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Opening extract from

Pillywiggins and the Tree Witch

Written by

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Pillywiggins and the Tree Witch

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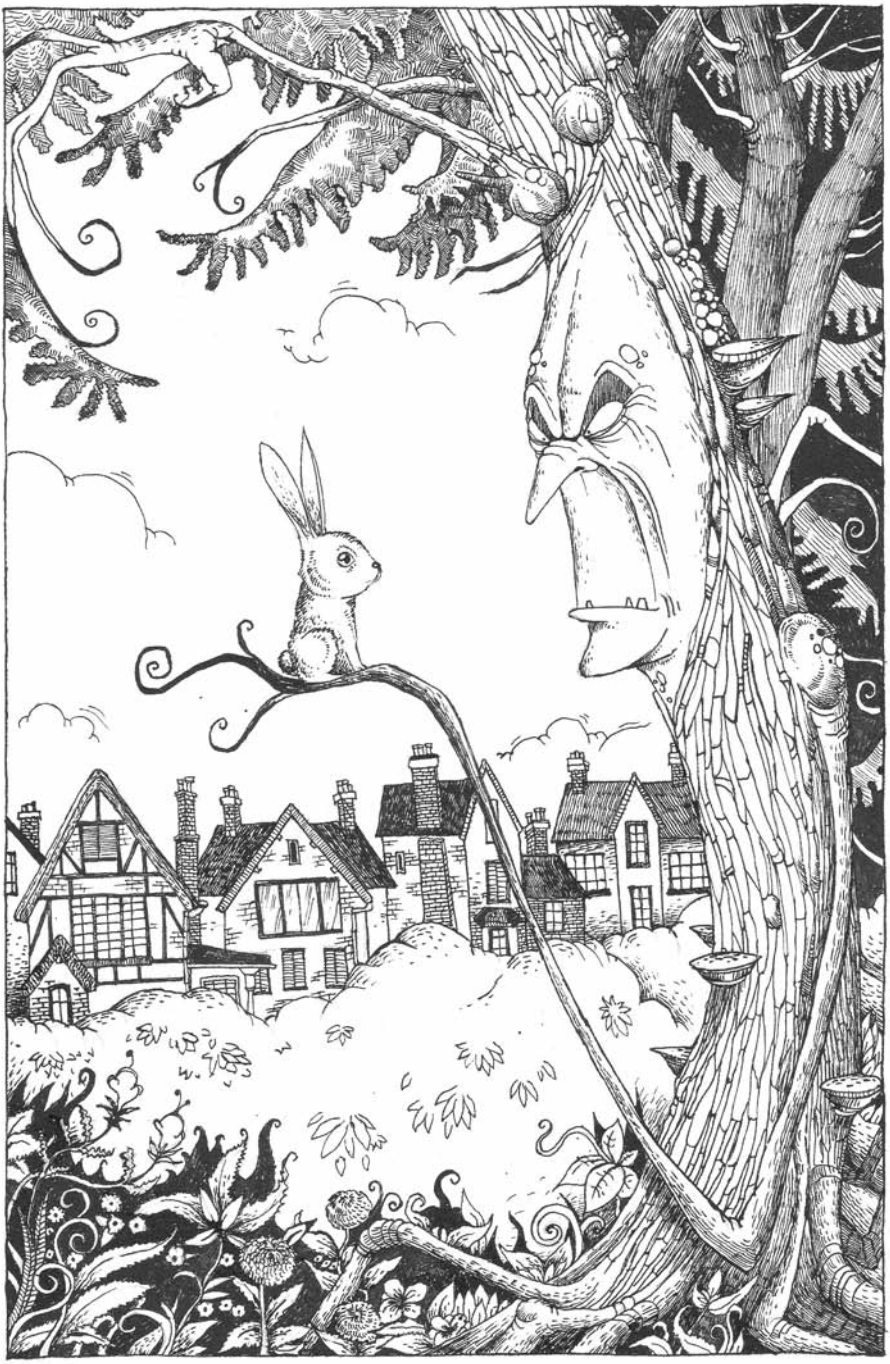
Chapter 1

There was a rabbit sitting in the fir tree.

The tree looked like a person. But then, trees often did if you were Natasha. She saw faces in all sorts of things, like on the pink chest of drawers in her bedroom or in the pattern on her wallpaper.

She was sitting in bed, looking out of the window. The view was still new to her as she had only just moved to the countryside. She lived at 7 Riverside Road, The Deepings and she liked her new address. Deepings made her think of water and stones dropping into it and ripples. There was a river at the end of the road.

The tree was a witch she decided. The rabbit was sitting on its arm. So how did the



rabbit get there? She wondered, and why hadn't it fallen off? It wasn't real, of course. Everyone knows that rabbits can't fly or climb. It must be a toy. So who put it there? The witch?

'It's just a tree,' she reminded herself as her mother looked round the door.

'Who are you talking to, Natasha?' Mrs Quillen was holding Charlie Baby.

'No one.'

'Tasha.' Her little brother reached out with both hands. 'Play.'

