

The Moon Forest

By Ben Samuel

**“Where is the song before it is sung?”*

Alexander Herzen

Prologue

It had been many years ago now that Rita Pudding’s father had died, crushed at one of his wife’s parties by an elephant wearing a tutu. Pudding Hall was now an overgrown ruin, covered with vines and surrounded by a sea of nettles and brambles. The wind would whistle through the broken windows and howl down the empty corridors and rotting guest rooms. Moss covered the floors like a green carpet. The great ballroom ceiling had an enormous hole in it. Most of the rooms were empty and only the kitchen and library were used now.

By day crows would gather in large flocks and swirl around the mossy green towers nesting in the walls, their croaking voices echoing loudly through the house. By night the house was a mass of bats, hunting between the tumbled down walls and towers, and returning to their roosts with bellies full of moths and insects. Animals made their homes in the walls and corridors, squirrels in the attic, foxes in the cellars and owls in the empty guest rooms.

Pudding Hall had once been the scene for magnificent balls famous the world over. But now the old house had fallen into disrepair and only Rita and her mother

Esmeralda lived there alone. Hardly anyone visited anymore and now most people had forgotten that Pudding Hall had ever existed.

Rita's mother Esmeralda never left her bed and Rita looked after her, making her meals and attending to the chores. Most nights she would read until she fell asleep. Her bedroom lay in the west wing far from her mother's room in the main house, but near enough so that she could hear her mother calling her at all times of the day.

The Strange Night

It was a cold night. It was the kind of night that creeps into your room and makes frosty patterns on your windows. Rita's room was always cold. It had no fire and no heating. Most of the chimneys didn't work anymore each one was stuffed up with bird's nests.

The house was quiet and Rita Pudding slept soundly in her bed. A book lay open on her pillow and a torch lit up a faint circle on the wall next to her head. She had fallen asleep reading and the torch battery was fading fast. It flickered on and off and then blinked out for good.

As Rita slept she dreamed of magnificent things. She always dreamt of magnificent things. She dreamt of enormous buildings and strange animals. She dreamt of impossible trees and upside-down mountains. She dreamt of living rocks and barnacled sea beasts. She dreamt of dark caves filled with glowing eyes. She dreamt of ogres with enormous hands and burping dragons.

But as she slept there was suddenly a very loud noise coming from outside her room. It was a sort of thumping sound. Rita opened her eyes suddenly when she heard it. The sound was deep and made her room shake like an earthquake. It was obviously made by something very big outside her bedroom window.

Her room was dark and shadowy and the curtains glowed with moonlight. Then there was no sound at all. She was suddenly very frightened. She could hear her own breathing in the silence so she pulled her covers over her mouth to muffle

the sound. The torch on her pillow sudden rolled off the bed and thudded on the floor. Rita pulled the covers right over the top of her head and closed her eyes in the darkness.

Then the thumping started again. It was loud and distant and shook her bed. She was so scared that she pulled the covers even tighter over her head even though she could hardly breath. There was more thumping louder this time. Rita held her breath in fear. Then she suddenly decided that she needed to find out whatever it was that was making all the noise. The thumping shook the room again and as she thought about what to do she heard her pencils spill out of the mug on the shelf and scatter all over the floor. The sound was getting louder and the shaking was getting worse. So Rita decided what to do and she did it.

The thumping came again. Rita lifted a tiny flap of the covers and made a little tunnel to the outside world and peered out. Thump! Boom! Her water fell over and began to drip onto the carpet. Thump, boom, rattle! She was shaken clean out of her bed and onto the floor. She looked up just in time to see a great big shadow pass by the window, a monstrous shadow that blacked out the entire window. As the shadow moved the thumping continued. One of her windows suddenly cracked and shattered in its frame. In a sudden act of bravery Rita jumped to her feet and ran to the curtains and threw them open. The frozen moonlit world beyond the window flooded the room in a cold grey light.

Rita pushed her face against the glass and cupped her hands around her face to see more clearly. Thump! Thump! Boom!

The world outside was frosty and pale and at first she couldn't see anything that could be making such a noise. It was just an ordinary winters night. The moon was bright the trees were black and spindly and the stars were twinkling brightly above her house. Thump! Thump! Boom! went the noise again. The glass in the window shook and a few icicles fell from the gutter above and shattered on the ground.

Then she saw it. She could hardly believe her eyes. Beyond the trees a little way away from the house a giant fox was wandering around near the forest. It was so tall that it was towering over the tops of the trees. The fox was at least as tall as a house maybe bigger. It was a dark red colour and its huge bushy tail was held out

straight above the trees. Not only was the fox enormous but also it was glowing brightly with an eerie blue flame that completely surrounded it. It was walking slowly and sniffing the ground here and there. The trees about its feet looked like toy trees. It sniffed the ground and looked nervously about from time to time. The flames rose about its body and licked the sky with a brilliant blue light.

The field between Rita's house and the forest where the fox was standing was covered in massive foot holes. Rita was astonished and utterly terrified. She pressed her face harder against the glass and watched the fox as it passed across the treeline and disappeared from view. Her breath fogged up the glass as she stared after the fox in amazement. The thumping grew quieter and then it stopped. Rita watched waiting to catch another glimpse of it but she didn't. She waited a long time but she heard and saw nothing more of the enormous fox. After a while she returned to her bed and pulled the covers back around her and tried to go back to sleep, but she couldn't she was too frightened and amazed by what she had seen. Seeing a huge flaming fox wandering the grounds of Pudding Hall was strange enough, but that wasn't the only strange thing about it. Something else was very odd about it too. The night before something bizarre had happened that made the giant fox she had seen seem even odder.

The Night Before

The night before Rita had been brushing her teeth ready for bed when she noticed a peculiar envelope sitting on her pillow. She picked up the envelope and examined it. How had it got there? Who had put it there? The envelope was made from the very finest materials and written across the middle in gold writing was her name...

Rita Pudding

It was written in a beautiful hand, neat and elegant, but also slightly flamboyant. When she opened the letter she found, written in the very same hand a note that read...

Fox of Flame?

Rita had no idea what it meant? But now the very next night she had seen a giant fox covered in blue flame. Had someone tried to warn her? Who? And Why?

Pudding Hall

Rita lived in an enormous house called Pudding Hall. Pudding Hall had once been a very beautiful building. Its walls had been covered in art. Its rooms had glittered with gold and silver. Its ballroom had been the scene for the most amazing balls in the world. The corridors had seethed with servants and Rita's mother and father had been very happy.

Rita lived on the ground floor of the house. She was a quiet inquisitive girl with good manners and a bookish nature. She had long black hair and blue eyes that shone like polished stones when she was thinking very deeply. She never cared much for her appearance, which was a good thing because no one else did either. Her mother never brought her new clothes and she was forced wear whatever she could find in the house. She mostly wore over-sized jumpers that had holes in them. She always wore large leather boots that she had mended many times and when she walked about the house the tongues of the boots would flap and slap and echo down the lonely corridors and hallways. The house was always cold so she wore a long red scarf that she had knitted many years ago. She knitted it when she was very young so it wasn't very good and moths had eaten patches of it so that it looked more like a net than a scarf but Rita didn't mind. The scarf would often

drag along the ground behind her getting terribly dirty and tattered. What Rita liked most was imagination and ideas and Rita had lots of both. She also liked other people's imagination and ideas, which she mostly encountered through reading books from the library.

Rita's mother was called Esmeralda and she lived on the top floor of Pudding hall. Esmeralda had bright orange hair that she swept up into a beehive, a great big orange mound that swirled up high over her face and stretched her skin so that her eyebrows were forever tugged up into points over her eyes. She always wore bright green lipstick and bright pink blusher on her cheeks and a deep purple eye shadow on her eyelids. Her favourite colour was green. Not just any green, the brightest green she could find. She always wore green dresses and green shoes and she always painted her long fingernails green.

Most people wear clothes that are appropriate. Most people wear clothes that are functional but not Esmeralda she always wore old ball gowns wherever she went (not that she went anywhere) usually she just sat around her bedroom ordering her daughter to bring her food and drink. She had been married to Lord Bartleby Pudding and had once been very happy. But that was many years ago.

Esmeralda was not a talented person. She wasn't really good at anything at all, but one thing she could do very well was to throw enormous fancy dress balls. Lord and Lady Pudding's balls were famous and people from around the world would come to attend them and anyone who went would never forget them. Esmeralda would fill her balls with marvellous things; there were elephants, jugglers, acrobats, chocolate fountains, brass bands, caged lions and fireworks. You name it Lord and Lady Pudding had it and everyone wanted to go. The trouble was that parties like that cost lots of money and Esmeralda spent all the money she had throwing parties.

Every night the Pudding's enormous house would be filled to the brim with dancing, laughter and music. Everything was over the top at Esmeralda's parties.

But at one particular party an albino elephant as white as snow dressed in tutu got loose and trampled Lord Pudding to death. No one else was hurt but Lord Pudding was no more. Though Esmeralda had tried to carry on with the balls (the only thing she knew how to do), the money had drained away and she could no

longer afford her new ball gowns. Eventually the money ran out entirely and the parties came to an end and all that remained was her collection of 50 green ball gowns and the enormous skeleton of the albino elephant in the ballroom, which Esmeralda had kept in memory of her late husband. Pudding Hall fell into disrepair and became a giant crumbling building, half empty of furniture.

Over the years Esmeralda had had to sell the furniture to pay for her dresses and the house had grown more and more crumbled. The roof had started to cave in. At first only a little crack had appeared where rain could drip through then as time went by the crack became an opening and then as the wood started to rot and collapse the beams broke and the tiles fell in. Houses always rot from the roof first and Pudding Hall was no exception. Eventually the sky could be seen through the roof of the main ballroom. When it snowed the snow piled up in the middle of the ballroom. In autumn the leaves piled up and drifted through the house like ghosts. When it rained water covered the ballroom floor like a fishpond and ducks swam across it.

The elephant bones lay in a loose elephant shape by the great fireplace. The massive skull propped up on its front legs where it had fallen. It lay like a dog by the fire enormous and strange. This is where Rita would sit. Within the huge ribs of the elephant, by the massive fireplace, lost in her books in the small amount of time she had before Esmeralda would wake up and call for her. When Esmeralda woke up Rita had lots to do.

Waiting for the Night

Rita had done her morning chores. She had made Esmeralda her fresh croissant. Cleaned the kitchen and made her bed. Now she had a few moments to read. This was her favourite part of the day. So she sat down in the elephant's bones and opened her book.

“*RITA!*” called Esmeralda from upstairs in her bedroom on the second floor. “Help me I’ve gone blind”! Rita could hear her mother screaming from upstairs. The call of her shrill voice filled the ballroom and echoed though the house as it did every morning. “HELP ME! Oh my goodness I can’t see a thing! Help me! Help me at once! Rita! Rita!” Esmeralda’s voice screeched like badly played bagpipes down the corridors. “Oh my goodness! Call Doctor Manners I can’t see a thing! It’s my eyes! Blackness has fallen over them! All I can see is blackness! AAAAHHHHH! Help me it’s so dark! Someone turn on the lights!” Rita rolled her eyes and closed her book and placed it on the end of the elephants’ rib. Then she patted the cover, sighed and took a tray from the kitchen. On the tray she put a glass of milk and a sweet pastry fresh from the oven.

