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opening extract from

Toby Tucker Picking People's Pockets

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The Allen house, present day

Toby Tucker was bursting to get back upstairs and open his wooden chest again. He dumped his two wet dogs in the garden and went in the kitchen door. He sniffed. 'What's that yummy smell?'

His foster mother, Evie, took a baking tray out of the oven. 'Flapjacks,' she said. 'You can have one when they cool a bit. Good walk?'

'Barney and Snowball went in the pond.' Toby leaned hungrily over the tray. 'Barney walked in, and it only came up to his tummy, but Snowball



did her famous belly flop. She's covered in green slime. I'll hose her off later.'

'Well, do it near my veg patch,' said Evie. 'Save me a job. Speaking of jobs, where's Don? It's nearly ten o'clock.'

'I'm here!' said Toby's foster father from the doorway. 'Popped out to get new bath taps.'

'Well, when you've fixed those, you're coming to the supermarket,' said Evie. 'Then you can make a start on the downstairs loo ceiling.'

Decorating their house had been a non-stop task since Don and Evie Allen had moved in, just before Toby came to live with them.

Don sniffed. 'What's that?'

Toby pointed. 'Flapjacks! Can't wait for them to cool.'

'What? You're going to eat them?' Don shook his head. 'You do know that they use those to test the biting strength of false teeth, don't you?'

Evie glared at him. As he left the kitchen, a wet dishcloth caught him on the back of the neck!



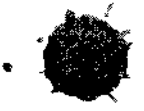
Toby giggled, grabbed a flapjack and went up to his bedroom at the very top of the house. He wished Don and Evie would hurry up and get round to doing his room. They'd made it really nice for when he moved in from the children's home, but they hadn't had time to get rid of the hideous wallpaper. Pink! Fairies! Toby hated it, and he'd never let his best friends Jake and Amber come upstairs.

He knew they thought he was weird and secretive. It wasn't just the wallpaper, though that really was just so embarrassing. Toby did have a secret. A big one!

He knelt by the wooden chest that stood beneath the window. Apart from his clothes and a few bits and pieces, it was the only possession he'd brought from the children's home. And it held the secret – a secret he didn't know how to explain to anyone.

'To-by!'

Oh no! Amber! And she was on her way up!



'Toby! Where are you?'

He bounded down the stairs. 'Hi, Amber, I'm just coming down.' He blocked the way.

Amber held a half-eaten slice of flapjack. 'Mrs Allen thought you were in the sitting room, but you weren't,' she said, 'so I came to find you. Jake might be round later.'

'Great,' said Toby. 'Let's go out. Snowball will be glad to see you.'

'I'm supposed to be going to the paper shop for my dad.' Amber wiped crumbs from her mouth. 'That was great,' she sighed. 'Wish my mum could cook like yours.'

Toby was going to say, 'She's not exactly my mum,' but he didn't. What Amber said sounded nice.

Barney scavenged for flapjack crumbs, while Snowball rolled over for Amber to tickle her filthy tummy.

'I came to tell you I'm off tomorrow afternoon for the weekend,' said Amber. 'We're all going





camping,' she explained. 'We go every year. We meet up with another big family, so it's really fun.'

She checked her watch. 'Better go. See ya.'

'See ya.' Toby saw her out, then headed up to his room again, and the wooden chest.

Evie passed him on the stairs. 'Toby, love, we really will start your room just as soon as we can, though I don't imagine Amber would mind the fairies at all. She might even like them.'

Toby laughed. 'Doubt it! She's got footballers all over hers.'

'What? Wallpaper?'



'Posters – loads of them!'

'I see,' said Evie, carrying on down the stairs. 'You know, you could always make a start on the decorating yourself, if you wanted to.'



Toby leaned over the banister. 'Haven't got time.'

She laughed. 'Still struggling with that jigsaw of a family tree, eh?'

Toby nodded. 'Still struggling!' He went into his room. Seconds later, in came Evie. 'I forgot to tell you, I've been in touch with the children's home again – they still can't throw any light on the old question.'

