

Crab Soup

One

In the beginning God created heaven and earth, but he did not get it quite right at first.

This is what Grandpa told me when we were sat in the garden, shivering in the cold because Granny does not like him smoking in the house.

“Don’t you keep that child out there in the cold; you’ll ‘ave ‘im freezin’ to death,” Granny shouted out of the kitchen window.

“At least his ears will be warm, listening to Dad’s tales,” I heard Mum say.

The sun was bright and the sky was clear but it was still cold. Grandpa looked up at the sky as if he were wondering where the light was coming from.

“Do you know ‘ow far away the sun is?” he said suddenly.

Grandpa was sat on a chair and I was sat on the grass picking randomly at the short blades. The ground was hard and not as soft as it had been a few days before.

“93 million miles away,” Grandpa revealed, seeming astonished at what must be, even to him, a miraculous distance. “Imagine that! 93 million miles away an’ it’s still bright. It’s still ‘ot, too, but you wouldn’t think so today, would you?” He rasped his leathery hands together to show how cold it was and it sounded as if sparks might fly off them. He smiled at me as I watched him in awe. “Think ‘ow bright an’ ‘ot it must be up close.”

I wondered if 93 million miles was as far as Dad walks every day. He always comes home complaining that he has walked for miles. Dad is a postman. It may seem inconvenient to be a postman and not like walking, but this is life, apparently.

“Pick that child up off that cold floor; ‘e’ll be catchin’ pneumonia,” Granny shouted through her trusty window.

Grandpa picked me up and placed me on his knee.

“That’s why the earth spins round, see?” he continued. “If it didn’t, one side’d be

roasted with the heat from t'sun an' t'other side'd be cold. It's like your bacon under t'grill, see? If your mum didn't turn it over, one side'd be burnt to a cinder an' t'other side'd be raw."

Grandpa tells me things like this. Without him I would not know anything. Sometimes I have trouble understanding what he says because he speaks in his old-fashioned way.

"I know this because in t'beginning God got it a bit wrong, believe it or not."

Grandpa lit a cigarette and had a good cough before carrying on. He used his hands to describe what he was saying and I watched his burnt-sausage fingers draw pictures in the air.

"On one side o' t'world, see, there's lots o' land an' at first that side were facin' t'sun all the time 'cos the earth didn't turn round. Well, t'sun baked it an' fried it till it started blisterin' an' crackin' like paint under a blow torch."

Smoke came out of my mouth as I blew into the cold air, just like Grandpa, but I did not have to have a cigarette to do it.

"That's where t'mountains an' valleys come from, see? There were cracks what formed valleys an' blisters what formed t'mountains. It were so 'ot that the earth sweated an' t'sweat rolled off t'land an' formed t'seas. That's why t'sea always tastes salty, like sweat, see?"

Grandpa repositioned me on his knee and put his cigarette into his mouth. It bobbed about as he spoke.

"By gum, lad, you're 'as 'eavy as a sack o' spuds," he said. He sucked one last time on his cigarette and then threw it on the floor and squashed it with his foot.

"Anyway," he continued, "God thought, this is no good; I'll 'ave to do somethin' about this. So God give the earth a bit of a shove, see? Just a gentle push wi'

t'sandelled foot that set it off spinnin', an' it still spins to this day. It spins round just once a day so's it won't get too 'ot in one spot."

Grandpa ruffled my hair like he always does.

"What does't think o' that, then, young Billy?"

I giggled and played with his burnt-sausage finger. He bent down and picked up his squashed cigarette then Granny would not shout at him.

Grandpa tells me things like this. He is my best friend of all.

"Gagga!"

This is me talking. This may not mean very much to you but it means everything to me; literally. As it is the only word I can say I use it to mean whatever I want it to mean. It is very handy having a word that can mean whatever you want it to mean. The downside is that I am the only person who knows what it means at the time. People smile stupidly as if they understand what I am saying. They tell each other that I am 'trying' to talk and call me a 'clever boy'. It does not make me feel clever when I see their expressions of bewilderment or amusement whilst I am desperately attempting to tell them that I need a biscuit.

It is a pity that the only word I can say is not 'biscuit'.

However, 'Gagga!' it is and 'Gagga!' it must remain until someone teaches me how to hold a conversation.

"Gagga!" this time means 'hello'. At the end it would mean 'goodbye', and in the middle, presumably, it would mean 'and so on', or some other middle-of-the-story type phrase.

Hello. My name is William Harry. Those are my first names. I have another name as well; that is Crabtree. I do not know why I am called Crabtree; it seems a strange name to me. People on the telly are called Flintstone and Simpson and Shrek.

I do not know anyone on the telly called Crabtree. I think it is a strange name. Perhaps I worry too much.

Mum said I was named after a prince. I do not know who that is. There is a dog who lives across the road called Prince but I do not think it is any great honour being named after a dog. But he is called Prince and not Crabtree so I do not understand. I get confused over names.

Mum calls me Wills and Dad calls me Billy. It is difficult being called different things. Mum says 'Wills' is cute and Dad says 'Wills' is no name for a postman's son.

"Have you seen yesterday's paper?"

This is Dad asking Mum if she has seen yesterday's paper. Dad does not look for things, according to Mum. If something is not on the top in the top drawer or does not jump out of the wardrobe at him Dad will never find it. If it is in the bottom drawer Dad may as well give up looking and buy a new one of whatever it is he cannot find.

I do not know how old Dad is but he has not got much hair left so he must be very old. Mum is prettier than Dad so she must not be as old as him. Dad says he has not got much hair left because he has to live with Mum and that Mum is not bald because she lives with him. I hope I do not lose my hair because I live with Mum – I have not got much to start with. I cannot afford to lose any. I do not know what Mum does to make Dad bald but I think I have seen her sewing buttons on with his hair.

"Have you looked in the paper rack?"

This is Mum asking Dad if he has looked in the paper rack for yesterday's paper. I do not know why it is called a paper rack, because it is made of wood. He will have looked there but if it did not grab him by the shoulders and yell at him: "Here I am! Here I am!" he will have given up looking and watched the news on the telly instead.

Dad's name is Harry but Mum calls him Pat. I think that is something to do with

his being a postman. Mum's name is Christine but Dad calls her Pet. Pat and Pet. Harry and Christine. Mum and Dad. I get confused over names.

We have a cat called Sam and a budgie called Riggarr. We had a goldfish once but it did not like playing with Sam so it went to live with Jesus. We do not have a dog. Dad does not like dogs; they give him a hard time. Dad says the only good dogs are the ones in the Great Kennel In The Sky. I do not know what he is talking about when he says things like this.

“What's for tea?”

This is Dad again as he arrives home after delivering his letters. He is quite thin, Dad, but he says carrying his sackful of letters round all day keeps him fit. He also says it helps him to develop his muscles. I do not know where he keeps his muscles; maybe they are in the greenhouse with the sun lounger and the lawn mower.

“Whatever you make!”

This is Mum's way of telling Dad that she has not made him any tea. She will have been too busy writing poems or talking to people from her Writer's Circle. I will tell you more about that later.

Dad is a comedian and a singer; at least he thinks he is. Mum also says he is a comedian but not in the sense that he is funny. When Mum and Dad's friends come to visit, Dad will sometimes tell jokes until Mum slaps him loudly on his bald head for saying something naughty. When he starts singing Mum always says that Sam has a better voice than him. He sings to himself when he is alone because no one else wants to listen. He does not sing songs that I know like *Old MacDonald* or *Twinkle Twinkle*. He sings about someone called *Delilah*.

Mum does not sing or tell jokes. She says that one clown in the family is enough. Mum should be on the telly. She is prettier than most people who are on. She is

prettier than Auntie Jo, who is her sister, and prettier than Karen from next door.

Mum has fair hair, which is short, and looks like someone on the telly whose name I do not know but who talks a lot and is on boring programmes.

We have a nice house with a garden, where Mum plants flowers and digs up weeds and where Dad drinks beer. Mum says that a garden is for more than just drinking beer in and Dad says she is right, then promptly falls asleep in it.

Dad falls asleep a lot. He falls asleep watching the telly, reading the newspaper, and even when their friends visit (when he has finished telling jokes). Dad annoys Mum by falling asleep so much. I fall asleep a lot, but Mum is always pleased when I do it. Mum says Dad could fall asleep on a washing line. I do not know if that would be by lying on it or by hanging from it. If he hung from it, with pegs holding his hands in place, his feet would touch the ground. She must mean by lying on it.

Mum gets annoyed at Dad's sleeping because she does not sleep much herself. She says she spends all day cleaning the house and cooking and gardening and looking after me (I do not mean to be such a burden), and then she tosses and turns all night long with thoughts running through her head and all she can hear is Dad snoring. She digs him in the ribs but nothing wakes him up. She says she would set fire to him to see if that would do the trick but she is afraid she would make a mess of the quilt. Dad says if she worked as hard as he did she would have no trouble sleeping. Then they argue and then they are quiet for a long time. I know something is wrong because Dad makes his own breakfast. "Deaf and dumb breakfast" he calls it.

Dad does not cook. He says he could if he wanted to. I think this is a joke. He says any fool can cook, that is why Mum finds it so easy. Whenever he has deaf and dumb breakfasts (which are always toast and marmalade) he sets off the smoke alarm. Mum says she cannot leave him to do anything. She says he would even burn lettuce.

I think this may be a joke, too, but you never know with Dad. He feeds me sometimes, and that usually tastes all right, but he does get quite a bit of it in my hair.

Mum is a good cook. She makes me *Alphabetti Spaghetti* and chopped-up-egg butties. The chopped-up-egg butties make a mess on the floor and the *Alphabetti Spaghetti* makes a mess on my face but they both taste good. She also makes a strange mixture in her mixer, in which she puts all kinds of things, whose names I am not sure of. There are carrots and gravy and some small balls that are the same colour as peas but bigger, which she turns into a slop, but which tastes all right. I find food difficult to refuse when it is being shovelled into my mouth.

Karen from next door comes round a lot. Karen has her hair cut very short. It is not nice like Mum's. Dad says he has seen more hair on a balloon. Karen must think it looks nice.

Karen talks for hours. I am surprised this does not help Mum sleep; it would Dad. Mum and Karen drink coffee and eat sandwiches whilst they compare Emily's (who is Karen's daughter) and my abilities. Apparently, when Emily was my age she was walking and talking and doing all the normal things which children of my age do. Mum despairs that I will be going to school before I can walk or talk. Emily is a lot older than me. She is nearly four and she talks a lot, too. It must be because of the early start she had and all the practice she gets living with Karen. Emily gets annoyed because she does not know what "Gagga!" means. How does she think I feel never being understood? Emily plays with my toys and I get shouted at for taking them off her. When we go to their house I get shouted at there as well, for playing with her toys. Life is unfair.

Mum tells Karen how handsome she thinks Tom Cruise and Jude Law are. Karen tells Mum how beautiful she thinks Sharon Stone is. I do not know who these people

are. I think they might work at Tesco.

I am becoming worried about Mum because I think one day she will explode. She is getting fat. She seems to get bigger every week and never complains about it like Karen does. She appears to be eating at every opportunity. Every time her hands are free she puts some food into them. Her belly makes her look as if she has a pillow stuffed up her dress. I saw Dad stroking her belly as if she were Sam. I think this is a grown-up thing like kissing or reading the newspaper.

Dad reads the newspaper a lot. This is something else he does in the garden when he is helping Mum. When he is reading the newspaper he shakes his head a lot and says things like: “Bloody typical!” and “Christ, have you read this?” and “Blood and sand! I’d be better off if I didn’t work!” I do not know why he reads it so much if he does not like it. Mum says he reads the print off but it never looks any different to me. Dad calls me ‘The Shredding Machine’. He says: “Don’t leave the paper on the floor or ‘The Shredding Machine’ will have it.” It is not my fault if paper tears so easily.

Mum reads lots of books. Her books have pages full of writing. It must be boring reading books without pictures. I have a book called *The Teddy Bears’ Picnic*. It has pictures of teddy bears in it; on a picnic. I suppose that is pretty boring, too. Dad reads magazines which he keeps in the top of his wardrobe. He only reads them when Mum is out, though.

At her Writers’ Circle, Mum writes poems for children and stories, which are for grown-ups. She says none of them are any good but I do not think she really believes that. She keeps on writing them no matter what she thinks of them. She goes to her Writers’ Circle every week and comes home saying that her poem was the best of the lot but nobody else seemed to think so.

“Hannah Cartwright’s short story was the biggest load of twaddle you’ll ever read and everyone thought it was brilliant,” she said. “The plot was ridiculous, the characters were insipid (*insipid?*) and the ending was unbelievable. I don’t know where I’m going wrong; I’ll have to start churning out some rubbish like the rest of them.”

It seems no one recognises her talent except me and Dad. She reads them to us and we like them; although I am not sure if either of us understands them. She sends things off to magazines and gets them back a few weeks later, “probably unread,” she says. This is the only way they could possibly have been rejected, she says, if the editor does not bother to read them. A rejection makes her sulk for a while until she writes something else and then she is all right again. Dad says that one day Mum will be as famous as Enid Blyton. I am not sure who he is. He may be the lollipop man who helps children across the road. He is quite famous around here.

Karen came around while Dad was asleep in the chair. Mum said things like: “Look at the state of that!” and called him “The Corpse In The Corner!” He had his mouth open and he was snoring.

“Don’t go too close,” Mum said, “or you’ll get sucked in.”

Suddenly his false teeth dropped down and rested on his bottom lip, sealing the entrance like a roof collapse in a cave, trapping everyone inside. Karen said he looked a picture so Mum took one of him. Since then, whenever he falls asleep, he rests his chin on his hand.

We sometimes let Riggat out of his cage when Sam is not around and yesterday he flew into the window and we thought he was dead. Dad picked him up and blew on him as if he were dusty. I do not know if this was meant to revive him but it did.

Riggar must have thought he had flown into a force field. Dad said he was only stunned and told Mum to cancel the window cleaner then Riggar could see the glass properly.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came to visit. Remember what I said about names confusing me? Well, these names confuse me, too. I bet no one else has an Uncle Joe and an Auntie Jo. Jo does not sound like a woman's name to me. I could be wrong. Perhaps Joe is not a man's name. I do not know enough about these things. When I can talk I will ask.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo do not have any children. They do not bloody want any, thank you very much.

Uncle Joe has more hair on his chin than Dad has on his head. It looks like a huge bird's nest slung between his ears and I keep watching it, expecting a sparrow to pop out at any time, but it never does. His beard is full of worms and spiders and crumbs, though, so I do not get too close. He found a fish in his beard once that he had lost two weeks earlier whilst he had been eating fish and chips. Dad told me.

Auntie Jo is Mum's older sister. They do not look like sisters; in fact, they do not look like the same species. Whereas Mum is pretty, Auntie Jo is, er.... well, she is somehow lacking the particular essentials that would make her look anything other than unpleasant to observe. Dad just says she is ugly.

She wears bucket loads of make-up, which she applies with the skill of a plasterer. Dad says he would not recognise her without her war paint. He says it could be someone else underneath all that glop posing as Auntie Jo. Uncle Joe could have done away with her years ago (which would be understandable, Dad says) and someone else could now be wearing the same disguise. She wears bright red lipstick that sticks to cups and cheeks, and also to her teeth, which are as big as cupboard

doors. When she smiles (which is not often) it looks like her gums are bleeding. Her hair is piled high on her head like ice-cream in a cone, and has things sticking out of it such as pins and hairgrips and knitting needles and lollipop sticks, and has knots and braids which look like they have been carved into place. Dad says it takes her a week to get ready to go out and two days to chisel everything off afterwards.

I do not think Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo like me. I cry when they come to our house; mainly because Auntie Jo's face makes me have bad dreams and because I never know what is going to jump out at me from the depths of Uncle Joe's beard. I am always sick on Auntie Jo. There are reasons for this; it is not merely a form of self-defence like a skunk smelling. She bounces me around on her knee after I have eaten, as if she is enjoying herself, so that does not help, and being too close to her face would make anyone feel a little queasy. If it were anyone else I would try to hold it back, but I enjoy being sick on Auntie Jo – it makes her put me down. She does not want to hold me anyway; she only does it because it is expected of her. She must think I enjoy being shaken up like a bottle of Coke, waiting to fizz over.

Perhaps Auntie Jo is smarter than I think. Maybe she shakes me up in order to make me sick then she has an excuse for passing me off to someone else. Whatever; she looks at me in disgust when I am sick. She holds me at arm's length as if I were about to dissolve into vomit. I hope Mum and Dad never ask Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo to baby-sit; they would feed me to the slugs in the garden or to the things which live in Uncle Joe's beard.

Rochdale is the name of the town where we live. It is famous for Gracie Fields and the Co-op. I do not know where Gracie Fields are; I think it is where the football team play. Dad says the football team are not very good. They do not kick off until he gets there.

We went to see Blackpool Illuminations. I do not think Dad wanted to see the bloody lights because he tutted and shook his head when Mum said we were going. Mum told Dad to watch his language.

There were lots of people at the Illuminations. Dad said the whole sodding world was there. We drove through the Illuminations for hours but we did not go very fast and we had to keep stopping. I fell asleep and when I woke up we were still there.

It was very bright and colourful. There were spiders and tigers and flying saucers with aliens peeping out all lit up, and a big picture of *The Teddy Bears' Picnic* with flashing lights, which made it much more spectacular than the pictures in my boring book. In the car in front of us someone was stood up, looking through the sun-roof. I wish our car had a sun-roof. After a while I got fed up. This was a long time after Dad had got fed up.

He said: "If people enjoy looking at coloured lights, why don't they go and stand around the traffic lights at home?"

He also said things like: "Look at the time!" and "You could have planted a forest and chopped it down fully grown in the time it's taken us to drive six yards."

He also said, a bit frighteningly: "We could all die of old age here. They'll find our car with three skeletons in it, all with bemused expressions as if they were wondering what they were doing here."

"They'll find it with one in if you don't shut up," said Mum.

I hoped we were not going to die because Grandad did that and we have not seen him since.

We did not die. We reached the end of the lights and came home.

Dad said: "Thank God that's over! I must have missed two days work while we've been there."

“Will you stop complaining?” said Mum. “You spoil it for us with your non-stop whining. Wills enjoyed it. Didn’t you, Wills?”

I just smiled and looked happy.

“Gagga!” I said.

These teeth, which are sprouting out of my gums, are giving me some jip. When the first one came I wondered what it was; this horrible foreign body, which was stuck to the roof of my mouth, and which had not been there before – well, you think all sorts of things. At first I thought Mum’s fingernail was stuck in my gum. Lately, she has taken to putting her finger into my mouth and rubbing food, or something all over my gums. I wish she would feed me with a spoon – I am sure it would be more hygienic.

I cry a lot when the tooth pains come. Not that I cannot stand a bit of pain, do you know what I mean? Never let it be said that William Harry Crabtree is a softy. But these tooth pains are a bit much.

And it is not only the pain that is so difficult to live with. It makes me dribble, too. It is so embarrassing having this stream of dribble dripping off your chin. It would be handy to have some guttering under my bottom lip with a downspout going over my shoulder somewhere, then no one would notice it.

When it is fine we go for walks. Mum takes me to the shops, which is boring. She stands talking for hours to women about Jacob Entwistle’s first day at school, after which he came home and said to his mother: “Now I have been to school, can I be a lorry driver tomorrow?” and about Lorraine Cassidy’s operation, which must be a secret because everyone whispers about it. If it is a secret, how does everyone know about it, and if everyone knows about it, why are they being so secretive about it?

We go into a shop called Marks and Spencer, where Mum spends all day looking

at skirts and at things to put her chests into. If Dad thinks Blackpool Illuminations are boring, he should go to Marks and Spencer with Mum. We go into another shop called Mothercare, which sells prams and baby clothes. Mum looks at dresses for babies in a colour she calls 'pretty pink'. It looks a soppy colour to me. I do not know what Mum is thinking of. The pretty pink dresses look too small for me.

Dad takes me for walks, too. We go through the fields, past the old mill and to the farm. There is always a funny smell at the farm and Dad always looks at me suspiciously. He says the smell is pigswill. It takes your breath away and makes your eyes water. It is like a wall of smell, just like Riggarr's wall of glass. It is better than Marks and Spencer, though.

At the farm we look at cows and Dad makes cow noises. When we look at the chickens he makes chicken noises. I do not know if he thinks they understand him, or indeed, if they *do* understand him. He does not explain to me what he is saying to them and they never answer him; they just look at him as if they are bewildered. He calls cows 'moocows' and the chickens he calls 'cluckclucks'. I think this has something to do with my confusion over names. Dad has the same problem.

I was lying in my pram in the garden. I had just woken up and I was watching the birds flying around the tree above me. My teeth were playing me up a bit and I was sucking my dummy to take my mind off the pain, and wondering whether or not to start crying, when Emily appeared and stood beside my pram.

She looked at me with her hands behind her back and her mouth ringed by what I presumed was chocolate.

"Is your mummy preggant?" she said.

Preggant? Who is preggant? "Gagga!" I said.

"I fink she is," said Emily, nodding her head knowingly. "Mummy saided so. My

mummy saided she lookeded like vat when she hadded me.”

Had her? What does she mean, had her? Had her for dinner? “Gagga!” I said.

Emily nodded her head again and spoke with obvious authority.

“Womens get like vat,” she continued, frowning her brow in thought. “Vey start to look like your mummy when vey is getted preggant.”

What? How? What is she talking about? I had never seen anyone else look like Mum. Not even Auntie Jo looks like Mum, and she is her sister.

“Gagga!” I said and sucked desperately on my dummy.

“Mummy saided she was like ve back end of a bus when she hadded me.” Emily twisted the top half of her body back and forth as if she were trying to unscrew herself from the bottom bit. Her pony-tail swished her face like a pony-tail.

Like the back of a bus? This was getting ridiculous, which was to be expected, coming from a girl. Dad always says that women talk a load of rubbish. With Karen being such a fine example of the art, it was no wonder that Emily was so good at it. It seemed I was getting a sample of it. It did not sound very pleasant to me. Does she mean with windows in and people looking out?

I knew I was getting confused and wanted Emily to go so I started crying.

Emily went away and Mum took me inside and put her fingers in my mouth.

I do not know if I am a bit slow in the talking department. Emily speaks all right, I suppose, but then, she is older than me, and what she says is bullshit. (I do not know if this is the right word to use but it is the one Dad uses when he thinks Mum is talking rubbish.) Anyway, I have heard people tell Mum that boys are lazier than girls, so there is no rush.

It worries me what Emily said about Mum. What did she call her? Prigmant? What does she think that means, then? And how can other women start looking like

Mum? I will be confused, then. How will I know which is mine?

Life is full of problems it seems. Mum gets fatter by the day and Dad puts his ear to her belly as if she has swallowed a radio. I wish she would stop eating so much; I am afraid she will explode.

Grandma comes to see us a lot. She is really old. She is even older than Dad, which is good because she is his mother, but she is not going bald because she does not live with Mum.

Grandma wears glasses for looking through and brings us cake and soup that she has made. Dad does not eat Grandma's soup because he does not like arsenic. I do not know what arsenic is. It could be what Grandma puts into her soup to make it taste of salt.

I have two grandmas but the other is called 'Granny' so that I will not become confused between the two. Granny lives with Grandpa and they come to see us, too. Granny and Grandpa look after me when Mum and Dad go to the Working Man's Club. When Dad comes home from the Working Man's Club and is sick in the toilet, Granny says: "I see 'e's 'ad a good night again."

I do not know why Granny thinks it is a good night when you are sick. I do not like being sick; unless it is on Auntie Jo.

Grandma makes curtains and knits cardigans for me. Last week she made a pretty pink one (!?!). There is something strange going on here. Mum looks at pretty pink dresses in shops and Grandma knits me a pretty pink cardigan. Grandma said to Mum that she might never use it but it was nice to knit something in pink for a change.

It looks a bit small for me. Perhaps it is for a doll; or something.

When Granny and Grandpa come to our house Grandpa goes to the football match with Dad. They always go to watch Rochdale play at Gracie Fields. When they

come home they look sad and cold. Mum offers them some of Grandma's soup to warm them up but they say that if they wanted to get warm they would rather set fire to themselves.

Dad says he is fed up with paying to sit in the freezing cold to watch a bunch of men kick the ball out of the stadium. He says they would not pay to watch him deliver his letters; even though it would be more entertaining. No matter how bad it is, they both go back for more.

Grandpa takes me for walks, too. We do not go very fast on account of Grandpa's breathing. He pushes my buggy and has to stop every so often to catch his breath and have a cigarette. He blows the smoke out of his mouth and it disappears into the air as he coughs. I like Grandpa taking me for walks because he tells me stories, like the one I told you before. He has a story to tell about everything we see and a big moustache which covers his mouth when he speaks.

Grandpa used to be a miner when he was very young, which must have been a long, long time ago. He used to tunnel underground for coal, which people then burned on their fires. They must have been very ungrateful to burn the coal after Grandpa had gone to all the trouble of tunnelling underground for it.

He stopped being a miner to join the army and fought in a war. He said he would tell me about that sometime.

Sam caught a frog and brought it into the kitchen. He put it at Mum's feet as if it were a gift. Mum did not want a frog as a gift. Although, what exactly she objects to in having a frog as a gift, I do not really know, considering some of the useless things she has been bought recently. Granny and Grandpa bought her a lamp for her birthday. A lamp! She has already got several lamps dotted around the living room, and they know this, so why did they buy her another? Dad bought her some earrings,

of which she has loads and only two ears. Grandma – wait for this – Grandma bought her a buggy for sitting two babies in. Can you believe that? She already has one for sitting me in. Now I will have a space next to me filled with nothing. Unless we pick up hitch hikers.

And she grumbles at a frog.

In fact, she did more than grumble; she screamed. She screamed and screamed and I thought: I bet she is sorry now, that she eats so much. Well, if she were not so fat, she would be able to run away quicker.

The frog hobbled under the table and Mum screamed again.

“Wills! Wills!” she screamed.

I do not know what she expected me to do. I was in my high chair, out of harm’s way, flinging rice pudding at the wall. What could I do?

After a while, Sam picked up the frog and took it outside. He seemed sorry that Mum did not appreciate his gift to her.

I crawled! I crawled!

Just when Mum was beginning to think that I would never be able to move under my own power, I did. I was lying on my front and I kind of lifted my leg into my belly and pushed my foot against the floor, and I moved. It was easy. I did not understand what I had done at first; I thought the floor was slipping away underneath me. If I had tried to do it I would not have known what to do.

I reckon some of the biggest discoveries have been made by accident. Who was the first person to eat one of Russell’s prouts? (This is the name of the big pea, which I told you about before. I do not know who Russell is, or where he gets his prouts from, but he can keep them as far as I am concerned.) They could not have put it into their mouth on purpose, surely? It must have got in there by accident, hidden among a

handful of dandelion leaves or something. And more amazingly, they ate another one and kept doing so until they decided they were not as poisonous as they tasted. And who was the first person to swim? And what were they doing in the water in the first place if they could not swim already? Were they drowning and happened to flap their arms about and accidentally created the butterfly stroke? And what is the butterfly stroke? Butterflies fly, they do not swim, or stroke.

Anyway, Mum now tells people proudly that I am crawling. She is probably pleased that I am not as dim as she was suspecting I was. She was getting tired of telling people that all I could do was sit in my chair and eat or lie down and cry.

Karen says that Emily crawled after eight months but that is all right because she is a girl and not as lazy as me.

Mum and Dad asked me if I would like a little brother or a little sister. If I had been able to talk I could have told them: “Neither, thank you. I am quite happy on my own.”

As it was, I said: “Gagga!” and they took it as a sign of delight.

I seem to remember being asked this question some time before. It must have been in the distant past because it is a bit of a blur. I must not have been paying much attention, or I did not know what a little brother or a little sister was in those days. What would I want a brother or a sister for? I do not want to share what I have. There would be less presents for me if I had a brother or a sister. Granny and Grandpa and Grandma would buy him or her things when they could be buying them for me. And besides, there is no room. There are only Mum and Dad’s room, my room and the spare room. Where would a brother or a sister sleep?

Come to think of it, where would they get one from, anyway? You do not see brothers or sisters for sale in Marks and Spencer’s or Mothercare. You do not find

them growing on trees (which is also where money does not grow, Dad tells Mum).
Now, that is something to think about. Perhaps Grandma will knit one.

I have been trying harder to talk. I have decided that it is all well and good being a boy and being allowed to be lazy, but it does not get my point across. I need to tell Mum and Dad that I do not want a brother or a sister, and not to go wasting their money on one just to please me.

“Gagga!” is not getting my message through.

I am trying to get “Dadda” right first, before I move on to: “I say, you do not have to get a brother or a sister on my account, you know. I really do not mind not having one,” but it is difficult.

I think “Dadda” will be easier to say than “Mamma” because you do not have to close your mouth to say it. You just sort of press your gums together and out it comes. Well, that is what it sounds like, anyway. If only it were so easy.

I have managed “Rarra” and “Yayya” and something similar to “Garra” but involving sounds that I have never heard before. If Dad were called ‘Rarra’ or ‘Yayya’ I would be laughing. Why is everything so difficult? It is much easier being lazy.

Never mind, I will soon be one year old, so Mum and Dad keep telling me, and most people can say something when they are one, so I will be all right, then.

The people who live in the house which is attached to ours (as opposed to Karen and Emily, whose house is not) come from a place called Paisley, which is in a place called Scotland. I think they are foreign, or very nearly. Dad says they may as well come from Russia, for all the English they can speak. I think they do speak English sometimes. They speak in their strange language and then, every so often, I hear a

word I recognise. This alerts me to what they are talking about, but then they revert to their motor car engine drone and I lose concentration.

They are called Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist.

Alan Gilchrist is like Superman. But, come to think about it, he cannot fly, he cannot see through walls, he cannot carry cars above his head, he cannot freeze lakes with his ice-breath and he cannot make the world spin in the opposite direction. In fact, Alan Gilchrist is nothing like Superman; I do not know why I said he was. The only similarity between Alan Gilchrist and Superman is that when Superman is not Superman he wears glasses, which is what Alan Gilchrist does. I should have just said that in the first place. Ignore everything I said about Alan Gilchrist looking like Superman. He is tall and skinny and cannot see very well through his glasses, never mind a wall.

Maureen Gilchrist has long hair, which is the colour of baked beans. She looks like she has had a pan full poured over her head. She is tall, too, but not as tall as Alan Gilchrist, and not as skinny.

Dad nods and smiles at them when they talk to him, as if he understands every word: “Yes. Oh, I know!” Laughs. “Yes!” When Mum asks him what they were saying, he says he does not have a clue. They must think Dad is very strange if they were asking him what time it was.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist have sons who are twins. This means they are two jokes out of the same cracker. I do not know what this means; it is what Dad says. The twins are called Roy and Rob. I get confused when I see them because they both look the same. At first I thought there was just one of them, then one day I saw them both together and I nearly swallowed my dummy. I thought there was something wrong with me. I looked at Mum and there was only one of her, then I looked at the

greenhouse and there was only one of that so I knew there was nothing wrong with my eyes. I could not understand it so I started crying and nobody knew why.

Roy and Rob have brown spots called freckles all over their faces. I have never seen anyone else with freckles; perhaps it is what children from Paisley have. They say they have counted their freckles: Roy has 124 and Rob has 125. They say that is how you can tell the difference between them. The trouble is, they are not sure if they miscounted, so you should not rely on it being a difference.

I can understand what Roy and Rob say. They go to school in Rochdale, so have learned how to speak properly. I am glad I do not live next door or I certainly would get confused.

