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The Runaway Troll

written by

Matt Haig

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THE RUNAWAY TROLL

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For Andrea and Lucas

The humans and other creatures
you will meet in this book

THE HUMANS

Samuel Blink: A twelve-year-old boy who once had a very normal life, with normal friends, doing normal things. That was before his parents got crushed to death by a falling log. And before he moved to Norway, and before he met a family of trolls, and before he found out that his Uncle Henrik had spent many years as a dog. But now, the day before starting a new school, life is back to being boring again. Until he hears a strange noise coming from under his bed.

Martha Blink: Samuel's ten-year-old sister. The winner of the World's Worst Keeper of Secrets Award, if such a prize existed. She loves: making friends, inventing songs, talking about her time in the forest, eating pickles. She hates: thinking about the day her parents died.

Aunt Eda: Sister of Martha and Samuel's mother, Liv Blink. She's a bit old-fashioned, and can be a little bit strict. A tall lady who always wears her hair in a bun, she tends to worry a lot. But if your husband had turned into a dog, then so might you.

Uncle Henrik: Uncle to Samuel and Martha; husband to Eda. Former ski jumper, goat farmer, cheese-maker and dog. A Norwegian elkhound, to be precise. Now spends most of his time as a kind human uncle, except when he's having one of his 'funny turns'.

Mrs Sturdsen: A teacher in the village school. She is a short, solid-looking woman with cheeks like red apples. She is quite a kind teacher generally, but gets rather annoyed with a certain clever-clogs called Cornelia Myklebust who corrects her in almost every lesson.

Cornelia Myklebust: Spoiled brat. Fluent in numerous languages. Mathematical genius. Owns more ponies than you've got fingers. Oh, and if she tries to make friends with you, run away. Fast.

Mr Myklebust: Cornelia's father. Messy eater. Richest man in Flåm. And the fattest. Has hated Uncle Henrik ever since he— No, I won't tell you that. Not just yet.

Mrs Myklebust: Cornelia's mother. Former beauty queen. Finds her husband repulsive, but will never leave him. He's got too much money.

Mr Tomas Thomassen: A policeman with a face so sour you would think he was sucking a lemon. Loves enforcing ancient laws about trolls. Hates people who waste police time.

THE TROLLS

Troll-Son: A young troll who lives with his family in the village of Trollhelm. He has to share the family's one eyeball with his parents and sister, which he doesn't mind. What he does mind is his mother telling him off for *everything*. Especially when she decides he has to be sent to the Betterer. Secretly, he wishes he was a human, with a proper name, rather like Samuel Blink.

Troll-Mother: Troll-Son's mother is a particularly ugly woman, with wild and matted black hair, a bulbous red nose, hairy nostrils, and five wonky grey teeth. She has been very crotchety since the Troll family lost their eyeball. She spends far too much time clouting Troll-Son around the head and worrying about what the neighbours think to realize that, underneath it all, she is actually quite nice.

Troll-Father: One of the friendliest and most humble trolls there is, although if he has a weakness it is that he rarely dares stand up to Troll-Mother. Mind you, if you'd ever had one of her clouts around the head, then neither would you.

Troll-Daughter: Troll-Son's younger sister. Fast becoming Troll-Mother's favourite child. Has an annoying habit of repeating her favourite words over and over again. Ignore her. She's just seeking attention.

The Betterer: The nastiest creature in the whole of troll history. Well, except for Troll-the-Cannibal, who died 7,552 years ago from a very bad stomach ache. The Betterer hates trolls and hates being one, which probably explains why he gains great pleasure from 'bettering' troll children. This involves sessions in the Dunking Cage and seven-hour maths lessons and numerous other forms of torture. All of which take place in his home, the Bettering Tower.

Troll-the-Left and Troll-the-Right: Two heads of the same troll, who hate each other's guts (which, technically speaking, they share). They were recently separated after a rather nasty incident involving a prison guard's sword, which cut off Troll-the-Right.

Troll-the-Wisest: Leader of the Troll Council. Judged to be the wisest troll in Shadow Forest on account of having the longest beard. In truth, he is one of the most stupid there is. And as most trolls believe the moon is a hole cut out of the sky, this is quite some achievement.

OTHER FOREST CREATURES THAT AREN'T IN THIS BOOK AS MUCH AS THE TROLLS BUT WHICH YOU MIGHT WANT TO KNOW ABOUT

The tomtegubb: A jovial, barrel-shaped creature with a strange taste in colourful clothes. Has the annoying habit of making everything rhyme. All the time. It should be a crime.

The huldre-folk: The huldres once lived underground but now inhabit a village near the southern edge of Shadow Forest. They have long tails, skinny bodies and wide-apart eyes, and spend all their days singing hymns to the sun and making wooden sculptures. Their singing can be heard on a few pages, if you make sure you read this book in a very quiet room.

Skullpeckers: These birds once used to peck skulls and eat brains for supper. Now they are vegetarian and fly around tweeting about how pretty the forest looks.

This book might also contain traces of **caloosh**, **trunklefish** and **truth pixie**.

