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Opening extract from

The Worst Witch To Rescue

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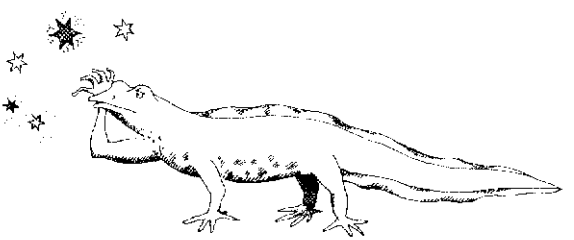
JILL MURPHY

THE Worst Witch TO THE RESCUE



PUFFIN

CHAPTER ONE

It was early in the morning on what promised to be a fine day in March, a bit blustery but a perfect start for the first day of Summer Term at Miss Cackle's Academy for Witches.

Dawn had only just broken when a lone figure on a broomstick came swooping and diving through the flocks of early-morning birds, soaring among them with such confidence that from a distance it almost looked like another bird.

The pilot was Ethel Hallow, top student at Miss Cackle's Academy, early as usual and eager to be the first pupil to alight in the schoolyard.

She slowed to an easy pace and hitched her suitcase more securely on to the broom, as it had shifted during

a rather ambitious nosedive. Her cat, Nightstar, was wedged between the suitcase and a bundle of box files, one leg in the air, doing some serious washing without a care in the world.

Ethel dropped down a little so that she was skimming the top of the forest which surrounded the academy for several kilometres. She could see the school now, misty on the horizon. There was no one else about, she was sure to be the first – she could take it more slowly from here.

Unusually, Ethel was anxious. The whole class had been set a holiday project and, for once, she hadn't been able to get to grips with it. Normally, the project would involve pupils looking things up in their *Spell Sessions* book and learning some complicated new spell that they hadn't been allowed to tackle before. However, this one was different. Miss Hardbroom, their extremely strict

and exacting form mistress, had given them a completely free rein and simply told them to come back with something unusual and interesting.

'That *doesn't* mean you just give it five minutes' consideration on your way back here next term!' Miss Hardbroom had warned them on the last day of the previous term. 'You've all been here long enough, so I'm expecting you to have a little self-motivation and imagination by now.'

Imagination – or the lack of it – was the trouble where Ethel was concerned. It was her only weak point and she found herself in the unheard-of (for her) position of doing exactly what Miss Hardbroom had told them not to do – trying to think up a brilliant project in five minutes flat on the way back to school.

Something caught her eye below and she saw, to her surprise, a tabby cat in

the topmost branches of a beech tree. It miaowed pitifully as she dropped lower and Ethel realized that she could see the top of a school hat, slightly bent, and a figure partly hidden by the tangled branches. That hat! That *cat*! It could only be Mildred Hubble.

'Mildred?' called Ethel, hovering expertly like a helicopter above the little cat's upturned face. 'Is that you down there? Are you OK?'

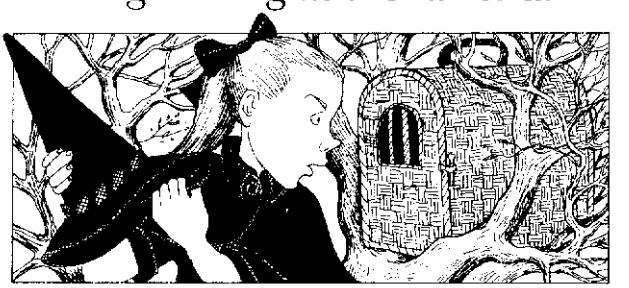
The hat leaned back, revealing Mildred Hubble's face. 'Oh hi, Ethel,' she said. '*You're* early. I just stopped here for a little rest – well, actually, Tabs fell off and I came down to save him and *then* we stopped for a rest. He's done quite well so far, considering how scared he is of flying. It's so difficult now that we have to keep them on the brooms all the time. Flying was *so* much easier when we could just bung them in their baskets.'

'Easier for *you*, you mean,' said Ethel, hovering down through the branches until she found a space next to Mildred. 'Nightstar was just born to fly. She was brilliant from day one.'

'Hmm,' mumbled Mildred. 'Yes, well, you've always been the lucky one, Ethel. It wasn't my fault I was given Tabby – though he's got a lovely nature and he's the perfect pet, even if he *can't* do anything else.'

Ethel arranged her broom and luggage carefully behind a cluster of branches which grew from the trunk like a giant upturned hand.

'Budge up,' she said, sitting down next to Mildred. 'What's that in your cat basket?' she asked, peering inside the basket, where there was definitely something lurking at the far end.



'Oh – er – nothing!' said Mildred brightly. 'Just some bits and pieces I couldn't fit into my suitcase. The cat basket was empty for the flight, so I thought I'd use it for extra stuff – you know. How did you get on with the holiday project by the way?' she added, swiftly changing the subject.

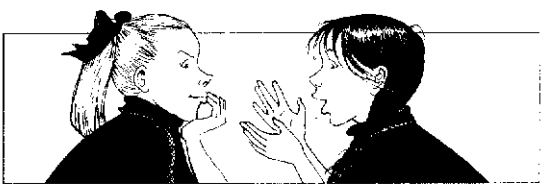
'Ah, yes,' said Ethel, 'the holiday project. Well, it was quite a challenge, wasn't it? How did *you* get on?'

