THE SLIGHTLY ALARMING TALE OF THE WHISPERING WARS
is a GUPPY BOOK

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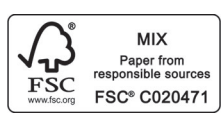
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I was taken by Whisperers at 2:00 p.m., so I never pulled the lever for the laundry chute.

That's what bothered me most.

I live in the Orphanage, see, and the laundry cart comes once a week to collect our dirty laundry. If it's your birthday that week, you get to pull the lever.

Some of the children stand back and watch the clothes slide down the chute. Little smiles on their faces. When it's done, they walk away, still smiling.

They have hearts that are dead easy to please, those kids.

Some children pretend they are the clothes themselves. They pull the lever, then squawk and screech: *Where am I going? Oh, I'm just a simple nightdress belonging to Avril, and I never thought to have such an adventure!*

SPLAT.

Waaah! WHERE AM I?

Is this a LAUNDRY CART? It is!! But I don't WANT to be clean!

And so on. They're pretty funny. But *one* child?

Here is what he does when it's his birthday.

He jumps into the chute. Rockets down along with the skirts, dresses, petticoats, and drawers, and hits the cart with a *THUD.* (It's a soft thud, since the clothes are like a pillow, so don't worry.)

The cart horse, Clodswald, twitches his nose and says *pfft*, but the Orphanage director, Lili-Daisy, who stands on the pavement supervising, well, she screams. She screams like the sirens. Or like the dentist has his pliers clamped around her favourite tooth. The whole thing is crackerjack. The ride down the chute, the thump into the cart, Lili-Daisy's screams. Doors fly open up and down the street and everyone runs out in a fright. "What is it? What's happened? Oh *Lili-Daisy*, for goodness' sake, he does this every year. Would you hush?"

Better laugh than the cinema.

Anyhow, it's me. Finlay. I'm the child who rides the laundry chute each year.

But not this year. Not my eleventh birthday. The Whisperers got us at 2:00, and the laundry cart doesn't come till 3:00.

This is way ahead in the story, though. A lot happened before that. I'm only saying it up front because it bothered me so much, the missing out.



1
FINLAY

Finlay here.

I'm starting the story, but a girl named Honey Bee takes over in the next chapter. You'll miss me then. You'll say, "Oh, I wish that Finlay was back, I liked him."

You won't like Honey Bee. Trust me on that. This is her fault. With some people, you don't like them and it's not their fault? They're accidentally annoying? But with Honey Bee, it's her fault.

Don't worry, though. I'll be back. Honey Bee and I are taking turns.

The story begins on the day of the Spindrift Tournament.

That's an annual competition that takes place on the Spindrift Town Green. (*Annual* means once a year. *Spindrift* is my town.) At the tournament, the local schools compete in athletics. (*Athletics* are running, high jump, and so on. *Compete* means—)

Listen, from now on, you can look things up in the dictionary if you don't know what they mean. Otherwise, this will take forever.

That morning, I woke up and dropped straight out of bed onto the floor-boards to do my push-ups. I do twenty first thing every morning. Only did seventeen that day, though, not wanting to wear myself out before the tournament.

Glim's bed is by the window and she was kneeling on her pillow, drawing pictures in the mist on the glass. She's not much of an artist, if I'm honest. But she tells us all crackerjack stories each night, pressing her nose against the glass as she speaks. (She likes to watch the goings-on in the town square.)

The twins, Eli and Taya, were reading newspapers under the covers. They always do that. They're big for ten, Eli and Taya, so every morning it's like a pair of boulders have got ahold of a paper each and climbed under the blankets to read.

I won't describe what the other kids were doing, as that would take too long. Also, I don't remember. Three beds were empty: I know that. Amie, Connor, and Bing had all been taken.

Back then, we didn't know who or what had taken them.

Jaskafar would have been on top of the wardrobe because that's where he always ends up. He climbs there in his sleep. It took Lili-Daisy about six months to stop screaming about this.

"A rat! A rat on the wardrobe!" she shrieked, the first time she saw him there.

"I am not a rat," Jaskafar replied, waking up. "I am a five-year-old boy—" And he bumped his head on the ceiling and realized where he was. "A five-year-old boy on a wardrobe!" He was that surprised.

Everybody had scolded Lili-Daisy for calling Jaskafar a rat.

"Jaskafar looks *nothing* like a rat!" we shouted.

"Still. Have a gander at his teeth," Daffo observed. "They stick out a bit." Then everybody shouted at Daffo to shut his trap. But he did have a point.

"They stick out in a cute-little-boy way," Glim said. "Not a rat way. Also, he has no tail – we'd have noticed if he did."

