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Opening extract from

Eco-Worriers: Penguin Problems

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Chapter One

It was because of the penguin.

Let me go back to the beginning. Not the beginning of time. That's too far. But I can go back as far as a few weeks . . .

I am lying on Evie's bed looking up at the penguin wallchart on her ceiling – there is no more room on the walls, every centimetre of which is covered by posters, wallcharts, shelves and cupboards full of books, cuddly toys and penguin paraphernalia. I am struggling to do up my jeans – I blame Mum for feeding me processed food (OK, so I nagged her into getting that pizza) but I hope she realises that Evie and I are serious about going organic – and I am serious about getting into shape for the Olympics. I want to win gold medals in swimming and athletics.

Evie is singing along to the latest track by our favourite singer, Dodo, who belts out powerful songs about changing the world and her own life.

'You stole my soul but I'm gonna get it back!' Evie yells, as the song comes to a punchy end. She loves Dodo's singing, and has posters of her on the walls along with the penguins – and a collection of all her CDs.

There is silence. A fly buzzes. It is stiflingly hot. Evie's curtains hang limply at the wide-open window.

'Smoothie?' Evie asks, opening her Koolsounds mini-fridge/CD player, and getting out two cartons of our favourite strawberry-and-mango smoothie.

'I thought you were going to ditch that fridge because it's non-eco-friendly,' I gasp, gratefully accepting the smoothie as I am exhausted and breathless from doing up my jeans. 'And because you're saving up for an MP3 player and speakers!'

'Yes – but if I get rid of it, where am I going to keep our smoothies? If I keep them in the fridge downstairs, Liam drinks them all. And I'll need another CD player so that I can listen to Dodo.'

Evie is sitting at her computer with her back to me, playing an online game called Ice-cream Pig, where you have to stop a cute little pig from getting hit on the head by a falling ice-cream scoop while you move him around the screen trying to catch the scoops in a cone.

'You certainly use up a lot of electricity!' I exclaim. 'You're *always* at the computer these days.' Evie's dad gave her his old prehistoric computer when he got an up-to-date, shiny new one – now he and Evie's brother Liam both have laptops.

'OK. Now you've made me feel guilty,' Evie grumbles. 'So I'm going to have to stick a black footprint on the chart, and I didn't want to.'

Evie has a wallchart and pull-out Eco-Guide from *Green Teen* magazine where you get to stick a green star on the wallchart if you or your family do something good for the environment – or a black footprint if you do something bad.

Eco-fact Number Three

The black footprint is a reference to the 'carbon footprint' which each household produces when they use electricity, gas and petrol made from non-renewable fossil fuels - coal and oil - the burning of which cause carbon emissions, which are trapped in the atmosphere and result in the 'greenhouse effect', otherwise known as global warming.



I didn't mean to upset Evie – global warming is obviously getting to me today. Feeling even hotter I go to stand beside the open window. This is not as easy as it sounds, as I have to clamber over a mound of assorted penguin and dolphin toys. Evie's last obsession was with dolphins – but she has now moved on to penguins. Most of the toys, books, posters, penguin stationery, etc. come from the Ecological Gardens, which is a local wildlife park for plants, birds and small animals, many of them on the endangered species list. It is a great place

for events, birthday parties and school trips. Evie and I love going there. Evie even nagged her parents into allowing her to adopt a penguin called Petal – you pay a certain amount towards the upkeep of your penguin and they send you an owner's certificate, a fact sheet, a free ticket to go and visit, and regular updates about your penguin.

'It's such a shame your mum won't have a bird-table in the garden,' I remark. I am passionate about *all* birds, not just penguins.

'I told you – she's bird-phobic.' Evie's mum has had a fear of birds ever since a starling got into the house and panicked and flew into her face.

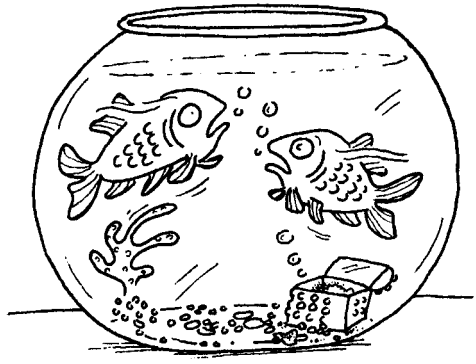
'I'd love to see a Golden Oriole,' I sigh. There have been some reported sightings of this rare visitor, and some talk of it breeding in this country now that the weather is warmer, which is really exciting because it is an endangered species.

