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Opening extract from

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Exactly the Sort of Thing I Call Magic

I do not like it when people shout.

Particularly when the person shouting is Mr Spencer.

(Mr Spencer, the new irritated teacher of Class 6.)

I especially do not like it when Mr Spencer is shouting at me.

School is no longer a peaceful place where you can catch up on your daydreaming, forget your family (or what is left of your family) and talk about things like *Dr Who* and how to stop Global Warming (we all know how but we don't stop it) and if it is OK for boys to wear pink and all those other things we talk about.

School, says Mr Spencer, is an educational establishment.

And education is learning facts to write down in tests.

Called SATS.

These new ideas do not stay in my head very well, they drift away and before I know it I am

back in the good-old-days ways, staring out of the window.

Hence (good word which will get me no marks if I continue to spell it the same way as the name of those birds which lay eggs – hopefully free range – says Mr Spencer, who takes no account of Spellcheck).

Hence the big shouts from Mr S.

At me, Rose Casson, aged eleven, perfectly warm and sleepy by the radiator, watching the rain and counting the sodden leaves left on the sycamore tree in the playground. Twenty-seven at lunchtime. Eighteen now.

I was sitting with my best friend Kiran. I am so lucky to have Kiran for a best friend. Not only because she is kind and funny and pretty, but also because she is very intelligent and does my worksheets for me whenever possible so I get good marks and am not put down into Bottom Set. Bottom Set (who were politely called Gold Team until very recently) are all either football nutters or saving-up-for-pony girls. I would not fit in there very well at all. Except maybe with Kai. He is a Bottom Set football nutter, but has a subsidiary interest in Practical Jokes.

Mr Spencer's voice made me jump, it was so sudden and so hard.

'Rose Casson! I am warning you!' he snapped.

'What, me?' I asked, amazed. 'Why me? Warning me about what?'

But Mr Spencer, who had swung round from the board to shout at me, turned his back in a very deliberate way and carried on writing.

'I wasn't doing anything!' I protested to his back because we have had to learn to put up with Mr Spencer's bad manners here in Class 6.

So Mr Spencer twisted around very slowly and gave me one of his dead-eyed looks and said, 'I will not tell you another time!'

'I don't know what you've told me *this* time,' I said, rather scared now, but sticking up for myself. 'Or what you are warning me about because I wasn't—'

'Rose Casson!' interrupted Mr Spencer in a voice that shook the windows. 'Your behaviour in class is idleness personified! Your standard of work is consistently appalling! And *how many times do you have to be told to stop staring out of that window?*'

I dropped my head and grabbed a pencil and began to draw very fast on my jotter cover. Being shouted at makes me feel terrible. I wanted to push Mr Spencer out the window. Or run away. Or both. It also makes my hands shake. They shook so much I dropped my pencil and it rolled on to the floor.

Kiran shoved me with her elbow and hissed, 'Stop it, Rose! Don't be useless! Smile at him!'

As if to encourage me she smiled at him herself, angelically (although showing all her teeth). He gave her a suspicious look but turned back to the board.

Kiran squeezed my hand and Molly picked up my pencil and after that I was all right again.

Molly is a girl who tags along with Kiran and me. She is a bit younger than us (ten) and she is a Brownie. We do not really mind her tagging on. She is very nice.

But.

(((((((Boring.)))))))

I would never say that out loud to anyone.

Kiran is not boring; she is brilliant. And she is Mr Spencer's enemy. She fights him and she wins. She fought him at Circle Time this afternoon to pay him back for shouting at me.

Circle Time is how Mr Spencer fills in the end of the day when he can't be bothered to try and teach us any longer. We have to sit in a circle and take turns to talk about whatever subject Mr Spencer decides in which to stick his nose. Of course, you do not have to say anything when it comes to your turn. You can say 'Pass' instead.

But saying 'Pass' is not an easy option. It causes Mr Spencer to snigger.

So, Circle Time. Everyone taking as long as possible to arrange the chairs and settle down, and dozens of glances at the clock to see how long it is until home time. Thirty-eight minutes. *Still* thirty-eight minutes! I was sure it was thirty-eight minutes the last time I looked.

The clock must be broken.

Then Mr Spencer announced the Circle Time subject for that day.

'The Worst Thing I Have Ever Done,' he said. 'That should be interesting!'

He put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair with his flesh coloured moustache spread hairily into the shape of a smile.

