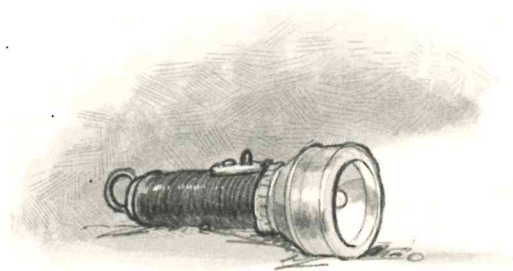


Remember when I said, 'What's worse than a Creaker?'



CHAPTER SEVEN

FOUR CREAKERS

Lucy jumped into bed that night faster than she'd ever done before. She was so fearful that something might grab her ankles from underneath the bed as she climbed up that she literally leapt from the floorboards to the mattress and pulled her bedcovers up and over her head. She didn't even bother to take off her dungarees, brush her teeth or tidy the house! She left it all messy and grubby.

And what a grubby mess it was!

There was all sorts of rubbish and litter scattered here, there and everywhere from the piles of children who had been in and out of her house over the last

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couple of days. So many crumbs of breakfast cereal had been trodden into the carpet that it felt more like walking on sand. She'd been so busy confiscating dangerous items from wally-chops children today that, unlike yesterday, she hadn't washed the dishes, emptied the rubbish bins or done any washing whatsoever.

The house was, quite simply, Dis-Gus-Ting.

But Lucy didn't care about that right now. Her breathing was heavy and the warmth of her breath soon filled up the small space under her duvet, making it hot and sticky. She tried to be as still and as quiet as she could, listening out for any strange sounds, any sign of that creature with those black eyes. But she was so scared and nervous that all she could hear was the sound of her own blood pumping around her body, beating in her eardrums like a persistent drummer who won't shut up when you're trying to think.

As the night wore on and the children of Whiffington grew sleepy from the second day of grown-up-less chaos, the noises from out in the streets began to settle. Soon everything was still. Everything was calm.

That is always when the weirdest things happen.

THE CREAKERS

Lucy heard it.

Her heart stopped.

She recognized it instantly.

She'd walked across her bedroom thousands and thousands of times and she knew that sound better than anyone: the unmistakable creak of the old wooden floorboards right next to her bed. The floorboards that only ever creaked when someone . . . or *something* . . . stepped on them.

Then she heard it again.

Then again.

. . . and once more.

Four times in total.

Then the smell came.



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It was foul and rotten, like a freshly pooped nappy, or off milk. It was so strong that Lucy could hardly even breathe. The thick duvet felt heavy as she hid beneath it, part of her wanting to stay covered, the other desperate to peek out and see what was creaking around her bedroom.

Then she heard something even more terrifying than a creak. She heard sniffing, followed by a delighted . . .

'Ahhhhhhhhh . . .'

It spoke!

Or at least it made a noise.

'This be the place!'

Yep, it definitely spoke. Although it didn't sound like you or me when we speak. This voice was croaky, creaky, disgusting.

'This be where *it* lives . . .' croaked the creature.

'Shhhhhh, the kiddering be hearin' you. It be hidin' just under the bedcovers,' squeaked another one.

'Shall we snatch it up?' scratched a different one, with a voice like nails running down a chalkboard. That was three separate creatures Lucy had counted.

THREE!

THE CREAKERS

There was a silence.

Snatch me up? Lucy thought. *Please don't snatch me up. Don't snatch me up. Don't snatch me up . . .*

'No . . . not this dark,' grunted a fourth voice. 'Let's just take what we be creakin' for and be gone back to the Woleb.'

The Woleb? thought Lucy. *Where on earth is the Woleb?* She'd certainly never heard of anywhere with a name like that.

Suddenly Lucy heard another creak – and then another, and another. These creaks were the sound of someone – or *something* – creeping across her bedroom, across the floorboards closer to her wardrobe.

They were followed by the sound of her wardrobe door opening.

'Well, where be it?' grunted the grunter.

'It be in 'ere somewhere! I saw the kidderling get it out last dark!' muttered the scratchy one.

They all started rummaging around. Lucy heard hangers clanging and drawers being opened and closed. These creatures weren't trying to be quiet, not tonight.

'It's good fun, innit, not 'avin' to creak around so

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quiet neemore, not since we snatched all 'em grown-ups,' blabbed the croaky one.

'Shut up, you dunglicker! We be Creakers, we still gotter creak!' huffed the grunter.

Creakers, Lucy thought. *So that's what they're called.* The word made her shudder and her skin crawl with creepiness.

'*It* might be earwiggin'!' added the grunter, and somehow Lucy felt these *Creakers* all looking in her direction on the other side of the duvet.

'So whats if it is. I don't care neemore,' screeched the scratcher.

'Let's get that stinkerful green coat and be off,' whispered the squeaker.

