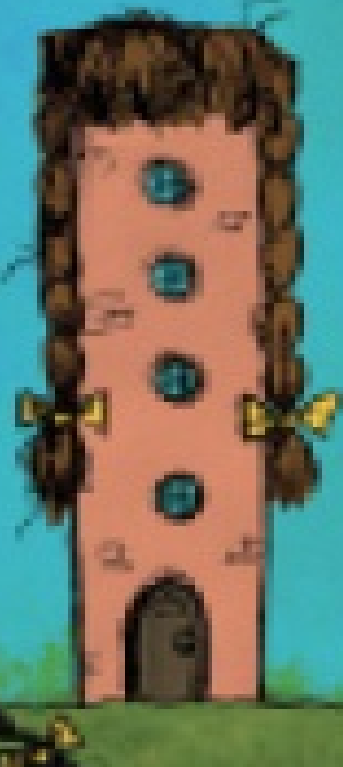


DEAD HAIRY



Debbie
Thomas



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1 - Stuck

Squashy Grandma lunged for her knickers. They slid with a sigh down the back of the radiator. ‘Blast!’ she tried to say. But it came out as ‘Vast!’ That was because, as she reached over, her false teeth fell out.

Abbie looked up. Everyone knew Squashy’s knickers were vast. Why bother announcing it? ‘What’s the matter, Grandma?’ she said, putting her book down.

‘My feef!’

Abbie went over and peered behind the radiator. The teeth grinned up from their flowery knicker nest. ‘Dad,’ she said, ‘Grandma’s lost her teeth. And her marbles,’ she muttered.

‘Marbles,’ echoed Dad from behind the paper, ‘a truly ancient game ...’

Abbie rolled her eyes. *Here we go*, she thought.

‘... played two thousand years ago by Julius Caesar ...’

Hello? Earth calling History Nerd.

‘... who also – interesting fact –’

I doubt that.

‘... used to pluck out his body hair with tweezers.’

‘Dad –’

At last he put the paper down. ‘What?’

‘Grandma’s teeth are stuck.’ Not that there was any point explaining. When it came to practical problems Dad was less use than earwax.

He came over to the radiator. He peered down the back. He rubbed his bald patch. He did his pretend-to-scratch-your-lip-while-picking-your-nose trick.

‘Abbie,’ he said, ‘get the Hoover.’

‘You what?’

He did his don't-argue-with-me word jiggle. 'The Hoover, Abbie. Get.'

Shaking her head, Abbie went into the hall and wheeled out the Hoover from the cupboard under the stairs. She dragged it by the neck into the sitting-room like a dog on a lead. Dad pointed the tube down the back of the radiator. He switched it on. Nothing.

'Try plugging it in, Dad.'

The Hoover growled into life. The teeth chattered to the wall.

'Oofeff!' Squashy Grandma got as close to snapping as anyone without teeth can get.

'Not useless, Mother,' said Dad. 'I'm sure it'll loosen them.'

It did. The teeth flew up from their flowery folds. They lodged in the mouth of the vacuum tube.



Dad turned the Hoover off. He shook the tube. The teeth were stuck. He tugged his beard. 'Get the phone book, Abbie.'

'But -'

'Abbie. The phone book. Get.'

Abbie went back into the hall. She knew the numbers of the plumber, electrician and carpenter off by heart. But the Yellow Pages had no Vacuum Cleaner False Teeth Removal man. Between Vehicle Testing and Video Repairs, however, she saw a small advert.

Wobbly widgets? Drooping drains?

Dad less use than earwax?

Call the VERY ODD JOB Man.

075-1345593

Abbie had no idea what widgets were, or how drains could droop, but it sounded promising. She dialled the number.

‘Hello. This is Matt Platt,’ said a recorded message. ‘Please leave your number and I’ll c-call you back.’

‘This is Abigail Hartley at 25 Mill Street. There’s a problem with our Hoover. I’ll try again later. Better keep it vague. She didn’t want to put him off.

Back in the sitting-room Grandma was kicking the Hoover. ‘Foopid foow,’ she spluttered at Dad.

Stupid fool yourself, thought Abbie, gazing at Squashy. *Fancy putting your knickers out to dry in the sitting-room – in full view!* What she said, though, was, ‘Poor Grandma.’

Dad grabbed the nozzle and tried to jiggle the teeth out, swearing quietly. Abbie had seen enough. She headed for the kitchen.

It was empty. Perfect. She crept over to the biscuit barrel and stuffed two Bourbons up each sleeve. Then she ran upstairs. She slipped into her bedroom and shut the door. Well, *she* called it shutting.

‘Abigail, don’t slam!’ shouted Mum from her room across the landing. ‘I’ve got a headache.’

