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BOTTOMBY

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Simon Cheshire is the author of many hugely popular books for children, including the bestselling Saxby Smart detective stories. He writes in a tiny little office which used to be a cupboard, and which is bursting at the seams with books, old chocolate wrappers and letters from his readers. All his stories are based on fact - only names, dates, places, descriptions and events have been changed, to make them more believable. He lives in Warwick, but spends most of his time in a world of his own.

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PROLOGUE

Nigel Swineway was a very, very ugly man. He was shaped like a potato doing a bad impression of a pear, and he was the owner of a building company, Swineway, Nockitt & Bodge Ltd. His head appeared to be a size too big for the skin it was wrapped in, and his lips were like two strips of meat sewn together at the ends. They wriggled as he spoke, his voice sounding as if it had once belonged to a highly educated lizard:

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr Pratt. I understand you want a toilet?”

Mr Pratt, who was tall and friendly-looking, was distracted by the hairs fluttering in Swineway’s nostrils. He shuddered slightly. “Oh, err, yes. I do. I accidentally blew up the old one, trying to fix a fridge, and it’s a nuisance having to go next door to the sweet shop all the time. Come into the office.”

Swineway smiled, and Mr Pratt suddenly

shuddered again. They made their way around a couple of piles of junk, and over to the rear of the shop. Mr Pratt noticed that Swineway kept looking in the direction of something interesting propped up against a wardrobe.

They were in Pratt's Parlour, the town's smallest and least impressive second hand shop. It was crammed with furniture, electrical equipment, stuff reclaimed from old houses, and an enormous assortment of odds and ends (most were odd and some had their ends missing).

The something-interesting which had caught Swineway's beady eye was a painting, about the size of a medium pizza box. Its frame was lumpy and golden, caked in layers of dust, but it was the picture itself that he wanted. He was - well, let's just say he was a collector - and he fancied that this picture would be something worth collecting.

A few minutes later, as the two men came back out of the shop's small office, Mr Pratt saw Swineway glancing at the painting again. The ends of Swineway's plump fingers tapped together thoughtfully.

“My estimate for the work on the toilet will be with you very soon, Mr Pratt,” he said softly. “In the meantime, I’ll bid you good day.”

“Have a look around while you’re here,” said Mr Pratt. “We’ve got a special offer on reconditioned ovens this week.”

“How kind, but I’m afraid the only time I purchase pre-owned merchandise is as part of my wonderful work for charity. And we’re bursting at the seams with reconditioned ovens at the moment.”

“Never mind,” said Mr Pratt, trying to sound cheery. “Maybe next time. Do excuse me, I’ve got a toaster in urgent need of repair.” He potted back to the office.

Swineway took a few steps towards the shop door, then swung on his heels as soon as Mr Pratt was out of sight. He headed for the painting. He barged past teetering piles of books and kettles, and dragged a box full of toy cars to one side, keeping one eye on the office at all times.

He picked up the painting and blew a cloud of dust off it. It was slightly faded with age, but its colours were still vivid. It showed

a woman, dressed in the fashions of ninety years before, slumped on a sofa with one arm waving at an open window. In tiny, choppy letters along the lower edge was “Daisy Reclining In The Afternoon - EB.”

“An original Bottomby,” breathed Swineway. “Enid Bottomby. Almost the greatest artist of the twentieth century.”

He grinned and took one last look in the direction of the office. Then he marched quickly out of the shop, with the painting tucked away inside his coat.

CHAPTER 1

The rat was long and tatty-looking. The shadows of a late Monday afternoon made its eyes look deep and black.

It was sitting out in the back yard of the Ken's Better Eating takeaway, watching the boy, the girl and the girl's dad from the top of a cardboard box. It nibbled calmly at a ragged old piece of lettuce, its whiskers twitching. It would have preferred nibbling at something with a higher fat content, but lettuce seemed to be all that was on offer at Ken's Better Eating.

"Steady," breathed the girl's dad, gripping a shovel. "Slowly does it... creep up on the little burger... then..."

He slowly raised the shovel over his head. The boy slowly raised his hands over his face.

The rat's glittery eyes stared at them. The boy was called Sam Pratt, and he spent far too much time wishing he was taller, and less

angelic-looking. The girl's name was Hasty Green, short for Hastings Green because her dad (a large man with an equally large chef's hat and apron on, the shovel poised above his head) had an interest in famous battles of British history. In turn, this had had an unfortunate effect on the names of his three children. Hasty had actually got off quite lightly in that respect.

