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Opening extract from

Paris Match: Agatha Bilk Goes To France

Selected and narrated by

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Published by

Short Books

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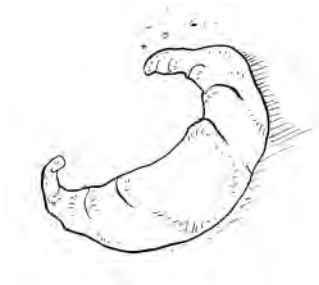


1. PACKED OFF TO FRANCE

Agatha held her cardigan up to the light so she could examine it closely. There were moist brown lumps all over the garment, which smelt of a non-specific meat. She took her jeans out of the washing machine and found that they too were covered in this lumpy stuff. It did not take her long to realise that all her clothes had been ruined. And then she spotted the open can of dog food on the machine. Demone – her French exchange and her supposed friend – had played yet another trick on her. How dare she?

Demone Canard was, perhaps, the worst girl Agatha Bilke had ever met. And, considering how horrible Agatha had been in the past, this was truly incredible.

At first, Agatha had been excited at the prospect of going to stay with a family in France. She had seen a TV

programme about Calais, the famous seaside town which people visited to buy lager. And she had been intrigued by the thought that this country, divided from Great Britain by merely a few miles of sea, was so different. The people appeared cultured, sophisticated and yet charming. The kids looked cool – they all wore leather jackets. It certainly seemed a better place than Rottington Town…

Agatha's school had started teaching French and she liked the way the words lilted and tilted, ebbed and flowed. Her favourite phrases so far were: "*merveilleux*" (marvellous); "*vous êtes un espèce d'idiot*" (you are an idiot) and "*déblaye le terrain, gendarme*!" (push off, policeman!). She had started to fall for the whole French thing: from now on, she told her mother, she would only eat baguettes; she took to wearing a stripy Breton jumper and put a poster of the 09.15 ferry to Dieppe on her wall.

The idea of finding a French exchange had come from Agatha's elder sister Margaret. About six months before this washing machine disaster, Margaret had swanned off to France, announcing she was going to become a property developer. A fan of the hare-brained scheme, Margaret had "f*aaaaa*llen in love" with an ornate mansion called the Villa de Mer whilst on a weekend break. A little tatty and located on a main road, it was going at an attractive price. If she rented it out, she would make a fortune. Margaret knew she had the potential to make property her livelihood; her ambition was to have a "portfolio", whatever that was.

For the first few months, Margaret stayed in an apartment nearby, just to make sure things went smoothly. And it was at about that time that Agatha started to express an interest in all things Gallic. "Why doesn't little sis come out to the South of France?" suggested Margaret. She would put an ad in the local *supermarché* for a French exchange over the summer. This way, Bilke junior would have a ~~much-deserved~~ holiday in the sun, learn more of the language and broaden her horizons – *and* Margaret could keep an eye on her.

A family was soon found and a date was set for Agatha to go and stay with them. The daughter, Demone, was willing to share her day-to-day life with the English girl. Agatha was delighted. The dream would soon become a reality. She would be setting sail, across the seas, to the land of opportunity (or was that America?). She would see those cool

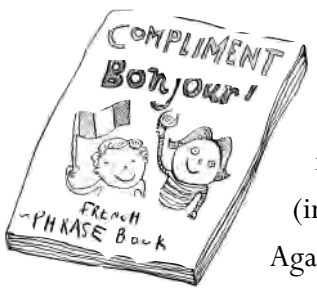
kids in leather jackets! She would eat a lot of garlic! She might even behave herself for once.

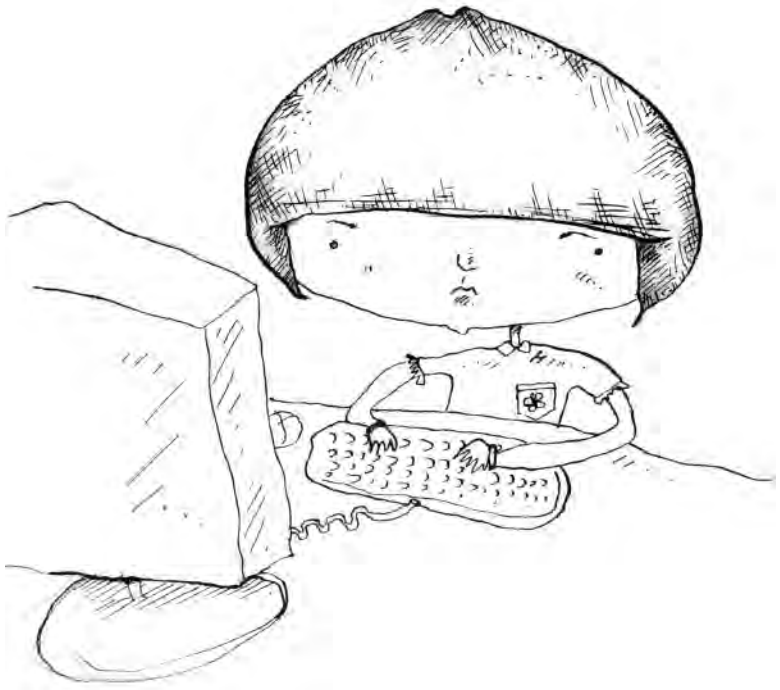
The Canard family, too, seemed thrilled – perhaps she would bring with her that curious delicacy, Marmite? Or she might sleep with a bowler hat next to her bed. Of course, they had not been told of Agatha's history. If they had been even half aware of the list of crimes she had perpetrated – arson, trespass, kidnap, theft, medical malpractice, carjacking, drugging a minor etc. – they would surely not have wanted this visitor residing with them at all.

2. LOG ON, LOG OFF

Was it all inevitable? How did Anglo – French relations disintegrate so quickly?

After a week, Demone and Agatha were barely on speaking terms. The French girl had taken an instant dislike to Bilke – maybe because she was not interested in computers. For Demone was obsessed by the internet – real life did not interest her one bit. She had ignored Agatha at first, and then become spiteful. On Monday, chilli powder had found its way into *all* Agatha's meals (including breakfast). On Tuesday, Agatha noticed that the pages of her *Compliment Bonjour!* French phrasebook





Instead of a cheery "hello" in the morning, Demone would cry "log on!" and run to the screen

had been glued together. On Wednesday, her hairbrush had been dipped in mustard. Meanwhile, Demone just sat in her bedroom all day, squinting at her PC.

She was tiny; she looked like a doll. Her hair was cut in a severe black bob and she had bandy legs with four moles on her left knee. She couldn't have looked less brittle had she been made out of breadsticks.

On occasion, she would address Agatha in English, but this was just to mutter how much she thought her French exchange was "the simple" and "not a vestibule who is a computer literate". Mostly, she talked digi-chat.

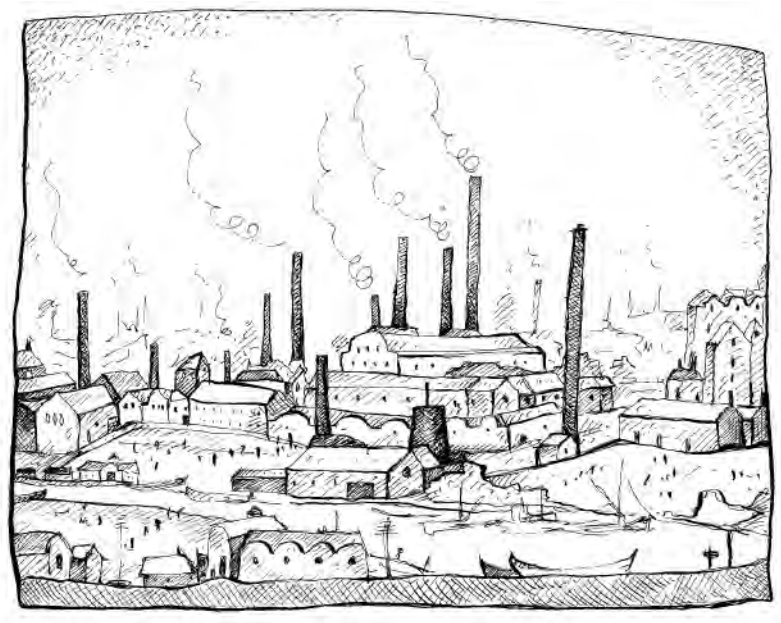
Instead of a cheery "hello" in the morning, she would cry "log on!" and run to the screen. If she was irritated she would command "reload!" If she hated something she would shout "spam!" – the opposite of that was "anti-spam!" She had hijacked a language which was already an amalgam of English, code, techno-jargon and American slang – and tailored it to her own needs. Most of the time, she sounded like a robot.

What made it more irritating was that the Canard parents were never around to notice what was happening. Demone's father was a factory worker: gruff and hairy. The mum made soap in the bathtub and flogged it to the local markets (and online to English people who thought it was

made by romantic peasants who worked the hillsides). Their only child was precious to them; although they sometimes forgot her name.

