

“Gagga!”

This means “hello”. In fact it means anything and everything. It means whatever I want it to mean when I say it. This is because it’s the only word I can say.

“Gagga!”

At this moment I want it to mean “hello”.

Hello. My name is William Harry. Those are my first two names. I have another name, as well. That is Crabtree. Mum calls me Wills, after a prince, she says. The only prince I know is next door’s dog and I’ve never heard anyone call that Wills; they call it Prince. It’s a Staffordshire bull terrier. Dad doesn’t like it. He calls it an ugly great mutt. Dad calls me Billy. He says Wills is no name for a postman’s son. Dad is a postman. I think that is why he doesn’t like next-door’s dog. Dogs give him a hard time.

I get confused over names. Mum’s name is Christine but Dad calls her Pet. Dad’s name is Harry but Mum calls him Pat. I don’t know why. It could have something to do with him being a postman. Pet and Pat. I get confused over names.

We have a cat called Sam and a budgie called Riggarr. We had a goldfish once but Sam ate it. We don’t have a dog. Dad doesn’t like dogs.

I don’t know how old Dad is but he’s going a bit bald so he must be very old. Mum’s prettier than Dad so she mustn’t be as old. Dad says he’s going bald because he lives with Mum, and that Mum isn’t going bald because she lives with him. I hope I don’t go bald because I live with Mum. I haven’t got much hair as it is – I can’t

afford to lose any. I don't know what Mum does to make Dad bald. I think perhaps she plucks his hair out to mend our clothes with.

Dad is quite thin. He says it's all the walking he does all day that keeps him fit. He says carrying his sackful of letters gives him muscles. I don't know where he keeps his muscles. Perhaps they're in the greenhouse with the tomatoes.

Dad tells jokes to his friends and Mum slaps him on the head because he says naughty words. He says: "Sorry, Pet!" and rubs his head.

You can sometimes hear Dad singing. Mum says Sam has a better voice than Dad. He sings to himself because no one else wants to hear. He doesn't sing songs that I know like: *Old MacDonald* or *Twinkle Twinkle*. He sings about someone called *Delilah*.

Mum doesn't sing or tell jokes. She says that one clown in the family is enough. Mum should be on the telly. She's prettier than most people who are. She's 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 telly, whose name I don't know but who talks a lot and is on boring programmes.

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

Dad falls asleep a lot. He falls asleep watching television, reading the newspaper, and even when their friends visit. 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 sleep on a washing line. I don't know whether 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 doesn't sleep much herself. She says she tosses and turns all night long and all she can hear is Dad's snoring. She digs him in the ribs but nothing wakes him up. Dad says if she worked as hard as he did she'd 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 dinner.

Dad doesn't cook. He says he could if he wanted. I think this is a joke. He says any fool can cook, that is why Mum finds it so easy. Every time he makes his dinner (which is always toast) he sets off the smoke alarm. Mum says she can't leave him to do anything. She says he burns lettuce. I think this is a joke, too. Dad feeds me sometimes and that tastes all right, but he does put quite a bit of it in my hair.

Karen from next door comes around a lot. This is not Prince's mum; this is next door on the other side. Karen has her hair cut very short. It isn't nice like Mum's. Karen makes Dad look hairy. I suppose she thinks it looks nice.

Karen talks for hours and hours. I'm surprised this doesn't help Mum sleep. It does Dad. Mum and Karen drink coffee and eat sandwiches. Karen brings her daughter, Emily. Emily is a lot older than me; she is three and a quarter, and she talks a lot, too. Emily gets annoyed because she can't understand what I'm saying. 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 for playing with her toys. Life is unfair.

Mum's getting fat. She always says she's too fat but this time I think she's right. I've

noticed for a few days now that she was growing fatter. 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; except when it's raining. When he's reading the paper he shakes his head a lot and says things like: "I don't believe this!" and "Typical!"

I don't know why he reads it so much if he doesn't like it. Mum says he reads the print off it but it doesn't look 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." I can't help it if paper tears so easily.

Mum and Dad read lots of books. Their books have pages full of writing. It must be boring reading books without pictures in. I have a book about *The Teddy Bears' Picnic*. It has pictures of teddy bears in it. I suppose that's pretty boring, too.

Mum writes poems and stories for children. She says that they aren't very good. She reads them to me and Dad and we like them. Some of her poems are funny. She sends them to magazines and gets them back a few weeks later. That makes her sulk for a while and then she's all right again. Dad says one day Mum will be as famous as Enid Blyton. I don't know who she is; perhaps she's the lollipop lady who helps children cross the road.

Karen came around while Dad was asleep in the chair. Mum said things like: "Look at him!" 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. Karen said he looked a picture so Mum took one of him. Since then, whenever he's fallen asleep, he's rested his chin on his hand.

Riggat flew into the window and we thought he was dead. He would have been if Dad hadn't got to him before Sam. Dad said he was only stunned and told Mum to cancel the window-cleaner then Riggat 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'll bet no one else has an Uncle Joe and an Auntie Jo. Jo doesn't sound like a woman's name to me. I could be wrong. Perhaps Joe isn't a man's name. I don't know enough about these things. When I can talk, I'll ask.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo don't have any children. They say they don't want any.

"Not bloody likely!" they say.

Uncle Joe has a great big beard that looks like a bird's nest on his chin. I sit watching it, expecting a sparrow to pop out, but it never does. It's full of worms and spiders, though, so I don't get too close.

Auntie Jo is Mum's older sister. They don't look like sisters; in fact, they don't look like the same species. Whereas Mum is pretty, Auntie Jo is, er...(how can I say this without sounding rude?) lacking the particular essentials that would make her look anything other than unpleasant to observe. Basically, she's ugly!

She wears bucket loads of make-up. Dad says he wouldn't recognize her without her war paint. 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 isn't often) it looks as if she's been drawing on her teeth. Her hair is piled up on her head

like ice cream in a cone and has things sticking out of it like pins and hairgrips and knitting needles and lollipop sticks. Dad says it takes her a week to get ready to go out and that no one would know her if they saw her beforehand.

I don't think Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo like me. I cry when they're here. Mainly because Auntie Jo's face frightens me and because I never know what's going to appear out of Uncle Joe's beard. I'm always sick on Auntie Jo. I don't know why. She bounces me around after I've eaten, so that doesn't help. That, and looking at her face too close up, is enough to make anyone sick. If it were anyone else I'd hold it back but I enjoy being sick on Auntie Jo – it makes her put me down. She doesn't want to hold me, anyway. She only does it because it's expected of her. She must think I enjoy being shaken up like a bottle of *Coke*, waiting to fizz over.

She looks at me in disgust when I'm sick. She holds me at arm's length as if I were about to have an outpouring from every opening. 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 whatever lives in Uncle Joe's beard.

Rochdale is the town where we live. It's famous for Anna Friel and Gracie Fields and the Co-op. I don't know where Gracie Fields are. I think it's where the football team plays. Dad says the football team are not very good. They don't kick off until the crowd arrives.

We went to see Blackpool Illuminations. I don't 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 hundreds of people there. Dad said the whole world was there. We drove through the lights for hours but we didn't 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 all lit up, and a big picture of *The Teddy Bears' Picnic* with flashing lights. 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 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 "Two hours we've been here!" and "Do you think we'll ever see home again?" and "We could die of old age here. They'll find our car with three skeletons in it."

I hoped we weren't going to die because Grandad did that and we haven't seen him since.

We didn't 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 here."

"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 keep 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 hadn't been there before – well, you think all things,

don't you? At first I thought Mum's fingernail was stuck in my gum. Lately, she's taken to putting her finger in my mouth and rubbing stuff over my gums. I wish she'd feed me the normal way – I'm sure it'd be more hygienic.

I cry a lot when the tooth pains come. Not that I can't 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's not only the pain: it makes me dribble, too. It's so embarrassing having this stream of saliva dripping off your chin. I could do with having some guttering under my bottom lip with a downspout going over my shoulder somewhere, and then no one would notice it.

When it's fine we go for walks. Mum takes me to the shops, which is boring. She stands talking for hours and people say how lovely I am. I don't think I like being called 'lovely'. We go in a shop called *Marks and Spencer* and Mum spends all day looking at skirts and at things to put her chests into. We go in another shop called *Mothercare*, which sells prams and baby clothes. Mum looks at dresses for babies in a colour she calls 'pink'. It looks a soppy colour to me. I don't know what Mum is thinking of. The 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 looks at me suspiciously. It's 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. 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'd 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 came 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 pregnant?” she said.

Pregnant? What's pregnant? I said: “Gagga!”

“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? I said: “Gagga!”

Emily nodded her head again and spoke convincingly.

“Women get like vat,” she said, frowning her brow in thought. “Vey start to look like your mummy when vey is getted pregnant.”

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

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

“Mummy saided she was like ve back of a bus when she hadded me,” said Emily, twisting the top half of her body back and forth as if she were trying to unscrew herself from the bottom bit. Her pigtails swished her face like small whips.

Like the back of a bus? This was getting ridiculous. It didn't sound very nice to me. I didn't know whether to cry or not. Dad always says that women talk a load of rubbish. It seemed that I was getting a sample of it. How could anyone look like the back of a bus? Does she mean with windows in and with 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 don't know if I'm a bit slow in the talking department. Emily speaks all right, I suppose, but then, she's older than me. Anyway, I've heard people tell Mum that boys are lazier than girls, so there's no rush.

It worries me what Emily said about Mum. What did she call her? Pregnant? What's that, then? And how can other women start looking like Mum? I'll get even more confused if other women become Mum look-alikes. How will I know which is mine?

Life is full of problems, it seems. I'm also worried about Mum getting fatter. She gets fatter every day. I wish she'd stop eating so much. I'm afraid she might explode.

Grandma comes to see us a lot. She's really old. She's even older than Dad, but she isn't going bald. That's because she doesn't live with Mum.

Grandma is Dad's mum and wears glasses for seeing through. Sometimes she brings us cake and soup that she has made. Dad doesn't eat Grandma's soup because he doesn't like arsenic. I don't know what arsenic is. I think it's 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 won't be 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 Croaking Toad.

When Dad comes home from the Croaking Toad and is sick in the toilet, Granny says: "I see he's had a good night again!"

I don't know why Granny thinks it's a good night when you're sick. I don't like being sick; unless it's on Auntie Jo.

Grandma makes curtains and knits cardigans for me. Last week she brought a pink one (!?!). There's something strange going on here. Mum looks at pink dresses in

shops and Grandma knits me a 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's 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. When they come home they look sad and cold. Mum offers them some of Grandma's soup to warm them up but they both say they'd rather stay cold, thank you very much.

Dad says he's fed up with paying to stand in the freezing cold to watch a bunch of men kick a ball over the stands. He says he bets they wouldn't pay to watch him deliver 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. We don't 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 and it disappears in the air as he coughs. I like Grandpa taking me for walks because he tells me stories. He has a story to tell about everything we see and a big moustache that hides 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 burned on fires to keep themselves warm. He says he got very dirty when he was tunnelling underground and had to have a bath every night. Mum wouldn't be very pleased if Dad was a miner and came home with dirty boots and walked over the carpet.

Grandpa left the mine to join the army and fight in the war. He said he'd tell me about that some other time.

Sam caught a frog and brought it into the kitchen. He put it at Mum's feet as if it were a present. Mum didn't want a frog as a present.

She screamed and I thought: I'll bet she's sorry, now, that she eats so much. Well, if she wasn't so fat she'd have been able to run away quicker, wouldn't she?

The frog hopped under the table and Mum screamed again.

“Wills! Wills!” she screamed.

I don't know what she expected me to do. I was sat in my high chair out of harm's way, flinging rice pudding at the wall; I couldn't help.

After a while, Sam picked up the frog and took it outside. He seemed sorry that Mum didn't like her present.

I crawled! I crawled!

Mum thought I would never move under my own power, but now I can. I kind of put a knee under my body and pushed – and I moved. It wasn't intentional, though. Oh, no, it was an accident. I don't know what I was trying to do but it was a bigger shock to me than to anyone else when I moved.

Anyway, this is crawling. It's easy. Mum now tells people proudly that I'm crawling. I think Mum was getting fed up with telling people that all I could do was sit up and eat or lie down and cry.

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

Mum and Dad asked me if I'd like a little brother or a little sister.

If I'd been able to talk I could have told them: “Neither, thank you; I'm quite happy on my own.”

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

What would I want a brother or a sister for? I don't want to share what I have. There'd be less presents for me if I had a brother or a sister. And besides, there's 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 don't see brothers or sisters for sale in shops or growing on trees, do you? Now, there's something to think about: where would they get one from?

I've been trying harder to talk. I've decided that it's all well and good being a boy and being able to be lazy but it doesn't get your point across. I need to tell Mum and Dad that I don't want a brother or a sister and not to go wasting their money on one for my sake.

"Gagga!" isn't getting my message across.

I'm trying to get "Dadda" right before I move on to: "I say, you don't have to buy a brother or a sister on my account, you know. I really don't mind not having one," but it's difficult.

I think "Dadda" will be easier to say than "Mamma" because you don't have to close your mouth to say it. You just sort of press your gums together and out it comes.

If only it were so easy.

I've managed "Rarra" and "Yayya" and something similar to "Garra", but involving letters that don't appear to be in the alphabet. If Dad were called Rarra or Yarra I'd be laughing. Why is everything so difficult?

Never mind, soon I'll be one year old and most people can say something when they're one, so I'll be all right then.

Prince, the Staffordshire bull terrier from next door, whom Dad doesn't like, remember (?) well, his mum and dad come from a place called Paisley, which is in a

place called Scotland. They are called Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist, and I can never understand what they are talking about. They speak faster than a motor car engine.

Alan Gilchrist looks like Superman when he isn't Superman, if you know what I mean. But, having said that, he can't fly, he can't see through walls, he can't carry cars above his head, he can't freeze lakes with his ice-breath and, well, you name it, he can't do it. In fact, Alan Gilchrist is nothing like Superman; I don't know why I said he was. The only similarity between Alan Gilchrist and Superman when he isn't Superman is that they both wear glasses. Alan Gilchrist is tall and skinny and couldn't tie a knot in a metal bar if he tried for a year.

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

I think part of their language must be foreign because sometimes I can pick out normal words which everyone else says and which I can understand. These words stand out like beacons in a fog. Dad nods when they talk to him as if he understands every word, but when Mum asks him what they were saying he says he hasn't a clue. They must think Dad is fairly strange if they are asking him what time it is and he just nods stupidly and says: "Yes!"

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist have two sons. They are twins. They 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 had the fright of my life. I thought there was something wrong with me. I looked at Prince and there was only one of him, and I looked at the greenhouse and there was only one of that so I knew there was nothing wrong with my eyes. I couldn't understand it so I started crying and nobody knew why.

Roy and Rob have brown spots called freckles all over their faces. I've never seen anyone else with freckles; perhaps it's what children from Scotland have. They say they have counted their freckles: Roy has 124 and Rob has 125. They say that's how you can tell the difference between them. The trouble is, they're not sure if they miscounted so you shouldn't 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 talk properly. I'm glad I don't live next door or I certainly would get confused.

Grandpa showed me the moon. Well, actually, I'd seen the moon before but I'd thought it was a balloon in the sky.

Grandpa told me it was a moon. The moon is a torch in the sky. There is only one moon. The smaller torches are called stars. The big bright torch which you can see during the day and which you mustn't look at is called the sun.

"T'moon used t'ave a face which tha' could see," Grandpa said, pointing moonwards. "Tha' can still see it a bit. Can tha' see it, young Billy?"

I watched Grandpa's finger, thick and quivering. I looked at the moon and, yes, I thought I could see a face on it. I'd never 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 t'old days tha' could see t'Man in t'Moon's face more clearly," Grandpa said. "But sin' they started sendin' space rockets up theer, tha' connas' mek it out proper. They send men up theer to dig 'oles an' walk about, an' space rockets land on it; they disturb all t'dust, does't see? No wonder tha' connas' mek it out like tha' used to."

As I watched Grandpa staring into the night sky and sharing his theories, 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 haven't seen Emily's dad for a long time and I think I've found out why: he's gone to live with Sophie Hardcastle's mum.

I know this because Emily told me.

She told me 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 don't really know what this has to do with going to live with Sophie Hardcastle's mum, unless he's going to live in a tent with her.

I think it would be exciting to live in a tent, except if it was cold or windy, or if spiders climbed over me in bed, or if foxes came and carried me away in the night, or if the bogeyman came hunting us, or if worms crawled into my *Weetabix*. I don't think I would like to live in a tent.

Emily says her dad's "goned off and won't comed back."

Karen speaks in riddles. She says something that has nothing to do with what she's talking about and you've got to guess what she means. Most people seem to understand what she's talking about – there's only me who doesn't.

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's too much baby talk going on for my liking: prams, nursery wallpaper, and cots. And I think it's something to do with Mum eating too much.



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

I don’t think that’s very polite, is it? You don’t go up to someone and say: “Aren’t you fat?” or, “Aren’t you big?” Do you? It doesn’t sound right to me.

The strange thing is – Mum doesn’t seem to mind people telling her she’s fat. She just smiles and pats her belly and says: “It won’t be long, now.”

Crawling is no big deal. There’s one problem, though: whenever I set off somewhere interesting, like towards the glass things which Mum keeps on the fireplace, or up the stairs Mum picks me up and turns me around as if I were a clockwork toy. There’s 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 Maureen Gilchrist’s house to a party where women buy clothes. Alan Gilchrist came to our house to watch telly with Dad. They watched a programme called *Taggart*, in which all the people spoke the same language as Alan Gilchrist. I don’t know whether Dad understood it very much.

