

DO NOT FEED THE TROLL

**(Full eBook edition - including
drawings)**

by

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Do not feed the troll

1



Moving house is supposed to make life better. Dad had said it would make life better because it would be 'a new start'. It was supposed to be a way to put the last year behind us. It was supposed to be better. It was not better. It was most definitely worse. In fact it couldn't have been any worse. It started bad and then it went downhill and then, just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, it went and did.

Dad had said that when we moved we could each have something we really wanted in the new house, to make it more like home. Dad wanted space in the garden to build his brew-house and so he got it, Angie wanted extra shelves for all her books and so she got

that and I wanted a three metre long, two metre wide work-surface, suspended on pulleys from the ceiling in my room. I could build my models on it and hoist it up overnight so Dad and Angie didn't touch them.

I didn't get what I wanted.

Apparently the ceiling in my room isn't strong enough or something. I wouldn't have minded if Dad had even tried to fit one pulley but he just poked his head into the loft, shone his 'phone around for a bit - he didn't even use a proper torch - and then came back down shaking his head.

Sometimes life is just not fair!

Dad said that he'd make some space for me at the back of the brew-house but I didn't like that idea. For a start it's not a "brew-house", it's a shed. Just because he was going to use it to try and brew his beer didn't stop it being a bog-standard shed! For some reason he couldn't see that giving me a cupboard at the back of a damp and dingy wooden hut was no substitute for a custom-made, spacious

work-surface in my room to use whenever I felt like it.

It's like asking someone if you can have one of their chicken nuggets and they give you a chip. Worse: it's like asking for a chicken nugget and getting a cold chip. A cold, wet, soggy chip with mayonnaise on it. A cold, wet, chip with mayonnaise on it that somebody has dropped on the floor. Okay maybe it's not that bad but it is bad and it's just not the same thing as what I wanted.

The worse bit of this shed idea was that, because I'd be using it too, I had to help Dad put it up. This was patently unfair! Angie wasn't asked to help. Apparently all she had to do was help Dad put her shelves up. That's a doddle. All you have to do is hold the drill, the screwdriver, the spirit level, the wall fittings, the brackets, the screws and the shelves until Dad needs them and then pass them to him when he asks for them. Piece of cake.

I suspected, knowing her, that all she would do was put them on the floor and read until he asked for one of them. She's a bit mad

about books, my sister. Not just novels but non-fiction too. She has every Guinness Book of Records for the last nine years which is pretty impressive seeing as she is only twelve.

The trouble with helping Dad put something up is that he hates it when you point out that he's read the instructions wrong. He did that with the Christmas tree and nearly ended up putting the branches on upside down. I kept trying to tell him but he wouldn't listen. If I had let him continue we would have ended up with a tree that was narrow at the bottom and went wider as it got higher. You would have been able to sit a whole family of fairies on top of that thing. Dad said he knew what he was doing but I wasn't convinced. You wouldn't believe what he did with the lights! Angie and I spent days sorting that lot out afterwards. It was a nightmare trying to do without him noticing.

Anyway I had to help him put the shed up. So, shortly after we moved in, I found myself in the garden, colder than a frozen pizza at the north pole, holding onto a bunch of wooden stakes and some string while Dad marked out

the area to dig for the base. Actually the idea of building the shed was more interesting than I let on. For me it was kind of like a huge model kit and I love models. I didn't tell Dad that though otherwise he'd get ideas and think he could get me to 'help' with all sorts of things. As it happened the shed turned out to be a bigger project than we first thought.

It was when we started on the base that we hit our first snag - Dad couldn't get the spade into the ground. It was quite funny actually. He carefully marked out the area and then measured it again and then fiddled with the stakes a bit more and then checked it all again and then got the hump when I pointed out that he had one of the stakes upside down. I think after the mess with the Christmas tree he was determined to get this right. So it came as a big surprise - after he had planned it so well - to find he couldn't even get the spade into the ground.

As he pushed down with his foot on the spade he found it only went in just below the grass and then stopped. He moved the spade a bit and tried again and found the same thing.

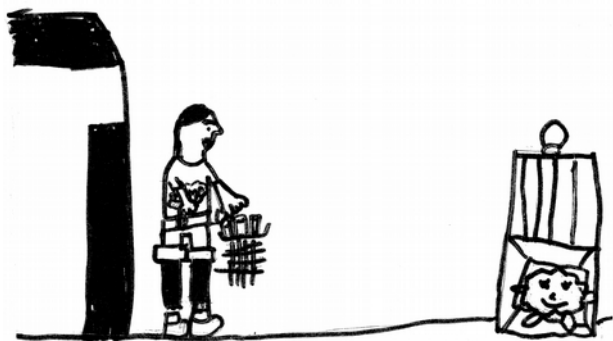
Then he moved a bit more and found the same thing again.

When he went to the other side of the marked out area the spade went in but on the side he first started it wouldn't. No matter how hard he tried he could not dig down below the grass. Eventually he stood on the spade with both feet and jumped on it like a weird pogo-stick. Of course the spade didn't go in and he fell off. I told him that I tried hard not to laugh but I didn't really, it was just too funny seeing him laying in the grass with his legs in the air.

After many attempts from both us we found that all we could do was lift the turf and expose whatever was under it. When we did that we found something really freaky. Below the grass was a trapdoor about a metre square. It was made of planks of wood, had large black metal hinges on one side and a small rope handle on the other.

We stood looking at it, not sure what to do. I thought it might be a hideout for pirate treasure but Dad said that was daft as we were miles from the sea. The trapdoor was

covered in mud and dirt and so we started to brush it off to see if revealed anything more about itself.



ANGIE WAS SHOCKED TO SEE WHAT WE FOUND IN
THE GARDEN

Just as we finished, Angie came out with some drinks. She doesn't normally get us all drinks so I think she had spotted us out of her window and came out to be nosey. She reckoned we should open the trapdoor but Dad said not to. I thought we should open it too but I let Angie do the talking so she would get in trouble if it went wrong.

Dad was just brushing the last of the dirt off when he stopped and stood up. In the middle

of the trapdoor was a dirty white sign with bold lettering.

It said:



“What do you think that means?” I asked

“Well obviously it means you shouldn’t feed the troll, silly!” said Angie. I sneered at her as it was obvious that was not what I was asking.

“What do you think it means by ‘troll’?” Dad asked, bending down to the door.

“That’s what I mean,” I replied, “and what does it mean by feed. I mean if we guess the troll – whatever that is – is under the trapdoor surely it will be dead after all this time. What good will feeding it do anyway?”

“Dead!” screeched Angie, “Martin, don’t be so cruel! How can you say such a thing?”

"I'm not saying I want it dead. I'm saying if something was in there, with no food or water, I can't see how it could survive." I shrugged, "To be honest I don't even know what a troll is."

"Yes you do." said Dad without looking up, "You remember, it's one of those monsters from the stories. Don't they live under bridges and eat rough goats or something?"

"Gruff Dad," Angie sniggered, "Billy goats gruff."

"Okay," he smiled, "gruff then but either way they're not real are they?" We shrugged in unison as if to say *"Don't ask me"*. Dad wasn't expecting an answer though. He was studying the trapdoor. "It looks real enough." he continued, "I suppose there could be something beneath it. Wait a minute!" He stood up quickly and turned to face us. "Is this you two having a joke?"

We looked blankly at him and then at each other. Dad stared at us in that smug way adults do when they think they've caught you out and are waiting for you to confess. The thing was we had nothing to confess.

"Dad," I mumbled, "are you suggesting we have put this trapdoor under the back lawn as a joke?"

"I don't even know how to do that!" Angie said. I shook my head to say "*Me neither*".

Dad looked at us intently and then shook his head. "No I suppose not but you have to admit it is a bit weird and it would be a good joke to play on me?"

"Blooming good, considering were only twelve and ten years old!" I said. "The question isn't 'How did it get there?' Dad, it's 'What are we going to do about it?'"

"I think we should open it." Angie said, folding her arms as if that settled the matter.

"I think we should leave it alone." Dad said, turning back to face the door.

"So I guess it's up to me to make the deciding vote." I said. "I think we should -"

"Deciding vote?" Dad spun and looked at me, "What do you mean 'deciding vote'? This is not a reality show you know? We're not deciding which blade of grass gets to come

back next week. There is no vote! I say we leave it alone and so –” but he didn’t get to finish because he was interrupted by the singing.

I say singing but it was more a sort of whimpering, kind of like a dog trying to get you to let it out if needs a wee. We all looked at each other and then slowly turned to the trapdoor, where the singing was coming from.

“Th-there’s someone in there!”, Dad spluttered, backing away.

“I think we should open the trapdoor.” Angie said excitedly.

“Shh!” I said, “It’s not just a noise, there are words. Listen!”

As we listened we began to pick out words in the whimpering noise. This is why I said it was singing because with the words it made it more like singing. It was hard to hear all of it but what we could hear was something about trouble and freedom and being grateful. The words kept repeating but we couldn’t hear them properly through the trapdoor. In the end Dad said “I think we should open it.”

“So do I.” I added.

“Oh,” snapped Angie, “so when Dad suggests it you think it’s a good idea!”

“I thought it was a good idea anyway,” I replied snarkily, “I’m just clever enough to keep quiet until Dad suggests it.”

“Crawler!”, she hissed between clenched teeth. I ignored her as it wasn’t the time for an argument.

Dad walked over and bent down to the trapdoor. Then he tapped it. Nothing happened. He took hold of the rope and wiggled it but again nothing happened. Then he gave it a gentle tug so all it did was tighten in his hand. Again nothing happened.

“Dad,” I grinned, “if you’re going to open it, then open it, don’t tickle it!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, “but before I do I want you two to stand back a bit. After all we don’t know what’s in there do we?”

We both rolled our eyes and took half a step back and then, as he took hold of the handle again, we shuffled forward to get a better

look. There was a slight creak as it lifted but it seemed to come up really easily. Dad seemed surprised that it wasn't stiff or rusty and to be honest I was a bit surprised by that too.

As the door lifted we saw that underneath was a hole. Well it was more like a pit but it was clean and neat and dry. It was lined with smooth, grey walls that made it look cold. All three of us stood there looking, although none of us were looking at the hole. We were all staring at what was in the hole.

Sitting in the middle of the hole was a small creature. It was about the size of a large cat but it didn't look like a cat. It had the shortest legs I've seen. In fact its feet just seemed to poke out from its hairy, fluffy body. The weirdest thing about its fur was the colour. It was a kind of grey-blue-green-purple colour. In fact the colour seemed to change slightly as it moved.



FAT WITH SHORT FLUFFY HAIR OR THIN WITH
LONG FLUFFY HAIR?

Beneath a furrowed, hairy brow it had two big white eyes each with a large blue iris. It had no nose and no ears – not that we could see anyway. From the sides of its fluffy body stuck two small hands. It was hard to see whether it was fat with short fluffy hair or thin with long fluffy hair. It had a mouth though, a wide mouth with a toothy grin.

It didn't fill the hole, in fact it was smaller than half the size of the hole but it didn't move around very much. It just sort of wavered. As we looked at the creature we became aware that it was looking back at us.

None of us knew what to say so we just stood there. Eventually Dad spoke but he was obviously worried that the creature would hear him so he didn't open his mouth much.

"Mm mm mmm mmmm mmmm mm mm-mm?" he mumbled.

"Pardon?" I replied, but instead of saying it clearer he just did the same thing again.

Angie looked at me and shrugged. Then she whispered "Dad, we can't understand you."

"Oh," he said, opening his mouth. "I said, 'do you think that is what was singing?'"

"Yes it was..."

The creature replied.

2



Three things struck me as interesting about this creature: firstly, that it had been buried under our back garden and was still alive; secondly that it could speak and understand us and thirdly that it spoke in rhyme.

Although it said "Yes it was.", that wasn't all it said. In fact the first thing it said to us was more like a limerick.

