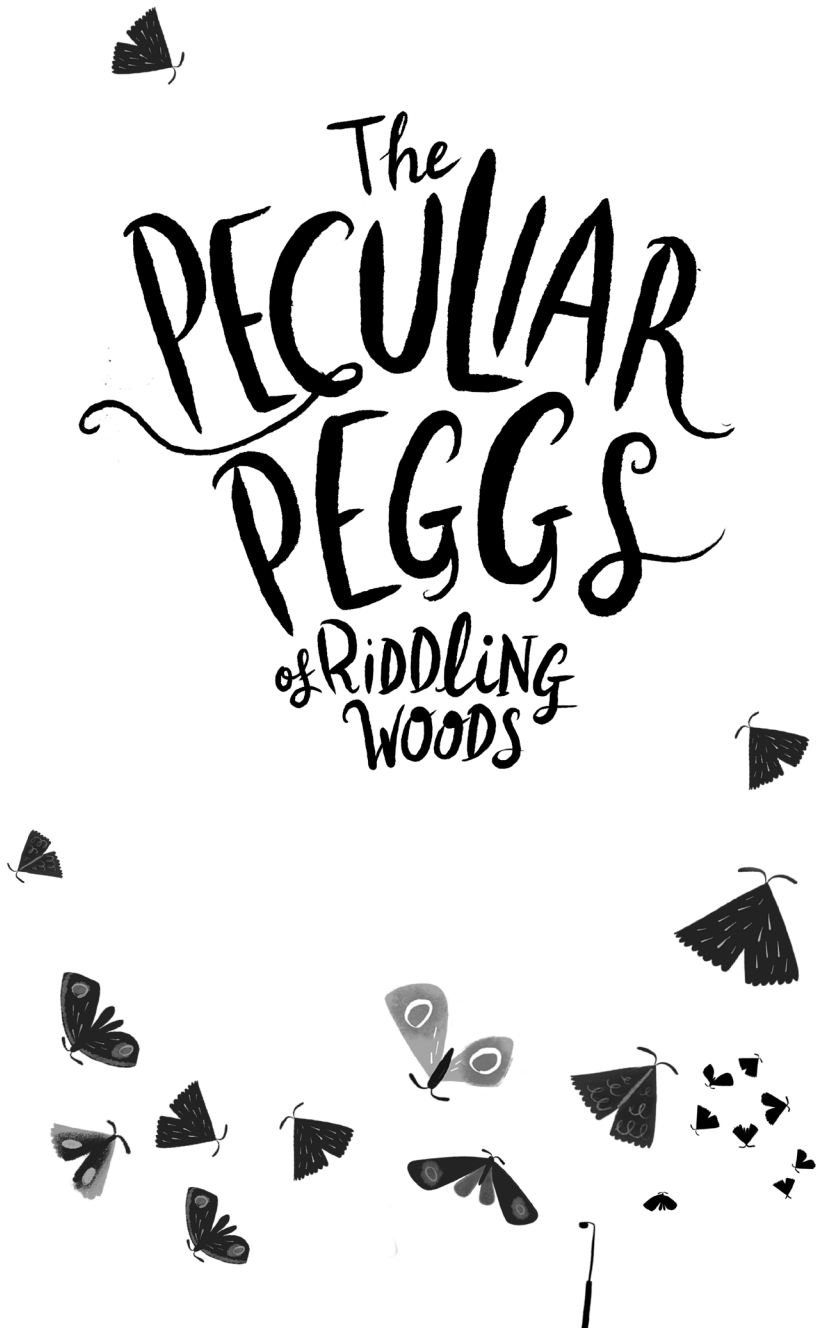
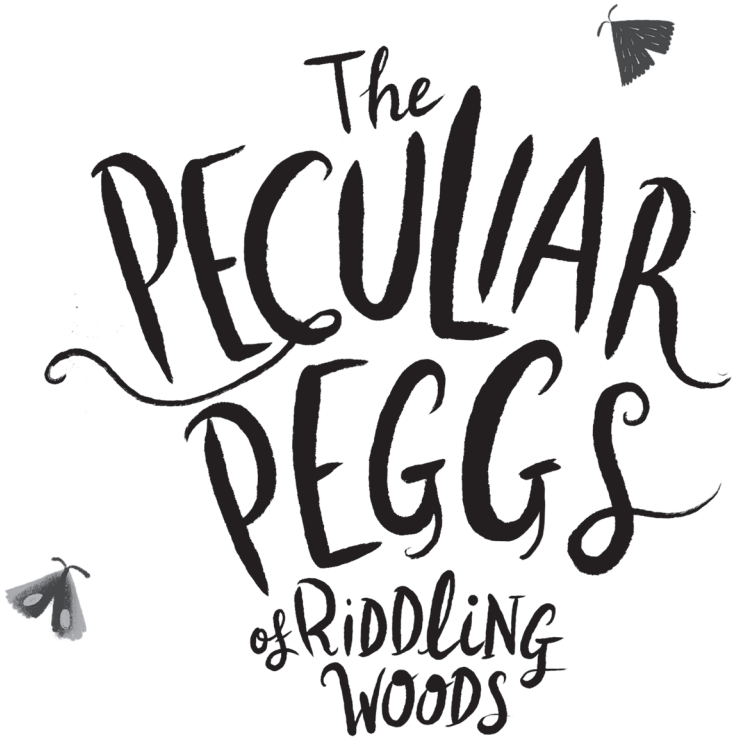