Abbie sat down on her bed and eased a biscuit out of a sleeve. She stuffed it into her mouth. Then she took a pocket tape recorder from her bedside table and switched it on.

‘GRUMPY GRAN IN HOOVER HELL,’ she said into the microphone. ‘Squashy Hartley had a fit coming when she leaned over the radiator to rescue her gigantic pants. The seventy-two-year-old false tee—’

‘Why are you talking to yourself?’ Abbie’s little brother slid his caramel curls round the bedroom door.

Abbie shoved the tape recorder under her duvet. ‘I’ll talk to you if you like. Bog off, Ollie.’

‘Will you play with me?’ he said.

‘OK. Grrraaaggh!’ Abbie dived for him. Ollie burst into tears and ran into Mum’s room. Abbie counted under her breath, ‘One, two, three and – wait for it –’

‘Abigail! Here. Now,’ came Mum’s weary voice.

Abbie slunk across the landing. Mum was in bed propped up by pillows. Headache or no, she still looked freshly ironed. Her nightie was smooth. Her lipstick gleamed. Her hair, sleek as custard, hugged her face in a bob. Bob – the perfect name for a perfect style. Abbie liked to think of it as a separate person, smart and fussy.

‘Hi Mum,’ she said brightly. ‘You’ll never guess. Grandma’s teeth are stuck in the Hoover.’

Mum did her don’t-try-to-distract-me sigh. ‘What is it with you, Abigail? Why do you have to make your brother cry?’

Abbie shrugged. She didn’t *have* to, she *wanted* to. Try explaining that to Mum. Try telling her that sometimes it felt good to see his cutie wutie five-year-old face crumple like a crisp bag. And sometimes it felt good to hear his lispy wispy voice wail like a wolf. Abbie didn’t *feel* good that it felt good – but it still felt good.

‘I only wanted you to play,’ Ollie sobbed.

‘I did,’ said Abbie. ‘I was a being a monster.’

Ollie howled. His curls burrowed into Mum’s shoulder like worms into earth.

‘Darling,’ said Mum, stroking his head.

Dung beetle, thought Abbie. What she said, though, was, ‘Sorry Ollie.’

‘That’s better,’ said Mum. Abbie got up. A Bourbon dropped onto the bed.

‘Abigail. Who said you could – ?’ The doorbell rang.

‘I’ll get it.’ Abbie hurtled gratefully downstairs.

Outside the front door, Matt Platt stepped back. ‘You do the talking, Perdita,’ he whispered to his daughter. He nudged her forward. Chitchat wasn’t his thing. He’d just fix the Hoover. It shouldn’t take long. Just as well. He’d already spent half the morning rescuing a lizard from a liquidiser and he *had* to get home before lunch. Back to his experiment. Because, unless it worked, his darling wife, his precious Coriander, might never come back.

Matt rubbed a dirty finger over his teeth. Ten weeks and three days since Coriander had left – and not so much as a phone call! OK, he’d argued horribly with her. But *surely* she’d forgiven him by now. It was so unlike his wife to sulk. What if she was ... No! Don’t even think that. He clutched his right plait. He had to hold on to hope.

But if she wasn’t ... then where on earth *was* she?

Coriander leaned on her broom. It felt like a dream, sweeping the floor of this stuffy little room. F

the millionth time she prayed she *was* dreaming. But when she pinched her arm it felt horribly real.

‘Ow!’

A tear trickled down her cheek. What would Matt and Perdita be doing now? Matt might be inventing some gadget to rescue snails from lawn mowers. Perdita might be trimming the bushes in her gardening trousers. The ones from Tibet made of yak hair. With the hole in the right knee that Coriander had meant to fix ... that she might never fix now. Another tear wriggled out.

No! Don't even think that. She clutched her left plait. She had to hold on to hope.

2 - Rescue

The first thing Abbie noticed when she opened the door was teeth. Big friendly ones, grinning out from big friendly gums.

The second thing was the girl wrapped round them. She had two black plaits that reached her elbows and eyes that glowed like Marmite.

The third thing was the man behind her. *He* had two black plaits that reached his shoulders and thick glasses. He was clutching a tatty rucksack and rubbing a finger over his own tremendous teeth.

The girl strode forward. ‘Perdita Platt.’ She grabbed Abbie’s hand and pumped it like a piston. ‘That –’ she flung her arm back, whacking the man in the stomach, ‘is my dad, Matt. And this –’ she nodded at the number on the front door, ‘is 25 Mill Street. So *you* –’ she jabbed Abbie’s shoulder, ‘must be Abigail Hartley. I like your curls Abigail Hartley. They make your head dance. And your freckles. I’ve always wanted freckles.’ Abbie opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Dad came up behind Abbie and stuck his head around the door. ‘Can I help you?’



