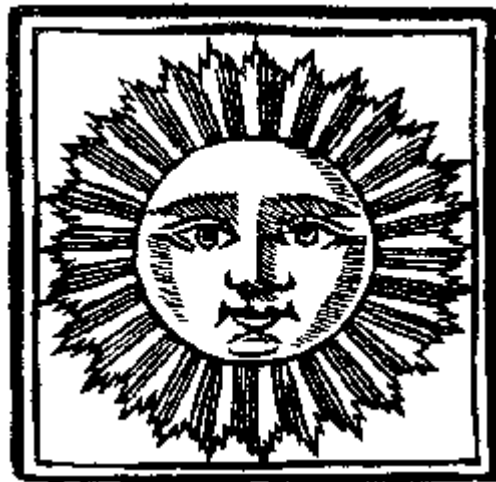


THE SALLY STORIES



**Ed Emery
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Chapter 1

THE BEGINNING

Now, before we start, I have to say that this is rather a QUIET story. It's not a story for Shouting over the Heads of Noisy Children. And it absolutely won't work at all if we've got Pinching and Poking and Pulling Faces and Whispering and Giggling and Pointing out of the Window and Stealing Other People's Sweets and Wriggling and Shuffling Bottoms. So, you can stop all that at once, and we'll get on with the story.

Our story is about Sally. She is eight years old. And it's about where she lives. And you may not know this, but where she lives isn't a house, it isn't a flat, it isn't a bungalow, it isn't a cottage and it isn't a caravan. It is – a boat.

However, before I tell you about the boat, let's go back to the beginning, to the point where it all began.

In the beginning it all began with the Poll Tax. Now perhaps you're too young to remember the Poll Tax. Well, let me tell you.

There came a certain day in this country when Her Majesty's Government decided that everyone in the land who was over the age of eighteen should pay a special tax to the government. Up to six hundred pounds a year, as it happened. It didn't matter if you were rich or poor – everybody had to pay it, and if you didn't pay it, the bailiffs would come and sell your furniture and put you in prison for weeks on end. Not very nice!

In other words, Mrs Poorpenny who lived in a council flat with her four children would have to pay the same amount as Lord Moneybags of Bankalot in his Very Stately Mansion. And the truth is that a lot of the people in the country were too poor to pay the Poll Tax. And a lot of other people said that they weren't going to pay it anyway, because the tax was unfair, because poor people had to pay the same as rich people.

Father was one of these. "Blow that for a lark," he said (what he actually said was ruder, but we're not allowed to print that here) when the first Poll Tax letter came through the door. "I'm not paying no Poll Tax," he said. "If they want money out of us, they're going to have to find us first!"

He thought for a while. "I know – we could move out of the flat," he said. "Why don't we go and live on a boat – they'd never catch up with us there!"

At this time they were living in a first-floor flat over a chip shop in East London. This was good when you wanted a meal in a hurry, but wasn't so good with the smell of greasy chips and vinegar coming through the windows all night.

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"A boat?!" said Mother. "NO WAY! You must be joking! I'm not living on a BOAT! Boats are cold. And boats are wet. Anyway, I get seasick on boats. If you're going to live on a boat, I'm going to live at my mum's. They'll never catch me there, either, 'cos my mum won't tell on me!"

Well maybe this might have been a solution, but there was one problem. What were they going to do with Sally? Where was she going to live? I mean, she could hardly live in two places at once, could she!

"I don't want you to live in two different places. I want you to live together. I want us all to live together. Why can't we just be like everyone else? Why can't you come and live on the boat, Mum?"

"Because I can't stand boats, that's why."

"Alright, so why can't you come and live at Grandma's, Dad?"

"Because Grandma's flat isn't big enough for your mum and you and me. And anyway, your Grandma and I don't get on very well."

At this point Sally became So Very Annoyed that she stamped off up the stairs, slamming the kitchen door behind her and shouting, "It's not FAIR! Nobody EVER listens to what I want! Why do we always have to do what YOU want?!"

Mother and Father sat in the kitchen and talked about it for a while. They looked at all the possibilities. They looked at the problem frontways, sideways, inside-out and upside-down.

"The big problem," said Mother, "is that Sally's just started her new class at school, so we can't move too far away. She can't go changing schools."

"Well that's alright," said Father. "If she stays with you at your mum's, your mum's flat is just down the road from the school."

"Yes," said Mother, "But I don't think it'd be fair on Mum to have Sally living there all the time. I think she should live with you for some of the time. What about this so-called boat you're thinking of living on? Will that be anywhere near her school?"

"Well," said Father, "as it happens, I've had a bit of good luck. You know Casper?"

