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SPIRIT

Sally Christie

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David Fickling Books
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To Celia
for connectedness

Chapter 1

THE TRUTH GAME

'I saw a real live fairy,' he said, 'and I took it home in a bag.'

Well, what would *you* think if someone said that? If it was someone you knew – a friend – you might say they were joking. But nobody knew Matt Barker. No one could guess why he'd said what he'd said. Was he attention-seeking? Was he a show-off? He didn't look the type.

They wanted to laugh, but that was against the rules. You had to respect what anyone said. And yet they felt *he* was laughing at *them*. Was he trying to make them look stupid? Taking advantage?

The one thing they knew for certain was he wasn't telling the truth.

And that was the problem. In the Truth Game, you had to. If you chose to open your mouth (and you might well not, but if you did) the rule was that any words that came out of it had to be true. If people broke that, then they'd better not play. As Mr McGann was fond of saying, he could equally well have called it the Trust Game – because truth and trust are so closely connected.

When Mikey Maloney had told them last term he'd done seventy-nine keepy-uppies, round the back of his house, they'd all had to trust that he really had (he had) because no one – not even Dip Jay or Joe Black – had been there. And when Angela Poole had chosen to say that she'd watched her grandpa actually die, she was trusting them to be understanding and ask only sensitive questions. They did, but even so Ange started crying and Mr McGann stopped the game.

He had a right to do that. He could do that now. But he didn't want the new boy to think that that was all there was to it. He could feel the anger around him, and several people had put up their hands.

Joe Black, a nice enough lad, thought Mr McGann,

but sparky: what would he ask? Something challenging. Something to show he was nobody's fool. *This fairy, where did you find it, then? How did you catch it?*

Tasha, who led the girls, what would she? *This 'fairy' of yours, what's it like?*

Neither would do, thought Mr McGann. Matt Barker mustn't be confronted. Gently, within the rules of the game, he had to be given a way out. But all the hands going up now were hostile. Till Angela raised hers.

Angela Poole was known for her kindness. Mr McGann had to chance it.

'Angela,' he said, 'this is a tricky one.'

Angela Poole would do what was best.

'Go on, then, Angela. What is your question?'

Angela asked it slowly and carefully. 'So, what you're saying is, really and truly, you've got a real, live – fairy – at home? I'm just checking I've got that right.'

Matt Barker should have been grateful. Mr McGann was – but then, he'd invented the game and didn't want it wrecked. But when Matt Barker answered Angela Poole, you couldn't tell what he was feeling.

'No,' he said.

That was all. A retreat as mysterious as his opening line. But the situation was saved.

'Well done, Matt!' said Mr McGann. 'The thing in this game is to tell the truth.' Relief made him speak a little too loudly. 'You'll get used to it after a while –' hearty laugh – 'and you'll realise how interesting it can be. Now, that's it for the moment, everyone. I must go and see Spike.'

Spike was the driver of the coach they were on, and right now he was changing a wheel. In the middle of France, on Day Two of their trip, they'd managed to get a flat tyre. They were stuck in the lay-by half an hour more, but they didn't go on with the Truth Game. You had to be in the right mood for that, and Matt Barker had spoiled it. They sang songs instead: mostly 'WHY ARE WE WAITING?'

Mr McGann said, 'You *know* why we're waiting!' but they sang it anyway.

Next day, on the way to the goats' cheese farm, the road had lots of twists and bends and, one by one, people

began feeling sick. Angela actually was sick, and the smell made everything worse. ('Wait till we get to the farm,' said Mr McGann, 'if you think this is pungent!') One by one, people moved to the front of the coach, where, Mr McGann assured them, they'd feel better.

That's how it happened that Matt, having been sitting at the front on his own (not because he got travel sick, but because he had no friends) was soon in the middle of things and worried that even the empty seat beside him might be filled. He started rearranging his coat and his bag to be more spread out, and when he glanced up he found himself looking right into a face wedged between the two seats in front.

The face was Jazzy O'Hanlon's, and her big, brown eyes were watching him, laughing.