UNCLE HENRIK'S FUNNY TURN

Samuel Blink was lying on the ground pulling clumps of grass out with his fingers, as if it were the green hair of some rather evil and large-headed monster.

He was bored, you see. Totally, utterly, brain-numbingly bored. Not that he really minded being bored. No. On the scale of Worst Things to Be, being bored was nowhere near the top. It was certainly not as bad as many of the other things he had been this summer. Like being frightened out of his skin, or feeling so sad he could hardly breathe.

But still, if only his stuff had arrived from England. Or if Aunt Eda and Uncle Henrik had a TV. Or a computer. Or a book that wasn't written in Norwegian. If only there were somewhere exciting he could go.

True, it looked *nice* around here. Just by tilting his head left, away from the white wooden house, he could see the still waters of the fjord and, further in the distance, the vast rugged triangle that was Mount Myrdal. But nice as it was, you can't play with a view. You can only look at it. And as it was, according to Uncle Henrik, still three months until the start of the skiing season, it was going to be quite a while before it offered some genuine fun.

Of course, there was one place he could see that offered something exciting. It was the pine forest right in front of him, at the top of the grassy slope where Aunt Eda and Uncle Henrik's land ended. But he wasn't allowed in there.

'We still haff to be careful,' Aunt Eda had told him and his sister, Martha. 'If we don't effer cause trouble with the forest, the forest won't effer cause trouble with us.'

'But the forest's safe now,' he'd said.

'Well, we don't know,' she said. 'Not for sure.'

This was true. There were still a lot of unknown things about the forest, like whether all the trolls who lived there were good or just some of them. And how many had one eye or two heads or some other unusual thing which gave you a shock when you looked at

them. And this type of question could do something to lessen the boredom of an afternoon, but not quite as much as seeing a troll face to face.

Samuel was just about to pull up a particularly large clump of grass when he heard the faint sound of the telephone in the house. A few minutes later his aunt was calling out to him from the door.

'Samuel!' she said. 'I haff to tell you something. And what are you doing on the grass? You are far too close to the forest.'

Samuel sighed, and got up to walk over to his aunt. She was quite a stern woman in some ways, and certainly looked it with her pulled-back hair and her buttoned-up cardigan and her tight mouth and prickly chin. But she was a good and kind woman too, who was only really guilty of worrying a bit too much.

'That was Fru Sturdsen on the phone,' she said as Samuel took off his shoes. He saw that Martha was in the kitchen, talking to Uncle Henrik at seven hundred miles an hour while he prepared roast elk and cowberry jam for supper.

It was funny. After their parents died Martha hadn't said a word for weeks, but now you couldn't shut her up. It was as though all those unspoken

words had been saved up like money in a bank and she was spending them at every opportunity. And all she would talk about was one thing – the time she had spent in Shadow Forest.

'. . . and so,' she was saying, 'when I was in the underground prison with the Snow Witch, I met this two-headed tro—'

'*Martha*,' said Aunt Eda sharply as she and Samuel went into the kitchen. 'I think we haff heard enough of this conversation. Perhaps we shall talk about something else. Like how you are feeling about your new school. And remember, when you start school you must not mention Shadow Forest. I know it is ferry exciting to liff next to a forest full of such strange creatures, but we must not effer tell anyone about it. This is ferry important, because as I say, Fru Sturdsen has been on the phone and—'

'What kind of a name is Fru?' said Samuel, frowning at the name as if it had an unpleasant smell.

'It's not a name, it's a term of address. *Fru* means Mrs in Norwegian. *Herr* means Mister and *Fru* means Mrs. So I am talking about *Mrs* Sturdsen. Your new teacher.'

Samuel's heart sank. How was he ever going to fit in at a new school if he didn't know the language?

'What did she want?' he asked.

'Well, she telephoned to say how ferry excited she is to haff two new children starting her school tomorrow. And she also said it would be a good idea if you wrote about what you did in your holidays. They do it after effery summer, she says.'

Samuel rolled his eyes. 'Homework before we even start?'

He had already thought schools in Norway sounded strange, with ten-year-olds like his sister being in the same class as twelve-year-olds such as him. But having to do homework *before* term began – that was even worse.

'Apparently, yes,' said Aunt Eda. 'Homework before you start.'

Uncle Henrik stopped crushing cowberries for a moment. 'I remember when I was at school,' he said, his gentle face broadening into a smile. 'Every summer I used to make sure I did something interesting just so I had something to write about.'

'Yes,' said Aunt Eda briskly. 'Well, I haff to say that is not the same problem we face here, is it, Henrik? Quite the contrary in fact. I am worried that there is rather too much for them to say.'

'What's the big deal?' Samuel said. 'Everyone

thinks there are weird creatures in the forest. That's why they're too scared to visit it.'

'They're scared because they don't know for sure,' she said. 'And if they know that Henrik is back after all those years he was meant to be missing in the forest, then efferyone will want answers. So we must pretend we know nothing, and you must not write anything about the creatures of the forest. And tomorrow, when you are both at school and people find out where you liff, you must not try and impress them with stories about the forest.'

'Hey,' said Martha, blushing. 'Why's everyone looking at me?'