Roy and Rob came, too. They talked about their favourite football team. They are called 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’s good because I don’t 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 year. I think I heard him wrong. How can locks be more beautiful at one time of year than any other? Unless he means the whole doors look better in the autumn. Dad didn’t understand him, either; he just nodded his head and said it was a quarter past nine.

Mum came home from the party with pink babygros. The world is going crazy.

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 only in a different colour. Grandma bought me clothes. So did Granny and Grandpa. Clothes are all right, I suppose – but you can't do a lot with them, can you?

All the mums came for my friends after the party. Karen was already there, and when Sophie's mum stopped her car outside Karen ran out and shouted something to her. Sophie's mum shouted something back and then Karen kicked Sophie's mum's car. My mum ran out with Sophie and bundled her into the car and dragged Karen back into our 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 doesn't cough is when he smokes a cigarette.

Granny says it's the cigarettes that make him cough and Mum is always telling him that he should stop smoking. Mum says cigarettes will be the death of him and Granny says he's seventy-six going on a hundred. He wheezes when he breathes and his chest rattles as if a ball were bouncing around his ribs.

I don't know why people smoke cigarettes if they know they are going to die because of it. You wouldn't have a teaspoonful of poison every morning just because it tasted nice, would you?

John, the boy who lives across the road, smokes cigarettes. I've seen him. He is sixteen and has friends who drive around with him in stolen cars. At least, that's what Dad says. John wears a baseball cap and Dad calls him a mushy-pea head. He calls him that because his pea-sized brain has been mashed to pulp through listening to loud music in stolen cars. Dad doesn't call it music but I don't think I dare say what he calls it.

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

“Harry, it's coming! It's coming!”

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

Dad came in and said everything was all right and we were just going for a ride in the car. It seemed a strange thing to do in the middle of the night. I would have preferred to stay in bed, so I cried some more.

I wondered what Mum meant was coming. I hoped it wasn't a train through the house. Later, on reflection, this, I realised, was a ridiculous thought because there isn't a railway line anywhere near our house, but at the time, in the blurry, early hours, it seemed a definite probability.

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

I thought: This is odd!

I hoped we weren't going to Blackpool Illuminations again. Dad carried me downstairs with a suitcase in his other hand.

Mum followed, saying: “Don't panic! Don't panic!”

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 a morning. So they were going ahead and getting a brother or a sister after all. And Mum made it sound like they were getting one for my benefit. They’d only asked me if I’d like one – they hadn’t said they were getting one.

Mum shouted in pain and I cowered away in case she popped open there and then.

We went outside to the car. It was frosty. I could see my breath when 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.

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. We walked down a long corridor that had a shiny floor. It was like walking on a mirror and Dad's shoes squeaked all the way. There were doctors and nurses walking about and people being pushed around on chairs with wheels on.

Dad had arrived back at Granny and Grandpa's house at breakfast time while 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 couldn't understand what the fuss was about. Everybody was pleased to have something I didn't want. The baby sister was called Lucy, and Granny and Grandpa thought it was a beautiful name.

Back at the hospital, we went into a room with beds in. Mum was lying in one of the beds and the first thing I noticed was that she wasn't fat any more. This, as you have probably noticed, had been troubling me for some time, so it was a relief to find that Dad had got her to the hospital in time to stop her from exploding.

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 there was nothing 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. But what if she had a hole in the middle like a *Polo* mint? Or like my falling-to-bits teddy, who has stuffing hanging out of his belly?

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

I dragged my eyes away from her missing belly and stared at her. Dad had already told me that the new baby was at the hospital with Mum but he hadn't told me where they'd found it. Where had they found a baby sister in hospital?

Dad lifted me to the side of the bed and showed me a glass cot. I hadn't noticed it before. In it was a baby. It had black hair and a shrivelled-up face like an old apple.

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

I looked around to see whom she was talking about but there was no one else there. She meant the baby was beautiful. I looked back into the cot to see what I had missed. But no, I couldn't see anything beautiful.

The baby's hair wasn't all over its head. There was a tuft on top like a coconut and the sides were bald. Its eyes were closed and hidden among the wrinkles that covered its face. Its lips pouted and sucked as if they were trying to burrow out of its head. It looked like a prune with lips. It certainly didn't look beautiful.

I said: “Gagga!” which this time meant: Please take me home - I don't like the look of this baby.

“There, he likes her, don't you, Wills?” said Mum, her face beaming but mistaking my grimace for a sign of adoration.

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

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

We ate at Granny and Grandpa's that evening. They hadn't seen the baby so Dad described it.

"She looks like Billy," he said finally, after describing how beautiful and wonderful and gorgeous she was.

This shocked me and I felt my face to make sure it wasn't collapsing like the baby's was.

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

I don't think I like being called pretty.

Dad and me went home and 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'd better get a move on with the walking business because if the baby came to our house I might want to get out of the way once in a while.

We went to see Mum and the baby and Dad told Mum I had stood up on my own. Mum said I was a clever boy. The baby slept all the while. I think babies are boring.

When Mum came home from hospital she brought the baby with her. I had a feeling she would. For some reason I half believed (or hoped) that Mum would leave the baby in the hospital to be looked after by nurses.

Alas, my hopes were dashed. Dad brought them both home whilst I waited for them with Grandma, Granny and Grandpa. You'd think they'd never seen a baby before.

“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 doesn't have a belly like a *Polo* mint. I can't understand what's happened. I think maybe the doctors have cut open her stomach and taken out all the food that was there. (Yuk!)

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'll never believe this – she put one of her chests into its mouth.

I thought: Hello, what's going on here?

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

“Lucy's hungry,” she said.

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, or anything, even, that was more convenient than a chest? I wondered what part of Mum I had eaten. There didn't seem to be any bits missing.

Lots of people came to visit us (or rather, Lucy) after she arrived home. 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 by now that people are being polite. Well, they can't come to look at her and say: "Ugh! What an ugly baby! Cover it up until its tail grows!" Can they?

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

I looked at Emily and sucked my dummy. If I could have spoken I'd have been speechless.

Emily touched the baby's hand and it grabbed her finger.

"Look, Mummy! Lucy's holded my finger," she said.

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

"You're lucky," Emily said, turning towards me. "I wish I hadded a baby in my house." She stuck out a bottom lip as if to prove she felt a sulk coming on.

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," she said.

Mum and Karen both laughed. Emily sulked.

I listen to these people and I don't know what to think. Is it me who's barmy or is it everyone else?

Grandma came back with Granny and Grandpa. They all brought pink things: cardigans, bonnets, and socks. One or two jigsaw pieces fell into place, now. Pink cardigans, *Mothercare*, "It would be nice to have a girl in the family." How did they all know?

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came. They didn't say: "Isn't she beautiful?" They just looked into the pram and nodded. I think Auntie Jo scowled for a moment, which is as close to a smile as she gets. I think I saw something drop out of Uncle Joe's

beard into the pram. I don't know what it was: maybe a piece of pie or an egg from the birds' nest.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo didn't talk about babies, and Mum didn't lift Lucy out of the pram to parade in front of them. Instead, they talked about their holiday. They had just come back from a place called Tie Land. Uncle Joe was wearing one of their ties. It looked as though he'd been sick down his shirt. They left without another glance into the pram.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist came.

Maureen Gilchrist said something about Lucy being a "comely wee bear," but I couldn't 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's all right when she's asleep. I think Mum could understand what I meant more easily than I could understand what Maureen Gilchrist said.

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

Dad seemed to have no trouble interpreting this statement, and was very keen to go and do whatever it was that Alan Gilchrist had meant for them to do. I think it involved going to the Croaking Toad because when they were going out Mum warned Dad not to make a noise when he was trying to find the key hole or he'd waken Lucy up.

I have become an expert crawler, now. I can scoot along the floor as if I'm 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 of these falling-over-occasions I banged my chin on the carpet. I didn't hurt myself anywhere else because Sam broke my fall and ran out of the room squealing as if his tail were on fire. Nevertheless, I screamed, yelling: "Mamma!"

It's surprising what you can do when you have to. The fact that it was "Mamma!" I shouted and not "Dadda!" was purely accidental. Dad wasn't there at the time but even if he had been, I would still have shouted "Mamma!" I don't 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 Lucy's cardigans: pink. Emily says it's her favourite colour. I've had enough of pink. Pink cardigans, pink babygros, pink this, pink that, and pink the other.

"Pink to make ve boys wink," said Emily.

This was something her mother must have taught her. It sounded as ridiculous as most of what Karen says.

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's a girl's colour," advised Emily. "Boys are not supposed to like dressing in pink clotheses."

I was pleased I was normal.

Roy and Rob come around quite often. They both dress the same so that doesn't help me to spot the difference.

They stare at Lucy and one of them says: "She's cute!" and the other one says: "Aye!"

They look at me looking at them. It amuses them that I get confused and think I'm seeing double. They laugh as my eyes flit from one to the other. They don't help my confusion because they move around and change positions just 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.

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

When Mum's changing Lucy's nappy I crawl into the kitchen out of the way. I saw it once and it wasn't pleasant. And the smell is like...is like...well, I can't think of anything it's like because I haven't been around long enough to have known anything that bad. I know my own nappies don't exactly smell like a bunch of flowers, but I don't look down at that end when Mum is changing me, and anyway, you can stand your own smell, can't you?

This talking business is easy. There's nothing to it. I can't believe it's taken me so long to get this far. It's not fair, having to be lazy.

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

The walking business is a bit trickier. I seem to go to pieces when I haven't got anything to hold on to. I think my legs are to blame. They don't seem to obey my commands. I know which direction I want to go in, and I know it's 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.

I'll never get used to these teeth. I keep biting my tongue – not to mention Mum's finger. Now I know why Grandma sometimes takes hers out. I don't know how she does that. Maybe they're like Dad's. I put my finger into Grandma's mouth and her teeth move. It's scary.

Grandpa took me for a walk into the hills near our house. It took us a while to get there because Grandpa had to stop for a smoke to get his breath. It was early in the morning and it was cold. Mum wrapped me up in thick clothes before we set off. The leaves and grass were white with frost and I peeped out of my buggy with only my eyes showing.

The sky was clear and Grandpa said it was going to be a nice, crisp day. 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 at the hills that surrounded it and wondered why Grandpa was blaming the view for taking his breath away when all the time it was the cigarettes that did it.

“Does tha' know what that is o'er t'lake, lad?” he asked me, pointing at the steam.

I looked at his moustache, drooping over his mouth and stained the same colour as his sausage fingers through smoking. There were drops of water hanging from it and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. I waited for his explanation.

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 tha’ gets water on t’ground,” he began, “like yon lake, or a river, or a bog, tha’ll find this, early of a mornin’.”

His overcoat brushed my face and I recognised his familiar smell.

“Durin’ t’night, does’t see?” he went on, “t’clouds up in yon sky get thirsty cos they’ve bin 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. I like watching the smoke come out of his mouth like words you can see until it disappears into the air.

Grandpa coughed and spat something else out before carrying on.

“They’re very shy, are them clouds,” he said. “That’s why they only come down for a drink when there’s nobody about. But some of ‘em, like this one,” he pointed to the steam again, “some of ‘em forget, cos they’re so thirsty, does’t see? 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 gettin’ up, with ‘em bein’ so shy, they disappear then nobody’ll see ‘em.”

Grandpa snapped his fingers to show me how clouds disappear.

“If we stopped ‘ere for long enough,” he said, “we’d see it vanish so as we couldna see it.”

I’d 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 don’t. He’s my best friend.

It's going to be Christmas soon. This is a strange time of year. It seems that a man called Father Christmas climbs down the chimney and leaves lots of toys in the house. I hope he doesn't make a mess on the floor – Mum's a bit fussy about things like that. If he makes a mess she won't let him come again.

Mum and Dad have put decorations around the house. It's like Blackpool Illuminations. We have a tree growing in the corner of the room. It has lights on it and sparkly string. I think it's a bit unusual having a tree growing in the house.

Lucy keeps waking everyone up during the night. She cries and then I hear footsteps on the landing and then she's quiet. Then I cry because I can't hear anything and Dad comes and gives me my dummy, which I have lost in the dark.

“Lulu's hungry,” he mumbles.

In the morning Dad's eyes have black around them as if he's been looking through dirty binoculars. Mum's hair looks as though she's combed it with a rose bush. Lucy cries for her 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 can't say Alan Gilchrist or Maureen Gilchrist, yet, but then, they can't 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's not exactly about me, rather something that happened to me. It's a bit embarrassing and I wasn't going to tell anyone about it

but, well, Mum's rather pleased with it so I'll share it with you. You'd better not laugh. She's called it *The Creature At The Bottom Of The Bed*. This is it:

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

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 as if I've never stirred

And drop the sheet, allowing me to see.

I look into the darkness, 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 fearsome 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 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? I hope he doesn't come and ask me what I want because I won't be able to tell him. He won't know what biddin bicks or picher boos 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 and makes the avenue vibrate. Dad says that one of these days he'll make John vibrate.

Lucy still eats and sleeps and dirties. Now she smiles as well. Dad says it's the wind but Mum says it isn't, it's 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 doesn't only smile when it's windy.

As well as eating Mum, Lucy now eats proper food, too. It doesn't look like proper food, though. Mum puts it in a mixer until it looks revolting and then feeds her with it.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came and brought parcels wrapped in fancy coloured paper. They said they wouldn't be here for Christmas as they'd booked a flight to go and see the canaries. Mum and Dad seemed to envy them and said it would be a lot warmer there. I don't know what all the fuss is about; I didn't know Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo were so keen on birds. They never take any notice of Riggarr. But then, if Uncle Joe has something nesting in his beard, I suppose they must like them a bit.

Dad said Prince had done his business on our front lawn. Dad was furious. He shouted and waved his arms around.

Mum said he'd better be sure it was Prince before he went complaining to Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist.

That made Dad go quiet. He frowned and thought.

He said if people had to have dogs they should make sure they did their business on their own lawns. He couldn't understand why people wanted to have dogs, anyway.

Mum says I will have to have my hair cut before Christmas. She says that, if I don't, Father Christmas won't know whether to leave boys' toys or girls' toys. This is bad news. Is this what Dad means when he says living with Mum makes him bald? Why does Mum make us have our hair cut off? I don't want to look like Dad.

Mum and Dad said they were going to take me to see Father Christmas. I had heard so much about this mysterious person that I was quite excited at the idea; but even before we arrived there my excitement was changing to apprehension.

We went to a big shop called a garden centre, where Father Christmas lives in a grotto. For some reason they called him Santa Claus here but Mum and Dad assured me that it was the same person. Why do people call him Father Christmas if his real name is Santa Claus? I wish people would have just one name. It's no wonder I get confused.

The garden centre was full and we had to queue to see Father Christmas. There was a curtain in the doorway of his grotto and every time someone came out I tried to see inside. It looked dark like a cellar, and a few of the children who came out looked as if they'd have been happier if they had never gone in. Gradually, my suspicions were confirmed; I really wasn't that desperate to see this person.

Emily had told me that she had seen him the day before and that Karen had sat down and sat Emily on her lap. Emily said Father Christmas smelled of fish. She said that where he lives, in Lapland, where people sit on laps all day long, there are tons of fish and that is why he smells of them.

The boy in the queue in front of us 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 cars for his garage. His face was lit up with anticipation and he almost made me eager to go in.

The boy finally went in with his mum and dad whilst I waited with my mum and dad. There were lots of people behind us in the queue and lots of people walking around carrying trees like the one in our living room. It was a wonderful place with loads of coloured balls and sparkly string everywhere. There were singing and

dancing models of Father Christmas and singing trees with faces on them. If I hadn't 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 a monster under a bed. A moment later the boy's mum and dad came out carrying him. He had tears streaming down his face and a screaming mouth that seemed to have displaced his head. They rushed through the crowd and disappeared into the distance until you could hardly hear him.

This had done nothing to encourage me to enter Father Christmas' grotto. I had decided that there were a million other places I would rather be. I tried to squirm out of Dad's arms but he held on and carried me inside. Mum stroked my hair and said illogical things.

"Don't be silly, Wills. He won't bite you."

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

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

Charming, I thought. If he's so particular about the type of children he sees, then he shouldn't 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. Father Christmas sat in the corner like an ogre awaiting his dinner of boiled boys and grilled girls. He wore a long coat and a big beard that covered all his face. He had a hood over his head and all I could see were two eyes peering out like a demon in a cave. He was fat like Peter Hinchcliffe's dad and he laughed when I buried my face in Dad's jacket.

"Ho, ho, ho! Don't be frightened, little fella," boomed Father Christmas, his voice echoing in the darkness like a devil in some long-forgotten dungeon.

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

I tried to scramble over Dad's shoulder and possibly burrow down the back of his coat. My screams were like a siren and I think Father Christmas was a bit alarmed (although he should have been used to it by now, judging from the noises we'd heard coming from his grotto before). I looked pleadingly at Dad, who just sat there wrestling with me with a worried smile on his face. Mum kept saying what a nice man Father Christmas was or some other blatant lie that 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 said, with a smile on his face that wasn't powerful enough to reach his eyes. His breath smelled like Dad's does when he's been to the Croaking Toad.

I continued to scream. Dad was looking agitatedly at Mum, wishing she'd take me off him. He wished he were somewhere else. He wasn't the only one.

Was this Father Christmas person going to climb down our chimney in the middle of the night and come into my bedroom? Even if I could have told him what I wanted, I wouldn't have done. I thought that if he didn't think I wanted anything, he wouldn't bother coming.

"There must be something you want," he persisted, with more determination for a satisfactory conclusion than I would have given him credit for.

I would have thought by this time he would have known what I wanted – to get out of there.

This went on for what seemed like a day until, eventually, he gave me a small parcel and said: "Goodbye, then. I'll see you at Christmas."