'That won't stop somebody sitting there,' she said.

'It might.'

'It won't.' And to prove it, she slipped out into the aisle and sat there herself. She plonked the coat and the bag on his lap and grinned. 'See?'

Jazzy and her family lived right next door to Matt and

his. When Matt had moved in, he'd worried about this: living next door to a girl in the same year at school. But Jazzy hadn't been a problem and he'd been able to keep himself to himself. Till now.

'Jazzy, where are you?' came Tash Lawes's voice. 'I need you! Where've you gone?'

Matt Barker was not a quick thinker. (At least, not unless he was playing football.) He wanted to say something stern, if not rude, to Jazzy O'Hanlon now, but all he came up with was, 'Your friend needs you. Didn't you hear?'

'Oh, Tash'll survive.' She waved a hand vaguely. 'Chocolate?' She offered him some.

'You shouldn't eat that,' said Matt. 'You should suck boiled sweets if you're feeling sick.'

'But I'm not!' she said triumphantly.

'Then why—'

Quick as a flash, she cut in. 'You have – got – something, haven't you?'

He couldn't think what she was talking about. Was it the empty seat next to him? Did she mean he had an

infectious disease? No. Though he wished she'd leave him alone, he felt she wasn't being nasty.

'Yesterday,' she went on. 'What you said in the game. You *have* got – something – haven't you? At home?'

Unprepared for the question and surprised by her directness, he said, 'Yes.'

'What?'

But he wouldn't be caught out again. I don't have to answer, he told himself, we're not playing that stupid game any more.

If he'd listened to begin with, when Mr McGann had explained the rules, he'd have understood that he didn't *have* to say anything at all: that you only spoke up if you had a remarkable thing you *wanted* to share. He'd said what he'd said because he'd thought he must. Mr McGann had gone on about how the best stories were often true, and most people had one inside them, although they might not want to tell it, which was perfectly OK.

But Matt had been taking a penalty for England, in injury time, and missed that bit. After the shot (and over the roar of the crowd) he'd heard Mr McGann finish up,

'You must be prepared to answer questions,' and then, it seemed almost at once, it was his turn: 'So. Matt?'

All he knew was he must speak the truth and it must be something unusual. He wasn't a quick thinker. He had no choice.

'What did you *mean* about seeing a fairy?' Jazzy O'Hanlon said now. Her eyes were unbelievably big. 'What did you really see? What did you do? *What happened?*'

'Jazz, come *back*!' called Tasha, but Jazzy ignored her as before.

'Look!' he said, pointing. 'We're there!'

He'd never have thought you could be so pleased to see a field full of goats.

Nobody liked the cheese. When the dumpy woman who'd shown them round had advanced on them with handfuls of little wrapped balls to take home, they'd all backed away.

'Non, merci!'

Only Tasha had turned it into 'mercy' and raised her hands in mock surrender, which made them laugh.

Standing beside her, laughing as well, Jazzy smacked her lightly and said, 'Don't!', because the woman was looking confused. No one had laughed when she'd wanted them to: when she'd pointed at the baby goats and said, '*Keeds!*' and then swivelled round and pointed at *them* and said it again.

'No one want cheese?' she said, disappointed, and Angela Poole stepped forward.

'I do. I like it,' she said. 'It's delicious.'

Then Mr McGann said something in French, and whatever it was made the woman smile and pack the cheeses for them in ice and insist they take them away.

'Pooh!' said Jazzy, beside him again as they drove back along the bendy road. 'This coach really stinks! Why did we have to take that lot with us? Nobody wants it!'

'Angela does.'

'Angela? Oh, she just said that. She doesn't really. Her parents are getting divorced.'

'Well, what's that got to do with it?' He felt cross.

Really he wanted to say, 'Why are you still sitting next

to me?' He didn't want this girl disturbing his thoughts with her constant chat. *Leave me alone.*

'Angela tries to be nice to people all the time, to make them feel good. *I* think it's better to be honest. That way, you don't get landed with a load of cheese!'