The last shred of lettuce disappeared between the rat's teeth. Once that had gone, it was time to -

WHACK!

"Whereditgo? Whereditgo?" shouted Mr Green.

"It jumped that way!" cried Hasty, pointing up at the wall which surrounded the yard. "Err, or maybe that way! Hey, Sam, it moved like lightning!"

"I wasn't looking," mumbled Sam from behind his hands.

The rat was now busy washing its whiskers on top of the wall, while the three humans below ran around bashing things and shouting a lot. It knew that eventually they'd give up and go inside, and it could get

back to the more serious business of finding something with a higher fat content. It had lived in this yard for years. It wasn't about to let a sudden diet of lettuce get the upper hand.

“Aw, forget it,” grumbled Mr Green at last. “Come inside. I'll get the little burger next time.”

They filed in from the yard, through the kitchens to the front of the restaurant. Everything at Ken's Better Eating was new and shiny and clean. Hasty's parents had only recently bought the place, using the money they'd got when they'd been made redundant from the local cake factory. Mr Green insisted on the strictest standards of hygiene at all times: the tiles that lined the walls were spotless; the chrome-plated counter gleamed brightly; any bacteria daring to settle on the microwave would find that a squirt of anti-bacterial spray had got there first.

Unfortunately, the importance of cleanliness meant nothing to Hasty's younger brothers, Agincourt and Trafalgar. They were spitting into the giant tub of coleslaw next to

the microwave when Sam, Hasty and Mr Green came in from the yard. Luckily, Mr Green was too boiling mad about the rat to notice.

“It is vermin, Hastings, and it must be got rid of!”

“It’s also a living thing, Dad,” said Hasty. “You should have more respect.”

“Sharper thinking from you, please, young lady. Have you forgotten that the previous owners of this restaurant got sent to prison for serving a cockroach in a bun?”

“Well next time a cockroach-in-a-bun comes in, tell him we won’t serve him!” She spotted Agincourt and Trafalgar stirring the coleslaw with their unwashed fingers and gave them each a swift kick on the shins. They hopped away giggling, glad she hadn’t spotted what they’d put in the mustard.

“You agree with me, don’t you Sam?” said Hasty.

Sam thought for a moment, using the edge of his sleeve to wipe away a blurry patch on his big, round glasses. As so often, his face was awash with serious concerns and weighty problems.

“I suppose the rat could bite somebody,” he said at last. “Or carry an infectious disease. Or fleas. Or maybe it might spring up and -”

“Yes, OK, thanks Sam,” said Hasty.

“Sensible views, that boy,” said Mr Green, giving the extractor hood a quick polish.

The glass door that led to the street swung open. A dopey-faced sixth former lolloped in.

“Uh-oh, customer,” sighed Hasty under her breath.

“Battle stations!” cried Mr Green.

“Hastings, at the grill! Agincourt and Trafalgar, out here on the double! One on buns and butter, one on onions! Jump to it, men!”

“See you tomorrow, Hasty,” said Sam. He picked up his school bag and ducked under the lift-up flap in the counter. He turned to say goodbye, but Hasty was already hurrying to fetch her apron with “Ken’s Better Eating” stamped on it. There was a matching hat, but she refused to wear it.

Her nickname at school was Crusty Hasty, or sometimes Hasty O’Pie, mostly because

she sometimes had a slight whiff of cooking about her. People were often extremely nice to her, just to see if they could get free burgers off her dad. Since Sam never ate out because of his fear of food additives, she knew he was a true friend. Sam, in turn, was grateful that she didn't find him peculiar, like everyone else seemed to for some reason. How someone like her could have such scruffy, spotty brothers was a mystery.

Sam passed the sixth former on his way out. The sixth former stared up at the slice-of-bread-shaped blackboard that the menu was chalked on.

“How can I help you, young sir?” said Mr Green suddenly, making him jump.

“Kebab, please.”

“Sorry, sir, we don't do kebabs. Healthy options only. One hundred per cent lean meat burgers, french fries cooked in low cholesterol oil, vegetarian meals, pasta, salads. It's all listed there for you, sir.”

The sixth former sniffed slowly. “You used to do kebabs.”

“That was the previous owners, sir, Ken's Kebabs. And you're quite right, they did

indeed do kebabs. But I'm the new owner, Ken's Better Eating. Yes, I'm also called Ken, but it's pure coincidence. No connection. We don't do kebabs."

"... Do you do anything that's like a kebab?"