Glim also had a point.

Lili-Daisy had pulled Jaskafar down from the wardrobe and apologized for calling him a rat. It was just she could only see his hair at first, she explained; that's where the mistake had come in. Then she sat on a bed, Jaskafar on her lap, and made up a song:

"Not a rat! Not a rat!
But a dear little boy, oh drat!
Oh drat that I called you a rat!
Oh, how foolish I can be
When I've not had my morning tea–"

"And when you've *had* your morning tea," I interrupted – and now *I* had a point. Lili-Daisy can be foolish any time of the day. She raised an eyebrow at me and carried on singing:

"Oh drat!
You're not a rat!
If you were, I'd get a cat!
To eat you!"

Jaskafar had been very cheerful and said, "It's okay! You can call me a rat if you like." But we all bellowed, "No!" except Daffo, who said, "Thanks, I'll do that."

Lili-Daisy had sung more loudly, and then it was time for breakfast.

But the next day, Jaskafar was on the wardrobe again and Lili-Daisy came into the dormitory and screamed, "A rat!"

Anyway, she got used to Jaskafar being on the wardrobe in the end.

On the morning of the Spindrift Tournament, everyone was trying to brush Jaskafar's hair at the breakfast table. Lili-Daisy was dabbing at his face with a washer. Avril was brushing dried mud from his shoes. Jaskafar himself wore a thoughtful expression on his face.

"What if I accidentally eat the flowers?" he asked.

He had a special job that day, you see. The queen and the prince were coming along to the Spindrift Tournament as part of their tour of the kingdom, and Jaskafar was the child chosen to give the queen a bunch of flowers.

Queens always need bunches of flowers. I don't know why. I think they have a special interest in them.

"What if I accidentally eat the flowers," Jaskafar repeated, "before I give them to her?"

We asked him if he was in the habit of eating flowers and he said no, he'd never done it before. Well then, we said, it probably wouldn't happen today. Glim suggested he have extra toast for breakfast so as not to have an appetite for flowers.

I was having trouble eating breakfast myself. It's not that I get

nervous on the day of the tournament, it's just that it seems like grasshoppers are kicking each other around in my belly.

Here is what always happens at the tournament: I win most of the boys' events. My best friend, Glim, wins most of the girls' events. My other best friends, the twins, being a boy (Eli) and a girl (Taya), and both big and strong for their age, win the rest of the events between them.

Between us, we four make the Orphanage School the champions of the Spindrift Tournament. Every single year.

Which is a big responsibility. I think that's why the grasshoppers.

This year, Sir Edgar Brathelthwaite Boarding School was competing in the tournament for the first time. That school is just outside town, and they're usually too rich and important to join in. But Millicent Cadger, local councilwoman and director of the Spindrift Tournament, had begged them to come today, on account of the queen and prince attending. Royals need the *better* sort of children, see? The sort who polish their faces and shoes, and tilt their chins at the sky.

We were not worried about the boarding school kids winning anything. They just lazed about on cushions eating cake all day, as I understood it. They'd be clueless about sport. Even if they tried it, they'd run into a wall or a tree, on account of their chins pointing up.

We knew we would win.

We washed up, tied our shoelaces, and set off for the tournament. And that is the beginning of the story.

*

(Honey Bee will probably say, "No, no, I cannot *abide* that beginning." And she'll try to tell you a different one. Ignore her.)

Okay, here she is. It's Honey Bee. Good luck.

2
HONEY BEE

Ahoy there!

I am Honey Bee, and I *completely* agree with Finlay about the beginning of the story. It did start on the day of the Spindrift Tournament.

I do not know what *crackerjack* means, but I *did* like Finlay's chapter.

He is funny! The joke about me being annoying, especially. That had me rolling on the floor. But he's right that you'll be missing him. I'll try to be quick.

I live at Sir Edgar Brathelthwaite Boarding School.

The morning of the Spindrift Tournament we marched around the courtyard, chanting the school motto, as per usual.

"Brathelthwaite students are
Better than the best!
Brathelthwaite students,
Put us to the test!
We will conquer all

We are ever so tall
We will never ever fall
We will never drop the ball
We would never have the gall
To come second*!*
What*?*
Second*?*! [then you must pretend to spit, as if you've tasted something nasty]
No way!
We will come first!

Ohhhhhhhh
Brathelthwaite students,
We are fine and well-pressed,
We are faster and stronger and much better-dressed,
We are – we are – we are the BEST!!"

Uncle Dominic, who is deputy headmaster, swished his horsewhip about our ankles as we marched. He only does that for show, of course, and has never once horsewhipped a student.