Lucy suddenly realized what the Creakers were looking for.

My dad's jacket! she thought.

Then she froze as she remembered what was in the jacket pocket: her father's silver harmonica. Her heart began pumping faster and faster. *They can't take my dad's things. They're all I have to remember him by!*

There was a frustrated rattle of hangers from the

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wardrobe. 'It not be in 'ere!' grumbled the scratchy one.

'That sneaksy little kiddier must've hid it somewhere else,' croaked the creaky one.

'Check the rest of the house!' ordered the hisser, and Lucy heard the four creatures all move at once, creaking across her wooden floor, out of her bedroom and into her mum's room across the landing.

I have to stop them taking Dad's jacket! thought Lucy.

Wait just a creak, Lucy. There are four Creakers creaking around in the next room. You're all alone, hiding beneath your bedcovers. Are you sure you want to try to stop them?

Yes! thought Lucy.

Wow – you're braver than I am, Lucy! OK, good luck!

Lucy gulped as she pulled the corner of her duvet down with trembling hands. She peeked out and saw that her bedroom was empty, but she could hear the creaks and croaks of the creatures searching her mum's room.

'Check them drawers! We wants that coat!' one of the creatures hissed.

Lucy looked at her open wardrobe and at the wooden panel that was still in place, hiding her dad's stinky work

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coat. Whether it was a moment of courage or pure insanity, Lucy leapt out of bed and legged it straight to her wardrobe. She heaped all her clothes on top of the panel to make sure it stayed properly hidden.

'Wait!' hissed a voice, and everything went quiet.

'I smell stink.'

'I smell dread!'

'I smell a kiddierling outta bed . . .' croaked the four creatures, and then Lucy heard the most terrifying sound she'd heard all night.

The creatures all started creaking back towards her bedroom.

Lucy's eyes darted around her room. She knew hiding underneath her duvet wasn't going to get her out of this. She couldn't run out of the door or the Creakers would snatch her. She looked at her bedroom window, but it was far too high to jump.

Would you be quiet while I'm thinking! Lucy thought.

Who, me? Sorry!

Where can I go? she thought. *Not out of the door, not out of the window. They'll find me in the wardrobe . . . there must be another way.*

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That's when she saw it – the shadowy gap beneath her bed.

If these Creakers got into my room that way, then maybe I can get out that way!

The creaks grew louder as the creatures shuffled out of her mum's bedroom and into the hallway just outside her door.

'Gonna snatch that kidderling!' they croaked.

'Gotter finds that grubby coat!' they cried.

Lucy had no time to think it through. It was under the bed, or be snatched by these four things that were about to come creaking through her bedroom door any second!

She bolted towards her bed as fast as her legs could bolt, and just as she got to it she dropped down and slid straight underneath.

For a few moments Lucy lay trembling in the darkness underneath her bed. All of a sudden she began to experience the strangest sensation. The hard wooden floorboards beneath her didn't feel as hard as normal.

In fact, the floor under Lucy's bed didn't feel normal at all.

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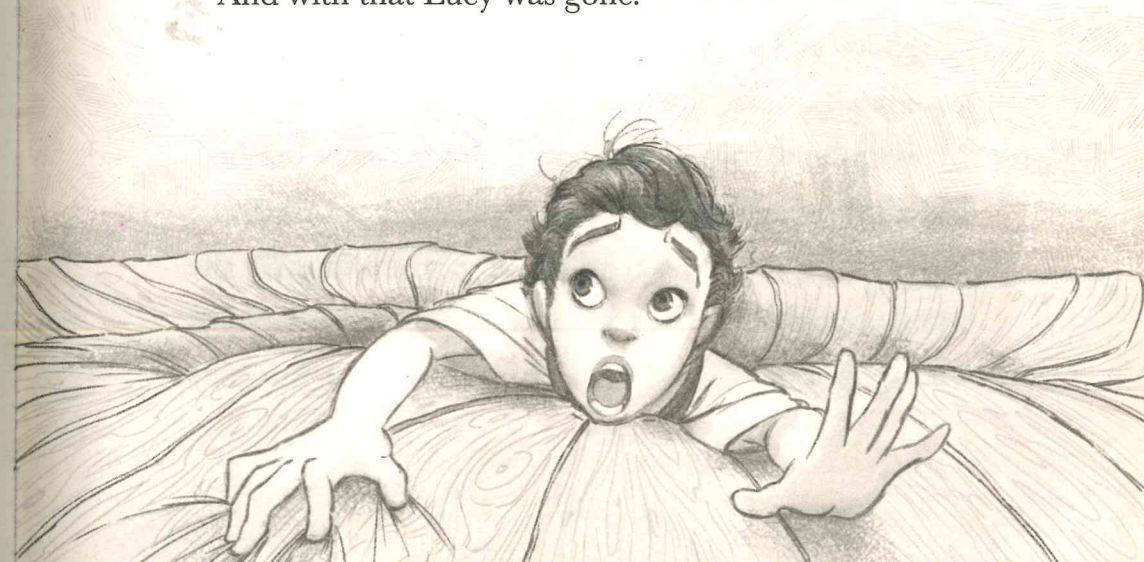
Lucy pressed the palms of her hands against it. It was soft and squishy, like bubblegum or warm cookie dough – and, before Lucy knew what was happening, she found herself sinking into the floor like quicksand.

