed the class how to make a bookmark. Shamoona drew an underwater scene on hers, with shoals of coloured fish and a coral reef. Danny Humble made a rocket. He got a gold star. Rosie drew a big tree (with Custer in the branches).

At twenty past two the room was so busy that Rosie didn't hear the door swing open. Danny Humble came by flying his 'rocket'. He bumped Rosie's shoulder and her bookmark went fluttering onto the floor. Rosie knelt down to pick it up, only to find her bookmark wedged beneath a pair of hobnail boots! She knocked on the toes and the boots moved back.

"Oh, choc chip cookies!" a gruff voice said. "In the way, again!"

It was Mr Gubbins, the school caretaker. He stood his brush against the wall and whipped a rag out of his pocket. A cloud of dust flew into the air, making Rosie and Hannah sneeze.

"Oh, pea pods!" Mr Gubbins jabbered, flicking his rag at the falling cloud and only making matters worse. He bent down and picked up Rosie's bookmark, breathed on it hard and polished it like mad. "Good as the day it was made," he said, handing it back with a cheery grin.

Rosie didn't tell him she'd only just made it. She liked Mr Gubbins. He was kind and

helpful (and a little bit clumsy). But what was he doing here, in the classroom?

Miss Beatty clapped her hands and told the children to take their seats. Mr Gubbins sat on a chair at the front. Rosie glanced at the clock. Half past two! She put her hand to her mouth. Surely *Mr Gubbins* wasn't here to tell a story?

"My, this chair's nice and firm," he said, just as a leg broke and spilled him to the floor. The children clapped and howled with laughter. They thought it was all a brilliant act – until they saw the frown on Miss Beatty's face. She found Mr Gubbins a stronger chair.

"So sorry, Miss Beatty," Mr Gubbins cringed. "That'll be those flipping moles, I bet."

"Moles?" Danny Humble screwed up his nose.

"I've got a mole on my arm," said Hannah. She pushed back her sleeve and raised her arm for everyone to see.

Miss Beatty smiled. "I don't think Mr Gubbins means *those* moles, Hannah. I think he's talking about the little black creatures that live underground."

"Quite so, Miss Beatty," the caretaker said. He slapped his thighs and grinned at the children. Year 4 stared back like a blank sheet of paper.

Mr Gubbins wrung his hands and looked rather worried. "Oh sherbet, I'm not doing this very well, am I?" He scratched his ear and tapped a foot. Behind him, his yard brush slid to the floor.

"You're doing very well," Miss Beatty encouraged him. She stood the brush upright again. "Why don't you simply tell Year 4 about the mysterious *happenings* in your caretaker's lodge?"

"Oh, there's been happenings," Mr Gubbins whistled. "All manner of strange goings-on. Oh, yes."

At the back of the room, somebody yawned. Danny Humble let his head fall onto his desk. Even Rosie's face creased into a frown. She leaned forward and tapped Mr Gubbins on the knee. "What sort of goings-on?" she asked politely.

Mr Gubbins sat back in his seat. "It all began with my television set."

"Did it explode?" Thomas Prewitt shouted out.

"Did it start talking?" Gemma wanted to know.

"Did it grow legs and run away?" asked Shamoona. She was still thinking about talking teddies.

Mr Gubbins bit his lip. "No. It just showed the normal programmes, I'm afraid."

At the back of the room, Danny Humble snored.

Miss Beatty scowled. "Some people are being very impolite, Mr Gubbins. Please don't

let them put you off. We'd all like to hear about your television set. Why don't you tell us why you bought it."

Mr Gubbins nodded and cleared his throat. "Well, it gets a bit lonely in my room in the summer, when all of you children are off on your holidays. So I thought a bit of telly would pass the time nicely. Anyway, one evening I was having a glass of ginger beer and watching a bit of golf, when I suddenly got the feeling I was *not alone*..."

An eerie sort of silence settled on the class. At the back of the room, Danny Humble stirred.

"Was it visitors from outer space?" he asked.

"Shush," went Hannah. "Who was there, Mr Gubbins?"

Mr Gubbins took off his glasses and popped them in his pocket. "I couldn't be sure at first," he said. "I looked over my left shoulder." He swung to his left. The children leaned the same way. "I looked over my right." The class swung with him. "But there was nothing there, just a scritty sort of scratching sound behind my buckets."

"I bet it was a rat!" Thomas Prewitt said loudly. He stuck out his teeth and squeaked.

"Can't it be an alien?" Danny sighed.

"Or a ghost?" someone shouted. "Or a monster? Or a thingy?"

Mr Gubbins shook his head. "I'm afraid it was a mole."

"A mole?" the class repeated doubtfully.

"Oh, yes," said Mr Gubbins. "But I didn't know it was moles until the plant pots disappeared."

"What?" said Thomas.

"Nine plant pots, four lollipop sticks and a big red marble," Mr Gubbins said. "All snaffled one night. Made away with by moles."

It sounded like a beehive had emptied in the room. Everyone was buzzing with the exact same questions. Was Mr Gubbins completely barmy? Why had *moles* gone into his lodge and stolen the plant pots?

"Golf," said Mr Gubbins. "They'd seen it on my telly and they wanted a go."

"Golf?" said Rosie, sitting on her hands. "The moles were playing *golf*?"

"On the playing field," Mr Gubbins added. "Followed them, I did. Crawled on my tummy. Hid behind the hedge. I watched them from a distance. Through the school binoculars! They were batting that marble with their lollipop sticks and trying to get it into the nearest pot."

"Fff!" went Danny. "He's telling fibs!"

“Oh, no,” said Mr Gubbins, looking quite serious. “That was just the start. They pilfered a stash of rubber bands next.”

“What for?” said Tessa.

Mr Gubbins gulped. “Bungee jumping – off the crossbar of the goals on the football pitch! Then they took some netting and some blu tack and my ball of string!”

“What were they doing with *those*?” asked Rosie.

“Escapology!” Mr Gubbins exclaimed. “I saw a mole wrapped in netting with its paws stuck together, suspended over a bed of drawing pins!”

“Smart!” cried Danny. He was liking this story more and more. But the rest of the class only wanted to know if the poor little tied up mole had escaped?

Mr Gubbins nodded. “But if its teeth hadn’t been sharp enough to bite through that netting, who knows what might have happened to it.”

Rosie and Tessa and Shamoona all shivered. It was left to Hannah to ask: “You mean ... the moles had been copying things they’d seen on your telly?”

“Precisely,” Mr Gubbins said.

“Couldn’t you give them *nice* things to watch?” asked Rosie.

Mr Gubbins beckoned her close. “I put a gardening programme on. They all booed! So I switched over for a programme about digging tunnels. They all just fell about laughing! But when I showed an episode of *Pirate Redbeard*, they made a mole walk a plank across the school pond. I knew then it had to stop. That television set was a bad influence. So I sold it. Do you know what I did with the money?”

“Bought some mole poison?” Danny said, cruelly.

“No, young man. I bought some *books*.”

“Uhh,” grunted Danny, but the bell rang and nobody really heard him.

“Well,” said Miss Beatty, springing forward. “I hope the moles appreciated the books. I think Mr Gubbins deserves a BIG round of applause. That was a very *meaningful* story. If there’s one thing we all ought to learn from Book Week, it’s that you can easily watch too much television but you can never really read enough good books.”

A thunderous round of applause broke out. Mr Gubbins patted his brow with his rag.

As the class filed out, Rosie stopped and thanked Mr Gubbins for his story. “I swapped some books today,” she said.

“Me, too,” said Mr Gubbins to Rosie’s surprise. “That author chap swapped me one, you know.”

Rosie felt a pinch of jealousy. She wished the author would swap a book with her.

“Just a little one,” Mr Gubbins went on. “I read it this lunch-time. It was very good. I was going to give it to my granddaughter, but it’s a bit too young for her. I’ve got it in my pocket. I’ll swap it for one of yours, if you like?”

“All right,” said Rosie. She sorted through her pile and offered Mr Gubbins *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

“Smashing,” he said, and handed her his.

“Yes!” squeaked Rosie. She clutched the book tight to her chest.

It was a shiny copy of *Harry the Alien*.

Wednesday

Custer's Last Stand

Rosie read the book four times before she went to bed. Harry was a funny, purple alien. He had landed on Earth because his spaceship had run out of fuel. It made Rosie laugh when Harry asked a cow where he could find some fuel. Harry reminded Rosie, a bit, of the author.

At breakfast, she propped the book against the marmalade jar. But this time she wasn't really reading the story, she was having a good look at the pictures. Harry the Alien was tall and gangly. He had wiggly purple ears and long purple tentacles and floppy, purple, flipper-like feet. He was altogether quite ... purple. That gave Rosie a brilliant idea. She dropped her spoon into her Choco Pops then pounded upstairs towards the spare room.

She was rummaging through a bin bag of old clothes and stuff when Mrs Clement popped her head round the door. "Rosie, what on earth are you doing? Come on downstairs and finish your breakfast. You'll be late for school."