Mr Green's eyes narrowed. "No."

By the time the sixth former settled for a veggie burger with extra cheese and chips, Sam was half way home. He walked on the side of the pavement away from the road, just in case a homicidal maniac-type madman happened to drive past. A drip of rain made him take shelter in a doorway.

He took a thick notebook from his bag. Written in tiny letters on the cover (so it couldn't be read over his shoulder) was "Secret Book Of Worries." With the pencil from the top pocket of his school blazer he wrote:

Entry 2411: Hasty might get bitten by rat.

Then he considered things for a moment, and added:

Also rest of Hasty's family might get bitten by rat.

He flipped back through page after page

of entries, assessing the most urgent issues, and reminding himself of one or two smaller items he'd nearly forgotten. Whenever a worry was over and dealt with, he crossed it out with a thick red line of marker pen. He counted up the thick red lines of marker pen. There were six.

“Not bad,” he muttered to himself. He replaced the notebook, tucking it under the small bottle of water he carried in case of fire.

The rain had obviously decided not to fall, only to loom threateningly overhead in black clouds. He ran the rest of the way home, before it had a chance to change its mind.

CHAPTER 2

Mr Pratt's coat wasn't in a crumpled heap underneath the hooks in the hall. So he wasn't home yet. Sam adjusted his glasses and frowned. He hung up his blazer, took his school bag up to his neat and tidy room, came downstairs again, and stood thinking for a minute or two.

"Hmm."

Cooking smells were weaving tastily around the house. At first, Sam wondered if maybe his dad had simply put his coat somewhere else, and was at that very moment grilling a sausage. But the bangs, clatters and crashes which accompanied the smells told him otherwise.

"Hi Gran!" he called.

His words were drowned out by the sound of Gran chucking a table spoon into the sink. Steam enveloped him as he entered the kitchen.

"Hallooo!" he called.

“Ooh!” cried Gran, noticing him. “Don’t creep up on me like that, lovey. You know shocks play havoc with me bladder.” The steam rising from the saucepans on the cooker was turning her hair into a frizzy white mass, tangled up with the flowery scarf which was knotted in a band across her forehead. The frills on her polka-dotted dress rippled, and her giant metal earrings jangled, as she sped from cooker to fridge, fridge to sink, sink to cooker. “Tea’s nearly done.”

“Dad’s not home yet, is he?” said Sam.

Gran suddenly raised her arms. She got a wild look in her eyes which would have frightened the life out of anyone who wasn’t used to it. “Yea verily,” she yelled, “he doth meet with evil.” Her arms fell. “I had one of me visions in the bath this morning.”

She drained a saucepan and splashed the empty pan into the washing up bowl. Sam wasn’t happy.

“‘Evil’? Gran? What do you mean, ‘evil’?” he said. “Anything could have happened.”

“Oh, it’s all right, lovey,” shouted Gran, clashing the plates together as she fetched them from the cupboard. “I had another

vision with me mid-morning biscuit.” She suddenly got that wild look again. “And lo, he doth come home for his tea afterwards, and in a right funny mood, too.”

Sam wasn't convinced. He silently collected up knives and forks from the cutlery drawer and went into the dining room.

The dining room table was covered in sister. Charlotte was nineteen, very tall and very thin, with a haircut so severe it made concrete look soft and manageable. Her clothes were permanently spattered with many shades of paint. She lay with her head on one side, staring at the canvas on the other side of the room, a long, narrow brush poised in her outstretched hand.

“Tea time,” said Sam. “You'll have to move.”

With an angry grunt, she jumped to her feet. She ripped a corner of paper from the drawing pad beside the table and scribbled on it with a stick of charcoal. She was perfectly capable of speaking, but no word had passed her lips for as long as Sam could remember. The note was held out for him to

read:

I am contemplating my latest work!

He looked at the canvas. She had painted a bleak, empty landscape. Dreary hills sat beneath a dark, weeping sky. A second note dangled in front of him:

It is entitled *Springtime In The Happy Garden*.

“Well now it’s tea time in the cheerful dining room,” said Sam. “So let me set the table.”

Gran kicked the door open with a loud thud, and hurried in balancing three plates of food in her arms. They sat, and Gran was half way through hers before Sam had a chance to take a first bite. It was boiled egg, peaches and curry. Charlotte peered at her plate for a moment, then scrawled a note on the table cloth:

Where did you learn to cook, you ridiculous old person??

“I can’t read that without me glasses,” cried Gran, through a mouthful of egg. Bits of yolk bounced off Charlotte’s question marks.

