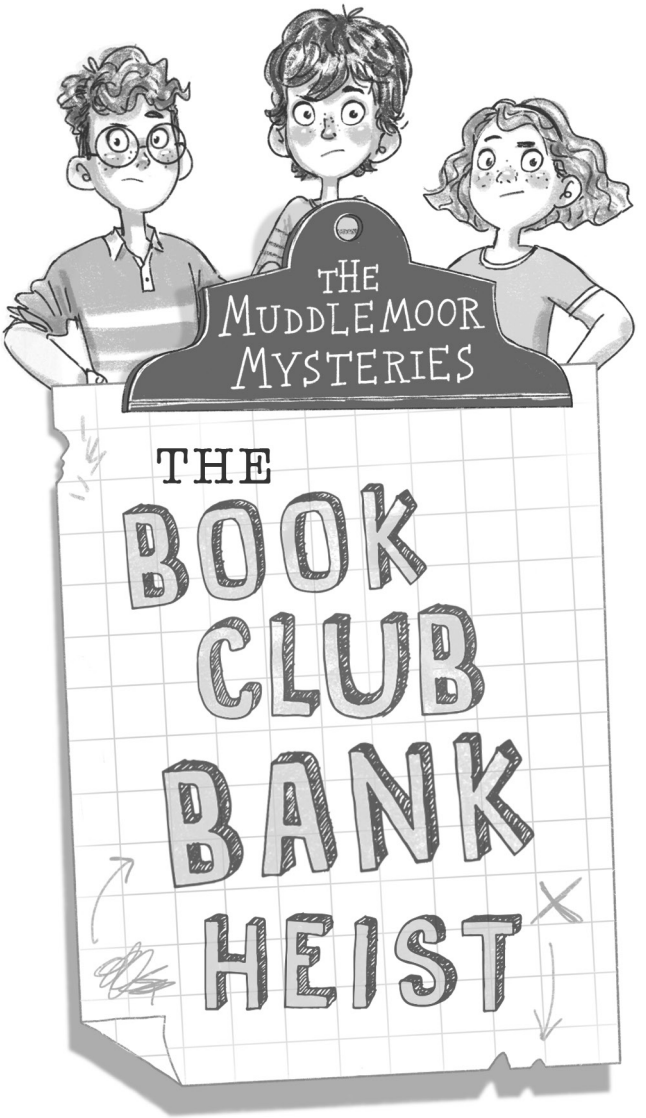
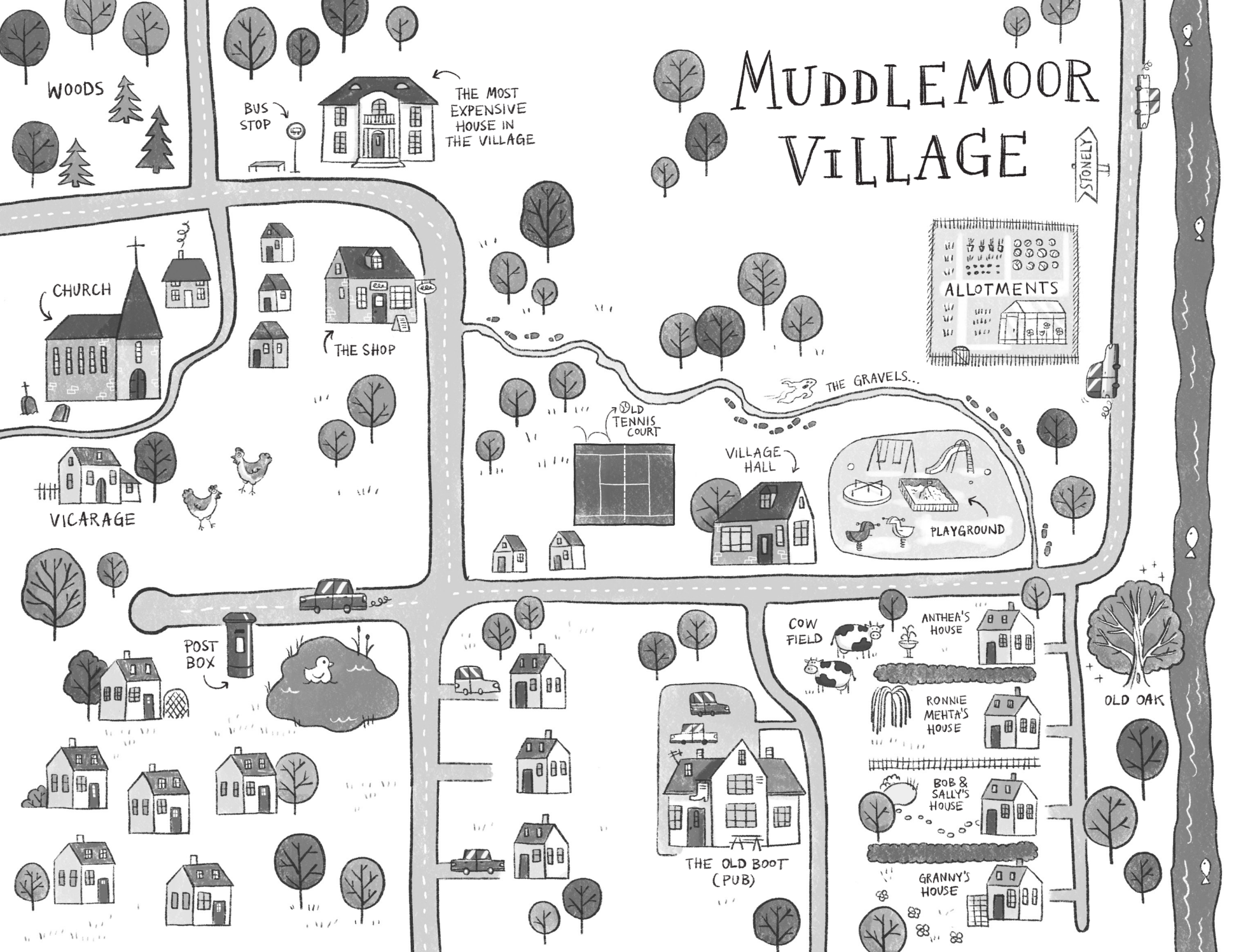
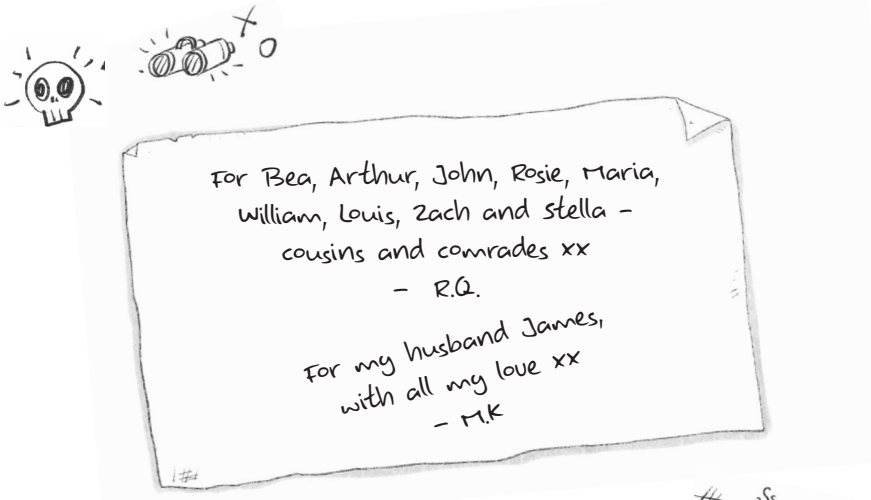