As she walked the long damp corridors of Pudding Hall her mother’s high-pitched screams bounced off the vine hung walls and echoed throughout the empty rooms and passageways. “Oh dear lord! AAAAARRGGGHHH! Help oh please help my darling”! She could hear her mother screaming.

When she reached her mother’s bedroom door the screams were so loud that she winced at the sound. Rita took a deep breath and pushed the door open. Inside Esmeralda sat bolt upright in bed. Her hair was a mess, great tufts of it sprouting out either side of the beehive. Her makeup was smeared all across her face (she always wore makeup) and she had a sleeping mask across her eyes. Rita watched as her mother fumbled around in the bed screaming and sobbing “I’m blind...Blind...Blind!” she mumbled as she collapsed in a heap on her bed. She had several dogs that shared her room and bed all of them were fat and round and arranged on the bed about her like big hairy sausages. None of them even looked up as she screamed and cried. Only Bruno the eldest of the dogs looked up once and licked his lips before going back to sleep. Rita sighed and placed the tray on the end of the bed. She walked around the bed and removed Esmeralda’s sleep mask.

“Mother you’re wearing a sleeping mask, remember? You wear it to help you sleep”. Rita handed her mother her milk and placed the mask on the side table. Esmeralda looked up a little sheepish for a moment, then she drank the milk greedily. The bright green lipstick was smeared across her face and when she

finished it she had a big moustache of milk across her lip too. After her milk she ate the pastry, equally greedily, and talked with her mouth full, spraying crumbs out over her dogs and bed. The dogs didn't seem to notice or care and all of them just slept on as crumbs rained down on them from Esmeralda's mouth. Every so often Esmeralda's tongue would pop out and lick up any loose crumbs from around her mouth. Rita watched her from the side of the bed sucking in her lips and blowing them out again with boredom. All she could think about was the giant flaming fox she'd seen last night with that bizarre blue flame glowing around it. Would it be back tonight?

"Well its no wonder my nerves are on edge is it?" Esmeralda shouted spraying more crumbs over the bedspread. "Your father went and got killed by that elephant and left me to look after you on my own. You're a terrible burden on your poor mother. The house is coming down around us and.... we have no food! We haven't even had a ball in as long as I can remember! Lord knows I've tried, but these things cost money. If only we could have a wonderful big extravagant ball with all my friends dressed up in their best gowns and we could have a chocolate fountain and miniature horses running around the ballroom. Everyone would have such fun!" Esmeralda was very excited thinking about it.

"Mother. We can't afford to throw a ball. I know you love them but I hardly have the money to buy the groceries," Rita explained patiently.

"Well I suppose you're right! But you needn't be so rude about it!" Esmeralda said sharply. She was prone to sudden mood changes. "My goodness all this excitement has got me very tired, I think I'll have a nap for an hour or two if you don't mind?" The dogs all looked up as Esmeralda put her head down again and they all yawned at once as she settled back to sleep as if on cue.

Rita closed the door quietly on Esmeralda's snoring and went back to the main ballroom. There she sat amongst the elephant bones to wait patiently for the night to come. She knew that something very strange and out of the ordinary had happened last night and that something had changed. She felt sure that something would happen again tonight and she couldn't wait to find out what it was.

The Stranger Night

After giving Esmeralda her usual dinner in bed and her nightly face pack and two cucumber slices for her eyes, Rita put her to bed and went down stairs towards her own room. The night comes quickly in the winter and it wasn't long before the moon was high and the earth was glowing under its cold grey light. The main ballroom glittered with frost. The cracked and broken floor tiles sparkled with tiny crystals of ice. The starlit sky appeared above the ballroom and Rita paused for a moment to look at it through the hole in the ceiling. The hole looked like an enormous star filled mouth with giant wooden fangs. Rita held her cardigan closer to her and shivered. She loved looking at the stars and imagining the bizarre and amazing worlds that might be up there. There were so many worlds that surely anything was possible?

When Rita went to her room she found another note on her pillow. Just as before the note was written in a neat elegant hand. Inside the note said...

Old grey whiskers?

She didn't understand what this meant. It was a very strange thing to write to someone. Why would anybody sneak into someone's room and put a bizarre note like this on their pillow? She felt a little scared.

She got into bed and thought about what the note might mean. Although the note scared her a little, she was also excited by what it meant and what she might see. She hoped that the fox would come back.

She waited curled up in the corner of her bed holding a torch ready to switch it on at the slightest noise. She waited a very long time. So long in fact that she eventually fell asleep without hearing a thing.

She dreamt very boring dreams about school and pens and bits of paper and folders and files. The dream was so boring that she was about to wake herself up

out of boredom, when suddenly she heard a huge clatter and she woke up instantly and found her room shaking. Her collection of fossils shook on the shelf and several of them fell off and shattered on the floor. Then there was silence. She lay in a ball terrified. Her heart was thumping like a big brass drum and she could barely breath. Then the shaking started again followed by a very loud thumping sound. Then the shelves of her bookcase began to shake violently and the books tumbled out and slid all over her floor.

She flicked on the torch and moved it slowly through the room searching for what might be making the noise. The beam held within it all the things she would usually expect to see in her room, her bookcase, her tatty old thinking chair, her fossil collection and her pictures. Then suddenly her bed shook again as another huge thumping began. She was frozen with fear. She took a deep breath. Then she jumped up and ran to the curtain and pulled it apart to reveal the frosty world behind the windowpane.

At first she couldn't see anything. As she tried to peer through the frosted glass another thump shook the window so hard that it shattered and broke the glass completely. Then she saw it. The fox. The huge dark orange fox was sniffing the ground near the house and stepping gingerly about the ploughed field between the house and the forest. All around it the blue flames quivered and glowed brightly beneath the glow of the moon. Everywhere its feet touched the ground a huge hole formed in the dark earth, such was the foxes size and weight. Rita trembled as she watched it.

The night was especially strange looking (besides the enormous fox). The moon seemed particularly bright and huge in the sky and the shadows seemed more black than normal. The trees against the sky looked like jagged black teeth. As she looked closer she could make out every detail of the foxes beautiful glowing fur, its black-socked feet and its massive bushy tail tipped with white. It's bright hazel eyes shone like diamonds, its teeth were as white and shiny as a porcelain sink and the flames rose from its body in sharp blue points.

She could contain herself no longer. She was so excited she felt she was going to scream. Then without thinking Rita suddenly threw open the window and jumped out onto the grass below her window. She stood there watching the fox

nothing between them now. She breathed deeply in excited gasps with her eyes wide and shiny with fear. The fox turned its enormous head towards her and watched her without moving. They both stood like this for a few moments, the fox not blinking just twitching its shiny black nose. Rita just stood there not even daring to breathe.

Suddenly the fox turned and lolloped away. It moved quickly but its massive size made it very heavy. It jumped over the fences and hedges and ran back towards the forest. Rita gave chase, although she was frightened she wanted to find some sort of clue to understand where it had come from. She followed the massive footmarks in the soil. The depressions were so big she could have sat in them. In the distance she could see the blue glow of the flames above the trees disappearing. She followed the glowing and the footmarks for a long time before realising how far she'd come and that the fox was nowhere to be seen. Rita stood alone realising that she was alone in the forest. The shadows here were thick and black and the trees stood in lines like tall grey figures waiting for her in the shadows. She was frightened. She could hear an owl in the distance. It screeched loudly and then passed overhead its wings silent as it glided away. Its big saucer like eyes turned to her as it moved between the trees as though surprised to see her there. Rita realised that she was alone in the forest at night and that she was lost.

She stood still for a moment and looked about in order to figure out what to do next. The forest was black. So black it seemed to have no features, no details, just black reaching into the sparkling night sky. She could hear strange rustling sounds coming from different places but she didn't know what was making the noises. She turned around to see if she could get out the way she had come but she had come too far into the trees. It was very cold and the ground felt hard beneath her feet.

The moon still hung bright and massive above but its light wasn't reaching the cold and frightening shadows of the forest. She fought her way through some brambles, which scratched her painfully and then found herself amongst some very tall and straight tree trunks. The trunks were tall and thin like pillars and the clearing was brightly lit with moonlight.

In the centre there was a huge mound all mossy and green. She moved through the trees and started to climb the mound. It was very high and steep. She wanted to see if she could see Pudding Hall from the top.

When she reached the top she was higher than the treetops. There was nothing between her and moon and she reached up to it as though she might actually be able to touch it. She was very deep in the forest at this point and she could see the black treetops stretching for miles around her. She could see in the distance the dark shape of Pudding Hall and took note of the direction in her mind. “That’s enough for one night? I must start back home before mother wakes and thinks I’ve run away,” she said to herself. She decided to climb off the hill and to set off back home straight away. It would take a bit of time but hopefully she would be able to do it. As she climbed down the mound it seemed to suddenly get steeper and she began to slip. The moss peeled away from beneath her heel in a long coil as she slipped and she slithered into a tangled mass of tree roots and vines. She pulled against the roots but she couldn’t move. She was completely stuck. Her arms were stuck. Her legs were stuck. She felt like a fly in a spider’s web. The roots and vines were very rough and jangly. She tugged against them but she couldn’t move. She fought and struggled but she couldn’t move at all. The roots were so tightly twisted around her legs and arms every time she tried to move they seemed to get tighter. What was she going to do now? There was no way she could get loose. How was she going to get out? She felt panicked and alone and very afraid.

Without warning the ground suddenly began to shake. Clay and soil flew up all around her. She was being lifted up. Steam gathered around her in thick clouds. She felt her body lift high above the ground. She was utterly terrified. As she struggled to escape she noticed the earth behind her split and open and a big brown eye appeared with huge long green eyelashes. She tried to scream but she couldn’t, she was too scared. The eye was large and brown and wet. It rolled to look at her. The eyelids were mossy and it blinked as the moonlight shone on them. She peered around and realised that she was trapped in the whiskers of a giant rabbit. The rabbit was so big that she had previously thought it was a hill and that its whiskers were the roots of a tree. Its back was covered in moss that looked like

green fur and its whiskers were incredibly long even for a rabbit of its size. Even though it was the size of a small house its whiskers trailed on the ground like a massive beard. The whiskers were grey and thick as tree roots. She was dangling from the whiskers like a little doll. The rabbit yawned showing its huge white teeth that were as big as gravestones. Huge clouds of steam rose from its mouth and gathered around its head.

The giant rabbit was bright green and mossy and it smelled of wet stones and soil. It rolled its eye to her again and just watched her blinking once or twice. Its eyelashes were as thick twigs and she saw how wet and beautifully shiny its eye was. Its body was warm and soft. It jumped forwards with a giant thump. Leaving a giant hole filled with twisted tree roots and worms where it had been sitting. As it landed she felt herself coming loose. As it jumped forward again the force of its landing shook her free just enough to pull her arm away. The Rabbit yawned again and she could see deep into its cavernous pink mouth.

