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opening extract from

Toby Tucker Dodging the Donkey Doo

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The Allen house, present day

Toby Tucker kicked the front door shut behind him.

His startled foster parents, Don and Evie Allen, appeared in the kitchen doorway, both clutching paintbrushes. Don's nose was blue, and Evie's hair was dappled with pale yellow paint.

'Good job we haven't decorated the front door yet,' said Don.

'Sorry,' said Toby. 'Had a rotten day.'

Evie ran the tap to wash her hands. 'Let's all have a cuppa, and you can tell us what's wrong.'



'We had PE,' Toby grumbled. 'I hate it. We did the first trials for sports day, and it's no good – I just can't run. I'm always last.'



Evie said, 'Don will go running with you if you want to practise. Won't you, Don?'

Behind Toby's back, Don made a face.

'Thanks, but no thanks,' said Toby. 'It won't do any good. Not even worth trying.'

Don blew his cheeks out in relief. 'Tell you what, lad. I've got something in the basement to show you. I was going to surprise you at the weekend but –'

'Oh no, you don't!' said Evie. 'Once you get down in your playroom I won't see you till bed-time!'

Toby giggled.

'It is not my playroom,' said Don huffily. 'It's a games room.'

'I don't care if it's World of Big Boys Toyserama Are Us,' said Evie. 'Toby, homework first, then dinner and afterwards you can do exactly as you want. And you,' she said, shoving a paintbrush in Don's hand, 'ceiling. Now!'

Toby grinned at Don, grabbed a chocolate

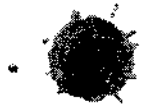


wafer and scooted upstairs to the very top of the house. He went in his warm, bright room, closed the door and looked round. His own room. If things went OK here, he'd never have to share with other boys in a children's home ever again.

He was happy here. He could forget rotten PE and just be himself, Toby Tucker. No friends had ever been up here, and weren't likely to – not until the pink fairy wallpaper went. Don and Evie still had a lot of repairs and decorating to do before they got up as far as here. Toby didn't mind. He didn't want anyone up here. Not until he'd got used to the wooden chest.

He whizzed through his homework – maths, which was a doddle – then crossed to the window. The chest stood on the floor, looking totally innocent.

But it held a secret. A secret so enormous and so strange that Toby hadn't yet found a way to tell Don and Evie. They were the closest thing he had to a family, but he'd only lived with them



for three weeks.

Toby knelt and opened the chest. He took out a framed photo of an elderly man with a gentle face. The warm feeling that Toby always got when he looked at the photo flooded over him. He turned it over and read, again, the pencilled note on the back.



The paper in the chest is your family tree. I wonder which little baby tore it up, eh, Toby Tucker? Piece it together and you'll find out who you are and when you come from.

Gee.

Toby chuckled. 'When you come from!'

The first time he'd read it, he thought Gee, whoever he was, had got it

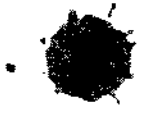
wrong – that he meant to write 'where you come from'.

But now Toby knew differently. Inside the chest were piles of torn paper, all with scraps of writing on. He'd learned the secret of the chest when he'd manage to piece together the name 'Seti'. The result was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to him. Toby had actually become Seti for a while. He'd lived in a farm on the banks of the River Nile in Ancient Egypt!

Toby yearned to piece together another name, and he'd been trying ever since. Would it, could it, happen again? He pulled out a handful of scraps and read them aloud. 'Wil, ita, Egb, nius . . .' None of those seemed to fit together.

He kicked off his shoes and put a CD on. After dinner, he promised himself, he'd settle down and see if he could finally put together another piece in the puzzle that was his family tree.

Don yelled up the stairs. 'Toby! Supper's



ready! Steak pie, mash, carrots, courgettes and Evie's special glue – I mean gravy!'

Toby grinned. Evie would get her own back for that! She didn't mind. She was a great cook, and she knew it.

Having dinner together was important in the Allen household. They shared their news, jokes, gossip and problems and it was at these times that Toby felt he almost belonged here. Almost.

But if he didn't belong here, he wondered, where did he belong? Nobody knew anything of his past. That's why it was so vital that he pieced together his family tree, to find out the answer to the question they all asked.

Who's Toby Tucker?

'Dearest, darling Evie, best cook in the world, kindest and brainiest –'

'Most generous and beautiful,' added Toby.

'Sweetest and –'

Evie laughed. 'Oh, go on, then, I'll clear up.



Go down to your playroom!'

The games room was once the cellar, and Toby went carefully down the steep, narrow steps. Inside, the room was surprisingly large.

'Wow!' said Toby. 'Table tennis!'

'Got it at an auction,' said Don. 'I'd rather have a snooker table, but they're too expensive. Come on. I haven't played for years.' He handed



Toby a bat.