Perdita frowned. ‘I thought *we’d* come to help you.’

Dad frowned back.

‘The Hoover,’ said Perdita.

‘The Hoo ...’ he echoed in a stupid way. Then he slapped his head. ‘Oh *right!* Do come in.’

Perdita seized her father’s hand and marched into the hall. She stopped and cocked her head. A furious huffing sound was coming from the sitting-room.

Very slowly Dad opened the door. Perdita followed, then Mr Platt. Abbie came last. She gasped. Both Perdita and her father had a *third* plait dangling from the back of their heads.

Perdita waved across the room. ‘Morning,’ she called to Squashy Grandma.

‘Nnnnggh!’ Squashy replied, kicking the radiator. Mr Platt edged backwards. But when he saw the Hoover, and the teeth grinning up from it, he couldn’t help smiling back.

‘That’s my Grandma,’ said Abbie, ‘and those are her teeth.’

‘Lovely,’ breathed Mr Platt. Abbie could see he didn’t mean Squashy. Kneeling down, he stroked the vacuum cleaner like a pet. Then he opened his bag and took out two metal poles. He screwed them together. At one end were claws, like skeleton hands. At the other end was a handle with buttons. Mr Platt pressed one. The claws wiggled.

‘The Crookhook,’ said Perdita. ‘Invented by Dad.’

Mr Platt aimed the Crookhook at the Hoover tube. The claws slipped inside round Grandma’s teeth. After more pressing and wiggling the teeth came loose. The claws dropped them onto the carpet where they beamed up at the world.

‘Magic,’ said Dad.

Without a word – or sound – of thanks, Squashy swept the filthy dentures off the floor into her mouth. ‘Now then young man,’ she said to Mr Platt, sucking her teeth into place, ‘you’ll be so kind to rescue me undies with that contraption of yours. They’re be’ind that radiator.’

Mr Platt followed her gaze. ‘Oh *my,*’ he breathed, seeing a cobweb on the corner of the wall beside the radiator. He took off his glasses and peered closer. His eyebrows looked as if they’d slipped down each side of his face, making him look even sadder. ‘Don’t worry,’ he murmured, apparently to the spider in the web, ‘we’ll soon get you out of there.’

‘Young man,’ boomed Grandma, ‘while *you’re* chattin’ up cobwebs, *my* personals are gatherin’ dust.’

Matt wheeled round. ‘Shhh,’ he whispered, ‘you’ll frighten the poor thing. Perdita, c-could you g

‘Sure.’ Perdita thumped Abbie’s arm. ‘Want to come?’ It was impossible not to smile back at the goofy grin. Abbie followed her out the front door. An old green van was parked at the kerb. Perdita opened its dented back doors.

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking,’ Abbie said nervously, ‘but why have you got three plaits?’

Perdita looked at her as if she’d asked what colour oranges were. ‘Because we *are* three Platts. Dad, me and –’ she stopped. Her teeth scraped white lines over her chin. ‘I hope you don’t mind *me* asking but why are there two biscuits sticking out of your sleeve?’

Abbie blushed. ‘Oh. It’s, um, a game I play with my brother – Hunt the Snack. Here.’ She gave one Bourbon to Perdita and ate the other.

‘Thanks.’ Perdita munched her biscuit and jumped into the back of the van. ‘Now, where *is* the thing?’ She rummaged among the spanners and screwdrivers, boxes and bags. ‘Ah, there we go.’ She pulled out what looked like a red gun and waved it in Abbie’s face. ‘The Gobbleweb.’

Abbie jumped back. And before she could say, ‘The what?’ Perdita was rushing back to the house.

In the sitting-room Mr Platt was crouched by the radiator, whispering to the spider. Perdita stood in the doorway. She aimed the gun thing at the cobweb and pulled the trigger. There was a sucking sound, like Grandma drinking tea. The cobweb shot off the radiator, flew across the room and disappeared up the gun barrel.

Abbie shrieked. Dad squeaked. And Squashy straightened her wig, which had slipped over her eye in the suction stream.

Perdita turned to Abbie. ‘Where’s your garden?’

Goggling like a goldfish, Abbie led her through the kitchen and outside. Staring like a sturgeon she stood back as Perdita aimed the machine at a bush. And gaping like a guppy she gulped as Perdita pulled the trigger again. The cobweb shot out, complete with spider, and attached itself to the bush.

‘Don’t mention it,’ Perdita said, as if the spider had thanked her. ‘Have a good day.’ She handed the gun thing to Abbie.

‘Wha ... whi ... whe ...?’ said Abbie, trying to work out what to ask first.

