

The Tree at Lakeside
Woods

Mid-summer June and the late afternoon heat at Lakeside Woods was still very hot. Annabella decided to take shade from the sun underneath the branches of a very tall dried-out looking tree. She sat herself down on the ground with her back leaning up against the tree's big round trunk looking across the lake. As she gazed her eyes down to the water's edge, Annabella noticed a long piece of pink silk ribbon lying on the grass moving slightly in the breeze. She got up to investigate closer, the ribbon was attached to a ladies cream coloured bonnet which was half submerged in the water. Annabella decided to fill the bonnet up with water from the lake several times and soaked the ground around the dried tree to give it a good drink, when suddenly she was interrupted by a young girl's voice.

"I'm sure I left my bonnet here father. I'm sure I did!"

On hearing the girl's voice, Annabella quickly ran around to the other side of the tree's big trunk to hide with the young girl's wet bonnet. Without warning, a big branch came down in front of Annabella and whipped the bonnet straight out of her hand taking it back up into the tree.

"Do not worry yourself my dear" said the girl's father "You have got lots of other lovely bonnets to wear so why worry yourself for losing that one"

As the young girl walked away with her father, Annabella took a peak at the girl from behind the tree. She wore such expensive fine clothes that included a long pretty lace dress that draped to her feet which pulled in at the waist; with a silk pink ribbon band that matched the ribbon of her bonnet. Annabella thought to herself that she had never owned such a pretty dress as she stood looking down at her own tattered dress. The girl's bonnet was caught firmly high in the tree with the silk pink ribbon wrapped around the branches.

"The girl will never get that back not unless her father had the tree chopped down; and that would be such a waste of life for the poor tree" Annabella said to herself. As Annabella was looking up through all the bushy-leafed branches of the tree, she suddenly felt something scratch the back of her head. She quickly turned around too see what it was, but there was nothing there. As she made a further attempt to carry on walking, the same sensation happened again; only this time she really felt the scratch. Annabella walked around the trunk of the tree twice but there was nobody there.

"Who is that scratching my head?" Annabella asked firmly. "It's me!"

"Who's me?" asked Annabella.

"Me!" the voice said again.

“It can't be the tree. Trees don't talk”

“I'm afraid this tree does” replied the Tree.

“Where are you speaking from Tree?” asked Annabella curiously walking in circles around the tree inspecting its trunk.

“I'm talking from the end of my branches” replied the Tree, lowering down two big bushy leafed branches so Annabella could take a closer look. But when Annabella pulled back the leaves on the end of the branches, she noticed there were little wooden faces hidden underneath.

“Would you like the chance to see the world from the very top of my trunk?” asked the Tree.

“I know I'm only ten years old and a good climber, but you're much too high for me to climb and it's a long way down to fall if I should slip”

“I don't want you to climb the outside of me, I wouldn't ask that of you. There is a much easier way of getting to the top”. The tree started to shake and a big chunk of bark opened up at the bottom of the trunk. It led to a little doorway which was just about big enough for Annabella to climb through.

“Step inside my trunk and continue up and around the wooden steps until you reach the very top”.

Annabella stepped inside the trunk and the bark door closed behind her.

The steps inside the trunk looked very steep so one careful step at a time had to be taken. On the way up the steps, there were little cupboards with names above carved into the walls of the trunk. Each cupboard was filled with different things. There was a half-eaten cherry tart and a selection of nuts and fish. Stored in one cupboard, Annabella could not believe what she saw. There were several gold rings and a gentleman's gold pocket watch.

“Who does all this belong to?” Annabella asked Tree. Tree put a big long branch down inside it's trunk to answer Annabella's question.

“Well! The first cupboard belongs to Lottie, the sweet little dormouse. Cupboard number two belongs to Nicker, the magpie but I will say no more about him. Number three is Stinkers cupboard, the kingfisher bird. Everyone calls him that because he keeps bringing home fish and stinking the place out. Finally, number four cupboard belongs to Marbles the white rat. She keeps bringing back children's marbles and throws them down on people's heads when they pass underneath me. But there are house rules! Anyone who gets caught pinching from someone else's cupboard gets served with an immediate eviction”.

Eventually Annabella gets to the top of the tree where there is a wooden bench to sit down on.

“All those steps to climb have left my legs feeling like jelly and sitting down has never felt so wonderful” said Annabella.

At the top of the tree there were four holes on each side of the trunk that gave a full circle view of the woods and lake below.

“What a view!” shouted Annabella. “I can see for miles. This is amazing!”

“It is amazing” said Tree “Especially with what I have seen and witnessed over the years from up here”

“What have you seen?” asked Annabella.

“Lots of things” replied Tree. “I remember seeing you with your parents when you were little, being pushed along in your pram by the side of the lake. And when you were big enough I would spend hours watching your mother and father teaching you how to walk”.

“Did you ever speak to my mother and father?” asked Annabella.

“A talking tree. Adults would have never believed it. They would have chopped me down with an axe... what a horrid thought” said Tree shivering its leaves.

“I promise I won't say a word to anyone that I have had a conversation with a talking tree. Cross my heart!” promised Annabella.

“You're a child” replied Tree. “Nobody would believe you anyway even if you did tell them”

“Am I the only person you've ever spoken to?” Annabella asked.

“You are the only person” replied Tree. “I decided to speak to you because you gave me a drink of water out of the kindest of your heart; but I probably look dry and wrinkled because I'm very old, and one day you will be old too”.

“I'm much too young to think about being old, that's a long way off for me” laughed Annabella.

“You might well say that now young lady but that part of life eventually comes to us all”

“Don't you ever get bored just standing there being a tree?”

“Bored!” exclaimed Tree. “It's a full time job looking after all my house guest, and now that Mr and Mrs owl are moving out of my tree with all their family next week, I won't have time to get bored. My big oak branches do seem to be getting rather full these days with everyone nesting and sleeping on them”

“Well it has been very nice speaking to you Tree but I must be getting back home for tea. My mother and father will get worried if I'm late”

“Excuse me for being rude” said Tree “but I didn't ask your name?”

“My name is Annabella!”

“That is the most prettiest of girls names I have ever heard. Will you come back and visit me tomorrow?” asked Tree “I have so enjoyed this conversation with you”

“It's Saturday tomorrow and I don't have school, so I promise I will visit you again straight after breakfast” Annabella said.

“How wonderful!” replied Tree “I will be so looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. When you get down to the ground Annabella, I would like you to wait outside for a few moments. I have a little gift I would like for you to take home. I'm giving you this gift because when you gave me that drink of water you thought of someone else, and that was a very kind thing to do” “It was nothing... really!” replied Annabella, as she made her way back down through the trunk of the tree.

“Every little thought counts no matter how big or small... now stand back Annabella!” said Tree in a firm voice.

A big forked branch came down from the tree and was thrust into the ground, digging up a scattering of gold coins.

“That should help you buy that pretty dress and do whatever you want in life... but spend it wisely” advised Tree.

“Are they real?” asked Annabella examining the coins in her hand.

“Let's just say the highwayman seemed to bury them very quickly”

“How long have these coins been buried here?” “To long to remember” answered Tree.

“What shall I tell my parents when I get home? I can't tell them a tree gave them to me” “Well... you could tell them that but I think there's very little chance they would believe you” said Tree.

“What if I tell my mother and father that I found the coins buried under some leaves while I was in the woods picking bluebells?” questioned Annabella?

“Sounds perfect” said Tree “Oh and don't forget to take your mother home a handful of bluebells will you”

Annabella safely placed all the gold coins inside her dress pocket and quickly made her way back home, waving goodbye to the tree. As she returned, remembering to stick to the story that she found the scattering of gold coins underneath some leaves, her parents were completely convinced with her story. The gold coins were put into a cloth and safely placed hidden under the bedroom floorboards of their house until mother and father decided to sell them. After a long day, Annabella was feeling very tired and went straight to bed after supper. The streams of the early morning daylight breaking through the bedroom curtains interrupted the peacefulness of a long nights sleep. While Annabella was sat at the kitchen table eating her breakfast, she couldn't help thinking about her newfound friendship with a talking tree. It was all very exciting but like Tree said, nobody would believe her even if she did want to tell

someone, so not a word would ever be mentioned to a living soul. As soon as breakfast was finished her father left for work and Annabella set off on her journey to visit Tree at Lakeside woods, leaving mother at home to look after her little brother.

