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Opening extract from

The Invisible Boy

Written by

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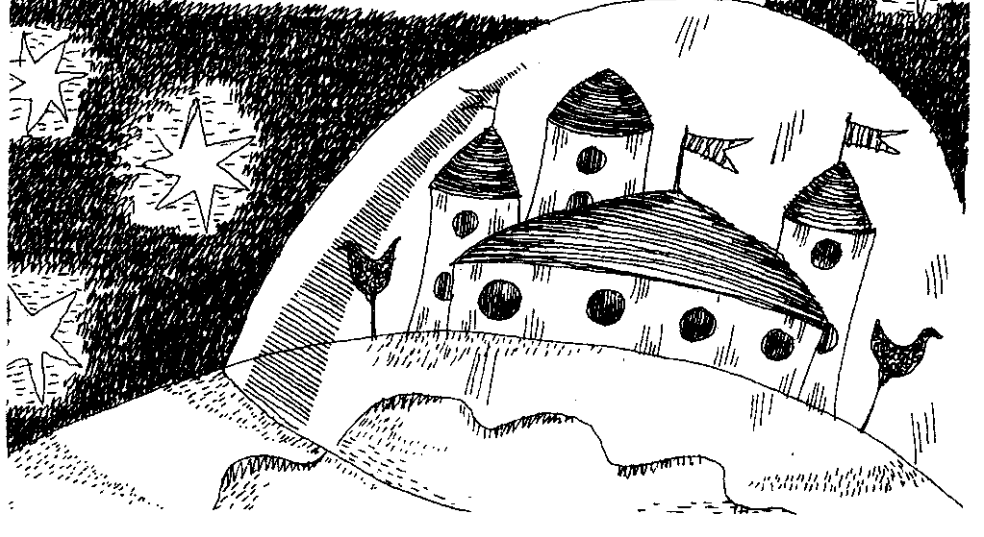
Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

"I can't believe it," said Mum, opening the gold envelope. "We won the top prize – a trip to the moon."

Dad, who was eating toast and reading the morning paper, said, "That's nice."

"Nice!" said Mum. "Charlie Ray, did you hear what I said? We have won a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the moon, all expenses paid, flying first class to Houston, then on the Star Shuttle, and staying in the Moon Safari Hotel, overlooking the Sea of Tranquillity. Oh Charlie, we are the first ones ever to have won this prize!"



Dad dropped his toast and paper.

"Let me see," he said. "Oh Lily my love, I don't believe it. We are going to the moon!"

Sam walked into the room to find his mum and dad dancing round the kitchen table and singing "Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars."

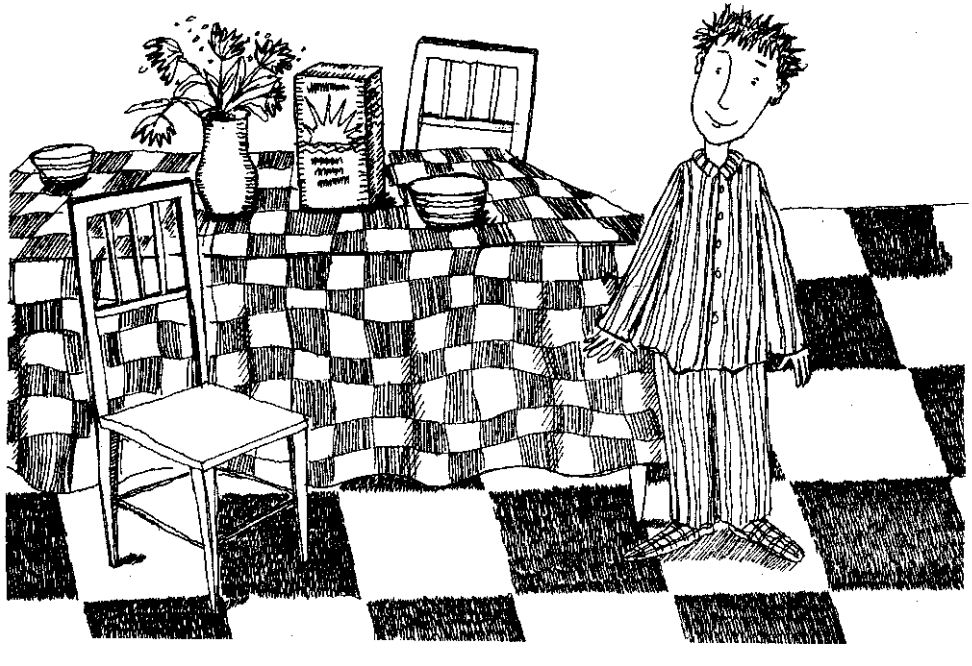
"What's going on?" said Sam, who was only half awake and unused to seeing his parents singing quite so loudly on a Saturday morning.