'Not this morning, Charlie.' Her mother was already heading downstairs. 'Natasha has to get up and get ready for school. Jonathan is up already.'

Jonathan was Natasha's older brother, and never stopped boasting about it. As if he could take the credit for being born first. He was probably downstairs hogging the computer right now.

The rest of the morning, in fact the rest of the day, was filled with ordinary things like getting dressed and having breakfast and going to school. Actually school didn't feel ordinary

yet as Natasha didn't know anyone very well. She thought she was starting to make a friend called Lydia, but she wasn't sure.

When she got home, the rabbit was still sitting in the tree, but seemed to have slipped lower down the branch. It looked even more worried. And no wonder – the branches were swishing up and down and looked darker. The day was cloudy. It was early June but not at all summery.

School hadn't gone particularly well. Lydia hadn't been so friendly. Nor had the other girls. They couldn't pronounce her name they said, so they were going to call her Titch. Natasha didn't like being reminded she was rather small for her age.

Grumpily, she gazed out of her window. A rabbit in a tree. A tree like a witch. Those were the first signs she thought later, when she looked back. Natasha knew from the start there was something different about The Deepings.

Even before she met Pillywiggins.

Chapter 2

Natasha would probably never have met Pillywiggins if she hadn't stopped to talk to a boy on the way to school. He had longish brown hair and he was skimming stones from the riverbank.

'Good one,' she called out, when one of them bounced five times.

He looked up, but then picked up another stone and turned away, so she set off again. He obviously didn't want to talk and she didn't want to be late for school.

The river ran alongside the road on her right. She had to cross an old stone bridge to get to the High Street on the other side. The bridge had triangle-shaped inlets, three each side, hanging over the water, and she stopped

in the middle one for traffic to pass. Natasha spotted Lydia on the High Street, walking with some other girls.

'Hi, Titch!' Lydia and the other girls waited.

When they reached the classroom, she saw the boy from the riverbank. He was sitting at a table with some other boys, but seemed separate from them somehow. None of them were talking to him. When Miss Rogers called the register, Natasha learned his name was Jamie.

Natasha was at a table of five with Lydia, a girl called Tanya and two boys. Miss Rogers had put her there on her first day.

Later, when they went outside for PE and had to get in sixes for a beanbag race, Lydia said, 'Now, who shall we have for our sixth person?'

'He's good at throwing.' Natasha pointed to Jamie.

But the other two girls shook their heads slowly from side to side. Lydia wrinkled her nose.

But Natasha noticed that the group he was in won. Lydia told her later that he

was unpopular because he wouldn't play in the Saturday League, even though he was the best footballer in the class.

When he passed Natasha in the dinner queue she thought he looked a bit scruffy. He was coming back from the serving hatch with his tray and she saw that the cuffs of his sweatshirt were frayed. He caught her eye briefly and she had the feeling that he wanted to say something.

But he didn't.

Later though, at home time, she was at the pegs collecting her bag when suddenly he was by her side, muttering something in her ear.

Then he was gone.

'What did he say?' Lydia shuddered.

Tanya held her nose.

Natasha shrugged and shook her head. 'I've no idea.'

But she had. She knew exactly what he'd said.

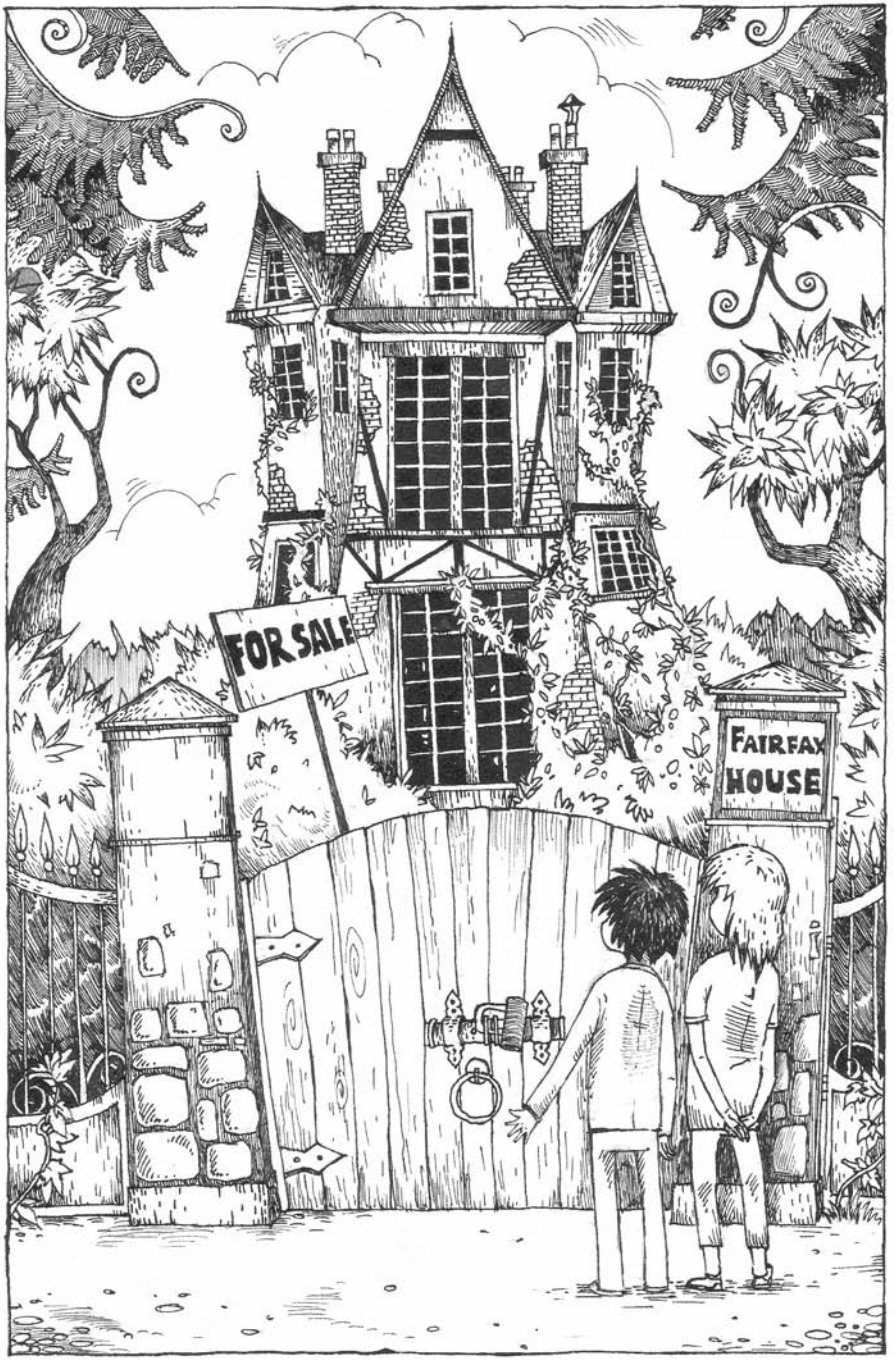
Chapter 3

'Got something to show you. Meet me at the other side of the bridge.' That's what he'd said.

Should she? None of the other kids would. What could he want to show her? Was it a trick?

When she got out of school she couldn't see him. She still couldn't as she made her way towards the High Street with Lydia and her friends, or when they stopped to chat in front of The Bell. She kept her eye on the other side of the street, but not so the others would notice.

When they'd all gone in different directions, she crossed the bridge warily, fearing that he might jump out of one of the triangular inlets.


FOR SALE
FAIRFAX
HOUSE

But he didn't. He was standing in front of a big old house with a FOR SALE board in the garden. She made out the words Fairfax House engraved on the gatepost.

'Hi,' said Natasha awkwardly.

'Fairyfax, that's what this house used to be called.' Jamie looked at her searchingly, gauging her reaction.

She was surprised a boy could say 'fairy' without sneering, but didn't comment.

'Fairies used to play in the garden,' he said quietly. 'You want to see it, don't you? I'll show you a short cut to your house.'

'How?' The gates were locked.

Fairfax House looked deserted. A red-leaved plant covered the walls and some of the windows. The grass in front hadn't been cut for ages.

'Come on.' He squeezed through a gap in the railings and set off up the drive.

'Are we allowed?' she asked, as he pushed open a rusty side gate.

She couldn't see a path – it was like a jungle – but he seemed to know where he was going. Sometimes he held back a thorny branch for

her, but mostly he forged through the undergrowth. Trees towered overhead. Bees buzzed from the insides of flowers. She recognised roses and hollyhocks and nettles.

'Ouch!'

'Try this.' He handed her a rough leaf. 'It's a dock leaf. Spit on it and rub it on the sting.'

It worked.

She looked around her and thought of Sleeping Beauty and the forest that had grown for a hundred years, but Jamie was no prince. Her mum would say he was 'a bit rough'. Natasha didn't know what she thought, but there was a wildness to him, as though he was more at home in the woods than in the classroom.

'I can't be late home,' she said, when she caught up with him.

They were standing under a fir tree with wide-spreading branches. 'You won't be. See. I told you it was a short cut. Your garden used to be part of the Fairfax estate.' He pointed at a row of houses and she realised that one of them was hers. In fact she was looking up at her bedroom. Her fairy-mobile was hanging in

the window and some of her fairy dolls were on the sill. The tree they were standing under was the one she could see when she was sitting up in bed.

It cast a cold shadow.

She was wondering if the rabbit was still there when Jamie dived off again. When she caught up with him he was standing in front of a statue, though she could only see it when he trampled down the grass.

'Pillywiggins.' He pointed at the statue. 'That's her name. She's a fairy.'

Cross-legged, sitting on a mushroom, the statue looked more like a gnome or pixie than a fairy, but Natasha decided to look at it again later. She'd suddenly remembered that her mum had said she'd meet her out of school. 'I've got to go. How do I get into my garden?'

'Come on. We can go through your fence.' He held back some loose slats while she climbed through.

'Don't go back there alone, right?' he said, when they were both through. Then he was off by the side of her house.