She pulled her other arm free and then her leg. The rabbit shook its head and she felt her other leg break free. As she fell she jumped away from the rabbit's cheek and she fell roughly to the ground. It paid her no notice as it huddled sleepily in the moonlight. Dark black soil fell from its body and tumbled all around it in thick muddy clods. It twitched its nose and closed its eyes and the great big clouds of breath grew around its mouth. Now she was away from its whiskers Rita didn't feel afraid it. It looked very peaceful huddled in the clearing. The dark hole it had left behind it was enormous. It was as though it had been there for so long that the earth had grown over it.

Its whiskers were very long and made it look incredibly wise, like a clever old grandfather with a huge silvery beard. Its ears were like two surfboards laid flat on its head. Frost sparkled across its body. The rabbit smelt odd like rotten wood. She wanted to touch its green coloured mossy fur. She didn't know what was going on, this was all very odd indeed. Is this what the note had meant? '*Old Grey Whiskers?*'" it had said. Who had written it? How did they know about the rabbit?

The moon was getting lower in the sky and Rita decided to leave the rabbit and try and find her way home. She had a very good sense of guidance and so she

started back towards Pudding Hall. The rabbits tree root whiskers twitched and jangled and it settled down as if it intended to sleep.

Rita picked her way carefully through the trees. The dark and frozen forest was alive with possibilities. She no longer trusted the things she thought she knew. She picked through the trees and wondered what it all meant. She didn't know whether to be frightened or excited? Perhaps both?

The hard frosty ground sparkled and Rita felt that the world was alive with magic and mystery. She needed to know who was leaving the notes and why she was seeing these amazing things. The notes seemed to describe the things she saw, before she saw them? But that was impossible. Or was it?

Rita looked over her shoulder towards the moon. It was sitting low as shiny and white as a giant eye. For now she had to get back to Pudding Hall and to bed before her mother woke up. So she headed off back towards Pudding Hall until she was back at her bedroom window. She jumped back through the open window got straight into bed and in no time at all fell soundly asleep her head swimming with visions of giant mossy rabbits, and blue flaming foxes of incredible size.

Night and Day

Rita woke to the sound of Esmeralda screaming her name at the top of her voice. When she looked over to her clock, she realised that she had slept in. Her adventures in the night had been so tiring that she had slept right through morning and her mother had woken before her. This had never happened before.

Her mother was screaming and wailing upstairs and Rita hadn't even made her breakfast yet. Esmeralda was so upset that Rita could hear her dogs howling after every scream.

“RRRRRRRrrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiitttttttttttTTTTAAAAAA!” Esmeralda screeched at the top of her lungs. Even from as far away as the east wing of Pudding Hall where Esmeralda slept to the west wing where Rita slept, the voice was extremely

piercing and shrill. Rita jumped from her bed, pulled on her clothes and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. She poured a glass of milk and threw a stale croissant onto a tray. She stumbled across the ballroom past the Elephant bones and up the stairs towards Esmeralda's room, pulling her shoes on as she went.

“RRRRRRRrrrrrrrrriiiiiittttttttttTTTTTAAAAAA!” she heard again and she winced as the scream jabbed through her ears like a knitting needle. Rita flung open the door and puffing and panting handed her mother the tray of milk and croissant. Esmeralda was sitting upright in bed red faced and tear stained, her eye shadow dripping down her cheeks and her lipstick smeared across her face. Her dogs were howling where they lay. Each one was old and plump and looked like their thick skin might envelope their heads. As Rita entered the dogs stopped howling and lay their heads back down to sleep as though nothing had happened.

Esmeralda's room was an odd mix of lavish and decaying. She slept in a four-poster bed as big as most peoples rooms. The bed was hung with beautiful green velvet curtains. Plush velvet cushions with gold tassels lay all around the floor. Her fat dogs always lay on the bed; most of them even ate on her bed so it was covered in bowls of half eaten dog food. They were all old and fat and slightly grey around the nose. She had a gramophone player next to her bed out of which she played old fashioned records that scratched and hissed through the trumpet and drifted through the house.

Dog bowls filled with half rotten dog food sat amongst the velvet cushions and all about the floor. Plush chairs and chez lounges lay on their sides in one corner and in another an enormous pile of party invites and empty cans of dog food lay moulding in an enormous mountain.

An unfinished portrait of Lord Pudding hung over the fireplace. It was faded and crookedly hung with his face only half finished. Rita took a tissue from a pearl tissue box on the bedside table and handed it to her mother. Esmeralda blew her nose in a loud and extravagant manner. She held her eyes tight shut and honked her nose like a horn. Snot and spit flew out onto the bed and then she threw the tissue into a bowl of dog food on the floor.

“Where, were you? I thought something had happened to you?! It's no good leaving me here like that Rita. You know how delicate I am. My nerves wont take

it. Your poor mother stuck up here alone without any comfort, with only my dogs to love me. My own daughter leaves me to rot in my room”. Esmeralda turned to the painting of Lord Pudding and addressed him as though he could hear her. “To think of you seeing your daughter treating me like this. Bartlby! I thank god that that albino Elephant in the tutu got loose and trampled you so you don’t have to see it”. Esmeralda began to sob again. Her tears trickled down her face, black mascara staining her cheeks. Her whole body was shaking and she held out her hand for another tissue. Rita handed her one.

Bruno the dog looked up at Esmeralda with his long drooping red eyes and then turned to Rita. He looked at her for a few seconds and then placed his head back on his paws and went back to sleep.

Rita watched her mother sobbing but she wasn’t really thinking about Esmeralda right then. Esmeralda often acted this way. She was thinking about what had happened last night. Esmeralda peered through her fingers with one eye checking to see if she was watching her display of sorrow.

“You aren’t even listening now you wicked little girl!” she suddenly screamed. Rita snapped out of it at once and patted her mother on the hand.

“There, there mother. I’m sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep last night and I am very tired. I must have slept in that’s all. It won’t happen again, I promise”.

“Don’t you understand I need you Rita? I need you to help me. I’m bed ridden, I truly am. I’m alone up here with only my dogs for company. If only an albino elephant dressed in a tutu hadn’t trampled your father we would still be having balls and dances to this day. You never saw one of our balls did you dear? You were too young. Just a baby when your father died. They were so magnificent. Chocolate fountains and ponies and fireworks and trapeze artists. Everyone came from all around just to be in this house and to enjoy themselves. I had a new dress everyday, always as green as emeralds. The women would wear all the colours of the rainbow and everyone would be laughing and having fun and it was all because of me, I had made everyone so happy”. When Esmeralda talked like this she would always look away to the picture of Lord Pudding.

“Tell me darling, does the ballroom still look as good as it once did? I must call the man who polishes the floor. I’m sure it needs a good polish by now?” Rita

looked at her mother's sad pleading face and patted her hand softly to comfort her. She looked up at the picture of her father and back to Esmeralda.

"Yes mother it looks magnificent. I'll call the man to polish the floor tomorrow. It could do with a clean".

After Esmeralda had settled down to her lunchtime nap Rita changed the record on the player and then went back down the stairs to the ballroom. The broken roof smiled down crookedly and a light shower of rain was pouring through the hole. The brown leaves left over from autumn had gathered in the corners of the room and the elephant skeleton was huddled by the enormous fireplace. Rita's books were piled high in the rib cage and as she stood there she could hear the wooden beams and tiles of the roof creaking and swaying in the wind. The tiles of the ballroom floor were filthy and cracked and covered with moss as usual. She went to the kitchen to prepare herself a lunch. She'd need to keep alert if she were going to go out again tonight.

After eating lunch she went to her bedroom to find her torch. There on the bed was another note, she almost gasped when she saw it! This time the note read...

Starfish?

What did that mean? She thought a lot about the words. Why was someone leaving notes like this on her pillow? The notes were connected to the things she was seeing but she didn't know why? It was all very strange.

But that wasn't the strangest thing that had happened. But Rita didn't know it. The strangest thing was behind her hidden in the shadows in the corner of her room. Within the shadows a little tear had appeared through time and space, like a rip in a curtain. Through the tear, held open by long fingers, an eye was peering at her from a strange and starless part of the universe.

From across the stars and from a place she didn't know existed, someone was watching. That someone had left the note and was observing her every move.

Starfish

By the time Rita closed her bedroom door for the night there was a beautiful starlit sky outside. Esmeralda was asleep in bed and well fed. All of her chores were done.

When she pulled open her window the cold air struck her at once and she shivered a little. She jumped to the ground and stood staring at the immense night sky filled to brim with brilliant shining stars. A bright white moon glowed happily in the sky. She felt nervous as she thought about the things she might see.

“Starfish” the letter had said. But what did that mean? She walked through the enormous nettle patch that surrounded Pudding Hall. The nettles and brambles were browned from the frosts and they rattled softly in the breeze, their slender stems swaying. She stood between the nettle patch and the outer wall of Pudding Halls’ grounds. The forest stood beyond a small field. So Rita climbed through the tumbled stone and wandered across the field towards the forest.

She looked around for any strange things but all she could see was a particularly lonely cow standing dozing in a field a mile or two away. She felt sure something would happen again tonight but she didn’t know how to find it. Should she go into the forest or wait here? So she picked a comfortable looking rock and sat on it. She looked up to the stars and watched them twinkling there for a moment, so many planets and suns, all so brilliant in the night sky. It was then that she noticed that the stars were moving in a very strange way. Each one was pulsing and moving in different directions all at the same time. Then when she looked closer she realised that each and every star was in fact a tiny jellyfish swimming through the night sky. She hadn’t really paid them much attention before thinking that they were only stars. But now she saw that there was thousands and thousands of them taking the place of the stars and swimming through the inky blackness, all moving at once in many different directions. Was this what the note had meant?

‘Starfish’ it had said. Now she looked closer they were all different colours too. She stood up and as she did she bumped her head on one she thought was a long way away. It exploded suddenly and showered little raindrops of bright coloured light onto the ground. When it exploded a beautiful chiming sound echoed across the field and Rita felt the sparks hit her and tingle warmly on her skin.

It was then that Rita noticed a large bright fish swimming towards her through the sky. As it moved it slipped through the air snapping at the jellyfish and turning its body this way and that just as it would have done under water. As it drew near she could see just how big it was, perhaps as big as a car? But it looked normal in every other way. It got very close to her before it suddenly noticed her and with a snap of its tail it was gone behind the trees. It was amazing. It was like sitting on the bottom of a large black ocean.

The sky pulsed with millions of the tiny jellyfish each falling to earth like snow. Then Rita saw a squid, huge and red slipping through the sky like a jet plane. It didn’t seem to move its body but just to shoot around like a torpedo. Rita could only see the faintest movement of its tentacles and its great big blue eye rolled and peering at her as it rocketed past. What next she thought? She hadn’t moved since noticing the jellyfish she was simply transfixed by the sight of all this sea life swimming through the sky. What was causing all these strange things to happen? Had the note been a warning?