'Whatever,' says Evie, who is obviously not into Golden Orioles. 'I just wish Mum and Dad would let me have a dog – but they don't want any animals. They're so mean.'

'They let you adopt a penguin. *And* they let you have fish.' Evie has a bowl in her room containing two goldfish called Posh and Pout.

'You can't take them for walks,' Evie grumbles, reluctantly sticking a black footprint on her wallchart.

I sigh and look down at the little patch of lawn at the front of the house – Evie's bedroom looks out on the



POSH AND POUT

street. The lawn is turning brown. There is a hosepipe and lawn-sprinkler ban. Suddenly something catches my eye.

'What's THAT?' I exclaim.

'What?' says Evie. 'Don't tell me you've spotted a Golden wotsit?'

'No! No – it's . . . it's a penguin!'

'Yeah . . . right.'

'No – really – it's a penguin!'

'Put your glasses on, Lola – it's probably a penguin-shaped rock, or something.'

'I told you – I only need the glasses for reading. I don't need them for seeing penguins. And I know a penguin when I see one.'

Evie scrambles over the mound of toys to join me at the window.

'Look – there!'

I point to a small shrub just inside the low wall which separates the garden from the street. Sheltering beside it is what appears to be a very small grey snowman wearing a black hoodie. But unless climate change has gone completely mad, it is not a snowman. It is definitely . . . A PENGUIN!

Chapter Two

Evie and I look at the penguin in the garden and then we look at each other. 'WHY?' we both say.

'I . . . I . . . I don't understand!' I stammer.

Then Evie takes charge of the situation. She likes taking charge. 'What on EARTH is a live penguin doing in my garden?' she exclaims. 'Climate change must be a lot worse than I thought if penguins are turning up in people's gardens! Come on – let's rescue it! Bring a pillowcase!'

'Pillowcase?'

'Yes, we can drape it over the penguin so it doesn't get alarmed – like putting a cloth over a parrot cage.'

Evie's parents have gone shopping, and Liam is engrossed in his latest computer game – Horrible Assassin 2 – so there is no one to question us about why we are rushing out of the front door with a pillowcase.

'Slow down,' hisses Evie. 'We don't want to alarm it. Oh – look! It's *sooo* cute!'

'Are you sure this isn't a dream?' I ask in a hushed

voice. 'Weird things happen in dreams, like penguins suddenly appearing . . . ouch!' Evie has just pinched me.

'You're not dreaming,' she says, as we very slowly approach the penguin.

The penguin doesn't look alarmed – it looks dazed. It doesn't move as we crouch down beside it.

'Oh, I do hope it's not injured!' I whisper.

'It doesn't look injured . . .'

'Who's going to pick it up?'

Evie takes the pillowcase. 'I am,' she says, sounding a little nervous. 'I've always wanted to p— , p— , pick up a penguin. I hope it doesn't peck me!'

Very gently, Evie covers the penguin with the pillowcase and lifts it up.

'Uh-oh – it's struggling! Quick – back to my room!'

Safely back in Evie's room, we carefully unwrap the penguin. Its beak is wide open, probably in alarm, and it waddles and stumbles across the bedroom floor. It looks hot and bothered.

'Open the door of the mini-fridge – we could sit it next to the fridge to cool down,' I suggest.

'I don't want to stress it out,' Evie replies. 'We probably shouldn't keep handling it. Wow! My very own *real* penguin! This is awesome!'

'Yes – but you can't keep it!'

'I *know*! The thing is, I think I recognise it! It's the penguin chick from the Eco Gardens. It had its picture in the paper because it was the first Adelie penguin chick

bred in captivity for several years. I even remember they called him Pablo!'

'But how do you know it's Pablo?'

'Because he's got a big white spot on the back of his head, and most Adelie penguins have completely black heads. So he's really unusual!'

I look closely at Pablo. Apart from the white spot, the rest of his head and back are black and he has white rings around his eyes. He keeps opening his short beak.

'Why is he doing that?' I ask.

'He's probably hot – or he may be hungry,' Evie replies.

Neither of us can take our eyes off the penguin.

'How on earth did he end up in Frog Street, anyway?' Evie continues. 'Come on, Lola! Why are we just sitting here? I'll contact the Eco Gardens – I'll ring them – they must be worried sick. Go and get Pablo some water – oh, and a tin of sardines, in case he's hungry!'

Evie can be a *tiny* bit bossy sometimes, but I put up with it when it's in a good cause, like now.

I find Liam in the kitchen, raiding the fridge.

'Hi,' he says, flicking back his long dark fringe and grinning at me.

I feel incredibly hot – it must be the effect of global warming.