"Your friend the housepainter?"

"Correct. Well, he's got a boat."

"What sort of a boat?"

"A narrow boat. One of the old canal boats. He's had it rebuilt and it's very cosy... it's got everything a person might need for living in – two little bedrooms, a kind of bathroom, a kitchen and a sitting room. I could easily live on that."

"With Sally?" asked Mother.

"Sure. There'd be plenty of room."

"Where is it, though? I bet it's miles away out in the countryside somewhere."

"Not at all. As it happens, it's moored by the river bank about a third of a mile away from Sally's school. Eight minutes walk, I should say."

"But how can you live on the boat if your friend Casper's living on it?"

"Because he's going to Holland. He says he can't get a decent job in this country, but he knows a man who needs housepainters in Holland, so he's going to live there for a year. He's been looking for someone to live on the boat and look after it. I wouldn't even have to pay rent – just the cost of the licence for mooring on the river."

"That sounds not bad at all," said Mother.

"If you ask me, it's brilliant," said Father.

"I tell you what," said Mother, "why don't we try it like this? Just for this term, why don't we say that Sally lives with you, on the boat, during the week, when she has to go to school. And then she can stay with me at my mum's at the weekend. That way she gets to spend time with both of us, and she won't be so sad about it. And maybe sometimes we could even go on trips on the boat, during the holidays. Does it work? I mean, can it actually go anywhere?"

"Hmm," said father, "I think so... Casper never goes anywhere on it, because he says that anyone who goes anywhere on a boat is just asking for trouble because something always goes wrong. I think the engine might need a few repairs, but I should be able to do that."

"Good," said Mother. "So it sounds like that's what we could do. Now, we only have one problem..."

"What's that?" said Father.

"The problem is, what's Sally going to think of the idea?"

"I don't know," said Father. "We'll have to ask her."

The next morning was a Sunday morning, with plenty of time to get up really slowly and lazily after reading three chapters of your favourite book all snuggled up under the bed covers with a couple of fat pillows to lean against. It was a cold sort of morning too, and the sun was shining low and bright through the window, so that every time you wriggled in bed little specks of dust danced and floated in the sunbeams. A good morning for porridge and honey and orange juice and a boiled egg and a slice of toast and a quarter of a cup of warm, milky tea, which, as it happened, was exactly what Sally had for her breakfast that morning.

When breakfast was over, Mother put aside her newspaper, Father put aside the spanner he was using to mend the leaking tap, and both together they said:

"Right... Time for a talk, I think."

And then they laughed, because they'd both said the same thing at the same time.

"Sally," said Father, "what would you think about you and me living on a boat together?"

"I thought we talked about this yesterday," said Sally. "What about Mum? Where's she supposed to live?"

"She'll live with your Grandma. And you can stay with her at the weekends."

"No," said Sally. "No, no, no, no, NO! I told you... I want us all to live together... I don't want to live on a boat...!"

And so saying, she stamped out of the kitchen for a second time, and up the stairs and back to her bedroom, and back under the warm, cosy covers of her bed.

"Hrumph!" she said, in a Very Bad Mood, and she decided that the only way to deal with her Very Annoying Parents was to go back to sleep.

But this, my friends, was easier thought than done. It was a cold, cold morning, but that wasn't the problem, because she was wearing her woolly bedsocks and she had the quilt pulled right up to her chin, so she was roasty-toasty warm.

Above her head she could hear the drip-drip of the hot water tank in the attic. Outside her bedroom window she could see the flash- flash of the zebra crossing light. And from down below she could hear the clunk-clunk of Mr Lee busying about in his chip shop. But even all that wasn't the problem.

The reason she couldn't get back to sleep was that THOUGHTS kept blowing round in her head like a flurry of leaves falling off a big tree with a gust of autumn wind. Sally thought and thought and thought, for what seemed like ages, and by the time she finally did fall asleep, she'd thought of six Very Good Reasons why she should not go and live on a boat. As follows:

One, if there's a storm your boat might sink while you're asleep, and you'll drown.

Two, rivers have rats that live in the banks, and they might come on your boat in the night and poo in the breakfast cereal.

Three, you can't run around and play on a boat, because you might fall in the water.

Four, water is wet and water is cold. Yuk!

Five, there's probably no proper toilets on boats. I bet you have to do it in a bucket.

Six, boats don't have nice warm baths like flats do.

By the time Sally woke up again, she was definitely HUNGRY, so she opened the bedroom door and tiptoed downstairs, hoping that nobody was in the kitchen, because she didn't even want to talk about boats.

But there they were, like waxworks dummies, Mother with her head stuck in the newspaper and Father with his head under the sink and his bottom up in the air.