“She says thank you very much, Gran, it looks delicious,” said Sam. He would normally have added a warning about

choking hazards and eating too quickly, but his mind was occupied with a different problem.

“Dad still isn’t home, Gran,” he said. “You said he’d be back for tea.”

“His tea’s in the oven. It’ll keep.” She suddenly stopped mid-chew and sat upright. “Is that the phone?”

“No, Gran,” said Sam in a kindly voice. “You’re listening to your jingly earrings again.”

“Don’t be cheeky! That was the phone and now whoever it was has gone. You’ve made me miss it!”

Sam switched on the portable radio and turned it up so they could listen while they ate. Charlotte drew a rude sign.

“I want the news,” said Sam. “There might have been a freak, unexplained mystery explosion or something.”

“That might have been news, on the phone,” grumbled Gran.

“- and it’s 5:59!” sqwarked the radio. “Here’s the local news, with me! Tony! Hi! This just in: there’s been a freak, unexplained mystery explosion at the hospital. An office

which was being redecorated went kaboom early this afternoon. Fire fighters fought to get the blazing building under control. There were no injuries, and emergency evacuation went smoothly -"

"There!" cried Sam. "You hear that? THAT'S why I make us do fire drills every month!"

CHAPTER 3

“Luckily,” said the Hospital Administrator, “we do a fire drill every month, so the emergency evacuation went smoothly.” He was a small, mousey man, with prominent teeth and a stringy moustache. He wriggled nervously. Visiting the offices of Swineway, Nockitt & Bodge Ltd, builders, always had that effect on him.

“A most tragic and unforeseen accident,” said Nigel Swineway. He did his best to squeeze out a tear or two. “And that it happened just as we had finished redecorating. Such a terrible coincidence. My horoscope this morning warned of bad news.”

“Thank goodness your two workmen were off on their lunch break,” said the Hospital Administrator. “We will of course pay you for all the work that was done.”

Swineway held up a hand. “At a time like this, the last thing you should be worrying

about is paying bills. No, no, no. You can send me the money any time you like. Even the very far end of the week.”

“Err, thank you, Mr Swineway,” said the Hospital Administrator. “But what I really came to ask was whether your firm would also come and do all the rebuilding work we now need? Things need sorting out in a hurry, as you can imagine.”

Swineway sucked in a gasp of air through his teeth. He opened the diary on his desk. “Oooh, now, let’s see... We are so terribly, terribly busy...”

“I can authorise extra payments,” said the Hospital Administrator quickly. “Due to the urgency of the situation.”

Swineway flipped the diary shut. “Leave it to me,” he grinned. “Somehow, with a mighty effort, we’ll get it done for you. For the sake of the hospital. For the sake of the community.”

“Thank you very much indeed, Mr Swineway,” said the Hospital Administrator. “You get started on the rebuilding and, umm, well, I’ll just have to think about buying new pills and bandages some other time.”

Goodbye.”

As the Hospital Administrator left Swineway’s office, he passed the two workmen who’d avoided being blown up that day. Bob Pitt, dressed in a dusty boiler suit, looked as if he was made of house bricks. Fuzzy red hair clung to his square head like glued-down carpet, and his boots left a trail of dried mud behind him. Joe Pitt was a miniature version of his father, and a year or two older than Sam. Sam wouldn’t have known him, though - Joe’s appearances in school were about as frequent as a solar eclipse at midnight.

“Nice to see you safe and well,” said the Hospital Administrator.

“Lucky boys, ‘im ‘n’ me, ‘int we?” said Bob, in a voice like a sack of rocks.

“Lucky boys,” said Joe, in a voice like a bag of gravel.

The Hospital Administrator left. Bob and Joe leant over Swineway’s desk.

“There’s some Pratt outside wants to see ya,” hissed Bob.

“Now, now, Bob, that’s no way to talk about our valued clients,” said Swineway.

“No, his name’s Pratt. Says ‘ees from Pratt’s Parlour.”

“Ah,” smiled Swineway. “The pre-owned man. My new secretary can deal with him. Well done on today’s work at the hospital. You used untraceable home-made explosives, I take it?”

“Smuggled ‘em in inside them tins of paint. Naughty boys, ‘int we, Joey?”

“Naughty boys,” said Joe.

“Just make sure that when you start the rebuilding, you fill the foundations with the mouldy old pile of scrap sitting out the back. With a bit of luck, the whole thing will fall down again in five years and we can get paid for another rebuilding job.”