Brioche was a grim industrial town and the Canards' home was near a glue factory, a polyester factory, a stationery warehouse and two large blocks of flats. Needless to say, the living arrangements left a lot to be desired. The food provision, for instance, was lacking. The only fresh fruit specimen was a lonely orange in a bowl, and that looked as if it were a few weeks old. From the day she arrived, Agatha found herself permanently hungry – she was fed on a diet of oatmeal, a rubbery sort of cheese and, for pudding, strawberry jelly which had unidentified bits in it. There was always a strong smell of coffee on the hob and jars of rough pâté which, left out for days, attracted a larger type of fly than Agatha was used to seeing back home. The sleeping quarters were not pleasant either. Her bed was in the cellar – next to the deep freeze which hummed at night – with a rough blanket which scratched her face.

Life outside the Canard home was hardly better. Demone never seemed to go to school. On the one day she *did* bother to accompany Agatha, she walked several paces in front of her, made her carry all the bags and when they



Brioche was a grim industrial town and the Canards' home was near a glue factory, a polyester factory, a stationery warehouse and two large blocks of flats

arrived she made it very clear she didn't want to sit next to her new English chum in class. Instead, Demone plonked herself down next to an ugly boy called Bernard, who wore thick glasses and had the first rumblings of a moustache – although he was only thirteen years old. Demone and Bernard then proceeded to speak in speedy French to each other, never once addressing Bilke.

The other kids seemed wildly cool by comparison. They *did* wear leather jackets and some drove around on mopeds. The girls looked really mature; they wore jewellery and chewed gum. They seemed bored in lessons and talked about "*ennui*". Agatha was amazed: in Rottington the girls wore velour tracksuits and some of them had pierced belly-buttons. The twelve-year-olds looked, at most, fourteen, and acted as if they were eight. But these French girls were everything Agatha had dreamt of! How had she got stuck with Demone?

That afternoon, instead of hanging around on motorbikes after school like everyone else, Demone and Bernard dragged Agatha to the public library, where they sat in front of yet more computer screens and ate a very smelly block of cheese together. Agatha sat in the corner, bored – she

threw chewed-up tissue paper at Demone and looked at the books to see if there were any pictures of naked people in them.

The following day, Agatha was yet again sitting on the edge of Demone's bed watching her surf the net. This was unutterably dull. Demone could not stop looking at the BeBois.com cyber-networking site. She tapped away under various aliases, pretending that she liked jazz music and frequented late-night bars. A pop-up advert sprung from the webpage she was looking at: an awful jingle which was promoting a fizzy drink that seemed to be called *Burp Burp*. It was performed by a pixelated monkey and Demone started singing along. If only her virtual friends knew that the girl who made herself appear to be so worldly on the web was such a geek, thought Agatha.

"*Bon bon bon*
Achetez le Burp Burp! Bon bon bon
Have you le slurp slurp?"

Then the monkey belched and a cartoon tree fell over. It was the worst song in the world, but Demone was really getting into it. She sang as if her life depended on it; it was a right racket.

Agatha contemplated smashing all of the girl's possessions with a big brick, but knew that she probably wouldn't be able to get away with that – she felt rather more vulnerable over here in France, away from Rottington. And, at this particular moment, she was feeling especially exposed. After the washing machine "accident", Demone had given her a pair of corduroy trousers and an itchy woollen jumper with a ship on it to wear. So now she looked like a geek too. It was high summer, and the top

was too hot and the trousers too long. (Was this another practical joke?)

Couldn't the girls go into the town and find something else to do? They had already been to the swimming pool, but they hadn't had enough money to get in. They had peeked through the railings and seen the cool kids sitting around, eating ice creams and throwing towels at each other. It looked like fun. Agatha had heard that there was also an ice rink nearby.

"Hey, Demone. Will your mum give us some money tomorrow?" she ventured. "Perhaps we could go skating."

Demone squealed "Spam!" then continued to sing the silly fizzy drink song.

"Come on, we have to find something to do…" persisted Agatha. " Is Bernard around?"

Her host still sang the song, louder now, as if to block Agatha out. "*Burp burp / Slurp slurp*!"

"You've been sitting at that frizzing computer all week now and I've had enough," said Agatha. "You're boring, spiteful, mean and conceited! *Tu es un espèce d'idiot*!"

Demone slapped the visitor on the cheek. "Shut down!" she screamed at her.

"You're worse than… I am!" cried Agatha, who started to pinch her opponent's arm.

At which point Canard spat in the English girl's face.

Arghhh! Time to show the French girl what British people were made of – Agatha came from the land of tug o' war, not airy-fairy croquet. She seized the girl's hair and yanked as hard as she could. Then she yanked again, just for good measure. But, for a little 'un, Demone was made of strong stuff. She kicked Agatha in the shins, pulled her nose, tweaked an ear and screamed at such a high pitch that a passing horse on its way to the glue factory began to vibrate.

Agatha yelled, caught Demone's wrist and bit into it. *This is quite good fun*, she thought. It almost made up for not going ice skating.

The fighting was halted by a screech from the computer and flashing lights. Both girls stared at the screen, as a familiar face appeared and neon-coloured green stuff started oozing from her nose. It was a horrible image: truly terrifying to man and beast (and insects and other stuff). The screeching got louder – green stuff was now erupting from the hooter at an alarming rate, like a volcano upside down. Then Agatha realised that this cartoon was a depiction of… herself!

"Demone!" she shouted, stunned. "What's going on? Is that *me*?" She watched in horror as the animation ended

with green snot all over the screen and the message: *Agatha Bilke: The Snottiest Girl In The World*.

Of course, this was not true – Agatha's nose was quite presentable – but the screen shot made her look like a fool. Demone had scanned her passport picture into the computer and used the Photosnot programme to do the rest. And she had done this while Agatha had been in the room, while pretending to email her cyber pals.

"It *is* you! Very clever, snot-face!" shouted the computer hacker, with a laugh that sounded like a cheese grater on a very busy, very cheesy day. "And I 'ave put it on your own special Bebois page, hahahahahahah!"

This was low-down, juvenile and petty. It looked like Agatha had posted the page herself – as if she wanted everyone to know she was proud of producing luminous phlegm. Now, to make matters worse, people were beginning to post their comments below, saying that they knew the girl and, yes, her nose had always dribbled. Many continued to reveal her awful past, albeit with bad spelling and poor grammar:

- August 23 10:40

dreampony99, Rottington/gbr

Agatha woz always vary snotty. She woz naughty

too and once tried to pull all of my hair off.

Comment No. 830122

• August 23 10:50

TheSpinach, Rottington/gbr

I used to know her when she is young and she is trouble, innit. Fire engines were always coming round her house, knowworrimean? Safe.

Comment No. 830123

• August 23 12:19

humphreydocs2005, London/gbr

I remember this girl from our famous Clinic. Perhaps we should all give her the benefit of the doubt, even though she is absolutely awful and terrorised her fellow-patients.

Comment No. 830166

[Offensive? Unsuitable? Report this comment.]

"Demone! How could you?" The fact was that the French girl hardly knew Agatha, yet she'd so far done all she could to make her life hell. At least when Bilke didn't like someone, she had *taken time* to note their bad points.

"My pleasure, chum," she said sarcastically.

"How did you get my passport? Give it back!" Agatha held out her hand.

But Demone just pointed out of the bedroom window. All Agatha could see was the polyester factory. Unless it was the stationery warehouse. Or the glue factory.

"The workers over there," she said. "They love your beautiful documentation! Hahahah!"

Demone was cold and calculating; digital and deceiving. She didn't care that Agatha disliked her; she didn't have time for the real world. She was wrapped up in gigabytes and microchips – and she was beginning to believe that she was invincible. She started humming that ridiculous fizzy drink tune as it popped up again.

"You will not win!" Agatha whispered under her breath. "You will suffer the way I have suffered" – and she was deadly serious. As Demone continued to whine the trite melody, her English "chum" suddenly had a great idea.

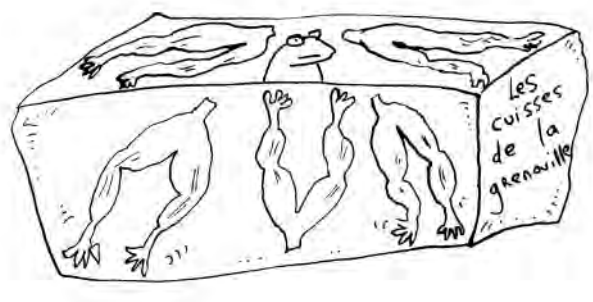
3. MONKEY MAGIC

In the old days, when fires were fires and Agatha frightened everyone she met, life had been straightforward. She had been bent on destruction and determined to be bad, and destructive and bad she invariably was. However, ever since she had set foot in France, roles seemed to have been reversed.

Agatha had been double-crossed and tripped up at every turn. Demone was always one step ahead and this from someone who seemingly had no reason to be mean. Agatha had not, for example, arrived and put biro marks on the furniture. She had not shoved anyone down a crevice or a ravine – even at Demone's school she had listened to the teacher jabber away in French and not set fire to anyone's rucksack. So why was she the target of Demone's hate? She

could not linger, waiting to find out; she needed to retaliate now.