*"Yes it was I that you heard sing.
My hope was that help it would bring.
When your digging I heard.
I thought 'Oh my word!
An adventure perhaps can begin!'"*

At first we just stood there, in silence. I think we were all wondering if we were dreaming. I certainly was. I mean there was a fluffy creature living in a hole, under a trapdoor, in our back garden, speaking in rhyme. Pretty cheesy rhyme at that. As the seconds passed though I realised that I wasn't dreaming and this was real or even if I was dreaming, standing with my mouth agape wasn't probably going to help.

It was Dad who spoke first. "What are you?" he said to the creature.

*"I would have thought that was clear,
if you have something up here."*

It replied tapping the top of its head.

"There's no need to be rude." Dad said.
"We've never seen anything like you before
so how would we know what you were."

*"But surely you saw
the sign on the door?"*

The creature smiled and pointed at the open trapdoor.

"You don't mean you're a troll?" Dad said,
"That's ridiculous!" The creature nodded.

*"This is not a game,
Johan is my name
and as I said, it is clear I'm a troll.
Do you have any food?
I don't wish to be rude,
but I could murder and ham and
cheese roll!"*

"B-but the sign said not to feed you." Angie stammered.

*"So you did see it then,
my young little friend?"*

The troll grinned and carried on speaking.

*"Do not be concerned with the letters.
They are there for the ninnies,
the daft and the silly.
For those who don't know any better."*

Then it stared at each of us and said

*"When you opened the door
you showed me for sure,
that you were drawn by what you
might find.
It is clear from the start that you three
are smart
and have an inquisitive mind."*

"Yes I suppose we do" said Dad, "but that doesn't mean we are careless. If the sign says not to feed you it must be for a reason."

*"My goodness! A reason?
Of course there's a reason."*

"What is it then?" I asked.

*"Well it refers to the trolls that are
weird.
The ones that are greedy,
the ones that are needy,*

*the ones that should always be
feared."*

"And you're not one of those kinds of trolls then?" I asked, raising one eyebrow.

The troll spread its hands and said

*"What do you think, young man.
Do I look like I am?"*

"Well, I'm still not sure we should feed you." Dad interrupted, "For all we know, feeding you might be what turns you into one of those kinds of trolls. The ones that live under bridges and eat goats."

*"Oh dear not again,
will his myth never end?"*

the troll exclaimed,

*"You'll not find a troll who eat goats,
They're too big and have smelly coats!
We don't live under bridges,
we're trolls, not midges
and we rather cross rivers in boats."*

“So why do all the stories have wicked trolls in them?” Angie asked. “Surely there must be some element of truth behind them?”

*“Those are lies told by goats
and spread by others!
The truth is we’re friendly
and animal lovers.”*

It stared hard at her and she shifted uncomfortably. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“Well we’re still not going to feed you.” Dad said, holding up a hand to stop Angie protesting, “At least not until we are more certain of a few things.”

*“I’d be happy to help,
all you need do is ask.
I think that you’ll find
I’m more than up to the task”*

“Thank you for the offer,” Dad said, “but I would prefer if we found out by other means.”

*“Well I never!
You’re rude as well as clever!”*

"I beg your pardon?" Dad said, "I wasn't being rude. I am just saying that I'd like to check out a few things first."

*"But you won't ask me?
I can't really see
why my word you not trust."*

and then it mumbled as if to itself,

*"They're rude to me
yet I'm meant to be
the mean one?
It's all a bit much!"*

"He has a point Dad." said Angie.

"What?!" Dad said. "No he hasn't. I am not being rude!"

"Well you are shouting." I commented.

"Oh for goodness's sake!" Dad spluttered. "Right that's it! You," he pointed at the troll, "listen to me. I am not saying I don't believe you. I did not say I don't trust you. I simply meant that I don't know anything about trolls and I'd like to check with Google before making a decision to feed you. The sign

clearly says not to feed you yet you say that doesn't apply to you."

*"That is plain to see,
unless you're as daft as you seem."*

"Arrghh!" Dad shouted. "What is it with all the rhyming?" he didn't wait for an answer. "Choosing not to feed you without further evidence is not what an idiot would do. It's what sensible people would do. Either way we are not feeding you until I find out some more information. Somebody put that sign there for a reason. I'd like to find out why and whether it is true or not."

*"If you'd said that to start,
it would have more sense.
Instead of saying I'm lying
and causing offence."*

"I don't think he said that, did he?" I said. Which got me a frown from Johan.

"Well he sort of did." Angie said which got her a big smile.

The troll carried on regardless.

*"I find myself interested
in where you will look.
You mentioned "Goodle"
is that a book?"*

We all laughed at that. "Not Goodle," I said, "Google! It's not a book it's a search engine." I could see this meant nothing to the troll. "It's a place on a computer you can go to find answers to questions." Johan just stared at me, quizzically so I continued. "To be honest, it doesn't provide many actual answers, it just points to places that might have them or at least the ones that want to sell you something about the answer."

"It's not that bad." Dad said. He liked Googling for things.

*"Is that the only location
to find information?
Could you look somewhere else?
You must have books on your shelf?"*

The troll asked, sweetly.

"Yes we do but probably not about trolls. Wikipedia might be a start." I said.

"That's not even a proper encyclopedia! Angie huffed.

Johan turned to Angie and said

"So no answers to find?

Perhaps you have something in mind?"

"Wikipedia is great." I said, glaring at Angie.

"Except it's edited by anyone who feels like it." Angie said, "There's no way you can trust information provided in it. A proper encyclopedia is better researched, much more accurate and—"

"Much more out of date." I interrupted with a smile. "Wikipedia is as trustworthy as any other encyclopedia. The problem is that you place too much trust in a dusty old hardback book from the last century than you do from a website where people check and update the facts all the time."

"Or make them up." retorted Angie.

The troll looked as if he was getting bored. He looked at Dad.

*"This discussion,
if I could just ask:
do you think it is really
helping your task?"*

"No." Dad chuckled. "Not really. But I will use Google and Wikipedia and," he turned to Angie, "our other encyclopedias."

*"And they will complete
the knowledge you seek?"*

"I hope so." Dad said.

*"Then may I suggest
you use them in your quest.*

*But in future if you could recall
this useful advice, so small:
Good manners are free
if you use them you'll see
they can be a great help to all"*

Dad sighed and said in an overly polite voice "Okay, we'd better go back to the house. If you could stay here, we'll come back tomorrow to let you know what we've discovered. Does that sound okay to you?"

*"To me that sounds fine,
considerate and kind."*

"Do you have to rhyme?" I asked. "I mean you do it in everything you say."

The troll looked at me,

*"Surely not all of the time?
And besides it's hardly a crime
if my words sound the same?
It's fun, like a game,
to always speak in a rhyme."*

I was going to respond but Dad kicked the trapdoor closed with his foot.

"That's enough for now, I think." he said, shaking his head smiling.

We all went back to house. All the while Angie and I continued arguing about the merits of Wikipedia. If any of us had been able we might have seen that, underneath the trapdoor, the troll was smiling to itself.



For the rest of the day we sort of avoided each other. I don't know why this was. After finding the troll you would have thought we'd have plenty to talk about but after all the arguing in the garden we sort of drifted to separate parts of the house as if we were annoyed with each other.

I spent the afternoon in my room designing some new Meccano models. One of them was a scale model of the Gateshead Millennium Bridge. I saw a photo of it online a few weeks before and I just fell in love with the way it curved and how it opened to let ships pass. It's a bit ambitious even for me really, mostly because of the curve. Look it up online and you'll see what I mean.

I've been building models for as long as I can remember. Dad says it must very therapeutic which I found out means it makes me feel relaxed and happy. I'd have found it a darn sight more therapeutic if I didn't have the prospect of making them in a dingy, cold shed. I suppose modelling does make me

relax though. I'm certainly never as happy as when I am building a model. It's the thing I go to when I have five spare minutes. I guess you'd call it a hobby but it feels like more than that for me.

You don't really get Meccano in the shops any more. There are little plastic sets for smaller kids but the proper metal stuff is harder to come by. I love it. I used to do a lot of Lego but once my Dad showed me his old Meccano set I was hooked. When I discovered you could get plans and guides online I was so happy I ran around the house whooping.

I think my favourite model so far is the music maker. I found a copy of the original guide on Meccanopedia, which is like Wikipedia but just for Meccano fans. The guide was a bit old-fashioned but I managed to make it and it really did make music. I had to replace the clockwork motor with a crank handle because I didn't have that bit.

Angie teases me sometimes about my models. She says that my obsession with them is why nobody will be friends with me. It's not true of course, I do have friends and I

am interested in other things like football and stuff. Besides it's not like she's "little miss popular" anyway. She has her book-club buddies and I have my mates but I guess both of us are pretty selective in the people we choose as friends.

Not that it matters now of course. Now we've moved neither of us have any friends near here. All our friends are back at home. Sorry, I mean back where we used to live and that's miles away. I sometimes get to speak to Simon on the webcam but not as much as we said we would when I first moved. I guess, deep down, I knew I'd have to find some new mates at some point but to be honest that wasn't the most pressing thing on my mind that day. It was the fluffy troll in the middle of my garden.

After an hour or so - I lose track of time when I'm modelling - the front doorbell went. Dad answered it and I heard some muffled voices. I thought it was probably someone selling something and carried on with the gearing I was working on. I heard the front door close and then Dad called up the stairs for us to come down immediately.

“Who was at the door?” Angie asked as we got downstairs.

“It was Mr Peaflummock from next door.” Dad replied, “We have a problem.”

“Not as much as he does with a name like Peaflummock!” I laughed but Dad wasn’t laughing when he looked at me. I decided it might be better to keep the jokes to a minimum for a bit.

“Mr Peaflummock was concerned about our dog and the noise it is making.” Dad continued.

“We haven’t got a dog.” I said.

“Martin!” Angie sighed, “He’s talking about the you-know-what in the garden.”

“You mean it’s started making noises?” I asked.

“Didn’t you hear it?” Dad said, “It’s been like listening to a mouse howling at the moon.”

“You mean a wolf?” I asked

"No, a wolf has a deep howl, this was like a squeaky sort of howl." Dad shuddered, "it went right through you."

"Really?" I was amazed. I hadn't heard a thing but then I also realised I had no idea what a howling mouse sounded like so I may not have noticed it. "When did it start?"

"About an hour ago." Dad said with a shake of his head, "It went on for about forty-five minutes. Mr Peaflummock is worried what will happen tomorrow when we're all out. He was upset that we didn't mention the dog when we were looking around the place before we bought it."

"Did you explain we don't have a dog?" Angie asked.

"No." Dad said, "think about it: if he thinks it's a dog making that noise we'll be fine."

"Assuming we can get the you-know-what to keep quiet." Angie said.

"Yes, presuming that of course." Dad said sitting down at the kitchen table. We joined him as he continued, "But if he finds out--"

"That it's not a dog but a troll." I said.

"Exactly." Dad nodded, "We'll be in all sorts of trouble! He'll call the police, animal control, the army!"

"Dad!" I laughed, "He's hardly going to call the army."

"Okay," Dad said, "bit of an exaggeration but we could do without the bother couldn't we?", He didn't wait for us to answer, "We need to get rid of this thing by ourselves if we can."

"Get rid of it?" Angie said, "Why?"

"Angie," Dad said, "we can hardly keep a troll in the garden! I mean we don't know what it will do or how dangerous it is."

"Dangerous?" she replied, "It hardly looks dangerous."

"That's not the point." Dad said, "Every story and tale we've heard about trolls has them as monsters that look to eat things. If this, " he nodded towards the back garden, "gets comfortable here there's no telling what damage it could do."

"Dad," I said, "I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. We don't even know if it is a troll yet."

"It says it is and then there's the sign." Angie sulked.

"Yes but how do we know if it is or not?" I asked, "I mean I've never seen what a troll looks like - have you?" They both shook their heads. "How did the Googling go Dad?" I asked.

