



BEWARE

OF THE



MIRROR

MAN



BENJAMIN BURFORD-JONES

Illustrated by Carie Martyn

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To the eagle-eyed Losh,
whose hard work made my hard
work possible. A thousand berties to you.

I find television very educating.
Every time somebody turns on the set,
I go into the other room and read a book.

Groucho Marx

Everyone has a purpose in life.
Perhaps yours is watching television.

David Letterman

Television is for appearing on – not for looking at.

Noel Coward

— PROLOGUE —

The attic was deserted. That is to say, deserted as far as humans were concerned. Most would have only noticed a spider busily building yet another web between the arms of an ancient rocking chair. The most observant may have spotted a lonely battered suitcase discarded on the carpetless floor, but they would not have given it a second glance. It had been many, many years since it had seen sun, sea and sand, and was now the home to several small rodents.

The cardboard box with the words *Aunt Rosie's Dried Egg* printed in fading blue letters may have raised an eyebrow, but most people would not have been interested. Even the large drum propped against the peeling wall would have been ignored. In its centre there was a hole where many years ago a clumsy foot had stumbled. It was now yellow with age, and covered in thick layers of dust. Among this rubbish, not even the most observant of people would have seen the rather unusual inhabitants of this particular attic.

The building that the attic sat on top of was a large, elegant Edwardian house – once proud, full of servants and their well-off masters. The house now stood quiet and still.

Outside in the overgrown garden the sun began to set and the 'For Sale' sign planted haphazardly in the flowerbed cast eerie shadows on the ground. With a flutter, a magpie flew upwards out of the undergrowth. Landing on his usual perch, the branch of a nearby tree, his eye caught something glittering through the cracked attic window. The bird watched with interest as an ancient and dusty television set, the kind that your grandmother may have recalled from after the last world war, flickered into life.

Almost as soon as the set came on an old husky voice yelled loudly, 'Oi! Turn the lights out!'

A younger voice replied sulkily, 'Keep yer 'air on! Thought there was an audience outside.'

A click and the light on the old television went out. With the glitter gone the bird soon lost interest and took to the air, returning to his nest for a night's sleep. As the sun went down, the house again appeared deserted. Really, it was only sleeping. Just like the magpie.

Arrival

The inside of the house was dark and gloomy. Sophie reached for a light switch and flicked it on. There was a feeble ‘ping’ as the bulb blew. She pulled a face in irritation, but her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness. Glancing around, she saw that she was standing in a short corridor with no windows. There were several closed doors and at the end of the corridor was a large, winding staircase. Her face lit up when she saw sprawling cobwebs hanging from the ceiling.

‘Great! Spiders! Wow, do you think there’s a big one?’ she exclaimed.

Barnaby just shrugged his shoulders. Annoyed by her little brother’s lack of excitement, Sophie decided to tease him.

‘This place looks so spooky,’ she said in her most ghoulish voice. ‘Do you think there’s a ghost?’ she added, rolling her eyes to bring the maximum chill up Barnaby’s spine.

‘What with no head?’

‘Oh, yes. No head and no arms.’

‘I’d like to meet a ghost with no feet and no legs,’ said

Barnaby.

Sophie lost interest. Her plan was not working. How can you scare somebody who wants to meet a ghost?

‘Don’t be daft. He wouldn’t be able to move.’

‘That means he can’t get away,’ shouted Barnaby gleefully. ‘But he might float away if it’s draughty. Quick! Let’s get him!’

Barnaby clomped off at speed along the corridor and up the winding staircase. Sophie afforded herself a smug grin. Now she would have a chance to explore by herself. Once more she looked around the place that was to be her new home. The building was a whole world away from the modern house she had lived in until now. This house had stood proud through two world wars, kings and queens had come and gone, and thousands of new inventions had delighted and horrified. Sophie let her mind wander, wishing that she could see just a little of the drama that it must have witnessed.

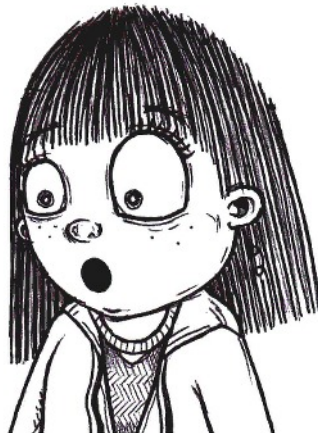
Her thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of the unloading of the removal van drifting in from outside. If she remained where she was any longer, her parents would find some boring task for her to do. Too late; the front door flew open. Sophie’s father, Bob, a short man with thinning black hair and a large belly, flopped into the hallway. Clutched tightly in his hands writhed Ginger, the family’s pet cat. The cat glared at Sophie with his shiny green eyes and struggled in her dad’s grasp, as keen as Sophie to explore. Bob pressed the animal firmly into Sophie’s arms.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘Don’t let Ginger out of the house yet. He’ll get lost. He has to get used to his new territory.’

Bob retraced his steps back to the removal van. Hugging the wriggling puss in her arms, Sophie sat on the bottom step of the staircase. Looking after Ginger wasn’t too bad a job she supposed. Exploring would have to wait. Being careful not to loosen her grip on the cat, she attempted to unroll the new issue of *Urban Teen* that her mother so disapproved of. She had nearly succeeded when a loud crash made her jump and Ginger lashed out with his claws at her bare arm. Yelping, Sophie rubbed her arm and peered around to find the source of the noise.

‘Sophie, Sophie!’ shouted an excited Barnaby from the top of the stairs. ‘I’ve found where the ghost lives!’

Sophie was both relieved and cross. It was only Barnaby, but his clumsiness had made Ginger hurt her. ‘There isn’t a ghost, silly,’ she said sulkily. ‘I made it up.’



She pretended to read the magazine, but Barnaby came down the stairs and pulled insistently at her arm. Sighing, she stood. There would be no peace unless she did as he asked. Barnaby grabbed Sophie's hand and dragged her stumbling up the stairs. At the top she noticed a large pile of tatty books, spread across the floor. Her brother must have knocked them over, causing the almighty crash that made Ginger lash out. Barnaby pulled her past them and down a thin corridor.

Glancing into a few of the bedrooms as they passed, she spotted masses of old crates and the occasional piece of furniture swathed in big white dustsheets. In one room she saw a large four-poster bed. Sophie hoped that it would be her bedroom. However, Barnaby dragged her onwards, along the landing and up a tiny staircase. In this part of the house it was becoming harder and harder to see. In fact, Sophie realised that in the dark she would have missed this staircase altogether and it surprised her that Barnaby had seen it at all.

At the top there was a small door. It opened with an eerie creak, and the children went in. Looking around, Sophie saw that she was in a small attic room. Set in one slanted wall was a large window. The daylight that filtered in cast peculiar shadows that danced on the faded and torn wallpaper.

'See! Told you!' said Barnaby proudly. 'This is bound to be where the ghost lives. Maybe he'll float back! Or maybe he's hiding!'

As her brother searched for his ghost, Sophie took in her surroundings. The items in the attic were very old, and very dusty. Cobwebs hung from every surface. Certainly it was dirty, but it was not ghostly. It was just a normal room, in a state of advanced neglect. Even the window was cracked. On the wall near it there was a big frame, hung on a crooked slant as if it had been put up in a great hurry. Sophie noticed that it was not only crooked, but it had also been put up back-to-front. All she could see of it was the old rough wooden back. It must be a picture, she thought. Maybe a long lost masterpiece that would be worth thousands. Even millions.

Sophie put down her magazine and let Ginger scamper off into the attic. Free of the cat at last, Sophie gripped the frame and turned the picture around. It was plastered in dust and grease, but Sophie could just about make out an outline of a person. Perhaps it was a portrait of some long dead owner of the house. Picking up an old rag from the floor, she carefully wiped away at the dirt that had built up over decades of neglect. It came off easily, but instead of a picture she was confronted with grimy glass. Sophie's heart fell. It wasn't a lost masterpiece, but a dirty old mirror. The outline she had seen was just her reflection through the grease and dirt.

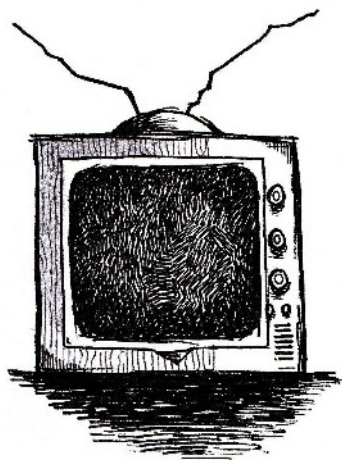
'Nothing supernatural about this stuff, Barney. Junk, that's all,' she said.

Sophie saw the look of disappointment in Barnaby's eyes, but it didn't last long. Suddenly, his round face lit up as he

moved the old box of *Aunt Rosie's Dried Egg* out of the way. He had spied something in the far corner. Excitedly he rushed over to an old upturned chest. Placed in front of it was a creaky old rocking chair. One of its arms was broken, and deadly looking splinters threatened anybody who dared to sit down. But it was not the rocking chair that had attracted Barnaby. Hidden partly behind the chest was a strange-looking television set.

'Wow, look at this telly,' Barnaby said to his sister. 'It must be a thousand years old.'

Sophie studied the bizarre-looking TV. It was a lot larger than the one that her parents had bought for her the previous Christmas, and it was as wide as it was tall. In fact, it was almost box shaped. The screen took up a sizeable portion of the front, and wasn't completely flat like modern televisions. It curved outwards slightly, and had rounded edges. If it still worked, it certainly wouldn't be as good quality as her dad's new TV. Sitting on top was a large aerial made up of two pieces of tarnished and slightly bent wire. The oddest thing about this television was that it appeared to be made of wood. On the front there were several large knobs, and there was not a remote control in sight. Sophie thought that there was a good chance that this particular television was made long before remote controls were invented. There was no doubt that it was old, but she was sure that televisions were not invented a thousand years ago. However ancient it looked, she was positive it couldn't be as old as Barnaby had suggested.



‘Not that old, silly,’ she said as she ran her finger over the television screen. Sophie looked at her finger. It was covered in dust. Nobody had been in the attic for a very long time. ‘It’s been here ages though. I wonder if it works.’

Sophie let her curiosity get the better of her. She turned the biggest knob, which looked likely to be the ‘on’ switch. Nothing happened.

‘Shame. Doesn’t work. As I said, junk.’

‘Yeah! But it’s my junk. I found it!’ said Barnaby.

Sophie shook her head. Why did Barnaby always say such stupid things? He could have all the rubbish in the house as far as she was concerned. She wanted that four-poster bed. How could she convince her parents to let her have it? An unexpected creak caused her to look up sharply. The door hadn’t been shut properly! Ginger! Sophie turned towards the door just in time to witness the cat slipping out

of the attic.

‘Ginger! Come back!’ she cried. ‘Come on Barney, better catch him or Dad will kill us.’

The children rushed out of the attic, slamming the door behind them. As they left, the room was again quiet, but it wasn’t to last for long. A few seconds later the old television broke into a loud hum.

With a flicker, the screen sprang into life to portray a black and white picture of a pretty young woman dressed in a flowing ball gown. Finally the hum cleared, and she began to speak in a posh clipped voice.

‘Good afternoon, and welcome to...’ The woman suddenly stopped mid-sentence. Shouting over her shoulder, her voice abruptly changed. In a rough Cockney accent she exclaimed, ‘Lads! There’s no one ‘ere! Are we still doing the show?’

An old husky voice replied, ‘May as well. We could all do with a rehearsal anyhow.’

Strange Programmes

Outside under the hot sun the removal men were nearing the end of their task. Many of the family's belongings, packed in a variety of boxes and bags, had already been taken into the house. Only a few large items were left. Ted, a young skinny man, clambered into the back of the lorry and selected a huge flat screen TV. Struggling with its weight, Ted stumbled to the lorry's door and awkwardly passed it to his workmate. Harry, a round elderly man with a grey moustache that appeared to be too big for his face, paused for a second to push his round glasses firmly up his nose. Ensuring he had a tight grip on the television he began to lug it up the garden path towards the house.

Sophie's father watched the hard-working removal men from his position on the doorstep. Although he hadn't carried anywhere near as much as them, he felt shattered. He wearily observed Harry lumbering along the snaking path, carrying something large with apparent ease. To his shame, Bob felt a pang of jealousy at the older man's fitness. Just at that moment, Harry stumbled on a loose paving stone and nearly lost his balance. Bob realised that the removal man was carrying the family television set. His television

set! His brand new television set! His most prized possession! With renewed strength, he sprang up and darted forward.

‘I’ll have that,’ he wheezed, ‘I’m sure you need a rest.’

Snatching the TV from Harry, he carried it into the house, puffing with extreme effort as he went. Harry simply shrugged and wandered back to his lorry, muttering under his breath, ‘He’s even worse than my missus.’

Once inside, Bob found his grip on the television slipping. The old man had made it look so easy to lift. As he carried it across the bare floorboards of the house and into the area that was destined to become the living room, he heard a scream. He recognised the voice at once – it was his wife Ruth. Bob looked thoughtfully at the television, placed it with great care on the floor, and then rushed back outside. In the garden Ruth was looking agitated. She pointed with a shaking finger to a cat, who was peering with luminous green eyes out of the shadows beneath the lorry.

‘A black cat ran across my path,’ she said, her voice quivering. ‘That’s bad luck! I knew we shouldn’t have moved! I should have listened to my horoscope!’

Bob relaxed. Ruth was by far the most superstitious person he had ever met. Unfortunately she was also his wife, and sometimes her ways simply baffled him.

Fatally he said, ‘Not that rubbish again!’ Immediately he regretted it.

‘It’s not rubbish. Black cats are very bad luck. One ran past a friend of Martha’s and she...’

‘Isn’t a black cat supposed to be lucky,’ interrupted Harry. The two removal men had crept up behind Bob and Ruth, no doubt to see what all the drama was about.

‘Yeah. It’s those Americans that say it’s unlucky. In England it’s lucky,’ chipped in Ted.

Ruth’s jaw dropped open, speechless. Bob breathed a sigh of relief. Saved by the removal men. The black cat bounded from the cover of the lorry, weaved itself between Bob’s legs and started to vibrate happily. Brushing the fur from his trousers, Bob picked up the purring cat and turned to Ruth.

‘It’s only Ginger. Those kids were supposed to be looking after him.’

Ruth relaxed. ‘Oh, it’s our cat. I thought he was inside. That’s okay then,’ she said.

‘I’ve never understood the difference,’ said Bob, eyebrows raised. ‘He’s still black.’

‘Yes, but he’s *called* Ginger,’ came Ruth’s reply.

Bob cast his mind back to when their cat was a kitten. He would never forget the fuss Ruth had made when he brought the tiny cat home for the first time. But the children fell in love with him on sight, and Ruth had found it impossible to deprive them of their new pet. Even though he was black, calling him Ginger seemed to cancel out the ‘bad luck’ in his wife’s eyes. He opened his mouth to argue, and then thought better of it, closing it with an audible pop. Then he turned around and carried Ginger back into the house.

‘Puss... puss... where are you?’ called Sophie.

Stooping down, she peered beneath a large table that had been dumped haphazardly in the kitchen by the removal men. Underneath there were a large number of boxes containing plates, cups and cutlery, but not even the faintest trace of Ginger. Perhaps he was hiding. To be sure, Sophie crawled into the space. She was so absorbed that she didn’t see her father enter the room until he spoke, and when he did she jumped. There was a crack as bone collided with wood.

‘Sophie, lock Ginger in the attic room will you? If you shut the door firmly he’ll be fine. This time, do it right. You don’t want him to get run over or lost do you?’

With her head throbbing, Sophie withdrew herself from under the table. Bob thrust Ginger into her arms and strode away. Sophie stomped up the stairs, rubbing her sore head. She was surprised to see Barnaby standing outside the attic door. Then she realised why he had not gone in. There were strange sounds coming from inside.

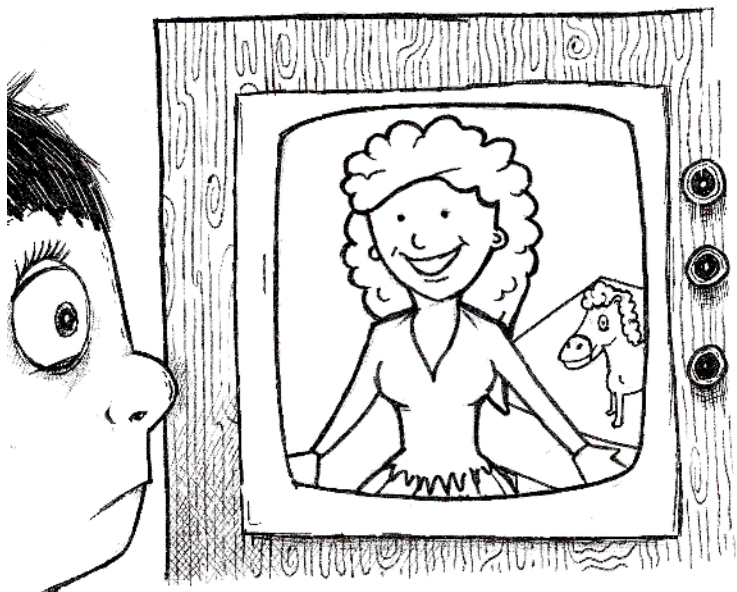
‘A stranger’s in our attic,’ said Barnaby, his face pale with fright. All his bravery at meeting ghosts was now forgotten.

Knowing it was up to her, Sophie held her breath and pushed the attic door. It did not take her long to realise that there was no stranger waiting in the shadows for them. Instead, the ancient television, which she had dismissed so readily as junk, had sprung into life. The picture was a little fuzzy and was in black and white, but the TV was certainly

working. Sophie recalled her parents' tales of their childhood. When they were young, all televisions were black and white. It must have been very odd, she thought, watching television in such a dull way. Sophie felt nudging behind her, as Barnaby tried to see who the 'stranger' was, bold now he had his big sister to hide behind.

'It's okay,' she laughed. 'It's only that old telly. Seems like it works after all.'

'Goodie!' yelled Barnaby. As her brother rushed in like a mini-whirlwind, Sophie checked the door. By the time she was convinced that it would not spring open again and put down the cat, Barnaby had already put the ancient TV on top of the old chest.



Ignoring the splinters, he threw himself onto the broken rocking chair and started watching the television. Being careful not to stab herself on the broken parts, Sophie pushed her little brother to one side and sat down alongside him. Ginger settled on her lap and broke into a loud purr, all thought of escape seemingly gone.

To Sophie's modern eyes, the programme was incredibly old fashioned. A pretty young woman, dressed in a flowing ball gown, was sitting by a piano. The woman's voice was posh, speaking perfect Queen's English. Somehow the voice did not sound quite right. It was as if she was putting on the accent, but Sophie couldn't see why anybody in the world would purposely want to appear as stuck up as this woman sounded.

'Children love, in the real sense of the word, Percival the Pony. And here he is,' said the woman in her upper-class voice. A wooden horse wobbled onto the top of the piano. Puppet strings hung loosely from its roughly made body, and it looked as if it would fall over at any minute.

'Say hello to the children, Percival.' As the horse nodded, the woman dipped into her pocket. 'I've got a little present for you. A hat! It'll make you look dashing.'

The children watched as the woman pressed the hat onto the puppet's head. Then the horse's front leg fell off, followed a few seconds later by the hat. Barnaby began to giggle.

'Isn't his hat grand?' soothed the woman, as she shoved the leg back onto the wooden horse. She had no sooner done

so, when the back leg fell off.

Sophie had seen enough. She never liked repeats, and this programme was certainly both old and bad. Possibly it was one of those 'classics' that her father always mentioned when he talked fondly of his childhood. He was welcome to them, but Sophie had no intention of wasting her time watching such drivel. She leant across to see if she could change the channel.

'Don't turn over!' complained Barnaby, 'It's funny!'

Sophie tutted in annoyance. If she turned over, Barnaby was bound to run off moaning to Mum and Dad, and they would be forced to help unpack. She settled back again into the chair. It would be better to watch an old television show than work, she thought. On the screen the woman was now playing the piano, and flashing such a large smile that her teeth threatened to burst out of her mouth. Then she broke into song. Sophie winced. She couldn't sing. The woman was so badly out of tune that Sophie believed even Barnaby could have done a better job.

'We love Percival the Pony. We love you,' she wailed.

Mercifully, the song was interrupted when the horse's leg fell off again. Once more the woman attempted to shove the leg back on, but this time her arm became twisted in the puppet strings. As she tried to untangle herself from the mess, the back legs of Percival were pulled forward and kicked the woman hard in the side of the head. Sophie's ears were subjected to yet more high-pitched laughter from her little brother.

‘Cor blimey!’ the woman said, losing her posh accent briefly before regaining her composure and continuing, ‘Percival is in a playful mood today, children.’

Much to Sophie’s amazement the horse replied, ‘No I’m not! Stop being so rough, will you!’

‘Shhh, you’re supposed to be mute,’ whispered the woman loudly.

Sophie shook her head. This had to be the worst programme she had ever seen. ‘This is awful. Perhaps it’s a joke,’ she sighed.

‘I like it,’ said Barnaby.

Sophie was about to respond, when the door opened and her father’s head popped around. ‘Tea’s ready. We’ve bought fish and chips,’ he said.

Sophie stood up, relieved to have dodged the unloading. Plonking the cat on the rocking chair, she leant over and switched the set off. Food was certainly a better prospect than the current programme. As Sophie left the attic, she spotted Ginger sneaking after her towards the delicious aroma of fish. She quickly shut the door in his furry face, and descended the stairs. Behind her was a pitiful meow of disgust.

As light faded and night closed in, a tall young man loitered in the street directly outside the house. His tattered black leather coat flapped in the breeze, sounding as if a multitude of bats were trapped within his pockets. His piercing eyes glanced up at the cracked pane in the attic window. He

stared for a full four minutes, only blinking when a lorry thundered past and disturbed his concentration. When the lorry's headlights brightened the street for a swift moment, a shimmer reflected back from the window. The man smiled eerily with lips that were thin and pale, displaying a set of orange teeth. They matched perfectly with the orange glow of a streetlamp close by. He turned his head onto its side and stared even harder. The smile turned into a leering grin. Through the broken pane of the window, a mirror could just about be seen hanging on the wall. The man turned to go, and his hands came into view under the feeble light of the streetlamp. Rather than the hands of a young man, his were old and wizened, as though they didn't belong to him.

Captured, Clawed and Interrogated

After being unceremoniously dumped in the attic, Ginger padded softly around his prison with his tail swishing in anger. Occasionally he would catch the unmistakable smell of mice in the air, but the rodents were tucked away safely inside the lonely battered suitcase. Besides, Ginger much preferred the smell of the fish supper that was wafting up the stairs. He brought his paw up and batted the door. It did not budge. In irritation, Ginger clambered onto the old rocking chair. His eyes slowly closed as he drifted off to sleep, but his catnap wasn't to last. A short while later his snooze was disturbed by strange sounds.

'Next time you can be the wooden 'orse. Doesn't 'alf 'urt your back.'

'I can't be the 'orse. You 'aven't got as good a singing voice as me, so you'll just 'ave to put up with the discomfort. That's showbiz I'm afraid.'

Ginger's eyes snapped open, and he sniffed the air. The smell was unfamiliar. It was not the well-known scent of rodent or fowl. His sharp eyesight caught movement near the base of the television. Curiously he studied two small

things climbing out of the set. They looked and smelled strange, but they had the manner of prey about them. Silently the cat slid off the chair, and crept closer. With luck they wouldn't see him until it was far too late.

'We 'ad two audiences tonight! I never thought we'd 'ave that many. And the size of them!'

'Of course. You were too young to remember the old lady. She was the biggest audience I've ever played to. I was just a nipper myself when she was 'ere. Although I 'ave 'eard rumour that 'er son was much taller and wider... but I don't believe that. The amount of woodlice 'e'd 'ave to eat to stay alive would be enormous.'

'Do you think they eat woodlice?'

'Why not? Tastes delicious, don't it?'

Keeping his belly flat to the floor, Ginger stalked his prey. He was enjoying the sport, but the delicious smell of the fish and chips seeping from downstairs had also made him hungry. He wondered what these strange animals would taste like. They were bound to taste better than the frog he had fished out of the old neighbour's pond last week. For now though, he was relishing the game. Ginger tensed his muscles. The stupid things had not seen him. This was going to be easy. He pounced.

The strike was almost perfect. Three claws pinned one of the creatures firmly to the floor. The other had, by a miracle, escaped his claws and disappeared down a hole in the skirting board. Ginger angrily shook his tail at the loss. It was soon forgotten as the prey began to squeak at him.

‘Excuse me sir. I’m sorry if I got in your way.’

Ginger lifted his paw, freeing the creature from his razor-sharp claws. The stupid thing brushed the dust from its fur, spilling clouds of grey into the air, and started to walk away uttering thanks. The prey had only taken three or four steps when Ginger batted it over with a swift swipe. Scrambling to its feet, the creature tried to run, but this time found its way blocked by an impassable furry barrier. For a while Ginger enjoyed his game, watching his prey run back and forth between his paws. It was not long though before his stomach reminded him of food, and his mouth began to water. Perhaps it was time for the game to end.

Sophie pushed the sausage with her knife. It was a horrible pink colour, and was stone cold. She had been hoping for a huge piece of battered cod. Her parents were munching away at fish, but for some reason she had been given this lousy sausage. She sighed and glanced around the room. True it still looked more like a warehouse than a living room, but given a little effort it could be very cosy indeed. Bob had already set the television in a corner, with the sofa and an armchair positioned in front of it. On either side towered boxes, packing crates and suitcases.

