get a little panicked. 'What have you done to them?'

'We?' said Scratch. 'Not we! Not us little Creakers, not Grunt, Guff, Scratch and Sniff. We's be good little Creakers. We's not hurtin' your –'

'Grown-ups,' jumped in Sniff.

'Then *who*?' asked Lucy, her mind racing to work out this riddle.

'It be the Woleb,' said Grunt darkly. 'The Woleb doin' what the Woleb does.'

'What *does* the Woleb do?' asked Lucy.

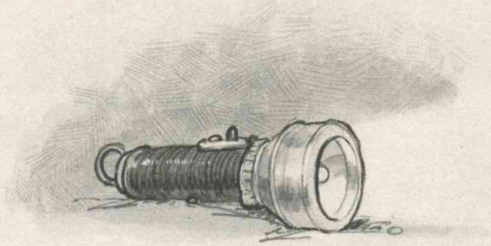
The Creakers looked at each other with wicked smiles.

'The Woleb be changin' 'em,' said Grunt.

'The Woleb be twistin' 'em,' said Guff.

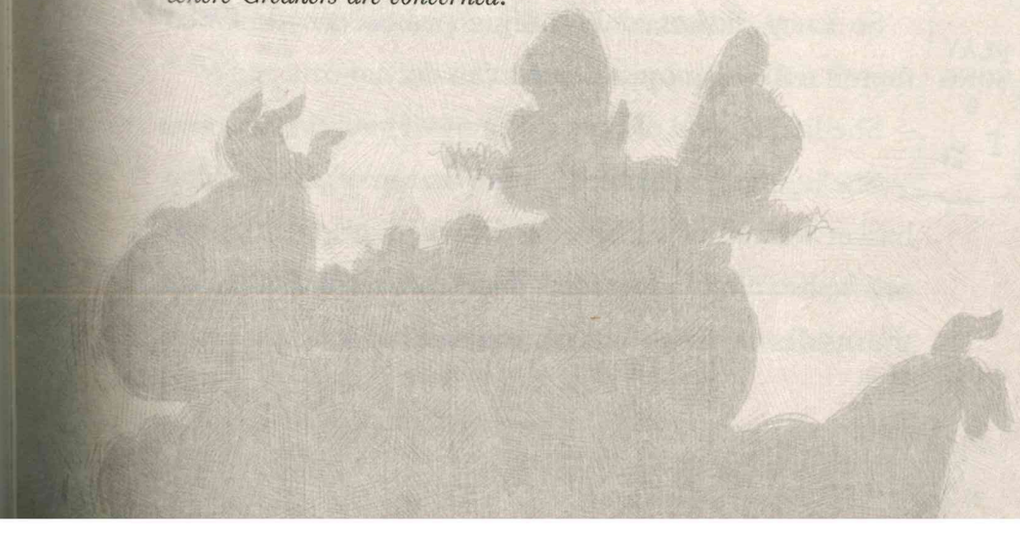
'The Woleb be keepin' 'em . . .' added Scratch.

'Forever,' whispered Sniff.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

. . . Hang on! Isn't thirteen an unlucky number? It feels a little bit reckless to be writing a book about creepy creatures that live under your bed and then just whack in an unlucky chapter number like it's no big deal. What if you read this chapter and then a Creaker snatched you? I'd feel so guilty! Shall we skip straight to Chapter Fourteen? I think it's probably wise. You never can be too careful where Creakers are concerned.



Chapter Fourteen
HUMAN SPELLS

Lucy couldn't hold it together any longer. She'd been staying strong ever since the day it all began. She'd already lost her dad. Now, hearing these creatures say that she might never get her mum back too was just too much.

So Lucy did the only thing a person can do when there's nothing more a person can do.

She had a good old cry.

She howled and wailed, sitting on top of the washing basket with the four hideous Creakers trapped underneath, listening to her sobs. The tears started filling up the insides of her swimming goggles, but she didn't dare

take them off. She definitely didn't trust the Creakers.

'What's the kidder doin'?' said Scratch.

'What a rotten noise!' said Sniff, plugging his floppy ears with his long fingers.

'I'm . . . crying . . . you . . . horrid . . . things,' Lucy sobbed.

'Cryin'? What is cryin'?' Sniff asked, and out of the corner of her teary eyes Lucy could see all four Creakers

peering up at her through the bars of the washing basket.

'Haven't you ever seen anyone cry before?' Lucy sniffed.

'No,' the Creakers said together.

'We be creakin' when kidders are a-snoozin'. We never seen a cryin' human befores,' explained Grunt.

Lucy wiped away the tears that trickled down her cheeks and sniffed up a sob.

'Well, crying is what you do when you're really, really sad about something,' she said.

'Cryin' is bad?' Guff asked eagerly. 'Us Creakers usually be likin' the bad stuff!'

'Actually, my dad used to say that crying is a good thing. It's when all the sad stuff inside your mind builds up so much that it starts to leak out of your eyes. It's good to let it out,' said Lucy.

The Creakers went quiet beneath her, like they were really thinking about what she'd just said.

'Sometimes I thinks I might have *too* much bad stuff inside my noggin,' admitted Scratch, peeling a bit of skin from his itchy scalp and popping it in his mouth.

'Every night it's creakin' here and creakin' there. Snatchin' grown-ups one day, dozyin' kidders the next . . .' His voice started to sound rather strange, almost like he was trying not to laugh.

'I knows what you mean,' said Sniff, who started giggling a little.

'All we be doin' is the nasties, night in and night out!' agreed Guff.

And, with that, the three of them cracked up in fits of laughter.

Lucy stared down at them. *What horrible creatures*, she thought. *Laughing at someone who's upset!*

But then she remembered that these Creakers were from a *backwards* world – and that, when they laughed, it actually sounded like crying. So did this mean that now they were laughing they were actually upset? It was all very confusing and rather odd.

'Pull yourselves together, you twozzles,' hissed Grunt. 'The kidderling be puttin' you under kidderling spells, makin' you all humany and washy-brained. Naughty human magic!' He glared up at Lucy through the bars of the washing basket.

'I'm not putting them under spells!' protested Lucy. 'I don't know any spells at all. Humans can't do magic! I just told you a story, that's all.'

'Exactly. Stories *are* magic. They puts ideas in your noggin that weren't in there before. They makes you think all different 'bout the world,' barked Grunt grumpily, and the other Creakers snapped out of Lucy's story spell and came back to their rotten senses.

All of a sudden something seemed to happen that made the Creakers shift awkwardly. Their wrinkly ears pricked up like a cat hearing a mouse squeak. Then Lucy heard the church bell chime in the distance. What time was it? Lucy started counting.

'It's gettin' early!' Grunt said.

'The dark be nearly over,' said Guff.

'Let's us be goin' back to the –' began Scratch.

'Woleb!' finished Sniff.

'Nope,' Lucy said, tightening the straps of her goggles. She shifted around until she was comfortable on top of the basket and stared straight at them in the mirror. 'You're not going anywhere until you tell me what I want to know. Why are you here and

what have you done with our grown-ups?'

The church bell stopped. It was five o'clock. Almost morning.

'Tell 'er, Grunt. It's the only ways,' said Guff. 'We be dust if she don't let us be goin' back!'

'Dust?' Lucy asked, but the Creakers pressed their ugly lips together tightly, and she could see they weren't going to say any more. She tried again. 'Tell me everything, or you're staying here!'

There was a silence as Grunt thought about what to do. He was caught in a rotten pickle . . . though actually Grunt loved rotten pickle, especially when it was in a mouldy cheese sandwich. This was more like being caught in a fresh strawberry for Grunt – which he hated!

'Tell 'er, Grunt!' whispered Sniff nervously.