by Ruth Quayle

illustrated by
Marta Kissi

Andersen Press


MUDDLEMOOR VILLAGE
WOODS
BUS STOP
THE MOST EXPENSIVE HOUSE IN THE VILLAGE
STONELY
CHURCH
THE SHOP
ALLOTMENTS
THE GRAVELS...
OLD TENNIS COURT
VILLAGE HALL
PLAYGROUND
VICARAGE
POST BOX
COW FIELD
ANTHEA'S HOUSE
RONNIE MEHTA'S HOUSE
BOB & SALLY'S HOUSE
GRANNY'S HOUSE
THE OLD BOOT (PUB)
OLD OAK



First published in 2022 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The rights of Ruth Quayle and Marta Kissi to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Ruth Quayle, 2022
Illustrations copyright © Marta Kissi, 2022

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 127 1
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

one

If someone in your family joins a book club, make sure you keep an eye on them because book clubs are not always what they seem.

The reason I know this is because in the Easter holidays, when me and my cousins, Tom and Pip Berryman, were staying with our granny in the countryside without our parents, we discovered something SUSPICIOUS about Granny's book club.



Our granny's village

is called Muddlemoor and even though it looks quiet and safe it is actually REALLY DANGEROUS. Bad things are always happening in Muddlemoor and they ALWAYS seem to happen in the school holidays when me, Tom and Pip are staying there.

Like for instance, last summer we discovered that Granny's best friend, Anthea, had invented a dangerous robot spy cat to spy on Granny so that she could steal Granny's secret chocolate fudge cake recipe and win the Great Village Bake Off.

We spent AGES solving that mystery, and we even had to kidnap the robot spy cat to stop it spying on Granny, but in the end Anthea got away with EVERYTHING as she is cleverer than most people.

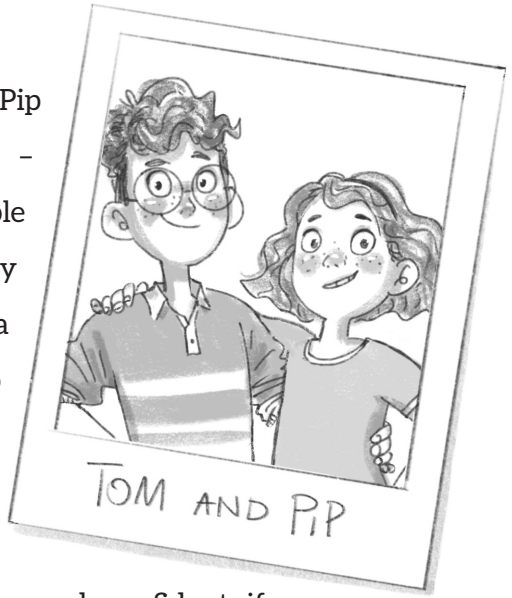
I hadn't seen Tom and Pip much since then – only at Christmas when their whole family came to London to go to the pantomime. (Mainly Tom and Pip live in Wales which is a long way from my flat in London). But going to the pantomime in London wasn't the same as being together at Granny's because our parents were there



and there wasn't a mystery to solve.