The morning was very quiet. The only noise was an elderly gentleman walking his dog along the pathway on the other side of the lake. Trees door was closed, but as Annabella looked up she noticed a white rat holding a marble sat amongst the branches and leaves of the tree. "I've never seen a white rat before, let alone a white rat holding a marble" said Annabella inquisitively looking up at the rat.

"You must be Marbles the rat! Tree told me all about you and I hope you weren't going to throw that marble down on top of my head?"

"And you must be Annabella?" replied Marbles. "Tree has been up all night telling everybody in the woods about you, and that's why everybody is feeling very tired and tree is still asleep" said Marbles whilst tapping his foot on trees branch.

"I didn't expect you to answer" replied Annabella looking very surprised. "A talking tree and now a talking rat"

"Everyone who becomes Trees friend gets touched by his magical spirit. Well, that's what Tree said anyway" replied Marbles. "Don't you believe in magic Annabella?"

"I wasn't sure but I certainly do now. And you still haven't answered my question Marbles!" asked Annabella. "We're you going to throw that marble down on top of my head?"

"No of course not... I was just sitting here holding a marble"

Annabella wasn't so sure that Marbles was telling the truth. Then suddenly Tree gave a big yawn stretching out every branch.

"That's Tree waking up" said a little squirrel scurrying the ground for food. "Tree goes through this noisy routine every single morning without fail... Of course I'm not saying there's anything wrong in waking up. Just do it more quietly" "Nobody else seems to be complaining" muttered Tree.

"A talking squirrel?" said Annabella. "This is all becoming rather strange"

"I couldn't agree with you more Annabella" replied Marbles. "It almost scared the living daylight out of me when Squirrel said good morning; I thought I was going mad"

"So there's nothing strange about a talking rat then?" remarked Squirrel.

"I don't mind being strange" replied Tree. "There's always something different about being strange"

"Good morning Tree" said Annabella "I promised I would come back to visit you!"

“Good morning Annabella” replied tree lowering a branch down. “How wonderful to see you again, I've told everyone in the woods about you!”

“Tree is continuously being taken advantage of” said Squirrel interrupting. “Tree allows everyone to jump all over him anytime they feel like it”

“I hope your not excluding yourself” protested tree putting the end of a big branch two inches from squirrels face. “It's called being hospitable actually”

“Hos... hospitable!” repeated squirrel. “ I don't know the meaning of such a big word” “It means next time when Ginger the cat is chasing you and you are in such desperate need of a tall strong tree in close reach to scarper up...”

“Alright Tree, keep your leaves on and don't get your branches in a twist I see your point. I apologise” said squirrel “But I'm not apologising for everything I've said... Or ever going to say, you hear?”

“Yes I hear you” replied Tree yawning “I'm too tired to argue with you Squirrel”

“Hope you don't mind me asking” said Marbles, looking down surveying the ground from Trees branches “Why is part of your ground all dug up?”

“Yes look at that!” interrupted squirrel pointing to the ground. “I could have fallen down that hole and really hurt myself”

“God forbid” said tree. “If that had happened we wouldn't have heard the last of it”

“The holes not that deep” said Annabella “It's just a bit of mud dug up”

“I only picked a few bluebells for Annabella to take home to her mother, isn't that right Annabella?” said Tree.

“It looks a bit more than just a few bluebells!” replied squirrel sharply ”You sure somebody hasn't been digging up recently?” With that, Marbles accidentally drops a marble, which lands on Squirrels head.

“Ouch! That really hurt!” shouted Squirrel rubbing his head.

“Sorry Squirrel” said Marbles laughing ”That was an accident”

“You're always doing that to people, that was no accident!” replied Squirrel in an angry voice.

“I remember you telling me yesterday Annabella that you didn't have school today” said

Tree. “What is school exactly? What do you do when you have school?”

“I go to school to learn” answered Annabella.

“That's sounds interesting” said Marbles listening to the conversation.

“Yes that does sound interesting” curiously replied Tree, scratching a branch on the side of its trunk.

“I would rather spend everyday visiting the woods than going to school. This is much more fun” said Annabella.

The tree started to shake and when the bark door opened up everyone stood there holding their noses. The smell that came from the inside of Tree’s trunk was absolutely disgusting. It smelt like rotten fish.

“Oh dear!” said Tree “That smell must be coming from Stinkers cupboard. Please excuse me for a few seconds while I do a bit of fishing out” The tree reached in with a long branch and pulled out all the dead rotten fish from Stinkers cupboard.

“Sorry about that everyone. Stinker collects fish like they’re going out of fashion” said Tree. After ten minutes of the door being left open the worst of the horrid smell was gone.

Annabella stepped inside the trunk and made her way up the steps, taking a little peak inside each cupboard. Lottie the dormouse was sound asleep over a piece of cherry tart. There were several more gold rings inside Nickers cupboard in addition to yesterday. And even though Tree had thrown out the rotten fish from Stinkers cupboard, it was still quite smelly with bits of fish skin stuck to the floor. After passing Marbles cupboard, there were just a few more steps to go until Annabella reached the very top of the tree. It was easy for Squirrel and Marbles; they both ran up the outside of the trunk reaching the top in no time.

“What part of the tree do you live on Squirrel?” asked Annabella.

“I don't live anywhere on Tree” replied squirrel “I prefer to live in the middle of the woods actually. It's less noisy. A branch broke off in high winds some time ago and left a little snug hole for me to sleep in. It's very warm and comfortable” Suddenly people's voices were heard walking underneath the tree. Annabella leaned out of a hole looking down to the ground below. It was the same girl that was here yesterday with her father searching for the bonnet that Annabella filled with water. This time the girl was accompanied by an elderly lady and gentlemen carrying a basket. The girl carried on walking down to the lakeside while the lady and gentlemen stayed back, sitting directly underneath the tree preparing a picnic of strawberry and cream tarts.

“Strawberries and cream fit for a Queen!” said the elderly lady.

“Strawberries and cream fit for a rat too!” whispers Marbles peering down over.

“Grandmother! Grandfather! Quickly! I can see fish swimming in the water!” said the girl calling to both her Grandparents.

“I'm sure the girl's Grandparents wouldn't mind if a few strawberry cream tarts went missing... would they?” wondered Tree. While the girl was with her Grandparents down by the lakeside

looking into the water, Tree used a long branch to pick up three strawberry cream tarts and brought them back up to the top of the tree.

“One strawberry cream tart for Annabella, one for Marbles and one for Squirrel” said Tree.

“They really do taste as good as what they look” said Annabella with her mouth full.

“Totally agree” replied Marbles and Squirrel.

“Somebody has stolen our strawberry cream tarts!” the grandfather was heard shouting.

“Thieves! You’re all thieves I tell you! I know you can hear me wherever you are!” “Oh dear” said Squirrel.

“It's too late to give them back now; we've eaten them all” said Annabella wiping her lips with the back of her hand.

“I'm sure the girls family have got more strawberry tarts at home to eat, why worry themselves for losing three” remarked Tree.

“I feel really full after eating that strawberry tart, especially on top of all my breakfast” said Annabella.

“You should only eat when you’re hungry!” exclaimed Marbles.

“That would cover most of the day for you then” answered Tree in a giggle.

“I'm not always eating!” said Marbles sharply.

“You're always eating when I see you” added Squirrel.

“Now! Now! Please no arguments” said Tree. “I'm much too old these days for arguments” “I couldn't help noticing that some of your branches are getting rather crunchy to sit on” said Marbles tapping his foot on Trees branch.

“Are you thinking about moving out and leaving me for someone younger? asked Tree. “Of course not!” replied Marbles. “I wasn't implying that... I was just saying some of your branches are a bit crunchy”

“I wouldn't want anyone staying where they didn't want to live” said Tree inspecting a branch. Annabella looked out from the top of the tree and noticed the girl and her grandparents had packed up their picnic and left.

“Just to let you all know... Miss Badger is in sight and heading straight this way” said Tree.

“And last night I told Miss Badger all about you Annabella and she could not wait to meet you. She's very funny with her riddles”

“Miss Badger is very funny when she's not continuously repeating them and telling everybody to have a nice day, it's so annoying” said Squirrel.

Annabella made her way back down the steps from the top of the tree while Marbles and Squirrel ran down the outside of the trunk to meet Miss Badger.

“Miss Badger is from America” whispered Marbles.

“Miss Badger thinks she is” replied Squirrel. “The woman has never even been to America. She’s clearly mad.

“Miss Badger was actually born underneath that weeping willow tree over there” said Tree pointing with a long branch. “I do remember that moment very well, her poor mother screamed for hours”

“Miss Badger could make a spider scream for hours, without any difficulty!” rudely remarked Squirrel.