"Are you in a better mood now?" said Mother.

"No," said Sally.

"Well," said Father, emerging from under the sink, "just sit down for a moment and listen to this... I'm not saying you have to live on a boat. But supposing, just supposing you did... What kind of boat do you think you might like to live on?"

Sally sat down and thought for a moment. Then she said, all in one breath, which is really quite hard to do:

"I'd have to have a little bedroom all my own. With a little porthole that I could look out of. And my own cupboard for my clothes. And a big place for my toys. And it'll have to be ever so, ever so warm. And I want a polished shiny wood steering wheel. And I want flower pots on the boat, with red flowers growing in them. And it must have a proper toilet, because I'm not going to wee in the river! So there!"

"Well," said Father, for a second time. "I think we ought to go for a walk this morning. Go and get dressed. Woolly tights and a skirt and a jumper. Wrap up warm, because we're going down to the river, and I think I've got a little surprise for you..."

Chapter 2

THE BOAT

Unless you have a short memory, you will remember that this story won't work if there's any Pinching and Poking and Pulling Faces and Whispering and Giggling and Wriggling and Shuffling Bottoms... So I hope you won't!

Anyway, to continue... Sally went to her room and put on her red woolly jumper and a skirt and tights. Father pulled on his woollen bobble-hat, and off they went for a walk. Down through the Market (which was all shut up because it was a Sunday), and over the main road, to the park. At the top of the hill two grown-ups were trying to fly a kite, but they might as well have not bothered, because their children kept getting tangled in the kite strings, so the kite wouldn't fly at all.

Other kids were roller-skating, and skate-boarding, and cycling, and kicking balls about, and one of the balls was kicked so hard that it rolled and rolled all the way down the hill, with someone's spotty dog yapping after it, and it would have rolled right into the river at the bottom if the iron railings hadn't stopped it. The kids ran down after the ball and Sally and her father followed them. Down to the river bank. They found themselves standing right at the edge of the river, near to the iron bridge that crossed to the other side.

"The cafe's open," said Father. "Do you want a drink, or something?"

"An ice cream."

"An ice cream? It's absolutely freezing, Sally. Sensible people don't eat ice creams on freezing days."

"You asked what I want. I want an ice cream, see?!"

"Since you put it so very charmingly, I shall buy you an ice cream," said Father. "In fact, tell you what, I think I'll have one too. I can't stand George's tea – it's like liquid tar. Why don't you wait here a minute, and I'll go and get the ices."

So Sally waited, on her own, at the side of the river. This was the first time that she'd ever looked at the river from this close up. Usually she only saw it from the top of the hill in the park, where it looked all glisteny and shiny in the sun. Nice, clean water, with lots of ducks and swans and geese, and probably lots of fish too. But now she was seeing it from close up, and it looked very different.

When she looked at the willow tree overhanging the river, what did she see? She saw three old rubber tyres and a plastic milk crate all jammed together in a patch of watery mud, and held together by slimy green river weed.

When she looked down the grassy bank, what did she see? Two metal supermarket trolleys and a rusty crashed motor bike, underwater, with their tops just sticking out.

And further down, a kind of floating island made out of black bin-bags and plastic carrier bags, and bits of plastic rope, and a half-wrecked foam-rubber armchair, all tangled up with each other. And a scattering of broken glass in the grass alongside the towpath.

“And when she looked at the surface of the water, what did she see? Great greasy oil slicks floating on top of the river, with their slimy rainbow colours, and horrid gassy bubbles bloop-blooming up from the river-mud at the bottom.

"This isn't a river," thought Sally. "It's a dustbin." And then she thought, "I don't want to live in a dustbin!"

She stood there, lost in thoughts. Then, suddenly, she became aware of something – a large black shape coming along the river right next to the bank. She looked up. It was a boat. A long, narrow motorised barge, painted dull black all over. She was startled, because she was sure it hadn't been there a moment before. The boat was chug-chugging very slowly along the river bank, and as it drew level with Sally it slowed to a halt.

Whoever was driving it was steering from the back, because she could see someone's hand on the big rudder, but she was surprised to find that the driver was an old lady. She was wearing Wellington boots and corduroy trousers and a thick grey overcoat and a pair of blue woollen gloves and a headscarf which had her so wrapped up that you could only just about see a wisp of grey hair and two twinkling blue eyes.

"Hello," said the Old Lady.

"Um, hello," said Sally, not sure if you were allowed to talk to strangers on the river, because you certainly weren't allowed to on the street where she lived.

"What's your name?" said the Old Lady.