'Yes, Grunt,' said Lucy. 'Tell me what I want and I'll let you go, but I won't ask you again. *What have you done with the grown-ups?*'

'Alwrong then, Grunt be tellin' the tricksy kidderling. But Grunt be gettin' in the troubles for this,' Grunt muttered.

'Troubles be better 'n dust!' said Sniff, trembling a little.

Grunt sighed and ran his claws over his spiky nailed back.

'It be simply easy to understand. We Creakers, we be hatin' them stupid grown-ups,' he said.

'Hating the grown-ups?' said Lucy.

'HATIN' 'em like the smell of roses on a sunny mornin'.'

'Hatin' 'em like the taste of raspberry-ripple ice cream.'

'Hatin' 'em like a warm 'ot-water bottle on a cold night,' all the Creakers agreed, shuddering.

'But why?' asked Lucy.

'Them stupid human grown-ups be takin' all the stinkerful waste, and . . . and . . .'

Lucy noticed that Grunt was getting very agitated as he tried to spit out these words.

'. . . they WASTE it!' he spat.

'They waste what?'

'They waste the WASTE!' all the Creakers barked in unison.

'All the glorious rubbish.'

'All the rotten leftovers.'

'All the stuff you silly humans use once and then get rids of, they takes it and chucks it in the watery oceans,' said Grunt.

'They buries it under the ground!' added Guff.

'Or they burns it all up into smoky clouds. Hidin' it outta sight, outta brain, but, worst of all, outta reach of us –'

'Creakers!' said Scratch and Sniff together.

'Right,' said Lucy. 'So . . . what's the problem with all that?'

The Creakers bashed their sticky hands on their slimy foreheads and let out frustrated moans.

'Innit obvious, you silly kidderling?' answered Grunt. 'We Creakers don't just loves the stuff you be gettin' rids of. We *NEEDS it.*'

'It's what the Woleb works on,' Guff explained. 'All

them things your grown-ups be thinkin' is rotten and nasty and wants outta their homes – we Creakers wants to 'ave it.'

'Oh, I see! To reuse it?' said Lucy.

'YES!' they barked.

'That's why we be snatchin' up all the grown-ups, takin' them away, just leavin' the messy kidderlings behind,' Grunt explained.

'You little muckers knows how to make good muck,' Guff said approvingly. 'And you not be clearin' it up. We be able to come and takes all the mess we wants now. We takes it back and builds stinkerful homes.'

'You make homes out of rubbish?' Lucy asked.

'Oh yes!' Guff said enthusiastically. 'We makes the worst rotten homes in all the Woleb! Big smelly ones where the walls are made of lumpy cardboard egg boxes and the windows outta fizzywhizz bottles.'

'I got a pure banana-peel rug!' said Scratch.

'And my pillows is plastic bags stuffed with empty tin cans!' boasted Sniff.

'I . . . I see,' said Lucy. She tried to imagine their homes, built from the rubbish she would throw in the

bin. They sounded rather awful to her, but the Creakers seemed very proud of how disgusting they were.

'So if we lets your stupid grown-ups go on hidin' it all in the ground . . .' went on Grunt.

'Or the oceans . . .'

'Or the sky . . .'

'We be havin' nothin' to live by any mores,' Guff finished. 'We not be able to survive in the Woleb.'

Lucy took a moment to really think about everything they'd said. She thought about all the mess she made, and where it went when her mum threw it away, and about all those truckloads of rubbish bags she used to see her dad drive off to Whiffington Dump each day.

'Now the kidderling be lettin' us go? Like she promised, yes?' said Grunt.

'Before the sun dusts us all!' blurted Guff.

'Be quiet, you twit!' snapped Grunt, shoving Guff so hard that Lucy felt the washing basket wobble beneath her. 'You be tellin' her our weakyness!'

'The sun . . . dusts you?' Lucy asked. Her brain was whirring. 'Do you not like sunlight?'

Grunt sighed and, in the mirror, Lucy saw him shoot Guff a nasty look.

'The sun be too nice,' he grumbled.

'And warm.'

'And loverly.'

'And kind.'

'Our black skin be too fragile to see it. That's why we live in the Woleb, under the beds. Sunlight can't gets to us down there. We be turnin' to dust if we gets caught in it,' explained Sniff, reaching into his pouch and pulling out a sprinkle of Dozy Dust.

'You mean – you mean that Dozy Dust is made of . . . of . . .'

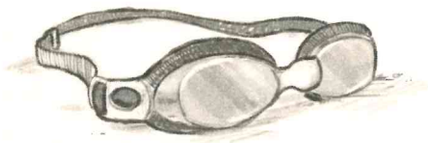
'Dusted Creaker,' Sniff said sadly, placing it back in the pouch and pulling the strings tight. 'That be why its magic works so good and powerful.'

Lucy thought of all the times she'd had little golden crumbles in the corners of her eyes when she'd woken up. She'd never wondered what it was before – but now she suddenly had a strange, uncomfortable feeling in her tummy. That dust meant that a Creaker had lost its life. They might be rotten, nasty-looking things, but Lucy was

beginning to think that they actually weren't all that bad.

'Look! It be the bright!' cried Guff, pointing his flabby claw to the sliver of warm orange light that had just crept in through Lucy's curtains.

Their time was up!



Chapter Fifteen

BACK TO THE WOLEB!

Has your mum or dad ever burned the dinner?
Or maybe a piece of toast at breakfast time?
Do you remember what it smelled like?

It's horrible, isn't it?

Well, that very same smell suddenly wafted up Lucy's nostrils.

'HOT! HOT! HOT!' the Creakers cried as the first pools of wonderful morning sunlight reached the basket they were trapped in and cut through the bars like knives. Lucy looked down and gasped as she saw their black skin puffing up like bubbling treacle at the first drop of light.

'Lets us go!' Grunt growled.

'Oh my goodness! I'm sorry!' Lucy said, leaping from the basket at once. She lifted it off the four Creakers, and rushed to the curtains to draw them properly, buying them some time.

But, when she turned back round, her heart thumped in her chest. The Creakers were tugging her dad's grubby coat off Ella's floppy, sleeping body.

'Hey! That's my dad's!' cried Lucy.

'Stupid little kidderling. Never trust a Creaker!' Grunt cried as he put the coat on himself, wearing it like a royal robe. Then, in a split second, he slid underneath Lucy's bed, much faster than Lucy had seen them move before. Guff, Scratch and Sniff followed, giggling and laughing in their weird twisted way as they slipped into the blackness below.

'No!' Lucy cried – but it was too late. They had gone, along with her dad's coat, back to their backwards Woleb!

She quickly shook Ella. 'Wake up, you sleepyhead!'

'But . . . but I only like the pink marshmallows . . .' Ella mumbled in her dreamy voice.

Lucy jumped on to her bed, bouncing up and down and shaking Norman.

'Wake up, you useless boy!' she called. 'There's no Scout badge for *sleeping-through-a-crisis*!'

Actually, there is *a Scout badge for* sleeping-through-a-crisis. *It looks like this . . .*

It was hopeless. Norman and Ella were too heavily under the Dozy Dust's magic to be woken. Lucy was on her own – and she had to think quickly.

'That's right. I've got to think quickly,' Lucy told herself firmly. 'I'm the only person who knows where the grown-ups are, and how to get there. I've got to find Mum. I've got to get her back!'

Lucy dropped to the floor and peered into the dark space beneath her bed. The wooden boards appeared to be normal, but Lucy knew better now. She reached out slowly and prodded one with her fingertips.

The floor wobbled!