Grandpa showed me the moon. Well, actually, I had seen the moon before but I did not know it was the moon, more likely a plate, I thought, or a balloon, but what a plate or a balloon was doing shining in the sky I had not got as far as thinking. It is strange, I think; you see these things so often that you take little notice and as soon as someone tells you about them they become fascinating.

It is the same with puddles. I thought puddles were there for Mum to push my buggy through in order to leave a disappearing trail. I thought they were quite boring really. I thought they might be a bit more interesting if there were fish swimming in them or boats sailing on them, but without them doing anything, what was the point of them?

Then Grandpa told me that the puddles are left by the rain and when the rain stops, the pixies and elves, not to mention the goblins and fairies, all come out of the woods and drank from them. That was why they slowly vanished. See what I mean? There is something interesting in everything.

Anyway, Grandpa told me the moon was the moon. The moon is like a torch in

the sky which lights the way in the dark. There is only one moon. The smaller torches are called stars, but you cannot see them very well and they do not light the way very well. The big torch which you can see during the day but must not look at is called the sun. I do not know why we need a torch during the day because it is light enough then anyway.

“The moon used to ’ave a face which you could see,” Grandpa said, pointing moonwards. “You can still see it a bit. Can you see it, young Billy?”

I watched Grandpa’s sausage finger, thick and quivering. I looked at the moon and, yes, I thought I could see a face on it. I had not noticed it before.

“That’s the Man in the Moon,” Grandpa said proudly.

He squinted his eyes and scoured the face of the moon.

I watched him squinting and scouring.

“In the old days tha’ could see t’Man in t’Moon’s face more clearly,” he said, “but since they started sendin’ up space rockets you can’t make it out proper. They send men up there to dig ‘oles an’ walk about, an’ space rockets land on it; they disturb all t’dust, does’t see? That’s why you can’t make it out like you used to.”

As I watched Grandpa staring into the night sky and telling me everything he knows, I wondered if the Man in the Moon had ever had a moustache, and if the men who dug holes in his face had covered it up with dust.

I have not seen Emily’s dad for a long time and I think I have found out why. He has gone to live with Sophie Hardcastle’s mum. I know this because Emily told me.

She told me that her mum had said to her: “If your father thinks the other man’s grass is greener, then let him go and pitch his tent there.”

I do not know who this man is who has the green grass or what it has to do with Emily’s dad going to live with Sophie Hardcastle’s mum in a tent.

It would be nice to live in a tent, especially on green grass. Except if it was cold or windy, or if spiders climbed over me in bed, or if foxes or wolves came and carried me away in the night, or if the bogeyman came hunting us, or if worms crawled into my Weetabix. I do not think it would be very nice to live in a tent.

Emily says her dad has “goned off and won’t comed back.”

Sophie Hardcastle’s mum is prettier than Karen. Perhaps that is why Emily’s dad prefers to live in a tent with her. It cannot be very pleasant having to look at Karen all day and listen to her riddles. It must be difficult listening to her all day, wondering what she is talking about. Mum seems to understand her, and Emily must do, too. Perhaps it is just me who does not.

I heard Grandma say to Dad: “It would be nice to have a little girl in the family. What with me only having you, and now there’s Wills – a little girl would be nice.”

A little girl would be nice? Would I like a brother or a sister? There is too much baby talk going on for my liking: prams, nursery (what nursery?), nursery wallpaper, cots. And I think it is all something to do with Mum eating too much.

People say to Mum: “Aren’t you big?” or, “You’re looking wonderful. It looks like you’re eating for two.”

I do not think it is very polite to tell someone they are looking big (another word for fat), or to accuse them of eating too much. Mum may be eating too much and I wish she would stop, but it is not for other people to insult her by telling her so. I wonder if they do that to all fat people? I cannot imagine someone going up to a fat person and telling them that they are looking wonderfully fat. The strange thing is, Mum does not seem to mind being insulted. She just smiles and pats her belly and says: “It won’t be long, now.”

It is all very mysterious.

Crawling is no big deal. There is a problem, though. Whenever I set off somewhere interesting, like towards the glass things which Mum keeps on the fireplace, or near the stairs, Mum picks me up and turns me around as if I were a clockwork toy. There is not much point in being able to go places if no one lets you go to the places you want to go to.

Mum went to a party at Maureen Gilchrist's house where women buy a lot of clothes. Alan Gilchrist came to our house to watch telly with Dad. They wanted to go to the Working Man's Club but apparently, I put paid to that idea because Dad had to look after me. They watched a programme on telly called *Taggart*, in which all the people spoke the same foreign language as Alan Gilchrist. I do not know if Dad understood it very much.

Roy and Rob came, too. They talked about their favourite football team, who are St Mirren. It sounds more like a church to me than a football team. Roy or Rob said that St Mirren had won cups. I suppose that is pretty good, because I do not think Rochdale have even won a saucer.

Alan Gilchrist likes talking about Scotland (I think!). He said something about the locks being beautiful at this time of the year. I think I heard him wrong. How can the locks in Scotland be any different from how they are here? And how can they be more beautiful at one time of year than any other? Unless he means the whole doors look better at a particular time. I think doors with windows look better than doors without windows, and newly-painted doors look better than dull, flaky doors. I suppose polished locks look better than unpolished locks. It is hardly riveting conversation, is it? And why does Alan Gilchrist prefer locks to letter-boxes?

All this thinking was tiring me out and I could hardly keep my eyes open. Dad did not understand Alan Gilchrist, either. He just nodded his head and said it was a

quarter past nine.

Mum came home from the party with pink babygros. I wish someone would save me from these people.

I am now one. I had a party where all my friends came: Peter Hinchcliffe, Emily, Sophie Hardcastle, Robert Wilson and Justin Harrop. Emily bought me a plastic ball with shapes in it, and Peter bought me the same thing only in a different colour.

Grandma bought me clothes, and so did Granny and Grandpa. Clothes are all right, I suppose, but there is not much you can do with them, is there?

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo sent some money to buy more clothes with. They did not come themselves. They probably could not trust themselves not to eat one of the guests.

All the mums came for my friends after the party. Karen had stayed at the party to help Mum cope, and when Sophie's mum stopped her car outside Karen ran out and shouted something to her. (I am even confused now as to what a cow is.) Sophie's mum shouted something back and Karen kicked Sophie's mum's car. My mum ran out with Sophie and bundled her into the car and dragged Karen back into the house. Karen was crying so Emily started as well.

Grandpa coughs a lot. He coughs when he walks, he coughs when he stands still and he coughs when he sits down. He says the only time he does not cough is when he smokes a cigarette.

Granny says it is the cigarettes that make him cough and Mum is always telling him that he should stop smoking. Mum says that cigarettes will be the death of him and Granny says they make him twenty years older. He wheezes when he breathes and his chest rattles as if his ribs were loose.

I do not know why people smoke cigarettes if they know they are going to die because of it. You would not have a spoonful of poison every morning just because it tasted nice, would you? You would not jump off a motorway bridge because you enjoyed the feeling that going down makes of your insides, would you?

Dad says he smoked cigarettes when he was younger but stopped because they became too expensive. This seems an unusually sensible thing for Dad to have done and I suspect the reason they became too expensive is because Mum found him something else to spend his money on.

John, the boy who lives across the road, smokes cigarettes. I have seen him. He is seventeen and has friends who drive around with him in stolen cars. At least, that is what Dad says. John wears a baseball cap the wrong way around and this winds Dad up like a clock. He calls John a mushy-pea-head because his pea-sized brain has been mashed to pulp by listening to loud music in stolen cars. Dad does not call it music but I do not think I dare repeat what he calls it.

The night was peaceful and quiet. I was fast asleep in my bed. Suddenly, Mum's voice shattered the silence.

“Harry, it's coming! It's coming!” She was holding her belly to stop it exploding.

I opened my eyes in the darkness and heard panicking footsteps in Mum and Dad's room. I thought I had better cry.

Dad came in and said everything was all right. He did not sound very convincing. He said we were going to go for a ride in the car. This struck me as an unusual thing to do in the middle of the night. I cried some more.

I wondered what Mum meant was coming. We went on a train once and we had to wait at the station for it to arrive. Mum looked down the tracks and shouted: “It's

coming! It's coming!" I hoped she did not mean that the train was coming now, through the house. Later, after I had thought about it for a while, I realised what a ridiculous idea it was, what with there not being a railway line on our hill, but it seemed pretty terrifying at the time.

Dad lifted me out of bed and put some clothes on me on top of my babygro.

I thought: this is odd. Mum does not dress me this way.

I hoped we were not going to Blackpool Illuminations again. This would have accounted for Dad's look of horror. He carried me downstairs with a suitcase in his other hand.

"Don't panic! Don't panic!" Mum said, forcing calmness into her voice, when all she wanted to do really was panic. She followed us downstairs.

I watched her fearfully as she held her belly, looking more likely to explode than ever before. When we reached the bottom of the stairs Mum brushed away my tears.

"Be a big boy and look after Daddy for me," she said. "Mummy's going to hospital for a day or two, and when I come home you'll have your brother or sister."

This was more than the brain could cope with at this time in the morning. So they were going ahead and getting a brother or a sister after all. And Mum made it sound as if they were getting one for my benefit. They had only asked if I wanted one – they had not said they were getting one.

Mum sucked in her breath in pain and I began crying again in case she popped open there and then at the bottom of the stairs.

We went outside. All the cars were dusty with frost and I could see my breath as I breathed. Dad drove us to Granny and Grandpa's house and left me there. Granny held me and I could smell the cigarette smoke on Grandpa's dressing gown as he wheezed by my side. He touched my cheek and brushed away a tear from my face.

We watched our car disappear into the night. I listened carefully but heard nothing that sounded like an exploding mum.

Two

Dad carried me into the hospital. I did not like the look of the place even before we went in. It was evening and the building loomed darkly in front of us, all its details hidden in shadow. It was like a mountain with windows. I clung desperately to Dad's jacket as I looked through the windows, where nurses from the waist up tended to hidden patients.

Inside it was like a glass palace. Well, not exactly a palace because there was no princess or queen or king, but it was like glass. Every surface shone in the bright light. It was like walking on a mirror. Even Dad's head reflected the dazzle that poured from the lights. We walked down a long corridor and Dad's shoes squeaked all the way. He tried to walk crookedly on the sides of his feet to make them quiet, but it must have been uncomfortable because he soon stopped and just tolerated the squeaking. Nurses rustled past on emergency missions – also squeaking, and a cleaner pushed a machine which polished the floor even more.

Dad had arrived back at Granny and Grandpa's house at breakfast time, whilst I was watching my Weetabix ooze through my fingers as I squeezed it in my fist. He said I had a baby sister, and Granny and Grandpa were overjoyed. I could not understand what the fuss was about. Everyone was pleased to have something I did not want. The baby sister was called Lucy, and Granny and Grandpa thought it was a beautiful name.

Dad told Granny and Grandpa that Mum had been in labour for nearly two hours (I do not know where labour is so I cannot tell you any more about that), and she had had to have some stitches afterwards. I looked at Dad's head to see where the hair for the stitches had come from. Mum must have exploded, then, if they had to stitch her up.

Back at the hospital, we went into a room where beds were lined up along opposite walls, with women lying or sitting up on them. Some of the women had people sitting around them, and those who did not have people sitting around them looked at me and Dad as we entered and smiled as if they knew us.

Mum was lying in the last bed in the room and I suddenly felt that I did not want to see her if she was very messy from the explosion. Before I could protest too much, Dad had hauled me, still squeakily, across the room to the side of Mum's bed. I was amazed to see that she looked so normal, but thin. There was no turtle belly and I looked twice at her face to make sure it was her.

Dad sat me on the bed next to Mum and she kissed me.

As she hugged me she said things like: "Have you been a good boy?" and, "Did you look after Daddy?"

I put my hand where her big belly had been and my touch confirmed my vision. It was not there. Maybe her top half had exploded away from her bottom half. What if, from now on, she was just going to be top half? I looked down the length of the bed and it was a comfort to see the shape of her legs under the covers. She even moved them to reassure me further. But what if she had a hole in the middle like a Polo mint? Or had stuffing falling out of her like my falling-to-bits teddy?

"Do you want to see your baby sister?" said Mum.

Dad had already told me that the baby sister was at the hospital with Mum and it suddenly occurred to me that this must be where people got baby sisters from. Maybe that was what labour was; a kind of storeroom where babies are kept on shelves or in cupboards, waiting to be chosen by someone looking for a baby sister or baby brother. I dragged my eyes away from Mum's missing belly and stared at her dumbfoundedly.

Dad lifted me to the side of the bed and showed me a glass cot. I had not noticed

it before. In it was a decaying orange with black hair sprouting from the top.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” said Mum, smiling proudly.

I looked around to see who had walked into the room whom Mum thought was beautiful, but there was no one else there. I took a closer look into the cot and after a while I thought I saw the orange move. A closer inspection revealed a pair of lips that were wriggling, as if attempting to crawl off the orange. There were also two eyes which were closed and hidden away amongst all the wrinkles, and a nose, which I had taken to be grub holes in the rotten fruit.

This was unbelievable! This was my baby sister, whom I would have to look at for the rest of my life, and who made Auntie Jo look like Tinkerbell. Strange thoughts ran through my head: having to take her for a walk in a bag then no one would see her, dodging around corners to avoid people, Granny and Grandpa’s disappointment in having a fruit for a granddaughter.

I said: “Gagga!” which this time meant: please take me home. I do not like the look of this.

“There, he likes her, don’t you, Wills?” Mum’s face beamed, obviously not recognising a grimace when she saw one.

“She’s called Lucy,” Mum continued. “Daddy calls her Lulu, but her proper name is Lucy.”

Well, here we go, I thought. We had only just got the baby and already I was confused about its name.

We ate at Granny and Grandpa’s house that evening. I must say that I have never seen Granny and Grandpa so excited. Granny could not eat for smiling and Grandpa kept rubbing his hands together in anticipation of telling my sister some of *my* stories. The thought of sharing Grandpa’s stories with my sister unsettled me even more than I

was already unsettled. Sharing my toys would be bad enough, but I could always take them off her when no one was looking. Depriving her of a few insubstantial spoken words was going to be more difficult.

As Granny and Grandpa had not seen the baby Dad described it.

“She looks like Billy,” were his final words after he had been in raptures about how beautiful and wonderful and gorgeous she was.

This shocked me somewhat and I felt my face to make sure that it was not disintegrating also. Mind you, Dad was wrong about the beautiful, wonderful and gorgeous part, so he was obviously wrong about my having any decomposing similarities to my sister.

“Well, she’ll be a pretty little thing if she looks like you, won’t she, Wills?” said Granny, stroking my hair.

I do not think I like being called pretty.

The following morning I pulled myself up by the armchair and stood up on my own. Dad was so surprised when he saw me that he shouted and made me fall over.

I thought I had better get a move on with the walking business because when the baby came to our house I might want to get out of the way once in a while. I took it for granted that the baby would be living with us and sleeping in the cot in Mum and Dad’s room. They would not have gone to the trouble of going to labour to find it if they were not going to bring it home.

We went to see Mum and the baby and Dad told Mum that I had stood up on my own. Mum said I was a clever boy. The baby slept all the time we were there. I still did not think it looked pretty. Maybe a little less disintegrated. I think babies are boring.

When Mum came home from the hospital she brought the baby with her. (Surprise, surprise!) Me and Dad went to the hospital and squeaked along the corridor to bring Mum and the freak home. When we arrived home, Grandma, Granny and Grandpa formed a welcome home reception committee, with the kettle on and smiles as big as upside down rainbows.

“Oh, isn’t she beautiful?”

“What lovely eyes!”

“She’s got her mother’s nose.”

“She’s lovely!”

“Aren’t you lucky, Wills? Such a beautiful sister.”

I sucked my dummy and mumbled; “Gagga!”

Mum is thin and normal again, now. She does not have a belly like a Polo mint. I cannot understand what has happened. I think the doctors must have cut open her stomach and taken out all the food that was there. I have seen Mum do that with a chicken. She takes out all the gizzards and cooks them and gives them to Sam.

After Grandma, Granny and Grandpa had gone home, the first thing the baby did was cry. It was a similar noise to the one Sam makes when I stand on his tail, but it lasted a lot longer. When it cried Mum picked it up and – you will never believe this, but I swear it is the truth – she put one of her chests into its mouth.

Mum must have noticed the dummy drop out of my gaping mouth.

“Lucy’s hungry,” she said, as if that explained everything.

This was too much. Is this what babies ate; their mothers? And why was Mum giving it her chest to eat? Why not give it a toe to nibble on, or anything, even, that was much more convenient than a chest?

I have had to endure some traumas for the sake of my sister. I was constantly

asked if I wanted one in the first place, and my opinion, if it registered with anyone, was ignored. So they went ahead and got one; fair enough, it is too late to do anything about it, now. Then I was told this decomposing melon looked like me; fair enough, I can almost understand the hysteria which goes with having a baby in the house. But none of the above compares with having your mother eaten by it. This is taking understanding and tolerance to extremes and I do not think I can stand it. I have sworn never to go near it when it is hungry.

I wonder if I ever ate bits of Mum? There does not seem to be anything missing.

Mum says she feels inspired to write a poem about the baby. She trips around the house muttering to herself and suddenly grabs a pen and writes something down. She will probably call the poem 'My Little Angel' or something equally sick-making. I would call it 'The Cannibal In The Cot'.

I do not think she ever wrote a poem about me. Perhaps I did not inspire her so much.

Lots of people came to visit us, or rather, the baby, after Mum arrived home with it. They brought cards and presents as if it were someone's birthday.

Karen came with Emily and said: "Isn't she beautiful?"

I have come to realise now that people are being polite. Obviously, they cannot come to look at her and shriek: "Ugh! What an ugly baby! Cover it up until its fur grows." Can they?

Emily said: "I fink she looks like you, Wills."

I looked at Emily and sucked hard on my dummy. If I could have spoken I would have been speechless.

Emily touched the baby's hand and it grabbed her finger. It was fortunate for

Emily that the baby had just had its fill of Mum.

“Look, Mummy. Lucy’s holded my finger,” she said, innocently unaware of how close she had come to losing a digit.

Mum smiled. “Babies do that,” she explained. “It’s an automatic reaction for them to clutch at things.”

“You’re lucky,” Emily said, turning to me. “I wish I hadded a baby in my house.” She stuck out her bottom lip as a sign that a sulk was on its way.

Karen made a noise that was close to a laugh.

“There’ll be no more babies in our house. We haven’t got a gooseberry bush in the garden.”

Mum and Karen both laughed as Emily continued sulking. Needless to say, I did not understand what was going on.

Grandma came again with Granny and Grandpa; yesterday and today. It is strange, and I do not want it to sound as if I am complaining, but they did not visit us this often before the baby came to live here. We used to go and see them and they would visit us, but not every day. It appears it is not me they want to see. But never mind, I shall get over it.

Not only do they visit, but they bring pink things with them: cardigans, bonnets, socks, babygros.

One or two jigsaw pieces are beginning to fall into place, now. Pink cardigans, Mothercare, “It would be nice to have a girl in the family.” It seems everyone knew except me.

Even Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came. They did not say: “Isn’t she beautiful?” They just looked into the pram warily as if something were about to jump out and grab them by the throat. I think Auntie Jo scowled for a moment, which is as close as

she gets to a smile. I thought I saw something drop out of Uncle Joe's beard into the pram. If it were something alive it would not stand a chance against the Carnivore Queen.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo did not talk about babies, and Mum did not lift the baby out of the pram for Auntie Jo to nurse. Instead they talked about their holiday. They had just returned from a place called Tie Land. Uncle Joe was wearing one of their ties. It looked as though he had been sick down his shirt. They said it was very hot in Tie Land and they had gone on a boat on the river. They said the people were very poor and lived in a place called Poverty. They said it was very sad. They said they would go again sometime because they enjoyed it so much.

They left without another glance into the pram.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist came.

Maureen Gilchrist said something about the baby being a "comely wee bear" but I could not be sure.

"An' wha' does yon mickle yickle yin think o' the bear?" she said.

Dad looked at his watch. "Ten past seven," he said.

Mum said: "Oh, he thinks she's wonderful. Don't you, Wills?"

"Gagga!" I said, meaning she is all right when she is asleep. No one understood me. I could tell from Mum's silly smile.

Alan Gilchrist said something about "wettin' the bear's heed."

Dad had no problem translating this statement, and was very eager to go and do whatever it was that Alan Gilchrist had suggested.

I have become an expert crawler, now. I can scoot along the floor as if I am on wheels. And I can pull myself up by the armchair without having to think about it. On a few occasions I have tried to put one foot in front of the other but I keep falling

over.

On one such falling-over-occasion I banged my chin on the carpet. I did not hurt myself anywhere else because Sam broke my fall and ran out of the room as if his tail were on fire. Nevertheless, I screamed, yelling: “Mamma!”

It is surprising what you can do when you have to do something. The fact that it was “Mamma!” that I shouted, and not “Dadda!” was purely accidental. Dad was not there at the time but even if he had been, I would still have shouted “Mamma!” I do not know why. Perhaps “Mamma!” is easier to scream when your mouth is congealed with tears and mucus.

Emily came, dressed in the same colour as the baby’s babygros; pink. Emily says it is her favourite colour. I have had enough of pink; pink this, pink that, pink the other.

“Pink to make ve boys wink,” Emily said.

This had to be something her mother had taught her. It sounded as ridiculous as everything else Karen said.

Emily looked like a stick of rock. She was carrying a pink Barbie doll and a pink Barbie car. All that pink together in one place looked sickly.

“Pink is a girl’s colour,” she advised me. “Boys is not supposeded to like to be dressing up in pink clotheses.”

I was pleased I was normal.

Roy and Rob come around quite often. They both dress the same, so that does not help me to spot the difference.

They stare at the baby and one of them says: “She’s cute.” Then the other one says: “Aye.”

They look at me looking at them and snigger. It amuses them to see me get

confused and think I am seeing double. They chuckle as my eyes jump from one to the other. My confusion is not helped by their moving around and changing positions in order to confuse me more. They go behind my back and then come at me from all directions. I think they enjoy making fun of me.

The baby cries, eats, dirties and sleeps all day long, and usually in that order.

Sometimes she sleeps, eats, cries and dirties. Whichever order they come in, these actions fill her day. Sometimes she is sick as well, which, I suppose, adds a little variety to her day. It is strange but, whenever she eats one of Mum's chests it seems to grow back straight away. There is never a bit missing.

When Mum is changing the baby's nappy I crawl into the kitchen out of the way. (I knew crawling would come in handy one day.) I saw the contents of one of her nappies once and it was not pleasant. And the smell is like...is like...well, I cannot think of anything it is like because I have not been around for long enough to have known anything like it. I know my own nappies are not exactly as fragrant as a summer meadow, but I do not look down at that end when Mum is changing me and, besides, you can stand your own smell.

I cannot believe it took me so long to do something so simple as talk. It is like eating and sleeping, two things at which I am remarkably good at, and which I never needed a moment's tuition. I just did them when I felt I had to. Okay, talking may not be as straightforward as breathing, but if I had not had to be so lazy I would have had it mastered by now.

I can say most people's names: Mamma, Dadda, Emmy. Alright, so it is not perfect yet, but it is nice not to have to say: "Gagga!" to everything that is asked of me.

The walking business is a bit trickier. I seem to go to pieces when I have not got anything to hold on to. You would think I would try harder when the handholds run out, like a tightrope walker trying harder without a net. But I seem to be too stupid to realise that extra effort is needed when all means of support are withdrawn. I think my legs are to blame. They do not seem to obey my commands. I know which direction I want to go in, and I know it is a question of balance, but every time I give an instruction to my legs they rebel and I collapse on to the floor. I have very rebellious legs.

Mum still keeps feeding me with food off her finger. It tastes very nice but I wish she would give it to me off a spoon. It is always the same food she gives to me like that; never soup or Weetabix. She always gives it to me when the tooth pains start. As if I needed feeding at a time like that. I keep biting my tongue, as well, not to mention Mum's finger. They are dangerous things, teeth. Now I know why Grandma sometimes takes hers out. They must be like Dad's. I put my finger into Grandma's mouth and her teeth wobble. It is quite scary.

Grandpa took me for a walk into the hills near our house. It was early in the morning and it was painfully cold. Mum wrapped me up in thick clothes before we set off. The stone walls and the grass were coated with frost and I peeped out of my buggy with only my eyes showing. The sky was clear and Grandpa said it was a sharp, crisp day. On the distant hills sheep wandered like blown leaves and in the next field to us cows watched us curiously as we walked by. It took us a while to climb the gentle slope because Grandpa had to stop for a smoke to get his breath.

There is a lake in the hills and when we got to it, it seemed to be steaming like a hot bath. Grandpa pointed to it and wheezed.

“Look at yon view, young Billy,” he said. “It’s breathtakin’, is that.”

I looked at the lake covered in steam and the hills which surrounded it, and wondered why Grandpa was blaming the view for taking away his breath when all the time it was the cigarettes that did it.

“Do you know what that is over t’lake, lad?” he asked me, pointing at the steam.

I looked at his moustache, drooping sadly over his mouth and stained the same colour as his burnt sausage fingers. There were drops of water hanging from it and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. I waited for him to tell me what we were looking at.

He smiled at me. He likes telling me things. He took a deep breath and spat something on to the floor before he began.

“Whenever you get water on t’ground,” he began, “like yon lake, or a river, or a bog, you’ll find this, early in a mornin’.”

His old overcoat brushed my face and I recognised the familiar smell. It was a heavy coat and must have contributed to his breathlessness.

“Durin’ t’night, see, t’clouds up in t’sky get thirsty cos they’ve been rollin’ round in t’sun all day. At night, when there’s nobody about, they creep down an’ ‘ave a drink.”

He pulled a cigarette out of his packet and lit it. He coughed and spat something else out before continuing.

“They’re very shy, are them clouds,” he said, the smoke coming from his mouth, making his words visible. “That’s why they only come down for a drink when there’s nobody about. But some of ‘em, like this one,” he pointed sausagely at the steam again, “some of ‘em forget, cos they’re so thirsty, they get carried away an’ forget the time. They forget to go back to t’sky before it gets light. Then, if they’re left behind

by t'other clouds, an' are still 'ere when people start getting' up, with 'em bein' so shy, they disappear then nobody'll see 'em."

He snapped his fingers to show me how clouds disappear.

"If we stopped 'ere for long enough, we'd see it vanish so as we couldn't see it."

I had never thought about clouds getting thirsty before, but I suppose they must do with being so close to the sun all day.

I learn a lot from Grandpa. He tells me things that other people do not. He is my best friend.

People tell me that it is going to be something called Christmas soon. Christmas is a strange time of year, it seems. This accounts for the tree we have growing in the living room and the lights we have dangling in the windows and the decorations which are scattered on every wall and the candles burning on every surface, which I am warned not to touch by means of many a wagging finger and stern expression, and what is called a reindeer stuck to the wall. The tree in the living room is full of coloured balls and lights and sparkly string and has a fairy stuck on the top of it. I am also warned not to touch the tree by means of Father Christmas not coming to see me if he found out I had disobeyed this order.

Father Christmas is the strangest thing about Christmas. He is a person who climbs down the chimney in the middle of the night and leaves toys for all the boys and girls. This may seem a kindly act, but who, in their right mind, would climb down a chimney of all things just in order to leave a load of toys for kids he does not even know? I do not like the sound of this. Mum and Dad do not seem to mind a strange person wandering around their house in the dead of night, treading mud in and knocking over ornaments in the dark.

Who is this Father Christmas? Is he like Father O'Donnell, whom Karen says is

‘so understanding’ after she has been to tell him what she has been up to? And why does he come down the chimney? Of all the means of access to our house, why the chimney? If he is so nimble as to get on the roof, why not limbo under the kitchen door or post himself through the letter box?

Yes, Christmas is a strange time of year.

Lucy keeps waking everyone up during the night. She cries, and then I hear footsteps on the landing and then she is quiet. Then I cannot hear anything so I cry because it is too quiet. Dad comes in grumbling, and gives me back my dummy, which always disappears in the dark.

“Lulu’s hungry,” he grumbles.

In the morning Dad’s eyes are hardly open and his smile is hard work. I wonder if Lucy has eaten anything off him but I cannot see any bits missing. It appears that she only eats Mum. Mum’s hair looks as if she has combed it with a rose bush. Lucy cries for breakfast.

“Goodbye, Pet,” says Dad, as he leaves for work.

“Goodbye, Pat,” says Mum.

I can say Gammer, Ganny and Gapper. All of them seem thrilled at the mess I can make of their names. I cannot say Alan Gilchrist or Maureen Gilchrist yet, but then, they cannot say my name properly either. They call me “Woolly,” which makes me sound like a sheep.

Mum has written a poem about me. Well, it is not exactly about me, rather something that happened to me. I suppose I should be grateful that she wrote one about me instead of the Angel Child. It is a bit embarrassing and I was not going to tell anyone about it but, well, Mum is rather pleased with it so I will share it with you. You had

better not laugh. She has called it: 'The Creature At The Bottom Of The Bed.' This is it:

The Creature At The Bottom Of The Bed

The bedroom's dark and gloomy and the window's packed with ice

As I curl and bring my knees up to my chin.

When warmth fills up my body and I'm feeling rather nice,

My exploration of the bed can then begin.

I stretch my legs out gently – for the edges still are cold,

As the pillow wraps itself around my head.

At full extent I can relax, my toes I can unfold –

To find there's something furry in my bed.

My head jerks up and then falls down, not eager to observe

What nestles there entangled with my feet.

Is it a fox? A cat? A dog? I'm feeling quite absurd,

What animal has chosen this retreat?

I raise my head up slowly, almost like I've never stirred

And lift the sheet, allowing me to see.

I look into the darkness then, as quietly as a bird

And see two eyeballs staring back at me.

I try to scream but nothing comes – my voice is dead with fright,

As I fix my eyes upon this ghostly vision.

What can this be that lives here in the middle of the night,

Without asking my mum and dad's permission?

As I shake the eyeballs move, to see me here more clearly,

I imagine I can hear a fearful wail.

Where are my mum and dad tonight? The ones I love most dearly.

Are they their duties now about to fail?

I gather in my lungs enough breath for a rousing scream,

To alert them to the horror of my fate.

I yell as if the room's on fire to wake them from their dream,

And hope then that I won't have long to wait.

The clatter on the stairs tells me that help is on its way,

To my saviours then I hold my arms out ready.

The light flicks on – I scream and cry....and remember to this day

That the creature at my feet was just my teddy.

Emily came with Karen to our house. She said proudly, and with too much certainty, if you ask me, that Father Christmas was going to bring her some jewellery. How does she know? Has this Father Christmas person been in touch with her, or has she seen him and asked him? The more I hear about this man, the less I like the idea of him sneaking around my bedroom. Mum and Dad have shown me photographs of him; he is an old giffer with a big white beard and a red dressing gown with a hood. I do not like the look of him. I am surprised that Dad likes him. He always says that he does not trust people who wear hoods. Father Christmas may look old and harmless, but anyone who goes to the trouble of climbing on to your roof and down the filthy chimney so that he can leave a sackful of toys to strangers, has to have an ulterior motive.

I hope he does not come to ask me what I want him to bring because I will not be able to tell him. He will not know what Gaggas or Gappers are.

John continues to annoy Dad by just being there. He has had his hair cut short with lines running through it. Dad says he looks like a tennis ball and that he wished he had a racket. When John comes home in one of his stolen cars he leaves the radio on to annoy Dad and make the avenue vibrate. Dad says that one of these days he will make John's head vibrate. Mum says Dad is so old that he cannot remember being young himself.