He seemed quite eager for Mum and Dad to take me out and I thought I heard him say: "Bloody kids!" but I couldn't be sure.

We were halfway home before I stopped sobbing.

I can say “Din-din,” now. I don’t say it because I’m 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’ll say “Din-din.” It hasn’t occurred to me to say “Din-din” if I’m hungry. Perhaps I ought to try that.

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

“Oolool!”

Oolool (which is what I’m going to call her from now on, because I like it better than Lucy and it’s 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.

She doesn’t waken up in the middle of the night very often, now, which is a good thing. She’s 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 that says “Oolool’s Room”. (It really says “Lucy’s Room” but I’m calling her Oolool, remember.) Perhaps it was Dad’s snoring that kept waking Oolool up like it does Mum.

I went to have my hair cut then Father Christmas wouldn’t leave me a doll. Having my hair cut seems a lot of trouble to go to in order for a strange man to come into my bedroom, uninvited, and leave a pile of toys that I probably won’t like, anyway. He takes a lot for granted, Father Christmas: he clambers over our roof, slithers down our chimney and tramples over our carpet just because he thinks people want him to.

Well, here's one person who would rather sleep soundly, knowing he wasn't coming, than stay awake half the night in order to hide under the covers when he arrives.

We heard a squealing from the front garden. Mum looked out of the window and screamed. She ran to the door and rushed out. I couldn't see what was going on. 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 was 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 wasn't in to look after Oolool and me so we all had to go in a taxi because Dad had taken the car to work.

When the vet saw Sam he took the mousetrap off and said Sam's leg was broken. I thought Mum was going to fall over when the vet told her how much it would cost. The vet asked Mum where the mousetrap had come from, but Mum didn't know. It was in the garden, she told him.

After the vet had finished we took Sam home in another taxi. Mum had to carry him because he was drowsy from the operation and couldn't walk anyway with his leg in plaster. She put him on an armchair and stroked him and talked to him to make him feel better.

Mum then went outside to see if she could find out how the mousetrap had ended up in our garden. When she came in she was carrying five more.

"We'll ask your dad if he knows anything about these when he comes home, shall we?" she said. Her voice frightened me. She looked as though she wanted to put Dad in a mousetrap.

When Dad came home the mousetraps were lined up on the kitchen table as evidence of his guilt. Mum was upstairs and when Dad saw them I thought he was going to be sick.

“Is that you?”

No name mentioned and Mum’s voice sounded like a clap of thunder upstairs. This was going to be bad. I crawled under the dining room table.

Mum thudded down the stairs and Dad looked around frantically for a means of escape.

“Oh, it is you, then,” she said when she saw him. She looked at him as if he were something that had fallen out of the dustbin. “What are these?” She placed her hands on her hips in threatening pose.

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

Mum walked over to the table. “These!” she said, nodding her head towards the table’s surface.

“Ohhh!” Dad stuttered. “Mmmousetraps!”

“What were they doing in our garden?”

Dad licked his dry lips and swallowed what seemed to be a grapefruit.

“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.”

“No...no, not to trap them – to frighten them off!”

“Why?” said Mum, 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.”



“Well, they wouldn’t come back, would they?”

Mum screwed up her eyes and glared at Dad as if she were trying to conjure up a laser beam to annihilate him with.

“And what about your own animal?”

“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 laughed but I don’t think she thought it was funny.

“So that’s all right, is it?”

“What?”

“For Sam to go on to other people’s lawns, but not for their animals to come on to 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 get his broken leg fixed.”

The mention of an arm and a leg threw me for a moment but I couldn’t stop to think about it or I’d have missed the rest of the argument.

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

Dad sat down at the table. He was beaten here but he wasn’t going down before he’d fired off his final ammunition.

“I didn’t think you’d let Billy crawl about on wet grass. Besides, the lawn isn’t fit for him to be crawling around on with all that dog muck on it.”

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

Dad rubbed his hands through his hair.

“Where is Sam?” he asked.

“He’s recuperating on the armchair,” Mum replied, her voice lowering a decibel or two. “Don’t you go anywhere near him. He’s had enough of your attention for one day.”

Dad 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.”

Karen told Mum that Emily’s dad had been to see her to ask if he could come home. 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.

Alan Gilchrist came to our house and asked Dad: “D’ye ken boot lictric, Harry? Ah’ve geeten mahssell yon dickle dockle feery leets an’ Ah’ll be jimmied an’ jockled if Ah kin git 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 don’t work.”

Dad knows as much about electricity as he does about heart surgery so he was the wrong person to ask.

He went around to Alan Gilchrist’s house with him to “sort out the problem.”

He came back three hours later looking guilty and sad. He'd 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 disappeared.

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 Gilchrists 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 his head out of the water then people can say they've seen him. Alan Gilchrist said he'd seen Nessie and his 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.

Before the Gilchrists could go home and keep warm in their own house Mum and Dad were speaking Scottish.

If Mum were giving Dad some potatoes, she'd 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. It was freezing cold even though the sun was shining. I would have preferred to stay at home but Mum said it would blow the cobwebs off us and get us from under her feet. So off we went. I was wrapped 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 that the lake was frozen over. I had never seen ice before except in our fridge. It was like the skin on Mum's rice puddings. Boys were throwing stones, which bounced off the ice. Two boys were walking on the ice and Dad called them 'silly buggers'.

I'm not sure what 'buggers' are. I've heard Dad say it before when he's been talking about John or Uncle Joe or Alan Gilchrist. It's always been 'worthless bugger' or 'stupid bugger' or 'Scottish bugger'. This makes me think that it's not a word you 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's rather coincidental that all these trees should grow in a place called 'the woods', rather than in, say the hospital car park. Why isn't there a pile of trees in the hospital car park like there is in the woods? These thoughts spring into my mind sometimes and puzzle me.

The trees were tall and kept the sun off us. It was even colder in the woods and dead leaves rustled under my buggy. It's quite spooky in the woods because it's so dark and quiet. You can hear things moving in the bushes and you expect something to jump out in front of you at any time. Well, I do, anyway.

We walked towards the witch's cottage. The witch's cottage 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. In the olden days, when Dad was a boy, an old witch used to live there. She put curses on people who went too close to the house.

We have walked this way before but have always gone past the house without stopping. It's very quiet there, as if the birds and animals know they shouldn't go near. You feel as if you should creep past and only whisper.

This time, to my horror, Dad started pushing my buggy towards the building.

There are tall stones standing on end near the witch's cottage. Dad told me, as he pushed me, that these stones were the remains of people whom she had turned to stone because they were trespassing. I began breathing heavily and sucked on my dummy until it almost 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 wouldn't it be funny if the witch came out now and put a spell on us. I didn't think it would be funny and suddenly realised what a useful word 'bugger' was to describe Dad.

He pushed me through the dead weeds to the front door and he looked through the window. He popped his head inside and looked one way then the other. I sucked desperately on my dummy, my eyes bulging with fright. I would have cried but 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 bounced around, 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 didn't care. All I wanted was to be a long way away. I looked through blurred, tear-stained eyes at Dad's face. It was full of fear and made me scream even louder.

We reached the path and stopped. My chest was pounding and tears streamed down my face as I gasped and almost choked with fear. I wasn't stone but I'd lost my dummy, which, now we appeared to be safe, seemed equally disastrous.

Then Dad came from behind the buggy and stood in front of me, laughing. He said he had only been joking and that he hadn't really seen a witch. I didn't think it was funny and when I grow up I'm going to be a witch and turn Dad to stone.

The nearer Christmas approaches the more my fear of Father Christmas is growing. Memories of our meeting at the garden centre keep haunting me and it's a toss-up between that and my walk in the woods with Dad as to which was the more frightening.

One day, I was in town with Mum, 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 pram and Mum, who'd been talking to Mrs Brierley from Platt Street, came rushing to my aid. I pointed in horror and cowered beneath my pram sheets 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 reassurances.

I don't care what anyone says, I don't like the look of him. Anyone who has to hide his face under that huge hood and cover it with such an enormous beard would seem to have something to hide. Well, I think so, anyway.

It's all very well Mum and Dad saying that Father Christmas is a "nice man who loves children." But does that mean he loves children as in – he looks after them and cares for them? Or does it mean he loves them on toast with a few baked beans and a bit of brown sauce? It isn't going to be in Mum and Dad's room that he'll 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'll end up sitting on someone's lap, making toys for other children.

I'll be glad when Christmas is over.

I seem to have created a new name for Lucy. Dad calls her "Oolool," now. She's going to grow up as confused as me if this goes on. It seems to be my star turn. People laugh when I say "Oolool" and the more they laugh, the louder I shout it.

"Oooloolooloolooloolool!"

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 chance 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.

Riggat 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 imagined Grandad on the floor of the cage with his legs in the air. Mum said Riggat was now with Grandad and Jesus.

Dad put Riggat in a 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 stone on top so that Sam couldn't dig it up.

I looked down the hole but I couldn't see Grandad or Jesus.

Mum and Dad kissed me goodnight and placed an empty pillowcase over the end of the bed and I wondered if it would be the last time I ever saw them. They closed the door and shut me in 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 creaks and groans as if the house were trying to uproot itself. Cars swished by on the wet road and cats howled at the moon. I was just about to drift into sleep when I heard the noise.

I couldn't make out what it was at first – just a noise that hadn't been there before. Then I identified it as breathing – heavy breathing; 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 covers but saw nothing in the darkness. I could hear the sound of grunting and groaning 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 covers up higher, ready to dive beneath them if I saw anything.

There was a flicker of movement in the darkness 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 stuffed head first into a sack and I screamed and screamed but no sound came from my mouth. No matter how much I wriggled and squirmed, it seemed that invisible hands were pinning me to the bottom of the sack.



Although I couldn't see anything, I knew I was being carried up the chimney. I could hear heavy panting as my kidnapper struggled with my weight. I was banging into the walls of the chimney 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 didn't 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 then 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, without thinking of the consequences, jumped over the side. As I tumbled over the side, I caught a glimpse of reindeer and a grasping hand trying to haul me back on board.

I drifted down and down, floating, almost, as if I were as light as a feather. The cold air brushed my cheeks and stung my eyes and, high above me, I saw the sleigh climbing towards the stars.

Below, our house was growing nearer and nearer. As I fell closer I saw the chimneystack 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 don't remember anything after that, but I must have guided myself to the chimney, for when I woke up I was back in my bed and Mum and Dad were stood there, saying: "He's been! He's been!"

Dazed, I looked around at the pillowcase, full of presents, at Mum and Dad, at Ooolool, in Mum's arms, and at the set of drawers that was in the same place as the non-existent fireplace, 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 to tell Mum or Dad that I want it, I'm told what it is. If Mum is eating chocolate and I point to it, I don't need telling it's chocolate – I know this, this is why I'm pointing at it; because I want some.

(Sometimes I think Mum acts a bit dumb on purpose because she doesn't want to share her chocolate.) If I cry when I've finished my dinner to tell Mum I want some more, I'll end up having my nappy changed. If I cry when my nappy is dripping as much as my chin, I'll be given a drink so I can wet it some more.

Life must be much easier for girls. Being lazy makes life hard. 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 end up watching Richard and Judy or, if I ask for a "bibick" to eat, I'm given a pile of building bricks.

"Gammer," "Ganny" and "Gapper" seem to get me understood so there's 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, wouldn't you? I can say "Da," and any fool can see that it's 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’m dribbling or making stupid noises, so why can’t I stick it on to the front of “am” to make “Sam?”

The trouble is that I get these moments of determination to improve my talking, and then a bout of drowsiness or hunger distracts me and I have to put off my attempts at improvement for another day. I wonder if girls don’t suffer from drowsiness or hunger? Perhaps, one day, I’ll be a ‘Corpse in the Corner’, like Dad.

I’m glad to say that my hair is growing faster these days; so living with Mum isn’t making me bald like it is Dad.

Emily came around to show me her new clothes. They were pink – you’d have guessed it, wouldn’t you?

“Daddy tooked me to ve shop and boughted me it,” she said, posing in pink dress, pink shoes and pink bobbles.

It mustn’t be much fun for Emily, having to go shopping with her mum and then having to go shopping with her dad.

She doesn’t seem to mind, though.

There’s so much to learn, you know, when you’re little. I still haven’t 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 buckle like bricks and I end up in a heap.

It’s not fair! I can’t even say: “Don’t let go!” or “Ouch!”

Oolool continues to progress. At this rate she’ll be walking and talking before me.

That would be something, wouldn’t it? I’d never be able to show my face in the *Early*

*Learning Centre* again. At the moment she can wave goodnight (but she does this even when she isn't going to bed, so perhaps she's not so bright, after all), she points at Sam, and she cries, eats and dirties.

People keep saying how beautiful Oolool is. She has big blue eyes and everyone says they are gorgeous; but they're the same as anyone else's: round and two in number. She has fair hair now, like me. Remember when Mum and Dad found her at the hospital; I said it was black? Well, somehow it's changed colour and now it's fair. People say this is gorgeous, too, but it's only hair like everyone else's. They say she's got a cute face. Well, I suppose it is kind of cute in a baby sort of way, but she's only got 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's 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 said that, since they had split up, he'd 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 live on Sycamore Crescent because, apart from Prince, I don't think there are any more dogs around here. I don't understand what they'll be able to do for Emily's dad, though.) She says that he can eat as much humble pie as he wants; she's not going to go soft on him.

I've decided that Karen is more difficult to understand than Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist. At least with the Gilchrists, I can't understand a word they say; I can understand everything Karen says but still not know what she's 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 Morton,” said the other.

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

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 own house; where else could he park it? Dad said he couldn’t care less where he put it, as long as it wasn’t outside our house.

John shrugged his shoulders, picked his nose, said: “Tough!” smiled and walked away.

I think this was a moment when Dad wished he had a racket. He wasn’t happy.

He went to the door of John’s stolen car and yanked it open. He did something inside and then started pushing it away. Dad’s face went through a few colour-changes and the car only moved from here to where I’m pointing now. (You won’t know how far that is but believe me, it’s not far.) He wound the window down and the window-winder came off in his hand. He tossed it on to the passenger seat and continued to push, one hand on the steering wheel, grunting and heaving. Eventually, it began rolling and Dad looked back at John’s house and grinned with satisfaction.

After a few moments a police car pulled up in front of Dad and he had to stop pushing. The policeman climbed out of his car and looked Dad up and down. He then

took out his notebook and studied it for a time. He told Dad that the car he was pushing had been reported stolen.

“Yes,” gasped Dad, mopping his brow, “it will have been. The thief lives over there at number twenty-three.” He pointed towards John’s house as he fought for his breath.

The policeman looked at Dad suspiciously. He studied his notebook again.

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

Dad nodded eagerly. “That’s where the thief lives,” he panted. “He steals cars.”

The policeman paused as if he were wondering which one of them was the more stupid. It didn’t take him long to reach his conclusion.

“The call 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 was here that Dad realised what the policeman had said. “What?” he said.

The policeman smiled. “It appears that you’ve been caught in the act, sir, of stealing this vehicle.” He nodded towards the object in question and Dad looked at it as if he hadn’t noticed it was there.

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

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

Dad threw his arms in the air. “I’m not stealing the car. Are you stupid?”

The policeman’s smirk disappeared, to be replaced by a look that was a little more threatening.

Dad began fumbling for words. “No! Sorry! No! Look!” He was having sentence problems again. He took a deep breath and started again. “I was just moving it from outside my house. It shouldn’t have been parked there.”

The policeman nodded. “And where were you going to put it, sir?”

“I...er...well, I...er, hadn’t thought, exactly!”

“I know,” suggested the policeman, helpfully. “You were just going to take it for a walk and then you were going to put it back where you found it.”

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

“I suggest it better had be right,” the policeman said, threateningly.

He took Dad’s name and told him that John could park outside whichever house he wanted to. Dad had to push the car back whilst John watched from across the road. The policeman told Dad to behave and to act his age. John was clapping his hands and laughing.

I think Dad is going to murder John.

Grandpa was in the army once. The army is a group of people who go across the sea and kill people who are in other armies. They blow up buildings and bridges with bombs, which explode with a loud bang. They shoot people with guns and then hide behind walls before 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. He said he was only a boy at the time. He had to go and fight for his country. Everyone had to do it; there was no choice. He didn’t enjoy being in the war, he said. He might have been killed.

When the war was over, Grandpa said he was “demobbed.” I don’t know what this means. He came home to his mother and father and was a hero.

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



Oolool doesn't eat Mum any more. She drinks from a bottle and eats from a spoon. I still don't understand why half of Mum isn't 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. I thought Auntie Jo was going to throw Oolool at the wall but she managed to force a smile on to her face.

“Well, never mind. I'm used to that here,” she said, looking at me. I don't like Auntie Jo.

Uncle Joe's beard is getting bigger. Every time they come back from their holidays it seems to have grown. I think Uncle Joe uses his beard as a bib. All the food he dribbles down it is swiftly gobbled up by whatever lives inside it. I think I saw a piece of carrot sticking out of it so I presume that whatever lives in there doesn't like carrots.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo are going on holiday again. This time they are going to see someone called Orlando. I don't know who Orlando is, but he's welcome to have Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo stay with him for a few weeks.

I think I know why Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo have so many holidays; it's then they won't have to visit us so often.

Whilst Dad was at work 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 they found out he wasn't seriously hurt.

Mum says he's been watching too many football matches and must have been rolling around in the gutter trying to attract attention.

Dad says, with his foot resting on a stool, that you never get any sympathy in this house. He says he's going to sue the council for putting a kerb there. He says it's a stupid place to put a kerb – by the side of the road.

I was holding on to the armchair, wondering if my dodgy 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 the coffee table. The gap was only a few steps but it looked like a gorge to me. I made a few false starts before letting go.