The wormhole to the Woleb was still open! But, as Lucy thought this, the floor gave a little shake, and a bubble rose to the surface and popped, as though it was some sort of living jelly. Lucy pulled her hand back quickly, and felt the warmth of the morning sun as it illuminated her room through the thin curtains.

The sunlight must be making the wormhole close! thought Lucy. *That's it – it's now or never.*

She pulled the straps of her swimming goggles tight, pushed her fringe to one side, took a deep breath and slid head first into the shadows beneath her bed.

The floor swallowed her up whole. In an instant, she

sank into the squashy-swishy, wobbly-bobbly floor – she was back in the Woleb once more.

Lucy tried to relax, to let the sticky walls tighten and stretch around her and finally spit her out into the strange Woleb tunnel. She flipped upside down, or was it downside up? Either way, she felt awfully dizzy again as she toppled on to her bottom next to the hole that led to her bedroom.

Suddenly the hole started to glow a glorious orange, like a warm sunrise, before shrinking and disappearing completely.

'The wormhole must close in the daytime and stop sunlight from getting in, protecting the Creakers and the Woleb from being *dusted*,' Lucy murmured. 'But that also means . . . I can't get out! I'm stuck down here now – at least until it's night time in Whiffington again.'

A Creaker laugh echoed down the steamy corridor, and Lucy saw four twisted shadows scurry off in the distance.

'We gots the stinkerful jacket!' she heard Grunt cackle.

'Scratch be usin' it as a duvet to sleep in.'

'Sniff wants it as a rotten rug!'

'Guff be makin' a pair of whiffy coat curtains with it.'

'None of yous be 'avin' this stinkin' thing. We be takin' it to the King!' Grunt hissed.

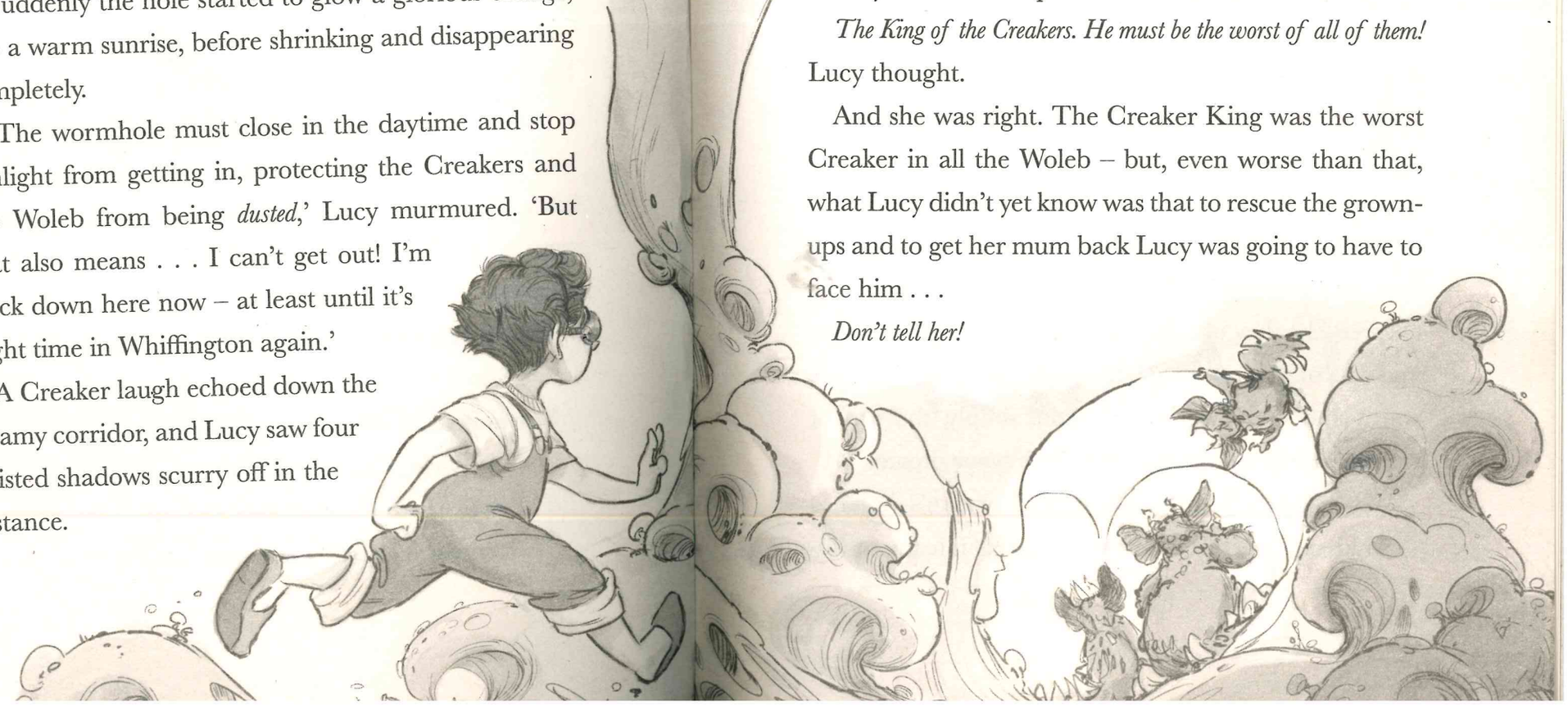
'The King?' Lucy whispered to herself.

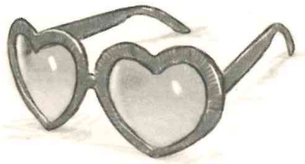
'All hails the King!' the Creakers snapped in unison as they marched deeper into the tunnel.

The King of the Creakers. He must be the worst of all of them! Lucy thought.

And she was right. The Creaker King was the worst Creaker in all the Woleb – but, even worse than that, what Lucy didn't yet know was that to rescue the grown-ups and to get her mum back Lucy was going to have to face him . . .

Don't tell her!





Chapter Sixteen

THE MARSHMALLOW OF YOUR DREAMS

The campfire was warm and cosy and the smell of toasting marshmallows made Norman's tummy rumble with excitement.

He twisted his marshmallow round in the flickering orange flames, getting the most perfectly even toast you could possibly imagine. This one didn't look black and charred like they usually did, and it didn't go all sloppy and fall off his stick. It was golden and crisp. It was warm and bubbling. It was, quite simply, the sort of toasted marshmallow you only see in your dreams.

Which is exactly where it was. In Norman's dream.

Suddenly his cosy little campfire was interrupted by

the most irritating sound Norman had ever heard. It was like a siren wailing through the sky, filling the air with annoyance.

OORRRAAAA OOOOORRRRRRAAAARRRR OOOOOORRRAAAAA

'What on earth is that sound?' Norman cried, dropping his marshmallow into the flames to cover his ears as the sound got louder.

OOOORRRRMAAAAA

OOOOORRRRRRMAAAAA

NOOOOORRRRMAAAA

NOOOORMAAAAN!

NOOORMAAAN!

NORMAN!

Norman sat upright in Lucy's bed.

'Norman? It's me, Ella!' Ella called, looking all scruffy and tired.

'I fell asleep?' Norman croaked.

'Guess so. We both did!'

'You fell asleep too?'

'Uh-huh.' Ella yawned, popping on her pink, heart-shaped shades to hide her tired eyes from the crack of sunlight coming in through the curtains, making Lucy's bedroom glow.

'Where's the jacket?' Norman asked, noticing that Ella was no longer wearing Lucy's dad's coat.

'Dunno,' Ella said with a shrug. 'Woke up and it was gone.'

Norman's brain was only just warming up. He couldn't work anything out yet.

He caught Ella's yawn and rubbed his eyes. That's when he noticed the little golden crumbles of sleep fall on to the bedsheets. The little speckles that had been in the corners of his eyes.