Before Rita could answer her own question she saw a strange shape in the distance. It was squat and round and close to the ground. It was rippling and sliding strangely over the field. The way it moved seemed so unnatural to see that she opened her eyes wide with fear. It was moving fast directly towards her slithering over the earth in the most bizarre fashion. As it drew closer to her she realised that it was a very large purple-red octopus. It loomed closer and closer and Rita found its movements so frightening that she was frozen with fear. Its tentacles shot out in all directions pulling its body forward. It would move forward and suddenly be much closer to her than she had realised. She ran back towards the trees and stumbled through the brambles in utter horror. The octopus reached out its long arms almost reaching her. It seemed intent on grabbing her and she knew that it was trying to eat her. Within two seconds it was coiling its long tentacles

around the tree trunks, pulling its bulbous head between them and pulling itself closer and closer to her. It was staring at her with its strangely cold eyes. The trees it held began to crack and break and Rita began to regret coming out tonight. She fell over backwards in panic scratching her legs and bumping her head against the branches of the trees. One long cold tentacle lined with suckers stretched out to her and began to coil itself slowly around her arm. The suckers gripped her skin tightly with a loud slurping sound. Then it began to pull her towards its mouth. She could see its bird like beak snapping in the middle of its eight legs. Another tentacle slipped between the tree trunks like a giant snake and coiled itself around her ankle. She felt panicked as she began to slide across the ground towards the mouth. She looked around to see what could be done. She watched the beak snapping in the air as she drew closer. There might be a way of trapping something in the beak so that it couldn't eat her? She looked around for a rock or stick.

Then behind the octopus, high in the sky Rita saw a shape, a bluish silver shape. It was swaying up and down as it swam through the night. Her hand caught on a rock as another tentacle slapped onto her other ankle with a loud slurping sound. It lifted her off the ground and began to lower her into its mouth. She watched the beak as it snapped viciously at her feet.

The bluish silver shape behind the octopus grew even larger as it got closer and now Rita could see that it was a whale at least as long as a train and as tall as two houses. She dropped the rock into the beak and it closed around it wedging it shut for a second or two. The beak opened and closed on the rock turning it round and round before it broke it in two and then it spat it out. But the rock had given Rita the time she needed. The whale snapped its jaws on the octopus and pulled it loose from the trees in an almighty wrench. The octopus lost its grip on Rita and she fell to the ground as the air filled with splinters of wood from the broken trees. Two trees had been broken completely in two and were now falling to ground with a loud thud.

She turned in time to see the whale pull the octopus away in its mouth. It was so big that it filled most of her vision as it clamped its teeth down on the octopus's legs and pulled it completely away. She watched amazed as the octopus wrapped its tentacles around the sperm whale's head fighting for its life. The whale

clamped its teeth down on the octopus and with a mighty flap of its tail turned and soared high into the sky. The wind from its tail knocked Rita off her feet. As it rose higher and higher it glistened in the moonlight, magnificent, enormous and beautiful. Then it was gone and thankfully so was the octopus.

Rita checked to see how hurt she was. She had big red circles all over her legs and wrist from the suckers, but apart from a few scratches here and there she was fine. She took a deep breath and thought about what she had seen. The trees around her stood tall and grey and for a moment she noticed something odd. Within the knotted bark of one of the trees not too far away she saw an eye. The eye was bright white and staring straight at her. It was lidded with bark and moss and as soon as she saw it it snapped shut like a clam. What or who was it?.

‘I better go back’ she thought ‘before something else scary happens’. Without any further thought she started for home keeping a very sharp eye for any hungry octopuses or anything else that might want to eat her for that matter. When she reached Pudding Hall she turned to view the creatures of the oceans drifting through the sky, creatures of all shapes and sizes of so many different colours, millions of them moving like living stars amongst the black. She was simply amazed by the sight and a little frightened by it too.

It was very late when she finally pulled herself into bed and she was very tired indeed. She slept soundly but her dreams were filled with images of strange eyes staring at her from strange places.

Mr Grotter

In the morning Rita got up to do her usual chores. She was still thinking about the octopus and the eye. Her dreams had all been about being watched. She entered the kitchen and began to roll out the pastries and she put some sausages on for breakfast when she heard a knock at the door. Rita knew who it was at once; she had forgotten that he visited Esmeralda today. She thought about not answering the door for a few seconds in the hopes that he would go away.

Mr Grotter was a horrid man. Rita had always disliked him ever since she had first met him. He had been hanging around Pudding hall for a long time and Rita suspected that he wanted it for himself. He hoped that after Esmeralda died that she would leave Pudding Hall to him in her will. He didn't care about Rita at all. He just wanted to suck up to Esmeralda. He was as always charming to Esmeralda, but extremely rude to Rita. He treated her like a slave and Rita would always have twice as much work to do, clearing away all the mess he had made deliberately, just to annoy her.

Rita took a deep breath before opening the door. As soon as she opened the door Mr Grotter rudely pushed his way straight in to the hallway.

"Hello Rita!" he barked without looking at her. He was a short plump man with very pale skin and an upturned nose that made him look like a pig wearing clothes. He wore very expensive clothes and had a thin moustache that looked like he'd just drawn it on with a pen. His eyes were very small and pale blue. He always wore a black cape tied around his neck which flayed out behind him when he walked like bat wings. He moved like a spinning top and had a strange amount of elegance for a man so large. He almost seemed to float as he walked. He was one of those people that always seemed like they are in a hurry, as though they are so busy that they can't talk to you for too long.

"Your mother in bed is she?" his voice was low and croaky like a frog with a cold. He always laughed at his own jokes, although he was usually the only one laughing. "Yes!" Rita said in a quiet voice not wanting to encourage Mr Grotter. He turned without looking at her and threw his hat and overcoat coat to her as if he expected her to hang them up for him. It just landed on top of her head.

"Put that up will you," he said and he immediately lit a cigarette with a match and started puffing on it blowing huge clouds of horrid smoke into the room. He threw the match onto the floor near a stack of newspapers. It kept on burning and a little flame began to grow on the edges of the pages.

"The old place is looking pretty run down Rita. Looks like it'll only have a few years before it gets pulled down. This place is a hazard. I should call the council and have them come and pull it down". As he spoke great clouds of smoke came

pouring out of his mouth and nostrils and gathered above his head. He still hadn't looked at her since he came in.

Rita watched the fire on the newspapers growing and without addressing Mr Grotter she stamped the fire out. Mr Grotter didn't even notice. When the fire was out Rita stood on tiptoes and hung his overcoat and hat up on the coat peg. Without thanking her or even noticing that he had nearly started a fire he walked over to the wall and pulled a huge piece of plaster away from it. It fell to the ground and shattered everywhere showering the floor with pieces of broken plaster and sending a cloud of dust into the air. A squirrel that had been minding its own business behind the wall looked up startled and ran away.

"You see the place is falling apart" he pulled at the wall again but this time nothing came free so this time he knocked it with the metal end of his cane and broke a bit more off. "Look, this proves my point" he held up the piece he had broken, without looking for Rita's response then he threw the plaster on the floor and swept into the next room his cape swooping behind him with a snap.

"The library needs pulling down first of course. Those mouldy old books need burning", Rita followed him into the hallway. "I want something to eat!" he snapped suddenly. "I'm in a hurry and didn't have time to have any breakfast". He swept into the next hallway and straight into the kitchen. He disappeared through the kitchen door sending it flapping back and forth. Rita followed him in to the kitchen.

When she pushed through the door she saw Mr Grotter standing over the frying pan and pushing the sausages into his mouth one after the other. He had eaten three before Rita had got fully got through the door. He slipped the sausages straight in between his thick rubbery lips. He barley chewed them. He followed them in with his fat finger and licked the tip after each one. His mouth glistened with grease as he looked around for more food.

Rita just watched him knowing that it was pointless to stop him. Whatever she told her mother about Mr Grotter her mother she just ignored. Her mother was very keen on Mr Grotter for some reason. Rita was pleased that at least one person came to visit her mother, even if it was this terrible man. Mr Grotter released a very loud wet belch and then he started to eat a raw croissant from the

sideboard. The croissant was uncooked and doughy but still he ate it. The butter squelched out of the sides of the croissant as he chomped on it making a sound like a wellington boot in mud.

“Mmmmmm very nice croissant Rita”, he said with his mouth full. His mouth was now even greasier and his chin was smothered with butter and his face had turned bright red. As he ate and he made strange little noises of pleasure as he stuffed the food in his huge fat lips.

“Usually we like to cook them before we eat them” Rita said wearily.

“Well I haven’t time for that Rita. Got to be getting on you know. Now lead the way you little pipsqueak. Take me to your poor mother. She’ll be looking forward to my visit. I know that she enjoys our little chats. I have always been particularly good at the art of conversation. As anyone I have entertained with my stories and opinions will tell you. It is today I have chosen to bless your mother with my fine company and sophisticated opinions she is so clearly lacking from you... Come now! Lead the way. I have a lot to do and that croissant has made me gassy”. All the way up the stairs Mr Grotter belched and thumped his chest with his fist to help his indigestion. His cigarette smoke stung Rita’s eyes and seemed to fill the corridor all around her.

They walked along the corridor to her mother’s room. Before he entered Mr Grotter threw his cigarette onto the floor. Rita watched as it burned the woodwork and started to catch light to the carpet.

“You wait here!” he barked suddenly “your mother sees enough of you she’ll be happy to see a different face than your ugly mug. Go and fetch us some tea and cakes”. Rita watched as the fire spread across the carpet and little flames began to lick up the wall.

He threw open the door and then stood like an actor announcing his entrance.

“Darling Esmeralda!” he said as he entered the room. Rita heard her mothers voice clearly from inside and one of her crackly old records was playing a waltz very loudly.

“Darling Edmond. How good it is to see you. It’s so very good of you to visit. I know how busy you are”.

“Nonsense darling. Anything for my dear Esmeralda! I’ve asked Rita to fetch us our breakfast and tea. Stupid girl has left you without breakfast again I see. What a shame you were left with such a brat”.

“Oh don’t be too hard on her Edmund, she tries. But I find I do have to do most of the work around here if I’m honest”. Esmeralda shrieked. Rita let the door close and then she stamped on the fire Mr Grotter had started until it went out. Then she turned and wandered slowly back down stairs to make cakes for Esmeralda and Mr Grotter.

Cream and Jam

By the side of Esmeralda’s bed there was a rope that hung from the ceiling. Many years ago the owners of Pudding Hall used the rope to call for the servants. If ever any past owners needed help in the morning to put on their slippers or to find their underpants they would pull the rope and a servant would come running to help them. Many old houses have such ropes. If ever Esmeralda needed Rita to bring her a drink or to help her with something, she would pull the rope and down in the kitchen a bell would ring. When Rita heard this bell she knew her mother needed her. Esmeralda would ring the bell perhaps three times a day for this or that reason. But when Mr Grotter visited the bell would never stop ringing. Rita didn’t even bother to open a book. She knew that as soon as she did the bell would ring. Whenever the bell rang Rita would have to walk up the stairs down the corridor along the hall and into Esmeralda’s room. Then Mr Grotter would shout without looking at her “TEA!” or “CAKE!” or “MUFFINS!” or “BRING ME THE FOOTSTOOL!” whatever it was and Rita would do it. She would do it without complaint because she knew that if she complained it would only get worse.