'Er, hi!' I reply. 'Do you have any sardines?' It seems an odd thing to say. Liam must think I'm odd. I *feel* odd.

'I think there's a tin in the cupboard. Help yourself. Why do you want sardines?'

'Um . . . um . . . fish oils! Fish oils – they're good for your brain!'

'Is that so?'

'Yes! They're . . . great! But . . . but I must go!'

Clutching the tin of sardines, a one-and-a-half litre non-recyclable plastic – BAD, VERY BAD – bottle of



water and the last tattered shreds of my fragile self-esteem – Liam thinks I'm mad – I rush back to Evie's room. Why didn't I just tell him there was a really cute penguin in his sister's bedroom? I think I just felt silly and wanted to escape. Liam might not have believed me. I also wanted to get back to Pablo – he is *soooo* sweet!

'You look really hot,' Evie remarks.

'I *am* hot. Have you spoken to the Eco Gardens?'

'Yes, I've told them we found Pablo in the garden and we're keeping him safe. Someone's going to get back to us in a moment. I left my mobile number.'

Just as she tells me this, her phone rings.

'Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . .' she says, while I do an agitated

little dance, wondering what is being said. Pablo has waddled off into a corner and is pecking at one of Evie's soft toys. 'OK,' says Evie, putting down her phone. 'They're coming to get him now. It must be a zillion-to-one chance that he ended up in *my* garden! They've got CCTV footage which shows two youths running away with Pablo, so at least they don't think that *we* took him.'

'That's good!' I exclaim.

'The person I spoke to sounded really grateful – almost close to tears,' says Evie. 'She said they've been having a bad time recently and losing Pablo was the final straw.'

'What sort of bad time?'

'I'm not sure . . . Can I feed Pablo?'

'You can try – I'm not having much luck.'

I have poured some water into an empty pencil tin and pushed it right under Pablo's beak, but he doesn't seem interested. He keeps waddling away. 'How are we going to feed him these sardines?' I ask.

'Parent penguins feed their chicks by regurgitation,' Evie comments. 'So we need to chew up the sardines, swallow them, and then bring them back up . . .'

'Eurgh – gross!' I roll my eyes at her and make a gagging noise.

'OK, maybe not,' she says. 'Why don't we try emptying the sardines into the water?'

She lifts the ring-pull and peels back the lid. A strong smell of sardine fills the room. Pablo opens his beak and lunges at the tin. With a shriek, Evie drops the tin, and

water and sardines fly in all directions. Pablo waddles around, gobbling them up. Then he poos.

'Oh – Lola!' Evie exclaims. 'My room's going to *stink*!'

'It's not *my* fault! Do you still want a penguin as a pet? Er, and your mum and dad have just got back with the shopping,' I comment, looking out of the window.

Evie gives another shriek. 'Help! Huge crisis! Mum will go mad if she finds a penguin in the house. She will seriously flip! What are we going to do? Oh, Lola – help!'

It is my turn to take charge. I shoo Pablo as gently as possible into the corner where the great heap of soft toys is piled. He blends in with them and could easily pass as a stuffed penguin as long as he doesn't move, but he seems to be falling asleep anyway. Quickly I cover the white slick of penguin poo with a fluffy pink rug and scoop up the remaining bits of sardine with a handful of tissues and stuff them in the bin, just in time!

We can hear Evie's mum coming up the stairs. 'Yoo-hoo!' she calls. 'We're back!'

Evie looks like a rabbit – or a penguin – caught in headlights. 'I . . . must . . . focus,' she says. 'Stay calm. What would Sherlock Holmes do at a moment of crisis, or when trying to solve a mystery such as a kidnapped penguin turning up in his garden?' We have been reading Sherlock Holmes stories at school – Evie and I are both in Year Eight at Shrubberylands Comprehensive. 'Of course! He'd pick up his violin and play!'

Evie seizes her violin from the open case beside her bed, and draws the bow across the strings just as her

mum enters the room.

'Ah! Doing your practice – what a good girl!' says Evie's mum, making a valiant effort not to look pained at the distressed-cat-screeching noises which Evie is wringing out of her instrument.

Evie's mum frowns and wrinkles her nose. 'Why does it smell of fish in here?' she asks.

I see Pablo step forward and I do a quick side step to stand in front of him. Behind me he starts making a strange rasping noise – he has a voice that could grate cheese. I realise that he must have thought that Evie's violin-playing was the sound of another penguin calling to him, and he is answering.

'What's that noise?' Evie's mum asks suspiciously.

'It's my violin, Mum!'

'But I can still hear it, and you're not even playing.'