“Excuse me my girl. Come here and give Miss Badger a big kiss and a hug”

“If you don't want to get squeezed to death just say no thank you, not today. You don't want to be squeezed to death on any day” Squirrel firmly told Annabella.

“Be quiet Squirrel!” snapped Miss Badger. “I have a brand new riddle I would like you all to hear, listening everyone!” “Listening!” everyone replied.

“The maker doesn't want it. The buyer doesn't use it. The user doesn't see it. What is it?” Everybody went about their way thinking, and was thinking very hard.

“Come on! Come on! I don't have all day!” said Miss Badger impatiently with her arms crossed and foot tapping on the ground. But not one sound of an answer came from anyone. “Sorry Miss Badger” replied Annabella “But I don't think anybody knows the answer to that riddle”

“A coffin!” answered Miss Badger aloud.

“A coffin!” repeated Annabella, Tree, Marbles and Squirrel all starring at Miss Badger. “Start laughing” whispered Tree. “If she kicks off we'll have more than glass marbles thrown at us all” Everyone started laughing to keep Miss Badger in a good happy mood.

“I'm so glad you all enjoyed my new riddle. It's been a pleasure to meet you Annabella, but I'm sorry I can't stay any longer, I have a dinner date with a new admirer” No sooner had Miss Badger gone on her way, Stinker was over heard shouting furiously from inside the tree. “Somebody has been in my cupboard and stolen all of my fish!” All the shouting and noise woke up the little dormouse from her sleep. Lottie was so small she could hardly be seen sat on Trees branch.

“Nobody has stolen anything” said Tree putting a long branch up through the stairwell to speak to Stinker. “I'm sorry but I simply had to throw the rotten fish out because your cupboard was rather smelly”

“I can't help the fact that fish smell rather smelly! What else do you expect me to eat?” argued Stinker.

“Just don't keep so many dead fish in your cupboard, that's all I have to say on the matter” insisted Tree.

“Help! Help!”

“That's sounds like Miss Badger's voice!” said Annabella turning around to observe where the screaming of help was directly coming from. Miss Badger was on the other side of the lake being chased by a big aggressive dog with snapping jaws. She managed to make it into the water and swam as fast as she could across the lake, but the big dog didn't stop giving chase to Miss Badger at the water's edge. The dog gave a springboard leap from its hind legs and plunged into the water.

“The dogs gaining on Miss Badger!” yelled Annabella “We can't just stand here, we've got to do something to help!” Everyone joined in shouting for Miss Badger to swim faster. The ordeal was petrifying to watch. She finally made it across the lake and scrambled out of the water, but the big dog was in no mood to give up easily and kept up its pursuit. Marbles and Squirrel quickly ran up Tree for safety. It was all too scary for Lottie to watch and she covered her eyes with her paws. Tree used the end of its branches to grab the dog by the collar to give Miss Badger and Annabella more time to make it into Trees door. The bottom half of Miss Badger was considerably larger than her top half, which caused a big problem when it came to getting inside the door. Annabella tried very hard pushing with both her hands on Miss Badger's bottom.

“Breath in Miss Badger!” Annabella shouted.

“I'm trying to!”

“Hurry up!” frantically shouted Tree. “I can't hold this dog much longer, the end of my branch is about to snap off!” Annabella pushed with her back and dug her heels into the ground to get Miss Badger through the door. The end of Tree's branch suddenly gave way and the dog was set loose. One last big push and Miss Badger was finally in and Tree quickly closed the door behind them leaving the dog barking outside.

“Good pushing girl!” laughed Miss Badger. “That is what I call a close nip in the butt”

“It was no laughing matter Miss Badger! That nasty dog could have killed us both!”

Annabella said panting. There was very little room at the bottom of Tree's trunk for Annabella to pass, so Miss Badger took the lead up around the stairwell.

“That is so sweet” said Miss Badger looking inside Lottie's cupboard, but was certainly taken back by surprise when she looked inside Nickers cupboard and caught sight of all the gold rings. Miss Badger could not resist trying one on her finger.

“It fits perfect!” she said holding her hand up in the air admiring the ring on her finger. “I’m sure the owner wouldn’t mind if I took just one, would they?” said Miss Badger whilst she carried on walking up the steps keeping the ring on her finger.

“Don’t open Stinkers cupboard” said Annabella, “It’s a bit dirty and smelling of fish”

“I do have very good hearing” replied Stinker overhearing the comment. Just as Miss Badger was about to peer inside Marbles cupboard, Nicker came down over the stairs and noticed instantly that Miss Badger was wearing one of the rings that came from his cupboard. Nicker stood on the stairs in front of Miss Badger with a wing on each hip and feet astride looking very angry.

“Take that ring off your finger immediately and put it back in my cupboard where you found it!” said Nicker in a sharp orderly voice. Miss Badger quickly took the ring off her finger and passed it back down to Annabella who then placed it back inside Nickers cupboard.

“I can’t have you served with an immediate eviction because you don’t live here!” sharply replied Nicker.

“Miss Badger was only admiring the ring... weren’t you Miss Badger?” quickly replied Annabella, trying to defuse the confrontation.

“I totally agree with Annabella I was only admiring the ring and just forgot to take it off” Nicker turned around and went back up the steps. The top of the steps was finally reached and Miss Badger was completely out of breath and sitting down had never felt so wonderful.

“Charles! Come here boy!” the big dog was heard being called back by its owner.

“Thank goodness that’s over and done with” said Tree. “And why is Nicker not looking in a very happy mood?”

“Miss Badger shouldn’t touch what doesn’t belong to her” replied Nicker who was perched on the outside on Trees branch.

“Maybe that’s something you should learn to do too” replied Tree lowering a branch in front of Nickers face.

“What are you implying Tree?” asked Nicker.

“Well Magpies do have a reputation for taking things that don’t belong to them” interrupted Annabella over hearing the conversation.

“People shouldn’t leave their things lying around unattended then should they” replied Nicker.

“But it’s still not yours to take” said Squirrel “And hiding stolen goods, well the police could have Tree charged with being an accessory to a crime” “Tree could end up being sent to jail” said Lottie.

“The police are not going to put a big tree in jail, they'll just have Tree chopped down with an axe” laughed Squirrel.

“Stop talking silly, nothing like that is ever going to happen” insisted Annabella.

“Sorry for interrupting this depressing conversation but would you like me to sing a song or two?” asked Miss Badger. “I have a fabulous high pitched voice that I would love Annabella to hear”

“The first and last time Miss Badger used her vocal cords all the birds flew out of the trees” said Squirrel.

“And I didn't come back for nearly two weeks and that's why everyone decided to have a hands up vote that Miss Badger wouldn't sing again” smirked Nicker. “I loved your voice Miss Badger” replied Lottie. “I thought it was wonderful”

“Well thank you Lottie” replied Miss Badger bowing her head. “You just can't please everyone these days can you. So how about another riddle instead then?”

Suddenly everybody's attention was drawn to silence when three loud banging noises were heard on Trees door. The banging echoed right up through the stairwell making everyone jump with fear. The noise even made Stinker run out of his cupboard and up the steps. “Everyone stay right where you are and don't move” ordered Tree. “I will investigate the situation by lowering a high branch down to take a closer look outside”

“It could be that girl's grandfather wanting his strawberry tarts back” said Marbles. The banging noise happened again. BANG! BANG! BANG!

“This tree would make a lot of wood for someone's fire. It's sounding a bit hollow inside” a man was overheard saying. What Tree saw and overheard made every branch tremble and shiver with fear.

“What's happening?” everyone asked Tree.

“The time has come. There are four men standing by my tree each holding a big axe. Well it's been lovely to have known you all and thank you for being my friend but you must leave now while there's still time”

“That's what happens when you talk about these things” said Miss Badger clipping her hand across the top of Squirrel's head.

“I really did not mean for Tree to get chopped down” said Squirrel crying. “Tree is my friend” Annabella, Marbles, Squirrel, Lottie, Stinker, Nicker and Miss Badger all leaned out of the hole at the top of Tree's trunk so they could get a better hearing of what the men were saying.

“The tree does look a bit old and dried up, but it's a shame to chop the old boy down yet. Let's take another look in a few more years” and the four woodchoppers went on their way. “Thank

goodness! “said Tree. “That is what I call a close nip in the butt”. Annabella waited for five minutes until the men were out of sight before she made her way back down Trees stairwell; followed by Miss Badger. As Miss Badger went to put her head out through Trees doorway, she suddenly remembered Annabella helped push her in and there was nobody behind Miss Badger to help give her a push back out.

