

Chapter 4 - Clara gets up early

As they got there, they looked to the right before crossing, and then to the left. As they looked left, they noticed an odd light about a hundred metres down the road. Not a street light, it wasn't that bright. And it was coloured. A sort of three or four coloured glow, moving, at one time the colours were in stripes, then they shifted, forming coloured hoops, then they swirled together and temporarily faded before reappearing brighter, just hanging there in the air.

The light was coming from the bus stop...

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The next day Clara was up early, as usual.

As she got dressed, she pondered the journey that lay ahead of them. 'It's January, it might be cold', she thought, and so she put on her green beanie hat, pulling it down well over her ears, so that her hair only just showed beneath the hat, and the single coloured plait she had weaved in to it that morning was pressed to her face. 'Depends where we go, it might be hot', she thought again, so she tucked a t-shirt into the waistband of her jeans, just in case the three layers she was currently wearing got too warm. For luck, she slipped a shiny pebble she had found on the beach the previous summer into her pocket.

Finally she put on her boots. These were also green in colour, and appeared to be several sizes too big for her, but actually they were quite a snug fit inside. It is just that they were made so thick and so waterproof, with different sections made of different materials, that the outside of the boots seemed to be a few sizes larger than the inside. Clara left the laces loose.

Her New Year's resolution to stop bouncing everywhere had come to an abrupt halt yesterday when she had tried to spin down three flights of stairs and had ended up in a ditsy, dizzy mess on the landing of the second floor. She was lucky she fell where she did, because the next flight, down to the ground floor, was much longer and had a number of sharp angles which might have hurt. In the end she was embarrassed rather than injured, but she resolved to end her resolution at that point. Many others had already done the same.

Instead of spinning, she had developed a new approach to the descent. By sitting on the t-shirt, she discovered that the quickest way down was to perch on the banister rail and slide gracefully down each flight. The only dangers in this approach were excessive speed, and the bump at the end of each rail where she had to climb around the banister post to get to the next flight.

She slid down successfully this time, and bounded out towards the hallway.

It was nine-forty five.

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There was a heavy clomping sound as Freddy made his way up the thick wooden stairs from the basement. He too was warmly clad, and he too had his biggest boots on, the ones that he had banged nails into the heels of, to make sure they didn't wear down too quickly. Actually, he had banged them in last winter because he liked the sound they made, but it made him feel

grown up and responsible, to believe that he had done it for this sensible reason. He clomped on up and met Clara in the hallway.

They didn't speak, but they both made their way over to the window. Wil was jogging briskly up the road towards the bus stop.

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They had all been on the bus before, but not since the timetables had changed and they had put the new buses on the route. The old timetables showing the routes to Frogsmere and Mamba Park via Devils' Bottom had been replaced by new electronic signboards with their vandal-proof Perspex screens.

In daylight, the odd glowing and streaming of light that they had seen on Wednesday were less prominent, but as they got to the stop, the sign was still behaving as if it had a life of its own, with different coloured lights and text alternating with brightly lit maps, the first one a cool blue colour, then a bright orange map of what looked like an island, followed by a sharp green image of a country they didn't recognise. They stood for three or four minutes staring at these strange images, which never stayed still for very long, until, at around nine fifty-five, the screen seemed to settle on one particular map, which filled the screen.

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'Give me some clues', muttered Freddy cryptically as the map settled on this unnamed and untitled place.

'I remember this from Monday when I first saw the glow from the new signs, I remember coming down and looking and just seeing this country without names, the day the boy was staring out of the back of the bus'. Clara was excited by the prospect of going somewhere unknown.

The boys looked much less convinced as they stared hard at the green map, showing a place, a country maybe, a country that was almost rectangular in outline, with a very jagged edge on the western side.

Above the screen was another much smaller screen with numbers on it, showing the date (written as 050106), and the time. The clock, with numbers showing hours, minutes and seconds, which were counting down slowly, read ninety fifty-nine.

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In the distance they could hear the familiar rumble, then the roar, but the whoosh didn't come, instead the roar started to

fade to a low hum, and the bus with the conical nose appeared around the corner.

The route the bus normally took meant that people from all walks of life and of all types were thrown together on a daily basis, going about their business in their own way. Most buses just took a bunch of the same sort of people to work, or a group of kids to school, but not this one.

As the bus pulled alongside them they could see a small boy wearing a black hat at the rear side window. Either he was very tall, or else he was standing on the seat. There was a sign in the bus to say that you shouldn't stand on the seats, but this boy must have been, because he had his arms outstretched against the rear window. It was almost as if he was trying to get out.

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They stood silently as it approached the bus stop, indeed by the time it reached them, it too had become almost noiseless.

The bus was almost completely conical in shape with a sharp nose, rising through a thin midsection to the rear, which was just about the height of a normal bus. It was about as long as a normal single-decker too, but because of the cone-shape it looked rather longer and much thinner. The seats were arranged in rows, so that the front row (at the pointy bit of the cone) only had one seat (the lady with the chicken), the next row two seats, the row behind that three seats, and so on until there were about 8 seats across the back row.

The door opened without a sound, and they climbed up the three steps up to the interior. As they did, Wil glanced back at the signboard. It had gone blank. He entered the bus, and took one more look behind him, but the door had closed. Very quietly.

The bus was not full, but Freddy quickly reckoned there were about 15 people on board. In the third row back, he noticed a lady with a chicken.

But there was no driver.

Clara led the way to the first row of seats which had three across. In doing so they had to pass only the lady with the chicken. Clara settled in close to the window, into the deep, comfortable seat. In front of her, set into the seat in front was a video screen. It was black.

Wil sat next to her, with Freddy taking up the rear. As he passed the lady with the chicken, he heard little high-pitched sneeze. He watched as the chicken pulled out a miniature handkerchief and wiped its beak. It sneezed again, and shuddered slightly. 'Poor little thing', he thought to himself, 'caught a dose of flu or something'. He sat down.

'*Seatbelts on please!*'. All three of them jumped as this announcement came from somewhere, they knew not where. The message was very clear, the voice slightly echoey. They complied immediately and pulled the belts over their shoulders, and locked them in place in front of them, with the big aluminium clasp which joined the two shoulder belts to the lap strap. They pulled the straps down tightly.

'*All aboard, hold on tight, next stop Bruinkilloch*', said the voice.

'BRUINKILLOCH!', they shouted in unison...