In case you don't know me, I am Joe Robinson and I am nine and one quarter. Mainly people think I am younger than nine because I am on the small side and I sometimes suck my fingers.

My teachers are always ordering me to brush my hair and tuck in my shirt. They say, 'What ARE we going to do with you, Joe Robinson?' in a sighing sort of voice. This is probably because I am not very speedy at maths or literacy but I am quite good at catching balls, except really high ones, and I am REALLY GOOD at making up games to play at break time. Mum says I have an A* imagination and she also says that having a good imagination is as important as maths and literacy. But I think she might be fibbing because she is my mum and it is her job to say I am clever.



My cousins Tom and Pip are PROPERLY clever – cleverer than most people (except for their dad, my Uncle Marcus, who is a brain box). Tom and Pip are also really brave and confident. You would not necessarily guess about them being brave and confident if you met them at, e.g. a birthday party or at a football match, but if you knew them as well I as do, you would understand what I mean. Tom reads everything he can get his hands on and Pip is calm in a crisis. Tom and Pip are better than all the children in my school put together, including Jack Passmore. This is why it is ESPECIALLY lucky that we get to see each other when we stay at Granny's during the holidays.

Our parents do not realise about most of the things we get up to when we are staying at Granny's. We try not to tell them because if they knew even half of it, they might stop us going. Luckily Granny doesn't spill the beans to our parents because, even though Granny is keen on telling the truth, she isn't one of life's tell-tales.

My sister Bella (who is at university) says there is nothing to do in Muddlemoor. But Bella is wrong because, even though Granny doesn't live near a beach or a theme park and even though she doesn't have many toys in her cottage (apart from some Lego that used to belong to Mum and Uncle Marcus when they were our age), me, Tom and Pip never get bored when we are staying with her, not even when it's raining.

That's because at Granny's we have to keep our wits about us AT ALL TIMES. That's just something you have to put up with if your granny lives in a dangerous neighbourhood.

Once I told Granny that she is lucky to have us around to keep her safe, but when I said this her eyes went all crinkly and she said, 'Keep me on my toes more

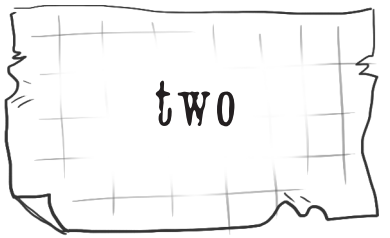
like' and then she got the hysterics.

Granny gets the hysterics all the time because she thinks a lot of things in life are funny, even stuff that most grown-ups think are serious.

But at the end of the Easter holidays, Granny did not get the giggles until right at the end. First of all she was quite cross and then she got a bit worried and then she was really cross all over again.

But we didn't mind as much as we normally would because even though we prefer it when Granny is NOT cross, we weren't actually sorry about what we had done. Deep down, we were RELIEVED that we had been around to keep an eye on Granny because, the thing is, she needed us. As you're about to find out.





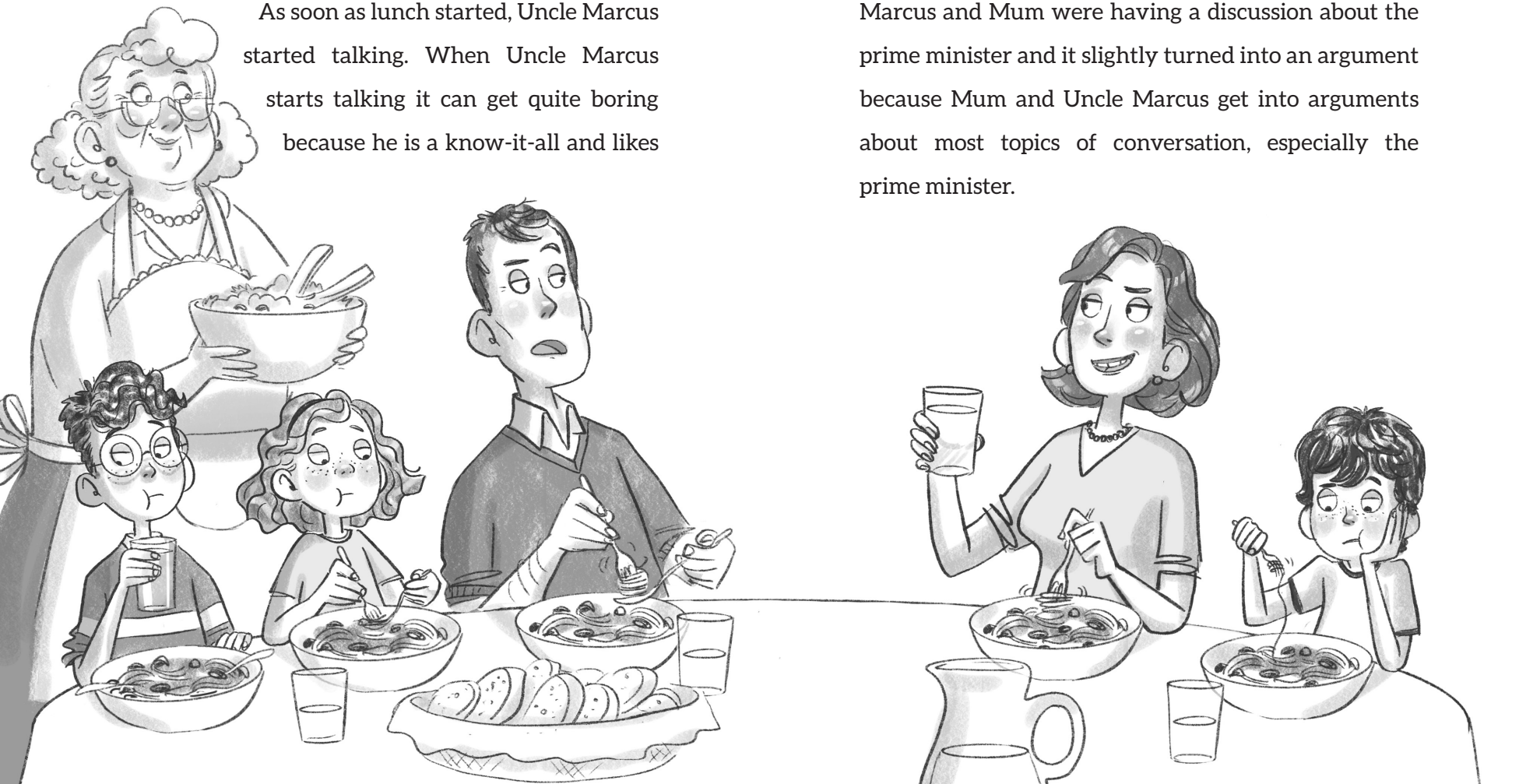
At the start of the holidays I was late getting to Granny's because Mum's car broke down just after we set off from our flat in London. Luckily, Mum knew what the problem was – there were loads of leaves stuck in the car's exhaust pipe because Mum always parks it under a half-dead sycamore tree. Mum said that when a car's exhaust is blocked, the engine won't work.