“How on earth am I going to get out of this one?” asked Miss Badger looking at Annabella.

Tree lowered a big branch down to take a closer look at the situation.

“Can I make a suggestion?” said Tree. “Why don't you lay on your side Miss Badger and then I will tie a branch around your feet, breath in and I will pull you out that way”

“Well if that is your suggestion Tree, I hope no one is watching!” exclaimed an embarrassed Miss Badger.

“Yelling like that Miss Badger you could entice the dog back!” said Tree losing patience.

“It's not Trees fault you're funny shaped” replied Squirrel standing outside.

“No fury little vermin talks to Miss Badger like that Squirrel! You wait till I get outside, then you can do all the talking you want; if you survive it” said Miss Badger, angrily.

“Obviously my services are not wanted so I'm going home for a few hours sleep, so sort your own mess out Miss Badger” abruptly replied Squirrel running away into the woods.

“When a girl is out of choices, you just use someone else's... So just get on with it Tree and make it quick!” One big pull by her feet and Miss Badger was pulled out of the doorway.

“Well done Tree!” said Annabella and Marbles clapping their hands.

“That's wasn't so bad, after all that shouting you made was it Miss Badger? At least you're out now” said Marbles.

“Well I can't say I've ever been through worse” replied Miss Badger brushing off the dust from her coat. All of a sudden a very loud thundery noise was heard coming from the woods.

“Another poor tree being chopped down” said Tree.

Squirrel came running back completely out of breath.

“The noise wake you up Squirrel?” asked Tree.

“Wake me up!” shouted Squirrel “I didn't have chance to go to sleep, it was my tree those men were chopping down. They didn't even give me time to pack all my things”

“You knew they were in the area” replied Stinker who was perched on a branch beside Nicker.

“I'm homeless, all of my belongings have gone“ said Squirrel feeling very upset.

“Please don't upset yourself Squirrel” said Annabella “Nobody's going to see you homeless”

“Well he isn't living with me!” said Miss Badger “I've never seen this guy de-flee himself once”

“I will not allow for anybody to become homeless” said Tree. “I will find you a safe snug little hole to live in within my tree Squirrel”

“Safe! They were thinking about chopping you down five minutes ago” “Just be grateful Squirrel” replied Nicker.

”I am grateful Nicker! I'm always grateful” said Squirrel.

“Nobody has been hurt and we're all still together so why don't we call this a day while the endings good” said Lottie.

“I agree” said Annabella. “My mother told me not to be late getting back home because my grandparents are coming for tea”

“I wish I was invited for tea” said Tree “But I don't think I would fit inside Annabella's house”

“Will you visit me again tomorrow Annabella?” asked Tree.

“I would love to see you all again tomorrow and I will be here straight after breakfast” promised Annabella.

“Goodbye! See you tomorrow Annabella” said Lottie, Stinker, Knicker, Marbles, Miss Badger and Tree all waving goodbye.

Annabella came back to visit the tree every day for the rest of the summer but with the good fortune the tree had given Annabella and her family, they all had the chance to start a new life together, moving faraway and was never to visit Tree again. Until one day, many years later in her life she decided to bring her own family back for a holiday. Walking down by the Lakeside Annabella noticed four men chopping down the tree, she ran over to the men shouting.

“Stop! Stop! Why are you chopping down the tree?” tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“Sorry Miss” replied one of the woodchoppers “We have been given orders to chop the tree down. Apparently the old boy has been dead for quite some time. It's a big tree to come down, so you and your family had better stand over there”

The tree fell down with a big bang, and floating down on the breeze of the fall was a bonnet with a pink ribbon tie.

When the dust settled on the fall of the tree,
I picked up an acorn to take away with me.
know it will take years for that seed to sow,
But from little acorns big trees grow.

The Adventures of Captain James Launder:

No Mans Land

Once upon a time many centuries ago, there was an old wealthy rum guzzling pirate called Captain James Laundry, and he was the Captain of a thirty-crew pirate ship called Big Bessie. This old sea dog fought every sea and land battle with a fighting spirit of a man half his age. But there would be one particular adventure that Captain Laundry and his men were never going to forget. Ten weeks sailing south from Talland Bay, Cornwall, land ahoy was finally seen in the far distance. Big Bessie sailed into the bay and her anchor was lowered into the water. But before anyone stepped ashore, Pirate Skegg checked out the island through his telescope from the crow's nest, and sights a wooden sign nailed to a tree.

“Well lad, what does it read?” inquired Captain Laundry.

“Sorry Captain... but I can only read a little!” replied Pirate Skegg.

“There can't be that many words written on the sign lad, not unless someone's left you a love letter” laughed Captain Laundry turning to his men.

Pirate Skegg holds his telescope steadily so he was able to read the sign.

“The sign says “No... Mans... Land... 1750!”

“1750? That’s five years ago” curiously replied Captain Laundry tapping one finger on his chin. Overhearing their conversation, Pirate Pook tells of a story that his uncle told him many years ago.

“Forty pirates got marooned on an island called No Mans Land. He told of fairies flying around everywhere. They were wearing gold tiaras, encrusted with pearls and gold rings as well as bracelets coated with diamonds. The treasure belonged to a princess who was very unhappy

and sad, for her prince had promised to return to her; but never had. In return the princess cursed every single piece of the treasure on the land. It was said that any man who would take the treasure for himself, shared its curse. The fairies sailed off stealing their ship leaving the pirates with all the treasure marooned on the island for many years” Captain Launder and his men could not stop laughing.

“Well there's plenty of men now to keep the little princess happy, but if any fairy on that island feel they have enough courage to steal my ship, then they had better come forth very quickly while I'm still in a good laughing mood!” loudly replied Captain Launder with hysterical laughter.

One boat was lowered into the water to take Captain Launder and twelve of his men ashore to the beach. The remaining crew stayed back on board to keep Big Bessie in safe keeping while she was anchored in the bay. Pirate Chipper noticed something shiny moving in amongst the trees and shouts for Captain Launder to come quickly. Sat on a branch high in the tree was the most beautiful fairy creature anybody had ever seen. The fairy was wearing an emerald coloured dress with a gold tiara encrusted with pearls clipped to its long mane of golden hair, and gold rings and bracelets were worn on each hand.

“Blimey!” said Captain Launder drinking a swig of rum from his bottle. The pirates were speechless and could not take their eyes off her. Just as they went to take one step closer, a pair of wings suddenly protruded from the fairies back and she briskly flew off flying into the dense woods.

“Swords and pistols at the ready men and follow that fairy!” ordered Captain Launder raising his sword.

Venturing half a mile, the pirates came to an opening in the woods where they came across a big long wooden table that was completely covered with enough food and rum-filled barrels to feed an entire ship's crew for a week. Hundreds of solid gold coins and pearls were scattered over the table. The pirates suddenly heard a whisper of voices coming from high in the trees. When all the pirates looked up, there was not just one fairy, but lots of them sat in the doorways of their little houses in the trees.

“Blimey! We've hit the jackpot men! So fill your faces till your bellies are full however men, as little as what the fairies are, be sure to keep your wits about you” whispered Captain Launder not wanting the fairies to hear.

After three hours of eating and drinking, the pirates were drunk and asleep. All of a sudden, loud shouting for Captain Launder was heard coming through the woods. It was Pirate Pook and the rest of the pirates that stayed back on board Big Bessie. "We're over here lads!" said Captain Launder stirring from his sleep.

"I'm really sorry Captain!" said Pirate Pook trying to catch his breath back. "One by one the fairies threw us overboard into the water leaving us to swim ashore. We all put up a hard and brave fight Captain to save Big Bessie, but the fairies got really nasty and became too strong and overpowering". Captain Launder looked up into the trees and all the fairies had gone, and every single pirate's sword and pistol were nowhere to be found. The Captain clenched his fist and shouted angrily at the top of his voice.

"Wake up men! Grab as much treasure as you can and get back to the boat now!"

The pirates ran back through the woods heading as fast as they could towards the beach but they were all too late, the fairies had stolen Big Bessie and smashed their boat into pieces leaving Captain Launder and his men stranded on the beach.

All the fairies on board Big Bessie were transforming back into men. But it was only then that Captain Launder realised that the fairies had been planning their getaway off the island since 1750.

"When you get your chance to get off the island, don't take the treasure because it's cursed!" shouted a man from Big Bessie's bridge.