‘Don’t you want that?’ asked Barnaby, pointing at her sausage with his fork.

Gratefully Sophie threw the ghastly piece of meat onto Barnaby’s plate. As she watched him shovel it into his mouth, she had a fleeting thought that she might become a

vegetarian. Standing up, she rummaged in a box that had been placed on a small brown coffee table. She had packed it without much care, chucking in pretty much anything, but she knew that it contained a copy of *TV Week*. After first putting her hand into a dirty cup and then onto an apple core, she fished out the magazine.

When Sophie flopped back onto the sofa, her father asked her, 'So, what do you think of our new home?'

'It's nice. A lot bigger than our old place. Dad, I noticed a four-poster bed upstairs. Can I...?'

Bob shook his head. 'I'm sorry, that's going to be our room. Your mother's always wanted a four-poster bed.'

'Oh, she won't want this one,' said Sophie hopefully, drawing a scowl from her mother. 'She'd prefer...'

'We found an old telly upstairs in the attic. The programmes are funny,' interrupted Barnaby.

'Is that room still full of junk?' said Bob. 'The estate agents promised they would clear it out for us. You can't rely on anyone nowadays!'

'Can we keep it? Please Dad. Can we?'

'No harm in that I suppose, so long as we chuck all the other rubbish away,' said Bob thoughtfully before turning to Ruth. 'What do you think, dear?'

'Yes. Why not? Sophie can you pass the remote?'

Without looking, Sophie chucked the remote control in her mother's general direction. Ignoring the clatter as it hit the floor and the cry of protest from her parents, she thumbed through the television listings. She frowned.

'Dad, that weird programme we watched on that old thing upstairs isn't in the TV guide.'

'Football must have ended early,' mused her father. 'They always fling on any old show when that happens to fill up time. I wonder who won the match?'



In a dreary alleyway the young-faced man strode up to a door with faded green paint. The flapping of his coat echoed as he walked. Stopping he held out a wizened finger, and chanted a few syllables in a strange tongue. With a faint popping sound another door materialised in the bricks

directly opposite the original one. It was an exact reflection, as if the bricks on the opposite wall had been polished to a high shine. The man opened the reflection of a door and walked through. There was another faint popping sound and the extra door disappeared abruptly behind him.

The mirror doorway led downwards to a bleak cellar. Water seeped through the ceiling, collecting in puddles on the concrete floor. The man strode through them, ignoring the splashes he left in his wake. He stopped in front of an elaborate mirror set on the far wall. Holding an ornate ring in front of him, he began the chant once again. The mirror shook, and its surface became fluid as if it was water. The man brought his wrinkled hands up to the mirror. They passed through. Soon his whole body followed, leaving the cellar empty.

The mirror was his domain, and he travelled through it with ease. A white flash loomed up ahead, pulling him forwards. He resisted. The time was not right. Caution was needed. The light cleared like mist, revealing his goal. Impatiently his piercing eyes scanned the attic room.

There was movement by the old rocking chair. Was it human movement or something else? He had to be sure. He mustn't be seen. No, it was too small to be human. It was a cat, and it had something in his paws. Perhaps one of the insignificant lives would end without his aid. He smiled cruelly, before reaching out his hands and plunging them through the mirror, into the attic beyond. Just as the rest of his body was about to follow, there was a noise. Quickly,

he looked to his right. A thin shaft of artificial light invaded the room, lighting up the rubbish on the floor and causing shadows to dance on the wall underneath the mirror. The attic door had opened, and a figure stood framed in the doorway. He pulled his wrinkled hands back into the mirror domain and withdrew. There was nothing to show he had ever been there.

‘Hello puss, what have you got there? A mouse?’

Ginger growled. Ignoring the warning, Sophie pushed the cat away from his prey. Quickly she scooped the curious creature from the floor, away from the claws and teeth of her pet. Looking around, she spotted an old hamster cage resting on top of a tatty chest of drawers. It was rusty with age, and the exercise wheel had long since seized up, but it would still make an effective prison for a small animal. She laid her find carefully inside, and flipped the lid shut. Before she had a chance to examine the creature, Sophie caught something moving in the corner of her eye. She turned and peered around uneasily. She thought she saw a strange shimmering reflected in the dirty old mirror hanging from the attic wall but almost as soon as she noticed it, it was gone. Maybe it was a reflection of the streetlights outside, she thought to herself. Or even a car’s headlights as it travelled past the house.

Shrugging off her uneasiness, she turned back to the cage to inspect the most bizarre animal she had ever seen in her life. It was smaller than a mouse, and its fur was bright blue.

From the shape of the body, it was apparent that the strange thing walked on its hind legs, supported by over-sized feet. Its arms were short and stubby, and the eyes were a deep amber colour. Strange floppy antennae topped off the animal's face, hanging down as if they were ears. As for ears themselves, they were large and tufty – like a cross between a squirrel's and an owl's.



The overall appearance would have been comical, if it wasn't for the fact that it was, or at least had been, a living, breathing thing. Instead it had almost become Ginger's lunch. Sophie was about to poke the creature to see if it was still alive, when it turned its furry head to look at her with round, disk-like eyes. In a broad Cockney accent, it spoke.

'Well, what are you going to do now? Sell me to a circus?'

'You... you can talk,' stuttered Sophie. To find a strange

animal was one thing. It may have been a rare creature that she hadn't heard of before – possibly an animal that had escaped from a zoo. But to find a tiny animal that could speak was in the realms of fantasy. The shock overwhelmed her, and she almost missed the creature's reply.

'I thought that was obvious. I'm Ell, by the way.'

'I'm Sophie,' she mumbled.

'Odd name,' said Ell. 'Better than just calling you an audience I suppose.'



'Audience?' asked Sophie, her shock subsiding a little.

'You're an audience,' explained Ell as simply as she could, 'I'm a mimic.'

'I'm a human, not an audience,' said Sophie.

“Uman. You don’t ‘alf ‘ave some funny words.’

‘Anyway, why do you call me an audience?’ said Sophie, still bewildered by what she was seeing.

‘You’ve been watching us on that television over there,’ snorted Ell. ‘So it stands to reason you’re an audience.’

‘I knew there was something odd about that TV!’ whispered Sophie. ‘But you look nothing like that woman. You’re small and blue, not to mention completely the wrong shape!’

‘That’s one of our best tricks,’ explained Ell proudly. ‘I s’pose you would call it an illusion. Us mimics can make you see something else when you look at us. If we try ‘ard we can confuse your eyes and make them see what we want. The trick is for us to tell your eyes what it needs to see, and the eyes just sort of fill in the gaps. It’s ‘ard to do that and act at the same time, so we ‘ave to paper over the cracks with make-up and costume sometimes. Probably need more practice, don’t you think?’

When Sophie didn’t reply and just stood there with her mouth open, Ell tried to elaborate. ‘We can even make ourselves look twice the size. Isn’t that neat?’

‘So you’re a mimic,’ said Sophie, thoughtfully. Even if the mimic was twice its normal size it would still be tiny, and she didn’t want to insult the strange creature. ‘How many of you are there?’

‘Well, apart from me there’s old Ethelbert. Then there’s Murb and ‘Ibbie. Not many of us nowadays. The others left when I was a nipper. On to pastures new Ethelbert said.

And of course can't forget Cousin Wireless in the old radio. That's where I was going when that cat got me. 'Orrible animal!'

'But where did you come from?'

'I told you... the television.'

'I mean, where are the mimics from?' said Sophie attempting to be clearer. 'I've never heard of creatures like you existing – not even in fairytales.'

'I don't know where we mimics came from originally, if that's what you're asking. Except for old Ethelbert, all of us were born inside the television. I asked Ethelbert a few times, but 'e just tells the same old story of 'ow we moved into the television. There's not much point bugging 'im about it. And as for asking Cousin Wireless, well when 'Ibbie...'

Suddenly Ell stopped and a worried look flashed across her face. "'Ang on a mo,' she said eventually. 'It's against all the rules to be talking to an audience.'

'Human!'

'Whatever! I've told you far too much. Ethelbert will 'ave a fit! You might be dangerous. You are after all keeping me prisoner.' Ell looked upwards into Sophie's eyes, took a deep breath and asked, 'Are you gonna let me go or what?'

Sophie watched as the little creature stretched itself up to its full height and looked at her expectantly. She had just discovered a whole new intelligent species; a species that could talk and reason. She had the proof in the cage in front of her. Nobody could call her a liar or say she had made it

up. She could be famous. But was that the right thing to do? What if the authorities got hold of the mimic? Would Ell become the subject of a scientific experiment or end up in a zoo? Sophie thought of her uncle's parrot, so sad, stuck in its cage when it should have been soaring through tropical trees. And parrots didn't really talk like Ell did, they just repeated things back to you.

On the other hand, if she let the mimic go she may be able to befriend it. She flipped open the lid on the cage, and gently picked Ell up. The mimic felt warm and soft in the palm of her hand. She lifted Ell until they were at eye level.

'You're free to go wherever you want,' said Sophie. She gently brought her hand down to the floor, keeping one eye on her cat as she did so.

Hastily saying thanks the mimic immediately scurried up to the television and climbed in a small hole at the back. Sophie stood alone for a full five minutes staring at the television, her head reeling from her discovery. Nobody would ever believe her. Only very small children thought there were little men inside television sets. Even Barnaby knew better than that. Eventually, Sophie turned on her heels and left the attic, hoping beyond hope that she would get a chance to talk to the odd creature again.

Behind the skirting board Hibbie lay on the floor, paralysed with fear. He had no idea how long he had lain there. Time seemed to have stood still since his narrow escape. It was only by chance that he had avoided the cat's claws. As it pounced, Hibbie had glanced back and seen the



animal's image reflected in the television screen. In sheer terror he had run. The safety of the television was too far, but he knew of a hole in the skirting board. The small distance seemed to take forever, but he had made it. He felt a stab of guilt. He had left Ell to the mercy of the terrible beast. His heart fell into his stomach when he realised he had to go and help. The revelation spurred him into action, and he picked himself off the filthy floor. Summoning his courage, he poked his purple furred head out of the safety of the hole into the attic.

A huge shadow descended. He leapt backwards in panic. A colossal paw darted after him, missing by millimetres. Shivering in fear, Hibbie backed away from the hole's entrance, further into the darkness and away from the searching razor-sharp claws. Suddenly he froze. With horror he felt breathing down the back of his neck – sharp, shallow,

rasping breathing with a terrible bad breath stench. Something was behind him. Fighting the urge to run headlong out of the safety of the skirting board, Hibbie walked as slowly as he could away from the smell. Perhaps whatever it was hadn't noticed him. To his immense relief there was no attack. At least not yet. When he thought he was a safe distance away, Hibbie stole a glance over his shoulder. The narrow shaft of light bleeding in from the attic reflected off a pair of evil pointed teeth. He could just about make out black eyes looking back at him. The creature shuffled towards him and Hibbie's nerve broke. He ran as fast as he could away from the terrifying monster into the darkness. A few seconds later he felt the floor give way beneath him, and was plunged into the depths of the house, his cries fading into the distance. Perplexed, the little mouse picked up an old peanut and began to nibble.

Beyond the Magnifying Glass

Behind the glass screen and wooden box of the ancient television set were none of the wires and electrical circuits that a repairman would recognise. If he could have peeled all the layers back, he would have been amazed to find it resembled a rabbit warren more than a television. Most of the set was a maze of tiny, interwoven passages and rooms, but these were blocked from prying eyes. Even if the wooden panels were removed, a thick black plastic coating hid the secret living areas of this particular television.

A repairman may have noticed the two immense magnifying glasses that were suspended directly behind the telly's screen, although he would have scratched his head at their use. Attached to a complicated series of ropes and pulleys, the magnifying glasses pointed into the only area of any great size – the TV studio. Various pieces of television scenery, cleverly made out of pieces of wood and plastic harvested from the rubbish in the attic were propped against the walls. Plush, orange flowing curtains, created from a lonely sock, hung down from the ceiling. An impressive grand piano, made with amazing skill from a multitude of matchsticks, stood in the middle of the studio. The piano

keys were delicately crafted from black and white toothbrush heads, and the matchsticks had been stained with brown boot polish to look like oak. As the television was not turned on, it was no longer full of the noise and bustle that accompanied the making of a show, but was quiet and still.



Ethelbert, the mimic elder, viewed the studio proudly. True, the performance had not gone entirely to plan, but one of the audiences liked it. As for fooling the audiences into thinking they were watching one of their own with a

puppet – well that had been an outstanding success. He hadn't had much of a chance to applaud the youngsters on their performance either. Rather than have the traditional aftershow meal, his two most promising performers had set off straightaway to visit their cousin in the old radio to tell him of the new audiences. He didn't know why they bothered. Cousin Wireless was always rude, and had no time for the marvellous shows. It was much better to keep away from the bitter old fellow. He was sure it wouldn't be long before Ell and Hibbie, bored of their cousin's snide remarks, would return for their food before it got cold.

He closed his big blue eyes and drifted back to a time when his fur was a fiery red, and the television set was brimming full of energetic mimics. That was an age ago. His fur was now streaked with grey, and the colony of mimics had dwindled to just four. Against his advice, the others had departed in search of new audiences. It had made sense, he supposed. The old lady had been moved to an old people's home, and the set had been roughly shoved into the attic. He felt seasick just remembering how the set swayed in the massive arms of the lady's middle-aged son.

In the attic there had been nobody to watch the shows, but Ethelbert was sure more audiences would come. He was right, but it had taken twelve years with only insects and spiders to perform to. Before the others left, Ethelbert had informed them he would remain to look after those that were too young to travel, but he knew that wasn't strictly true. He had been scared, because of the stories Cousin

Wireless had told him. Terrible stories. Nothing was ever heard from the others again, so he feared the worst.

Without his comrades and with no audiences, the still life of the attic was almost unbearable. He spent his time teaching the youngsters the art of illusion and the joy of performance. They did well and he was proud of them, but there was something that bothered him. They shouldn't need to use make-up and props as well as their powers of illusion. With the lack of practice over the years they had unfortunately become a vital necessity. Ethelbert pondered for a moment. Lack of practice was the excuse he kept telling everyone, including himself. He had a nasty feeling that it wasn't simply that.

Mimics never used to need props. They should be able to trick an audience with a wave of their antenna. But the youngsters found it hard to concentrate. It would only need one slip, and a blue claw would be seen instead of a black and white hand. So costumes, props and make-up were necessary to paper over the cracks. What if it wasn't a lack of practice, but the very fact that they had been in hiding for centuries upon centuries that was to blame? If their powers are not always used, would nature take them away? If the illusions were lost what would they do? Make papier-mâché masks?

An ear-splitting buzzing sound snapped Ethelbert back into the present day, away from his morbid thoughts. Behind him, a fat mimic with yellow and brown mottled fur burst into the studio. A slightly too small beekeeper's hat was

rammed firmly onto his head, and behind him travelled a swarm of tiny bees.

‘Gawd Murb! Do you always ‘ave to bring those infernal beasts into the televisual studio?’ exclaimed Ethelbert. ‘They cause ‘avoc with the sound when the audience ring for a show.’

‘My bees need the space and warmth for their ‘oney making,’ said Murb sulkily. ‘They’re special bees, you know. Extra small Japanese Bonsai Bees. Very rare. Very special.’

Ethelbert thought carefully. True he enjoyed the honey. He decided to compromise.

‘Very noisy more like! Just ensure the next time the televisual machine is switched on you usher them right out of the studio, pronto. Anyway, where were you during the performance?’

‘With the bees, they need constant company or they get lonely,’ replied Murb before adding hopefully, ‘These shows are bit pointless though aren’t they. Only spiders and things watch them. What about turning the studio into a beehive instead?’

‘But we ‘ave a proper audience now! In fact we ‘ave several!’ exclaimed Ethelbert in annoyance.

‘They’re just bigger than spiders, that all.’

‘Look young un, just because Cousin Wireless thinks ‘e can shirk his responsibilities doesn’t mean you can. Remember the story of ‘ow we got this lovely ‘ome. It was long before you were born...’

‘Not this again,’ mumbled Murb under his breath.

‘Ages ago a clever audience found a way to put entertainment into televisual machines, so you didn’t ‘ave to go to the theatre or circus to see a good act. Of course their ones didn’t ‘ave us mimics inside. Not sure ‘ow they work to be ‘onest, but it gave your great grandfather a fantastic idea. We could make our ‘omes look just like their televisual machines, and we could perform our very own shows without ‘aving to ever go out. Much better value than the original televisual machines as well. They all ‘ave the same shows on at the same time. That’s just lazy, don’t you think?’

Ethelbert looked over at Murb, expecting some sort of reply. When none was offered, he continued, ‘Televisual machines were expensive. Everybody wanted one, so all we ‘ad to do was to copy ‘ow they looked and sell them door-to-door, cheap. Audiences love a bargain. We ‘ave to uphold our part of the deal and entertain them though, and you should make your great grandfather proud by working ‘ard as a performer. If we don’t do the shows, then the audiences will think the televisual machine ‘as broken down and throw it away. Then we would lose the safety of the audience’s ‘ouse. Do you want to be cold and ‘ungry living outside?’

Murb shook his head, and Ethelbert smiled. Perhaps his words were sinking in this time.

‘When the audience got themselves a new Queen...’

‘They ‘ave a Queen, like my bees?’ said Murb, his interest pricked slightly.

‘As I was saying,’ said Ethelbert irritably, ‘when the audience got themselves a new Queen, we sold our superior televisual machines to places dotted all over the country, each with its own colony of us mimics inside. The televisual machine salesman was the last great mimic performance. All of us climbed on top of one another and used our powers to look like a life-sized audience. We played ‘im as an eccentric old man, with a round rosy face and an enormous waxed moustache. It was a joy. Just imagine over a thousand mimics on top of one another, working together as one. Your great grandfather was the left ‘and side of that there moustache... or was it the right?’

‘What were you,’ asked Murb with a smirk.

‘You already know I was the big toe,’ mumbled Ethelbert, his fur going a slightly more vivid red. ‘But that was an important job! Without me we would ‘ave all fallen over!’

The old mimic realised that he wasn’t getting anywhere with Murb, so decided to shift the piano off the set instead. He turned to Murb and snapped, ‘Are you going to just stand there? Give me an ‘and with this!’

Grudgingly, Murb left his bees to their own devices and helped Ethelbert move the heavy instrument over to its usual position. The Bonsai Bees made the most of the distraction, and flew out into the adjoining make-up room. There they started to make a nest of honeycomb in the wig cabinet. The second the piano was in place, Murb shot off after his pride and joy.

Alone again, the old mimic sank onto the piano stool for a quick tinkle to cheer himself up. As a general rule, he didn't like other mimics using the piano. If confronted by the young ones he would firmly announce that it was the only proper instrument available, and must not get damaged. However, if he was honest to himself, it was because he couldn't bear to see anybody else use it. It had pained him to watch Ell play it during the recent performance. As he raised his fingers to start, the main studio door swung open and the delicious aroma of roast woodlouse invaded the studio. The blessed solitude had lasted mere seconds. Accompanying the mouth-watering smell trotted Ell, wiping the remains of her meal from the corner of her mouth.

'That was gorgeous,' she said in satisfaction. 'I'm afraid I've eaten 'Ibbie's portion. Where is 'e anyway?'

'Wasn't 'e with you? Didn't you visit our good-for-nothing cousin together?' said Ethelbert.

'But I thought 'e 'ad come back already. I was... I mean... Oh dear.'

A look of panic and guilt spread across Ell's face, and she fled from the room. Ethelbert didn't notice as a sight that caused his eyes to widen with horror confronted him. As they were talking, Murb had re-entered the studio with his bees. And the Bonsai Bees were busy swarming in the worst place possible.

'I realise I said it was in order to keep your flying creatures 'ere, but that's my director's chair!' Ethelbert

exclaimed.

‘You can’t tell bees what to do,’ said Murb.

‘But they’ve covered it in ‘oney!’

Bob flicked the remote control. The television’s volume was loud enough to drown out the cry of a brightly coloured ball as it tumbled from a crack in the ceiling. The humans were too busy watching the screen to observe it land with a dull thud behind a crate of curtains. For a few moments, Hibbie lay motionless on the floor. The fall through the house had terrified him even more than the close encounter with the cat. He felt emotionally drained. The whole world spun around him. Best to lie still, he reasoned, until he felt better. Bit by bit Hibbie’s head began to regain some feelings of normality.

‘Oh, I’ll come up all tartan coloured in the morning,’ he moaned to nobody in particular.

When the ringing in his ears started to subside he became aware of voices – and they were not mimic voices. He pulled himself to his feet, and peered around. With shock he realised that he was no longer in the safe surroundings of the attic, but in a place completely unfamiliar. He was in a gigantic room, with a terribly high roof. On the walls hung peeling strips of wallpaper portraying badly drawn fish. If Hibbie’s sense of humour had not been knocked by his ordeal, he would have smiled when he realised the fish wallpaper was pasted upside down. It gave the sense that all the fish were ill. Instead he grasped at a piece of

knowledge passed onto him by Ethelbert.

‘Upside down,’ he said to himself. ‘I must be on the other side of the world.’

Cautiously he peeked around the box that hid him from the view of the mysterious voices. To his amazement, he was confronted with four audiences. Seconds later he saw the television set that they were watching.

‘Well I never! What a beautiful ‘ome!’ he exclaimed in awe. ‘The mimics living there must be rolling in it. Been to ‘Ollywood no doubt.’

Trying not to feel too jealous of the obviously talented owners of the magnificent set, who were so good that they had four audiences, Hibbie headed straight for the TV. When he got there, to his surprise the television was nowhere near as wide as his home in the attic. The reason for this came to him quickly. He had heard that people in Hollywood were always watching their weight, so they obviously only needed thin houses.

Hibbie paused for a moment. Last time he had seen Ell she was in the claws of a cat. Was she alright? Maybe the mimics that lived here could help him? Finding a small opening, he held his breath and squeezed in. Once inside the mimic crawled upwards, climbing higher and higher. He frowned. The bustle of everyday life, so familiar to him, could not be heard. There were no mimic voices, none of the racket associated with the moving of scenery, no sounds of rehearsals, not even any applause. Even worse, the layout was very different. There was no maze of

passageways and rooms. Instead there were masses of wires, and many strange things that the young mimic's mind could not understand. Soon he was hopelessly lost. Then softly in the distance he heard a buzzing sound. The thought struck him – somebody kept bees here, just like Murb! And so it followed that the mimics from Hollywood must be nearby. Hibbie ran towards the sound. There was a crackle of energy and he disappeared.

The television blared out the news headlines into the living room. Barnaby was bored. Sophie was sprawled on the sofa, reading her magazine as she tried to ignore her parents' bickering.

'Who's that? What's she doing on the news?' Bob asked, pointing to a woman being interviewed by the newsreader.

'She's the one we saw in that other thing. You know. The documentary about thingy.'

'Thingy?' said a confused Bob.

'You know. Married to that MP.'

'No. I don't know.'

'You do. It was in the paper,' Ruth snapped. As Bob opened his mouth to question her further, she waved her hand at him irritably, 'Shhh... We've missed what she said now.'

'It's all over anyway,' sighed Bob. As his wife flashed a scowl in his direction, he sneakily flicked to the sports channel. 'Ah, this is more like it. Football!'

Bob was soon transfixed by the football results. When

the highlights of the afternoon's matches began, he could hardly keep still. It was his team playing – an important match that he had missed due to the bustle of the move. Their best striker was in the perfect position for a cross, not far from the penalty box. The ball flew long, curving towards him. A goal was surely about to be scored. Suddenly an odd purple ball of fur appeared upon the grass, wandering as if in a daze in-between the players.

'Eh... what's that idiot in fancy dress doing on the pitch? Get off you fool,' shouted a dismayed Bob.

'They can't hear you, you know,' said his wife, absently. 'It's only a TV.'

Sophie smiled to herself. She knew better. The fur was a different colour to Ell, but it was obviously another mimic.

Her father watched in horror as the man wearing a silly costume roamed aimlessly across the penalty area. The football flew towards him, and he kicked it hard in the opposite direction with his oversized feet. The ball flew the entire length of the pitch and bounced neatly past the goalkeeper and into the goal. The watching crowd were aghast. The commentators were speechless. Bob was appalled. Just as his team looked as if they were about to pull a master stroke and score, the fool in the stupid purple costume had kicked the ball into their goal. They were now 1-0 down. Surely the ref wouldn't allow it.

'Idiot! He's ruining the game,' yelled Bob.

He was standing and shouting at the television, his face crimson. Ruth was losing patience. She picked up the

remote control and changed channels. The cheers of football supporters became the opening titles of an Australian soap opera.

‘Oi, I was watching that.’

‘But dear, I always watch this programme. Anyway all that excitement’s bad for your heart.’

‘Don’t talk daft. What the... it’s him again!’

Sophie’s parents watched in amazement as the same strange man in furry fancy dress ambled into the pub. One good-looking hunk, sipping from a bottle of ice-cold beer, stopped his conversation with a beautiful blonde and turned to the unexpected visitor.

‘Hey mate,’ he said, ‘What you doing in that get up?’

‘I appear to be lost. ‘Ave you seen any mimics in ‘ere?’

‘Mimics? Ah, you mean parrots. Clever birds parrots. Can copy anything. Out in the bush, mate,’ said the hunk. He turned back to the girl, and continued the conversation about the affair that her sister was having with his boss.

‘Oh Bob! Maybe it’s an omen,’ said Ruth. ‘I knew that cat meant bad luck!’