Mum and I spent ages on the side of the road pulling out all the mushy leaves with our fingers, but eventually the car started and we managed to drive all the way to Granny's without stopping.

By the time we'd arrived and taken the bags out of the car and eaten a Jaffa cake, it was nearly lunch time.

Mum and Uncle Marcus told Granny they were going to stay for a quick lunch before driving home. Mum and Uncle Marcus think Granny's cooking is the best on the planet because she is their mum and they grew up eating it.

As soon as lunch started, Uncle Marcus started talking. When Uncle Marcus starts talking it can get quite boring because he is a know-it-all and likes to tell you everything he knows in one helping. Me, Tom and Pip gobbled down our spaghetti Bolognese really quickly because we hadn't seen each other for ages and we wanted to leave the table as soon as possible to get away from the grown-ups. But Uncle Marcus and Mum were having a discussion about the prime minister and it slightly turned into an argument because Mum and Uncle Marcus get into arguments about most topics of conversation, especially the prime minister.



When Mum and Uncle Marcus argue none of us can get a word in edgeways which is unusual for me because I am known for being a chatterbox (except I prefer talking about the FA Cup or how to make slime).

In the end, I interrupted to ask if we could leave the table because we had finished our lunch, but Uncle Marcus said that it was good for children to be involved in adult conversation. Tom pointed out that we weren't exactly involved in the conversation because he (Uncle Marcus) was doing most of the talking, but Uncle Marcus just laughed and asked Granny and Mum what they thought about the state of the economy.

It turned out to be the longest lunch EVER, even longer than the lunch in the posh restaurant Mum won vouchers for at the school summer fair, when we had to eat nine courses without a break, and I wasn't allowed to sit on my knees because my trainers were a bit muddy and the chairs were covered in white silk.

But, FINALLY, when the grown-ups were drinking coffee, Uncle Marcus said we could leave the table as long as we went upstairs and unpacked our bags. We raced straight upstairs, but we didn't unpack our bags because unpacking is not our favourite thing to do in life and also it is not important. Plus, we had too much to chat about.

Tom and Pip told me about a really strict new teacher at their school called Mr Evans who carried a black walking stick even though he didn't have a limp. Tom said all the children at their school were really scared of Mr Evans because when Mr Evans got cross he waved his stick around in the air and, once, Mr Evans's stick hit Pip's little finger by accident. Pip's mum (my aunt Polly) reported it to their head teacher – and now Mr Evans leaves his black stick in his car in the school car park and pretend limps everywhere.

I was just thinking how glad I was that I didn't go to Tom and Pip's school and have Mr Evans as a teacher when Mum and Uncle Marcus called up the stairs and told us they were leaving. Luckily, I never mind saying goodbye to Mum when I am staying at Granny's

because when you have a granny and cousins to keep you company it is hard to feel homesick. We went out to Little Draycott (which is the name of Granny's road) and waved goodbye as Mum and Uncle Marcus drove away.

'Good,' said Tom. 'That's better.' And I knew exactly what Tom meant because even though I really love my mum, it is nicer when it is just me and my cousins at Granny's.

As we walked down Little Draycott, Tom told us about a new series of books he was reading about a boy called Albie Short who is an amazing detective. He showed us the front cover of a book he had in his back pocket. It was of a boy with black hair and freckles holding a map. Tom told us there were three books in the series, *Gotcha!*, *Trapped!* and *Target!*, and he had already read them all twice.