His heart leapt.

'Lucy!' he gasped.

'She's not in there,' Ella said as Norman scrambled out of bed and stumbled across to the wardrobe.

'She's –'

'Gone?' Ella interrupted.

Norman nodded.

'She's probably just downstairs making breakfast.'

'No, Ella – you don't understand. They've snatched her!'

Ella dipped her head and peered over the top of her sunglasses with a raised eyebrow.

'Who?'

'The Creakers! They must have snatched her in the night once we fell asleep!' Norman whispered.

'Snatched? Really?' Ella questioned, seeming rather unconvinced.

'REALLY! I guess the first part of the plan must have worked.'

'Plan? What plan?' Ella asked.

Norman suddenly realized he'd better not tell Ella that they had only invited her round in order to use her as live bait to lure a bunch of creepy monsters out in the hope of catching them.

'Well?' Ella said, tapping her foot impatiently.

'Ella, those dreams you had . . .'

'The ones about the monsters under my bed?'

'Exactly! Those weren't dreams, Ella. They were real. *They* are real.'

'Who?' Ella said.

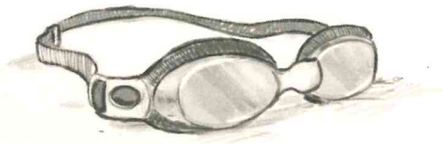
Norman raised a shaky finger, pointing at the shadows under Lucy's bed.

'The Creakers,' Ella jumped in again as she started to realize what was going on and just how serious the situation had become.

'We need the grown-ups,' she said.

'We need Lucy!' said Norman.

OK, we're about to dive down into the Woleb with Lucy. Are you ready? You might want to go to the loo before reading this chapter. I'd hate you to have a little accident. No? OK, don't say I didn't warn you. By reading on, you agree that the author accepts no responsibility for any toilet-related mishaps you may have as a result of being scared by the following chapter(s).



Chapter Seventeen

YOU'RE NOT HERE!

Lucy crept along the creepy, stinky corridor, following the wretched voices of Guff, Grunt, Scratch and Sniff as they creaked deeper into the Woleb.

She stepped over the little wooden signs, reading the names of all her Whiffington neighbours, and her tummy gave a little flutter as she thought of all the children above, waking up to another grown-up-less day, not knowing anything about this place, not realizing what was at stake.

Of course, Lucy knew exactly what was at stake. And you know too.

If Lucy couldn't find the grown-ups, if she got lost down here, she might never find her way out, and the children of Whiffington would never see their families again.

Suddenly a second corridor appeared in front of her, one she was sure hadn't been there a moment ago. She scratched her head as she stared at the fork in the road and the choice she now had to make. Should she go left? Or right? Or should she take the third tunnel?

The third tunnel?

Where did that come from? Lucy thought. *That* definitely *wasn't there a moment ago.*

She glanced back the way she had come – and stared in disbelief.

It was now a dead end!

The Woleb was changing.

It was moving!

Like it was *alive.*

Lucy felt crushed.

'I'm never going to be able to find my way around here. This is impossible!' she said, and slumped to the sticky floor in a huff.

As those words came out of her mouth, they felt so strange. She'd never said that anything was impossible before. She usually hated those words.

Her mum's voice suddenly popped into her head: *Impossible isn't real. It's just in your mind.*

Lucy's heart sank. It meant that down here, in this backwards place, impossible was very real.

Impossible.

Mind.

Lucy's head went fuzzy – and then her thoughts suddenly became crystal clear, as though her mind was an old TV and someone had just tuned it properly.

'Wait a second. If the thing I'm trying to do – rescue all the grown-ups from nasty monsters – *IS* impossible . . . then down in the Woleb, where everything is what it isn't . . . it is totally **POSSIBLE**!' she cried. 'It's the one place in the world where I *can* do this!'

Lucy jumped back to her feet. She'd had an idea.

'I know exactly where I'm going,' she announced as loudly as she could, her voice echoing down the multiple tunnels and hallways that had appeared

around her. 'I don't need a MAP! The last thing I would ever want is a precise, detailed map of the entire Woleb. If anything, a MAP would just slow me down.'

Lucy waited hopefully. There was a deep silence. She peered down each of the twisted routes ahead of her as they wound deeper into this weird world.

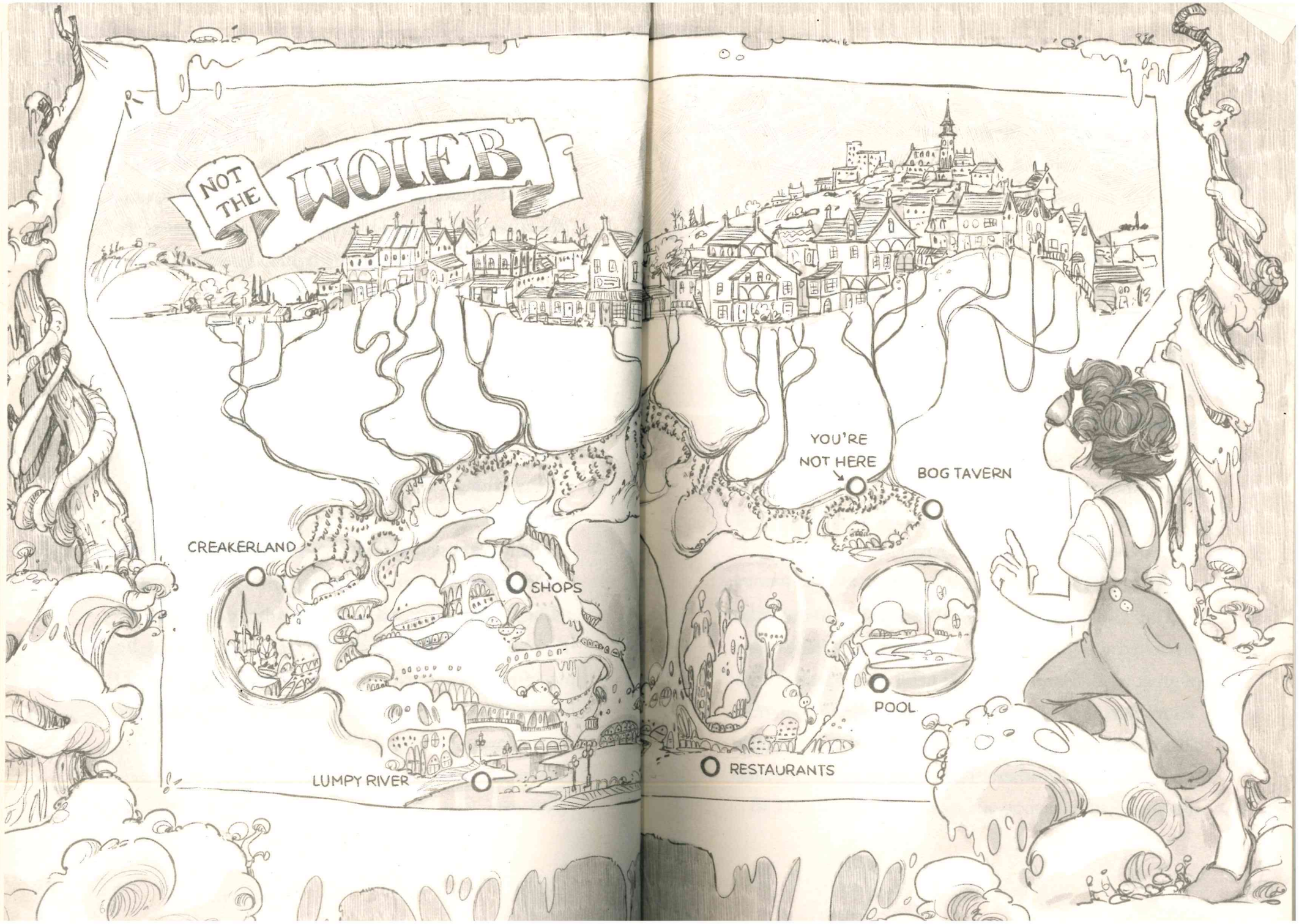
Then, all of a sudden, something caught her eye. Something stuck to the wall of one of the tunnels. She ran over to it, her heart skipping in her chest. It was a giant map spread out on the wall, like the ones you see in shopping centres.