They told him the good news, both excited and talking at once, so that it took quite some time before they realised that children under twelve weren't allowed. It meant quite simply that Sam couldn't go.

"Well, that's that," said Dad after Mum had phoned to double-check with Dream Maker Tours.

"I will be fine," said Sam bravely. "Look, you must go. It's only for two weeks and I have lots of friends I can go and stay with, like Billy. I'm sure his mum won't mind."



2

The great day arrived. Mum and Dad were packed and ready to go when the phone rang. It was Billy Brand's mother, who was terribly sorry to say that Billy was not at all well. The doctor had just come round and said he had a very infectious virus. Sam couldn't possibly stay with him now. Mrs Brand hoped it hadn't ruined their trip.

"What are we going to do?" said Mum, putting down the last of the suitcases.

"I don't know," said Dad.

Just then the doorbell rang. Dad answered it. He was surprised to find their next-door neighbour, Mrs Hilda Hardbottom, standing there.

"I just popped round to see if you wanted the plants watering while you were away," she said, smiling.

"That's very kind of you,





Mrs Hardbottom, but I don't think we will be going after all," said Dad.

"What?" said Hilda, walking uninvited into the hall and closing the front door behind her. "Not going on a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the moon! Why not?"

Mum felt a bit silly. She should have got this better organised. "Sam's friend's mum has just rung to say he's not at all well, so Sam can't go to stay there," she said.

"Oh dear," said Mrs Hardbottom. "Still, that shouldn't stop you. Anyway you can't cancel, not now, with the eyes of the world on you, so to speak."

"We really have no choice, I can't leave Sam alone," said Mum.

"We must phone Dream Maker Tours right away and tell them we can't go," said Dad.

"There is no need to cancel. If it comes to that I can look after Sam," said Mrs Hardbottom firmly.

Mum and Dad were lost for words. They felt somewhat embarrassed. Mr and Mrs Hardbottom were their neighbours, and had been for years, but they really knew nothing about them, except they kept to themselves and seemed nice enough.