Lucy still eats and sleeps and dirties. Now she smiles as well. Dad says it is the wind but Mum says it is not the wind, it is a proper smile. As Dad says, Mum is usually right, and I suppose she is this time, too. Why would Lucy smile at the wind? Besides, she does not only smile when it is windy.

As well as eating Mum, Lucy now eats proper food, too. It does not look like proper food, though. Mum puts it into a mixer until it looks revolting and then feeds it to her. Mum can make her eat anything she wants her to this way. It is a cunning plan.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came to see us. Dad said they must have been desperate for a cup of tea, for them to visit us. He said they must have run out of milk at their house.

They brought parcels wrapped in fancy coloured paper which Mum hurriedly whisked upstairs; before Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo could change their minds and take them away again, presumably.

“They've no sense of occasion,” Mum said after they had gone.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo said they would not be here for Christmas as they had booked a flight to go and see the canaries. They were to stay at a place called Fort O'Ventura, which is where the canaries will be, I suppose. Mum and Dad seemed to envy them, saying it would be a lot warmer there than here.

“But I'd rather be cold at Christmas,” Mum said after they had gone.

I do not know what all the fuss is about. Why the sudden interest in birds? Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo never show any interest in Riggarr, although; I suppose if Uncle Joe has them nesting in his beard, then he must have a certain attachment to them.

Some dog keeps doing its business on our front lawn. Dad is furious and blames Prince and is about to declare war on all animals. If Dad had a weapon he would have slaughtered the entire dog population of our estate by now. He scoops the business up and says he is going to put the next lot through the owner's letter box. Mum said he had better be sure it is Prince who keeps doing it before he does anything stupid. She knows what Dad is like. He finds stupid things easy to do; it is the sensible things which never occur to him.

Dad went quiet, frowned and thought. This is a dangerous process.

Mum says I will have to have my hair cut before Christmas, otherwise Father Christmas will not know whether to leave boys' toys or girls' toys when he invades my bedroom. Father Christmas must not be as smart as everyone reckons he is. He finds his way from Christmasland burdened with toys for all the world, lands on your roof, clammers down the chimney without getting any soot on him, and when he lands up at the side of your bed he does not know if you are a boy or a girl. Perhaps he needs to do a little more research before he sets out on his expedition.

Still with Mum: she received a story back from a magazine with a note, which could not have been good news. The result of this further rejection was a rant at me for dropping a bean off my spoon, a rare raised voice at Lucy for waking up (which made things a little better), and a volley of verbal bullets at Dad as soon as he walked through the door.

“Wipe your feet! Take your shoes off! Not there, over there! Don't just stand

there! There's no tea ready, yet! Right?"

Dad knew better than to breathe too loudly, and to be careful with his beans.

The people at the magazines who keep telling Mum that her stories and poems are no good should be made aware of the traumas they are putting us all through. Should any permanent damage be done to any of us, they should be held responsible.

Granny and Grandpa said they would look after Lucy whilst me and Mum and Dad went shopping. Not my favourite pastime, as you know, and especially later, when we discovered Father Christmas was appearing at the Sods N' Stuff Garden Centre. This was too good an opportunity to miss it seemed.

Despite my reluctance to go and see him, I thought maybe this would save him the bother of coming to see me in the middle of the night. We arrived at Sods N' Stuff and there were more trees and coloured balls and strange Christmas ornaments than you have ever seen in your life. Everyone seemed happy and I soon caught the atmosphere, and what with Mum and Dad's enthusiasm rubbing off on me, I became infected by the occasion and was quite looking forward to meeting the man.

Father Christmas lives in a grotto at Sods N' Stuff. For some reason they call him Santa Claus here but Mum and Dad continued to call him Father Christmas. This is someone else with two names. Is there anybody in the world with just one name?

Before we arrived at the grotto my excitement had changed to foreboding.

There was a queue of people waiting to see Father Christmas or Santa Claus. There was a curtain in the entrance of his grotto and every time anyone came out I tried to see inside. It looked dark like a cellar and perhaps there were cobwebs, and shuffling noises coming from murky corners, where hands shot out and grabbed you as you walked by. A few of the children who came out looked as though they would have been happier if they had never gone in. Gradually, my suspicions were

confirmed: I really did not want to see this person.

Emily had already told me that she had been to the grotto the day before and that Karen had sat down with Emily on her lap, with Father Christmas facing them. Emily said that Father Christmas smelled of fish. She said that, where he lives, in Lapland, where people sit on laps all day long, it is very cold and everything is covered with snow and ice. She said that people cut holes in the ice and catch fish through them and that is why everybody smells of fish.

The boy in front of us in the queue was really excited about going into the grotto. He wriggled about in his dad's arms and kept going on about wanting an Action Man and some more cars for his garage. His face was lit up in anticipation and he almost made me eager to go in.

The boy finally went in with his mum and dad whilst I waited with mine. There were lots of people behind us in the queue and lots more people walking around carrying sparkly things. There was a huge Father Christmas in his sleigh hanging from the ceiling, and singing and dancing models of him on the shelves near where we stood. Trees with faces on them sang about Holly and Ivy, whoever they are, and angels smiled at us from up above. If I had not been so worried about my fate in the grotto I might have enjoyed myself there.

All of a sudden there was a scream from inside the grotto that sounded as if someone had just seen eyeballs at the bottom of their bed. A moment later the boy's mum and dad rushed out, carrying him to safety. He had tears all over his face and a screaming mouth which seemed to have displaced his head. They dashed through the crowd with us standing open-mouthed (Mum and Dad in amazement, me in horror), until they disappeared into the distance, where you could hardly hear the boy.

And this was where they wanted to take me.

If there had been a crocodile, or even a spider crawling along the floor, I would rather have gone to play with either of them than enter that hellish grotto. And here was Dad carrying me towards it as if there were nothing unusual in seeing a family flee for its life as if escaping from the maw of a dragon. I tried to squirm out of Dad's arms but he held on to me as if I were a sack of mail. Mum stroked my head and said stupid things.

"Don't be silly, Wills. You want some presents, don't you?" No!

"You'll be glad you've seen him when you come out." If!

"Father Christmas doesn't like children who make a fuss." Great!

If he is so particular about the types of children he sees, then he should not be allowed to see any.

I was right. It *was* dark like a cellar inside the grotto and there were twinkling lights hung on the walls. There was a sleigh piled high with presents and a not-very-healthy-looking reindeer fastened to it. Father Christmas sat in the corner like an ogre awaiting his dinner of boiled boys and grilled girls. He wore the same coat that I had seen him wearing in photographs and the same beard, which covered all his face. He had a hood over his head and all I could see were two eyes peering out of the darkness, shifty and demonic. He was fat like Peter Hinchcliffe's dad and he laughed grotesquely as I buried my face in Dad's jacket.

"Ho, ho, ho! Don't be frightened, little fella," he boomed, his voice echoing in the darkness. He may as well have said: "Ho, ho, ho! Now, little fella; I've got you and I'm going to eat you very slowly."

Dad sat down with Mum beside him and plopped me on his lap. This was when I really started screaming.

I tried to scramble over Dad's shoulder and possibly burrow down the back of his

jacket. My screams were like a siren and I think Father Christmas was becoming quite alarmed, although I would have thought that he would have been used to the commotions he caused. Tears and all manner of secretions were running down my face and Mum made silly attempts to stem the flow. I looked pleadingly at Dad, who just sat there wearing a useless smile as if everything would be alright in a minute. If I could have talked it would have made no difference. Surely I did not need words to convey my feelings. I could not even formulate “Gagga!” at that moment. Mum kept saying what a nice man Father Christmas was, or some other blatant lie which convinced me never to believe anything either of them told me again.

“Now, now, little fella! What would you like me to bring you for Christmas?”

Father Christmas’s experience must have told him that the situation was hopelessly out of control and had decided to deliver his punch-line and get the whole shebang out of his sight. His voice did not sound as friendly as I had been led to believe it would. He was rather ill-tempered, I thought, and his breath smelled like Dad’s does when he has been to the Working Man’s Club. I watched him through my torment and he wore a smile that was not powerful enough to reach his eyes.

I continued to scream. Dad was becoming agitated, looking at Mum and silently pleading for her to take me off his hands. Dad wished he were somewhere else. He was not the only one.

“Don’t be a silly boy,” he said. “No one else has made such a fuss.” When will these people stop lying to me?

“Tell Father Christmas what you want,” Mum chimed in. “He won’t know what to bring you if you don’t tell him what you want.”

I do not think that Mum and Dad are much use in a crisis. If our house were burning down, they would stand looking at each other, wondering which one should

fill a bucket.

More immediately, though; if this Father Christmas person were going to climb down our chimney and come into my bedroom in the middle of the night, then something had to be done to stop him from doing so. Therefore, even if I had been able to tell him what I wanted, I would not have done so if it prevented him from coming.

“There must be something you want,” he persisted, with an increasingly forced jovial chuckle, and with more determination for a satisfactory conclusion than I would have given him credit for.

“Bring him some bricks,” Mum said.

“Bring him a car,” Dad said.

After what must have been a day, Father Christmas was forced to concede defeat. He gave me a small parcel and said: “Goodbye, then. I’ll see you at Christmastime.”

He seemed quite eager for Mum and Dad to take me out and I thought I heard him say: “Bloody kids!” but I could not be sure.

We passed lots of children with fear on their faces as I was whisked away. We were halfway home before I stopped sobbing.

I can say “Din-din,” now. I do not say it because I am hungry. I only say it if someone tells me to say it.

If Mum says to me: “Wills, show Granny how you can say ‘Din-din’. Let her see how clever you are,” then I will say “Din-din.” It has not occurred to me to say “Din-din” when I am hungry. Perhaps I should try that.

Mum and Dad keep telling me to say “Lucy,” but I think it is a bit difficult. I think Lulu is easier. Maybe that is why Dad calls the baby Lulu. I can say it kind of backwards, which is easier still.

“Oolool!”

Oolool (which is what I am going to call my sister from now on, because I like it better than Lucy and it is easier to say) still eats and sleeps and dirties. Mum shovels this revolting mess into her at one end and, a little while later, a remarkably similar looking revolting mess comes out of the other end. I cannot imagine what process takes place whilst the revolting mess is inside her, but the smell between going in and coming out deteriorates overwhelmingly.

She does not wake up in the middle of the night very often, now, for which we must be grateful. She has moved out of Mum and Dad’s room and now has her cot in the spare room. There is a sign on the spare room door which says ‘Oolool’s Room’. (Actually, it says ‘Lucy’s Room’ but I am calling her Oolool, remember.) Perhaps it was Dad’s snoring that kept waking Oolool up like it does Mum.

I had to have my hair cut then Father Christmas would not leave me a doll. Having my hair cut seems a lot of trouble to go to in order to go through with something I do not want to go through with. Ordeals seem to be what life is all about. If it is not smelly sisters, then it is excruciating teeth, or falling over, or not being understood, or going shopping, or cowering away from Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo, or listening to Karen, or.... I do not think this page is long enough. I shall stop now.

We heard a squealing from the front garden. Mum looked out of the window and screamed. She ran to the front door and rushed out. I thought John was stealing our car.

Mum came back carrying Sam in her arms. He had a wooden thing stuck to his leg. Mum said it was a mousetrap. I thought the mice had set a trap for Sam because he is always eating them. Mum tried taking the mousetrap off Sam’s leg but he

squealed in pain, so she left it where it was. She said we would have to take Sam to the vet. Karen was not in to look after me and Oolool so we all had to go in a taxi because Dad had taken the car to work.

When the vet saw Sam he stuck a needle into him to make him sleep before he took off the mousetrap. He said we would have to leave Sam there because his leg was broken and would need an operation. Mum asked the vet how much it would all cost and she nearly fell over when he told her. The vet asked Mum where the mousetrap had come from, but Mum did not know. It was in the garden, she told him.

The vet told Mum to collect Sam the following morning so we got another taxi to take us home. When we arrived home Mum looked in the garden to see if she could find out how the mousetrap had ended up there. When she came inside she was carrying five more.

“We’ll ask your dad if he knows anything about these when he comes home, shall we?”

Her eyes frightened me – not to mention her voice. She sounded more deadly than all the mousetraps in the world.

When Dad came home the mousetraps were lined up on the kitchen table like captured soldiers pointing their evidence at him. I thought Dad was going to turn around and run away. His jovial glad-to-be-home smile sank to the floor and he stood on it as he floundered in the doorway.

“Is that you?”

No name mentioned: no Pat, no darling; it was bad. He was beneath a name, now, and Mum’s voice sounded like a clap of thunder rumbling downstairs. I crawled under the kitchen table.

Mum swept downstairs hardly able to contain her venom. Dad looked around

frantically for a means of escape.

“Oh, it is you, then,” Mum said when she saw him. She looked at him as if he were something that had fallen out of the bin. “What are these?” She leaned on the table, as nonchalant as a hangman can be. Her voice was remarkably calm, obviously saving the best, or worst, depending upon where you were standing, until later.

“What?” said Dad. It was obvious from his face that he had no plan of action other than to delay the inevitable.

Mum nodded her head towards the evidence. “These!” Her voice rising slightly.

“Ohh!” Dad spluttered. “Mmmousetraps.”

“What were they doing in our garden?” Her face a mask, her voice a threat.

Dad licked his dry lips and swallowed what appeared to be a grapefruit that had been stuck in his throat.

“I...I...I put them there to keep animals off our lawn.”

“You mean you put them there to trap animals that came on to our lawn.” Eyes narrowed, voice widened.

“No...no. Not to trap them. To frighten them off.”

“Why?” Mum said, looking puzzled. “Do the mousetraps say ‘SHOO!’ or something?”

Dad looked equally puzzled. “Wha-?”

“Animals wouldn’t know what they were for until they were trapped in one of them.” Voice rising, not quite screaming.

“Well, they wouldn’t come back, would they?” Dad had a sly grin on his face, which did not help his cause.

Mum screwed up her eyes and glared at Dad. She appeared to be frustrated at not

having a convenient weapon to throw at him.

“And what about your own animal?” Approaching maximum volume.

“What?”

“Sam!”

“What about Sam?”

“He goes on the lawn.”

“He doesn’t do his business on our lawn. He does it on someone else’s.”

Mum gave a single laugh but I do not think she thought it funny.

“So that’s all right, is it?”

“What?”

“For Sam to go on other people’s lawns, but not for their animals to come on ours.”

“Well, I...it’s...it’s different for cats. They’re tidy. They bury their...their business.”

“Oh, I see! The traps are just for dogs, are they? It’s a pity Sam didn’t know that. It’s just cost an arm and a leg at the vet’s to have his broken leg fixed.” Achieved maximum volume.

The mention of an arm and a leg threw me for a moment but I could not stop to think about it or I would have missed the rest of the argument.

Dad’s face paled a little. His mind must have been whirling like a spinning top. I think his paleness was caused by the thought of the expense rather than Sam’s welfare.

“And what if Wills had crawled into one of your traps?”

Dad sat down at the table. He was beaten but he was not going down before he had fired off his last ammunition.

“I didn’t think you’d let Billy crawl about in all that dog muck.”

“You’ve seen one lot of dog muck on our lawn and you get yourself enough artillery to wipe out an entire species.”

Dad rubbed his hands over his head. This is something he does when he is trying to erase something from his mind.

“Where is Sam?”

“He’s at the vet’s. We had to leave him there. You can pick him up tomorrow and pay the bill.” Mum said this with a flourish, her volume lower, her satisfaction granted by laying the biggest burden on Dad.

He picked up the mousetraps and threw them into the bin.

“Don’t throw them away,” Mum said. “I might find a use for them. You’d better check your shoes in future before you put them on.”

Mum told Karen about the mousetrap episode. Karen said Mum should have put superglue in Dad’s underpants; see how he liked being ‘patched up’” I get the impression that Karen does not like Dad, or men in general, very much. Karen told Mum that Emily’s dad had been to see Karen to ask her if he could come home. He said he had been a fool. Karen told him that now he had had his cake and eaten it and made his bed he could get on his bike and lie in it.

Dad brought Sam home the following day and laid him on the sofa where he will get better. He has his leg in something called plaster and he keeps this on until his broken bone mends itself. Dad complained about the cost of making Sam better and Mum said he only had himself to blame. Dad said that vets should treat animals on the enaichess. I do not know what the enaichess is.

Alan Gilchrist came to our house and asked Dad: “D’ye ken ‘boot ‘lectric, Harry?”

Ah've geeten mahsell yon dickle dockle feery lets an' Ah'll be jimmied an' jockled if Ah kin geet they things tay worrk."

"You've come to the right person, Alan," said Dad eagerly, after Mum had translated what Alan Gilchrist had said. "I've had plenty of experience with tree lights that won't work."

Dad knows less about electricity than he knows about heart surgery, so he was definitely not the right person to ask

He went to Alan Gilchrist's house with him to "sort out the problem" with a multi-purpose screwdriver that had only ever been used before to open envelopes.

He came back three hours later looking guilty and sad. He had broken next door's electricity. All the power had gone off. The lights had gone off, the washing machine had stopped mid-spin, and *Coronation Street* had been plunged into darkness.

Maureen Gilchrist came around with frozen chickens and bags of chips and sprouts to put into our freezer. She looked at Dad as if he were daft.

It was two days before the electrical man came to repair Dad's damage. During that time Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist, together with Roy and Rob, spent a lot of time in our house in order to keep warm. It was like living in a foreign country.

Mum and Dad and all the Gilchrist clan watched *Braveheart*, which is a film about people in Scotland giving the "saucy nicks" a good hiding. One night Alan Gilchrist told us about "Nessie," which is a monster who lives in a lake in Scotland and who sticks its head out of the water so that people can say they have seen it. Sometimes it sticks its head out for long enough so people can take photographs, but will not get too close because it is a bit shy. Mum said she did not suppose Nessie had survived for 65 million years without being a bit wary of mankind. Alan Gilchrist said he had seen Nessie, and its head was as big as a house. Maureen Gilchrist said Nessie

was as tall as the tale Alan Gilchrist was telling. This is where they lost me and I stopped listening.

By the time the Gilchrists were able to go home and keep warm in their own house, Mum and Dad were speaking Scottish.

If Mum were giving Dad some potatoes, she would say: “D’ye want some more tatties?”

And Dad would reply: “Aye, but no so many!”

Dad took me for a walk in my buggy. Oolool stayed at home eating or being sick. It was freezing cold even though the sun was shining. The grass and the cars and the trees were all covered in sparkling dust and the ground crunched beneath Dad’s feet and my wheels. I would have preferred to stay at home but Mum said it would blow off the cobwebs and get us from under her feet. So off we went. I was wrapped up like a gift in layers of clothes, with only my eyes, nose and dummy sticking out.

By the time we reached the lake I had stopped looking for cobwebs and looked up to see there were no clouds drinking from the lake, mainly, I think, because the lake was frozen over. I had never seen ice before, except on our fridge, and I needed Grandpa to be there to explain what it was all about. I do not think Dad knew. The ice was like the skin on Mum’s rice puddings. Boys were throwing stones that bounced off the ice. Other boys were walking on the ice and Dad called them “silly buggers.”

I am not sure what ‘buggers’ are. I have heard Dad say it before when he has been talking about John or Uncle Joe or Alan Gilchrist. It is always “worthless bugger” or “stupid bugger” or “Scottish bugger.” This makes me think that it is not a word you would use if you wished to compliment someone.

We came away from the lake and walked through the woods. What I would like to know is: why are woods full of trees? It is rather coincidental that all these trees

should grow in a place called 'the woods,' rather than, say, the hospital car park. Why is there not a pile of trees in the hospital car park like there is in the woods? Perhaps if they grew in the hospital car park it would be called 'the cars.' These thoughts spring into my mind and the more I think about them, the more confused I become. I wonder if other people have the same problem?

The trees were tall and kept the sun off us, making it even colder, and eerily silent. The leaves rustled under my buggy as we moved deeper and deeper into the darkness. You can imagine that by now, I was growing warily concerned about our little trip. I could hear things moving in the bushes and twigs snapping in the distance. I expected something to jump out at us at any time. Grandpa never took me there. I only want to go for walks with Grandpa in the future. Bird squawks broke the silence like screams and I did not know if I would have liked to have met some other person in there or be better off not doing. It was small comfort to know that my only protection against anything was Dad.

We came to a clearing, in the middle of which was the witch's cottage. This is the cottage I always imagine when Mum reads to me about the children who get lost in the woods because the birds have eaten all the breadcrumbs. The witch's cottage in our wood is an old ruin with no glass in the windows and only half a roof. The other half of the roof has fallen off or blown away. Dad says that the witch's cottage has been empty for years. He chooses this moment to tell me that, in the olden days, when he was a boy, an old witch used to live here and she put curses on people who went too close to her cottage.

We have walked this way before but have always gone past the building without stopping. I was never very happy here even before I knew its history. It is very quiet, as if the birds and animals know they should not go near. You feel as if you should

creep past and only whisper.

This time, to my horror, Dad began pushing my buggy towards the cottage.

There are tall stones standing on end near the witch's cottage. Dad told me, as we got nearer and nearer, that these stones were the remains of people whom the witch had turned to stone because they were trespassing. I began breathing heavily and sucked on my dummy until it nearly popped. I looked around for dad, boy and buggy-shaped stones but could see none. There was a stone with a big nose and one with a hole in its head. I wondered what it felt like to turn to stone.

Dad said it would be funny, now, if the witch came out and put a spell on us. I did not think it would be funny and suddenly realised what a useful word 'bugger' was to describe Dad.

There was a scream in the distance, which could have been children playing somewhere in the wood, but you never know. I looked at Dad and he looked at me with a frightened face. I did not know whether he was serious, or not. He pushed me through the dead weeds to the front door and then he walked to the broken window and looked through. He was saying something but I could not tell what he was talking about because he had his head shoved inside the cottage. I listened for more screams but there was nothing, only silence. I sucked desperately on my dummy, my eyes bulging with fright. I considered crying but thought that the witch might have heard me.

All of a sudden, Dad screamed and jumped away from the window. He grabbed hold of my buggy and ran. He pushed me over ruts and stones, screaming all the way. I had stopped caring whether the witch heard me or not, I screamed along with Dad, bouncing around in my buggy, screeching and wailing, waving my arms around in terror, expecting, at any moment, to be brought to a halt by a sudden change in our

structure.

My dummy bounced out of my mouth, but I did not care. All I wanted was to be a long way away. I looked through blurred, tear-streaked eyes at Dad's face as he peered into the buggy. It was full of fear and made me scream even louder.

We reached the path and stopped. My chest was pounding and I gasped for breath through my clogged up face. I almost choked as I coughed and spluttered amid all the junk that had sought escape from my head.

I was not stone, and neither was Dad, but I had lost my dummy which, now my screams were reduced to sobs and we appeared to be safe, was equally disastrous.

Dad came from behind the buggy and stood in front of me, laughing. He said he had only been joking and that he had not really seen a witch. I did not think it was funny and when I grow up I am going to be a witch and turn Dad into a slug.

The closer we get to Christmas, the greater my fear of Father Christmas. Memories of our encounter at Sods N' Stuff keep haunting me. It is a toss-up between that and my walk in the woods with Dad as to which was the more terrifying.

One day I was in town with Mum and Oolool, shopping, of course, and I saw Father Christmas coming out of a greengrocer's shop, carrying a bag in each hand. I suddenly began screaming in my buggy and Mum, who had been talking to Mrs Brierley from Clementine Street, came rushing to my aid. I looked in the direction of Father Christmas and cowered down in my buggy until the danger was passed.

"You silly boy," Mum said, not very sympathetically, I thought. "He's only been shopping for carrots for Rudolph and his other reindeer."

I snuffled and sobbed, unconvinced by her convenient reassurances. Mrs Brierley looked at me with more concern than Mum had shown. Oolool looked at me as if she did not know what was going on, which she did not.

I do not care what anyone says; if Father Christmas is so kind and loving and warm-hearted, why does he go around concealed behind a beard and a hood? It seems logical to me that he has something to hide.

It is all very well Mum and Dad saying that “Father Christmas is a nice man who loves children,” but does that mean he loves them as in ‘looks after them’ or does it mean he likes them on toast with a few baked beans and a bit of brown sauce? It is not going to be in Mum and Dad’s room that he will be creeping about in the dead hours, snooping and sniffing, carrying his sack of toys in which he could steal me away and turn me into one of his elves and take me back to Lapland, where I will end up sitting on someone’s lap, making toys for other children.

I am going to grow up to be a nervous wreck if this carries on.

I will be glad when Christmas is over.

I seem to have created a new name for Lucy. Dad also calls her Oolool, now. She is going to grow up as confused as me, with too many names to choose from. It seems to be my star turn. People laugh when I say “Oolool” and the more they laugh, the louder I say it.

“Ooolooloolooloolooloolool!”

John got out of his stolen car and walked up to our drive. Dad jumped out of his chair and ran to the front door before John had the opportunity to spray paint on it.

When Dad opened the door John gave him a Christmas card and said: “Merry Christmas!”

Dad looked at the envelope as if it were booby-trapped. John looked at Dad as if he were stupid.

Riggar died. It was very sad.

Mum came downstairs and found him on the floor of his cage with his legs in the air. She said this was what happened to Grandad. I tried to imagine Grandad on the floor of the cage with his legs in the air. Mum said Riggarr was now with Grandad and Jesus, not to mention the goldfish.

Dad put Riggarr into a small box and dug a hole in the garden. Mum cried and I cried. Dad cried a bit, too, and so did Oolool, but only because she was hungry or dirty. Dad put the box into the hole and shovelled the dirt back on top of it. He put a big stone on top then Sam could not dig it up.

I looked down the hole but I could not see Grandad or Jesus, not to mention the goldfish.

Sam hobbles around the house and into the garden, but does not stray very far from home. He looks pathetic as he limps about in his plastered leg and Mum tells him that it is all Dad's fault. I do not know if Sam understands her, but he but he looks at Dad as if he has a score to settle. Dad looks guilty and gives Sam extra helpings of Whiskas and milk. The cat will be as fat as a cushion before he is walking properly.

Mum and Dad kissed me goodnight and placed an empty pillowcase over the end of the bed for Father Christmas to fill with toys. I cried a bit as I wondered if this would be the last time I ever saw them. Mum sat with me for a while and stroked my head and sang *Daisy, Daisy, Give Me Your Answer, Do*. This always works. She closed the door and abandoned me to the darkness.

I looked at the faint light that came through the curtains and I pulled my duvet up to my nose. I listened for sleigh-bells or footsteps on the roof. I could hear the wind blowing and I wondered if it was making Oolool smile. For a long time I imagined I could see shadows moving in the shadows. There were strange cracks and groans, as

if the house were trying to uproot itself. Cars swished by on the wet road and somewhere a cat howled at the moon. Trees shuffled in the wind and a siren slashed through the night. I was just about to drift into sleep when I heard the noise.

I could not make out what it was at first – just a noise that had not been there before. Then I identified it as breathing – heavy breathing; and grunting, too, as if someone, or something were squeezing through a narrow opening – an opening like a chimney. Then some dust or soot fell into the fireplace. I peeped out from under my bed cover but saw nothing in the darkness. I could hear the sound of groaning and cursing coming from somewhere between me and the roof. Suddenly, something heavy fell down the chimney and my heart lurched into my throat.

I peered through the night towards the fireplace, not knowing what to expect. I pulled the cover up higher, ready to dive beneath it if I saw anything.

There was a flicker of movement in the shadows and the duvet was whisked away from my bed and a hand grabbed hold of my arm and began dragging me towards the chimney. I was thrown headfirst into a sack and I screamed and screamed but no sound came from my mouth. No matter how I wriggled and squirmed, it seemed that invisible hands were pinning me to the bottom of the sack.

Although I could not see anything, I knew I was being hauled up the chimney. I could hear heavy breathing as my kidnapper struggled with my weight. I was banging into the walls and dust fell around me as I was yanked up from above.

Eventually, I could feel the cold wind through the sackcloth and I knew I was on the roof. I tried to find an opening in the sack through which I might escape, but there did not seem to be one. I was then lifted up, still in my sack, and thrown into what seemed to be a tangle of writhing bodies.

I pulled at the rough material of the sack and I could see the stars in the clear sky.

I poked my head out and looked around. The Man in the Moon looked down coldly and grimly at the goings-on on our roof.

We rose into the smooth night as I watched. There were lots of children, all crying on the floor of the sleigh. One or two of them looked vaguely familiar, but all their faces were distorted by their crying. I climbed out of the sack and looked over the edge of the sleigh. I could see our house disappearing into the distance below.

I clambered over the crying children and grabbed the edge of the sleigh. I pulled myself up and beckoned to the others to follow me. Without thinking of the consequences, I jumped over the side. As I tumbled down I caught a glimpse of reindeer and a grasping hand attempting to haul me back on board.

I drifted down and down, floating, almost, as if I were drifting in the breeze. The cold air brushed my cheeks and stung my eyes and, high above me, I saw the sleigh climbing with its terrible cargo to the stars. Below, our house was growing nearer all the time. As I fell closer, I saw the chimney-stack and the familiar conifers in our garden. I steered myself towards the chimney, desperately trying to wipe tears from my eyes to clear my vision.

I do not remember anything after that, but I must have guided myself to the chimney, for when I woke up I was back in bed and Mum and Dad were saying: “He’s been! He’s been!”

Dazed, I looked around; at the pillowcase, full of presents, at Mum and Dad, at Oolool in Mum’s arms, and at the set of drawers that was in the same place as the fireplace had been, out of which I had seen Father Christmas appear only minutes earlier.

Three

I have come to realise that it is time I concentrated on the speaking business. I seem to be missing out on so much. If I point to something in order to tell Mum and Dad that I want it, I am told what it is. If Mum is eating chocolate and I point at it, I do not need telling that it is chocolate – I know that, that is why I am pointing at it; because I want some. (Sometimes I think Mum acts a bit dumb on purpose because she does not want to share her chocolate.) If I cry when I have finished my dinner to tell Mum I want some more, I will end up having my nappy changed. If I cry when my nappy is dripping as much as my chin, I will be given a drink then I can wet it some more.

Life must be much easier for girls. Being lazy makes life so difficult. Emily tells me that when she was my age she could tell her mum that she wanted a banana, or that she wanted to watch *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Me? If I point to the telly I wind up watching *Richard and Judy* or, if I ask for a “bibick” (biscuit), I am given building bricks.

“Gammer,” “Ganny” and “Gapper” seem to get me understood, so there is no need to improve on these. By some freak of pronunciation I have managed to get “Mummy” right with ease. You would think if I could say “Mummy,” then “Daddy” would follow quite naturally, would you not? I can say “Da,” and any fool can see that it is just a matter of putting “di” on the end of that to make “Daddy.” If I know this, then why does it come out “Dada?” I can make a wonderful “Ssss” sound when I am dribbling or making stupid noises, so why can I not stick it on to the front of “am” to make “Sam?”

The trouble is that I get these moments of determination to better my talking, and then a bout of drowsiness or hunger creeps up on me and I have to postpone my attempts at improvement for another day. Perhaps girls do not suffer from drowsiness

or hunger and that is why it is easier for them. If I did not have to be so lazy, I bet I could talk as good as Emily.

Emily came round to show me her new clothes. They were pink – you would have guessed it, I suppose!

“Daddy tooked me to ve shop and boughted it for me,” she said, posing in pink dress, pink shoes and yellow hair bobbles. (“They had no pink.”)