Lucy grinned. Her plan had worked! She had tricked the Woleb!

'Oh no, not a map!' she said out loud. 'This isn't helpful at all . . .'

Lucy took a step closer to get a better look at the map. She thought her swimming goggles might be playing tricks on her, so she lifted them up to check, but . . . nope. The map was unlike any Lucy had ever seen before.

It looked like this:


NOT THE WOLEB
YOU'RE NOT HERE
BOG TAVERN
CREAKERLAND
SHOPS
POOL
RESTAURANTS
LUMPY RIVER

It looked like Whiffington Town but sliced in half, like an apple. Underneath the town there were no layers of rock or a hot lava core like Lucy was used to seeing in the maps of the Earth in her geography lessons at school. Instead, there was a complicated network of tunnels winding downwards into the ground – tunnels that led to a large Creaker city.

Lucy gasped. It was unbelievable. If you stood back, it looked like an enormous black spider was living somewhere inside the planet with all its legs poking up to the surface – a secret monster beneath all the homes in Whiffington.

She leant in to take an even closer look . . .

And the spider suddenly moved.

'AHHHH!' Lucy cried.

The Woleb *was* alive! As the spider on the map stretched and shifted one of its knobbly legs, Lucy heard a great creak from the tunnel ahead of her and saw the entire thing bend and stretch before settling down, now leading to a new location. No wonder all these tunnels appeared out of nowhere. This whole world was moving. Changing.

Lucy took a breath and leant in again. Now she could read some of the locations in the Creaker city.

There was a public swimming pool filled with live rats and cockroaches . . .

A restaurant serving leftover Brussels sprouts from Christmases past. The most expensive sprout on the menu was one found in one of the bins at Buckingham Palace in 1953, which had been severely undercooked and partially chewed, possibly by royalty. Possibly not.

There were shops selling stinky old shoes with holes in . . .

Shops selling stinky old socks to match the stinky old shoes . . .

Shops selling ice cream, which was actually scoops of human earwax . . .

Shops selling belly-button-fluff blankets . . .

A market with only rotten vegetables . . .

A lumpy river of off milk . . .

And just about every gross thing that Lucy could imagine. Actually, this place was so gross that a nice girl like Lucy wouldn't even have been able to imagine it.

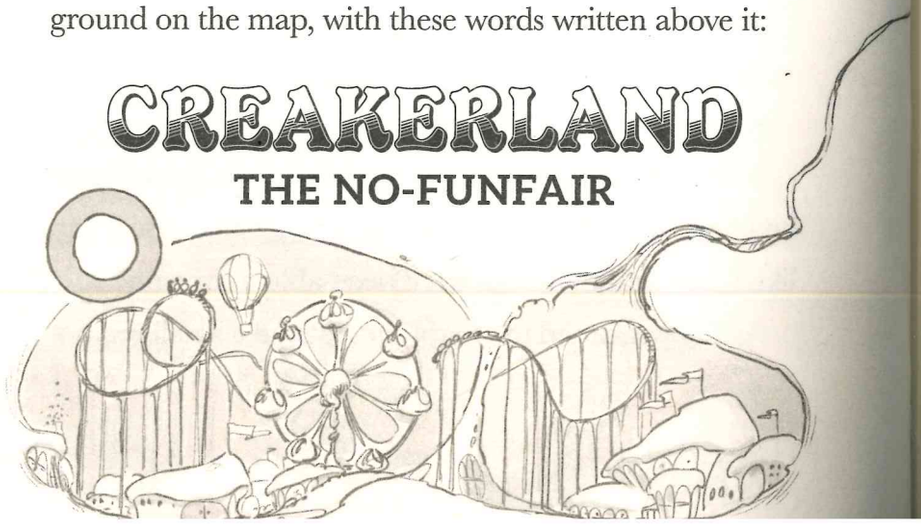
As Lucy scanned the map, she noticed a small red dot

with an arrow pointing to it. Above it were the words YOU'RE NOT HERE.

Lucy smiled to herself. She knew it meant that this was *exactly* where she was. She was beginning to figure out this backwards place.

'This map is so unhelpful. But what would be even less useful would be to know where the grown-ups are being kept. I definitely don't want to know that!' she said loudly, and waited.

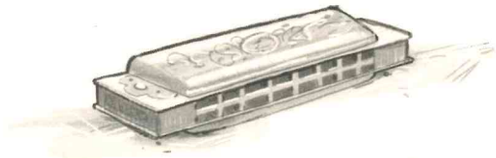
Suddenly a great hole opened up in the wall to her right, like giant tree roots twisting themselves open. A new spider's leg appeared on the map next to the spot where she was. She traced it with her finger to see where it led, and her tummy did a little flip when she reached the end. There was a picture of what looked like a fairground on the map, with these words written above it:



Suddenly a scream echoed through the new opening, which gave Lucy the chills.

Because it wasn't a Creaker screaming . . .

It was a grown-up.



Chapter Eighteen

THE BOG TAVERN

Grunt, Guff, Scratch and Sniff creaked through the Woleb, carrying Mr Dungston's stinking coat.

'His Rottenness be awful pleased with Grunt when he sniffs this,' said Grunt.

'And Guff,' said Guff.

'And Scr–' began Scratch.

'And Sniff!' added Sniff happily. 'Sorry, Scratch,' he quickly added.

They all wound their way through the crooked, winding, twisted tunnels, deeper into their backwards world.

'Shall we stops off on the ways for snacks?' asked Guff hopefully, rubbing his rumbling round belly.

'No, you flabby rotbag! We be gettin' this to His Rottenness rights aways,' Grunt barked.