"Oh hopeless, completely hopeless!" he said throwing his arms in the air.

"You mean you didn't find anything?" I said.

"Oh I found out plenty," he replied, "but it was all about online trolls."

"Trolls have websites now?" I asked.



THE FAMILY RESEARCHED TROLLS BUT WE DIDN'T
FIND MUCH

"Well not exactly but it doesn't really matter. The online trolls are not the ones we want to be researching anyway." Dad pulled the laptop over to himself. He hit a key to cancel the screen saver and after a few clicks found his way to the browser window.

"Here we go. This is the kind of thing we need to consider." He pointed at the screen to show a page which had information about trolls without mentioning anything about being online. I smiled to myself because it was on

Wikipedia. Angie saw it and huffed very loudly.

"Don't start." Dad said without looking up. "Look, it says here that trolls are mythical creatures mostly found in stories originating in Scandinavia."

"What like Sweden?" I asked.

"Uh-huh and Norway, Denmark, Finland and the rest."

"So what does it say about them?"

"Well it's all a bit of a mess really. It says they might be anything from huge ugly, rock-like creatures to small human-like beings. Apparently some people say that they are very like fairies."

"Fairies?" Angie asked.

"Oh, yes," said Dad half turning to see her, "fairies. I don't think that means they have wings, just that they are mythical or mischievous beings."

"What does it say about feeding them?" I asked.

“That’s just it.” Dad sighed, sitting back in his chair. “It says nothing.”

“There must be something?” Angie said, adding “Have you looked anywhere other than Wikipedia?”

Dad shrugged, “The problem with searching online is that so much of it points to itself. You find a useful looking article and then find it quotes Wikipedia. You find a link on Google and find it’s a list of links to Wikipedia. As it happens there are millions of links about not feeding trolls but every single one of them refers to online trolls which are not what we are talking about.”

“What exactly is an online troll then?” I asked.

“Oh it depends really. Mostly it’s someone who causes a nuisance of themselves or looks to cause one in forums and on Twitter and Facebook and the like. In the worst cases it can move offline as well. It’s a form of bullying.”

“And you’re sure there’s no connection to the thing in our garden?”

"Not that I can see – unless it has a Twitter account."

"Well I looked in my real encyclopedias." Angie said with a slight sneer.

"Oh?" Dad asked.

"They say pretty much what you've found out." She replied, ignoring my grin, "Apart from the bit about fairies. There was nothing on that. There was nothing about online trolls or about feeding them either."

"So we're stuck then." I said.

"Looks like we'll have to figure this one out by ourselves." Dad said stretching his arms and yawning.

*"Perhaps I may help you,
if you allow me to?"*

We all spun to see the troll standing in the door way.

"How did you get out?" I spluttered.

*"I am able to jump,
although I land with a bump."*

"This rhyming is going to get annoying really fast." Dad muttered.

*"I can speak without rhyme,
if it occurs at the time."*

"Sorry," Dad said, "it's just hard to understand what you are getting at sometimes." The troll seemed to shuffle and then said.

*"Did you find what you need
to give me a feed?"*

"Not yet." I said. "There's very little information about feeding trolls that we can find."

*"This may not be a surprise
as I'm sure that you realise
humans don't tend
to see me or my friends
as they rarely open their eyes."*

"What does that mean?" I asked

Dad said. "He's saying humans are not very observant." Then he sighed and shook his head. "Johan I don't think you should be part of this discussion. It's not helpful."

The troll sort of bowed its head and backed away lightly.

*"I am sorry dear man,
as much as I can
I seek to help others you see.
It is most upsetting
to find you are getting
bothered by something from me."*

"That's not what I meant. " Dad said, "I just mean we would like to discuss this alone, if you don't mind."

*"So if I am not helping you
is there some thing I should do?"*

"I'm not sure really." Dad said looking at us, puzzled. "Why don't you have a wander around the garden."

"Okey-dokey"

"Just a minute?" I said, "What are you holding?" The troll was holding one end of a long piece of wool. "What is that wool for?" I asked.

*"This will help me to find
my way home. Do you mind?"*

"Why would I mind?" I said and then heard Dad gasp.

"Where did you get the wool?" he asked. The troll didn't answer but looked across the garden towards next door's fence. "Oh no." Dad said putting his head in his hands.

"What?" I asked.

"What?" Angie asked.

"He's grabbed a jumper off next door's washing line and he's unravelled it!" Dad shouted, rising to his feet and pointing to Johan.

"What?" I asked, "How do you know?"

"Mr Peaflummock was asking about his blue jumper when he came to complain about the noise. He mentioned it was missing and he wondered it had blown off the line into our garden."

Johan stood still still holding the piece of blue wool by the end.

*"I need this thread
as I have already said,*

*in order to find my way home.
I sadly must say
that we trolls lose our way,
if we stray too far when we roam."*

"Mr Peaflummock said he got that jumper for his birthday! If he finds out you took it and ruined it he will be really angry and he'll blame me!" Dad was fuming.

*"Do not fear,
all is clear!
I promise to make recompense.
Once I am at home,
the jumper will go
back over your neighbour's fence."*

"What!" Dad said "What do you mean it will go back? Are you going to somehow knit it back together then?"

"No."

"No rhyme?" I said.

"For one word? How absurd."

"Never mind the rhyme," said Dad, "we just don't have time." Angie and I both laughed at that but we stopped when Dad shot us a hard

stare. He carried on, "You must not throw the remains of that jumper over the fence. In fact give it here!" and he made a grab for the wool.

Suddenly Johan was off running, well sort of plodding quickly, round the garden trailing the long piece of blue wool after him. Dad gave chase and started gathering up the wool as best he could. The problem was that Johan had run between bushes and across the rockery so Dad kept tripping as he ran.

*"Be aware of the yarn,
you may come to harm!"*

Johan yelled as he ran.

"I'll bring you to harm if you don't give it to me!" Dad puffed as he tried to keep up.

*"You really must heed my warning.
Fear not. I'll restore it by morning."*

Dad stopped running and stared. "You'll restore the jumper? How?" he asked.

*"I have my ways.
I think you'll be amazed."*

“And it will be complete?” Dad was indeed amazed. So were Angie and I come to that.

*“Yes do not worry at all
it will be complete.
I just ask something small:
give me something to eat.”*

We all looked at each other and waited to see who would speak first. The troll had us trapped. If we fed it who knows what would happen. The sign clearly said not to. But then if we didn't feed it, Mr Peaflummock would find out and we'd have even bigger trouble.

In the end it was Dad who shrugged and said “Okay we'll find you something to eat but you must have that jumper back to normal by tomorrow morning!”

While Angie and I looked at each other, amazed, Dad went back indoors and got a handful of biscuits. He handed them to Johan. “Here will these do?”

*“Oh indeed, oh yes.
Garibaldi's, the best!
I am always surprised
How much I like dead flies.”*

I smirked at that.

“Now get to work on that jumper.” Dad said and ushered the two of us back in the kitchen.

When we got inside I said “Now what?”

“What what?” Angie said.

“What do we do about the troll now?” I asked.
“That’s what.”

“I guess we hope that it is telling the truth.” Dad said with a sigh, “About it not being a nasty troll I mean.” He glanced at the clock, “It’s getting late and we should eat ourselves but to be honest I don’t feel like eating here tonight. So let’s go out for pizza.”

He didn’t need to tell us twice.

4



The next day we had to get back into our normal routine: school, work, washing, that kind of thing. It’s not easy trying to pay attention at school at the best of times but

when you have a troll back home doing who-knows-what it's even harder.

For his part Johan did deliver the jumper. It was there, on our back doorstep, as good as new when we came down in the morning. Johan was nowhere to be seen though. The trapdoor was shut and we decided he must be asleep in there. It was a mystery how he had restored that jumper but Dad was happy enough just to be able to deliver it next door and win some neighbour-points with Mr Peaflummock.

Having only just moved to the area I was still settling in at school. It's hard being the new kid at school, especially mid way through a year. I missed my old school. The teachers at the new one were okay, considering they were teachers. I got told off in maths for staring out of the window. I'd seen a purple carrier bag flutter past in the wind and I got scared Johan had followed me or starting sprouting tiny trolls because we had fed him.

Lunch and break times are always the hardest at a new school. That's when everyone gets into their little groups. There's the science

kids, the footballers, the dancers, the card swappers and the FOTS. I call them that because they are **F**ull **O**f **T**hem**S**elves. Every school has them. They're the ones who just sit around, pointing and laughing at the rest of us because they think they are so much better than us. They act as if this makes them special. I think it just makes them irritating and because they are so full of themselves it makes them selfish. They have no time for anyone else except to make fun of them. The weird thing is that they, themselves are petrified of what people will say about them. About the worse thing for a FOT is to be excluded by the other FOTS. As you'd expect me being the new kid made me a bit of a target to start with.

To make it worse, without realising, I sat on my own at lunch. I was thinking about the troll and what to do about it and hadn't realised I'd sat on an empty table. A girl came over at one point. At first I reckoned she was either there to make some joke at my expense or because she had no friends of her own. I was wrong on both counts. She did

have friends and she didn't seem to be making fun of me.

"You're Martin aren't you?" she said.

"Yep." I said "New kid and all that." I glanced over at a table of FOTS who were gesturing towards me and giggling.

"Don't worry, " she smiled, "they're not as important as they think they are. Don't let them get to you."

"What makes you think they're getting to me?" I asked.



EVERY SCHOOL HAS F.O.T.S.

“Well,” she said sitting down, “you look a bit bothered. I just guessed it was that lot.”

I shook my head. “Nah, I have more important things to worry about than a bunch of FOTS”

“FOTS?”

“Full Of ThemSelves”

She laughed and looked over at them. “I like that. I’ll remember it. So if not them, what’s bothering you?”

“Oh not much.” I lied. Had my concerns about Johan been that obvious?

She raised one eyebrow as if she didn’t believe me.

“Okay, but to be honest it’s not worth mentioning and you wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

“Oh? You know me that well already do you?” she said folding her arms in mock-anger.

“No, I just know how unbelievable it sounds.” I smiled, “Look I know you’re trying to be

friendly and it's nice of you but really there's not much you can do in this case."

"You'll never know unless you tell me." she said, still smiling. She had this weird look on her face as if she already knew what I was worried about.

"I really don't think you can help." I said wishing she would just go away but partly beginning to wonder why she was so insistent.

"Try me?" she said. "You'd be surprised how resourceful me and my friends can be."

"Friends?" I said, "I only ever see you with that one kid over there."

"I do have other friends, not at school," She said "and to be honest even one is more than you have right now."

For some reason I felt like I could trust her but Dad had ordered us not to tell anyone about the troll and I happened to agree with him. Still it didn't look like she was going to give up so I tried to figure out what I could say without giving the game away.

"I'm just doing an outside project, kind of a research thing and I'm stuck for information." I said.

"Have you tried Wikipedia?" she asked. I looked at her and she worked out how silly that suggestion was. "Sorry, what are you stuck on."

I said the first thing that sounded plausible. "I'm trying to find out about trolls for a game I'm helping develop."

"An online game?"

"Not exactly. More a sort of role-playing game." I was making it up as I went along now.

"So we're not talking about annoying twerps on Facebook then?"

"No, I'm talking about the other type of troll."

"The ones that hide under bridges and eat goats?"

"Or not as the case may be." I smiled. "I've found out quite a bit but I can't find anything about what they eat or how often."

"Apart from goats that is?" she smiled.

"Well I'm trying to find out a little more than one fairy tale says." I shrugged.

"Why did you think I'd find that hard to believe?" she asked.

I was stuck for a response "Well it just seems a bit daft for me to be so distracted by something so silly." I said, hoping she'd buy it.

She laughed, "You should meet some of my friends. They could write a book on being distracted by stupid things! So what can I do to help?"

"You're serious?" I asked.