‘Pardon?’ said Perdita, and cartwheeled across the lawn.

Abbie found her voice. ‘What *is* this thing?’

‘I told you. The Gobbleweb. Rescues spiders with mini-mum stress.’

‘Did your dad invent it?’

Perdita looked at Abbie as if she’d just asked how many toes a three-toed sloth has. ‘Of course. Very Odd Jobs need Very Odd Tools. You can’t *buy* them.’

‘That is so cool,’ said Abbie. ‘Do you think I’d be able to interview him?’

Perdita cartwheeled back over the lawn. ‘I doubt it. He’s very shy. Why do you want to?’

Abbie sighed and sat down on the grass. ‘It’s just – well, I want to be a journalist you see. And I’m looking for –’

‘Journalist?’ Perdita sat down next to her. ‘Does that mean you’re a digging about, snooping around sort of person?’ Her oil-dark eyes bored into Abbie’s.

‘I – I s’pose so,’ said Abbie doubtfully.

‘Perfect!’ Perdita jumped up. ‘I’ve got just the job for you. When can you come over?’

‘Well, I –’

‘We need to get going straight away.’ Perdita did a little skip. Then she knelt down and grasped Abbie’s shoulders. ‘Thank you, Abigail Hartley,’ she said solemnly. ‘You have no idea what this means to me.’ She unzipped her gigantic grin.

It was a grin you couldn’t refuse. Not that Abbie wanted to, when she thought about it. The summer holidays forked in her mind. To the left, six weeks of boredom and biscuit burglary with the Rottweiler Lot. To the right, fun, sniffery and sneakage with this exclamation mark of a girl.

They went back to the sitting-room. Squashy was stuffing her knickers into her handbag. Ollie had come in and Mr Platt was showing him how to work the Crookhook.

Dad watched it claw the air. ‘So versatile,’ he marvelled, ‘reaching books from shelves, painting the ceiling ...’

‘... Picking your sister’s nose,’ said Ollie, trying to.

‘Get off!’ squealed Abbie. ‘This is my brother,’ she said, rubbing her nose, ‘Stink Bug.’ She glared at him. Ollie burst into tears and howled off upstairs.

‘Abigail!’ came Mum’s voice. ‘Here. Now.’

Abbie ignored it. ‘Dad’s useless,’ she explained to Mr Platt. ‘He can tell you how the Romans unblocked their drains but he can’t unblock ours.’

‘Good job I teach history not plumbing, then.’ Dad’s laugh sounded like a drain was unblocking. Mr Platt smiled politely and unscrewed the Crookhook.

‘Could Abigail come over to our house tomorrow, Mr Hartley?’ asked Perdita.

‘Well ...’ Dad pulled his beard.

‘Please Dad,’ said Abbie. ‘I haven’t been anywhere this hols.’

‘I don’t see why not.’ Dad did the thumbs up at Mr Platt. ‘Hunky dory by me, if it’s hunky dory by you.’

Abbie winced. If being a plonker was an art, then Dad was Picasso.

‘Of c-course.’ Mr Platt rubbed a tooth with his finger. ‘Though I’m not sure *house* is q-uite the word.’ He finished packing while Perdita wrote out directions.

Abbie waved the green van off. Inventors, investigations and a not-quite house? The summer was looking up.

Back at the Platts’ home, Matt unlocked the door of his workshop.

‘What are you working on, Dad?’ asked Perdita, trying to follow him in.

He pushed the door against her. ‘Oh – oh nothing much. Why don’t you go and get some lunch darling?’

She frowned. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes. Yes of c-course.’ Matt kissed her forehead. ‘See you later.’

He locked the door behind her. Then he picked his way through a mess of boxes and books, tools and test tubes. He sat down at his desk and stared at the clump of white hair in front of him. How many strands should he mix in this time?

Matt rubbed his teeth miserably. Why was he doing this? Coriander had begged him not to. But didn’t she see where it could lead? To her dream – building this place into a world centre of wonder

Hadn't she said there was nothing she wanted more? He put his head in his hands. There was nothing he wanted more than to see her again.

In her little room Coriander finished brushing Winnie's hair. She'd do anything to be back brushing Perdita's. She sighed. Winnie snuggled up to her.

Coriander kissed her forehead. 'Now then, Win,' she said briskly, 'how about some lunch?'

3 - Missing

‘Don’t ask for biscuits,’ said Mum the next afternoon. ‘And you could’ve brushed your hair.’ She turned left off the main road into a twisty lane.

‘OK Mum, sorry Mum,’ said Abbie, messing her milky coffee curls even more.

‘And for goodness sake, take your wellies off inside.’ They thought the Platts must live on a farm because Perdita’s directions said park by a gate into a field.