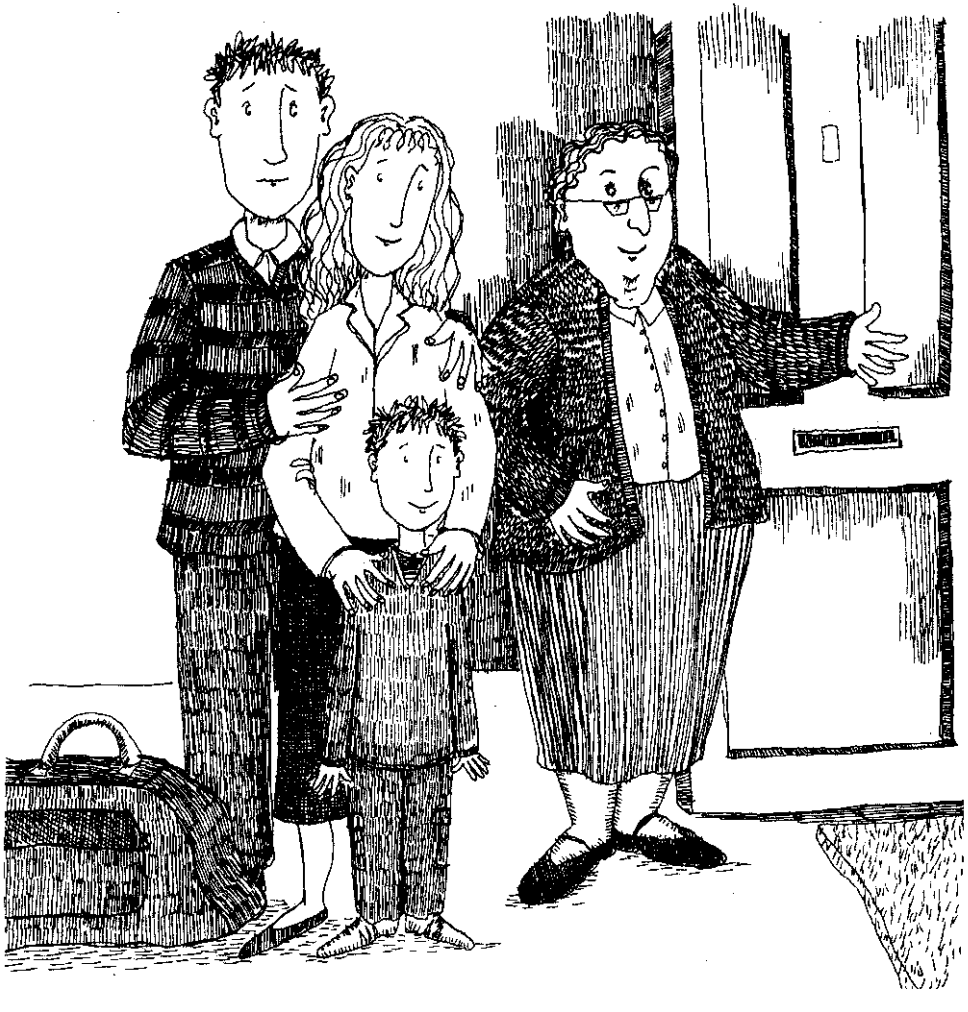
It was Sam who broke the awkward silence.

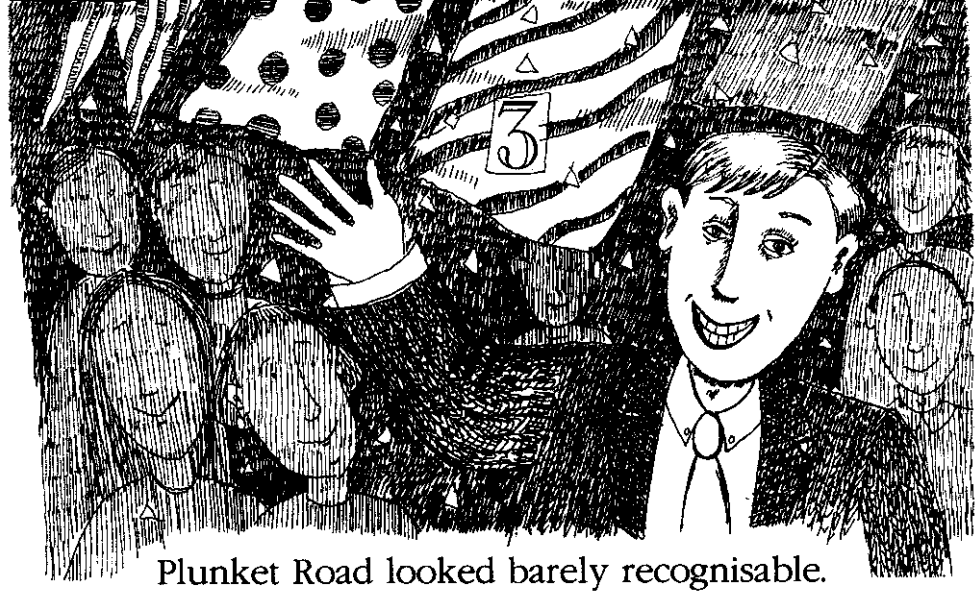
"That's the answer, Dad," he said, trying to sound cheerful.