It must not be much fun for Emily, having to go shopping with her mum and then having to do it again with her dad. She does not seem to mind, though.

I am pleased to say that my hair is growing faster these days; so living with Mum is not making me bald like it is Dad.

Mum is not very happy again. She sent some of her poems off to a magazine and the magazine sent them back saying they were unsuitable. I think this is a kind way of saying they were no good. Mum sulked and said they would not recognise a good poem if it was sent to them by William Wordsworth. I think William Wordsworth owns a big shop in town, but I did not know he wrote poems. (Or is that Woolworth?) Mum says it is a matter of finding the right magazine with an editor with taste and intelligence. I think she has been sending her poems to a gardening magazine.

There is so much to learn, you know, when you are little. I still have not mastered the walking business, yet, although I can move my legs correctly if someone holds my hand. When they let go my legs panic and collapse like warm jelly and I end up in a heap.

It is not fair! I cannot even say: “Hold tight!” or “Ouch!”

Ooolool continues to progress. The lack of improvement I am showing makes me

concerned that she will be walking and talking before me. That would set people sniggering. I would hide in my room or run away (hardly likely) and never be seen in public again. At the moment she can wave goodnight (but she does this even when she is not going to bed, so perhaps she is not so bright, after all), she points at Sam, and she still does her old favourites: crying, eating and dirtying.

People still keep saying how beautiful Oolool is. She has big blue eyes and everyone says they are gorgeous, like precious stones, summer pools. As far as I can see, they are pretty much like everyone else's; round, and two in number. She has fair hair now, like me. Do you remember when Mum and Dad found her at the hospital? Well, Oolool's hair was black then, or nearly black, anyway. But now it has changed colour and is almost as fair as mine. I do not know how this is possible. People say it happens. Maybe her eyes will turn red and her skin will turn green. We will see how gorgeous she looks, then.

People also say that my sister has a beautiful face. Bonny, cute, adorable, like a little doll, are all descriptions I have heard recently that are beginning to bore me senseless. I suppose it is kind of cute, in a baby sort of way, certainly better than the wrinkled old orange she resembled when Mum and Dad found her. But she only has two eyes, a nose and a mouth, just like everyone else, so how can she be so different?

I suppose I should be thankful that it has stopped people calling me beautiful and lovely. I never liked being called beautiful and lovely.

Karen told Mum that Emily's dad had lost his job and his car. She did not say where he had lost them. She said that since they had split up, he had not been able to get his head into gear and his bosses had pulled the plug on him. Karen said she thought he was going to the dogs. (She must mean the two dogs on Sycamore Crescent because, apart from Prince, I do not think there are any more dogs around here.) She says that

he can eat as much humble pie as he wants, she is not going to go soft on him.

I have decided that Karen is more difficult to understand than Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist. At least with the Gilchrists, I know I cannot understand a word they say. I can understand everything that Karen says, but still not know what she is talking about.

Roy and Rob told me that St Mirren had won a game.

“It’s brilliant!” said one of them.

“They won 2-1!” said the other.

“They’re third in the league, now,” said the other.

“Aye, they beat Partick Thistle,” said the other.

In Scotland, it seems they do not name football teams after towns; they name them after people: St Mirren, St Johnstone, Mother Well, Al Ower, Peter Head, Queen Spark are all teams I have heard Roy and Rob talk about, and I wonder who these people are and why they have had football teams named after them.

Sam has finally had his plaster removed. Mum told Dad that if he did anything as stupid as put mousetraps in the garden again, he would be the one needing plasters.

Sam did not like having his leg in plaster. I do not suppose he liked having his leg broken either, but he hated his plaster more. He scratched it and chewed it and covered it in all kinds of dirt before the vet eventually took it off. He now walks normally and you would never guess that he had been the object of Dad’s military offensive.

John parked his stolen car outside our house and Dad marched out and told him to move it. John said there was no room outside his house and this was the nearest place to put it, directly opposite. Where did he want him to put it? On the roof? Dad said he

could not care less where he put it, as long as it was not in front of our house.

John shrugged his shoulders, picked his nose, smiled and walked away.

I think this was a moment when Dad wished he had a racket. I could hear his teeth grinding, his nose snorting and his brain ticking.

He went to the door of John's car and yanked it open. (Car thieves must not lock their cars because they do not think anyone will steal from a thief.) He did something inside and then began pushing it away. Dad's face went through a few colour changes and the car only moved the width of our drive. He wound the window down and the window-winder came off in his hand. He tossed the winder on to the passenger seat and continued to push, grunting and heaving, with one hand on the steering wheel. Ours is a straight road so he did not have to steer it very much, and once he achieved a certain momentum, it began to move more easily. Dad looked back at John's house and grinned and panted in satisfaction.

After a few moments a police car pulled up in front of Dad, so he had to stop pushing. The policeman climbed out of his car and looked Dad up and down. He then spoke into his radio and pulled out a notebook. He walked slowly towards Dad, straightening his hat as he did. He told Dad that the car he was pushing had been reported as stolen.

"Yes," gasped Dad, mopping his brow, "it will have been." He paused to take a few gulps of air. "The thief lives over there at number twenty-three." He pointed towards John's house and leaned on the car for support.

The policeman looked at Dad suspiciously, slapping the notebook on the palm of his hand.

"That would be twenty-three, Chestnut Drive, would it, sir?" he asked.

Dad nodded eagerly, pleased to have found a friend. "That's where the thief

lives,” he panted. “He steals cars.”

The policeman hesitated as if he were wondering which of him or Dad was the more confused. It did not take him long to make up his mind.

“The call we received that reported this car stolen came from number twenty-three, Chestnut Drive, sir.”

“Yes, that’s what I mean,” Dad continued, undeterred. “That’s where he lives. He steals –” It must have been at this point that Dad realised what was happening.

“What?” he said.

The policeman’s face creased into what would have been a smile on most people. “It appears that you have been caught in the act, sir, of stealing this vehicle.” He nodded towards the object in question and Dad recoiled from it as if it had burnt his hands.

“This? Me? Stealing?” Dad seemed suddenly incapable of stringing together a full sentence.

The policeman smirked, toying with a fool. “You must be fairly new at this game, sir, are you? You’re supposed to drive them away, not push them.”

Dad threw his arms in the air. “I’m not stealing the bloody thing. I’m just moving it a bit.”

The policeman’s smirk disappeared. “And have you the owner’s permission to move it, sir?”

Dad looked over to John’s house and obviously saw John stood at the window enjoying every minute of this episode.

“No! Sorry! No! Look!” Dad was having sentence problems again. He took a deep breath and started once more. “I was just moving it from outside my house. It shouldn’t have been parked there. There’s plenty of room down there, look. He parks

it outside my house to annoy me.”

“The owner of this vehicle is perfectly entitled to park it wherever he wishes, provided it is not parked illegally or causing an obstruction.”

“But it *is* causing an obstruction,” Dad said. “It’s obstructing me from parking my car outside my own house.”

“And where is your car, now, sir?”

“It’s... it’s on my drive.”

“So you don’t need to park it in front of your house?”

“Well...we may be having visitors. Where are they supposed to park?”

“I suggest they park it elsewhere.”

“Outside someone else’s house?”

“It’s not a crime, sir.”

“You can’t keep an eye on it when it’s parked halfway down the street, can you?”

“You mean if some fool comes and starts pushing it away?”

Dad paused to think what the policeman meant by this.

“When are your visitors arriving, sir?”

“Well...we’re not having visitors. But we might have been.”

It was the policeman’s turn to pause. He turned around as if surveying the crime scene.

“So, what are you going to do with this vehicle, now, sir?” he asked, looking back to where Dad had pushed it from.

“I don’t know,” Dad said. He looked fed up.

The policeman patted Dad on the shoulder. “I know,” he said, as if he had just had a bright idea. “You can push it back to where you found it.”

Dad grinned sickly and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose that’s a good idea.”

“I think it’s an excellent idea.”

“It’s a bit heavy, though.”

“It won’t be any heavier going backwards than it was going forwards,” the policeman explained helpfully.

The policeman took Dad’s name and reminded him that John could park outside whichever house he wished to. Dad had to push the car back whilst John watched from behind the glass of his living room. The policeman told Dad to behave and act his age. John was clapping his hands and laughing.

I think Dad is going to murder John.

As I said somewhere before, Grandpa was in the army once. The army is a group of people who go across the sea and kill people in other armies. They blow up buildings and bridges with bombs, which explode with a loud bang. I do not know what happens to the people who are in the buildings. Armies shoot people with guns and then hide behind walls until they, in turn, are shot. The fights they have are called battles, and the battles they have take place in wars.

Grandpa was in a war once. It was not because he wanted to kill another army, but because his country had to help another country to fight their war, and he was told he had to go and “do his bit.” He said he was only a boy and had to do as he was told. He said he wished he had stayed down the mine. It was not like going to the football match or Marks and Spencer; there was no choice.

When the war was over Grandpa came home and was a hero. He was a hero because he had killed the enemy. I wonder if Dad will be a hero when he kills John.

I hope I never have to fight in a war. I would rather not be a hero.

Ooolool does not eat Mum any more; she drinks from a bottle and eats with a spoon –

on her own, which is somewhat alarming. When I was as young as she is, I cannot remember how I ate, or what, but I have trouble with a spoon even now, so I think we can rule that out as a means. She will be using knives and forks next and washing up afterwards. I still do not understand why Mum's chests are not missing.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came back from their holiday with the canaries and to our house for tea. Auntie Jo sat Oolool on her knee because she thought she should, and Oolool was sick on her. Auntie Jo does not learn her lesson: bouncy, bouncy equals spewy, spewy. I thought Auntie Jo was going to throw Oolool at the wall but she managed to force a weak smile on to her face.

“Well, never mind. I'm used to that here,” she said, looking at me as if I had masterminded a conspiracy.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo stayed at a place called Coral Echo when they stayed at Fort O'Ventura, which is a bit confusing because I do not understand how they stayed at Coral Echo when they stayed at Fort O'Ventura. They never mentioned any canaries, and did not bring one back for us to replace Riggarr, so maybe they did not see any.

Uncle Joe's beard is getting bigger. Every time they come back from their holidays it seems to have grown. I think he uses his beard as a bib. All the food he dribbles down it is swiftly gobbled up by whatever lives in there.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo are going on holiday again. This time they are going to see someone called Orlando. I do not know whom Orlando is but he is welcome to have Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo stay with him for a few weeks. Dad says Uncle Joe launders his money. I think he likes to keep it clean, so must wash it when he gets it.

I know why Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo have so many holidays. It is then they will not have to visit us so often; and we will not visit them.

Whilst Dad was at work, delivering his letters, he stepped off a kerb and sprained his ankle. A crowd gathered outside Cohen's Chemist, which was where it happened, and someone rang for an ambulance. They took Dad to the hospital but the doctor sent him home when he found there was nothing wrong with him.

Mum says Dad has been watching too many football matches and must have been rolling around in the gutter, trying to attract attention.

With his foot resting on a stool, Dad says that you never get any sympathy in this house, and he should be entitled to some compensation. He says he will sue the council for putting a kerb there. It is a stupid place to put a kerb – by the side of the road.

Mum said he was lucky he did not have to go to the vet to be examined, because we would not have been able to afford it and he would have had to stay in the gutter.

Karen has a new friend living at her house. This friend is called Gail. I do not know if Gail is a man or a woman. Gail dresses like a man, with jeans and a shirt, and has short hair; but so does Karen, so that is nothing to go off. Gail sounds like a woman but does not wear make-up like Mum does; but neither does Karen, so that is nothing to go off, either. When I can talk, I will ask Emily.

There are so many things I need to ask people when I can talk. The trouble is that by the time I will be able to talk, I will have forgotten all the things I need to ask, so I will never find out, anyway.

I was holding on to the armchair, wondering if my unreliable legs would carry me to the coffee table. I thought about it for a while, experimenting by letting go with one hand and reaching out towards my destination. The gap was only a few steps but it looked like a gorge to me. I made a few wobbly false starts before wading into no-

man's-land.

As I set off, I was surprised at how well I was doing. I knew I could not stop because it was only my forward movement that was keeping me upright, and it was when my momentum ran out that things went horribly wrong. My legs wanted to turn back but did not seem able to convey this wish to the rest of my body. As my legs refused to go any further, my body carried on, unaware of the protest going on below. I fell into the coffee table with the clatter of a house falling down.

This alone may not sound so bad, but I hit the table with my chin. Now, if you did not already know, let me tell you that the chin is the part of the body where all the blood is stored. Most of mine formed a pool on the living room carpet as it gushed from my gashed chin as if it were being poured from a bucket. Not only that, but, as the table collapsed at my end, the lamp that had been sitting at the other end catapulted through the air with only one target in mind. It landed on my head, shattering into more pieces than there are numbers, and allowing whatever blood that was not in my chin to escape through my scalp.

I screamed, of course. Mum came rushing in, saw the blood and screamed even louder than me. Dad hobbled in to see what all the screaming was about, and Mum scooped me up, wrapped a towel around my head until I could hardly breathe, and we had a family outing to the hospital.

By the time we reached the hospital I was almost suffocated. Oolool watched in awe at the strange spectacle before her. She had never before seen her brother leaking away his life's blood, whilst at the same time he was trying to breathe through the week's laundry. I heard a nurse ask what was wrong with me as Mum was taking the towel off my head. Her question did not fill me with confidence over her powers of observation.

They took me to a room with curtains around it and a doctor poked at my head. The doctor was brown and had a bandage around his head, too. I wondered if he had fallen over a coffee table, like I had. It made me feel better, knowing that someone who could appreciate my injuries was treating me.

They cleaned all the blood away and said I would have to have stitches in my chin. I did not like the sound of this because I knew it involved needles, and I had seen what Mum does to socks. It was a good job Dad was there to provide thread.

My head would be all right, they said, with a couple of butterflies in it. I was beyond caring what that could possibly mean.

Before they started sticking their sowing needle into me, they stuck a needle into me to stop me from feeling anything. They should have stuck a needle into me first to stop me from feeling the needle they stuck into me to stop me from feeling anything.

Whilst all this was going on I was jerking with sobs and gasping for:
“Mammammamma!”

The nurses kept telling me how brave I was being but I did not feel I was acting particularly bravely. I would hate to hear the noise a coward makes.

So they stitched me up and sent me home and Mum treated me like a wounded soldier, with Smarties and ice-cream and chocolate eggs. I vowed I would never try to walk again.

It is like a hospital ward in our house. Dad limps around as if he is learning to walk and I have my stitches and swellings, which make me look like a bruised tomato. Even Sam still hobbles a bit since he became a victim of Dad’s vigilante campaign.

I must admit that my face looks a bit of a mess with all these stitches on my chin. I do not know if I will have them there for the rest of my life, or if they somehow disappear. I have never seen anyone walking around with a patchwork face so I am

hoping that, one day, they will fall out.

At least I do not have to go to the hospital again.

I have to go to the hospital again.

I heard Mum telling Dad that when they take me back to the hospital to have my stitches out, he should see a doctor at the same time to have his ankle examined again. Dad said it was funny but, all of a sudden, his ankle did not feel too bad any more.

Karen and Emily came to see me. Karen said I looked like a bear with a sore head, but I would be right as rain before I could say Jack Robinson. I do not know whom Jack Robinson is, but it would take me a while to say his name so this is no consolation. Emily kissed me to make me feel better. Unfortunately, she had been eating jelly babies, and I thought Mum was going to have to prise us apart.

Maureen Gilchrist came around to see “the poor wee bear” who had a “poorly heed.” She said I looked a “sorry seet” but I would be “rennin aroon in a wee while.” She forgets it was trying just to walk that caused all this in the first place.

Oolool stares at my bandaged head as if I am wearing a light bulb. She must be attracted to it because it is something that was not there before. I wonder if, when I stop wearing it, she will look at me strangely because it is not there?

I am sure she pointed at me and said: “Hurt!” but I must have imagined it.

When Grandma came she picked me up and hugged me, almost ripping out my stitches on her necklace. She let go as if I had given her an electric shock when I screamed into her ear, and from then on just patted my cheek.

Granny and Grandpa bought me a motor car dashboard and steering wheel with a horn for being “such a brave boy.” I was not going to spoil their illusion, so just smiled suitably bravely, despite the uncomfortable feeling in my chin when I did so.

Grandpa started coughing so went out into the garden for a cigarette to clear his lungs.

“Gapper” has now become “Gampa” which, I think, is near enough to the real thing as to be perfect. “Ganny” and “Gammer” remain unchanged because they sound alright to me and are understood.

It is not the single words that bother me; it is things like: “Can I have some Smarties, please?” or, “Can I watch Sooty and Sweep?”

It is rather unfortunate that most of the things I like begin with “S.” I may not be able to string letters together to form a word, but at least, in most cases, I can make the sound. As I have said before, I can do “Ssss!” but I cannot get the hang of fitting it on to the rest of a word. Therefore Smarties, sweeties, Sooty and Sweep and Sesame Street are fumbled attempts and hard work to request. “Martie” is understood straight away, “eetie” took time at first but we got there in the end, “Ooteep” is easy, surprisingly. Mum realised instantly which words I was mutilating, although Dad thought I just wanted to go to sleep. Sesame Street was a non-starter until I shortened it to “eet.” Even that was frustrating for a while when Mum became delighted and told Dad and Karen that I had requested food. I would gorge on bananas and yoghurt whilst wondering forlornly what Big Bird and Kermit were up to.

I think Oolool said: “Dadda!” I say “think” merely because I am hanging on to the hope that I misheard her, but I know I did not; she said it. This is quite alarming. In fact, it is extremely alarming. She is more than a year younger than me and already she has started talking. No one else heard her and I am in no position to tell anyone, even if I were inclined to do so, so I will have to wait and see if she says it again, and hope no one else hears her.

This is disastrous! Any day now she will be taking me for a walk in my buggy, telling me stories about clouds and moons and things.

I went to the hospital to have my stitches out. It was no big deal. Perhaps I really am brave.

Grandpa took me for a walk into the woods. I still had bad memories of that place and whinged a bit as the shadows swallowed us up.

We stopped beneath a big tree and Grandpa pointed out the new leaves budding on it. He lit a cigarette to clear his lungs and gave me some chocolate to shut me up. He coughed until his face was the colour of Father Christmas' cloak. He said he felt better afterwards. I felt better after my chocolate.

Grandpa told me that many, many years ago, even before he was a boy, there used to be trees everywhere. He said there were bears and wolves and wild boar roaming around among them. He made it sound quite frightening and I looked over my shoulder to make sure we were not about to be eaten. I think I shall grow up to have a fear of trees.

Grandpa said that many, many years ago, before people drove in cars, they rode on horses and in coaches pulled by horses. There were robbers who rode a Black Bess and stopped the coaches, threatening people with "your money or your life." People gave their money and their jewellery to these robbers because they wanted to hang on to their lives. The Black Bess would then ride away to find another coach to rob. The robbers were called highwaymen and things do not seem to have changed very much. Dad said he was robbed by a highwayman when a camera took a picture of him while he was driving too fast.

Grandpa said that when the trees covered all the land, people chopped them down

and built houses with the wood. Mum and Dad have a thing about trees: Dad says that Mum is barking up the wrong one, and Mum says that Dad is out of his.

John's stolen car was stolen. He parked it outside his house (for a change, said Dad), and someone stole it during the night.

Dad said: "Oh, dear! How sad! Never mind!"

Dad does not really seem very sad about it. I can tell by the way he laughs every time it is mentioned.

It appears that Dad's history is not going to be forgotten for a while. John looks at him as if he has stolen it, and a policeman asked him if he had seen anyone suspicious hanging around.

"Only John," said Dad, having difficulty concealing his joy.

The policeman went away. Dad said it did not really matter because John could always go out and steal another car.

Mum slaps Dad on the head when he says things like that. She says John works hard for his car and Dad should not say such things.

When Mum is out of hearing, Dad says that it is not hard work stealing cars.

Karen came around to drink coffee with Mum. She told Mum that Emily's dad still wanted to come home. Karen said that he had promised to turn over a new leaf and that he would never stray from the fold any more. He only wanted to be with the ones he loved and could not imagine life without them.

Karen said that she did not want Gail to leave. She was happier with Gail than she had ever been with Emily's dad. She said she felt like a schoolgirl again. She said she was going to tell Emily's dad that he had burnt his boats and kicked down the bridges and the water under them was all gone. He must acknowledge that she had a new life

and her future did not include him and her past was not worth remembering, so at present she was thinking about tomorrow.

Mum said if Emily's dad came back, then her name was Jemima Puddleduck.

Dad said it was a funny old world.

I just sat there being confused.

We now use the buggy that Grandma bought for Mum, in which me and Oolool can sit side by side. Already I am fed up with people stopping Mum in the street to tell her how beautiful my sister is. They say she has Mum's eyes and that she is the cutest baby they have ever seen. They talk to me as an afterthought.

"Hello, Billy," they say. "Aren't you lucky to have such a gorgeous sister?" or something equally nauseous.

I remember the days when they used to call me beautiful, not that I particularly enjoyed it, as I think I have already said, but it is better than being ignored.

Oolool knows when people are calling her pretty, because she smiles cutely. In fact, she smiles cutely at people before they say anything in order to make them say something.

Oolool sits on the floor without being propped up by anything – and without falling over. This is amazing. It is more than amazing – it is alarming. I could not do that at her age; and Mum and Dad are not slow to remind me. I suppose I had better concentrate on the walking business or my sister will be showing me how to do it.

The trouble is that I am a little bit wary after the chin incident. I practice a little when no one is looking, for fear of making a fool of myself, and I can stand up without holding on to anything, but my legs go all wobbly, as if I were on a tightrope. As I put one leg forward the other one collapses as though it cannot take all my

weight on its own. I think it just refuses to move in case it results in more stitches. Being top-heavy and having no balance is not helping my progress. It is a bigger handicap than being lazy.

Granny and Grandpa are going on holiday. They are going to a place called Austria, which is over the sea. The last time Grandpa went over the sea he fought the enemy over there. I hope they are not still waiting for him. Granny has never been over the sea and they have to go on an aeroplane. I think Granny would rather walk there.

She keeps talking about aeroplane crashes and how no one survives if an aeroplane crashes into a mountain. Grandpa tells her she is much more likely to crash in a car than she is in an aeroplane. Granny says that if a car breaks down it coasts gently to a halt; it does not plunge to earth like a dead bird. Grandpa tells her that flying is the safest way to travel. Granny says that the bus to the market on a Tuesday afternoon is the safest way to travel because it never crashes, into mountains, seas or forests. Grandpa says that that bus does not go to Austria.

I do not know if they will ever get as far as Austria. They said there were mountains there.

Alan Gilchrist came around and said: “D’ye ken boot cars, Crabby? Yon mickle mackle jalopy winny start.”

Before I go any further, I would like to say that recently Alan Gilchrist has started calling Dad “Crabby.” This is worrying. I do not know why he calls Dad “Crabby” when he knows his name is Harry. This is another instance of someone having yet another name. Dad already has “Pat” and Mum has “Pet.” Why do people not have just one name?

Anyway, Alan Gilchrist came around and said: “D’ye ken”...and all the rest of it.

After Dad had asked Alan Gilchrist several times to repeat what he had said, Dad said he would go and have a look.

I do not understand why Dad says these things. Why does he not just say: “Sorry, I am not too familiar with what makes a car move?” Instead he says he will go and have a look. He knows more about Christmas tree lights than he does about cars. Mum said if Alan Gilchrist treasured his car he should not let Dad anywhere near it; not even as a passenger.

Anyway, Dad went to have a look and came back half an hour later with oil up to his elbows and a little oily beard on his chin. He said he would have to give the car a tow. At first, I thought he meant he was going to kick it like he does ours sometimes, but then I saw him with a rope and presumed he was going to strangle it.

They tied Alan Gilchrist’s car to ours and off they went.

It was almost an hour later when they both came back – on foot. Dad said that our car had broken down, too. He said he could not understand it and scratched his head, adding more oil to his face. Alan Gilchrist had the look of someone who regretted asking for help.

Dad rang a man with whom he works called Frank. Frank knew a lot about cars, Dad said. What Frank did not know was not worth knowing. Nobody seemed relieved at this news. Mum said that Dad should have rung Grandpa because he knows a lot about cars, but Dad rang Frank, anyway. Frank came and off they went.

Not much later they were all back; Frank towing Dad and Dad towing Alan Gilchrist. They all looked a bit gloomy. Mum asked them what was wrong and Dad said they had all been booked by a policeman for causing a hazard to other road users. The policeman had told them that they could not tow two vehicles at the same time, and anyone with any sense would have known that.

Mum called Dad stupid and said she could not believe what he had done. I could not believe it either, and I bet you cannot either, can you? It is true. And what is worse, Ooolool could not believe it either, as she sat there, shaking her head, saying: “No!” Mum said she hoped Dad was satisfied. He did not look very satisfied; and the cars were still broken down.

Dad eventually rang Grandpa, as Mum had told him to do in the first place. Grandpa came up and examined the cars and proclaimed they had both run out of petrol. He said they could have dragged them all the way to Istanbul and they still would not have started. He said he was surprised no one had thought to check the petrol first of all. Mum said nothing Dad did surprised her.

Perhaps, now, Alan Gilchrist will stop asking Dad for advice.

Grandpa says that when he was in the war all he had to eat was a biscuit and a cup of water every day. He said the Americans, who were his friends, had hamburgers and chips, but they were not as good as Grandpa’s biscuit and water. I would rather have hamburgers and chips, but I would not mind a biscuit as well. You can keep the water, that does not taste of anything, unless you put orange or blackcurrant in it, then it tastes of orange or blackcurrant. It is a wonder Grandpa grew so tall eating only biscuits and water. Mum tells me I will never be big if I only eat biscuits. When I can talk I will have to point out to Mum that eating biscuits did not do Grandpa any harm.

John has a new hairstyle. In fact, it is more of a headstyle, because he has shaven all his hair off. His head shines like a polished doorknob. Dad says he looks like a snooker ball and with about as much sense. Dad says John has shaven off all his hair then whoever he mugs will not be able to tell the police what colour hair the mugger had.

Mum slapped Dad on the head for saying this.

Oolool does not say “Dadda” any more; she says “Daddy!” And what is more; she points at Dad when she says it. She knows what she is doing – it is no accident. It is a nightmare.

Mum and Dad say: “Who’s a clever girl?” as if they are talking to a performing parrot.

Oolool replies, like a performing parrot: “Me!”

My dummy fell out of my mouth when I first heard her. My world is falling apart. What am I to do? If I could walk I could leave home, but I am pretty useless in that direction, too, as you know.

I dread to think what Oolool will do next.

Four

There is a time of year approaching called Easter. Easter, it seems, is a time of year when people give each other eggs, strangely enough. Why eggs is not too clear. Why not apples, or bananas is anyone's guess, but eggs it is. But they are not ordinary eggs, thankfully. People give each other chocolate eggs.

I think this is a brilliant idea. Chocolate eggs; very nice. I do not know where chocolate eggs come from. If normal eggs come from chickens, do chocolate eggs come from chockens? I do not know.

One thing worries me – no one else has mentioned this and I fear they are keeping it quiet from me but, with all these eggs being passed around, where do people get the eggs from in the first place? What I am trying to say (but not too loudly) is: is there a Father Easter?

As I say, no one has talked about this because they know what affect it will have on me. I do not want to cause or (more importantly) suffer any unnecessary worry but, after my problems with the other fellow, I do not want to discover some distant cousin of his is going to be descending down the chimney with a familiar sack, this time laden with chocolate eggs and intent on dishing them out at some heathen hour whilst we are helplessly asleep.

As much as I like the idea of chocolate eggs, I would rather do without if having them entails suffering an ordeal. Mum will probably eat mine, anyway.

“She’s a canny wee lassie,” says Maureen Gilchrist. (I think.)

“She’s as bright as a button,” says Karen.

“She’s the cleverest and most beautiful baby in the world,” says Grandma.

Grandma associates talking with hearing; the fact that I cannot do one inevitably means that I cannot do the other. Either that, or she does not take my feelings into

consideration when she is making ridiculous statements like the above.

“Has she stopped being sick?” asks Auntie Jo.

“Mummy, Daddy! Mummy, Daddy!” shouts Oolool, repeatedly, loudly and annoyingly.

These are a few of the things I have to listen to every day. People come to our house to see Oolool perform her trick of talking whilst I skulk uselessly in the background, knowing that no one will be impressed with my trick of walking a little and falling over. I am normal, though. It is my sister who is the freak. But that is no consolation. I feel like a by-product; a leftover, the core of an apple, the cold tea at the bottom of a cup, yesterday’s newspaper, a forgotten dream.

Every day Oolool astonishes us with a new word. Names are no problem for her. She says, “Wills” and “Emily” and “Karen” with the ease of breathing. She says, “go walkies” or “pooh-pooh” or “hungry” with such brazen coolness that you would think it unusual if six-month-olds did not say those things. But the thing that annoys me the most is that she says “Sesame Street” with the clarity of a television presenter, whilst I am being given jam butties if I ask to watch it. And another thing: thanks to Oolool’s ‘brilliance’ I have to try harder, too, and it is no fun having to try harder when you are lazy.

I can say, “Mummy” and “Daddy,” now, and the usual other things, you know, like “bik-biks” or “ta” and even “Elimy” (there are too many different sounds in Emily’s name in such a short space – and you know how confused I get), so things are improving, but I feel like Sooty and Sweep next to Spiderman.

The walking is coming on, but I am still a long way from running. If it had been my sister who had just learned to walk there would have been queues of people out of the door and around to Beech Close waiting to see our ‘beautiful little miracle.’

(These last words are not mine – obviously – but the ones I actually heard someone use to describe my sister. It was some woman I did not know, and do not want to, frankly. Can you believe that? I was almost sick on her. It is making me feel sick, now, just thinking about it; or maybe it is the milk shake I have just drunk, along with the bar of Galaxy that Mum had hidden for safe keeping, which I found stashed behind the cushion on the chair.) People come to our house to see her blink. They queue in the wind and rain to see her wave to them through the window. Okay, this may be an exaggeration, but I bet if anyone had thought of doing it, they would.

People continue to stop us in the street to comment on how beautiful Oolool is. Alright, alright, I admit it: I suppose there is a certain amount of cuteness there, if you like that kind of thing, but then, I am no judge of beauty. And now, of course, people have the added bonus of being able to tell her how clever she is, too.

They say: “Let’s have a look at this beautiful baby. Hello, beautiful. And you, too, Billy, you’re beautiful, too, aren’t you?” They try to involve me. I should be grateful for that, I suppose.

It does not stop me looking at them with disdain. Oolool looks at them with her big eyes from under her stage curtain of blond hair, and, as she prepares to perform, she looks at me, pathetically sucking on my dummy, and smiles knowingly, before saying in her cutest squeaky voice: “Hello!”

People then melt into puddles of joy and resort to a language that makes me sound like a linguist.

“Well, she’s such a cutie-wutie, clever girly wirly. We could eat you up for dinsy-winsy!”

These people worry me.

Mum has got herself a mobile phone. It is the first one she has had. She talks to

Granny when she is in the bath – when Mum is in the bath, that is, not Granny. Granny may be in the bath, too – not the same one, the one at her house, I cannot say for sure. She also sends text messages to Karen and Maureen Gilchrist. Mum understands Maureen Gilchrist’s messages, so her texting must not be as complicated as her speech. (Granny cannot speak to Mum from her bath because she does not have a mobile phone and her normal phone will not reach the bath.) Karen still comes around for a cup of coffee and talks her nonsense when she is here, so the mobile phone has not put a stop to that. Mum has told Dad that he should get a mobile phone but he says he does not want people ringing him when he is on the loo. Besides, he says, he has no one he wants to ring and all these people ringing people instead of writing letters is doing him out of a job. It will not be long before my sister is using Mum’s mobile phone to have a chat with her many admirers.