At last, Rosie found what she was looking for. She dragged some material out of the bag. "Can I have these, Mum?"

"Rosie, what do you want with a pair of old curtains?"

"They're *purple*," Rosie said, as if the answer ought to be obvious. She pushed the curtains towards her mother. "We're going to make a costume out of them."

Rosie's mother raised an eyebrow and put on her 'oh, are we now?' face.

"Well, you are, please," Rosie said sheepishly. Her mum was good at making things.

"And what do you need a costume for?"

"Oh, Mum!" Rosie stamped a foot. "It's Book Week! On Friday, we have to dress up as our favourite character!"

Mrs Clement gathered the curtains up. "And who might that be?"

"Harry!" said Rosie. And she shot downstairs to finish her breakfast.

It was Miss Dewberry's turn for assembly that morning. Miss Dewberry taught the reception class. She always brought a hand-puppet into assembly. It was a large black crow and its name was Corby. No one knew why. It was rumoured that Miss Dewberry had once been the star on a talent show. Rosie and Hannah thought she was fun. Sometimes Corby told a funny story or croaked a little song or did a little dance. That morning, he told a 'knock

knock' joke.

"Knock, knock!" he cawed.

"Who's there?" yelled the school.

Someone in Year 6 muttered cruelly, "A fox to bite your stupid head off ..."

"Writer!" screamed Corby.

"Writer who?" screamed the school.

"Craark!" went the crow. "Writer-bit, left a bit, writer-gain ... ooh, look! It's an author!

Craark!"

"Hooray!" the school cheered, clapping loudly. The author trotted out and did a bow.

When the excitement had all died down, the author said how much he was enjoying being at Northfield and how impressed he was with everyone's writing.

"Prize! He's got a prize to give out!" croaked Corby.

"I have," said the author, and he called Jane Digby out to the front. Everybody clapped. Jane Digby looked embarrassed. She tried to hide behind her hair. She had written a story about a ghost called Stone who couldn't walk through walls. The author said it was brilliant. He said he wished he had ideas like that. The school sang, *Upwards, Far and Round!* Then Miss Dewberry made an announcement:

"It's come to Corby's attention," she whispered. "That some of you would like to ask the author a question..."

"Yes!" blurted Rosie, putting up her hand. She had dozens she'd like to ask.

"Not now! Not now!" shrieked Corby the crow.

Rosie snatched her hand back down.

"When, Corby?" Miss Dewberry asked. Corby whispered in her ear. Miss Dewberry nodded. "Corby says on Friday morning we are to have an *extended* assembly, when the author will answer all your questions. Hands up, who'd like to ask him something?"

97 hands went up.

"Craark!" said the author. "A *very* extended assembly, I think..."

That morning, Year 4 did 'factual' books. Miss Beatty explained that while story books were fun and entertaining to read, factual books helped *teach* us things. She had gathered a pile together from the school library. There were books about all sorts of things: planes, motor cars, Henry the Eighth, reptiles, recycling, origami, juggling, countries of the world, dinosaurs, the Industrial Revolution, Captain Cook, creative crafts, heat and energy, maps and measuring, football, ballet, the skeleton (Danny Humble wanted that), wind and water

power, magic tricks, the desert, computers, seas and oceans, and finally, one called 'Alien Worlds'. Rosie wondered if there might be a picture of Harry the Alien's world in that one, but she was too shy to ask Miss Beatty to look.

After playtime, the class had to choose a book and split into pairs. Then they had to read it and answer some questions Miss Beatty had written up on the board:

What have we learned from this book?

Can we write down an important line from it?

What do we think is the best part of the book?

Rosie and Hannah picked a book about conservation. They learned that saving old bottles and papers and cans was a good thing to do because all these things could be recycled and therefore: '*did not deplete too much of the Earth's natural resources*'. Miss Beatty said that was a *very* important line and gave both girls a double gold star. Rosie wasn't sure what the best part of the book was, but the worst, she said, was a picture of a forest blazing with fire.

Miss Beatty tapped the picture. "Remember that for this afternoon, girls."

"Why?" asked Hannah.

Miss Beatty wouldn't say. But she promised the girls that the class were in for 'a wonderful treat'.

That dinnertime, Rosie was so excited she gobbled down her pizza and let Danny Humble finish off her butterscotch mousse. She was sure it was Year 4's turn to see the author. What could be a better treat than that? She was back in class long before the bell sounded. She adjusted her seat every possible way to be sure she was in the best position (even though she always sat at the front). When the bell finally went she plonked herself down. She was already sitting on her hands.

But not for long.

"Right, Year 4," Miss Beatty clapped. "Hats and coats. We're going for a walk."

Rosie stared at the clock. It was ten past two. "Please, Miss? Will it be a *long* walk?" she asked.

Miss Beatty studied Rosie's face. "Why the worried frown, Rosie?"

"If we go out, Miss, we won't see the author."

Miss Beatty gave an understanding nod. "I'm afraid we've already missed him today. He's gone into Mr Nuttall's class."

"Oh, no-oo." Rosie dropped her shoulders.

Miss Beatty gave her a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry. He'll come to us when he's ready. Now hurry along and get your coat. Author or no author, I promise you'll enjoy where we're

going this afternoon..."

Ten minutes later, Year 4 were assembled out in the yard. Miss Beatty formed them into a crocodile and marched them quietly out of the gates. It was too early for Mrs Block to be on duty, but Mr Gubbins was out marking lines on the playing fields and he saw everyone across the road safely. The class weaved their way down Northfield Road. Danny Humble was jumping cracks in the pavement and Rosie was just getting into her stride, when all of a sudden the crocodile turned and went ... straight through the doors of the fire station!

"Hello!" cried a big deep voice. A fireman came striding up to greet them. He was wearing a navy blue uniform with yellow reflective bands across the chest.

"Hello," said a rather puzzled Year 4.

Miss Beatty smiled. "This is Fireman Stoker," she beamed. "Though the correct description nowadays is fire *fighter*. Thomas Prewitt, I think you know why."

"It's because ladies fight fires as well," mumbled Thomas. He had learned that from his factual book that morning.

"They certainly do," Mr Stoker said. "But you can call me *fireman*, if you like. Fire fighter Stoker is a bit of a mouthful."

"Is your first name Sam?" Danny said, being silly.

A few children giggled. Miss Beatty raised her eyes.

Fireman Stoker crossed his arms. "It's Stanley," he said. "Fireman Stan."

Everybody laughed, Miss Beatty included. "Well, Year 4. I promised you a treat and this is it: Fireman ... Stan is going to show us round the station--"

"Cor," went Hannah. Sean wouldn't half be jealous.

"-and later, he's even going to tell us a story."

"Really?" said Rosie. The fireman nodded. Rosie grinned like mad. She was feeling a whole heap better already.

Fireman Stan did a very good tour. He took the children up a winding flight of stairs and showed them the control room and the Fire Chief's office. Thomas Prewitt got to shake hands with the Chief. Then they went into the rest room and met six more fire fighters. The fire fighters pretended that someone had just dialled 999 and they all ran off and slid down the pole. Year 4 cheered. Danny Humble asked if *he* could please have a slide down the pole? Miss Beatty said she didn't think that was wise.

Afterwards, the children trooped out into the yard. Fireman Stan made them stand

behind a barrier while he lit a match and started a fire. It was just some rags and paper, but there was lots of smoke and some very good spitty, crackly noises (Gemma said they sounded like Corby the crow). Everybody clapped when Fireman Stan set off an extinguisher and a whoosh of white foam put the fire out. Danny Humble asked if he could have a go with the fire extinguisher. Miss Beatty said that wouldn't be wise either.

Next, they took turns to climb some steps and sit in an engine. Rosie couldn't believe how big the engines were. She could hardly sit high enough to look out of the window. Fireman Stan let Danny try on a helmet. Danny's head disappeared and you could hardly hear his voice any more. Miss Beatty jokingly said could she borrow the helmet, please? It might be very useful to have in class.

While they were looking round fire engine 1, Custer the cat came strolling up. He let himself be cooched by several children. Then he hopped onto the footplate, skipped up a ladder and curled into a ball on top of the engine.

Fireman Stan saw the look of surprise on Rosie's face. "That's where Custer likes to sleep," he told her.

"Hasn't he got a proper basket?"

"Oh, yes," said Stan. "There's one in the kitchen. But he likes it there, because it's warm when the sun shines in through the windows." He pointed to the big glass panels in the roof. "Gather round, everyone. I'll tell you a story. We call it 'Custer's Last Stand'."

Everybody found somewhere to sit.

"A couple of years ago," said Stan. "We moved here from our old fire station across town." He passed some photographs round. The old station had a tall clock tower at its centre. Around it was a little crescent of houses.

