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opening extract from

Mirrormask

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Jim Henson

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I.

This is my story about what happened to me last year when Mum got ill and Dad and I had to go and stay at Aunt Nan's and I had my weird dream.

It's the first story I've written down, although sometimes I like to make up stories in my head. (This isn't a made-up story, though.) Normally, what I do best is draw, although I can do a lot of other things, too. I can juggle. I can sell popcorn. I can walk a tightrope and I'm an extra clown when we need one—and, trust me, the Campbell Family Circus pretty much always needs an extra clown.

I call this story

MIRRORMASK,

and it is written and illustrated by me, Helena Campbell.



So. Last year I had my own caravan, which wasn't big but it was mine. It had my drawings all over the walls. I love drawing places, imaginary cities with bits of all the towns the circus goes through put in them. We weren't anywhere long enough for me to go to school, so Mum would teach me things like geography and maths, and the German Tumblers taught me some German, and Eric the Violin Player used to be a biologist before he ran away and joined the circus, so he taught me science.

You probably think that with a name like The Campbell Family Circus there would be lots of us Campbells, but it's only my dad, Morris Campbell, my mum, Joanne, and me. Everyone else works for Dad. Dad says the circus is in his blood, and it was his dream to have his own circus since he was a little boy, when he learned about the first Campbell's Circus, the one my grandfather owned. He says the circus is in my blood, too.

My dad says lots of silly things like that.

Dad's the ringmaster, also he juggles and takes bookings. My mum is the brains behind the outfit. She was once a great beauty, and my aunt Nan says it was a great disappointment to everyone when she married my dad instead of going off and being a film star or something. Mum sells tickets. She talks to the bank and to the tax people, keeps the books, does things with contracts. Also she does a Spanish Web act and is the Gorilla. (Dad bought the gorilla costume cheaply when I was seven and he uses it whenever he can.)

That night Mum was utterly furious, and it was all my fault.

I'd sort of lost track of time, and I was in my caravan making up a story with my socks when my mum started banging on the window, and she's all, "Helena, you're not even dressed yet" (I was actually), and I was all, "Mum, it never ends. It's always smile for the punters, Helena sell popcorn, Helena juggle, Helena help with the washing up," and the washing up, even in a little circus like ours is—well, you wouldn't believe it, that's all.

"Listen to those kids in there," said Mum. "They all want to run away and join the circus."

"Let them," I said. "I want to run away and join Real Life."

After that, the argument just got worse and worse, with me inside my caravan and her outside, and I told her I was getting dressed and not to shout at me, and she shouted that she wasn't shouting, and it was all getting sort of horrid when she said, "You'll be the death of me," and I said, "I wish I was." I didn't think I'd said it loud enough to be heard, but she went very quiet. It sort of hung there in the air and it couldn't be unsaid.

"Real life? Helena, you couldn't handle real life," she said, and she went away, hurt, and I knew that this wasn't the last I'd hear about this.

I don't know what it is with me and Mum. We never mean to fight, but suddenly we're yelling at each other and it's all stupid.

I pulled on my mask, and I ran for it. The masks were my dad's idea. They make it look like there's more people in the circus than there are, so you won't go, "Oh look, that lady on the rope is the same lady I bought my ticket from," As if you'd notice, or you'd care.

I was in a rotten mood, but it started to lift when Dad and I went out to juggle (as "Raymondo and Fortuna, from Darkest Peru," and the name is Dad's. We have to talk in what I think Dad imagines a Peruvian accent sounds like). We'd just got up to the gorilla bit, where Dad says, "Hey, Bambino. You want to juggle the bananas?" and I go, "Uh-uh. You know what you get if you juggle the bananas?" and he says, "What?" and I say, "Gorillas!" and that's always when Mum comes out in the gorilla suit and chases us around the stage and then juggles the bananas.

Only she didn't. She missed her cue. And you can set your watch by my mum. And when she did come on, she didn't even try to juggle the bananas. Just ran around. But the kids were cheering, and, you know, when I ran out of the ring I was thinking that there are a lot worse things than being in a circus.

And that was when the gorilla took off its head, and it wasn't Mum. It was Fred, the strong man. Mum was on the floor. She'd passed out.

The show went on (the show must go on). An ambulance came and I watched them take my mum away. You'll be the death of me, she'd said, and I couldn't get it out of my head.

My aunt Nan lives in a crumbling block of flats in Brighton. She says that fifty years ago it was, and I quote, "the height of modernity." Right now it looks like prison, only less inviting. Still, she's got a big flat, so I had my own room (I put my drawings up on the wall, to make it feel more like my caravan) and Dad made his bed on the sofa in the sitting room. Mum was in the hospital.



Once upon a time Aunt Nan was a magician's glamorous assistant (she says they do all the hard work while the magicians stand there and look pleased with themselves), but now she watches telly all day, goes and gossips with the other ladies in the block of flats, and loses things.

This is not, I was reliably informed,* because of old age. Mum told me that when she was a little girl Aunt Nan lost stuff, most famously a set of magical linking rings and a barometer. It was because of Aunt Nan that my mum evolved her **Two Rules for Finding Things That You've Lost**:

- 1) It's usually where you left it.
- 2) It's probably staring you right in the face.

These are extremely useful rules, by the way. It was by applying them that I found Aunt Nan's missing false teeth, in the fridge.

I finished drawing Mum's Get Well Card, I kissed Aunt Nan good-bye, and I ran for the bus. They're a bit strict about visiting hours at the hospital. I made the bus by the skin of my teeth, and I sat on the bus worrying about Mum and about Dad and about the circus. Dad and Mum are a wonderful team, but Dad on his own is . . . well, he doesn't really inspire confidence. He's got his head in the air. Mum has her feet on the ground.

*By my mum, actually.