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Four Children and It

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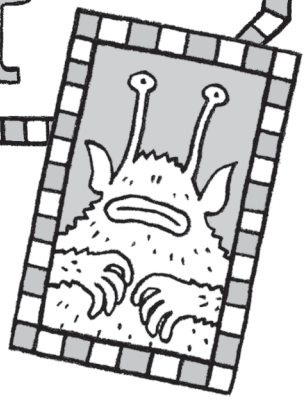
FOUR CHILDREN and IT



Can your wildest wishes really come true?

Jacqueline Wilson

FOUR CHILDREN and IT





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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON



'What's that you're reading?' said Smash, grabbing the book out of my hand.

'Hey, give it back,' I said, but she waved it out of my reach and poked me sharply with her elbow when I tried to retrieve it. She was always grabbing my things when she was bored. Her stupid nickname should have been Smash-and-Grab.

'*Five Children and It*,' Smash read in a silly voice. 'Well, that's a stupid title for a start. What's the *It*?'

'It's the Psammead,' I said.

'What's a Sammyadd?' asked Smash. She seemed mildly interested now. 'Is it a monster?'

The only books she ever read were Marvel O'Kaye horror stories, the gorier the better.

'No, it's a strange magic creature, a sand fairy,' I said.

'A *fairy*!' said Smash scornfully. 'I grew out of those silly fairy stories when I was *six*. You're such a baby, Rosalind.'

'It's not a *silly* fairy, it's a very pernickety creature like a monkey with eyes out on stalks and it grants wishes,' I said. 'It's a fabulous story.'

'You're such a sad little nerd – you think all books are fabulous,' said Smash.

She hitched herself up on the kitchen table and leafed through my book, waving her legs. My brother, Robbie, happened to be *under* the table, lying on his stomach, privately playing with his zoo animals. Smash's feet in their sparkly trainers were swinging dangerously near his head, so he wriggled back against the wall. He liked arguing with Smash even less than I did.

Smash paused at a picture.

'Why are they wearing these weird clothes? They look stupid,' she said.

I sighed. Robbie under the table sighed. Doubtless all his little plastic lions and tigers and elephants sighed too. It was Smash who was stupid, not the children in the illustration. She was seriously the worst stepsister in the world.

'It was written more than a hundred years ago,' I said. 'So the children are dressed in Edwardian clothes, pinafores and knickerbockers.'

'Knickerbockers to you too,' said Smash. 'I hate historical books.' She yawned and casually chucked my book on the floor. She was deliberately trying to pick a fight – and I knew who would win.

'Exactly how old are you?' I said, trying to sound lofty. 'Even Maudie behaves better than you.' I picked my book up. Some of the pages were crumpled now. I tried to smooth them, my fingers trembling. I didn't know how I was going to cope, being with Smash day after day. She was so hateful to everyone – especially Robbie and me. She was younger than me and yet I couldn't help feeling scared of her.

'Oh, diddums, did your boring little book get all bumped?' said Smash. She swung her legs harder and felled two elephants and a monkey. 'Whoops!' said Smash.

Robbie's hand shot out, trying to gather up his fallen beasts.

'Help, there's a wriggly, scrabbly thing under there. Perhaps it's a rat? Better stamp on it quick,' said Smash, sliding down from the table and stamping hard on Robbie's hand.

'Stop it! You leave my brother alone, you big bully,' I said, goaded into losing my temper at last.

Robbie didn't say anything because he was trying so hard not to cry, but he made his favourite lion bite Smash on the ankle. She laughed at this little plastic nibble, seized the lion and tossed it high in the air. It

landed on all four paws on the Jamie Oliver cookbook on the kitchen shelf.

'Hey, that lion should be in the circus doing tricks like that,' said Smash, jumping up and snatching it back. 'You know that trick where the trainer puts his head in the lion's mouth? Well, this lion would be rubbish at that – but maybe we could try the lion putting his head in the trainer's mouth? Yeah, nice one.' She put the little lion in her mouth and bit down heavily.

'*No!*' Robbie screamed.