As I set off I was surprised at how well I was doing. I actually made three steps before it all went horribly wrong. My legs wanted to turn back but didn't mention this 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 didn't know, the chin is the part of the body where all the blood is stored. Most of mine ended up 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 which had been sat at the other end catapulted through the air with only one destination in mind. It landed on my head, shattering into a million pieces, and allowing whatever blood wasn't in my chin to escape through my head.

I screamed – well, you do, don't you? Mum came rushing in, saw the blood, and screamed even louder than I did. Dad hobbled in to see what all the screaming was about and Mum scooped me up, wrapped a towel around my head so that I could hardly breath, and we had a family outing to the hospital.

By the time we reached the hospital I was almost suffocated. I heard a nurse ask what was wrong with me as Mum was taking the towel off my head. Her question didn't fill me with confidence over her powers of deduction.

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'd fallen over a coffee table like I had. It made me feel better knowing I was being dealt with by someone who could appreciate my injuries.

They cleaned all the blood away and said I would have to have stitches in my chin. I didn't like the sound of this because I'd seen Mum putting stitches into clothes and I knew it involved needles being stuck in.

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

Before they started they stuck a needle in me to stop me from feeling anything. They could have done to have stuck a needle in me first to stop me from feeling the needle they stuck in 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 didn't feel I was acting particularly bravely. I would hate to see what a coward is like.

Anyway, they stitched me up and sent me home and Mum treated me like a wounded soldier. I vowed I would never try to walk again.

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

I don't know whether I'm supposed to keep my stitches in for the rest of my life or not. If not, then how am I going to get rid of them? Do they fall out on their own, or what? I've never seen anyone walking around with a patchwork face so, hopefully, one day they'll fall out.

At least I don't 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 whilst we're there to have his ankle examined again. Dad said it was funny but, all of a sudden, his ankle didn't 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 don't know who 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, her mouth was sticky from eating jelly babies and I thought they were 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 "rannin aroon in a wee while." She forgets that 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's something that wasn't there before. I wonder if, when I stop wearing it, she'll look at me because I'm not wearing it?

I could have sworn she pointed at me and said: "Hurt!" but I'm sure I must have imagined it.

When Grandma came she picked me up and hugged me, almost ripping out my stitches on her necklace. She put me down when I screamed into her ear and from then on just patted my cheek.

Granny and Grandpa bought me a motor car dashboard with a steering wheel and a horn for being “such a brave boy.” I wasn’t 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 to be perfect. “Ganny” and “Gammer” remain unchanged because they sound all right to me.

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

It’s 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. I can do “Sssss!” as I’ve said before, but I can’t 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, and “Ootyep” is easy. *Sesame Street* was a non-starter until I shortened it to “eet.” Even this was frustrating at first when Mum became delighted and told Dad and Karen that I had requested food. I would gorge on bananas and chocolate biscuits whilst wondering forlornly what Big Bird and Kermit were up to.

I think Oolool said: “Dadda!” This is quite alarming. She’s more than a year younger than me and already she’s started talking. No one else heard her and I’m in no position to tell anyone, so I’ll have to see if she says it again.

Marvellous, isn’t it? Any day now she’ll be walking in from the kitchen, chewing on a chicken leg, yelling: “Thanks, Mum. Shall I give some to Wills, or can’t he eat it on his own?”

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 had bad memories of that place and cried as we entered the trees.

We stopped beneath a big tree that had new leaves growing on it. Grandpa 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’s cloak. He said he felt better afterwards. I felt better after my chocolate.

Grandpa told me that there used to be trees all over the country many years ago, with bears and wolves and wild boar roaming around among them. He made it sound spooky and I looked over my shoulder to make sure we weren’t about to be eaten. I was glad we were nowhere near the witch’s cottage.

Grandpa said that when the trees covered all the land people chopped them down and built houses with them. I don’t suppose this has anything to do with Dad saying Mum’s barking up the wrong tree and Mum saying to Dad that he’s out of his, do you think?

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

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

I think this is Dad's idea of a joke. He doesn't seem to be very sad about it. I can tell by the way he laughs every time it is mentioned.

John looks at Dad as if he has stolen it and the police asked Dad if he'd seen anyone suspicious around.

"Only John," said Dad.

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

Mum slaps Dad on the head when he says things like that. Mum says John works hard for his car and Dad shouldn't say things like that.

When Mum is out of hearing Dad says that it isn't hard work stealing cars.

Karen came around to drink coffee with Mum. She told Mum that Emily's dad was coming home. Karen said that he'd promised to turn over a new leaf and that he wasn't going to stray from the fold any more. He only wanted to be with the ones he loved and couldn't imagine life without them.

Mum told Dad later that if Emily's dad really meant that then her name was Jemima Puddleduck. Mum's name is Christine Crabtree. I'm confused.

We now have a buggy in which Oolool and me can sit side by side. Already I'm fed up with people stopping Mum in the street and telling her how beautiful Oolool is. They say she has Mum's eyes and that she is the cutest baby they've ever seen. They talk to me as an afterthought.

"Hello, Billy," they say. "Aren't you lucky to have such a beautiful sister?"

I remember the days when they used to call me beautiful. I didn't particularly enjoy being called beautiful, as I think I've told you already, but it was 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. I couldn't do that at her age; so Mum and Dad eagerly remind me. I suppose I'd better concentrate on the walking business or Oolool will be showing me how to do it.

The trouble is that I'm a little bit wary after the chin incident. I practice when no one is looking for fear of making a fool of myself. I can stand up on my own without holding on to anything, but my legs go all wobbly as if I were on a tightrope. As I put one leg forward my other one collapses as though it can't take all my weight on its own. Being top-heavy and having no balance is not helping my progress. It's a bigger handicap than being lazy.

Granny and Grandpa are going on holiday. They're going to a place called Austria, which is over the sea. The last time Grandpa went over the sea he fought the army over there. I hope they don't run into them again. Granny has never been over the sea. 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 a plane crashes into a mountain. Grandpa tells her that she's much more likely to crash in a car than in a plane. Granny says that if a car breaks down it coasts gently to a halt.



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.

I don't know if they'll ever get as far as Austria. I think they said there were mountains there.

Alan Gilchrist came around and said: "D'ye ken 'boot cars, Harry? Yon mickle mackle jalopy winny start."

Dad said he'd go and have a look. I don't know why he says these things; he knows more about Christmas tree lights than he does about cars. Mum said if Alan Gilchrist treasured his car, he shouldn't let Dad near it, 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'd have to give the car a tow. I thought, at first, that he was going to kick it like he does our car sometimes, but then I saw him with the rope and realised 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 couldn't understand it and scratched his head, adding more oil to his face.

Dad rang a man with whom he works called Frank. Frank knew all about cars, Dad said. Mum said Dad should have rung Grandpa because he knows a lot about cars, but Dad rung 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'd all been booked by a policeman for causing a hazard to other road users. The policeman had told them that they couldn't tow two vehicles at the same time and anyone with any sense would have known that.

Mum called Dad stupid and said she hoped he was satisfied. He didn't look very satisfied. And the cars were still broken down.

Dad eventually rung Grandpa, as Mum had told him to do in the first place. Grandpa came up and examined the cars. He said they'd both run out of petrol and he was surprised they hadn't thought of that first. 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. Cor! Still, it's better than cauliflower cheese and diced carrots.

John has a new hairstyle. In fact, it's more of a headstyle because he's shaven all his hair off. His head shines like a polished doorknob. Dad says he's shaven all his hair off then whoever he has mugged won't be able to tell the police what colour his hair was.

Mum slapped Dad on the head for saying this.

Ooolool doesn't say "Dadda" any more; she says "Daddy." And what's more, she points at Dad when she says it. This is no accident – it's a nightmare!

Mum and Dad say: "Who's a clever girl?"

And Ooolool says: "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'm pretty useless in that direction, too, as you know.

I dread to think what Ooolool will do next.

## FOUR

There is a time approaching called Easter. Easter, it seems, is a time when people give each other eggs. But not ordinary eggs, apparently. People give each other chocolate eggs.

This sounds brilliant, doesn't it? Chocolate eggs; very nice. I don't know where chocolate eggs come from. If normal eggs come from chickens, do chocolate eggs come from chockens? I don't know.

One thing worries me: no one has mentioned this, and I hear that people give each other the eggs, but where do people get the eggs from in the first place? What I mean is: is there a Father Easter?

As I say, no one has talked about this and I don't want to cause any unnecessary worry but, after my problems with Father Christmas, I don't want to discover some distant cousin of his is going to call on our house in the middle of some night armed with sackfuls of chocolate eggs intent on being 'nice' to boys and girls and leaving them little surprises for when they wake up.

As much as I like the thought of chocolate eggs, I'd rather do without if that were the case. 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.

“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. I’m normal, though. It’s Oolool who is the freak. But that is no consolation. I feel like a by-product: a leftover from an experiment, the core of an apple, the rind of the bacon, yesterday’s newspaper.

Every day Oolool astonishes us with a new word. Names are no problem. She says “Wills” and “Emily” and “Karen” with the ease of breathing. She says, “go walkies,” or “pooh-pooh,” or “hungry” with such coolness that you’d think every six-month-old baby said these things. But the thing that annoys me the most is that she says “Sesame Street” with the clarity of a television presenter whilst I’m still 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’s no fun having to try harder when you’re lazy. But I can’t let her make a fool of me, can I?

I can say “Mummy” and “Daddy,” now, and the other usual things, you know, like “bick-bicks” 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 can get), so things are improving.

As for walking, well... I think I’ve got the hang of it - kind of. At least I can take a few steps before falling over, so I suppose you could say they’re a few steps in the right direction. Mum and Dad don’t have people around to see me walk. In fact, I think they try to keep it quiet that I’m only just learning.

I think that if it had been Oolool who'd just learned to walk, there would have been queues of people stood at the door waiting to see our "beautiful little miracle." (I actually heard someone call Oolool that – "a beautiful little miracle." It was some woman I didn't know but, well... can you believe that? I was almost sick on her. It's making me feel sick, now, just thinking about it. Or maybe it's the milk shake I've just drunk, along with the bar of *Galaxy* which I found that Mum had stashed away beneath the cushion on the chair.)

People continue to stop us in the street to comment on how beautiful Oolool is. All right, all right, I admit it; I suppose there is a certain amount of cuteness there, if you like that kind of thing. But then, I'm 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?"

I look at them with disdain. Oolool looks at them from under her blond hair, with her big eyes, then looks at me, sucking my dummy, and says in her cutest, squeaky, baby 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 was pushing Oolool and me 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. These are three words I could never imagine myself using: listen, to and this. Whilst I'm grappling with basics like "Mummy" and "Daddy," I've got Cleverclogs sitting there, next to me, letting me in on the secrets of her act and, presumably, 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?" she asked.

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 muttered something like: "Eeebropp!" which was not an attempt to say anything meaningful, but I think it's more polite to say something unintelligible rather than say nothing at all.

Oolool, the show-off, said: "Fine, thank you!"

Her voice doesn't sound as if it should be saying things like that, and would be more suited to: "Goo-goo" and "Gagga!" Mrs Kershaw's mouth dropped open and she looked at Mum as if she were hearing things.

"You know," she said to Mum, "I've heard about this talking baby of yours and I didn't believe it."

Oh, it's true, Mrs Kershaw, it's true. Already Oolool is the talk of the town, it seems.

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

There are times when I'd like to whack my sister around the head. This was one of them. She smiled up at Mrs Kershaw with her best gloating and boastful smile. I don't know what stopped her from saying: "Aren't I clever?" It couldn't have been modesty because that's one word she doesn't 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! See what a mess you can make of it.”

Emily comes around fairly regularly to have a chat with Oolool. It’s girls’ talk so I don’t get involved.

Emily says to Oolool: “Do you like my dress?” (It’s pink, of course!) She then spins around like she’s seen them do on the telly and becomes dizzy and almost knocks Mum’s geranium off the coffee table.

Oolool replies: “Yes, it’s very pretty.”

Pretty boring, huh?

Emily told Oolool that her dad had come home after being away for a while. She explained how she and her mum were sad when her dad went away but are happy now that he’s back. Oolool listens and nods in all the right places as if she were an Agony Aunt. I suck my dummy and watch *Tom and Jerry*.

I think I know what an Agony Aunt is because Auntie Jo is one; well, at least Dad says it’s agony having her with us.

People tell Mum that she should ring the local newspaper and tell them about Oolool. They say she’s a prodigy. They say that in a few months’ time she’ll be playing the violin and doing impossible mathematical calculations. I think they mean sums. I have sums in my book. They are one cat and one cat equals two cats, and three bricks plus two bricks equals five bricks. These sums seem fairly impossible to me but I would think Smarty Pants would be able to work them out whilst she was calculating the weight of the moon.

Anyway, Oolool can count things now, never mind in a few months' time. She counts fingers and toes and knobs on the telly. She also counts the hairs on Dad's head; as long as there is not a lot of anything she can count them.

Mum says she doesn't want to tell the newspaper about Oolool in case what she can do isn't so unusual. She says she'll feel a fool if the newspaper people turn around and say: "So what? Talking babies are ten a penny!"

And besides, she says, she doesn't want Oolool to suffer all the publicity like the Queen and David Beckham.

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

"You wear it on your head," she said.

I'd never have worked that out.

It's called a balaclava. I don't like it. It makes me itchy and looks stupid. I've never seen anyone else wearing one of these. Maybe it's Grandma's invention. I've got some bad news for her; it'll never catch on. If she ever enters a competition called: "Invent A Ridiculous Piece Of Headgear" she'll win it easily with her balaclava.

I can walk! I can walk! I think I can now officially say that I can walk. What joy!

Cool!

All right, so walking's no big deal and I still fall over sometimes when my legs don't get the message in time. The thing is, I can now walk away from Brainbox when she's boring me with her brilliance, while she has to watch me go, stranded, as she is, in her chair.



It's only because her spindly bow legs won't carry her that she hasn't started walking before me. If it had been down to brain power she'd be running marathons by now.

Alan Gilchrist happened to mention that the central heating radiator in his bathroom "wassny worrkin." Dad immediately said he'd go and have a look at it but Alan Gilchrist said it "didnay maatterr," and rushed off to phone a plumber.

I don't think he trusts Dad any more.

Ooolool doesn't have a dummy. She doesn't need a drug to help her overcome the stresses of everyday life. Besides, she wouldn't be able to talk 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 get lost at a good time), heaven and earth must be moved in order to find it.

Having said all this, I'm not giving mine up. I can live with the occasional cat hair.

When Grandpa was in the army he went to France where he slept in a hole in the ground for three days. I'm never going to France if they don't have proper bedrooms.

Emily came around and we had an interesting conversation. Well, I call it a conversation but you can imagine what it was like, can't you?

"I'm going to school in September," said Emily.

I'd heard something mentioned about this. Karen must have been telling Mum.

“All my friends are going, too,” Emily continued. She stood in her familiar pose, with her hands behind her back and twisting her body to and fro as if she were trying to bore a hole in the ground.

“When are you going to school, Wills?”

I hadn’t a clue. I sucked my dummy and made a noise through it as if I were attempting an answer.

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

“Your garden’s pretty,” she said. It is, compared to hers. “Ours will be, now Daddy’s comed back.”

Hmm, maybe, I thought. But what do dads have to do with gardening?

Emily turned towards me and looked at me thoughtfully. I could sense there was something on her mind. It must have been the same terrible feeling that Dad gets before Mum tells him something he doesn’t want to know.

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

I looked around stupidly. I hadn’t been anywhere. What was she talking about?

“When you were borned,” she explained, impatiently. “Do you know where you comed from?”

I could see she was becoming a little excitable so I thought I’d better try to reply. Was Emily’s impatience 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 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 and looked at her in wonder. If Oolool was anything to go by, then Mum and Dad found me in the hospital. I must have been in one of the beds, or something.

“I know where I comed 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 comed from?” she asked, teasingly.

I nodded and sucked. Of course I want to know. Was it from in a bed or from under one, or somewhere else? Maybe from in a cupboard or off a shelf? I hoped Emily wasn't going to want to swap anything for the information. I didn't want to give her any of my chocolate buttons.

“I comed from Mummy's tummy,” she said eventually, in a hushed, secretive voice.

What? What was she talking about? Karen's tummy? How? Why? What? I sucked feverishly.

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

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

What was I doing in Karen's tummy?

“You comed from your mummy's tummy,” she said.

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

“Mummy tolded me,” Emily went on. “We watched a cow being borned on the telly and Mummy saided that was where I comed from.” She wrinkled up her nose. “It didn't looked very nice,” she added.

I was confused, now. First of all, Emily was in Karen's tummy, and then Karen tells her that 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 properly." She began tapping her feet on the floor and spinning around like a ballerina. "Mummy said I can go to dancing lessons now that Daddy's come home."

What has dancing got to do with soggy cows? I thought. Keep to the point! Don't change the subject!

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

"Do you remember your mummy's tummy being big before Lucy was born?" Emily asked, her mind somehow ricocheting back to the subject in question.

I nodded. Yes, before she exploded.

"Well, that was Lucy, inside."

The girl had obviously flipped. Oooh hadn't been in there; she'd been under the hospital bed or in a cupboard. If she'd been in Mum's tummy she'd have been covered in cabbage and bacon sandwiches.

"Your mummy went to hospital and Lucy popped 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.

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 and there was no mention of Father Easter. I had a *Smarties* egg and a *Buttons* egg. I also had a *Yorkie* egg and a *Galaxy* egg. Mum said

she would have to help me to eat all these because I would be sick if I ate them all myself. Oolool had the same and Mum helped her to eat hers, too. Good old Mum!

Dad said he was going to ring the *Rochdale Observer* (that's the local newspaper) about Oolool's talking.