‘Don’t be daft. It’s got to be a publicity stunt. It must be.’

Sophie giggled as her dad flicked from channel to channel. Whatever programme he switched to, it never took long before the bizarre-looking fur-ball turned up. She listened to her parents argue about the meaning of this odd occurrence – her mother’s superstitious reasons and her father’s logical ones. She knew that both her parents were wrong. How the mimic had managed to get onto the

television screen was the burning question. It should be impossible, but the little being's very existence had also seemed an impossibility.

Sophie slipped towards the door. She was sure this mimic was in trouble, and she wanted to offer her help to Ell. As she left the room, she glanced back at the screen. A spacecraft sped with a jet of fire past planets, stars and a purple-furred organism floating in space.

'Oh... stay on this channel, dear,' said her mother, 'It's Doctor thingy.'

'Who,' said her father.

'I just said! Doctor thingy! You know Doctor thingy.'

Hibbie did not like this one bit. He held his breath as he floated helplessly in the wake of the passing spaceship. Then suddenly he was somewhere else. The scene had changed, and he was inside a large control room. A many-sided panel covered with a dizzying array of buttons – both low tech and high tech – took up the centre of the room. Was it the bridge of another spaceship? He supposed it was better than the last place. He couldn't have held his breath for much longer.

On the other side of the control panel was a strangely dressed, gangly man. His clothes were eccentric and odd, but as he busied himself around the controls it was obvious that he thought he looked fantastic. He swept a lock of hair out of his eyes, and looked up. His eyes met Hibbie's. They burnt with an air of alien intelligence.

‘Who are you?’ asked the gangly man in surprise.

‘Er... ‘Ibbie,’ said the mimic.

‘Well hello Hibbie,’ said the gangly man politely. He flicked a switch on the control panel before whirling around towards him.

‘Only a being of almost limitless power can breach the defences, so who are you really?’ he said. ‘Got it... you’re the Great Soprendo! Let me know if I’m getting warm?’

‘Just ‘Ibbie,’ mumbled the young mimic. ‘I’m sort of lost. I didn’t mean to come ‘ere.’

‘In that case I may be able to give you a lift home,’ said the gangly man pleasantly. ‘Where are you from? And what time?’

‘The attic, about teatime.’

‘Do you have the galactic coordinates? A postcode would help. Intergalactic taxi driver, that’s me. By the way, you’re looking a little fuzzy round the edges.’

Looking down, Hibbie was surprised to see that he was out of focus.

The man whipped out a silver tube from his pockets, and pointed it at the mimic. The tip glowed a brilliant green, and a high-pitched whine filled Hibbie’s ears. He flinched. Was this some kind of weapon?

‘No, no... this is impossible,’ said the man looking at the silver device. ‘According to these readings you don’t exist. You’re a mirage, a figment. If you really are here, you may be damaging the whole of space and time. Either that or I’m dreaming.’

The man pinched himself hard on his cheek, leaving a vivid red mark.

‘Ow, I’m pretty sure I’m not dreaming.’

‘It’s you that don’t exist,’ Hibbie said as his heckles rose. ‘You’re just some illusion caused by that electrical television!’

‘Now that was rude,’ said the man, looking hurt. There was a gentle shudder as the machine ground to a halt.

‘Ah, we’re here,’ said the man. ‘I don’t know who or what you are, but you’d better leave. Don’t bother with the tip.’

The man strode over to a pair of doors, flung them open and pushed Hibbie out. The colourful world was gone, replaced with the dull grey of a black-and-white film. For a split second he felt at home. Black and white felt normal to him. Perhaps this place would be safer. The relief swiftly disappeared when bullets began to whistle past his head and explosions rocked the ground he was standing on. He waded through thick mud, carefully avoiding the vicious strips of barbed wire that encircled the area.

He couldn’t see anyone around, although the sound of fighting was close by. It couldn’t really be a battle, just as he couldn’t really have been in space. He knew that it was simply an image created by the awful machine. Somehow his power of illusion had joined forces with this strange electrical beast’s power to create a very convincing reality. And it was not a reality that he could control. Some of the places he had visited had excited him, and gave him

fantastic new ideas for shows. Others were terrifyingly dangerous.

He looked again at his hand. It was still out of focus. Perhaps the illusion was breaking down and he would be able to find some way out of this horrible place.

Hibbie dived for cover when another bullet whizzed by. It missed him by inches and hit instead a blackened, peeling sign that read 'Warning – Land Mines'. Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion. As the German soldiers made their advance across the minefield, a few scraps of purple fur floated down from the sky and settled on the black-and-white mud, before being trampled by black-and-white feet.

Letters of Warning

‘**W**hat do you mean there wasn’t an incident with a man in fancy dress at the match? I’ve just seen it on the news... I don’t care if you were there... I’ve seen the proof on the telly... You say you saw the news too and it wasn’t on that... I watched it with my own eyes...’

Bob’s increasingly confused telephone conversation filtered in from the next room. Barnaby ignored it. He was glued to the TV. At long last his parents had tired of television and left him watching his favourite programme, a low-budget Japanese import. The Super Galaxy Heroes were about to use their super transforming powers to beat the evil General Zardos. Barnaby held his breath, as Zardos conjured up even more dastardly demons from hell – and then the screen went blank. In alarm, he tore his eyes away from the television, and found that Sophie had sneaked in and unplugged it.

‘Sophie! Switch it on! Switch it on,’ he gabbled.

‘In a mo,’ said Sophie, as she knelt down behind the television.

Careful to remain unseen, Ell peered out from Sophie’s pocket. She was not enjoying herself. The pocket was filthy,

and the dust made her want to sneeze. Added to that, she was standing on something extremely sticky and disgusting. For now though, Ell endured the foul pocket in the hope that she could find her missing friend – if he was still alive. She was relieved when the smaller audience rushed out of the room, his complaints fading into the distance.

‘Mum, Sophie’s being nasty.’

‘Hibbie?’ Sophie said quietly when she was sure her brother was gone. ‘Hibbie? Are you there?’

There was movement by the DVD player. A dazed mimic cautiously peaked from behind the machine. His purple fur was covered in grease and mud, and was still smoking from the explosion on the minefield. The already fading illusion had been shattered by the exploding mine and, luckily, the impact had catapulted him out of the electrical world of the television.

‘An audience!’ he said in disbelief. ‘Ow do you know my name?’

Ell leant further out of Sophie’s clothing until she could easily be seen. ‘Ibbie, it’s me. This audience is ‘ere to ‘elp rescue you. ‘Ere, Sophie. Give ‘im an ‘and will ya.’

‘But we’re not supposed to talk to audiences!’ said Hibbie, backing away slightly.

‘Never mind that,’ replied Ell, ‘This one’s okay. She saved me from the cat.’

‘Well if you’re sure,’ said Hibbie uncertainly, and taking a deep breath he clambered onto Sophie’s lowered hand. ‘Sorry about running out on you by the way, Ell. That cat

was well scary.’

When Barnaby finally returned with his mother, Sophie and the mimics were gone and the television blared out the dramatic end theme of Super Galaxy Heroes. Barnaby would have to wait to find out whether General Zardos’s dastardly demons from hell had finally been defeated. In a mood, Barnaby flopped down to watch the next programme.

Sophie crouched in a cramped studio, with Ell and Hibbie by her side. The mimics were no longer tiny creatures but slightly taller than her. Ell pointed to a chest of drawers, and told her that it was the costume she had to wear for the next show. Sophie attempted to speak, but when she turned around her voice dried up as she realised that she was still shrinking. Hibbie now towered above her. If she became any smaller she would be microscopic. There was no way the chest of drawers would fit her now. Then a harsh sound attacked her ears – a high-pitched beeping, that got louder and louder.

Half asleep, Sophie’s hand found her alarm clock and switched it off. Her head was still reeling with the events of the previous evening. She had to think hard to convince herself it was not all a dream. Clearly, she thought as she rubbed her eyes and looked around, the shrinking was not real. But the mimics were no dream. Of that she was sure.

Unfortunately, she only had a short talk with the two creatures after the rescue of Hibbie, as they had to return to the ancient television before they were missed. Ell had explained that the other mimics would not understand why

she knew of their existence, so they had to keep their friendship secret. Sophie was pleased when Ell had used the word 'friendship'. Just thinking of the phrase gave her a sudden urge to go to the attic to see if Ell or Hibbie were up, but Sophie realised in irritation that she would not have time. The alarm was to remind her it was school today. Her mother must have set it while she was sleeping. The mimics would have to wait. She dragged herself out of bed and struggled into her school uniform, almost falling over her school bag in the process.

Twenty minutes later Sophie left the house. Stifling a yawn, she started her journey. Her new house was closer to her school, so she no longer needed to take the bus or blag a lift from her parents. The walk wouldn't take long.

Halfway down the street her ears picked up a strange flapping sound following her. The noise reminded her of bat's wings. She halted and glanced behind. There was nothing there. Apart from the usual traffic and the occasional pedestrian, the road was quiet. Was it her imagination? Hurrying her pace, she turned onto the main road. The flapping began again, keeping in step with her. Now Sophie was spooked. Even though the road was empty, she had the distinct impression that she was being followed. She resumed her journey, but the feeling continued to niggle. The flapping got louder until she could bear it no more. She spun around quickly. Squinting into the morning sun, she was sure she saw a tall figure in a full-length black coat staring at her. The sun caused spots

to float before her eyes, but when she blinked to clear her vision the figure had disappeared. Sophie turned and fled.

Sophie sat in her history class, and stared out of the window. She usually loved history, but today she couldn't concentrate. Her mind was cluttered with images of loveable mimics. She was probably the only person in the whole world who knew of the mimics' existence. And they had already called her a friend. Maybe there would be a way to befriend the other mimics as well. She wondered what stories Ell and Hibbie could tell her about their lives. There was so much to ask and it was so much more interesting than history. She let her mind wander, daydreaming of all the adventures she and the mimics would have together. Eventually, her thoughts drifted to the flapping sound that followed her on the way to school and she felt queasy at the memory. She tried to be logical. The sun was in her eyes, she reasoned, which made her see things that were not really there. As for the sound, maybe it was a bird. Sophie was snapped back to reality by the stern voice of her teacher, an imposing woman named Miss Cooper. She was being asked a question.

'Now then Sophie. Who first discovered America?'

Sophie fidgeted in her seat, and said 'Christopher Columbus, Miss.'

'Good. That's right,' said her teacher. Then she turned and addressed the rest of the class. 'However, some people think that the Vikings visited the Americas far earlier.'

Sophie sighed with relief. She had made it look as if she had been listening. It was fortunate that she knew the answer. Miss Cooper then strode around the room, placing homework books onto the pupils' desks.

'This week I would like everyone to write an essay on Viking life,' she said. 'If you need any help I'll be in my office tomorrow lunchtime.'

As Sophie's homework book landed in front of her, a piece of yellowing paper fluttered out onto the table. Curiously she unfolded it, half expecting it to be a receipt that her teacher had used as a bookmark. She gasped. It was a message, written in the most beautiful curved letters. The writing would not have been out of place inscribed on the pages of an antique Bible. She read it, and knew with absolute certainty that the message was meant for her.

Beware.
The one who is
Stalking
you
is
EVIL!

He will not listen to any
Reason that Goodness
may bring
W.W.

A lump welled up in Sophie's throat. However beautiful the writing was, it could not hide the fact that this was a warning of danger together with, oddly enough, a correction to her teacher's lesson. It was not her imagination. She was being followed – the message proved it. Sophie recalled the tall figure in the black coat. Meeting him face-to-face filled her with dread. But what could he want of her? And who was W.W.? It was obviously somebody that had her wellbeing in mind, but who? She had a Grandmother Winnie Walsh, but she was eighty, bedridden and had terrible writing, so it couldn't be her.

When the school bell finally clanged, Sophie was still deep in thought. For the first time in her life she didn't want to go home. The stalker sounded dangerous. She could be murdered. Sophie gulped. She did not notice the other children bustle out of the classroom, followed shortly by her teacher. She did not even notice when somebody entered and began the tidying up of crisp packets and chocolate wrappers discarded on the floor after the day's lessons. Eventually she came to her senses. It was better to leave with everyone else, as she would be safer with others around her. Clutching tightly to the message and her homework book, Sophie rushed out of the room.

When Sophie's footsteps had almost disappeared into the distance, the crisp packets and chocolate wrappers fell back to the floor, dropped by the person who had been tidying up. He strolled across to Sophie's desk, with an eerie flapping sound following his movements. In her haste,

Sophie had forgotten to pick up her bag. It was plucked from the floor by hands that were old and wizened. A laugh gurgled, and it echoed after the fleeing girl.

Sophie sped into her new house's driveway, and skidded to a halt. She was so glad to be safe at home. She had run the entire journey, the memory of the laugh that followed her out of school haunting her thoughts. She desperately wanted to talk to the mimics about the warning from her mysterious friend, and of the person following her. She didn't know if he was evil as the message had informed her, but the laugh made her believe it. Perhaps she should go to the police, or tell her parents? But she wanted to talk to the mimics before she made a decision. It seemed too much of a coincidence that this was happening to her just as she had discovered their existence. She paused in the garden to regain her breath, and nearly jumped out of her skin when a greeting came from nowhere.

'Hello dear. Good day at school?'

Sophie scanned the garden. The voice was her mother's, but nobody was there. A few seconds later, Sophie screamed in fright when Ruth popped her head up from behind a large, tangled holly bush. Sophie was angry with herself. It was obvious that her mother was in the garden. Her greeting had told her that much, and her jumpiness was certainly an overreaction. From now on, Sophie was determined to be braver. Mumbling a reply, she hurried through the front door, propped open with an ugly garden gnome while her

mother cleared the lawn of weeds.

Leaping two steps at a time, she bounded up to the attic, desperate to garble the entire day's events to her new friends. She couldn't stay indoors forever and wanted their advice. Reaching her destination at last, she stopped dead in her tracks. Barnaby was watching the ancient television, and judging from his idiotic grin, he was enjoying himself immensely. It took a moment for her to realise what he was watching. It was a mimic version of Super Galaxy Heroes.

On the television screen there were two astronauts, the 'Galaxy Heroes', dressed in what could only be described as Japanese Samurai spacesuits. Their setting appeared to be some sort of distant alien world, whose rocks held an amazing resemblance to polystyrene. Behind one exceptionally large polystyrene rock jumped a man, dressed in a silver suit and brandishing a stick that had to be some sort of weapon.

The two Galaxy Heroes looked at each other and said in unison, 'General Zardos. So it was you that caused the destruction of this peaceful planet.'

'You fools!' exclaimed General Zardos. 'Nothing in ze world can stop me now!'

Sophie grinned when she realised that the mimics were miming the words, with somebody out of sight filling in the speech. From the old husky voice, she guessed it was Ethelbert, recalling that he was far more advanced in years than the others. The old mimic simply put on different accents for each character. The result was the look of a

foreign film, badly over dubbed into English. To complete the mood, the whole scene was accompanied by dramatic piano music.

With a flourish of the gun-stick, the music built up to a peak and Zardos called out, 'Arise! Arise my beauties!'

'Oh no!' said one of the Galaxy Heroes, 'He's conjuring the demons from hell!'

A gigantic rubber tentacle fell from the top of the screen to lie wobbling on the unconvincing alien floor. One of the astronauts grabbed it, and held one end to his throat.

'Help it's got me... aaaahhhhhh!'

The other astronaut unsheathed a blunt-looking Samurai sword, and attempted a somersault towards the highly dangerous inanimate object. Instead the hero did a heroic trip, and fell headlong into a polystyrene rock.

General Zardos then said, 'Actually maybe we can all become friends. Let's go for a meal and talk about it.'

The General looked surprised at what he said, glared in anger and followed up with, 'Come on, let's be nice to one another.'

Zardos, hissed out of the corner of his mouth, 'Oi, I'm supposed to be nasty. What's all this about friends?'

Ethelbert's quiet whisper replied, 'I thought it was a bit too violent. It is a children's show after all.' Then he added loudly, 'Yes, let's go out for pizza. How about it?'

Sophie laughed out loud. Hibbie must have copied this show, after seeing her little brother watching it on Dad's television. Although it was badly made, and in black and

white, it was certainly no worse than the original version. She realised that as long as the mimics continued with the show, there was no chance of making Barnaby leave the attic.

Disappointed, Sophie wearily made her way down the stairs and into the living room. She flopped onto the sofa, next to Ruth who had finished weeding and had now settled down in front of the telly. She was watching a soap opera that Sophie usually enjoyed, but today it had lost its appeal. Sophie just wanted to talk to Ell and Hibbie, and wouldn't be happy until she had the chance. It seemed like decades before the cheery end theme blared into the room. Forcing herself to think about anything other than the mimics, Sophie noted that the music did not seem in keeping with the suspenseful 'did-he-or-didn't-he-murder-her' cliffhanger. All that effort to make it suspenseful, and they ruined it with a happy cheesy tune. Ruth interrupted her forced thoughts.

'Oh, I nearly forgot. This came for you this morning.'



Ruth handed her daughter a small brown envelope. Her name was written in the same fancy, curled letters as the note in Sophie's homework book. She ripped the envelope open. Inside was another scrap of yellowing paper. Her mysterious friend had sent her a new message.

Be careful who you tell about your little secret, or should I say friends, in the attic. Some wish harm. The loss of your bag and keys was careless. Alertness is needed.

Yours W.W.

Sophie's jaw dropped open in surprise.

'Is it from anybody interesting?' asked her mother. Sophie didn't reply.

She realised she had forgotten to pick up her bag after school. The loss of her keys was embarrassing, as she had only been given them the day before. It was fortunate that her mother was home or she would have been locked out. She crossed her fingers with the hope that she would find them in Lost Property the next day. However, in the meantime, she would need to firmly bolt the door... and borrow her mother's bag for her schoolwork.

The loss of her keys was of great concern, but seemed less important than the fact that the writer knew about the mimics. If the sender was aware of them, then it was likely it was not some local madman following her. And how did her mysterious friend know about her bag and that she had made friends with the mimics? There had to be a connection

with the mimics. But what could it be, and how could she find out? When she thought about it, her mysterious friend was right about keeping the mimics' existence secret. She couldn't risk having the police or her parents involved. If she did, then the mimics could end up being studied in some secret government laboratory.

She turned over the letter, and examined it carefully. Maybe there would be a clue to the sender's identity. What she found only deepened the mystery. The postmark was 25 May. Today was the 27 May. She hadn't even moved into the house when the letter was sent, let alone met and befriended the mimics. How could the mysterious W.W. know, two days in advance, that she was going to move house, meet the mimics and lose her keys?

Gathering Scissors and Covering Mirrors

Barnaby's stubby finger twisted the knob to the 'off' position. The television picture faded, and was replaced with a dull reflection of the young boy leaving the room. From all outward appearances the set was still. Inside, the studio was in upheaval. The mimics were in disagreement.

'The audience loved it. You could tell by the glee on 'is rosy face,' said Ethelbert.

'But it wasn't supposed to be like that,' complained Hibbie. 'It was supposed to be good against evil. Not good against *misunderstood chap who is nice really.*'

'But it was 'orrible and violent.'

'You can say that again,' said Ell. 'I think I've got bruises on my bruises, from all that martial art.'

'What's so arty about it? How can 'itting people be like a painting?' asked Murb.

The other mimics ignored the pointless question, and their argument continued.

'Couldn't we at least 'ave done the show in full colour?' said Hibbie in frustration.

'All the televisual machines are black and white,' replied

Ethelbert stubbornly.

‘But downstairs...,’ began Hibbie before stopping himself.

Ell swallowed hard. Hibbie had almost let the cat out of the bag. If he said anything about the electrical thing downstairs, Ethelbert would know that they had been out of the attic and then questions would be asked. The two young mimics had decided not to let the others know of their encounter with Sophie. They expected Ethelbert to become angry with them if he ever found out, and fume about the breaking of important rules. Rules that he always insisted were there for good reason, and should never ever under any circumstances be broken.

‘Ow can you be so sure?’ he said instead. ‘What if...’

The alarm bell interrupted him. The television had been switched back on, and they did not have a show ready. In panic, Ethelbert pushed Hibbie onto a small set in the far corner of the studio.

‘You still look like one of them,’ he said. ‘Do *The Weather*.’

Ell looked over at Hibbie. True he was not looking his normal self and his concentration was holding up well, but was a Super Galaxy Hero, saviour of the universe and defender of the innocent, really the correct person to say if it was going to rain or shine? Fortunately, they didn’t need to find out.

‘Look! Look up at the screen!’ shouted Murb.

They looked up along the narrow corridor towards the massive magnifying glasses – not only the audience’s view

to the world of the mimics, but also the mimics' link to their audiences. Instead of an audience waiting expectantly for a programme, a gigantic hand confronted them holding a piece of paper. The paper was then thrust against the screen, displaying clearly a message in fancy, curled writing. When Ell read the words '*friends in the attic*' she gulped. There was no way they could hide the truth from Ethelbert now.

Nervously she glanced at the old mimic, waiting for the stern telling off that was bound to come. Ethelbert scanned the message and fell silent. Ell and Hibbie looked at each other in surprise. They had not expected him to go quiet. Eventually the set clicked off, and the image of Sophie's hand disappeared. Shivering, Ethelbert turned to his younger colleagues.

'So you've been talking with an audience.'

'S... she s... saved me. I was l... lost, and w... well, she saved me,' stammered Hibbie. 'First of all I was a... attacked by a cat, and then this 'orrible monster crept up on me a... and I fell into the 'ouse, b... but that there audience saved me.'

'That's right,' said Ell. Feeling braver she added, 'They don't like being called audiences though. They like being called 'uman...'

'That's a name I don't want to 'ear,' interrupted Ethelbert. 'What's this monster that you're talking about anyhow? There's no such thing!'

'There is!' exclaimed Hibbie. At last he had stopped stammering. 'It towered above me it did – behind the

skirting board. 'Beady eyes, nasty pointed teeth, and its breath was revolting.'

'Behind the skirting board was it? It couldn't be that big then,' said Ethelbert. 'That was a mouse you stupid pup. Didn't you recognise the smell from that old suitcase?'

'Oh, I suppose it might have been,' mumbled Hibbie, looking embarrassed.

'Now this ridiculous monster theory is sorted, let's return to the real problem. 'Ow could you turn to an audience for 'elp? If 'Ibbie was in danger, you should 'ave come to me. You know it's dangerous to advertise our existence.'

'Why?' said Murb, who until now had been standing open-mouthed and lost as events overtook him.

'Cousin Wireless has told me stories of our past. Scary stories. Stories about the Mirror Man,' said the old mimic.

He strode out of the studio, leaving the alarmed young mimics alone.

In the darkness of her room, Sophie lay in bed. It was past midnight, and she hadn't managed to sleep a wink. Her eyes were drawn to dancing reflections and shadows on the ceiling, created by the streetlights outside. One of the shadows appeared to have antennae, just like Ell's. All evening she had tried to get the mimics' attention, with no luck. Maybe they did not trust her. Surely, she had shown the mimics that she was a friend by rescuing two of them? What other proof did they need? She sighed.

The heavens opened up above the house and the

repetitive drumming of rain began on her window. Coming to a decision, she swung her legs over the side of her bed, and tiptoed out of the room.

A lightning flash briefly lit up the four-poster bed. The accompanying thunderclap disturbed Bob's peaceful slumber. Mumbling to himself, he rolled over and promptly dragged the covers from his sleeping wife. Her eyes flickered open. Ruth looked at her snoring husband, and attempted carefully to pull the blankets back over her body. Spluttering in his sleep, Bob held onto the covers with all his might. Ruth took a few moments to realise that it was a thunderstorm that had disrupted their rest. Her mother had told her that a sleeping person could never be hit by lightning. She had often thought that this must be true. She had never heard of a case of anybody being struck while in bed. That would surely be headline news. She halted her attempt at regaining the covers, just in case she endangered her beloved's life. She frowned, remembering her mother's other advice. When there is lightning, all scissors must be collected together and all mirrors must be covered up. Otherwise it was bad luck. Ruth hated the thought of bad luck. Half asleep, she unsteadily rose to her feet and staggered to the far side of the room. She threw a towel over the dressing-table mirror and a sock over her small make-up mirror, before fumbling in the drawer. Clutching tightly to her nail scissors, she whispered to Bob, before leaving the room.

‘Stay safe and don’t wake up, darling. I won’t be long.’

Ell leant against the leg of the television set that had been her home for all of her short life. She studied the dark attic with interest. She had never seen the place as a home to beings other than mimics. The audiences were simply things to perform to. True, she took their form for her shows, but before she had never thought of them as intelligent creatures with feelings and emotions. In fact she had seen them simply as a piece of clothing, a pair of eyes and a set of funny-looking ears. After meeting Sophie, she knew that they were very similar to mimics. They just did things differently, and of course, humans looked very strange. However odd her appearance, Ell couldn’t see how Sophie could possibly be as dangerous as Ethelbert believed. If only she knew why talking to an audience scared her elder so much.

Her blue antennae twitched, as her ears picked up the creak of a floorboard outside the attic door. Ell braced herself. It was possible that the cat was on a night prowl. The door swung slowly open and a tall shadow entered. Ell relaxed slightly. Too tall for a cat, and lacking the glow-in-the-dark eyes. It had to be an audience, but which one?

‘Ell, Hibbie. Are you awake?’ whispered Sophie.

In the darkness of the room it would have been easy for Ell to hide. That would certainly have been Ethelbert’s advice. However, Ell felt guilty at ignoring Sophie’s many pleas for conversation throughout the evening. Taking a deep breath, she decided that for the rescue of Hibbie,

Sophie was owed at least some sort of explanation.