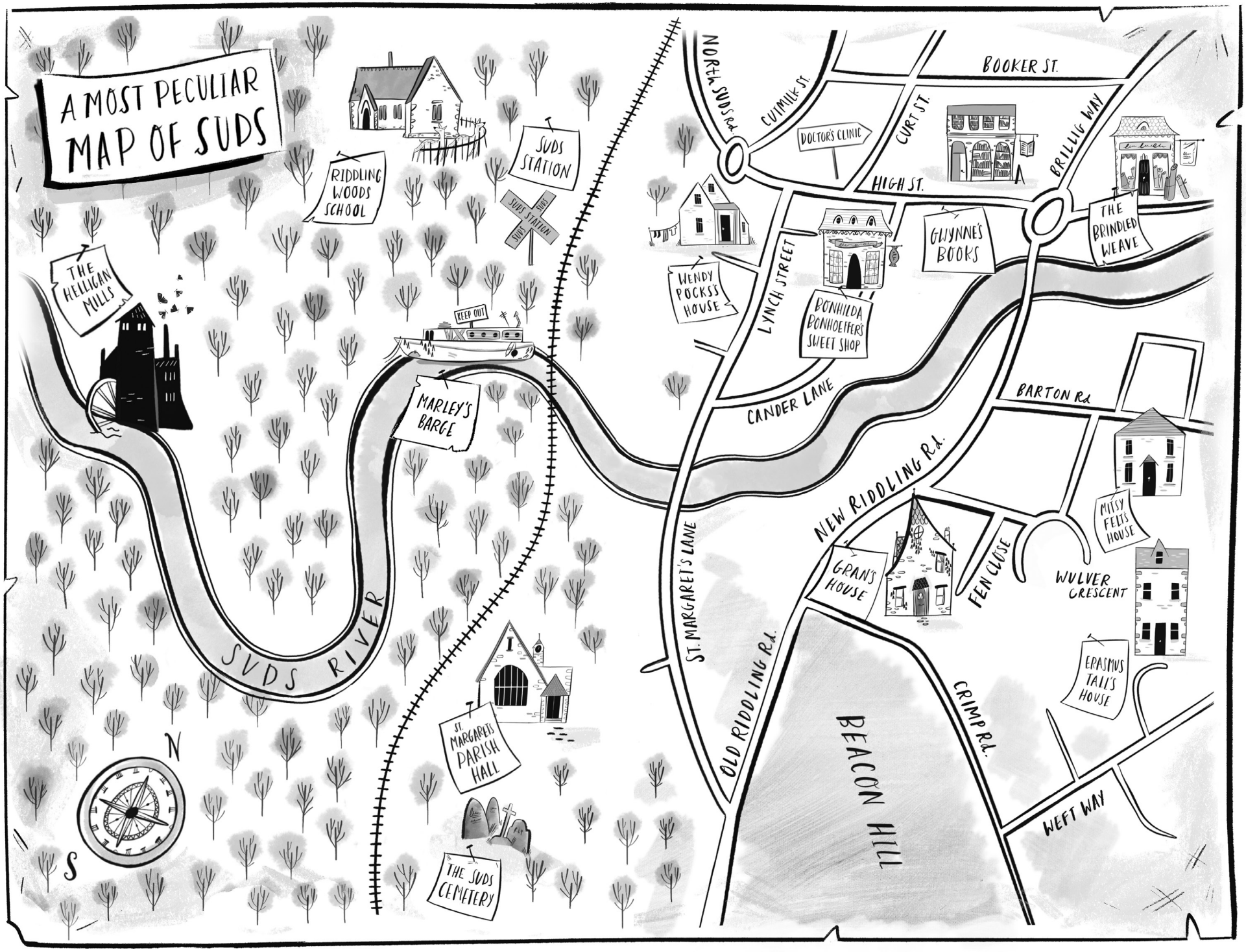
The Peculiar Peggs of Riddling Woods