I jumped up, seized hold of her and yanked hard at the lion's haunches. It came out glistening with Smash-saliva – and streaked with blood.

'Ow! You made my lip bleed, you pig!' said Smash, holding her mouth.

'Good! It's your own fault,' I said, though my heart was pounding. 'Why do you have to be so hateful all the time?'

'Because I can't stand you or your pathetic little wimpy brother and I wish you'd clear off,' said Smash.

'Hello, kids! What's all the shouting about?' said Dad, bursting into the kitchen. He stood there in his pyjamas, scratching his head. He looked at Smash. 'I don't think that sounded very friendly.'

'*They* weren't being friendly to me!' said Smash. 'Look!'

She stuck her chin up and pointed to her cut lip. Dad peered at the little smear of blood.

'How did you cut your lip, Smash?'

Smash looked pointedly in my direction.

'Rosalind?' said Dad, sounding astonished. 'Rosalind, you didn't *hit* your sister, did you?'

'She's not my real sister,' I mumbled stupidly.

'I can't believe you hit her!' said Dad.

'She was sticking up for me,' said Robbie, crawling out from under the table.

'Oh, so you let your sister fight your battles for you, do you, Robert?' Dad said coldly.

'Well, I'm not very good at fighting,' said Robbie, truthfully enough.

'What were you fighting *about*?' asked Dad.

We stared at our bare feet. I chased a couple of cornflakes with my big toe. We'd been eating them straight out of the packet and some had got spilt.

Dad sighed heavily. 'Oh, never mind. But you watch that temper, Rosalind. Don't you ever hit anyone again! I'm not having that sort of behaviour in my house. Now come on, help me start breakfast, chop chop.'

Dad bustled to the crockery cupboard and trod heavily on one of Robbie's scattered animals.

'For God's sake!' He picked up the elephant and chucked it at Robbie. 'You're worse than Maudie for scattering your toys. Aren't you a bit old for this sort of thing anyway?'

Robbie hung his head. Didn't Dad *remember*? He gave Robbie his first three animals himself when he still came to see us every weekend and took us to the zoo.

'I don't know,' said Dad, shaking his head. 'I have a daughter who picks fights and a son who hides away with his toys under the table. You're the wrong way round, kids. I shall have to put you in a bag and shake you.' He was saying it as if it was part of a comedy routine, but Robbie and I burnt, not finding it the slightest bit funny.

Smash laughed at us, knowing Dad wouldn't pick on her. It wasn't fair. We knew Dad didn't like Smash any more than we did, but he didn't criticize her because she was Alice's child, not his.

Alice herself didn't appear until we'd all had breakfast and Dad was on his second cup of coffee.

'Hello, darlings,' she said, wafting around, smiling at us, like a famous actress onstage, expecting a round of applause. She was still in her filmy nightie that showed a little too much of her, but her long blonde hair was carefully brushed and she was wearing her glossy pink lipstick.

'It's so lovely to have you all here together,' she said, clasping her hands.

We stared at her. Who did she think she was kidding? She didn't want any of us, not even Smash, her own daughter. We usually came separately in the holidays, Robbie and me first, and then Smash. But this summer Smash's dad was off to the Seychelles on honeymoon with his new wife, and our mum had gone to her Open University Summer School. So we were all stuck here in Dad's house in Surrey, playing Happy Families.

I was missing Mum terribly, even though I'd seen her only yesterday. I was sure Mum must be missing us too. She'd cried when she hugged us goodbye. It was so awful never having Mum and Dad together any more, like a proper family. We'd wanted to see Dad this summer, of course – but we didn't want to see Alice. We especially didn't want to see Smash.

We didn't mind little Maudie, though.

'Hello, hello, hello!' said Maudie, right on cue, like a very tiny comic policeman. She shuffled precariously after Alice in her pyjama bottoms, a pink-and-cream bra slung round her neck, a pair of high-heeled sandals on her tiny feet.

'I'm a big grown-up lady,' she said.

She staggered across the room, smiling at us. This time we all smiled back, even Smash.