Captain Launder sat helplessly on the beach as he watched Big Bessie being stolen away to sea, until she was out of sight in the distance. Then suddenly, one by one the pirates dropped to the ground screeching with unbearable pain, as wings started to protrude from their backs until they themselves, were each turned into a beautiful fairy. Captain Launder and his men were embarrassingly turned into fairies and left marooned on the island, hundreds of miles away in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing they could do but to sit and wait for a passing ship to drop anchor in the bay. Every pirate fairy including Captain Launder took their two-hour turn keeping watch at the beach shoreline, sitting high in a tree awaiting sight of a ship. Everyday that passed, a mark on a tree was crossed off. Days became weeks and weeks became long dragging months. Each fairy had their own magic wands that matched the colour of their dresses. By waving their wands five times in an anti-clockwise motion, they could wish for as much food as what they wanted to eat, but only as much rum as what they could sit and look at; because being little fairies brought very little appetite and thirst as alcohol made them feel very sick. Everyman had his own share of its given curse.

On the Seventh hundred and fortieth day, a big ship finally sailed into the bay. Fairy Chipper swiftly flew back through the woods to raise the alarm. All the pirate fairies came to look at the ship that would hopefully get them off the island. They sat hiding in the trees making sure not one fairy was to be seen until the men from the ship were on the beach, and lured into the same fate Captain Launder and his men were subjected to. Fairy Skegg perched himself high amongst the branches and leaves of the trees to take a closer look at the ship though his telescope.

“I want the full details on that flag and the name of the ship, if it’s not too many words for you to read lad!” asked Fairy Launder in a loud whisper.

“It’s a black flag with a picture of a pirate standing on the head of a skull. The name on the side of the ship reads... Looe”

“Blimey! If it isn't our very own Pirate Bertie.” replied Fairy Launder. “Had many a drunken fights with him over the years”

“Did you win Captain?” asked Fairy Pook.

“What do you think I am, a big fairy? Of course I won lad!” answered Fairy Launder in a whisper. A boat carrying ten men including Pirate Bertie was observed on the water heading towards the beach.

“Those pirates who stole Big Bessie and smashed our boat into pieces so that we couldn't get back to our ship... we have got to make sure that these pirates can't either!” said Fairy Chipper.

“I'm the captain of a pirate ship, not a powder puff and I want that ship to get us all off this island, so a fight to the death we'll have men!” quietly proposed Fairy Launder shaking a clenched fist in the air.

“Fight to the death!” whispered the fairy pirates each raising their wands.

“Who’s the prettiest fairy to lure the men back to the woods then Captain?” asked Pook. “Now that you've mentioned it Pook, I think you could do the job splendidly” suggested Fairy Launder, with a big grin on his face.

“And don't forget to put a big smile on your face for the boys Pook” replied Fairy Chipper, laughing.

“That’s the only ship in seven hundred and forty days that has passed this way, so if you think it's so funny Chipper, maybe you would like to be the fairy that entertains those men while the rest of us go back to get the table ready!” angrily replied Fairy Launder pointing to the ship anchored in the bay.

The boat carrying ten of the ships men were eventually at the shore, and it wasn't long before Pirate Bertie and his men caught sight of Fairy Pook sat in the tree. They could not quite believe

the fairy creature was real but just as they went to take a step closer, a pair of wings protruded from Fairy Pook's back and he briskly took off flying into the dense woods. "Swords and pistols at the ready men and follow that fairy!" ordered Pirate Bertie raising his sword in the air.

Venturing half a mile, the pirates came to the same opening in the woods, where they came across a big long wooden table that was completely covered with enough food and rum to feed an entire ship's crew for a week. Hundreds of solid gold coins and pearls were scattered over the table. The pirates suddenly heard whisper of voices coming from high up in the trees. When all the pirates looked up, there was not just one fairy, but lots of them sat in the doorways of their little tree homes. Fairy Launder and his fairy pirates looked very enchanting, wearing their sparkling jewels and different coloured dresses with matching coloured wands.

"Looks like we've hit the fairy jackpot men" whispered Pirate Bertie to his men.

After several hours of eating and drinking, the pirates were drunk and asleep. But it was not before long when loud shouting noises for Pirate Bertie was heard coming through the woods.

"One by one, the fairies threw us overboard into the water leaving us to swim ashore! We fought back with our lives but they were too vicious and overpowering for us!" said the pirates. Pirate Bertie looked up into the trees and all the fairies had gone, and every single pirate's sword and pistol were nowhere to be found. Pirate Bertie clenched his fist and shouted angrily at the top of his voice.

"Wake up men! Fill your pockets with as much treasure as you can take and get back to the boat now!"

The pirates ran back through the woods heading as fast as they could towards the beach, but they were all too late. Fairy Launder and his fairy pirates had stolen Looe and smashed their boat into pieces leaving Pirate Bertie and his men stranded on the beach. All the fairy pirates on-board Looe were once again transforming back into men. But it was only then did Pirate Bertie realised that Captain Launder and his men had been planning their getaway off the island.

"When you get your chance to get off the island, don't take the treasure because it's cursed!" Shouted Captain Launder from Looe's bridge. Pirate Bertie sat helplessly on the beach as he watched his ship being stolen away to sea, until she was out of sight in the distance. Suddenly, one by one the pirates dropped to the ground screeching with unbearable pain as wings start to protrude from their backs until they were each turned into a beautiful fairy. Pirate Bertie and his men were embarrassingly turned into fairies and left marooned on an island hundreds of

miles away in the middle of nowhere, and there was nothing they could do but to sit and wait for a passing ship to drop anchor in the bay.

Captain Launder and his men were no more than three days at sea when Pirate Skegg caught sight of a ship through his telescope in the distance. The pirates sailed Looe a little closer for a better view of the ship.

“Blimey! If it isn't our very own Big Bessie” said Captain Launder standing on the ship's bridge. “Shall we fire the guns Captain?” asked Pirate Chipper.

“Over my watery grave Chipper, I want that ship back undamaged!” loudly replied Captain Launder pointing to his ship in the distance. Looking very closely through his telescope, Pirate Skegg could not see one man on-board. All the pirates took their positions, ready to fight with swords in hand and pistols fully loaded. Pulling up along side Big Bessie, Captain Launder shouted across for any man hiding on board the ship to come out with their hands held high, but there was no answer. Captain Launder and fourteen of his men boarded Big Bessie. Something shiny lying on the deck beside Pirates Skegg's left foot caught Pirate Pook's attention. Looking down closer, he noticed it was a gold coin which he quickly picks up giving it to Captain Launder. The Captain stared at the gold coin in his hand with great curiosity and thought.

“Don't take the treasure because it's cursed, but somebody had taken the treasure with them!”

“So what happened then Captain?” asked Pirate Skegg.

“The curse stays with each man who takes the treasure, which means Skegg... he or they are still wearing frilly underwear” laughed Captain Launder. The first place everyone very carefully looked was in between the ships sails; they all had to look no further. Three fairies were to be found sitting on the ships sail rigging. Captain Launder tried peacefully to coax and encourage the fairies down to talk, with an attempt to come to an agreement. After a conversation of whispering, the three fairies decided to fly a little closer but still keeping their distance. The fairies explained the situation that when they left the island of No Mans Land, they did not transform back into men like everyone else. One fairy was still wearing a gold ring, and the other two fairies found a gold coin and a pearl inside each of their dress pockets. All three fairies had taken the curse with them, and it wasn't long before the Captain realised that three of his men were unaccounted for. Having little choice of spaces to hide and too far to fly anywhere, all three of the fairies were eventually found two hours later. The Captain and his crew completely refused to take them back to the island to reverse the curse, and so made plans to sell the fairies as soon as the ship got back home to England. The fairies were left with

no choice but to put up a fierce fight, ending with every single man including the Captain being thrown overboard into the deep ocean. They could not find the ship's map and compass to navigate their way back to the island of No Mans Land. All three fairies were lost at sea ever since they left the island. Captain Launder thought deeply for a few minutes and only spoke aloud when a decision of intention was decided.

"I propose we should all sail back to the island of No Mans Land and give that princess a drop of her very own medicine"

The pirates looked around at one another with uncertainty until Pirate Pook was the first to speak out.

"I'm sorry Captain, but I don't fancy being turned into one of those things again" he said pointing to the fairies.

"We don't either" said the rest of the pirates.