Mum said, oh, no, he wasn't. She didn't want to turn Oolool into a celebrity. Dad said she wouldn't be a celebrity; she'd only be famous for fifteen minutes. (Everybody, it seems, is famous for fifteen minutes.) And besides, people liked to read about things like this, Dad insisted.

Mum ooh'd and aah'd and if'd and but'd, but in the end she gave in.

"As long as it goes no further than the *Observer*," she warned.

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

We went shopping to a place called an Outlet Village. I'd never been there before. I hope I don't have to go again. It was a nightmare. I've never seen so many cars parked in one place before. The car park was bigger than Rochdale.

Dad said they'd built the car park first and then added the shops afterwards to give the people somewhere to go after they'd 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 wasn't going to be a good day.

Dad pushed me and Oolool in the buggy as we followed Mum into the shops. Mum spent ages picking up clothes and putting them down again. There were Mum-type clothes and 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's pushing the buggy around. His face was sad and he yawned a lot. I began crying 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 properly I'm going to explain to Mum that shopping is a lot quicker if you don't stop to go into shops.

Eventually, we reached *MacDonald's*. I had some fries and some of Dad's *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, she was in the same shop we had left her in. I thought we'd spend the rest of our lives there. There were still millions of people walking around. Half the world must have been there, 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 like they'd been there for days. There were men with tired, red eyes and lined faces as a result of waiting for wives. People argued and sighed and jostled and pushed. Like I said, it was a nightmare.

That was nothing, though, compared to what followed.

After what seemed like a week, but was probably only two days (Dad definitely had the beginnings of a beard by this time), Mum came out of the shop and said it was time to go home. Dad and me almost cried with relief. Mum had bought two pairs of socks. She said what a wonderful place this was and that she'd love to come back with some money to spend. If she hadn't brought any money, what was the point of coming here in the first place? It was like watching the telly without turning it

on. Mum said we'd all have to come again. The rest of us remained silent; we didn't have the energy to answer. Even Oolool couldn't be bothered answering.

We went back to where we'd left the car and it wasn't there. Dad looked up and down the row 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 he was sure 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 didn't 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 a patch of oil on the floor in the spot 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 country has an oil leak.

Dad was chunnering something about mushy-pea-heads and stringing them up 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 didn't trust Dad. She said we should try another aisle of cars to make sure he wasn't mistaken. Dad said there was no point because he knew he'd parked it 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 hadn't emptied the bins or we'd be well and truly up the creek.

Dad walked up and down aimlessly for a while until Mum said he wasn't 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'd forgotten to lock the car door.

Dad said he'd go and phone the police, so off he went.

Half an hour later the police arrived. They 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 call a taxi," said Mum in a voice that wasn't to be disputed.

Dad said it would cost us an arm and a leg.

"Would you prefer us to walk home?" Mum asked, her words barbed and poisoned.

Dad went to call a taxi.

Forty minutes later, the taxi arrived to take us home. It was very nice in the taxi. A voice on the radio kept talking to the driver and the driver kept talking to Dad. Dad wasn't very chatty. It cost thirty-three pounds in the taxi 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'd book us a holiday in Tenerife and we'd go there instead. It would be cheaper – and we'd be home sooner.

Roy and Rob told me a story about football and I don't know if it's true or not. This is it:

A man went on holiday to Florida and whilst he was there he went to a fairground. At the fairground was a Memory Man. This is someone who remembers things, right? On the board outside his booth it said: "Any Event Remembered – Come And Try Me."

The man thought, I'll go and see how good this chap is. So in he goes.



The Memory Man says: “Ask me any question about an event from over the last fifty years and I’ll tell you the answer.”

The man thought, so this chap thinks he know it all, does he? I’ll show him!

He says: “Which team won the Scottish Cup Final in 1955?”

The Memory Man thought for a moment and said: “Clyde beat Celtic 1-0.”

“That’s amazing!” said the man, and walked out, staggered by the Memory Man.

Ten years later the man goes back to Florida and to the same fairground. At the fairground he sees the same booth advertising the Memory Man.

The man thinks to himself, I’ll see how good this chap is. If I go and see him again, now, if he’s so good he should remember me from ten years ago. But I’ll make it a bit more difficult for him – I’ll go in disguise.

So the man goes to a fancy dress shop and hires a Red Indian costume. He puts it on and goes to see the Memory Man.

He walks into the booth in all his feathers and frills and says the traditional Red Indian greeting: “How!”

The Memory Man looks at the man and says: “A diving header by McAllister in the sixty-seventh minute.”

This may be a joke. Judging by the way Roy and Rob have to hold on to each other to stop themselves falling over laughing, it would appear they hadn’t heard it before.

I wish I could understand jokes. They make people laugh.

Mum’s started putting me on the potty. This isn’t something I wish to talk about, okay? Let’s just say that I’m not performing very well in this direction, either.

I'm still fed up with complete strangers stopping us in the street to tell us how beautiful Oolool is. She's been called an angel so many times that I've started looking for her wings. She loves every minute of it. She sits in the buggy accepting the compliments and smiling smugly.

“Oh, what a lovely smile!” they'll 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 throw up.

I have tonsillitis. This is a disease, which gives you a sore throat and a temperature, and makes you want to lie down in bed and never get up again. I've had colds and little things like that before, but I've never had tonsillitis. Mum keeps pouring medicine down my throat and keeps telling me that I'll soon be better.

She took me to the doctor and he looked down my throat to see if he could see my tonsillitis and he stuck a lollipop stick in my mouth, which almost made me sick. He told Mum to give me the medicine and I would soon be better.

In the meantime, I don't seem to have much energy so I'm going to go to sleep.

A man came to see us. He had a notebook and a pen in his hand. He was a reporter from the local paper. He was only young and wore wire-rimmed spectacles with glass so thick they made his eyes as big as golf balls. He had red hair and freckles and his front teeth stuck out and made him look like a rabbit. Apart from that, he looked quite normal.

He said his name was Humphries. I thought, if his name belongs to Humphrey, what's this person doing with it? (I think this is a joke. If you don't laugh, I'll know I'm wrong.)

Mum came in with Humphries 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?” Humphries said, looking at me. He not only looked strange, he sounded strange, too. His voice was high and he whistled when he said his esses.

“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 Humphries. “What a pretty girl!” (Did he sound pleased it wasn’t me, or am I being paranoid?) “You’re a bit of a chatterbox, are you, young lady?”

Oolool looked at him as if he’d beamed down from another planet. She just frowned silently for a moment and then let out a scream that would have woken Riggarr. She couldn’t have been more terrified if she’d seen the Witch In The Wood. I think it was Humphries’ strange-coloured hair that did it – or his eyes, or his freckles, or his voice...

“Oh, dear,” he said, a worried frown on his brow as he nibbled his pen as if it were a carrot. “I have this effect on children. It’s my hair, you know.”

His face grew redder by the second. A smile kept flickering on his face as Oolool quietened down, but disappeared again as she erupted anew. I think he was new at being a reporter and he looked very uncomfortable as he fidgeted on his chair. He looked like he was sat on a cricket ball.

I was beginning to feel quite sorry for him as I sat sucking my dummy, looking at him and wondering if he didn’t wish he were somewhere else, reporting about a lost dog.

Tears streamed down Oolool’s face as Mum tried to sooth her.

“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 in Mum’s shoulder, peeped from her haven and, seeing Humphries was still there, let out a new scream. The reporter was having the same effect on Oolool as Father Christmas had on me. I was pleased to find that she was quite normal in some ways.

Humphries continued to squirm and smile guiltily. If his pen had been a carrot, he’d 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 her soothingly. “He wants to see how clever you are.”

Oolool looked at poor Humphries sulkily through red-rimmed eyes. “No!” she said, her bottom lip protruding like a tongue. “Not nice man!”

Mum tapped Oolool on the back of her hand. (If it had been me she’d have whacked me across the back of the head with a mallet.) “That’s not nice!” she said. “Don’t be cheeky!”

Oolool renewed her outburst and buried her face in her hands.

Humphries kept looking towards the door as if he were searching for an excuse to leave. If this was his first assignment it was enough to make him want to be 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.”

Humphries grabbed at this opportunity to get out as if it were a lifeline. He stood up.

“If...if it’s a bad time, I’ll...I’ll call back,” he said. “Or... or I’ll get someone else to call,” he added (which undoubtedly sounded like the better option to him), his eyes brightened at the brilliance of this idea.

He made a hesitant movement towards the door. He seemed to be afraid that any sudden exit might have Oolool throwing knives after him.

“I’ll, er...I’ll ring, or get someone else to ring to make an appointment,” he said to Mum. “Perhaps, er, maybe if you warn her that someone’s coming...” His voice trailed off because, like me, he didn’t know what difference warning her would make. We’d told her that he was coming and that hadn’t helped much.

He smiled helplessly and his teeth seemed to reach out into the room.

“Don’t get up,” he continued, as he shuffled sideways towards the door. There was relief in his voice, now, as he realised escape was near. He opened the door. “Goodbye,” he said. “Goodbye, little girl.”

He was gone. I imagined him dashing down the garden path to his getaway car, thankful that the day was over and looking forward to the morning when he could look for another job.

I think Oolool may have been right about him, though. For one thing, he never said goodbye to me and, for another, nobody rang back.

When I say nobody rang back, that’s not entirely true. We did get a phone call, but it was from the police.

It was four days since we’d reported our car stolen from the Outlet Village and the police were ringing to say they’d found it. It was in the car park of the Outlet Village; in the same place we’d left it.

Mum’s mouth opened so wide when she screamed: “WHAT?” that I thought she was going to bite the phone in half.

After she'd hung up the phone she walked back and forth across the room, folding and unfolding her arms, tapping her fingers on any convenient surface, and swearing to herself.

"Wait till your bloody father gets home!" she kept saying. "Your father is an absolute idiot!" She said this several times, but also used various alternatives to "idiot."

Oolool and me looked at each other but said nothing. We know when not to be nuisances.

She polished every surface in the house as if she were trying to wear them out, and she put the rug over the garden wall and beat it with the carpet-beater as if she were imagining it were Dad lying there at her mercy.

Eventually, Dad came home whistling and I went and sat behind the settee. Mum threw verbal grenades at him as soon as his foot hit the welcome mat.

"You absolutely stupid idiot!" she screamed. "You useless, worthless object! You absolutely...useless (here, Mum obviously didn't want to repeat herself but was struggling to find suitable alternatives which she could use within our earshot) moron! You're as much use as a...a...a...as a two-legged table!"

Mum paused for breath and Dad looked at her as if he'd noticed something was wrong.

"And a good evening to you, pet," he said, curiosity and fear draining the colour from his face. "Have...have you had a bad day?" He looked around for any visible damage that might have caused Mum's outburst. "Er...have I done something to upset you, pet?"

I thought Mum couldn't have got any angrier, but she did. I could hear the crackle in her voice as it shot across the room like a thunderbolt.

“Have you done something wrong? Have you ever done anything right, you mean!”

At this point, Mum clenched her fists and jumped up and down, frustrated at having only words with which to attack Dad.

“THEPOLICEFOUNDTHECARINEXACTLYTHESAMESPOTYOULEFT ITINYOUMORON!”

It took a moment for Dad 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 hadn't bothered.

“What?”

Mum's eyes were wide 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 though she couldn't bear to look at him any longer. She stormed over to the window and looked outside with her arms folded. Then she turned towards him again as if her anger had been 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!” She gritted her teeth and I thought I saw a puff of smoke escape from her lips.

Dad shook and scratched his head. “You mean the car was where we left it?” he dared to ask.

By now, Mum was having difficulty speaking. She couldn't 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 that if he shook his head enough this nightmare wouldn't be happening. He looked

totally confused. He looked as though someone had just told him that the earth WAS flat, after all.

“Oh, I do,” Mum snorted. “I understand perfectly.”

“But...but it wasn't there,” said Dad, frantically. “You saw yourself; it wasn't there.”

“It wasn't where we looked,” Mum shouted. There was spittle frothing on her lips, now and I thought, if she were a dog, they'd say she was mad. Mind you, dog or not, she wasn't very pleased.

Dad thought for a moment, searching for straws at which he could clutch.

“The mushy-pea heads that took it must have put it back where they found it,” he said desperately, but not very convincingly.

“There's only one mushy-pea head around here,” Mum said, her voice rising even higher than I thought possible. “There's no damage to it; the radio's still in it. IT'S NEVER BEEN MOVED!”

I've 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?”

Dad was really 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 held a raffle at the police station to decide who would be the lucky one to ring us.”



Mum then shook her head in despair; as if there was 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 finish up in a litter bin, but I'm sure there must be more than one."

I felt quite sorry for Dad in the end. Mum thought he was an idiot and, presumably, the police did, too. The story would go down in the family history and be a means of ridiculing him for years to come. He sat there looking sad. He'd run out of theories and didn't 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 appear there suddenly, 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 don't 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 don't remember, even though I was there. We all go to church and sing hymns and the vicar wets Oolool's head. I hope he doesn't get all wobbly and start talking daft like Dad did when he wet her head.

I can't 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 aren't as fast as my body wants to be, 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's easy, really, but if she thinks I'm going to help her she can think again. I've got to stay better than her at something.

I don't think Mum has exactly forgiven Dad for losing our car but at least she's stopped talking about it, which is more than can be said for some:

“Wos yon I 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 chose to ignore what Alan Gilchrist said, whether he understood it or not.

Karen said she didn't want to put her foot in it but Mum had let the cat out of the bag that Dad wasn't flavour of the month. She said she'd hate to be left high and dry with her car gone for a burton, but she thought it was time to bury the hatchet.

(If you don't understand this last paragraph, don't worry; neither do I.)

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo came to see us. They said Orlando was hot and too busy. I'll bet Orlando only said he was too 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 wasn't sick on Auntie Jo this time. She isn't sick so much now that she's stopped eating Mum. Auntie Jo bounced her on her knee and pretended to enjoy herself.

Oolool didn't pretend; she just said: “Want off!”

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo are going on holiday again. They're going to have Anna in Cuba. I don't know who Anna is, but she's welcome to be having Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo in Cuba, or anywhere else, for that matter.

I think Uncle Joe has a mouse in his beard; I saw its tail sticking out. It was either that or a piece of spaghetti that Orlando had given him.

Granny and Grandpa didn't 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. I know what she expects me to do but you can't always perform to order, can you? I'll sit there for ages trying to squirt something out and then, when I eventually manage a dribble, she jumps around, clapping her hands and saying how clever I am. Come to think of it, I suppose it is a bit clever, isn't it? I'll bet Smartypants couldn't do it.

Oolool has been christened. Everyone made such a fuss before it that I thought it would last all day. It was only short, though. We sat on the front row in 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 don't know how Dad managed to wet Oolool's head because he didn't have her with him at the time.).

When we'd 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 and a few more people I'd never seen before.

Oolool entertained them all with her chatter and everyone said she ought to go on telly.

Dad's eyes lit up at the mention of this and he said: "Do you really think so?"

They all said: "Yes, she'll be a child star."

Dad's eyes twinkled. I think he'd like to see his name on telly.

John now has a girlfriend. She's called Heather. Dad said he didn't realise it was a girl until he saw John kissing her. She has a head like a tennis ball, too, but with a long pony-tail hanging down the back. Dad says she looks like 'soap on a rope'. I think she's 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 and then go back to start all over again. Dad says why can't they take a walk in the park like he and Mum did when they first met? Mum says they care for the environment and they're right to protest. She says people can't go on building roads because we'll live on a tarmac island before long.

Dad says she's right. The environment is a lot safer while John's up a tree.

When they come home from sitting in trees and being dragged along the ground they are covered in mud and look as if they haven't washed for a week. Dad says they make a perfect pair.

Oolool bit me. She has two teeth and when I put my finger in her mouth to feel them, she bit me. I cried and Mum told me to stop being a baby.

This is typical! When Karen and Emily came around and Emily spilled her blackcurrant juice on the carpet, Mum said it didn't matter because the carpet was ruined, anyway, with all the spills I'd had. When Oolool was sick on Auntie Jo, Mum

would blame me for bouncing on the settee. I'm sure if Mum thought about it for long enough, she could find a reason for blaming me for losing the car at the Outlet Village.

As well as learning what objects are and having to learn how to say them, I now find that each object has a colour. It's no longer good enough to know that a car is a car or a dog is a dog; I have to know that a red car is a red car and a black dog is a black dog. They'll be telling me next that I have to learn what shape things are: that triangles have three sides and squares have four sides and that circles are round. I'll never be able to learn all that.

Grandma made me some gloves without fingers in them. She said I'd be glad of them when winter comes. I don't see the point in them because it's always my fingers that get cold. It's like wearing trousers with no legs in them.

Mum's writing a book but she won't tell us what it's about and she won't tell us what it's called. She says she doesn't know if it's any good or not and will only find that out if it ever gets published. Dad pesters her to tell him about it but she won't. She says he'll have to wait until it's published (if ever).

"Now, you must talk to the nice man from the paper when he comes to see you. All right?"

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 won’t hurt you.”

“Right, then,” Oolool said, her bottom lip almost touching her chin.

So the man from the newspaper is coming again. There’s 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 from the *Observer* was coming and we'd all been waiting patiently. Well, three of us had been waiting patiently; Dad had been waiting impatiently. He'd been rehearsing with Oolool what she was supposed to say. He'd then been looking at his watch every minute and Mum had been watching him with growing irritation. Every few minutes he would go to the window and look outside.

Mum kept tutting and sighing, looking up from the magazine she was trying to read.

"I wish you'd just sit down and wait," she eventually said, as Dad's fidgeting became too much for her. "It isn't Michael Parkinson who's coming, you know. It's an unknown reporter from the local paper who, judging from his last visit, will be more nervous than you are." She turned the page of her magazine and shook her head.