Mum and Dad looked at one another then at Sam. Oh, how they loved their little boy! It broke their hearts seeing him being so grown-up and courageous.

"It's very kind of you, Mrs Hardbottom, but..."

"Hilda," said Mrs Hardbottom, taking control of the situation. At that moment the doorbell rang. "No more buts," said Hilda, opening the front door as if it were her own house.





Plunket Road looked barely recognisable. It was full of wellwishers and TV cameras. Parked outside their front door was a white shining limousine waiting to take the Rays away.

A TV presenter with a games show face walked into the hall where Mum and Dad were standing. They both looked like a couple of startled rabbits caught in the headlights of an oncoming circus lorry.

"Mr and Mrs Ray, today is your day! You are Dream Maker's out-of-this-world winners!" said the presenter. "How does it feel?"

Dad and Mum appeared to be frozen to the spot.

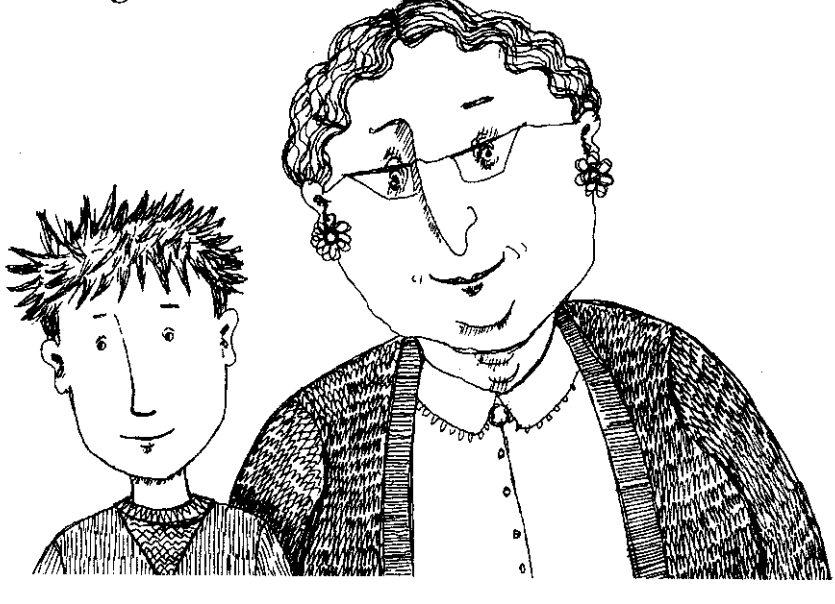
"Yes," said the presenter, "I too would be lost for words if I was lucky enough to be going to the moon."

Hilda spoke up. "They are a little sad to be leaving their son. But he is going to be fine, me and Ernie are going to look after him."

The camera panned on to Sam's face.

"You must be his kind and devoted granny," said the presenter, pleased at least that someone in the family had a voice.