Leaving Demone cackling in her swivel chair, in front of the computer, Agatha ventured out onto the landing and downstairs. Monsieur and Madame Canard were out, as usual. The girl ran down to the cellar and located the chest freezer. This must contain something that she could use for a revenge attack. The light bulb had gone, so she rummaged around, barely able to see what she was doing. There were things with claws, something slimy that smelt like old sports headbands do – and a few boxes at the bottom. She pulled out one of these and saw a picture of a frog, with a big arrow pointing to its legs. Ideal! She carefully crept up to the kitchen, opened the packet and slowly stuffed the frozen limbs, one by one, into the four-slot toaster. *This* should make an impression.



Agatha would now need to find something to document the evidence. Did the Canards have a camcorder? Most families owned one nowadays – they all wanted to film themselves being happy at the seaside, or smiling on a zoo trip. Agatha rifled through the pine cabinet in the living room.

"Agatha! More comments from ze friends on your Bebois page!" Demone was calling her from upstairs. "Hey, where are you? Make me a *cup of tea*!"

Agatha found all sorts in the cabinet: an old tape recorder, a book about the Foreign Legion, a ruler and an ancient ham croissant – but no camcorder. She had to think it through – if they did have one, where would it be kept?

She looked in all the usual places; then some strange ones: the fridge, under the sink, in the oven… She glanced in the knife drawer then went to the washing machine.

Aha! There it was, sitting on the top. Agatha shuddered, a quivery, quavery feeling that made her shoulders feel as if they were made out of meringues – flaky and light. Of course, she had to press "play" – *just in case someone had been secretly filming*…

Crisis! She had been filmed taking her soiled washing out of the machine! Agatha looked for all the world like a lost, lonely little girl. This was too much. She had been

angry after the fight with Demone, but now she was raging – raging like a wildebeest trying to find a space in a full car park. The girl not only wanted to make her life impossible, she wanted to remind her time and time again. And it was probably the next thing to be added to her Bebois page.

Agatha pressed "rewind" and found the beginning of the tape. She started recording her own wobbly film. She called up to her so-called friend: "Demone! I have made your tea! Come and get it!"

The French girl wandered downstairs into the kitchen and saw her filming. She looked worried.

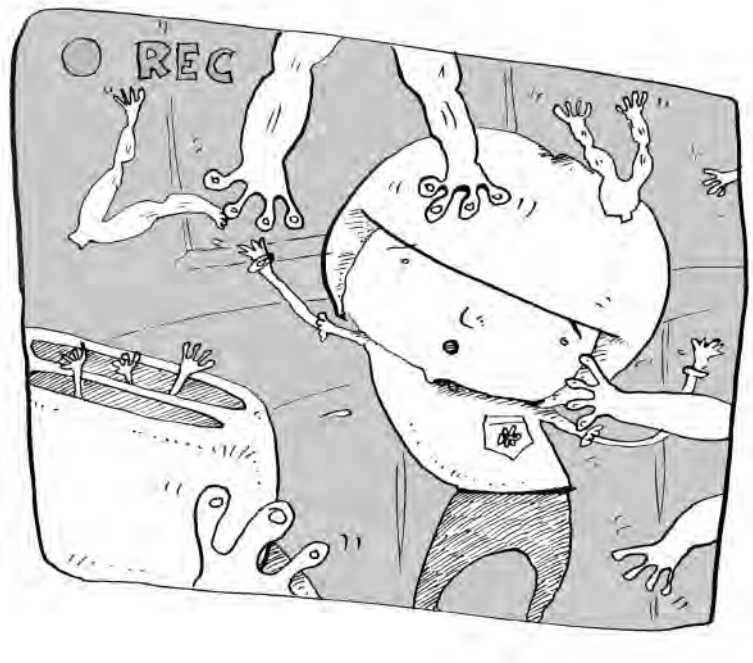
"*Spam*! *Log off*! *Log off*!"

She grabbed for the camcorder but Agatha moved away and switched the toaster on.

"Give me zat!"

"No, Demone. You filmed me taking my washing out of the machine – it *proves* it was no accident! And so… here is *your* 'accident'…"

As Demone approached, snarling, a plague of one thousand crispy frogs' legs erupted from the toaster. The tiny amphibian limbs filled the air and bounced off the walls like popcorn in a pan. Then the toaster caught fire and Demone started hollering and jumping up and down. Small green sticks were everywhere.



The tiny amphibian limbs filled the air and bounced off the walls like popcorn in a pan

"*Crash*! *Crash*! *Force quit*!"

She started to cry.

Agatha pressed "stop" – she had plenty of material. Ripping out the memory card, she threw the camera on the ground. It bounced – and three bits of plastic fell off.

"My camcorder!" Demone was distraught as she picked it up. Agatha did not care. She giggled as she ran out of the house and towards the public library. She logged onto a public computer by copying the card number of the person next to her and uploaded the footage on BeBois.com. It took almost an hour, but when she had finished she was triumphant. Wailing as burnt frogs' legs rained around her, Demone looked like a total prat – and would now be exposed before all her cyber pals. Agatha punched the stale library air with her fist in celebration. She had won!

Suddenly there was a kerfuffle at the door. The gendarmes were running towards her. *Zut!*

A tall man with a bushy moustache and a bulbous nose gripped Agatha tightly by her victory arm. He bellowed at her, as if she was further away than she actually was.

"We 'ave reason to believe," he yelled, through the nose, "zat you are using zis computer wiv ze illegality."

Had the librarian snitched on her? She had seen those ~~elephants~~ TV programmes about people who bring a jar of

chutney across the channel and get arrested by customs for introducing diseases to rich people. Did she have any chutney about her person? She didn't think so.

The official took a bit of bright yellow plastic from his pocket and dangled it in front of her.

"We know who you are, Mademoiselle Bilké from ze Rottington, England," he shouted, nose a-bulbin'. "We 'ave been told to keep an eye on you, hence *le tag*. Bilké, you are now marked."

"*Déblaye le terrain, gendarme*!" said Agatha, hopefully.

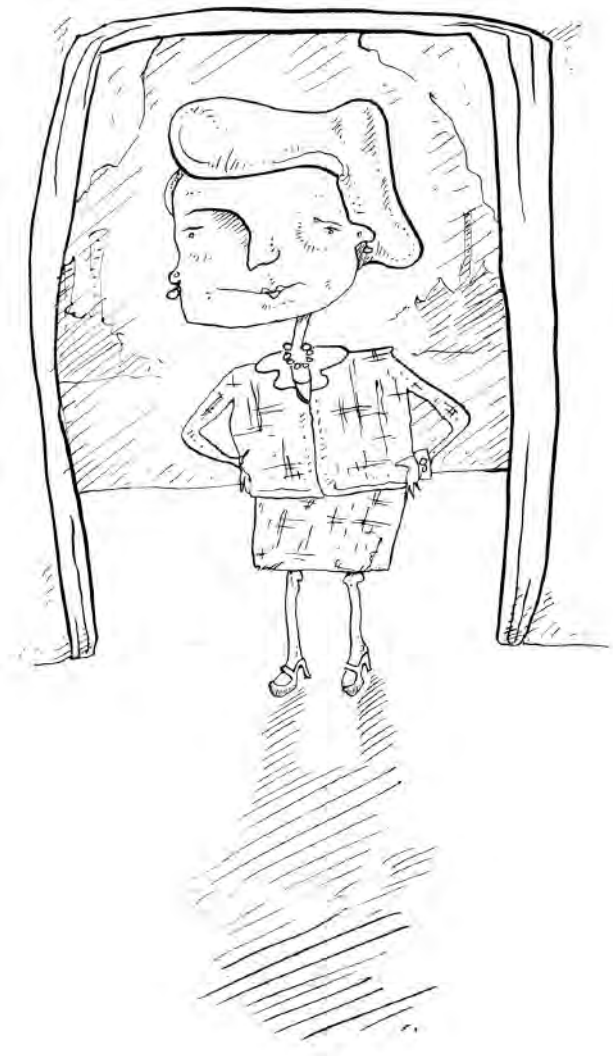
The phrase had no effect – the policeman clipped the tag around the girl's ankle and pulled it so tight it looked like it would never come off. What was worse, Agatha could hear it vibrating; a small sound which – to Agatha – was like an ant stuck in a plastic beaker.

Everyone in the library was staring. Agatha looked around and saw a shadow lurking in the doorway… Margaret? Her sister?

Urgh. What on earth was she doing here?

Bilke senior was angry. She elongated her "a"s even more than usual.

"The Can*aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa*rd family has phoned me," she said sternly. "You h*aaa*ve been a n*aaaaaaaaaaaaaaa*ughty girl. They will no longer have you in their house, so you're



Agatha looked around and saw a shadow lurking in the doorway... Margaret? Her sister?

going to have to come with me."