"Huh," thought Sally. "That's rather rude. Why should I tell her my name? I mean, she might be a witch or something. Creeping up on people, like that... So she said: "Before I tell you my name, you must tell me your name."

"My name," said the Old Lady, who didn't seem at all put out by this, "is any name that you care to call me."

"This lady is rather peculiar," thought, Sally. Then she said: "All right... So that's my name too. My name is any name that you care to call me." She decided not to tell the lady her real name, just in case she decided to do magic on her or turn her into a frog or something.

"Well," said the woman. "In that case, I think I'll call you Sally."

"You may call me that if you wish," said Sally – and inside she was very, very pleased with herself, because this meant that she wouldn't have an extra name to remember. This would be very useful. She could be two Sally's – if anybody ever asked her, she could be a pretend Sally, and a real Sally deep down inside, that nobody else knew about.

The Old Lady seemed to have decided to leave. She gave a couple of tugs on the engine throttle, pushed the gearstick into forward drive, and her boat began to move

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away from the river's edge. Since it was moving very slowly, there was still time for a few more words of conversation, and they went as follows:

Old Lady: "What are you doing by the river this morning?"

Sally: "My dad wants me to come and live here on a boat."

Old Lady: "That is a good thing, child. It is a good thing to live on a boat. But if you are coming to live here, there are three things that I should tell you."

Sally: "What three things...?"

And the Old Lady with No Name said:

"First – Always watch out for the Fox.

"Second – Water kills fire, and fire kills water, but beware, because it was fire and water that killed my daughter.

"And third – Don't be scared to ride with the Swan, if she asks.

Sally looked at her, looking right into her twinkly blue eyes, trying hard to understand what she was saying. "What on earth does all that mean?" she thought. She wanted to ask the Old Lady, but by this time it was too late, because the boat's engine was chugging loudly as it strained to move the heavy iron hulk, and the boat was moving slowly away. Sally was sure that one day she'd want to see the Old Lady again, so she shouted after her:

"I've decided what I'm going to call you. Your name's Verity."

Just as she said this, three crows that had been sitting on a log on the opposite bank of the river spread their wings and flapped up into the air, cawing as they went, and for one very strange moment it sounded as if the sound of their cawing was saying, "Caw.... Verity... Caw... Verity..."

And when she looked back along the river to see where the Old Lady had gone, she was nowhere to be seen, and not her boat either. All she saw was large ripples of water, big rings moving outwards, as if some kind of creature, a fish or a frog, had dived into the river.

"This is very odd," thought Sally.

At that moment, Father returned with two vanilla ice cones.

"Right," he said. "Now, to see what we've come to see, we have to cross over that bridge to the other side of the river. Then we have to walk along to the part of the river bank where all those boats are moored. All right? Are you ready?"

"I suppose so," said Sally. But she wasn't sure about this, because that was the direction where the Old Lady had gone. And the river was looking more stinky and rubbishy every time she looked at it.

As they crossed the iron bridge, there were ducks and drakes doing their "bottom dance" – heads down under the water in among the river weed, and their feet and tails wagging in the air as they looked for food on the river bottom. It was a sight silly

enough to make anyone laugh, and Sally laughed out loud when she imagined herself having to eat her lunch like that.

They walked along the river bank, towards the first of the line of boats moored at the river's edge. This, I must say, was the oddest kind of boat that you ever did see. It looked as if its bits didn't really fit together, as if it was really just a big old rowing boat and its cabin and mast and deck and hatches had been tacked on, all higgledy-piggledy, by an amateur woodworker.

What's more, this boat was painted in bright colours of red and orange. Not just ordinary red and orange, but a fluorescent red and orange that seemed to flare up from the riverside like flames. And along the sides of the boat there was a line of black marks running just below the deck line. It was only when you got closer that you realised that they were letters – words, in fact. And not only words, but words that looked as though they came from the Bible. Like: "By the Waters of Babylon, there I lay down..." and "Suffer the little children to come unto me..." What on earth was that all about?

As Sally was about to walk past, one of the hatches on deck flipped open, and a man's head and shoulders popped out. He had a gold ear-ring in one ear, a red scarf knotted round his neck, and long dreadlocks that flicked this way and that as he turned his head. He was holding a torch in one hand, as if he'd been looking for something under the decks.

"Hello Sally," he said.

"How on earth does he know my name?" thought Sally. "And is it my real name, or is it my pretend name that he knows?"

And as she was thinking this, the man said "Welcome to our riverside, Sally. For the little children are a blessing unto the Lord. Woe be to he that brings harm to a child, for he does wrong in the sight of the Lord."