Dad looked at Mum as if she didn't understand.

"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 was growing louder and I wondered about Dad's common sense as he rose from his chair to look out of the window again. "It's not a talent contest, you know," Mum insisted. "It's an interview for 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. “I thought it wouldn’t go any further than the *Observer*.” Her eyes burned into Dad like lasers.

Dad was evasive. “It won’t, probably. It won’t. It’s not important enough to go any further.”

Maybe it was my imagination but Dad’s eyes told a different story than his mouth.

I realised by now that Dad was a frustrated star. He longed to be famous but there was nothing he could do that would make him so. He couldn’t sing (apart from about *Delilah* and *Eleanor Rigby*, and he couldn’t become famous by singing two songs), he couldn’t act (except daft, Mum says), and he couldn’t dance. Mum says he’s a comedian but he isn’t funny; so he’s trying to become famous through Ooolool. Secondary stardom, if you like.

Anyway, by the time the knock came on the door, Dad’s fingernails were chewed down to the second knuckle and he’d 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 that almost pierced our eardrums and shot 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 opens his notebook,” she growled.

Dad looked at Mum and knew she meant what she said.

“All right, pet,” he said, holding his hands up, apparently to calm everyone down. “It’s all right! Everything’s all right!”

It seemed everything was all right, except Dad.



He reached the door without further mishap and opened it.

A lady stood there 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 thought he’d probably hung himself rather than come back here.

Stephanie Rose was young and pretty. She had blond hair like Ooolool, and it hung down her back. Her lipstick was bright like her handbag and she wore a white jacket and a white skirt. She 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 stood back to let her in, his eyes like saucers and his smile so wide that it’s a wonder his teeth didn’t fall out.

As she entered the whole room seemed to light up. It was 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 Ooolool she smiled beautifully at her and Ooolool smiled back as if she’d known her all her life.

“Let me introduce you,” Dad said, guiding Stephanie in. “This is my wife, Christine, this is Billy, and this...” he paused for effect, “...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 expected him to make a fool of himself.

“Sit down, sit down,” Dad said, after he’d been 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 out of the corner of her mouth. 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 becomes excited.” Dad smiled stupidly and Mum and Stephanie smiled back. “I’ll go and make a cuppa.” Mum 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 handbag for her notebook.

Dad said something about the weather and Stephanie said something about the rain and Dad said something about the day suddenly becoming brighter and Mum coughed in the kitchen.

Stephanie suddenly looked at Oolool.

“So this is Lucy Loudmouth, is it?” she said dazzlingly.

Oolool chuckled and smiled back.

“You’re a pretty girl, aren’t you?” Stephanie said.

Stephanie had a strange accent. Her voice rose and fell like a roller-coaster and it made you stare at her even when she’d finished speaking. It had the same effect on Dad, too, for he couldn’t take his eyes off her, either.

Oolool 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 Oolool as if she’d had a spell cast upon her.

After a lengthy pause she said: “Thank you,” to Oolool and began busily scribbling in her notebook. She looked towards Oolool once or twice as she wrote as if she couldn’t 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 Oolool’s forehead and laughed as my sister grabbed hold of her finger.

Dad beamed ridiculously; either with pride towards Oolool or because Stephanie had spoken to him.

“Er...” he spluttered. “Eight and a half months.”

“That’s amazing!” Stephanie said, shaking her head and making her hair swish like a curtain. She continued to write in her book. “And you are the father?”

I don’t know whether there was a note of disbelief in her voice, or whether it was my imagination.

I think Dad noticed it, too.

“Yes!” he replied 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.”

“That makes a change for a reporter, doesn’t it?” Mum’s voice floated in from the kitchen. She appeared in the doorway. “Sugar in your tea?”

During these exchanges Oolool’s head had swivelled from speaker to speaker as if she were watching a tennis match. She patiently awaited her time to show off.

“Not for me, thank you,” Stephanie answered, 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 that she’d 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'd never heard a Welsh accent before, but if you knew what one sounded like you'd have to be pretty stupid not to know the person came from Wales. In fact, you'd have to be pretty stupid to ask the person with a Welsh accent 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 stupid.

"Oh!" squealed Stephanie. "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," Stephanie said, shuffling excitedly in her chair. "It's beautiful."

Dad smiled at her dreamily as she spoke.

"Right!" Stephanie said suddenly. "We must get down to business."

She put her pen to her mouth and nibbled the end just like Humphries had done. I wondered if it was a thing that all reporters did. It looked an interesting thing to do. When I can get my hands on a pen, I'm going to have a go at that.

"Tell me, Mr Crabtree," Stephanie continued, "how old was Lucy when she first spoke?"

"Call me Harry," said Dad. "You sound like the bank manager, calling me Mr Crabtree." He smiled at what he must have considered a joke. "Er...about six months."

“Seven months,” said Mum, carrying in the teas on a tray. “She said ‘Dadda’ at seven months.”

“Gosh! She’s really progressed in a short time.”

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.

“Wills,” corrected Mum.

“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 a bit like men, aren’t they? A bit slow on the uptake!” She looked at Dad when she said this.

Suddenly, Oolool began waving her arms around.

“Talk to me!” she shouted, her fragile voice gaining strength. “Talk to me!”

We were all startled and looked at Oolool’s eager face. Stephanie smiled, her white teeth sparkling through her lips.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lucy,” she said. “Were we all ignoring you?”

When she saw Stephanie smile, Oolool smiled in return. If Stephanie hadn’t been here, my sister would have sulked and thrown a tantrum. They certainly seemed to be hitting it off with each other; a bit of a difference to Humphries.

Stephanie shifted in her seat to face Oolool.

“Lucy, your mummy tells me you can count; how many fingers am I holding up?”

Oolool's brow furrowed in concentration. "Seven fingers and one thumb," she answered.

Stephanie shook her head in awe.

"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'd jump through that, too.

"And what's your favourite toy, Lucy?" Stephanie continued.

Oolool put her finger to her mouth in thought, posing in the cutest way she knew.

"I like Belinda," she said.

"That's her dolly," Mum explained.

"And picture books with writing," Oolool continued, determined to have her turn.

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 bit 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!" Oolool replied, as if it should have been perfectly obvious.

Stephanie smiled. "Show me," she said.

Dad passed her 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 one-

year-olds. Although she isn't yet into *The Wind In The Willows* or *Swallows And Amazons*, this, I thought, was going to be a cinch.

Stephanie took it with a "Thank you" and opened it. She covered the pictures with her pad, leaving the words exposed at the bottom.

"What do the words say, Lucy?"

"Cat and doctor," she answered with ease.

Stephanie turned a page.

"Egg and fence," Oolool said casually.

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.

It's a shame she hasn't discovered the concept of modesty.

Stephanie stayed a while longer, asking questions to which Oolool displayed her brilliance.

Before she left, Stephanie said a photographer would come later to take Oolool's picture.

"She's so beautiful, we'll have to have a photo in the paper."

Oolool smiled her baby smile 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 don't know why she wants to call Dad Harry all of a sudden; she always calls him Pat. Perhaps it's a joke; I don't know. I get confused with names, as I think I've mentioned.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist have been to Scotland to see their family. Roy and Rob went, too. They have grandmas and granddads there and don't see them very often.

Roy and Rob came to tell me about their visit while I was in the garden trying to catch a beetle. It kept falling out of my hands on to the floor, and with those two talking to me I couldn't concentrate on catching it.

"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.)

"We took Grandma and Grandad for a drive to see Ben Nevis," said the other one.

I've never heard them mention this Ben Nevis before. They didn't say what relation he was.

"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 was as big as...as...as a submarine."

"It was probably a submarine you saw, with somebody as stupid as you in it looking for him."

"It wasn't a submarine. It had a head and...and a tail."

"It's funny you saw him when you were by yourself. Why didn't you see him when there was somebody with you?"

What must have been Rob shrugged. "I dunno!" he shouted. "Maybe he doesn't like crowds."



“Pah!” 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 don’t know what Loch Ness is, I don’t know what Nessie is, and I don’t know what a submarine is.

Life seems to be so pointless when you don’t know anything.

The man with the camera came and didn’t say very much except: “Aren’t you a little beauty?” to guess who? And “Thank you,” when he’d finished. He took a lot of photographs so maybe Ooolool will have a special edition all to herself.

Emily’s dad left home again. This time he’s gone to live with Abigail Hardy’s mum. I don’t understand why he wants to live with different people. Why doesn’t he just live with Karen?

Karen came and explained what had happened. She had red eyes like I do when Mum has eaten my chocolate.

“That’s the final straw,” Karen sniffled. “He’s made his bed and cooked his goose, now he can lie in it. He wants his cake and to eat it, too. Well, I hope he chokes on it! It’s typical of him! The other man’s grass is always greener; well, he can put that in his pipe and smoke it.”

I didn’t know Emily’s dad smoked a pipe; but then, I didn’t know he slept with a goose, either.

Grandpa’s cough is getting worse. He has to sit down a lot because the coughing makes him tired and breathless. Granny says she’s going to make him go to the doctor, but Grandpa says he isn’t going because he won’t be able to smoke in the waiting room.

Mum is always complaining that I don't eat my vegetables properly. Well, who likes sprouts and stuff? Anyway, she's written a poem about it. It's called *The Vegetable Plot*. This is it:

Once we had trouble with our William,  
My brother would never eat his greens.  
He'd eat cornflakes and ham  
And toast filled with jam,  
Lemon cheese, marmalade and baked beans.

My mother despaired of him sometimes,  
And mealtimes she started to hate.  
Seeing him pushing his peas  
And cauliflower cheese  
To a pile on the side of his plate.

He hid carrots beneath his potatoes,  
And cabbage he threw to the cat.  
He never would learn  
That the cat in his turn  
Wasn't partial to green stuff like that.

We'd stand in it when we had eaten  
And tread it all over the place.  
Mum's face would turn red  
As she sent him to bed  
Shouting, "William, you're a disgrace!"

He heaved when he looked at his spinach  
And turned green when he tasted a leek.  
He'd quickly run out  
With a mouthful of sprout –  
We soon came to know his technique.

Mushrooms and beetroot and turnips  
He'd treat in a similar way.  
He'd pick and he'd poke  
As if he would choke,  
Until something strange happened one day.

On his plate was a portion of onions  
That had caused our poor mother to sob.  
She'd peeled them with care  
And we'd all had a share,  
When along came the corn on the cob.

William sat there and moaned he was hungry,  
But not for the things he'd been given.  
Our Mum drew a breath  
(His sentence of death),  
She was madder than she should be driven.

She picked up a cob from the table  
And broke it in half on his head.

He looked somewhat dazed,  
Perplexed and amazed,  
And one or two tears were shed.

I put my hand over my snigger,  
Not wanting my mother to know  
How much I enjoyed  
The tack she'd employed,  
In case I felt the force of her toe.

Mum said then that things would be changing,  
Her nerves were all tied in a knot.  
I don't know whether  
Mum and Dad got together,  
But somehow they came up with a plot.

I couldn't believe when I saw it,  
What Mum had made William to eat.  
I sat down and stared  
And silently dared  
Him to moan when he'd taken his seat.

Determined to get greens inside him,  
She'd gone to extraordinary lengths  
To make sure he ate  
What she put on his plate,

And hopefully keep up his strength.

She had boiled up his carrots all mushy,

And with his baked beans she had mixed them.

He ate up the lot

And never did spot

The sneaky way Mother had fixed them.

There were fish fingers made out of turnips,

All mashed up and covered in crumbs.

He didn't have a clue

What he'd started to chew

As the turnips rolled round in his gums.

The cabbage she covered in custard,

Disguised as a gooseberry pie.

With sugar made sweeter,

The naïve little eater

Scoffed the lot in the wink of an eye.

The peas she dipped in some chocolate

And told him she'd bought him some sweets.

He slobbered and drooled,

Not knowing he was fooled,

Saying how he enjoyed all these treats.

The cauliflower she boiled with some strawberries,  
And when mashed to a smooth and pink paste,  
It was easily spread  
On a big slice of bread,  
And he ate it without any waste.

Now, as he sits there so smugly,  
Eating food that he doesn't know is there,  
I quite often feel  
That I'd like a meal  
That's so colourful, tasty and rare.

I get no reward for what I eat,  
While William gets pats on the head.  
But I've not complained,  
For I know that I've gained  
By getting his portions instead.

I think I'm going to have to start examining what I eat before I stick it into my mouth.

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 don't know why because he doesn't smoke. They may as well as brought him some disinfectant or some carpet underlay.

We got the *Rochdale Observer* with Oolool's story in it. There's a photograph of her smiling angelically.

"Local Wonder Baby Talks At Six Months!" screamed the headline.

"I told them seven months," Mum complained.

"Never mind!" said Dad. "Six sounds better."

There was almost a full page, including the writing. It even mentioned me, Mum said. "Her brother, Billy," it said.

People kept ringing all day. Grandma said she wished she'd known Oolool was having her picture taken; she'd have knitted her a cardigan.

Maureen Gilchrist said: "Och! Would ye criddit it? A famous wee bear! We stay next tay a starr!"

People stop us in the street and ask Oolool to say something. They point 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!"

Grandpa says that when he was in the army they had to clean the toilet floor with their toothbrushes. It's enough to make you wish you had no teeth. They also had to polish the coal that they burned on their fires. I've heard them talk about 'clean fuel' on telly; perhaps this is what they mean.

Since Oolool became famous Emily comes around to our house more than ever. She came when Oolool was having a sleep (after a particularly strenuous autograph-signing session – I'm joking but, mark my words; it won't be long, it won't be long),

so she had to interrupt me while I was throwing a ball at the birds on the lawn. (The birds were safe enough; don't worry!)

"Lucy lookeded pretty in the paper," she said, looking at me scornfully, disapproving of my game.

I didn't answer.

"Doesn't she?" Emily persisted.

"A bit."

"Will she be in the paper again?"

"Don't know!"

Pause.

"Will she be on telly?"

Pause. Sigh.

"Why wasn't you in the paper?"

"Don't know!"

Pause. Sigh. Tut.

"You don't know much, do you?"

What did she expect? If she wanted to know anything, she'd be better off asking Mega Mind.

"Lucy's clever, isn't she?"

"A bit."

"Seems a lot, to me."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"Is she cleverer than you?"

I shrugged again. "Maybe."

"Mummy saided she could read and count and talk."

"A bit."



“I can’t read. Can you?”

“A bit.”

“You can’t!”

“Can!”

“Read me something!”

“No!”

“You can’t!”

“Can!”

I hoped I wasn’t talking myself into a corner. I hoped Emily didn’t produce something with writing on it.

“You wasn’t in the paper, so you can’t read!”

“Can!”

Emily seemed to realise this was a pointless argument and wandered off home. I hoped she wasn’t going to bring a book back with her to test me on. I thought I’d better go and hide inside, just in case.

Mum had a telephone call from the local radio station. Doc Crock, the Demon Jock, wanted Oolool to be on his show. Mum said she wasn’t sure at first but with a bit of persuasion from Dad, she reluctantly agreed. Dad’s face was a delight. He was going to be almost a star.

I think I can probably speak as well as Oolool, now. The trouble is that I don’t know as many words as she does, and I can’t string a sentence together. The words I do know I can pronounce as well as she can, though I still have problems with ‘Emily’. ‘Emmy’ is much easier. Oolool can say it, of course. I sometimes wonder if there is

something wrong with Oolool's mouth that allows her to contort it in such a way that it forms words.

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 couldn't 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 some 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.

Grandpa took me to sit in the garden. He can't 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 to see Grandma and we sat and listened to the birds chirping in the trees.

We have starlings in our rafters and we watched them coming and going under our roof slates. There's a bird house in our garden but no birds ever use it. 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 don't think Dad chopped it down or it would have fallen on the house. Anyway, Grandpa sat on the stump and pulled at his tie knot because it was hot. Grandpa always wears a shirt and tie. He probably wears a tie with his jim-jams.

"Yon sun's 'ot, young Billy," he said, wiping his brow with his hanky. He looked up at the sky, as if he were wondering where the heat was coming from.

"D'you know 'ow far away t'sun is?"

I looked at him in wonder, his burnt sausage fingers always fascinating me. I shook my head as I sat on the grass pulling up dandelion leaves.

“93 million miles away,” Grandpa revealed. “Imagine that; 93 million miles away an’ still it’s ‘ot. Think ‘ow ‘ot it must be up close!”

I wondered if that was as far as Dad walked every day. He always comes home and tells us he’s walked for miles.

“That’s why t’earth spins round, does’t see?” Grandpa continued. “If it didna’, one side’d be roasted an’ t’other side’d be raw. It’s like a lump o’ meat under t’grill, does’t see? If tha’ doesna’ turn it over, one side’d get burnt to a cinder an’ t’other’d be red raw.”

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

“I know this ‘cos in t’beginnin’, God got it a bit wrong, does’t see?”

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 move through the air.

“On one side o’ t’world, see,” he continued, “there’s lots o’ land an’, at first, that were facin’ t’sun all t’time ‘cos t’earth didna’ turn round. Well, t’sun baked it an’ fried it till it started blisterin’ an’ crackin’. That’s weer t’mountains an’ valleys come from, does’t see?”

I cowered away from a bee as it settled on the roses. It stayed there and seemed interested in Grandpa’s story.

“There were cracks that formed valleys an’ blisters that formed mountains. It were so ‘ot that t’earth sweated an’ t’sweat rolled off t’land an’ formed t’seas, does’t see? That’s why t’sea’s allus salty; it’s sweat from t’land.

“Anyway, God thought, this is no good; I’ll ‘ave to do summat about this. So ‘e give t’earth a bit of a push, does’t see? Just a gentle shove that set it off spinnin’; an’ it still spins to this day. It spins round just once a day so as it willna’ get too ‘ot in one spot.”