"Of course I am. What can I do?"

"Well," I said sitting back, "for a start can you and your resourceful friends find out what trolls are supposed to eat, how often and what happens when they do?"

"We can try." she said as the bell went, stopping her from saying any more. As we cleared the tables I thanked her and then got off to class.

She and her friend were in my group for science, maths and technology so we chatted over a few things like what I knew about trolls already – which was not much as Dad and Angie had done all the research. They asked a lot of questions about the game I was doing this for, particularly what I imagined trolls looked like. I think I managed to give good enough answers without sounding like I had a real troll back at home.

Given the chaos of moving, being miles from my old mates, the troll in my garden and that my Dad was relegating my modelling to the back of his shed, this day hadn't turned out too bad after all. I went home with a bit of spring in my step.

I arrived home still in a good mood but as soon as I opened the door I had the stuffing knocked right out of me.



The first thing I heard as I opened the door was Dad screaming “Nooooo!” then I saw Angie run up the stairs shouting “I’ll see if it looks any better from up here!”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Don’t ask!” shouted Angie.

But I had asked and their behaviour was kind of freaking me out. “Dad!” I shouted, “What’s the matter?”

Dad turned at looked at me, “You’d better come and see for yourself.”

I walked into the kitchen to see all the cupboards and the fridge door open. Every single piece of food – except for the tins and the freezer stuff – was open or missing.

"It looks like he squeezed in through the cat flap." Dad said.

I looked at the back door and gasped. The cat flap was not there. In its place was a round hole as if somebody had smashed through.

"So I see, " I said "But surely he'd fit through the flap. Why is the hole there?"

"He got in through the flap. The hole is how he got out." Dad sighed.

"I don't understand?"

"He tried to go through the flap but he didn't fit." Dad said. "Have a look in the garden and you'll see what I mean."

I looked through the back window and saw the troll sitting in his hole with the trapdoor open. Whereas he had room to spare before, now he fitted the hole almost completely. He was the same shape and colour and just as fluffy but now his fur was a bit more spikey . The main difference was that now he was the size of a large dog. He saw me and waved and smiled. For some daft reason I waved back but Dad grabbed my hand and pulled it

down. As he did this Angie yelled down the stairs.

"The apples on the tree have gone Dad and it looks like next door's vegetable patch is a right old mess."

"What the heck happened?" I spluttered.

"Isn't it obvious? He grows when he eats." Dad said.

I looked around the chaos of the kitchen. "He grows a lot" I said "and he eats a lot too."

"As far as I can tell, this was all done this afternoon. It also seems he has trouble stopping once he starts." Dad continued.

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes, he says we gave him permission to eat our food."

"We didn't do that, did we?"

"I don't think so but he reckons we agreed to feed him and therefore it was a natural for him to presume we'd let him help himself."

"How the heck did he get to that conclusion?" Angie said coming back in the room.

"I don't know." Dad sighed, "When I started to question it, he started all that 'You're being rude' stuff again."

"But even if he thought we did, that doesn't mean we'd give him permission to eat next door's vegetables." I said.

"He didn't eat them." Angie said, "They've not been eaten, they've just been trampled on."

"By what?" Dad asked.

Angie shrugged. "Beats me, looks like some kind of animal – or a few of them."

"Do you think it was him?" I asked, nodding to the back garden.

"No. He said couldn't get over the fence, remember, and besides there are small footprints in the mud." she said.

"Still think we should trust him?" I smirked.

"I never said we should!" she huffed.

“Enough!” Dad said. “We don’t have time for arguing. We need to work out how to get rid of the troll before he eats our entire house!”

“Perhaps he’ll move on when there’s nothing left.” I suggested.

“By which time, we’ll also have to move on Martin!” Dad said, “We need a plan to get rid of him before then.”

“What are we having for dinner?” I asked as my stomach rumbled.

Angie glared at me “Bad timing, Martin!”

“What?” I said, “I can’t be expected to think on an empty stomach!”

“We’ll get something in.” Dad said, “But while we’re thinking, let’s clear this up.”

“What about the troll?” Angie asked.

“I’ve explained that he is not welcome to help himself to any of our food or belongings or indeed anything in the house or garden without asking first – each time.”

“Did you shout?” Angie asked.

"No I did not shout," Dad said, getting frustrated, "I explained it to him."

"Oh dear." I said.

"What?" Dad said.

"Well your explanations don't always have the effect you expect Dad."

"What do you mean?"

"They're not as," I struggled to find the right word, the polite word, "interesting as you they sound to you."

"Are you saying I'm boring?"

"No, not at all. Well, maybe a bit." I said.

"Yes Dad, we are." Angie added.

"Oh this is just great!" Dad said, "Here I am, trying to fix this mess and you two choose now to tell me I'm the most boring person on the planet!"

"Not the most boring Dad." I said helpfully, "Some of the documentaries you watch on the telly are more boring than you."

Dad shook his head. "So what, you are saying that he might not have listened to me?"

"It's possible." Angie said. "You do tend to go on a bit."

"I'll have another word with him." Dad said.

"Why don't I do it?" Angie smiled "You two can make a start here. She went outside and chatted to Johan for a few moments and then came back in.

"He understands now." she said. "I've explained his behaviour upset us and we found it a bit rude. He's said he'll get permission before doing anything like that again."

"Good." Dad said.

"But he also said," Angie continued "if that's not what we meant we should have been clearer. He suggests we label the food so he knows which bits he's allowed to eat."

"Label the food!" Dad spluttered, "LABEL THE FOOD! He's not allowed to eat any of it!"

"I said that but he said it was just a suggestion."

"Perhaps," I added, " we could put a label on all the cupboard and the fridge which says 'Trolls are not to eat the food in here.' or something?"

"Good idea!" Dad said throwing empty packets into the bin. "This is going to cost a fortune and somehow I've got to explain to Mr Peaflummock."

"It's worse than that, Dad." Angie said.

"What do you mean?"

"Johan said the vegetable patch was wrecked by the foxes, not by him."

"What foxes?" I said.

"Apparently he invited a family of foxes to live in our garden. He said he told them we were friendly and wouldn't throw them out."

"What!" Dad said, dropping the bin.

"It's true, I've seen them. They've made a den behind the shrubs at the back. He's also

invited some magpies, field mice, assorted worms and a group of beetles.”

“Colony.” I said. “It’s a colony of beetles.”

“I don’t care if it’s a bag of beetles!” Dad said, “They’re not staying in my garden! I’m not running a nature reserve you know?”

“You are now Dad.” I said, looking in the garden.



THE GARDEN WAS GETTING A BIT CROWDED



The garden looked like we had opened up a city zoo. Not only were there foxes sitting by the bushes but there was a collection of hedgehogs, rabbits, some kind of rodents and even a badger. A badger! I've never even seen a badger at a real zoo and there was one in my garden, standing there like it was on holiday or something!

Angie said "Oh my goodness!" and grinned from ear to ear.

Dad sat on a chair and held his head in his hands. I think he was starting to lose it because he just started muttering to himself.

"It's a dream, just a dream." he said, "Any minute now I'm going to wake up. It's just a dream."

"Dad." I said.

He just carried on muttering. "I mean, trolls aren't real. Badgers are real of course but they don't wander into gardens in the middle of the day. Trolls on the other hand-"

"Dad!" I said louder and he snapped out of it. "What are we going to do?" Dad shrugged and then stared back out the window.

"For a start we should stop Angie." he said.

I turned and saw that Angie had gone back outside. We both rushed out, skidding to a halt beside her. She was talking to Johan, who was standing just in front of his hole. He had grown a little bit more and I'm not sure he would have fit in it very well.

"Angie what are you doing?" Dad said.

"Talking to Johan," she replied as if it was obvious.

"Johan," I asked, "what are all these animals doing here?"

*"I invited them,
don't you see?
As I told you,
animals are friends with me."*

"You invited them?" Dad stammered. "You can't just invite a bunch of wild animals into our garden."

*"Why-ever not?
What wrong could there be*

*in telling my friends
of your hospitality?*

"Wrong? Wrong?!" Dad said, "There's plenty wrong!" and then he shook his head, muttering something about the fact that he was arguing with a troll.

*"Really? How confusing.
I'm afraid I did not know.
If I did something wrong,
You should tell me so."*

"Yes Dad," Angie said, "what is wrong with having the animals here? I mean you're always saying we should take care of the environment."

"She has a point Dad," I added, "last year we spent ages building that bug hotel."

"No, no, no," Dad said, "that's not the same."

*"Not the same?
Why is that,
I'm confused again."*

I have to say that I could see what he meant.
"Dad, why are these animals different?"

Dad was getting flustered. "I suppose, well, if you put it like that, I, er, well they're not."

*"So then please tell me why,
They are making you cry?"*

"They're not making me cry," Dad said, "but them being here has upset me a bit."

He started to pace around, Angie and I both recognised this from when he had told us off. We knew we were in for a lecture.

"As much as the animals might be your friends. You can't just invite them here without asking. " Dad carried on, "You see, this garden, this house, is not yours. You don't pay for it, you won't have to clear up the mess, you won't have to try and explain to the neighbours. When you are gone, we'll be left to sort this out and so I'd like to keep the work we will have to do to as little as possible."

*"Gone? What on earth do you mean?
Why leave my hole, so cosy and
clean?"*

I'm not sure Dad had considered if the troll wanted to leave. "You will leave," he said, "you have to leave. You see, while I am sure you are a nice troll, it seems a lot of trouble follows you about. Trouble we could do without."

*"But the trouble has been small
and I did not cause it all.
It's not fair to blame me!
The facts seem to be
that you've not made me welcome at
all!"*

"Not made you welcome?" Dad said, "We didn't even know you were coming! You turned up here and ruined our garden. You've eaten all our food, brought a host of wild animals into it and ruined Mr Peaflummock's jumper!"

*"The jumper is as good as can be.
Look over there and you'll see.
And as for your food,
I don't mean to sound rude,
but the biscuits were not eaten by
me."*

"That's true Dad", I said, "we all ate the biscuits between us."

"That may be true, " retorted Dad, "but it was 'Mr fluffy' here who ate pretty much the rest of the kitchen by himself!"

*"Sorry, but I still am not clear
what I have done wrong here?"*

"I thought I had explained that," Dad said, "you can't go around treating this place like you own it. We live here, it's ours and we want to build our home here. If you take it over like this, then there's no room for us."

*"But surely there is room for us all?
I am only small after all?"*

"Actually you're not." Angie interrupted. I looked at Johan and it was true he seemed bigger than when we had first come out.

"How come you have grown so much?" I asked.

*"It is plain to all but a ninny-head,
that things will grow when they're
fed."*

I was going to answer but my phone bleeped and stopped me. I pulled out the phone and unlocked it. It was a text from the girl at school. I'd given it to her in science class in case she came up with something. It seemed that she had. The text read:

FOUND OUT SOMETHING
ABOUT UR PROBLEM.
TELL U AT SCHOOL 2MORO.
FOR NOW -
VITAL THAT U LEAVE UR
VISITOR ALONE.

I was dumbstruck. How could she possibly have known? Surely she hadn't been spying on me? I looked around and saw nobody. Yet she clearly knew my issue with trolls was beyond some research project. She mentioned a visitor so she must have known about Johan, but how? I had been extra careful and to be honest how could somebody think we had a real troll in our garden? Most people think they are made up creatures, the stuff of fairy stories. Even I did, before we started digging up the garden.

I started to text her back and then stopped. I couldn't think what to say. If I admitted about the troll, she'd know for sure. She might have been guessing and her text was a hook waiting to catch me like a fish. On the other hand she did say her and her friends were resourceful. Even if she had figured it out she clearly thought Johan was something to be avoided. Why would she think that? What had she found out? I was getting more confused by the minute.

I realised I had to respond to her, whatever I thought. In the end I simply typed

THX C U 2MORO

I'd just have to wait until school to find out the rest.