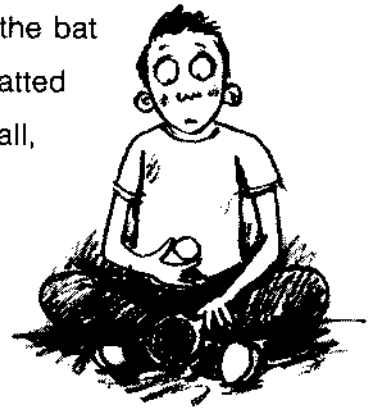
Ten minutes later, Toby picked the ball up from where Don had smashed it into a corner. 'That's it,' he said. 'I've had enough. I'm useless at this as well.'

'Have another game,' suggested Don. 'You'll improve. I expect you're just rusty.'

'You're not rusty, and you haven't played for years.' Toby climbed the stairs. 'See you later.'

He went straight to his room and plonked down on the floor. He was very fed up. I'm no good at anything, he thought.

Toby found, to his surprise, that he was still holding the bat and ball. Crossly, he batted the ball against the wall, aiming at a lavender fairy's head. He missed.



'Can't even hit that,' he moaned, and



bashed the ball against the wall over and over, missing the fairy's head every time. He gave the ball an extra hard whack. It hit the wall and shot back over his head, bounced off the cupboard behind him and ricocheted round the room, coming to rest by the chest.

He'd almost forgotten his plan to have another go at the family tree tonight!

Toby put on his favourite CD. He opened the chest, took out armfuls of paper and sat in the middle of the deep red carpet. He spread the scraps out and began to sort through them. He decided on a strategy. He'd choose one piece, then try every other piece until he found a match. It could take days, but at least he'd end up with a name.

And a name, he believed, was all he needed for the chest to reveal its secret once more.

Toby closed his eyes, riffled through the pile and selected a piece of paper. Opening his eyes, he read, 'leon'.



Leon's a name by itself, he thought, and laid the paper on the carpet. He waited. Nothing.

'Toby Tucker, where are your brains?' he said. 'Names begin with a capital letter. That means there's a bit missing from the front of this one.'

He began trying to match other scraps of paper to 'leon'.

'Elizaleon? No. Judileon? Doubt it. Leleon? Not likely. Nikoleon? Never heard of that na–'

Toby froze. A small drawing of a boy was appearing beside 'Nikoleon'. A boy in a short tunic and tatty sandals.

As he stared, his tummy churning with excitement, the drawing changed. It morphed into a drawing of himself – Toby Tucker! Then just as quickly it changed back. As it did so, it shimmered. The shimmer grew and grew, and when it was half as high as the room, the silvery light moved towards Toby, and passed right over him. He got the same feeling he'd had before – the feeling of cold, wobbly jelly sliding through his



whole body.

Toby turned, almost sure of what he would see. Yes! There was the boy – the boy in the tunic! – standing with his back to the room, right where the chest should be.

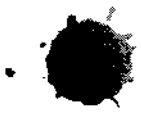
Taking a deep breath, Toby walked towards the boy. As he did so, two things happened. He felt himself being pulled forward, as if by a huge magnet, and he tripped over the table tennis bat.

The room was spinning. Everything in it was a blur as Toby cried, 'Look out!'

He tumbled head first into the boy. 'Ooof!' he cried as his head thumped into something warm and soft. Then he felt a tearing pain in the side of his head, as if his hair was being yanked out by the roots. 'Yeeow!'

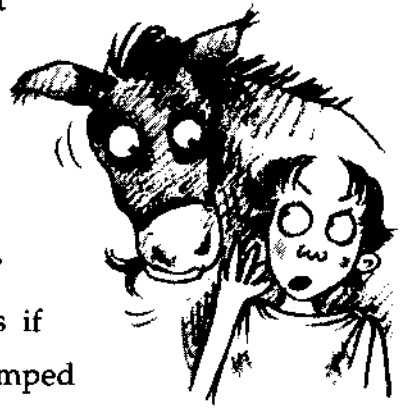
He saw stars for a moment. 'What's happened?' he said. 'I can't remember . . . Who am I?'

He shook his head to clear it. 'Of course,' he muttered. 'I'm me. Nikoleon. And my feet are covered in donkey doo.'



430 BC, near Athens, Greece

It's hardly a good idea to head-butt a donkey, and I'll never know what made me do it this morning. One minute I was standing there wondering which of the stubborn creatures to take to market, the next I was cross-eyed with my nose pressed up against a donkey's rear end. Not the nicest thing I've smelt today!



How in the name of all the gods did it happen? It was spooky – as if someone had thumped into me from behind. It nearly took all the breath out of my body, but I must have had some breath left, because I shouted, 'Yeeow!'

