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SPOOKED

The THEATRE GHOSTS

STEVEN BUTLER
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SIMON & SCHUSTER



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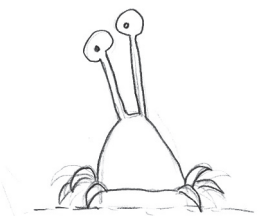
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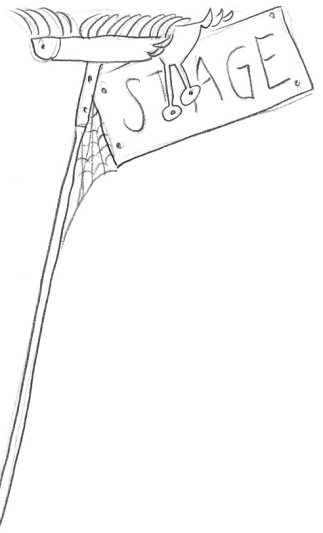
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For Jane Griffiths:
Editor of The Nothing to See Here Hotel
and inspiration for Ella Jane Griffin




STAGE



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1
SO THIS IS HOME?

The town of Cod's Bottom was a miserable little place, squashed between the foot of steep cliffs and the spiteful sea. Its slate buildings were huddled together like squat grey piglets jostling for space at feeding time, and everything was covered in layer upon layer of seagull poo.

Ella Griffin looked out from the front step of her new home and grimaced.

'I wonder how long it would take for *us* to get covered in bird droppings like that?' she thought out loud. 'Not long, I bet.'

'Stop it, darling,' said Mum from the open front door, fumbling with her coat.

'Ten minutes and I'll be splattered in the stuff. *Splish! Splash! Sploo!* The princess of—'

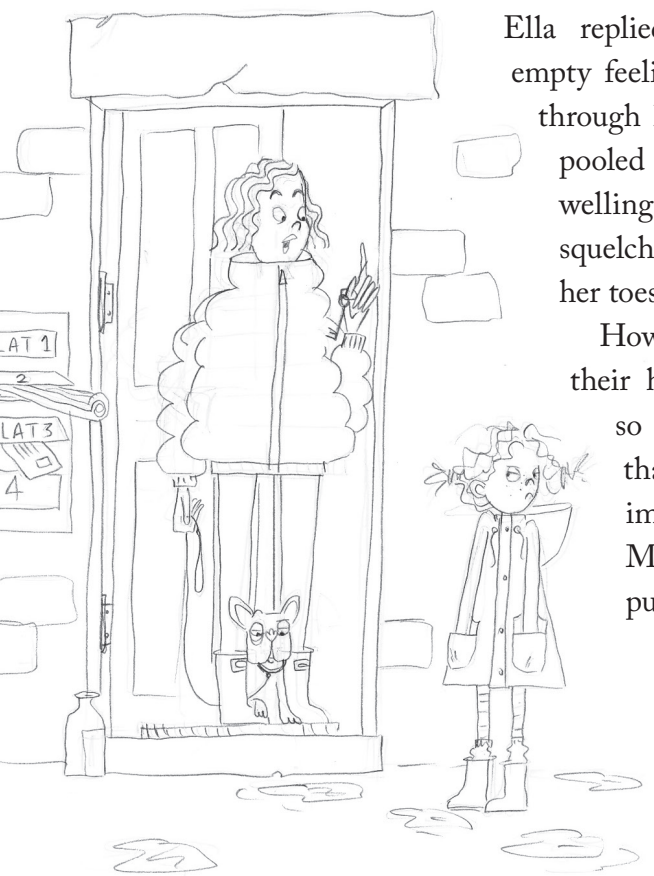
'I'm not listening . . .' Mum stepped out into the chilly

evening air, closing the door behind her, as Wilson, the family's French bulldog, snuffled at Ella's heels. 'Isn't this a lovely place? The rain's stopped for us, look!'

