ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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The Lion Above the Door

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Orion

1

THE SCHOOL TRIP

'Yesssss! School trip tomorrow – did you get your form signed? I hope there's cool things to buy in the gift shop. I hate it when they only have a few tiny rubbers and rulers and then everything else is super sad grown-up stuff – like tea towels and biscuits. Apparently people *collect* tea towels. How? Maybe they hang them up on a wall like pictures in a gallery. Some people are so *strange* . . .'

Sangeeta looked over at me to make sure I was still listening, and then carried on talking. If I decided to never ever speak again, I'm pretty sure she could go on talking all by herself for the rest of both our lives. My dad says she could talk the hind legs off a donkey or any animal with four legs. Maybe that's why her mum

and dad have only ever given her fish for pets. Even though she's always wanted is a cat.

'Hey, you know Katie? And Sarah? And Tom with no teeth in Mrs Thompson's class? Well, apparently they've already been to the cathedral – for like a concert or something. And they said there's a naughty word on one of the slabs on the floor, right by the front of the church. I wonder what it says – and if the vicar knows about it. They *must* do if it's right at the front. I hope we see it tomorrow – Oooooh! Bell! Come on. Race ya!'

Sangeeta sprinted towards the school doors, her bright yellow wellies flashing at everyone like muddy thunderbolts, and her two long plaits of shiny black hair zig-zagging through the air.

Sangeeta loves racing. Even more than she loves talking. And she doesn't just race with her legs but with her brain too. Like in class when we're reading she always has to be the first to finish her book and when we get asked a question, she always has to be the first to answer. I think she even races against herself when there's no one around. Sometimes I think it's strange that we're friends because we're so different. But we're

the only ones who look like us in the whole school, so somehow the differences don't matter.

I ran after her at full speed too, when someone suddenly stuck a foot out and tripped me over. Luckily I was used to it, so instead of falling straight down, I caught myself by crashing into a wall instead.

'Watch it, chopstick head,' hissed Toby, quiet enough so that no one else could hear. Looking around to make sure no one was watching, he gave me a push and ran off. Right behind him was Harry, who pretended that I didn't exist and never looked at me, and Catherine, who always giggled because she thought whatever Toby did was funny.

Ignoring them like I always do, I made my way into class.

'Right! Bottoms on seats! Settle down please. NOW,' shouted Mr Scott, thumping his desk loudly to make everyone quiet. Mr Scott loves thumping his desk. It's why his hands are always the colour of squashed raspberries.

As everyone fell quiet and stopped shuffling and whispering, Mr Scott leaned against his desk and picked up a clipboard. It was time to find out the most

important answer to the most important question we had all had been asking ourselves the whole day long: who was going on the school trip tomorrow, and who wasn't because their parents clearly hated them and wanted to ruin the rest of their lives by not signing the form.

'Right,' said Mr Scott, holding up a clipboard of names. We all squinted and tried to make out the names, as if we were taking an eye test together, but the letters were way too small to make out.

As Mr Scott turned the clipboard around so that only he could see it, I crossed my fingers under the table extra hard. Mum and Dad had promised me that I could go and said that they had sent all the forms in, but you could never be too sure with parents. Especially not ones who forgot which one of them was meant to pick you up from school and always arrived late.

'David, Catherine and Toby . . .' read out Mr Scott. 'None of your parents have sent the forms back, and this morning was the final cut off. So I'm afraid you'll all be staying behind tomorrow.'

The whole class turned to look at the sad victims of parental cruelty who were going to be left behind

with the worst form of torture our school had: Mr Denby. The only teacher in the world who thought reading Shakespeare all day beat even going to Disneyland. We know because he always wore a T-shirt that said: *To Disneyland, say Nay! To reading Shakespeare all day? Yay!*

'Sir, how come Leo and Sangeeta are allowed to go and I'm not?' shouted Toby. 'They're probably not even allowed inside a church! AND my great-grandparents lived through the war and things – theirs didn't. So *I* should get to go more than them!'

'Yeah!' added Catherine, her eyes all wet and pink.

The whole class turned to look at me and Sangeeta. We stared straight ahead at Mr Scott, just like we always do when everyone looks at us. That's the problem with being the only ones who look different to everyone else. There's always someone who doesn't like you, and then doesn't like you *even more* when you can do something that they can't.

'Because their parents said they could go, and yours didn't,' said Mr Scott, throwing the clipboard onto his desk loudly. 'Anything else?'

