

Chapter 15

'OK, you win. Congratulations my friends. For your next clue, proceed to the empty room with the creaky floor. You will find what you need where the coats are hung'. *****

They made their way over to the big old house in the late afternoon. Everyone was tired but the elation of winning the cheese fight was such that they were eager for the next challenge. Up the grand old staircase to the empty room. They must have made an odd sight that afternoon to anyone looking in on them, walking urgently up the old staircase with the faded red carpeting. The big ones, Freddy and Hardy, at the front, the medium sized Wil and Helga chatting animatedly in the middle, and the small ones, Little Chris and Clara, bringing up the rear. They marched confidently into the room and up to the big oak wardrobe which stood there. On the front door was a small handwritten note. They crowded around as Little Chris, who had slipped to the front of the bunch, read out the details, 'Your mission is simple. Select one of your group to spend one night in the wardrobe. Stay in until daybreak, and the task is complete'. They looked at each other nervously. The floorboards creaked ominously as they each shifted from foot to foot. ***** 'I'll do it'. They were so surprised that they looked for where the voice had come from. Freddy and Wil both turned towards the door. But it was Little Chris. 'I'll do it', he repeated. They surrounded him, looking down, happy that he had taken responsibility. 'Are you sure?' 'That's very good of you' 'Well done, mate' 'Excellent' The voices were just murmurs really, most of them looking down at the ground, no-one talking to him directly. 'Come on you lot! None of you wanted to do it. Let me do it. What's a night in a wardrobe anyway? Eight lousy hours.' He tried the door. Locked. 'Hang on', said Freddy, taking charge, 'if you're going in there, we'd better get you prepared properly.'

For the next two hours, they did their best to get Chris ready for his ordeal, or adventure, or nightmare. They didn't know which. Wil produced crisps and chocolate from his sports bag, and transferred them to a small carrier bag with 'Fortnum and Mason' written on it. Helga added a carton of orange juice, and Wil insisted Chris eat carrots, straight away, 'Good for the eyesight. I looked in there once. Very dark.' 'It's a wardrobe, Wil, of course it is dark,' said Chris, munching nonchalantly on a piece of raw carrot, and playing with the handle on the outside of the wardrobe door. 'Stuck fast', he said as he tried to open the door, 'feels like something is pulling it back'. There was not a trace of concern in his voice. It was dark outside now. ***** As they got Chris's things ready for him, Hardy pulled him to one side. 'Look mate, I would go in there for you, but unfortunately I had a little accident yesterday...' he pointed to a small graze on the inside of his arm, '...you know, injuries and all, don't want to make it worse...you understand?' 'No problem,' said Chris with a smile, 'especially as you don't know what you're going to find in there. Last time I looked it was just full of coats, but that was months ago. Don't worry.' Hardy felt happy that he had offered to do it. ***** They were just speculating on what might go on inside the wardrobe that night, when there was a light click from the door, or from inside. They all turned to look. Freddy tried the handle. 'OK, it's open now,' he turned to Chris, quickly moving away from the door and making sure the handle was re-latched. 'Right then, see ya', said Chris in his squeaky little voice. He pulled his cap down further over his left eye, and marched round high-fiving his friends. The looks on some of the faces were like they would never see him again, but his jaunty manner reassured them. They were probably more scared being in the big room for the night. ***** Chris pulled open the door. They took a little pace backwards, mouths a little open. As the door opened to reveal a wardrobe full of what looked like fur coats, all of them, except Hardy,

moved a little pace forwards, trying to make it look like they had not taken a little pace

backwards. Chris almost jumped into the wardrobe, over the high step. 'See you in the morning'. The door shut behind him. The same click. Freddy tried the handle again. Locked. Not a sound in the room. Creak, as Hardy moved closer to Wil. Creak again. ***** Fur brushed his face. Unable to really tell whether his eyes were open or closed, Chris blinked a few times. No difference. He couldn't see anything. He felt his way along the front of the wardrobe, from one corner, across to the door, past the door, and over to the other corner. It felt like some distance, but was probably only a couple of metres. His heart pounded a bit. He stopped. 'OK, so I've covered the front, let's move towards the back. All I need is somewhere to sit for the night, somewhere comfortable'. He lifted his arms up in front of him. Once again he was disorientated, not knowing exactly which way he was facing. He pushed against the material, heavy, furry, swinging back and forth, that stood in front of him. He considered kneeling down, but then thought again, reckoning that he wanted to be ready in case they had sprung any surprise for him inside. He pushed through towards the back. The wardrobe was large, he thought, as he took several small paces. Pushing through again, he stumbled slightly over something soft on the floor. As he stumbled he felt something push against his back, which made him start to fall. He put his arms out straight in front of him to cushion the fall. He fell, now uncertain about where he was going to end up. He covered his face, as the fabric brushed past it and he fell straight into..... the back of the wardrobe. Bang!. There was a loud crack as his head hit the back wall of the wardrobe, cushioned slightly by one of the coats which he had clutched at as he fell. There was a second thud as he plonked down heavily on the thick wooden floor. He felt a little afraid now, and sat down, breathing quickly. All of a sudden, he was aware of a presence in the cupboard with him. More strong breathing. Not his. The arm of a coat grabbed his bare arm. He tried to resist. 'La résistance est futile', said a familiar voice, 'now, you listen carefully to me, it is time for your education to begin'. *****

The group outside had sat down on the floor on a blanket Helga had provided. Periodically, they stopped speaking, and Freddy called for silence. They listened intently to the sounds of the house. A little groaning from the timbers as the wind blew outside. A miaow from a distant cat. But from the inside, nothing. The wardrobe was constructed from heavy timber, the contents insulated any sound from reaching the outside. Freddy went closer and put his ear to the door. A dull, low thud. Otherwise, nothing. ***** JoJo, sitting close to Chris in the darkness, started, *Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre, Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour, Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière. De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles: Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!* This stuff continued for nearly an hour. Chris was intrigued at first, then confused by the fact that he understood nothing of what she was saying, and after she carried on and on, he started to laugh in the darkness, quietly at first, then his high-pitched giggle started to penetrate the darkness. 'Why are you laughing?' JoJo demanded at length, 'this is not funny, this is important. By the morning, you will understand the importance of literature, poetry, and culture'. Chris giggled again. 'Listen to this then, he said, still laughing. There was a fly upon a wall, it said buzz buzz and that was all'. 'Ah, you are teasing me now, huh!'. You are a nasty, uncultured little boy'. 'And you are a nasty girl'. 'Ordinary Boy!' 'Well it's under my skin so I can never win, so thanks a lot we cheat and we lie and we fight we don't cry while we try' He sang the verse three times, then ran through the chorus another three or four times. 'No, no, no!' came her voice, piercing through the darkness in indignation, 'please stop it'. 'You spin me right round, baby right round,

Like a record baby right round, round round' Chris went through the whole of this song three times, as well. JoJo was moaning softly. He then went through his full repertoire of songs, jokes, puns and nonsense poems. She had no chance. There was a stumbling, a bump, a click, and

the wardrobe was suddenly full of light. Chris blinked several times, and saw JoJo crawling out of the door on all fours. The others were standing round her, cheering. She held her hand up wearily. 'OK, you win again. I can't take that little creep for one more minute. Take this.' Freddy took the envelope from her, and she tramped miserably out of the room.*****