‘Over here,’ she called softly to the approaching shadow.

A few moments later the two beings – one tall, thin and pink, the other tiny, blue and furry – were slumped against the wall underneath the attic window, away from the television in case they disturbed the other mimics. Rain hammered on the windowpane, disguising their hushed voices.

‘You’re telling me we can’t be friends?’ said Sophie for the umpteenth time.

Ell sighed before replying, ‘It’s not that I don’t want to, but... you know. It’s old Ethelbert. ‘E says you’re dangerous. And as for that note... well it means someone else knows about us. You must have told someone.’

‘I didn’t! I’m as much in the dark about that message as you are!’ said Sophie. She paused to let her words sink in. ‘I was sent another letter earlier today that told me an evil man was following me. So I think I’m the one who’s in danger.’

Ell was lost for words. It had not crossed her mind that creatures as large as the audiences could ever be in any danger. She had simply assumed their size would protect them. She thought about her performances on the screen. Except for *Super Galaxy Heroes*, copied from the modern television, all their programmes had been calm and placid. If she was speaking the truth, surely Ethelbert could not abandon this particular audience. Sophie had, after all, saved two of them from certain death and now it appeared

she may be in danger herself.

'I'll talk to Ethelbert for you. Maybe 'e'll listen to reason,' she promised. 'It's odd though. When Murb asked why audiences were dangerous, Ethelbert mentioned the tale of the Mirror Man. But it's only a fairytale so I don't know why 'e mentioned it.'

'The Mirror Man?' said Sophie, 'Who's that?'

'It's a mimic fairytale so you wouldn't have 'eard it. When I was growing up I was told that the Mirror Man would come for me if I wasn't a good mimic.'

'That's a bit mean,' remarked Sophie.

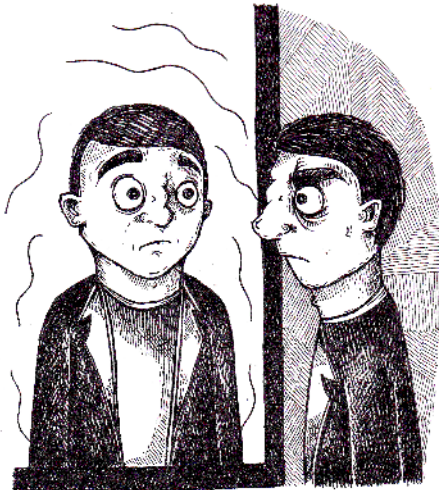
'Suppose so, but that's Ethelbert's way. I was quite a handful when I was young,' confided Ell. 'The story is in a collection of fables called *The Tales of Penda*. It's a very old fairytale – *Death and the Audience*. I've got a copy in the television if you fancy a read.'

'I think it will be a bit small for me to see,' said Sophie sadly, 'I'd need tweezers to turn the pages.'

'Sorry, didn't think,' said Ell looking at the much larger hands of Sophie. 'Well the story goes something like this. Once upon a time mimics and audiences lived side-by-side in a fabulous forest. But audiences were treacherous, and were always looking for ways to show that they were the true masters of the forest. 'Owever, all the other animals looked up to the mimics first, much to the audiences' dismay. During one night – the darkest night that there ever was – one audience crept up and surprised Death as 'e went around 'is deadly business. The audience asked Death if 'e

could grant 'is wish and allow 'im to live forever, as this would surely prove once and for all that audiences were better than mimics. Death pondered for a moment, and then 'eld up a bony mirror. 'E told the audience to gaze into it if 'e truly wanted to live forever.

Believing it was truly what 'e wanted, the audience looked into Death's mirror. In front of 'is eyes 'is reflection came alive and stepped out into the real world. It was impossible to tell which audience was the original and which was the reflection. Death said that one of them was *all that was good* and the other *all that was bad*.



One 'ad to go back into the mirror, and the other would live forever. As soon as the evil reflection 'eard this, 'e picked up the good by the scruff of the neck and 'urled 'im

into Death's mirror. Death then told the reflection that 'e now no longer 'ad a name. From now on 'e was the Mirror Man, and 'e was to punish all mimics that did not perform their shows to the best of their ability.'

'Pretty dark, but most fairytales are,' said Sophie. There was a rumble of thunder from outside as if to emphasise her point.

'Yeah. It's obviously not a true story,' said Ell, 'But I do wonder why Ethelbert brought it up? You know 'Ibbie wanted to do a version of it on the television.' Ell slipped briefly into the posh voice she had used for *Percival the Pony*. 'Hamster House of Horror' he wanted to call the show. Different scary story each week, but Ethelbert thought it was a terrible idea.'

Anxious to change the subject to more pleasant topics, the pair began chatting in low voices about anything that popped into their heads. Soon Sophie was listening in disgust to Ell's recipe for boiled woodlouse with spider and honey dressing. When the subject of the mimics' talent with illusions came up, Ell automatically glanced at the grimy mirror hanging from the wall close by. In the dim light she saw her reflection, and felt full of pride that she could copy such a weird-looking species as humans so accurately.

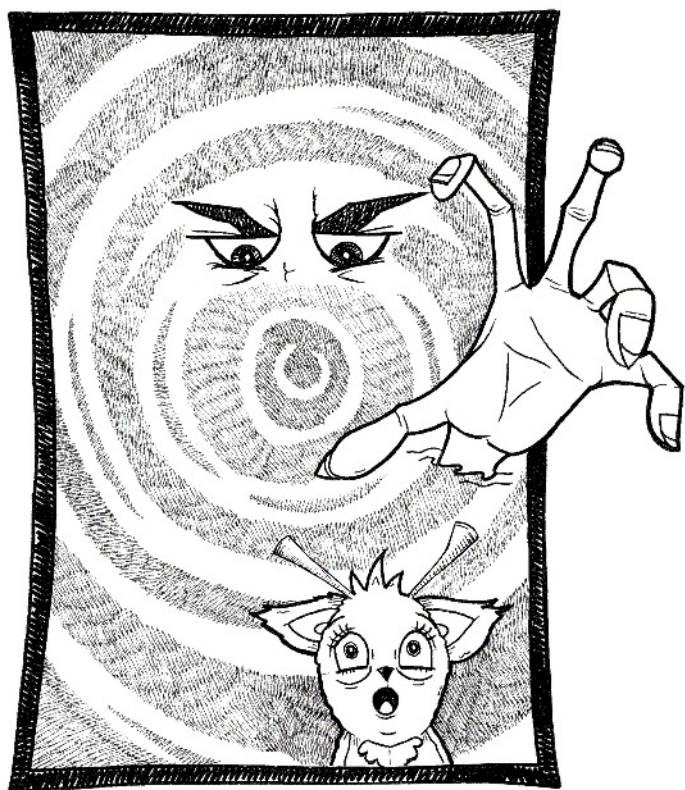
She was still chatting away, when her reflection dissolved and disappeared. As she finished her sentence, she studied the mirror more closely. It seemed to be glowing. She stopped listening to Sophie's reply, and leant closer. Ripples began to form on the mirror's surface – as if it was liquid

and someone had thrown a stone into the middle.

Before her, she saw the reflection of a pair of eyes, coldly staring at her from out of the mirror. A pair of eyes that were not hers. Her scream came out as a gurgle. She tore her eyes away, burying them in her hands. Sophie didn't notice, and began a lecture on sausage rolls.

Ell forced herself to look back at the mirror. The eyes had been replaced by a reflection of a pair of ancient hands. One hand moved forwards, as if it was about to tap the mirror. In terror, Ell spun around. Only the attic's brick wall was behind her. She turned back, and realised that Sophie had stopped her one-way conversation.

The girl was staring, mouth open, at the hand. It was no longer a reflection, but was sticking out of the mirror into the attic. The reflection was becoming solid.



Today You Will Be Abducted

The creak from the loose floorboard outside the attic hardly registered with the two friends. Sophie and Ell were rooted to the spot in terror, transfixed by the withered hand. As the attic door swung open, they slowly turned their heads towards the doorway, fully expecting to be confronted with another horror. Instead Sophie and Ell were surprised when Ruth swayed into the room, clutching an armful of scissors. Fortunately, Sophie's mother was in such a daze that she failed to see the pair crouched beneath the window, or that there was a hideous hand poking out from the mirror. Instead, tutting softly to herself, she picked up an old ragged towel and threw it. The shot was perfect, and completely swamped the mirror. Briefly, there was a bulge in the towel where the invading hand was covered. Then, with an annoyed hiss, the bulge abruptly disappeared.

Her task done, Ruth promptly turned on her heels and trudged wearily out of the attic. Sophie and Ell sat in silence for a full minute, neither sure what to do. Then, holding her breath, Sophie carefully lifted the towel and peeped underneath. Her reflection stared back at her. It was normal. The danger appeared to have passed. However, the scare

had been too much for Ell. Sophie turned around just in time to see the tiny creature climbing back into the television. She could hardly blame her mimic friend. The whole ordeal had been terrifying. Perhaps there really were such things as ghosts. Maybe she should fetch Barnaby, she thought grimly. He wanted to meet a ghost after all.

Without Ell's company, there was no reason for Sophie to remain in the attic. She had no wish to see the ghostly hands again anyway, so she tiptoed back to her bedroom, carefully avoiding dropped scissors as she went. As Ruth stumbled back to her room, her words floated down the landing.

'Didn't realise my hands were that wrinkled. I'd better get some lotion tomorrow.'

To Sophie, it only seemed like minutes before her alarm woke her up. She made a mental note that she would have to get a decent night's sleep soon, or she would make herself ill. Sleepily she lay in bed for as long as she could, before dragging herself upright and throwing on her clothes. If she delayed any further she would be late for school. She rushed downstairs and decided to skip breakfast. Grabbing her coat, she threw the front door open and crashed straight into the postman. Letters and parcels went everywhere. Apologies tumbled from her mouth, as the poor man sank to his hands and knees to stop the spilt mail blowing away in the wind.

Sophie desperately tried to help him, grabbing soggy letters out of the puddles on the doorstep and shoving them

back into his postbag. A strong gust threatened to swipe a gas bill addressed to a 'Miss Rooney' and send it high into the sky. Sophie made a grab for it just in time, but when her dainty fingers plucked it from the air she suddenly stopped in surprise. Stuck to the underside of the bill flapped a small brown envelope clearly displaying her name. Judging by the beautiful writing, it was another message from her mysterious friend. Quickly, Sophie ripped the precious message from Miss Rooney's letter, tearing the bill's envelope in her haste. With an annoyed grunt, the postman snatched the gas bill from her and strode off down the path, glaring back at her as he went. Alone, Sophie looked at the letter. She was afraid to open it. The other messages had all been warnings, and last night proved just how accurate they were. As the seconds ticked by, she held her breath and tore it open.

*Phew, nearly missed you!
Our Majesty's postal workers will not
like you much from now on, don't you think?
However, this warning is more important than who
likes or dislikes you. Today you will
be abducted. There is nothing to stop it.
But don't worry.
All is not lost if you remember to reflect.
Yours W. W.*

All thoughts of school momentarily forgotten, Sophie

found herself back in the attic turning the knob on the ancient television. Desperately hoping that the mimics would respond, she held the latest message to the screen. After the horrific vision in the mirror and Ethelbert's orders not to see her, would Ell reply? To her relief she saw two furry shapes clamber out of the set.

'Quick, turn off the set,' garbled Ell, 'Before old Ethelbert sees it.'

Sophie twisted the knob back to the 'off' position, before bending down to her small friends. She felt guilty. What could the mimics do to help her? Even a mouse dwarfed them.

'I'm sorry. I didn't know who to turn to,' apologised Sophie. 'But I shouldn't have disturbed you. I'm late for school, so I should be off...'

'Can I come? To wherever audiences... sorry... 'umans go when they're not watching telly,' asked Ell to Sophie's amazement.

'Ell!' cried Hibbie in protest. 'Speaking with an audience is one thing, but to leave the attic with one? It's too dangerous.'

'Look,' said Ell stubbornly, 'All we know about these 'umans is from Ethelbert's tales and 'e 'asn't been out in sixty odd years. I want to see what it's like outside for myself.'

'What about that note? She's going to be abducted.'

'All the more reason to go. I might be able to 'elp. Anyway, 'ow on earth would anybody know for certain that is what will 'appen?'

‘Are you sure, Ell?’ asked Sophie. ‘What about that thing in the mirror last night? Coming with me might be dangerous.’

‘Sure, those wrinkled ‘ands were scary but it must ‘ave been an illusion. There’s no way it was real. Cousin Wireless was probably ‘avin a cheap laugh at our expense,’ said Ell. ‘Do you want my ‘elp or not?’

Sophie felt a warm glow inside. This was more than she had dared to hope for. She wasn’t sure what Ell could do to help, but the chance to spend the whole day with her was too good to turn down.

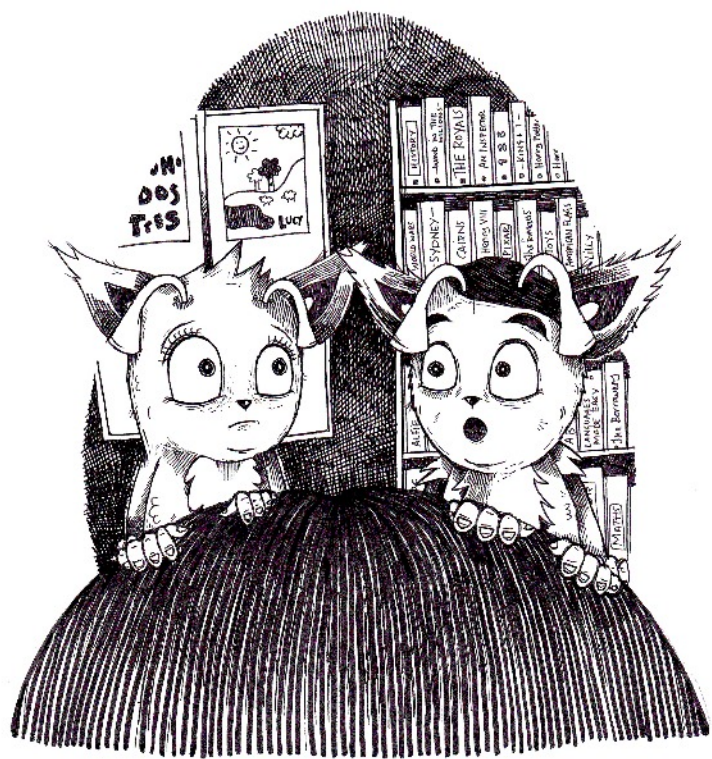
‘If you really want to, come on!’ said Sophie, lowering her hand to the floor.

‘I’m not going in that pocket and that’s final,’ said Ell. ‘It’s disgusting. Isn’t there somewhere else I could ‘ide?’

As Ell clambered on to Sophie’s palm, Hibbie squeaked out, ‘Can I come too?’

The school day swiftly disappeared. By all appearances everything had been normal – well as normal as they can be with two bickering mimics hidden in your hair. Sophie had tied up her long hair, making a rough cocoon for Ell and Hibbie. Their presence certainly made school life more interesting, if a little complicated and slightly itchy. So far she hadn’t seen anything out of the ordinary – just the usual crowd of children and teachers.

When the final bell rang, she decided to take a different route home in case the man in the leather coat lay in wait to ambush her. She had ordered herself earlier to be braver,



and she was now more determined than ever to be so. If she didn't have a clear head and gave in to fear, the stalker would have a big advantage. The first part of the journey proved uneventful. However, as she neared home her nerves began to fray and her newfound bravery was waning. The message seemed so certain that she would be abducted, and out in the open she was at her most vulnerable.

The mimics were busy arguing about where they should tell Ethelbert they had been all day, when a loud flapping sound echoed around the street. In panic, Sophie spun around. It was not the sound of the stalker's coat, but a pigeon taking to the air. Relief washed over her. Shaking her head at her own jumpiness, Sophie continued her journey.

Ten minutes later, after continually turning to look behind for any danger, Sophie realised that she had not been paying attention to where she was heading. She had missed her turning and had wandered into an unfamiliar alleyway. As Sophie turned to retrace her steps, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Poised to run, she squinted into the shadow-bathed dustbins. She relaxed when a dog padded out from behind a bin that he had been snooping in, a bone in his mouth, a prize for his investigations. It was another false alarm.

She had only taken a few more paces, when a laugh cackled behind her. Quickly she spun around. Silhouetted in the entrance to the alleyway stood a figure of a man in a long leather coat. This time it was no false alarm. This time

it was real. She turned on her heels and fled, the laugh following her every step. Panting with the effort, Sophie skidded around the corner into the street beyond. She stole a glance over her shoulder, and her heart sank when she realised that her pursuer was close behind. He did not appear to be making any effort, but she was rapidly running out of energy. She kept her eyes staring straight ahead, and continued to sprint down the road. The unnerving flapping sound of his leather coat drew ever closer, until she believed she could almost feel the man's breath on her neck. She had to find somewhere to hide... and fast!

In front of her loomed the entrance to a large block of offices. Without pausing for thought, Sophie rushed inside. She whizzed straight past a startled security guard, who almost dropped his cup of coffee in fright. As she bounded up the stairs towards the first floor, Sophie sneaked another glance behind her. To her relief the security guard had now come to his senses and was attempting to stop her pursuer entering the building. Sophie's relief was short-lived. In the plate glass window of the office block, the security guard's reflection suddenly took on a life of its own. Silently his own reflection laughed and pointed at the surprised guard, and pretended to strangle itself. At once, a ridiculous grin splashed onto the guard's face, and he slid unconscious to the floor. His lukewarm cup of coffee slipped from his fingers to sink into the rough, grey carpet. Its job done, the reflection faded to be replaced with a normal reflection of an unconscious security guard slumped on the ground.

Sophie's pursuer stepped over the guard's prone body, and strode towards the bottom step.

Knowing that she was mere seconds ahead, Sophie raced around the top of the stairs and found herself in a long deserted corridor with doors leading off to various rooms. Picking one at random, she threw herself in and slammed the door shut behind her. Too late, she realised that she had entered a broom cupboard. She would be trapped if the man found her. She heard footsteps in the corridor. She whispered for the mimics to remain quiet, and softly bit her lip to stop herself crying out in fear. Sophie sank low behind a vacuum cleaner. Her only chance was to hide. If her pursuer opened the broom cupboard, perhaps in the dim light he would miss her. She was aware of heavy breathing outside the door, and then nothing – absolute quietness.

Sophie remained in the cupboard for a full twenty minutes before she dared to emerge. Selecting a mop as a makeshift weapon, she carefully opened the door. To her surprise, she was confronted with pitch-blackness. Her bright mind easily explained this away. Her pursuer was unable to locate her hiding place, and had been forced to leave before the police arrived. No doubt the police had taken the security guard away to hospital, and had turned the lights off when they had gone. In the far off distance, she saw a source of light, and fumbled towards it. More than likely it was the exit. Was she locked in? She stumbled downstairs, but the exit light didn't appear to be any closer. Onwards she went. The office corridor seemed endless,

twisting and turning. With all the corners, she wondered why she was always able to see the light. But it stayed in sight, taunting her. Her footsteps echoed, and she was sure she could hear the drip, drip of water. Not the usual sounds she would have expected in an office corridor. She sniffed, and almost choked with disgust. The corridor smelt as if something had died in it. She was struggling to find a rational explanation.

As she approached the light, her eyes were becoming used to the gloom. She frowned. This was impossible. She was no longer in the office corridor, but in a smelly, concrete cellar. The light was not the exit, but a ghostly, shimmering mirror. She turned around to retrace her steps. In horror, she realised that the corridor behind her had disappeared. Panicking, she looked wildly around, only to find that there were no doors or windows. She was trapped. A voice came from behind her. A voice that made her flesh crawl.

‘Well, well. Are you going to wash me to death, or is that mop a hint that I should clean up more often?’

Sophie dared not turn around. She knew that her abductor was behind her, but she was too terrified to look at him. Instead her eyes flicked wildly around the room, searching in vain for a way of escape. She shuddered when she heard the flapping of the man’s coat, as he repositioned himself by her side. With supreme effort, she slowly turned her head to face him. He smiled at her with a broad grin, displaying a set of orange teeth.

‘Well, aren’t you going to tell me how lovely my home

is? Go on please, don't be shy.'

'Who... who are you?' said Sophie in a weak voice.

'Ahh, so the creature does talk.'

'I said who are you? Are you the Mirror Man?' asked Sophie once again, this time trying to make her voice sound stronger.

The man began to chuckle. The laugh made Sophie's hairs stand on end. In panic she swung the mop towards him. He didn't attempt to avoid the strike and the wet end narrowly missed his nose.

'No need for violence, young woman,' he said smoothly. 'I have not used a name for centuries, so I'm afraid it's a little pointless to give you an answer, but if you insist then yes I suppose you can call me the Mirror Man. I was given the title by the creatures you have stupidly befriended. As for what I want – which I'm sure is your next question – well, you are in the privileged position of being able to help me.'

Sophie lowered the mop a little. 'Help you?' she asked in surprise.

'Help me, and indeed yourself,' said the Mirror Man. 'Give me the mimics, and I'll leave you in peace. It's a small price to pay.'

'They are not mine to give.'

'They have no rights, girl.'

His voice was so soothing, that she almost believed his words. She felt herself relaxing and the mop slipped further down, until she lost her grip and it clattered to the floor. The

unexpected noise broke his hypnotic hold on her, and she fought to clear her mind. The mimics were her friends, and she would never betray them. She would not be able to live with herself if she handed the little creatures over.

‘What do you want with them?’ she demanded.

‘They are scum. A blight that has to be crushed. No better than cockroaches or rats. I have given you a chance to help human kind. Will you reject it?’

Sophie began to back away. She had the strong impression that this man was mad as a hatter. Seeing the distrust in her eyes, the Mirror Man’s soothing tones abruptly changed.

‘You can’t win against me,’ he said sharply. ‘You don’t know who you are dealing with. If you did, you would cower before me like a beaten puppy. Your life on this world is brief, but I have seen civilisations rise and fall. I was there when Stonehenge was built with blood and sweat, and when Julius Caesar was stabbed on the steps of Rome. Humans have shaped this world, but the mimics dirty it. I am simply attempting to cleanse our planet of their filthy existence.’

‘I don’t know where they are,’ Sophie lied.

‘Not a very good bluff I’m afraid, mimic lover,’ he spat. ‘I can smell their stench on you.’

To Sophie’s horror, she felt the mimics stirring in her hair. She tried to warn them to keep quiet. Her arms flailed in the air, looking to a casual observer as if she was pretending to be a windmill, but the movement persisted. The Mirror Man leered at her, and probably thought she

was mad. Better that than allow the mimics to give themselves away, Sophie reasoned. However, it didn't work. Hibbie, never one to take an insult lightly, shouted out one short comment. It was one comment too many.

'I'll 'ave you know I shampooed my fur this morning!'

The Mirror Man grinned nastily. Sophie backed away as he moved towards her, but there was nowhere to go. No escape from her abductor's grasp. He leant forwards, and she recoiled from his vile breath until the back of her head was resting on the crumbling brick of the cellar wall. Slowly he straightened out one of his long, wrinkled fingers. Sophie let out a whimper, as he brought the finger up to her hair and began to prod at her curls. All of a sudden, he cried out in pain. Quickly he withdrew his finger from Sophie's hair, to find Ell clamped firmly to the end – her teeth embedded in its tip. Her tiny body dangled in the air for a brief moment, until she opened her mouth and released the withered finger. Ell fell to the floor and scurried towards Sophie, as their captor sucked his bitten finger in his still leering mouth. Strangely, although Ell had bitten deep, there wasn't a single drop of blood to be seen.

Realising that she would not get a better chance, Sophie quickly scooped up her friend. Pushing the Mirror Man to one side, she rushed into the middle of the room. Her mind raced. The message from her mysterious friend had warned her – told her – that she would be in this situation. It had also said that she need not worry, so she assumed that she was not doomed to die in this dark, damp cellar. She thought

back to the exact words from the message. It had told her to 'reflect.' It sounded more like a crossword clue, than an escape route. As she began to wish she had spent more time solving crossword puzzles rather than playing computer games, she spied the shimmering mirror. It sparked the memory of her experience the night before.

'Of course! The mirror!' she said in triumph.

She ran at full speed towards the gleaming light, sensing the Mirror Man was close behind. Skidding to a halt by the mirror, Sophie nervously touched its surface. Her hand disappeared inside. Closing her eyes, she held her breath and plunged headlong into the mirror. A split second later, the Mirror Man reached the spot where she had stood moments before. He did not follow. Instead he grinned with enjoyment.

It was like moving through the stickiest toffee pudding that had ever existed, served up with toffee custard with toffee on the side. Each step was an effort, and Sophie had to struggle to keep herself moving. There didn't appear to be a floor, but she tried to block the fact from her mind. Her eyes saw streaks of colour rushing towards her. Gradually the colours arranged themselves into blurred images. It reminded Sophie of a television set tuning-in. Many images were too blurred to recognise, but certain ones held an odd familiarity.

Abruptly a sharp picture formed in front of her eyes. Sophie flushed with embarrassment. It was an image of

herself at school. An image she forever wanted to block out of her memory, but she was now forced to see once more. In vivid detail she watched herself sneeze over a classmate's burger and chips in the school canteen. To her shame, it was exactly what she had done a few days earlier. She was glad nobody could see her rapidly reddening face. Then came several images she did not recognise. One involved a hazy picture of her yelling angrily at her little brother. It was not unusual for her to be angry with Barnaby, but she could not recall ever blowing her top as much as this. It looked as if he was about to burst into tears, which made her feel utterly lousy. There was a brief image of an ancient looking ring with a green stone. The tarnished silver band of the ring had an ornate engraving of interlocking lizards. Then the ring was blotted out as thousands of tiny pieces of glass were seen falling into water. As each piece landed, a multitude of ripples spread out across the water's surface until the ripples were all that could be seen.