'Albie Short and I share a common outlook,' said Tom.

Pip did a backflip and I told her that it was really good. Straightaway Pip stopped doing backflips and stared at her shoes.



'Pip has gone off doing gymnastics in front of people,' explained Tom. 'She doesn't like the attention.'

'I don't mind if it's just you and Tom,' said Pip apologetically. 'I just hate it when strangers – mainly adults – ask me to perform in front of them.'

Pip shrugged her shoulders and I could tell that she was a bit embarrassed so, to change the subject, I told them about when Dylan Moynihan cheated in the school cross country race by taking a short cut and how, when Mrs Vukovitch told Dylan he was disqualified, Dylan shouted, 'I've been robbed!' and pushed Kane Ashfield into some mud. But just when I was getting to the best bit (i.e. when Dylan Moynihan told Mrs Vukovitch she was a 'loser'), Tom interrupted and said, 'Vicar alert!' and pointed at a tall man with fluffy hair.

I stopped talking and looked at the vicar and noticed that he was peering through Ronnie Mehta's letterbox. (Ronnie Mehta lives a couple of doors down from Granny, on the other side of Bob and Sally Merry.)

Tom told us to duck behind the biggest oak tree on Little Draycott. The vicar turned round and I think he must have spotted my red T-shirt because he stopped looking from side to side and waved in our direction.

'School holidays, is it?'

Tom and Pip didn't say anything but I am not keen on silence so I said, 'We're here for nine days on our own because our parents have to work and we don't like going to holiday clubs if we can help it.'

The vicar laughed. 'I'd better be on my guard then,' he said. 'I've heard that you lot are sticklers for good behaviour.'

Tom took a sharp breath and said, 'Are you looking for Ronnie Mehta?'

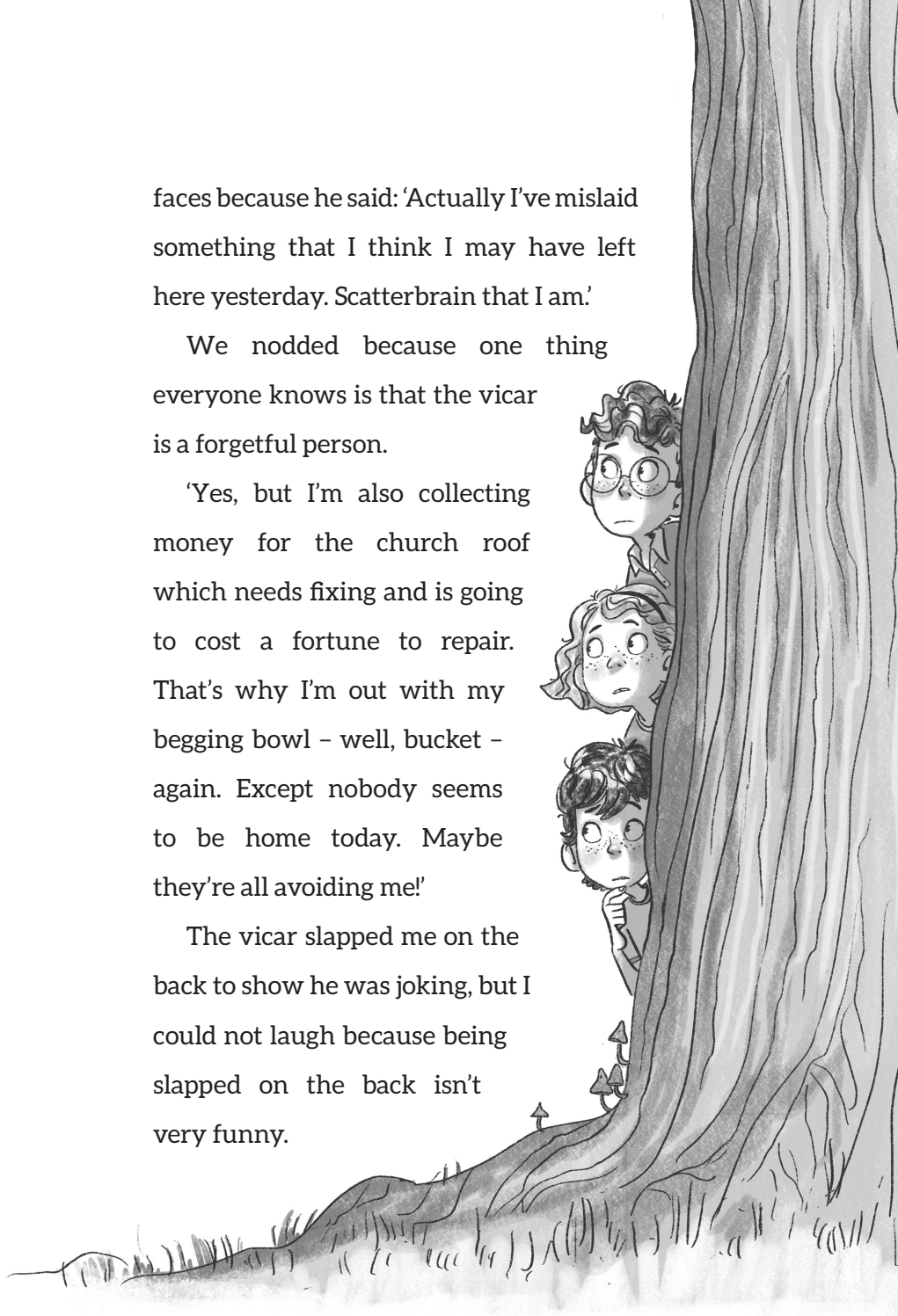
The vicar grinned. 'Yes, I'm after his money!'