'Maudie!' I said, holding my arms out.

I loved my funny little half-sister *so* much. She seemed to love me too, and followed me around like a little shadow when we stayed with Dad and Alice. But now Smash was here as well. She leapt up, grabbed Maudie and spun her round and round. Maudie's high heels went flying and she shrieked with laughter.

'Careful, Smash. Don't be so rough with her,' said Alice.

Smash flushed. 'I wasn't being rough,' she said.

'She's only little. Put her down. She'll get dizzy,' said Alice.

Maudie wriggled free, still chuckling. She found Robbie's lion and put it in her own mouth experimentally.

'No, Maudie, *dirty*!' said Dad, squatting down beside her and putting his hand out. 'Give it to Daddy-Pop.'

Robbie and I looked at each other. *We'd* never called him Daddy-Pop.

Maudie took the lion out of her mouth, gave it a kiss on the end of its muzzle and handed it over. Dad wiped the lion on his pyjama sleeve, and then peered at it.

'Good lord, Maudie's left teeth marks!' said Dad.

'Maudie have lion back now?' said Maudie hopefully.

'Well, don't bite him so hard, darling. You'll hurt your little toothipegs,' said Dad, washing the lion thoroughly under the kitchen tap. He dried it with a clean tea towel and handed it over to Maudie with a flourish.

'There! Say tank-oo to Daddy-Pop,' said Dad, making Robbie and Smash and me squirm.

'Tank-oo,' said Maudie obligingly.

We were sure she could say 'thank you' perfectly, but Dad and Alice seemed to prefer her to speak baby talk.

'It's *my* lion, actually,' Robbie muttered.

He sat beside Maudie at the table while she ate her special yoghurt with chopped-up banana. He made the lion prowl up and down, roaring hungrily, while Maudie giggled.

'Why can't she have ordinary cornflakes and toast,

like us?' said Smash, helping herself to another slice of bread from the packet, and spreading it thickly with butter and strawberry jam.

'Well, we like her to have a healthy diet. We don't want her to get fat,' said Alice.

Smash flushed again. It was clear this was a dig at her. She wasn't *fat* fat, but she was podgier than she'd been last time we saw her.

'You're mad, Mum,' she said. 'Maudie will end up anorexic by the time she's ten if you keep fuss-fuss-fussing about her weight when she's still only a baby.'

Alice's mouth twitched, as if she might start saying all sorts of unkind things about Smash's weight. I edged towards the kitchen door, clutching my book, hoping to escape. I couldn't go up to my bedroom because I was sharing with Smash, while Robbie had a camp bed squashed into Maudie's room. There wasn't anywhere I could be totally private. Even if I locked myself in the loo someone would come banging on the door. I wished I had a torch and then I could hole up in the cupboard under the stairs.

'Where are you off to, Rosy-Posy?' said Dad.

I felt myself grow hot. I hadn't been called that since I was Maudie's age. Smash snorted with laughter.

I mumbled something about reading my book.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, sweetheart – you and your books! You can't just slope off by yourself and *read*. Let's make the most of our time. We'll have a real family day

out, how about that?' Dad rubbed his hands together cheerily. 'Where shall we go then?'

'Chessington World of Adventures,' said Smash. 'They've got some really cool rides.'

'And I think they've got animals!' said Robbie, gathering up his own plastic zoo. He made a lion and tiger dance in front of Maudie. 'You'd like to see the animals, wouldn't you, Maudie?'

'Yes, animals, big doggies,' said Maudie, patting them happily.

'And we'll all go on amazing roller coasters,' said Smash, grabbing the lion and tiger, and making them swoop wildly up and down.

'Watch out, darling. You nearly poked poor Maudie in the eye,' said Alice. 'I think Maudie's much too small for roller coasters.'

'Really?' said Dad. 'I'm sure there are lots of little-kids' rides.'

'And it's going to cost a fortune for all six of us. Maybe we'll go later on in the holidays,' said Alice.

She meant without *us*.

