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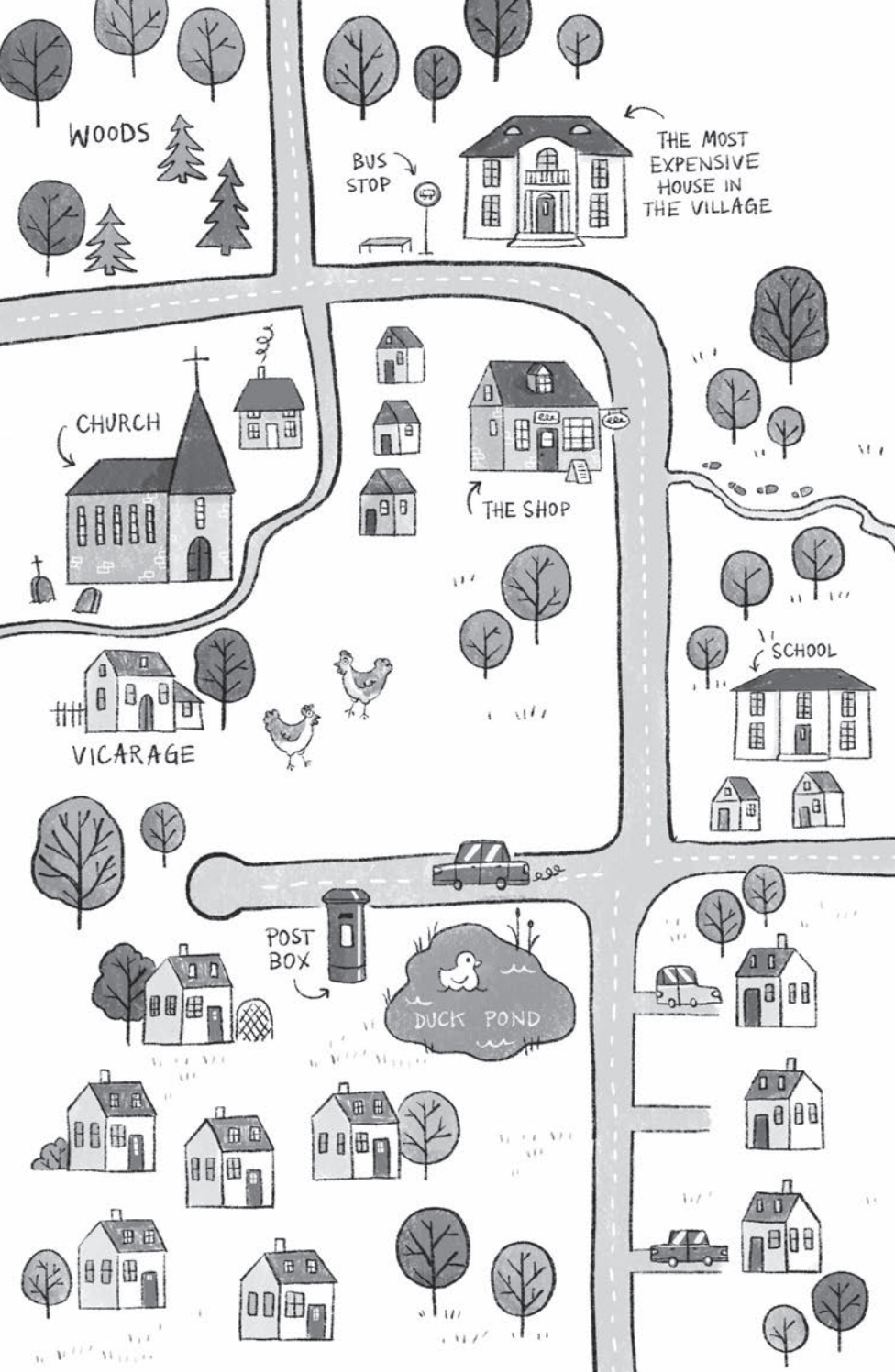
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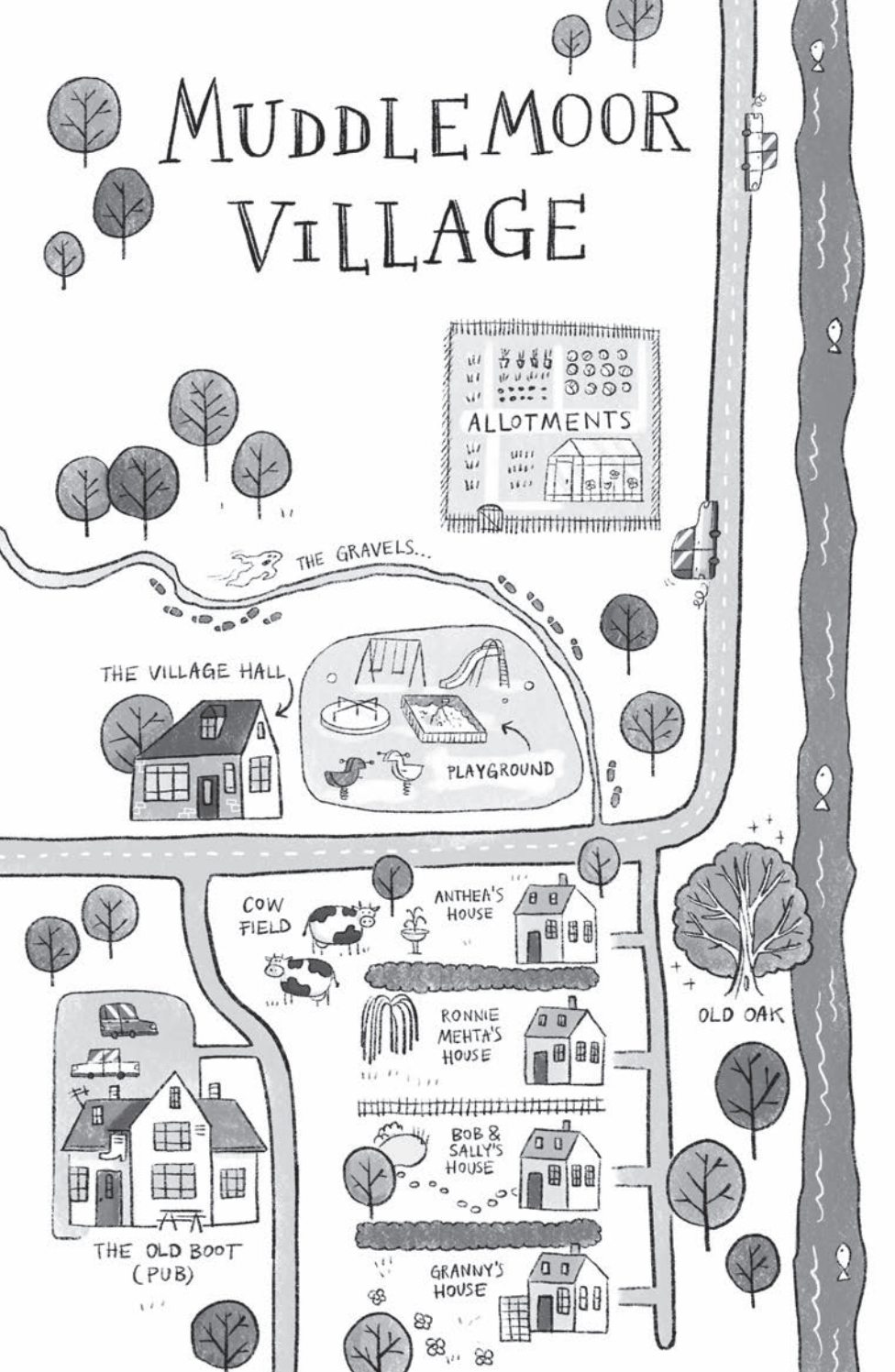
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WOODS
BUS STOP
THE MOST EXPENSIVE HOUSE IN THE VILLAGE
CHURCH
THE SHOP
SCHOOL
VICARAGE
POST BOX
DUCK POND


