Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Nothing Scares Me

Written by

Gene Kemp

Published by

Faber & Faber

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

Sunday evening

I met a boy upon a stair
A little boy who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish he'd go away and stay –
That's George

H-O-M-E-W-O-R-K. It shouldn't be allowed. It ought to be banned. For Ever. The curse of Children. Torture. Misery. Cruelty. HOMEWORK. Down with Homework. Burn it!!!!

I'd got five lots all to be given in tomorrow morning, and the words of a carol to be learnt. Yuck! Double yuck! I could've done it before but I always leave it till Sunday. Slowly I got stuck into making a list of Henry VIII's wives. Why couldn't he have just stuck to one? Why did he have to be so greedy? Why six? It

was six, wasn't it? And I looked up to see George in his usual place, standing six inches off the floor by the big old bookcase. Granny (Mum's Mum) left it to us stuffed with old books, and George with them.

'Go away, George,' I hissed at him (I didn't want Mum hearing me. She says I make him up). 'Get lost. I've got tons of homework to do and some of it's late already. Go away. P-L-E-A-S-E.'

But he just stood there, grape-green eyes glaring at me, twiddling his nasty flat cap round in his hands, greeny-yellowy curls all over his head, bony wrists sticking out of his patched jacket, dirty short-longs or long-shorts reaching down to his scabby knees and the awful, awful huge Victorian Doc Marten boots with no laces in – his Dad's, I guess. He was no surprise. Like us, he lives here and he's about as scary as an old slice of bread. I'm really sorry for him. He must have led an awful life from the look of him. But I'd got to get on with my homework.

'Oh, get away,' I muttered. 'Just go. Like now. Sometimes I can't stand the sight of you. And you've got that funny fungus smell again. You need aroma-therapy. Freshen you up. Let me get on with my work, George.'

But George, I knew he was called George, though I didn't know how I knew he was called George – didn't go away. He just stood there looking beseeching like

Please Help Me, Petra. Give me, gimme Something. But I didn't want to give him anything because I hadn't a clue what he wanted.

I put down my Biro. Henry VIII's wives would have to wait. (And why the hell were half of 'em called Catherine? Hadn't they any imagination in those days? What about Britney? Queen Britney? Beheaded? Not a good idea.) But I couldn't carry on with HOMEWORK. No one, not Shakespeare or even our headteacher, could cope with George staring at them.

'George,' I said gently. 'The answer's no. Like whatever it is you want I don't know it and I don't have it and I don't have the time. Clear? I don't want to solve your problems. You keep them. I've got my own. Like Henry VIII and maths.' Actually, I get Barney, my brother, to do maths for me, so that one's solved. But there's the rest. 'If it's the fight of good against evil don't ask me, I'm not noble enough, and sometimes I don't know which is which, specially when Seth's around and talking me into things. You can have all the magic spells. I don't want 'em. They're complicated. They only cause trouble. You 'ave 'em. Or Barney. I won't be like jealous. They're all yours. I don't do problem solving, George. I've got too much homework.'

George's eyes filled with watery sorrow. A pale, sick-looking aura flicked round his head and he flick-

ered and wobbled. He seemed to be saying no, shaking his silly head and twisting his horrible cap round like crazy, trying to tell me something. I felt mean and wormy and a bit sick.

'I don't want to see you again! Ever! Never is too soon for me, George. Good-bye.'

But he didn't go. He just stood there, twisting his cap, goggle, goggle.

There's different ways of seeing. The OK kind. People: Granny reading a book, my kind teacher who died, Uncle Batty digging in the garden, the old corner sweet shop. Friends. I got friends. Hunter, my first little terrier, silly old George.

But there's the other seeings. Disasters, earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, hurricanes – I see them just before they come on telly, like 9/11 in America and the giant tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Thousands die. All I can do is cry.

Last week I woke up in the middle of the night and knew Grandpa had won something. I hoped it was the lottery, but it turned out to be a bottle of whisky. He was very pleased with it all the same, but then *he* hadn't thought of there being anything more than a bottle of whisky whereas I had. Then there's a beautiful lady I see in the park sometimes. She wears blue and a rainbow halo and smiles at me, as real as the other people walking around but she isn't, I know. I

like seeing her. She makes me feel safe. But she doesn't come as often as she used to. I expect I'm getting too old. It might all go away soon.

I suppose it's a gift. But I didn't ask for it, did I? Any more than you ask for brown eyes instead of blue. I often wish it would go away. I don't want to be different. Who the hell wants to be different? Kids are often horrible to the ones who are different like Barney, but he doesn't notice, too busy thinking up the secrets of the universe, whereas I do notice. So I don't talk about it, my gift or whatever.

But I still see things even if I don't talk about them any more. They're part of my life. I can't help it if I'm different. I just have to get on with it. It doesn't scare me.

Long ago I talked to my Dad about seeing things. He listened to me very carefully. But what do I have to do? I asked him, for I was beginning then to realise how strange it was. I don't think you have to do anything, just accept them when they come, don't worry and don't be afraid. I told him that I wasn't, and that I didn't get scared. That's great, he said; and I'll say a prayer for you, Petra – for Pete's sake, he grinned. That's an old name joke. He helped me see that I wasn't a freak, or mad, but still Petra, his daughter and OK.