Sophie jumped as a faceless reflection stared out of the ripples. It looked at her. It had no eyes to look at her with, but Sophie knew it was looking at her. It seemed to be trying to speak, but was having difficulty doing so. Suddenly the image disappeared in a flash of brilliant white light. Sophie realised she was being dragged forwards, and in vain she desperately tried to stop her rapid progress. Her body began stretching and distorting. Her hands grew longer and her legs became massively thin. She literally flowed into the light, and the next thing she knew she was back at home,

sprawled across her parents' four-poster bed.

To Sophie's exhausted body, the bed felt like heaven. After the events she had witnessed during the past few days, she was not surprised at finding herself at home. Her hand nudged a small object lying next to her, nearly knocking it to the floor. It was her mother's make-up mirror. However impossible it seemed, she knew she must have squeezed out of the tiny foldaway mirror! Sophie thought for a moment. When the old towel had been thrown over the mirror the previous night, the hands were repelled from the attic. So it figured that covering this mirror would prevent her being followed. She made a mental note to make sure the mirror in the attic was still covered, along with her parents' dressing table mirror and the mirror in the bathroom. That should be all the mirrors in the house, she thought. She would tell her mother that it was to prevent bad luck, and her dad would be forced to accept it. When her fingers flipped the make-up mirror shut, Sophie became aware of the mimics climbing out of her hair. With the excitement of her escape, she had forgotten they were there. Ell clambered across the bed, and leapt onto Sophie's stomach. Hibbie simply made himself comfortable on top of the soft feather pillow. They seemed in high spirits.

'Gawd, that 'as to be the oddest thing that I 'ave ever seen!' exclaimed Ell.

'What an escape though,' said Hibbie. 'I'll 'ave to use it on the next episode of *Super Galaxy 'Eroes*.'

'Did you all see those pictures of my performances?' said

Ell. 'Did you think they were up to 'Ollywood standard or what?'

'I saw me, not you,' replied Hibbie. 'Me this morning. As I 'ad spider marmalade on toast for breakfast.'

Sophie sighed. The mimics didn't seem to realise that they had escaped by the skin of their teeth. Odd though, that they had all seen different images.

'He'll come after us again, you know,' she said. 'We were lucky.'

The two mimics went quiet. Some more time had just been bought, that was all. Ell opened her mouth to speak, but she suddenly froze when the door began to creak open. She dived for cover under the bedspread, dragging Hibbie with her. A wave of relief swept across Sophie, when she realised it was only her mother. And her mother was being weird again. Tucked under Ruth's arm was a loaf of crusty bread, and she was holding before her a dinner plate heaped with salt.

'Oh, hello dear,' she said when she noticed her daughter. 'I didn't hear you come in. Good day at school?'

Sophie thought quickly for a reason for her to be in her mother's bedroom.

'I thought I'd take another look at this four-poster bed,' she lied clumsily. 'It's great isn't it?'

'I forgot to take bread and salt into each room when we moved in,' said Ruth in a worried voice. 'You're supposed to do that when you move into a new house, you know. Otherwise it's bad luck. Do you think it'll be okay being a

little late?’

Sophie forced a smile. Bad luck on the house was the last thing on her mind. Out of the corner of her eye, she had spotted the mimics crawling out from under the bed sheets. Using the pillow as camouflage, they moved away from Ruth’s line of vision. Soon she could feel scratching on her back, and then on her neck.

‘I’m sure it’ll be alright,’ she said rising to her feet, the mimics again hidden in her hair. Absentmindedly, she slipped the make-up mirror into her pocket as she left the room. She felt the gentle scratches of the mimics on her scalp as she took them back to the attic. For now, they were safe, but what could a few tiny creatures and one girl do to protect themselves from somebody as powerful as the Mirror Man?

— CHAPTER EIGHT —

The Power Cut

Electronic sounds echoed around Barnaby's bedroom. The shields of General Zardos's mothership had been destroyed. It was a sitting duck. All Barnaby had to do was press the fire button, and the universe would be free from tyranny. Abruptly the mothership disappeared. Barnaby looked in dismay at his hand-held *Super Galaxy Heroes* computer game. He had been seconds away from becoming the saviour of the universe, but the bargain batteries his mother had bought him from *Pound-a-Rama* had run out. In disgust, he threw the game onto the floor, and there was a slight cracking noise as something inside broke. Crawling off his bed, the little boy left the room. Perhaps there would be something worth watching on telly.

Amazingly, Ell and Hibbie had been able to sneak back into the ancient television without the other mimics even noticing their absence. They had gone to a great deal of trouble concocting a story of how they had set off early to visit Cousin Wireless, and for once he had welcomed them in gracefully. The day had been spent listening to his tales of days long past. It wasn't very believable, as the mimics

all knew how sour-faced Cousin Wireless always was, but they needed some sort of alibi and it was all they could think of. Ethelbert certainly wouldn't bother checking with their cousin to see if it was true. The young mimics thought it best to keep the events of the day to themselves, realising that Ethelbert would be extremely angry if he knew they had yet again been talking to an audience. They needn't have bothered with the planning of their fantastic lie. Whilst Murb had frittered the day away tending to his bees, Ethelbert had locked himself in his room to write some new scripts. It was simple for Ell and Hibbie to slip in and act as if they had been there all along.

When Ethelbert had finally emerged, he immediately busied the mimics into preparing a brand new show. Before he did so, he had made an announcement. Judging by the note that had been held up to the television screen, it was obvious that somebody else other than the audience that rescued Ell and Hibbie knew of their existence. Taking this into account he said, it would be wise not to use their powers of illusion for a little while just to be on the safe side. The youngsters still had a lot to learn, and he didn't want any mistakes giving them away. Still the show must go on, so an alternative had to be found. It was time for a cartoon. Under the old mimic's instructions, the youngsters held in front of them a large cardboard-cut-out character apiece. Each was a badly drawn black and white line drawing. Art was not one of Ethelbert's strong points. When Murb had pointed out this simple fact, Ethelbert had explained shortly

that as the show was for young audiences they didn't need fancy effects. Children would watch anything, he reasoned.

Hibbie held Captain Hogwash, the pirate pig, who roamed the high seas in his ship, *The Black Pudding*. Ell's task was to prop up the pirate crew. Out of sight Murb waited with the villainous archenemy, the Pig Farmer. As Barnaby clomped up the stairs, they were ready. When Barnaby's stubby finger turned the set on, the alarm bells rang. The set had been switched on, and it was time for the performance to begin.

The television sprang into life, and Barnaby smiled broadly when he saw that the programme was a cartoon. He loved cartoons. On the screen, a pig was strutting importantly around a ship, waving a sword in a very jerky fashion and talking in a voice that was a cross between a pirate and the three little pigs.

'Har, har, me harties,' he squealed. 'Let's get our treasure.'

Captain Hogwash and his crew wobbled unsteadily across the screen, towards the ship's plank. Perched unbelievably at the end of the plank, was a treasure chest brimming over with the crown jewels.

'Oh no, it's the Pig Farmer,' said the pirate crew altogether, as another cut out figure popped up in front of them. It was a drawing of a large salad sandwich.

'I've got you now, Captain Hogwash,' said the sandwich, 'Give me...'

A husky panicky voice hissed, 'That's the wrong

character! The Pig Farmer, quick! The Pig Farmer!’

Abruptly the sandwich disappeared, to be replaced with a cow with a daisy in its mouth.

‘Give me...’ said the cow.

‘Not that one! The Pig Farmer! The Pig Farmer!’

Barnaby was bored with the cartoon. He did not find it funny or exciting. Some people thought that children would watch anything – no need to put proper effort in. Well, he would reply by turning over. Remembering that this television was too old to have a remote control, he leant forward and reached for the knobs. He twisted one at random, then another. Nothing happened. The set kept broadcasting the same old cartoon. As he twisted the knob, the cartoon seemed to go haywire, with characters running everywhere in panic. Barnaby was sure he saw a glimpse of a bright purple foot at the bottom of the black and white picture, but as soon as he had spotted the splash of colour it was gone.

Then everything went black. The attic light had gone out, plunging the room into semi-darkness. Barnaby rose to his feet and fumbled to find the attic door, knocking over the rodents’ suitcase home in the poor light. Eventually he found it, and yanked it open. It was immediately clear that the lights were off throughout the house. He could hear the other members of the family, bumping and crashing around downstairs.

‘Haven’t we got any candles?’ he heard his father say. Then after another large crash, Bob’s frustrated voice cried

out, 'No dear... not them! They're for birthday cakes! Better still, if we can find my torch... '

Barnaby broke into a broad grin. He remembered the previous year, when a workman accidentally cut the electricity cable to his street and everybody's lights went out. It was like a big game, and he had a great time playing ghouls and goblins. With glee, he made ghostly sounds and rushed around the darkened attic. It was a miracle that he didn't fall over in the gloom. Then something caught his eye. In his excitement, he had forgotten about the television. His jaw dropped down in astonishment when he realised that it was still on. The loss of power had not affected it in the slightest. There was a different programme on now – another rubbish cartoon. This time it was a tale of a Viking that had accidentally been delivered cowboy hats instead of horned helmets, but Barnaby didn't care. He was more interested in why the telly was still working.

After a few moments of pondering, Barnaby decided that this particular television had to be battery operated. His excitement rose, when he realised that he might be able to borrow its batteries for his *Super Galaxy Heroes* computer game. He was dying to complete the last level. Barnaby sank onto his hands and knees, and peered behind the set. In the darkness, he couldn't see any battery compartments. Irritated, he clambered to his feet and gripped the side of the television. He tilted it up on its side, and attempted to look underneath. He could see nothing.

He tilted it even further up, and this time his sharp eyes

spied a glint of metal. There was something under the television. Grunting with effort, Barnaby pushed the set still higher. His small fingers fumbled for the object. He couldn't quite reach. He stretched his arms as far as possible, and finally gripped it. At that precise moment, he lost his hold on the TV. To his horror, Barnaby watched the set topple over the edge. The side of the telly hit the floor with an almighty bang! The picture flickered off, plunging the attic into complete and utter darkness.

Terrified, Ell hung desperately onto the door handle. During the show, the floor had, without warning, disappeared beneath her feet. It was as if there had been an immense earthquake. Now her legs were dangling above a huge drop, with her grip on a door-handle the only thing preventing her from plummeting downwards. The door's hinges screamed in protest, as they twisted and buckled with her weight.

She forced herself to look below. Most of the lamps had gone out, and so it was very hard to see anything at all. To her right she heard a creaking sound. Twisting her head, Ell was confronted with the sight of Ethelbert hanging upside down. His leg was wedged between a studio light, and what used to be the ceiling, but was now a wall. As he came to his senses, he began shouting in panic. Ell recalled that old Ethelbert had never been very good at heights. It was then that she heard the comforting voice of Hibbie, from the gloom below.

“Ang on. We'll get you down. Just catch this.’

Squinting in the semi-darkness, Ell was just about able to spot her friend. He was at the bottom of the drop, standing next to one of the few working lights. It flickered occasionally, but the furnace that powered it was still working. Running on woodlouse dung, the furnace supplied all of the mimics' power needs. It was fortunate that it hadn't been damaged during the earthquake, or they would have been in total darkness. Bathed in the glow of the studio light, Hibbie uncoiled a length of rope and looped it into a rough lasso. With his stout arms, the young mimic threw the lasso in the general direction of Ethelbert – and missed. Hurriedly he gathered up the rope for a second try. The second attempt looped over the old mimic's big nose, causing him to whimper in fright.

'Don't worry,' Hibbie called upwards. 'We'll 'ave you down in a jiffy. I'll just get that off your nose and try again.'

With a flourish, Hibbie pulled the rope. Instead of dropping off poor Ethelbert's nose as intended, the pull had the effect of tightening the noose.

'Whut yud dunin!' cried Ethelbert, sounding like a train announcer with a heavy cold.

Shouting his apologies, Hibbie attempted to correct his mistake. He flicked the rope, aiming to free it from Ethelbert's nose. He felt it loosen. All it needed now was another twist, and it would slide off. Carefully, he turned the rope... and then he jumped out of his purple fur. Beside him, Murb had materialised seemingly out of thin air. He appeared unconcerned about what the earthquake had done

to the studio. As usual, his mind was set on only one thing.

‘You’ll be pleased to know my bees are okay,’ said Murb. “Apply buzzing away they are. Spilt their ‘oney though.’”

Hibbie’s temper rose. Of all the times to start jabbering on about bees. Stupidly, he took his temper out on the rope. Instead of delicately twisting as he had intended, Hibbie yanked hard. Too late he realised his awful mistake. With this one yank, Ethelbert was abruptly pulled off the studio light. With nothing to support him, he plummeted towards the ground. The young mimic looked upwards in panic. Everything appeared to move in slow motion, as Ethelbert fell and Hibbie was powerless to stop him.

‘What you doing anyway?’ asked Murb, oblivious to what was going on.

When Hibbie didn’t answer, he craned his head to see what the other mimic was looking at so intently. His vision was immediately filled with the sight of Ethelbert plummeting downwards, his arms and legs clawing at the air. A fraction of a second later Murb was sprawled on the floor, the heavy body of his elder pinning him to the ground. By a miracle, the fat, round body of Murb had broken the old mimic’s fall. The youngster groaned, as he forced himself from beneath Ethelbert. His head spinning, he struggled unsteadily to his feet. The old mimic remained where he was, happy to be on solid ground. However, Murb had only a split-second before he had the breath yet again knocked out of him. Without warning, the door handle Ell had been holding onto snapped and it was her turn to find

a soft landing.

In the cavernous cupboard under the stairs, Bob held aloft a saucer with twelve tiny, brightly coloured birthday candles melted onto its centre. The light was good enough to see by, but he couldn't help feeling stupid using it. He kept expecting somebody to start singing *Happy Birthday* at any moment. If only he could have found his torch.

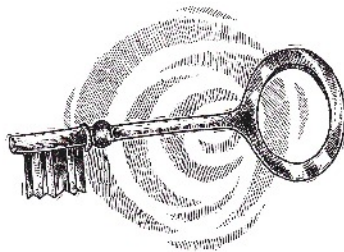
Reaching up, Bob gripped a fuse. Roughly pulling it out, he peered at it for a few seconds, shook his head and replaced it. The same process was repeated twice before he found the blown fuse and made the necessary repair. A smug expression crept onto his face when the lights again flickered into life. Bob turned to leave, glancing briefly at the tatty mirror hanging on the back of the door. To his surprise, he saw a letter hanging from the mirror's cracked wooden frame. It was addressed to his daughter. Bob tucked it under his arm, and left the cupboard. He didn't notice the soft glow bleeding out of the mirror, or the eyes that watched him leave.

By the time the lights came back on, Sophie had just about finished washing up. She had thought the power cut would have halted her boring task, but her mother was not one to give in so easily. It had taken hours to bring Sophie to the sink, and a simple lack of light was not going to be enough to let her slip away again. Instead, Ruth had set up a whole line of birthday candles along the draining board.

She looked at her hands sadly. Her fingers had become purple and shrivelled, just like the disgusting prunes that her grandmother insisted on serving up for pudding whenever the family visited. Even the thick homemade custard couldn't hide the horror of the nasty little fruit. Shaking these thoughts away, she turned and headed for the attic. She had only reached the foot of the stairs, when she bumped into her dad.

'I found this under the stairs by the fuse box,' he said. 'Dunno how it got there. Barnaby playing a joke I suppose.'

As Bob handed her the letter, Sophie mumbled her thanks and waited for her father to disappear back into the sitting room. The moment he was out of sight, she swiftly ripped open the envelope and fished out a piece of notepaper. Before she had a chance to read it, a shiny object fell with a clatter to the floor. She bent down, and realised with surprise that it was her door key.



Sophie smiled with relief. With all the recent events, it had slipped her mind to find out if it had been handed in at school. Her mysterious friend must have retrieved it for her, and returned it with his message. Its return certainly made

her feel safer, but she made a mental note to see if her bag had been handed into Lost Property. She couldn't keep using her mother's. When she unfolded the message and scanned the words, her face turned a deathly pale. Dropping the envelope to the floor, she bolted to the attic and towards the television set. The TV lay on its side, a large scratch on its wooden finish. One of the knobs had been snapped off and rested on the floor in front of Sophie's feet. Barnaby was slumped in the rocking chair, with a big frown on his face. His eyes were red and swollen, and Sophie realised that he had been crying.

'It didn't go off when the lights went out, so I was looking for the batteries,' he sobbed. 'But all I found was this.'

Barnaby held up a shiny bottle top. Anger began to well up inside Sophie. Her brother had destroyed the mimics' home – maybe even killed them – and for what? A lousy bottle top! She dragged Barnaby off the rocking chair, shouting in rage. She could see the confusion in his face, and she knew that as far as he was concerned it was his toy, and not hers but she couldn't stop herself. More tears welled up in his eyes, and he ran from the room.

With her brother gone, Sophie moved to the television and gently pushed it upright. She scooped up the knob, and rammed it back onto the front of the set. Holding her breath, she twisted it to the 'on' position. Nothing happened. She called softly out to the mimics. There was no reply. What if they were all dead?

Carefully she picked up the television and put it back on

top of the old chest. She tried the knob again, and it came off in her hand. This time she took great pains to reattach it correctly. Eventually she was able to turn the set on. There was a gentle click and nothing more.

Desperate, Sophie put her ear to the wooden panel on the side of the box. She thought for a moment that she could hear something, perhaps voices. She held her breath to listen more carefully but it was no good. If there had been voices they had fallen silent now.

Tearfully, Sophie perched on the rocking chair and stared at the dull grey screen. After many long minutes, she took the note out of her pocket, and reread it. It was not written in the beautiful writing of her mysterious friend. The message was scribbled in thick black ink. Here and there were smudges and filthy fingerprints. Whoever had written it had paid no heed to presentation.

*Have your keys back. As you can tell I don't need them!
Wherever there is a mirror, I am there. You cannot escape.
Give me the mimics, or suffer the consequences.*

It was plain to Sophie that the note was written by her kidnapper. It was also likely that he had caused the power cut, and was trying to frighten her. Unfortunately, she had to admit that he was succeeding. Since she could not rouse the mimics, Sophie decided that the best course of action was to have another check for mirrors. At least one must have been missed, and she could start with under the stairs.

It would have to be covered up as well. At least her mother would not uncover them again. Sophie was pleased with herself on that front. She had told her mother of an old superstition – that the ancient people of Britain believed that you should cover all the mirrors in a new house until twelve minutes past midnight on New Year’s Day. If you don’t, the winter will be harsh and cold. Of course the whole thing was made up and wasn’t a real superstition, but Ruth believed her and was very grateful for the warning from her daughter. Her mother moaned that it was bad enough defrosting the car in the winter. She didn’t want to have to dig it out of five-foot snowdrifts. Her father complained that he would be unable to shave, but finally agreed to the mad idea. He did, however, give Sophie a sharp look when her mother’s back was turned.

The mirror under the stairs was easy to find, and swiftly it was also covered. Once Sophie had double-checked that there were no more mirrors lurking about, she decided to search for her brother. She felt awful at upsetting him earlier. As she strode towards the living room it suddenly dawned on her that she had seen the events in the attic before. During her escape through the mirror, she had seen images that were identical in every way to her argument with Barnaby. It was as if it had foretold the future. Mulling this thought over, Sophie pushed open the living room door to see her little brother, who was still sobbing.

That night, Sophie lay in bed staring up at a crack in the

ceiling. She couldn't sleep. After making her amends to Barnaby, she had tried yet again to rouse the mimics but had received no reply. Why hadn't they responded to her calls? Were they alright? Eventually, the crack became blurred as her body rebelled and she drifted off into a deep sleep. She was exhausted, both mentally and physically, and her body desperately needed to recover. When her alarm clock went off, she awoke feeling refreshed and full of energy. As she rubbed the sleep-dust from her eyes, she pulled on her clothes and wandered downstairs for breakfast. Her stomach was moaning noisily at her. It wanted food, and it wanted it now. Unfortunately, it would have to wait. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she noticed a single letter lying on the door mat. It was addressed to her. Was this a message from her mysterious friend or her abductor? Nervously, she ripped the envelope open, and saw with relief the beautiful curved writing. It was a letter from her mysterious friend.

*Well done on your escape. However, the Mirror Man is too powerful a foe for you to tackle alone and he will be back. If you bring your tiny friends to the headmaster's office at precisely thirteen minutes to one o'clock, I will do my best to help.
Your friend. W.W.*

Sophie felt hollow. At last she had the chance to meet the author of the notes, and what was even better he was

willing to help them against the Mirror Man. The note should have filled her with hope and excitement but it only made her feel worse. She had no idea if the mimics were still alive.

The Mirror Man

‘E ll. Hibbie. Are you there?’

There was no answer.

‘It’s me, Sophie. Are you there?’

There was still no answer.

‘Ell... Hibbie... I’ve received another letter. It’s offering you help. Please answer?’

Hibbie hid underneath a discarded shoebox and listened to Sophie’s increasingly desperate pleadings. When the attic door had creaked open, he had thought it was the cat looking for a bite to eat so had dived for cover. On hearing Sophie’s calls, he knew he was in no danger from Ginger, but he was unsure whether he should reply. The earthquake was confirmation that Ethelbert’s fears had been well founded. The small audience had purposely pushed over his home, and destroyed numerous essential pieces of scenery and props in the process. Could humans really be trusted?

‘Please be alive!’

A pang of guilt swamped the young mimic at the words. Surely, Sophie didn’t mean them any harm. After all she had rescued him, and had also been in peril herself only

yesterday. But still he remained under the shoe box with Ethelbert's warnings ringing in his head. He was so confused. Repeatedly Sophie called out the mimics' names until finally Hibbie could stand it no longer. He decided to give Sophie the benefit of the doubt and left his hiding place.

'Gawd, don't talk so loud,' he whispered. 'Ethelbert will 'ear.'

Now he was out in the open, he wandered confidently over to a disused cotton reel and sat on it. He said very little as Sophie, greatly cheered by the revelation that the mimics were all alive, proceeded to explain at breakneck speed about Barnaby's accident with the television set. When she told him of the threat from the Mirror Man and the invitation from her mysterious friend, Hibbie eventually spoke.

'I really don't know. Ethelbert won't like it. 'E's sure that the accident, as you put it, was deliberate.'

'But it wasn't!' protested Sophie.

'Well, I believe you, but will 'e?' asked Hibbie matter-of-factly. 'I'll 'ave a word with 'im. See what 'e says. Might take some time though.'

Sophie glanced at her watch. She would have to leave soon, or she would be late again.

'I'll come back at lunchtime. That should give you plenty of time to sort it out with Ethelbert,' she said.

Silently, the mimic nodded his approval. With one final glance at her watch, Sophie left, leaving Hibbie seated on the cotton reel. He was deep in thought and greatly troubled.

If he put forward Sophie's proposal, Ethelbert was likely to bite his head off. But if they remained where they were, they were doomed sooner or later. Eventually, he summoned up his courage. Purposefully, he sprang off the cotton reel and went to find the others.

'It's ruined!'

'What's ruined?'

Ethelbert pointed sadly at the piano. Ell followed his gesture to see the old mimic's pride and joy lying on its side like a beached whale. Its matchstick panels were split apart and the toothbrush keys were broken and mangled. Realising that there was nothing that could be done to repair the damage, the two mimics began to clear up the pieces with heavy hearts. They had toiled throughout the night, desperately attempting to mend and tidy their home. They were now nearing the end of their mammoth task. Only the studio itself remained in disorder, but it was exactly here where the most heartbreaking damage had occurred. Some of the finest scenery had to be thrown away, and now their only musical instrument was smashed beyond repair.

When the studio door opened, Ell looked up to see Hibbie returning from his break outside. She smiled grimly. Now he had returned they could get down to some serious repair work. Ell had just opened her mouth to give him some orders, when she caught the expression of dread on his face. Immediately her mouth snapped shut.

'Come 'ere everyone,' he said nervously, 'I've got

something very important to tell you all.'

Ell called over to Murb, who reluctantly left his Bonsai Bees and trotted across to stand with the other mimics. Ethelbert quietly waited. It was rare for anyone other than him to make any announcements, so everybody was curious as to what was to be said. It was not long before the curiosity dissolved into dismay. Hibbie had no idea of how to pass on Sophie's suggestions, so he simply blurted out everything in one go.

'What 'appened 'ere was an accident. The smaller audience didn't mean to 'urt us. Sophie told me it was an accident, and I believe 'er. But she's 'ad a threat from that 'orrible man. 'E said 'e won't stop till 'e's caught us. And when 'e does 'e'll be 'orrible to all of us I'm sure. But we've also 'ad an offer of 'elp.'

'So after all I said, you carried on talking to that audience,' said Ethelbert slowly and deliberately.

'Uh... yup... sorry.'

'Well then, who is this 'orrible man that you speak so unkindly of?'

'Well, I know it sounds daft but 'e said 'e was the Mirror Man,' Ell butted in, 'but I think 'e is, as 'e uses mirrors to travel about somehow. 'E wants to 'urt us. And 'e'll 'urt Sophie too. She saved us from 'im, so 'e's got it in for 'er now as well.'