Toby gave me and Sangeeta a look that told us his

life wasn't fair and that it was somehow our fault. Then he shook his head and growled at his hands. David gave a sniffle and Catherine crossed her arms, glaring angrily at everyone and everything. Even the ceiling.

'Right, now that's settled, ground rules for tomorrow . . .'

Mr Scott walked up to the whiteboard and, picking up a bright red pen, began to write out words that looked as loud and as angry as the ones he was now shouting out at us.

'NO pushing, shoving, or fighting! NO being a smart-aleck to anyone at the RAF museum OR the cathedral. NO losing your partner on purpose OR pretending you've forgotten who your partner is. Adam and Evelyn – I'm looking at you both. NO running off and trying to join another school group – Kerry and Christina, I'll be watching you. NO bringing in extra spending money. And NO impertinent questions . . . Quick, someone tell me what "impertinent" means!'

I watched as the usual three hands catapulted themselves into the air.

'Yes Gary?' asked Mr Scott.

Gary took his hand down, turned bright red, and

said, 'Something that doesn't . . . last a long time?'

Sangeeta tutted and continued waving her hand in the air.

'No . . . you're thinking of im*permanent* there,' replied Mr Scott. 'Sangeeta?'

'Being rude and disrespectful to people who are older than you,' said Sangeeta. She gave me a grin because we both knew why she knew the meaning of that word so well. It was because her parents and aunts and uncles and grandparents were always telling her not to be it.

'Exactly,' said Mr Scott. 'So long as none of you are *impertinent* and you all follow those rules, maybe we can have just one day of the year where I'm not shouting at you. And maybe Mrs Fitzgerald will trust us to have another school trip soon.'

'Yeah!' muttered Toby loudly. 'Probably to the stupid fruit farm again!'

Everyone giggled, because that's where most of our school's class trips took place. Going to a school in a village in the middle of nowhere meant taking a trip to see the local farmers was considered a 'thrilling learning experience'. That's what all the teachers

promised those trips would be. Except they weren't ever thrilling and no one really learned anything except that farms really smell of poo.

That was why everyone was so excited about the school trip tomorrow. It was the first time ever that we were going to get on a real coach and travel into a *real* town with a *real* museum and, hopefully, some *real*, proper sweet shops too. The kind of shops that didn't sell vegetables and double up as a post office too.

'Come on now kids. I know Whot isn't exactly London, but we should be proud of all our farms and businesses,' said Mr Scott, seriously. 'Most of your parents make a living from them, remember? Now, books open, and let's have a recap of what tomorrow is all about.'

Mr Scott began talking about some of the World War Two stories we were going to learn more about at the museum the next day. We had already learnt about how the war had started when Germany had invaded Poland, and just finished learning about how Hitler had blitzed France and lots of other countries across Europe. Now it was time for the 'Battle of Britain'.

I opened up my workbook and looked down at the

black and white pictures staring back at me. They were all photos of RAF pilots, smiling and wearing scarves and leather jackets, or coats with medals made out of extra-large coins. They looked like actors from an action movie and had names like 'Arthur' and 'William' and 'George' – like members of the Royal family. Maybe you needed to look like an actor and have a royal-family sounding name to fight in wars and get medals and get into history books.

I looked over at Sangeeta who was racing to finish reading the worksheet Mr Scott had given us. I could tell she was racing because she her face was less than a centimetre away from her piece of paper, and her lips were moving up and down quickly. She looked like a fish that was talking to itself.

When she had finished, she looked over at me and frowned.

'What?' she asked.

I shrugged. 'Do you know what your great-grandad's name was?' I asked.

Sangeeta frowned at me. 'My *great*-grandad? Er . . . no,' she replied. 'But it was probably Something Singh. *Everyone* in my family is called Singh. It's well boring.'

I spent the rest of the day wondering about what my great-grandad's name might have been. It definitely wasn't 'Arthur' or 'William' or 'George' like the soldiers in the booklet.

'Right! Eight-thirty *sharp* in front of the school gates,' announced Mr Scott at the end of the day. 'Not eight thirty-*one*! Not eight thirty-one and thirty-seconds! Eight-thirty! And remember to tell your parents ALL spending money needs to be in an envelope with your name AND the amount written on the front of it, and handed to ME! The maximum you can bring is five pounds. If I catch anyone bringing in extras, you won't be spending any of it!'

'That's so stupid,' whispered Sangeeta, as she shoved her workbook into her rucksack extra quick, hoping to beat the whole class again. 'What can we buy with five pounds? Sometimes a pencil's two-pound-fifty! This school doesn't know anything about the rates of inflation in gift shops.'