Grandpa put the cigarette into his mouth and slapped his hands on his knees.

“What does’t think o’ that, then, young Billy?” he asked, his cigarette jiggling about in his mouth.

I giggled whilst keeping an eye on the bee that had been listening, too.

Grandpa tells me things like this. He’s my bestest friend of all.

Karen doesn’t want to be married to Emily’s dad any more. She said enough was enough and that the final straw had somehow broken a camel’s back. She said Emily’s dad had shown his true colours by fouling his own nest and that she was going to take him to the cleaners and make him pay through the nose.

One day I’m going to ask Emily if she understands anything her mother says.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo asked if Mum and Dad needed a lift to the radio station.

They said they’d be only too pleased to take them and, if necessary, go into the studio with them and, of course, bring them home afterwards. After all, they said, they couldn’t 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 Ooolool out of the window after she’d thrown up on her new frock. It’s funny what a bit of stardom can do, isn’t it?

Mum and Dad said they didn’t 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 couldn't manage a deep breath, never mind a star's career.

I've got tonsillitis again, but never mind me; let's get back to the star.

Grandma knitted Oolool a new cardigan for her radio appearance. She said we couldn't have everyone listening to her in anything but her best.

I listened to Doc Crock, the Demon Jock's programme with Granny and Grandpa. Mum and Dad and Oolool weren't on for very long – about five minutes. Doc Crock spoke about some other things first, which was a bit boring, and to a man who used to shave sheep in Australia. (I didn't know sheep had beards – perhaps they do in Australia.) Finally came the moment we were waiting for, and it was interesting:

Doc Crock, the Demon Jock:- This morning I'd like to introduce a talking sensation. A little girl who's causing quite a stir in her home town of Rochdale. She's only twelve months old...

(This was the first time I'd heard Doc Crock, the Demon Jock. He spoke with a funny accent, too. Why does everyone speak with funny accents? It makes learning very difficult if you can't understand what people are saying. Doc Crock, the Demon Jock sounds like Mrs Doubtfire before the man who plays the part of Mrs Doubtfire becomes Mrs Doubtfire. I don't know what he's called. He's an actor. Doc Crock, the Demon Jock speaks very fast and you have to listen very carefully to hear what he says. Anyway, let's carry on with the programme...)

Dad (muffled, in background): - Ten and a half.

Doc Crock (startled): - Uh! I'm sorry! What was that?

Dad: - Ten and a half months old.

Doc Crock: - 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 them. I can see her turning into a real little chatterbox. Listen for yourselves to little Lucy Crabtree.

(Silence for a moment.)

Doc Crock (laughing to hide his embarrassment): - Yes... well! That introduction didn't go quite as well as we'd rehearsed it, did it, Lucy? You were supposed to say, 'Hello, listeners,' weren't you? (laughter) I think it was Daddy's fault for confusing us wasn't it? Never work with animals or children, folks! (more shuffling of paper) Right, then! Let me ask you some questions, Lucy. First of all, what would you like to be when you grow up?

Oolool (after a moment's silence): - Older!

Doc Crock (laughing): - Tremendous, Lucy! Wonderful! Hey, hasn't she got a cute voice, folks? You'd never expect a voice to come out of such a tiny body. Now, then, where were we? Yes! Lucy, you've got a big brother, haven't you?

Oolool: - Yes.

Doc Crock: - And what's his name?

Oolool: - Wills.

Doc Crock: - Wills, eh? Hey, you've got royalty in the family, eh?

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 Crock (laughing louder): - That's wonderful, Lucy! Hey, we'll have to get you a job here. You're funnier than our producer. (more laughter) Right, now! Let's have a word with Mum and Dad. Mum and Dad, how long has Lucy been talking?

Dad (acting puzzled): - Well, since you started asking her questions. For about a minute.

Doc Crock (silence, then patient laughter): - Yes, I can see where Lucy gets her sense of humour from; someone other than Dad, eh! (Laughter from Doc Crock – hesitant chuckle from Dad) I meant, of course, how old was Lucy when she started talking?

Mum: - Seven months.

Doc Crock: - Seven months, eh? That's truly amazing! 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 sporadic background laughter.)

Doc Crock: - Yes, Mr Crabtree. Er, I wonder, Mr Crabtree; have you ever been a comedian?

Dad: - Me? No, no! I'm no comedian.

Doc Crock: - Yes, I know that, Mr Crabtree. I just wondered if you ever had been.

(Silence whilst Dad wondered if he'd just been insulted or not.)

Doc Crock: - It sounds like an insane household, Mrs Crabtree.

Mum: - Only part of it.

Doc Crock: - I know what you mean, Mrs Crabtree. I believe Lucy can count and answer general knowledge questions. Is that correct?

Mum: - Yes, that's right. She's past twenty, now.

Dad: - She doesn't look it, does she?

Doc Crock (ignoring Dad): - Let's try a little 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 Crock (laughing loudly): - That's wonderful! (more laughter) You're wonderful, Lucy! (pause and giggles) Er...(sniggers) I can't concentrate on what I'm supposed to be doing, now.

Dad: - Ask her a general knowledge question.

Doc Crock: - Right, hang on a minute. (Pause and snigger) Who's your favourite person on the telly, Lucy?

Ooolool: - Wills.

Doc Crock (puzzled): - Wills? You mean Prince William?

Ooolool: - No! My brother. His photo is on the telly.

(Sounds of the whole studio erupting into laughter. Doc Crock guffawing and snorting.)

Doc Crock (trying to regain composure): - I don't believe this! You're too much, Lucy!

Ooolool (obviously enjoying every minute): - Ask me what the capital of Nicaragua is.

Doc Crock: - Okay, Lucy. What's the capital of Nicaragua?

Ooolool: - N.

(Microphone falls over. Sound of Demon Jock falling off his chair.)

Mum: - I think he likes you, Lucy.

Ooolool: - Yes. He's a nice man.

When Mum and Dad and Ooolool arrived to pick me up from Granny and Grandpa's house 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 they'd only answered the questions they'd been asked and that,



if their answers happened to be naturally funny, then it was because they were natural comedians at heart.

Granny and Grandpa had taped the interview so we listened to it again. Dad laughed at the funny answers as if he'd never heard them before and Grandpa coughed along with him. Mum tried not to laugh but couldn't help tittering. Dad said did we think Doc Crock, the Demon Jock had been having a dig when he'd asked him if he'd 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 funny he thought he was. She said they must have rehearsed what they were going to say. Dad said how could he have known what Doc Crock, the Demon Jock was going to say? He said Oolool's answers were funny because she was quick-witted, just like him. Mum said Oolool might be quick-witted, but Dad was only half-witted.

Karen came around and said she'd listened to Doc Crock, the Demon Jock and thought that Oolool was the funniest thing since sliced bread (!?). It's funny what makes some people laugh, isn't it? 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. I think Emily listens to Karen too much.

Alan Gilchrist said that Oolool was a 'canny wee bear who couldny cockle yon mickle tockle, d'ye ken?'

"Ten to four," Dad said.

Grandpa has to go hospital to have his cough made better. Mum said we could go to see him in hospital. She sounds sad when she talks about him. I hope the doctors make him better soon. And I hope he doesn't find another baby in hospital.

## SIX

I am now two. I had a birthday party. 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 this time in case she saw someone's mother whom Emily's dad had seen before her.

Dad and Oolool did a bit of a 'spot.' Oolool sat on Dad's knee like a ventriloquist's dummy 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 that 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 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 that she's going to change her name to Catherine Cookson so she'll have a better chance of having her book published. I don't understand what difference her name makes, unless the people who publish the books can't spell Christine Crabtree, which is her proper name.

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 that it's a bit late in the year to be going on holiday in this country and that we'd better take some snow shoes with us. Mum told him to stop trying to be funny; he wasn't on stage, now, and that you can have lovely weather at this time of year.

Emily told me how Oolool got into Mum's tummy. It's so ridiculous I'm not even going to bother repeating it. Sometimes I think Emily's imagination gets the better of her.

Oolool 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? Not liking apples very much because they're boring after the first bite, I'd have said: too many! Oolool 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? Oolool answers twelve, which is also correct, apparently.

This is all very well, and I'm sure it'll get her name in the papers again but really, who needs all these apples?

Grandpa went into hospital. Mum and Dad took Granny to see him and Karen looked after Oolool and me. When Mum and Dad arrived home it looked as though Mum had been crying. I don't know if she'd fallen on the drive outside our house and hurt her knee, because that makes me cry, or if she'd trapped her finger in the car door, because Emily told me once that that had made her cry. I didn't ask because I didn't want to make Mum cry again.

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 don't know the name of. I hope the natives are friendly. I hope they don't eat us. I saw someone on telly in a big pot with carrots and things being boiled up and it didn't look very nice. Someone will have to stand guard every night to make sure they don't creep up on us.

It doesn't seem like a good idea to me, to go on holiday to somewhere where you might get eaten. I'm sure Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo don't have this problem. I think the weather that Dad was on about will be the least of our troubles.

Grandma knitted me some swimming shorts and a sun hat.

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'll enjoy it a lot better now that I know that.

Grandpa came home from hospital. He had only been in for three days. I don't think they've made him better yet because he still coughs a lot and gasps for breath.

When he arrived home he sat in his chair and said: "Thank the Lord I'm 'ome. Yon nurses wouldna' let me smoke i' bed."

Oolool walks now. One day she was crawling and the next day she was walking.

There was no stumbling from settee to armchair like a pinball for her; once she'd discovered how to do it, she did it properly.

It rained a lot in Anglesey. It was raining when we arrived at the caravan site and Mum said it would 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 didn't go. 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 wasn't really in a holiday mood and I think if Dad had started complaining she'd have held his head in one of the many puddles.

There was no jungle in Anglesey, and no need to stand guard at night to keep the natives at bay. The natives were friendly but they all spoke funnily, like Stephanie. When they spoke they sounded like they'd got something stuck in their throats and were trying to get it out. I couldn't understand a word some of them said and I realised how lucky we were to live where we did and have only the Gilchrists to cope with.

Red Wharf Bay was very nice but there were no roundabouts or dodgem cars for Dad to take me on. The most exciting thing there was the seagulls fighting over the bacon rind that Dad threw to them. The beach was very nice and very big; perfect – if it had been sunny. The beach in the rain is like an empty biscuit tin – not much use.

We went to places in the car. We went to the town with the longest name in the country; it was called – just a minute – Land Fair Porch Swinger Go Gareth Wind Trouble Land Is Silly Oh God God God. Or something like that.

We also went to a place called Holyhead from where boats sail to Ireland. Dad wanted to go on the boat but Mum reminded him that he was once sick on a canal barge so how did he think he'd cope on some real water?

We went to Llangefni, where Stephanie Rose came from, and to a castle at Beaumaris. We saw some ancient burial chambers and some standing stones and a power station.

Then 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 wouldn't be able to see anything, but Dad persuaded her and off we went.

As we approached the mountains we couldn't see them and Mum said she told us so. Dad said it was only the tops we couldn't see and we wouldn't be driving to the tops because there were no roads on the tops, only on the sides. So on we drove.

The biggest mountain we couldn't see was called Snowdon. Dad said he bet it got snowed on a lot. He laughed and said that he and Oolool would have to use that one in their act. We drove towards Snowdon and, guess what? Mum was right, of course. We couldn't see a thing. It was like driving through dirty water.

By this time it was getting 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 don't know how Dad knew this but, apparently, he did. 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 like this.

Then the car broke down. It sort of spluttered and 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 position as Dad climbed back into the car: her arms folded and her fingers tapping.

"Well," she said, looking straight ahead 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 said. "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 she were 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 mending a nuclear reactor.

Dad came back a few minutes later, wetter.

“Well?” asked Mum; with that note in her voice that defied Dad to admit he couldn’t fix it.

Dad sniffed. “I can’t fix it. I don’t know what’s wrong with it.”

That was to the point, I thought. He mustn’t have thought there was any point in beating about the bush, as Karen might have said.

“Well, that’s a surprise,” said Mum, fingers still tapping. “So what do we do now?”

“I’ll go and see if I can find a phone box,” Dad replied.

“You can’t go out there in this. Look at it!”

Dad looked into the mist as if he hadn’t seen 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 leaving 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 doing nothing to satisfy our need for comfort.

“Will we be here all night, Mummy?” Oolool asked again, voicing my own increasing concern.



There was a moment's silence, as if Mum had to think about her answer. I didn't find this altogether encouraging.

"We won't be here all night, darling, no. Someone will come along, soon." She said this as if she were reading it from a script; and she isn't a very good actress. Things were not improving.

No one spoke. In the complete silence, somewhere in the distance, a sheep bleated. A trickle of water bounced down a mountainside somewhere, but from which direction it was difficult to tell. There were no sounds of approaching cars or help. I didn't 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 a mobile phone, we'd be all right," Dad volunteered.

"If we had a car that hadn't broken down, we'd be even better," Mum replied hastily.

I looked at Oolool again and she looked at me. This was going to make the Outlet Village episode seem like a picnic.

Mum tutted and when she 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 on a day like this.”

This was it. Oolool and me sank lower into 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 an hour 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’re 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 so sure? No one’s passed in the last ten 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 a bit, 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?”

“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 couldn’t, and wouldn’t, 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 didn't get out of the car. They continued to argue until Ooolool and me fell asleep. When we awoke it was still dark but the mist had cleared. Mum and Dad were both asleep and there was a telephone box just in front of the car.

Dad went to phone a very nice man who came in a very nice yellow van with a flashing orange light on top. The very nice man said it sounded like our car needed a service. Dad said it hadn't seen a service since Ooolool's christening. The very nice 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'd had to stay here much longer it might have been a funeral service that the car went to.

Mum and Dad thanked the very nice man and we drove back to the caravan.

Mum and Dad didn't speak much after this and the following day we went home.

When we arrived home (wait for this) there was a letter from a television company who want Ooolool to appear on one of their shows. It's only a local news programme so it won't be shown all over the country, so Mum says, but 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: "The bear's a wee cridditt tay ye. A bonny mockle dockle!"

Grandma said: "I'll have to knit her something extra special."

Granny and Grandpa said: "Our baby on the telly! Imagine!"

Uncle Joe's and Auntie Jo's postcard said: "Wish you were here!"

The first thing we did when we arrived home from Anglesey (after we'd read the letter, that is) was to go and see Grandpa. He was still poorly. I didn't know a cough could last for so long. He has medicine that stops him from hurting and he can wear a mask that helps him to breathe. Mum and Dad looked sad when they spoke to him but Grandpa made a joke about his mask. He said that he'd been saying all his life that he'd look better in a mask and now he could prove it.

I wish Grandpa would hurry up and get better; then we could go for our walks again.

I suppose our street is becoming quite famous. We've got Oolool performing her tricks on the telly, and there's John, across the road, getting himself arrested for throwing stones from up his tree. Actually, John and his girlfriend, Heather, now live underground. They've dug a tunnel to stop the 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, and Manchester City. They have lots of St Mirren programmes, of course, and those of other Scottish teams who aren't so well known: Buckie Thistle, Brora Rangers and one of a team called Keith. I don't know if Keith plays on his own, because if he does, you'd think he'd get some of his friends to play with him; he can't be very good, all by himself.

I'm fed up with Emily always asking me if I think she's pretty. It's a bit soppy, telling a girl she's pretty. She stands there in front of me and asks me if I'd like to kiss her.

When I blow a raspberry and say: “No chance!” 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’s very pretty and Mum thinks she’s a tart. I’m not sure what Mum means by ‘tart’. It’s not jam or lemon cheese because Mum doesn’t find her sweet.

Oolool will have to talk and count and walk to show 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 an hour earlier.

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’ve managed to sell it while John was up his tree or down his tunnel or whichever animal habitat he’s chosen to live in this week. It’s a pity for the new owners, Dad says, that they’re in for a shock when John decides to resume lifting the tiles.

It will soon be Oolool’s first birthday and already preparations have begun. Mum and Dad have hired a room at the Croaking Toad and sent out invitations to thousands of people. There’ll be Karen and Emily, Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist, Roy and Rob, Stephanie Rose, Doc Crock, the Demon Jock and Mandy Hillier, not to mention all the relations.

It'll be a real show-biz party: spot the celebrity. There'll be photographs in the morning papers of all the stars arriving, and of Oolool toddling in on her own, waving to all her admirers.

I didn't have all this fuss for my first birthday. I suppose I was lucky they remembered mine, what with all the worry of wondering whether 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're normal and the next minute you're not. It's 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 fall-out. She says that, any time now, Dad is going to start calling people 'Darling' and 'Lovey'.

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 breathes through his mask. Granny says he must be poorly because he doesn't even want a cigarette. She says he's finally learned his lesson.

I caught Mum and Granny crying in the kitchen. When they saw me they tried to smile and picked me up and hugged me.

Mum still complains because I don't eat my sprouts. I don't care how many poems she writes; a sprout is a sprout and I'd be sick if I put one in my mouth. She says I always used to eat everything when I was younger. I'm not surprised; I had no choice in those days. It was all shovelled in and I didn't know what I was being given.

I wonder who it was who discovered we could eat sprouts? And why, once they'd tasted them, they bothered to eat any more? They couldn't have enjoyed them, surely! And where did they find them? Were they growing wild on a tree or whatever they grow on, and someone came along and picked one and thought, Yummy, this looks tasty? Surely not!

Instead of having sprouts with chicken and potatoes, I think we should have *Maltesers*. They'd be much nicer than sprouts. Just add a splash of gravy and a dash of salt; it would cause a lot less hassle in our house if we did.