'Yes that's right!' said Hibbie enthusiastically. 'When we were in the smelly cellar, she pushed 'im and...'

'So you not only ignored my orders not to talk to an

audience, you also accompanied one on a trip outside the 'ouse?' interrupted Ethelbert.

'Um, y... yes b... but...' stuttered Ell.

Again, Ethelbert interrupted her. He spoke clearly, letting each of his words sink in.

'You realise that you 'ave condemned all of us. Letting the audiences know of our existence, invites death on us all. Now the Mirror Man 'as found us and we're doomed.'

'I thought the Mirror Man was just a fairytale,' said Murb in a confused voice.

The look of dread was evident on Ethelbert's face. He looked as if he was wrestling with his conscience. He peered at the young mimics' expectant faces, and gave in.

'I suppose you deserve to know,' he said. 'In a way I'm glad. Sharing the burden may lighten the load, but I 'ope to 'eaven you can 'andle the information. Many fairytales 'ave an element of truth. What I am about to tell you was passed onto me by Cousin Wireless, and is the true story behind that *Death and the Audience*. The mimic's dark secret it is. Our Cousin's family were important players in the most perilous period in our 'istory, and so 'e's never forgotten what 'appened to us so long ago.

'Back in time, before 'istory began to be written down, the Earth was a very different place. Us mimics and, I suppose I should call them 'umans, lived side by side. There were thousands upon thousands of us. Maybe even millions. We used to perform in circuses and theatres, entertaining the 'umans. Doing tricks and plays, alongside strange

animals from exotic locations. Us mimics enjoyed the work, and we earned our keep. But one ‘uman in particular took a dislike to us. It was one of the circus performers. A performer of illusions. Cynewulf the Illusionary ‘e was known by all. But ‘e wasn’t anywhere near as good as us mimics. We ‘ad our powers you see. A gift that made us able to bend the reality of what the audiences see. This ‘uman didn’t ‘ave any powers. ‘E just used mirrors to make it look as if ‘is assistant ‘ad disappeared and other childish tricks.’

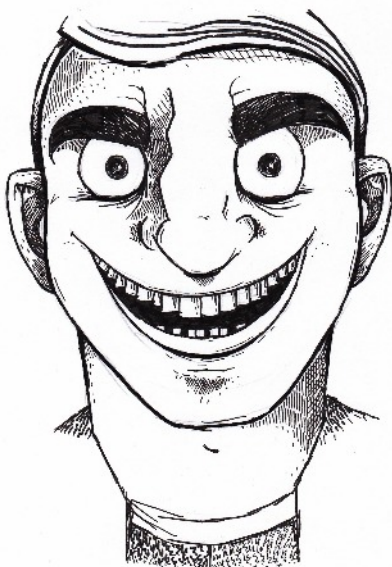
‘Mirrors!’ exclaimed Ell.

Ethelbert scowled at the interruption, and ploughed on. ‘When Cousin Wireless’s ancestor – Penda ‘e was called – giggled at Cynewulf’s illusions from backstage, well the ‘uman stormed off right in the middle of his show. As if that wasn’t bad enough, ‘undreds of us mimics decided it would be a great ‘oot to ‘umiliate ‘im further. We all climbed on top of one another and used our powers to look like a life-sized double of Cynewulf. Penda was ‘is nose I think. When the ‘uman came back ages later, ‘e saw what looked like ‘imself laughing and pointing. ‘E knew of course that ‘is laughing double was us mimics, and ‘e stormed off again. It was only a stupid joke, but they shouldn’t ‘ave done it.’

‘A pyramid of mimics, just like the television salesman. Now I always thought that was cool!’ said Hibbie in awe.

Glaring at the youngster, Ethelbert continued. ‘Every performance that Cynewulf attempted from then on ‘ad a double of ‘imself laughing in the audience. We all thought

it was a great giggle. It wasn't. The last time it 'appened, 'e vowed revenge. Nothing was seen of Cynewulf for years and years. Life went on as normal, and then one day out of the blue 'e returned. If only 'e 'adn't. 'E 'ad done something to 'imself you see. 'E craved the powers that we 'ad naturally, and tried to get them in an unnatural way. 'E no longer went by the name of Cynewulf.



The Mirror Man is what 'e was now, with real magic rather than childish tricks. But 'e only used 'is new powers of illusion to kill. As 'is revenge 'e dedicated 'is twisted being to destroying us. Thousands were wiped out in a matter of days. The survivors fled and 'id. We still 'ad the strong desire to perform, but couldn't risk using our powers in the

open as we would be found by 'im. We made puppet shows, where we played the puppets. When the Mirror Man found us out we moved on swiftly, but many were caught and slaughtered.

'Owever, the Mirror Man wasn't content to simply kill us. 'E used 'is powers and influence to erase any stories of our magnificent performances. Soon we 'ad disappeared from the memories of the 'umans – as if we 'ad never existed. A fate worse than death, but we were safe. Eventually we moved into radio, and finally into the televisual machine. But the threat always 'ung over us, that the Mirror Man would track us down one day. That threat still remains. With your foolish actions, you have brought extinction upon us.'

Murb looked thoughtful for a second, before asking another question.

'If the... what did you call them? 'Umans? Well if they have forgotten we existed, and Sophie can be trusted, surely we're safe. The Mirror Man must be long dead by now.' Then he added hopefully, 'Can I now get back to my bee keeping?'

Ethelbert shook his head, before replying, 'Didn't you listen to 'Ibbie? The Mirror Man 'as found us.'

'It can't be!' said Murb grumpily. 'Nobody lives that long!'

'I wish you were right, but the fairytale 'ad that bit spot on. 'E's immortal,' said Ethelbert so quietly that the young mimics had to strain to hear his husky voice. 'You see, 'e is

a mirror warlock. That's why 'e can travel through mirrors, as easy as we can walk across floors. But the Mirror Man's magic doesn't stop there. 'E wanted immortality, you see. Somehow 'e used 'is magic to split 'imself into two. Two opposite reflections of 'imself – one all that was the best of 'im and one that was all that was the worst. I think the idea was to trap the evil part, but it didn't work out like that. Instead, the evil one trapped the good in a very special mirror. Then 'e smashed the mirror into thousands of tiny pieces. The good part remained inside the fragments of the mirror, unable to go to either 'eaven or 'ell. With the two halves of 'im separated the warlock cannot die. And 'e is still after us. Now 'e knows where we are, we're doomed!'

Ell looked guiltily at the floor. She felt as if she had brought the whole situation upon them. If only she had seen the cat on that fateful day, then she would never have needed rescuing by a human and none of this would have happened.

'What can we do?' she said.

'Nothing! We've got nowhere to go,' said Ethelbert. 'I don't suppose you young uns noticed the mirror in the attic. Is it still turned around?'

'Well no. I mean, it isn't turned around anymore,' said Ell before adding, 'it is covered up though.'

'That's something I suppose,' sighed Ethelbert. 'It should buy us a little time.'

'Do you mean to say that it was supposed to be turned around?' asked a confused Murb. 'What's the point in it

being turned around?’

‘When we were first put in the attic,’ explained Ethelbert. ‘The other mimics – the ones who left – spent ages using ropes and pulleys to turn it over. That way the Mirror Man couldn’t use it to find us. It was ‘ard work. There were no longer as many of us as there used to be, you see. Even less of us now though.’

‘Is covering as good, or do we need to turn it around again?’ asked Hibbie.

‘Covering it will do just as well. But since the Mirror Man knows we are ‘ere, it won’t ‘elp for long. ‘E’ll find another way. It’s only a matter of time.’

‘Couldn’t we go somewhere else? Move ‘ome?’ said Ell.

‘Where on earth do you think we’d go? Televisual machines don’t grow on trees you know. And ‘ow long do you think we’d last? Even without the Mirror Man on our trail, there’s cats and worse out there. No, this is where we belong. Putting on shows for audiences.’

‘Oh, didn’t I tell you?’ said Murb. ‘One of the magnifying glasses is broken.’

Murb’s horrendous words sunk in, and Ethelbert’s fur turned a pale red. Without a word, he rushed off leaving the youngsters alone. Ell and Hibbie looked at each other in alarm, and swiftly followed. With a sigh, Murb ambled after them.

By the time the other mimics had caught up with Ethelbert, he was slumped on the ground with his head in his lap and his antennae twitching in panic and grief. Murb

was right. On the dusty floor, lay the shattered remains of a giant magnifying glass – the link to the audience was gone. Hibbie put his hand on his elder’s back, and began to explain the invitation from Sophie’s mysterious friend. When Hibbie had finished, Ethelbert simply nodded. As far as he could see, they no longer had any choice. It was either accept the offer, or perish.

Unlucky For Some

The mimics had spent the morning packing what few belongings they could carry. Each had a tearful task, as they decided what to take. Ethelbert couldn't bear to be parted with his costume and make-up bag, while Hibbie packed his scenery-building tools. Once he had completed the sad task, the young mimic made a brief journey across the attic to visit Cousin Wireless. He had hoped that their cousin would join them in their departure. He needn't have bothered. Cousin Wireless had been very rude in dismissing any possibility of talking to humans, and had thrown him out of the radio. Hibbie was so angry with the old fool, that he left him to his own devices.

Ell opted to take an enormous packed lunch of boiled ant eggs, woodlouse sandwiches, chocolate covered spiders and honey yoghurt for the journey. Murb was the only mimic that did not pack anything. When Ethelbert had refused to allow him to take his Bonsai Bees, he was devastated. Out of sight of his friends, he had wiped a single tear away from one of his large, round eyes, before going to say his goodbyes to his tiny buzzing buddies. When Sophie finally returned to the attic, Ell and Hibbie were already

waiting for her with their bags.

‘Don’t worry,’ Sophie said softly. ‘I’m sure you’ll find other audiences to perform to. Moving home isn’t that bad, you know.’

The young mimics didn’t answer. How could an audience know how a mimic felt? The television was much more than a home to them. It was their life. Still, it was not Sophie’s fault. She had done her best. Sophie opened her mouth to offer more comforting words, but before they could leave her lips a voice floated up from the far side of the television.

‘So... you’re the audience that got the young uns into trouble, and now ‘ave to ‘elp us against the Mirror Man.’

Ethelbert and Murb had left the safety of the ancient television to join them, and it was the old mimic who had spoken. He had his head craned to look up at the audience towering above him.

‘I assume you’re Ethelbert and that must be Murb,’ said Sophie, doing her best to ignore the rude remark. ‘Who is the Mirror Man really? Is the fairytale...?’

‘Please... just take us to the person who ‘as offered to ‘elp,’ interrupted Ethelbert. ‘I’ll answer any questions you ‘ave on the way.’

Sophie rested her mother’s bag on the floor, and the little creatures clambered in. As she carefully picked it up, she heard Murb’s pleading voice.

‘Can’t I please take just one bee? The Queen Bee? She’ll be no trouble.’

Sophie checked her watch. It was a quarter to one. She was early. The message had been precise about the time that she had to arrive at the headmaster's office, and she had two minutes to spare. These moments were spent going over the situation in her head. She tried not to jump to the conclusion that, simply because she was asked to meet in his office, the sender of the messages was her headmaster. It was possible, she supposed, as he had the surname Wallace. That would fit in with the initials W.W. but what could his first name be? Perhaps he was William, or Wilfred or even Wally? Sophie was unsure that her headmaster's knowledge stretched as far as the strange events that she had witnessed. To her he seemed very prim and proper. She just couldn't see him believing in anything that was not written down in an encyclopaedia in black and white. Maybe it was all a fantastic act, and the headmaster she knew was just the face he showed to the world to hide his magical ways. Or perhaps it was simply a convenient meeting place. Maybe her mysterious friend was one of the dinner ladies. Wasn't there a Wendy serving food? She could believe that one of them was a witch. However, she was not quite so sure about a white witch fighting on the side of all that is good and right.

Realising that her imagination was getting carried away, Sophie forced herself to think about something else. She reflected on her talk with Ethelbert during the journey to school. The old mimic had answered a few of her questions as he had promised, but she had the distinct impression that he felt uncomfortable talking to her. It was like trying to get

a record contract for a talented elephant. She had, however got to the truth behind *Death and the Audience*, although she was sure that Ethelbert didn't give all the juicy details. She knew that the mimics had been mean to Cynewulf the Illusionary, but she couldn't feel sorry for him. Despite the fact that he had been badly treated in the ancient past, the mimics did not deserve to be persecuted like this.

She glanced at her watch again. It was time. She held her breath, reached out and pushed the door open. The blinds were half drawn, and the lights off. In the semi-darkness, Sophie could just about make out the outline of a man sitting at the desk with his back to the door. A voice that felt familiar, but which she could not quite place, reached her ears.

'Glad to see you could make it. Are our little comrades in good health?'

'They're fine, but...' began Sophie.

'We can speak for ourselves, thank you,' interrupted Ethelbert. He clambered out of the bag, which Sophie had carefully placed on an empty chair. As the other mimics followed nervously behind him, he stared up at the silhouette by the desk.

'Ah, the brave mimic leader I presume,' said the silhouette.

'That's right. As 'er over there said, we're fine.'

Ell plucked up the courage to put forward the question they were all itching to ask. 'You said you could 'elp us. What can you do?'

‘I can take you away from here. Take you to a place where no human could ever hurt you again. A place where you are guaranteed a huge audience for your shows, with no danger.’

‘Where?’ said Ethelbert.

‘I can’t tell you now. If the location is to be kept secret, no man must know where it is. You have a young human with you. She is well-meaning but important information, even in the most well-meaning hands, can be dangerous.’

‘Who are you?’ she snapped. ‘You won’t even show your face.’

‘Of course ‘e won’t,’ said Ethelbert. ‘It’s for the same reason.’

‘You’re not the headmaster then?’

‘Not at all. I just find this room... useful,’ said the stranger. ‘If you don’t know who I am, you cannot be of any danger to the mimics. Also if you know nothing, the Mirror Man will leave you alone.’

Realisation began to dawn on Sophie. Her next question nearly became caught in her throat. Before she even asked it, she already knew the answer.

‘You mean I’ll never see them again?’

‘I’m sorry. It’s the only way to save them. The only way to give them a new start. A new beginning.’

‘But surely we can still see...’ began Ell.

Ethelbert interrupted her. ‘E’s right. If Sophie knows where we are, she will be in great danger. It’s better this way.’

Sophie felt her face warm in a crimson flush. For the first time the old mimic had referred to her by her name, instead of as ‘an audience’. At last, in these final moments, the mimic elder was seeing her as an equal. In time he may even have seen her as a friend. But there was no more time. Sophie desperately wanted the mimics to return with her to the attic. She wanted to watch more of their ridiculous shows. She wanted to hear more of Ell’s woodlouse recipes. It was heartbreaking – but she knew Ethelbert was right. The future suggested by her mysterious friend was the only way to save herself and the mimics. She knew she would miss the small furry creatures that she had grown to adore in such a short space of time, but she had to be brave for their sake. She knelt down beside the chair on which Ell and Hibbie stood.

‘They’re right,’ she said. ‘But I’ll miss you both. I know I will.’

‘Remember us when you watch that ‘orrible electric television,’ said Hibbie with a sniff of his purple nose. ‘Remember that us mimics do far better shows!’

‘And we’re far better friends,’ said Ell. ‘Take care of yourself. I’ll never forget what you ‘ave done for us.’

In the background, Sophie could hear the ringing of the school bell. Lunchtime had ended, and it was time for the afternoon’s lessons to begin.

‘I have to go,’ said Sophie sadly.

Tears began to well up in her eyes. She was annoyed with herself, as she had been determined not to cry. It took only

seconds for her to blink away the tears, but when her eyes reopened she found herself standing alone in the headmaster's office. Her mysterious friend and the mimics were gone. In their place was an envelope, with her name written on it in beautiful cursive writing.



With minutes ticking away, Sophie knew she did not have the time to feel sorry for herself. If the headmaster came back and discovered her there, he would have a fit. She stuffed the envelope into her pocket. Before she left the room, she took one final miserable look back. There was nothing to show that the mimics were ever there.

Sophie stood outside the headmaster's office for a few moments, reluctant to go to lessons. When all the hurrying students had disappeared from sight, she at last motivated herself. She needed to get to class before she got herself a detention. At last she set off. A few steps down the corridor, her foot kicked something small and shiny. It clattered a few feet, and lay to rest by a stack of lockers. She bent down and scooped it up. Turning it in her hands, she saw that it was

a ring. Two embracing lizards were coiled around the silver band. Embedded in the centre was a strange green stone. Sophie shivered. The thing gave her the creeps, but it looked very old. It may be an antique, although Sophie had a suspicion that if she took it into an antique shop they would tell her it came out of a Christmas cracker and offer her a pound for it. She slipped the ring into her pocket, with the intention of taking it to Lost Property after lessons. She could take a look for her bag at the same time. For now though, she must hurry. She was already late.

The afternoon seemed to stretch forever. Each minute felt like hours and each hour felt like days. Sophie continually checked her watch, only to find that mere seconds had passed since her last look. She desperately wished she could go home. Her normally bubbly personality was depressed. She had lost the most exciting group of friends that she would ever be likely to meet. It was worse than one of her school friends moving to another town, or even abroad. At least in that situation she could email, telephone or perhaps write. No, this was for keeps. Her little non-human friends were gone from her sight for good.

Eventually, when entire seasons seemed to have past, school ended. She wandered slowly home, feeling sorry for herself every step of the way. When she finally reached her destination, she crept quietly inside. The last thing she wanted was for her family to see her in her present mood. They would only ask questions. Questions that she would be unable to answer without sounding quite mad or bursting

into floods of tears – or both. She tiptoed up the stairs, fully intending to seek refuge in her room. Instead, Sophie’s grief drew her towards the attic. The room appeared deathly quiet. She had become used to seeing her little brother’s face inches away from the ancient set, and his eyes glued to a hopelessly incompetent performance by the mimics. Their mother was always scolding him for sitting so close to the television.

‘You’ll get square eyes,’ she would say. Now the room was quiet and still and the television set just an empty shell. Barnaby wouldn’t be able to get square, triangular or any other type of eyes, except the ones he was born with, from this television. With a sigh, Sophie slumped into the rocking chair. The splinters threatened to stab her with their spikes, but she didn’t care. As she slid further down the chair, her hands forced their way into her pockets. Her eyebrows rose in surprise, when her fingers felt something crinkle. From the depths of her pocket, she drew out the final message from her mysterious friend. Its existence had completely slipped Sophie’s mind. She had been too wrapped up in her sad thoughts. With a heavy heart, she gripped the envelope and tore it open. Maybe something inside could cheer her mood. The letter she found was composed using the same exquisite writing as the previous ones.

*You have done a great service to your kind,
and it really was only a small price to pay.*

Yours W. W.

A frown flickered across Sophie's face. She had been expecting a final farewell, but this message was as clear as mud – it simply didn't make sense. Firstly, she wasn't a mimic so how could she have done a great service to her kind? She had done a great service to the mimics, but the rest of humanity had no benefit from her actions. But it was the words 'a small price to pay' that concerned Sophie most. Something bothered her greatly about that phrase. She had heard it before, but where?

In her head, she heard a soothing voice. 'Give me the mimics, and then I'll leave you in peace. It's a small price to pay.'

'They are not mine to give,' she heard her own voice replying.

'They have no rights, girl.'

Her heart in her mouth, Sophie upturned the bag that she had been using for her schoolwork. She still hadn't gone to Lost Property to see if her own bag had been handed in. It seemed so unimportant when the day had ended, and seemed even less so now. Books, pens and other various bits of clutter flew out onto the dusty floor. She scrambled through the pile and found the messages, bundled together by a large blue rubber band. Pausing for one moment, with determination she ripped off the band. Quickly she found the threatening note from the Mirror Man and studied the writing closely. Holding it up to the light, she took a random letter and compared it to the same letter on the messages from her mysterious friend. Sophie let out an involuntary

gasp. Although much of the threat was scrawled, the letter 'e' was identical. Her fears growing, she examined her mysterious friend's signature.

Yet again, she wondered what W.W. stood for. It could be 'Willy Winkle' for all she knew. Her idle thoughts of Mr Wallace or Wendy the dinner lady were frankly ridiculous. Then an idea struck her. She fished in her pocket and found her mother's make-up mirror. With shaking hands, she brought the mirror close to the writing. Holding the mirror at a right angle to the letter, Sophie finally knew what W.W. stood for. As the initials came into focus in the mirror, the final piece of the jigsaw had snapped firmly into place and what it revealed was not good. Her mysterious friend and her enemy were one and the same person. There wasn't a safe haven for the mimics. Only pain and death awaited them. In the mirror she watched W.W. transform into M.M. She had been fooled into handing her friends directly to the Mirror Man.

A Split Personality

‘What’s that buzzing?’
‘Oh... just me ‘umming.’

‘It can’t be. It’s coming from my bag!’

‘No, it’s me. Buzz, buzz, ber, ber, buzz.’

‘That sounds nothing like it! What ‘ave you put in my bag?’

‘Nothing... er... buzz, buzz.’

Ell groaned. Ever since the mimics had left the headmaster’s office Ethelbert and Murb had been at each other’s throats, arguing on every subject under the sun. Their argument now concerned a strange noise coming from inside the old mimic’s bag. Ell couldn’t care less about the sound. She just wanted them to shut up. Their constant bickering was spoiling the excitement she could feel overwhelming her small body. She was sad, of course, that she had left her human friend behind forever, but she was looking forward to seeing her new home. It sounded absolutely perfect for mimics. If only Ethelbert and Murb would be quiet and feel the thrill with her. She couldn’t even share her thoughts with Hibbie. He was using the journey to catch up on his sleep and was snoring loudly.

Pushing the unwelcome noise to the back of her mind, Ell surveyed her surroundings for the millionth time. The mode of transport the mimics found themselves in was the inside of an old leather pouch. Its top was tied firmly with a piece of leather cord, keeping them secure inside. Her sensitive nose picked up faint traces of tobacco. Sometime in the past the man must have been a smoker. The smell was unpleasant, but she felt sure that it was only a temporary irritation. It was probably the reason she had felt giddy and sluggish when the journey started. The giddiness had reminded her of the escape through the mirror days before. She dismissed the thought. It must simply be a coincidence. They were off to a place where the Mirror Man would never find them. It went without saying that there wouldn't be any mirrors anywhere near their new home. In all other respects, she found the pouch surprisingly comfortable, although she would have preferred to be able to see out.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she felt a bump. Ethelbert immediately complained loudly about the uncomfortable journey and grumbled that the driver should be more careful. Against all odds Hibbie managed to remain sound asleep. None of these things interested Ell. Something far more enticing had occurred. The pouch had been put down and the strings had worked loose. A shaft of eerie light illuminated the mimics. Ell's curiosity soon got the better of her, and she reached her small blue hand towards the opening. A quick pull and the outside became completely revealed to her. A human's face stared down at her. The

young mimic fainted in terror.

‘It’s the... the...’ said Ell, her head feeling groggy as she came around from her dead faint.

‘Never mind young un,’ interrupted Ethelbert. ‘A little travel sick I expect.’

‘No... it’s... it’s... it’s the Mirr...’

Ell couldn’t get the words out. Ethelbert needed to be warned that above them towered the Mirror Man – the mimic’s sworn enemy. Unfortunately, her tongue could not form the correct shapes to give the warning. Only stutters left her mouth. Oblivious to Ell’s attempts to alert him, the old mimic craned his neck upwards towards the leather-clad human.

‘I ‘ope this ain’t the lovely new ‘ome you promised us,’ Ethelbert called up to him. ‘It don’t ‘alf pong!’

‘You’re in great danger, my petite friend.’ The man’s words echoed eerily around the dingy cellar.

‘Danger?’ said the old mimic. ‘We know that. That’s why we’re letting you ‘elp us.’

‘I’m afraid there is no new home. It was a trick by your enemy.’

‘Our enemy?’ Ethelbert snapped. ‘But you told us about it!’

‘I’m sorry, but there is something very important you should know.’

‘Don’t listen to ‘im! ‘E’s the Mirror Man!’ Ell suddenly blurted out as her mouth finally managed to form the words

she had been longing to say.

Ethelbert's jaw dropped open in astonishment. He turned to the sleeping body of Hibbie and lashed out with his foot. It landed with a crack on the young mimic's elbow. Spluttering awake, the youngster sat bolt upright and yelped in pain.

'What was that for?' Hibbie moaned. 'I was 'aving such a lovely dream.'

'You've seen the Mirror Man 'aven't you? Is that 'im?' whispered Ethelbert loudly.

'I told you! 'E is the Mirror Man!' exclaimed Ell, before a startled Hibbie had a chance to reply.

'Please... time is running out. I need to tell you something important...'

Something in the way the Mirror Man said those words caused Ell to study him more closely. Curiously, he looked different to how she remembered. His eyes did not portray the essence of evil that had been so noticeable during their previous meeting. In fact, the more she looked at it the more his whole face appeared friendly and kind. As for his hands – they were not wizened and ancient. They were normal, young and healthy looking. Although he looked similar, this person couldn't be the Mirror Man. Did their enemy have a twin? When he came to the end of his sentence, Ell realised guiltily that she had not listened to a word he had said.

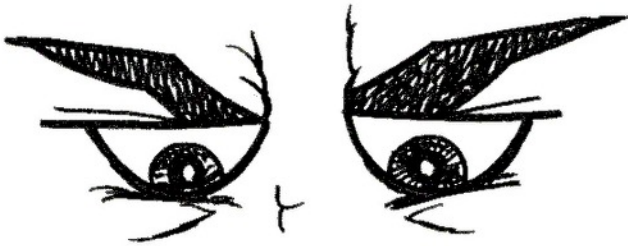
'Could you repeat that?' she asked, her fur turning a darker shade of blue in embarrassment.