Angie interrupted my thoughts. "Who was that?" She said.

"Oh just a friend from school."

"You're making friends already? That's great!" Dad said, "Why don't you invite them round?"

"Dad!" I sighed, nodding towards Johan, "can we have this conversation later?"

“Oh, yes. Good point.”

“I think we should go back in. This all seems to be getting us nowhere.” I said.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Dad said, “but before we do, you” he looked sternly at Johan, “need to get this straight. From now on you do not bring anything into this house or garden and you do not eat or touch anything of ours without asking first, okay?”

Johan nodded and shuffled back to his hole, not that he could fit in it any more. We all went back indoors. We finished clearing up in the kitchen and then after Dad had ordered some more food, Angie and I finished off our homework. To be honest I couldn’t really focus on it though. All I could think of was that text message. What on earth had the girl from school found out and what we were going to do about that troll singing to the badger in the garden.



The next day at school was a nightmare. I looked for the girl but I couldn't find her. I was silently annoyed with myself for not finding out her name. I didn't even see her friend, the one she was always hanging around with. It was like they had just disappeared. I asked around but it's really hard to ask where somebody is if you don't know their name. I stumbled around describing her but realised just then how bad I was at describing girls.

Eventually someone figured out who I meant and said some of her science class were on a school trip to the city farm that morning. I had forgotten about the trip. It was too small for a whole class to go at once so they split us up. My group was due to go that afternoon. This meant I wouldn't see her unless she came back in time for lunch.

The clock seemed to tick ever slower. At one point I thought it was going backwards. History was a complete waste of time. We were looking at the Romans and whilst I was initially excited, because I thought we'd look at some of the great constructions they made, all we ended up talking about were

floors. Floors! I mean how can you spend half an hour talking about floors? Floors are just, well, just stuff you walk on.

Eventually the lunch bell went and we all drifted outside. By which I mean some of the others drifted, I walked as fast as I could without running. As I got outside I saw one the most welcome sights I had seen for some days: the school bus was parked outside. They had come back.

I scanned the playground until I saw her, sitting with her friend on the benches by the play equipment, smiling. Smiling! How could she smile when her text had practically turned my brain into spaghetti!

I ran to them and then realised as I reached them I didn't know how to start. That was because I didn't know how I felt. Was I angry that she had spied on me, confused over why I should leave Johan alone or relieved that I could talk to somebody else about this?

"Hi Martin," she said as I approached, "I'm sorry about the text message. It was a bit out of the blue." Her smile put me at ease.

"Have you been spying on me?" I asked.

"No I haven't." she said, glancing at her friend. "But I can imagine you're wondering how I know about the visitor in your garden."

"Just a bit." I said.

"I have a confession," she said, "I knew about it when I came up to you yesterday."

"What! How?" I shouted.

"Shh!" her friend said. "Keep your voice down."

"Okay but how did you know?" I pressed.

"We have some friends who are interested in that sort of thing and they knew it had arrived." said the girl.

"Friends?" I said, "You mean like the government?"

The girl laughed. "No but they are a little unusual. The point is that we knew it was in your garden and were keeping an eye on you to make sure you were okay."

"Are we in danger then?" I asked. This was beginning to worry me.

"Not if you ignore it." she said, "It thrives on attention."

"You what?"

"Your visitor, it loves attention. The more attention you pay it, the more it likes it and the more it grows. That's why I told you to ignore it."

"Grows? You mean it gets bigger if we pay attention to it?"

"Exactly that."

"Not by how much it eats?"

"It does grow when it eats, like anything does, but if you give it attention it gains a hold on you and yes, it grows bigger." she was really beginning to worry me now. I was wondering what I got mixed up in. To be honest, if I didn't have a large purple troll in my garden, I might have questioned whether these two were on drugs.

"How do you know all this," I asked, "and how did you find out about our, er, visitor?"

"I told you, our friends told us. I said we were resourceful." the girl smiled, "I could tell you more but you won't believe me." that made me smile as she used the same words I had said to her the day before.

"You know me that well do you?" I replied with a grin. I was a little freaked out though. They were beginning to sound like people in

spy movies. "So why did you decide to help me then?"

"Look," interrupted her friend, "we've had similar experiences ourselves. We just figured you could do with some help."

I looked at them, not even trying to hide my amazement. "You have had experience with - what I have in my garden?"

They both laughed. "Not exactly but we have experience of other things. Things that other people wouldn't believe." the girl said.

I couldn't quite figure these two out. First there was the fact that they had no other friends. Second I couldn't see what that had in common - apart from books. The girl had beside her an e-book reader which I guessed had a bunch of books about girls who didn't get on with their sisters. Her friend had a huge book on electronics beside him. I don't know how he fitted in his bag which was bulging as it was. I was starting to think they might be working for the government and were actually placed in my school to find out more about my troll. I decided to push my luck a bit with them.

"Okay, look, you two have clearly spied on me or bugged my house or something and so you

know what I have in my garden." I held up my hand as they started to protest. "You say you have experience and some strange , all-knowing, friends you can't tell me about. All I know is that right now it seems a bit unfair because you know my secrets and I don't know yours. I mean I don't even know your names but I'm beginning to think that none of that matters."

"Really?" they said, looking at each other.

"Yes really. None of it matters because what really matters to me right now getting rid of the thing in my garden. If you can help me with that, without involving the police or the government or letting my Dad find out I told you, then I'd be grateful."

"Okay," said the boy, "I think we can say this much for now. We knew where the visitor was and we worked out it was where you lived. After that we just needed a look around when you and your family weren't in. To confirm what we suspected."

"So you did spy on me! What did you do, break into my house?"

No. We had a friend take a look from a distance. Sorry but we had to find out whether our suspicions were correct."

“Actually they weren’t our suspicions” said the girl, “they were,” she hesitated, “somebody else’s.”

“True, “ the boy continued, “we have some friends who are a little different and are quite knowledgeable. Particularly about things most of us wouldn’t think existed.”

“Like my visitor?”

“Like a lot of things. They have knowledge we couldn’t have.”

“And who are these people?”

“As I said,” the girl looked at me, “you wouldn’t believe us if we told you.”

“Are they like my visitor?”

“Sort of.” the boy said, “They certainly know a lot about him. The first thing you need to know is he is not what you think he is.”

“He’s not?” The more I thought about it, the more I realised that I wasn’t sure what Johan was. We had just taken him at his word.

“No. He’s an alien.” the girl said and I laughed. “I wouldn’t laugh,” she continued, “because if he’s not then he must be something that’s only been heard of in fairy tales.” She had a point but I wasn’t sure

which idea sounded more ridiculous. Either I had a fairy tale creature making friends with wild animals in my garden or it was a traveller from another planet. Presumably a fluffy, purple planet where everyone speaks in rhyme.

“His race thrives on attention. They crave it like we humans crave chocolate. They managed to destroy their entire planet and almost wiped themselves out. It seems some managed to escape and now you have one in your garden.”

“You said they destroyed their own planet, was in some kind of accident?” I said.

“No it was a war. It turns out they don’t care what kind of attention they get, just as long as somebody is paying attention to them. Apparently they figured out it was easier to draw attention to yourself by being nasty to others than by being nice. So they started arguing, selfishly. Eventually that turned into a mass war until they pretty much blew up the planet. This is the first time one of these has been spotted on Earth.”

“So why does it call itself a troll then? It seemed to know a lot about troll legends?”

"We're not sure but we think when it arrived here it must have found out about troll legends and decided to pretend to be one." the boy said.

"Your friends seem to know a lot about life on other planets, are they aliens too?" I joked but I saw they weren't laughing. They just shot looks at each other. "You're kidding?" but I could see that they weren't. "Blimey!", I continued, "If aliens are invading the Earth shouldn't we tell the authorities?". They looked at each other for a while and then the boy nodded and the girl spoke.

"Okay we owe you some kind of explanation. We were going to tell you this later but it seems things have got ahead of us. Sit down." She shuffled up to make room.

I sat, with a very strange feeling in my stomach.

"First let start with some names." she said, "This is Tim and I am Priya."

I nodded to both of them. It was odd, she said them like I was supposed to recognise the names. She carried on.

"What we are about to tell you is something nobody but us knows. If you tell other people

we will deny it. Last year we had an encounter with some refugees from another planet. Their planet had been destroyed and they had been looking for a new home. At first we thought they were coming to invade the Earth but it turned out they were just looking for a new home because their old one was destroyed.”

“They wanted to live here alongside us.” said Tim.

“So where are they then? I mean if they’re anything like the thing I have in my garden they’ll be hard to hide.”

“They are nothing like your visitor and they are good at hiding.” he said. “We’re not going to tell you where they are, for obvious reasons.”

“Okay, how do I know you are telling me the truth? This could be all part of some big game to wind up the new kid at school.”

“Look around you Martin,” Priya said, “Do we look like the sort of people who’d do that? I mean we’re not – what did you call them – FOTS?”

I laughed, "No, you're not but still you are asking me to believe you without giving me any evidence."

"Fair point," Tim said, "but these are our friends and we have been trusted to protect them. We can't risk them being found. I'm not sure how we can prove it to you without putting them at risk."

"I do," said Priya, "The visitor in your garden, it talks to you right?"

"Yes it does."

"Well our friends said that the race it belongs to prefer to speak in riddles or rhyme. Does it speak in rhyme?"

"It does, " I said, "but your spy could have told you that."

"Our spy couldn't hear anything," said Priya, "he was looking from a distance."

"What like with a telescope?"

"Not exactly," Tim said, "but he didn't set foot in you garden or your house. He couldn't hear anything from where he was."

"Okay so you know it speaks in rhyme," I said, "but that doesn't prove much. So far you've

not told me anything you couldn't have found out from your spy."

"Tim, I think we need to show him." Priya said.

"What? No!" Tim said grumpily.

"If we don't then he won't believe us. If he doesn't believe us then we don't know what could happen with that, er, visitor."

"But we don't know if we can trust him!" Tim hissed.

"He doesn't know if he can trust us either. You know what could happen if we let this situation continue. We can only find out if we can trust Martin by, you know, trusting him."

"What on earth are you two on about?" I asked. "You've told me about the aliens, the one in my garden and the ones you have hidden in your attic or somewhere. What secret could you possibly have that is bigger than that?"

"Tim," Priya said, "we have no choice."

"Okay, okay!" Tim said, holding up his hands, "Are you free after school?"

"Yes," I said, "I have to be home by five but I can spare ten minutes."

“That’s all it will take.” he said. “Meet us at the gate after the bell goes. It’s time you met our spy.”

I was about to ask more when one of the teachers came out asking those of us who were going on the trip to the farm to get ready. I’d forgotten about that.

“I’m at the city farm this afternoon but I guess we’ll be back in time. If I’m not I’ll see if my Dad will let me come round tonight. He seems to quite like the idea that I may have made new friends.”

“Enjoy the farm!” Priya said as I ran off.

“And watch out for the goats.” Tim yelled, “They bite!”



The farm trip had ended sooner than I thought and we got back to school about fifteen minutes before the bell. We were given that time as free time to do what we wanted. Most people headed for the playground but I used it to text my Dad and ask about seeing Priya and Tim after school.

As expected, he was fine with it. I mentioned to him that I may have found out something about Johan and that for now it was probably best to leave him alone. Dad was a little tired of it all I think and seemed to like the idea of ignoring the purple, fluffy creature and his private zoo in our garden.

When the bell went, I expected Tim and Priya to race out to meet me but they seemed to take ages. Eventually they wandered up to the gate, chatting to each other.

"You took your time." I said.

"We had a few things to discuss." Tim said.

"Still not sure whether to trust me?" I smirked.

"Kind of." Priya smiled, "Mostly we were deciding how much to tell you."

We walked out of the gate and headed for the bus stop. We managed to get three seats together because they had taken so long to reach the gate and everyone else had caught the early buses.