Oolool’s progress is phenomenal. She is a genius, a prodigy, a wonder, and anything else you can think of that means roughly the same as the above. These are words I have heard people use to describe her and the ones I have not used are the ones I have forgotten. She really does get on my nerves. Not content with being ‘brilliant’, she loves to show how dim I am sitting next to her.

Mum was pushing me and my sister down the street, when we were approached by Mrs Kershaw outside the greengrocers.

Oolool leaned towards me and said: “Listen to this.”

She amazes even me sometimes. You would think with having to live with her she would have ceased to amaze me, but every now and then she crosses new thresholds and amazes me anew. “Listen to this.” These are three words which I could never imagine myself using: listen, to and this. Whilst I am grappling with the basics like ‘Mummy’ and ‘Daddy,’ I have got Cleverclogs sitting there, next to me, letting

me in on the secrets of her act and expecting me to be impressed, which I am, unfortunately, although I try desperately not to be.

Anyway, Mrs Kershaw said: “Hello!” to Mum and then leaned over the buggy. “And how are you two little lovelies?”

At least five out of ten here for Mrs Kershaw for noticing me, but I could have done without the ‘little lovely.’

I blew a raspberry and screamed something like: “Eeebroppp!” which was not an attempt to say anything meaningful, but I think it is more polite to say something unintelligible rather than say nothing at all.

Oolool, The Miracle, said: “We’re fine, thank you.”

Now she has started answering for me. How did she know I was fine? She may be have been fine but I may have been a little depressed or under the weather and not wanted to make a fuss about it; it was not for her to presume that, just because I was sat next to her, I was somehow as fine as she was, as if I were shielded by her presence into being anything but fine.

And another thing: her voice does not sound powerful enough to be using grown-up language. She sounds as if she should be using my language: “Goo-goo!” and “Gagga!”

Mrs Kershaw’s mouth dropped open and she looked at Mum as if she were hearing things.

“Do you know,” she said to Mum, “I’ve heard about this talking baby of yours and I didn’t believe it.”

Oh, it is true, Mrs Kershaw, it is true. Already Oolool is the talk of the town, it would appear.

Mum beamed with pride while I felt as useless as a wet nappy.

There are times when I would like to whack my sister around the head. This was one of them. She smiled up at Mrs Kershaw with her gloating and boastful sneer. I do not know what stopped her from saying: Aren't I clever? It could not have been modesty because that is one word she does not know the meaning of.

She looked at me with what people would call a cute smile but what I call a smirk. It was a look that said: You try that, Big Brother, and see what a mess you can make of it.

Mum hates postmen. The fact that Dad is one does not make her like them any more; possibly the opposite. Postmen are the unfortunate ones at the end of the line, who post Mum's rejected stories through our letterbox, which land with a heavier thud than all our other mail combined. The postman whistles jovially as he feeds our door these unwelcome snacks, unaware that inside, a life (or lives) has been made miserable by his diligence.

Today was no exception. Mum was made miserable again by our whistling postman and, therefore, we were all made miserable. I hate postmen, too. I bet Dad is pleased he does not deliver mail to our house because I think Mum would stuff the unwanted delivery down his throat (or elsewhere).

Emily comes around fairly regularly to have a chat with my sister. It is girl's talk so I do not get involved (and would not, even if I could).

Emily says to Oolool: "Do you like my dress?" (Pink, of course.) She then twirls around like she has seen them do on the telly and becomes dizzy and almost knocks Mum's geranium off the table.

Oolool replies: "Yes, it's pretty."

Pretty boring stuff, eh?

Emily told Oolool that her dad had called to visit them because he wanted to live there again. She said he was surprised to find Gail there and Karen had said that he had had an eye-opener and had been brought down to earth with a bump and had finally got the message. Oolool listens and nods in all the right places, presumably understanding what is going on. She is like an Agony Aunt, like Auntie Jo. I suck my dummy and watch Tom and Jerry.

(An Agony Aunt is someone who listens sympathetically to someone's problems and then gives them bad advice, says Dad. His opinion originates from the time that Auntie Jo recommended he take a dose of castor oil to cure him of a bout of diarrhoea that had been troubling him. Stupidly, he took her advice and spent the day sat on the toilet with his head in the sink. I think this was the closest Auntie Jo ever came to joking.)

People tell Mum that she should ring the local newspaper and tell them about Oolool. They say she is all the things I said earlier, you know, a prodigy, and all the rest of it. They say that in a few months' time she will be playing the violin and doing impossible mathematical calculations. I think they mean sums. I have sums in my book: one cat and one cat equals two cats, two bricks and three bricks equals five bricks. These sums seem fairly impossible to me but I would think that Smartypants would be able to work them out whilst she is calculating the weight of the moon.

Mum says she does not want to tell the newspaper about Oolool in case what she can do is not so unusual. She says she will feel a fool if the newspaper people turn around and say: So what? Talking babies are ten a penny!

And besides, she says, she does not want Oolool to suffer all the publicity like the Queen and David Beckham.

Grandma came and brought me a black thing that she had knitted.

“You wear it on your head,” she said.

I would never have worked that out. It looked like something you would put over the teapot.

This thing is called a balaclava. It makes me itchy and look stupid. I have never, ever seen anyone wearing one of these. Maybe it is Grandma’s invention. I have some bad news for her; it will never catch on. She would have done better knitting a three-armed pullover or a woolly wellington boot. If she ever enters a competition called: ‘Invent A Ridiculous Piece Of Headgear,’ she would win it easily with her balaclava.

I think I have reached a landmark in my life. I can walk. I can officially state, without hesitation, and without any doubt, that I can walk. What joy! Cool!

Alright, I know you are thinking that walking is no big deal, but when you do not live up to expectations on the scale which I do not live up to them, then being able to simply walk is as sensational as flying. I still sometimes fall over when my legs refuse to obey an instruction, but these occasions are becoming more seldom and, besides, even Grandma falls over sometimes when she is trying to avoid the hoodlums who terrorize the town centre by riding their bikes on the pavement, so it seems that falling over is something we have to live with all our lives.

The best thing about being able to walk is that I can escape from Brainbox when she is boring me with her brilliance, whilst she has to watch me go, stranded, as she is, with her spindly bowlegs, which will not carry her from here to there. If spindly bowlegs were not a handicap in the walking stakes and it was just down to brainpower, she would be running marathons by now.

Alan Gilchrist happened to mention that the central heating radiator in his bathroom

“wassny worrkin.” Dad immediately said he would go and have a look at it but Alan Gilchrist said it “didnay maatter,” and rushed off to call a plumber.

I do not think he trusts Dad any longer.

Ooolool does not have a dummy. She does not need a drug to overcome the stresses of everyday life. (Maybe she does not suffer the stress I have to endure. I suppose when you are as wonderful as she is, you do not get stressed out.) Besides, she would not be able to talk and demonstrate her brilliance with her mouth full of dummy. She must have reasoned with her super-intelligence that a dummy’s benefits are all in the mind. It serves no useful purpose other than to fill the hole where the screams come from. It falls on the floor, it gets covered in cat hairs and, if it gets lost at a bad time (it never gets lost at a good time) heaven and earth must be moved to find it.

I know all this and choose to ignore the facts. It would be boring to be as brilliant as she is.

When Grandpa was in the army he went to a place called Career, where he slept in a hole in the ground for three days. He said he and his pals were pinned down by enemy gunfire and it was not until reinforcements arrived that they were able to clamber out of their hole and escape. I do not know what they were doing in the hole in the first place; whether they were chasing a rabbit or playing hide and seek, I do not know. It does not sound very pleasant being asleep in a hole for three days. I would much prefer a bed. I do not think I will ever go to Career.

Emily came around and we had an interesting conversation. Well, I call it a conversation but it was a bit one-sided, as you can imagine.

“I’m be going to school in September,” said Emily.

I do not know where September is but I had heard something about this thing

called school. (I think it was Jacob Entwistle who wanted to be a lorry driver after his first day there.)

“All my friends are be going, too,” Emily continued. She stood in her familiar pose, with her hands behind her back, twisting her body to and fro, as if she were boring into the ground. “When are you be going to school, Wills?”

I did not have a clue. I suspected school involved being deprived of your home all day. It did not sound like something I wanted to be bothered with. I sucked my dummy and made a noise through it as if I were attempting an answer.

Emily looked as though she had suddenly become bored with this topic and swivelled around to look at the garden.

“Your garden is pretty,” she said. It is, compared to hers. “Ours will be, too, soon. Gail does good gardening.”

She turned towards me and looked at me thoughtfully, like she did not know whether to trust me with something.

“Do you know where you comed from?” she asked, lowering her voice mysteriously.

I looked around stupidly. I had not been anywhere. What was she talking about?

“When you were borned,” she explained, trying to keep her patience. “Do you know where you comed from?”

I could see she was getting a little irritated, although I do not know how she expected me to answer such an intricate question. I wondered if Emily’s impatience was a characteristic of her own, or was it typical of girls in general? Dad says that Mum expects him to be a mind-reader, like she herself is; perhaps Emily’s annoyance at my slowness on the uptake was the beginnings of what Mum has evolved over the years.

I shook my head in answer and looked at her in wonder. If Oolool was anything to go off, Mum and Dad found me in the hospital, in labour, probably on a shelf or hanging up in a cupboard.

“I know where I came from. Mummy told me.” Emily stood there, twisting herself into the ground with a satisfied smirk on her face.

I sucked my dummy hard.

“Do you want to know where I came from?” she teased.

I nodded wide-eyed, and sucked. Next door was obviously not the answer.

Of course I want to know! This has been one of life’s mysteries and now the answer could be standing here in front of me.

I hoped Emily was not going to want to swap anything for the information. I did not want to give her any of my chocolate buttons.

“I came from Mummy’s tummy,” she said eventually, in a hushed voice and leaning towards me to prevent any outsiders hearing this exclusive report.

I sucked my dummy and looked at her. She had obviously inherited Karen’s knack of speaking in riddles. What was she talking about? Karen’s tummy? How? Why? What? I sucked harder.

“So did you!” Emily said, confirming, finally, what I was beginning to suspect; that she had taken a break from reality, as women do, according to Dad.

Emily nodded her head firmly as if to underline what she had said.

What was I doing in Karen’s tummy?

“You came from your mummy’s tummy,” she said.

Oh, I thought. How does she know all this? She cannot be right, surely? Hospitals were where babies came from. Mum went into hospital without Oolool and came out with her. It stands to reason she got her in hospital.

It was all very well Emily saying she came from Karen's tummy, but how did she know where I came from? How does she know what goes on in Mum's tummy? Just because she came from a tummy does not mean to say I did.

"Mummy tolded me," she went on. "We watcheded a cow being borned on the telly and Mummy saided that was where I comed from." She wrinkled up her nose. "It didn't look very nice."

I was confused now. First of all Emily was in Karen's tummy, and then Karen tells her she was in a cow's tummy.

I can say "moo-cow," so I said it: "Moo-cow!"

Emily nodded. "It was soggy and floppy and couldn't stand up proper." She began tapping her feet on the floor and spinning around like a ballerina. "Mummy saided I can have dancing lessons."

What has dancing got to do with soggy cows? I thought. Keep to the point! Do not change the subject!

I said: "Moo-cow" again in the hope that it would steer her back in the right direction.

"Do you remember your mummy's tummy big when Lucy was borned?" Emily asked, her mind somehow ricocheting back to important matters.

I nodded. Yes, before she exploded.

"Well, that was Lucy inside of her."

The girl had obviously flipped. Oolool had not been in there; she had been in labour at the hospital, on a shelf or in a cupboard. If she had been in Mum's tummy she would have been covered in cabbage and bacon sandwiches.

"Your mummy wented to hospital and Lucy poppeded out."

She seemed determined to stick to her ridiculous story. Popped out? *Popped out?*

It would have been louder than a pop if Mum had exploded. Erupted out, more like.

I was fed up with Emily talking rubbish so I walked off. It has its advantages being able to walk – and also being too young to be polite.

The Easter eggs arrived safely without any help from Father Easter. I had a Smarties egg and a Buttons egg. I also had a Galaxy egg and a Mars egg. Mum said she would have to help me eat all my eggs because I would be sick if I ate them all myself.

Oolool had the same and Mum has to help her eat hers, too. Good old Mum! The things she does for our benefit.

Dad said he was going to ring the local newspaper and tell them about Oolool's talking. The idea had been put into his head by different people saying this was what Mum and Dad should do; it was so unusual to hear a brat (my word) of my sister's age talking, that the newspaper were bound to be interested in her story.

Mum said, oh, no, he was not going to ring the newspaper. She did not want to turn Oolool into a celebrity. Dad said she would not be a celebrity; she would only be famous for fifteen minutes. (Everybody, it seems, is famous for fifteen minutes.) And besides, people liked to hear about these things, Dad insisted.

Mum did not put up much of a fight against the idea. She ooh'd and ah'd and if'd and but'd but gave in in the end.

“As long as it goes no further than this,” she warned.

After all, it would be rather nice to turn a few heads in admiration, she did not need to add, but what I knew she was thinking.

We went shopping to a place called the Outlet Village. We had to drive for miles to get there and it seemed to me that it was a long way to go shopping when Mum manages perfectly well enough just popping down the street to the greengrocers and

the chemist. I had never been to the Outlet Village before. I hope I do not have to go there again. It was a nightmare. I have never seen so many cars parked in one place before. All the cars in the world were there. The car park was bigger than Rochdale.

Dad said they built the car park first and then added the shops afterwards to give the people somewhere to go after they had parked their cars. He said we would never find our car again. Mum said other people managed to find their cars and told him to shut up and stop moaning. I could tell from the start that it was not going to be a good day.

Dad pushed me and Oolool in the buggy as we followed Mum into the shops. There were shops selling clothes, shoes, pans, more clothes, jewellery, more shoes, holidays, even more clothes, perfume, handbags, in fact anything you can name and more besides. Mum spent ages picking up clothes and putting them down again. There were Mum-type clothes, Dad type clothes and baby-type clothes.

Oolool slept. I wish I could have slept, too. Dad can sleep in most places but not when he is pushing the buggy around. His face was sad and he yawned a lot. I began to cry in order to encourage Mum to hurry up but all she did was tell Dad to take us for a walk.

We walked passed all the shops and found it a lot quicker than stopping to look in every one. When I can talk I am going to explain to Mum that shopping is a lot quicker if you do not stop to go in shops.

Eventually we reached MacDonald's. I had some of Dad's fries and some of his Big Mac. Oolool fed herself with fries. Dad grumbled because his Big Mac fell to pieces and when we came out he said he was hungrier than when we went in.

We went back to find Mum and, when we finally did find her, she was in the same shop we had left her in. I thought we would spend the rest of our lives there. I

was worried in case Mum had forgotten that I started school in three years time and needed to be home by then.

There were still millions of people walking around. Half the world must have been there, and the other half was on their way or going home. People were going in and out of shops, picking things up and putting them down again, carrying bags and shouting at their children. Some of the people I saw looked as though they had been there for days. There were men with tired, red eyes, stubbled chins and lined faces, standing around with their arms folded, following their wives as they burrowed deeper into the shops. People argued and sighed and jostled and pushed. It was a nightmare.

That was nothing, though, to what followed.

After what seemed like a week, but was probably only a few days (Dad could hardly stand up through going so long without sleep), Mum came out of the shop and declared it was time to go home. Dad almost cried with relief. Mum had bought two pairs of socks. She said what a wonderful place this was and she would love to come back with some money to spend. I could not understand why we had come here in the first place if she had not brought any money with her. It seemed to me like watching the telly without switching it on. Mum said we would all have to come again. The rest of us remained silent; we did not have enough energy to answer. Even Oolool could not be bothered replying.

We went back to where we had left the car and it was not there. Dad looked up and down the line of cars and then from one to the other of us as if he expected us to explain what had happened.

Someone had stolen our car.

Mum asked Dad if we were looking in the right place and Dad said of course we

were looking in the right place, did she think he was bloody stupid?

Mum did not answer. Dad pointed at the floor in the empty space where our car had been.

“Look,” he said, “that’s the oil patch where our leak is.”

Sure enough, there was an oil stain on the floor where our car dripped away its life-blood. I looked at the space next-door-but-one and there was a patch there, too. It seems every car in the world has an oil leak.

Dad began chunnering. (According to Dad, this is a mixture of mumbling and grumbling and is what Mum does when she is grumpy.) No one escaped his wrath: mushy-pea-heads, the police, shopkeepers, car park planners, security cameras, women drivers, dogs, John, Auntie Jo. He went on about stringing up the mushy-pea-heads by their thumbs and chopping their hands off and feeding them to the sharks and making them jump up and down on a bed of nails and locking them up until they were a pile of dust and performing experiments on them.

Mum did not trust Dad. She said we should try another aisle of cars to make sure he was not mistaken. There were letters and numbers at the end of each lane of cars to indicate where you had left yours. Mum asked Dad why he had not taken any notice of these. Dad asked Mum the same question. He said they had been in the shops for so long he would have forgotten the number anyway by the time we came out. He said he did not need a bloody number because he knew he had parked the car next to a litter bin with an empty Coca Cola can on top. He pointed and, lo and behold, there was an empty Coca Cola can on top of the nearest bin.

Mum said it was a good job they had not emptied the bins or we would be well and truly up the creek. (I am not sure what a creek is. I thought it was what the door did when you opened it, but it sounds as if I am wrong.)

Dad walked up and down aimlessly for a while until Mum told him he was not going to make the car reappear by walking up and down aimlessly.

Dad said it was all Mum's fault for taking so long in the shops. Mum said Dad had been so busy moaning when we got there that he had forgotten to lock the car door. Dad said if we had gone shopping at home we could have walked. Mum said it looked like we would be walking anyway. Dad said he would phone the police but Mum had no credit on her mobile phone so he had to go and find a phone somewhere else. He chunnered something about there not being much point in having a mobile phone with you if you cannot use it and it was like carrying around an empty purse.

Luckily it was not raining so things could have been worse, although I do not think Mum and Dad saw it that way. Unluckily Mum took me and Oolool back into a shop while Dad waited outside for the police to arrive. Luckily it was not too long before the police arrived and before Mum had done too much rummaging. The police took Dad's name and address (you may have noticed by now how many policemen have got Dad's name in their books) and a description of the car. They then left us miles from home with no means of getting there.

"You'll have to get a taxi. You don't really expect us to walk, do you?" Mum said in a voice that was not to be disputed.

Dad said it would cost an arm and a leg.

Mum looked at him.

Dad went to call a taxi.

Some time later a taxi arrived to take us home. It was very nice in the taxi; much nicer than in our car so I think we struck lucky in having our car stolen. A voice on the radio kept talking to the driver and the driver kept talking to Dad. Dad was not very chatty. I think he could feel Mum's eyes burning into the back of his head. It cost

thirty-three pounds for the ride in the taxi, which is a lot, apparently, and Dad almost choked when the driver told him how much it was.

Dad said the next time Mum wanted to go to the Outlet Village he would book us a holiday to Disneyland and we would go there instead. It would be cheaper, he said, and we would be home sooner. Ho hum!

Mum has started putting me on the potty. This is not something I wish to talk about, okay? Shall we just say that I am not performing very well in this direction, either?

I am still fed up with complete strangers stopping us in the street to tell us how beautiful my sister is. She has been called an angel so many times that I have started looking for wings. Of course, she loves every minute of it. She sits there, in the buggy, accepting compliments and smiling smugly.

“Oh, what a lovely smile!” they will say, or: “What a cheeky grin!” or, even worse: “If you could bottle that smile you could cure the world.” That was another one that made me want to puke.

I have a disease called tonsillitis. I will tell you about it when I am better.

I am better now, thank you very much. Tonsillitis is no joke. It gives you a sore throat so that you can hardly swallow and gives you a temperature and makes you want to stay in bed and never get up again. I have had colds before and runny noses but never anything like that.

Mum took me to the doctor and he looked down my throat to see if he could see my tonsillitis. He stuck an empty lollipop stick in my mouth, which almost made me sick. I heaved and heaved like Sam does with his fur balls and my eyeballs stood out like ping pong balls, until they began watering. The doctor gave me some medicine

and said I should take it three times a day. The medicine tasted quite nice, actually. It was an improvement on Grandma's soup.

A man came to see us. When Mum opened the door to him he appeared more startled than Mum was to see him. He held a notebook in his hand and said his name was Humphrey's and that he was from the *Observer*, which is the local newspaper. He was only young, old enough to have left school, presumably, but not as old as Dad. He wore round spectacles with wire around them and with glass so thick they made his eyes look like golf balls. His hair was the colour of carrots and his face was full of freckles, just like Roy and Rob. That should be enough for any person to be burdened with, but I have not got to his teeth yet. If I suggest his nickname could be 'Bugs,' then you have an idea of what they were like. Apart from all the above, there was nothing wrong with him.

I was puzzled as to why this person was using a name that belonged to someone else. What was Humphrey going to do whilst someone else was using his name?

Mum came in with the man with Humphrey's name and they both sat down. I was sat on the floor and Oolool was in her chair.

"So this is the child wonder, is it?" the man with Humphrey's name said, looking at me. He not only looked peculiar, he sounded peculiar, too. His voice was high as if he were holding his breath when he talked, and he whistled when he said his esses. He licked his lips nervously and fidgeted in his seat.

"No, not him," Mum was quick to point out. (A little too quick, if you ask me.) "It's Lucy who's the star." (They know how to make you feel inferior in this house.)

"Ah!" said the reporter. "What a pretty girl!" (Did he sound pleased that it was not me who was the 'star,' or am I being paranoid?) "You're a bit of a chatterbox, are you, young lady?"

Although he smiled as pleasantly as he found it possible to do so as he said this, he looked a little fearsome with his encroaching teeth and flaming hair. His tone was a bit stern as well, as if he were accusing Oolool of being a chatterbox. My sister, being such a sensitive soul, as all highly-strung prodigies are, apparently, tuned into his questioning manner and immediately switched off. Well, I say she switched off (if only). She looked at the man with Humphrey's name as if he had beamed down from another planet, and frowned for a moment before letting out a piercing scream that would have woken Riggarr.

"Oh, dear," the man with Humphrey's name said, a worried frown rolling up his brow as he nibbled his pen. "I have this effect on children. It's my hair, you know."

He may have been right. He had various flaws, any one of which could have triggered off Oolool's reaction. I think maybe if he had been a little more experienced he would have approached our diva with a little more understanding. Then again, if he had not looked so spectacularly odd he may have achieved the right results with the attitude he had. His face grew redder by the second. A smile flickered for a moment near his mouth as Oolool quietened down but fell away again as she erupted anew. The way he shuffled around on his chair made it seem like he was sat on a cricket ball.

I was beginning to feel quite sorry for the man with Humphrey's name as I sat sucking my dummy, observing this episode. I watched him fingering his shirt collar and wiping his hands on his knees and guessed he wished he were somewhere else, reporting on a lost dog or the opening of a supermarket.

Tears streamed down my sister's face as Mum tried to sooth her. I got the feeling that Oolool was over-reacting a little and that now she had got into her role she was going to milk it to the end of the performance.

“Come on, now,” said Mum. “Don’t be a silly girl. This nice man only wants you to talk to him.”

Oolool, her head buried deep into Mum’s shoulder, peeped from her haven and, seeing the reporter was still there, let out a fresh scream. The man with Humphrey’s name was having the same effect on Oolool as Father Christmas had on me. I was quite pleased to find that my sister was normal in some ways.

The man with Humphrey’s name continued to squirm and smile stupidly and guiltily. If his pen had been a carrot he would have been down to the green bit at the end by now.

Mum wiped away Oolool’s tears. “Are you going to talk to this nice man?” she asked reasonably. “He wants to see how clever you are.”

Oolool looked at the poor man sulkily through red-rimmed eyes.

“No!” she said, her bottom lip protruding like a tongue. “Not nice man!”

Mum tapped her on the back of her hand. (If it had been me who had been cheeky she would have smashed a pan over my head.) “That’s not nice!” she said. “Don’t be cheeky!”

Oolool renewed her outburst and buried her face in her hands. It was a classic drama queen pose and I wondered which film she had seen to have copied it. Or perhaps it came naturally.

Meanwhile, the man with Humphrey’s name kept looking towards the door as if he were gauging the distance in order to make a run for it. If this were his first assignment it was enough to make him want to become a bricklayer.

“I think you’ve caught her on a bad day,” Mum said to him apologetically. “To tell you the truth, I didn’t think she’d perform in front of an audience. I didn’t want to call the press at all, but my husband wanted to see his name in the paper.”

It was a surprise to me that Oolool did not want to perform in front of an audience. When we are out shopping she is posing and smiling and talking and being cute, and the more people there are watching her, the better her performance. Maybe she was being temperamental, as all celebrities are entitled to be.

However, this reporter chap grabbed hold of Mum's explanation as if it were a lifeline. He stood up, revved his mouth and gave it full throttle.

"If...if...if it's a bad t-time, I'll...I'll call back," he said eventually. "Or...if you prefer, I'll...I'll get someone else to call." This second option undoubtedly sounded the better one to him and his eyes brightened at the brilliance of his idea.

He made a hesitant step towards the door as if he were afraid that any sudden movement might have Oolool breathing flames at him.

"I'll, er...I'll ring, or get someone else to ring to make an appointment," he said to Mum. "Perhaps I should have warned you I was coming. Perhaps she'll be better if she knows beforehand if...if someone's coming." His voice petered out because, like me, he did not know what difference warning Oolool would make.

Mum told him not to worry and apologized and told him that she would discuss it with Dad and let the newspaper know.

The man with Humphrey's name smiled helplessly and his teeth reached out into the room.

"Don't get up," he said as he shuffled sideways to the door. There was relief in his voice now as he realised escape was near. He opened the door. "Goodbye," he said. "Goodbye, er... Lucy."

He was gone. We all looked at the closed door behind him, wondering if the last few minutes had really happened. I imagined the man with Humphrey's name dashing down the drive to his getaway car, thankful the day was over and looking forward to

the morning when he could visit the Job Centre.

When Dad came home he was not happy that Oolool had not performed for the man with Humphrey's name. He said she would have been all right if he had been there. (I am not sure what Dad could have done to make her perform.) He said he would ring the *Observer* again and tell them to make sure they rang before they sent someone and he would make sure he was at home. Mum told him not to bother; she would rather forget all about it.

I do not think Dad wants to forget.

Mum tells us that she has begun writing a book. It is based loosely, she says, on our family. It is the soup of our lives, she says proudly, with its upheavals and turmoils, its good times and bad times all mixed together in a stew of emotion. These are Mum's words, not mine; it is the poet in her. Whatever it is about, it has put her in a good, optimistic mood. Long may it last.

Dad says it is about time she wrote something with a bit of meat in it.

What was I saying about Mum being in a good mood? Something happened to change all that.

We received a telephone call from the police.

It was several days since we had had our car stolen from the Outlet Village, and the police rang to tell us that they had found it – in the same place we had left it.

As Mum held the phone to her ear the colour drained from her face so rapidly that I expected to see a puddle of pigment at her feet. Her mouth opened so wide when she screamed: "WHAT?" that I thought she was going to bite the phone in half.

After she had hung up the phone she walked back and forth across the room, folding and unfolding her arms, tapping her fingers on convenient surfaces, and

swearing to herself. She walked into rooms; kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and came out again as if she did not know why she had gone in there at all.

“Wait till your bloody father gets home!” she kept saying. “Your father is an absolute bloody idiot!” She said this several times and used alternatives to ‘idiot.’

Gone was the pretence of solidarity between Mum and Dad regarding mine and Oolool’s position. If they ever disagree about something to do with us, be it punishment or praise, they do not air their differences in front of us but agree (telepathically, it seems) to follow each other’s lead until any dispute can be resolved in our absence. They would never criticize one another to me or Oolool if the other was not present. This strategy, it appeared, had gone out of the window.

My sister looked at me and I looked at her. We knew when not to be nuisances.

Mum polished every surface in the house as if she were trying to wear them out. She put the rug over the garden wall and pulverised it with the carpet beater. I can only guess at whom she imagined she was beating.

Eventually, Dad came home whistling, which is not something he does every day (whistle, that is, not come home, he does that every day), but today, of all days, he chose to be a whistling day and riled Mum even more with his joviality.

“You absolutely stupid idiot!” she screamed as Dad took off his jacket. “You useless worthless object!” she continued as he sat on the kitchen chair and unfastened his shoes. “You absolutely...useless” (here Mum was struggling to find a word she could say in front of me and Oolool, without repeating herself) “moron! You’re as much use as a...as a...a...a two-legged table!”

Mum paused for breath and Dad looked at her as he rubbed his chin in bewilderment.

“And a good evening to you, pet,” he said. “Er, have you had a bad day?” He

looked around for any visible damage that might have caused Mum's outburst.

I thought Mum could not have got any angrier, but she did. I could hear the crackle in her voice as it shot across the room like a thunderbolt, armed with electricity and venom.

“THEPOLICEFOUNDTHECARINEXACTLYTHESAMESPOTYOULEFTIT
INYOUMORON!”

It took a moment for Dad to catch the volley and another moment for him to decode the sentence and when he did his jaw dropped. His mouth moved but no words came out. When they did, I think he wished he had not bothered.

“What?”

Mum's eyes grew wider with fury.

“You don't have to act stupid, do you? You don't have to pretend to be stupid.
You are stupid!”

She turned away from Dad as if she could not bear to look at him any longer. She stormed over to the window and looked outside with her arms folded. Her foot tapped on the floor as if counting down to an explosion. Then she turned back towards Dad, her anger refuelled. It looked as though she were about to scorch him with her breath.

“I knew I should have checked that car park myself; I just knew it. I should have known you wouldn't be right.” She ground her teeth and I thought I saw a puff of smoke escape from her lips.

Dad shook his head and then scratched it. “You mean the car was where we left it?” he dared to ask.

By now, Mum was having difficulty speaking. She could not trust herself to say what she felt in case she said something that Oolool or me might find amusing to repeat in front of Grandma.

“I...I don’t understand,” Dad said, shaking his head again. I think he thought if he shook his head enough it would erase this episode from his memory. He looked totally confused; as if a tooth fairy had brought back a tooth.

“Oh, I do,” Mum snorted. “I understand perfectly.”

“But...it wasn’t there,” Dad said frantically. “You saw yourself, it wasn’t there.”

“It wasn’t where we looked – where you insisted it had been.” There was spittle frothing on Mum’s lips by this time, and I thought, if she were a dog, they would say she was mad. Mind you, dog or not, she was quite angry.

Dad thought for a moment, searching for straws at which he might clutch.

“The mushy-pea-heads that took it must have put it back where they found it,” he said desperately and not very convincingly.

“There’s only one mushy-pea-head around here,” Mum said, her voice taking on something of a growl. “There’s no damage to it, the radio’s still in it. IT’S NEVER BEEN MOVED!”

I have never heard Mum scream so loudly. The wisps of hair on Dad’s head fluttered in the gale from her mouth.

Dad was still searching obstinately for answers.

“Suppose...what if someone had wanted a lift home and took the car, then brought it back the following day?”

He was struggling now.

Mum was wrestling with her self-control. She forced herself to speak calmly.