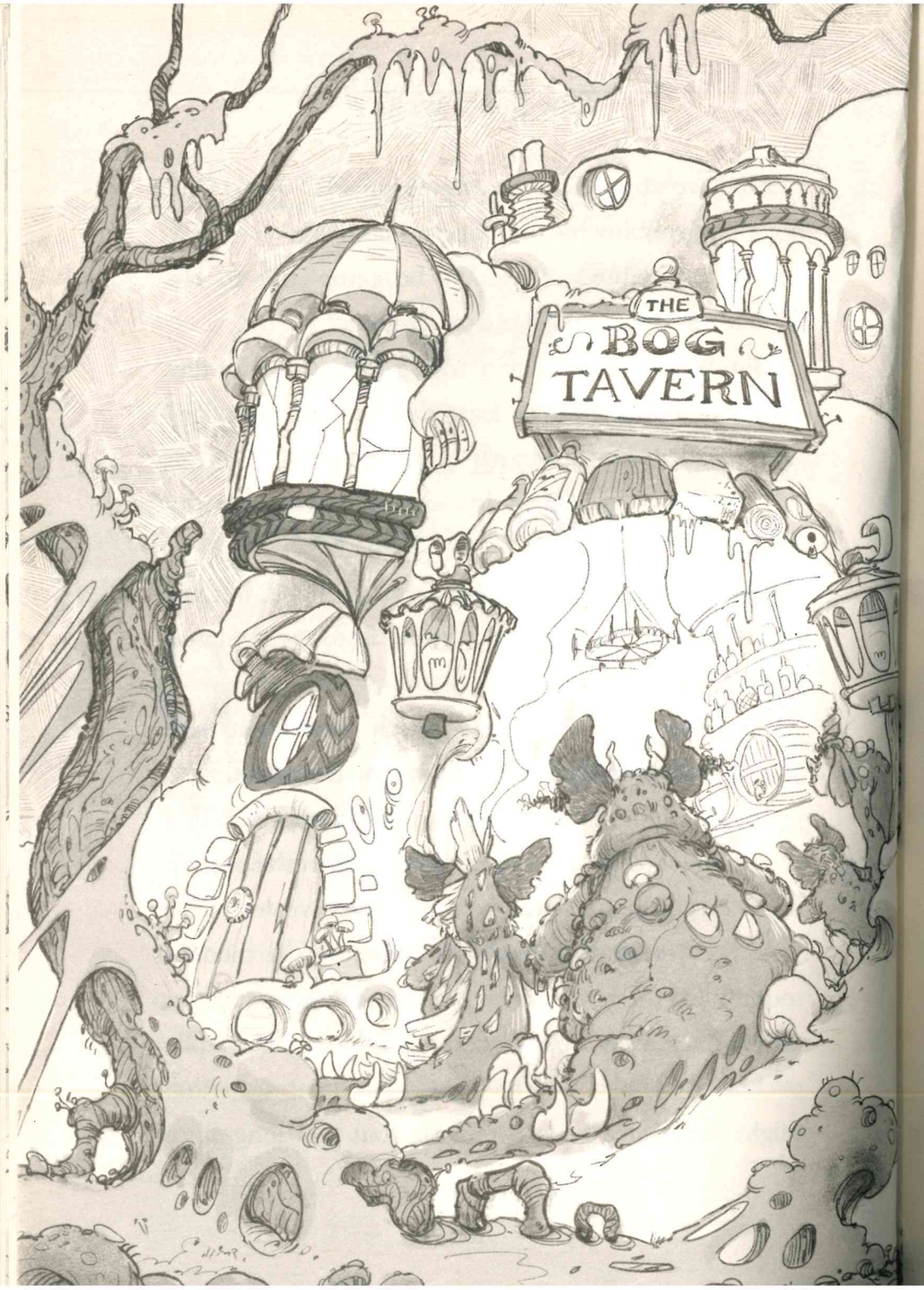
'But, Grunt, we's be 'avin' a long night wot with that crafty kidderling. We at least deserves some sludge,' Guff pleaded, giving Scratch a little nudge.

'Oh yeah, some old sludge would go down a trick,' Scratch agreed.

'Alwrong, alwrong! We stops for a quickybit, but just one slop,' Grunt said sternly, caving in to the demands of Guff's greedy belly.

They turned a sharp left (which went right) and almost walked straight into the wall of the tunnel, but, just as their pointed noses were about to bosh into it, a brand-new hole twisted open. Entwined tree roots and mud cracked apart, and a new path was revealed.

As they creaked through the hole, a great raucous sound filled the new tunnel. It came from a building in the distance. I say a building, but it was more like a pile of bricks, rubble, smashed glass and bent steel that might have once been a building but had long since



been demolished. Swinging from the top of the ruin was a bent, rusty old sign, which read: **THE BOG TAVERN**. The Creakers had banded together to bring this whole derelict building site down into the Woleb, and it was now the place they all went to have a slop or two of sludge after a long night of creaking.

The Bog Tavern was always busy. As they stepped through the doorless doorway, the glorious stench of damp and mould filled their snotty nostrils and they heard a discordant song from the Creaker playing a strange, creaky instrument in the corner. It had the bashed-up keys of an old piano, the dented horn of a trombone, three bent pipes from some bagpipes, one broken guitar string and a little triangle on top, all cobbled together into one.

'Oh looks, they gots Belch playin' the bogpipes tonight. 'E's awful, 'e is. Can't play a single note wrong!' Guff said, rubbing his claws together gleefully. He loved the Bog Tavern.

Grunt trudged to the bar and a respectful hush fell over the rotten room as every stinking Creaker in the place realized who had just set claw inside.

'What'll it be, Grunt?' barked Squelch the landlord, breaking the silence.

'Four slops,' Grunt replied. 'And make 'em quicks. We gots important business.'

'And some pork scratchin's!' Guff added to the order, followed by one of his stinky bum-trumps.

'Wrong away. Anythin' for the King's most untrusted Creakers,' Squelch muttered with a dip of his bald, scabby head.

They made their way through the crowds of Creakers who were busy sharing creaking stories.

'I nearly gots dusted last night,' one old Creaker called Bulge said as he gulped the last mouthful of sludge from his glass. 'Chubby kidderling fell outta bed and landed on me. I broke the rotten thing's fall so it didn't wake up, see? So there I was, trapped with this heavy lump of a kidder on me leg – and then the bright started comin'!'

'What did y' do, Bulge?' asked Barf, the wrinkly Creaker sharing his table.

'Had to gnaw me own leg off, didn't I!' And, with that, Bulge plonked his black leg on the table, and all

the Creakers who were listening cheered and clinked their goblets together in celebration. Everyone loved it when a Creaker escaped being dusted. 'I'll stick it back on somehow!' Bulge laughed.

'Bunch of twitnits,' Grunt huffed grumpily as he and Guff found space at an empty table. Scratch and Sniff made their way to join Belch on the bogpipes

and began singing along to all the songs they didn't know.

'You're always rotten in the face when you comes in here,' Guff said to Grunt as he perched his bottom on an upturned stool.

'Look at 'em all. All these useless lumps of Creaky flesh. Wastin' away their hours in here, tellin' nonsense waffle to each other.'

'It's just whats we do, Grunt,' Guff said.

'Not me. Not Grunt,' Grunt whispered. 'I be wantin' more.'

Guff stared. 'More? More 'n what?'

'More 'n *Creakin'*,' said Grunt. 'It always be the same. Sneakin' up there into the human world where everythin's the right way up. Stealin' their rubbish, night in and night out. Never gettin' to see my Creakerlings back home.' He pulled out a little photo of his hideously ugly Creaker children to show Guff.

'Ahh, they gets more disgustin' every year,' Guff said politely.

'Thanks, I know. Just likes their mother.' Grunt sighed fondly at the photo before tucking it away.

'But this be the Creaker way, Grunt. Creakin' is what we does. It puts muck on the table and mulch over our 'eads,' Guff said.

'Have you never thoughts in your noggin what it might be like *not* 'avin' to creak abouts? *Not* 'avin' to do the nasties up there? *Not* stealin' things that isn't ours?' Grunt replied in a hushed voice.

'Four quick slops,' interrupted Squelch before Guff could answer, spilling most of their sludge on the table as he put their overflowing goblets down. 'Made 'em just the way you like, Grunt. Rotten eggs, cheese flakes, broccoli juice, and I put some extra snot drops in for you tonight too. On the house,' Squelch added as he wiped his nose.

'Cheers.' Guff grinned, stuffing the whole packet of pork scratchings in his mouth, along with the foil wrapping.