'Nothing wrong with doing things to be nice to people,' he said pointedly. 'You should give it a go.'

Jazzy looked at him in surprise. 'Are you trying to tell me something?'

'No. But, well, wouldn't you rather go back and sit with Tasha?'

'You're trying to tell me to go away!' She laughed merrily. 'But I don't want to! I want to sit here!'

'Why?'

'Because I like you, of course!'

He felt alarmed.

'Why?'

'You sound like my sister. Melissa. *She* always says, "Why?"' She adjusted her voice to sound like someone explaining something to a very young child. 'I like you because you're an in-tresting person.'

Matt was stunned. No one had *ever* said that. His mum called him one-track minded. He couldn't think what on earth to say next.

'That thing you said yesterday, in the game . . . '

'Oh, *that*!' he burst out. 'Wish I'd never said that!'

She ignored him. 'I'm interested in fairies.'

'I'm not,' he said rudely, hoping to crush her.

'Well, I am. Because I'm playing one.'

'What do you mean?'

'Ha! Now you know what it's like! When someone says something you don't understand.' She paused, deciding whether or not to explain. Matt hadn't explained yesterday. She could do the same back. But then they'd get nowhere. 'I'm playing a fairy in a Shakespeare play.'

'Shakespeare?' he was contemptuous. '*Shakespeare?* What's *he* got to do with anything? What—'

'A lot, if you want to know!' Jazzy said hotly. 'He's really relevant – now more than ever. He makes you *think*. He's brilliant!'

'He's dead,' said Matt.

Jazzy went quiet. 'You're – what an *ignorant* thing to say! Only a *totally ignorant* person could say that. Don't you know *anything*? Do you know *nothing* except about football?'

No one spoke for a moment. Then, 'How did you know?' said Matt.

'Know what?'

'About me and football.'

Jazzy said, 'Oh, I just do. Everyone does. Mikey, Dip, Joe. They were going to ask you to play yesterday, only then they weren't so sure, after . . . '

'How d'you mean?'

He knew about Mikey, Dip, Joe, the footballing boys, who Mr McGann said might as well all three be joined at the hip (only then they'd have trouble running about). Their names were certainly fused: Mikey, Dip, Joe. No one ever said 'and'.

'How d'you mean?' said Matt. 'About yesterday?'

'I mean after what you said in the Truth Game. They thought it was weird. I heard them talking.'

Matt suddenly punched the seat in front.

‘Leave me alone!’ he said, this time out loud. ‘Just go away!’

But in less than twenty-four hours she was back.

They had spent the day at Mont Saint-Michel, which was a heap of rocks in the sea, with an old medieval abbey built on top. Jazzy and Tash and the rest had noisily counted the steps you had to climb, and lost count and argued and had a good laugh. As Tash’s best friend, Jazzy got to do everything first (with Tash) and everyone else had to follow behind. Not that Jazzy was like that. But still, it was fun being first up Mont Saint-Michel.

The boys had gone up in their own little groups, some counting the steps, some not. Matt had gone up alone.

But on the coach, on the way back to the hostel, that face had popped up again in the gap between the two seats.

Jazzy beamed. ‘Sorry about what I said. About football.’

She hadn’t said anything much. But still. He grunted. ‘What is it now?’

‘I want to tell you about Ariel.’

‘What?’

‘Ariel. The fairy I play.’

He groaned.

‘Not a fairy with wings and a wand. Not the pink kind. Shakespeare calls him a spirit. *You* could have said “spirit” instead of “fairy”. Why didn’t you? If you’d said “spirit”, it would have been better for you, I think.’

Yes, why hadn’t he? Stupid. She was tiresome, but she was right.

‘Anyway, Ariel’s locked in a tree—’

‘A tree?’ Matt interrupted.

Hearing his sudden interest, she paused, and he saw he’d revealed too much.

‘How can you be locked in a tree?’ he went on, quickly and scornfully. ‘You get locked in a house, or a prison or a loo—’

‘Yes! The tree is like Ariel’s prison. A witch shut him in it—’

‘A witch?’