"Okay, the suspense is killing me here." I said, "Who exactly is your spy and why would letting me know who it is pose such a risk?"

"You'll find out when you meet him." Tim said. He looked at a Meccano book sticking out of my bag. "What's that? Are you into Meccano?"

"Just a bit." I smiled, "I spend most of my waking hours doing something with or about it."

"Have you made many models?" he sat up and seemed genuinely excited.

"Loads." I said getting the book out. "Do you like building Meccano models then?"

"Sort of." He said, "I build robots and sometimes I use Meccano bits in them."

"Really?" I was amazed. What were the chances of me meeting up with a fellow builder at my new school. I turned to Priya, "What about you Priya?"

She nodded, "We both like robots but I'm more into the software and programming side. We've been best friends since reception when Tim brought his toy robot into class. That's when the Roboteers was born."

"The Roboteers?"

"It's kind of our club. We meet up to talk about robots, build them and that kind of

stuff. Sometimes we get involved in other things too." Tim smiled.

"So how many are in this club then?" I asked. I liked the sound of building robots with Meccano. I'd built a robot arm before but it was operated by pulleys, not electronics.

"Three main members." Tim said.

"So is this spy the other member?"

"Yes." Priya said. "Oh look this is our stop."

We got off the bus. It turned out the stop was only one past my stop. We lived closer to each other than I thought. It was a short walk to Tim's house and mostly we did it in silence. When we arrived Tim's mum was in the kitchen boiling something particularly smelly. Tim said she was experimenting with a new jam recipe or something. I was hoping she didn't offer us any and I think Tim was too. Tim introduced me to his mum as "a new kid at school" and added that I was mad about Meccano. She said that was nice without looking up from her stirring. I got the impression that Tim could have said I was a rabid alien from Saturn and she would have acted in exactly the same way.

When we got up to Tim's room it was pretty much what I was expecting. The books were about electronics and the bits and pieces on the floor were electronic components and not Meccano screws but his room was pretty much like mine - a mess.



TIM'S ROOM WAS A BIT LIKE MINE - A MESS

"Sorry about the mess." he said almost reading my mind. "I never seem to have enough room."

"That's fine," I said putting my bag down, "mine is the same. I wanted my dad to build me a work-surface on pulleys but he said the ceiling wouldn't take it."

"That's not a bad idea." Priya said, "You should get one of those Tim."

Tim shrugged and nodded for Priya to shut the door.

"So when does your friend get here?" I asked.

"He's here." Time said. "Look you have to promise never to tell anyone about this. He's very special to me and I don't want anyone to take him away." He started rummaging at his desk.

"Take him away? What is he an alien too?"

"No, but he used to work for them." Tim smiled. Then he turned to face me, holding a toy robot. "Martin," he said with a big grin, "this is Sugar."

I think I was supposed to be impressed but it's hard when you are faced with an ancient toy robot. It seemed in good condition but I was a bit confused.

"It says Surge?" I said.

"Yes but his name is Sugar." Priya said, "It's been his name since Tim first got him from his Grandad. Tim couldn't say it properly so he said Sugar instead of Surge."

“Right.” I said, “Look, I’m sorry but I thought we were meeting your spy. I like old toys but I think we have more important things to discuss.”

“Sugar,” said Tim, ignoring me, “meet Martin. It’s okay you can speak to him.”

Speak? Had he said speak? This old toy had more tricks than I thought. The robot’s eyes lit up and its head turned towards me.

++HELLO MARTIN++ it said.

“Oh that’s good!” I said moving forward, “You fitted a voice circuit.” I turned to Priya, “Did you program the voice activation too?”

++HOW ARE YOU MARTIN?++

The sound was definitely coming from the robot.

“That’s amazing,” I said. “It’s even picking up my voice too!”

++HE DOES NOT UNDERSTAND++ I think the robot chuckled a bit there.

“No, he doesn’t.” Priya smiled, “but then neither did we at first.” then she turned to

me, "Martin, Sugar is the third member of the Roboteers and he is our spy."

"You're kidding?" I said, "You made the Robot spy on me?"

"We didn't make him do it." Tim said, "He volunteered."

"Volunteered?" I laughed, "You make it sound like it's alive."

++I AM++ the robot said.

"This is really good work." I said, "I mean it really sounds like it's alive."

++MARTIN, I AM ALIVE.++

"Alright, you can stop now. I'm impressed, let's get on with the reason I'm here."

++ARE YOU HERE BECAUSE OF THE ALIEN IN YOUR GARDEN? DO YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT WE HAVE DISCOVERED?++

I was dumbfounded. They couldn't have had time to program all of this. Maybe it was a puppet or something.

“What’s going on here?” I asked suspiciously.
“Do you have someone else in another room?”

“Sugar was given to me by my Grandad when I was four.” Tim said, “He was pretty much broken at the time but I spent years trying to fix him. Last year I did it – but I’m not sure how.”

“Okay, so you fixed him.”

“Yes, except it turned out he was not just a toy robot. He was an alien probe, sent here to discover if this planet was a suitable home for his masters.”

“Who are his masters?”

“The aliens we spoke about before.” Priya said, “We thought they were planning to invade but it turned out they were just refugees.”

++THEY MISTOOK MY ACTIONS AS A CALL
TO INVADE THE EARTH. SO THEY TRIED
TO STOP ME++ the robot said

“Woah!” I said, “that thing is starting to freak me out.”

++WHAT DOES FREAK OUT MEAN?++ it asked.

“Stop it.” I said backing away, “You’ve had your fun but that’s enough.”

“Sugar,” Tim said, “let us speak for now.” and then to me he said, “Martin, Sugar really is alive. We don’t understand why or how but he is. He used to be a probe for the aliens but once they landed we convinced them to let him live with me. He is our proof. I’m good at electronics and Priya is good and programming but there is no way we could produce something as sophisticated as Sugar.”

I was shaking. I thought finding a troll living under my back garden was bad enough but here was apparently a living, talking robot. A robot called Sugar!

“Okay, so if it’s real, how does that help me?” I said. “I’m hoping you’re not suggesting Sugar here takes on the troll. Unless you have an army of toy robots of course?”

++I AM ONE OF A KIND++

“You have to admit,” Tim said, “having a living robot as your friend is pretty cool.”

“Yeah I suppose. It’s just a little hard to take in.”

++AT LEAST I DO NOT SPEAK IN
RIDDLES AND RHYME++

“I thought you two said he hadn’t heard the troll?” I said looking at Tim and Priya.

“He didn’t,” Priya said, “but he knows what our friends told us about it.”

++TROLLS USE RIDDLES AND RHYMES TO
CONFUSE THE LISTENER AND MAKE THEM
PAY MORE ATTENTION. TROLLS LOVE
ATTENTION. THAT IS WHY YOU MUST NOT
FEED THEM++

The robot was joining into the conversation like a human. This was a little unsettling.

“Because feeding him requires giving him attention?” I asked.

“No,” said Tim, “because giving him attention is what feeds him. You must not give trolls

attention, you must not feed their selfishness.”

“Do not feed the troll.” I said, almost to myself.

“What, like people say online?” Priya asked.

“Yes, but this time it was written on a sign on the trapdoor we found Johan under.”

“Johan?” Tim asked, “It has a name?”

“It says it does.” I said, “The sign on the trapdoor said ‘Do not feed the troll’. We thought it meant don’t give it anything to eat but really it meant don’t pay it any attention – just like online.”

++INDEED. BY LISTENING TO IT OR ARGUING WITH IT OR GIVING IT FOOD YOU WILL CAUSE IT TO GROW.++ Sugar said.

“So that’s why it kept getting bigger then. Why was it under our garden though?”

“Our friends say that trolls often hide and then give clues to their presence in order to draw attention to themselves.” Priya said.

“I wonder how long it was there?” I mused.

“It may have worked out you were moving in and gone there deliberately.” Tim said.

“I don’t get it though.” I said, “I mean why do this in my garden? If you wanted to draw attention to yourself, why not just walk into a public place like a football ground?”

++BECAUSE TOO MUCH ATTENTION IN ONE GO WOULD KILL HIM UNTIL HE WAS BIGGER. HE MUST GROW GRADUALLY, BUILDING UP ATTENTION AS HE GOES.++

It was the weirdest thing to hear these words come from a toy robot which had no moving mouth.

“How did you spy on me?” I wondered out loud.

++I FLEW OVER YOUR HOUSE++ the robot replied.

“You can fly?!”

++I HAVE A FLIGHT PACK WHICH TIM BUILT FOR ME++

"It's a toy hang-glider with a small motor on the top housed in a yoghurt tub." Tim said sheepishly, "It's hardly a flight pack."

I smiled, Tim and Priya were quickly turning into people I liked.

"Okay," I said, "I believe you. You do have aliens living in your shed or something and it seems I have one living in my garden. It seems that could be quite a dangerous thing."

"Yes it is," Tim said, "we haven't got to that part yet."

Something about the way he said that worried me even more. Tim continued:

"These aliens grow with attention, we've said that but as they grow, they get bolder and meaner. Before you realise it they can grow too big to hide and then you are in trouble."

"*Then* I'm in trouble?" I spluttered

"Yep. Most creatures have a point at which they stop growing. Trolls don't. If you let it, the troll will grow to the fill the area it lives in."

“You mean it will fill my garden?”

++HE MEANS IT WILL FILL THE PLANET+
+ Sugar corrected.

“The planet?”

++GIVEN ENOUGH ATTENTION, YES.++

“Okay,” I puffed out my cheeks, “that is pretty dangerous. So I guess the question is: how do we get rid of it without paying attention to it?”

++WE HAVE AN IDEA++ Sugar said.

“What’s that?” I asked and then listened, dumbfounded as Tim, Priya and Sugar explained their plan. It was tricky but it might work. The real problem was that I had to explain it to Dad and Angie and I didn’t know how I was going to do that without mentioning anything about aliens and a living toy robot.



By the time I got home it was a bit later than Dad had said but he was so preoccupied with the troll that he didn't tell me off. If anything he seemed relieved I was there.

"I was worried about you." he said.

"I told you I was going to Tim's house after school." I said.

"Yes, I know," I guess I just got concerned that Johan had done something to you."

"Done something to me?" I said, "What would he do to me?"

"He could have eaten you." Angie said, "That would have been nice. Well nice for me!"

I was about to complain but I saw her grin and realised she didn't mean it.

"So," Dad said, "what's all this about having some more information about the troll?"

"More information?" Angie said. "Where did you find that?"

"A friend at school had some really old encyclopaedias at home." I said, sticking to

the plan I had agreed with Tim, Priya and Sugar.

"Ooh, which ones?" she asked as her eyes lit up.

"I don't know." I said, "The covers were missing. But it had a lot of information on the original legends of trolls." This wasn't true but I was hoping it would fool them. It was a awkward choice, either I lied to my family or I got myself into a million other questions that none of us had time for.

"The Scandinavian trolls?" Dad asked.

"I think so. I'm not sure."

"I thought you didn't like encyclopaedias?" Angie sneered.

"I didn't say I don't like them, I just think they're out of date. In this case that helps us. We are talking about very old information, after all."

"Okay, so how does this information help us?" Dad asked.

"Not here." I said, now feeling like I was the one who was in a spy movie.

"Why not?" Dad said.

"Because I don't want you-know-who to hear me." I said, nodding towards the back garden.

"So what you want to meet in a park at midnight, wearing sunglasses and making sure we're not followed? Martin this isn't a game, just tell us."

"Not here." I repeated "We need the car." I said, walking towards the front door.

They got their coats and followed me and we all got in the car. I told Dad to drive away from the house so Johan couldn't hear us. He drove for ages and kept driving into car parks. Then, when he realised there was another car in there, he would drive out again.

"Dad," I said, "what are you doing?"

"Finding somewhere where we can't be overheard." he said.

"We're twenty minutes drive from the house Dad!" Angie said, "I don't think the troll is going to follow us all the way out here."

