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Opening extract from

The Strongest Girl In The World

Written by

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1

Josie could do many tricks. She could balance a pencil on the end of her finger. She could pick her nose without anyone seeing. She could tickle the cat until it said Stop it! But her best trick happened at ten-thirty one Friday morning. It was a trick that changed her life.

It happened in the school playground when Billy Brand got his head stuck in the school railings. His teacher, Mrs Jones, came to help. It was no good. Billy Brand's head would not budge. The school nurse came to have a look. Billy Brand was going very red. The headmaster, Mr Murray, called the fire brigade. The dinner lady put butter on Billy Brand's swollen face but still he could not squeeze his head through the railings. Billy Brand was well and truly stuck.

All the children crowded round to have a look. This was the best fun they had had all week.

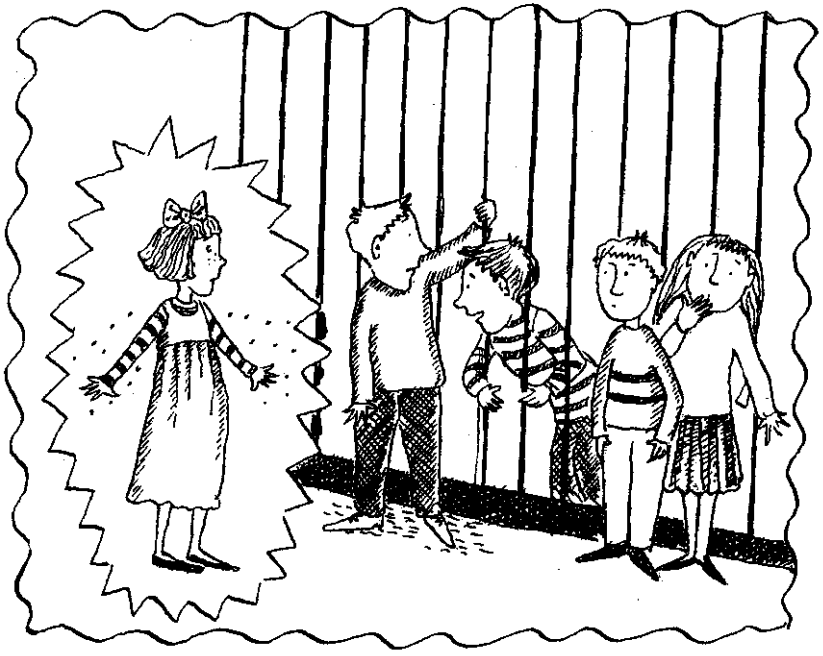
"Will he explode, miss?" asked a little lad.

"Miss, miss, will they have to cut off his head?" asked another.

"No," said Mrs Jones. "Now, children, please don't all crowd round."

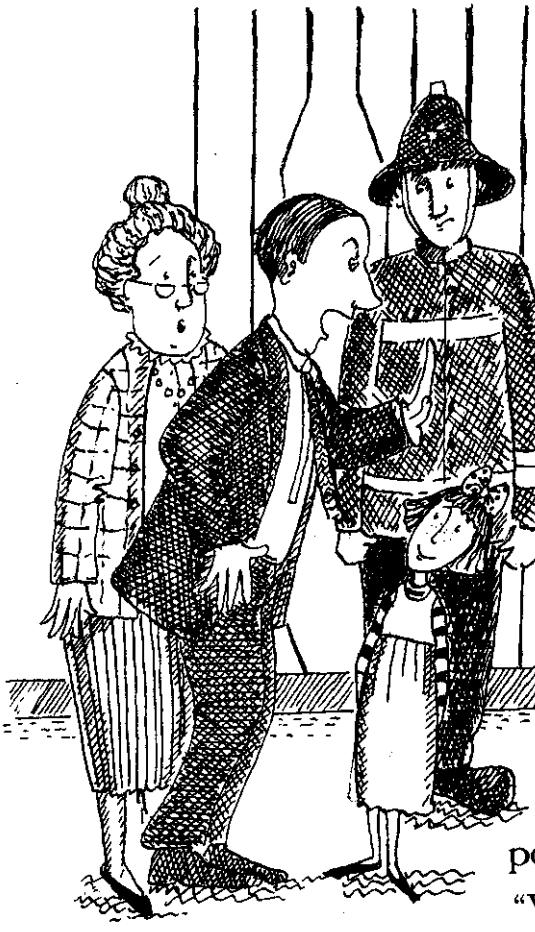
Billy Brand started to cry.

It was then that Josie Jenkins, aged eight and nine months, knew that she could do her trick. She felt a whizz of power down her arm into her fingers.



She went over to the iron railings and bent them right back. It was like pulling tissue paper apart, easy-peasy. Billy Brand's head was no longer stuck. There was a stunned silence, then a loud cheer. Mrs Jones couldn't believe her eyes. There stood Billy Brand, a little red in the face, with butter on his ears, but free.

At that moment Mr Murray came running into the playground, followed by the fire brigade. All the children were now trying to see if they could bend the school railings, which they couldn't. Billy Brand was standing in the middle of them looking rather red and silly.



"What is the meaning of this?" said Mr Murray, looking at Billy Brand. "How did you get free? Mrs Jones, what is going on here?"

Mrs Jones, who was quite lost for words, pointed at Josie.

"Well," said Mr Murray, "is this some kind of trick?"

"Yes, sir," said Josie. "I could see Billy was stuck so I just unstuck him."