On the wall in front of me the clock was still refusing to admit that it was less than thirty-eight minutes till home time. All around people were very quiet, each of us hurrying to stow our private memories into the most secret corners of our minds. Behind, I heard Kai swallow.

Poor Kai. He knows now that dialling 999 and calling out police, fire and ambulance to his mother's fortieth birthday party was completely unfunny and ruined the whole evening. He has only

just finished writing the letters of apology.

And they cancelled his birthday party.

At the moment it is not kind to remind Kai of anything to do with parties, or mothers, or the emergency services.

But Mr Spencer is not kind.

Mr Spencer must have heard rumours.

'*Whom* shall we pick to start?' he asked, his moustache stretched even wider. 'Kai?'

'Pass,' said Kai and began struggling with the knots in his shoelaces.

'Pass?' repeated Mr Spencer, his voice high with delight. 'Well, well! Obviously the memories are still too painful! Molly, then? Oh dear. Clearly not.'

Molly had hidden her face in her hands.

'Kiran?'

At first Kiran looked like she had not heard her name.

'Kiran?' said Mr Spencer. 'Hmmm?'

Time stopped. The clock, which was obviously on Mr Spencer's side, refused to concede a minute. Molly's face remained hidden. Kai's shoelaces still would not loosen. Mr Spencer looked as pleased with himself as ever.

It was as if the whole world waited to hear what Kiran would say.

Kiran flicked back her plaits, a battle gesture that should have frightened Mr Spencer, but didn't.

'Kiran?' he repeated.

'I think,' said Kiran softly, looking straight at Mr Spencer, 'we should choose you.'

Oh, wonderful Kiran! Because Mr Spencer went red and then redder, and his hairy smile vanished and was replaced by something that looked like a dead caterpillar draped over a slit, and we saw that he too had memories in the secret corners of his mind that he preferred to keep private.

So we had silent reading until the bell went, and it rang almost as soon as we had got our books out to begin.

Even though the broken clock still said thirty-eight minutes till home time.

And that is exactly the sort of thing I call magic.

Molly and I left school together. I was feeling very good because of the magic broken clock, but Molly was unhappy. Poor old Mollipop. But why did she run after me to tell me she was miserable, and then refuse to say why?

'Stop asking!' she snapped, like I really annoyed her.

Hmmm.

I probably do annoy Molly because I am not like her in any way and I don't know why she bothers with me.

It may be because of Caddy.

Caddy, my big sister aged twenty-three, kind, daft and hasn't been seen for ages. (In fact it is just like she has totally vanished from the face of the earth except for a few crackly phone calls and some animated e-mails that do not always load.)

But (a word you are not supposed to use to begin sentences and which will cause Mr Spencer to draw big red aggravated rings around it pressing so hard with his pencil that it goes through to the next page) *but* Molly admires Caddy very, very much. They are both fascinated by Natural History of the exotic David Attenborough variety. Molly used to come round to our house just to look at Caddy, and when Caddy got herself a job in the nearby Zoo Molly was so impressed she begged me to ask for her autograph.

So I did and Caddy wrote on the back of a Zoo Map postcard:

Darling Molly – one day you and I will let them all OUT but meanwhile I am keeping them as comfy as possible love Caddy.

Molly laminated that postcard so that it would last for ever and carried it around in her school bag until Mr Spencer came across it one day. And smiled.

Sniff, sniff, went Molly, plodding beside me – pathetic, difficult-to-ignore kind of sniffs.

'*Molly* . . .' I said.

'Stop *asking*!' said Molly. 'Can't you talk about something else?'

So I tried to think of something else. Caddy? No. Vanished. Mr Spencer? No. Terrible. And unfortunately not vanished. David Attenborough (whose laminated autograph Molly also possesses)? Yes. Wonderful. (Always supposing he is still alive.)

'What do you mean?' squealed Molly. 'Rose! Of course he is still alive! Why wouldn't he be, why shouldn't he be? You are horrible!'

Oh dear. Calm down, Mollipop.

'Anyway,' said Mollipop, calming down, 'if he *wasn't* still . . . If he *was* . . . I'm not even going to say it! They'd have told us in Assembly like the Queen Mother, you know they would.'

How strange is that? For me Assembly is a chance for a ten-minute doze. For Kai it is an opportunity to get his shoes on the right feet. But for Molly it is:

Celebrity Deaths!

I was extremely relieved when Kiran came charging up behind us. Kiran was very bouncy because of her victory over Mr Spencer and she guessed immediately what was making Molly so dismal.