They reached the gate. They thought again.

There was the field all right, muddy from last night’s rain. It was dotted with dark green bushes. But it looked nothing like a farm. The bushes were squat and trimmed into strange shapes. *What’s that called again*, thought Abbie. *Tapiry? Toppery? Topiary – that’s it*. She grinned as she remembered one of her favourite car games: pointing out a heart or cockerel-shaped bush just in time for Ollie to miss it.

But there were no hearts or cockerels here. Only balls on stems. Some balls had a dangly triangle on each side. Others were smooth on top with little tufts at the side. And others were large balls with small balls on top – like fat-bottomed number eights, or Big-Bum Beryl, Abbie’s music teacher.

In the middle of the field stood a round tower. The bricks were fleshy pink. At the bottom of the tower was an arched wooden door. Above the door, in a vertical line, rose four round barred windows. The roof was rusty red thatch. It brushed the top window like a fringe. Two columns of interwoven thatch, also rusty red, hung down, one each side of the tower. And tied round the bottom of each column was a huge, yellow ... *ribbon*. As if – well, as if the tower had plaits!

Abbie gasped. That was it. Hairstyles. Not just the tower, the bushes too. Those balls on stems were like heads on necks. The dangly triangles were bunches. The tufty bushes were balding heads. And the big-bottomed number eights were heads with buns.

Mum switched the engine off. Her mouth opened, closed and opened again.

‘Cooo-wul,’ breathed Abbie. She fingered the tape recorder in the right-hand pocket of her jacket.

The door in the tower opened. Perdita appeared, waving madly. She half bounced, half flew toward them like a great daddy longlegs. Her plaits danced, her eyes danced, even her *teeth* danced. She was wearing a pair of hairy trousers which looked like they'd been hacked from the hide of some mountain beast.

'You can't go in there!' hissed Mum from the side of her mouth.

'Please,' Abbie whispered, 'I'll be fine.'



'We don't *know* them. That girl looks bonkers.'

Of course she's bonkers, thought Abbie. What she said, though, was, 'Perdita's lovely. She didn't laugh at Grandma.' That was a first among Abbie's friends. Mum raised an eyebrow.

'And Dad really liked Mr Platt.'

Perdita was climbing over the gate with a grin wider than her face. Abbie played her best card. 'We can't leave now. What would it *look* like?'

As usual, that did the trick. 'Then let me come in with you,' sighed Mum.

You just dare, thought Abbie. What she said was, 'Your shoes. They'll be ruined.'

Mum glanced from her pearly pumps to the muddy field. 'Well, I don't know. You *must* take my phone then. Ring the minute you've had enough.' Abbie put the phone in her left pocket, on top of the packet of Jammy Dodgers she'd stolen from the snack cupboard.

'I must be mad,' muttered Mum. 'The Bellinghams don't let Tallulah post a *letter* on her own – and she's *twelve*.'

Perdita's grin barged through the car window. 'Helloo there!'

‘Aargh!’ Mum jerked backwards in her seat. Then she collected her face and switched on a smile. ‘You must be Perdita.’ She put her hand to her head and combed through Bob with her fingers. ‘Nice to meet you, dear.’

‘Bye Mum,’ said Abbie firmly. ‘See you at five.’ She jumped out and slammed the door. Perdita vaulted back over the gate into the field. Abbie clambered after her and waved. Mum mouthed something bossy and drove off.

‘Do you like my designs?’ asked Perdita, waving towards the bushes.

‘Brilliant,’ said Abbie. ‘You’re a great gardener.’

Perdita laughed. ‘Hairdresser, you mean. The bushes are just for practice. If you can style yew, you can style anything.’

They followed a path that wove between the bushes to the tower. When they reached the front door, Perdita stepped out of her hairy trousers, revealing tatty jeans underneath. She hung the outer pair on a hook by the door.

‘Must fix that,’ she murmured, peering at a hole in the right knee. Then she brushed bits of brown hair off her jeans. ‘Yak,’ she explained. ‘Gets everywhere.’

Abbie stared up at the thatched plaits. ‘What is this place?’ she asked.

‘Oh, right. I forgot to introduce you.’ Perdita cleared her throat. ‘Welcome,’ she said grandly, ‘to The Platt Institute of Hirsute Pursuits.’ She stood up and threw her arms out, smacking Abbie in the face. ‘Oops, sorry.’

‘The *what?*’ said Abbie, rubbing her nose.

‘OK,’ Perdita muttered, ‘just call it The Museum of Hair. Come on.’

Abbie followed her through the front door. When her eyes had adjusted to the gloom, she made out a circular room with a stone floor. It was empty apart from a fat pillar in the middle, which rose to the ceiling. There was an archway in its side.