SAMUEL J. HALPIN




A MOST PECULIAR MAP OF SUDS
RIDDLING WOODS SCHOOL
SUDS STATION
SUDS STATION
SUDS STATION
THE HELLIGAN MILLS
KEEP OUT
MARLEY'S BARGE
SUDS RIVER
ST. MARGARET'S PARISH HALL
THE SUDS CEMETERY
N
S
NORTH SUDS Rd.
CUTMILK ST.
BOOKER ST.
DOCTOR'S CLINIC
CURT ST.
BRILLIG WAY
HIGH ST.
THE BRINDLED WEAVE
GWYNNE'S BOOKS
WENDY POCKS'S HOUSE
LYNCH STREET
BONHILDA BONHOEFFER'S SWEET SHOP
CANDER LANE
BARTON Rd.
NEW RIDDLING Rd.
MITSY FELTS HOUSE
GRAN'S HOUSE
FEN CLOSE
WULVER CRESCENT
ST. MARGARET'S LANE
ERASMUS TALL'S HOUSE
OLD RIDDLING Rd.
CRIMP Rd.
BEACON HILL
WEFT WAY

To Mum, Dad, Georgina, Julian, Michaela,
Camilla, Xavier and Remi

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Prologue
WORRIED



Poppy had been worried for a long time.

Stretching her neck, she pressed her flushed cheek and the side of her nose against the cold glass of the train window and tried to focus her eyes on the little stones and tracks hurtling past below.

Breathe, she said to herself, *breathe*.

That was what she knew to do whenever her heart began to play that little game where it thought Poppy was galloping up a mountain when she really wasn't.

I'm not worried, she told her reflection firmly. Her reflection had slate-blue eyes and short, inquisitive hair the colour of rust and bricks, just like she did. Although she didn't think her actual arms were as pointy at the elbows, or as skinny as the ones she could see in the window. Wrestling her jacket out of her backpack,

she hauled it on over the top of her bottle-green cardie to hide the enormously pointy elbows. The cardie was something of her own creation, and it hung over her favourite tangerine-coloured corduroy dress like a bit of moss on an old tree. The dress had two wonderfully big pockets at the front, which were large enough to secrete away all manner of useful things, and Poppy liked to wear it when she was in a creative mood or travelling long distances.

LOOKOUT 4 MUMBLING MARLEY

read a wonky line of graffiti on the wall of the carriage. She wondered spitefully if whoever had spent half an hour gouging it into the plastic was aware that *lookout*, when employed as a verb, was two separate words.

Stop being so boring, she thought.

Poppy had only brought one backpack with her to Gran's. After all, she was only staying in Suds for two weeks of the summer holidays while Dad was away, so she hadn't packed a whole lot of stuff. She'd had that backpack since, well, since a very long time ago. She wasn't the kind of person who needed new things. After all, who wanted new things? Everyone except Poppy.

To Poppy, new things meant new smells. New shoes meant new blisters. A new backpack meant lodging the sharp end of your drawing compass beneath your

fingernail as you fumbled around trying to find your ruler. She didn't like "new". In order for something to be new, something else had to be old, and that in turn meant that the old thing might very well be forgotten.

