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Opening extract from

# A Hen in the Wardrobe

Written by

## Wendy Meddour

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# A Hen in the Wardrobe

This book is dedicated to Ardjouna Bouchareb,
and to her son – who found a hen in the wardrobe,
left a sheep in our kitchen and helped me find
'the best of all possible worlds'.

JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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# A Bump in the Night

All was quiet in Cinnamon Grove. The little cluster of grey terraced houses huddled together beneath the moonlight. Birds tucked their heads under their wings, flowers closed their petals and children snuggled into their duvets like caterpillars in cocoons. Only the brook that gurgled along the bottom of the gardens interrupted the sleepy silence. Everything was drifting into the deep hush of night.

Suddenly there was a CRASH at Number Thirty-two! An upstairs light came on, a door swung open and a man in blue-and-white stripy pyjamas hurtled across the landing. He burst into a bedroom at the top of the stairs and opened the doors of a big white wardrobe. Then, with one swift jerk, he stuck his head inside!

"What's up, Dad?" shouted Ramzi, throwing aside his bedcovers.

"*Where's* it gone?" whispered Dad. He twisted his neck first to the left, then to the right.

"Where's *what* gone, Dad?" Ramzi asked nervously.

But Dad stared straight through Ramzi. His eyes were watery and distant, his dark hair ruffled and unkempt. He stroked his beard and thrust his head back inside the wardrobe. Then he started hurling clothes into the air!

"Stop it, Dad!" cried Ramzi. "You're acting really strange." He ducked to avoid a shower of socks.

"I *will* find it!" said Dad.

"Find *what*?" asked Ramzi, clutching his knees tightly to his chest.

"Here, chicky-chick. Come on, my little hen. I *know* you're in there." Suddenly Dad crawled inside the wardrobe and shut the doors. There was a scratching noise. Then everything went quiet.

Ramzi rubbed his eyes and looked around the room. Clothes were scattered everywhere. He waited. Nothing happened. Ramzi tiptoed across the room and gently opened the wardrobe doors. Dad was sitting cross-legged in the corner, blinking like a startled rabbit.



"Dad, what *are* you doing?" asked Ramzi.

"Where am I?" whispered Dad.

"You're in my wardrobe, Dad! In my bedroom!"

"Huh? Is that you, Ramzi? What time is it? Where's your mother?"

Ramzi looked at the clock. "It's really late, Dad. Mum will be back next week. But can you get out of my wardrobe? This is completely, totally weird."

Dad staggered to his feet, scratched his head and looked around.

"But… I don't… understand…" he stammered.

"It's all right, Dad. Come on," said Ramzi gently.

Dad slumped against Ramzi's shoulders and they stumbled back across the landing. Then Ramzi tucked Dad into bed, kissed him lightly on the forehead and turned off the light.



# Wake Up!

Next morning, the sun flickered in the sky like a big yellow dandelion. The birds had sung their dawn chorus and flown off on the breeze. The milkman had delivered the milk and gone home for a cup of tea. The postman had finished his round and was doing a crossword in his van. But at Number Thirty-two, the day had not begun. Ramzi and his dad were still fast asleep.

"*Dingaling, Dingaling,*" went the doorbell.

Dad jumped out of bed, splashed his face with water, hopped into his trousers and threw a crisp white shirt on his back. Then he flew down the stairs and opened the door.

An immaculate-looking woman wearing bright pink glasses and matching lipstick stood outside.

"Good morning, Miss Blunt. Can I help you?" puffed Dad.

"It's Miss Sharp, actually," snapped the lady. Her voice was thin and wiry. "And I'm afraid this is *not* a social call. Mr Ramadan – do you realise that this is the *third time* Ramzi has been late for school this week? It's really *not* good enough, you know."



Dad frowned. Then he took a deep breath and looked at the sky. "The sun is shining and the birds are singing. Yes – this is the best of all possible worlds," he sighed.

Miss Sharp screwed her lips together. Mr Ramadan had such a *curious* way of talking. She peered round his shoulders and looked inside. Shoes were scattered in the hall and there was *no* sign of Ramzi or Mrs Ramadan!

"If Ramzi is not in school by ten o'clock this morning," she said, wagging her finger, "then I will report you to…"

Suddenly Ramzi appeared in the doorway.

His skin shone in the sunlight as he rubbed his eyes sleepily.

"Morning, Miss," he grinned.

Miss Sharp gasped! Ramzi's usually neat brown curls stuck up in all directions and his school shirt looked like a crumpled sheet.

"R...R...Ramzi!" she stammered. "Wh…wh… where's your mother?"

"Oh, she's not here, Miss. She's gone to learn about buildings and stuff," said Ramzi cheerfully.

Dad puffed out his chest and smiled proudly. "My wife is training to be an architect, Miss Sharp. Currently, she's studying Domes of the East." His hands fluttered in the air as he spoke.

"*I see*," said Miss Sharp slowly. "Well, in that case, Mr Ramadan, can you *please* make sure that Ramzi gets to school *on time*!" She tapped her watch fiercely. Then, turning on her pointy pink heels, she tottered up the path and out of sight.

"What a dreadful woman!" muttered Dad.

"Dad! You *can't* say that!" giggled Ramzi.

Dad smiled and looked down at his son. "Arggghhhhhh!" he yelled, leaping backwards.

Ramzi jumped. "What? What's up now?"



"Your uniform! Your hair! Your… you're such a mess!" cried Dad.

"But it's not my fault, Dad. It was *you* that messed up all my clothes last night."

Dad looked blank.

"You know…when you were looking for that hen."

"A hen? What hen?"

"The hen in my wardrobe."

"Ramzi, you must *always* tell the truth," said Dad,wiggling his finger at the ceiling. "Remember, the Creator sees all!"

"I *know,* Dad. I completely *am* telling the truth! Last night, you *were* looking for a hen in my wardrobe. Remember?"

There was a pause. Dad's butter-beige cheeks turned grey.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Ramzi nodded.

"A hen, you say?" Dad slumped on to the bottom stair and put his head in his hands. "Ramzi," he began slowly, "is this the *first* time you've noticed

me doing… strange things in the night?"

"Ermm. Well, no, errrmm… not really the absolutely first time, Dad."

Dad looked at Ramzi through the splayed fingers of one hand. "I think you'd better tell me everything, son," he whispered.

Ramzi slowly remembered the previous nights. "Well, two nights ago you were chasing frogs in the pantry… And on the night Mum left, I found you in the bath…"

"Stop!" cried Dad.

There was silence. A car passed by the house, its engine rattling like a faulty washing machine. The fridge hummed loudly in the kitchen.

At last Dad spoke. "Come here, little warrior. I must've frightened you." He swept Ramzi into his big arms and squeezed him tight.

"It's OK, Dad! Really, I'm fine," spluttered Ramzi.

Dad ruffled Ramzi's hair and sighed a deep sigh. Then he looked at his watch. "Oh! It's nearly ten o'clock! Quick, we must get you to school."

Minutes later, they were driving along in the car. An espresso cup teetered on the edge of

the dashboard and Ramzi was swigging from a carton of milk.

"One thing, Ramzi," said Dad, clunking into fourth gear. "What did I say I was doing in the bath?"

"Ermm, something about 'sailing to the moon,'" answered Ramzi.

"Oh, no," groaned Dad, "I'm afraid it's *all* starting again!"