"Look, Margaret, whatever they say, I can explain… I tried to get on with Demone, I am INNOCENT!" pleaded Agatha, as Margaret grasped her wrist and led her out of the library… even though she had just filmed a load of piping-hot frogs falling on a schoolgirl.

Her sister said nothing as she marched her out. However, rather than leaving in an old van or having to walk, they were greeted by a chauffeur who helped them into Margaret's waiting limousine.

If this was a punishment, thought Agatha, then she rather liked it. Had Margaret found success as a property owner?

4. YACHT HOT HOT HOTSPOT

"I'm afraid we are going to my deluxe holiday ap*aaa*rtment in Cannes," said the bigger Bilke. She was dressed head to toe in Flannelle, the most desirable label for a woman with an eye on a good investment. Her nails were manicured and painted with Oriental symbols. Her hair was coiffed. She looked a bit like a newsreader.

"You will live in state-of-the-*aaaa*rt splendour overlooking the sea, eating the finest grub known to hum*aaa*nkind – *aaaaaaaaaaa*nd drinking very strong coffee," she informed her sister. "I will throw in some pickled onion sandwiches too, if you're lucky. Of course, you will need to stop putting *aaa*nimals in toasters."

Agatha told her it was retaliation, for all the horrible things Demone had done to her.

"Well, as I h*aaa*ve seen no evidence… I will take you at your word."

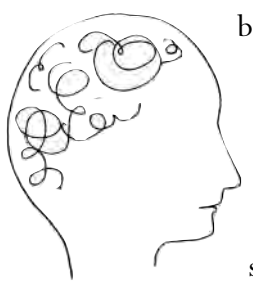
Why had Agatha not been offered this treatment sooner? She had suffered a week of humiliation with the Canards, when all the while Margaret had been sitting – nay, lounging with her mouth slightly open – in the lap of luxury. How on earth had Margaret suddenly got so rich? Agatha had to accept that this was one of those "learning" experiences – and now she had landed on her feet. Why should she worry when she had a rosy future ahead of her? No more cyber bullies. No more snotty noses. No more frogs' legs.

The truth was that Margaret was pleased to have Agatha back in the fold – but not because she had missed her, or anything nice like that. Instead, she thought that her hardnosed little sister might prove herself rather useful. Margaret was learning to become ruthless when it came to money matters – and now Agatha owed her a favour.

The older Bilke's mind was like a very small spaghetti factory. Ideas would form like long strings of fanciful notions, then somehow they would pile up against each other, forming one big lump and eventually a large mass of mush inside her head. To say that her thoughts were stringy and sometimes rather chewy – well, that would be exactly right.

Margaret's bonce was full of troublesome noodles today. The tenants in the Villa de Mer had failed to pay their rent for the last two months, and Margaret smelt a rat. ~~She had even smelt a woodlouse~~. She had tried, on various occasions, to go round and evict them, but she had always come up against an obstruction of one sort or another. Legally, it was a minefield – in fact it would have been easier if it was a minefield because then the tenants would have ~~had their feet blown off by now~~ known that it was too dangerous to stay.

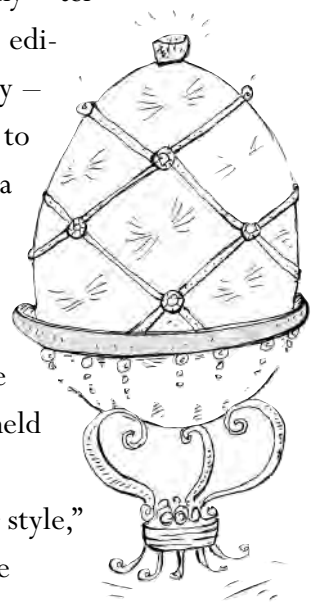
The problem was that the residents of the villa were no run-of-the-mill tycoons. They were the one and only Folbecks, proprietors of *Folbeck Mints* – whose cravat-wearing posh-boy son, Holbeck, had become good friends with Agatha at the Rottington hospital last summer. Margaret hoped that her sister would be able to coax the family out by getting round the boy, who would persuade his parents that they must leave. But she wasn't telling Agatha any of that yet.



The Folbecks were, Margaret had noted, stinking rich. When she had shown them around the property they had not made the customary "ooh" and "aah" noises at the stunning proportions, light and space – instead the mother had complained about "attention to detail" and "poor quality fixtures and fittings". Such high-octane moaning was surely a mark of people with more money than sense. But Margaret was starting to hear stories around the town – that the family had been ruined by the recent Exploding Mints Scandal – where packets of their Folbeck Imperials had randomly combusted because they were fitted with illegal tracking devices. Local people claimed that they had not seen the family for days, weeks. They may have once had pots of cash, thought Margaret, but were they *still* loaded? Why had they suddenly stopped paying the rent? And what was all this about teams of children running riot in the place? It was up to Agatha to find out.

Margaret told the driver to stop outside a block of art deco apartments and Agatha was awestruck. The lobby was plushly carpeted in red, with pearly white walls and tiny butterflies painted on the ceiling. A wizened old man in a blazer stood by a walnut desk which had further butterfly figures carved into it – and a lizard doing the splits.

Up the lift to the fourth floor, into the flat and Agatha almost fainted. They could see across the Mediterranean – the apartment overlooked yachts, film stars, bigger yachts and more successful film stars. The interior of the flat was white, with huge Corinthian pillars everywhere, a gold tiger statuette in the corner and niches in the walls where busts of great composers were placed. It was not only sumptuous, it was *cultured*. There was a cabinet full of Favergé eggs – from the historic display cabinets of the Russian monarchy – terribly expensive but not actually edible (the eggs, not the monarchy – although they weren't very nice to chew either). In the bathroom, a marble turtle was placed on the free-standing bath, and out of its mouth frothed gallons of bubbly water – even when the taps were turned off. Its feet held soaps and fine tapestries.



"I do so love the *nouveau riche* style," said Margaret proudly, as she

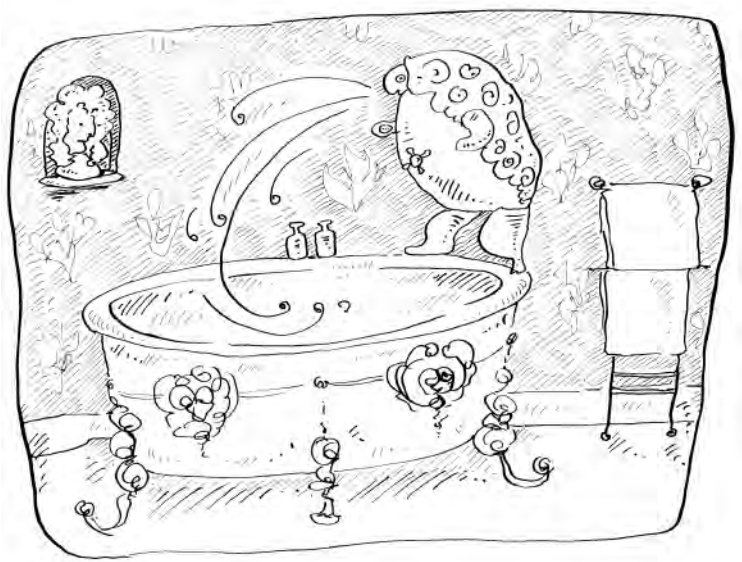
went to the tiny fridge and poured herself a *jus de canteloupe*.

"Would you like a *jus d'éléphante*? So refreshing. The life out here, I must say, is a cut *aaaaaaaaaa*bove."

Agatha had never seen her sister in such an opulent setting before. What a good idea this property lark was. Making deals, borrowing money, buying turtles. This was something Agatha herself should consider going into. She would obviously have to go to school first – one that she hadn't been excluded from – and take Business Studies and wear a suit and try not to look bored. But it could be a great life, a *good* life. Helping people live in nice houses was certainly a very decent thing to do. It really did add something to the "collective good".

Margaret shoved a pickled onion into her juice and slobbered a bit, as if the spaghetti in her mind was unravelling – and dangling down the back of her throat. She turned around and smiled at her young sister broadly.

Of course, this was all an act – the flat, the juice, the eggs – and she hoped that Agatha was falling for it. What she kept telling herself *not* to reveal – although she soon would



In the bathroom, a marble turtle was placed by the free-standing bath, and out of its mouth frothed gallons of bubbly water – even when the taps were turned off

– was that she was near breaking point financially. All this opulence was a front – put on for the benefit of her virtually non-existent clients. The eggs were on loan and she was desperate to get the Folbecks out – she would be declared bankrupt if she didn't evict them in the next 24 hours. It was easy for a business empire to go down, you know. The would-be property tycoon had learnt all about it from *Claire Tomato's Property Hot Hot Hotspot!* on TV.