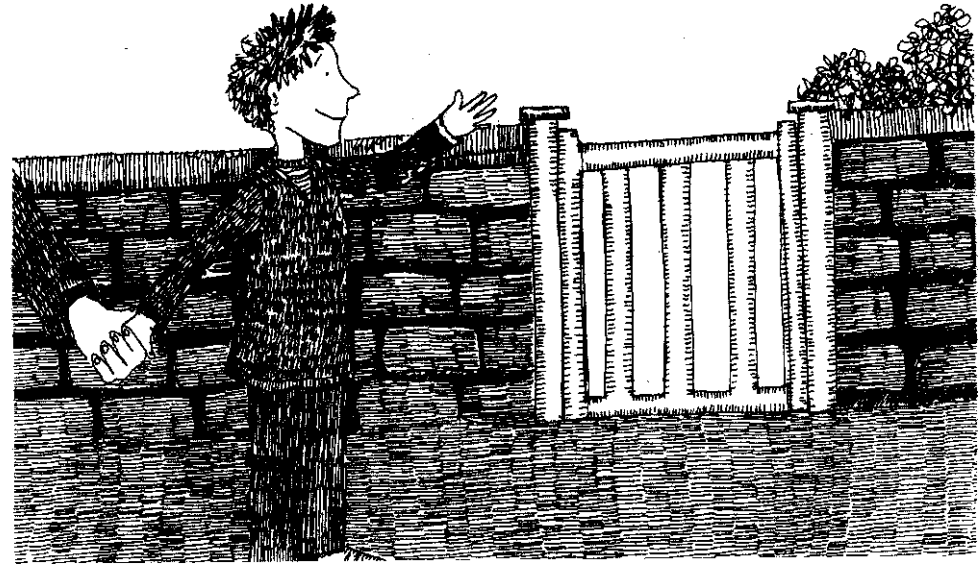
"No," said Hilda, "I am the next door neighbour."



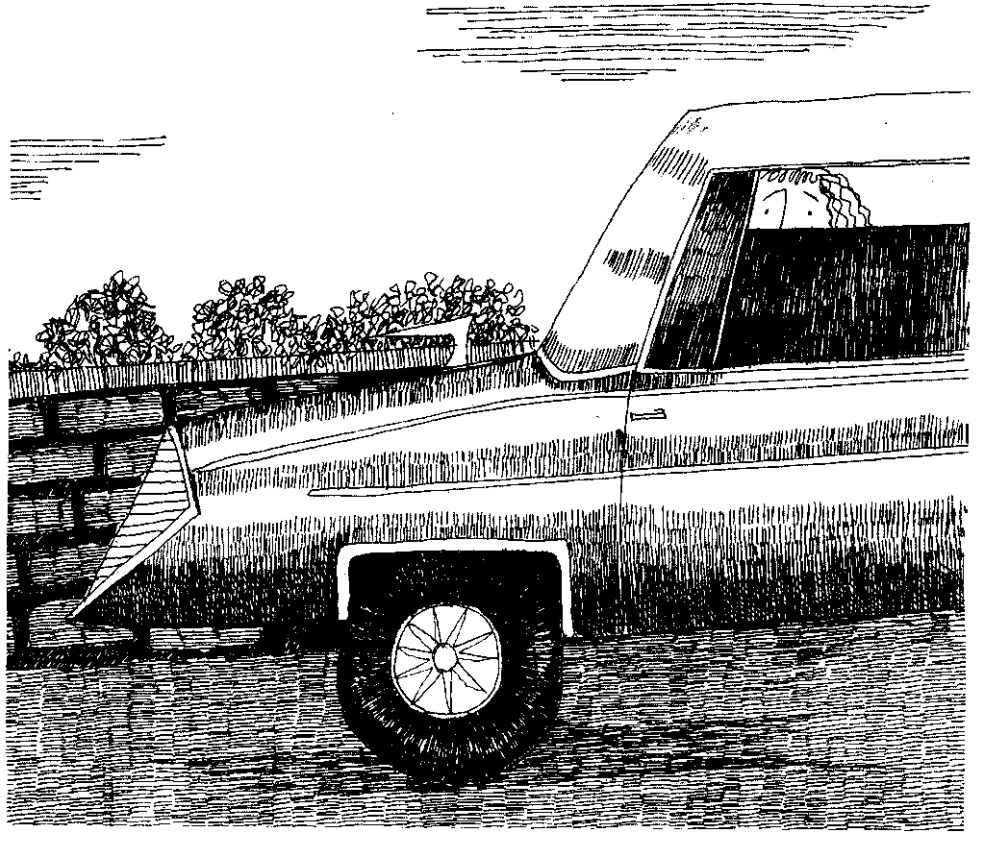
The presenter beamed his most plastic smile and his teeth shone like a neon sign. "Now isn't that what neighbours are for!" he said, putting an arm round Hilda and Sam.