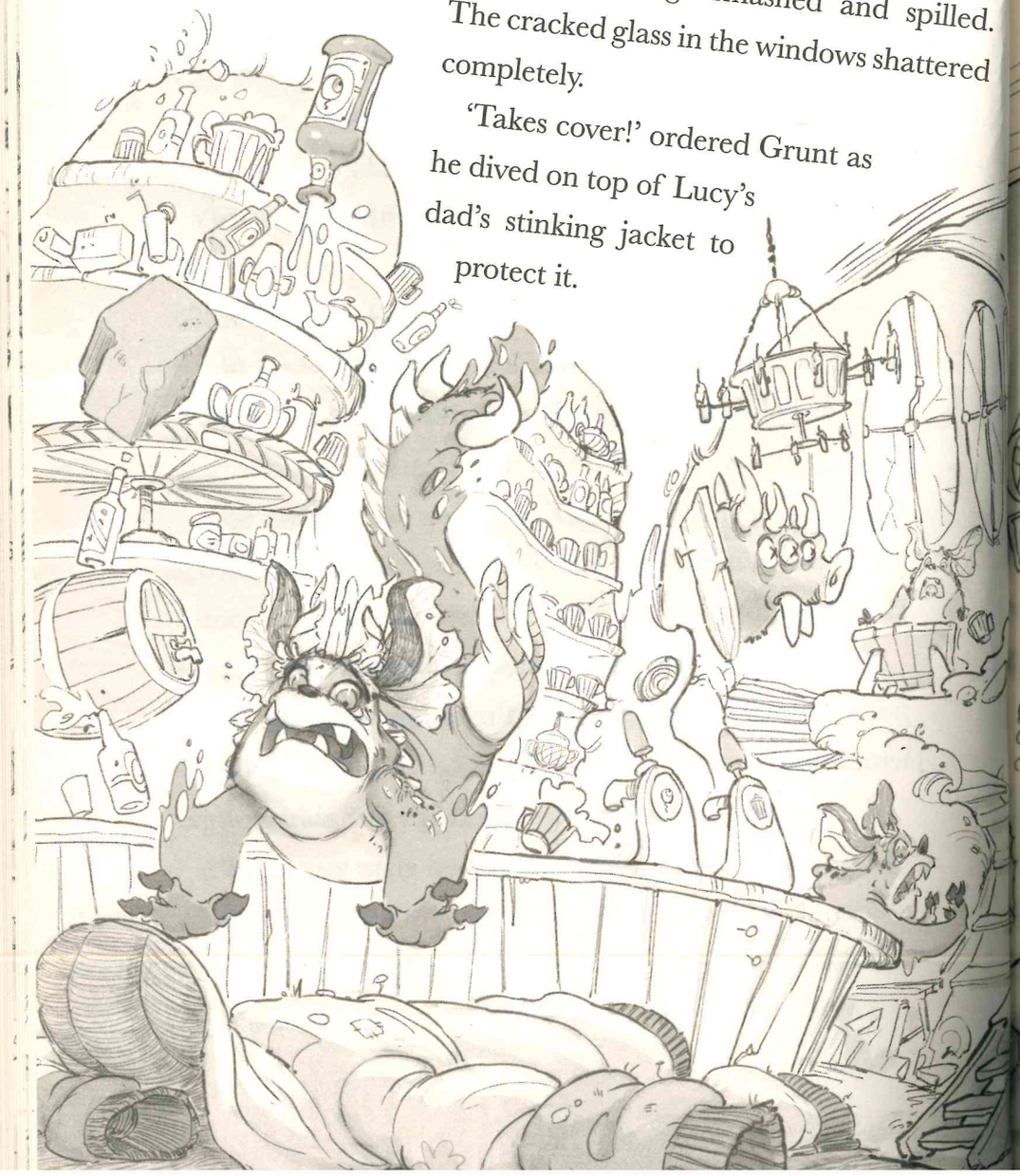
'Cheers,' Grunt muttered, and made to take a swig of his sludge. But, before the chipped glass touched his cracked lips, the whole building site around them began to rumble.

The rumble became a **shake**.

The shake became a jolting **Wolebquake**!
Broken bricks broke again and fell to the ground.

Slops of sludge smashed and spilled. The cracked glass in the windows shattered completely.

'Takes cover!' ordered Grunt as he dived on top of Lucy's dad's stinking jacket to protect it.



'Grunt!' cried Scratch.

'Guff!' called Sniff.

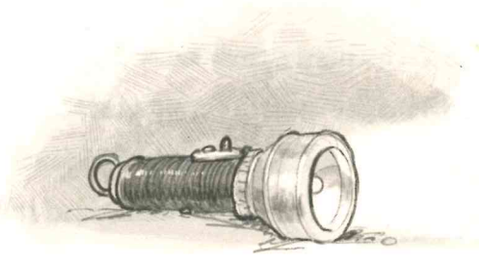
'What's goin' on?!'
yelled Guff over a mouthful of pork scratching.

The rumbling slowly calmed down. The shaking settled. The Wolebquake was over and the whole Bog Tavern was silent in shock.

'What the muck was that, Grunt?' grumbled Squelch the landlord as he climbed out from under his bar.

Grunt got to his feet, brushing debris from the precious, stinking coat.

'*That*,' he replied grimly, 'is a kidderling in the Woleb.'



CHAPTER NINETEEN
CREAKERLAND

Lucy sprinted down the tunnel, following it deeper into the Woleb. The screams were growing louder with every step she took.

She rounded a crooked corner and the spider-leg tunnel opened up into a great cave, stretching out far above her head where the roots of trees poked through mud and dirt. The sticky ground beneath her feet suddenly became a row of neat, polished green paving stones, and this path led down to something so strange Lucy had to take off her swimming goggles to get a proper look at it.

Right in front of her eyes was a ginormous

underground theme park. It was massive! Bigger than any fairground or theme park Lucy had ever seen.

Further along the path was a giant entrance with bright, shiny turnstiles and a curly-swirly sign over the top that said:

WELCOME TO
CREAKERLAND
THE NO-FUNFAIR

Where dreams definitely don't come true

The most miserable place below the Earth

But Lucy knew that in the Woleb this meant that this *was* a fun place. A place where dreams *do* come true.

'But whose dreams?' Lucy asked herself quietly so the Woleb wouldn't hear her thoughts.

Her mind was interrupted by the screams again as

the carriages of an enormous rollercoaster whizzed by and did a huge loop-the-loop high up over her head, the track skimming the cavernous, rooty roof above. The seats of the rollercoaster were packed with passengers dressed in their pyjamas and nighties, all waving their hands high above their heads.

And that's when Lucy realized two things.

The passengers in the rollercoaster cars were all grown-ups.

And it was these grown-ups who were screaming – but they weren't screaming in pain or fear. They were screaming with laughter and happiness.

Lucy saw their faces as the rollercoaster shot by. They were giddy with excitement, wide childish smiles stretched across their faces as they waved their arms in the air.

What the jiggins?! thought Lucy as she rushed down the shiny green path to the turnstile and gave it a push. It spun round and whacked her on the bottom, shoving her into Creakerland.

She was suddenly hit by the most delicious, sweet smell. Lucy closed her eyes and breathed it in deeply. It

was the smell of sugar and caramel, freshly baked cookies and steaming hot chocolate. It was the nicest thing she'd smelled since being down here and seemed completely out of place in this rotten world.

As she looked around, she couldn't believe what she was seeing. There were rides and rollercoasters that looked so mind-bogglingly fun that she found herself being drawn towards them, desperately wanting to ride them. Some had stomach-churning twists soaring so high it hurt her neck to keep looking at them.

There was a merry-go-round that whizzed around so fast and didn't stop until the grown-ups riding it couldn't hold on any longer. They just let go, flying into the sky, landing in huge piles of pink fluff.

'Candyfloss!' Lucy whispered in amazement as she watched the grown-ups eat their way out of these pink fluffy piles of deliciousness, which were as tall as the houses of Whiffington.

There were popcorn machines on the rooftops of all the buildings, continuously popping fresh, buttery popcorn, which burst into the air and fell like warm, delicious popcorn-snow over their heads.

A large pink milkshake river flowed round a silver castle in the centre of it all. Lucy rubbed her eyes and saw that the castle was in fact made of hundreds and thousands of sparkling silver dustbins, stacked high on top of one another.