‘Yes, a witch, and along comes this magician—’

'*Magician?*'

'Yes – and lets him out.'

But Matt had had more than enough. 'What happens to him in the end? Does he die?'

'Ariel? No, of course not. Spirits – *fairies* – can't die!'

Then Matt said a very surprising thing, his second in three days.

'I think they can.'

Chapter 2

WHAT MATT BARKER SAW

He'd been walking Dash. Mum had said, 'Take her out one last time before you go to France.' He hated the way she'd said that, as if Dash might die while he was away. Dash was old, but not that old: twelve. That was eighty-four in dog years. Lots of people lived to well over a hundred. It was a fact. Those cards sent from Buckingham Palace on your hundredth birthday were pointless now, but they had to keep sending them, now they'd started. Imagine being the first *not* to get one. You'd feel really let down.

Dash was going to live loads more years. But he took

her out anyway. He took her to Burnham Mount, their favourite place.

One of Mum's favourite things to say was that Matt was away with the fairies. Meaning he was a dreamer – though it wasn't so much fairies as football, with him. She worried he lost concentration too easily. She worried (just ever so slightly) every time he took Dash for a walk.

'Don't forget you're *responsible* for her,' she said. 'Keep her close when you cross the road. And don't let her off till you're sure it's OK. Matt, are you listening? Don't let those fairies distract you! Remember, Dasher's safety is in your hands!'

She needn't have worried. At least, not about Dash's safety.

'Oh, and clear up if she does a poo! Matt?' He was already out of the door and she had to run after him, down the path, with a bag. 'Promise you'll clear up after her, Matt!'

He didn't promise, but he took the bag and shoved it deep in his trouser pocket. When Dash did a poo on the

pavement, two minutes later, he kicked it skilfully into the grass.

Mum needn't have worried about Dasher's safety, though. Soon after they'd left the village, the pavement ran out and they had to walk on the road, but Matt kept the little dog close. Football wasn't the only thing he cared about – though it did take up most of his head space.

The track up Burnham Mount began with a gate and, beside it, a sign: 'Footpath to the Burnham Stone 1/4'. Burnham Stone was the village that Matt and his family had moved to; *the* Burnham Stone was a lump of rock which must once have been important enough to give the village its name. Those who knew why were long gone. But the Stone was still somewhere people went. Boyfriends and girlfriends, to hold hands at sunset; families, out for their weekend stroll. When little kids played tag up there, it was always 'Home'.

As soon as Matt was through the gate, he let Dash off the lead and she pottered ahead of him, shoving her nose into clumps of grass to discover who'd been there before. This was a hobby of hers, and she weed on each clump

before moving on, to give the next dog (as Dad always liked to say) the same pleasure.

Matt clipped the lead round her neck and set off up the track.

It was a lovely, warm spring day. The fields on either side of the track had been planted with a crop that was just beginning to come up. The sun caught the delicate spikes of green, and the further away you looked, the more the spikes merged together, so that in the distance they became one pale green haze. You could see to the horizon, till the track took you into the wood.

Burnham Wood was not the sort you'd choose for a picnic. Not that it was unpleasant, but it was dense and prickly in a way that suggested you'd never have found a space clear enough to lay your picnic rug down. It had the appearance of somewhere private. There weren't any signs saying keep out, it was just that it didn't look inviting. It looked like a place that had secrets to keep. Dash always went in, but that was different.

Dash loved Burnham Wood even more than she loved the track leading up to and through it. Matt always kept

to the track, but as soon as it entered the wood, Dash was gone. Matt didn't worry, he knew she was safe; they were far enough from the road. He didn't know what she got up to in there, but pheasants were often involved: you could hear their outraged squawks now and then, and the flap and fuss as they rose through the trees. Once there had been a sharper alarm – the call of a different bird, or a rodent – but Dash was too old to catch anything now, Matt knew. She just had fun.