The Pitts giggled and snorted. Swineway sat back in his huge swivel chair and it groaned loudly. Suddenly, the door burst open and in stormed Mr Pratt, Sam’s dad. He was followed closely by Swineway’s secretary.

“I want a word with you!” cried Mr Pratt.

“I’m sorry, Mr Swineway,” twittered the secretary. “I told him you were on a business trip to Bolivia, like you said, but he wouldn’t

believe me.”

“You’re fired!” yelled Swineway. “For failure to lie properly!”

“B-B-But I only started today,” she whimpered.

“You’re still fired! Get out!”

She slammed the door and ran off, wailing. Mr Pratt glanced around the office. It was a low, dark room, with chipped wooden shelves and rusty filing cabinets. A PC sat silently in one corner, and a narrow window looked out onto a brick wall which formed one side of a damp alleyway. Swineway’s desk took up half the floor space. A plain desk lamp threw out a dim pool of light.

Mr Pratt gulped. Swineway, Bob and Joe stared at him. In the gloom, their eyes seemed black and their faces were smeared with shadows. Swineway edged forward on his chair, and it creaked painfully.

“Now then, Mr Pratt. How can I help you?”

CHAPTER 4

Forty minutes later, Mr Pratt hung his coat up on the hook in the hall. It slipped off and dropped into a crumpled heap on the floor. He sighed and trudged into the living room.

“Dad!” cried Sam. “Where have you been? You didn’t tell us where you were going! You didn’t phone! Anything could have happened to you! ... Well?” He put down his copy of *OMG Ecological Crisis* magazine and gave his dad an I-want-an-answer look.

Mr Pratt had a peculiar expression on his face. He perched carefully on the sofa, beneath the framed photos of times gone by that hung along the wall: Gran in her days as a pilot with the Egyptian Air Force, Gran arresting a pickpocket in Madrid, Gran and six huskies at the South Pole.

“Thought I heard you come in!” cried Gran, clattering in from the kitchen with a tray. “I’ve kept your tea warm in the oven.

Told you he'd be here in time for it, Sam."

She slapped the tray onto Mr Pratt's knees. His boiled egg had gone a sickly grey, and his curry was a fossil.

"Can you get your sister in here?" he said quietly.

Sam jumped out of his chair and ran into the dining room.

"Dad's back!" he said.

Hurrah wrote Charlotte.

"I think he's got something to tell us," said Sam. "Come on, quick! It had better be something important, after all the worry he's caused me."

Once everyone was assembled, and once Mr Pratt had spat out the curry and had a drink of water, there was silence in the living room. Sam glanced up at the picture of Mum, in between Gran's photos on the wall. Even she seemed to be listening. He didn't really remember her, but it was nice to have her around all the same. Finally, Mr Pratt spoke:

"The shop closed today," he said. "For the last time."

Sam got a weird feeling in his stomach. His throat felt as if it was shrinking.

“We all know Pratt’s Parlour has never exactly been swamped with customers. Well, the bills have piled up, and... and I can’t pay any of them. I’m sorry. We’ve got no money at all... Nothing.”

“I knew it!” growled Gran to herself. “Me psychic vibes are never wrong. I had a vision of evil and, yea verily, it hath come to pass.” She glared angrily at her son-in-law.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” said Sam, very worried indeed. “You’ll find another job.”

“It’s not just a question of jobs, Sam,” said Mr Pratt quietly. “I owe the bank a lot of money. A lot of money. I’ve been putting things off, and putting things off again, and... Now we have to move out. Very soon.”

“Sell the house?” said Sam, going pale. His voice had turned a bit squeaky.

“Not sell, Sam. The bank are taking it. It’s being repossessed around this time next week. Next Monday, five o’clock, I’ve either got to hand over what I owe, or else hand over the front door keys... I’m sorry... I’ve got us all in a right mess... I’m really... very sorry...”

Silence.

Sam looked at Charlotte. She'd gone pale too. Or at least, even more pale than usual. She looked back at him. Both of them looked blank.

Then Gran scooped up the remains of the curry and broke them over Mr Pratt's head.

"You TWIT!" she screeched. "I told my daughter not to marry you!"

"Gran!" cried Mr Pratt, tugging sticky bits of sauce out of his hair.

"I told her!" wailed Gran. "I said, lovey, I've had a message from beyond. And the message is: this Pratt bloke is complete rubbish! And I was right!"

She crashed the remains of Mr Pratt's tea down at his feet.