MUDDLEMOOR VILLAGE
ALLOTMENTS
THE GRAVELS...
THE VILLAGE HALL
PLAYGROUND
COW FIELD
ANTHEA'S HOUSE
RONNIE MEHTA'S HOUSE
BOB & SALLY'S HOUSE
GRANNY'S HOUSE
OLD OAK
THE OLD BOOT (PUB)

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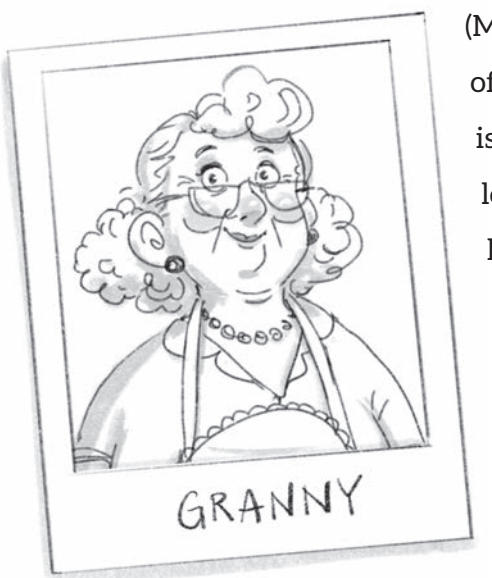
When people call me 'Joey' I say, 'Who's Joey?' If people shout 'Joseph', I have trouble hearing them. I am not called Joey or Joseph or Jojo or J. I am **Joe Robinson** and that is that.

My family is on the small side, just me and Mum most of the time. Sometimes my sister Bella comes home from university, but she doesn't count because she's too old to play fun games. Mum says it's a good job there aren't more Joe Robinsons in our family because she has trouble keeping



up with just one version. But I don't think I'd mind more of me because I am quite friendly and also I'm a chatterbox. Mum says I could talk the hind legs off a donkey, but I would NEVER do that because I LOVE donkeys and wouldn't want them to lose their back legs. I might be a vet one day – or maybe a hamster trainer.

Normally in the school holidays when Mum has to work, I go to the holiday club at our local leisure centre, but this summer Mum made a big announcement. She said there had been a change of plan and I was going to stay with my **granny** in Muddlemoor instead.



(Muddlemoor is the name of Granny's village. It is in the countryside, a long way from where I live in London).

When Mum told me this I looked her straight in the eyes to

check she wasn't joking because it is really **good** at Granny's house. It is better than the holiday club. But even though I was happy I also felt slightly nervous because one thing I have never done is stay at Granny's on my own. Mainly Mum comes with me and sometimes Bella, too.

'Will me and Granny have enough to talk about?' I asked.

Mum laughed and said, 'Running out of conversation is not exactly a problem for you, Joe Robinson.'

And I nodded because that was quite a good point of Mum's. But then Mum said something that stopped me worrying about running out of conversation with Granny. She told me that my cousins Tom and Pip Berryman were also going to be staying in Muddlemoor WITHOUT THEIR PARENTS.

At this point I got a bit hyper because me and my cousins get on like a house on fire. The handy thing about cousins is that they're not as cross as brothers and

sisters but they know you better than your friends do.

Like for instance, at my school in London, people think I make things up and they sometimes say I'm REALLY SILLY, but Tom and Pip don't think being silly is a bad thing. One day I would like to bring Tom and Pip into my school and show them to the Year Sixes. Even Dylan Moynihan would be impressed with my cousins.

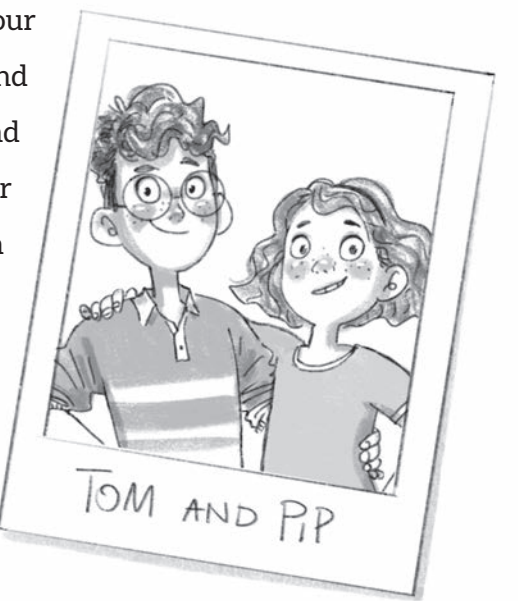
Tom is one year and four months older than me and he knows a lot about dinosaurs and the solar system and why the world exists. Tom always knows about stuff before everybody else finds out. In Wales, where he lives, Tom has a girlfriend called Carys Jones who he loves even though he hasn't spoken to her yet. Tom is really fast at running and good at catching balls and he is also a bookworm. For example, he doesn't just read a few pages of his book at bedtime like I do, he reads in broad daylight whenever he fancies. He even reads when the telly is on – that's how much Tom loves books.