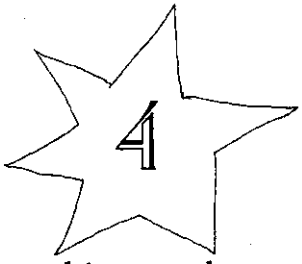
Hilda was in heaven at being seen by forty million viewers world-wide. Mum and Dad smiled weakly. Nothing was agreed. This was all moving too fast.

"I brought round a disposable camera," Hilda continued. "I was hoping that my dear friends Charlie and Lily would take some nice pictures of the Sea of Tranquillity, for my Ernie. He wants to know what watersports they have up there on the moon."



"Well, isn't this cosy," said the presenter, handing the camera to Mum. He was now moving Mum and Dad out of the house into a sea of flashing camera lights, and somewhere in amongst all the chaos that was whirling around them, they found themselves parted from Sam. The white limousine whisked them away. The last thing they could see was Sam waving bravely.





There were two things at the top of Hilda Hardbottom's wish list. They had been there for forty years and hadn't until today shown any sign of coming true. The first was to be on TV, the second was to be rich.

"I don't know what's come over you, sweetpea, you hate boys," said Ernie in a stage whisper after Sam had gone to bed. "You always said they smelt of old socks that had been chewed by a dog."

"There is no need to whisper, Ernie Hardbottom, unless I say whisper," she snapped back at him.

Sam, who was trying to get to sleep upstairs in the cold spare bedroom with no curtains, heard Hilda's voice, and crept to the top of the landing to see what was going on. What he heard made going to sleep even harder.

"Because, you numskull, how else was I ever going to star on TV?" said Hilda. "You have videotaped it, haven't you?"

"Yes, every minute of it, dearest," said Ernie.

"Good," said Hilda. Then she added as an afterthought, "Sam's parents must have taken out a lot of travel insurance, don't you think?"

"Well, if they haven't, Dream Maker Tours would have done, I imagine," said Ernie, pressing the play button on the video machine.

"Just think if anything were to go wrong with that Star Shuttle! Think of all that insurance money," said Hilda, rubbing her hands together with glee.

"That's not very nice," said Ernie.

"Who said anything about being nice," said Hilda, a wicked grin spreading across her face.



Sam went back to his cold lumpy bed. Tears welled up in his eyes. Oh, how he hoped that nothing would go wrong and that his mum and dad would soon be safely home!

The next day Sam went back to school and only had to be with Hilda and Ernie in the evening. All the evenings were long and dull. There was never enough to eat. After tea they would all sit together watching TV, and Hilda would hand out some of her homemade treacle toffee. The first night Sam had been so hungry that he had made the mistake of taking a piece. To his horror his mouth seemed to stick



together so he could hardly swallow, let alone speak. All he could do was sit there trying to finish the treacle toffee while listening to Ernie snoring and Hilda's stomach gurgling like an old dishwasher.

Bedtime couldn't come soon enough. Every night Sam would thank the stars that it was one day nearer to his mum and dad coming home.

But then, on the day his parents were due to return to earth, the unthinkable happened. Houston said they had lost all contact with the Star Shuttle. They were hoping it was just computer failure. The slow, mournful hours passed and the Star Shuttle still couldn't be found. Finally a spokesman for Dream Maker Tours announced on the six o'clock news that the Star Shuttle was missing.

5

The next morning Sam got ready to go to school. He would tell his teachers that he couldn't stay with the Hardbottoms any longer. He had lots of friends at school. He was sure someone would help him while this terrible mess was sorted out.

Hilda must have known what he was planning, for she was waiting for him by the front door, wearing her iron face. "Where do you think you're off to?"

"School," said Sam.

"No you're not. It's out of the question. Not at this sad time," said Hilda firmly.

"I can't stay here, I mean I was only supposed to be with you until my mum and dad got home," said Sam.

"Well, they're not home, are they, so it looks as if you're stuck with us," Hilda said smugly.