Perdita had already gone through. ‘This way,’ she called.

Abbie followed, shivering in the damp air. Inside the hollow pillar was a spiral staircase that rose up to the centre of the tower. She panted up the stone steps after Perdita, putting out a hand to steady herself against the wall. Her fingers touched moss. The cool air smelt sweet and vaguely familiar: a cross between strawberry jelly and bathroom cleaner.

Abbie reached a circular landing. Perdita was waiting by a door in the pillar wall. At the top of the door hung a crooked metal sign.



Perdita turned the handle and beckoned her in. The sweet smell rushed up Abbie's nose, making her gag. Hairspray – that was it – like the stuff Mum squirted over Bob every morning. Abbie stopped at the doorway and looked round.

At first glance the room was full of people.

At second glance they were standing or sitting, still as statues.

At third glance they *were* statues – or rather tailors' dummies in costumes.

At fourth glance the one on the left looked strangely familiar.

At fifth glance –

'Hi Robin,' said Perdita.

And there he was. Robin Hood. Well, a model of him, large as life and clothed in faded green. He looked very sorry for himself. His tunic was ripped. His breeches were frayed. A longbow sagged from his right shoulder, a quiverful of arrows from his left. His feather cap was dusty and his painted eyes lopsided.

But his hair! It gushed from his fibreglass chin, perky and red. It crawled across his brows like two hairy caterpillars. And it sat beneath his hat, glossy and smug.

'How are you today, Rob?' asked Perdita, patting his hand. 'Has Dad got round to fixing you?' She pressed a button on his thumb. His left hand unhooked the bow from his shoulder. His right hand plucked an arrow from the quiver. He aimed at the ceiling. The string drew back. Then the bow and arrow nosedived and Robin shot himself in the foot.

Perdita sighed and pulled the arrow out. 'Nope,' she muttered. 'Let's try Einstein.' She went over to the next model: an old man standing by a desk. He held a piece of chalk in his right hand. Behind him was a blackboard. His jacket and trousers were dusty with chalk. But his hair – again it looked almost alive. It cuddled his lip in a snowy moustache. It whizzed and fizzed and sprang from his head in wild

white wires.

‘Pull that lever on the desk,’ said Perdita.

‘Whooooaaauh?’ said Abbie, which would have been a reasonable noise for someone yanking a handle to make, but was actually the sound of all her questions crashing out of her mouth at once.

She pulled the lever. Einstein turned to the board and began to scribble with the chalk.

Abbie read what he’d written. *Ee, it’s a messy square*. ‘I – I thought it was supposed to be $E = M^2$ squared.’

‘It is,’ sighed Perdita. ‘Dad has some great ideas. But they don’t always quite work.’ She sat down on the floor and hugged her knees.

‘What *is* this place?’ whispered Abbie, crouching next to her. ‘And why does the hair look so real?’

‘Because it *is*.’

Abbie stared at Perdita. She didn’t have the sort of face that pulled legs. But what on earth ...?

Perdita jumped up. ‘Come and see for yourself.’ She ran over to a model of a lady in a white robe. The lady was sitting by a small paddling pool that was half full of water. Toy boats huddled against the side furthest away from her. ‘Helen of Troy,’ said Perdita. She took a handful of the lady’s hair. It was dazzling. It poured down her back like golden syrup. Fat lashes curled from her painted blue eyes. Golden eyebrows arched on her forehead.

Helen of Troy, thought Abbie, *the face that launched a thousand ships*. Wouldn’t Dad love this! He was always banging on about that ancient Greek king who’d led a fleet of a thousand ships to Troy to rescue his beautiful wife Helen. And at the end of the story Mum always asked the same thing: would Dad launch a thousand ships if she was kidnapped? And Dad always assured her, ‘*Ten thousand, my angel.*’

‘Go on,’ said Perdita, ‘feel it.’

Abbie came up to Helen and reached out a trembling hand. The hair felt as silky and cool as butter.

‘Now press her nose,’ said Perdita.

Abbie pressed. The boats in the paddling pool shot into the air. They soared towards Helen, then over her head, and crashed into the wall behind her.

Perdita tutted. ‘Oh dear. The face that launched a thousand aeroplanes.’ She went over to the wall

and started picking up the boats. Then she hurled them at the wall. ‘Dad’s giving up!’ she cried. A tea splashed onto the floor.

Abbie came over. She patted Perdita on the arm and said the most comforting words she could think of. ‘Jammy Dodger?’

Perdita grinned through her tears. ‘Thanks.’ They sat on the floor. Perdita took a sniffly bite. Crumbs sprayed everywhere. ‘He’s giving up,’ she went on, ‘because he thinks she won’t come back.’