"We had quite a few cats in those days," said Stan. "One called Mr Jangles lived here..." He pointed to the end house on the crescent. "Suki the Siamese cat lived next door to him. And a big black cat called Ladders lived here." He pointed to a house on the other side of the clock tower. "But Custer always lived in the station itself. And just like now, he slept up there, on fire engine 1."

Rosie looked up. She could see Custer's tail dangling over the side.

Fireman Stan went on with his story. "The only trouble was, the fire station bell was on the wall beside Custer. Whenever we had to answer a call, that bell went off. It was very loud."

"Wasn't Custer frightened?" Shamoona asked.

"Very frightened at first," said Stan. "He would flatten his ears and jump in the nearest

bucket. But as time went on he grew used to the noise. Until one day, the bell didn't frighten him at all. He didn't even know the bell was *ringing*. He hardly felt a tickle in his big ginger ears."

Rosie glanced up at the tail, flicking lightly. "You mean he'd gone *deaf*?"

Fireman Stan walked over to the engine. He reached up towards Custer and clapped his hands. Custer just snoozed merrily on.

"Ah, bless him," Miss Beatty said. "But weren't you worried he'd get into bother?" She explained to the children that cats rely a lot on their hearing.

Fireman Stanley smiled. "Well, you couldn't call him in for his tea any more – but he always followed his nose for that. No, Custer was happy enough – until the day the bulldozers came."

"Bulldozers?" Thomas Prewitt's face lit up. He liked trucks and bulldozers. He had a collection of toy ones at home.

"Four of them," said Stan. "The old station was due for demolition, you see. But engine 1 was still in service, right until the very last minute. On the day we were due to move out, we went to fight a fire and left Custer in the station. When we came back, the bulldozers were knocking the houses down. You never heard such crashing and smashing. There was brick dust everywhere."

"Poor Custer. He must have been terrified," said Miss Beatty.

"He probably was," said Stan. "Even though he couldn't hear the crashing, he must have felt the rumbling through every last whisker. I searched everywhere for him. He wasn't in the tree that Mr Jangles liked to climb. He wasn't in his basket in the fire station kitchen. And he wasn't on top of fire engine 1. To be honest, children, I thought he was done for."

Rosie glanced up. Much to her relief, Custer's tail was still dangling over the side of the engine.

Fireman Stan said, "Then all of a sudden, the crashing stopped. I ran into the yard to see what was happening. The bulldozer drivers looked very annoyed. One of them pointed at the fire station tower. In a gruff voice he said, 'Excuse me, mate, is that your cat?' He pointed up high, to the station clock. Guess who was sitting there?"

"CUSTER!" cheered the class.

Stan smiled. "He'd climbed the stairs all the way to the top of the tower. He was sitting on this narrow ledge, here, look." He showed the children the ledge on the photographs he was holding. It was very narrow.

"Goodness, how precarious," Miss Beatty said.

Stan nodded. "My thought exactly. 'He'll have to come down from there,' said a driver. 'Come down or be knocked down,' another one said."

The children laughed. Fireman Stan was good at doing the drivers' voices.

"Well," he continued. "I wasn't going to let them knock down that tower, not with our favourite moggy on the top. So I had to find the best way to rescue him."

"I know," cried Danny. "You spread out a blanket and yelled to him to jump!"

"He's deaf, silly," Hannah tutted. "How's he going to hear?"

"Oh, yeah." Danny stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Fireman Stan smiled. "See that big yellow cradle on the back of the engine?"

The children craned their necks.

"We raised that, with me inside it, right up high to the ledge. Custer was huddled up and shivering. The ends of his fur were sticking up. Carefully, so he wouldn't be alarmed, I put out my hand and tickled his ears. He nuzzled his head against my palm. Then I scooped him up gently, put him in my jacket and brought him down safely."

"Well done!" cried Miss Beatty. She clapped fiercely and the children joined in.

Fireman Stanley tugged his ear. "Thank you. That was the last we saw of the tower. We all miss it, even Custer. The next day I brought him here, to this station."

"Well, that's a wonderful story of courage and devotion," Miss Beatty said. "The best we've heard this Book Week so far. Thank you for sharing it with us and thank you for taking the time to show us round your station. What do we say, class?"

"THANK YOU VERY MUCH, FIREMAN STAN!"

"Steady on!" he laughed, covering his ears. "You lot are louder than the fire station hooter!"

There was a pause - everybody whipped round to check on Custer.

He hadn't even batted a whisker.

Thursday morning

World Book Day

It poured with rain on Thursday morning. It was falling so fast that Rosie's dad got soaking wet just running to the garage to get his car.

"I've never seen a storm so fierce," said her mum. "We'll have to wait for this to stop before you set off to school."

"But we can't!" cried Rosie. "We're sticking up our collage and it's WORLD BOOK DAY!"

"I can't help that," Mrs Clement clucked. "If the road becomes flooded, you might not make it to school at all..."

Rosie's mouth fell open in shock. "But it might be our day for the author's story!" She opened the back door and thrust out a hand. "I think it's slowing down a bit."

"Rosie Clement, come inside this instant!" Her mum banged the door shut. "Flipping author. I don't suppose he'd care if you went and caught a chill."

As if by magic, Rosie sneezed.

"See." Her mother tutted loudly.

"I'm all right," said Rosie, blowing her nose on a piece of kitchen roll. That made her think of Harry the Alien. Harry had *three* noses. He must get through an awful lot of tissues.

As it happened, Rosie wasn't the only one thinking of Harry just then. "Oh, yes," her mother muttered, "while I remember..." She got out her tape and measured Rosie's waist. "Yes, there should be plenty of curtain to go round there. Now, how am I supposed to make these noses?"

Rosie didn't answer. She was reaching for her coat.

Outside, the rain had stopped.

As she hurtled across the rain-soaked playground, eager to get into school on time, Rosie nearly sent Miss Devereux flying. Miss Devereux was the school librarian. She was tiny, hardly a shoe size bigger than Danny Humble. She had eyes as brown as a chocolate muffin and streaks of honeycomb colour in her hair. Like Miss Beatty, she wore her hair in a pony tail. She was bright and funny and the children loved her. She knew everything there was to know about books. She even knew how to juggle them, it seemed. As she leaned to one side to avoid a collision, the large pile of books she was carrying in her arms wobbled and swayed

like a giant stack of plates.

"Hhh!" went Rosie, hopping left and right in readiness to catch one.

"Left hand down!" cried Mr Gubbins. He hurried across the yard to help.

But Miss Devereux seemed blessed with miraculous balance. She dropped to one knee and steadied herself. Somehow, the book tower remained intact.

"Bravo!" cried Mr Gubbins, relieving her of half the pile anyway. He handed two or three to Rosie, for safety.

"Gosh, thank you both," Miss Devereux puffed, blowing a strand of hair off her brow. "Goodness, it's been a hectic week. So many books. These are for the book fair tomorrow. Could you help me carry them into the library?"

"Certainly," Mr Gubbins boomed. He smiled at Rosie. She smiled thinly back. She wanted to help Miss Devereux, of course, but she didn't want to be late for assembly.

Miss Devereux seemed to sense her predicament. "I think Rosie had better run along," she said. "It can't be too long before the bell goes." She bent one knee and took back the books that Rosie was holding. Rosie said bye-bye and was about to hurtle off, when a smart red car rolled into the car park. It came to a stop just a few feet away. A familiar mop-haired figure got out.

"Morning," said the author. "It's a wet one, today."

Miss Devereux promptly sneezed.

"Bless you," said the author. He glanced at Rosie and gave her a wink. Rosie gulped hard and did a crunkly sort of smile. The shock of being so close to the author seemed to have glued her lips together.

"These all mine, then?" the author said cheekily. He nodded at the books and bent to read the spines.

"I wish you would write a few more," sniffed Miss Devereux. "I've had tons of requests for yours this week."

"I'm working on it," the author muttered. "This visit has given me lots of ideas." He stood up straight and tapped the side of his nose.

A-choo! went Mr Gubbins.

"Oh, dear," said Miss Devereux. "I hope you're not catching my cold, Mr Gubbins?"

Mr Gubbins shook his head. "Allergy, Miss Devereux."

"Pollen?" said the author.

"Mole hairs," Mr Gubbins replied. And he marched off in the direction of school, with Rosie close behind.

As Rosie was hanging up her coat, she overheard Mrs Applewhite talking to Mr Brocklehurst. They were just inside the staff room door. The Head teacher said, "About this assembly with the author tomorrow. The poor chap can't answer questions from everyone. I thought if the children wrote down one thing they would most like to ask him, we could pick the best two from each year group, and the lucky children can stand up and read them out. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me," Mr Brocklehurst replied. "I'll spread the word. Who's he with today?"

Rosie crossed her fingers and held her breath. She saw Mrs Applewhite run her finger down a timetable. "He's with Year 3."

"No!" cried Rosie, a little too loudly.

Mr Brocklehurst popped his head into the corridor.