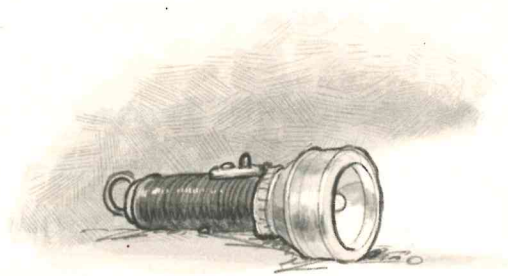
She was being pulled into the world below.

She clawed at the floor as it began to swallow her up, but it was no good, she was going into it, whether she liked it or not. The doughy floor tightened as she sank up to her chest, then to her neck, her mouth, her nose, and, just as the room above disappeared completely, Lucy caught a glimpse of four pairs of twinkling black eyes peering at her from the doorway.

'The kidderling be goin' down to the Woleb!' they hissed.

And with that Lucy was gone.





CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WOLEB

Lucy was sinking, deeper and deeper. Every now and then the floor beneath her bed would stop swallowing her and the dark, spongy walls around her would loosen and tighten before pulling her down again. She imagined that this was what it must feel like to be eaten whole by a giant snake.

Wherever Lucy was going, whatever this Woleb place was, it felt like she was being sucked through some sort of wormhole, travelling not only down below her bed, but also across time and space itself. She began to feel a little queasy, like the time she'd been in training for the family jelly-baby-eating competition and she'd puked on her shoes.

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She couldn't quite put her finger on why or how, but everything she knew to be real and safe was suddenly uncertain. Up was down, left was right, this way was that. Her mind was spinning with dizziness, and not in a good way, like when you spin round and round in the park and fall over laughing. It was more like that dizziness you get when you ride a rollercoaster too many times and feel like your head is stuck to the ground and you can't stand up.

Lucy's arms soon started feeling wobbly and tired. Her legs felt like they were made of mashed potato, and she realized she was losing her fight with the floor. But, oddly enough, the very second Lucy stopped struggling and wriggling, the walls seemed to let her go.

Her feet came out first as she plopped out of a hole and fell a few metres, but before she landed she stopped in mid-air, just hovering, like one of those astronauts on the International Space Station.

Yep, Lucy was floating, just above the ground. Except the ground wasn't beneath her feet now – it was above her head, and everything was the wrong way up! The moment Lucy realized this she went toppling up to it

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with a wet thud, landing next to the hole she'd plopped out of.

Lucy was in the Woleb.

'Whatever the Woleb is,' she muttered.

She stood up (which was now down), brushed herself off (which was now on) and her head began to feel all twisted with this backwards-ness. She took a step forward (which was now backwards) and stumbled a little as the ground wobbled under her bare feet. It was the strangest thing she'd ever stepped on. It felt warm, damp and squelchy, like standing on a giant tongue.

Yuck! thought Lucy. *I wish I'd worn my slippers!*

That's the thing about having adventures in the middle of the night. You can never be fully prepared for them.

The air was hot and misty down here in this soggy corridor, and



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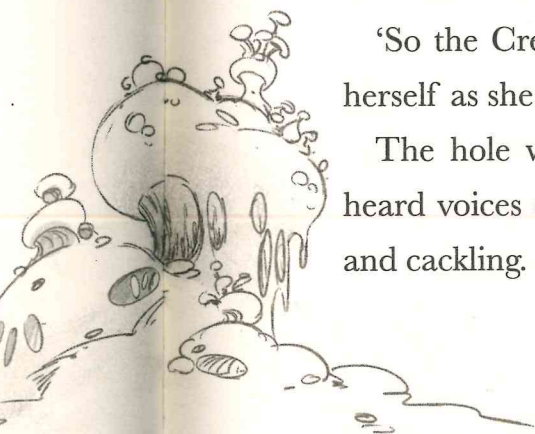
Lucy felt her T-shirt begin to stick to her arms and back. She slicked her fringe out of her eyes and it stayed there, stuck in place on the side of her forehead by small drops of sweat.

The walls were slightly rounded, with ridges on them that arched up over Lucy's head as though she was standing in a giant throat. The thought made her shiver. It also stank – it was so disgustingly rotten that Lucy could feel her eyes watering and she had to hold her nose.

