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Opening extract from

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Written by

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1

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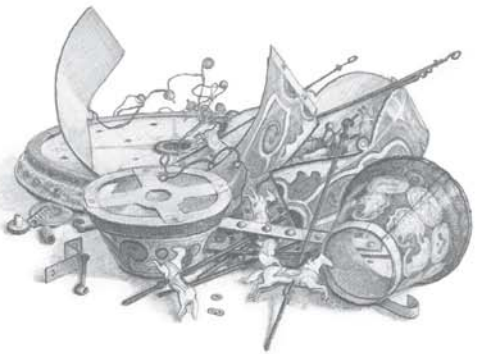
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1.

MUM WAS LATE PICKING ME UP FROM DRAMA CLUB again. Which meant another twenty minutes of not wanting to be there. There was just me looking through the window as all the other children left.

Me and this boy called Jamie were extras and scenery painters, doing background colours. Which was just about all right with us, if we had to be there at all. So I thought if anyone was on my side

it would be Jamie. But he wasn't. Especially not when he told Mrs Oliver that I was out the back doing dangerous things with the wiring.



Mrs Oliver blew a fuse and said I should explain myself. I looked at her and took a breath and I was about to speak, but then I didn't know what 'explaining myself' meant. You can't explain yourself. You're just you. Even though what actually

happened wasn't like me at all. I'd never, ever done anything like that before.

The heat in my face made my eyes sting because I was suddenly thinking about what Mum would say.

"Well?" Mrs Oliver folded her arms.

"Well, what happened was this," I said, deciding to tell her the events like a story. "I finished doing the scenery painting, like you said, and Jamie and me had washed the brushes and we were just leaving them to dry and I found those lights… you know – the ones you were looking for? And they were in a bag with other things that needed fixing and the plug was missing and I knew how to join them to another set of lights. So I just did it, but I forgot to ask and… I didn't mean to do it."

"Nell Green, this is so unlike you," she said. What were you thinking, playing with such dangerous things?"

Which was silly because it wasn't dangerous; the lights weren't even plugged in, so nothing bad was going to happen. And maybe that made me look as if I wasn't sorry enough.

So I said, "Sorry, Mrs Oliver, I won't do it again."

Mainly I was thinking, please don't tell Mum. Which made my face flush and prickle again.

"Who knows what might have happened?" Mrs Oliver said. "What would your mother say?"

Sometimes you wish people could read your mind.

It didn't seem to matter that there was now an extra-long string of lights for the scenery. Mrs Oliver didn't expect an answer though, because she turned on her heels and clopped across the wooden floor.

So there I was with my face pushed against the window, looking as far down the road as I could to watch out for Mum's car, hoping Mrs Oliver wouldn't see Mum arrive. But she did and they discussed the

incident through the car window. Now it was an *incident*, like some great big disaster.

I was belted in my seat, sandwiched between their conversation. Mrs Oliver said what an unusual skill I had, but that I should be discouraged from meddling with electrical things. Surely she meant fixing! Mum agreed instantly and gave me a look that said, *How could you?* Which was what I mostly wanted to avoid. That look.

"Maybe Nell needs more to do," Mum said. "Something more challenging to keep her occupied, Mrs Oliver. A bigger part in the play perhaps?"

One little thing was now turning into a major drama.

Keep quiet, I told myself. From Monday there's going to be two weeks of Easter holidays with Nana. Mum will be too busy with work and a conference, so there'll be no after-school clubs, no appointments,

no waiting. Just me and Nana mooching about her house watching daytime TV, playing cards and computer bingo, safe and quiet. Nana doesn't drive and she won't take the bus because you never know who's sat on the seat before you or where they've been, so she can't take me to rehearsals. Hah! And Mrs Oliver was bound to forget.

Mum drove away, saying, "Do we need to have a talk?"

"No," I said. Because her betrayed face said everything.