“We pay thirty-three pounds for a taxi, as if we are made of money. Then I suffer the humiliation of listening to a sniggering policeman telling me that perhaps we should have made a thorough search of the surrounding area before reporting our car stolen. I bet they had a raffle at the police station to decide who would be the lucky

one to ring us.”

Mum shook her head in despair as if there were nothing else she could say that would prove Dad’s stupidity further.

Dad was still trying to escape. “But there was a can of Coke in the litter bin.”

Mum sighed. “Do you know how many cans of Coke are drunk in a day? I know not many of them end up in a litter bin, but I’m sure it must be more than one.”

I felt quite sorry for Dad in the end. Mum thought he was an idiot and, presumably, so did the police. The story would go down in family history and be a means of ridiculing him for years to come. He just sat there looking sad. He had run out of theories and did not understand what was going on.

“I don’t understand,” he kept saying. “I don’t understand.”

He gazed at the wall in the living room as if he expected the solution to suddenly appear there, scrawled in burning letters of enlightenment.

Then he said: “If the car hadn’t been moved, then why did it take the police so long to find it?”

I do not think Mum had an answer to that one because she never said anything.

Soon, it seems, Oolool is going to be christened. I was christened once, they tell me, but I do not remember, even though I was there. We all go to church and sing hymns and the vicar wets Oolool’s head. I hope the vicar does not get all wobbly and start talking daft like Dad did when he wet her head.

I cannot understand why I found it so difficult to walk. I find it so easy now that I think I must have been stupid not to be able to do it before.

I never fall now, except when I trip over Sam. I can even run; well, almost, but my legs are not as fast as my body, so I sometimes fall over then.

Oolool stands up but she has to hold on to something. I remember doing that and wondering if I could make a dash for the settee. It is easy, really, but if she thinks I am going to help her she can think again. I have to stay better than her at something.

I do not think Mum has exactly forgiven Dad for losing our car, but at least she has stopped talking about it; which is more than can be said for some:

“Wos yon Ah ken boot yon mickle mackle motor bin tacken fray weer ye poot it then feenin it wasny?”

This was Alan Gilchrist asking Dad about our missing car. Dad just grinned through gritted teeth. He ignored what Alan Gilchrist said, whether he understood it or not.

Karen said she did not want to put her feet in it but Mum had let the cat out of the bag that Dad was not flavour of the month. She said she would hate to be left high and dry with the car gone for a burton, but she thought it was time to bury the hatchet.

(If you do not understand the last paragraph, do not worry; neither do I.)

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came to see us. They said Orlando was very hot and busy. I bet Orlando only said he was busy so he could keep out of their way. They never mentioned the car – they were too busy telling us about their holiday which, for a change, pleased Dad.

Oolool was not sick on Auntie Jo this time. She is not sick so much now that she has stopped eating Mum. Auntie Jo bounced my sister on her knee and pretended to enjoy herself.

Oolool did not pretend; she just said: “Want off!”

While they were staying with Orlando, Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo went to see Florida’s keys. They said they were beautiful but I cannot imagine what can be so

beautiful about a bunch of keys. It makes me wonder if they are anything to do with Alan Gilchrist's locks.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo are going on holiday again soon. They are going to have Anna in Cuba. I do not know whom Anna is, but she is welcome to having Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo in Cuba, or anywhere else for that matter.

I want to hear Uncle Joe play his violin. I did not even know he could play an instrument until Dad said he must have a new fiddle going. I wish Uncle Joe would bring his new violin to our house, and then we can hear him play it.

I think Uncle Joe has a mouse in his beard. I saw its tail sticking out. It was either that or a twig from one of the birds' nests he has in there.

Granny and Grandpa did not go to Austria; they went to Paignton, instead. There are no mountains in Paignton – and no plane crashes.

Mum keeps putting me on the potty as if I were clockwork. I know what she expects me to do but you cannot always perform to order, can you? I will sit there for ages and every so often Mum will come and lift me up to see if I have left anything behind and then plonk me back down if I have not been successful. When I eventually part with a dribble she jumps around clapping her hands and saying how clever I am. Let us be honest about this. If she sits me there for long enough there is bound to be a result of one kind or another. Like when she puts me to bed; if I lie there for a few hours, eventually I am going to go to sleep. Still, if she wants to pile all her praise on to me for doing what comes naturally, then I can live with that.

Oolool has been christened. Everyone made such a fuss about this occasion that I thought it would last all day long. Mum and Dad had been talking about it for weeks before it happened and I thought it would be something like Christmas, where

everyone is on holiday and there are special programmes on the telly. It did not last very long, though. We sat on the front row of the church and the vicar carried Oolool around to show her to everyone. We sang some hymns and the vicar wet Oolool's head without wobbling. (I do not know how Dad managed to wet my sister's head because he did not have her with him at the time.)

When we had finished at the church everyone came back to our house for some food. People took photographs and ate and drank and took more photographs. Everyone was there: Grandma, Granny, Grandpa, Uncle Joe, Auntie Jo, Alan Gilchrist, Maureen Gilchrist, Roy and Rob, Karen, Emily, Gail, and few more people I had never seen before. Karen and Uncle Joe were Oolool's Godparents. This, it seems, means that Karen and Uncle Joe have to make sure that my sister is brought up properly. That should be interesting!

Grandma brought some soup but no one wanted any and Grandpa had a coughing spasm and had to have a couple of cigarettes in the garden to "put him right." Uncle Joe told everyone that he was having Anna in Cuba in case someone was there who had not already heard about it, and Alan Gilchrist became more indecipherable the more Carlsberg Special Brews he had.

Oolool entertained everyone with her chatter and they all clapped every time she breathed. Gail said she should go on telly. Dad's eyes lit up at this idea.

"Do you really think so?" he said.

Everyone seemed to think so, except Mum. She just gave Dad that look which warned him not to get any ideas about anything.

Dad liked Gail's suggestion. His eyes twinkled. The idea of being on telly had been born.

John now has a girlfriend. She is called Heather. Dad said he did not realise it was a

girl until he saw John kissing her, and even now he is not certain. She has a head like a tennis ball, the same as John, but she has a long pony-tail hanging down the back. Dad says she looks like 'soap on a rope.' I think she is quite pretty but Dad would never admit to that. He says a pony-tail suits her because she looks like a horse.

John and Heather sit in trees, shouting names at men who want to build roads. They are dragged through mud by policemen, escape, and then go back to start all over again. Dad says why can they not just take a walk in the park like he and Mum did when they first met? Mum says they care for the environment and they are right to protest. She says people cannot go on building roads because we will live on a tarmac island before long.

Dad says she is right. The environment is a lot safer while John is up a tree. He says, if John is so concerned about the environment why does he throw his cigarette packets and MacDonald's rubbish on the floor?

When John and Heather come home from sitting in trees and being dragged along the ground they are covered in mud and look as if they have not washed for a week. Cleaner than when they went, Dad says.

Oolool bit me. She has two teeth at the top and one at the bottom and when I put my finger in her mouth to get back a sweet she had pinched off me, she bit me. I cried and Mum told me not to be a baby.

This is what I am finding. It is part of the growing up process, it seems, but I do not think I have grown up enough to be a part of it. When Karen and Emily came around and Emily spilled her blackcurrant juice on the carpet, Mum said it did not matter because the carpet was ruined anyway with all the spills of which I had been guilty; none of which had been followed by a pat on the head, I might add – more like a whack! When Oolool was sick on Auntie Jo, Mum blamed me for bouncing on the

settee and churning up the little darling's stomach contents. I am sure if Mum were not so determined to blame Dad, if she thought about it for long enough, she could find a reason for blaming me for losing the car at the Outlet Village.

Grandma made me some gloves without fingers in them. She said I would be glad of them when winter came. I do not see the point in them because it is always my fingers that get cold; I cannot see how fingerless gloves will keep my fingers warm.

"Now, you must be a good girl and talk to the nice man from the newspaper when he comes to see you. Alright?"

This was Dad telling Oolool that she must talk to the nice man from the paper, whom Dad had rung and begged for another chance.

"Don't like man," Oolool replied sulkily.

"He's a nice man," Dad reasoned. "He only wants to talk to you. He wants to see how clever you are. He's not going to eat you."

My sister performed a number of acting expressions ranging from anger, through outrage, and into sadness.

"Right, then," she said eventually, her bottom lip almost touching her chin.

So the man from the *Observer* is coming again. There is still a chance for Oolool and Dad to become famous.

Five

There was a knock at the door and Dad jumped up as if he were expecting a cheque from the lottery.

The man with Humphrey's name was coming back and we had all been waiting patiently. Well, three of us had been waiting patiently; Dad had been tutting and tapping and sighing and watching as if we were all going to dissolve before the reporter arrived. Dad had been rehearsing with Oolool (out of Mum's earshot) exactly what she was going to say. I did not know what was going to happen; presumably something that would propel them to their own show on television on Saturday nights. Since this morning Dad had been fidgeting and looking at his watch and going to rehearsals with Oolool and biting his nails (which is something he cannot usually do on account of his false teeth not being strong enough), until Mum began eyeing him with growing irritation.

It was now Mum's turn to tut and sigh as she looked up from the magazine she was trying to read.

"I wish you'd just sit down and wait," she told him eventually. "The way you're hovering at the window, you'd think Michael Parkinson was coming. It's an unknown reporter from the local paper who, judging from his last visit, will be more nervous than you are. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't turn up – he was a bag of nerves." She turned the page of her magazine and shook her head.

Dad looked at Mum in frustration. She did not understand and he could not explain.

"I know that," he said. "But it's important for Oolool that she gets it right."

"Gets it right? What do you mean, 'gets it right?'" Mum's voice grew louder and I wondered about Dad's common sense as he rose from the chair to look out of the

window again. “It’s not a talent contest, you know,” Mum persisted. “It’s an interview with the local paper.”

“Yes, I know,” said Dad calmly, as he paced the floor, ringing his hands. “But it could lead to bigger things.”

Mum glared at him. She closed her magazine as an indication that this was becoming serious.

“I thought it wouldn’t go any farther than the *Observer*.” Her eyes burned into Dad’s like lasers.

“It won’t, probably. It won’t. It’s not important enough to go any farther.”

Maybe it was my imagination but Dad’s eyes told a different story than his mouth did. He squinted into the sunshine once more, looking for the approach of the red reporter.

Dad is a frustrated star. He longs to be famous but there is nothing he can do that will make him so. He cannot sing (except about *Delilah* and *Eleanor Rigby* in the tub), he cannot act (except daft, Mum says) and he cannot dance. Mum says he is a comedian but he is not funny, so he is trying to become famous through Oolool. Stardom by proxy, Mum says.

Anyway, by the time the knock came, Dad’s fingernails were chewed down to the second knuckle and he had worn a hole in the glass by looking out of the window. He jumped out of his chair and stood on Sam’s tail. The cat let out a shriek and squirted out of the room like a deflated balloon. Mum impaled Dad with her eyes.

She gritted her teeth. “If you can’t calm down I’m going to send this chap packing before he sets foot in the hall,” she growled.

Dad looked at her and knew she meant what she said.

“All right, pet,” he said, holding up his hands as if he were being ambushed. “It’s

all right! Everything's all right!" Dad was trying to convince himself as much as us.

He appeared to walk to the door in a daze. His eyes were hypnotized and his grin fixed before he turned the handle.

A lady stood on the doorstep, with a red handbag in her hand.

"Mr Crabtree?" she asked, smiling. "I'm Stephanie Rose from the *Observer*.

Danny asked me if I'd stand in for him on your story. He's a bit tied up."

(Tied up? I would have thought he would probably have hung himself rather than come back here.)

Stephanie Rose was young and pretty. She had blond hair like Oolool, and it hung down her back like a waterfall. She wore a white jacket and white skirt and looked like an angel. Her smile twinkled in the sunlight and must have dazzled Dad because he rubbed his eyes.

"That's me," he said through a beaming smile. "Yes, er, come in, come in." He shuffled back awkwardly and banged his elbow on the hall cupboard. His eyes were like dinner plates and his smile so wide that it is a wonder that his teeth did not fall out.

As Stephanie Rose entered, the whole room seemed to light up, as though light was coming from her. It must have been the sun on her white clothes that made it look like that – either that, or she really was an angel.

I was gawping with an open mouth, and so was Dad. When Stephanie saw Oolool she smiled beautifully at her and my sister smiled beautifully back as if she had known her all her life.

"Er, let me introduce you," Dad said, eagerly guiding Stephanie in. She moved like a dancer, her skirt flicking musically around her legs. She was obviously in the wrong profession. "Er, this is my wife, Christine," Dad continued. "This is Billy"

(rather dismissively, I thought) “and this...” he paused for effect or silent drum roll “...is Lulu.” Stephanie smiled at us all in turn. “This is Stephanie, pet,” Dad added to Mum.

Mum said: “Hello!” and looked at Dad knowingly, as if she knew what he was thinking and expected him to make a fool of himself.

“Sit down, sit down,” Dad said, bustling around, trying to find the best seat for Stephanie. “Would you like a tea of cup, er, tea of coffee... er, cup of tea...or coffee?”

Dad turned red and Mum smiled.

“Don’t get over-excited, now, Pat,” Mum said to him. She turned to Stephanie. “He’s been looking forward to this. He wants to be famous. You’ll have to excuse him; he gets a little confused when he gets excited.”

Dad just smiled stupidly. It seemed he could not form a sentence that he might have defended himself with. Mum and Stephanie smiled at him, but for different reasons, I suspect.

“I’ll go and make a cuppa,” Mum said and tapped Dad gently on the cheek as she walked past him.

Stephanie giggled. “Not to worry,” she said. “Let’s get down to business, shall we?” She rummaged in her red handbag and came out with a notebook.

Dad said something about the weather and Stephanie said something about the rain having stopped and Dad said something about the day suddenly becoming brighter and Mum coughed in the kitchen.

Stephanie suddenly looked at Oolool and smiled.

“So this is Lucy Loudmouth, is it?” she said dazzlingly.

My sister chuckled and smiled back.

“You’re very pretty, aren’t you?” Stephanie said.

I thought the man with Humphrey’s name could have done himself a favour by listening in to this performance on how to interview temperamental brats. But he was probably a painter and decorator by now.

Stephanie had a strange way of talking. Her voice rose and fell like a roller-coaster and it made me stare at her even when she had finished speaking. It had the same effect on Dad, too, for he could not take his eyes off her either.

Ooolool giggled in response to Stephanie’s compliment. “So are you,” she replied in her cutest, squeakiest voice.

Stephanie almost dropped her notebook. She sat smiling silently at Ooolool as if she had had a spell cast upon her.

After a lengthy pause she said: “Thank you,” to the Loudmouthed one and began busily scribbling in her notebook. She looked towards my sister once or twice as she wrote, as if she could not believe her eyes, or, presumably, her ears. She stopped writing and turned towards Dad.

“Exactly how old is Lucy, Mr Crabtree?”

She reached forward to brush a strand of hair off Ooolool’s forehead and laughed as my sister grabbed her finger.

Dad beamed ridiculously; either with pride towards Ooolool or because Stephanie had spoken to him.

“Er...” he spluttered, off guard. “Er...eight and a half months.”

“That’s amazing!” Stephanie said, shaking her head and making her hair swish like a curtain. She began writing in her book again and said to Dad without looking up: “And you are the father?”

I do not know whether there was disbelief in her voice or whether it was my

imagination. I think Dad noticed it, too.

“Yes!” he answered defensively.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Stephanie. “Of course you are. It’s just that I have to make sure all the facts are correct, don’t I? You never know these days, what with relationships changing, and all.”

“That makes a change for a reporter, doesn’t it?” Mum’s voice floated in from the kitchen. She appeared in the doorway. “Making sure your facts are correct, I mean. Sugar in your tea?”

During these exchanges Oolool’s head swivelled from speaker to speaker as if she were watching a tennis match. She was patiently waiting for her opportunity to show off.

“Not for me, thank you,” Stephanie replied, smiling politely at Mum’s remark.

“You don’t come from Wales, by any chance, do you?” Dad asked suddenly, as if that had anything to do with anything.

“I do indeed!” said Stephanie, looking thrilled to have been recognized. She giggled. “Well spotted!”

I was impressed with Dad. How had he known that?

“I suppose my accent’s a bit of a giveaway, isn’t it?” Stephanie added.

Then I understood. I had never heard the accent of a person from Wales before, but if you knew what one sounded like you would have to be pretty stupid not to know the person came from Wales. In fact, you would have to be pretty stupid to ask a person who spoke like a person from Wales if they came from Wales, and Dad had asked.

“We’re going to Anglesey for our holidays,” said Dad (this was news), oblivious to the fact that Stephanie, by now, had probably got him marked down as daft.

“Oh!” Stephanie squealed. “I was brought up in Llangefni. My parents moved here nine years ago.” She brushed her hair behind her ears with her fingers.

“Whereabouts are you going?”

Dad looked puzzled. “Anglesey!” he said again.

“We’re going to Red Wharf Bay,” Mum shouted from the kitchen, rescuing Dad from his confusion. “Near Benlech.”

“Oh, I know it well, I do,” Stephanie said, shuffling excitedly in the chair. “It’s beautiful!”

Dad smiled at her dreamily.

“Right!” she said suddenly. “We must get down to business.”

She put her pen to her mouth and nibbled the end in the way the man with Humphrey’s name had done. I wondered if it was a thing that all reporters did. It looked an interesting thing to do. When I get my hands on a pen, I am going to do that.

“Tell me, Mr Crabtree, how old was Lucy when she first spoke?”

“Call me Harry,” said Dad. “You sound like the bank manager, calling me ‘Mr Crabtree.’” He laughed at what he must have considered to be a joke. “Er...about six months.”

“Six months, three weeks and two days,” said Mum, carrying in the teas on a tray. “She said ‘Dadda.’”

Ooolool smiled at the memory of her brilliance.

“Gosh! She’s really progressed in such a short time,” replied Stephanie, looking admiringly at Wonderbabe.

Mum nodded efficiently. “She’ll be walking soon, and she can already count up to twenty.”

Stephanie scribbled. “And what about your other child; Billy, isn’t it?” She looked over at me, to where I sat sucking my dummy. I realised all the eyes in the room were on me so I looked at the floor, to where an opening might appear to swallow me up.

“Wills,” Mum corrected her.

“Billy, that’s right,” recorrected Dad.

Stephanie smiled. “Does he have any of these advanced tendencies?”

“Oh, no,” said Mum, with rather too much haste, I thought. “But then, he’s a boy, and they’re just smaller versions of men, aren’t they? A bit slow on the uptake!” She looked at Dad with a satisfied smile on her face when she said this.

Suddenly Oolool began waving her arms around.

“Talk to me!” she shouted, her fragile voice gaining strength. “When are you talking to me?”

We were all startled and looked at Oolool’s eager face. Stephanie smiled, her sparkling teeth peeping through her lips.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lucy,” she said. “We’re all ignoring you, aren’t we?”

“She doesn’t like being in the background, do you, chicken?” said Mum.

“Come on, then,” said Dad. “It’s time to do your stuff.”

It sounded as if she were about to do some juggling, or somersaults, at the very least. It certainly needed a drum roll. Did you notice how she took the attention back to herself when it drifted towards me? Not that I should complain; it got me out of a spot, I suppose.

Stephanie shifted in her seat to face Oolool.

“Lucy, your mummy tells me you can count. How many fingers am I holding up?”

My sister's brow furrowed in concentration. "Seven fingers and one thumb."

Stephanie shook her head in disbelief.

"I love the way she talks – such a sweet voice. You'd never expect a voice to come out of such a tiny person."

Oolool smiled with satisfaction. She was loving this. I wondered if, when they brought out the hoop, she would jump through that, too.

"And what's your favourite toy, Lucy?" Stephanie continued.

"I like Belinda," said my sister.

"That's her dolly," Mum explained.

Dad's eyes were wide with excitement. He was becoming more famous by the minute.

"And picture books with writing," Oolool carried on, determined to have her say.

Yes, not just any old picture books; they had to have writing in them. It seemed Dad and Oolool had rehearsed this very well. Although her answers did seem a little too clever for Dad to have had anything to do with them. I carried on listening and sucking.

"Can you read the writing in your picture books?" asked an astonished Stephanie.

Can a fish swim?

"Yes!" replied Oolool, as if it would have been pointless having words in the books if she could not read them.

Stephanie smiled. "Show me," she said.

Dad passed Stephanie the newest picture book. It was only the basic one page – one picture kind of thing, you know: apple, bus, cat, with the words written underneath. Actually, I thought it was a bit easy for Mastermind; after all, it was only for two-year-olds. And although she was not yet into *The Wind In The Willows* or

Swallows And Amazons, this, I thought, was going to be a cinch.

Stephanie took the book with a “Thank you,” and opened it. She covered the pictures with her pad, leaving the words exposed at the bottom of the page.

“What do the words say, Lucy?”

“Cat and Doctor,” my sister replied.

Stephanie turned a page.

“Egg and Fence.”

And another page.

“Gate and House.”

Stephanie laughed, her eyes glowing. “That’s brilliant,” she said. “You are clever, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Brains.

Stephanie stayed a while longer, asking questions, giving Oolool the opportunity to show off her brilliance.

Before she left, Stephanie said a photographer would come later to take my sister’s photograph.

“She’s so beautiful, we’ll have to have a photo in the paper.”

Oolool smiled her baby smile and nodded as if she agreed with every word.

As Mum was closing the door after Stephanie had gone, she said to Dad: “Can I call you Harry, too?”

I do not know why Mum suddenly wants to call Dad Harry. She has always been happy to call him Pat before. Maybe it is a joke. I get confused with names, as I think I have mentioned.

“Hey, Crabby, are ye cammin the Club for a dram?”

This was Alan Gilchrist shouting into our hallway when the front door was open,

asking Dad if he was cammin the Club for a dram. The only reason I know it was a question and that it was Dad he was talking to was because it was Dad who answered. The alarming thing about it was the name he called Dad to attract his attention. Crabby? Why Crabby? Does Dad nip him as he walks past? Does Dad walk sideways? Does Alan Gilchrist think Dad looks like a crab? Dad's name is Harry or Pat, or now, apparently, Crabby.

Karen came to have a cup of coffee with Mum and started talking in riddles again. She said her life had changed unimaginably. Where she was half, now she is whole. There is a spring in her step. She wants to shout it to the world. Her love can now speak its name. Now she is out of the closet, she feels herself.

What can I say?

The man with the camera came and did not say very much, except: "Aren't you a little beauty?" to guess who? And "Thank you," and "Goodbye," when he had finished. He took a lot of photographs, so maybe Oolool will have a special edition of the paper to herself.

Grandpa's cough is getting worse. He has to sit down a lot because the coughing makes him tired and breathless. Granny says she is going to make him go to the doctor, but Grandpa says there is nothing wrong with him that a bit of fresh air will not cure. Granny says he cannot get any fresh air because of the damn cigarettes that he always has in his mouth.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist have been to Scotland to see their family. Roy and Rob went, too. They have grandmas and grandpas there whom they do not see very often.

Roy and Rob came to tell me about their visit whilst I was in the garden trying to get away from a beetle. It had crept up on me as I was sat minding my own business throwing stones at Sam (who, needless to say, was in no danger of being hit), and would have eaten me if I had not seen it in time.

“Grandma and Grandad live in Perth,” Roy or Rob said. “We haven’t seen them for a long time. It’s nice in Perth; it’s quite close to the mountains.”

I wondered if they had plane crashes there. The beetle was scurrying under a rock.

“We took Grandma and Grandad for a drive to see Ben Nevis,” said the other one.

I have never heard them mention Ben Nevis before. I do not know what relation he is.

“And we went to see Loch Ness. Rob said he saw Nessie but it was only a seal,” said what must have been Roy.

“I did, too!” said what must have been Rob. “I saw him! You’re only jealous because you didn’t see him!”

“You didn’t see Nessie! There’s no such thing.”

“Is, too! I saw him! He’s as big as a...a...a submarine.”

“It was probably a submarine you saw, with someone as stupid as you looking for him.”

“It wasn’t a submarine. It had a head...and a tail.”

“It’s funny you saw him when you were by yourself. Why didn’t you see him when someone was with you?”

What must have been Rob shrugged. “I dunno!” he said. “Maybe he doesn’t like crowds.”

“Poh!” What must have been Roy blew a raspberry at what must have been Rob and they began wrestling and rolling about on the grass. I peeped towards the rock to make sure the beetle was not going to attack them. Obviously I could not warn them, and besides, part of me was curious to know if the beetle would be able to eat both of them.

I do not know what Loch Ness is, I do not know what Nessie is, and I do not know what a submarine is. I feel I am missing out on so much.

John came home from up the tree and he had drawings on his arms. These are called tattoos. It seems some people have them on their arms or on their chests and even all over their bodies. These people are called ‘Pillocks,’ according to Dad.

Mum thought John’s drawings were impressive; a statement, she said. Dad said that was true – they were a statement, stating just how stupid John was. Mum was moved to write a poem about tattoos. It is called *Abergele Rhodes* I do not know who this person is but Mum wrote about him anyway. This is her poem:

Abergele Rhodes

Of all the people who have ever lived, and a lot of them were heroes,

You could count on one hand the particular brand (forget all your Caesars and Neroes)

Who could brighten the world with their presence, like a light in a dark and cold room.

Well, there’s one man I know who could stop any show, with a rather strange *nom de plume*.

He comes from a town by the seaside, in the tiniest corner of Wales,

He worked on the quayside, beside the seaside, painting boats and banging in nails.

He often went out on the trawlers, handling fish that made him all smelly,
They could tell from his name the town whence he came, for they all called him
Abergele.

He isn't a Jones or a Williams, nor is he a Jenkins or Hughes,
His name it is Rhodes and he has simply loads of bright and colourful tattoos.
His body is just like an Atlas, mementoes of places he's been.

He went to the States and came back like Tate's, with tokens from Maine to
Abilene.

You could plan out your route on his body, if going to London by car,
If going much farther (that's if you'd rather), he could guide you to old Zanzibar.
Exotic are the places he's been to: Acapulco, Beijing and New Delhi,
But when he returned, whatever he'd learned, we could read it on dear Abergele.

There are highways and rivers and airports dotted all over his skin.

The bit he likes most is a piece of the coast near the Wash, which is north of
King's Lynn.

There are Avons and Derwents and Stours, all flowing with magnificent ease,
And on his left shoulder, but looking much older, are the Tyne, the Wear and the
Tees.

There are Kennedy, Shannon and Gatwick, with planes taking off at a few,
And just for good measure (it gave him such pleasure), there's the railway station
at Crewe.

As a memory of his trip to Venice, on his hand are some words penned by
Shelley.

He can't understand this writing so grand; it doesn't matter to our Abergele.

On his thigh is the coastline of Italy, looking like a long leg in a boot.

By the side of the Med, to the left of Spithead, lies a mosque in the town of Beirut.

On his back are a million islands, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Malta, Madagascar and Skye, the Palace of Versailles, and an ape from the Rock of Gibraltar.

Under his armpit Etna erupted, throwing out plumes of ash and hot lava, As the smoke drifted and each arm is lifted, it clouds over Spain's Costa Brava.

Ayre's Rock is a brilliant picture, like sitting at home watching telly.

The Great Wall of China has never looked finer as it roams around old Abergele.

There are ships leaving port at Southampton and hovercraft leaving from Dover, There are buses in stations in various formations and a queue at the Hammersmith flyover.

There are pyramids, igloos and towers, and Chesterfield's cock-eyed church steeple,

Gardens and fountains, valleys and mountains, and statues of famous dead people.

On the back of his hand is a delta, either Mississippi or Nile,

While etched on his wrist, to the left of his cyst, are the castle walls up at Carlisle.

There are stately homes, mansions and hovels, and caves round the hole in his belly.

There was only just room for the fort at Khartoum on dear picturesque Abergele.

Then came the day we all dreaded, and it made Abergele a wretch,

The sad-faced tattooer said: "Sorry, I'm sure. There's no room on your skin for a

sketch.”

There wasn't a pink patch to draw on, and I think Abergele went pale.

He scoured the area, from Bonn to Bavaria, in the end it was to no avail.

After that Abergele went nowhere, he stayed in his house in a mood.

He sulked and he pined and didn't feel inclined to do anything but be tattooed.

We go up to visit him sometimes, and take him some food from the deli,

But it isn't the same, it seems such a shame, what happened to old Abergele.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo are back from their holiday with Anna in Cuba. They brought back some cigars for Dad. He looked really pleased when they gave them to him. I do not know why because he does not smoke. They may as well have brought him back some disinfectant, or a lampshade.

We got the *Rochdale Observer* with Oolool's story in it. There is a photograph of her smiling angelically.

'Local Wonder Baby Talks At Six Months,' screamed the headline.

"I told them seven months," complained Mum.

"Never mind!" said Dad. "Six sounds better."

"I knew that bimbo would get it wrong!"

Dad looked at Mum but somehow realised that he had better not defend Stephanie.

There was almost a full page, including the writing. It even mentioned me, Mum said. 'Her brother, Billy,' it said. (Sat and sucked his dummy whilst the Interesting One spoke, it probably also said.) Humph!

People kept ringing all day. Grandma said she wished she had known about Oolool having her photo taken, she would have knitted her a cardigan.

Maureen Gilchrist said: “Och! Would ye crriddit it? A famous wee bear! We stay next tay a starr!”

People stop us in the street and ask my sister to say something. They stop and stare at us from across the road as if we are aliens. When we go into shops I can hear people whispering to each other: “That’s Lucy Crabtree – the Wonder Baby from the paper.” Or: “Isn’t she beautiful, the Wonder Baby?” Or: “They say she could talk as soon as she was born, you know.”

Mum is not very pleased at being famous.

Grandpa does not take me for walks now because of his coughing. He told me that when he was in the army they had to clean the toilet floor with their toothbrushes. They also had to polish the coal that they burned on their fires. I have heard them talk about ‘clean fuel’ on television; perhaps this is what they mean.

I think I will stop trying to talk as well as Glorygob. I will never be able to talk like she does. As Dad says, women get a lot more practice at talking than men and their jaws are more supple. I shall be content to say what I can say and let my sister get on with being famous. Who wants to be famous anyway?

I may change my mind tomorrow.

Since Oolool became famous Emily comes around to our house more than ever. She comes to have girly chats with my sister and to bask in the shadow of her fame.

Oolool enjoys these girly moments for they give her the opportunity of talking without having to perform and also to find out what is happening in the real world.

“Why has Belinda got only a eye?” Emily asked.

“Wills pulled out the other,” said my sister.

(I did not pull out the eye. It fell out when I was trying to hit Sam with the doll

and I put it in the bin before anyone found it, but I could not explain all that, even if I wanted to.)

“Do you like Wills?” asks Emily.

“Suppose so. He’s my brother.”

Well, thank you. Try not to be so enthusiastic.

“I like Wills. He’s cute.”

Shucks!

On one particular occasion Oolool was having a sleep (after a strenuous autograph signing session – I am joking, of course, but mark my words, it will not be long, it will not be long), so Emily had to interrupt me whilst I was throwing a ball at the birds on the lawn. (The birds were safe enough, have no fear.)

She talked a bit about school and how great it was and how great Mrs Ramsey (who is her teacher) was and how great school dinners were and how great weekends were, when she did not have to go to school. It sounded as if she liked school but also liked not going to school, which is a bit confusing, but there you go.

“Lucy is pretty in ve paper,” she said, scowling at me scornfully, disapproving of my game.

I said nothing.

“Isn’t she?” she persisted.

“Doesn’t know,” I said. (I can say that.)