Margaret had been visiting the Villa de Mer every day for three weeks now. Once or twice she had come up against Holbeck – who had been wearing a strange floppy wig – but most of the time no one answered the door, no matter how long she waited. She heard children's laughter and tried to look round the back, but all to no avail. Someone had added extra locks to the gates so she was denied way of entry. When Margaret got the call from Demone's parents, so upset that this Agatha had "ruined our baby's life!", it suddenly occured to her that she could turn things to her advantage. In Margaret's flawed logic, i.e. in her spaghetti brains, Agatha was the perfect person to get the Folbecks out. Perhaps if Holbeck saw her at the door he would be eager to catch up for old times' sake and invite her in. He would really listen to Ag – seeing as they'd been such great chums. Margaret was certain that her plan would work. But

if Agatha *knew* Holbeck was in there before she went round, she would not want to go through with the mission.

Margaret had felt manipulated by Agatha ever since she had first thrown her toys out of the pram all those years ago. She may have been a decade Agatha's senior, but she increasingly needed to feel superior to her sister – and here was her chance. If she managed not to reveal her troubles, and Agatha successfully got the Villa de Mer back for her, then no one need be the wiser. For a few magnificent days she would keep up the façade – that of the loaded businesswoman – until the performance became reality. Margaret glanced in the mirror, smoothed her eyebrows with her middle finger and raised her chin. She would not be intimidated as she had been before. This time, Agatha would do exactly what she was told.

The only dent in Margaret's already-quite-dented plan was the yellow tag, which was micro-chipped to ring an alarm back at the police station if Agatha was out after a 7pm curfew. Would the police rush to find her on her first offence? Margaret wondered. She had to take that risk. And anyway, what could they do to Agatha, other than just take

her back to her sister's? She doubted they would even notice.

Agatha, meanwhile, was still wandering through the apartment amazed, blissfully unaware of Margaret's troubles. She was more interested in the fact she would never have to work at any ~~boring~~ proper job – ever. And she would never see that toasted frog Demone again. Everything had turned out perfect after all.

5. BOILED F*AAA*VERGÉ EGGS

"Oh n*oooooooooooooo*! What h*aaa*ve you done??!"

The young Miss Bilke – formerly the Worst Girl Known to Humanity – was relaxing in the warm suds of the turtle bath. She tried to wash around the tag that had been clamped around her ankle, pulling at it, hoping that she could ease it off. No such luck. She had forgotten that she had left something on the hob in the kitchen.

Margaret, who planned to heat up some soup while Agatha bathed, had just noticed the empty pan that had boiled dry. Inside it were three blackened Favergé eggs.

"You cannot boil a jewelled *oeuf*!" she shrieked through the flat. "It is not a real foodstuff! They are worth thousaaands, millions – now destroyed! What *aaa*m I going to do with you??"

Margaret despaired. She threw the eggs in the bin, opened the soup and added a few pickled onions to give it a bit of zing. Why did her sister need so much instruction? Why was she so different from all the other children? She was always getting into trouble.

It was true: Agatha's early upbringing had been both long and arduous for her family. One moment a twinkle in her father's eye, the next a full-throttle, terrorising tomahawk of a girl.

Her parents had decided not to have another child since first-born Margaret seemed intent on eating them out of house and home. They had reasoned – quite understandably – that one child was just about enough, and two would see them bankrupt: no job, no future… no tins of sardines left in the cupboard (and there's usually loads of them if nothing else).

And so Mrs Bilke was surprised when she discovered that she was expecting, and when Agatha had arrived, she had hoped that Margaret, already ten years old, might make a friend soon and go round to their house for tea – just to leave the house for a while and eat someone else's food. They prayed that this new baby would be a calm, kind child – one that perhaps did not like dancing as much as Margaret, who had scuffed most of the skirting boards

They prayed that this new baby would be a calm, kind child...

one that perhaps did not like dancing as much as Margaret, who had scuffed most of the skirting boards and furniture with her inelegant moves

and furniture with her inelegant moves.

But Mrs Bilke, who suffered from nerves as it was, grew disheartened when her new baby would not stop crying. If Margaret tried to help, little Agatha would bash her over the nose. She vomited, cooed, burped and waved her arms in the air like every other child in the world. But she never started smiling and would hardly notice when Mr Bilke pretended to be a monster. She was checked for deafness, short-sightedness and stupidity. She was prodded by a doctor and tickled by a nurse but they found nothing. Baby Agatha was, quite simply, always in a bad mood.

It was only in November of her first year that she perked up. A family trip to the local fireworks display was a big hit. For almost the first time ever, Agatha giggled and laughed, squealed and snorted. She was slightly sick on her new fluffy top and laughed even more. The family bonded; the four of them, living 'n' learning 'n' loving 'n' watching ten tons of explosives zoom off into the night.

It was never quite the same again – the fireworks were the start of a worrying trend. Agatha seemed to be obsessed by the fireplace – and candles. It was around this time that Mr Bilke became a little distant, going out for "coffees" when Mrs Bilke knew that he'd always preferred tea.

Sometimes even Mrs Bilke found it impossible to deal

with her daughter's moods, and found it best to ignore her. Primary school had not improved things: Agatha did not make any friends. She hated the teachers and didn't like schoolwork. And she certainly never acquired any of those typical schoolchild symbols of success: a cabinet full of sports trophies or a wall of certificates. No, Agatha had merely scraped by, and had caused a rumpus in certain other ways. *Bad* ways.

It was now, over a decade later, that Margaret Bilke was having to deal with the child. She knew that Agatha needed to be trusted if she was to visit the villa alone tonight. Margaret would have to "chill out", as she'd heard someone say once. As her sister appeared from the bathroom and sat at the kitchen table, she looked apologetic but didn't bother to say sorry. Margaret breathed in, then breathed out again. She dropped her shoulders – until they hunched up again with stress.

The soup was almost entirely disgusting, but they both ate it, slowly and quietly. The smaller, more troublesome Bilke wondered if she should suggest they pop out for fish and chips instead – or perhaps some caviar. Wasn't her

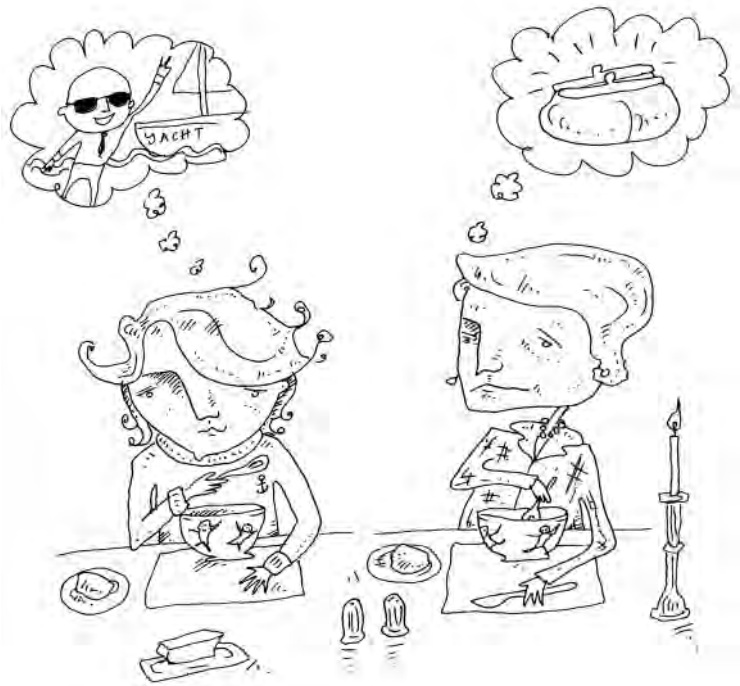
sister minted? Or they could skip dinner, buy a yacht and make friends with a movie mogul. Agatha fancied a career in Hollywood (in the remake of *Blazing Saddles* perhaps?). She wondered why Margaret was so irked about a couple of silly eggs, when she could afford a whole Favergé chicken factory – but Bilke the elder had other things on her mind: serious matters.

"Ag*aaa*tha," she said suddenly. "I need you to help me with a little job. I have some troublesome tenants, you see, who need evicting from my luxury vill*aaa*. They are avoiding me – I want you to go and persuade them to move on, yes? P*aaa*ss the *beurre de paysan*, please."

"But I have a tag on… and I want to watch the telly and eat sweets."

"I'm not *aaa*sking you, I'm telling you," barked Margaret. "I'm in big ships if you don't get them the frizz out of my house."

She slammed her silver spoon down on the table, then regained her composure – nothing was won on anger alone (apart from quite a few wars, boxing matches, modelling competitions, scientific discoveries, disputed areas of land etc.) Margaret explained carefully that there was a boy about Agatha's age in the villa, and that he must be the one that she approach first. Agatha would have to use any means



The soup was almost entirely disgusting, but they both ate it, slowly and quietly

to get into the house, even if that meant pretending to be French, Russian or even Chinese. Then she could serve them notice to quit.

"Don't you have security men to do this for you?" Agatha was not pleased at being ordered about: it sounded like a difficult job.

Margaret was becoming irate. She had not expected such resistance from her sister, who had seen how rich and successful she was. She had presumed the luxurious setting would have made her more deferential, not the opposite.