'Well, let's go for a trip to the seaside then. A real bucket-and-spade day,' said Dad. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you, Maudie? Daddy-Pop take you for a paddle?'

Maudie grinned, but Alice sighed and rolled her eyes.

'Do *think*, David. How could we all fit in the car? You and me in the front, Maudie in her baby seat in the back. There're only two seats left – and three children,' she said.

'They can squash up small,' said Dad.

Robbie and I imagined being squashed up to Smash the entire journey.

'Robbie and I don't need to go. We'll be fine by ourselves, honestly,' I said quickly.

'Yes, I'm sure it's against the law or Health and Safety or something, three children in two seats,' said Robbie.

We had a vision of a glorious day by ourselves, me lying on the bed reading, Robbie exercising his animals up and down the stairs – endless hours of calm and peace.

'Don't be silly, you two,' said Dad. 'It's against the law to leave children in the house by themselves, Mr-Know-It-All.' He swatted at Robbie with the tea towel. He was only playing, but Robbie winced as if he had hit him.

'Cheer up, chum,' said Dad. He gazed into space for inspiration – and then his eyes lit up. '*I* know! We'll go on a lovely long tramp in the country. It would do the kids good to have a bit of exercise, and I'll give Maudie a piggyback if she gets tired. And we'll have a picnic. Yes, a picnic! I haven't had a proper picnic since I was a little kid myself. Sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs and cherry cake and lashings of lemonade,' said Dad.

'That's an Enid Blyton picnic – and it's lashings of ginger beer, not lemonade,' I said, but so quietly that only Robbie heard.

Alice didn't look very enthusiastic about the picnic idea.

'I've got eggs, but I don't have enough bread left for

sandwiches, let alone cherry cake or lemonade, and that sounds a very weird picnic anyway,' she said.

Dad sighed and looked as if he might lose his temper with her at last. He was always losing his temper when he lived at home with Mum and Robbie and me. But he managed to keep cheery – just.

'Nil problemo,' he said, in what he thought was a foreign language. 'I'll nip off to Sainsbury's and buy a few provisions, while you guys boil the eggs.'

Robbie and I hung around the kitchen obediently, and fetched and carried while Alice boiled eggs and fried some bacon and chopped lettuce and tomatoes. Maudie started moaning because she wanted to do some chopping too.

'Shall I take her to get washed and dressed?' I offered, holding out my hand to Maudie.

'No, *I'll* take her. Come and have a splash-splash with Smash-Smash, Maudie,' said Smash, grabbing her quickly by the other hand.

We were like two toddlers ourselves, fighting over a favourite doll.

'No, *I'll* see to her in just a minute,' Alice snapped. Then she saw our faces and took a deep breath. 'But thank you so much for offering, darlings. It was really sweet of you.'

Smash didn't look at *all* sweet now. She looked as sour as lemons. She stomped off and shut herself in our bedroom. I thought it wiser to stay out of her way. In

fact I stayed out of everyone's way. Alice asked me to fetch the salt and pepper from the larder. I thought it was just a cupboard but it was a proper little walk-in room. Robbie was happy in the kitchen showing Alice how to make chocolate crispy cakes, his speciality. Robbie likes cooking a lot.

I hid in the larder with *Five Children and It*. It was almost too dark to read and the floor was very hard, but I managed an entire peaceful hour to myself, and finished my book. It didn't really matter. I had heaps more in my suitcase, one for every day of the holidays. That meant I'd had to leave quite a lot of tops and shorts and jeans and dresses at home, but I decided I'd just have to stay very, very clean in the clothes I was wearing.

I started the first chapter all over again, where the children find the strange Psammead buried in a sandpit. I heard Dad's voice in the kitchen and an awful lot of bustling about, but I stayed put. I'd felt too shy and lonely to eat very much at breakfast, and the different delicious smells of bacon and chocolate were making me feel hungry now, but I found a packet of sultanas in the larder and had a very satisfying secret snack.

Then Dad started calling for me and calling for Smash. I didn't hear Smash answer so I didn't either. Maybe I'd manage to stay hidden away all day long and they'd go off on their walk and have their picnic without me.