"But he might have friends! We need to make sure we are absolutely alone."

"Oh for goodness' sake Dad!" I said. "You go from one extreme to the other. Just pull over

up here. We don't need to be quite that careful."

"How do you know?" asked Dad, scouring another almost-empty car park.

"We're wasting time." I said, trying a different track. Dad eventually pulled the car into the car park of a disused factory. Once I was happy that he was happy and we weren't going to keep trying car parks until we hit the ocean, I started talking.

"Okay, the first thing we need to know is that trolls do not grow when they eat food."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Dad said, "Have you seen how much he has grown?"

"Yes," I said, "but not because of the food. He grows because we give him attention. The more we talk to him, laugh at him, humour him or even get angry with him, he grows. The bigger he gets the more troublesome he'll get too."

"So are you saying we should just ignore a fluffy, purple bear camped in the garden with a host of animals?" Angie asked, flippantly.

"It's too late for that." I said, ignoring her attitude "That would have worked if we had

done it on day one but now he's too big to ignore."

"I'll say." said Dad, "Mr Peaflummock nearly saw him yesterday. Towards the back of the garden where the fence has broken. I just managed to throw a sheet over the washing line to hide him. I've fixed the fence but I don't know how long we can keep this a secret."

"We won't have to." I said, "We can use the fact that he loves attention against him."

"How?" said Angie, "And how do you know all this?"

"I told you, from encyclopaedias." I smiled. "As for how, we are going to need to do this at night so nobody else sees."

"We're not going to kill him, are we?" Dad said.

"No, we won't have to. If this works."

"Go on." Angie said, suspiciously.

"We need to get him out of the garden and into another hole. One that nobody will discover."

"Do you know of such a hole?" Dad said.

"As it happens, I do." I smiled, trying to show confidence in a plan I had only just heard myself. "Here, I've written the plan down." I handed out bits of paper with instructions on them.

They started reading and then Dad exclaimed "You want me to do what?!"

"It's the only way Dad. He thinks he has got you where he wants you. He can wind you up really easily. So it has to be you that tricks him into leaving. Dad shook his head, sighing.

"How did you find this hole?" Angie said and then smirked, "Oh don't tell me, your new buddies told you."

"As it happened they did." I said, "Do you think we can do it?"

"I think we have to least try." Dad said and Angie nodded.

So we headed back to the house, picking up a few supplies on the way.

As we got near home Dad dropped Angie and me off so we could get on with our parts of the plan. He then drove home to start "Operation Gruff", as we had named it.



Dad got home and immediately went out in the back garden, locking the back door behind him as he did. Johan was sitting on the edge of his hole – he was far too big for it now. Dad approached him and then walked straight past. He had his mobile 'phone up to his ear and as he passed Johan he said, very loudly, "What here, in our town? Really? Oh that's brilliant! Will there be cameras and everything? Wow! Broadcast to the nation, really? That is great. Yes, yes I'll come. The kids are there already. It was easier for them to go direct from school, I'll meet them there."

As intended, Johan's interested was sparked by this and he waddled over to Dad.

"It sounds like you are planning some fun?

Do you have some room for a little one?

Dad smiled as Johan described himself as "a little one". The troll was now about the size of a large dog but rounder and he looked decidedly less cute. According to plan Dad

didn't answer Johan but just looked at his 'phone. Eventually he pretended to realise Johan was there and said "Oh hello Johan, are you well?"

Johan nodded and just looked at him with anticipation. He had an expression like a dog wanting you to throw a stick for it.

"What's the matter?" Dad asked. "Oh, did you overhear that? There's a parade on today and we're all going to watch. It should be a great evening. I might even get on the TV! Say, would you like to come? There will be lots of people in costumes, you can just pretend to be one of those."

"Really, me?"

Oh! What glee"

"Oh," Dad said with a frown, "but you can't because if we get separated, you'll get lost and you won't be able to find your way home."

"Do not worry, I have a plan.

I can leave a trail, oh yes I can!

All I need is something to lay

*As we walk along and
I'll find my way - er - home."*

Dad smiled at that last bit. Johan clearly was so excited by the prospect of getting on TV that he completely forgot he had to rhyme.

"Actually," Dad said with a smile, "I do have some old balls of wool inside. You could use those. I won't miss them."

Johan was so excited by this that he started jumping up and down.

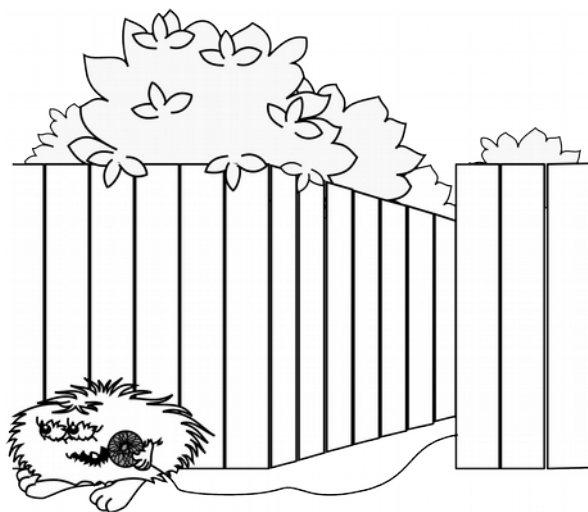
*"Really, you do?
You wouldn't mind?
Could you fetch them?
That would be kind!"*

Dad went back in the house and came out with a bag of blue wool he just happened to have in the kitchen. This was mostly because he had brought it into the house with him when he came home.

"Here they are!" Dad exclaimed, "I think there will be enough."

Johan jumped even higher in absolute delight and almost clapped his hands. Or he would

have if they had met in the middle. His arms were so short that instead of clapping, his hands just flapped about. It was quite funny to see. Dad tied one end of some wool to the trapdoor handle and the two of them walked or waddled out the back gate. It was dark by then so nobody would have noticed or at the very least Mr Peaflummock might have thought Dad was taking the dog for a walk.



JOHAN UNRAVELLED THE WOOL
AS HE WENT ALONG,

You might be wondering how I know all this if I wasn't there but I was there. When Dad had dropped me off, I walked back to the house and by the time I arrived Dad was already in

the garden. I sneaked round the back and waited in the shadows for them to leave. I had peeped through a knothole in the fence and when they left I went into the garden.

As soon as I got there I untied the wool and started to slowly walk out of the garden. I followed Dad and Johan some distance behind so Johan couldn't see me. I needn't have bothered as he was so excited that I don't think he'd have noticed if a Tyrannosaurus Rex was following them. As I walked I gathered the wool they had laid, rolling it into a ball. When I was a few streets away from the house I turned away from the path they were following and went the opposite direction, pulling the wool with me. When it was all gone I tied another ball of wool to it and carried on walking.

It took me a while to weave in and out of the various alleys and footpaths and I could have made better time if I got direct but I wanted to lay as long and confusing a trail as I could. Eventually I reached the start of the fields where I had agreed to meet Tim and Priya. They weren't there but out of the corner of

my eye I saw a faint glow coming from the grass.

“Sucrose” I whispered.

++PLUM FAIRY++ came the response.

I smiled at Priya’s use of Sugar-related codewords and walked towards Sugar. He was standing not far from a pylon with fencing around it. I knelt down to speak to him. It still felt weird that I was even doing that. This was, after all a toy robot. I had to keep reminding myself that this one was a bit special.

“Are you sure you know how to get to my house?” I asked.

++YES++ he said.

“And your friends will be able to do what they need do in time?”

++YES. IT WILL BE DONE BY THE TIME WE AGREED.++

“Okay then.” I said. “Here’s the wool.” and I handed him the ball of wool I had been unravelling as I went. He took it and then said

++MARTIN, IT WILL BE ALRIGHT. DO NOT WORRY++

After that I ran as fast as I could to the agreed meeting point where Angie was standing, looking cold.

"They've not arrived yet then?" I asked.

"No, but they should be here soon." She said.
"Are you sure this is going to work?"

I shook my head.

"Have your friends done this before?"

"I'm not sure. They are not exactly normal."

"No wonder they made friends with you then." She smiled and poked me in the arm. I smiled too, it was interesting how having a common task had made bicker less.

"I've been thinking," Angie continued, "what if Johan finds out what we're doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will he get angry or something?"

I shrugged, "I don't know. Apparently trolls can be quite nasty if they want to be so I guess we'd better hope he doesn't."

"Nasty?"

"Yes, all those stories about eating goats and things might have been based on some truth."

"He lied to us!"

"Of course he did. He wants us to pay attention to him. he'll say whatever he can to make us focus on him. If he's anything like online trolls he'll make it as shocking or surprising as possible, just to get a reaction."

"How do you know about online trolls, all of a sudden?"

"I did some reading on them." I smiled, "Look, here comes Dad."

Dad came round the corner with a waddling Johan beside him. Johan was unravelling a ball of wool as he went completely oblivious to the fact that it no longer went to our back garden.

"Here we are." said Dad to Johan as they arrived. Then he turned to me and said, "Did you find us a good spot Martin?"

"He got it wrong!" Angie said with a huff, right on cue.

"Wrong?" Dad asked.

"Yes, sorry Dad." I mumbled, "It turns out the parade started up this end of town but it has moved off. The best place we'll get to watch now is actually when it goes past our front door."

"Our front door?" Dad said, loudly, "You mean it's going to go right past where we live?"

"Yes." I said, "I didn't realise. We need to get back there quick before it's too late."

"Okay, then we'd better run." Dad said and with that, again right on cue, the three of us ran off further up the road. Johan paused for a second and then realised we had gone. He called after us.

"You must wait.

Slow down I say!

*I cannot keep up.
I will lose my way!"*

As we got out of his sight-line I ran back towards him.

"Johan!" I yelled, "Come on! Keep up!"

*"I cannot!
I cannot!" he yelled.*

"If you lose us, just follow the wool. It will take you all the way home." I said and ran off.

*An excellent plan.
I shall do all I can
to get there before the parade.
Oh what a worry.
Dear, dear I must hurry.
I cannot afford to be late.*

But I wasn't listening, I had run off. The three of us ran in entirely different - and wrong - directions, just in case Johan caught sight of us and followed. Johan started gathering the wool and followed it all along the length he had laid. Of course he didn't know I had laid a false path for him to follow so when he finally reached the end of the wool and found it tied

around the trapdoor handle he must have thought he was in the right place. He must have been worried because he didn't notice that he could fit in the hole again. He also didn't notice the hole was deeper than it used to be and it didn't appear to be in my garden. This was the part of the plan I was worried about but Tim and Priya assured me that Johan would be too concerned with missing out that to look at his surroundings. He didn't notice the patch of wet mud - odd considering it hadn't rained for a while - right in front of the hole. As he approached it he slipped and fell straight in.

The trapdoor shut on top of him and with a 'click' it was locked. From behind where the trapdoor had been open, Sugar the robot stood with his antennae flashing.

When we lost Johan Dad, Angie and me didn't go home. We decided it wasn't a good idea in case Johan saw us and started following us. So we went to a chippie for chips with gravy. The problem was that nobody has chips with gravy down here so we had to have just chips with curry sauce instead.

After about an hour we walked back to the house and carefully peeped over the back garden fence. We all gasped at the same time.

The hole was gone. Not even a trace of it remained. In its place was a freshly dug trench ready for the foundations of our shed. It was as if all the stuff with Johan had never happened. We went in and inspected the garden. Not only was the hole gone but the animals were gone too.

Dad unlocked the back-door and we went in the house. Just as we arrived a supermarket delivery arrived with our groceries so we spent the rest of the evening putting them away.

We never heard from the troll again. Dad and Angie never found out what really happened to the hole. That was mostly because I never told them.

We agreed never to speak about Johan on the principle that if he ever found out we were paying him attention he might return. They don't know that he is very unlikely to come

back. I guess they are just quite happy, as I am, to put the whole mess behind us.