I think the vicar must have noticed our shocked faces because he said: 'Actually I've mislaid something that I think I may have left here yesterday. Scatterbrain that I am.'

We nodded because one thing everyone knows is that the vicar is a forgetful person.

'Yes, but I'm also collecting money for the church roof which needs fixing and is going to cost a fortune to repair. That's why I'm out with my begging bowl – well, bucket – again. Except nobody seems to be home today. Maybe they're all avoiding me!'

The vicar slapped me on the back to show he was joking, but I could not laugh because being slapped on the back isn't very funny.



'What about you lot?' he asked. 'Any money to help pay for a new church roof?'

The vicar jangled his bucket and we looked at each other, all worried. We did have some money of our own, but we definitely DIDN'T want to spend it on a new church roof. We wanted to spend it on sweets.

'Ten pence here, twenty pence there,' said the vicar. 'Every little helps, as they say.'

He looked down at his mostly empty bucket of money and smiled. I put my hand into my jeans' pocket and felt the collection of coins. I knew exactly how much was there – fifty-four pence. I did a quick calculation in my head. If I gave the vicar ten pence I wouldn't have enough for a Chomp AND a Refresher bar in Mrs Rooney's shop.

'It leaked like billy-o last winter with all that rain. We had to leave buckets up and down the church aisle. Mrs Holgate nearly broke her hip when she tripped over one of them on her way to arrange the church flowers.'

The vicar turned to go. I glanced at Pip and Tom but they would not look at me. They were too busy staring at the laces on their trainers.

'Right-o. Better keep searching. Bye then.'

At that moment I did something a bit stupid. I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out what I thought was ten pence but was actually twenty pence.



'Here you go,' I said, flinging the twenty-pence coin into the vicar's bucket. I did not dare look at Tom and Pip's faces.

'Good man,' said the vicar. 'Much obliged.' Then he strolled back up Little Draycott and turned left onto the main road. We could hear him humming even when he was out of sight.

'You've been robbed,' said Tom.

'I know.'

'He basically guilt-tripped you into giving him the money.'

'Is that illegal?'

'No,' said Tom. 'But it's something to look out for next time. Vicars are obsessed with church roofs. You need to learn to avoid getting in long conversations like that.'

I nodded. I was not sure Tom was right about vicars being obsessed with church roofs, but I did NOT like the way the vicar had hoodwinked me into giving him twenty pence. When it came to that vicar we needed to keep an eye on our pocket money.



three

Three days went by and we didn't spot ANYTHING suspicious. No ghosts, no spies, no one trying to poison us – and no vicar after our money.

So we got on with doing the usual things instead. We found the Lego box and we played football in the garden and we hung out in Ronnie Mehta's weeping willow tree, which has branches all the way down to the ground.

The weeping willow tree is our favourite place to go when we have something important to discuss, and it's also where we keep things we don't want the grown-ups to find, e.g. bubble gum and a rusty pen knife. We keep them in a locked-up tin and Pip wears the key around her neck. No one knows we use the

weeping willow as our hiding place except for maybe Ronnie Mehta and his teenage daughters, but they aren't interested because they don't go in their garden if they can help it.

Sometimes we mooched in the village because mooching is more interesting than it sounds. Like for instance we walked up to Mrs Rooney's shop to buy sweets and we played on the old tennis court next to the village hall.

It was fun but it wasn't as good as having a true-life crime to solve. Tom told us that we shouldn't get complacent (which means taking our eye off the ball) because, according to Albie Short, bad things always happen when you are least expecting them. But it was hard NOT to feel complacent because the truth was, nothing much was happening in Muddlemoor. It was even quieter than usual because lots of the people we knew, e.g. Sophie Pearce, were away on holiday.

Sophie Pearce is at secondary school and has a gold mobile phone. When she ISN'T away on holiday she is always taking the bus into Stonely to spend the money she earns from looking after people's chickens. Granny says that Sophie Pearce is a fearsome entrepreneur, but I don't find Sophie Pearce fearsome because she smiles a lot and is quite friendly. Then again, I think Tom might find her fearsome because he finds it tricky to speak to her.

The people who WERE in Muddlemoor weren't doing anything suspicious – not even Granny's friend Anthea who used to be a spy. Anthea is always asking us tricky questions and she likes to improve our education. Except we are not keen on improving our education, especially when it is the school holidays. Plus, we are not mad about Anthea because she smells of cats and always gets away with things.

