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opening extract from

Oli and Skipjack's Tales of Trouble: Mirror Mischief

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Ceci Jenkinson

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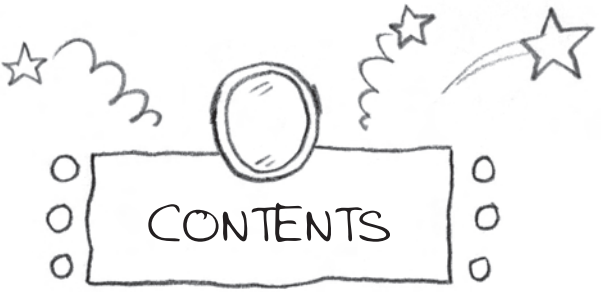
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1
A Parcel of Surprises

At 7.27 precisely on Monday morning, the alarm clock beside Mr Vernon Surd's narrow iron bed began to ring. Mr Surd reached out a long bony arm and flicked it off. He always set his alarm for 7.27, as this allowed him a lie-in of exactly three minutes. Any longer would have been lazy, and Mr Surd frowned on laziness. In fact, Mr Surd frowned on almost everything.



Mondays always started with Double Maths for Year 7. Mr Surd's hands clenched into knots under the coverlet and he frowned his frowniest frown. All the children he tried to teach were stupid but Year 7 had not a single brain between them. Their refusal to grasp fractions was so stubborn that he sometimes suspected them of pretending not to understand, just to irritate him.

When his allotted 180 seconds were up, Mr Surd climbed out of his creaky bed and drew back his thin curtains. His dark mood grew even darker when he saw the cloudless blue sky outside and the early-morning sunlight already glowing on the rooftops. He hated sunny days. Sunny days made children gaze out of the window and wish they were playing outside. He would have to keep Year 7 extra busy today.

At 7.30 a.m. Mrs Stubbins went to the foot of the stairs, took a deep breath and hollered 'MELVYN!' at top volume, startling the birds from the trees and causing old Mrs Higginbottom next door to fall out of bed. But

her son, commonly known as Slugger, merely grunted under his duvet and rolled over.

At 7.40 a.m., Mrs Stubbins marched into Slugger's room, yelled, 'MELVYN!' again and pulled all the covers off the bed, revealing what appeared to be a young hippopotamus underneath. Yawning and scratching, Slugger hauled his large and lumpy body out of bed. As his tiny brain slowly woke up, he began to wonder what amusements the day would provide. He could start by taking the junior boys' lunch money as usual. After that he could bully Nerdy Ned about his stutter. A broad grin spread over Slugger's



flabby face at the prospect of all this fun. Then he thought of someone else: Oli Biggles. He scowled.

At 7.45 a.m., eleven-year-old Oli Biggles was snatching a few final seconds in his cosy bed and re-living a beautiful moment from yesterday's rugby practice. He was running with the ball and he neatly sidestepped a diving tackle from Slugger Stubbins, whom he left grabbing armfuls of thin air while he whizzed on to score a try between the posts.

Slugger was still face down in the mud – by far the best place for him – when Oli's younger sister Tara marched into his bedroom to announce that if he wasn't downstairs in five minutes Mum would eat his waffles. Electrified by this terrible threat, Oli sprang from his bed, scrambled into his clothes and shot down to the kitchen with just ten seconds to spare.

Tara was already tucking into her waffles and at the far end of the table sat Oli's other sister Becky, nibbling a grape. Becky was fourteen and, in Oli's opinion, the most boring person ever

invented. Becky would no doubt have thought the same of Oli, if she had bothered to think of him at all.

Waffle Breakfast had become a Monday morning treat in the Biggles house, a moment of maple syrup and happiness to fend off Oli's fear of Double Maths. This morning the waffles' job of providing cheer was helped by a bulky parcel which sat beside Oli's plate. Parcels are always exciting and this one was almost entirely covered in exotic stamps, with just a small space for Oli's name and address in the middle.

'It's from Sid!' cried Oli in delight. Sid ran the local pizza shop, where she made the best triple-pepperoni pizzas in town. She was large and jolly with curly orange hair and she had helped Oli and his best friend Skipjack out of many narrow scrapes.

'She's been on holiday for ages,' remarked Tara. 'Where is she now?'

Oli tore the parcel open at one end and drew out a postcard. It showed a smiling African man standing in front of a thatched hut. The man's smile was surprising given his circumstances: he

was entirely festooned with pythons. Pythons were coiled around his neck and hung in thick ropes from his outstretched arms. Intrigued by this human snake-tidy, Oli turned the postcard over.

'She sent this from a snake temple in Benin,' he said, reading the back. 'It must have taken ages to get here, cos she's coming back on Wednesday.'

'Benin!' exclaimed Tara. 'That's so unfair – I've been saving up for years to go to Africa.'

Oli reached into the parcel and pulled out a large wooden object.

'It's a mirror – cool!'

'It's beautiful,' said Mum. 'Look at those carved animals around the frame.'

Tara announced, 'They're chameleons. They give you the Evil Eye.'

'Not that you'd need one of those,' remarked Oli, 'having two already.'