I warn you though if you ever find a trapdoor under your garden, ignore it. Cover it over again and plant a tree on it or something. Whatever you do, don't open it. If you can't resist though, if you do open it and find one inside, remember:

DO NOT FEED THE TROLL!

Epilogue



I guess you are wondering what happened to the hole and to Johan? I couldn't tell Dad and Angie but I reckon I can tell you. I doubt anyone would believe you anyway.

When I gave the wool to Sugar he continued across the field to a new hole, almost identical to the one we found Johan in. Except it was bigger and it had a lock and slippery mud around the edges.

I have no idea how Tim and Priya's friends built that thing so quick but I saw it and it was

perfect down to the last splinter in the trapdoor.

Once Johan fell in, Sugar shut and locked the door and then sent a text message to me so I knew he was trapped. My job was to distract Dad and Angie from looking up. I did this by insisting we have chips with gravy. I knew they'd be examining the chip shop menus. So they didn't see a streak of light shoot up into the sky like a firework. Except it wasn't a firework it was a spaceship with one passenger, heading for a large, deserted, asteroid just past Saturn.



SUGAR TRAPPED JOHAN UNDER A FALSE TRAPDOOR

All I had to do then was keep Dad and Angie away from the house until “the friends” had got rid of the hole and the animals. I’ve found out that Tim and Priya refer to the aliens as “the friends”. For the life of me I cannot figure out how they did all this but, as I said, when we got back the garden was as good as new.

After things settled down we built the shed. Dad tried to make it more complicated than it had to be but I managed to calm him down and between us we got it done. Even Angie helped a bit. Dad has started brewing his beer although to be honest he's spent so long testing the equipment he's not actually brewed any beer yet.

My workshop at the back is pretty good actually. It's spacious, has plenty of work-surfaces and is even insulated and has electricity. I spend a lot more time down there than I thought I would but I am not usually alone. Tim, Priya and Sugar also come round. We have become really good friends and they have even let me join the Roboteers. So now there are four of us.

The Roboteers has changed now. It used to be a club for people who wanted to build or talk about robots. Now we are a detective agency.

That sounds very official but what it really means is that we enjoyed trying to sort of my issues with Johan and we figured there might be others around who need similar help.

Tim set up a web-page for us and we got a few enquiries, mostly for people who had lost their cat. We've gotten pretty good at finding lost dogs and cats.

Best of all, as a part of the Roboteers I am now allowed to meet "the friends". They're tiny. They must be about five centimetres tall, which is a lot shorter than I imagined. They live under the ground in an amazing town with streets and buildings and lighting. It's under the field where I met Sugar and apparently it was originally made from the spaceship they arrived in.

They've added to it since then and I've been able to learn a lot from them in terms of building. I've let them have some of my Meccano bits and even built them a couple of towers. Their plans were easy to understand but I haven't a clue what they wanted the towers for. There's still so much about them that none of us understand.

So all in all, it turned out that moving house did makes things better. In fact it was about

the best thing that could have happened to me.

The End

THE ROBOTTEERS



About this story



I hope you liked this story. I had fun writing it. After I wrote my first book "Sugar the Robot and the race to save the Earth" (you can read a sample chapter at the end of this book) I was planning on writing another Sugar the

Robot story. I even had gathered some ideas from my family for it.

Things have a way of not always turning out how you expect though and one day I saw the words “Do not feed the troll” on a web forum. I’d seen them hundreds of times before but this time they caught my imagination. What if the troll was real? What does feeding it mean? What effect would having a troll in your garden have on your life?

Originally this story wasn't going to include Sugar, Tim or Priya but as I started thinking about Martin meeting new friends I thought wouldn't it be cool if they were the Roboteers.

From these questions, this story started to grow and then it kind of took on a life of its own – much like the troll did!

How do you imagine this story?

I’ve always found that I have a clear picture in my head of what the scenes in any story look like but a while ago I realised my picture wasn’t always the same as other people’s.

So just like with Sugar the Robot and the race to save the Earth I've asked my own children to do the illustrations for this book. Nearly all the pictures in this book are done by my children and very proud of them I am too!

If you would like to draw a picture of how you imagine scenes or characters from this story might look or if you have ideas for future stories, you can share them with others at the website. Don't forget you can also download, free of charge, the full text of this book in various e-book formats at the website too.

www.crimperbooks.co.uk/troll

Sample Chapter from
SUGAR THE ROBOT AND THE RACE
TO SAVE THE EARTH
also by Ryan Cartwright

*This is the first chapter from my first book - **Sugar the Robot and the race to save the Earth**. It's set before **Do not feed the troll** and tells the story of how Tim discovers*

his old toy robot - called Sugar - is much more than he seems.

Together Tim and his friend Priya get into a race to stop an alien invasion and stop Tim's mum from finding out how her favourite knickers got ruined.

1



Do you have hobbies?

Many people do.

I do.

For some it's computer games or wrestling or collecting things like stickers or stamps. Some people's hobbies become their whole life and some of them are just, well, hobbies and some of them are very, very weird. I discovered the other day that some people hold competitions for mooing like a cow and there are people who make their dogs look like tigers. Some people lie down in public places and put a photo of it on-line. That's it. They don't do anything else, they just lie

down. I don't mean they lie down in a pattern or wear some silly outfit, they just lie down. I guess in the end hobbies are like people - they're all different and not everyone will find yours interesting. I'm pretty certain not everyone finds my hobby interesting but that's fine with me.

I like robots.

That might not seem very strange for a ten year old boy but unlike other boys who like computer games, sport or comics I don't like anything else.

Not at all.

Nothing.

Just robots.

Mum says my hobby is more like an obsession which I suppose it is but at least I'm not mad about jam. My mum makes jam all the time. Strawberry jam, blueberry jam, raspberry jam, gooseberry jam, she even tried making banana jam once! I think there's still some of that on the kitchen ceiling actually. For me it has to be about robots: bedroom, ruler, pencils, lunch box, pyjamas, badges, t-shirts - even underpants, all about robots.

I've been building robots since I got my first box of Lego. I think it was supposed to be a kit for a truck or something but I made it into a robot-truck instead. My dream is to build a real robot. I'm not quite there yet but I will be.

I'm going to build a good robot. So many of the robots in stories are nasty and turn against humans. My robot will be different. I don't want to be its master, I want to be its friend. My robot will be someone I can learn from. Someone I can teach. A friend. Mum once said there were plenty of those kinds of friends just waiting to be made at school and she's probably right but that's not as exciting as building your own friend.

I do have friends at school, they are the members of the Roboteers. It's not an official club or anything, just something that a group of us who like robots call ourselves. We got the name from Wikipedia. I looked it up and it says A roboteer refers to those with interests or careers in robotics. That's what our group is made of.

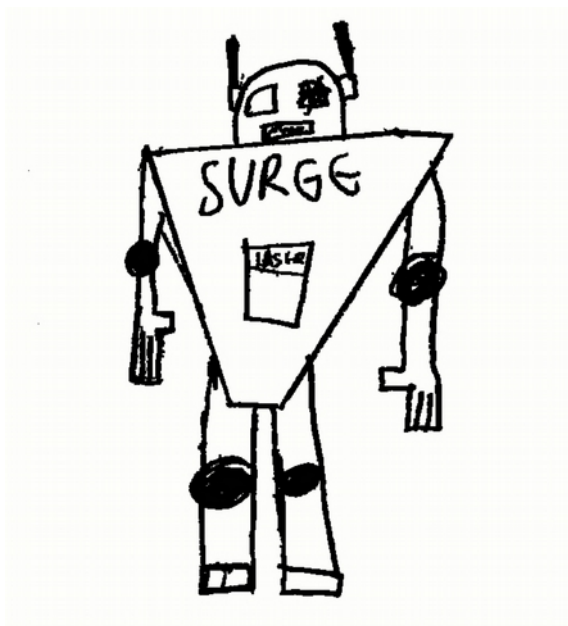
Actually when I say a group I mean a few. Okay at the moment it's just me and Priya but you can't expect too much. After all we've only been going for five years and we're quite particular about who joins. We did have one

other member a few years ago but he moved away in year four.

I guess my fascination with robots is because of my Grandad. He's always fiddling with mechanical stuff and I suppose it rubbed off on me. When I was four Grandad gave me one of his old toys. It was a metal robot - called Sugar. Grandad said it was his favourite toy from when he was a boy. He said I had always played with it when I went to visit him. I don't remember that but I do know that Sugar was about the best present he could have given me.

I should explain that Sugar is not what Grandad called the robot, it was my fault he got that name. His real name is SURGE, it's written on his box and across his red chest doors in big gold writing. The trouble is that when I was four I couldn't read that well and I got a bit mixed up.

I thought it said Sugar and no matter what anybody said I decided that was his name. He's been called Sugar ever since, even though his chest still says SURGE. Dad always says it's a really sweet name and then he laughs. He often laughs at his own jokes. Actually he's usually the only one who does.



SUGAR THE ROBOT

When Grandad first got Sugar his eyes flashed and he swung his arms back and forth as he walked. I mean Sugar's eyes flashed of course. I don't ever remember Grandad having flashing eyes but come to think of it he does swing his arms when he walks. Grandad said Sugar's red and gold paint was shiny when he was new and his chest opened to reveal a laser-cannon. It was just a little red light really but Grandad always called it a

laser cannon. He looked after Sugar really well but he played with him a lot.

By the time I got Sugar he was still in the original box. It was a bit battered and worn but there was a cool picture of him firing his laser as he towered over crowds of fleeing people on the front. I loved that picture.

I would stare at it for ages, imagining Sugar striding across the earth but instead of seeing the people running away from him I thought he was protecting them from some invader you couldn't see. For me Sugar has always been the hero and not the villain. Dad said we should keep Sugar safe as he's probably worth some money as a collector's item. Grandad said that Sugar was a toy and toys were meant to be played with. I agree with Grandad. Besides I don't know how he could be worth anything now.

His paint was peeling and faded when I got him. His eyes never flashed – even with new batteries – and he couldn't even wobble let alone walk. About the only thing that worked was his chest doors which would pop open if you pulled on them and the cannon would flip out. The light didn't come on but I didn't care, I could move his arms and legs and twist his head and that was good enough for me. Ever

since I got him Sugar has gone everywhere with me – except to school. I did take him once on one of my first days in reception. Miss Lapsi let me stand at the front and show him to the class. I was very proud of him and everybody thought he was great.

Then at lunch time someone stuck a pencil into Sugar's eye. I think it was David Trumaker. He's always denied it but that's the sort of thing he does.

The bulb broke and even though it had no chance of flashing if it did work, this damage was enough to convince me that Sugar would never accompany me to school again.

I remember being really upset and just crying. Pretty much everyone laughed, except Priya. She sat next to me and said she thought Sugar was brilliant. Priya said she wanted to be an engineer when she grew up. I thought she meant train driver but she explained her Mum was an engineer who designed bridges. After that we talked about building stuff all the time. I never realised you could build robots for a living! It wasn't long afterwards that the Roboteers was born.

In time I realised if I was going to build a robot I needed to practice. I decided to

practice on Sugar. To fix him I knew I had to learn electronics so I put electronics learning toys on every Christmas, birthday and Internet wish list that I could. I got pretty good at electronics too. Not good enough to build my dream robot but enough to have a go at fixing Sugar. The first few attempts didn't really work though and if anything I think I made it worse but after a while I did it. I fixed him. Well I think it was me.

After what happened you would think I'd be famous but things don't often turn out like that so, just so somebody else knows, this is the story of what happened when I finally got Sugar working again.

Read what happens next . . .

www.crimperbooks.co.uk/sugar

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or buy in paperback/kindle

About the author



Ryan Cartwright is a web developer and cartoonist who loves stories. He lives in the UK with his wife, two children, nutty dog and a tyrannical cat. He has a weakness for wine gums.



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