'It's your worst thing ever, isn't it?' she asked, and without waiting for an answer began recounting some of her and my worst things ever.

And some of them were pretty bad.

Kiran is a wonderful storyteller. She tells stories like some people paint pictures, sketching in the bare facts and then adding details as bright and alive as if they had just been picked from a new box of colours.

Today's story was the account of what happened when Kiran got bored when left alone for five minutes in her father's brand new parked car. It was very exciting although the only thing Kiran actually did was take off the hand brake. But on a rather steep hill. And when the car began to move, instead of pulling the brake on again, Kiran panicked and jumped out. So the car rolled and rolled, away down the hill, gathering speed, bashing off wing mirrors, frightening old ladies, hitting notices and posts like skittles, faster than anyone could run, keeping stubbornly straight when the road curved, across the pavement and through the automatic opening doors of the Post Office and into the passport photo booth.

Where it stopped.

'*Kiran!*' exclaimed Molly, much cheered.

'But at least I didn't do it *on purpose*,' said Kiran. 'Not like (she won't mind me telling you because she's given it up) when Rose was an actual shoplifter.'

(Oh, thank you very much, Kiran, for digging that one up.)

'*Rose!*'

For a moment Molly actually stopped walking. Then she shrugged and sighed and carried on again. Saying, 'Yes well, I know shoplifting is illegal and so is smashing a car into the Post Office (I expect) but at least you've never *killed* anyone.'

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'Yet,' added Molly fairly.

And Kiran and I were forced to admit that as far as we knew, we hadn't.

After that we walked along very thoughtfully for a while, looking at Molly out of the corners of our eyes now and then, wanting to ask who, and when, and what she had done with the corpse.

Sometimes things are disappointing that should not be disappointing.

★ ★ ★

The sniffing began again.

I would not call the accidental freeing of Molly's grandma's ancient budgie murder, even if it was discovered ten days later in the jaws of a neighbour's cat.

But poor Molly did.

And none of Kiran's persuasive powers could make her consider that ten days of freedom ending in a cat might be a good exchange for an unlimited future in a very small cage.

Until, just as Molly was about to turn in at the gate of her home, Kiran demanded, 'Which would *you* choose then, the days or the cage?'

'Oh,' said Molly, suddenly transformed, 'oh, the days, the days, the days!'

After Molly left us Kiran and I walked on together to my house.

At first it seemed that there was no one home. All the windows were dark (I love it when I come home and all the windows are bright) but then we bumped into Mummy outside the back door. She was wearing a sleeping bag like a toga and clutching a hot-water bottle and obviously heading for the garden shed where she paints her pictures, makes private

shed-based plans for world peace, and escapes from us, her wonderful family (this time represented by Me).

Kiran and Mummy have met before, so I did not have to explain them to each other.

'Hello, Mrs Casson!' said Kiran.

'Kiran . . . (sneeze) how lovely . . . (sneeze) Call me . . . (sneeze) Eve, darling,' said my mother, her face muffled in a handful of kitchen roll and backing away like mad. 'Rose, I won't kiss you because I think I may have caught something (sneeze-gasp-sneeze). I am going to go and have it in private in the shed . . . (sneeze).'

'Oh!'

'One huge germ,' continued Mummy, pointing to her head to make things quite clear. 'So off I go! Hope you had a lovely day at . . .' (she sneezed so hugely that the sleeping bag fell around her knees) '. . . school?'

'No,' I said. 'It was terrible. I've told you before. It gets awfuller every day.'

But I don't think Mummy heard. She was concentrating on recapturing the sleeping bag. Saffy heard instead. She came out of the house just in time. Saffy is my other sister (ie the one who is not Caddy). Saffron: seventeen, stunningly beautiful, super-intelligent, and not to be argued with.

★ ★ ★

'What gets awfuller every day?' she demanded, herding Kiran and me into the kitchen and then rushing about collecting things for Extra Spanish which she does after school two days each week because she is so brainy. 'You're not ill too, are you, Rose? Perhaps you should go and live with Mummy in the shed. Indigo and I could leave you supplies at the door as if you had the plague. Don't look like that, Kiran! She would love it!'

Yes I would.

No school.

It was a wonderful idea and I was about to start fake sneezing straight away when Kiran said, 'She isn't ill at all. It is Mr Spencer that gets more awful every day.'

'Never heard of him,' said Saffron, with her head in her bag.