What happened next nearly caused Ell to faint again.

The mimics watched in disbelief as the man's mouth twisted and contorted. His body shivered, and teeth chattered uncontrollably. He gritted them together, and forced a few words out into the dingy cellar.

'No more time... can't stop it.'

Hatred burnt in his eyes. It spread like a disease across his face. Every friendly line it touched was scorched away and replaced with a seething mask of loathing. Gradually the shaking stopped, and the mouth twisted into a thin sadistic smile.



With alarm, Ell knew that she had seen this smile before. She had been right. He was the Mirror Man that she had come to despise and fear after all. How could she have believed that he wasn't their enemy? He must have tried to confuse her with some sort of spell, which had backfired big style.

With a spine-chilling chuckle, the Mirror Man stretched his arm with lightning speed into the pouch towards the cowering mimics. His fingers closed tightly around Murb. The grip on his small body was so tight that it caused him

to wheeze like a punctured tyre. The mimic was lifted up into the air, until he was level with the Mirror Man's grotesquely leering face.

'Please... I can't breathe,' gasped Murb.

'Why should that bother me?' spat the Mirror Man, 'You're here to die anyway.'

'But... you were nice a few minutes ago,' Murb puffed. 'So I thought there was no way... that you could be... the Mirror Man.'

'Well you live and learn. Or perhaps that should be die and don't.'

He cackled at his own cruel joke. Flipping open the lid of an old birdcage hanging from the ceiling, the Mirror Man thrust Murb roughly inside. Released from the iron grip, Murb's mottled body collapsed onto its rusty floor. He sucked in the stale air from the cellar as if it was the sweetest woodlouse he had ever tasted.

One by one the Mirror Man repeated the same process with each of the other mimics, and then flipped the rusty birdcage door firmly shut. For a brief moment he leered at his captives, before giving a sarcastic wave of his hand and disappearing into the shadows. Alone, the mimics lay panting on their jail's floor. Each of them felt as if they had been in a vice, with the life being squeezed out of them. Now bruised and battered, they were at least still alive – but for how long? When Ell had sucked the precious air back into her lungs, she looked at their new home. A perch hung from the centre of the cage, with a rusty bell and a smashed mirror

suspended to one side. Old ancient bird droppings littered the floor, fossilised with age. It must have been countless years since the cage held a budgie or canary prisoner. If that wasn't enough, it smelt terrible and rocked alarmingly whenever any of them made a sudden movement. Carefully, so as not to cause the cage to rock more than necessary, Ell plucked up the courage to turn around and gaze into the cellar. To her horror, the mocking face of her captor emerged out of the darkness on the other side of the bars. He was so close that she could smell the stench of his breath, overpowering even the awful foulness of the cage.

'Why were you pretending to be nice?' she said in a small voice, hoping that if she kept him talking he would not hurt them yet. 'Was it some sort of spell that made you look friendly? I only ask 'cause you said you 'ad something to tell us.'

'I'm afraid you won't be seeing Mr Goodie-Goodie again,' the Mirror Man said with a sneer. 'He ran out of time.'

'What does that mean?' said a voice from Ell's side. It was Hibbie, who had crept up behind her. 'That doesn't make sense! You talk as if you are two people, and that just don't make sense!'

'Ha, daring to question me are you, mimic?' said the Mirror Man. 'Why should I explain myself to the likes of you?'

Ell couldn't help herself. As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted saying them. 'You're mad.'

‘No, I’m perfectly sane,’ said the Mirror Man calmly. ‘But why should I explain anything to you? You are not worthy of my answer. Nothing you do is yours. You copy us in your pathetic little shows. You steal everything from us. Even your language is ours. The human race must not have parasites such as you dragging them down.’

‘But I thought you wanted to be like us? I ‘eard you weren’t as good at shows and wanted to learn ‘ow to be,’ said Hibbie unwisely.

‘I once thought that, but then I realised with clarity that you were making a laughing stock of all humans. Your mimicry shows you up for what you are. When you mimic us, you always make the humans dumb and bumbling. This shows me what you really think of us. You think humans are stupid, lumbering apes and you have been laughing behind our backs all this time. For that insult you all must die.’

‘See what you ‘ave done!’ said Ethelbert to the young mimics. ‘I told you lot that talking to audiences would lead to disaster, and you wouldn’t listen would you?’

‘You think talking to that idiotic girl lead me to you?’ the Mirror Man taunted. ‘That’s priceless. If it wasn’t for her you would have been long dead. True it wouldn’t have been so much fun though!’

Ethelbert looked aghast, and asked in a feeble voice, ‘Ow’s that then?’

‘I learned long ago of the design of your childish television set, so that is what I searched for,’ said the Mirror

Man. 'Antique sellers and estate agents were my spies.' A rusty cackle leapt from the Mirror Man's throat as he recalled his story. 'The estate agent that sold the house tipped me off about the television. He was supposed to have removed it before anyone moved in. Instead the stupid bloated moron forgot. He will suffer soon enough for his lapse of memory. Still, for all his faults at least he is human. Even when the mirror in attic was covered, I managed to find another under the stairs. Don't you see? I could have taken you anytime I wanted, but why spoil the chase until every morsel of entertainment has been had.'

The Mirror Man fell silent, watching in amusement as the mimics huddled together in fear. Terrified, Ell shut her eyes firmly. She felt Ethelbert at her side fumbling for the strap of his bag. She realised that by now the weight of his pack must seem overwhelming. It dropped to the floor of the cage, with a clang and a buzz that echoed faintly around the cellar. The impact caused the birdcage to sway alarmingly, causing Ell's stomach to do cartwheels. What was going to happen to them? Were their lives going to end in a prison built for canaries?

Much to her distress, a sound she had dreaded appeared to answer her question. It was the squeak of the rusty hinges on the birdcage door. She forced her eyes open to see the Mirror Man extend one long finger into the cage. The mimics cowered in fright. There was nowhere to run to. No escape from the approaching finger. Ell shrank away, fully expecting to be squashed to death. The cage rocked still

further, until she was sure she would be sick. The finger came within a hair's breadth of her antennae. But it didn't touch her. Much to her surprise, the Mirror Man ignored all the mimics and instead roughly prodded Ethelbert's bag. A furious buzzing sound came from within. The finger prodded again and again, attempting to determine the source of the noise. Suddenly the Mirror Man let out an almighty shriek, and his hand was rapidly withdrawn. In a hissing rage, he slammed the door shut. One solitary miniature bee flew out of the bag, and through the bars of the cage.

'Mildred!' cried Murb, as his favourite Bonsai Bee flew into the far corner of the cellar.

'I knew you 'ad sneaked something into my bag!' said Ethelbert. 'I don't suppose...?'

'Look!' interrupted Hibbie, "'E's 'aving another funny turn. Maybe it was the bee sting!'

Every one of the mimics cast their eyes towards the Mirror Man. His finger displayed a bright red bulge where the bee had stung him. Ell noted with morbid fascination that ever since they had entered the cellar, his hands remained young and agile. He still wasn't quite the same Mirror Man she had met before. But it was his expression that had caused Hibbie to interrupt Ethelbert. It was as if his face was in conflict with itself. His teeth were again chattering, and saliva formed huge bubbles around his twisted lips. Gradually the hate in his eyes faded, and his features became soft and friendly. He staggered across to

the cage, and fumbled with the door. His fingers were shaking so much he had great trouble opening it. He gave up, and turned towards Ell. He addressed her in a slurred and slow voice.

‘He’s too strong... I’m powerless to help... I’m sorry.’

Before the mimics’ eyes the Mirror Man’s expression changed once again. The hate returned, more powerful than ever. His eyes became cold and harsh, and his mouth turned to a triumphant grin that made Ell’s flesh crawl. Purposefully he strode towards the shimmering mirror. For the first time, Ell noticed that the surrounding frame was constructed from thousands of tiny pieces of broken glass. Realisation dawned. They were the shattered remains of a large mirror. All the fragments had been gathered together, and glued in a seemingly random pattern to a framework of bronze and silver. Strangely, the pieces only reflected dim images of the cellar. It was as if they no longer worked properly as a looking glass. The young mimic wondered if it was the very same mirror that had trapped the warlock’s good half all those centuries ago. The Mirror Man reached out a young finger towards the frame.

When it came into contact with one of the broken shards of mirror, a bright neon blue spark briefly lit up the cellar. Ell could have sworn that she saw a faint reflection of their captor appear inside each of the tiny pieces of glass, which then faded and disappeared. The Mirror Man turned back towards the birdcage, a look of triumph on his face. Ell let out a gasp as his hands shrivelled before her eyes. Seconds

ago they were young and fresh, and now they were old and ancient, withered like dry autumn leaves. It was as if they belonged to an old man in the twilight years of life. He looked at his hands, and his brow furrowed as if something was wrong. Glancing sharply at the frame he gritted his teeth defiantly.

‘My ring,’ the Mirror Man spat. ‘Hah, you think giving my ring to that fool of a girl will help. No child can thwart me.’

Ell was confused. What had just happened? Who was he speaking to, and what was all this about a ring? She watched as the Mirror Man strode off again into the darkness of the cellar, leaving the mimics alone. Although Ell was glad to be out of the warlock’s sight, she couldn’t help imagining what he might be doing. Was he setting up devices to torture them? Maybe he was going to leave them where they were – to starve to death in the rusty old birdcage. The welcome voice of Hibbie banished these dark thoughts from her mind.

‘Well everyone. Escape plans please. What ‘as everyone got in their bags?’

‘All I ‘ad was George and Mildred,’ said Murb sadly, ‘And now Mildred’s gone and poor Georgie is dead. Bees die when they sting you know.’

‘What about you, Ethelbert?’

‘Well, apart from a dead bee in my bag, I’ve got my make-up,’ said Ethelbert. ‘And you’ll be pleased to know I ‘ave the perfect escape plan. This is what we need to do ...’

Gateway

Sophie screwed the message from her so-called friend into a small ball, and flung it across her bedroom. If she had been in a better mood, she would have aimed it at the bright red wastepaper basket that stood near the door. Instead she simply threw it anywhere. With a delicate crumpled sound, it hit the wall and rebounded towards the dressing table that hosted her collection of seaside ornaments, knocking one to the floor. Sophie didn't even glance up when the sound of a breaking shell reached her ears. She was furious with herself for being duped by the Mirror Man's deception. Even worse was the feeling of shame; she had persuaded the mimics to accept the offer from her 'friend'. She desperately wanted to do something to set everything right, but there were no clues to follow. No footprints or cigarette ends that the likes of Sherlock Holmes would see as a clear path to the villain's secret hideout. She had racked her brain for hours, and was still no closer to finding an answer.

Sophie looked at her alarm clock as the digital numbers changed from 19 to 20. One more minute had passed. One more minute closer to the mimics' deaths, assuming, she

thought with a lump in her throat, that it wasn't already too late. Suddenly she froze. She looked at her alarm. It was one of the types that had an in-built radio. She recalled the mimics talking about their Cousin Wireless. With a name like that, surely he must live in an old radio. He didn't go with the mimics into the trap, so he must still be in the house. Perhaps he would have an idea of how the mimics could be saved. She sped out of the room.

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief when she found the attic empty. Barnaby hadn't entered since he broke the ancient television. Sophie thought he was probably too embarrassed. Then again, it could be that without the television working there was nothing for him to do there. Nervously she glanced around the room until her sharp eyes spotted a radio shaped contraption on the shelf near the door. Quickly she hurried to it. The old wireless, covered in layers of thick dust and cobwebs, looked extraordinary to Sophie's young eyes. She was so used to seeing the sleek and compact radios of modern times. This radio was anything but sleek and compact. As far as Sophie was concerned, it was a large yucky brown eyesore. It was also the home of Cousin Wireless.

'Hello. Are you there?' she said into one of the speakers. 'Your friends... er... the mimics desperately need your help.'

There was no reply. The radio remained deathly quiet. Sophie tried once more, determined to persuade the creature dwelling inside that his cousins needed his urgent assistance.

In spite of her words, after five minutes of pleading there was still no response. She was getting nowhere, and she knew that every minute that passed could spell doom to the mimics. In desperation, she thumped the shelf. A small cloud of dust took to the air like a miniature mushroom cloud, but even this noise didn't rouse a reply from within the craggy old radio. Making a snap decision, Sophie seized an old screwdriver, streaked in paint and dirt, from the shelf. Delicately, she began to unscrew the back of the wireless. If the mimics' cousin would not answer her, then she would have to take drastic action.

Holding her breath, the final screw came free and she carefully pulled the back away. The sight before her was overwhelming, and she found herself taking an involuntary step backwards. The inside of the wireless reminded Sophie of a doll's house. But doll's houses, however well made, were simply toys. This had an air of homeliness to it that a doll's house never could. She spied a fireplace with the embers still glowing, a rocking chair and even a bookcase. Miniature unwashed pots and pans lay in a tiny sink. Sophie wondered what meal they were used for. Probably woodlouse, if Ell's tastes were anything to go by. But there was no sign of Cousin Wireless. He hadn't replied because he was no longer there.

Sophie felt her new found hope trickle away. She had gambled on Cousin Wireless helping her, and now she had discovered that he was also missing. Had the Mirror Man got him too? Refusing to give up so easily, she poked her

finger into the minuscule home. There must be a clue somewhere. There had to be. And there was. On a tiny table she noticed a minute piece of paper. Holding it between her thumb and forefinger, Sophie squinted her eyes to read the incredibly small writing.

*To whom it may concern,
It is no longer safe here, so I have moved on.
I will never talk to humans. Beware the Mirror Man.
Cousin Wireless.*

The last speck of hope disappeared. There was no one to help her, and Sophie had no idea what she alone could do. Downhearted, she left the deserted attic. Her feet moved on autopilot, taking her to the living room where she flopped herself onto the sofa next to her mother. Ruth was engrossed in a repeat of an old tacky sitcom. She was too immersed to acknowledge her daughter and snorted with laughter at the feeble jokes. The last thing that Sophie wanted to do was watch a comedy.

‘Is there anything else on?’ she said.

Ruth didn’t reply. Feeling bored and frustrated and with nothing else to do, Sophie’s fingers began to explore her cluttered pockets. In the right-hand side, she found a boiled sweet, unwrapped and half-dissolved in the warmth of her clothes. In the other pocket she found her mother’s make-up mirror, together with something round and unfamiliar. She fished the mirror out, flipped it open and looked sadly at

her reflection. With the mimics gone, there was no longer any point in ensuring that the mirrors in the house were covered up. She was sure that the Mirror Man would leave her in peace as he had what he wanted. From now on, she supposed, looking into mirrors will become the hardest thing she could ever do. Maybe she would get a phobia of mirrors – mirrorphobia perhaps? With a shiver, she placed the make-up mirror on her lap, realising that she ought to return it to her mother.

Idly she fiddled with the other object, before bringing it into the open. Her eyebrows raised in surprise, when she realised it was the ring that she had found outside the headmaster's office. With all the drama, it had totally slipped her mind to take it to Lost Property. It was amongst the last things she wanted to see, as it was a stark reminder of the foolishness of handing her friends straight to the Mirror Man. The more she looked at it, the more it looked as if it was an antique. It was odd that it would have been lost at a school.

As Sophie was about to slip it back into her pocket, she noticed the decoration of embracing lizards on the silver band. For the first time, she realised that she had seen this type of lizard before – on one of the wildlife documentaries her mother liked. They were chameleons, of that she was sure. Sophie knew that chameleons changed their colour to look like other things. Perhaps the ring's decoration was some statement about illusions. Maybe the ring belonged to the Mirror Man. He certainly had been there just before she

found it.

When the thought struck her, her fingers automatically dropped the ring onto her lap in disgust. With a clatter, it landed on the make-up mirror. To Sophie's amazement, the mirror began to glow softly. Its surface rippled and pulsed. Cautiously Sophie extended one finger. The tip disappeared inside the mirror, and she could feel a force dragging her hand further inside.

'You know Sophie, I used to watch this programme when I was your...' said Ruth, as she turned towards her daughter. She stopped talking when she realised that Sophie was no longer sitting next to her. 'How odd! I didn't hear her leave,' she mumbled to herself.

Sophie felt as if she was wading through runny glue, and if she stopped she would soon be stuck fast to the floor. Except there was no floor to become stuck to. Although she had done this journey before, the lack of a stable surface below made her very nervous. As in her previous trip through the mirror, images flashed before her eyes. This time Sophie made a conscious effort to ignore them. She had no desire to see pictures of herself handing the mimics to the Mirror Man. Eventually the images faded to be replaced by the explosion of light that marked the exit from the mirror passageway. She felt herself being pulled forwards. A wave of sickness enveloped her at the thought of meeting the Mirror Man again, but she had to be brave for the sake of the mimics. Summoning all her courage, she got ready to

fight.

She had already tensed her muscles, set to rescue her friends or perish in the attempt, when behind her a distant voice called her name. Dumbfounded, she tore her body away from the exit. Briefly, she felt herself being pulled back, but once she resisted the tug decreased and she was able to stand still. Other than the overpowering white light, there was nobody to be seen. The voice spoke again. It was faint, almost a whisper. She looked wildly about, but she still appeared to be completely alone. Sophie turned back towards the light, and considered ignoring the peculiar whisper. But something deep inside told her that she might regret ignoring the voice. Perhaps it was an ally who could help her in her quest. The voice spoke for a third time. This time it was crisp and clear, and came from directly behind her. All thoughts of finding an ally vanished. With dread, she recognised it as the voice she had come to fear.

With great effort she turned around, but there was nobody behind her. Was her mind playing tricks on her? She had to admit that she was becoming spooked, and her new found courage was fast evaporating. Her arms were now covered in goosebumps. Realising that she didn't have time to waste on ghostly voices, real or otherwise, Sophie turned back towards the brilliant white light. She screamed.



Blocking the exit stood the Mirror Man. Sophie backed slowly away, her feet heavy in the realm of the mirror. She wanted to run, but her feet were sluggish and unwieldy. Why did she hesitate on hearing the voice? Now she had deprived her rescue attempt of any element of surprise. The Mirror Man spoke.

‘Be calm. I’m not who you think I am.’

‘I’m not falling for that trick again!’ said Sophie angrily. At least some of her courage had returned. ‘What do you take me for? Stupid?’

‘Not at all. However, I do want to help.’

Sophie could hardly believe her ears. Here was the evil

man who had harassed and threatened both her and the mimics, offering help. It was like a shark offering to eat himself for pudding. It was obviously a trick to get her to lower her guard. If she did, she would end up as the main course. Her face turned red with fury at his attempt to do the same trick twice.

‘Help! Don’t make me laugh. You conned me into giving you the mimics, but you’re not going to fool me again. In fact...’

Sophie stopped in mid sentence. The Mirror Man was no longer standing in front of her. He had disappeared.

‘I’m not the one who fooled you,’ said a voice by her right ear.

Sophie turned her head, and saw that he was now standing at her side.

‘Oh, of course. Don’t tell me... I fooled myself. Is that it?’

‘Look at me. Don’t I appear different?’

The young girl had to admit that the Mirror Man didn’t look exactly as she had remembered. His face was softer, and his hands looked as if they belonged to him instead of some old-aged pensioner. So he’d had a facelift. So what!

‘Look, it’ll take more than a mudpack and a manicure to impress me,’ she said.

‘Did you hear of the warlock who split himself into two? The good and the evil. All to gain immortality. Did the mimics not tell you of this story?’

‘Sure. That was you. That’s why you’re evil. All the good

stripped out of you.’

‘Half right. But I’m not the evil,’ he paused to let his words sink in, before he followed it with the bombshell. ‘I’m the good. Or Cynewulf to be more accurate, as unlike the evil part of me I still use the name given to me by my father.’

‘You’re kidding me. This is just another trick isn’t it?’ said Sophie.

‘It wasn’t supposed to be like this. The plan was to trap the evil, but it went so, so wrong,’ explained Cynewulf pleadingly. ‘I was not a bad person you know. I was no saint and did many bad things, but I was not evil. But there was more bad in me than good, so when we were split, the bad was stronger and it was me that suffered the fate of this prison not him.’

‘I heard that you vowed revenge on the mimics?’ said Sophie. She was still unsure if she believed this strange sob story.

‘True I wanted revenge for the laughter and ridicule, but I never wanted the destruction of an entire race. I wanted to be able to do what the mimics could do. The magic I had already learned had helped of course, but I was distracted by revenge and impatience so the illusions always imploded and failed. I thought if I stripped away these negative emotions, then perhaps the illusions would work properly. And if not I would be immortal anyway, and who doesn’t want to be immortal?’

‘I’d rather not. It would be boring,’ answered Sophie.

‘Well you’re wiser than me then,’ said Cynewulf.

‘Immortality has destroyed me.’

‘But weren’t you trapped in a broken mirror,’ said Sophie suspiciously. ‘How could you be here?’

‘The mirror that was smashed to trap me many, many years ago, was made into the frame for a magic mirror. With it, the Mirror Man can travel to any mirror in the world,’ explained Cynewulf. ‘My life essence is the power source for the mirror. And he likes to keep me close, as well. He’s afraid I’ll find a way to break free, and leave this world. If I am not trapped, then he will lose his immortality. He would age and die just like any normal person. But I know there is no escape from this snare. You must have noticed the snap-shots of your recent past and close future when you travelled through the mirror?’

‘Yes! There was one where I shouted at my little brother, and it happened,’ said Sophie.

‘The mirror magic tears a small passageway in reality, you see. Little bits of the traveller’s past and future bleed in. A random jigsaw puzzle. It’s a side effect really, but a useful one. Using these images of his future, the Mirror Man was able to keep one step ahead of you. He knew when he was going to meet you, and what you would do. Some images I was able to block from him, so you were able to outwit him. But I could never block them all.’

‘You blocked images from him,’ said Sophie, ‘How?’

‘There is a plus side to my prison,’ continued Cynewulf. ‘Whenever the Mirror Man enters this domain to travel, he is in my world. Much of the time, I am no bother to him or

at most a minor irritation. But I can hide a little of what he sees within this world and sometimes, with great effort, I can take control of my old body for a short while. He is much more powerful, so the periods of control tend to be extremely short. Minutes really. It was during these periods that I was able to send you the messages of warning and the ring.'

'That was you!' explained Sophie in surprise.

'Whenever you received a letter, the Mirror Man was somewhere nearby. These are the times when I gained some brief control of my body,' said Cynewulf. 'The ring is special. It holds the after effects of the Mirror Man's magic. He uses it to focus the magic and make it stronger. I knew that you were intelligent enough to discover you could use it to travel as he does.'

'But your last message put the mimics into the hands of the Mirror Man,' said Sophie, secretly pleased with the compliment. This good version of the Mirror Man was growing on her, but there were still some unanswered questions. She had to be sure that this wasn't another trick.

'I'm afraid that was the one that I did not write,' apologised Cynewulf sheepishly. 'Unfortunately, after a while he realised what I was up to. When he did, he sent his own letter and tricked you. For that I am truly sorry.'

'Are you going to help me rescue Ell, Hibbie and the others?' asked Sophie hopefully.

'I cannot go with you,' said Cynewulf. 'I am trapped here. But continue with your plan. It will work, and I will

do my part when the time comes.'

Sophie was confused. She had no plan. Indeed, she had no idea what to do to help her small furry friends. She was going to run blindly forwards and hope for the best. She opened her mouth to ask what the plan was, and realised that yet again she was standing alone. Cynewulf had gone

'But I have no plan!' Sophie cried out into empty space.

Of Mice and Mimics

In the grimy far reaches of the cellar, half submerged in shadows, the Mirror Man was erecting a hellish creation. It was a monstrosity of shining silver, with gleaming barbs and razor-sharp wire. The moisture dripping from the ceiling had taken its toll, with more than a hint of rust spoiling its shiny finish, but this only added to the machine's sickening appearance. There was one thing for certain – this was not a device for play and laughter. When his task was complete, the Mirror Man took a firm hold of the base of the machine and pulled hard, grunting with effort as he did so. The scrape of its bulk against concrete caused a spine-chilling metallic wail to float around the cellar. Little by little it was dragged across the floor, towards the dangling birdcage that imprisoned the creatures that he despised so much.

Ell winced. The scraping sound reminded her of the awful earthquake caused by the small audience. The sound was just like the noise the TV studio door made, as its hinges twisted and buckled under her weight whilst she hung onto its handle for dear life. Her jailer's grunts, combined with the noise of the machine itself, chilled her to the bone. Knowing time was short, she tore her gaze from the shape

approaching slowly from the darkness. She had a few things to finish before her terrible enemy came within sight. Out of view of the Mirror Man, the captive mimics had been hard at work. Together they had devised a plan, but it wasn't running as smoothly as she had hoped. As always, Hibbie and Ethelbert were ready and Ell wasn't far behind, but Murb seemed to be having trouble understanding what he was supposed to do. Murb was never one to speak much, unless it was about bees, but now he was full of questions and this was not the time for questions. If only he would hurry. They didn't have much time, and Ethelbert's frankly insane plan required them all to be ready. If all went as Ethelbert hoped, the Mirror Man would believe that they had already escaped.

Ell finished the last of her tasks. She was now as prepared as she could be. In anticipation she peeked out across the cellar. The Mirror Man had come to a halt nearby, and was busy checking gears and wheels. Now the foul machine was bathed in the dim light of the shimmering mirror, she was able to gain a proper look at the full horror before her. Light reflected off sharp evil blades and cruel jagged saws. The saliva in her mouth dried up. Whatever the purpose of the machine was, she knew that it was not pleasant. She gulped when their captor finished his final checks, and strode purposefully towards the cage. She hissed a warning to the others. The plan had begun.