Mr Grotter was such a horrid man. Her mother would only sit there in bed happy as pie to receive a guest. It was the only time that Rita ever saw Esmeralda look totally happy. So Rita did all that she was asked just so that her mother would be happy.

Over and over Rita would have to go up and down the stairs until her legs ached and her back hurt. Mr Grotter shouted orders at her and he enjoyed it. He just loved to make Rita look bad in Esmeralda's eyes.

Wherever she was in the house she could hear the two of them roaring with laughter and the old records echoing through the corridors, waltz's and romantic songs and dance numbers all played at top volume. But she could still hear that high-pitched laugh of Mr Grotter and the deep booming laughter of her mother over the music.

Upon entering the room she would always wince at the volume of their laughter and the music. She'd see Mr Grotter swinging back and forth, his face as red as boiled ham, sometimes sitting or sometimes swishing around to the music showing Esmeralda his dance moves as though dancing with an invisible partner. His greasy lips parting as he stuffed another slice of cake or muffin or crumpet or sandwich into his mouth. He would never say "thank you" or "please" or "That was nice". He only ever took the food or drink and began to eat or drink it without even bothering to stop talking. Rita would watch in horror as food sprayed out of his mouth as he talked and ate. Great spouts of soup or butter or tea would spray out of his mouth and splatter the carpet all around him. He would knock over his teacups and spill the contents all over the floor. He would blow clouds of smoke into the room making it stink of cigarettes. He would throw the finished cigarettes wherever he wanted and Rita would find burnt patches all over the place or sometimes little fires that needed putting out.

After delivering their lunch Rita sat down in the kitchen totally exhausted. She closed her eyes for a moment in order to get a little peace. She took a deep breath and thought about the amazing things she had seen the night before. Then the bell rang again! She stood up and walked up the stairs and down the corridor and across the hall.

As usual the laughter from inside exploded through the door as she entered. She stood inside the room and waited. She had to listen to Mr Grotter tell an extremely unfunny story about a time he was on a train and picked up another man's coat by mistake. When he finished her mother laughed so much she nearly

fell off the bed. Then as her mother was laughing Mr Gotter turned to her and said.

“This cake is off! It tastes funny! What have you put in it you little maggot!”, his face was very red and blotchy and his cheeks were hanging down like burst balloons.

“I didn’t put anything in it!” said Rita.

“That’s what’s wrong! It’s got no flavour! It’s flavourless! I’d rather eat a dog dropping than eat this! Take it away!” Rita took away the slice of sponge cake she’d spent so long making and went to the door. Her mother was still laughing at the unfunny story and paying no attention to Mr Grotter or Rita. Then Rita felt a splat on her shoulder. Mr Grotter had thrown a cream bun at her the cream and jam had exploded all over her hair and half of her face. She scooped away the cream and put the bun back on the plate. Mr Grotter’s fat lips stretched across his face and his yellowing teeth peaked out from between them and he smiled an extremely obnoxious and unpleasant smile as if to say ‘yes I threw it and there’s nothing you can do about it’.

Rita felt her blood boiling. She had never felt so angry. She felt dizzy and she started to feel the tips of her fingers tingle and her skin turn hot. Without thinking she picked up the cake and threw it with all her might at Mr Grotter. The ball of cake parts and cream rocketed through the air like a comet with a tail of jam and cream behind it. Esmeralda stopped laughing in time to see the ball land squarely in Mr Grotter’s face. An explosion of jam and cream sprayed out all over the walls and all over his clothes. It was as though a bomb filled with cream and jam had gone off. It hit him with such force that it nearly knocked him off his chair.

There was silence in the room. Rita stood without moving. Esmeralda sat looking at Mr Grotter and Mr Grotter sat with his face a mess of cake, cream and jam, his tongue darting out to lick the cream up from around his mouth.

“RITA!” shouted Esmeralda her face turning bright red. “How could you treat our guest this way?” Rita hung her head in shame. She knew she had gone too far. Mr Grotter would use this against her. As she left the room she could see him smiling from underneath the mask of cream and jam.

Later that evening Rita was putting the finishing touches to a cake for tomorrow's visit. She had cleaned the kitchen and chopped the wood for the fire. She had scrubbed the toilets and seen to Esmeralda and Mr Grotter's every whim.

She was very nearly finished for the day when Mr Grotter came sashaying into the room looking like a balloon filled with whipped cream. He stood watching Rita for a moment as she scrubbed the oven. She was exhausted. Every so often she looked up at him then continued her work trying to ignore him. He had cleaned himself up and there was no more cream or jam on his face. His pencil moustache was straight and neat and his cheeks were tight and red as apples. He was grinning ear to ear and Rita didn't like it. She was nearly finished and was looking forward to getting some sleep tonight, she would be too tired to explore tonight. He lit a match and held it to a cigarette. Then he threw the match across the room not caring where it landed. Then he blew a great cloud of foul smelling smoke out of his mouth. Whenever he did this the smoke always seemed to gather around Rita's head as though he had trained it to annoy her. Rita coughed but continued her work.

"You are a horrid little sack of walking vomit aren't you?" he said suddenly. "You are a carbuncle! A verruca on the soul of my foot! A wart on my nose! You are a dog plop that I've just stood in! Do you know what I am saying to you Rita?" He said each word like he enjoyed every sound, like he relished every awful word he uttered. Rita stopped what she was doing and looked at him. She didn't know what to say to him.

"Just like a dog plop I'm going to scrape you off my shoe", Mr Grotter blew out a huge cloud of smoke from his mouth. "Your mother, that poor dear thing, has just asked me to move in with you. That little display of yours helped me a great deal. She was so upset she asked me to move in as soon as possible to make it up to me and so that she might enjoy my wonderful company each and every day". The cloud drifted over to Rita where it just stopped and hung around her head. It made her eyes sting and her head spin. What a horrible man, she thought but she didn't say it.

Mr Grotter's eyes flashed like knife blades. "One day this house will be all mine. I'll own it all. I may stay here and keep you as my slave. Or maybe I'll strip

the place bare and burn it all down. Moving in is the first step of my plan. Esmeralda is very fond of me you know. I'll make sure she leaves it all to me, and you will be left with nothing. Perhaps I'll marry her? Then I'll be your father and you'll have to do exactly what I say. Yes I think I'll ask her on her birthday. That's the day to ask her, as a birthday present". There was a small pause. Then without warning Mr Grotter plunged his head into Rita's cake. His face splatted deep into the cake, cream splurged out the sides as he moved his head back and forth chomping at it and swallowing it down. Rita just looked on amazed and horrified. He wolfed every last bit of the cake up and licked the stand until there was nothing left. Rita couldn't believe it. When he had finished he scooped up the cream from around his mouth and popped it in with his big plump finger. Then he threw his cigarette onto the floor and left.

Toenail Clipping

The morning after Rita got out of bed as soon as her alarm rang. She put on her clothes and walked to the kitchen. It was cold in the house. She lit a fire in the wood-burning oven. Then she made a pastry and popped it in the oven to bake.

As the pastry was baking she went to pick up a book from the library. Pudding Hall had the most amazing library. Though the room was small it was packed to the brim with books on every subject. Books lay in massive piles all around the room and were stacked high on the shelves like treasures awaiting discovery.

Esmeralda never came in this room and Rita had it all to herself. There was no wall space that wasn't covered in books. Hardback books, softback books, picture books, leather bound books, pamphlets, folders, manuscripts, essays the lot.

The room was damp and some of the books were rotten and growing mould. The huge green crushed velvet curtains were permanently drawn shut, they smelled damp and were too heavy and wet for Rita to pull open. From the ceiling an enormous gold chandelier hung. When a wind got up in the house it would swing and shower dust down over the books like snow.

Rita never sat in here to read because the lights on the chandelier never worked. She had to bring in a torch to read the titles on the books and to rummage around amongst the piles of books that were stacked to the ceiling. Sometimes she felt like an archaeologist discovering an ancient tomb. She would have to twist and turn her way through the walls of piled books to find the one she wanted. She thought of books as friends that she hadn't got to know yet. Every one of the books in the library might be her friend and all she had to do was open the pages and get to know them. Some might be friends to her only as she read them. Others might be friends for life and could forever change her.

Today she was looking in the science section and the magic section. She took down and read every book about science and magic she could find. There were so many books on both subjects. But even after reading them she didn't feel she was anywhere nearer understanding what was happening. It was then that she noticed a burning smell in the air. Esmeralda's Pastry was burning!

Rita jumped up and shot into the kitchen as fast as she could. She pulled the pastry out of the oven and dropped it onto the kitchen counter. It was lightly singed around the edges but otherwise it was ok. So she poured a glass of milk drank it herself and then poured another into a clean glass and put it on the tray with the burnt pastry. Then she carried it up to Esmeralda's bedroom.

When she reached the bedroom she found one of the dogs lying on the floor howling. Its plump little legs were turning in the air and its fat body was wriggling like a maggot, it was so fat it was unable to get up. Esmeralda was sitting up in bed reaching for it.

"Oh thank heavens you're here Rita!" she said suddenly falling back on to the bed with her arm across her face. She held the back of her hand against her brow, her long green fingernails rattling together. "Ponsonby has fallen off the bed. He's been howling all night long the poor little thing. He's gotten so fat recently. I think you've been over feeding him dear?" she said. Her lipstick was smeared across her cheek. Ponsonby was rocking back and forth on his back trying to flip himself over. Rita pulled him to his feet and lifted his plump body back onto the bed where he

settled back into a dimple in the duvet and began to whimper in a very sorry manner indeed.

“Oh poor Ponsonby” said Esmeralda in the baby voice she always used for the dogs. Esmeralda pulled off a piece of the pastry from the tray and fed it to him. “There, there my little prince,” she said kissing him through the air.

“I think he might be so fat because you feed him things like that mother. Dogs tummy’s aren’t meant to eat pastries and cream and pâte”. Rita took her seat in the corner and watched her mother feeding Ponsonby the burnt pastry.

“Oh but he’s had a tough night my dear. He needs a little pick me up don’t you my darling?” Ponsonby darted a look at Rita for a second as though he knew he’d beaten her somehow. So Rita glared back at him. He lay completely still but through the massive folds of his skin he was licking at the pastry and pulling it into his mouth without moving.