Ella glanced along her new street, Cuttlebone Lane, and eyed the fishermen's cottages on either side, as wonky and worn as a set of rotten teeth. She tried desperately to spot anything even remotely lovely about the town that squeezed in around her, but failed.

'I . . . I don't know,' Ella replied as a sad, empty feeling swooshed through her body and pooled in her blue wellington boots, squelching between her toes.

How could this be their home? It was so much worse than Ella ever imagined. Was Mum secretly punishing her



for hiding snacks under her bed, or for that time she'd tried to climb the bedroom curtains and accidentally ripped them off the wall?

'I had a brilliant childhood here,' Mum cooed happily. She gave Wilson's lead a little tug and set off down the hill towards the harbour.

'I was having a brilliant childhood too, in London,' Ella called as Mum and Wilson continued walking away. She knew she was pushing her luck, but Ella couldn't help herself. 'London isn't covered in giant splats of—'

'Yes, all right,' Mum snapped over her shoulder. She stopped in her tracks and shot Ella one of her 'You're not too old to be sent to your room!' stares. 'I get it! But you'll soon love Cod's Bottom, I promise. Let's go look at the sea and breathe some fresh air before the sun sets. It's good for you.'

'I can't!' Ella gasped in mock horror. She skittered across the wet pavement, trying not to slip as she caught up to Mum and Wilson.

'Why not?'

Ella took a deep sniff of the air, then pretended to be sick into her gloved hands. She was relieved to see Mum give a tiny smirk. 'This place smells just like its name – FISH BUM!'

'It's Cod's Bottom!'

'Wilson thinks so, don't you, boy?' Ella joked, making

the roly-poly pooch bark and wriggle about. 'See? Wilsy thinks it smells of fish bum too!'

Mum raised an eyebrow and tried very hard to look cross, even though she was stifling a laugh.

'You've made your point . . . Look, I know this was all a tiny bit quick.'

Ella said nothing, ignoring the urge to cry that bubbled in the back of her mind. *Quick?* Mum packed up their old flat so fast she nearly broke the sound barrier! Even worse, this was only the beginning of the summer holidays. Ella had weeks before she could distract herself from all this gloom with even some brain-boggling schoolwork.

'I know you miss London. I do as well . . . but things will be great here, you'll see.' Mum put an arm round Ella's shoulder and pulled her into a hug. 'London didn't have this wonderful view, did it?'

Ella's eyes darted to the narrow sliver of sea visible at the end of Cuttlebone Lane. They had only been in Cod's Bottom for two days, but she was already certain she might die of boredom pretty soon. Where was the noise and traffic? The interesting people and Alfie's Burger Bar? Her Saturday drama club? Boredom was going to get her for sure. Ella could just *feel* it. Any day now, Mum would come in to wake her and find a dried up, girl-shaped husk in her bed. A shrivelled boredom-mummy in panda pyjamas!

She glanced back at their new home, Minerva Mansions, perched at the top of the lane like a lopsided wedding cake gone soggy in the rain. From Mum's curly-cornered photographs, Ella knew the block of apartments had once been painted a smart, forget-me-not blue, with flower boxes on every window ledge. Now, years of damp and grime had turned it the colour of an old bruise and it seemed to have slumped lazily against the building next door. If homes could talk, this one would probably be groaning *Oh, my aching bones!*

'Come on,' Mum said, starting off with Wilson again. 'We can't dawdle for too long. There are suitcases to unpack, plus I promised Miss Jenkins I'd pick up some groceries for her.'

'Which neighbour is Miss Jenkins?' asked Ella, hurrying to catch up. 'The upstairs lady who shouts at the telly, or the downstairs lady with weird smells coming from under her door?'

'I'm warning you!' Mum's hard stare powered up into one of her mega glares.

'I just wondered.'

'You mustn't make jokes about people.'

'I wasn't,' Ella said, holding up her palms like she was surrendering after a crime.