But by then there was no one to see. Rosie had stormed off to sit in the toilets, shedding a little tear along the way.

Later, on the pieces of paper Miss Beatty passed around, Rosie wrote one question for the author:

WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO COME TO **OUR** CLASS!?!?

She wrote it TEN times at different angles. She pressed so hard she broke the tip of her pencil. Hannah, wondering what the fuss was about, glanced over and read the question. "He might come today," she suggested brightly.

"No, he *won't!*" gribbled Rosie. She scrawled across her paper in blue felt pen. She told Hannah what Mrs Applewhite had said.

Hannah thought carefully. "Good," she said, tilting her head to one side. "That means he's coming to us tomorrow." And she went back to biting the end of her pen while she tried to think up a brilliant question.

A banana-sized grin lit up Rosie's face. Tomorrow. She hadn't thought of that. If he didn't come today the author **MUST** come tomorrow. And tomorrow was the best day of the *whole* of Book Week, because tomorrow was—

"Stop writing, please." Miss Beatty clapped her hands.

The shock made Rosie sneeze across her paper. Now it really *was* messed up. She couldn't possibly give Miss Beatty that. She blotted it on the sleeve of her jumper and tore off the only blank corner she could find. If she was quick, there was still time to scribble down a

sensible question. She managed it with barely seconds to spare. Miss Beatty read the paper as she swept it up.

“Ooh, now that would be telling,” she chuckled.

Rosie frowned and wondered what Miss Beatty meant. It was only a simple, tiddly little question:

Who is your favourite character?

After break, Year 4 set to work on turning their room into a chocolate factory. Rosie and Hannah worked on the collage. They stuck their paintings alongside the others and helped Miss Beatty cut out the letters that spelled WILLIE WONKA LIVES HERE.

Meanwhile, at the next desk along, Shamoona was helping Jamie Shepherd make a mobile out of golden tickets. But the main activity was in the centre of the room, where Tessa Peacock and her friends were making a chocolate river out of flattened cardboard boxes. The river stretched in a wavy line from Tessa’s desk, under Miss Beatty’s chair and on to the door. Thomas Prewitt came up to have a look. He said it was the yukkiest-looking chocolate he’d ever seen. Tessa said she didn’t care. She said the chocolate pipes that Thomas was making from rolled-up paper were so thin they wouldn’t suck a hamster up them, never mind a fatty like Augustus Gloop! Thomas Prewitt narrowed his gaze. He said Tessa Peacock was fat. He spilt some water *accidentally* in her river. ‘Oh, dear,’ went Tessa, *accidentally* sticking a ruler through one of Thomas’ pipes. She said Thomas was ugly and looked like an oompah lumpah! Thomas pulled her hair. Tessa kicked him in the shins. Gemma Newbon fell over trying to get out of the way and squashed the great glass elevator that Danny and Thomas had spent *a whole hour* building. Danny Humble got angry. And when Danny got angry...

...When Miss Beatty came in she could hardly believe it. She had just nipped out to the art room for some pins. And now the classroom looked like a clown’s playground! Fantasy sweets were flying through the air. And there was paper and chalk and paint powder *everywhere*. Miss Beatty was FURIOUS. She said playtime after lunch was cancelled, and if this factory wasn’t built by precisely half-past two there would be NO story this afternoon, either.

The children had their dinner, then set to work.

Thursday afternoon

A-phwaar!

On the stroke of half-past two, Miss Devereux popped her head round the door. "Goodness, have I got the right room?" she gasped. "Is this a classroom or a chocolate factory?"

The children were as silent as passing clouds.

Miss Beatty welcomed Miss Devereux in. "Good afternoon, Miss Devereux. Yes, it is rather impressive, isn't it? Year 4 have worked quite hard on this project, even staying in over LUNCH to finish it. I think they *just about* deserve a story."

"I see," said Miss Devereux, quickly guessing from Miss Beatty's manner that some naughty behaviour had taken place. "Well, it's a good job they did stay in, Miss Beatty. It's terrifically chilly outside. I thought I saw Custer in a thick woolly jumper going over Mrs Block's crossing place just now."

Hannah stifled a giggle. Miss Devereux smiled. "Come on, let's have a story, shall we? Let's cheer you all up. It is World Book Day, after all."

The children began to brighten a little. They liked Miss Devereux. She often came in and told the class stories. She could do all sorts of funny voices.

"This is an old-fashioned tale," she said, perching on Miss Beatty's desk. "Rather appropriate for today's gloomy weather. It's all about a king with a really bad cold."

"Did he have a runny nose?" Hannah asked quietly.

"Runnier than the runniest egg," said Miss Devereux.

"Was it snotty?" giggled Danny, making everyone go ugh!

"'Snotty' is hardly the word, Danny. It was bunged up with stuff that was stickier than honey, greener than gooseberries and slimier than the slimiest snail..."

UGH! went the class, even louder than before. Even Danny Humble winced a bit.

"And when the King sneezed," Miss Devereux said. "Goodness! It was worse than a fire extinguisher going off!"

Rosie went yuk! and hugged herself. She remembered Fireman Stan putting out the fire with a fire extinguisher. The thought of sneezing green goo all over the place made her snuffle. She blew her nose at once.

"Now, the King had a daughter," Miss Devereux went on. "Her name was Princess..." She moved her finger in a circle and pointed at... "Shamoonna."

Shamoonna blushed and folded herself into a huddle.

Miss Devereux went on, "Every morning, Princess Shamoona took the King his breakfast. And every single morning ... he sneezed on it!"

"Oh," went Miss Beatty, pulling a face.

"Quite," said Miss Devereux, swinging a foot. "As you can imagine, Princess Shamoona was rather fed up polishing goo off the King's boiled eggs. So one bright morning she said to her father, 'Father, I am off to find someone who can cure your cold.' And away she went, on a tour of the palace.

"The first place she came to was the royal kitchen. 'The King has got a cold,' she announced to the cook. 'Do you know how to make him better?' The royal cook wiped her hands on her apron. 'Slice a mouldy onion in half,' she said, 'and waft it under his highness's hooter!' And she found a mouldy onion that had rolled behind the fridge and bit it in half with her sticky-out teeth!"

"Blurgh!" went Tessa. She hated onions.

"My mum's got sticky-out teeth," said Thomas.

Miss Devereux held up a hand for quiet. "The Princess put the onion on a royal cushion and carried it at arm's length to the King. 'My royal Dadness,' she said very boldly. 'I have found a cure for your snuffly snout.' She wafted the onion under his nose. Guess what he did?"

"Sicked in a bucket!" Danny Humble shouted. But he was drowned out by everyone going: A-PHWAAARRRR!

"Correct," said Miss Devereux. "He sneezed and sneezed and he cried as well. Great streaming oniony tears. His nose was redder than a royal cherry."

"That's a terrible cure," Shamoona said.

"It certainly was," Miss Devereux agreed. "*Princess* Shamoona thought so, too. She threw the mouldy onion over her shoulder and went off in search of a better idea."

"I should hope so," said Miss Beatty. "Mouldy onions. Yeuch."

Miss Devereux leaned forward. "Outside, on a hill, a knight was busy doing battle with a dragon. The Princess marched up and shoved them apart. 'Pack it in,' she said. 'That's a royal command!'"

"She's bossier than my sister," Jamie muttered.

"Shush," went Rosie, sitting on her hands. She liked this story. "Did the knight know a cure for a cold, Miss Devereux?"

Miss Devereux nodded. "A very odd one, though. 'The King must stand on his head!' roared the knight. 'The snot will bung up his royal snitch and 'twill not run down his

majesty's beard!."

Ee-yurgh! went the class. They didn't know whether to laugh or pull a face.

"Awesome," said Danny.

"Gruesome," said Miss Devereux. "But not half as gruesome as the dragon's suggestion. He said the King should come to his cave and have some dragon breath hurred up his nostrils!"

The children laughed at that. They liked dragons, especially funny ones.

Miss Devereux raised a hand again. "Back in the palace, the Princess tried it. She made the King stand on his head. And just for good measure she hurred up his nostrils."

"Did it work?" asked Rosie, with a doubtful look. If she had a cold she normally went to bed with a hot water bottle and some honey and lemon.

Miss Devereux shook her head, making her pony tail swing. "The King just did an upside-down sneeze and fell on a plate of toast and marmalade."

"That's *gooey*," Hannah muttered.

"Gooier than school rice pudding," Miss Devereux said. "The Princess wasn't having much luck at all. But just then, the royal Jester walked in. He laughed out loud and rang his bell. 'Quiet!' said the Princess. 'The King's got a cold - and he's covered in marmalade!' 'Gadzooks,' said the Jester. 'I will telleth him a joke, to cheereth him up. What sayeth the King when he saw the royal train?'" Miss Devereux paused. "Can anybody guess?"

The class shook their heads.

Miss Beatty put up her hand. "I think the answer might be 'A-CHOO CHOO', Miss Devereux!"