"You're my only hope!" insisted the older Bilke, pressing her sister's forearm in a bothersome way.

"Push off," said Agatha, who wanted to laze around. She'd had a hard time in the last week and she thought that she deserved a rest.

"Sist*aaaaaaaaaa*… I need your help…"

"You haven't even asked me about my time at Demone's. It was rubbish. She sat in her room all day looking at her computer…"

"Oh dear. Well anyway, I w*aaa*nt you to – "

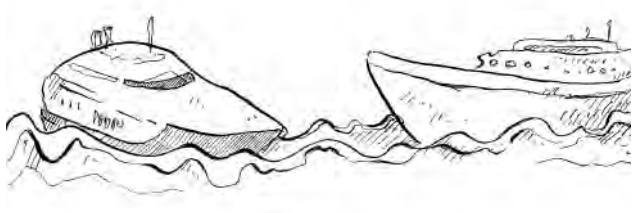
"You haven't listened to a word I've said. You don't care about my time at Demone's!" She got up to leave the table but Margaret grabbed her forearm with her manicured talons and wouldn't let go. She was livid.

"LISTEN TO *ME* for a moment, will you? Have some respect for once! *Aaaaa*fter all I've done for you…"

The obnoxious child stopped. She realised that if she continued in this vein she could be sent back home, to England.

"Woe is me!" gasped Margaret who just couldn't keep up the fancy-pants act any longer. "OK, Agatha. Let me explain. This ap*aaaa*rtment is… er… not quite what it seems. My – *our* – smart lifestyle is in pieces if you do not go to the villa…"

She looked around her and waved a hand about, melodramatically. "I've just had to cancel the driver and limo!" she sniffed. "Soon it will be no more *jus d'éléphant*! Or turtle b*aaa*ths! Or yachts in the h*aaa*rbour…" She gazed out of the window, forgetting that there would always be yachts in the harbour, whether she had a high standard of living or not.



"You need to do it tonight, Agatha."

"I see… " her sister replied. "Well, OK, let's make a deal." She was quite level-headed and cunning sometimes, despite being ~~completely out of control~~ a little wayward. If we all remember rightly, she was still dressed like a computer whizz from Brioche in mid-winter.

"If you get me an entire new wardrobe this afternoon, I will help you out."

"But I h*aaa*ve almost no money!"

Agatha picked up Margaret's swanky handbag. Tassels that had been dipped in an entirely new and expensive type of gold dangled from the pockets; toenails of the great red elephant swung from the zipper and a rare purple squirrel tooth decorated the clasp. She plucked a wodge of euros from the purse inside and spread them out on the table.

"I think this will do."

And so the Bilke girls went shopping.

6. THE POULET VUITTONNE LUXURY LUGGAGE BOUTIQUE

The fashionable rue Contretemps near the seafront was southern France's premier shopping street, lined with swish boutiques and people who looked like they never laughed.

Of course, Agatha had heard the phrase "chic boutique" before but was never entirely sure what this meant – having nothing similar in Rottington; the nearest they had to such a thing was a Primart, which sold cheap clothes that "bobbled" as soon as you put them on.

The *rue* was full of older English women, deep-soaked in sun, with shiny otter cheeks. They were so very thin that they could have been mistaken for giant knitting needles. Agatha was thrilled: high fashion was hers! And *French* high fashion! Just as she had seen in the magazines she used to

nick from the newsagent. Just like the girls at Demone's school. She had never before had the lifestyle or the cash, but today was a brand new day in the brand new life of the Most Trendy Girl Known to Humanity.

She spent the afternoon trying on all manner of bizarre outfits. She chose a bright blue frock from Jim Galliani which had a small waist and a wide skirt. She picked out a pair of Diorgh python-skin platform shoes to match. They clashed with her tag – a fact which the enthusiastic boutique owner thought was "divine". The hat she chose resembled a plate of breaded scampi.

"Zat is *fantastique*!" squealed the shop owner, who put false eyelashes on her and painted her nails a vile shade of green, which Ag thought rather fetching.

Their last stop was the Poulet Vuittonne Luxury Luggage Boutique, as Margaret wanted a status-enhancing keyring, to reward herself for such a long afternoon. As soon as Agatha saw the purses, she demanded one – wearing brand new clothes was not enough. She decided on a wallet which was made out of gerbil skin, and cost over ten thousand euros. Margaret said no, as she made her own purchase.

"Why can't I have the purse?" raged Agatha, who had been sucked in by a consumerist whirl (which was quite

The hat she chose resembled a plate of breaded scampi

pleasant and it gave her a buzzy feeling in the back of her ears). "I want it."

"That's not the point," countered Margaret. "You've h*aaaa*d lots of presents today. You must go and wrestle my property b*aaa*ck for me now."

"I can't be bothered."

"A*aaa*gatha, you must. I h*aaa*ve just spent a lot of money on you."

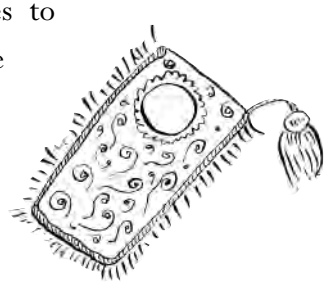
"You don't care if I live or die!"

Margaret gave the Poulet staff a look. One which suggested a life of infinite pain and unending misery.

As Agatha was dragged from the shop she swiped an mp3 cover (which cost hundreds) right from under the shop assistants' noses. They ran after the pair but were left behind when Margaret hailed a taxi.

"Ooohhgh! I can never go in there again!" wailed Margaret in the cab. "I'm dropping you off at the Villa de Mer immediately! You must now fulfil your half of the bargain!"

The cab took a few minutes to arrive at the mansion. It gave Agatha time to think. Of course, she did not like being bullied by her sister, but was-



n't this a bit of an adventure? Who knows what sort of people she might meet in there? In her new clothes she could pretend to be a bottom-kicking landlord, a real heavyweight. It would be practice for her future role as a property millionaire. She was rather excited, but tried not to show it.

When they reached the front gates, Bilke senior stopped the cab and elbowed her out onto the road.

"We're here. Get my estate b*aaa*ck for me, or you go b*aaa*ck to Rottington!"

She thrust an envelope with her last 20 euros into Agatha's hand, to pay for the taxi journey back to the flat.

"The eviction papers, sis. Now do your ~~worst~~ best!!"

7. THE FAMILY OF "LE MONSIEUR"

Dressed like a merry parakeet on a bank holiday, Agatha Bilke walked up to the extravagant rental property. The driveway was lined with palm trees and passion flower bushes – the building itself was low but obviously roomy. Soft music – a recorder? – was playing from somewhere inside and many of the lights were on. This was a balmy summer evening, and birds sang as she walked along the gravel. She clutched the envelope in her hand and inhaled slowly.

The palms, so common to this part of France, suddenly ceased at the front of the house. In their place, there was a rose bush, a rope ladder, a well and a small vegetable plot. There were wellington boots by the door and a large bow and arrow – which appeared to be crafted out of rubber

bands and sticks. Was this a family home or was it a meeting place for the boy scouts? Agatha could hear faint voices coming from the house and her confidence faltered. Who or what would she find inside?

Margaret had failed to say whether the family were French, English or otherwise. Were they aggressive or mild-mannered; executive types or layabouts? Agatha had been provided with no detail whatsoever. Maybe they all had beards – even the kids – and had spent all their money on special clippers and shampoos. Maybe they would kill her, because she was beardless.

As she was contemplating running away and joining the circus, the door opened. Agatha wished she didn't have the false eyelashes on – they were making it difficult for her to see properly.

A child of about ten, wearing shorts and a v-necked jumper, appeared. His knees were scuffed and dirty.

"*Bonjour*." He smirked as he looked her up and down.

"Erm, *bonjour*. Could I talk with the rent dodgers, *s'il vous plaît?*" Agatha adopted a stern pose (hands on hips) which showed that she was on serious business. After all, she mustn't let a young boy put her off.

"Come in, *Mademoiselle*…"

This fellow did not seem to register Agatha's authoritarian

manner. He sloped down the palatial hall and disappeared into a room somewhere. Agatha had no idea whether she should follow or not. She stood for a moment and heard laughing, shouting and giggling – unfamiliar noises for someone who had so recently been cooped up in Demone's bedroom watching her use Instant Messenger all day.

Agatha looked around her. What had once been a beautiful home was now admittedly a bit of a mess. The walls were daubed with paint splodges and badly put-up shelves. There was loud banging coming from one part of the house.

She set off along the corridor shouting, "*Excuse me! I have a notice to quit this property*!" but no one bothered to listen. She glanced into one of the rooms. A girl of about her age was reclining on a sofa, reading a comic. In the next room a group of kids were playing marbles and squealing with delight.

Agatha walked into the impressive kitchen area to see kids baking cakes, giggling as they ate some of the uncooked mixture. No one took any notice of her. A phone upstairs kept ringing. It remained unanswered.