“Rita!” Esmeralda suddenly said. “This pastry is burned!” She was holding it up to the light and examining the edges. She reached suddenly for the magnifying glass she kept on her bedside table. She held it up to the pastry peering with one eye at the edges of it. “It most certainly is burned”. Esmeralda looked across the room at Rita. “When your father was alive we had fresh French pastries delivered every morning. Monsieur Du Flambe’ would deliver them personally. All manner of beautiful pastries would arrive at the door, beautiful, elegant and perfect. Our table would groan with them. He would make them to order for our balls. Everyone would talk about them for days. Your father and I would eat them every morning. Now all I ask is for one pastry brought to my bedroom promptly at 11 o’clock everyday. Is that too much to ask? Monsieur Du Flambe’ would never give us burnt pastries... never!” Esmeralda was staring angrily at Rita. Her hair was standing in an enormous dome on her head but sagging down now like a flopped meringue. Her blue eyes were held solidly on Rita. Her smeared lipstick made her look quite mad. Rita just looked at her she knew what her mother was going to say.

“I’m afraid Rita that you are going to have to clean mummy’s feet as punishment for burning the pastry and for throwing that cream cake at Mr Grotter yesterday. Honestly Rita I don’t know what came over you? He really is the most delightful

man. You don't seem to like me having visitors? Well it's just as well he's going to move in and keep me company. He said he was going to move in on my birthday.

Anyway Rita you haven't cleaned my feet in ages and they need a good scrubbing. The nails are very long and my bunions are hurting terribly". "Ok Mother" she said and she went to the cupboard to fetch the things she needed. There really was no point arguing.

Esmeralda needed her feet cleaning very often because she never got out of bed. Because she didn't get out of bed her feet would smell and her toenails got very long. Esmeralda didn't like cutting her toenails. She liked them to get extra long and to paint them bright green. But every now and again they needed to be cut. Today was the day and Esmeralda had taken the opportunity to get Rita to do it. She would have to give her mother a full pedicure.

Rita rolled back the duvet and exposed the horrid sweaty feet. They were wet and pale and the toenails were so long they were starting to curl. Rita took out a pair of pliers and began to hack at the toenails as low down to the toe as she could. The lower she cut the longer she would have before she had to do it again.

"Oh not too low darling" Esmeralda suddenly said. "I need room to apply the nail varnish!" Rita squeeeeeeeeezzzzzzzzeeeddd on the handle of the pliers but the nail was so tough she couldn't get through. She squeeeeeeeeezzzzzzzzeeeddd again and then suddenly the nail popped off and flew through the air. It landed on Ponsonby's and he looked up with the long green toenail hanging across his nose. "Oh well done dear! That was a tough one. But you got there in the end didn't you". Esmeralda had taken out a magazine and was talking to Rita from behind it. Rita took hold of the next nail and squeeeeeeeeezzzzzzzzeeeddd as hard as she could. Each toenail was jangling and shaking and the pong from Esmeralda's feet was incredible. Her feet smelt like mouldy old cheese. The second nail popped off and landed on the carpet with a thud.

"NEXT" shouted Esmeralda delightedly. Rita ceased the next nail and took hold of the pliers with both hands and squeeeeeeeeezzzzzzzzeeeddd!

"Mother" she said, "why don't you ever cut your own toenails? I mean it would be a lot easier if you cut them more often". She said this very gently. She didn't want to

upset her mother. Esmeralda slowly dropped the magazine down and Rita watched her eyes rise over the edge like two suns.

“Rita dear. I am your mother, bedridden these years since that albino elephant crushed your father. All I ask is a little help around the house. But if that is too much to ask then why don’t you just leave me to rot here in this house with only your fathers painting for company”. She suddenly threw her hand over her eyes again and began to sob. Great black tears stained with mascara streamed down her cheeks.

“Oh mother. I’m doing it aren’t I?” Rita said as she squeeeeeeeeeeezzzzzzzzeeeddd on the pliers again and the next nail dropped off with a loud cracking sound. All of the dogs jerked their heads up in alarm at the sound and then settled back down again. Esmeralda slowly pulled the magazine back up over her face and carried on reading, though she continued sniffing every now and again so that Rita would know that she was still upset.

In time each long scraggly nail had been removed and filed down to a smooth end. After that Rita applied the green nail varnish carefully and with great confident strokes. She knew exactly how her mother liked her nails to look. Every so often Esmeralda would look up over the magazine with her big sad eyes to check how she was getting on. Rita had done this many times. Esmeralda liked to have her toenails painted. After this Rita would have to wash and rub Esmeralda’s corns and bunions. My goodness Esmeralda’s feet were whiffy though.

“Mother, you really ought to wash your feet more often. They are getting very smelly”. Rita tried to say this with as much delicacy as possible. But she knew even as she said it that it was not going to go down too well. There was complete silence in the room. The clock on the wall was ticking loudly (or it would have been if it had been working). Esmeralda suddenly threw her hand over her face again and began to wail. All of the dogs began to howl as if on cue. All of them raised their heads high and howled in chorus. The noise was incredible but above it all Rita could hear her mother’s sobs.

“ Oh mother, do you have to be so dramatic?” Rita spoke calmly wiping at her mothers feet with a damp cloth.

“How would you feel if you were treated so badly by your own daughter!” at this Esmeralda sat bolt upright in bed, her makeup streaming down her cheeks her hair loose and flopping down over her face. She raised her eyes to the painting of Rita’s father. “Bartlby...” she shouted in a loud voice breaking with emotion. “Can you believe the way she treats me, your darling Esmeralda, bedridden since the day of the ball? Our own daughter refusing me even the simplest kindness. I wish that elephant had trampled me that day too! Burnt pastry for breakfast and now she says my feet are smelly! Why I washed them only last month!” Esmeralda collapsed back on the bed and covered her face with a pillow and sobbed uncontrollably into it. The pillow muffled her sobs and the dogs suddenly stopped howling and lay their heads back down. Rita continued massaging her mother’s feet and after a while Esmeralda stopped crying and fell to sleep with the pillow still over her face. It was way past her afternoon naptime after all and Rita was frankly glad of the peace and quiet. She finished up and drew the covers back over the beautifully painted nails and bright clean fresh smelling toes. Esmeralda was snoring so loudly that even the dogs seemed annoyed by it.

It was dark outside as Rita crossed the ballroom she could see the stars through the crack in the ceiling. Upon returning to her room for the night she found another note. As before it sat on her pillow neatly written in gold. Inside the note read...

Crystal forests?

Big head?

Stick around to find a friend?

These notes were getting stranger every night.

Big Head

Rita jumped onto the ground below her window. It was very cold. The moon was peaking out from behind the fast flowing clouds.

Rita walked through the cold towards the forest. She wore a rucksack tonight with a torch and extra warm clothes inside. By the time she reached the woodland the moon was glowing full and white in the sky and the surface of the frozen ground was glittering like diamonds. She started to feel that she'd rather be in bed with a cup of coco but she was curious what the note had meant. Every night she had received a note she had seen something new and bizarre. What could it be tonight? What did the note mean? After her experience with the octopus she wondered if it was actually a warning.

She decided to explore the forest again and to find out for herself. That's where she had seen the Rabbit and the Fox the first night. The moon was really bright now and it seemed almost like a pale silvery day. The trees were very close together and their roots looping from the ground over one another like big snakes. Thick squelchy mud moss covered most things in thick green carpets. Everything smelt damp and mossy. It was then that she noticed a sparkling light in the distance between the trees. She squeezed through the tree trunks and climbed over the roots. She got closer to the sparkling and decided to hide and have a closer look before pressing on.

As she moved closer to the glowing light she noticed a bright beautiful crystal growing from a tree. It was a ruby, attached to the branch like an icicle. It was sparkling a little and growing very slowly. After a few seconds it was as big as an apple.

As she carried on she noticed more and more crystals growing from every nook, cranny and tree branch. They were growing all around her. Each one a different colour each one a different shape and size, each one growing very quickly. The crystals were all humming and crackling as they grew and bloomed like crystal flowers. Some were massive others were small but getting bigger. There were greens and, reds and pinks and blues. Some were clear like glass. They were getting very big and some started to crack and shatter. One crystal in front of her

broke in two and fell to the ground with a loud rumble. As it struck the ground it shattered into lots of smaller crystals each one as beautiful as the first.

Rita suddenly felt a bit nervous that she might be squashed flat by a falling crystal and so she decided to move away from them before they all got too big and began to break. Before moving away she picked up a few handfuls of the shattered red rubies and put them into her rucksack. Then she looked for a way out from amongst the crystals forest. They were getting very big now and as she moved she could hear them creaking and groaning in loud pings and cracking sounds. An owl passed overhead and hooted with alarm as it saw the massive structures rising out of the forest.

Rita found herself stuck amongst them. They were criss-crossing each other now as they spread. Behind her one of them cracked in two and rumbled to the ground before shattering into a million pieces with a tremendous ear splitting roar. Then another. Then another. Pieces were raining down on her each one as sharp as glass. Every turn she made she was faced with another wall of crystals. She felt as though any minute she was going to be sliced into a million pieces by the falling shattered crystals.

There was a sudden tremendous crack and a giant emerald bigger than the other crystals broke in two in front of her and began to tumble down to the ground. As it fell it rolled into the others and they in turn shattered. There was a tinkling crashing tinkling sound as all of the crystals in front of her broke into a million pieces and those pieces broke into a million pieces. Rita had to cover her ears at the sound. The smashing sound was over as suddenly as it had begun. When Rita opened her eyes the path was clear and instead of the huge crystals blocking her way there was hundreds and thousands of tiny little jewels all of different types lining the way like a gravel path. She stooped to pick some up and filled her rucksack with them. Then she walked out of the crystal forest. She turned to watch as they continued to grow behind her. She breathed a sigh of relief. She had to remember that some of the things she saw could be dangerous.

‘What next then?’ She stood and thought to herself. Someway away she could hear a strange sort of humming sound. She went to it feeling wary of the dangers she might find. Through the trees she could see movement. As she walked

towards the sound she noticed that lining the odd tree around her were tiny eyes. The eyes were small and blue and lidded with tree bark. They seemed to be watching her. Each one followed her as she passed, blinking from the knotted tree bark. It was very strange and she felt odd to be watched in this way. Why were the trees covered in eyeballs? She had been sure that she'd seen one the night the octopus attacked her but now she knew that it was true. The eyes peered at her and made no attempt to hide from her. They just watched silently.

When she got closer she placed her hands onto two trees and peered between them and down to where the sound was coming from. The sound was coming from a great big hole in the ground. The hole was lined with tree roots all twisted and twined like the edges of a broken wicker basket. Inside she could see a tunnel that was slanting through the ground. She watched for a moment not sure what to do.

From inside the tunnel she could hear a strange sort of humming. She peered into it for a long time trying to see if there was any danger. The hole looked like any other hole in the ground, but massive. The humming was getting louder. She decided that she would go and have a peak inside. She walked up to the edge of the tunnel and peeped in. The tunnel glittered all over with slug trails. She could see something at the bottom but she couldn't make out what it was. The humming was louder now and she squinted to see into the tunnel. Before she knew what she was doing she had stepped into the tunnel and was walking along it.