Year 4 howled with laughter.

Miss Devereux clapped her hands together as if she was pleading with the children to stop. "The Princess didn't find it funny, I'm afraid. She chased the royal Jester out of the palace - and found herself on the royal farm."

"I like farms," said Thomas. He had a tractor in his collection of models, as well as trucks and bulldozers.

"The royal farmer was feeding his pigs," said Miss Devereux. "He was giving them something called 'swill' out of a bucket. There were carrots in the swill and potato bits, bacon rinds, tea leaves, cabbage ends, sauce, cat food, school dinners. Just about everything smelly you could think of--"

Miss Beatty gave Danny a VERY hard stare, before he could say something quite unnecessary.

“The stuff in the bucket looked horrible,” said Miss Devereux. “But the pigs were tucking in like mad.” She made some snorty, piggy noises. The children laughed and all joined in. “‘Why do you feed them that?’ asked the Princess. The farmer wiped his nose on his sleeve. ‘Keeps ‘em good ‘n’ healthy,’ he said. ‘Is it good for colds?’ asked Princess Shamoona. ‘Ooh, arr!’ said the farmer. ‘Them pigs, they never ‘ad a snuffle since they wuz piglets!’”

“Oh, no,” said Rosie. “She’s not going to feed the King some swill?”

Through gritted teeth Miss Devereux said, “I’m afraid she is. ‘Try this,’ she said to her royal dad. She shoved a bowl of piggy food under his nose. The King had a sniff. ‘Is it soup?’ he asked. He spooned some up and took a sip. ‘The farmer calls it swill,’ the Princess told him. BLURRGHH! went the King and spat the swill out. It went all over the royal duvet. It didn’t seem to do his cold much good.

“Suddenly,” Miss Devereux went on quickly, “the room turned dark and an ugly face appeared at the window. It was the royal *hag*. She was a filthy old woman who put spells on people and turned them into moths.”

“I don’t like the sound of her,” muttered Hannah.

Miss Devereux pulled a witchy face. “The royal hag sat on the window-sill. A frog went *ribet* and jumped off her hat. ‘I know a cure for a cold,’ she cackled. And this, children, is what she said:

*To cure a conk of snuffle and sneeze,
All you do is give it a squeeze!
Give it a peck! Give it a pinch!
The snot won’t run another inch!”*

“I don’t trust that hag,” said Gemma.

“Very wise, my dear,” Miss Devereux cackled. “Before you could say ‘Corby’, the royal hag had turned into a crow! The crow flew across the room and landed on the royal pillow! ‘Give it a peck!’ it carked out loud. And it PECKED the King’s conk! It was trying to steal the royal hooter!”

“Ace!” shouted Danny. “Did it pull his nose off?”

“It never got a chance,” Miss Devereux replied. “Princess Shamoona whacked it with a pillow. The crow disappeared in a cloud of feathers. The feathers made the King sneeze even MORE!”

“Oh, no,” tutted Rosie. “Won’t he *ever* get better?”

Miss Devereux put a finger to her lips. “Just then, the Queen walked into the bedroom.

Friday morning

I will have that!

“Ta-dah! Well, Dad, how does she look?”

Mrs Clement was glowing with pride. Her ‘creation’ posed at the end of the kitchen, wriggling its tentacles and flapping its flipper-like feet on the tiles.

Mr Clement looked lost for words. He was struggling to get his arm into his jacket, pick up his briefcase and eat a cold piece of toast – all at the same time, as usual. “She’s very, erm ... purple,” he muttered, crunching his toast and showering crumbs into the hamster cage.

“I’m an alien, Dad!” Rosie managed to shout from somewhere within her pair of curtains.

“You certainly look out of this world,” he said. He gave Mrs Clement a peck on the cheek, then looked for somewhere to plant one on Rosie. He plumped for her middle nose.

“I’m Harry,” said Rosie.

“I’m off,” said Dad. “I’d take you to our leader, but I’ll be late for work.” He waved bye-bye from the kitchen door.

Rosie flapped all her tentacles at once.

“Looks like a plant gone mad,” her dad muttered. He finished his toast and headed for the garage.

It was a very peculiar lot of children who went walking down Northfield Road that morning. It was just as if Miss Devereux’s library had magically come alive and spilled all its characters out onto the pavement. There were pirates, witches, ghouls and ghosts, footballers, monsters, and even some...

“Oh, no!” Rosie shouted as they reached the crossing place. Hannah was already waiting there. She was dressed as Cinderella. A Frankenstein’s monster was standing beside her. But it wasn’t Hannah or Frankenstein that Rosie was annoyed at. It was *Sean*: he was dressed as Harry the Alien!

“Goodness me, I think Northfield has been invaded,” said Mrs Block. “A spacecraft must have landed nearby; there are lots of purple creatures about this morning.”

“Pardon?” said Rosie.

“There’s one,” said Mrs Clement.

Sure enough across the road was *another* Harry the Alien. He wasn’t dressed nearly as

well as Rosie, but he was definitely purple and not of this world. He waved a papery tentacle at Sean.

“‘S’not fair,” Rosie grumbled, flipping and flapping all the way across the road. She’d forgotten that Sean’s class had heard the story. If *all* of them decided to come as Harry she had no chance of winning the best-dressed character competition. And what if Mrs Block was right? What if there *was* a sort of alien invasion? Besides Year 2, how many other classes had the author read his story to? In the playground, Rosie started to count.

She’d spotted thirteen Harrys by the time she’d reached assembly.

It was Miss Beatty’s turn for assembly that morning. Miss Beatty was the children’s favourite dresser-up. She always wore a really good outfit for Book Week. This year she had come as *Winnie the Witch*, in a long black dress and smart black boots and a pointy hat that crinkled at the tip. Everyone cheered when she came to the front. She did a loud witchy cackle and twiddled her fingers. A shower of confetti fell from her hands! “Watch it, or I’ll turn you into frogs!” she hissed. The school booed and hissed back. *Winnie* cackled again and stuck out her tongue!

“Well,” she said, when everyone was quiet, “you all look absolutely MARVELLOUS. What a lovely lot of outfits we’ve got this year. Mrs Applewhite is going to have a very hard time choosing the best-dressed character, isn’t she?”

“Me!” cried a *BFG* near the back.

“We’ll see,” laughed Miss Beatty. She raised a hand for silence. “Now, before we go on, I’m afraid I have some slightly bad news. The author rang up early this morning to say he hasn’t been able to start his car. He might not make it into school today.”

A groan of disappointment went around the hall. But the loudest noise was in the sixth row back where a purple-coloured alien had just squealed, ‘Oh, Mi-ss!’. Rosie gaped at Hannah. Hannah bit her lip. She looked about ready to turn into a pumpkin.

“I know,” said Miss Beatty. “It’s dreadfully disappointing. Especially as Mrs Applewhite has written out some questions on cards, with the names of the lucky children who thought them up.”

Mrs Applewhite, who was dressed as *Cruella de Ville*, waved the evidence in front of her. “Terrible shame, Miss Beatty,” she said. “I suppose we’d better just tear the questions up.”

There were disgusted mutterings all around the hall. A *Fantastic Mr Fox* said he would never read a book by the author again. In row six, Rosie began to snuffle. She felt like tearing her flippers off and stuffing them up her alien noses.

“Never mind,” said Miss Beatty. “Let’s cheer ourselves up by singing a song. We’ll do one from my songbook, shall we?”

Normally, this was a special treat. The children loved Miss Beatty’s songs. But no one felt like singing today.

Just then, one of the curtains behind Miss Beatty twitched. A large group of children noticed it at once. They nudged their friends and craned their heads sideways. Some rows at the back began to stand.

“Sit down, please,” Miss Beatty said, but her words were drowned out by happy cheering. A tall, slightly *mop-haired* figure had just popped out from behind the curtains. He was wearing a mask and a hooped T-shirt. It was the AUTHOR. He was dressed as *Burglar Bill*!

Miss Beatty rested a hand on her chest. “Well,” she said. “I know you all like my songs, but I didn’t expect to hear cheering like that.”

“Behind you, Miss!” the children shouted. They were frantically pointing now. A Year 2 *Paddington Bear* stood up. He tried to run forwards and grab the author. Mr Nuttall (dressed as *Mr Stink*) managed to restrain the bear just in time.

Miss Beatty looked puzzled. “What’s behind me?” she said. She glanced over her shoulder. *Burglar Bill* popped back behind the curtain. When Miss Beatty looked away, he popped out again. He tip-toed left. He tip-toed right. He even came sneaking up behind Miss Beatty! The whole hall screamed: “It’s *Burglar Bill*!” (“It’s *Boggla-bol*!” a little girl in the reception class echoed.)

“Pardon?” said Miss Beatty, cocking her head. “I can’t hear too well in this witch’s hat..”