Burnham Wood went round the shoulders of Burnham Mount like a cloak, or at least a wide scarf. The track took you straight up through it and then turned right and went up a bit more. So now you were in the top field (which the wood encircled), with the wood on your right. You could see to the top of the Mount now: there on the skyline was the Burnham Stone.

It wasn't large, for a landmark that had its own sign and was marked on the map: only about the size of a lying-down cow. Once it had been larger, but the farmer who had to plough round it all the time had at last lost patience and had the idea of smashing it up. He'd begun,

but a crowd of people who lived in the village had come and stopped him, and now the Stone was protected by law, and all farmers after him had to plough round it – and sow their crops round it – and harvest around it, when the time came. (One of them, more recently, had applied for permission to plough up the *wood*. But the council had said no – the wood was an ancient feature of the landscape and a haven for wildlife; it must stay.)

When Matt reached the brow of the hill, he left the edge of the wood, as everyone did, and walked the last little bit of the way to the Stone through the field itself. The path at this point was no more than the crop trampled down by people's feet. These days, the farmer resigned himself to the irritation of it: he knew better than to try changing things, which only led to trouble. Matt, with his trainers white and chalky from the field, sat on the Stone as you might sit on a bench.

If ever he had any sweets with him when he came here, that's where he ate them, but he hadn't today. If he'd had any friends to text, that's where he'd text them, but all his friends were back at his old home, and texting them now

would make him feel sad. Mum said he'd soon make new ones – on the trip to France, he was bound to. He hoped she was right. Sitting here on this rock, he felt bored and alone.

And then, from somewhere back in the wood, Dash barked.

The wood went right round this top field and she could have been anywhere in it. She sometimes went in really deep, but she hadn't today. He could tell by the sound. The surprising thing was that she'd made any sound at all: in general, she wasn't a barker. (That was Dad's great joke: we're all of us Barkers, except the dog!)

She barked again.

'Dash!' Matt called, and immediately wished he hadn't. If she came, he'd never find out what the big deal was. Her bark had sounded excited, and he could do with a bit of excitement right now. She didn't come, but barked once more, and this time he got up and hurried back through the field, towards the wood. He couldn't see any obvious way in, so began retracing his steps down the track, looking to his left all the time, for an opening. There were

plenty of rabbit holes in among the roots of the thorn bushes edging the track, but nothing large enough to be useful to him.

He came to the point where the track turned off the field to cut through the wood, and he took the turn. If he didn't find an opening soon, he'd be out of the wood on the other side, and he'd have to give up and call Dash back and take her home. He took a kick at a toadstool in the grass and the head flew off to the left and landed on a patch of bare earth surrounding a cluster of three or four big rabbit holes. Something, perhaps a fox – perhaps Dash – had scrabbled away at them, making quite a sizeable excavation.

Could he crawl through?

And even if he could, *would* he? Did he really want to go into the wood, he asked himself? Nobody else did; they went to the Stone, which was friendly and safe.

But Matt was bored.

If he went right down on his belly, he could use the freshly made hollow to wriggle in under the thorns. What if he did? Would more thorns, further in, force him back?

So what? He'd get dirty – but Mum would be washing these clothes, anyway, while he was in France.

Dash barked. *Come on!*

Matt flung himself down and pressed himself flat to the earth and pushed himself forward.

It was horrid.

People who go exploring in caves or down potholes may like being shut in – but Matt, though he wasn't even under the ground, felt trapped, and nearly panicked. If he lifted his head, thorns jabbed at his scalp. If he stretched out an arm, they caught his sleeve. But he pushed on, and suddenly found he *could* lift his head without being jabbed. He was through the thorns.

He got to his knees, then his feet. Crouching, because he was still among branches, he stumbled forward. He was surprised to find that the wood wasn't all bushes and scrub, as he had supposed. In amongst the dense tangle were trees, proper trees, that you couldn't see from the track.