Together, they chorused, 'Who's Toby Tucker?' and laughed.

Toby was quiet for a moment. If you only knew, he thought. There are times – magical times

– when you shouldn't be asking, 'Who's Toby Tucker?', you should be asking, 'Where's Toby Tucker?'

'Look,' he said, going to his pinboard. 'I've got four names now.'

'You know quite a lot about your ancestors already,' said Evie. 'More than I do about mine! Right, we're off to the supermarket. Will you hang out the washing if we're not back by the time the machine stops? It'll be about an hour.'

'Sure.' Toby glanced up again at his ancestors' names. Don and Evie, he thought, have no idea exactly how much I do know about my ancestors. And today, I hope to find out more.

From the hall downstairs, Toby heard Don grumbling about having to go shopping, then, when the front door shut, he put a CD on really loud and opened his wooden chest.

Beneath the mountain of paper scraps inside it, was a framed photo. Toby looked forward to the warm feeling he always got when he saw the



gentle face of the elderly man in the photo. Was he one of Toby's ancestors?

On the back of the frame was a pencilled note.

> 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 knew, from experience, that Gee, whoever he was, hadn't made a mistake. He actually did mean 'when you come from', not 'where'.

That was the secret the chest held. All Toby had to do to start the magic was piece together a name from the scraps in the box. He'd done it four times already, when he found the names on his pinboard. How could he ever explain to anyone the amazing truth, that he actually became those people – that, for a while, he lived their lives?

Toby took out two great handfuls, settled



down on his deep red carpet, and began sorting through them.

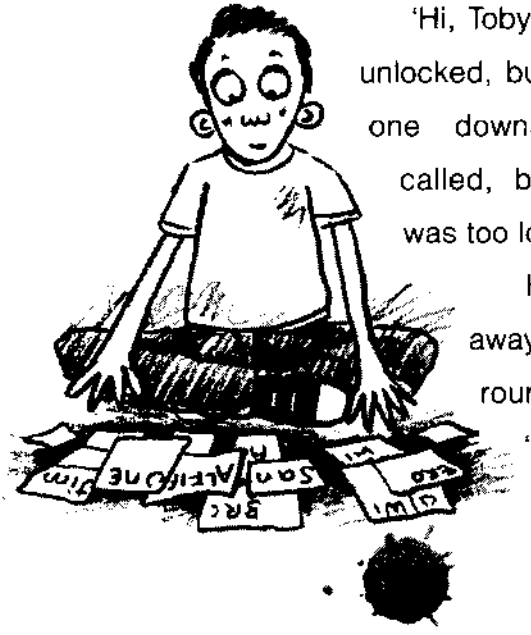
'Pel . . . ates . . . Lar . . .'

Nothing there.

He got excited when he found 'rick', thinking that was a name by itself, but quickly realised it wasn't, because it didn't have a capital letter.

'Per . . . Trott . . .' Toby punched his fist in the air. 'Trott! Yesss!'

He heard footsteps on the stairs. 'Don?' he called. 'Did she let you off the hook, then?' He looked up to see not Don, but Jake!



'Hi, Toby! The door was unlocked, but there was no one downstairs, and I called, but your music was too loud . . .'

His voice trailed away as he gazed round the room. 'Blimey!'

Toby felt hot. 'I didn't choose it,' he said. 'They keep promising to get rid of it, but – you know. Don told me I could start it myself, but it'll take too long. They're quite quick at decorating – once they get started.'

Jake threw himself on the bed. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.' Toby picked up all the bits of paper except the one with 'Trott' on it, and thrust them back in the chest. 'Want to come to the cinema with us tomorrow evening?'

Jake shook his head. 'I can't, sorry. It's my aunt's fortieth birthday and she's having a big family party. We're going.'

Toby made a face. 'Bor-ing. Loads of old people.'

'It'll be great,' said Jake. 'All my cousins are going.'

'So?'

'Cousins are brilliant!' said Jake. 'They're like brothers and sisters, only you don't have to live with them.' He jumped off the bed and looked