"It comes a time in a pirates life when you've got to find the courage to go back and confront your worst fears, and being made to wear a dress with matching coloured underwear for seven hundred and forty days without a drop of rum is just about my worst! So hands up high men! What pirate has got the courage to sail back with me to bury and burn the princesses curse to a cinder?" asked Captain Launder in a loud voice.

Every pirate cheered and even the fairies raised their hands and voted in favour with Captain Launder. The pirates split into two parties, one taking hold of Looe and the other taking hold of Big Bessie with Captain Launder at the helm.

Within three days of sailing back, Pirate Skegg eventually caught sight of the island in the distance through his telescope. Once both ships had dropped anchor in the bay, the three fairies quickly flew to the island to tell Fairy Bertie and his men of their plans. Once the fairies gave the all clear by waving their magic wands from high in a tree, a boat from Looe was then lowered into the water to carry Captain Launder and ten men to the shore. Leaving only the strongest fighting men on board the two ships in case of any reprisal and betrayal. Trekking half a mile, the pirates once again stopped when they approached the opening in the woods. Fairy Bertie and his fairy men were not looking very happy sat in their tree houses. "You have been very lucky Pirate Bertie!" shouted Captain Launder. "It has been a grand total of six days for you and your men dressed in frilly underwear. Seven hundred and forty days we had to endure that cruel curse, so you and your men Bertie, can thank my men and I for coming back to save you"

“Just get me out of this horrible dress and off this island and I will call it a truce!” hollered Fairy Bertie.

“I want every man to make a thorough check of his pockets that they are completely empty of any treasure, because I am certain of one thing... I will not be coming back to this island for a third time” warned Captain Launder.

Every single piece of the treasure was thrown into a pit and hopefully buried forever. The fairy tree houses and the long wooden feast table were smashed to pieces and burned to a cinder. Just as the pirates and the fairies were about to leave, a bright glowing light was seen emerging from the woods. As the glow got closer and closer, the light started to turn darker and darker until a big witch’s face appeared.

“This isn't looking good!” shrieked Pirate Skegg with fear.

Captain Launder stood ready for the challenge with his sword in one hand and pistol in the other.

“I have no less courage now than what it took for me to come back to this island. In fact I've suddenly found myself with a hell of a lot more!” he roared angrily at the top of his voice. Pirate Skegg ran in fear, followed by the pirates and fairies. Captain Launder was the only pirate left standing to fight this dark force.

“Fight to the death! I'm not afraid of you, whatever you are!”

Out of the darkness of the witches face the most beautiful princess fairy appeared. Her long white pearl sequinned dress and waist length golden hair caught the sparkle of the sunlight that was shining down through the opening in the woods. Captain Launder dropped to his knees.

“Blimey! You really are the most beautiful princess” said Captain Launder feeling quite speechless dropping his sword and pistol.

“You are the only man in a hundred years that finally found the courage to come back to this island to help your fellow men. You also found the courage to confront me without running away, and for that, you shall be rewarded Captain Launder. Hold out your right hand” said the Princess. With that, she waved her magic wand in an anti clockwise motion until a big red ruby appeared in the middle of Captain Launder’s hand.

“Blimey! Wearing frilly knickers for seven hundred and forty days wasn't so bad after all” said Captain Launder, biting the ruby between his teeth to see if it was real. The princess started to fade away back into the dark light until she completely vanished. When Captain Launder got back to the beach, he told everyone a story that he killed the witch by stabbing her straight through the heart with his sword. Pirate Bertie was given his ship back and all the fairies were transformed back into men.

The story of the princess was sworn to secrecy and was never told by any man again. Until one day, many centuries later, a ship's chest was found in the basement of a house, and inside laid the sea journal of Captain James Launder.

The End

The Magic Box

Friday was finally here. The end of the day school bell rang loudly down through the corridors outside the classrooms, and Elizabeth could not wait to get home from school to meet Grandad. This weekend was going to be extra special for Elizabeth because on Saturday, she will be celebrating her ninth birthday while staying with her grandparent's and eight year old cousin Thomas who was also invited to stay. No sooner had Elizabeth arrived home from school, Grandad pulled up outside the house beeping the car horn.

"Love you all!" Elizabeth shouted to her parents from the car window before quickly setting off on their journey to beat the heavy teatime traffic.

After a ninety-minute drive into the countryside and offering to pick Thomas up on the way, they finally arrived at Wits End Cottage. Grandma and Marcus the Labrador dog, were in the front garden awaiting their arrival. Gran greeted Thomas and Elizabeth with a big hug by wrapping her arms around the both of them, leaving Marcus jumping around, wagging his tail with excitement. Gran asked Elizabeth if she would like the attic for her new bedroom, considering how much time she spent playing up there. Grandad asked Thomas if he would like Elizabeth's old bedroom, which was a much bigger room than his own. Elizabeth and Thomas thought it was a great idea and Gran knew they would not say no. During the week when Grandad was driving past a junk shop with Gran on their way back home from town, they both noticed a big brown trunk in a shop window for sale. It wasn't very expensive, and Gran thought it would make an excellent toy box for Elizabeth's new bedroom. After Grandad gave the trunk a good clean and a lick of pink paint, it looked as good as new. Thomas was never bothered about having too many toys to play with; he just liked kicking footballs around and bringing home grass worms from the field at the back of the house.

Elizabeth ran up the stairs to the attic to see what adjustments she could make to her new bedroom. But when Elizabeth opened up the door, she gasped with surprise. Her new bedroom was completely redecorated with new floral wallpaper and all the bedroom furniture was moved up from her old bedroom. When Thomas came in to have a look at Elizabeth's new bedroom, the newly painted toy box immediately caught his attention.

"Your new toy box Elizabeth looks really old" said Thomas, bending down on his hands and knees curiously inspecting the side of the box.

"It could be a treasure chest from a pirate ship. The side handles are shaped with a skull and cross bones"

"Have you ever seen a real pirate ship?" asked Elizabeth.

“I’ve seen pirate ships from films and books” replied Thomas, still curiously examining the box.

“Can I take all your toys out of the box Elizabeth because there could be a date or something written on the inside?”

“If there was a date I think Grandad would have noticed something while he was painting the box” replied Elizabeth.

“There could be a date written underneath the toy box” suggested Thomas.

“You’re more curious than a cat but if you must tip all my toys out Thomas, you better put them all back again afterwards”

Thomas took all the toys out and laid the box onto its side, promising to put every toy back afterwards.

“Elizabeth!” Thomas said aloud “I’ve found a date and a message written underneath the bottom of the box. The date reads eighteen-eighty and a message that reads...

“Imagine a place you would want it to be, Then
step inside to enter me.

Believe the magic will come true,
And the box shall conjure just for you.”

Thomas tips the toy box back up and steps inside.

“A magical land where there are free sweet shops and free footballs because I keep losing all mine” Thomas asked the trunk raising his voice.

“You have to be a bit more imaginative than that Thomas! I don’t think an old box could do a trick like that” replied Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth! Thomas! Time for tea!” shouted Gran from downstairs.

Elizabeth decided to help Thomas get all the toys back into the box so they could both get down for tea quicker. Sitting around the tea table, Thomas mentions to Gran and Grandad about what was written underneath the bottom of the box.

“Eighteen-eighty!” repeats Grandad. “Well it’s nineteen-seventy now. So that is ninety years ago, but I wouldn’t believe too much about the rest of the story. I say someone was having an overactive imagination if you ask me”

“I have an idea” said Gran. “Write down all the things you would like to see in your magical land and that will give Grandad and I an interesting read tomorrow”

“Free sweet shops and as many free footballs I can kick around!” said Thomas, raising both arms in the air.

“If Thomas would like to help Grandad keep company in taking Marcus for a little walk first, and Elizabeth helps me wash the dishes, you can both then go off and play in your rooms” said Gran.

After the dishes were washed and cleared away, Elizabeth was feeling very tired after being at school all day and decided to take an early night and get ready for bed. On the way back up to her bedroom, Elizabeth took a quick peep inside Thomas' new room. It was decorated very boyish with football wallpaper, which suited Thomas completely. As Elizabeth was just about to get ready for bed, Thomas was heard running up the stairs heading straight for Elizabeth's bedroom.

“Shall we see if your toy box really does work magic?” asked Thomas.

“It's just an old painted trunk box” replied Elizabeth. “But if it could do magic, I would love to help Santa Claus and his reindeers deliver all the presents on Christmas Eve. Also, I would love to visit a street filled with lots of toy shops, all lit up with Christmas trees and sparkling candle lights”

“We only celebrated Christmas three weeks ago” said Thomas.