No such luck. Dad tracked me down like a

bloodhound. He flung the larder door open and discovered me in seconds.

'Rosalind, what are you *playing* at?' he demanded.

'Hide-and-seek?' I said.

'For goodness' *sake*. Can't you act your age? You're the oldest. You're meant to set an example,' Dad said.

I wished I wasn't the oldest. I wished I was the youngest, little and cute like Maudie, everybody's favourite.

It took Dad much longer to track down Smash. We looked all over the house but there was no sign of her. That was because she wasn't *in* the house. Dad and Alice started searching the garden. She wasn't technically in the garden either – she was *above* it, halfway up the big lime tree at the back.

Alice made a fuss, saying it was dangerous, and then she made a further fuss when she saw Smash had got her white T-shirt grimy. So it was quite a while before we were all rounded up and ready, practically lunchtime.

'We could just as well have the picnic here in the garden, without having to lump all this stuff about,' said Alice, juggling rucksacks and carrier bags.

'Nonsense! I know a perfect picnic place in Oxshott woods,' said Dad. 'I used to go on picnics there when I was a kid. We used to bike over from Kingston. It's wonderful there. I want the kids to see how lovely it is.'

Robbie and I exchanged glances. He'd never tried to take us there all the years he'd lived at home with Mum.

We set off for these woods. Dad had the big rucksack on his back, Alice had a bulging bag-for-life in one hand and held Maudie by the other. I carried a canvas bag full of fruit and Robbie clutched a bag of paper plates and cups and a bottle cooler of wine for Dad and Alice. Smash carried a string bag of Coke and fizzy lemonade. She swung it wildly round and round, obviously intent on making them explode.

We plodded along the pavement for a long time, past row after row of suburban semis just like Dad's.

'Funny-looking countryside,' Smash remarked.

'We're *nearly* in the country. Stride on,' said Dad. 'Breathe in all that healthy fresh air.'

'The country, the country, the country!' Maudie chanted, hanging on to Alice and Dad as they swung her along between them.

We walked on and on. The roads got busier and busier until there was such a roar of traffic we could hardly hear each other.

'Let's fill our lungs with all the healthy fresh petrol fumes,' said Smash.

The houses gradually grew bigger, and retreated down driveways. Alice gazed enviously at each large house, trying to decide which she liked the best. There were several for sale, which excited her. She even rang one estate agent on her mobile to find out the asking price.

'It's more than a million!' she said, round-eyed, switching off her phone.

'Of course it is,' Dad said irritably. 'Completely out of our price range.'

'Well, obviously. But I reckon we could just about afford to trade up a bit, especially if I work longer hours when Maudie starts school – and if you get another promotion. There'd be enough money coming in, if only we didn't have so many commitments.'

She wasn't looking at Robbie and me, but I knew she meant us. Dad paid Mum for our keep every month and I think Alice had to give Smash's dad money too. It wasn't *our* fault, but it somehow felt as if it was.

I slowed down to walk beside Robbie, who was lagging behind. He clutched his paper sack awkwardly, red in the face with effort.

'Here, give me that wine cooler. It must weigh a ton,' I said.

'No, I'm fine,' said Robbie, breathing heavily.

I grabbed his sack and felt for the wine cooler. My hands scrabbled over many manes and haunches and tails. I raised my eyebrows.

'I thought my animals might like to roam free in these woods,' said Robbie.

'I don't think we're ever going to *get* to these woods. They probably don't exist any more. All the trees round here got chopped down donkey's years ago so they could build all these big houses,' I said.

But after an endless trudge we crossed a main road and suddenly there we were, walking in woods at last.

‘Right, let’s have this picnic. I’m *starving*,’ said Smash, sitting down cross-legged.

‘No, not *here*, where we can still hear the traffic! We’ll go further into the woods. When I was a boy we always had our picnics by the sandpit.’

‘There’s a sandpit in my book,’ I said. ‘That’s where the children found the Psammead.’

But no one seemed remotely interested.