“Will she be in ve paper again?”

“Doesn’t know.”

A pause and a sigh from Emily.

“Will she be on telly?”

A sigh and a raspberry from me.

“Why wasn’t you in ve paper?”

“Doesn’t know.”

A pause, a sigh and a tut from Emily.

“You don’t know nuffin, you!”

What did she expect? She should be talking to Mega Mind if she wanted to find anything out.

“Lucy’s clever, isn’t she?”

“Doesn’t know.”

“I fink she is.”

I shrugged.

“Is she more cleverer van you?”

I shrugged again.

“Mummy says she can read and count and talk.”

“Doesn’t know.”

“I can’t read. Can you?”

“Yep!”

“You can’t!”

“Yep!”

“Read somefin ven!”

I hoped I had not argued myself into a situation where Emily was going to conjure a book from up her sleeve.

“You wasn’t in ve paper. You can’t read!”

“Yep!”

Emily seemed to realise that this was a pointless discussion and wandered off home, disappointed at what she had not learned. I hoped she had not gone to find a

book to test me on. I thought I had better go and hide inside, just in case.

Mum had a telephone call from the local radio station. Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock wanted Ooolool to be on his show. Mum said she was not sure at first but, with a little persuasion from Dad, she reluctantly agreed. Dad's face was a delight. He was going to be almost a star. They needed to get down to some rehearsing, Dad said. Mum tutted and shook her head.

We went to Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo's house for tea. This was going to be a bit of a pain because they do not eat normal food, like we do; they eat grass and lettuce and dandelion leaves. We do not go to their house very often, mainly because Auntie Jo does not want her house wrecking by us 'little darlings' and she does not want to have to spend extra on food to feed us with. They need all their money to go on their holidays with and a few extra tomatoes could mean the difference between Blackpool and Bermuda. Dad says they could pick our tea out of their garden; a few laburnum leaves and lupins would go down a treat.

When Auntie Jo opened the door to us she looked like a totem pole with her colourful clothes reaching up to her colourfully arranged face and a hair-do that would have shamed Carmen Miranda. (According to Dad, Carmen Miranda was a singer and dancer who performed with fruit and flowers in her hair.) Auntie Jo's mouth sliced into a smile when she saw us and we trooped in.

Uncle Joe was in his jigsaw room. This is a special room that other houses do not have. As we entered it, I could see that it was like a treasure trove, full of wonderful, magical objects, all waiting to be played with and enjoyed by me especially. Other houses have living rooms and dining rooms and bedrooms but Uncle Joe's house has a jigsaw room, which has a big round table in the middle of the floor, from which

Uncle Joe jumped up when he saw us to prevent us from getting too close to his jigsaw. The room had finished jigsaws framed on the walls of anything you can think of, and probably some that you cannot: airplanes, castles, boats in harbours, animals, you name it. The room also had model airplanes on top of every surface and models of old cars alongside them. I did not think there was much chance of Uncle Joe letting me play with one of his toys.

Uncle Joe scampered to the jigsaw room door and hurried us out, closing the door firmly behind him. It was obviously a room into which we were not going to be allowed. Auntie Jo guided us into the living room and we sank into the soft chairs. Mum immediately took off my shoes then I would not contaminate anything with my germs and told me not to touch anything.

There were lots of things to touch. Mum and Dad's house is boring compared to Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo's. There were interesting corners to investigate, all housing objects which looked too fascinating to ignore.

Mum and Dad and Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo talked about boring things: the weather, the garden, the Government, cars, holidays, kids (this part of the conversation was rather one-sided because Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo do not know anything about them) and the price of washing powder. Every time I climbed off the chair I was yanked back on to Mum's knee as if I were a ventriloquist's doll. Oolool sat quietly on Dad's knee looking as if she wanted to join in the talk.

We eventually sat down to eat. We had soup, which tasted like Grandma's, then we had lettuce and tomatoes and other green stuff, which I think were thistles and nettles, and we had a special kind of meat which tasted like cardboard. We had some sponge cake (when we got home, Dad said it tasted like it had just come from the bottom of the sea) and a cup of tea. Me and Oolool did not eat very much.

We sat back on the soft chairs and Uncle Joe talked about trains. Dad looked at his watch and stifled a yawn. He had been warned not to go to sleep or he may not wake up. Uncle Joe went on to talk about airplanes during the war and car engines. I think Dad's ears were bleeding by this time and his eyes were showing signs of death.

Auntie Jo never asked Oolool to perform and when my sister did say something ("Want to go home"), she just smiled and said what a delightful child she was.

I began whinging and struggling to get on to the floor and this gave Mum and Dad the excuse to make their escape, saying I was tired and ready for bed. Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo did not put up much resistance to this and bundled us out of the house as swiftly as they could.

On the way home Dad said that at least we would not have to go there again for a while. Mum said she would be glad to get home to have something to eat. Oolool slept to regenerate her brain and I played quietly with a little toy soldier that had been stood all alone on Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo's fireplace.

John has been arrested for climbing a tree. We were watching television and, all of a sudden, there was John, on telly, up a tree. He was throwing things at a policeman. Dad could not believe his eyes. He said he was amazed at the lengths to which John would go in order not to have to go to work.

John and Heather had built a house in the tree and lived in it to stop men building a road there. I wish I lived in a tree – it looks exciting. Dad says John looks quite at home in a tree.

I sat in the garden with Grandpa. He cannot walk very far now, what with his breathing and all that, and it was a sunny day so we sat in the garden. It was quiet and peaceful. Mum and Dad had taken Oolool and Granny to see Grandma and me and

Grandpa just sat listening to the birds chirping in the trees. Grandpa likes it when it is quiet and peaceful, sitting with the sun on his face, with no one pestering him. His breathing sounded like the tide going in and out and his chest rattled with each breath.

We have starlings in our rafters and we watched them coming and going under our roof slates. There is a bird house in our garden on which Mum sometimes hangs nuts, but no birds are ever tempted to feast on our gift. I think Sam has something to do with this. We often find feathers scattered across our lawn as evidence of Sam's eating between meals.

Grandpa sat on the stump of a tree which Mum and Dad had cut down before they found me. I do not think Dad could have chopped it down or it would have fallen on our house. Anyway, Grandpa sat on the tree stump and pulled at his tie knot because it was warm. Grandpa always wears a shirt and tie. He probably wears a tie with his jim-jams.

There was a big cobweb in a bush next to us and I moved away when I saw it. Grandpa laughed and rattled.

"There's no need to be scared o' that, young Billy," he said. "It won't eat you."

I was not convinced. I watched the cobweb and waited for the spider that had made it. There was something in the web that shuddered in the breeze. It looked like a stone or something. There was no sign of the spider and I wondered where it was if it was not here. I think it is better knowing where a spider is than not knowing.

"D'ye see that little parcel all wrapped up in t'web, lad? Well, that's t'spider's dinner."

I looked more closely at what Grandpa had called a parcel. It did not look very appetizing.

"Yon's a fly what t'spider's caught. He'll eat it later when he's 'ungry." He

looked in admiration at the cobweb. “They’re very clever, are spiders,” he said.

I did not think it was very clever to only have a fly to eat. The spider would have been much cleverer if he could have wrapped a bun up in his web, or a jam butty.

“If spiders eat flies,” Grandpa said, “ what do you think eats spiders?”

I did not know and whatever it was, they were not doing a very good job because there were too many spiders about for my liking.

“Birds,” Grandpa said. “Birds eat spiders. But they don’t wrap ‘em up an’ save ‘em till later. They gobble ‘em up, there an’ then.”

Perhaps it was Sam’s fault there were so many spiders around. He eats the birds that would otherwise have eaten the spiders.

“An’ what do you think eats t’birds?”

Sam, obviously.

“T’birds are eaten by things like cats an’ foxes an’ even bigger birds,” Grandpa said and coughed.

His coughing lasted a while and when he finished it took him a bit longer to get his breath back.

“An’ then, t’foxes are eaten by bigger animals, an’ they are eaten by bigger animals, an’ so on, an’ so on.”

I could not think of a bigger animal than a fox, except for a cow. I did not know that cows ate foxes.

“This is called the Food Chain, young Billy,” Grandpa said. “Little creatures are eaten by bigger creatures, until you get to t’top, where you get a creature that is the fiercest of ‘em all, which no animal can eat. Do you know what that is, lad?”

I could not think of an animal bigger than what I now feared as the vicious cow.

“It’s us, Billy. Man is the fiercest creature on God’s earth.” Grandpa was thinking

and he shook his head slightly at whatever he had thought. “E may not be t’biggest, but e’s the most savage.”

Grandpa went quiet and I pondered on what he had said. I could not imagine a man wrestling a cow to the ground and strangling it with his bare hands before eating it. But if Grandpa had said it, then it must be right.

The spider still did not appear, and I wondered if it had been eaten before it had had the chance to dine itself.

It seems I may be going to prison. Mum found the toy I had found on the fireplace at Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo’s house, and said I had stolen it and only thieves steal and thieves go to prison. Mum rang Auntie Jo and Auntie Jo said she had been searching frantically for the toy and had wondered if someone had ‘accidentally’ picked it up and taken it home, but she did not want to ring because she did not want anyone to think she was ‘accusing’ anyone of taking it. The toy is not a toy but a valuable ‘collector’s item’ that Uncle Joe bought ‘for a snip’. It was worth £800, which Mum said would buy thousands of lollipops, which I take to be a lot.

Anyway, Mum gave it back and, if it were so valuable, it should not have been left lying on the fireplace waiting for someone to pick it up ‘accidentally’.

Karen does not want to be married to Emily’s dad any more. She said she has no regrets and is happy as a pig in shit. She said Emily’s dad had shown his true colours by fouling his own nest and it had broken the camel’s back. She said she did not want to take him to the cleaner’s and make him pay through the nose because all was well that ended well in the end.

So there!

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo asked Mum and Dad if they needed a lift to the radio station.

They said they would be only too pleased to take them and, if necessary, of course, go into the studio with them and bring them home. After all, they said, they could not do enough for their favourite niece. Auntie Jo seems to have changed her opinion a bit from when she used to look as if she were about to throw Oolool out of the window after my sister had thrown up on her new frock. Perhaps they want to be nearly famous, too.

Mum and Dad said they did not need a lift, thank you very much.

Mum seems to be getting as excited as Dad about Oolool's career as a star. She said that if the time came when Oolool needed a manager, she was going to be it and not Dad. She said Dad could not manage a deep breath, never mind a star's career.

I have got tonsillitis again; but never mind me, let us get back to the star.

Grandma knitted Oolool a new cardigan for the radio appearance (although she will not actually *appear* on the radio; perhaps I should call it her radio exhibition). She said we could not have everyone listening to her in anything but her best.

Believe it or not, she walked! Before they went to the radio station, she walked. I did not feel very well before but I felt considerably worse after that little spectacle.

I listened to Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock's programme with Granny and Grandpa and my tonsillitis. I was doped up with Calpol and was hot and sleepy on Grandpa's knee when it finally came on.

Mum and Dad and Oolool were not on for very long. Doc MacRock spoke about some other things first, which was a bit boring, played a bit of music, and spoke to a man who used to shave sheep in Australia. (I did not know sheep had beards – perhaps they do in Australia.) Doc MacRock speaks with a funny accent, too. Why

does everyone make understanding them so difficult? Even when we go to the shops Mum will talk to people whom I cannot understand. The old people speak like Grandpa. I can understand Grandpa because I must be used to his way of talking, but I cannot understand the old-fashioned language when it comes from a strange tongue. Mr Chowdrey speaks as if he has lost control of his tongue, Mrs Bennett speaks as if she cannot drag her tongue around her mouth quickly enough and Mrs Brierley speaks as if she has no tongue at all. It would certainly help me if everyone spoke the same.

Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock speaks like Alan Gilchrist with the speed turned down a little. He speaks with the same disnays and willnays and mackle tickle yockles that I have such difficulties with with our neighbour. I wondered if Dad could cope with a slowed down Alan Gilchrist.

Finally came the moment we had been waiting for, and it was interesting:

Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock:- This morning, I'd like tay introduce a talking sensation. A wee girl who's causing quite a stir in her home town of Rochdale. She's only twelve months old –

Dad (muffled in background):- Ten and a half.

Doc MacRock (startled):- Uh! I'm sorry! What was that?

Dad:- Ten and a half months old.

Doc MacRock:- Oh, I'm sorry! Yes, only ten and a half months old and, er...where was I? (Sounds of rustling paper.) Ah, yes! Ten and a half months old and she's already talking with the best of 'em. I can see her turning intay a real wee chatterbox. Listen for yerselves tay wee Lucy Crabtree.

(Silence for a moment.)

Doc MacRock (laughing to hide his embarrassment):- Yes, well! That introduction didnay go quite according to plan, did it, folks? Ye were supposed to say

‘Hello, listeners’, weren’t ye? Never mind, we’ll blame Daddy for confusin’ us, shall we? Never work with animals or children, folks! (More laughter and shuffling of papers.) Right, then! Let me ask ye some questions, Lucy. First of all, what would ye like tay be when ye grow up?

Oolool (after a moment’s silence):- Older.

Doc MacRock (laughing):- Tremendous, Lucy! Wonderful! Hey, hasnay she got a cute wee voice, folks? Ye’d never expect a voice tay come out of such a wee person. Now then, where were we? Yes, Lucy, ye’ve got a big brother, have ye not?

Oolool:- Yes.

Doc MacRock:- An’ what’s his name?

Oolool:- Wills.

Doc MacRock:- Wills, eh? Hey, ye’ve got royalty in the family, have ye?

Oolool (after a moment’s thought):- Dad calls Mum the ‘Old Queen’.

(In the background, the unmistakable sound of Mum slapping Dad’s bald head.)

Doc MacRock (laughing louder):- That’s wonderful, Lucy! Hey, we’ll have tay get ye a job here. Ye’re funnier than our producer. (Laughter from Doc MacRock and laughter in the background.) Right, now. Let’s have a word with Mum and Dad. Mum and Dad, how long has Lucy been talkin’?

Dad (acting puzzled):- Well, since you started asking her questions. For about a minute.

Doc MacRock (silence, then patient laughter):- Yes, I can see where Lucy gets her sense of humour from – someone other than Dad, eh? (Laughter from Doc MacRock, hesitant chuckle from Dad.) I meant, of course, how old was Lucy when she started talking?

Mum:- Seven months. Six months, three weeks and two days, to be precise.

Doc MacRock:- Golly! That's truly amazin'. She's come a long way, hasn't she?

Dad:- Well, it's only about ten miles from our house to the studio.

(Silence, then forced sporadic background laughter.)

Doc MacRock:- Yes, Mr Crabtree. Er, I wonder, Mr Crabtree, have ye ever been a comedian?

Dad:- Me? No, no. I'm no comedian.

Doc MacRock:- Yes, I know that, Mr Crabtree. I just wondered if ye ever had been.

(Silence whilst Dad wondered if he had just been insulted or not.)

Doc MacRock:- It sounds like an insane household, Mrs Crabtree.

Mum (through gritted teeth):- Only part of it.

Doc MacRock:- I know what ye mean, Mrs Crabtree. I believe Lucy can count and answer general knowledge questions. Is that no' correct?

Mum:- Yes, that's right. She's past twenty now.

Dad:- She doesn't look it, does she?

Doc MacRock (ignoring Dad):- Let's try a wee experiment. Lucy, if I held up five fingers on one hand and four on the other hand, what would I have?

Oolool (after a moment's silence):- A finger missing.

Doc MacRock (laughing loudly):- That's marvellous! (More laughter.) Ye're amazin', Lucy! (Pauses and giggles.) Er...(Sniggers.) I canna concentrate on what I'm supposed to be doin' now.

Dad:- Ask her a general knowledge question.

Doc MacRock:- Right, hang on a minute. (Pauses and sniggers.) Who's yer favourite person on the telly, Lucy?

Oolool:- Wills.

Doc MacRock (puzzled):- Wills? Ye mean Prince William?

Oolool:- No, my brother. His photo is on the telly.

(Sounds of the whole studio erupting into laughter. Doc MacRock guffawing and snorting.)

Doc MacRock (trying to regain composure):- I dinnay believe this! Ye're too much, Lucy.

Oolool (obviously enjoying every minute):- Ask me what the capital of Nicaragua is.

Doc MacRock:- Okay, Lucy. What's the capital of Nicaragua?

Oolool:- N.

(Microphone falls over. Sound of Demon Jock falling off his chair.)

Mum:- I think he likes you, Lucy.

Oolool:- Yes, he's a nice man.

When Mum and Dad arrived at Granny and Grandpa's house to pick me up (I am surprised they had not forgotten me in all the excitement), they were still arguing about their performances. Mum said it was supposed to have been a simple interview and Dad had turned it into an audition. Dad said this was rubbish and that he and Oolool had only answered the questions they had been asked and that, if their answers happened to be funny, then it was because they were natural comedians at heart. He said he was surprised the Demon Jock had not noticed their natural talent.

Granny and Grandpa had taped the interview so we listened to it again. Dad laughed at the funny answers as if he had not heard them before, and Grandpa coughed along with him. Mum tried her best not to laugh but could not help tittering at some of the things my sister said. Dad said did we think that Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock had been having a dig at him when he had asked him if he had ever been

a comedian?

On the way home Mum and Dad were still arguing. Mum said Dad and Oolool had acted like a double act and that Dad was using Oolool to show everyone how amusing he thought he was. She said they must have rehearsed what they were going to say. Dad said how could they have known what questions the Demon Jock was going to ask? He said Oolool's answers were funny because she was quick-witted, just like him. Mum said Oolool may be quick-witted but Dad was only half-witted.

Karen came around and said she had listened to Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock and thought Oolool was the funniest thing since sliced bread. She said that a star is born and that Oolool was going places and the world was her oyster.

Emily said Oolool made her laugh and that she was as funny as a bull in a china shop.

Alan Gilchrist said: "Ye must be prood o' yon canny wee bear, Crabby. She couldna cockle yon mickle tockle, d'ye ken?"

Dad said: "Ten to four!"

Grandpa has to go into hospital to have his cough made better. Mum said we would go to see him in hospital. She sounds sad when she talks about him and sometimes cries. I hope the doctors make him better soon. And I hope he does not find another baby in hospital.

SIX

On the topic of Oolool walking, I do not want to say too much about it because it depresses me. There is no stumbling about from settee to armchair like a pinball for her. Now she has discovered how to do it, she does it properly. She marches from Mum to Dad like a clockwork soldier and does not seem to have wobbly or hesitant legs at all. Perfection is only to be expected, of course. When watching a genius in action, anything less than perfection would be a failure.

I am now two. I had a birthday party and my usual friends came: Emily, Sophie Hardcastle, Robert Wilson, Danny Brierley, Justin Harrop and a few more. Karen said she would stay out of the way because she did not want to cause a stink; not that she was bothered now, anyway, because she had never been happier.

Dad and Oolool did a bit of a 'spot'. Oolool sat on Dad's knee and she would ask Dad questions and he would give a funny reply. Oolool said she wanted to give the funny reply but Dad insisted he was the comedian.

Things like the capital of Nicaragua gag were wasted because no one knew what a Nicaragua was. One or two knock-knock jokes raised a few laughs but the audience seemed quite alarmed at the sight of a 'turn' performing in front of them as if they were in a theatre. They did not know whether to laugh or stay quiet out of a combination of politeness and fear. However, they soon became restless and began fidgeting and pushing one another. Perhaps a few custard pies would have kept their interest rather more than clever one-liners.

Mum says she has finished what she calls the 'first draft' of her book. This means she has to write it again now to improve it and put in all the full stops. She says this is the usual way with writers; they are never satisfied with what they have done and can

always make their work better. She says some writers rewrite their books six or seven times before they are satisfied with them. It seems our 'soup' is bubbling. At least the longer she delays sending it off to a publisher, the longer we will have to wait for her bad mood when it is sent back.

We are going to a place called Anglesey, which is where Stephanie Rose came from; remember? It is an island in Wales, where they speak funny, like Stephanie. Dad keeps saying it is a bit late in the year to be going on holiday in this country and that we had better take some snow shoes with us. Mum told him to stop trying to be funny; he was not on stage now, and that you can have lovely weather at this time of year.

Ooolool now counts apples, as well as fingers. Dad asks her if she had three apples and someone gave her another three, how many apples would she have? (I would like to point out here that unless she knew this person with the three apples, she should not accept them. She should not take apples or anything else off a stranger, but Dad failed to mention this, which, I think, is rather irresponsible of him.) Not liking apples very much, because they are boring after the first bite, I would have said: too many! Ooolool answers six, which is correct, apparently.

Dad then asks her: if she had sixteen apples and gave four away, how many would she be left with? Ooolool answers twelve, which is also correct, apparently.

This is all very well, and I am sure it will get her name in the paper again but really, who needs all these apples?

Grandpa went into hospital. Mum and Dad took Granny to see him and Karen looked after me and Ooolool. When Mum and Dad arrived home it looked as if Mum had been crying. I do not know if she had fallen on the drive outside our house and hurt her knee, because that makes me cry, what with all the gritty bits, or if she had trapped

her finger in the car door, which not only makes you cry, it also makes you want to be sick and wet your nappy. Dad put his arm around Mum and that made her even worse, so me and Oolool joined in as well.

I hope Anglesey is a big island. I hope there are palm trees and some jungle to explore. We could light a fire on the beach to attract the attention of passing ships, like they did in a film I saw on the telly but which I do not know the name of. I hope the natives are friendly. I hope they do not eat us. I saw someone on telly in a big pot with carrots and things being boiled up and it did not look very pleasant. Someone will have to stand guard every night to make sure they do not creep up on us.

It does not seem like a very good idea to me; to go on holiday to somewhere where you might get eaten. I am sure Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo do not have this problem. Why can we not go to see the canaries or visit Anna in Cuba? I think the snow that Dad is worried about will be the least of our problems.

Grandma has knitted me some swimming shorts and a sun hat for the holiday.

Maureen Gilchrist has been to Anglesey. She said: "It's a wee bit mickle for yon tuckle, the noo, but ye ken tay cockle for yon muckle."

I will enjoy it a lot better now that I know that.

Grandpa came home from hospital. He had only been in for a few days. I do not think they have made him better yet because he still coughs a lot and gasps for breath. He said he would rather be at home with Granny than stuck in some hospital waiting for her to visit him.

It did not snow in Anglesey; it rained. It was raining when we arrived at the caravan site and the sky was the colour of stone. Small rivers trickled around our feet as we made our way to the caravan. We could see the beach between the rocks and it

seemed deserted (not surprisingly). Other miserable holidaymakers dashed from caravans to cars whilst others watched from their windows at us poor new arrivals arriving.

Mum tried to be optimistic. She said the rain would help to keep the dust down. Dad said he would rather be ankle deep in dust than in mud and Mum warned him not to start moaning.

We almost did not go to Anglesey. Mum was a bit sad at leaving Grandpa poorly at home, but Granny said he would be fine and to go and enjoy our holiday. So Mum was not really in a holiday mood and I think if Dad had started complaining she would have held his head in one of the puddles.

There was no jungle in Anglesey, so no need to stand guard at night to keep the natives at bay. The natives were friendly but they all spoke strangely, like Stephanie Rose. When they spoke they sounded like they had got something stuck in their throats and were trying to loosen it. They were a bit difficult to understand, but not as bad as the Gilchrists.

The caravan was very nice but there was no upstairs in it. The bedrooms had small doors and there was not much room to move around. The rain was very noisy on the roof and we could hardly hear the television for it. There was no bath in it so we all had to have showers. There was mud all over the carpet by the time we had come and gone all day and Mum had to sweep and mop every day.

Red Wharf Bay was the name of the place where we stayed and it was very nice but there were no roundabouts or dodgem cars for Dad to take me on. The most exciting thing to happen was the seagulls fighting over the bacon rind which Dad threw to them. I threw some, too, but throwing is something else I am not very good at, and it hit Dad in the face and he would not let me throw any more. The beach was

very nice and very big. If it had been sunny it would have been perfect. The beach in the rain is like an empty biscuit tin – not much use.

We went to places in the car in the rain. We went to the town with the longest name in the country; it was called – just a minute – Land Fair Pull Gwyn Girl Go Gareth Wind Trouble Land Is Silly Oh God God God. We also went to a place called Holyhead, where boats sail to Ireland, which is another island across the sea. This was another area of confusion for me, because Ireland sounds like island, I thought it was some unnamed piece of land in the middle of the sea. It was only after Oolool explained things to me that it was made clearer. Dad wanted to go on the boat to Ireland but Mum reminded him that he was once sick on a canal barge, so how did he expect to cope on some real water?

It appears that going on boats makes people sick. This is called seasickness; or in Dad's case canalsickness. So why do people do it? Why do people put themselves through the torture of being sick just because they want to go on a boat? And what is it about a boat that makes people sick? This is something I shall have to think about. Maybe it is like being sat on Auntie Jo's knee.

We went to a place called Bow Marries, where there is a castle with a moat, and a dungeon, which was shut. We also saw some ancient burial chambers, which Mum said were thousands of years old and some old stones stood on their ends in a field, which Mum said were also thousands of years old. I think if these things are so old they should replace them with new ones. People are quick enough to knock down houses and things that are growing old, so why not replace these old stones and burial chambers with shiny new plastic ones? We also saw a power station.

One morning it was not raining. The sun even sent a spear of light on to our caravan but we could not go on the beach because the tide was in. Grandpa has

explained everything about tides to me. It seems that with all the rain we get the sea gets so full it is in danger of overflowing, like a bath. When it gets full to the brim God pulls a plug out at the bottom of the sea and all the extra water runs away. Then the tide goes out. When so much has been run off He puts the plug back in and the tide comes back in again. Clever, eh? We waited patiently for God to pull out the plug, but by the time He had it was raining again.

One day Dad suggested we go off the island and up into the Welsh mountains. Mum said it would be misty up there and we would not be able to see anything, but Dad persuaded her and off we went.

As we approached the mountains we could not see them and Mum said she told us so. Dad said it was only the tops of the mountains we could not see and we would not be driving to the tops because there were no roads up there, only on the sides. So on we drove.

The biggest mountain we could not see was called Snowdon. Dad said he bet it got snowed on a lot. He laughed and said that he and Oolool could have to used that one in their act. I looked at Mum and she closed her eyes and began shaking her head. We drove towards Snowdon and, guess what; Mum was right, of course, we could not see a thing. It was like driving through dirty water.

I suppose it would have been very nice in the sunshine: the mountains and valleys and streams. So would Red Wharf Bay, in the sunshine. If it had been sunny we would have been on the beach and we would have missed the mountains and valleys and streams. In order not to miss Red Wharf Bay in the sunshine, the best time to go to the mountains must be when it is not sunny, which is what we had done and ended up in the middle of a black cloud. In order to see the mountains and valleys and streams in the sunshine, it would mean not going on the beach when it was sunny.

This was becoming complicated. There is more to going on holiday than meets the eye.

In the meantime, it was growing dark as well, and Mum said we should turn back. Dad said if we carried on for a few more miles the road would drop down into the next valley, where it would be clearer. I do not know how Dad knew this but, apparently, he did. I also do not know why Mum listens to him, but she does. We drove on. No other cars passed us in either direction. It seemed we were the only ones foolish enough to be driving through the mountains, sightseeing, on a day when you could not see anything.

Then the car broke down. It sort of spluttered, juddered and coughed, then stopped. Luckily, amazingly, even, there was a convenient lay-by and Dad was able to push the car off the road. Mum was sat in a familiar pose as Dad climbed back into the car; her arms folded and her fingers tapping. It did not augur well.

“Well,” she said, looking into the milky distance. “What do we do now?” She seemed surprisingly calm; a bit like a volcano before it erupts.

Dad wiped the water from his face where the mixture of sweat and mist had caused trickles to run down his forehead.

“I’ll have a look under the bonnet,” he panted. “It might be something simple.” He pulled the bonnet catch and climbed out.

We all watched as Dad lifted the bonnet and disappeared into the engine.

“It’ll need to be extremely simple if your dad is going to fix it,” Mum said, as if talking to herself.

“Will we be here all night?” Oolool asked, voicing my own concern.

Mum shook her head. “No, sweetheart! Daddy will soon mend it.”

We all knew this was a lie. Dad had no more chance of mending the car than he

would have had of flying off for help.

Dad came back a moment later, wetter, his shirt sticking to him as if he had put it on straight from the washer.

“Well?” asked Mum, with that note in her voice that defied Dad to admit he could not fix it.

Dad sniffed. “I can’t fix it,” he said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with it.”

That was to the point, I thought. Get the bad news over and done with. No point beating about the bush, as Karen might have said.

“Well, that’s a surprise!” Mum said, her fingers still tapping. She rummaged in her bag and brought out her phone. She looked at it for a moment then shook her head again. “No signal!”

Dad looked up towards the mountains and the sky as if he were waiting for the signal to arrive.

“What do we do now, then?” Mum asked.

“I’ll go and see if I can find a phone box,” Dad said. Anything rather than be in Mum’s vicinity when she was about to blow. Dad would have said he would walk home to Rochdale if it meant he could escape from the lava flow.

“You can’t go out there in this! Look at it!”

Dad looked into the mist as if he had not noticed it before.

“You can’t see the front of the car,” Mum snarled. “How are you going to find your way to a phone box? You hear stories about people wandering around for days in weather like this. And besides, you’re not going to leave us alone in the car while you go traipsing off. You never know who might be lurking about.”

I looked at Oolool and she looked at me. This conversation was not going in the direction we needed it to go in.

“Will we be here all night, Mummy?” Oolool asked again, putting into words my own silent question.

There was a moment’s silence as if Mum had to think about her answer. I did not find this altogether encouraging.

“We won’t be here all night, sweetheart, no. Someone will come along soon.” She said this as if she were reading it from a script; her heart and soul were not in her answer. Mum is not a very good actress. Things were not improving.

No one spoke. I could hear Mum soundlessly bubbling and Dad soundlessly praying. Somewhere in the distance a sheep bleated. Water was gushing down a mountainside somewhere, but it was difficult to tell from which direction the sound came. There were no sounds of approaching cars or help. I did not know how Dad was going to stop a passing car, anyway. In this mist, the first a driver would know of Dad’s presence would be when he bounced off the bonnet.

“If we had blankets and food we’d be all right,” Dad volunteered.

“If we had a car that hadn’t broken down we’d be even better,” Mum snapped back.

I looked at Oolool and she looked at me. This was going to make the Outlet Village episode seem like a picnic.

There was silence again until Mum tutted. I preferred the silence. When Mum spoke her words were like poisoned darts.

“It’s half past five on a miserable Thursday evening and here we are, stuck in the middle of the mountains with no means of getting off. The weather’s as bad as it can be and I’ve a husband who hasn’t a clue as to what to do about it. Do other people use this road? I mean...is it likely that someone is going to pass by?” She looked at Dad and he automatically ducked.

“Well, yes...of course they use it,” Dad mumbled unconvincingly. “It’s not a dirt track, is it? People must use it.”

“Is it a main road? There aren’t exactly traffic jams, are there?”

“Well, no, but...that’s on account of the weather.” Dad was floundering and making it worse for himself.

“We came up in this weather,” rumbled Mum. The volcano was ready. “There must be another idiot somewhere who will have taken his family up a mountain in the fog to see the sights.”

This was it. Me and Oolool sank lower in our seats.

“It’s not my fault the car broke down.”

“It’s your fault it broke down up here.”

“It could have broken down anywhere.”

“Yes, but you chose for it to break down up here.”

“Well, from now on, we’ll just do what you want to do.”