"The day she got eaten by that shark was a blessing in disguise!"

She marched out of the room, her earrings jingling madly. They heard her stop for a moment to pick up the phone - "Hallo? HALLO? Gone again!" - then slap the receiver down and thunder up the stairs to the bathroom. The shock of it all was playing havoc with her bladder.

"I think Gran's upset," said Sam. He

started to clear up the floor, in case anyone tripped over the mess. The plate was smashed, but the boiled egg was still in one piece.

“She has every right to be,” said Mr Pratt. “It’s a shock to me, too. If only I’d been able to sell the painting.”

“What painting?” said Sam.

“Dusty old thing. It’d been sitting there for ages. Sort of peaceful-looking, not like... a-hem, not nearly as nice as your pictures, of course, Charlotte, darling. I thought it might be worth a few pounds though, maybe enough to let us keep the house until business picked up. It was the only piece of good luck we’ve ever had. And now it’s gone.”

“Gone?” said Sam.

Charlotte just pulled a ‘Gone?’ face.

“It was stolen a few days ago,” said Mr Pratt.

Sam could feel his heart thumping. “Did the police catch the thieves? Are they international terrorists? Do they know our address?”

“It’s OK, don’t panic. I know who did it.”

They both pulled a ‘Huh, say that again?’ face.

“Well, I think I know,” continued Mr Pratt. “He came to see me at the shop one day. The painting was there one minute, gone the next. From what I remember. But I can’t prove a thing. It’s my word against his. I talked to the police, but they took one look at the shop and thought I must simply have lost it under an old sofa or something.”

“Can’t you get it back from him?” said Sam.

“I’ve been round to his office several times. That’s where I went tonight. That’s why I was late home. One last try. I told him I wouldn’t call the police, I just wanted the painting. I told him I’d lose everything if I didn’t get it back. All he did was sit there with a horrible smile on his face. I even told him I’d sent a photo of it away, to have it valued by an expert.”

And its value is...? scribbled Charlotte on her shirt sleeve.

“I don’t know. The valuation’s at the shop somewhere. I lost track of it before I even had a chance to open the envelope.”

“Oh Daaaad!” said Sam.

“Telling this man about the valuation made him sit up and take notice, though. But then he said how dare I accuse a respected citizen of theft, and did I know what wonderful work he did for charity. He said if I didn’t stop harrassing him, he’d allow his workmen to ‘have a chat’. Nasty looking pair, they were. Mind you, I think one of them’s only about your age.”

“Dad, who are these people?” cried Sam.

“It doesn’t matter. Forget it.”

“But this is our home! They’ve nicked the only thing that could have stopped us LOSING OUR HOME!”

“Sam, just pack it in. I’ll... think of... something. It’s over. It’s finished.”

“You’ve got to get the painting back! They can’t get away with this! Dad, WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?”

“Sam!” shouted his dad suddenly. “That’s enough!” He rubbed his face with his hands and let out a long, slow breath.

“Sorry, Sam,” he said quietly. “But you’ve got to realise, there’s nothing that can be done about it now. Next Monday, five o’clock,

we're out. If I were you, I'd start sorting your stuff ready for packing."

Sam thought about saying a whole string of things he'd just thought of, but the look on his dad's face made him think again.

"I'll go to bed," he said instead.

Charlotte slunk back to the dining room. She got out a fresh sheet of paper and sketched a screaming face with boggle eyes which she entitled 'Oh How Joyful Is My Family'.

Sam's room was an orderly place. His books were all on the bookshelves, his clothes were all in the wardrobe, and the hand-held vaccum cleaner he'd begged for last Christmas was propped up against his desk. He hadn't always been so neat and tidy. One of the early entries in his Secret Book Of Worries had been:

Germ and other Biohazards resulting from dirt and piles of unwashed stuff.

This was now one of the entries which had been dealt with, and crossed out. Unfortunately, in the last hour, he'd added roughly two and a half pages of brand new ones.

There was a small wooden box of essential items under his bed, kept there in case a volcanic eruption or tidal wave forced the Pratts to flee the town at short notice. Somehow, though, the situation he now found himself in seemed worse. He was curled up under the covers, with the blankets pulled tight around him, and the light switched off. A pocket torch shone on the pillow, pointing at his notebook.

Entry 2448: May have to sleep in bus shelter.

Entry 2449: Dampness of bus shelter, resulting in poor health.

Entry 2450: Arrest by police, resulting from illegal occupation of bus shelter.

He wrote long into the night.

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