“I want it to be Christmas again. You want free sweet shops... like that's ever going to happen” replied Elizabeth unpacking her weekend bag.

“I want free sweet shops and free footballs” said Thomas. “Why don't we both just stand in the box Elizabeth, to see if magic can really happen”

Once again the box was tipped over and out came all of the toys and Elizabeth stepped inside with Thomas.

“Well, we've asked the box what we both want and nothing is happening Thomas” said Elizabeth looking down at both their feet. Then all of a sudden, snowflakes started to land inside the box making Thomas and Elizabeth look up very quickly. They were no longer in Elizabeth's bedroom. They were standing in a snow covered street, lined with toy shops and sparkling Christmas trees all lit up with candle lights.

“I've never seen anything so magical and real! This is what I call real magic” Elizabeth said loudly with excitement grabbing hold of Thomas' arm.

“Pinch me!” exclaimed Thomas. “I want to make sure I'm not dreaming!”

“Look Thomas! Over there!”

An elf was standing outside the biggest sweetshop they had ever seen. Giant candy canes and big lollypops were stacked outside the doorway of the sweet shop.

“I haven't brought any money with me Elizabeth so I can't buy any sweets” said Thomas checking his pockets.

“You asked the box for free sweets and footballs Thomas, so you wouldn't need any money” replied Elizabeth.

The elf started to wave for Thomas and Elizabeth to come over.

“Come on Thomas we've got to go and meet the elf he's calling us over”

The Elf told Thomas and Elizabeth to go inside the sweetshop and each fill a bag with as many free sweets as they could carry. When they entered the sweet shop, Thomas and Elizabeth stood gobsmacked staring at all the sweets. They had never seen so many sweets in one shop. There were lots of different coloured long strips of candy hanging from the ceiling that were in easy reach to pull down and eat. Hundreds of jars were filled to the brim with a variety of sweets all stacked along the shelves, and the biggest edible chocolate Santa that was almost the height of the ceiling.

“Sorry Santa Claus, but you look so delicious” said Thomas biting a big chunk of chocolate out of Santa's right arm. Thomas and Elizabeth spent ages in the sweet shop, filling their bags and faces at the same time with sweets. Thomas found a blue football on the floor behind a big bin of large chocolate sticks and started to kick it around the shop, accidentally smashing a jar of fizzy flying saucers off the shelf. On hearing the noise, the Elf came back into the sweet shop and asked Thomas if he would like to have a game of football with Santa Claus and the Elves. Elizabeth and Thomas quickly filled their bags with handfuls of sweets before rushing outside the sweet shop to meet Santa Claus. Parked on the snow in front of them was a huge big red sleigh pulled by eight reindeers. Lots of Elves were helping Santa Claus stack the sleigh with lots of presents. It was more magical than what they could have ever imagined.

“Santa Claus always likes to warm up with a good game of football before he delivers all his presents on Christmas Eve” said the Elf.

“I want to be on Santa's team!” shouted Thomas with excitement.

“I'm in goal!” said Santa Clause loudly. “Nobody ever scores a goal past my big belly”

Elizabeth sat down on the step of the sweet shop watching Thomas play football with Santa Claus and all the Elves. When the football game was finally over, Thomas was the highest scorer with five balls kicked straight into the goal.

“We best get going” said Santa Claus. “We've got lots of presents to deliver... with the help from Thomas and Elizabeth of course”

Thomas and Elizabeth boarded the sleigh and sat either side of Santa Claus.

“All sitting comfortably?” asked Santa Claus.

The reins were flipped down onto the reindeer's backs and the sleigh gently lifted up into the air and swiftly took off into night sky.

“This is brilliant!” Thomas shouted.

“I don't just deliver to children. Grown-ups also like to find presents underneath their Christmas tree. I've seen grown-ups get more excited than the little ones”

When the sleigh parked on the roof of each house, Thomas and Elizabeth would then pass Santa Claus the presents to take down the chimney and place underneath the Christmas tree. Santa Claus' belly was very full from all the mince pies and chocolates the children left him to eat, and sometimes he would have trouble getting back up the chimney.

The magic of Christmas Eve was over, and there were no more presents left to deliver. Thomas and Elizabeth were very tired and fell asleep beside Santa Claus on the long journey back home.

The sound of Thomas running up the stairs shouting happy birthday awoke Elizabeth from her sleep.

“What time did we get back last night Thomas?” asked Elizabeth waking up and rubbing both her eyes.

“Get back from where?” replied Thomas.

“You fell asleep in bed so I went back downstairs and watched television with Gran and Grandad.

“You and I helped Santa Claus deliver lots of presents with all the reindeers pulling the sleigh. You played a game of football with the Christmas Elves and Santa Claus was in goal... and the biggest sweet shop I ever saw with all those free sweets. Don't you remember Thomas? It really happened! I know it did!” exclaimed Elizabeth, thinking back on the night. “I wish I could have dreams like that when I go to sleep. My dreams always seem to be boring” replied Thomas.

A Christmas Star

Benjamin Blake started to feel fed up with his job at the office, continuously having to deal with people's insurance claims all day long. Benjamin had gotten to hate his job so much; he started to take days off work by ringing in sick. That night after a long day at work, Benjamin found it hard to sleep. But while he lay awake on top of his bed watching the stars through the bedroom window, a fallen star suddenly shoots across the clear night sky in a trail of bright light. Benjamin makes a wishful thought upon the star for his life to be more fulfilling. Suddenly, his attention is quickly drawn away by a sudden noise that is heard coming from downstairs and living by himself, he was not expecting any visitors.

He opens the bedroom door very slowly so it does not creak. He leans over the banister in the hallway at the top of the stairs. Benjamin could hear somebody moving things and walking around the kitchen when suddenly, he remembers that he forgot to lock the back door before going to bed. Feeling scared and anxious, he goes back to the bedroom thinking of what to do next. Benjamin could not telephone the police because his phone was inside a jacket pocket hanging on the coat rail downstairs in the hallway. Quickly, he got dressed and searched around the bedroom trying to find an object he could use to defend himself. The only thing that he could find was a small pair of paper scissors at the back of a drawer. With the scissors clenched tightly in his right hand, he makes his way down over the stairs tiptoeing quietly. Before entering, Benjamin switches on the light and is very startled when he sees a masked burglar standing in the middle of the kitchen. Benjamin shouts at the top his voice.

“Get out of my house!”

The masked burglar snatches a laptop off the kitchen table and quickly runs out the back door making no attempt of a confrontation. Benjamin gives chase to the burglar down the back lane of his house. But the chase is cut short, when Benjamin accidentally trips over and falls head first down through an uncovered manhole and into a pitch-black pipe. Benjamin slipped down the pipe at such a fast speed; the fall became completely unstoppable and very frightening. Benjamin yelled at the top of his voice, “Help! Please someone help! My god help!”

Benjamin saw daylight throttling towards him and found himself suddenly flung out at such a high speed leaving his body spinning around in mid-air. Within seconds he started to descend and plunged headfirst into a deep pool of water. Heart racing and running out of breath, Benjamin swims as fast as he could to the surface of the water. A crack in the rock wall sheds enough daylight down through for Benjamin to see that he had fallen into a cavern with very high solid rock walls. He swims to the waters edge where he manages to pull himself out. A large wood panelled door was on the other side of the water pool. There was no other way to get to this door but to submerge back into the water and swim across. Pushing the iron handle in a downward motion, Benjamin slowly pulls the door open. Beyond his amazement was a large grass field completely surrounded by large hedgerows.

Shots of gunfire and aeroplane engines could be heard in the far distance. Benjamin makes his way across the field heading closer towards the noise. Pulling back a latched gate in the corner of the field, he looks down over a steep hill and could see army vehicles and soldiers at the bottom holding guns. In the far distance sky, there were old-fashioned looking warplanes firing their weapons. Running closer Benjamin shouts over to one of the soldiers.

“Could you please help me, I need to know where I am?”

“Get your head down!” shouts the soldier. “You will get yourself shot!”

“Shot!” repeated Benjamin looking very confused “Are you doing some sort of military exercise?”

“Don't stand out there!” yelled the soldier “Keep your head down and get over here to the bunker.”

“You're lucky we didn't mistake you for an enemy. What is your name?”

“My names Benjamin Blake”

“Nice to meet you Benjamin. My name is Maurice Bridgman” holding his hand out for a friendly welcome shake.

“I think we have shot all the soldiers that were hiding behind the trees over there”

“Shot who?” Benjamin asked, feeling very confused and overwhelmed by the entire encounter.

