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Opening extract from

There's a Hamster in My Pocket

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Germane

On Saturday morning I woke early, to the sound of pouring rain and Nani's wheezes.

There was a feeling of utter dread in my stomach, and a sour lump of guilt at the back of my throat.

I clambered carefully over Nani, fetched some milk from downstairs, then crept into the Fiesta Red bedroom. Killer Queen peeped out over the top of her box, and I lifted her out, and watched her drink the milk. Then I put her on my lap and stroked her.

Things couldn't have been much grimmer. That morning, Mum and Dad were going to paper the Feature Wall. On Monday morning the new furniture would arrive, and on Monday evening Auntie Shabnam would take up residence.

As far as Killer Queen was concerned, we'd reached the end of the road.

I held her against my cheek. Her fur was silk-soft and she smelled of fishy milk. "There's nowhere left for you to hide," I told her. "And I've no more food for you. And

you're making Nani ill. I can't keep you. I just can't. . ."

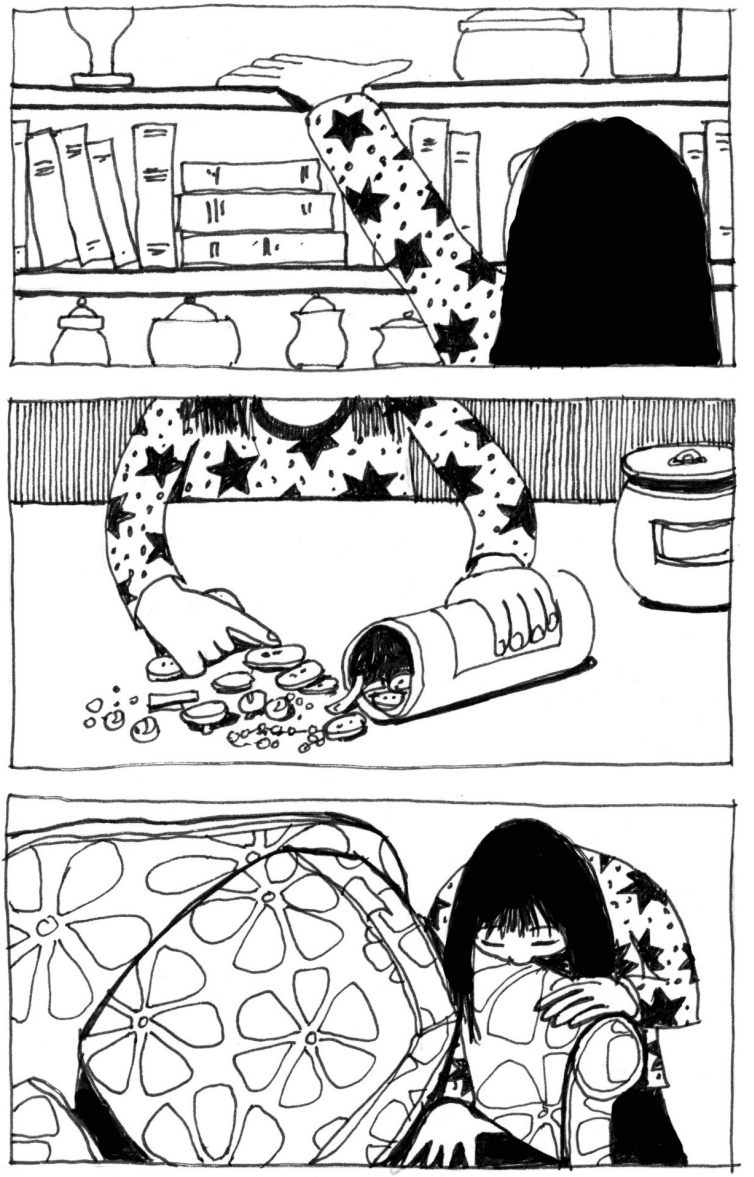
Killer Queen meowed pathetically and watched, cross-eyed, as I gave her box a bit of a clean. Feeling incredibly sorry for myself, I lifted her back in, got dressed, and went downstairs to begin the hunt for the heart-shaped key.

I hunted everywhere. I climbed on chairs and ran my hands along every shelf. I tipped out every vase and every jar. I crawled under tables, searched inside drawers, and rummaged down the backs of settees and armchairs. I even felt inside the toes of ancient shoes and slippers. That key was *nowhere*.

By this time, things were beginning to stir upstairs. In double-quick time, I set the breakfast table, and by the time Mum and Dad appeared with Bilal, the tea was bubbling on the stove and the bread was in the toaster.

When everyone was settled round the table, I ran back upstairs and shifted Killer Queen into my bedroom. Kylie had given me a ball with a bell inside which belonged to one of the Papillons, and I threw it in the air and watched Killer Queen pounce on it, then roll onto her back and shred it with her back claws.

I wished I could play with her all morning, but of course I couldn't. Before you could say 'executive office', Mum and Dad and the wallpapering table were on their way up. I threw Killer Queen's ball one last time,



then went downstairs to keep Nani and Bilal company, and to take my mind off things.

All week, Nani had been playing a game with Bilal which involved a load of plastic tubs. Every time he put a small tub inside a bigger tub, Nani would say, "*In*, Bilal. Say *in*," and every time he tipped one out, she would say "*Out*, Bilal. Say *out*."