I could tell everyone else was grumbling about the same thing, and I knew for a fact most of them – including me and Sangeeta – were going to try and sneak in at least a few extra coins somehow. I had heard

Kerry say she was going to tape everything she had to her belly. And I was pretty sure Adam would be limping extra-hard tomorrow. Adam always limped when he had something hidden in his sock. One time Mr Scott had found three marbles and a packet of chewing gum in one. But only because the marbles kept clanking together and Andrew's feet had started to smell like fruit. I was going to keep it simple and hide all my saved-up birthday money in my pencil case. That way if Mr Scott saw me opening it, he would just think I was working extra-hard.

'I'm going to keep my extras up my sleeve,' said Sangeeta, as we headed out to the playground to meet her parents. Sangeeta's parents were always early, and they knew mine were always late, so they let me sit in the back of their car with her and gave me snacks until my mum or dad arrived. Usually they gave me a huge samosa that was the size of my face or a crispy onion bhaji that looked like an orange UFO with squashed up tentacles, but sometimes I would get lucky and get a big bar of chocolate too.

'How will that work?' I asked, as her mum beeped at us from her car.

'Shhh!' whispered Sangeeta. Then, turning around so that her mum or dad couldn't see us from the car, she pulled up her school jumper sleeve. A single crisp, five-pound note was fixed to her shirt sleeve with a huge silver paperclip. 'I tested it out today. See? And it worked! No one noticed. Not even when I had to wash my hands in the sink right in front of Mr Scott.'

'Clever,' I grinned, wondering if I should do the same.

'You should do the same,' suggested Sangeeta, as she turned back around and began running towards an extra shiny black car. 'Come on! It's Mum today – race ya!'

I ran after her and *nearly* beat her too. Sangeeta smiled and stuck her tongue out at me as she reached the door handle first, and then opened it for us both to pile in.

'Hello Leo! Would you like one?' asked Mrs Singh, in her musical voice. 'It's veggie as usual.' She shoved a plastic container lined with tissue and filled with two giant triangle samosas in front of us.

'Thanks Mrs Singh,' I said, as I grabbed one and Sangeeta grabbed the other. We both sunk our faces

into them at the exact same time.

'Are you excited for the school trip tomorrow?' asked Mrs Singh, as she handed us each a tissue.

We nodded, too busy munching through big chunks of bright yellow potato and half mushy peas to speak.

'Good,' said Mrs Singh. 'Mr Singh and I have never been to the museum you're going to. So I will be looking forward to hearing all about it when you come back tomorrow!'

As I gulped down a giant mouthful of spicy potato, a question popped into my head and then out of my mouth.

'Mrs Singh – have *you* ever met anyone who was in the Second World War?'

Mrs Singh turned around from her driver's seat and looked at me with a frown. 'Hmmm . . .' she murmured. 'As a matter of fact yes, I have! Before Sangeeta was born I met a man—'

'Ew! Mum!'

Mrs Singh rolled her eyes. 'Stop being impertinent Sangeeta!' She shook her head before continuing. 'As I was saying, before you were born, I lived next door to a very, very old man who had fought in Italy, and then

in India, and then in Burma. We had lots of interesting discussions. But sadly he died a long time ago.'

'What was his name?' asked Sangeeta.

'George . . . George something . . . Marshwall?' replied Mrs Singh.

Another George. I knew it! 'Do you think he might have been related to the royal family?' I asked, wondering if my secret suspicion was true.

Sangeeta frowned at me as her mum laughed and said, 'No. I don't think members of the royal family live in council flats in Birmingham. Ah! Look, here is your dad!'

Giving a short beep, Mrs Singh rolled down the window and waved to my dad.

'See you tomorrow – at eight-thirty sharp!' said Sangeeta, as I shoved the rest of the samosa into my mouth and jumped out of the car. 'And don't forget the paperclip!' she added in a whisper.

I grinned as I slammed the door shut. I ran over to my dad and grabbed his hand.

'Sorry I'm late, son,' he said, his face red and sweaty as if he had just run a marathon. 'Got stuck at work. And your mum's somewhere up in Bristol.'

'That's OK, Dad.' We began heading home, my hand swinging in his. As we walked through town, I could feel people staring out of the corner of their eyes, and talking more quietly as they watched us pass by. I was used to it, so I tried not care. Besides, I had more important things to worry about. Like how to change all my birthday coins into a five-pound note, and where to find a giant paperclip.