It's typical, isn't it? 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 a dose of tonsillitis. It's like an old friend by now; a friend who comes and pinches all your sweets and whom you know won't be here for long but while he is, makes a bit of a nuisance of himself. I couldn't even be bothered to sulk when Mum said I wasn't fit to go to the television studios and become famous. She said that I'd have to stay with Granny and Grandpa after they came to the rescue and told Mum she'd have to go with Dad and Oolool if only to stop Dad from making a fool of himself.

So I sat sandwiched between Granny and Grandpa, sweating and dosed up with medicine, as limp as a rag doll and determined to stay awake, as we watched Mandy Hillier introduce Oolool, Mum and Dad.

They were sat opposite Mandy on a big, blue settee and Oolool sat on Dad's knee. My sister wore a new pink dress bought specially for the occasion and didn't have on the new pink cardigan that Grandma had knitted. I didn't think Grandma would be very pleased about that.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Granny said (not for the first time, of course).



“Aye! She is that!” Grandpa agreed, his wheezing seeming to get worse every time I saw him.

I think Granny was talking about Oolool, but I’m not sure if Grandpa meant Mandy Hillier. She’s rather pretty with lipstick and shiny black hair that’s cut short like Mum’s but it’s not like Mum’s because Mum’s is fair and Mandy’s is black...if you know what I mean.

Oolool, Mum and Dad looked rounder on the telly. They reminded me of those mirrors you look into that make you look a funny shape.

Mandy Hillier smiled. Her teeth are very white. She introduced Oolool, Mum and Dad and explained who they were. The camera stayed on Oolool, Mum and Dad; and Dad looked terrible. He was white and looked terrified. I’m not surprised, though; he’d been to the toilet four times before they went out. He must have a bug – or something.

Mandy Hillier began talking to Oolool. “You’re looking very pretty, Lucy. Is that a new dress?”

Oolool smiled enchantingly, like she does, and composed herself before answering: “Thank you, yes. We got it from Debenhams, yesterday.”

Mandy laughed. “A priceless plug, there,” she said. “What a lovely voice, Lucy! It seems so strange for a voice to come from such a tiny person. You usually get gurgles and gargles.”

Oolool stuck her hand out towards Mandy and the interviewer leaned forward in her seat to take hold of it. Oolool chuckled and shook her hand. You could never say my sister doesn’t know how to manipulate her audience.

“How sweet,” said Mandy, 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 and a half months old, now, so that makes four and a half months.” Oolool answered the question as though she’d been asked it many times before which, of course, she had. She smiled happily, exposing her cute, little teeth, knowing she’d given another example of her brilliance.

Mandy Hillier looked impressed. “And you can count, too; aren’t you clever? Mr Crabtree,” she said, suddenly turning on Dad and making him jump. His eyes were glazed with fear like a trapped rabbit. “What was your reaction when Lucy began talking at seven months?”

Dad shuffled in his seat and gave a timid smile, which made his dry lip stick to his teeth and loosen his top set from the roof of his mouth. He juggled 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 replied, his voice at a higher pitch than that he usually spoke in, and turning to Mum for support. “We knew Lulu was special, didn’t we? We were amazed, weren’t we?”

“Mrs Crabtree,” said 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’d never heard of anything like it before which, in itself, was a stupid answer because they’d heard of child prodigies before but never witnessed one. Mandy must think we live up a mountain if we’ve never heard of this kind of thing. I snuggled up to Grandpa and blinked my tired, burning eyes.

Mum was answering Mandy’s question. “No, everyone else is quite normal, aren’t they?” She looked at Dad for confirmation.

Dad nodded – or trembled. He didn’t open his mouth for fear of losing his teeth again.

“Lucy,” said Mandy, pointing a long finger-nailed finger at Oolool. “You can count, too. How did you learn to count?”

Oolool shrugged. “It’s just something I can do,” she said. “Mum and Dad helped me a bit but I could do it anyway. I had some books to help me, too.”

Mandy gasped. “Gosh!” she gasped. “You can read, too? I didn’t know you could read.”

“Oh, yes,” Oolool said, as if it were unusual for anyone not to be able to read at eleven and a half months.

“You know, I just love your voice – it’s so sweet,” Mandy said, twinkling. “And how long have you been reading?”

Oolool raised 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 shook her head in disbelief. “That’s incredible,” she whispered 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 answered.

“You’ve got an older brother, haven’t you?” (That’s me!) said Mandy. “What does he think about having a genius for a little sister?”

“Well,” Oolool began, “he’s only two so he doesn’t say much. I suppose he’s a bit proud of me.”

(Proud? That’s one emotion that never crossed my mind. Tired, maybe; bored, perhaps; but not proud, I don’t think. And another thing: did you notice how she rubbed it in about me not saying much, even though I’m two?)

Mandy clapped her hands with glee. “Well, Lucy,” she said, “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 wound up by saying: “The Crabtree family, ladies and gentlemen. Aren’t they wonderful?”

I looked at Granny and Grandpa. Tears were streaming down Granny’s cheeks and Grandpa had a beaming smile that lit up his tired old face for the first time in weeks.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Granny blubbered, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

Grandpa nodded, not trusting his voice.

“Is Ooolool on again?” I asked, surprised and, surprisingly, disappointed at how brief their appearance had been.

“No, sweetheart,” Granny snuffled, stroking my hair. “They’ll be coming here for you, now.”

When they finally arrived at Granny and Grandpa’s Dad said he had been so nervous about going on telly that he had actually been sick with fear. He had been so nervous that at one point he had refused to appear in front of the cameras. Mum had accused him of ‘bottling out’ and had said that it was his fault they were there in the first place, and if he thought she was going on telly with Ooolool without him, he had better think again. Dad says he is never going to have his photograph taken again because he’s sure that he’s suddenly 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 didn't know rang to say how wonderful Oolool had been on 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. Photographers rang, offering to do Oolool a portfolio for a small fee. I'm not sure what portfolio is; it sounds like a disease you catch at the docks.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo rang to say they'd had a brilliant time in Ellay. I don't know where Ellay is and I didn't even know they'd gone there. They go away so often, now, nobody mentions it any more. It's just like nipping to the corner shop – nothing special.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo said they hadn't seen Oolool on telly but Ellay was out of this world. (So that's where it is!) No, they didn't know Oolool was a star but there were a lot of stars in Ellay. Well, all right, if we've got a video recording of Oolool on telly they may as well watch it, but we won't have seen anything until we've 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 don't know what it was.

Grandpa has gone back into hospital. He collapsed on the kitchen floor and couldn't breathe. The ambulance arrived just in time and now a machine helps him to breathe. We went to see him in hospital. He couldn't 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. I asked if Grandpa would soon be better but no one answered.

An agent rang. Mum said it was an agent. I don't know whether it was a travel agent or an estate agent or a newsagent. Mum said the agent offered to look after Oolool's career. We didn't know Oolool had a career but the agent was intent on giving her one, Mum said.

Dad was very enthusiastic about this as long as it didn't involve him going on television again.

The new people across the road next door 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, said Brian.

There is also a younger person living with them. This is their son who is called Russell. I thought this was the noise leaves made when you walked through them but, whatever, Russell is his name. He's not as young as Emily or me and not as old as John; somewhere in the middle, I'd say. You can tell how old he is by the number of times he runs inside crying when he falls off his skateboard: if he were older he wouldn't cry and if he were younger he couldn't skateboard.

Brian and Angela moved here from a town nearby called Bury. I think Bury is a strange name for a town; it's what dogs do with bones. It's 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.

This is terrible. He...he...

Dad had a phone call from the hospital to tell him. Mum could tell from the look on his face what it was about before he opened his mouth.

It happened during the night. Granny was with him when he died. He just... stopped breathing.

Everyone is so upset, it's...it's...

I can't believe that Grandpa isn't here any more. There'll 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 puts on a brave face but I know that he's sad, too.

Granny blames the cigarettes. "Cigarettes and coal dust," she says. She said if he hadn't smoked he would have lived for another twenty years.

I don't understand why people smoke. If they know it's going to kill them, why do they do it? If chocolate were poisonous, no matter how delicious it was, you wouldn't eat it, would you? If you got a kick out of jumping in front of speeding motor cars but you knew it didn't do you much good, you'd stop doing it, wouldn't you?

I don't understand much about this world or the people in 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 of Grandpa's funeral Karen looked after Oolool and me. Perhaps funerals aren't suitable for little kids; I don't know. Mum and Dad decided it would be best if we didn't go.

While we were at Karen's house Emily came to talk to me. I don't 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 died?" she asked me, her open mouth exposing a kaleidoscope of chewed jelly babies.

"Where?" I was only half interested. I wasn't really in the mood for any of Emily's cock-eyed theories.

"We go to heaven to see Jesus."

Well, I know this. I thought she was going to reveal a whole new explanation.

"So?" I answered.

Emily had on some new shoes that made a clicking noise when she walked. She now began tapping on the floor, trying to dance like she'd seen people do on the telly.

"But after a while, Jesus sends us back." She stuck another jelly baby in her mouth and chewed knowingly.

I held out my hand for another one but she didn't oblige.

"Why?" I asked, withdrawing my empty hand.

"He sends us back to look after our friends on earth."

"How?" I asked, mesmerised by the disappearance of a black jelly baby into the cavern of Emily's mouth.

She looked thoughtful as if she were gathering her thoughts together before she told me.

"Mum wanted to see a clairvoyant after –"

"Who's Clair Buoyant?" I interrupted. Emily forgets I'm only two and that she's not talking to Oolool.



She raised her eyes to the ceiling. “A clairVOYant is a person who knowses what’s going to happen. She lookses into the future and knowses all about you.”

I nodded. A bit like Mum, I thought.

“Well,” Emily continued, “Mummy wented to see a clairvoyant after Granny dieded. The clairvoyant askeded Mummy if Granny had dieded and Mummy saided yes. The clairvoyant saided was Granny calleded Mary and Mummy saided yes. The clairvoyant saided, well, there’s no need to worry about her because she’s quite happy and she’s here in this room, now, looking after you. Mummy lookeded round but couldn’t see nothing. The clairvoyant saided that Granny was with Mummy all the time, looking after her.” Emily nodded with satisfaction to underline the certainty of her story.

I wondered if Grandpa was watching me, now. I looked around nervously.

“How did Clair Buoyant know?”

Emily tutted impatiently. “ClairVOYant!” she growled, 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. “She felted Granny’s presence in the room.”

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 wasn’t around. 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’s pretty, isn’t she?” Emily said suddenly, breaking the spell and offering me a jelly baby. It was only an orange one, presumably not one of her favourites, but I grabbed it quickly before she had time to change her mind.

“A bit, I suppose,” I replied, chewing contentedly.

Emily looked at me, two jelly babies sticking out of her mouth like fangs. “Do you think she’s prettier than me?” she mumbled, stickily.

I knew it was leading to this. 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 ponytail. “Do you think she’s prettier than me?”

“Nah!” I said, trying to catch a jelly baby bit that was stuck to my chin. I had a vague idea that I’d answered correctly but was more concerned with my runaway sweet.

Emily beamed. I seemed to have given her the answer she’d wanted.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” she asked, parading in front of me, running her hands through her hair.

I kept an eye on where she’d placed her jelly babies.

Why does she ask me these useless questions? What if she is pretty or what if she isn’t?

“Do you?” she persisted.

I held out my hand for another jelly baby. Was this bribery? I wondered. If so, then Emily obviously didn’t 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 bargain. She watched me patiently, waiting for the answer she wanted.

“Do I what?” I think I’m fairly good at these delaying tactics.

“Do you think I’m 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. She was all right, I supposed, so I said what she wanted me to say.

“Suppose so!” I was hoping for at least another two jelly babies.

Emily smiled happily. She knew this 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 wouldn't tell anyone what I'd said.

After Grandpa's funeral Mum and Dad, Granny and Grandma, and Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo all 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 suddenly glad I wasn't at the funeral.

Mum picked me up and began crying again. Her body shook as she sobbed and I began crying, too. Then Ooolool started crying and I remembered what Emily had said. I looked around the room but couldn't see Grandpa, although knowing he was there made me feel better.

Mum and Dad took Ooolool to see the estate, travel or newsagent. They said they'd be gone all day because they had to go to London. They said they might see the Queen or Cilla Black. I stayed with Grandma.

Whilst I was at Grandma's house 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 couldn't move, but was warm. 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 having enough time 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 Tom died,” she said. Tom was Grandad who died before Mum and Dad found me in the hospital. I’ve seen photographs of him but I don’t remember ever seeing him. “Time doesn’t heal the pain altogether,” 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 didn’t. If Grandpa were there he wouldn’t like 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’ve seen the Queen on telly and she’s always smiling at people and waving and taking flowers off them. I didn’t suppose the Queen would recognize Mum and Dad, never having seen them before, that is. I didn’t know whether Mum would have any flowers that the Queen could nick off her.

“It’ll be exciting to hear what the agent has to say, won’t it?” Granny said.

I wondered if we were moving house or going on holiday, depending on which kind of agent they’d gone to see.

There are swings and slides by the lake in the park and Grandma pushed me on the swing, but I was suddenly worried about moving house and couldn’t enjoy

myself properly. It seemed things were changing; nothing would ever be the same again.

Granny bought us some chips and we came home.

I was in bed when they all arrived home but in the morning Mum told me what the estate, travel or newsagent had said.

She said that the estate, travel 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 estate, travel or newsagent had said that Oolool would be just right for the role.

Dad said this was only the beginning. From TV commercials Oolool would go on to make television programmes and then films.

“Holly Wood beckoned,” Dad said, his face flushed with excitement.

I don’t know who Holly Wood is but it sounds fairly exciting that she’s beckoning.

Next week is Oolool’s first birthday. As I’ve already said, everyone will be there.

Alan Gilchrist and Maureen Gilchrist will be there. “We’ll nay want tay miss yon bear’s mickle dockle doo, the noo, would we?” they said.

Karen will be there. “Wild horses wouldn’t keep me away,” she said.

Emily will be there. “And everyone will see why you think I’m prettier than Lucy,” she said.

Roy and Rob will be there. “St Mirren for the cup,” they said.

Granny will be there. “How could I miss our baby’s birthday?” she said, in tears.

Grandma will be there. “I’ll knit her something special,” she said.

Uncle Joe and Auntie Jo will be there. “We might just fit it in before we fly off to sing a pore,” they said. I don’t care what they sing, as long as they don’t sing it here.

John won’t be there because he’s still down a hole somewhere. “The deeper, the better,” Dad says.

And Grandpa will be there, but I’m the only one who knows.

Then there are all the celebrities whom Ooolool has befriended during her climb to fame. She picks up famous friends like other people pick up mud on their shoes.

I’ve heard whispers about Father Christmas again. I thought we’d finished with all that nonsense. Marvellous! Isn’t life wonderful?

There’s something strange going on in our house. Mum mopes around as if she’s carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. When Dad comes in they hardly speak to each other. They’ve obviously had ‘words’ but I don’t know which ones they used.

Mum says she’s almost finished her book but won’t allow anyone to read any of it. She says we can all read it when it’s completed - and not before! Well, I won’t be able to read it, of course, but maybe Superbabe will read it to me.

Iris from Bury stopped to talk to me. She speaks in the same old-fashioned way that Grandpa used to speak; only it’s 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?” she said.

She looked really old; older even than Granny and Grandma. She had white hair and lines all over her face like a cobweb. She wore small glasses which she squinted through as if they were stopping her from seeing properly rather than helping her. There were whiskers growing on her chin that caught my attention and I stared at them as if I'd never seen a woman with a beard before. There were no creatures in hers though like there are in Uncle Joe's and I was happier letting her get a little closer.

I presumed she was asking me my name so I told her.

"Wills," I said. I'm never sure which of my names to use. Well, I've got so many to choose from, I still get a bit confused. Should it be Wills, Billy, William, Woolly or whatever? I usually opt for Wills because, being lazy, it's easier to say.

"Eee, well, tha's named after a prince ar't?" she said, her beard moving fascinatingly with her chin.

I don't know who Prince Art is, so I smiled and nodded. I wondered why Mum and Dad hadn't called me Art.

"Ah'm jus' poppin' down to t'shop. If th'ar't still 'ere when Ah gets back Ah'll githhee some chocolate, reet?"

I recognised the word 'chocolate' so smiled and nodded again.

I watched her toddle off down the road and wondered where my chocolate was.

I've found out what's going on in our house.

There have been major changes of opinion about Oolool's future. According to Mum, she hasn't got one; not in the limelight, anyway, she says.

She was reluctant from the start to allow 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'. Anyway, she finally persuaded Dad that she was right (this is never in doubt so I don't know why Dad needed persuading) and he promised to try and live with his anonymity.

So they've told the estate, travel or newsagent that Oolool is not having a career and they've cancelled her party at the Croaking Toad and told all the guests that the celebrations are off. Oolool is now having a small party at our house, just like I did.

"Lucy will be much better off having a normal life," Mum said.

"Yes," said Dad, trying to convince himself. "I suppose you're right."

Oolool's opinion was typical.

"I don't need to be on television to be a star," she said.

I suppose she's right; just like Mum.

There's not much more to tell you, now. Well, there is more I could say but I think I'll stop here before you become too fed up with reading about us all. You may not have got this far; you may have got bored with it a hundred pages ago, after all, we're nothing special – just an ordinary family, I think!

Oh, by the way, Mum has finished her book. We've all read it. Well, I haven't, of course. Mum and Dad read bits of it to me and Brainchild read some other bits. I find I haven't got the attention span to sit and listen for days while I'm being read to.

Mum hasn't called herself Christine Crabtree or Catherine Cookson; she's used my name, William, and her old name before she married Dad, which was Weaver. William Weaver. I don't really know why but there you go.

It begins:



“Gagga!”

THE END