'Well, if you must know, Miss Jenkins lives in the flat upstairs. How did you know she shouts at the television?'

'I heard her last night,' Ella mumbled. 'She was hollering about something on the news. A proper strop-wobbler!'

Mum snickered for only a nanosecond, but Ella spotted it and felt herself relax. She pulled out her treasured green notebook and matching green pen from her coat pocket, turned to a list she'd already started under the heading Cod's Bottomers, and scribbled Miss Jenkins's name next to where it already said

Upstairs lady – bit scary. Proper grannysaurus. Shouts at the telly.

Mum sighed as they trudged downhill. 'I know it's strange,' she said. 'Sometimes life throws these things at us. No one was expecting your poor Aunt Sylvie to . . . to . . . um—'

'Die.' Ella finished Mum's sentence. She already knew what the word meant.

'Yep, that,' Mum continued. 'And now her home belongs to me . . . to us. It's where Sylvie and I grew up together. We moved here when I was just your age. I was worried at first, too. But you'll love living in Cod's Bottom, just like I did.'

Ella nodded.

'Think of this as a new adventure,' Mum said with a sad smile.

Ella smiled back, ignoring the shiver that ran down her spine. What kind of adventure was this!?



At the bottom of the lane the cobbles opened onto the promenade, which crept around the edge of the dreary harbour.

'Ta-dah!' said Mum with a smile. 'Do you want to entertain yourself here or come grocery shopping with me?'

'I thought we were off to have an adventure,' Ella reminded her. What on earth was she supposed to do on her own? Count the seagull poos on the post office roof? An image of herself as the SHRIVELLED BOREDOM-MUMMY flashed across her mind again.

'We *will*, darling,' Mum said, handing her Wilson's lead. 'But someone has to do the chores first. So, what'll it be?'

'We'll stay out here,' mumbled Ella, admitting defeat.

'Good girl,' Mum said. 'Keep out of trouble, the pair of you, and I'll meet you back here in a jiffy. I'll be as quick as I can.' With that, Mum smoothed Ella's curly red hair, planted a kiss on her forehead, and hurried into the Laughing Starfish Store, letting the door swing shut behind her with a loud *TING-A-LING-A-LING!*

'Okey-dokey,' Ella mumbled, setting off along the harbour wall with Wilson huffing behind her. 'No one

likes a Mopey Mildred, do they? Come on, Wilsy – let's go and find some fun.'

They'd barely gone more than a few steps before Ella's thoughts wandered to her best friends, Ava and Yusif. 'What are those beasties up to back in London, eh, Wilson? I bet they've been rehearsing lines for theatre club all day,' Ella mused as she realised it was Saturday. 'And laughing loads and loads without me.' She'd been planning to audition for the part of Juliet this term and had even figured out how to plant a kiss on Romeo's slobber-chopsy boy-germ cheek without being sick and everything. She'd practised on Wilson's stubby snout. Then Mum announced they were moving to Fish Bum and her chances were snuffed out. *KA-POW!* Whatever Ava and Yusif were up to, Ella was pretty sure it would be more exciting than sightseeing along the promenade. She'd give them a call before bed and find out.

Down the road a little, Ella spotted people coming and going. She tried smiling to a few of the friendlier-looking ones, but nobody smiled back. Everybody seemed just as glum as she was feeling. The whole town was one big globule of gloom. THIS PLACE WAS GLOOMSVILLE!

'They're all so warm and chatty, aren't they?' Ella joked to Wilson, but the snorty French bulldog just yanked his lead in the direction of a seagull perched on

a bin overflowing with greasy chip-shop paper.

'WILL *YOU* BE MY FRIEND?' Ella yelled at the startled bird. It shrieked and whirled off into the air, wings and legs flailing, making Wilson bark excitedly. They both watched it fly out to sea, a tiny bright dot against the glowering sky.