Meanwhile, *Burglar Bill* had tip-toed away. He stopped by a chair and pointed at something. It was Miss Beatty’s songbook. He turned to face the school. “That’s a nice songbook,” he said with a grin. “I will have that!” And he snatched it up and put it in a bag marked SWAG!

The children howled a thunderous warning, but Miss Beatty STILL didn’t seem to hear. “Time is getting on,” she cried above the din, “and we still haven’t chosen which song we’re going to sing.” She turned and walked towards the chair. “Oh,” she said, finding it empty. “That’s very strange. I’m sure my songbook was on that chair. Has anybody seen it?”

The whole school pointed at *Burglar Bill* - who quickly hid behind the piano.

“Over there?” said Miss Beatty, pointing piano-wards.

“YES-SS!” screamed the school.

Miss Beatty shook her head and turned back to the chair. "No, I'm sure I left it here..."

The children groaned and slapped their heads. *Burglar Bill* popped up behind the piano. He lifted the lid and plonked out a string of awful notes. "That's a nice tuneful piano," he said. "I will have that as well!" And he whipped an old sheet from the bottom of his bag and threw it over the top of the piano. The sheet said 'NICKED!' in big red letters. Surely Miss Beatty would notice *that*.

"Hmm, how peculiar," she said, coming over. "First my songbook disappears, now the piano!"

"Aw, Miss!" cried the children. She was standing right in front of the piano! It was easy to see it was only covered up!

"Oh, well," said Miss Beatty, clip-clopping back to the centre again. "We don't need a book. We don't need a piano. I think we all know the songs by now. Let's sing ... *Clap for Custard*, shall we? Come on, I'll start everyone off."

Miss Beatty took a breath and started: *Ohh...*

When my tummy screams and shouts

I CLAP for custard, STAMP for sprouts!

No one joined in. Not a voice, not a clap, not a single stamp. "Sing up!" cried Miss Beatty. "I can't hear you too well in this hat."

But the school were quiet because behind her the author was going, "Shusshhh!"

Miss Beatty sang on:

I like sweet, I don't like sour

So CLAP for jam and STAMP for cauli-flower!

STILL no one was joining in. Miss Beatty plonked her hands on her hips. "Well, children, that's *very* disappointing. What's got into you lot today?"

She didn't have long to wait for an answer. *Burglar Bill* was right behind her. He looked Miss Beatty up and down. He rubbed his hands together in glee and grinned naughtily at the children. "That's a nice singing witch," he said.

The children gasped. What was he going to DO? Surely he wasn't going to steal MISS BEATTY?!

Yes! He was!

But before he could grab her, a loud whistle sounded and a voice cried, "Stop! Thief!"

Another character stepped out from behind the curtains. It was Mr Brocklehurst, dressed as *PC Plod*!

"Run f' rit!" cried *Burglar Bill*. And he disappeared out of the doors at the back!

A few seconds later, he was in the hall again. This time *Winnie* was chasing *him* – straight into the arms of *PC Plod*.

PC Plod arrested him at once. Miss Beatty whipped off *Burglar Bill's* mask. “Oh, I might have known!” she cried. “It’s the author, up to his tricks again!”

The school laughed so loudly the windows rattled.

The author gave Miss Beatty another air kiss, just like he had in Monday’s assembly. Everyone went ‘ooh!’. And even with green witchy paint on her face, everyone could see Miss Beatty blushing.

“Right,” said the author, clapping his hands together. “Who’s got a question they want to ask...?”

Mrs Applewhite shuffled the question cards. One by one, she called out the names of the children she’d chosen.

The school learned these facts about the author:

He was born on the island of Malta.

He wrote his first story at the age of 32.

His favourite food was vanilla ice cream.

His favourite book when *he* was at school was *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien.

He played the ukulele in a ukulele band.

He had always wanted to be an astronaut when he grew up.

Avril Shaughnessy from Year 6 asked a very important question: “What advice would you give to someone who wants to be an author?”

Mrs Applewhite awarded her a gold star for that.

The author said, “Read! Read LOTS of books! Especially mine, they’re ever so good!”

Mrs Applewhite smiled. “So I keep hearing,” she said. “Now, we have one last question – from Rosie Clement.”

What?! Rosie’s purple antennae twitched. She couldn’t believe she’d been chosen. She stood up slowly. It wasn’t easy with flippers and tentacles flapping all around her, especially as Thomas Prewitt was sitting on one. She pulled the tentacle free, took a deep breath and asked her question: *Who is your favourite character?*

“You are!” the author said. When everyone had finally stopped laughing he explained. “Harry the Alien, of course – who else?”

Friday afternoon

A bit off the top

After break that morning, everyone was allowed to tour the other classrooms, to see the work other children had done for Book Week. There was a queue to get into Mr Brocklehurst's room. His Year 6 class had done a 'Goosebumps' scene with lots of scary traps and things. The first time Rosie and Hannah went in they ran out screaming when a skeleton flopped down from one of the light fittings. They didn't fare well on their second visit, either. They got past the skeleton, and the vampire bats, and only jumped *a bit* when the severed head stuck out its blood-soaked tongue. But when a bandaged hand grabbed Rosie's ankle and a snake slithered out of a coffin lid, both girls squealed and ran for their lives. They went to the library and had tea with Miss Devereux, who was dressed as the Mad Hatter. After a few minutes talking about Wonderland, Rosie said she needed a wee. But when she spotted an Egyptian mummy heading for the toilets, she crossed her legs and waited to go. She wasn't about to take any chances.

It seemed like the afternoon would never come. The bell that signalled the end of lunch was late going off. When Rosie came rushing back into class, she glanced at the clock and saw it was nearly half past two. HALF PAST TWO! She shot to her chair and fixed her gaze on the classroom door.

Five minutes went by. Six minutes. Seven. Miss Beatty warned her not to fidget. Rosie tucked her hands underneath her bottom. Miss Beatty was droning on and on about a school trip to somewhere called Stonehenge and hadn't seemed to notice that the author was nearly ... eight minutes LATE!

Then there came a knock at the door.

Miss Beatty didn't even turn her head. "Tessa, would you answer that for me, please?"

Tessa Peacock lowered her red riding hood and hurried across the room. She opened the door.

"Excuse me," said a voice in the corridor. "Is this Willie Wonka's chocolate factory?"

Tessa nodded.

"Can I come in? I've got a ticket..."

Tessa pulled the door wide. And there stood the author, waving a golden Wonka Bar ticket.

"That's one of mine!" Jamie Shepherd pointed at his mobile. Sure enough, the mobile was missing a ticket.

Miss Beatty put her hands on her hips. "Well. I don't know how the author got *that*. I think he's been up to his burgling tricks again. What do we say, class? Should we let him in?"

"YES!" they cried.

And at long, long last the author walked in.

"Afternoon," he beamed. "Year 4, isn't it?"

"Yes!" they shouted.

"Very pleased to meet you." He did a little bow. "Have you had a good week?"

Everyone was far too shy to answer. In the end, Miss Beatty had to do it for them.

"They've had a super week, haven't you?"

Heads nodded.

"We've read books, we've swapped books, we've created book displays. And we've heard some *wonderful* stories, haven't we?"

"Yes, Miss Beatty."

"Excellent," said the author. He clapped his hands together. "Well done, Miss Beatty. I might as well be off then."

"NO!" cried Rosie. She couldn't help herself. "Please, will you tell us a story now?"

Yes-ss! cheered the class. *Tell us a story! Mrs Block told a story, and Mr Gubbins, and Miss Devereux - and we went to the fire station on Wednesday for one!*

Surprisingly, the author looked a bit hesitant. "I'd love to tell you a story," he said, "but I've told so many this week that I'm ... well, I'm all *out* of stories..."

A stunned sort of silence settled on the room. Rosie shot a glance in Miss Beatty's direction. Miss Beatty gave a vacant shrug.

"But you *must* know a story?" Rosie pleaded.

"Sorry." The author tapped his head. (There *was* a rather hollow sound coming from it.)

Rosie pulled her hands out from under her bottom. She scowled very darkly at the author. How could he let them down like this? Even Mr Gubbins knew a story. After all the trouble she'd taken to read *Harry the Alien* and dress like him, as well. Her scowl melted into deep dismay. She wanted to run up and kick the author's shins. That would be a *story* for him. She was still considering this course of action when he wagged a finger in the air and

said, "Tell you what, maybe you can help me with something."

"What?" snapped Rosie.

"Ro-sie?" Miss Beatty said, staring at her.

Rosie's face reddened a little. She sank into her outfit, sorry that she'd been a bit rude.

The author didn't seem to mind. He said, "Every morning when I've driven to school this week I've seen a big tabby cat sitting outside a hairdresser's shop. I keep wondering what it's doing there. I keep thinking I could write a story about that cat, but I just can't think up a decent plot. It's times like this when authors need to ponder."

"To what?" said Thomas.

"Ponder," the author repeated. "We pace up and down, stroking an imaginary beard." He started to pace back and forth at the front of the classroom. "Try it," he said, encouraging Year 4 to stand. "It helps if you frown and hum thoughtfully while you do it."