Mum says Tom is so sharp he'll cut himself. But once,

when Tom did actually cut himself on a tin of tuna, he cried like crazy even though it wasn't even that bad and didn't need stitches, just a waterproof plaster.

Pip is eight months younger than me, but she is strong – especially when it comes to doing cartwheels and headstands. Pip doesn't say much, but she isn't shy, she's just keener on thinking. Pip NEVER cries. If Pip came to my school I would ask her to do backflips at breaktime.

The grown-ups in our family call me, Tom and Pip the Terrible Trio and they wink at each other as if we can't see them (but we can because our eyes are always peeled and we don't like to miss a trick). Mum says that when me, Tom and Pip



are together we go round looking for trouble, but she has got her facts wrong because, for a start, when we go to stay with them in Wales or we all go to Granny's house, Mum is mainly chatting to the grown-ups and not even paying attention to what we're up to.

Tom says the grown-ups in our family are lucky that we are so good at looking after ourselves because while they are chatting and drinking wine we are usually in grave danger. The swear-on-my-life truth is that we don't go round looking for trouble. Trouble comes looking for us. It just arrives.

It turned out this summer that most of the time Granny was too busy baking cakes and listening to the radio to worry about what we were up to. She mainly thought we were upstairs playing Lego. Sometimes she didn't even ask questions when we came through the back door covered in mud with suspicious cuts and bruises all over our arms and legs. She'd just say, 'Oh isn't it lovely to see proper grubby knees,' and run us a bath.

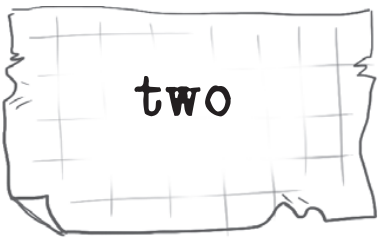
I am not mad about baths, but I was pleased that Granny didn't ask too many questions. I was also happy that she didn't take us to museums like some grannies do.

But then Granny DID start asking questions for a change and that's because me, Tom and Pip did something REALLY BAD.

Tom said it was the worst thing he had ever done. Mum said it was even more serious than when I flooded the school toilets. Granny told us that if we did anything like that again, she **would** start taking us to museums.

THAT'S how cross she was. But the thing is, we didn't mean to be bad. We were ONLY trying to help.





It took me and Mum nearly three hours to drive to Muddlemoor because there was a lot of holiday traffic. It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when we parked outside Granny's house. Tom and Pip were already there. Pip rushed out to our car straight away to meet us. She didn't say much but she smiled and helped carry my bag upstairs to the bedroom I was sharing with her and Tom.

After a few minutes, Tom wandered into the kitchen, all cheerful, carrying a letter in his hand. 'Sorry,' he said, 'I was catching up on my correspondence.' Mum raised her eyebrows and gave Granny a look, but I don't think Tom noticed the look because he was too busy stealing biscuits from the tin in the larder and putting them in

his rucksack. After Mum left to drive back to London, Tom shared the biscuits with me and Pip and showed us round the village.

Tom knew Muddlemoor off by heart because, unlike me and Pip, he had stayed on his own with Granny once before. He led us down Little Draycott (which is the name of Granny's lane) and turned left on to Stonely Road. We walked past the village hall and a dilapidated tennis court, and we looked through the window of the village shop (which was run by a very tall woman with spiky hair called Mrs Rooney). At the end of Cuddingmill Road we stopped in front of a big red-brick house with chickens in the front garden.

'Most expensive house in the village,' said Tom. 'The owners only come here during the holidays and occasional weekends. They live abroad most of the time.'

'How do you know?' I asked.