Suddenly the hole by her feet started wobbling like mud-flavoured jelly, and Lucy noticed a small wooden signpost next to it with one word written on it. *Dungston*. Her surname – and Lucy recognized the writing instantly. It was the same sticky brown writing that had been used in the letter she'd found pinned to the school door.

'So the Creakers wrote that letter!' she muttered to herself as she studied the messy handwriting.

The hole wobbled again, and a moment later she heard voices echoing through it. Voices, and laughter, and cackling.



The Creakers.

'They must be following me down!' she gasped.

Lucy had no choice but to keep moving deeper into the Woleb, or they would catch up with her and snatch her. She started running as best she could, but it was like being on a bouncy castle, or in those dreams when you're running and not getting anywhere. Lucy puffed and panted and her chest felt tight as she struggled for breath. *I've got to slow down*, she realized.

Then, just like the backwards-ness of the upside-down floor, as Lucy slowed down and began walking, everything suddenly felt easier, and she realized she could move faster.

She only managed to sprint a few slow steps before her foot hit something, tripping her up. She bounced on the wobbly, wet ground with a disgusting squelch and, as she came to a halt, out of the corner of her eye Lucy caught sight of the thing that had tripped her.

It was another small wooden signpost in the squishy floor, just like the one she'd seen with her surname on it.

When Lucy read what this sign said, her heart leapt with hope.

It said *QUIRK* in exactly the same sloppy brown writing. And next to the signpost she saw a small hole, just like the one that she'd plopped out of.

Norman Quirk! That has to be Norman's house through there! Lucy thought as she peered into the small opening. She could just make out a dark bedroom at the other end of it.

Lucy looked around and saw another signpost just a few metres away. Then another, and another: there were hundreds, maybe thousands of these little wooden signposts dotted all around her, stretching into the distance of the Woleb, poking out of the steamy mist like tombstones in a graveyard.

She began to read all the names scrawled on them. *Noying, Badding, Payne, Green, Trundle, Cobblesmith . . .*

It's Clutter Avenue! Lucy realized.

As she stared at the positions of these signs, Lucy could tell that they all matched perfectly with the houses and streets and buildings of Whiffington Town. Next to each post was its own small round opening, like a

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portal, joining this backwards place with the world above.

'Oh, little kiddering!' a menacing grunt echoed off the wet walls. 'You's not s'posed to be down in the Woleb.'

Lucy spun round. Through the mist she saw four pairs of small, black, beady eyes staring at her.



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Her heart froze mid-beat. She could barely make out these four creatures through the haze, but their piercing eyes were enough to make her want to get as far away from them as possible. Quickly she looked around at the long, wet, twisted route of the Woleb, which seemed to go on and on, deeper into the ground.

I don't fancy going down there! she thought.

Good idea, Lucy! (Although what Lucy didn't know was that in a few chapters she would be going much deeper into the Woleb.)

What? thought Lucy.

OH, NOTHING! Carry on – you were about to escape!

Oh right! thought Lucy.

She took a deep breath, slicked her fringe over and dived head first into the jelly-like hole next to Norman Quirk's signpost, hoping, wishing, praying that it led to her world!

'She's crawlin' backs up!' one of the Creakers hissed from somewhere behind her.

'Too late to get 'er now,' grumbled another.

'We'll have to snatch 'er tomorrow . . .' another one creaked – and then the wobbly walls grabbed her and sucked her in deeper, and Lucy could no longer hear them.



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The sensation of going back down (or was it up?) the tight, squishy wormhole was just as weird as when it had swallowed her the first time. Lucy closed her eyes tight and held her breath as the walls wriggled and twisted like they were alive, pushing her along until they spat her into the darkness underneath another bed.

She opened her eyes. Her heart was pounding, and her breath came in shaky gasps.

She was back in Whiffington, in someone else's bedroom.

'Hello?' she whispered, but there was no reply.

She crawled out from under the bed, and her legs wobbled as she stood up in the small room, still feeling the effects of the backwards Woleb. The room was covered with all sorts of bits and bobs, from maps and camping stoves to fishing rods and rope ladders and the biggest collection of Transformers toys Lucy had ever

THE WOLEB

seen. There was also an iron and ironing board with a neatly pressed, badge-covered uniform ready for the morning, and hanging on the wall was a photo of a young boy and his father, both in full Scout uniforms, holding a huge fish between them with even bigger smiles stretched across their proud faces.

Definitely Norman's house! thought Lucy, and raced for the door.

'Norman?!' she called, running downstairs as fast as she could. She yanked open the front door, and to her surprise she was blinded by sunlight as it engulfed her face with warm kindness.

It was morning!

'Lucy?' Norman said, waking up in his hammock, and shielding his eyes from the sun.

'Monsters under the bed again?' he asked.

'No . . . *Creakers!*' Lucy replied.

The hammock swung and swayed as Lucy climbed up next to Norman and told him all about it.