‘Who won’t?’ asked Abbie.

‘My mum. She’s gone. Disappeared. Ten weeks, four days and –’ Perdita counted on her fingers ‘eight hours ago. We got up one morning and there she wasn’t.’

The first question that flashed across Abbie’s mind was *who made your breakfast then?* Wisely she asked the second. ‘Did you call the police?’

‘Not straight away. Mum had been called to Spain urgently. That was no big deal. Mum’s a world expert on hair, you see, and she often has to –’ Perdita sniffed – ‘*had* to, leave at short notice. To check out interesting finds.’

‘Like what?’ asked Abbie.

‘A strand of Cleopatra’s eyebrow, a hair from Shakespeare’s moustache, that sort of thing.’

‘But what’s interesting about a few old hairs?’

‘If they turn out to be real, Mum brings –’ Perdita sniffed again – ‘*brought* them, back to the museum. Then Dad dipped them into this mixture he invented to make the hairs grow.’

‘What do you mean “grow”?’ asked Abbie, who had a funny feeling she knew exactly what Perdita meant. She was right.

‘Get longer, sprout, thicken,’ said Perdita. ‘All the things hair does.’

Abbie stared at her, blank as a blanket.

‘Look,’ said Perdita, pointing to a model dressed in pirate clothes. ‘Take Blackbeard. Mum collected a tiny tangle of his beard. Then Dad dipped it in the mixture, and hey presto.’ The model’s painted brown eyes glared at Abbie between furious eyebrows and a coal-black beard. Abbie swallowed. This was so crazy you couldn’t make it up.

Perdita took a photo out of her pocket. ‘There’s Mum in Israel,’ she said, handing it to Abbie. ‘She

just dug up the end of Abraham's beard.' A big lady with a round face was beaming under a tree. She wore a blue tent of a dress. One arm was raised high above her head. Hanging from her finger and thumb was a cloud of white hair.

But it was the *lady's* hair that made Abbie squeal. 'Red plaits with yellow ribbons – she looks like this tower!'

'Other way round,' said Perdita. 'The museum was her idea, so Dad and I thatched the tower to look like *her*. We did it a few months before she left.'

Abbie thought for a minute. 'That morning ... how do you know your mum had gone to Spain she'd left by the time you woke up? Did she leave a note or something?'

'No. Mum had told my aunt – she lives here too with my uncle, you see. Mum woke Auntie Mell and say there'd been this phone call from an archaeologist. He was digging in the ruins of a castle near Barcelona. And he found a golden hair comb with a few strands of black hair. He thought they might belong to Wilfred the Hairy, Count of Barcelona, who lived more than a thousand years ago. So Mum flew over there to check.'

'Why didn't she wake you?'

'She told Auntie Mell not to disturb me, she'd be back that night.' Perdita shook her head. Her plait whacked her cheeks. 'But there's more to it than that. I heard Mum and Dad arguing the night before. And they *never* argue –' Perdita sniffed her sniffliest sniff yet – 'I mean argued. Dad still won't tell me what it was about.' She wiped her nose with a plait. 'And we haven't heard from Mum since.'

'Not even a phone call?'

'No calls, no letters. I try her mobile phone every day, but it just says the number's not available. The police have searched all over, here and in Spain. And now they say she might be ...' Perdita's teeth ploughed her chin. 'But I know she isn't.'

Abbie wasn't at all sure how someone could sound so sure about something that didn't sound so sure at all. What she said, though, was, 'Sure.'

'Even my aunt and uncle are beginning to lose hope. They say I've got to start facing reality. Perdita tugged her front plaits fiercely. 'But I am! I know Mum's still out there. And I know she still loves us.'

Abbie squeezed Perdita's arm. 'I wish I could help you.'

Perdita slotted a Jammy Dodger into her mouth like a giant coin. 'You can. Find her.'

If you'd poured petrol over Abbie's knickers and lit a match she couldn't have jumped up faster
'What?!'

Perdita brushed crumbs from her mouth. 'You're a journalist. There's your story.'

If you'd squashed a tomato on Abbie's face and squirted ketchup on top she couldn't have gone
redder. 'No! I mean how can I – I mean *what* can I – ?'

'Think about it,' said Perdita, standing up. 'Now come and see Henry the Eighth.'

She ran over to a barrel-shaped model of a man. He wore a bejewelled tunic and stood with his legs
wide apart. A red beard rimmed his chin and fat cheeks. On his head sat a furry pancake of a hat. His
right hand grasped his hip. His left hand clutched an axe.