And so, for the next thirty seconds, there was a lot of humming and beard stroking and serious frowning – and a good deal of silliness besides. Finally, the author said, "No. It's no good. Pondering just isn't working for me today. I can't think of a single reason that cat would be outside a hairdresser's shop."

"It might live there," said Hannah, as Miss Beatty ushered everyone back to their seats.

"Or someone might be giving it milk," said Shamoona.

"Hmm," the author nodded, still pondering a bit. "Either of those things could be right, I suppose."

"It might not be a real cat," Thomas shouted.

"What?" said Danny, making a face.

"It could be one of those boxes you put money in," said Thomas.

"Could be," the author muttered. He ran a finger over his lips. "But I don't recall seeing a slot in its head."

"I know," said Rosie. Her hand was almost touching the ceiling. "Perhaps it's waiting to have a hair-cut."

"A HAIR-CUT?" the author exploded back. Everyone burst into fits of laughter. The author scratched his chin. "Hmm, now wait a minute, young alien. That could be a very good storyline: the hairy cat that wanted a *fur-cut*."

"It could have a skinhead!" Danny shouted out.

"No, a Mohican!" Thomas whooped.

"Or a perm!" said Tessa, her right arm almost sprouting from her shoulder. "My mum does perms! She did one on my dad!"

The author snapped his fingers repeatedly at Tessa. "What's your mum's name?"

"Millie."

"Good name. We can use that. Let's have a girl called Millie working in the shop."

"Yes-ss!" went Tessa, clutching air.

"What about the cat?" Miss Beatty intervened. "Isn't the cat going to have a name?"

"Dinah!" someone shouted.

"Smokey!"

"Cuthbert!"

"Scissors," said a small voice near the front.

The author came up to Hannah's desk. "Scissors, did you say?"

Hannah chewed her lip and nodded.

"That's a BRILLIANT name!" the author cried. "Scissors it is."

Hannah bounced proudly in her chair. Suddenly, the whole class seemed to be energised.

"Right," said the author, pacing up and down like a mad professor. "How about this for a story. He struck a dramatic, authorly pose. Scissors scratches at the hairdresser's door. Millie lets her in. Scissors jumps into the chair. She says *miaow brrup a-row*, which in cat language means, 'I'd like a bit off the top, please.' So Millie gives Scissors a really trendy fur-cut. Scissors swishes her tail and poddles off, happy, the envy of all the other cats in the neighbourhood. End of story. Whaddya think?"

"It's rubbish," said Jamie.

"I agree," said the author, wringing his hands together. "We wouldn't make fourpence from a story like that. We'll have to think up a better plot."

"What if the cat gets its tail chopped off?"

Miss Beatty gave Danny a very hard stare.

"No," said the author, with a shake of his head. "No choppings-off or blowings-up. But we do need some conflict. I think we need ... *a villain*."

"A grumpy old woman!" someone yelled.

"The grumpier the better," the author agreed. "What shall we call her?"

"Mrs Flobbit!"

"Mrs Snookums!"

"Mrs Blubber!"

"Mrs Matchstick!"

The author moved a tentacle away from Rosie's face. "Why would anyone be called Mrs

Matchstick?"

Rosie thought hard. "Because ... she's tall and skinny with pinky-coloured hair."

To which Danny added: "And she only eats treacle. That's why she's so thin!"

"Wow," gasped the author. "Weird – but I like it. All right, so Mrs Matchstick arrives for her monthly perm, carrying her shopping: a bag of treacle puddings! Does she like cats, do you think?"

Everyone shook their heads. "She might sneeze when she sees one," Jamie said.

"Or go all scratchy!"

"Or do a funny dance!"

"Or her hair might turn a different colour!"

"Or it might be ALL those things," said the author. "Excellent. I think I feel some proper conflict coming on. Okay, Year 4, how about this: Mrs Matchstick tootles into the salon. But as soon as she's through the door, she sneezes, she dances, and her hair turns blue. 'There is a CAT in here!' she bellows in a snotty voice. 'No, no,' gulps Millie. 'Cats aren't allowed in the salon, Mrs Matchstick'. And Millie tries to stand in front of the chair where Scissors is curled up, quaking. BUT!"

The whole class jumped. Even Miss Beatty clutched the neck of her top.

"Scissors flicks her tail and Mrs Matchstick sees it."

"Hhh!" gasped Hannah. "What's she going to do?"

The author narrowed his gaze, as if he had suddenly become an evil villain himself.

"Mrs Matchstick reaches for a *shaver*."

"Oh, no," breathed Rosie.

"Oh, yes," said the author. "Zzzz! Vvvp! Burrrr! Mrs Matchstick pounces on Scissors, and suddenly there's tabby fur everywhere!" He flung his arms like a windmill, making all the mobiles whirl. "Mrs Matchstick rolls the hair into a ball, hurls it down the loo and flushes it away! Scissors runs out of the salon looking like a plucked chicken, and ... well, that's it. Good story, don't you think?"

"No," protested Rosie. "It's cruel and horrid!"

"I think it's good," Danny Humble told Thomas.

But most of the class were booing. *It's not fair!* they cried. *Scissors only went in for a bit off the top!*

"Make up something better!" Rosie gribbled.

"I can't work under pressure," the author sniffed.

Rosie folded her arms and gave him a *look*.

"Hurry up," said Hannah, glancing at the clock. "The bell's going to go for final assembly."

The author started to pace again. "Okay, don't rush me. I suppose you want Scissors to get her own back, don't you?"

"YES!" cried the class.

He squinted into space for a moment. "Okay. Let's say ... the phone goes and Millie has to answer it. Mrs Matchstick starts chuntering like mad. She says she'll never come to this salon again if her hair isn't permed this *very* instant. But it's Millie's granny on the phone. And she rabbits on for absolutely ages."

"My gran does, too," Shamoona muttered.

The author tapped his teeth. "So Scissors jumps onto the back of the chair and spreads her claws above the old bag's bonce, because Scissors never wanted a fur-cut at all ... she wanted to be a HAIRDRESSING cat!"

"Hhh!" went Hannah. "And now she's going to practise on Mrs Matchstick!"

"Practise!" The author practically squealed with laughter. "Scissors is spitting mad! She flattens her ears and rears like a dragon and..."

"Mrs Matchstick sees her in the mirror!" shouted Thomas.

The author paused, mid-rear. "I wasn't going to say that."

"She *would* see Scissors, though," Hannah reasoned.

"And then the old bag'll get away," Rosie tutted.

"Well, perhaps she's got her eyes shut," the author said.

Year 4 wouldn't have that. That was far too feeble, they said.

"Well, *you* suggest something, then," the author huffed.

"One minute," said Miss Beatty, pointing at the clock.

"I know," said Tessa. "When Scissors rears up she goes sssssssssssss! really loudly and Mrs Matchstick is so frightened that her hair falls out!"

"*Falls out?*" squeaked the author.

"We LIKE that," Year 4 agreed.

"That's spookier than the first plot," the author said. "Now we've got a half-shaved cat and a bald old lady!"

"But Scissors could grab all the hair," said Rosie, "and stick it on herself."

"How?" said the author.

"She could knit it into a wig," said Hannah.

"Or find some sticky tape," Thomas suggested.

"I know!" shouted Danny. He was so excited his knees banged the desk. "When Scissors scares Mrs Matchstick, all the treacle puddings go *splat!* on the floor. So Scissors rolls in the treacle and then in the hair, and all the hair sticks onto her body!"

"You what?" scoffed the author. "*A cat with pinky, treacle-y fur?*"

The class took a vote. "YES!" they agreed.

The author gave a serious shake of his head. "I don't know. I'll have to think about this." He fiddled with his ear and paced the room yet again.

"Hurry up-pp," said Hannah. The hands of the clock were right on three.

The author stopped pacing and took a deep breath. "TEN OUT OF TEN! YOU are the best story-tellers in the WHOLE of this school!"

Year 4 cheered and hammered their desks.

"Praise, indeed," Miss Beatty said.

"Phew!" went Rosie. She was exhausted.

The bell rang.

"WAIT!" cried Miss Beatty, as the class began to rise. "Before we rush off, we need to understand what we've learned from this afternoon. You might have thought the author was teasing you a bit, but he's actually been quite clever, I think. He's made you see how authors work. How they make up their stories by asking themselves lots and lots of questions about characters and plots: What if this happened? What if that? And they don't always settle on the first thing they thought of. We'll remember that next time we have a story writing session. For now, well done, all of you. Give the author a round of applause, please."

"Thank you!" they shouted, clapping like thunder.

The author generously clapped them back.

"Now, quickly. Assembly," Miss Beatty said.

And the room began to empty faster than cat hair being flushed down a loo!

Final Assembly

In the corridor, Rosie tugged the author's sleeve.

"Hello, Harry," he said with a grin.