Granny was acting normal too. She listened to the radio and watched *Cul-de-Sac* (which is her favourite programme on telly) and read the newspaper and filled up the bird feeders and she also did non-stop knitting. One day I asked her what she was knitting but she said

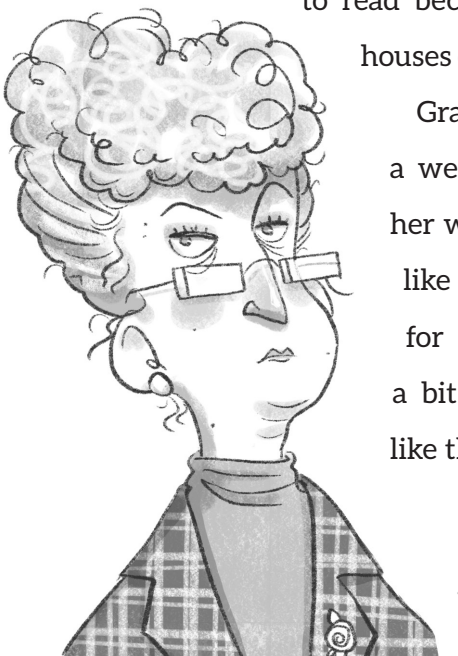
it was a secret and she didn't want to spill the beans. I got a bit worried at this point because I thought she might be knitting something for ME to wear and I'm not one hundred per cent keen on Granny's knitted jumpers. But when Granny saw my face, she laughed and said, 'Don't worry, it's not for YOU,' and then she hid the pile of knitting in her knitting basket.

Compared to the last time we stayed with Granny, everything seemed very ordinary.

'Gosh,' said Granny on the morning of our fourth day. 'What on earth has happened to you lot? You're being UNUSUALLY WELL BEHAVED. Carry on like this and you may get through a whole visit without causing trouble.'

Granny laughed quite a lot when she said this and then she drove us to Sainsbury's to choose cheese and wine for her book club that evening.

Granny's book club meets up most weeks because, according to Anthea, they 'gobble up books like most people eat hot dinners'. Anthea is one of the regular members of Granny's book club, along with Bob Merry. (Bob comes on his own without his wife Sally because Sally takes their new puppy, Puff, for dog training classes on Thursday evenings.) The last member of Granny's book club is Mrs Mackintosh who is the strict head teacher of the primary school in Cudlington, the next-door village. We are quite scared of Mrs Mackintosh and we never call her by her first name (Janet) because head teachers don't suit first names. Very occasionally Ronnie Mehta comes along to book club too, but he doesn't have much time to read because he is always selling houses on his phone.



Granny says her book club is a weekly tonic. When I asked her what a tonic is she said, 'It's like a good dose of medicine for the soul.' This made me a bit worried because I didn't like the idea of Granny needing

medicine for her soul. For one thing, I wasn't sure what a soul was. I thought it might be something to do with our feet but when I asked Granny, she said a soul isn't something you can see or touch. She says it is something that stays around after we are gone. Then she gave me a hug and went to prune the roses.

Granny's book club meets every Thursday evening and they always eat a lot of cheese and drink red wine. Even though they are all MAD ABOUT BOOKS Granny says they are not always mad about the SAME books. Sometimes they have arguments about the books they are reading. Granny says this is what makes a book club interesting. She says there's nothing worse than everybody being polite and agreeing with each other. Which is the complete opposite of what my teacher Mrs Vukovitch says whenever I have a fight with Ike Samuel. Mrs Vukovitch tells me and Ike Samuel that we need to learn to agree with each other. Except it is impossible to agree with Ike Samuel because he is a show-off. Also, he is wrong.

It was Granny's turn to host book club at her house so she chose about six different cheeses and lots of crackers, and a big tub of olives, and a few bottles of wine, and then she threw in a newspaper on top of all the things in her basket. I didn't look at that newspaper until we were waiting in the queue to pay, but waiting makes me a bit fidgety so I couldn't help glancing down at Granny's basket to see if she had put in any KitKats. (KitKats are our new favourite thing to eat.) That's when I read the headline on the front page of the newspaper and that's also when I got a big shock.

This is what it said:



I elbowed Tom and Pip and pointed to the newspaper and they both gasped so loudly that Granny looked up and raised her eyebrows.

I couldn't help gasping a bit too because Stonely is Granny's local town and we were in the Stonely Sainsbury's AT THAT MOMENT IN TIME.

'What on earth is the matter?' asked Granny.

I shook my head and gulped and Granny said, 'Good heavens,' and paid for the shopping.

I was suddenly REALLY CONCERNED because everybody knows that burglaries are a WORRY, especially when they are in the nearby town to where your granny lives.

Later on that day, after we'd unloaded the shopping and Granny had finished reading the newspaper, we took the article to our secret hiding place in Ronnie Mehta's weeping willow tree.

Tom had a squished pack of Fruit Pastilles in his pocket so we shared them out and then we read EVERYTHING about the masked robbers:

Masked thieves broke into a local hardware shop on Tuesday and terrorised shopkeeper Shirley Mason (53). The armed robbers raided Stonely Stores in broad daylight and made off with hundreds of pounds from the till. Ms Mason told police that there were five gang members and they were all wearing red balaclavas and carrying rucksacks. 'It was the most terrifying experience of my life,' she said. 'I'm still having flashbacks about those balaclavas.'

Stonely Stores is the third business in Stonely to be targeted by the gang in recent weeks. The other victims include Palamino Records and Rumsey's Coffee Shop. Police believe it is likely that the criminals will strike again.