“If you’d realised three hours ago that that was the sensible thing to do, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Yes, you’re right, of course. It’s my fault. I keep forgetting that you are always right.”

“You realise, don’t you, that it’s going to get cold tonight? What if no one comes along?”

“Someone will.”

“When? How can you be sure? No one’s passed in the last twenty minutes.”

“Someone has to come this way sooner or later. It’s a main road.”

“Is it a main road? Where is it on the map?”

“It’s a red road on the map. A main road.”

“Show me.”

“What?”

“Show me on the map.”

“I haven’t got the map.”

“What?”

“I left it in the caravan.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“What difference would a map make? I know where we are. A map isn’t going to fix the car.”

“We’re stuck on top of a mountain; no map, no means of getting away, no help for miles. We could be here for days.”

“I think you’re exaggerating now.”

“Mummy, will we be here all night?”

“If your father has anything to do with it – yes!”

“Daddy, why do you want us to stay here all night?”

“I don’t want us to stay here all night, Lulu. Your mother’s just getting a little hysterical.”

“Can you blame me? It’s a wonder I’m not suicidal, living with you.”

“I know! Perhaps if I blast on the horn for long enough, someone will hear it.”

“Go on, then!”

“I am. The horn doesn’t work.”

“You do this on purpose, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You do it to wind me up.”

“Do what?”

“If you didn’t do it on purpose, you wouldn’t be so good at it.”

“Do what?”

“Raise my hopes, then dash them.”

“Rubbish!”

“It’s a test, that’s what it is. This is fate testing my patience. It’s a game in the scheme of things; to see how far I can be driven.”

Not very far in this car, I thought, but could not (and would not even if I could) say.

“I’m going out to find a phone. There’s more chance of us both surviving if I’m out there than stuck in here with you.”

Dad did not get out of the car. They continued arguing until me and Oolool fell asleep. When we awoke it was still dark but the mist had cleared. Mum and Dad were both asleep and the moonlight shone on a telephone box just in front of the car.

Dad went to phone a man who came in a yellow van with a flashing light on top. The man said our car sounded as if it needed a service. Dad said it had not seen a service since Oolool’s christening. The man looked at Dad strangely. He twiddled with a few things in the engine and the car started. He advised Dad to get the car serviced as soon as possible. Dad said if we had had to stay here much longer it might have been a funeral service the car went to.

Mum and Dad thanked the man and we drove back to the caravan.

Mum and Dad did not speak much after this and the following day we went home.

When we arrived home (wait for this) there was a letter from the television company, who want Oolool to appear in one of their shows. It is only a local news programme, so it will not be shown all over the country, Mum said. Dad said it was a start.

He said: "This is another step on the ladder to stardom."

Mum said: "Don't be stupid!"

Karen said: "Success is in the bag; as sure as eggs is eggs!"

Alan Gilchrist said: "Och, Crabby! The wee bear's a crridditt tay ye. A bonny mockle dockle!"

Grandma said: "I'll have to knit her something special."

Granny and Grandpa said: "Our baby on telly! Imagine!"

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo's postcard said: "Weather glorious. Hope you enjoyed Anglesey."

The first thing we did when we arrived home from Anglesey (after we had read the letter, that is) was to go and see Grandpa. He was still poorly. I did not know a cough could last for so long. He has medicine, which stops him from hurting and he can wear a mask that helps him to breath. Mum and Dad looked sad when they spoke to him but Grandpa made a joke about his mask. He said that he had been saying all his life that he would look better in a mask, and now he could prove it.

I wish Grandpa would hurry up and get better; then we can go for our walks again.

I think he has stopped smoking cigarettes now.

I suppose our street is becoming quite famous. We have Oolool performing her circus tricks on telly, and there is John, from across the road, getting himself arrested for throwing stones from up a tree. John and his girlfriend, Heather, now live underground. They have dug a tunnel to stop men from building roads, and now they live in that.

"With the rest of the worms," Dad said.

Roy and Rob brought their collection of football programmes to show me. As well as famous teams like Rochdale, they say they have programmes from clubs no one knows: Billingham Synthonia, Dulwich Hamlet, Accrington Stanley, Manchester City. They have lots of St Mirren programmes, of course, and there are other Scottish teams, who are not so well known: Buckie Thistle, Brora Rangers, and one of a team called Keith. I do not know if Keith plays on his own because, if he does, you would think he would get some of his friends to play with him. He cannot be very good all by himself.

I am fed up with Emily always asking me if I think she is pretty. It seems a bit sappy, telling a girl she is pretty. She stands there in front of me and asks me if I would like to kiss her.

When I blow a raspberry she turns away in a huff and says: “Well, you should be so lucky!”

Oolool is going to be interviewed on telly by Mandy Hillier. Mandy Hillier is on telly every night and we always watch her. Dad thinks she is very pretty and Mum thinks she is a tart. I am not sure what kind of tart Mum thinks she is. It cannot be jam or lemon cheese because Mum does not think she is very sweet.

Oolool will have to talk and count and walk to prove to everyone how wonderful she is. The programme is on telly at six-fifteen and Oolool, Mum and Dad and me (yes, me!) have to be at the studios before that.

There are new people moving into a house across the road; not into John’s house, but next door to him. The house has been for sale for quite a while and Dad said they would never sell it with John’s mushy-pea-head music vibrating the tiles off the roof and the plaster off the walls. Fortunately, Dad says, they have managed to sell it

whilst John was up his tree or down his burrow or whichever animal habitat he has chosen to live in this week. It is a pity for the new owners, Dad says, that they are in for a shock when John crawls home to resume lifting the tiles.

It will soon be Oolool's first birthday and already preparations have begun. Mum and Dad have hired a place called the Masonic Hall and sent out invitations to thousands of people. There will be Karen and Emily, Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist, Roy and Rob, Stephanie Rose, Doc MacRock, the Demon Jock and Mandy Hillier, not to mention all the relations and people who are not famous. It will be a real show-biz party; spot the celebrity. There will be photographs in the morning papers and a slot on the evening news, showing all the guests arriving, and of Oolool, toddling in on her own, waving to all her admirers.

Needless to say, I did not have all this fuss for my first birthday party. I suppose I was lucky they remembered mine at all, what with all the worry of wondering when Mum was going to explode.

Mum says stardom is like a drug: if you have a little you always want more. She says one minute you are normal, and the next minute you are not. It is as though a fairy godmother has put a spell on you and changed your life completely. Mum says that when the fairy godmother tapped Oolool on the head Dad got some of the fallout. She says the trouble with second-hand stardom is that you receive it for the wrong reasons.

We go to Granny and Grandpa's quite often now, to see how Grandpa is. He never gets any better. He coughs and wheezes and breaths through his mask. Granny says Grandpa finally learned his lesson about smoking cigarettes when it was too late.

I found Mum and Granny crying in the kitchen. When they saw me they tried to

smile and Mum picked me up and hugged me.

Mum complains to me that I do not eat my greens. I would be sick if I put a sprout into my mouth. Mum says I always used to eat everything when I was younger. I am not surprised; I had no choice in those days. It was all shovelled in and I did not know what I was being given. In those days, I did not realise I could refuse things. I must have been like a waste disposal unit – if there was anything around that no one else wanted to eat it was poured down my throat. This did not apply to my sister because she ate Mum, as we know. There are several things which fall into the same category as sprouts: cabbage, spinach, cauliflower, broccoli. If I go on any further, this page will look like Mum's shopping list, so I will stop there.

It is typical that on the most exciting day of my life, Mum's life, Dad's life, and certainly Oolool's life; when we were all to go to the television studios and become famous, I catch another dose of my old friend, tonsillitis. I am beginning to think there is a conspiracy going on here. Maybe someone does not want me to become famous. I will be famous for being the only member of our family who is not famous. People will think I do not exist. I will be mentioned by my famous family in the newspaper, on the radio, and now on television, but I will never be seen. I will become like Nessie and people will come from miles around to see if they can see me.

As it was, I could not even be bothered to sulk when Mum said I was not fit to go to the television studios to become famous. She was going to stay with me until Granny and Grandpa said I could go to their house and then Mum could go and keep an eye on Dad to stop him from making a fool of himself. So I sat sandwiched between Granny and Grandpa, sweating like an old sock and dosed up with Calpol; as limp as a wet hanky and determined to stay awake as we watched Mandy Hillier

introduce Oolool, Mum and Dad.

They are sat opposite Mandy Hillier, on a big blue settee and Oolool sits on Dad's knee. My sister is wearing a new pink dress bought especially for the occasion and does not have on the new pink cardigan that Grandma has knitted. I do not think Grandma will be very pleased about that.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Granny says (not for the first time, of course).

"Aye! She is that!" Grandpa agrees. His wheezing seems to get worse every time I see him.

I think Granny is talking about Oolool but I am not sure if Grandpa means Mandy Hillier. Mandy Hillier is rather pretty with shiny lips and shiny black hair, which is cut short like Mum's but is not like Mum's because Mandy's hair swings a bit and Mum's does not. Also Mum's hair is blond and Mandy's hair is black. Also Mandy is not as pretty as Mum, although other people might think differently.

Oolool, Mum and Dad look rounder on the telly. They remind me of those mirrors you look into that make you look a funny shape.

Mandy Hillier smiles. Her teeth are very white. She introduces Oolool, Mum and Dad and explains who they are. The camera stays on Oolool, Mum and Dad, and Dad looks terrible. He is white and terrified. I am not surprised, though; he has been to the toilet many times before going out. He must have a bug – or something.

Mandy Hillier has finished her explanations and begins talking to Oolool.

"You're looking very pretty, Lucy. Is that a new dress?"

Oolool smiles enchantingly, as she does, and composes herself before answering. "Thank you. Yes, we got it from Debenhams yesterday."

Mandy laughs, clearly amazed. "A priceless plug, there," she says. "What a sweet voice, Lucy! It seems so strange for a voice to come out of such a tiny person. You

usually only get gurgles and gargles.” Mandy laughs again.

Oolool sticks her hand out towards Mandy and the interviewer leans forward in her seat to take hold of it. Oolool chuckles and shakes Mandy’s hand. You could never say my sister does not know how to manipulate her audience.

“How sweet!” says Mandy, smiling, her teeth dazzling, before releasing Oolool’s hand and sitting back. “How long have you been able to talk, Lucy?”

“I was seven months old when I first spoke and I’m eleven months old now, so that makes four months.” Oolool answers the question as if she has been asked it many times before, which, of course, she has. She smiles happily, exposing her cute little teeth, teeth which are too small to have words rolling around them. She knows she has given another example of her brilliance.

Mandy Hillier looks impressed. “And you can count, too; aren’t you clever? Mr Crabtree,” she says suddenly, turning on Dad and making him jump. His eyes are glazed with fear and his mouth, attempting a smile, only manages a grimace. “What was your reaction when Lucy began talking at seven months?”

Dad shuffles in his seat and tries another smile. This one makes his dry lip stick to his teeth and loosen his top set from the roof of his mouth. He juggles them around with his tongue in order to slot them back into place.

“We’d never heard of this kind of thing before, had we?” he replies, turning to Mum for support. His voice is at a higher pitch than usual; rather like a squeal for help. “We knew Lulu was special, didn’t we? We were amazed, weren’t we?”

“Mrs Crabtree,” says Mandy, “has there been anything like this in your family before?”

I thought this was a bit of a stupid question because Dad had already said they had never heard of anything like it before which, in itself, was a stupid answer

because Mum and Dad had heard of child prodigies before but never witnessed one. Mandy must think we live up a mountain if we have never heard of this kind of thing. I snuggle up to Grandpa and blink my tired, burning eyes.

Mum is answering Mandy's question. "No, everyone else is quite normal, aren't they?" She looks at Dad for confirmation.

Dad nods – or trembles. He does not open his mouth again for fear of losing his teeth.

"Lucy," says Mandy, pointing a long finger-nailed finger at my sister, "you can count, too. How did you learn to count?"

Oolool shrugs. "It's just something I can do," she says. "Mum and Dad helped me a bit, but I could do it anyway. I had some books to help me, too."

Mandy gasps. "Gosh!" she gasps. "You can read, too? I didn't know you could read!"

"Oh, yes," Oolool says, as if it were unusual for any eleven month old genius not to be able to read.

"You know, I love your voice – it's so sweet," Mandy says, twinkling as much as my sister. "And your pronunciation – I mean, the way you say things so clearly is amazing."

Oolool nods as if she knows this already. "I know what 'pronunciation' means," she says eagerly and not unpleasantly. "You don't need to explain."

Mandy laughs. "Of course, of course! Tell me, how long have you been reading?"

Oolool raises her eyes heavenwards in a thoughtful pose. "I read *Little Red Riding Hood* when I was about nine months old, then I read *Supergran* and now I'm reading *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*."

Mandy shakes her head in disbelief. "That's incredible," she whispers in awe. "I

imagine you'll have difficulty holding the books, won't you? Your little hands won't be able to support them, will they?"

"I rest the books on the tray of my high chair, or on the floor," Oolool replies.

"You've got an older brother, haven't you?" (That is me!) says Mandy. "What does he think about having a genius for a little sister?"

"Well," Oolool begins, "he's only two so he doesn't say much. I suppose he's proud of me."

It seems my sister has perfected the art of lying, as well as all her other abilities. She knows I am not proud of her and she knows what my feelings are, but she is not going to tell anyone on the telly. Did you notice how she rubbed it in about me not saying much, even though I am two?

Mandy claps her hands with glee. "Well, Lucy," she says, "I'd certainly be proud of you and I'm sure your mummy and daddy are. It's been a joy meeting you. Mr and Mrs Crabtree, thank you so much for bringing your beautiful daughter to meet us. Aren't you proud of her?"

There was a long shot of all four of them, with Mum and Dad nodding and saying: "Yes!" and "We are!"

Mandy winds up by saying: "The Crabtree family, ladies and gentlemen! Aren't they wonderful?"

I look at Granny and Grandpa. Tears were streaming down Granny's cheeks and Grandpa beamed with a smile that lit up his face for the first time in weeks.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Granny blubbed, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

Grandpa nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Well, sweetheart, that's it," Granny snuffled, stroking my hair. "Mummy and Daddy'll be coming for you now."

When they all finally arrived back at Granny and Grandpa's (at least they had not forgotten where they had left me) Dad said he had been so nervous that at one point he had refused to appear before the cameras. He said he had been sick with fear. Mum had accused him of 'bottling out' and had said it was his fault they were there in the first place and if he thought she was going on telly with Oolool without him, he had better think again. Dad says he is never going to have his photograph taken again because he is sure that he has developed a phobia that makes him sick in front of cameras.

Then the telephone calls began.

Everyone we knew and most of the people we did not know rang to say how wonderful Oolool had been on the telly. Some said she ought to be in advertisements and some said she should be in films. It was a whirlwind. Every minute, the phone rang. As soon as Mum put it down, it rang again. Journalists rang, wanting to write about Oolool, designers rang, wanting to dress her, photographers rang, wanting to do a portfolio. I am not sure what a portfolio is; it sounds like a disease you catch at the docks.

Mum handled all these enquiries. Dad seemed to have given up on his life under the spotlight. Maybe some people have stronger stomachs than others and can handle fame and fortune. Dad seemed happy to be back posting letters and fighting off dogs.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo rang to say they had had a brilliant time in Ellay. I do not know where Ellay is and I did not even know they had gone there. They go away on holiday so often now that nobody mentions it any more. It is just like nipping out to Asda for them – nothing unusual. Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo said they had not seen Oolool on the telly, but Ellay was out of this world. (So that is where it is!) No, they did not know that Oolool was a star, but there were lots of stars in Ellay. Well, alright,

if we have a video recording of Oolool on telly they may as well watch it, but we will not have seen anything until we have seen Ellay.

Karen said now that Oolool had been launched, all she had to do was sit back and wait for someone to offer her the moon.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist said something, but I do not know what it was.

Grandpa has gone back into hospital. He collapsed on the kitchen floor and could not breathe. The ambulance arrived just in time and now a machine helps him to breathe. We went to see him in hospital. He could not speak because he had tubes in his mouth and up his nose. He squeezed my hand when I touched him and I cried with everyone else because he looked so poorly.

We left Granny at the hospital and when we came out Mum cried all the way home. Oolool asked if Grandpa would soon be better but no one answered.

An agent rang. Mum said it was an agent. I do not know whether it was a travel agent, an estate agent or a newsagent. Mum said the agent had offered to look after my sister's career. We did not know she had a career but the agent was intent on giving her one, Mum said.

Dad was not as enthusiastic as he would have been a week ago.

The new people across the road next to John seem very friendly. They came and said hello to Mum as she was pulling up dead flowers in our garden.

There are two old people like Mum and Dad, and there is an even older person like Granny or Grandma. The old people are called Brian and Angela, and the even older person is called Iris. Iris is Angela's mother and she lives with them because no one else would have her, Brian said.

There is also a younger person living with them. This is Brian and Angela's son, who is called Russell. I thought this was the noise leaves made when you walked through them but, apparently, it is also a name. I wonder if squeak, or creak are also names? Russell is not as young as Emily or me and not as old as John; somewhere in the middle, I suppose.

The family moved here from a town nearby called Bury. I think Bury is a strange name for a town; it is what dogs do with bones. It is like having a town called Whistle or Jump. I suppose there may be towns called Whistle or Jump. If there are, I think they are just as strange as Bury.

Grandpa has died.

It means we will not see him, ever again. This is terrible. He...he...

Dad had a telephone call from the hospital to tell him. Mum could tell from the look on Dad's face what it was about before he opened his mouth.

It happened early in the morning. Granny was with him when he died. He just...stopped breathing.

Everyone is so upset, it is...it is...

I cannot believe that Grandpa is not here any more. There will be no one who can explain things to me or tell me stories. Grandpa was my best friend.

Granny and Mum are very sad. Dad tries not to be sad, but he is really.

Granny blames the cigarettes. "Cigarettes and coal dust," she says. She said if he had not smoked he would have lived another twenty years.

I do not understand why people smoke cigarettes. If they know it is going to kill them, why do they do it? If chocolate were poisonous, no matter how delicious it was, you would not eat it, would you? If you enjoyed being knocked down by buses but

knew it was not doing you much good, you would not jump in front of them, would you?

I do not understand much about life or the people living it, but the more I do come to understand makes me realise that I understand things even less.

Perhaps Grandpa could have explained.

On the day Grandpa went to see Jesus, Karen looked after me and Oolool. Perhaps funerals are not suitable places for little kids; I do not know. Mum and Dad decided it would be best if we did not go.

While we were at Karen's house Emily came to talk to me. I do not know where Oolool was; maybe she was explaining to Karen the workings of the central nervous system. Emily was eating jelly babies. She gave me a green one.

"Do you know where we go when we are dieded?" she asked me, her open mouth exposing a kaleidoscope of chewed jelly babies.

"Where?" I was only half interested. I was not really in the mood for one of Emily's cock-eyed theories. I had wanted to go to Grandpa's funeral but no amount of crying could persuade Mum and Dad to change their minds. They thought I was crying because I was being left behind, not because I wanted to go; there is a difference. I did not have the words to explain in my confusion and distress that I needed to say goodbye to Grandpa, and my crying was only making things worse, so I quietened down and let them go.

"We go to heaven to see Jesus," Emily said.

Well, I knew that. I thought she was going to reveal a whole new explanation.

"Yep!" I answered.

Emily had on some new shoes that made a clicking noise when she walked. She then began tapping on the floor, trying to dance like she had seen people do on the

telly.

“But, in a bit, Jesus sends us back.”

She stuck another jelly baby in her mouth and chewed succulently. I held out my hand for another but she did not oblige.

“Why?” I asked, withdrawing my empty hand.

“He sends us back to guide friends who are here.”

“Why?” I asked, mesmerized by the disappearance of a black jelly baby into the cavern of Emily’s mouth.

Emily looked thoughtful, as if she were gathering her thoughts together before revealing what she knew.

“Mum wanted to see ve Clair Buoyant after –”

“What?” I interrupted. Emily forgets that I am only two and that she is not talking to Ooolool.

She raised her eyes to the ceiling. “A Clair Buoyant is a person who knowses what is happening. She sees tomorrow and knowses what you are going to do.”

I nodded. A bit like Mum, I thought.

“Well,” Emily continued, “Mummy wanted to ve Clair Buoyant when Granny dieded and she saided Granny was in ve room and was calleded Mary.”

I was not sure what Emily was talking about and she started clicking her shoes again to distract me further.

“Ve Clair Buoyant saided Granny was wiv Mummy all of ve time to look after her.”

I thought Emily had a long way to go before she made it on to the telly with her dancing.

“Ve Clair Buoyant saided vat Mummy should not worry about Granny because

she was happy looking after her.”

She hammered out a final tap on the floor as if to underline the certainty of her story.

I wondered if Grandpa would look after me now.

I held out my hand again and brought it back again – empty again.

My mind wandered for a moment to thoughts of Grandpa and what I would do now he was not here. I had a strange feeling in my throat, as if a chocolate button were stuck there and my eyes began to fill with tears.

“Lucy is pretty,” Emily said suddenly, breaking the spell and spitting out half a jelly baby, which clung desperately to the front of her dress. She picked it off and popped it back into her mouth. I do not know why she keeps going on about Oolool being pretty but she offered me a jelly baby so I did not care. It was an orange one.

“Yep!” I answered, chewing contentedly.

Emily looked at me, two jelly babies sticking out of her mouth like fangs. “Is she prettier van me?” she mumbled stickily.

I knew it was leading to that. Some unidentified instinct told me to pick my answer carefully.

“What?” I said, feeling that was careful enough.

Emily gathered her hair together and held it at the back in a pony tail.

“Do you fink she is more prettier van me?”

“Nah!” I said, trying to catch a jelly baby part that was stuck to my chin. I had a vague idea that I had answered correctly but was more concerned with my runaway sweet.

Emily beamed. I seemed to have given her the answer she wanted.

“Do you fink I am pretty?” she asked, parading in front of me, smiling stupidly

like the women do in Mum's catalogues, but not looking anything like the women in Mum's catalogues.

I kept an eye on where she had placed her jelly babies. Why does she ask me these useless questions? What if she is pretty, or what if she is not? As long as she has jelly babies, it does not matter. If I said, yes, she was pretty, she would say, how pretty? If I said very pretty, she would say, more pretty than such and such a person; I do not know, whoever came into her head. It could go on forever.

"Do you?" she persisted.

I held out my hand for another jelly baby. Was this bribery? If so, then Emily obviously did not mind paying the price; she gave me a black one and a red one.

"Do you?" Now she expected me to keep my side of the unspoken bargain. She watched me patiently, waiting for the answer she wanted.

"What?" I think I am fairly good at these delaying tactics. I think it is something I picked up off Dad.

"Do you think I am pretty?" A first hint of anger stirred in her voice.

I looked at her smooth skin and sticky lips, her wide, dark eyes and her shining brown hair with a piece of jelly baby stuck in it. She was all right, I supposed, so I said what she wanted me to say.

"Yep!" I could not look at her as I said it, and stared at a fascinating spot in the middle of the floor.

Emily smiled happily. She knew that was a better answer than she had dared hope for, and a better one than I need have given. Suddenly she came towards me and gave me a jelly baby kiss on the lips. It was sticky and wet and quite disgusting and I wondered why Mum and Dad kept putting themselves through such an awful ordeal.

Emily gave me another black jelly baby and skipped away. For some reason I

hoped she would not tell anyone what I had said.

After they had sent Grandpa to Jesus, Mum and Dad, Granny and Grandma and Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came back to our house. They all wore dark-coloured clothes and looked very sad. Granny and Grandma and Mum and Auntie Jo all had red eyes, and I was glad I had not been there when Grandpa met Jesus.

Mum picked me up and began crying again. Her body shook as she sobbed and I began crying, too. Then Oolool started crying and I remembered what Emily had said. I looked around the room but could not see Grandpa anywhere, although knowing he was there made me feel better.

Mum and Dad took Oolool to see the travel, estate, or newsagent. Mum said they may as well go to see what was being offered, but was not going to 'thrust Oolool into the spotlight for the sake of a bag of gold.' They said they would be gone all day because they had to go to London on the train. They said they might see the Queen or Cilla Black. I stayed with Grandma. Mum said it was too expensive for all of us to go and, besides, they were not going to make a sight-seeing trip out of it; they would be in to see the travel, estate or newsagent, and then come straight back home. I was happy to stay with Grandma. I thought she might knit me a train set.

Grandma did not knit me a train set but, whilst I was there, Granny arrived, and together they took me to the park. There is a big lake in the park with ducks and empty Coke tins in it. It was a bit cold but Grandma had knitted me a new cardigan, in which I could not move, but was warm. The sky was white and a strong wind ruffled the surface of the lake so that the ducks and empty Coke tins bobbed up and down as they floated. We fed bread to the ducks and Granny and Grandma fed ice-cream to me. It was a bit cold for ice-cream but Granny and Grandma seemed to enjoy

watching me make a mess of myself.

“They say time is a wonderful healer, don’t they?” Granny said to Grandma. “But I can’t imagine havin’ enough time left for it to heal me.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a tissue. She sobbed and her shoulders shook as Grandma put a hand on her arm.

Grandma spoke softly in reply. “I was the same when Harry died,” she said. Harry is not Dad; Harry was Grandad, who died before Mum and Dad found me in hospital. I have seen photographs of Grandad but I do not remember ever seeing him. “Time doesn’t heal the pain all together,” Grandma continued, “but it turns an open wound into a scar.”

Granny turned to Grandma and put her head against hers. They stood there silently for a moment, thinking back, I suppose. It seems strange to see grown-ups cry; only kids should cry. I felt like crying, too, but I did not. If Grandpa were watching he would not like to see me cry. He never liked to see me cry.

Granny and Grandma pushed me around the lake in my buggy. It was a bit bumpy but it was easier than walking.

“Mummy and Daddy will be in London now,” Grandma said after a while. “I wonder if they’ve seen the Queen yet?”

I wondered if the Queen was expecting them. I have seen the Queen on telly and she is always smiling and waving at people and taking flowers off them. I did not think the Queen would recognise Mum and Dad, never having seen them before, but she would probably have heard of Ooolool. I did not know if Mum would have any flowers that the Queen might take off her.

“It’ll be excitin’ to hear what the agent had to say, won’t it?” Granny said.

I wondered if we were moving house, or going on holiday, depending on which

kind of agent Mum and Dad and Oolool had gone to see.

There are swings and slides by the lake in the park and Grandma pushed me on a swing, but I was suddenly worried about moving house and could not enjoy myself properly. It felt colder, and somehow lonely: the lonely trees, the empty swings and slides, the lonely lake, and lonely Granny and Grandma. It felt like something was missing and, of course, I knew with certainty who it was. It seemed things were changing. Nothing could ever be the same again.

Granny bought us all some chips and we went home.

I was in bed when they all arrived home but in the morning Mum explained to everyone what the travel, estate or newsagent had said.

She said that the travel, estate or newsagent had signed Oolool up and was going to make her a star. They had an appointment to meet a film director, who was making a television commercial about baked beans, and the travel, estate or newsagent had said that Oolool would be just right for the role. Mum said all this with hesitation in her voice, as if every sentence ought to be a question.

Dad had no reservations. He said baked beans were only the beginning. From television commercials Oolool would go on to make television programmes and then films. As long as he did not have to get too close to a camera, I presumed.

“Holly Wood beckons,” Dad said.

I do not know who she is, but Dad is certainly excited that she is beckoning.

Oolool’s birthday is next week. The excitement is growing. There is a real buzz around the whole area. People cannot wait to see all the stars arriving. Everyone we see has some comment to make about the Glorious One.

“We’ll nay want tay miss yon bear’s mickle dockle doo, the noo, would we?”

said Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist.

“Wild horses wouldn’t keep me away,” said Karen.

“And everybody can see why you fink I am more pretty van Lucy,” said Emily.

“St Mirren for the cup,” said Roy and Rob.

“How could we miss our baby’s birthday?” said Granny in tears.

“I’ll knit her something special,” said Grandma.

“We might just fit it in before we fly off to sing a pore,” said Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo. At least they will not be singing it here if they are going to fly off to sing it.

John will not be coming because he is still down a hole somewhere. “The deeper, the better,” Dad says.

And, of course, Grandpa will be there, but I will be the only one who knows.

And all the celebrities will be there. Ooolool picks up famous friends the way other people pick up mud on there shoes.

I have heard whispers about Father Christmas again. I thought we had finished with all that nonsense. Marvellous! Life is so wonderful!

There is something strange going on in our house. Mum mopes around all day as if she is carrying everyone else’s problems as well as her own. When Dad comes home they hardly speak to each other. They have obviously had words but I do not know which ones they have used.

Mum says she has almost finished her book but will not allow anyone to read any of it. She says if it is good enough to be published we can read it then – and not before! Well, I will not be able to read it, of course, but maybe Superbabe will read it to me if she can fit it into her schedule.

Iris from Bury stopped to talk to me. She speaks in the same old-fashioned way that

Grandpa used to speak; only it is more difficult to understand. How did we ever learn to speak properly if we learned from old people who, more or less, speak a different language from us?

“Ello, young fella-me-lad! Wha’s thy name when tha’s at ‘ome?” Iris said.

She looks really old; older even than Granny and Grandma. She has white hair and lines all over her face like a cobweb. She wears small glasses which she squints through as if they are stopping her from seeing properly rather than helping her. There are hairs growing on her chin which caught my attention and I stared at them as if I had never seen hair before; well, I had not seen it on a woman’s chin before. The hairs are not thick enough to allow creatures to hide, so I was happy to let her get a little closer.

I presumed she was asking my name so I told her.

I am never sure which of my names to use, having so many, so, being lazy, I used the one which is easiest to say.

“Wills!” I said.

“Eee, well, tha’s named after a prince, art?” she said, her beard bewitching me.

I do not know who Prince Art is, so I smiled and nodded.

“Ah’m jus’ poppin’ down to t’shop. If th’ar’t still ‘ere when Ah come back, Ah’ll githee some chocolate, reet?”

I recognised the word ‘chocolate,’ so smiled and nodded again.

I watched her toddle off down the road, slightly stooped but faster on her feet than both Granny and Grandma. I wondered where my chocolate was.

I have found out what is going on in our house. We are not moving house, we are not going on holiday and we are not buying a newspaper.

There have been major changes of opinion about Oolool’s future. According to

Mum, she has not got one; not in the limelight, anyway, she says.

She says she was always uneasy about allowing Oolool to be manipulated into becoming a celebrity. She only went along with it because Dad was so excited at the prospect of being the father of a 'star.' There must have been a part of Mum that was intrigued at how Oolool's career would progress. I cannot imagine any of Dad's persuasion changing Mum's mind if she had not been inclined in that direction anyway. But she said that child stars do not live happily ever after and she does not want Oolool's life ruining in order for Dad to wallow in a bit of glory.

So she has told the agent that Oolool will not be appearing with any baked beans, and she has told Dad that Holly Wood can beckon as much as she wants, Oolool will not be joining her. We have to carry on with the big birthday party but Mel Gibson and Ant and Dec will not be coming.

And so we carry on as before. Dad posts his letters, Mum looks after me and my sister and Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo are off somewhere singing a pore. Karen continues to confuse, as does Emily; similarly Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist. Granny still weeps occasionally and Grandma still knits and makes soup, whilst Grandpa watches over us all. Roy and Rob said St Mirren had been relegated. I think this means they are not as good as they said they were.

Oolool's reaction to all the changes of opinion were typical.

"I don't need to be famous to be a star," she said, a little sulkily, I thought.

I think I know what she meant.