"Thank you for coming to our class," said Rosie. "I liked that story about Scissors in the end."

The author smiled. "I liked it, too."

"I've got your book," Rosie said shyly. She showed him her copy of *Harry the Alien*.

"Thank you," he said. "I love your outfit. You're the best Harry I've seen."

Rosie blushed. "Do you think I'll win the competition?"

"I don't know," the author said kindly. "Tell you what." He eased the book from her flipper-like hands. "Whether you win the competition or not, I'll si—"

"Rosie Clement? What are you doing?"

Rosie whipped around. It was Mrs Applewhite. "Come along," the Head clapped. "Don't dilly-dally. Assembly. Now. Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!"

"Yes, Mrs Applewhite." Rosie scooted away.

"Rosie! Your book!" the author called. But he was just too late. The purple alien had swept around the corner and on into the hall.

Mrs Applewhite herself took the final assembly. The hall was absolutely packed. Many of the parents were there. And so were Mrs Block and Miss Devereux and Mr Gubbins. Rosie hoped she might see Fireman Stan, but he was probably at the fire station giving Custer his tea. The school sang, *Wisdom brings its own rewards!* then Mrs Applewhite made some announcements:

"Well, here we are at the end of Book Week. I, for one, think we have had a fantastic time. Wouldn't you agree with me, school?"

"YES, MRS APPLEWHITE!"

The head teacher smiled. "The classrooms look marvellous, your outfits are splendid, and I think we've learned this week just how wonderful books are. We've also learned how to use our BIG imaginations to write AMAZING stories. And who do we have to thank for that...?"

"THE AUTHOR, MISS!"

That was the cue for the author to make his appearance.

Everyone cheered.

"This gentleman has worked so hard," said Mrs Applewhite. "I'm almost too embarrassed to ask him to give out our final prize. I expect you would all like to know who has won the best-dressed character competition?"

"Yes, Mrs Applewhite," the school muttered nervously.

In row six, Rosie's tentacles were shaking.

"It was a very, very hard decision," said the Head. "But after a lot of thought, I have decided that the winner is ... Maria McNeill, from Year 2, dressed as *Noddy!*"

There was a huge groan of disappointment, over-ridden by a gradual wave of applause. Miss Dewberry and Corby helped Maria to the front. Mr Nuttall took out his camera and snapped a picture of Maria alongside the author, who gave Maria a gold envelope with a book token inside. Rosie felt an awful tinge of envy. But she had to agree that Maria's outfit was really good. She told herself that if the author had picked the best-dressed alien in school, her Harry would have won by a couple of noses.

As it happened, Harry was soon on the Book Week agenda.

As Maria McNeill sat down again, the author said, "Do you mind if I ask a favour, Mrs Applewhite?"

"Certainly," she said.

The author turned to the school. "Would all the Harry the Aliens come to the front..."

Hannah gave Rosie a nudge in the ribs. Rosie scrambled to her feet and went to join the other twenty-two Harrys grouped around the author. To Rosie's amazement, the author beckoned her over.

"It's Rosie, isn't it, under all that purple?"

Rosie nodded. One of her tentacles fell off.

The author turned her toward the audience. "Tell everyone, Rosie. In the story of Harry, what is it that Harry is always looking for?"

"Lemonade," said Rosie, gripped with nerves.

"Bit louder," the author whispered.

"LEMONADE!" she shouted, making everyone laugh.

"And when he finds some, what does he do with it?"

"He puts it in his rocket."

"That's right, he does. But if *you* had some lemonade, what would you do with it?"

"I'd drink it," said Rosie. Everyone laughed again.

"What about the rest of you Harrys?" asked the author.

We'd drink it as well, they mumbled in unison.

"Hmm," went the author. "Hang on a minute, then..." There was silence as he disappeared behind the stage curtains. "Mr Gubbins!" he barked. "Could you give me a hand, please?"

"On my way!" boomed Mr Gubbins. Mr Brocklehurst went to help, as well. A ripple of curious chattering started. Large groups of children rose to their feet. The author and Mr Brocklehurst both reappeared. They were each tugging a huge pack of lemonade bottles out to the front. Mr Gubbins arrived with some stacks of cardboard cups. And Miss Devereux wheeled out a cake she'd made. The cake was in the shape of a big stack of books!

"Party time!" the author shouted. "This is my treat to say thank you for having me! It's been brilliant! See you next year, okay?"

"Three cheers for the author!" Mrs Applewhite cried.

"Three cheers for the *cake*," said Danny Humble.

And Rosie could only agree.

In the free-for-all that followed, Rosie was a bit surprised to find herself a quiet spot near the piano. She sat down on the piano stool, with her back to a *Gruffalo*. She had just finished the last of her drink when a familiar face looked over the piano.

"Hello," said the author. "You forgot to take this." He handed back her copy of *Harry the Alien*.

"Thanks," she said meekly. "Are you going home, now?"

"Off to write a new story," he said.

"About Scissors?"

He smiled. "Hmm, she'll be in it."

There was a pause. Rosie asked, "Will *I* be in it?"

The author smiled again. "You'll *all* be in it."

"Even Danny Humble?"

"Even Danny Humble."

Rosie gave a nod. "What will it be called?"

"The new story?"

"Yes."

The author winked. "BOOK WEEK," he said.

Rosie nodded and gave him a smile. "I'm going to get it when it comes out. I might even swap it for *Ten in a Bed*, that's my favourite."

"My favourite, too," the author said. "In the meantime, you hang on to *Harry*." He

twiddled his fingers to wave bye-bye. Rosie flapped all her tentacles at him. As she did so *Harry* dropped off her lap. She knelt to pick it up and gave a little gasp. On the title page was a hand-written message:

To Rosie, the very best Harry of them all.

Never be afraid to be different.

best wishes, the author,

Chris d'Lacey

THE END

(ALMOST, PLEASE READ ON FOR A BONUS TREAT!)

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HARRY THE ALIEN

by Chris d'Lacey

Harry the alien has landed on Earth.

He has not come to invade our world. He does not want us to take him to our leader.

Harry's spaceship has run out of fuel.

Where on Earth can Harry find some?

Harry decides to ask a cow. "Monster, where can I find fuel?"

"Moo," says the cow. It chews some grass.

Harry is confused. In Harry's language, 'Moo' means boots. Harry looks in his boots.

There is no fuel there. Harry takes a picture and carries on walking.

At the bottom of the hill is a small garage. Harry sees a row of petrol pumps. He walks up to a pump and says, "Robot, where will I find some fuel?"

The petrol pump does not reply. Harry's tentacles begin to twizzle. The robots on

Earth are not polite. And there is a horrible niff round here. Not a bit like the smell of rocket fuel. Harry takes a picture and carries on walking.

Along the road is an ice-cream van. Harry has a sniff at the raspberry topping. Zonglebloids! Alien soap! Harry has not had a bath for weeks. He takes a wash in raspberry topping. A group of children laugh. They wash their faces in raspberry topping, too! The ice cream man is very confused. Harry takes a picture and carries on walking.

Soon, Harry comes to a fish and chip van. He spies an Earthling sprinkling something called 'VINEGAR'. Zigglebats! Pongly perfume from Venus! Harry shakes some 'VINEGAR' over his head. Hmm, he smells fantastic now. He will not need a bath for a zillion years. A dog runs up and starts to bark. On Harry's planet, dogs are teachers.

"Teacher, where will I find fuel?" asks Harry.

The dog rolls over. It wants to be tickled. Harry snorts through all his noses. The teachers on Earth are very strange. Harry takes a picture and carries on walking.

Along the way, he finds many things that could be fuel, but none that will make his rocket fly.

Now Harry is growing tired of Earth. He wishes he could go home and have a snooze. Then ... Zogglenuts! He sees some other aliens! A Blobbledoob from the planet Nuggle. And a Griddlewot from the galaxy Flarrb. Surely they must know where the rocket fuel is?

Harry follows the aliens into a house. They seem to be having a happy meeting. "Would you like some jelly?" the Griddlewot asks.

Harry looks at the jelly. He shakes his head. It looks a bit like the stuff he digs out of his ears.

The Blobbledoob rushes up. "It's time for the fancy-dress!" it shouts.

Harry lines up with the other aliens. A female Earthling decides he has won third prize in the "DRESS LIKE AN ALIEN" competition. The other aliens clap and cheer. Harry does

not understand. A short-haired Earthling takes a picture. Then a long-haired Earthling gives Harry a prize...

The prize is a strange container with the word LEMONADE written on the side.

ROCKET FUEL!

Harry flaps his tentacles in glee. He finds more fuel in the cups on the table. There is black SUPER-FUEL in the Earthling fridge!

Harry runs up the hill as fast as he can. He pours the rocket fuel into his ship. Lots of hubbly-bubbles appear. Down the hill, the other aliens wave.

Harry waves back. Earth is not so bad after all. Harry decides he will return one day.

When he runs out of alien soap.

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