She stepped outside into the garden to see a great treehouse. Children from six to sixteen sat, high above the ground, drinking lemonade – not the clear, fizzy sort that

Agatha was used to, but proper, *home-made* cloudy lemonade with bits in. One little boy swung dreamily back and forth in a tyre swing. Along the bottom of the garden ran a stream. Children were fishing – some paddling in the clear water. A boy whizzed past her, shouting to his friends: "Hey! I've found the pin-hole camera!"

Most of the kids were talking in English; all appeared to be content. They looked like they came from a mix of backgrounds and cultures. If this was a family, it was a very big family. No wonder Margaret couldn't get them out.

What struck Agatha was that this was something she had never before encountered – children having fun. Back in the mists of time, "fun" for Agatha Bilke had mainly involved matches and large buildings. This scene was idyllic. The oddest thing of all, she noticed, was that there was no TV and no computer – everyone was smiling, enjoying the simple things in life.

"Look, friends! It's a gramophone player!" A tall boy had found a contraption from one of the rooms and wheeled it outside onto the grass. The children gathered around as he opened the built-in cupboard below, pulled out a 78 rpm

One little boy swung dreamily back and forth in a tyre swing

disc, and placed it on the turntable.

"Wind it up, little Chi-Du!" he cried to the small boy next to him. A fast-paced samba simmered from the one speaker and everyone cheered.

Although this hideaway was in France, Agatha could have been right back in Rottington – in the 1950s, that is. But this did not worry her. For a girl who had just come from the world of virtual geeks and cyber bullies, square eyes and microwave lasagne, the whole thing was entrancing and all notions of evicting the children vanished. Forget Margaret and her egg collection! She wanted to become part of the group. She would forgo all her past hobbies; no more texting the man from the supermarket, claiming to have planted a bomb by the kippers. Agatha stood in the corner, gazing in wonder. She scrunched up the letter in her hand and made a big decision: she would not serve them notice to quit. With no bin in sight, she stuffed the paper in her jacket pocket and forgot about it.

The jolly atmosphere was shattered by a voice on the speaker system.

"*Mes chatons furieux*!" cried a boy's voice in broken French. "Inside now. We have an intruder!"

Les chatons? Agatha was baffled by the name. And who or what was running the show?

8. THE FURIOUS KITTENS

Each and every child ran into the house. Metal grilles automatically descended over the windows to secure them all inside. A siren wailed and ~~horses~~ hoses began to water the grass. A not-so-concealed camera spun around, trying to capture an image of the visitor.

Agatha dashed under the lowering barricades and rolled into safety. Inside, the lights had been switched off and the same boy's voice was making a speech. Agatha spotted the kitchen table and dived under it. She listened with all ears (of which she had two).

"My furious kittens…"

So this is what the name meant!

"…If we are going to be so lax as to let a complete stranger into the house," the voice continued, "I will have to go through the rules again with you."

The voice was firm, most definitely angry. The children gulped. Agatha gulped.

"The first rule of *les chatons* is that we do not allow anyone into the house. The *second* rule is that we do not allow anyone into the house. The third rule" – Agatha had not guessed this one – "is that we *may* let someone in if they are good at rafting or making knots and they don't want to evict us. At least we have installed those metal grilles to protect us. The visitor should be long-gone now."

"Ah *oui*, Le Monsieur!" cried the crowd, who seemed more relaxed now. They were pleased that "the intruder" had disappeared and did not stop to think that she might be inside among them, getting pins and needles under a table.

Who was *Le Monsieur*? He spoke in an English accent yet had a French name. Agatha had already realised that this was not a traditional family, but she now saw that it was even more unusual that she'd first thought.

"Followers, it's been a difficult week," the voice continued. "We have managed to stay in the villa despite constant haranguing from our dreadful landlady."

Agatha strained to look out from under the table – this made her pins and needles worse. She could not see the speaker, but caught a glimpse of a dartboard on the far

wall, which – *ugh* – had a picture of Margaret and several hundred holes in it.

"We must fight, my kittens, for what we believe in!" continued Le Monsieur. "I have a dream! That we are living the perfect childhood in our unending summer camp – no one can stop us or our passion for traditional childish pastimes! *What-ho*!"

Every kitten cheered. The mood had been elevated and Agatha marvelled at the charismatic leader. He had the children eating out of the palm of his hand – and when he picked up the freshly baked biscuits and tossed them into the crowd it proved the point.

Hang on… there was something familiar about him – Agatha couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Hm…

"*What-ho*!"

The words rung in her head like a ~~particularly wriggly octopus~~ loud bell.

In the silence, as happy followers munched their snacks, she remembered who he was: Holbeck Folbeck, her old friend whom she'd left for dead at the Rottington hospital (well, nearly). The tiny [tiny] speck of heart inside her started leaping. It *was* him! That posh way of talking – the *by crikeys* and of course the *what-hos*. The fun they'd had together! The hilarious, if not a little dangerous, times

they'd shared. And now, the pair had been flung together again by fate! She was delighted. That said, he was now a cult leader and she looked like a psychedelic goat. Would they ever be friends again?

A piercing sound interrupted the calm. "*Tweeeerping*! *Tweeeerping*!"

Agatha's tag. It was past curfew and she needed to be at home with her sister.

"*Tweeeerping*! *Tweeeerping*!"

Le Monsieur was flummoxed.

"What's that noise? Is the intruder still here? Come out, stranger, whoever you are!"

Everyone started looking for the source of the noise. Agatha cowered: what would they do with her once she had been discovered? Chain her to a wooden hop and stick set? Plonk her up in the treehouse until she starved? Play dominoes with her day and night until she crumbled?

The tag still shrieked and she sat undetected. Crikey, these children were hopeless; they couldn't even see her lime-green platform shoes sticking out from under the table. After ten minutes of wondering if her legs were going to seize up, Agatha decided that enough was enough and poked her head out.

"Here I am!" she announced. "The intruder! But don't

"We must fight, my kittens, for what we believe in!" continued Le Monsieur

worry, I am going to leave now, thanks."

Le Monsieur barred the way. Close up, she could see that he was wearing a wig.

"You cannot go: the place is sealed." He looked her up and down. "What was that bleeping noise? A secret spy camera? A mobile phone? Tell us who you work for now!"

A small boy of about seven, in lederhosen, sidled up and tried to look threatening, but he failed.

"It's a police tag," admitted Agatha. The leader softened.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, and looked nostalgic. "I had one of those, years ago! Different design, mind, but – what-ho! – such a laugh! May I ask your name, young *mademoiselle*?"

Agatha had to think fast. "Fifi le Feu," she said.

"Welcome!" Holbeck stretched out his arms.

"You're home now, with your people. *Pierre*!" he shouted, as a teenage boy rushed towards him.

"Take the tag off this young lady, make sure she has a hot bath and…" He turned to "Fifi". "Um – have you got any *practical* clothes?"

Agatha looked blank.

"Never mind, eh, by *jiminee*?" His breath smelt of mints – it was Holby, most definitely. "Might actually work in your favour."

With a crowbar, Pierre cut the tag and smashed it up

with a loud "voilà!". Then he picked up his book on Lenny Mailer and continued reading. What a macho, literary type, thought many of the young girls there.

"Come up to the ballroom once you're refreshed, Fifi," said Le Monsieur. He smiled like a crow who's just spotted a nice juicy worm.

9. HOLBECK

It was Margaret's fault, thought Agatha. She must have known all along that Holbeck was holed up here, and had taken advantage of her younger sister. But now the errant girl in platform shoes would turn out to be Margaret's worst nightmare: she was not only refusing to evict the group, she was going to join them. Her elder sister's superiority was short-lived – had it lasted even an afternoon? Agatha would always get one over her sister. Fancy wanting to make a houseful of innocent children homeless! What a nerve!

As she undressed – it was her second hot bath of the day but she felt obliged to take it – Agatha felt smug. And then the grin fell from her face like an amateur mountaineer slipping off Ben Nevis. How should she play it with Holby?

She desperately wanted him to recognise her behind all the haute couture. She wanted them to relive the heady days of the hospital. But she couldn't reveal her identity, not yet. He must be in a lot of trouble, with no money to pay the rent and no parents to support him. She should find out more about his situation before she risked showing him who she was – apart from anything else, harking back to the old days would be a distraction, and Holbeck clearly needed to concentrate all his current efforts on sorting his problems out.

She heard the phone ringing again and this time Le Monsieur picked up the receiver. She strained to hear the conversation.

"Darnnit! Eh? Ah, little Albert is fine… And no, you can't speak to him at the present time. He is – um – doing some sums. Yes, yes, we will get back to you tomorrow. I must bid you good day. No… no, Monsieur Citron, everything is under control here. Hey, do not call me names! I am a respectable boy! Bonsoir!"

He slammed the phone down.

The truth was that Agatha could not have begun to imagine what a mess Holbeck was in.