Perdita pushed the axe and jumped back. The king's arm lifted. The axe swung above the hat. 'Off
with her head,' growled a voice deep within his fibre glass chest. 'Off with her head. Off with her
heuu ...' The voice wilted.

'Battery dead,' muttered Perdita. 'Oh dearie me. How about you, Sam?'

Next to the king towered a huge figure. His head was bent and his palms pressed against two plastic
pillars either side. He was covered from head to toe in dark brown hair. It glowed and flowed.
It glistened and gleamed. It poured onto the floor like melted chocolate. It sprouted from his chest, thick
as a doormat. It swamped his face in beard.

'Samson?' gasped Abbie. That bruiser from the Bible whose strength lay in his hair? That real
took the biscuit. She took a biscuit.

'Remember how he pushed down pillars with his bare hands and killed loads of Philistines? Watch
Perdita stamped on the model's foot. His right hand, pressing against its pillar, cracked and fell off.

'Oh for goodness sake!' shouted Perdita. She looked at Abbie. They burst out laughing.

'Hang on.' Abbie wiped her eyes. The Mexican Hat Dance was blaring from her pocket. She fished
out the phone.

'Hi darling,' came Mum's too-bright voice. 'Slight emergency. Dad needs the car. See you at the
gate. Bye.'

'Mum, it's not even –'

But Mum had rung off. Abbie stuck out her tongue at the phone. 'Can you believe it? I've got to go

She put the phone back in her pocket and felt the edge of the tape recorder. Some journalist. She forgotten to switch it on.

‘Ring me,’ said Perdita, leading the way to the door.

Abbie turned for one last look at the room. Wonky eyes gazed out beneath whizzy hairstyles. As she turned away something grey streaked across the floor.

‘Yeeugggh,’ Abbie gasped, ‘a rat!’ She shot after Perdita.

On the floor above Hairstory, Matt was peering through a magnifying glass. He’d just squeezed three drops of liquid from a pipette onto a woodlouse. The creature was scuttling round his desk. Matt sighed. Poor thing. Better take it back to its family.

Hang on a mo. Its back was sprouting tiny white hairs!

Matt sighed again. So what? A hairy back didn’t mean the mixture had worked. How on earth could you *tell* with a woodlouse? Oh, this was getting nowhere.

Matt threw the magnifying glass down. He grabbed the end of his left plait and yanked off the elastic band. He did the same with his right plait, then the one at the back. There. He ran his fingers through his hair. It flopped onto his shoulders, greasy and sad. He’d plait it again when Coriander came back ... or rather *if*.

Coriander pulled her two front plaits out of Minnie’s hands. ‘Leave them alone, Min,’ she laughed. ‘They’re all I’ve got left of my family. This plait for Matt, this one for Perdita and the one at the back for me. They keep my hopes up.’

Minnie tugged her hand.

‘All right dear,’ said Coriander, ‘I’ll play with you. After I’ve finished my letter. And please don’t wee on it, like you did on the last one.’

4 - Rotten Lot

‘Are you OK darling? I was so worried.’ Mum turned round in the front seat with her stick-on smile.

Abbie scowled from the back. ‘Course I am. Why does Dad need the car?’

‘He doesn’t.’ Mum took a hand off the steering wheel to smooth Bob. ‘I just wasn’t happy. The place is so –’ she gave a little shudder – ‘weird.’

‘What?!’ Abbie exploded. ‘You made it up, just so you could collect me early? How *could* you?’

‘Abigail,’ said Mum, meeting her glare in the rear view mirror, ‘we don’t *know* these people. It was for your own good.’

‘*Your* own good you mean,’ Abbie muttered. ‘I was having the best time ever. Their house is amazing. You wouldn’t believe it.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Mum. ‘Persian rugs. Oak kitchen like the Bellinghams?’

Abbie prayed for peace on earth and goodwill to all parents. ‘I didn’t get to see the kitchen, thank you. The whole place is a mess. I loved it. You’d hate it.’

Mum ignored the insult. ‘What’s Mrs Platt like? My kind of person?’

Abbie doubted that very much. ‘How do I know?’ She saw her chance for a neat little lie. ‘I was just about to go upstairs and meet her when you phoned. Perdita was so upset I had to go. She’s *really* nice.’

‘Please darling,’ said Mum, ‘I only did it to protect you. Look, maybe Perdita could come over to see me next time.’

And see what I have to put up with? thought Abbie. *Why not?* ‘Tomorrow?’ she asked.

‘Sure.’ Mum unlocked the front door. The smell of tuna fish and orange slid up Abbie’s nostrils. Oh no. Dad must be doing dinner.

He came out of the kitchen in a frilly white apron. ‘Hi Abbie. Everything OK?’ He waved a wooden spoon.

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