The game was incredibly tedious, and Bilal only ever made gurgling noises, but Nani kept on and on at it. I suspected anything was better than thinking about red and gold zigzags and Auntie Shabnam. I sat on the settee beside Nani and we watched Bilal.

"Any progress?" I asked.

Nani smiled and shook her head. "The best things in life," she said solemnly, "take time. *Out,* Bilal."

I sat for a bit, watching Bilal dribble into his tubs. Then, cautiously, I said, "You know the key for the puzzle box, Nani? I don't suppose you have any idea. . .?"

Nani frowned and chewed the inside of her cheek. Then she shook her head.

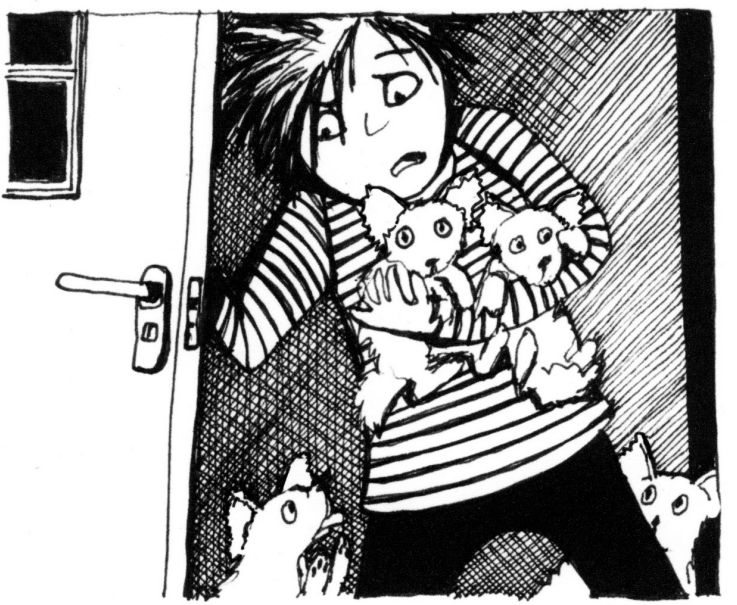
"If you don't mind," I went on, "I'd like to give the box to Kylie's mum for her fortieth birthday."

To my relief, Nani's face softened a little. "Go ahead, Yosser," she said. "And I hope it brings her more joy than it brought *me*. *In*, Bilal."

***

By lunchtime I'd had more than enough of the *In/Out* game, so I changed into my very best jeans and my turquoise-and-silver kameez, and my glitziest turquoise hijab. I found an umbrella, and went to Kylie's house to see if she needed help with the 'do'.

When Kylie opened the door, she looked completely stressed out. Her hair was sticking straight up, and there were streaks of purple glittery stuff on it, and on her arms and her face.



She had two Papillons clamped to her chest. Another two were running in and out between her legs. Behind

her, three more leapt up and down like demented jack-in-the-boxes. Every single dog was barking fit to burst.

"We usually keep the Papillons in the dining room," Kylie explained, "but we've set out the buffet there. Can't trust them with a roomful of canapés. . ." And she handed one to me.

Now, I'll be honest, I'm not that keen on Papillons. I know they're very cute, with their shiny black noses and their funny butterfly ears and everything, and I could probably cope with *one* if it was reasonably calm – but seven hysterical Papillons was *way* too much for me. And, that afternoon, it was definitely too much for Kylie as well.

I dumped my umbrella and tried to sidle in, but my way was completely blocked. Then, as I turned to close the door, a Papillon took hold of the hem of my jeans – my *very best* jeans – and proceeded to shake it vigorously from side to side.

Handing me another Papillon, Kylie tried to pull the jean-ripper off. Immediately, the three jack-in-the-boxes smelt freedom and flew out of the door and down the garden path. With an agonised cry, Kylie raced after them.

As soon as she'd gone, the remaining Papillon joined forces with its friend, and a spirited tug-of-war began.

I watched in horror as my very best jeans *ever* were shredded before my eyes. Then, when it seemed things couldn't possibly get any worse, they did. Germane arrived.

Taking gigantic strides that sent all the Papillons flying, he strode up the path towards me, and as he walked he slowly drew his hand out of his pocket. I saw the bright flash of something small and silver.

A knife? A razor blade?

On the doorstop, Germane bent so that his face was level with mine. This close, he was simply enormous, and he was wearing some sort of musky stuff that made me feel quite lightheaded.

I gazed, mesmerised, into his shades. Every sequin of my glitzy turquoise hijab was reflected there. So were the whites of my eyes.

Above the shades, Germane's dreadlocks hung like wet creepers in a dusky-grey forest, and somewhere to the left of his nose, a diamond sparkled like a solitary star in a dark, dark sky. For a long time, neither of us spoke. Then Germane did.

"You Yosser Farooq, then?" he said, in a big, deep voice.

For a split second I considered denying it. Then I nodded. I was beyond terrified.

"Got somefink for ya, Yosser Farooq," Germane said,

and he opened his hand, and held the silver object right under my nose.

I looked down into his massive palm. All I could make out through the rain was a vague silver shape which was pointed at one end. Desperately, I stood on tiptoe and tried to catch Kylie's eye but Kylie, oblivious to my plight, was still chasing Papillons.

I was all on my own with Germane and a deadly weapon. The Curse of Samarkand had struck again.