The tunnel was damp and smelly. Worms were writhing about and flopping onto the floor as though they had been caught unawares, as though a giant spade had cut through the earth. Broken roots were sticking out also and slugs had passed this way and that leaving their slimy trails over everything. Ahead she could still see the shape at the bottom of the tunnel, it was moving and humming. Through the slimy earth and broken roots she saw the eyes again. As she moved down into the darkness she noticed them popping out of the walls. There would be a little popping sound in the soil and then the eyes would appear as though they were blinking awake from beneath the soil. Each one watched her and then disappeared behind her only for another to appear ahead.

When she was close enough to see it she realised that the end of the tunnel was blocked by a massive head. There were pink coloured mushrooms gathered in clumps along the cheeks and moss covering large parts of the face but there was no mistaking that a huge head blocked the tunnel.

The humming seemed to be coming from the mouth. It was then that Rita noticed a kind of deep breathing sound. Not only that, but she could feel the air rushing down the tunnel towards the head as though it was sucking air in. The face was kind of like an old man's. The lips were thin and creased and the eyebrows were thick and wiry. The eyes were closed and Rita could see veins under the skin. It was as though the head were asleep but the lips were moving like it was whispering. The mushrooms all started moving in waves and there was a low rumbling sound. It took Rita few seconds to realise that it was a sort of voice. The voice was strange and sounded like rocks might sound if rocks could talk. The mouth was muttering something but Rita couldn't understand what it was saying. She felt her rucksack pull suddenly towards the face as though it was being sucked to it. The rumbling got louder. Rita felt scared that she was about to be eaten.

It was then that she felt that the face looked very sad rather than angry and she suddenly felt as though it meant her no harm. She could feel the air sucking at her rucksack and she felt that the face wanted her rucksack or rather what was inside it. The crystals perhaps?

She took the rucksack off her back and as she did the air rushed and pulled it closer. She pulled it back and unzipped the top. Inside the crystals were piled high and sparkling. She pulled a large one out and pushed it into the mouth. She pushed it in between the giant lips and they opened as she did so. The humming stopped. The breathing stopped and instead she could hear the crunching of the crystals in the mouth. The mushrooms were moving all over the face and Rita saw that it was smiling. She took out another handful of crystals and fed them into the mouth. She heard the rumbling sound again and Rita felt that the face was asking for more. It must eat crystals for food. It must have been starving down here with nothing to eat.

When all of Rita's crystals were gone she emptied the dust into the mouth and watched as a massive tongue came out and licked up the last bits. It seems like

a very kind and sweet sort of face she thought as it turned away a little and seemed to settle to sleep. Rita sat on the ground and watched it for a while.

The breathing changed into a snore and Rita felt a little sleepy herself. The head twitched in its sleep and Rita felt like she might fall asleep. Before she fell asleep she gathered her rucksack up decided to set off home. She patted the face on the cheek and in its sleep it smiled and twitched its nose. Great tufts of wiry hair grew out of its nose like a forest and fluttered as it breathed.

Rita jumped clear of the hole and back out into the forest. The moon was low in the sky and Rita felt it was time to go back. She pulled the rucksack over her shoulder and began the walk home. It was then by the side of a tree she saw a small bundle of sticks. The sticks sat leant up against a tree and were so oddly bundled that she couldn't help but notice them. She jumped over to them and picked them up. The sticks were bundled up with thick string and roughly human shaped with arms, legs and a head. The sticks were so light that she could carry them easily, so she did.

She ran back to Pudding hall as fast as she could and jumped through her window when she got there. She placed the bundle of sticks on her dressing table and got into bed. She thought of all the things she'd had seen so far and what adventures were still to come. She wondered what it all meant or if any of it meant anything at all. She just didn't know. The note had come true again. *Crystal forests? Big head? Stick around to find a friend?*

Bundles

When Rita woke it was to a loud crashing sound. She jumped up in bed and looked about to see what on earth all the noise was. A jug of flowers had been smashed on the floor. Standing over the puddle looking guilty (if sticks could look guilty) was the bundle of sticks. The bundle of sticks was standing on its own. It was holding its hands behind its back and hanging its head in shame. It tottered backwards and

tripped over a book that was lying on the floor, as it fell it grabbed hold of the curtains and pulled them off from the wall. They tumbled down over the top of it and lay in a crumpled heap with the sticks underneath.

Rita was used to odd things by now but before now they had mostly happened in the woods. Never (so far) had anything happened in the day. She watched as the stick figure rose from the pile and toddled on its bundled legs towards her.

“Are you ok?” Rita said to it, feeling a little odd to be talking to a bundle of sticks. The stick figure nodded its head making little creaking sounds as the wood and string that bound it together stretched. It had no face to speak of but instead where a face might have been there were knots in the twigs and string around the head that could almost be a mouth nose and eyes. Rita stared into the knots trying to see if there was any life to the ‘eyes’. The stick figure just stood frozen to the spot and seemed to be watching her.

“Who are you?” Rita said suddenly and as she spoke the bundle jumped in the air as though it had been frightened. It ran about the room waving its arms about before running straight into the wardrobe. “Oh don’t worry I won’t hurt you” Rita said in her calmest voice. The figure seemed to be very frightened all of a sudden and Rita could see tree sap leaking out of its eyes like tears. She went over to it and gathered it up in her arms.

“There, there little sticks” Rita said as she stroked the bundle’s head. The bundle turned its head towards Rita and then without warning it flung its arms round her and gave her an enormous hug. Rita carried it to the bed. There it sat with its little stick legs dangling and its twig hands on its lap. “Can you speak?” Rita asked looking deeply into the knotty eyes. The stick bundle shook its head. “Do you have a name?” again the bundle shook its head ‘no’. “Well that won’t do, you have to have a name. A name is a very important thing you know”. The stick figure looked up at Rita blankly. “How about ‘Bundles’?” Rita asked and the stick figure nodded enthusiastically. “Well Bundles I don’t suppose you know what all this is about do you?” Bundles shook his head again and the ropes and twigs creaked. At this moment Rita’s alarm went off and Rita knew that it was time to get up and start the day. But what should she do with Bundles? He was sitting staring up at her with

his eyes still dripping sap a little from his tumble. He was only up to Rita's knee and he looked very happy to be with her as though perhaps he were a little lonely and just enjoyed being in someone's company. Although Rita had lots to do she sat down a moment and decided to get to know Bundles. He could only answer yes or no by nodding it was a little hard but she tried.

She discovered that Bundles didn't know where he had come from. He had not moved the night before because he had been frightened.

"Well you'd better come with me Bundles. You can help me with the breakfast. Do you know how to make almond croissants?" Bundles shook his head. He really was a sweet little fellow thought Rita. "Come on then Bundles, let's get started". With that Rita walked off to the kitchen with Sticks following along behind her, his legs and arms creaking as he went.

It is very hard to make croissants with a tiny stick man following behind you. Rita found that Bundles was very good at some things, but not at all at others. He could fetch her things like milk and butter. But he was very clumsy and Rita was frightened that if he went too close to the oven that he might catch on fire. So she tried to keep him at a safe distance. Mostly he just liked to sit on the sideboard with his legs crossed, watching her. He seemed so contented to just watch her and Rita didn't mind at all. In fact she actually liked it.

She realised as she spent time with Bundles that she was lonely too. Everyday she got up and made breakfast for her mother. The only thing that she did for herself in the morning was read her books. But it was really nice to have a little company, even if it was with a little boy made of sticks who couldn't talk. She felt happy that she had found him.

After she had given Esmeralda her breakfast Esmeralda had made her quaff her beehive and re apply her makeup. Rita didn't know why, but Esmeralda seemed to be very excited about something today.

After that Rita pulled a book down off the shelf in the library and then her (and Bundles) sat in the Elephant bones and Rita read her book whilst Bundles slept in her lap. He was so very sweet sleeping there and Rita listened to his creaking joints as he breathed. It was very soothing. The ballroom was very cold but Rita dared not light a fire in case Bundles caught alight. So she pulled her

blanket around her and Bundles and continued to read. As she turned the pages a piece of paper flopped out and fell onto the floor. The paper had been wedged in between the pages of her book. When she picked it up it was another note, just the same as the others. How had anyone put it in the book she was reading? How would anyone know which book she was going to read? The note read...

Birds of all colours will show you the way.

*Go into the forest for the answers you'll
find?*

*But try to remember that it's all in your
mind.*

Rita didn't like the sound of that. They seemed to be clues. She thought long and hard about the meaning of the little poem. What on earth could it mean? She was so tired from her adventures that she nodded off and slept all through the afternoon, with Bundles on her lap.

When she woke up it was night-time. The ballroom was very dark and cold. Bundles was sleeping in her lap. She wondered how long she'd been asleep. She got up and gathered her things and wondered what to do. She needed a proper night's sleep. But she still wanted to go out and explore. She carried Bundles in her blanket towards the door taking her things with her.

Without warning millions upon millions of birds suddenly exploded through the hole in the ceiling in an enormous colourful tornado. They began to swirl the room in one huge mass of flapping wings. Every type of bird she could imagine. Rita stood amazed, she could hardly breathe she was so frightened and excited. The wind from the bird wings nearly knocked her off her feet. Each bird swirled and swirled round and round, a whirlwind of colours and shapes. Each bird beat its wings as it turned. She raised her hands in the air to stroke them as they passed.

She felt the tips of their wings tickle her fingertips. Then as suddenly as they had appeared the birds all rushed out of the hole in the ceiling and disappeared.

Rita just stood holding Bundles and wondered what to do. Then she turned suddenly and went out of the room. "Follow the birds with the beating wings" the note said. So she ran out of the door and outside into the cold air.

Standing outside she watched the swarm of birds turn in the sky, the rainbow coloured cloud span in one enormous circle and then the birds poured down in there millions. They squawked and screeched and they beat their wings and look magnificent in the night sky. Rita just watched them open-mouthed. As they swarmed towards her they suddenly turned and in a flurry of motion they roared through the grounds of Pudding Hall and towards the forest. Rita ran as fast as she could towards them, following them as best she could. In a massive multi-coloured stream the birds shot through the trees blurring into one mass of wings and feathers followed by Rita and Bundles. Then all of a sudden they all spread apart and disappeared. Rita stood and watched the birds fade away until there was nothing but silence in the forest.

It was very dark and frosty in the forest. Now the birds were gone she could hear the bizarre sounds of the nocturnal creatures that lived in the wood. She wasn't sure what she was looking for but she felt that she should just look about and see what she could find. Far away she could hear the eerie barking of a fox. As she walked deeper into the darkening wood rabbits turned and fled, their white tails bobbing up and down as they disappeared into the deep green foliage and away into their black burrows. An owl landed on a tree nearby grabbing at the branch as it landed. It looked straight at her and then flew away again its pure white body swooping silently through the dark tree trunks. She felt very strange as though someone was watching her. Then she realised that she was being watched.