PC Owen Shearcross said: 'We have reason to believe that this criminal gang is local to the area. Gang members may well be hiding in one of the smaller villages surrounding Stonely, planning their next robbery. They may be using a deserted building – for example an old shed – right in our midst. These criminals are armed and dangerous. We urge

members of the public NOT to approach them but to keep an eye out for any suspicious behaviour. If you have any information that may help us to arrest these criminals, please call our incidents team on: 07865 567433.

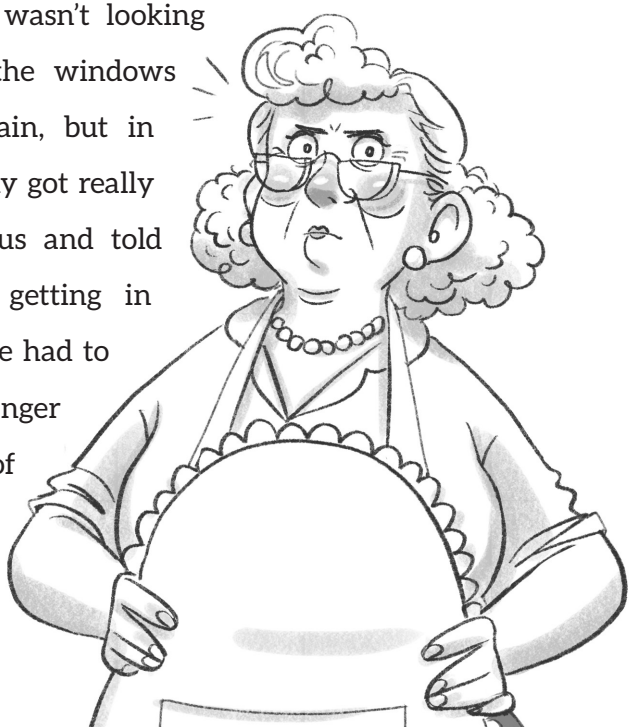
Me, Tom and Pip looked at each other and sucked a lot of air in through our teeth because when you are worried, sucking air through teeth is a helpful thing to do.

I could not stop thinking about Granny's jewellery collection that she hides in the laundry basket in the spare room. I had a feeling those armed robbers might be on their way to Granny's cottage to steal her jewellery RIGHT NOW.

We talked about Granny's trusting nature and then we talked about how Granny wasn't as young as she used to be. That's when we decided to be on the lookout because this gang of robbers could be hiding out in the countryside or in a rural village, e.g. Muddlemoor, right in front of our eyes. Plus, the police had asked members of the public, i.e. us, to keep an eye out for any suspicious behaviour.

For the rest of the day, we kept checking that Granny's doors and windows were closed and locked. This was quite tricky because Granny kept popping into the garden and leaving the back door wide open and when she was cooking our lunch she said, 'It's far too stuffy in here,' and flung open ALL the windows.

When she wasn't looking we shut all the windows and doors again, but in the end Granny got really fed up with us and told us we were getting in her way. So we had to leave her in danger for the rest of



the afternoon and go to the park. We sat underneath the zip wire and Tom took the first Albie Short book, *Gotcha!*, out of his back pocket.

'This is our reference book,' he said. 'It's about when Albie Short has to track down a gang of bank robbers on his own in broad daylight.'

I was really interested in hearing more about Albie Short so I stopped chatting and listened. I could tell Pip was listening too because she wasn't waggling her feet for once.

'Albie Short's trick,' said Tom, 'is to identify the key clues and focus on them. For example, in *Gotcha!* he speaks to all the people who have been robbed and EVERYBODY says that the robbers are covered in dog hair. So Albie Short stops looking for suspicious people and starts looking for hairy dogs instead. He spends AGES keeping an eye on all the different dogs in the neighbourhood and one day he notices a shaggy labradoodle walking through town, carrying a newspaper in its mouth. Albie follows the labradoodle and eventually the dog leads Albie Short to a park bench, and on the park bench are a man and a woman. The dog jumps on to the bench and hands over the newspaper, and Albie Short hears the woman say, 'Oh look, dear, there's an article about our latest robbery!' And that's when Albie Short knows he's on to something and that's also when Albie Short takes a photo of them and gives it to the police.



Tom opened up *Gotcha!* and started to read:

> The photograph taken by Albie Short turned out to be the vital evidence the police needed. Police used the photograph to track the criminals down to their caravan. The caravan was full of stolen goods and it was also full of dog hair.

'See,' said Tom. 'The dog was the thing to watch, not the robbers themselves.'

I looked at Tom, all wondering, because I didn't want to ask a silly question in case I had got the wrong end of the stick, but then again I couldn't remember the Stonely newspaper article talking about one single dog (which was a shame because I love dogs more than any other animal).

'Do the Stonely Robbers have a dog then?' I asked, looking at the article again.

'No!' said Tom. 'But that's not my point. My point is that the dog is the clue that leads Albie to the robbers.'

'Oh, I see,' I said, even though I didn't have a clue what Tom was talking about.

'What I mean,' said Tom, popping his Albie Short book in the back pocket of his jeans, 'is that we need to focus on the clues because the clues will lead us to the criminals.'

Pip stopped doing a handstand and looked at Tom all sparkly. She picked up the newspaper and read the story in silence. When she had finished reading she looked up at me and Tom and whispered: 'Rucksacks. Red balaclavas. Old sheds.'

'Precisely,' said Tom, grinning at Pip and nodding at me. 'Those are the three clues and we need to look for them.'