As with most train journeys that are northbound, the countryside became wilder and greener. The busy patchwork of fields ebbed away into quiet, untamed brushstrokes of leaves and wood, peppered with white flashes from where the chalk seams that ran through this part of the country raised their powdery heads above the surface.

She tried to phone Gran as the train pulled out of the next station to remind her of when to come and collect her. But Gran didn't answer. Gran hardly ever answered. Poppy wasn't worried though. She said so to herself again, *I'm not worried*. Because amongst all the things Gran never did, was forgetting. Gran never forgot.

The train rounded a bend and up ahead Poppy watched as the caterpillar-like succession of carriages vanished into a tunnel up ahead. Poppy's carriage soon flickered to black. She held her breath and counted eight seconds before the train shot out at the other end. She and Mum would do that in the car when they went through tunnels in London. The longest they'd managed was forty-three seconds.

Poppy's heart chugged in time to the train's engine.

Stop it, you stupid thing, she said to the spot on her chest where she imagined her heart must be.

Glancing down the long swaying carriage she noticed, perhaps for the first time, a tall woman at the other end beside the sliding doors. She was looking straight ahead out of the window, her hands clasped around a thin silver cane.

She doesn't look as if she needs a cane, Poppy thought to herself, quietly.

If people did need support getting about, they would use a walking frame nowadays, or one of those nippy little mobility scooters, or those chairlifts that old people sometimes have on the stairs.

The lady was wearing a velvet jacket with an assortment of glittering pins. On her head was a silver cap, and from it poked a feather so curled that it almost vanished against the dark rings of hair spiralling out from underneath. The lady was smiling. A smile that said she knew Poppy was watching her.

Without looking away from the window, the lady removed one of her green gloves and dipped her hand into her pocket, just long enough for Poppy to see her knobbly fingers. Poppy's heart gave a thump in her chest. The lady's hands weren't like her face at all. Her face was like glass, but her hands were like speckled paper.

Poppy turned away for a moment, but only so far that she could still see what was happening. From her pocket the lady pulled a small purse that was the same colour as her jacket. Opening the purse, she found a

compact mirror and adjusted one of her curls a little with a hooked finger.

To either side of the train the black trees of the woods which surrounded Suds rose above them like twisted chimneys.

Poppy hadn't noticed the second tunnel approaching, and before she knew it they were plunged into darkness. She held her breath again and counted.

1, 2, 3…

She heard a sharp tap on the carriage floor.

4, 5, 6…

She closed her eyes.

7, 8, 9…

Daylight flooded back in and Poppy could see the rusty eaves of Suds station up ahead. She looked around the carriage. The lady was gone.

How could she be? The train had only been in the tunnel for nine seconds. Perhaps she'd just moved along to the next carriage. But Poppy hadn't heard the doors sliding open.

The voice over the train's speaker garbled something about "Taking all belongings with you" and "This train terminates here".

She heaved her backpack onto her narrow shoulders and positioned herself beside the doors. Then she noticed the lady's purse lying forgotten on a seat. It was almost the exact same colour as the quiet green fabric of the carriage upholstery. Poppy wouldn't have noticed

it if she hadn't been spinning in circles as she struggled to squeeze her arm through the strap of her bulging backpack. The doors opened, a sharp gust of autumn wind plunged into the carriage, and instead of thinking, like she always did, Poppy snatched the purse and stuffed it into one of her wonderfully big pockets.





One
Cloth



"Take the key from around my wrist," Gran told Poppy when they arrived back at her house. Poppy had visited Gran just once before, when she was three or four and Mum had driven her up for the day. After that, Gran took the train down to visit them a handful of times, but otherwise Poppy only really got to talk to her on the phone. It didn't matter though, because Gran's house smelled the same way that she remembered Gran did: of dark wood, musk and sugar. "Go to the cabinet by the fireside and open it just a little."

Poppy did as she was told.

"Now, using only one hand, lift the lid from the jar wrapped in cheesecloth."