She suddenly noticed that all of the trees around her were watching her, every single one. As she walked amongst the thick trunks of the knotted oaks she noticed that each tree had several eyes, all watching and blinking from the gnarled bark, just as they had been in the tunnel. As she passed them the eyes turned each one looking in the same direction, at her. She found this very odd and suddenly felt very self-conscious. Why were they watching her?

As she continued to walk she noticed that an enormous oak tree blocked the path she was on. The trunk of the tree was so thick it looked like it would take a week to walk around it. The tree was such an enormous height that she couldn't even see the top. The tree smelt of moss and rotting wood. She walked up to it and ran her hands along its thick knotty bark. Then she noticed it. On the one of the roots pinned there was another note. She was incredibly frightened all of a sudden as though she had some idea that whatever it was written on the note would be very important.

Demiurge

What did Demiurge mean? She was confused. She had been absolutely certain that the note was going to be very important. But she had no idea what it meant. She felt along the enormous tree root. Her fingers slipped through the ridges and knots until she suddenly felt a door handle. The handle was cold and metallic and before she even knew what she was doing she had turned it and was pulling on it. It took a lot of pulling but eventually the massive thick wooden door creaked open and from inside there was a glow of candlelight.

Rita peered through the opening and inside she saw a long stone flagged corridor with recesses in the wooden walls all along it. Inside each recess there was a big mound of pale yellow candle wax with a burning candle pressed into it. It looked as though thousands of candles had been burnt in the recesses for hundreds of years. She passed through the door and started to walk down the corridor. What was all this, was she imagining it? The floor was slimy and covered with thick algae. Stalactites hung in massive rows all along the tunnel and she had to duck under them or go around them to move along the corridor. Each stalactite dripped slowly in a strange rhythmic dripping that echoed along the damp corridor. She could hear strange noises like a rumbling tummy echoing all around her.

She felt a little scared to be wandering along a dark tunnel like this. Where might it lead? She was glad that she had Bundles with her. He was sitting on her

shoulder and watching everything around them. Before long the corridor took a sharp left turn then to the right and then it started to climb up, step-by-step turning here and there as it went.

Then suddenly it stopped and there was nothing but a solid block of stone in their path. Rita wasn't sure what to do so. She shrugged and turned around to go back the way they had come. But when she turned back that way was blocked too. The corridor was blocked both ways by solid blocks of cold green stone.

Rita felt suddenly very panicked; she didn't like small spaces at the best of times. There wasn't much space even to turn. Rita felt that the walls were getting closer and closer every time she looked at them. She felt trapped. She couldn't breathe. The cold stone was pressing up against her back and front and she was about to scream when she remembered the note. "Try to remember that it's all in your mind".

She thought quickly and then took a very deep breath to calm down. Then she had an idea, she breathed out onto the stone. As she breathed out the stone began to melt like an ice-cube under a hot blast of air. It was as though her breath were so hot that it could melt stone. In no time at all the stone had gone and in its place was a thick green puddle. How could she do that? What had made her even think of it?

The corridor was clear so Rita carried on along it. The passageway suddenly started to rise again and she found herself walking up a spiral staircase. Bundles jumped down and started to run ahead. Up and up the stairs led higher and higher until they came to a ladder and above it a trap door. Bundles ran straight to the top and before Rita could tell him not to he had opened the trap door and jumped through. Rita climbed the ladder too and peered out a little nervous as to what she might find.

Outside of the trap door she saw the canopy of the oak tree thickly leaved and so high above the forest that she couldn't see any other trees. She lifted herself up and stood there on top of the massive oak tree balancing on the canopy. It was winter of course but for some reason it was covered in leaves. They were so high now that clouds were passing slowly by and Rita could touch them with her fingertips. The moon was so big and so close that it seemed almost to fill the entire

sky. Bundles was running back and forth and doing cartwheels, he seemed to be having a fine time.

It was then that Rita noticed a sort of singing. It was coming from a little way off nearer to the moon. She followed the singing until she came to a strange little man sitting with an easel and a set of little paint pots around him. He was short and bald. He had very droopy eyes like an old dog and thin elegant fingers. He was singing and concentrating so hard on his painting that he hadn't noticed Rita or Bundles. He painted with an elegant, practised but flamboyant hand.

There was something very odd about the way he painted and Rita couldn't figure it out at first. He was dabbing his canvas with his paintbrush and then holding it to the sky. It was then that she realised that the man was painting backwards. He had a very clear and detailed painting on his canvas and he was removing the paint with his brush and every time he held the brush to the sky he was painting it directly onto it. He was taking stars and details of the moon from his canvas removing them and then adding them to the actual sky. As Rita watched he swirled with elegant brush strokes a star away from his canvas and then he held the paintbrush up to the night sky. When he did so with a flick of his hand an amazing glowing star appeared. The way he moved was so beautiful and elegant that Rita was mesmerised. On his canvas there was a beautiful scene. The night sky full of stars and a huge moon glowing brightly over a frost covered forest. As she watched, the man passed his paintbrush over a crater on the moon and removed it. Then in one quick movement he passed the brush across the same area on the real moon. Just as it had looked on the canvas the crater suddenly appeared on the moon. The man flicked the brush again and it was finished. He seemed so old and small but he obviously had great skill with the brush.

He turned suddenly to Rita and fixed a pair of pale blue eyes on her. Rita froze as he watched her, frightened of this odd little man. His face had millions of little creases in it. He watched her a long time before he spoke and when he did he said.

"Hello Rita. I'm glad to see you here. My name is Dorian Wise and I am a fellow Demiurge. I have been waiting here for you, waiting and watching. I was the one who left you all those notes. I hope I didn't scare you? I so wanted to talk with you.

I was testing you a Rita. I hope you don't mind. The things I wrote were to test you to see what you came up with, I wanted to spark a few ideas off. I wrote 'long grey whiskers' and you thought up the giant rabbit. Wonderful! It was a little test to see if you could make it to me, and make it you have. You created this meeting. You made the tree and the tunnel and I merely waited for you here. I merely hinted at the details and you filled in the rest. You are getting stronger the more you realise what you are". He stood up and walked towards Rita. His face had turned from a frown of concentration to a look of pure joy. When he stood up he was barely bigger than when he was sat down. He only came up to Rita's shoulder. "Why did you want to see me?" Rita said.

"Because of all this" he said opening his arms wide and showing Rita the stars and the moon and the trees. "Someone has to make all this. Someone has to maintain it all. Someone has to create strange and wonderful things to fill the world with don't they?" Rita was very confused.

"What do you mean?" She said, "I don't understand"? Then all of a sudden Dorian recited a little poem...

**"We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems".**

The little man opened his arms again to the world around them and winked. As he did so a cloud passed by just over Rita's head. Dorian watched the cloud passing and then blew on it. As he did so the cloud grew very brightly and began to crackle. As it continued it began to throw out bolts of lighting and then the little man blew on it again and it shot off towards the horizon.

“I’ve just created a thunderstorm somewhere,” he said with a little mischief in his voice. Rita was still very confused. “I know that you are very confused by all this and you will need time to fully understand things. Very often in life you will find it hard to understand something, mostly its new experiences. When you’re young most everything is a new experience. The best thing to do is to take it on board. Let it sit in your brain for a while, don’t let it bother you and then think about it until you understand it better”. He smiled when he spoke and his eyes crinkled at the sides in the most charming way. He was so enthusiastic and excited.

He stopped for a second and then he said, “Hang on a second! I’ve just had an idea”. He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a giant pipet. The pipet had a big red bulb on the end. He held it over the canopy of the oak tree and squeezed it. One tiny drop of liquid formed at the tip. It was bright purple and sparkled like a sapphire as it dangled there. When it fell and hit the canopy, it broke into thousands of sparks and each spark grew wings and flew away. Each one was a butterfly. The air was filled with them. They clustered in the air around Rita. “I just invented a new type of butterfly. It’s called the ‘Large Purple’. It lives in South America and it hasn’t been discovered yet. You give it a try! Try to think of something that hasn’t been invented yet. Think of something totally weird”. The man smiled and opened his eyes wide. Rita didn’t know what to say. So she just stood there dumbfounded.

But in her mind she had a thought a strange thought, she couldn’t help it, as soon as Dorian had asked her she had thought it. She thought about a stinking tree with bright spotted hairy fruit all over it.

“ooooohhhh! That’s a good one,” the man said excitedly as though he could read her mind. As he said it a shooting star fell from the sky and landed at Rita’s feet like a burning tennis ball. It was tiny and glowing and it just sat there sparkling on top of the tree branches. Rita watched it unsure of what was going to happen next. The star sparkled then it split open and inside there was a pink nut. The nut opened up and out grew a tiny green shoot. The shoot grew and grew until it was a small tree then the tree grew leaves then flowers, beautiful bright flowers with vivid petals. The flowers turned into fruit and the fruit grew hairs and spots. Then it stopped

and Rita could smell a really awful smell. It smelled worse than Esmeralda's feet.
 "Eeeerrrr! What is that smell"? She said covering her nose.
 "It's the fruit you just invented. What do you want to call it"?
 "Me!? I just invented a fruit"?
 "You sure did. It's a good one too. Never seen one before. You should just call it a
 'Stink fruit'... keep it simple". Dorian walked around the tree and admired it.
 "Very nice. I like it a lot. Not bad! Where should we send it? How about deepest
 darkest Borneo? Into some far away place no one has really explored properly yet?
 It'll be just sitting there waiting to be discovered. Ho! Ho! I like it Rita. We are
 going to be good friends you and I. We really are". Then he recited another little
 poem..

**"The brain is wider than the sky,
 For put them side to side,
 The one the other will include,
 With ease, and you beside.*

*The brain is deeper than the sea,
 For, hold them, blue to blue,
 The one the other will absorb,
 As sponges, buckets do".*

He did a little jig as he sang the poem. He seemed so happy with himself. His eyes twinkled and he laughed as he danced. "Again... make something else" he clapped his hands and watched her expectantly. This time he hadn't said anything to guide her, he had just asked her to create something. Rita felt a little dizzy. She didn't know what the man wanted, but he seemed so excited she didn't want to disappoint him. She started to think about animals and fish and all the creatures of the earth. Had this man thought of them all? Had he created everything in the world? As she thought about it another shooting star fell at her feet. It started to swell and to grow in size. It was bubbling and throbbing and making strange whooshing sounds. The air seemed to be sucking everything towards it and a loud rumbling sound

filled the air. Rita watched as the ball began to grow. It was getting bigger and bigger by the second. Dorian watched it grow with amazement.

“My goodness”! He said, “Your getting a bit ahead of yourself aren’t you”? He laughed as he spoke. Rita didn’t know what was happening. It was as though the ball had a massive gravity and was pulling everything towards it. “I think we’ll send this away” Dorian said suddenly. “It’s going to cause a big problem here”. As he spoke the ball started to beat like a heart. He took a tube from his coat pocket and put his lips to it. Then he took aim at the beating ball of light and blew a hard gust of air towards it. The ball shot off away into the sky. It kept going and going until Rita couldn’t see it anymore. Then it became a tiny light in the night sky and there it stayed, a new star.