'Our new class teacher. He doesn't like any of us. Do you know what he said to me last week? He said, "Kiran, you will undoubtedly find yourself in well justified but colossal trouble one day if you do not learn to understand the vital difference between plain fact and paparazzi-style fantasy!" That's what Mr Spencer said. I wrote it down.'

'Tell him less is more when it comes to adjectives,'

said Saffron, sounding very uninterested. 'And pass me that blue file, please!'

'He says we are all immature,' continued Kiran (passing it). 'And he says however will Rose manage at Big School in less than one year's time if she cannot read!'

By this time Sarah, Saffron's best friend, had arrived because she does Extra Spanish too. Sarah has a wheelchair that she uses for transport, emotional blackmail in queues, as an occasional weapon, and as a convenient place to hug people from. I got a quick, protective wheelchair hug as she exclaimed, 'Of course Rose can read! What's the man talking about?'

'Books,' explained Kiran.

'Books?'

'You know how Rose doesn't read books? Mr Spencer can't take it. She stares out of the window and it makes him so mad he—'

'*I* didn't know Rose didn't read books,' interrupted Sarah. 'What, never, Rose? Not even at school?'

'Lazy little disgrace!' remarked Saffron.

'You don't know how it is at our school!' I said, defending myself. 'If you finish one book, they make you pick another. And as soon as you finish that, they send you off to the book boxes again. And each book is a little bit harder than the one before. It's called

Reading Schemes and it's just like a story Indigo once told me about a dragon with two heads. And when the dragon's two heads were cut off, it grew four. And when they were cut off it grew eight . . .'

'I've never *heard* such rubbish!' said Saffron.

'It's true! Do you know what happened when Kiran finished all the books in the school library last year? They got extra money from the PTA and ordered two hundred more!'

'Actually I was pleased . . .' murmured Kiran.

'So at school now I just . . .'

'Hand over your school bag!' ordered Saffron.

'. . . usually . . .'

Saffron turned my bag upside down and grabbed a book from the heap of junk that fell out.

'. . . draw.'

But Saffy wasn't listening. She was asking, 'What's this supposed to be? Look, Sarah! What does that awful writing say?'

'History,' said Kiran helpfully, craning to look as Saffron flipped through the pages.

'It's all pictures!' said Sarah, staring at it. 'Give me another! What's this?'

'Science.'

'*It's* all pictures as well! Where's your Maths?'

'Maths?'

'Maths! Numbers! Sums!'

'Probably at school,' I said.

'Ha!' said Saffron. 'I bet it's all pictures too!'

(A bad guess, although I did not say so. My Maths book is all Spaces for Missing Work.)

'Her not reading's the worst,' said Sarah, looking at me in a truly shocked kind of way.

'Well, I'm with Mr Spencer,' said Saffron, bundling all my stuff back together into my bag and handing it to me. '*I* don't know what you're going to do when you start Big School either! Just don't let on you're related to me. We're late, come on, Sarah!'

Slam.

Saffron was gone.

'Rose,' said Sarah, 'not reading's *awful*.'

It's not.

'You've got to change.'

I don't see why.

'I'll help.'

You needn't.

'Don't argue, I'm *going* to,' said Sarah.

Slam.

Oh.

Kiran left almost straight after Saffy. She was late too. There are always loads of people at Kiran's house,

waiting for her to come home and wondering where she is. I can remember when it was like that here. The kitchen used to be full. There was never enough space.

There is plenty of space now; a whole houseful.

Where have we all gone?

Mummy is in the shed.

Daddy is in London, being an artist. He says he is getting old.

Caddy, my grown-up sister, has been very elusive for the last year or so. Last heard of she was in Greece, working in a Sea World centre, getting up campaigns to rescue unhappy parrots from unsuitable owners, and trying to get over Michael who was the boyfriend she only fell completely in love with after she had agreed to marry someone else.

Michael is avoiding us. I saw him only the other day, teaching someone to drive.

He looked away. Which is not fair, because if anyone was on Michael's side, it was me. Think what I did at Caddy's wedding. (No, don't.)

Saffron. Saffron is on her way to Spanish class.

Indigo, my brother, will be at the music shop in town. He has free guitar lessons from the owner in return for vacuuming the carpets and washing

up the day's supply of dirty mugs in the little kitchen at the back.

And
The guinea pigs have been given away.
The hamsters all escaped.
So that is why
This house
Feels so
Empty.