“The enemy!” replied Maurice.

“You cannot be telling me this is for real Maurice? You and everyone else are dressed up like World War II folks... What exactly is happening Maurice? Where is this place?” asked Benjamin looking very puzzled.

“France, 1944, and it's Christmas Day tomorrow, or have you forgotten that too?” replied Maurice.

“This is absolute madness” said Benjamin. “It's 2015 and the month is June not Christmas”
“Lots of people have gone mad in this war Benjamin. That soldier over there, woke up yesterday morning took his uniform off and went looking for his pyjamas. I wish I could wake up and find myself back home, sat in front of the fire with my wife Gladys on

Christmas Day with all this war being just a dream”

“I have not gone mad Maurice!” said Benjamin. “Five minutes ago I was chasing a burglar down the back lane and the next thing I know I went flying down this man hole and ended up here”

“Sounds like you knocked yourself out and woke up seeing the fairies!” laughed Maurice.

“Where is home then Benjamin when you're heads feeling alright? Do you work for the press because you are not in uniform?”

“I live in Exeter and I work for an insurance company” replies Benjamin.

“That's not far from where I live” replied Maurice looking surprised. “I live in a small town called Modbury, just outside of Plymouth”

“Somehow Maurice I have got to get back home, but I'm not sure how?”

“Try going back home the same way you came” replied a soldier who was stood by the entrance of the bunker listening in on the conversation.

“I wish I was going back home, eating my Christmas dinner with all my family sat around the table” the soldier remarked.

“Don't worry Tim, the war will soon be over and then we can all go home” said Maurice.

“Why not come back with me Maurice and get the hell out of this place?” asked Benjamin.

“I'm sorry Benjamin but I could not desert my men. I know I'm stuck in a place where none of us want to be, but sometimes you have to make the best out of the worst when you do not get given a choice”

“Write a little letter to your wife Maurice and I promise you I will hand deliver it tomorrow on Monday”

“You're as mad as a hatter Benjamin, my wife won't get that letter that quick and besides, postmen don't work on Christmas Day”

“It may be Christmas Day for you Maurice but it's not for me and I promise I will deliver that letter to your wife”

“Ok Benjamin, I will write that letter to my wife just to keep you happy, but I am not saying I believe in your time travelling story though”

Maurice retrieves a piece of paper and pen from his bag and writes a small letter to his wife.

He then folds it in half and writes his address on the front.

“Would any of your other soldier friends like to write a letter?” asked Benjamin.

“I would not go spreading that story around too much Benjamin. Those men in the white coats will have you locked up in a nut house for good” said Tim. ”But like I said, try going back the same way you came... wherever that is and good luck to you mate”.

A few miles away, planes could be seen in the sky dropping bombs, leaving a vibration of heavy pounding when they hit the ground. Benjamin quickly ran back up the hill and across the field heading towards the large wood panelled door. The end of the pipe that Benjamin fell through was embedded high on the wall, which made it quite impossible to get to. Suddenly the water pool started to swirl around and around getting faster and faster.

The water lifted high up into the air emerging into a whirlwind. The water starts to wind itself around Benjamin's body, sucking itself and Benjamin headfirst back into the pipe elevating at a much faster speed than what he came down. There was daylight throttling towards him and he finds himself thrown out at such a high speed leaving his body spinning around and around again into mid-air. Within seconds, he started to descend and finally plunged headfirst back into a deep pool of water. With his heart racing and running out of breath, Benjamin swims as fast as he could back up to the surface of the water. The full moon sheds enough light over the water for Benjamin to see that he has been thrown into the lake not far from his home. He swims to the waters edge where he manages to pull himself out. Making his way back home and still thinking about Maurice, he enters the back door of his house, which was still left unlocked from when the burglar was chased down the lane. Benjamin unfolds the soaking wet letter and leaves it on the kitchen table to dry off for the rest of the night. Passing the front door on his way back up the stairs, he picks up a note that was lying on the doormat. It was from the local police station. They have stated that a man has been arrested in connection to several local burglaries. Stolen items have been obtained which included a wallet that may hold some interest to you. Please call into your local police station and bring identification with you.

On a late Monday morning, Benjamin wakes up remembering that he wanted to keep his promise by delivering the letter that Maurice had written to his wife.

“Would Maurice still be alive and living at this address?” Benjamin thought to himself looking at the letter. After a fifty-minute drive down the bypass, Benjamin arrives at the address in the town of Modbury. He rings the doorbell of an old Victorian house and a gentleman answers the door.

“Sorry to bother you Sir, but I am looking for a Maurice Bridgman. Would he still be living here by any chance?” asked Benjamin.

“I am David Bridgman his son and yes my father still lives here”

“I can't believe Maurice is still alive and living here” replies Benjamin looking very surprised and shaken by the ordeal.

“You will have to explain yourself better than that or I will have to shut the door on you!” replied David raising his voice.

“Sorry Mr Bridgman, I should have explained myself a bit better. In 1944, my grandfather was a soldier stationed in France. He had died quite some time ago but recently I was searching through a box of his old stuff and I came across this letter which was addressed to your family”.

“Well Benjamin you best come in then. I am sure my parents will be delighted to see you” Benjamin is shown through to the living room where Maurice is sat on the sofa watching the television with his wife Gladys sat asleep beside him.

“This is Benjamin Blake dad. He has got a letter from 1944 to give to you. Dad is a bit deaf these days but then he is ninety-eight and mum is ninety-three now”

“I remember you!” exclaimed Maurice looking at Benjamin. “France 1944! I never forget a face and I never forget dates”

“Good lord Dad!” said David looking rather flabbergasted. “Do not take any notice Benjamin, I think dad has gone a bit silly in his old age”

“I might be old but I am not silly!” said Maurice raising his voice to his son.

“Oh dear” replied David “I better make myself useful and put the kettle on” Benjamin passes Maurice the letter he wrote to his wife all those years ago.

“Do you honestly remember me Maurice?” asked Benjamin.

“Yes I do remember Benjamin. You look no older from when I first met you back in 1944. I thought you were mad and after you had gone we could not stop talking about you. I remember you saying something about falling down a hole. You are seventy-one years late with that letter Benjamin, but at least you got the day right; it is Monday” Maurice puts the letter into Gladys' hand.

“All those bombs hitting the ground and all that gun fire. It was frightening Maurice, but I am so happy that you made it through the war” said Benjamin.

Maurice's eyes started to fill up with tears of emotion.

“Half of my comrades did not make it through” replied Maurice pointing to an old black and white framed photograph on the mantle piece.

“My best pal Tim Bradshaw got shot and killed late on Christmas Eve, two hours before Christmas Day. And so, every Christmas Eve since then, I have always lit a candle and I light that candle for...

Peace on earth.

William

Everyday, William the ginger cat would sit and wait patiently on the windowsill. He could not quite understand why his master did not want him in the house anymore, especially now that the evenings were drawing in darker and the nights were getting colder. Eating scraps of food and sleeping underneath cars became a place of shelter from the cold night winds. William looked over to his house and could see the front door had been left wide opened. He ran as fast as he could before it closed but just as William went to take a step in the doorway, the master put a foot in the way of the door and stopped him in his tracks.

“I don't want you anymore cat, find somebody else to feed you!” was the reply in a snappish tone before closing the door. William did not have anywhere else to go, so he continued to sit on the windowsill of his master's house.

It was not until one late afternoon, as the snow began to fall from the skies and the temperature became freezing cold, William's only chance of survival was to find warm shelter. He tried sitting on the windowsills of other houses, hoping a person would be kind enough to give him refuge in their home; but they did not want a cat. Poor William felt so cold and lonely he did not care anymore. He curled himself up into a ball and fell to sleep on his master's snow covered pathway.

After ten or so minutes into his sleep, a robin flew down from the gatepost and started to peck at William's nose to try and wake him from his sleep. The robin would not stop chirping and whistling until William followed him. The robin took William and led him across the park and into a graveyard where an elderly lady was laying flowers upon a grave. “What a pretty cat you are” said the lady smoothing William's fur with her hand.

“Walking around in a graveyard all by yourself without a collar on”

William loved the attention so much he rubbed his fur against the ladies legs. The elderly lady looked at William and mused...

“It is no need for someone to be on their own,
When there are cats like you that need a good home.
I know you cannot speak but I know you can hear, And
that is all I want from a cat so dear.
So why not come home and live with me,
Where I will give you some of my delicious tea.
And if you do not mind I’d like to call you William,
After my husband who was one in a million.”