The Mirror Man reached the rusty birdcage, and glared inside with a twisted smile on his lips. In a blink of an eye



the smile vanished, and involuntarily his head moved back in surprise. The mimics were no longer there. Instead, the birdcage was full of mice. Two brown mice and two white mice scampered around. One scurried up to the bars, and raised himself onto his hind legs into a 'begging' position, as if he wanted some cheese. When no cheese was offered, his little pink nose twitched and his whiskers drooped. He squeaked sadly before returning to his comrades. The Mirror Man flipped open the door, and prodded his finger into the cage. The mice scattered, and three of them squeaked in fright.

The other one simply said 'Squeak!'

In an instant the Mirror Man clamped his thumb and forefinger around a small brown mouse's tail. It was the mouse that had used human speech.

The animal was whisked out of the cage, and dangled triumphantly in front of the Mirror Man's leering face.

'You should know better than to try to fool me,' he sneered. 'I am a master at illusions, and know that you disgusting creatures are also.'

'Squeak!' said the mouse.

The Mirror Man shook the creature roughly by his tail. There was a faint ripping sound. The 'mouse' struggled in his grasp, but was powerless to break free from the iron grip. The Mirror Man mumbled a few words under his breath, and the murderous machine crackled with energy.

'You know what this is?' he said sarcastically. 'Oh, of course you don't. It's just a little something I made to

dispose of mimics. I drop you in, and something nasty happens to you. You get the general idea. Messy, but fun. But it doesn't end there, oh no. In death you at last have a purpose. Your remains will be used to power my ring, and aid me in finding the last few of your kind. I'll be visiting that moronic girl soon to retrieve it, so do you have a final message for her?'

The Mirror Man waited a few moments for a grovelling reply. When nothing but whimpers left the 'mouse's' mouth, he slowly drew the dangling head towards the sharp biting teeth of the machine's spinning blades. The knives and saws buzzed as if in excitement at their approaching meal.

In the cage, Hibbie lost concentration and regained his normal shape and size. 'We must do something!' he cried.

Ell followed his example. There was no point in using precious energy pretending to be a rodent. The plan had been a disaster.

'Ethelbert, it was your idea,' she said grimly. 'What do we do now?'

'I'm impressed that even under that pressure, 'e stayed in character,' said her elder as he too discarded his mouse illusion.

'But what good is that if 'e's dead?'

'At least 'e'll 'ave gone down in true mimic style. Furthermore...'

'We must do something to 'elp poor Murb!' interrupted Hibbie, 'and quickly!'

'You do realise that we're next?' said Ethelbert.

The two mimics looked at each other in fright. Ethelbert was right. Soon they would be thrown, like discarded rubbish, into the machine. Ell turned away from Ethelbert, and racked her brain for a solution. She looked across at the Mirror Man, who had a triumphant grin on his face, as he held her friend over the blades. To simply kill the mimics wasn't enough for their captor. First, he wanted to gloat, and the machine was a way to show off his power over them. It would take one simple movement, and the mimic that she had grown up with would cease to exist.

Suddenly her acute hearing picked up a faint ripping sound, and Murb abruptly disappeared from sight. Her first thought was that the Mirror Man had tired of tormenting the young mimic, and had tossed him to his death. A split second later she saw the look of bafflement on their enemy's face, and noticed that his hand was still stretched towards the machine. Clamped tightly between his thumb and forefinger remained a mouse's tail. Ell's face fell. Murb had used a prop tail from Ethelbert's bag, as he was finding it hard to make an illusion of having one himself. It was all he could do to get the whiskers and body right. The mimic's fat body had been too much for the stitching that fixed the tail to his fur. It had finally given way. Ell felt sick. It was likely that he had plummeted straight into the vicious blades. She couldn't imagine life without Murb and his Bonsai Bees – not that she had much of a life to look forward to. Soon the Mirror Man would come for her. The thought made her fur stand on end.

Then movement on the floor caught her eye. She cried out in delight. Murb was alive. He had bounced off the rim of the mimic murdering machine, and was laid out in a daze on the floor. He still looked like a mouse, except he no longer had a tail. He reminded Ell of a refugee from the *Three Blind Mice* nursery rhyme. She watched as Murb pulled himself unsteadily to his feet, and looked in panic for a place to hide. He was too late. Ell watched helplessly as a huge black shadow loomed over him. Murb craned his neck upwards. Towering over him stood the Mirror Man.

‘I do believe you forgot something!’

The fake mouse-tail floated through the air to land, with a plop, in a puddle next to the tiny mimic. Then all hell broke loose. Murb turned on his heels and fled, and the Mirror Man lunged with amazing speed after him. The tubby mimic twisted and turned, dodging the grasping fingers by mere millimetres. If Murb had stayed in the open all would have been lost, but by a miracle he saw the only cover available. The glowing mirror was propped up against the crumbling bricks of the cellar wall. Behind it there was a small gap. The Mirror Man snarled in anger, as his prey squeezed his tubby little body into the tiny space. Almost knocking the mirror flying in his haste, the Mirror Man dropped down onto all fours and shoved his hand after Murb. To Ell’s horror, the Mirror Man withdrew his hand almost immediately. Clamped in his fist something small struggled. Her heart sank when she caught sight of Murb’s mouse costume. Her friend had been recaptured. In the firm

grip of the Mirror Man's hand he squeaked weakly with fright. Ell nodded to herself. Ethelbert was right – it was good that he was keeping in character.

'Didn't Murb's tail fall off?' said Hibbie's voice from behind her.

Ell frowned, and studied the struggling figure more closely. She saw its brown furry body, pink nose and twitching whiskers – all identical to Murb's costume. Then she saw the writhing tail. She looked around at the fake tail, floating in the puddle on the floor. It wasn't Murb in the Mirror Man's hands at all. It was a real mouse, and the mouse was far from happy. With an amazing feat of acrobatics, the little animal managed to twist around in the Mirror Man's grip. His sharp teeth sank into the flesh below the knuckle on the warlock's middle finger. No blood ran from the wound. The Mirror Man had no need for blood, but with all his power he couldn't banish the human response of pain. His cry of agony echoed around the cellar.

Ell held her breath. Surely the Mirror Man would realise that he was not grappling with a mimic. As the Mirror Man struggled with the angry mouse, Hibbie nudged her in the ribs. With a huge smile on his face he motioned towards the mirror. The first thing she saw was Murb. He had discarded his mouse disguise, and was peering out from behind the frame. The second thing was the reflection of a person in the mirror. A person that she had never expected to see again. The surface of the mirror became a shimmering liquid, and Sophie's body materialised into the room.

Sophie had spent the last few moments floating just behind the glass of the mirror, wondering desperately what to do. If only she had looked at the images during her travel through the mirror. She felt sure that she could have devised a plan if she was armed with knowledge of the future. She was pretty certain that the birdcage suspended from the crumbling plaster ceiling contained the imprisoned mimics, but she had no idea how to help them. She also couldn't for the life of her work out why the Mirror Man was grappling with a tiny mouse. She supposed it must be some sort of mystic ritual. While she watched, the Mirror Man changed position in his fight with the mouse. He now had his back to the mirror. It was then that she knew what she needed to do.

Cautiously she slipped out from the safety of the mirror passageway, and into the cold, damp cellar. The Mirror Man was too occupied with the mouse to notice her, and she tiptoed as quietly as she could towards the cage. Inside she could see the shapes of the mimics huddled together. A finger was put up to her mouth, to gesture for the mimics to remain silent. Racing against time, her nimble fingers soon untied the rope connecting the cage to the ceiling. With care, Sophie held the cage to her chest, and commenced the return journey to the mirror. She had only covered half the distance when she found her path blocked.

'Not so fast young lady. I do believe that you are trespassing.'

The Mirror Man sucked on one of his wrinkled fingers.

It was red and sore from the mouse's bites. Sophie hoped that the small animal had finally broken free, and was happily on his way to eat the contents of a cheese shop.

'Well, that didn't stop you from going into my house did it!' she exclaimed.

'The content of that cage is mine.'

The words floated, hypnotic and calm. Sophie nearly believed them. Perhaps it was his answer to the humiliation with the mouse, but his words were stronger and more persuasive than on her previous meeting. She had to shake her head to clear the soothing words that were invading her thoughts.

'They're not your property, or anyone's,' she shouted. 'They're living, breathing creatures with a right to freedom!'

'Pathetic girl,' sneered the Mirror Man, his change of tone snapping the spell like a dry twig. 'You're a traitor to human kind, and if you love these vile creatures so much, you can perish with them too. And don't think my ring will save you. You are trapped and now you will die.'

Sophie backed away in fright. She kicked herself for listening to Cynewulf. He had told her that her plan would work, but now she was trapped by a powerful warlock and soon to die a horrible death. She closed her eyes and waited for the blow or curse that was to end her short life. All she heard was a cry of pain. And the cry was coming from the Mirror Man. Her eyes snapped open. The Mirror Man was hopping on one foot, with Murb's razor-sharp teeth firmly embedded in his ankle. Sophie leapt on the brief moment

of confusion, and rushed at full speed towards the mirror. Without hesitation she plunged into its watery surface, her hands still hugging the birdcage tightly as if it was the most precious object in the world. She knew that the Mirror Man would not be far behind.

‘Wait! What about Murb? You’ve left Murb in the cellar!’

Seven Years Bad Luck

Sophie forced herself to ignore the cries of protest from the birdcage. The pangs of guilt at leaving one of the mimics behind were driven to the back of her mind. It was necessary. As the Mirror Man was descending on her to snuff out her life, she had a flash of inspiration. She remembered the first time she had entered the mirror domain, and recalled an image of broken glass. It gave her an idea. A proper plan. If this idea was to work it was vital that she reached the other side of the gateway before the Mirror Man. She wished she had time to explain everything to her friends, but she could feel the presence of their pursuer close behind and he must not know what she planned to do. The Mirror Man had thousands of years of practice to perfect the art of mirror travel, and Sophie knew that it was only a matter of time before he caught up. She imagined it would be like a race along the school playing field – except your opponent had the newest, sleekest pair of ‘go-fast’ trainers and you had your feet encased in huge concrete slabs.

Desperately blocking out the sobs of dismay from Ell, Hibbie and Ethelbert, she redoubled her efforts. She must

beat the Mirror Man to their destination at all costs. The strange images of the past and future that surrounded her were now a blur of colour and shapes and it was impossible to focus on them. She hoped Cynewulf would block out any images that the Mirror Man may see or she would be sunk. It couldn't be much further. Just as she thought her muscles were about to give way, the brilliant white of the exit loomed up ahead. Immediately her body distorted and stretched, as she felt herself being pulled at speed towards the waiting light.

Moments later, she was back in her living room, slumped on the sofa with the cage clutched tightly to her body. To one side lay her mother's make-up mirror, glowing softly with the Mirror Man's power. Her mother was still engrossed in front of the television, and hadn't noticed the sudden appearance of her daughter by her side. But Sophie knew that she had no time to waste on such things. She was wasting precious seconds. She must be ready. Quickly she whipped up the make-up mirror and held it out in front of her. With its reflective surface facing away from her body, she sat back and waited. She was just in time. The mirror trembled in her grasp. Although she had been expecting it, she stifled a scream when she saw a withered hand claw its way out. Within milliseconds the hand was attached to an arm, and then a torso dressed in a full-length leather coat. Finally, the entire Mirror Man emerged into Sophie's living room, his angry eyes sweeping the area for his quarry. As she had turned the mirror around, Sophie was stood directly

behind the vile man.

Quickly she angled the mirror back towards herself. She knew that at this point of the game, there would be no margin for error. If she played safe, she was sure that she could rescue the mimics and destroy the centre of the Mirror Man's power. However, she did not relish the idea of always having to watch her back, never knowing if the evil warlock had plans against her and her friends. The Mirror Man had to be put in a place where he could not cause any more harm, and for that she needed the help of his better half. Summoning all of her courage, she spoke.

'Cynewulf, I know you would have tried to enter your old body. Speak to me.'

The Mirror Man spun around and with a chilling grin displayed a set of orange rotted teeth. 'You're wasting your time,' he sneered. 'I'm too strong for him.'

'Come on,' Sophie encouraged. 'I know you can do it.'

'Save your breath for your screams, mimic lover. The pain you will feel...'

The Mirror Man stopped in mid-sentence. His face went an even more deathly pale, before a wave of warmth flooded across his face. The good had taken over.

'I cannot hold him for long,' he said in a weak voice. 'Go. Go now.'

'Please,' Sophie begged. 'I need your help...'

'I know what you plan,' said Cynewulf. 'You wish me to follow you, after first destroying the gateway at this end of the mirror. I will deal with it. Go now.'

Muttering her thanks, Sophie extended a finger and plunged it into the small mirror. Her body, stretched and deformed, was rapidly sucked into the passageway beyond. With a lack of support to hold it, the make-up mirror crashed to the floor. The youngster gone, Cynewulf turned and smiled at Ruth, who was sitting mouth open in surprise. She had been distracted from her television programme by her daughter's conversation with an unfamiliar voice – the threatening voice of an ugly demon of a man, who then turned into his friendly twin. As if that wasn't enough, when the conversation ended her daughter was sucked into the mirror that Ruth used to apply her lipstick on special occasions. None of the events could be real. Once this simple fact had been decided, she knew what had happened. It had, of course, been all her doing.

'I... I knew I shouldn't have changed the sheets on a Friday,' she stammered. 'It's given the control of my dreams to the devil.'

'That's right,' he said in a soothing voice. 'You're asleep. But if you smash this mirror you'll wake up and all will be well.'

'But that's bad luck!'

'But you'll only be dreaming it, so it won't count. Trust me.'

Rubbing her aching eyes, Ruth watched the figure in the horrible leather coat disappear into her make-up mirror. Robot-like, her hand plucked it from the floor and, after a second's thought, lashed it against the wall. The sound of

broken glass filled the room.

When Sophie finally burst back into the cellar, Murb was pacing back and forth displaying a long depressed face. On her return he literally jumped for joy. Happily he craned his neck upwards at the audience he at last regarded as a friend.

‘Aren’t I glad to see you!’ he said with a huge grin. ‘I thought you’d left me behind for good!’

Sophie didn’t have time to talk. Instead she placed the cage containing the other mimics on the concrete floor, and did a quick scan of her surroundings. The Mirror Man’s machine was still crackling with power, and the vicious blades were spinning in a blur of metal. Raising her foot, Sophie kicked out at the vile thing with all her strength. The monstrosity spluttered, but the blades kept spinning. She aimed another blow, and then another. The machine carried on as if it hadn’t even been hit. She groaned. All she needed was to break off one piece of metal, but the Mirror Man had built it too well. There had to be something she could use. Then her foot nudged something on the floor. It was the mop that she had brought into the cellar as a makeshift weapon on her first visit. With glee, she stooped down and grabbed it from the floor. It would be perfect for her uses.

Her brain registered a cry of warning. It was Murb. He was staring in panic at the mirror. A clear outline of a human body could be seen just behind the shimmering liquid surface. The hands were withered, old and dry and the eyes burned with a fierce evil. The Mirror Man had

regained total control of his body. He reached out a hand, and the tips of his fingers began their rapid emergence into the cellar.

Purposely, Sophie took two steps forward and raised the mop high above her head. Her first blow crashed heavily into the centre of the mirror. One single crack spread across the glass. The next blow caused the crack to multiply into hundreds of tiny offspring. She rained still more blows onto the shimmering surface. Soon the whole mirror surface resembled a spider's web, with the Mirror Man caught in its centre. He began to growl with anger, and attempted desperately to push his way out of the mirror passageway. The cracks prevented him. They were like prison bars. He was trapped behind the glass of the mirror.

'Let me out you pathetic girl,' he roared. 'Or I will plague you forever.'

'I don't think so,' said Sophie.

She raised the mop one last time, and brought it down with all her might. There was one final scream of outrage, before the mirror collapsed into thousands of tiny pieces of glass. The gateway into the realm of mirrors had been destroyed, and the warlock who had claimed it as his own was now trapped inside forever. Trapped inside a broken mirror.

With the Mirror Man gone, the whole atmosphere of the cellar changed. It was no longer oppressive and unnerving. It simply felt normal, if somewhat filthy. It was just a typical dirty, damp cellar, and the worst that a visitor could expect

was the sight of a scaly-tailed rat. It was lighter too. Thin shafts of light shone down from a small window, bathing the cellar in a feeble yellow glow. In plain sight beneath the window was a door covered with faded green paint, and it wasn't even closed. The illusion that hid the window and exit from view was now broken. In the corner, the Mirror Man's monstrous machine lay quiet and still, the energy that kept it running abruptly cut off. The only use for it now was a support for spider's webs, and a much-needed sanctuary for mice.

Sophie walked across to the imprisoned mimics, crunching splinters of mirror underfoot. She swung open the door of the birdcage, and held out her hand for them to clamber on. As they were doing so, Murb crawled out from beneath a pile of broken glass and brushed mirror dust off his fur.

'Murb, I'm sorry for leaving you behind,' said Sophie.

'That's okay. You came back, didn't you,' replied the fat mimic.

Sophie lowered her hand, and Murb hopped on to join the others. She turned to leave, but before she had a chance to she heard a buzzing from the far reaches of the cellar. From out of the shadows flew a lone Bonsai Bee, which promptly landed on Murb's head.

'There you are Mildred!' exclaimed Murb cheerfully. 'Right, we can go 'ome now.'

'So the Mirror Man is trapped inside the mirror, and can't

‘arm us anymore?’ asked Ethelbert for the umpteenth time.

Sophie nodded her reassurance. She had spent much of the journey putting the mimics’ minds at rest, and filling in the details of what she had actually done to their archenemy. Ell had been so pleased to get out of the rusty birdcage, that even the sticky sweet in Sophie’s pocket couldn’t dent her mood.

‘So everything’s back to normal,’ she said.

‘Not quite,’ replied Ethelbert sadly. ‘The televisual machine is still broken. We still can’t perform any shows.’

‘Maybe it’s best that the television is bust,’ said Hibbie. ‘Without it we won’t make enemies of ‘umans again.’

‘We could turn the studio into a bee sanctuary,’ said Murb hopefully.

‘But nobody knows you’re in the TV,’ said Sophie. ‘They all believe it’s electrical. And with the Mirror Man gone you will be safe.’

‘And what’s the point in stopping something we enjoy?’ remarked Ell. ‘It’s what us mimics are all about.’

A broad grin swept across Hibbie’s face. ‘You’re right!’ he exclaimed. ‘Let’s go and do a show. We can...’

‘We can’t!’ interrupted Ethelbert moodily, ‘as I said, the televisual machine is still broken. But it’s not becoming an ‘aven for those infernal flying creatures!’

Both Hibbie and Murb’s faces drooped, and the remainder of the journey was completed in silence. Once home, Sophie let herself in and trudged up the stairs towards the attic. She could hear sounds from within. The door

creaked open, and she peered inside. To her shock, her father was at the back of the ancient television with a screwdriver.

‘Hello dear,’ said Bob to his daughter. ‘You know this TV is amazing. It’s not like any other I’ve ever seen. No idea how it works as I can’t get the whole top off, but there was some damage at the front that I spotted. I’ve superglued a magnifying glass back together and I think I’ve replaced it correctly. Dunno if it will help though.’ He fished in his pocket and took out a screw, which he inserted into the television’s back. Connecting the screwdriver to its end, he began to turn. ‘There was a large area that buzzed, so I assume it was the power source. I don’t want to poke around too much, or I might get a shock.’

Sophie sat on the floor next to her father, and pretended to take interest in his work. She knew that if he had poked about too much, he would have got a shock, but it would not have been of the electrical kind. As Bob had made repairs, he had completely missed all the clues that it was not really an electrical machine. Being careful not to be seen, the mimics sneaked out of Sophie’s pocket and made their way towards the set. When Bob looked away, they slipped safely inside.

‘Barnaby’s taken quite a shine to this old telly, you know,’ said Bob. ‘Look I even found one of his toys inside it.’

He held out a small rubber tentacle. It was one of the mimics’ props from *Super Galaxy Heroes*. There was a crash

as her little brother whooshed into the room, his arms outstretched in his game of aeroplanes.

‘Ah, Barnaby,’ said Bob. ‘You’re just in time. Shall we see if it works?’

‘You know, if it wasn’t for my bees ‘e’d ‘ave found the studio and our living quarters,’ boasted Murb.

‘Shh,’ whispered Ell. ‘We need to be ready when they turn the set on.’

‘Ibbie!’ said Ethelbert. ‘Nip into the costume room and see if there’s anything useful. Use any bits of costume in there to add to whatever you decide to be. There’s a good chap.’

‘What’s the character?’

‘Oh I don’t know! Um... maybe a monk, or a vet perhaps. What about a doctor? Surprise me.’ The young mimic darted away, while his elder surveyed the studio. ‘Ell, can you shift all that rubble over into the middle of the studio?’ he said. ‘We can ‘ave it as a quarry. No, on second thoughts make it an alien planet. Murb find something to wear.’

Murb wandered across to the dustbin in the corner of the studio. Emptying the contents onto the floor, he put the shiny silver bin over his head, and waddled as best he could onto the set. The costume room door slammed, and Hibbie walked out. He had made himself into the likeness of the gangly man that he had met in the electrical television, right down to his eccentric wardrobe. To finish the costume off,

he had also opted to wear around his neck an impossibly long scarf.

‘I’m afraid this is all I could think of,’ he apologised.

‘It’ll do,’ said Ethelbert as the alarms sounded to indicate the set had been switched on. ‘Places everyone... and begin.’

The old mimic ran his hands across the piano wire of his broken prized instrument creating eerie music, whilst Hibbie bounded with an air of insane alien intelligence across the studio. Suddenly he stopped dead in front of the dustbin covered Murb, who cried out in a metallic voice...

‘Exterminate! Exterminate!’

Barnaby hardly noticed his big sister sit down on the floor next to him. His eyes were firmly set on the old science fiction show playing on the telly. Never in his wildest dreams did he consider that there might be little creatures inside the ancient set performing for him. Only small children believed stories like that, and he was far too grown up. His eyes remained glued to the screen, engrossed in the programme playing for an audience of two.



— EPILOGUE —

The impact caused the water to splash up like a miniature volcano. Ripples spread outwards across the river, starting insignificantly small but rapidly gaining impressive size. The larger they grew, the weaker their effect became. Eventually they grew so weak they disappeared altogether. More impacts followed. Soon the whole surface was littered with tiny splashes of dirty river water and multitudes of ripples. The dark water appeared to boil, as the splashes and waves covered its polluted surface. The thousands of pieces of broken mirror that caused the disruption to the usually peaceful river sank immediately. They settled for a short while on the rubbish strewn riverbed, before the strong currents snatched them away to be swept towards the sea.

Sophie looked down from the steel footbridge that stretched across the waterway. Perhaps it was her mother's superstitions that caused her to throw the remains of both the magic and make-up mirrors into the water. She recalled Ruth informing her that it was the only way to prevent the onslaught of seven years bad luck, so she had returned to the cellar and collected every scrap of broken glass. Somehow it seemed a fitting end for the Mirror Man. Perhaps the water would wash his evil away. She hoped

Cynewulf's eternity was more bearable, now his other half was trapped as he was.

Fishing in her pocket, she brought out the Mirror Man's ornate ring. She studied the chameleon design for a full thirty seconds, and then slipped it back into her pocket. It had been given to her by Cynewulf, so couldn't be dangerous in itself. It would be something to remind her of the help he had given. Silently she stood and watched the last of the ripples disappear until she was sure the mirror was gone forever. Eventually she turned to go. It was time to leave. The mimics had a new show ready, and she mustn't be late. On the far bank she caught sight of a bird dipping its bill in the river to take a drink. She remained for a few moments and looked across at the tranquil scene in front of her. True the river was badly polluted, but it was still beautiful. All life was beautiful. With a sigh, Sophie began her journey home. There was a flurry of wings, as the bird took to the air in search of a less polluted mouthful.

Under the water, caught on the skeletal remains of an umbrella wedged firmly in the silt, one last fragment of mirror remained. A passing fish swam near in the search for food, intrigued by a strange glow seeping through the water. A ghostly reflection of the Mirror Man, parts of his body missing as if he himself had been shattered, glared up at the startled creature. A few gurgling words left his mouth.

'I will return. I have not lost... yet!'

The fish didn't understand the human speech, and darted away just as the strong currents finally managed to sweep the fragment towards the open sea.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

Born and raised in Keynsham, Bristol, Benjamin Burford-Jones was but one member of a large family. With six brothers and sisters to play with and very little money, he was forever learning the art of imagination as it was free, reusable and there was plenty to go around. This imagination he put to great use in both schoolwork and playtime. As he grew up, these brothers and sisters produced nephews and nieces. In fact, he could hardly turn a corner without being confronted with another tiny new addition to the ever-expanding family. The result was that he grew into adulthood with the strong belief that nobody should ever be talked down to or patronised – whatever their age.

When he realised that his childhood dream of becoming a fireman could quite possibly cause him to get burnt, he decided to drop the fantasy and focus on more obtainable goals. Unfortunately being an astronaut was also not his cup of tea. During his adult life he has put his hand to many things, from very tedious clerical work to building and performing with puppets. As a result, he appreciates the sacrifice that clerical workers give to enable artists to flourish. He also realises the pain and suffering that the poor

puppeteer has to undergo, with his hand up an animal's bottom. Currently he is working in education – teaching young people how to make television programmes.

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