There was no sign of Dash, but leading into the wood was a kind of path, which he started to follow. It could

only be used by woodland creatures – he kept having to stoop to avoid low branches – but it was better than nothing. And it led him to a clearing, into which sunlight slanted down through the boughs of a truly majestic tree on the further side. This tree spread itself overhead, a bit like the ceiling of a cathedral, but at its foot was a more homely sight.

Dash was there, with her front legs stretched out and her bottom stuck comically up in the air. You might have thought she'd seem out of place, but somehow she didn't. Her tail was wagging like mad and she was watching something intently, just up from the level of the ground. She couldn't take her eyes off it, couldn't afford to look round, but she knew Matt was there, he could tell, and she barked again. That same, excited bark. Playful, almost.

She looks like a puppy, Matt thought, and was glad he'd come, if for no other reason.

And then he saw what she was seeing.

He saw it for only two seconds, but they were to shape the whole of his summer and – who knows what influence things have on people? – maybe his life.

A largish branch had broken off from the tree and crashed to the ground. It lay there amid a confusion of smaller branches and snapped-off twigs. It was too early on in the year for leaves; there was just this tangle of twigs and sticks and, sticking up out of it, one twig in particular. This twig was quite short, quite straight and quite slender.

Unremarkable, you might say.

Except it was moving.

Matt shook his head. *Twigs move all the time*, he thought. *In the wind, or when somebody shakes the branch that they're attached to.*

But this twig was not attached to a branch. And besides, there was nobody there.

It didn't make sense.

The twig twisted and turned in mid-air, with a life of its own.

It must be a trick of the light.

But no.

It must be the wind.

But there was no wind.

It might have been spooky, but Matt had no time to be scared. Because, suddenly, as he watched, the life went out of the twig (if it was a twig) and – right there, right then – it died.

How could he know it had died, when he'd hardly known it had been alive? It suddenly writhed in the air, then went rigid and fell. And he just *did*.

And he cried out, 'No!' because nobody likes seeing something actually die. Whether it's Angela's grandpa – or this. He stuck his fists in his eyes and rubbed them.

Maybe he rubbed them too hard. Because straight after that, he saw something else.

Or thought he did.

He never told anyone else about it. He never saw it again, and dismissed it as just his imagination. It didn't seem connected to the twig.

A human figure it was, quite tall – though whether a man or a woman, he couldn't have said. A figure *going away*, though as far as Matt knew, it had never been there in the first place. Going away from him soundlessly.

Going where, impossibly, there was no path. And yet going – receding – quite fast. Getting smaller.

Disappearing into the trees.

The shock of seeing the twig must have messed with his brain.

Dash came over to greet him, wagging her tail, swishing it low, as she always did for people she knew. But Matt ignored her for once, and ran forward. He never doubted that he'd recognise what he was looking for in amongst all the debris of ordinary twigs on the ground. He picked it up without hesitation.

It felt like an ordinary twig, itself, as he held it, barely reaching across the span of his outstretched hand. It had little black buds pressed in close to the bark, he noticed: a pair, about halfway along, and a single one, bigger but no less black, at the end. These buds made him think of delicate paws or tiny, pointed hooves, but even they weren't extraordinary, the twigs on the ground had them, too.

What was strange was he could – just – also see what *his* twig had been before. It was two things at once. A twig and – what? He couldn't have given it a name, if

someone had asked: but no one was going to, were they?

He put it in the plastic bag from his pocket, called Dash and turned back.

They left the wood the same way he'd come in. (There wasn't any other.) Dash seemed familiar with the path. When they came to the scooped-out passageway under the outer wall of thorns, she slipped through, no problem, with just some mud getting stuck to her fur. But Matt had even more trouble than before.

This time, he had his find to protect – and he couldn't put it in his pocket, in case it got broken. The thorns kept snagging the plastic bag – and the skin of his hand – so that when at last he emerged, the bag was torn and his hand was bleeding. But the hard, knobbly thing inside the bag was safe; he could feel it. He didn't know why he wanted to take it home, nor what he would do when he had. But he carried it carefully down the track as if it were as precious to him as the little black dog at his side.