'Because you've got an unstoppable mouth,' said Samuel.

'No I—'

'Listen,' said Aunt Eda, raising her hand to stop an argument. 'It's going to be difficult for all of us. But you must pretend you haffn't effer seen Uncle Henrik. Well, not until we decide what we are going to do. And they must not know about trolls and pixies and so forth. What do you think Magnus Myklebust would do if he found out we had seen such things?'

'Who's Magnus Myklebust?' asked Martha, stealing

a pickled onion from a jar she had opened in the kitchen.

Aunt Eda and Uncle Henrik shared a glance, and Samuel noticed there was something strange about this glance, but he couldn't work out what it was.

'Mr Myklebust is a man I used to know before I went into the forest,' said Uncle Henrik in a slow voice, as if each word were precious and breakable and needed to be let out as carefully as porcelain teacups from a chest. 'I met him after I retired from ski jumping and moved to Flåm with Eda.'

'What's so special about him?' said Samuel, staring at the empty dog basket.

Aunt Eda laughed. 'Beleef me, there is nothing ferry special about him. But he is not ferry nice. Not ferry nice at all. And he has neffer liked your uncle ferry much.'

'Why not?' said Martha, taking another pickled onion.

'It is a long story. And you haff your homework to do. But anyway, the point is that if he found out about the forest, he would want to chop it down and make money out of it. If he wasn't so scared of what might be in the forest, then he would do it right now. He already owns half of Flåm. Ski lodges, holiday homes. He is the richest man in the willage. And he has always

been wanting to know about the forest. So if he found out we would be in trouble. There are local laws about this kind of thing. Laws that go back hundreds of years, to the time of King Håkon the Good, the first Christian King of Norway. Laws about knowledge of efil creatures. Laws that no one has bothered to update. We must be ferry careful.'

Aunt Eda's attention switched as she noticed Martha pinching another pickled onion. 'Now, Martha, that's enough nibbling. You won't be able to eat your elk. Honestly, what is it with you and pickles?'

Martha shrugged. 'They're tasty,' she said. Indeed, for Martha, this was the very best thing about Norway. There were pickles everywhere. Pickled berries, pickled nuts, pickled onions, pickled cucumbers, pickled gherkins. And she was eating them at every opportunity.

'Right, well, when you do your homework you must not say anything about the creatures that liff in the forest. And when you go to school you must not say that your uncle has come back. That is ferry important.'

Samuel leaned back as far as he could on his chair, supporting himself on tiptoes. 'So . . . you want us to lie?'

Aunt Eda closed her eyes tight, as if someone had just flicked water on her face. 'Well, it is not really *lying*, it is just not telling the whole truth.'

Samuel nodded. 'Yep. Thought so. Lying.'

Aunt Eda was getting flustered. 'No, it's— Could you just *sit still*.'

As soon as she said the word 'sit' in such a sharp way, a rather remarkable thing happened. Uncle Henrik dropped his chopping knife and squatted down on his heels, with his hands on the floor. His tongue was hanging out of the side of his mouth, and he was panting, as if doing an impression of a dog. But if it was an impression, it was a very good one, and Uncle Henrik's eyes showed no sign of a joke. Indeed, Uncle Henrik's eyes showed no sign of Uncle Henrik. It was as though he were in some kind of a trance and had momentarily forgotten he was a human being.

But Aunt Eda didn't look too bothered. She just rolled her eyes as if it were a perfectly normal occurrence.

'What's happening to Uncle Henrik?' asked Martha, so confused that she stopped crunching on her pickle.

'Is he all right?' added Samuel.

'Yes, yes,' said Aunt Eda, through a sigh. 'He had a couple of these turns yesterday.'

'Turns?' said Samuel. He remembered how his mum had used to say his granddad had 'funny turns'. But Samuel was pretty sure Granddad's variety of funny turn never involved sitting on all fours on the kitchen floor, panting like a dog.

'Before you woke up I found Henrik lying in the dog basket,' said Aunt Eda.

And as she said the word 'basket', Uncle Henrik cocked his head to one side and gave her a look of canine bemusement, before charging through the house on all fours. Martha squealed as he nearly ran her over and Samuel jumped out of his chair to get out of his way. But Uncle Henrik flew past the rocking chair and ended up in the dog basket, where he lay down. Obviously he was rather too big for the basket, and seemed most awkward in there, with his head leaning over the side and his legs sticking out. Yet, despite his clear discomfort, he still found time to lick the backs of his hands like paws needing a wash.

'Henrik!' shouted Aunt Eda. 'Henrik! Snap out of it! You are not a dog! Henrik Krohg, get out of that basket immediately. Henrik? Henrik? Can you hear me?'

And Samuel and Martha watched as Uncle Henrik's eyes fluttered, as if he were waking from a bad dream.

'Oh,' he said wearily, pushing himself into an upright, more human position. He blushed when he realized Samuel and Martha were watching the whole thing. 'It's happened again, hasn't it? I thought I was still a—'

'Yes,' said Aunt Eda, stroking his arm. 'But don't worry. You're back with us now. Everything's going to be fine. I'm sure. Yes, everything's going to be fine.'