Jakub's Otter

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troika

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In memory of
my precious mother, Jean,
who spent her life caring for others.

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Above all shadows rides the Sun . . .
—J. R. R. Tolkien

Jakub Needs a Rest

Jakub Polanski is coming to stay
With Mum, Dad and me, on our holiday,
But Mum said, 'Don't expect him to play;
Jakub needs a rest.'

Mr Polanski lives back in Krakow,
He doesn't have plans to join Jakub now,
But Mum said, 'Don't ask him why, what or how;
Jakub needs a rest.'

Mrs Polanski is really quite ill,
Her body's gone floppy, she takes lots of pills,
But Mum said, 'Don't ask him about it until
Jakub's had a rest.'

Jakub's Prologue

I know I should start at the beginning, but I want to tell you first about her eyes. I wasn't scared. The light was fading and her eyes shone like tiny torchlights, like pinpricks of sunshine in the dark green shadows of the evening. And she didn't move, not for ages. Just kept staring a spell on me. I'm glad you're reading this but I wish you'd been there.

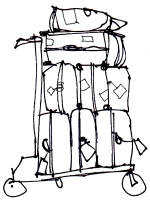
Yes, I *really should* start at the beginning, so I will. My name is Jakub Polanski. I'm from Poland but we live in London now. I'm ten years old. Jakub is pronounced *YAH-kup* but some of the children at school call me 'Jacob'. It's really annoying!

I live in a flat in Lewisham with my mum, Maria, who has MS. We moved here a few years ago. We have a Border Terrier called Baxter who is getting very old. My dad, Filip, still lives in Poland with Karina, his girlfriend. She tries to be nice to me but I

just ignore her. Our oldest friends, the Koniks, used to live in Poland too. We were friends back then, and we're friends right now, but they don't live in Lewisham. They moved here before us and live in a posh house in Kensington. They buy and sell houses – they're good at it.

I look after Mum and I've heard people say I'm good at *that*. I know everything about MS and what I need to do to help her – it takes a lot of time. I don't really have time to see friends, apart from at school. I used to have a best friend called Harry, but he got fed up with me because I kept saying I didn't have time to go places with him. I don't mind looking after Mum – she's got the best smile and the biggest heart. I'm all she's got.

But now I'm going to start this story properly – go back to when I went to Italy for a holiday with the Koniks: Lena, Dan and Marta.



Chapter 1

A Fear of Falling

I'd been on a plane only once before – when we moved from Poland to England – and I hadn't liked it. I'd closed my eyes when we took off and when we landed. That seemed like the best thing to do *this* time, too, as we took off from Heathrow. The middle bit of a flight is OK though. I can almost forget about the space beneath me, about how heavy a plane is and how it really shouldn't be able to stay up in thin air!

'How are you doing, Jakub?' asked Lena. 'We'll be up here for a couple of hours, so relax, enjoy the flight.'

'I look worried, don't I?'

'You look *terrified*! Like you're waiting for us to

fall from the sky,' said Dan, with a kind smile.

I didn't mind Marta having the window seat. I *did* mind sitting next to her. When our families used to spend time together in Poland, she was really annoying. When our families spend time together in the UK now, she's really annoying. Even when we were younger she thought she was the boss – and she's three months younger than me. Of course, our parents thought we'd *love* to play together because neither of us has a brother or sister! She's super clever, too, but childish at the same time. I'm pretty sure that living in the middle of a forest in Italy with Marta for four whole weeks is going to be . . . well, annoying.

Once we'd landed, I opened my squinting eyes properly and saw Perugia airport out of the window. There were vehicles taking people's luggage back and forth, and sunrays seemed to be bouncing from wing to wing of every plane. Phew! Solid ground! Everyone in the cabin was standing, turning, grabbing luggage from under seats and from overhead lockers. Of course, Marta was ready first with her bag, looking eagerly for the nearest exit.

Some of the signs in the arrivals lounge didn't have English words underneath, so I enjoyed working out what the Italian words meant. *Aeroporto* was dead

easy. I stood by the baggage carousel until Marta shouted, 'I can see my case! I can see my case!' I stared at her and raised my eyebrows at her stupid excitement. It wasn't long before Dan had stacked our luggage on a trolley and we were heading quickly to the taxi rank. I made the most of being able to stretch my legs before we had to sit down again. This time we'd be in a taxi for nearly two hours, until we got to Castelsantangelo sul Nera, where the Koniks have their own house. They go there most school holidays. Mum said to me a few weeks ago, 'The Koniks have done very well for themselves since they moved to the UK.'

Our taxi driver spoke happily in a loud voice for most of the journey, sometimes in Italian, sometimes in a sort of English. I closed my eyes once more as we raced wildly around hairpin bends on winding roads with no barriers. It wasn't as bad as the flight, but I'd had a big fear of falling all day!

I was asleep when we arrived at their house, Casa nella Foresta, just outside the village. Marta poked me in the ribs to wake me up. So annoying! The name of the house means 'House in the Forest', which is exactly what it is, and the shadows of tall trees seem to wrap around the walls. The taxi parked next to an old Fiat Panda – the Koniks' Italian car. They have a really flashy car in Kensington!

'Everyone take their own luggage,' said Lena. She was determined to get us all inside to unpack and eat. My case was last out, hidden deep in the huge boot, so I was alone when the taxi drove away. I just stood there, listening to the forest sounds all around me. We really were in the middle of nowhere. The sun would soon sink behind a tall mountain I could see in the distance, and the whole place felt as though it was getting ready for bedtime.

Just as I was about to make my way towards the house, a sudden movement in a bush caught my attention. I focused hard on the trembling leaves and held my breath. I tried not to think about the stories of wolves Marta had told me as we'd travelled through thick forests and whizzed by huge rockfaces in the taxi. Perhaps it was just a breeze, or perhaps my eyes were playing tricks on me. I started to walk slowly towards the front porch, my heartbeat louder than my footsteps! An owl hooted and a cold shiver slid down my back. *There's nothing there . . . There's nothing there* . . . I kept repeating to myself as I stared at the porch light, which was getting brighter as I moved towards it.

My breathing started to slow down and my shoulders relaxed. Nearly there. I was so glad Marta hadn't seen me panicking – she would have loved that! I picked up speed, but as I got closer to

the porch steps I tripped on a large stone poking through the dusty earth and landed flat on my face. I pulled myself up, brushed myself down and picked up my case. Leaves rustled again. I noticed another movement in the bushes near to me. I stood frozen and stared hard, until the branches suddenly parted and from out of the shadows a massive tornado of hair and teeth came racing towards me!

I Need a Rest from Jakub

Jakub Polanski is such a big bore,
He's not smiled once, he stares at the floor,
He's just like a bear with a head that is sore.
I think I need a rest.

Jakub Polanski looks tired and worn,
He speaks to me with impatience and scorn,
In his very pale skin, I'm a sharp, painful thorn.
I think I need a rest.

Jakub Polanski is clearly quite frail,
And he hides all his feelings under a veil,
But together we fight with a tooth and a nail.
I think I need a rest.