But I didn't tell him all of it . . . It might worry him

and it doesn't often happen. You see, and it's hard to explain – it's different and whereas the other things are *here* on this planet, this one is not. It's *not* here at all. I call it 'The Nothing'. And I'd told Dad that seeing things *doesn't* scare me. I could like manage them. But 'The Nothing' is different, it's out in space, in another dimension and it scares me rotten. I don't want to tell anyone about it, not even Dad, for I hope it will go away. For ever.

But as George stood twisting his cap round and round, there's a black flash in the corner of my left eye. I shut my eyes tight, trying not to notice. If I open them slowly it will go away taking George with it.

It's still there. But I won't take any notice of it. No. I refuse. I've got homework to do. And then another black flash in the corner of my left eye. I can't escape.. I knew, somehow, that it was coming . . .

Out of the mist, seeping in, like water filling up a hollow slowly comes a picture, pale, like in old photos – a narrow, twisty, lonely lane winding uphill. It's muddy and desolate. Bare trees rise above high banks, branches black for Winter. Then out of the swirly mist a shadow girl comes running up the hill, a little dog on a lead scampering after her, trying to keep up on stumpy legs. I can't see her face, only her long dark hair streaming down her back. But even as

she fades out of sight I hear the sound of an approaching car . . .

Another sound – louder – music playing. Seth's playing a heavy metal CD at full volume. He and Barney crash into the room. George disappears. I never see him go.

Chapter Two

How the hell could I cope with Seth standing there where George had stood a moment before, Seth grinning at me, Seth talking, talking as he always does? Seth's too much, always too much. I could see his mouth opening and closing, rubbish coming out. And there was still tons of homework to do.

'Get lost, Seth. Unless, unless, can you tell me the names of old Henry VIII's wives in the right order?'

'You must be joking, Pet. Who was Henry VIII anyway? Some old geezer?'

'I can tell you,' said Barney and he was off. 'Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, divorced, beheaded, died, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, Katherine Parr, divorced, beheaded, died,' chanted Barney. He knew. He's a walking encyclopaedia. Why had I bothered to ask Seth? Oh, just to

stop him talking at me and calling me Pet.

'Come on. Leave the rubbish stuff, Pet, and let's go have a game,' cried Seth.

'You two can. I gotter finish this. And don't call me Pet!' I shouted.

'You work too hard. I don't believe in work,' Seth replied.

He doesn't believe in anything except Seth. He's rich, fit, gorgeous – all the girls go for him – and he's a total . . . (that word Mum won't let me use). Like George he's always around. Ever since he landed in my class. Who didn't like him – at least the boys didn't. He's been everywhere and boasts about it – Hollywood, New York, gambled at Las Vegas, Paris, Moscow, Rome . . . Seth had done everything, sung the songs, worn the T-shirt. He has loadsa pocket money and his mother, who came from South America and had been a beauty queen, said Seth, wore designer gear and didn't look like the other Mums.

'I've got an idea,' he said now.

'Treasure it, then. Take care of it. It might survive.'

'Shut up. Listen, Pet . . .'

'I'm listening . . . But don't call me Pet.'

'Why don't we use this gift of yours?'

'What gift? No one's given me a prezzie lately.'

'I don't mean that. I mean you seeing things . . .'

'I thought you didn't believe that I could.'

'Well – I've changed me mind. It was the other day when you knew about that tsunami in Asia before it came on the news . . .'

'Oh, shut up, willya? I don't talk about things like that any more.'

'Well, you should. To me, anyway. You see, at the moment it's not very useful, is it?'

'What d'you mean? Useful?'

'Your gift. I mean, you can't *do* anything about Africa or Asia, can you, Pet?'

'I can try, can't I? And I'm not your Pet. Or anyone else's. And shut up.'

But he carried on.

'Well, you could train it to *be* useful. Foretell things. Exam questions, the lottery draws, football results, horse racing details, everyday happenings. It would be fantastic, wouldn't it? We could be rich, successful and powerful. Totally cool!'

'I think you're disgusting, Seth!'

'No – listen – it makes sense.'

'No, it doesn't. First of all, I can't see things to order. Second, I've no control over it. Third, it would be wicked. Fourth, your family's loaded already, Seth.'

'Ah, but you and Barney could be rich, too. Since your dad's a vicar, you're all as poor as third world victims!'

'Did you mention me?' put in Barney. 'I don't care about being rich. It's not interesting like maths.'

'Oh, go back to your maths puzzles, Barney. It's only Seth being – like – evil as usual.'

'Oh, that,' said Barney.

'I think it could be brilliant . . .' Seth grinned.

'And I think it's wicked. You think I'm one.'

'That's because your dad's a vicar. You have to try to be good. It limits your thinking. I'm sorry for you, Pet.'

'Don't be. My dad's great, fantastic. I love him. And go home, it's time for you to go to your beddy-byes, Sethy-Wethy.'

'OK, OK, I'm off. But think about it, Pet . . .'

'DON'T CALL ME PET!'

'I'll talk to you again when you're in a better mood. And you look terrible. Greenish. You know I'm right. I always am.'

'See you!'

He's got a multi-coloured aura like Joseph's Technicolor Dreamcoat. But Barney doesn't have one. Sometimes I wonder if I made him up. But he seems real. Like a funny furry animal. Whereas Seth's like a film star leaping around, showing off, fighting duels and carrying off women. I once saw him suddenly clear as anything, swords flashing, etc. He was in the past and called Ronaldo, like a footballer. I did tell