'Wow!' Lucy said out loud. This place really was strangely amazing. She couldn't help but want to dive into the milkshake river and go for a swim with her mouth wide open.

Two women skipped by, holding hands, eating enormous lollipops and giggling like little kids as they played in the falling popcorn, trying to catch it on their tongues.

'Excuse me!' Lucy called to them, but the women turned and blew raspberries at her, then ran away laughing. As Lucy watched them go, a crowd of men burst out of a toy shop, kicking a brand-new football.

'On yer head!' one of them called and toe-punted the ball so hard it smashed through the shop window, showering the street with glass. The men fell about laughing.

'Nice one, Simon!' another man said. 'Let's drink some cream soda and go on the rides until we puke again!'

Lucy, who didn't usually consider puking very funny,

found that a little giggle was making its way out of her mouth.

'Oh!' she said, taking herself by surprise.

Just then, a great blast of trumpets broke out from the far end of Main Street, Creakerland. 'Oooh, it's a parade!' cried an elderly man next to Lucy, beaming and turning a cartwheel as a row of giant floats began cruising their way down the street.

Crowds of all the grown-ups of Whiffington suddenly emerged from the Main Street shops and attractions – the video-game arcade, the ice-cream spa, the comic-book library, the hot-fudge hot tub, and the petting zoo – filling the street to watch. Wrinkly Mr Ratcliffe was there in his underpants. Molly the milk lady was handing out Woleb milkshakes, and even Mario was jogging backwards along Main Street.

Then Lucy spotted Mrs Fudge McScroodles, who owned Scrummy McScroodles Sweets 'n' Stuff; Old Man Carvey, who ran the butcher's; Paige Turner, the librarian; and even Piers Snoregan from *Wakey-Wakey, Whiffington*. They were all here in Creakerland – having fun in their pyjamas!

The grown-ups whooped and cheered as the parade came past, as though they were having the time of their lives. It *was* fun – but Lucy couldn't help but feel that this was all wrong. These childlike people around her were the grown-ups who should be up in Whiffington with their children and families. Not down here.

Lucy turned away, her mind racing. A lady with curly white hair skipped past her, holding a large choc ice. The chocolate was melting in her hands, making them sticky and messy. The lady tossed the melting choc ice on the ground, and it landed with a splodge right at Lucy's feet.

'Excuse me, aren't you going to clean that up?' Lucy asked.

The lady's expression changed from a sort of hypnotic excitement to utter hysterics.

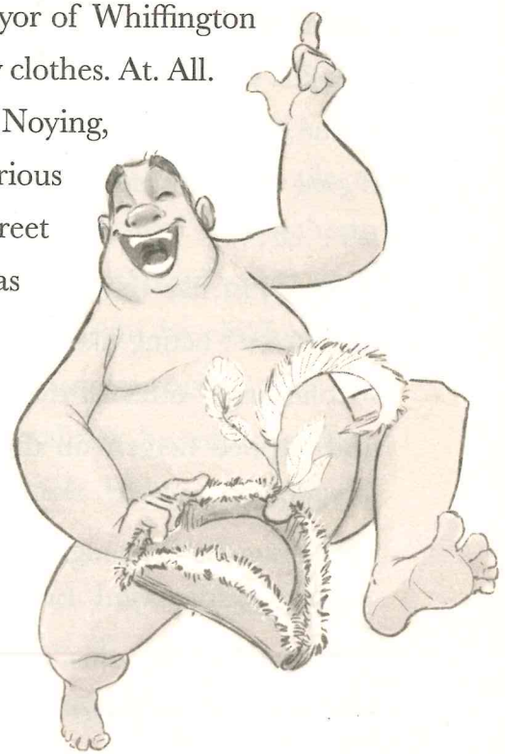
'Clean it up?! Pah-ha-ha!' she called. 'Good one! I'm off to get a fresh choc ice. Want one?'

As much as Lucy would have loved a choc ice, she knew that there was some sort of Woleb magic at work here, and magical choc ices were not to be trusted. 'No thanks,' she replied, and watched the old woman run

full speed down Main Street to the choc-ice vending-machine, faster than a kid running downstairs on Christmas morning.

As the woman disappeared, another grown-up came into view. Lucy stared at the distant figure. Then, as she realized what she was seeing, she clapped her hands over her eyes and peered through her fingers. It was an awful sight, which she was afraid she could never un-see. It was Ella's father, the Mayor of Whiffington – but he wasn't wearing any clothes. At. All.

Lucy groaned as Mayor Noying, who was usually very serious indeed, ran down Main Street – completely naked. He was covering up his funny bits with a ridiculous Creakerland Mayor's hat, screaming, 'I'm Mayor of Creakerland, and I declare this the BEST PLACE EV-ER!' at the top of his lungs.



Lucy quickly shut her eyes tightly as his bare bottom whizzed past her and disappeared down Main Street.

'I couldn't agree more!' said Piers Snoregan as his film crew captured the Mayor's naked moment. 'That's about all from me, Piers Snoregan. See you tomorrow for another *Wakey-Wakey, Woleb*.' He winked smugly at the camera before the broadcast ended, and the film crew high-fived each other.

'I'm *never* telling Ella about this,' Lucy muttered to herself.

She stared at the chaos around her. *What the jiggins is going on?* she wondered. *Why are all the grown-ups acting so . . . so . . .*

And, just like that, she understood why the grown-ups weren't acting like grown-ups any more. It was all so blindingly obvious that Lucy slicked her hair over and slapped herself on the forehead for not realizing it sooner.

Of course! she thought. *This is the twisted work of the Woleb again!*

Everything in this place was different. It was backwards. And the grown-ups were no exception.

Because the grown-ups *weren't* grown-ups down here. They were naughty and silly and fun – like *children*.

And, most importantly of all, they were messy!

Lucy looked around at all the litter on the ground. There were sweet wrappers, greasy fish-and-chips papers, lollipop sticks, bottles and cans. There were scattered jelly babies and drips of chocolate. There were bits of broken glass and piles of discarded popcorn. There was litter EVERYWHERE!

Just what the Creakers wanted, Lucy realized.

The grown-ups had been snatched away into the Woleb and had forgotten about their lives. This place had erased their responsibilities. It had made them forget all the stresses and worries of the *real* world, and remember instead what it was like to be children: to simply have fun. A life without consequence.

It was only then that Lucy realized the true meaning of the word she hated. *Impossible*. How was she ever going to fix this mess?

'Impossible is just in your mind. Impossible is just in your mind,' Lucy repeated to herself.

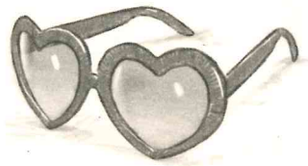
At that moment, she heard a laugh she recognized,

and spun round. She looked down the glistening green-paved street and saw a giddy girl tumble out of the exit of the Waltzer, fall to the shiny floor and begin rolling around in a fit of giddy giggles.

'Let's do it again!' she said, laughing.

Lucy stared.

It was her mum.



CHAPTER TWENTY
NORMELLATRON

'This is a disaster! We're all doomed!' Ella whined, flopping into Lucy's pillow dramatically.

Norman paced around the room behind her, his feet squeaking on the creaky floorboards in rhythm.

'Not necessarily,' he said.

'Oh please, Norman. It's useless. Mama and Papa are gone. Lucy's gone. There are monsters under our beds, and . . . yep, there are only white marshmallows left.' Ella inspected the half-empty packet of sweets. 'This is the worst day of my life. I officially quit.'

'Lucy wouldn't quit on us,' insisted Norman. 'She didn't give up on the grown-ups.'