'Sophie Pearce told me. She looks after their chickens. Sophie Pearce looks after everybody's chickens. She

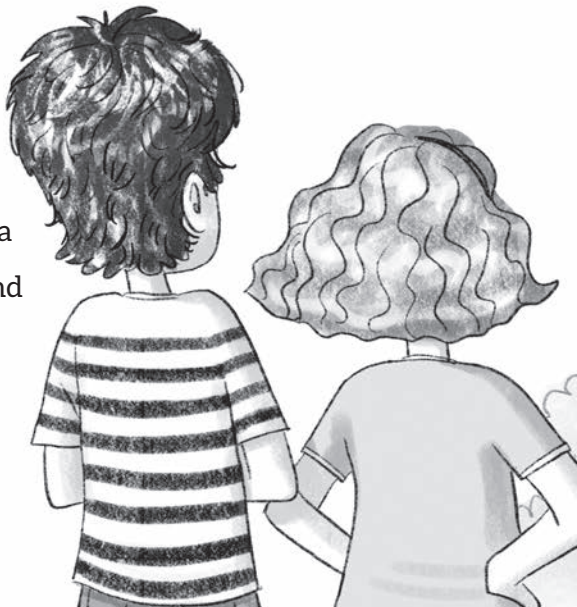
goes to secondary school and has a gold mobile phone.'

Tom went a bit red. He said, 'Sophie Pearce is an interesting person,' and then he told me and Pip to be quiet and stop winding him up, even though we weren't saying anything.

We walked on in silence and after a few seconds, Tom said, 'That's where Sophie Pearce lives,' and walked us down a no-through road called Church Lane.

Like most roads in Muddlemoor, Church Lane seemed very quiet and safe compared to the crowded London streets that I was used to, but when I pointed this out Tom said, 'Don't judge a book by its cover.'

I was about to ask Tom to explain what he meant, but he showed us a modern house with a tidy front garden and said, 'That's Sophie Pearce's house.'



At that moment the front door of the house opened and a girl with black curly hair and hoop earrings came out.

'Oh,' she said, tapping into a gold mobile phone. 'Hi.'

Tom went bright red and didn't say anything.

'Everything OK?'

Tom just stared.





'Well,' said Sophie Pearce, looking bored. 'Bye then.'

As soon as Sophie Pearce turned the corner towards the bus stop, Tom said, 'Split!' and we raced after him all the way back to the shop.

'Was that Sophie Pearce?' asked Pip.

'Yes.'

'I thought you knew her.'

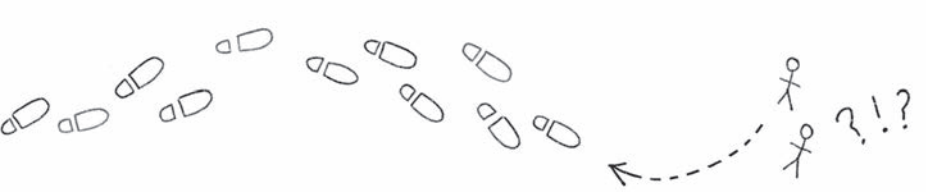
'I do.'

'Then why didn't you speak to her?'

Tom told Pip to stop being so nosy or else, and then he went into the shop to buy wine gums because Tom never gets tired of wine gums. He once ate sixty-two in one go.

We had nearly enough money between us for a small pack of wine gums and three lollies. We asked Mrs Rooney if we could come back later with the one penny we owed her, but she said, 'I'm not a bank. I don't do credit,' and carried on watching the telly on the wall above the counter.

So we had to swap the wine gums for a packet of



chocolate buttons because chocolate buttons are always the cheapest thing you can buy, even in London.

'They'll rot your teeth,' Mrs Rooney shouted as we left her shop, but I didn't mind because when it comes to teeth I am not much of a worrier.

'This is much more fun than doing multi-skills at the leisure centre,' I said as we walked back to Granny's house.

'More dangerous though,' said Tom. 'That's something I discovered when I stayed here on my own in the Easter holidays. Granny's village is a hotspot for crime.'

I went a bit gulpy. 'Are you sure?'

''Fraid so,' said Tom. 'In the Easter holidays I spotted suspicious activity from morning till night. Missing lipsticks, mail going walkabout – you name it. An innocent pensioner from Tiddlington Road died in her sleep one night – they said it was old age but they would, wouldn't they?'

I nodded but I was not quite sure. Tom pointed to a

narrow, overgrown path on our left.

'See that path?' he said. 'It's called The Gravels. It's a shortcut back to Granny's but my advice is, don't ever go down there if you can help it. It's haunted.'

I looked at the overgrown path and shivered.

'At Granny's you have to concentrate even when you're watching telly,' said Tom. 'And the weird thing is, Granny never seems to notice.'