'I wish I did,' retorted Tara. 'I could double curse you.'

Oli read Sid's postcard. 'It's to both of us. Listen: "Hiya Oli and Tara! I'm having a

smashing time here in Africa. I bought these from a groovy medicine man. He says they have Magic Powers! Must go or I'll miss the bus to Burkina Faso. Lots of love, Sid.'"

'So there's a present for me as well!' cried Tara. She grabbed the envelope, felt about inside and pulled out a small brown leather bag, tied at the neck with beaded strings. She loosened the strings and shook the contents of the bag onto the table.

Everyone stared down at a pile of tiny white bones.



‘Fortune-telling bones!’ exclaimed Tara. ‘I know all about these –’

‘Of course you do,’ muttered Oli, rolling his eyes.

‘You cast them on the ground,’ Tara continued, ‘and then you look at the pattern they fall in and that tells you about the future.’

Oli peered at the bones. ‘I wonder what they’re saying now,’ he said.

‘I can tell you exactly what they’re saying,’ said Mum.

‘You can?’ chorused her children, impressed.

‘Yes. They’re telling you that if you don’t get a move on you’ll be late for school.’

Excitement of an entirely different kind was approaching Mr Vernon Surd as he stood at the bus stop with his eyes peeled for the Number 11. Ah, here she came and yes – she was indeed completely re-painted! Mr Surd had looked forward to this moment for months, ever since he had read about the plan for new colours in his favourite magazine *Bus-Spotters’ Monthly*. Now, brimming with emotion, Mr Surd clutched his

briefcase a little tighter and for a fleeting second he looked almost happy.

The gleaming bus arrived and Mr Surd drew an approving finger along the smooth red paintwork before boarding. 'What a marvellous job they've done on your bus, Mr Grimble!' he said to the driver. 'You must be a very proud man.'

'It makes a change from driving a rusty old heap,' agreed Mr Grimble, in an unusually cheerful mood.

'I shall have to bring my camera tomorrow,' said Mr Surd. 'I should like a photograph of her smart new paintwork for my collection.'

'If only everybody respected my bus like you, Mr Surd,' commented Mr Grimble and then he clenched his teeth, for he had just spotted through his rear-view mirror a pair of the most disrespectful bodies on the planet. They were cycling along behind him and, as he drew up at a red light, they manoeuvred their bikes through the narrow space between the kerb and his beautiful red bus.

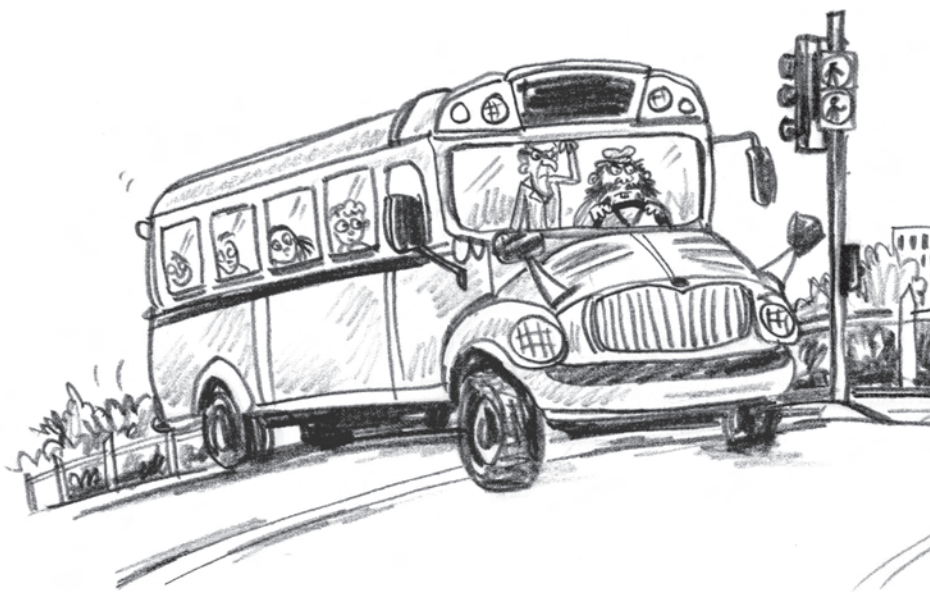
'If they get so much as one tiny scratch on my

nice new paintwork I'll run them over,' growled the bus driver.

The two cyclists risking Death By Number 11 Bus were in fact Oli Biggles and his best friend Skipjack Haynes on their way to school. They were followed by Tara, at the distance she always kept when she wanted to pretend she had nothing to do with them.

'Look, Skip – a new Number 11,' shouted Oli.

'Let's hope it's got a new driver,' Skipjack



shouted back. He reached the front of the bus, peered in and saw the familiar, extravagantly hairy face of Mr Grimble glaring back at him. 'No such luck. Hello, Mr Grimble. What colour are they going to paint you?'

'Come on, Skip – the light's green,' called Oli. 'Bye, Mr Grimble!'

'Bet you can't catch up!' yelled Skipjack over his shoulder and the boys sped off, leaving Mr Grimble muttering through his beard.