Oh, other than Carlos. Uncle Dominic did horsewhip Carlos the day he kicked the windowpane out of the school's second-best carriage. It had filled with smoke, you see. Madame Dandelion had tossed her cigar inside and the seat caught alight. Carlos ought *never* to have damaged school property, Uncle Dominic said – he ought to have squeezed himself and the other children into a corner, away

from the flames, and *waved* the smoke away. Never mind that little Reenie has the asthma and was turning blue, Uncle Dominic said.

Uncle Dominic also horsewhipped Sarah-May, I just remembered, when she accidentally dropped a tray of fine china. She was carrying it down the stairs for deportment class. Wood lice had gotten into the floorboards and her foot cracked right through a step, causing her to drop the tray. But never mind that, Uncle Dominic said, she ought to have guessed about the wood lice.

Oh yes, and Jeremy, when he was thrown from a dragon during prelim officer training and broke his ankle – he was horsewhipped too. (The dragon had been spooked by a snake.) Jeremy ought to have held on, Uncle Dominic said. Brathelthwaite students never *ever* fall. It's in the chant.

I just thought of four or five more children who have been horsewhipped, but I must get on. Suffice to say, Uncle Dominic has (practically) never once horsewhipped a child.

After we finished marching and chanting, we filed onto the sports field for our daily sprints and drills. Next, on to the dining hall for breakfast, where Sir Brathelthwaite, our headmaster, gave a rousing speech about the tournament. He is a fine-looking man, Sir Brathelthwaite, little and dapper, with a moustache and a perfectly bald head. This glows fiercely under the school's chandeliers, and you often see him patting it affectionately. Another thing he often does is brush down his immaculate suit jacket. He wears bright white shirts that flare out from his jacket sleeves dramatically.

My Uncle Dominic, as deputy, tries to dress the same way but he

is a much larger man, and his buttons tend to pop. Also, he's always getting those flaring shirtsleeves in his soup.

"Today," Sir Brathelthwaite said, "my fine students, the queen and prince are going to be *dazzled* by your athletic prowess! The people of Spindrift will be stunned!"

We all nodded as we buttered croissants and sipped tea.

"Now, the little local schools," Sir Brathelthwaite continued, and he counted them on his fingers, "Spindrift Public, Harrison Boys, Thea Ashley Girls, and the Orphanage School – will *not* be accustomed to seeing such skill. I ask myself: ought we to *let* them win an event or two, so as not to crush their spirits?"

We waited, curious to know how he might answer himself.

"No! We ought not!"

Ah.

"It would be wrong to hold back!" Sir Brathelthwaite continued, and he gave his own head an encouraging little pat. "The local children *deserve* to see the splendour of *true* athletics. Certainly, they will be horribly depressed by their defeat, but I think, in the end, they will be grateful. Watching *you* will be rather like a pageant to them!"

Here, Victor Ainsley wiped his mouth with a napkin and raised his hand. "Respectfully, sir," he said. "May I interject?"

"Certainly, Your Grace!" Sir Brathelthwaite replied. "Do you think me wrong?"

The teachers all call Victor *Your Grace*, as that is his proper title. Even though he is only twelve, he is already a duke. But most of the

children just call him Victor. Because he might be a duke, but he is also a horrid little toad.

Victor chuckled. "No, no, Sir Brathelthwaite," he said. "You? Wrong? Impossible to imagine!"

Sir Brathelthwaite beamed. "Oh, you make me blush, Your Grace. What a delightful boy you are. Go on, then. What is it?"

"Sir, is it quite the thing for us to associate with local riffraff? Could not a wicked outsider conceal him- or herself amidst the . . . *unwashed* crowds? Personally, I am not at *all* concerned about the danger, but some of our younger children might be nervous?"

"Indeed," Sir Brathelthwaite replied solemnly. "You make a fine point. Dear students, please try to be as considerate as our young duke. For His Grace is correct. Seventeen children *have* been taken from Spindrift in the last few months. *Hundreds* have been stolen across the Kingdoms and Empires. But I ask you, my dear students, has a *single* student of Brathelthwaite Boarding School been taken? Have they?!"

We all cried, "No!" and cheered, which was what he meant us to do.

"So, be calm, dear students. It's true that the townsfolk will be at the tournament, but they will be seated in the stands. Children will be seated *across the field* with their school groups, well-guarded by the local constabulary. The ten most highly trained constables will focus on protecting *our* school. I have demanded this."

Sir Brathelthwaite cleared his throat. "In addition," he said, "your teachers will be vigilant for your safety." He waved his hand at the teachers seated around him at the high table, and they all nodded