Poppy obeyed. Churchill, Gran's miniature pig, sniffed anxiously around the kitchen and then charged

through the door towards his basket, where he curled up cosily by the hearth. A fat log of wood surrounded by bundles of dry twigs blazed silently. Mum always said she could never remember Gran's house without a fire chattering away in the lounge room. "Suds was always seven degrees colder than anywhere else," she would say. "And if you didn't like the weather, all you had to do was look in a different direction, because the temperature in Suds was as changeable as the wind."

"Find the tweezers in the cabinet and take two lumps of sugar." Grandma squinted across the room over the top of her glasses. "Bravo," she said. "Now hold the sugar lumps in your hand as tight as you can without crushing them. Lock the cabinet. Bring me back the key."

Poppy did *exactly* as Gran instructed.

"Put the sugar lumps in my tea, as carefully as you can without making a splash."

When she had done this, Poppy stirred the tea.

"Scrummy!" Gran whispered, slurping her tea noisily. "Ahhhh!" She smacked her lips.

Poppy was not impressed.

"You'll soon find that I'm not a proper lady, Poppy," Gran told her, noticing Poppy's quiet disapproval. "I don't mean I'm not a girl. I'm very definitely a girl. I mean I talk with my mouth full. I put my elbows on the table. I *like* interrupting people." Gran winked at her with one little eye.

Poppy didn't know what to say, so she changed the subject. "Why do you hide the sugar, Gran?"

Gran drank some more tea and arranged herself more comfortably. She was wearing a crushed silk robe in a colour she called Burnt Brandy, topped with a hat that was dappled like a sun-drunk avocado. Poppy's eyes liked the colour. Burnt Brandy was a colour that made her think of black coffee, amber and chestnuts. The hat was similar to a fez and had a tassel that danced around Gran's blossomy hair. Perched on her nose was a pair of brass pince-nez, framing her glistening sea-green eyes.

Poppy liked looking at her grandma's armchair. It was furrowed and patched, and dotted with hundreds of glistening pins. Gran always said she got all her best ideas while sitting in that chair. She called it the Seat of Wisdom.



Gran was a seamstress and could make any wearable thing you wanted. Think of a costume now; she could make it. A scaled sea monster, the robes of a golden sultan, a goblin made of nothing but leaves and wind. She worked through the night, her long fingers stitching and milling like a spider. Although Gran wasn't famous, her costumes were. You could always tell if she'd made something by the tiny initials she'd embroider into the lining: T.H.

"The sugar *must* be kept locked up," Gran said simply, which was no real answer at all. Then she changed the subject with insect-like speed. "I moved to Suds forty-six years ago when I was twenty-two. The people here aren't any kinder or meaner than any other town. The library doesn't have better books. The post doesn't come any faster, and the mutton pies are just as delicious as the ones two towns over. I didn't come here for any of that. I came to Suds for the *cloth*."

Gran took another sip from her cup, and when her pursed lips pulled away they created a little ripple in her tea.

"There is no better cloth in the whole, wide, wonderful *world* than the cloth they make in Suds."

Poppy cradled her cocoa and nestled up beside Gran's velvet slippers.

"I've seen cloth that changes colour like a cuttlefish, and fabric that crumbles like ancient stones but stitches like new satin."

"Where do they make the cloth?" Poppy asked.

"At the Helligan Mills, just out of town on the river. Miss Crink at the fabric shop says that once a week, on a Tuesday morning, bolts of the most exquisite cloth float down the river in a crate which stops at the brook beside her shop. There is never any left over, because the perfect amount is always made. Not an inch more or less."

"Who makes it?"

"That", her grandmother said, "remains a mystery." She thought for a bit. "Your mum wouldn't like me telling you this, but since she isn't with us any more I make those decisions now, so I'm going to tell you."

Gran cleared her throat and opened a tin of syrupy peaches sat beside her.

"Many years ago, before there were street lamps and car horns, there opened a famous fabric mill in Suds. Merchants came from all over the world to buy their fabric. Nothing was impossible, no colour too specific, no texture too complex. You could take them a toadstool and they'd weave you a red and white spotted fabric with an underside of pleated bone muslin that was so fine you'd think they'd plucked it from a witch's supply cupboard. They made a voile so light, you could drape it on a ghost."