A shy smile spread over Mildred's face. 'Quite well, as a matter of fact,' she replied. 'I had a *really* good idea. In fact, it was the best idea I've ever had in my whole life! Then I looked up all the relevant bits in an ancient spell book in our local library. It's an amazing old book, tiny print – you actually need a magnifying glass – and hardly any pictures, so it's a bit boring, but it's got everything in it. Anyway, I've got it all written down, so for once I can't wait to get to school and show everyone. Makes a change, eh?'

'What exactly *is* the spell?' asked Ethel casually.

'Well,' said Mildred proudly, 'it isn't actually a known spell. I sort of made it up by myself. It's to make an animal able to speak. Not like when a human turns into an animal, because, when that happens, the human sort of *becomes* the animal and can talk as the animal would. No, this is to make a small animal under twenty-five centimetres square able to have a conversation with a person. The animal has to be a maximum size because you have to make an exact formula for a particular body area – which means that it has to be correct down to the last detail. I tried to get it bigger, because I was dying to have a chat with Tabby, but I couldn't get the equation right for the larger size, so I gave up trying. Anyway, I've actually managed to work it all out for twenty-five centimetres and under –

all the incantations, and the herbs and how to mix it – so you could have a chat with, say, a toad or a field mouse. Oh, and it only works for two weeks on each animal and after those two weeks you can never get it to speak again. Weird, isn't it?'



'How do you know it only lasts for two weeks?' asked Ethel, intrigued. 'I mean, if *you* invented the spell, how do you *know*?'

Mildred smiled.

'Well, actually I *have* tried it,' she said. 'I tried it on a shrew and a young hedgehog and a newt, who all fitted the size criterion – I don't know *why* I'm telling you all this Ethel, I expect your project is a zillion times more interesting.'

Ethel did her best to look admiring and pleased for Mildred.

'Gosh, Mildred,' she enthused, 'you really have come up with a winner there. My idea's *nothing* compared with that. What did the shrew and the hedgehog *say*?'

'Not much actually,' said Mildred. 'The hedgehog was quite quiet and shy, just asked if it could have a saucer of milk and be directed to the nearest slug-infested flowerbed, but the shrew was

really quite nasty – very bad-tempered and complaining about everything. I was glad when the two weeks were up and it suddenly went back to squeaking.

I noticed that both of them stopped being able to talk bang on fourteen days at noon and that, however hard I tried, I couldn't get them speaking again. So I used the formula on a newt and it worked, though newts aren't very chatty either – just for two weeks again, so it's been properly tested. I've written it all up and put it in this special folder. Look, fifteen pages! H.B. won't believe it until she sees how well it works.' She held up a neat blue folder.

Mildred suddenly felt slightly uneasy, sitting there in a tree with Ethel, having what appeared to be a normal, pleasant conversation. Up until this point the two girls had never had any conversation longer than two minutes without an argument developing.

'Come on then,' she said, putting the folder back into her school bag and beginning to gather her things together. 'We'd better set off or we'll be late after

our early start. Thanks for listening, Ethel. I must admit I'm quite proud of myself, for once.'

'And with very good reason,' Ethel said, smiling. 'It's an excellent idea. I wish I'd thought of it myself.'

As they pulled themselves up on the branches, gathering their cats and bags, Ethel lurched sideways, knocking Mildred's overstuffed school bag. It was still unfastened and everything went tumbling down through the branches in a cascade of pages and folders. At

the same time, her pencil tin flipped open and her twenty brand-new sharp-pointed coloured pencils clink-clinked down the tree, bouncing through the twigs and buds.

'Oh no!' exclaimed Mildred as Tabby scrabbled further up the tree, miaowing with fright at the commotion.

'Don't worry, Mildred,' said Ethel. 'You grab Tabby and I'll pick everything up for you.'

Ethel climbed down the tree, painstakingly picking up all the paperwork and the pencils and carefully putting everything back into the bag.

'I'm so sorry not to help,' called Mildred. 'I'm trying to keep hold of Tabby or he'll be off and I'll never find him up here. Have you got everything?'

'*Nearly* everything!' called Ethel, who was out of sight at the base of the tree. 'How many coloured pencils were there?'

'Twenty!' called Mildred.

'Hang on!' Ethel shouted. 'They're scattered all over the place.'

For several minutes, Mildred heard Ethel rustling about in the bushes, then it went quiet. 'Are you all right, Ethel?' she called, holding on tightly to the struggling Tabby.

'Yep!' called Ethel. 'Got the very last one – the red one! Coming right back up now!'

Ethel appeared through the branches with the bag across her shoulder and Mildred could see that it was nicely

full, with the precious blue folder slightly sticking out between books and exercise books. Ethel patted everything neatly down into the bag and fastened the straps. 'There you go!' she said, handing it over, sounding really glad to have helped.

'Thanks so much, Ethel,' said Mildred. 'This is such a great way to start a new term, isn't it?'

'Isn't it *just*!' said Ethel. 'Come on, race you to school!'