Ella sighed to herself. Now what? Maybe she could do tiny pigeon-steps all the way from one end of the seafront to the other and count them as she went? Or . . . she could make a fishing rod out of a stick and try to catch a shark from the rocks? Maybe not . . .

Maybe she *would* go and explore . . . Mum had told her to think of their new town as an adventure, after all.

The rickety pier and its lopsided lighthouse were closed due to the bad weather, so Ella headed off along the harbour wall instead, dragging a reluctant Wilson behind her and enjoying the jellied smack of her wellingtons against the wet cobbles.

'This calls for a list, Wilsy,' Ella said, pulling out her green notebook again.

Ella loved making lists. Mum always joked that it was her 'superpower'. Ella had been jotting things down ever since she first learned to read and write. Right now, there was a box in her new bedroom crammed with stacks of old notebooks all jam-packed with lists. Lists made the world seem safe when Ella was nervous and it felt

good to know everything she'd ever seen, heard, tried, touched, thought, found or tasted was neatly arranged in rows on crisp white pages, and that she could look at them again anytime she liked.

'We don't want to miss anything, do we?' She turned to a new page and wrote Things in Cod's Bottom across the top. Then, with a giggle, Ella scribbled it out and wrote Things in Fish Bum instead.

'Right. Let's start from here.' She looked both ways, then, feeling more comforted already, started to write.

Pier - closed (BORING!)
The Laughing Starfish Store
The post office (a lot more bird poo than the other shops?)
A boy kicking a ball
Two seagulls fighting for leftover chips
Mrs Markham's wool shop (s-n-o-o-z-e!)
The fishmonger's (MEGA WHIFFY)
A crate of sardines
A lady with a screaming baby
The Crab and Conch Shell pub
A rusty bike with a missing front wheel

A tall man with a clipboard
The fishermen's yard (EVEN MORE MEGA WHIFFY!!!)
A boat named Barnacle Betty
A dog barking at a cat
A cat hissing at a dog

Ella looked up from her list and frowned. There, at the far end of the promenade was a strangely shaped building she hadn't noticed before. This was only the second time she'd been down to the waterfront, and her first time she'd ventured so far along the seawall.

'What do you think it is, Wilsy?' Ella asked the portly dog, but he was too preoccupied with sniffing at lampposts to even glance her way.

She hurried him past a newsagent's, not bothering to add it to her list, and as they got closer, Ella could see there were large metal gates in front of the building, a chain and padlock twisted through them. On either side, crumbling statues of angels in long, drapey dresses wept streaks of seagull poo down their pale cheeks.

'Ooh! Only exciting places are kept behind gates with chains and padlocks!' she told Wilson as she peered through the metal bars. Her eyes widened and she drew in a gasp of chilly air.

Beyond the rusted gates was a huge derelict building

that stood half on a jut of rock at the base of the cliff and half on rotting wooden stilts over the foaming breakers. Ella couldn't believe her eyes. It looked like a museum or evil scientist's palace or . . . something she couldn't put her finger on. She searched around for clues, trying to figure out what the old place might be.

Before her, a path led from the gate to an ornate wide entranceway with red and gold doors, topped with a stained-glass dome. Most of the glass was smashed or had fallen away, and the painted wood was peeling and cracked. A high archway above the entrance was carved with dozens of plump cherubs, each holding a musical instrument, and their faces were all turned towards the gates, as if they were expecting someone to arrive.

All the hairs on the back of Ella's neck stood up on end as she met the cherubs' lifeless gaze. 'Good afternoon,' she whispered to them, trying not to laugh at their naked bottoms. 'Were you waiting for me?'

The cherubs didn't reply . . .

Above the gaggle of plump stone babies stretched row upon row of broken windows like open mouths showing jagged fangs. The wind howled through them and made the building seem as if it was groaning in the cold; scraps of tatty curtains flapped in and out like tongues.

'This place is amazing!' Ella hooted down at Wilson,