'It's . . . it's an echo.' Hastily, Evie starts playing again.

Unfortunately, whatever her violin is saying in Adelie-penguin language – perhaps it's a mating call – Pablo responds by barging past my legs and waddling towards her, rasping away.

All hell breaks loose. Evie's mum screams louder than I have ever heard a mother scream before, and Evie's dad and Liam come charging up the stairs.

'Whatever's going on?' her dad demands, bursting into the room. 'What . . . what on earth is a live penguin doing in here?'

'He's not doing any harm!' Evie protests. 'Stop scaring him!'

Evie's mum flees downstairs. It takes a little while to explain the situation to Evie's dad. Liam is fascinated.

'Now I know why you wanted those sardines! Why didn't you say?' he asks me.

'Er . . .' Probably because I seem to be incapable of saying anything except 'er'.

'Hello, little fellow!' says Liam gently, crouching down. 'Are you still hungry? There's some nice fresh fish over here . . .'

'Leave Posh and Pout alone!' Evie exclaims indignantly.

'Stop it, Liam,' says her dad. 'So the people from the Eco Gardens will be here soon to collect him, will they?'

'Yes, Dad. They're on their way.'

'You've done the right thing. Well done, both of you.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

In the pause that follows, we hear Evie's mum calling in a strange, strangled voice from the bottom of the stairs. 'Get . . . that . . . penguin . . . out . . . of . . . here!'

From the street we hear the familiar jingle of Meltonio's Marvellous Mouth-watering Eco-friendly Ices as Meltonio's specially-adapted battery-powered van trundles slowly past our house. Meltonio is our friend – he is just as passionate about green causes as we are.

'Oh, good!' Liam exclaims. 'Ice-cream! It's so hot – I seriously need to chill!'

Suddenly, inspiration strikes me. 'We could ask Meltonio to keep Pablo in his van until the Eco Gardens people get here. It's nice and cool in the van – good for penguins.'

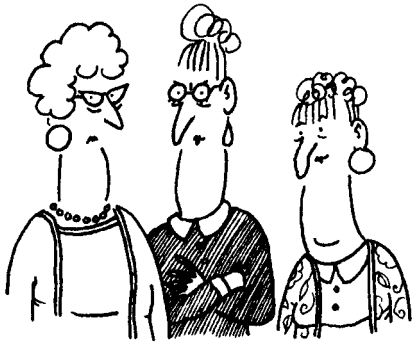
'And good for Mum because the penguin would be out of the house. Brilliant, Lola! You go and ask – I'll bring Pablo.'

Meltonio doesn't understand at first. He thinks that I am offering him a Penguin biscuit, and politely declines as he hands Liam a double-scoop Strawberry Sunrise Sorbet (which is my favourite, too. Liam and I share similar tastes!).

When I explain that the penguin I am talking about is a real one, Meltonio looks worried and says that he is concerned about the Health and Safety implications of having a live penguin in his van. I say that it will probably only be for a few minutes until the Eco Gardens people arrive. Then Evie comes out of the house with Pablo wrapped in the pillowcase, looking *reeeally* cute, and Meltonio relents – he has a soft spot for all animals and birds. His droopy black moustache ripples as his face creases into a big smile.

'Poor little guy!' he says gently. 'I will put him next to the freezer until his owners get here. I can disinfect the van afterwards.'

I can see Mrs Fossett from across the road craning her neck to see what is going on as she clips her hedge. She is the original nosy neighbour, and is always gossiping with her friends, Mrs Baggot and Mrs Throgmorton. Evie and I refer to them, in private, as the Three Witches. Mum told me off about this until they complained about our overgrown hedge and said it lowered the tone of the street; she hasn't told me off since.



THE THREE WITCHES

Pablo is pecking at a Mouth-watering Melon Sugar-free Non-Dairy Nice-Ice, which Meltonio is offering him.

'He likes his food!' says Meltonio approvingly. Meltonio also likes his food and is quite round.

We eat our ice-creams and watch Pablo while we wait for the people from the Eco Gardens to arrive. Meltonio sings gently to Pablo, who seems to go into a kind of trance.

'He's enjoying the singing . . .' Evie whispers to me.

'Or else he's not feeling well,' I say, wishing the Eco Gardens people would hurry up.

'Here comes the van!' Evie exclaims, sounding relieved. The Eco Gardens has a fleet of green-coloured vans which run on bio-fuel, made from animal and bird poo from their own enclosures. I learned this at the Education Zone when we visited the Eco Gardens. I am amazed that the van doesn't smell bad at all.