"How did they make it?" Poppy wondered if perhaps Gran was exaggerating a little.

Gran finished off the last peach and drank the juice

from the tin. "Some say they made it with the web of the Whistling Spider, others say they used silk threads from the Chinese Devil Worm softened in the stomach of the Skipping Camel. But I say otherwise."

The old woman narrowed her briny eyes and leaned towards Poppy.

"I say magic," she said, and picked her teeth with a needle.

Poppy's neck was suddenly aware of the tiny hairs on the back of it.

"You can't expect me to believe that, Gran."

"Then how else do you explain it?"

Poppy thought for a moment and considered biting her nail absent-mindedly.

"Well, no one can ever really prove they've seen a ghost or what it looks like inside a witch's supply cupboard. So no one could ever prove the materials really ever were that special, could they?"

Gran smiled. "You must be careful not to be too clever, my little button. Overthinking clogs the brain like soggy cereal clogs the sink."

Poppy narrowed her eyes. Gran held out her cup.

"Make me another tea and fetch me a biscuit, would you, pet?"

Poppy put the kettle on the stove.

"Where did we leave off? Oh, that's right," Gran said, unpicking a few of the scales from a pair of beetle wings she was making. "The fabric became even more

famous. The town of Suds prospered and grew…until something odd began to happen."

The kettle whistled as it began to boil and Poppy poured the hot water over the fragrant tea leaves.

"One by one, like the birds of summer, children began to vanish."

Poppy put the kettle down and brought Grandma her tea.

"What do you mean? How did they vanish? When did this happen?"

Churchill the pig rested his snout on the edge of his basket, as if listening to the story too.

"I mean just what I say: children began to vanish. One here, one there. They faded away. I remember I was twenty-three when Wilma Norbles disappeared. Wilma was a swimming champion. Every day before school she would swim up and down the river like a seal, until one morning something peculiar began to happen. It started with Wilma's eyes. Very slowly, little by little, their colour began to fade. Before she knew it, the colour from her hair began to drain away too. The last time Wilma climbed into the river, despite being ten years old, she was as grey as an old woman. People watching from the shore said that she took a deep breath, sunk beneath the water and dissolved like a blob of paint. Some said she was eaten by the old fish rumoured to live in the River Suds. But even I'm not superstitious enough to think *that's* likely."

Poppy nodded politely. She didn't quite know if she believed her wily old gran. She was twelve after all, and twelve is the age when one truly starts reasoning what is real and what is fabricated.

"I can see you don't believe me, but let me tell you this: ever since, and ever so slowly, the children of Suds have been dwindling away."

"Where did they go?" Poppy asked. "When was the last time it happened?"

Gran looked at Poppy and answered only one of her questions. "No one knows. Sugar, my button. Two lumps."

Poppy retrieved the sugar, heeding Grandma's instructions.

"And what's happened to the Mills now?"

"They're still there," said Gran, sipping her tea. "Somewhere in the woods outside of town. Riddling Woods. Neglected, ruined and overgrown. Whether the fabric which floats down the river comes from the Mills or not is anybody's guess. People in the village like to say they are haunted."

"Haunted?"

"Haunted," said Gran. "By the ghost of a washerwoman who crouches beside the river's edge, washing the stains from a grey cloth."

"That's not real," muttered Poppy, her chest swimming with unease.

"It might not be real, but it's a fact that people have seen her," said Gran wryly. "Now, while your dad is

away for the next few weeks and you're staying with me here in Suds, I want you to follow four simple rules. No one else seems to bother with them these days, but I'm a bit old-fashioned sometimes, Poppy, and I like to stick to them."

Poppy fetched her notepad from her backpack and wrote down what Grandma said. With each line she wrote, her fingers stiffened and her heart began to dance its familiar dance.



RULES:

1) All washing must be done during the day. Bring your clothes in off the washing line (even if they are wet) before six o'clock every night.

2) All sugar cubes are to be kept under lock and key.

3) At night close your window, lock it, draw the curtains.

4) NEVER, DON'T YOU EVER, dust the window sills.