The fire officer was looking at the bent school railing. "Who did this?" he asked.

"I did, sir," said Josie.

Mr Murray looked as if he might explode at any minute.

"Josie," he said, "those railings are made out of iron. No one can bend iron, especially not an eight-year-old girl. That is why I called the fire brigade."

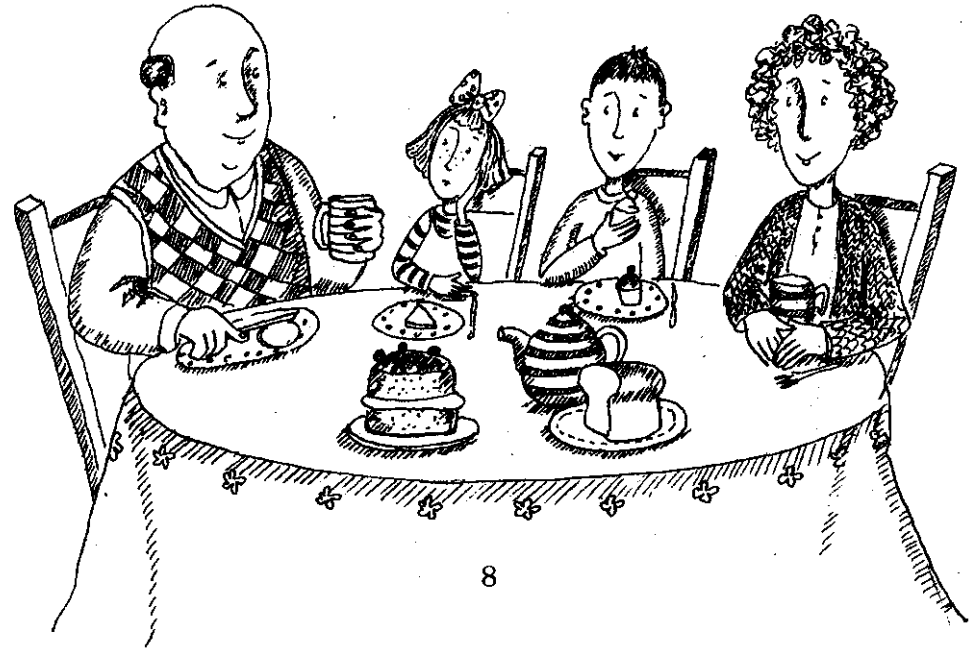
"Shall I straighten them out again, sir?" asked Josie.

"Don't talk such drivel!" said Mr Murray.

Josie walked over to the railings and in front of the whole school, in front of the fire officer, she gently put the railings back as they were.

2

That evening Josie was having tea with her family, Mum, Dad and big brother Louis. She hadn't told anyone about what had happened at school. She had a small feeling that no one would believe her. Even Mrs Jones, her teacher, had told the whole class that it was just a trick that Billy Brand and Josie had thought up between them. Billy Brand had had to stand all afternoon outside Mr Murray's door. Josie had had to



write a hundred times I won't do any more tricks.

"You're very quiet, my love," said Dad. "Everything all right?"

"Yes," Josie mumbled. She thought there was a chance her dad might understand about the school railing. He often told her that magic is all around us except people don't want to see it. But as for Louis who was twelve and clever, best to keep quiet.

After tea and telly, Josie went to her bedroom. She just had to see if she could still do her trick. She picked up her bedroom chair. It was as light as a pencil. She was just balancing it at the end of her finger when Louis walked into her bedroom. Usually Josie hated Louis barging into her bedroom. But not tonight.

"Josie, what are you doing?" he laughed. "Trying to be the strongest girl in the world? Come on, put the chair down before you hurt yourself." Josie put the chair down gracefully and with no trouble at all.

"You do it, Louis," she said.

"Oh, give us a break. Pick up a chair! That is so easy, it's sad! But if it makes you happy..."

Louis picked up the chair. It was much heavier than he thought. There was no way he could balance it on one finger. Then he nearly dropped it. Finally he banged it down heavily on the floor. He was not going to let his baby sister show him up. He went over to Josie and patted her on the head. "That's a good girl. Time for bed."

For once Josie was not cross with Louis. She knew her trick hadn't gone away.

3

The next morning Josie was up and downstairs before Louis. Her dad was eating his breakfast. "Well Josie, my love, off to watch the cartoons?"

"No Dad," said Josie. "I want to help you at work today."

Josie loved where her dad worked. He owned a small garage where he mended old cars. She would always take him his lunch on a Saturday and he would push his tools off the bench so that his little princess could sit next to him and not get dirty. But she had never before gone to work with him. That was Louis' job.

"All right," said Dad, "you can answer the phone and make us coffee." It was not quite what Josie had in mind but it would have to do. She waited all morning until her chance came.

"I'm just popping out for a minute with

Louis. Answer the phone if it rings and don't touch anything."

Josie went over to the car her dad had been working on. This was what she had been waiting for. Would her trick work on cars as it had on the school railings and on her chair? She put her tiny arm out and held on to the bumper of the car. Then she lifted. Yes! Yes! she could do it. The car was no heavier than her school rucksack. With a bit of careful handling she could balance it on the palm of her hand.

That was how Dad and Louis found her: this skinny little girl in a dress holding up a Ford Cortina.

"Don't move!" screamed Dad. "Louis, call 999 and get the fire brigade fast."

Josie carefully put the car down. "Don't call them," she said. "They don't like my tricks."