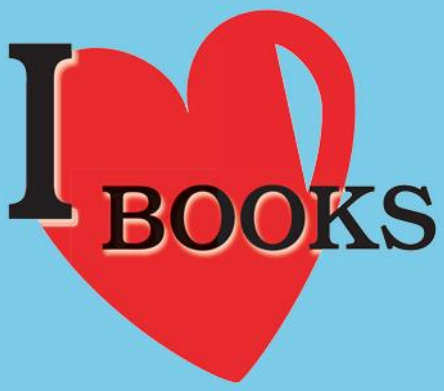


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To my finches.
Here's one to tick off the list.





Did you know that the largest pumpkin ever to exist in Great Britain was grown by twins Ian and Stuart Paton in a town called Pennington? It took over six months to grow and measured well over a metre tall!

You can probably look up this fact on the Internet or in one of the books in your school library. You'll undoubtedly be able to find a picture of the twins standing by the humungous orange beast and smiling proudly at their giant vegetable creation.



But what you won't know is that this interesting fact is, in fact, not a fact at all.

The largest pumpkin ever to exist in Great Britain was actually grown by an eight-year-old girl called Lottie Parsons. It measured over two metres tall (about the size of two baby elephants standing on top of one another!) and took exactly twenty-seven days to grow.

There are no photographs of this giant creation. There is no evidence to say it ever existed at all. In fact, there are only three people who have even seen this extraordinarily enormous vegetable.

I expect you would like to know why

an eight-year-old girl would even want to grow a supersized pumpkin in the first place. Well, it's a long story, but it starts with Lottie in her least favourite place.

School.



‘Only fifteen minutes late this morning, Lottie! What an achievement!’ called Mrs Murray across the classroom, as Lottie hung up her coat and bag and stumbled towards her seat with her pencil case.

Lottie heard a snigger from across the

classroom and checked to see whether she'd tucked her skirt into her knickers again like yesterday.



Like most eight-year-olds, Lottie struggled to drag herself out of bed every morning and ended up being late for

school most days. She didn't mind school; in truth she loved the thrill of exploring new ideas and learning cool stuff. If her mum could ever be bothered to attend parents' evening, Lottie's teacher would be able to explain that her daughter was a bright and capable child. Nevertheless, Lottie remained unenthusiastic about school and could pinpoint the two main reasons why.

The first thing that made Maplebrook Primary so intolerable was Penelope Pembleton-Puce.

I use the word 'thing' purposely, as this is exactly the right word to describe

the girl in question. Penelope Pembleton-Puce had a face that reminded Lottie of one of those little wooden elves one often finds dangling from a Christmas tree. She was slightly chubby, with tiny, piercing-blue eyes; small, protruding ears; sharp, defined eyebrows; and a thin grin. Every feature of Penelope's face was abnormally small, aside from her nose, which was abnormally large and caused her to snort like a pig whenever she laughed, most of the time at Lottie. Her hair was always pulled back into a French plait which looked as neat at the end of the school day as it did at the beginning, the exact



opposite of Lottie's unruly mane of thick brown curls.

Penelope had a habit of over-pronouncing the A sound, which often made her sound like she was singing in an opera rather than having a normal conversation.

For some reason, Penelope took great delight in making Lottie feel horrible. Last year, when Penelope brought in home-made biscuits for her birthday, Lottie was the only person who didn't receive one. Lottie's teacher, Mrs Murray, had tried to make her feel better by offering Lottie a Slimmer's



World chocolate-coated rice cake. While Lottie sat in the corner trying to lick the chocolate off something that tasted like cardboard, the rest of her classmates feasted on indulgent cookies.

Despite her meanness towards Lottie, Penelope was never told off by any of the staff at Maplebrook Primary. Mrs Murray was a kind teacher but, like a lot of Lottie's classmates (and all of the other teachers for that matter), she tried to stay on the good side of Penelope at all times. Mr Pembleton-Puce – Penelope's father – was well known for the special gifts that he handed out to teachers at the end of term.



Here's a little secret about teachers that you may not know. Most of them do not like children very much.

However, teachers *do* like gifts.

There is probably nothing more thrilling for a teacher than the prospect of receiving an expensive end-of-year thank-you pressie from a child in their class. It is the highlight of their year.

Mrs Murray was looking forward to receiving her iPad and spa day vouchers from the Pembleton-Puce family – so very much, in fact, that she frequently ignored Penelope's cruel treatment of others.





Penelope was the polar opposite of Lottie; where the former was rich, the latter was poor. Penelope arrived at school every day on time, looking perfect and

well cared for; Lottie trudged in late, in an untidy state. Lottie was intelligent. Penelope was not.

Penelope's parents tried to make up for her lack of intelligence by throwing money at virtually everything she did at school. They encouraged their daughter to make friends by bringing in expensive gifts for them on their birthdays, and when it came to school projects, Penelope would always win the class prize because Mrs Pembleton-Puce would hire experts to create spectacular masterpieces for her end-of-term presentation.

Last term, when their topic was Fire

and Ice, Penelope danced in an iridescent leotard around a metre-tall working volcano that spewed out smoke and lava.



As she performed the splits, the papier mâché mountain melted away to reveal an ice sculpture of a baby polar bear. Unsurprisingly, she walked away with first prize.

The end-of-term project was the second reason Lottie hated school. The last day before the Christmas holidays, all pupils were herded into the assembly hall and made to present a project they had been working on at home. It was such an important part of the year that each child received an explanatory letter to take home to their family, along with an invitation to witness the projects at

the end of the year.

Those with parents who cared about their child's reputation made some effort to help produce something that their children could be proud of.

Because her mum was unwilling to participate, last year Lottie ended up preparing something embarrassing about the Antarctic on scraps of paper that she found in the kitchen cupboard.

There was, of course, a prize for the winner of each year group, but Lottie knew she would never have a chance to win anything while up against the likes of Penelope. There was really no point in her



trying, but Mrs Murray insisted over and over again, like a squawking parrot:

'At Maplebrook Primary we do not give up. Determination and imagination are the keys to success!'

Lottie would have to produce something.

The school project was being announced today.

She had five weeks.