The Villa de Mer was being used as a summer camp. When his parents had left at the end of spring, Holbeck had needed to raise some cash for the rent. He had placed an advert in the local press announcing a place for "all kids under sixteen" to have fun in the holidays and learn English at the same time. He promised it would be "very educational" and that he, Le Monsieur, was highly trained. He had been a victim of his own success. Once the children got there and found no lessons and no real discipline, they never wanted to leave. Holbeck had accidentally created the perfect environment where they could be free to run around. More children joined and he could not get rid of the first lot. Now the parents were starting to wonder when their offspring were coming back. Holbeck was torn – should he urge the children to go home, or keep them there? Perhaps he would be able to make the parents cough up for "extra tuition"… And yet the longer the children stayed, the more suspicious he became of anyone infiltrating the group – which is why he hadn't answered the door to Margaret when she had visited. And let's face it, no parent in their right mind was really going to hand over more cash to enable their child to continue at the mysterious villa. He had to find money to pay the rent now. Himself.

Why did he not simply leave the Villa de Mer? Ensure the parents picked up their children and have done with it? Because, strange though it may seem, Holbeck had grown fond of his followers… there was little Chi-Du who was not sleeping well at night. And young Pliny with that terrible bunion on her toe. The children relied on him and he was protective. Ultimately, he wanted to escape the emotional and financial burden, but he found he just couldn't say no. And he certainly did not want to go back to his parents and… whisper it… boarding school.

The villa was enormous, with oak panelling in some rooms, pictures of aristocrats everywhere and vast chandeliers that you could have mistaken for ~~motorbikes~~ planets were they not inside a house. It took Agatha a while to locate the ballroom. It was almost like walking into a James Bund film set, although everyone was a lot younger – and there were fewer cars. The leader was surrounded by a small group of children who looked at him, besotted, as he spoke to the new arrival.

"You join us just as a big change is taking place," said the furious kittens' boss. "I have just had word from a source in Paris. I may have some, erm, business to attend to in the capital."

What? She had just found him – and now he was leaving her! Agatha really did like the boy and was astounded they had met up again under such odd circumstances. She *had* to remain with him now that they were together again.

"I have a question to ask," said Holbeck. "Pardon me for being direct, but Fifi, do you have any spare cash?You've got a lot of very expensive clothes on and so I thought you might be able to… um…" he trailed off.

"Sorry, Le Monsieur," said "Fifi". I have nothing left; I am poor." She drooped her head slightly so that he might feel sorry for her. He didn't.

"Dash it to frizz!" The enigmatic leader was agitated. Agatha wanted to reach out and mop his posh brow but she couldn't let her persona slip. She must retain her cool.

"My 'family' is special to me," he said. "We *Chatons* are all waifs and strays. We want to stay together… no one bossing us about, no restrictions, no bedtime. But we are broke. I've come to the end of my allowance. Mater and Pater are on their uppers. If *you* have no money then I will have to go and plead with the, erm, embassy."

Words started spilling out of Agatha, as if she was a typewriter that had been sat on by a very fat rhinoceros.

"Let me help! I will come with you to Paris! I have a lot of ingenuity and at least I *look* like I've got money." It wasn't the most romantic of sentiments, but it did the job.

"Well, I might need someone to carry my briefcase, yes…" He was thinking hard.

"I'll come with you too!" squeaked an acolyte, and then another. Holbeck had to explain that he needed people back here to "hold the fort – *eh, by crikey!* – and that sort of thing". The fewer of their number who went, he explained, the more likely they were to secure the dosh. He bent his head to the left and looked at Agatha.

"You're very familiar, Fifi… Did we meet at Clichy? Or perhaps the avenue du Soleil in Monaco last year?"

"I don't think so," said Agatha. When she was alone with him she could tell him the truth. Paris! It would be a dream come true.

"It won't be *all* hard slog." He came up closer to her. "We'll squat in a swanky apartment until the moolah comes through. Then I may have a small cognac and we can try our hand at poetry. We can come back here in due course and build a wooden octopus for the garden, which the kids all seem to be hankering after…"

"I don't know anything about Paris," said Agatha, frankly.

"Oh, let me be the one to show you! The cafés, the boulevards, the revolutionary zeal… the, um, tiny dogs!" replied Holbeck. "It will be a blast."

10. TROUBLE

Margaret had left Agatha to deal with the Folbecks and knew that it might take a while, but now it was almost midnight and, sitting in her luxury apartment with a leaky turtle bath, she was a little anxious.

Was she taking her time because the family had asked her to help them pack? Perhaps they had made her stay for supper when they found out what a good friend she was of their son. (Margaret had no idea how much Mrs Folbeck hated young Agatha.) She wondered whether she should go over there herself – but she had given up the limo and had no more cash left for a taxi. She reasoned that Agatha would be all right, because she was a resilient type, and she'd see her some time soon.

By morning, however, she was ~~anxiouser~~ even more

anxious. She considered the possibilities. No answer, as usual, on the telephone number of the villa. Maybe she had gone back to Demone's – having forgotten a favourite pen or her pyjamas. No, this wasn't right – something was amiss. She decided to email the French exchange.

To: Canard, Demone <demone.canard@bebois.com>
From: Bilke, Margaret <property.tycoon@tycoonyfeelings.net>
Time: 08.04 CET
Subject: Mlle Agatha
Hiya Dermonnne. It's Margaret Bilke, the sister d'Agatha here. Do you know where Agatha est? I cannot find her and I've looked for her everywhere. She even has a tag but she's missing! Is she back with you and your Canards?
All my amours,
Margaret

To: Bilke, Margaret <property.tycoon@tycoonyfeelings.net>
From: Canard, Demone <demone.canard@bebois.com>

Time: 08.08 CET

Subject: Re: Mlle Agatha

Hey Ciao Margarets. I haven't viewed Agatha for a long times now, yes. If I will see her I hates her, she ruins my reputation with videos inside a Bebois.com and the frogs hurt. I am blinded by legs! If I finds her first, the since is soonest, I gives her a piece of my minds.
Best wishing and sinceres,
Demone

Margaret did not understand all of the reply and was perturbed. It did not sound as if Agatha was with Demone. Where could she be? Her little sister had been missing for a day now.

Of course! The tag! Perhaps it had gone off and the police had found her and taken her into custody. How stupid she had been to gamble with such a contraption. *Frizz*. She rang the gendarmes – it took ages to get through. When she did speak to someone they had never heard of Agatha; let alone taken her to the station. Margaret was not happy. Everything was going wrong.

"I presume you c*aaaa*n locate her," she shrieked. "Her t*aaa*g must be bleeping away!"

The woman on the other end of the phone told her to hang on, then went away for twenty minutes.

"Zorry, *Madame*. We 'ave looked at ze computer and we 'ave no communicazions wiv zis tag. Are you sure she 'ad one fitted?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Margaret, who was now 100% irate, as opposed to being 98% irate and 2% sensible a minute ago. "You should arrest *yourselves* because you *aaaa*re full of incompetence!"

She slammed the phone down, and in doing so knocked an ornamental lizard off the base.

Margaret Bilke decided there was nothing else for it but to walk to the Villa de Mer and try and retrieve Agatha herself. She must be there – perhaps accidentally fallen down the well or stuck up a palm tree.

It took an hour and her feet hurt by the time she got to the mansion. She sighed despairingly as she saw what a mess had been made of the front garden. The place looked ruined – old sticks, boots and mixing bowls were strewn over the grass. The windows had all been left open and the lights on.

"Is there *aaaa*nybody in there?" she called. There was no reply.

Margaret tried the door – it too was open. She walked in and what she saw was horrifying. She had last been in the property when it was new and clean, with Mrs Folbeck running her fingers along the dado rail to check for dust.

There was debris everywhere: cake tins, poster paints, huge dressing-up boxes and, in the garden, a treehouse made out of her valuable Louis XIV furniture. There were tyre-marks over the walls where someone had tried to ride a bicycle. And – *oh no!* – in the centre of the living room a dartboard with her face on it. Sobbing, she went upstairs. In the middle of the ballroom floor lay proof that Agatha Bilke was gone – her yellow tag, broken into a thousand pieces (or even more).

What had happened? Could the Folbeck family have done this?

Margaret had no knowledge of Holbeck's summer camp – the fact that so many children had been living in the villa without adult supervision. She would never have guessed that Agatha and Holbeck had gone early that morning. They had left the children to look after themselves, although in fact they had fled soon afterwards – which was not part of Holbeck's plan. If Margaret had been aware of any of this,

she would have wondered where they had gone. It will be left for us, dear reader, to ask that question ourselves.

Demone Canard sat at home. This was interesting – so Agatha had a tag! This meant that if the computer geek could hack her way into the central police computer she should be able to find out where her "friend" was. She wanted to even the score. Agatha had made fun of her and it would not do. The girl spent a few minutes getting through the system with elaborate passwords and some fancy decoding until, at last, she had access to the "Surveillance" section. (This was much more than the local policewoman could do, when Margaret had phoned the station. So many of these officials were useless with computers!) Demone started filling in the blanks on screen, tapping in her enemy's name and details:

Perpetrator de crime: Agatha Bilke
Tag: Plastique, Yellow

She waited a few moments and the following appeared on screen: