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Opal Moonbaby

Written by

Maudie Smith

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OPAL
MOONBABY



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Maudie Smith

Illustrated by Gillian Johnson





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For Madeleine and Emma



First of all . . .



A city never sleeps but there is a time, somewhere in the early hours, long before dawn, when it grows drowsy. When parents snore their loudest and children mutter through the deepest of dreams. When slumbering dogs twitch and even the night cats let their hunting eyes close for a few precious moments.

It's only a short time, two, maybe three minutes when no one is paying attention. No one glances up at the sky and spots the revolving orb that is heading so certainly towards Archwell. No one notices it hovering over the Half Moon Estate and splitting open like an overgrown egg. No one sees the mass of sparkling particles that showers down, landing somewhere below, beneath that old copper beech tree. No one watches as the strange sphere closes again, perfectly, smoothly, as an egg can never

do. Its job is done and it spins silently away out of the half light and up into the darkness, disturbing no one.

Almost no one.

Barton Green has just set out on his milk round and is meandering down Half Moon Parade. His eyes are bleary and he only has one hand on the steering wheel; there's a meat pasty in the other. He's got the radio on and he's thinking about the slice of cream cake waiting on the seat beside him.

And suddenly there she is, standing in the road, under the branches of a huge tree. A long-haired girl in a cape that is rippling with wind although the leaves on the tree are still. Her luminous hair is spinning around her head like the rotating blades of a helicopter. She's clutching something in her arms, a white creature, a cat or a small fox, and she is staring right at Barton Green with huge, gleaming violet eyes.

Barton stops thinking about cream cake and drops his pasty. He is going to hit this girl. He is going to crash right into her, he can't possibly stop in time. He cries out in horror, jumps on the brake. Too late though, surely it's too late!

The animal flies out of the girl's arms and up over the milk float but the girl doesn't move. Barton wills her to jump out of the way but she doesn't. Instead she stares straight into the headlamps and her eyes

send out giant beams of blinding light. Shielding his own eyes with one arm, Barton heaves on the steering wheel. The milk float swerves, skids and thuds straight into the tree.

The sound of breaking glass seems to go on forever.

Barton jumps out and runs round to the crumpled front of the float, his heart beating hard against his chest. He is sure the girl will be lying there, crushed beneath the wheels.

She is not.

She is nowhere to be seen.



Martha woke up with that feeling again, the same one she had every morning. It felt as if a cold weight was pressing down on her stomach, like a stack of dinner plates. Then she remembered: school was over. It was the first day of the summer holiday and six weeks stretched ahead of her. Six whole weeks without Chloe or Colette or the rest of the Secret Circle; she wouldn't have to spend time with any of them. Martha breathed a sigh of relief.

She leaned over the side of the bunk and saw Robbie, sprawled under his jungle duvet cover, still snoring. Yoyo, his toy monkey, lay across his cheek as usual, one brown paw tucked inside Robbie's nostril.

Martha climbed down and went to the window.

'Whoops!' she exclaimed as she drew back the curtain.



'Huh? Who? Where? Whassup?' Robbie extracted Yoyo's paw from his nose. 'What's going on?'

'It's the milk float!' said Martha. 'It's crashed into a tree. There's milk and glass all over the place.'

'Cool!' Robbie hopped over to join her at the window and together they peered at the float's squashed-in bonnet. 'That float's had its chips. Do you think there are any casualties?' Casualties was Robbie's current top favourite word. He used it as often as he could. 'How about we go and see if there's any bodies?'

'How about we don't,' said Martha. 'That's not how I want to spend the first day of the holiday, thanks very much.'

'The holiday!' yelled Robbie, punching the air with his fist. 'Yessss! We can do what we like. Stay in our pyjamas and watch telly till our eyes drop out. Mum can take us swimming and maybe, just maybe, she'll *finally* take me to Pirate Planet!'

Robbie had been dying to go to the new pirate theme park ever since it had opened. He had a map of it on his wall and he could describe all the rides in minute detail. He was so obsessed with Pirate Planet, he'd even made up a song about it. He began to dance around the bedroom, singing at the top of his voice.

'Pirate Planet! Pirate Planet!
Make a date!'

Martha had heard the song thousands of times before. There wasn't much to it.

'Pirate Planet! Pirate Planet!
I can't wait!'

She put her fingers in her ears but Robbie didn't let that put him off. He just sang even louder.

'Pirate Planet! Pirate Planet!
Pirate Planet! Pirate Planet!
Pirate Planet! PIRATE PLANET!'



'Pirate Planet?' said Mum, showering cereal into their bowls. 'I don't think that's on the agenda. Do you know how much those tickets cost?'

'But I've never been,' pleaded Robbie. 'I'm the only one in my class that's never been.'

'Stop exaggerating,' said Martha, seeing Mum's anxious face.

'I'm not exaggerating,' Robbie insisted. 'They've all been. Zack's been fifty million times. It's not fair!'

Mum frowned. 'Sorry, Robbie,' she said. 'But we do have to be a bit careful with money, you know.' She began to butter her toast. 'Tell you what, we'll save up for it, shall we?'

Robbie opened his mouth, ready to protest, but Martha gave him a warning look. They'd agreed

not to give Mum any more worries, she had enough already. Robbie caught the look, shut his mouth, said 'Uuummpph' and began to guzzle his Space Nuggets.

'It's fine, Mum,' Martha said. 'We don't need to spend any money this holiday. We can stay at home every day if you like, just the three of us.'

Mum smiled. 'Well,' she said, waving her knife in the air, 'as a matter of fact, I've got some good news.'

'Dad's coming back!' said Robbie. 'We've won the lottery!'

'Neither of those, I'm afraid,' said Mum. 'No. I've got my old job back.'

'At Snippers?' said Martha. Snippers was the hairdressing salon in the shopping parade at the bottom of their block of flats. Mum had been a stylist there before Martha and Robbie were born.

'That's right,' said Mum. 'Only it's called A Cut Above now, sinceAlesha took over.'

'Very posh,' said Martha.

'Yes, and Alesha's taking me on full time. I start tomorrow. Isn't that great?'

'Cool,' said Robbie, pushing his bowl aside and spreadinghis toast with an extra thicklayer of strawberry jam. 'I might come in one day actually, for a free haircut. You can do me an Ashley Cole, or a Matt Smith. Yeah, I want to look like Dr Who.' He picked up his monkey. 'And Yoyo fancies a quiff. What do you want, Martha?'

But Martha wasn't thinking about hairstyles. She

clutched her stomach as the stack of cold dinner plates settled in again. She had been so looking forward to staying at home with Mum this holiday, not having to worry about what anyone else was doing or saying, what anyone else thought of her. Now it looked as though Mum was planning to abandon them for the whole summer.

'What about us?' she stammered. 'Robbie and me? Will we have to go to a child minder?'

'Oh no,' said Mum, wafting the idea away. 'I can't afford one of those.'

Martha breathed a little easier.

'Thank goodness for that!' said Robbie. 'Yoyo doesn't like child minders. They're always giving him bananas when what he really wants is chocolate biscuits.'

'No,' Mum continued. 'You'll come to the salon with me. Alesha said it would be all right as long as you're well-behaved. You might even be able to help with the teas and coffees and things.'

'No way!' said Robbie. 'No way am I going to spend the entire holiday trapped in a hairdresser's!'

'Sorry,' said Mum. 'It's bad timing but the job's come up and we need the money.'

Robbie wasn't listening. 'If my friends hear about this I'm going to be a total casualty! Zack'll laugh at me!'

Martha, however, was feeling much happier. She liked the idea of helping out in the salon, passing round drinks and towels, sweeping up hair. Being tucked away in there every day would suit her right

down to the ground. She'd probably never see anyone she knew, no one from school at least. It sounded just about perfect.

Robbie was shaking his head woefully and a crease had appeared between Mum's eyebrows, the one that always appeared when she was upset. Martha shot Robbie the warning look again but he wasn't receiving anything.

'I'm dead!' he said. 'I am so, so . . .' Martha kicked him under the table. 'So . . . ow! . . . dead keen on hairdressing.' He rubbed his shin. 'Yeah, as a matter of fact I've always wanted to know about shampoo and scissors and . . . and partings and stuff. Tell you what, Mum, this is probably going to be the best summer I've ever had.'

It wasn't very convincing but Martha could see Robbie was making a big effort. And it seemed to do the trick because Mum's crease disappeared like magic.

'Of course,' she said brightly. 'If it doesn't work out we'll have to think again, maybe see if one of your friends could have you to play sometimes. Perhaps you could go to Zack's house, Robbie.'

'We-ell,' said Robbie, getting into his stride. 'I suppose I might be able to spare Zack a bit of time for a game of football. As long as it's between appointments.'

Mum laughed. 'And what about you, Martha?' she said gently. 'Shall I ask Chloe's mum if she could have you occasionally?'

'No! Don't!' said Martha. The words shot out

more sharply than she had meant them to and now Mum was looking all concerned again.

'What is it with you two?' she said. 'Have you had some kind of falling out?'

'No,' said Martha. 'It's nothing. Nothing's happened. All I meanis, I'll be completely fine at the salon. I won't need to go to *anyone's* house.'

She didn't want Mum to know it butChloe's was the lastplace she wanted togo.

Last summer it would have been a different story. Last summer shewould have begged to go to Chloe's. Last summer she had spent almost the whole holiday with her.

Chloe had a pond in her garden and they had made a water zoo full of snails and water boatmen and mosquito larvae. They had spent hours decorating the zoo with stones and leaves and pond weed. They had even made posters advertising the place. Bramble Zoo, they'd called it. They had stuck the posters on the telegraph pole outside Chloe's house. Mum and Dad and Robbie and Chloe's family all visited the zoo and Martha and Chloe had served them bramble wine they had made themselves from blackberries mashed up with water and sugar. The wine was delicious and Martha had gone home with her mouth and her T-shirt stained a lovely purplish pink. At the end of the holiday they had sworn to reopen their zoo the following year. They had spat on their palms and shaken hands to seal the promise.

But that was almost a year ago. Before Dad had left home. Before the Secret Circle had even been

invented. Long before the dreaded Colette had arrived on the estate and started at Archwell Park Primary.

Martha didn't want to see Chloe any more. She didn't even want to think about her.

For Martha had made another promise. A secret promise to herself.

She was never going to be friends with anyone ever again.

From now on she would trust no one.

No one in the entire human race.

Never ever again.

Ever.