And so saying, he wagged his torch in the air in a friendly wave and disappeared below the hatch again. But he wasn't gone for long. He suddenly reappeared in the middle of the boat, in the cockpit next to the steering wheel. He reached up to the shelf and took down a can of beer, from which he took a long swig. It was then that Sally noticed the oddest thing about him. Despite the fact that it was a freezing cold day, he was wearing only a T-shirt, shorts, white socks and a pair of trainers.

"He must be really cold," thought Sally. No sooner had she thought this than she became aware of a yappy-yappy noise, and over the edge of the cockpit appeared the face of a little dog, barking frantically with its little yappy bark. It was a Yorkshire terrier, the same as Grandma's next-door-neighbour had, and it had a black patch over one eye.

"Down, boy! Shush!" shouted the man. The he turned to Sally:

"My name is John," he said. "And this noisy little creature is called Pirate. And we are pleased to meet you."

Sally presumed that the dog was called Pirate because it had a black patch over one eye. But to tell the truth, the man looked more like a pirate than the dog did. In fact he really looked rather fierce.

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"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said Sally. But even as she was saying this, John and Pirate disappeared inside the boat and showed no sign of coming out again.

"Why do people keep appearing and disappearing like this?" thought Sally. "Why can't they wait around for long enough so's you can make some sense of them...?"

Thinking this thought, she walked along to the next boat. This boat looked even more absolutely odder than the one before. Because it hardly looked like a boat at all. True, it was floating, so Sally supposed it must be a sort of boat – but it looked more like some castaway's raft.

The boat consisted of a collection of oil drums lashed together with ropes. On top of the oil drums was a deck made out of wooden planks. And on the deck was a sort of big tent made out of sheets of plastic and bits of sacking and pieces of cloth and string. All in all it looked like a terrible mess, and Sally wondered how anybody could possibly live on it. There was no sign of life – no faces suddenly appearing to greet her. But somebody must have been on board, because at one corner of the boat was a rickety, ramshackle chimney, and out of it was coming smoke from somebody's fire.

But there were other signs of life... and this was rather peculiar... because this boat, or raft, or whatever it was, had various kinds of farm creatures sitting around on it. Real live creatures, not dummies or models as if someone was playing a joke on you. At one end it had two large wooden boxes that looked rather like dog kennels. They had ramps running up to small doors in front, and around the boxes there were four chickens and two white ducks fussing about, and little chicks and ducklings pattering up and down the ramps. On top of the tent-thing there was a big ginger cat, lying there, with one eye half open, as if it was protecting the ducks and chicks. And at the other end there was a rabbit hutch, of all things, and two grey rabbits were sitting outside it, preening themselves with their paws.

"This is very strange," thought Sally. "It looks like a kind of Noah's Ark!"

And as she thought this, all of a sudden somebody made a move behind her and put their hands over her eyes, right over, so that she couldn't see a thing. For a moment she was scared, because she didn't know who it was. But then she recognised the smell of the soap from the bathroom at home.

"Dad," she shouted... "Don't be so stupid! I can't see where I'm going. I might fall in the river!"

"Don't worry," said Father. I said there was a bit of a surprise for you today. Well, all you have to do is walk twenty steps... Make sure you keep your eyes shut... You can hold my hand, I'll make sure you don't fall in the river... Count to twenty and then open them again."

"That's stupid," said Sally. But she did walk along, and she did keep her eyes shut, because what's the point in spoiling a good surprise.

She walked twenty steps. Listening to the birds and the river sounds all around her. Then she stopped. She counted up to three, and opened her eyes.

I don't need to tell you what the surprise was. It was a boat. And what did they find when they went on board and opened the door at the back? They found – all in one breath, which, as I say, is very hard to do – a little bedroom, all for Sally... with a

little porthole that she could look out of... and her own cupboard for her clothes... and a big place for her toys... and it was ever so, ever so warm... and it had a polished shiny wooden steering wheel... and it had flower pots on it with red flowers growing in them... and it had what I forgot to mention last time, a lovely shaggy carpet... and it had a little door marked "Toilet", which meant that Sally wouldn't have to wee in the river! And as if that wasn't enough, there was a little note pinned to the door, which said: "Welcome to our riverside, Sally."

"Oh dear, oh dear," thought Sally. "Whatever shall I do now? I mean, how can I not want to live on a boat that's got all the things I wanted on it?"

Father could probably see that Sally was teetering on the edge of making up her mind, because he said: "Why don't you step out onto the bank for a moment?"

Sally climbed off the boat and stood on the river bank.

"Look down there," said Father, pointing to the back of the boat next to the rudder.

Sally looked where he was pointing. At first she wondered what she was supposed to be looking at. Then she saw that the boat had its name painted on the back, in black and gold letters. And its name was... *Sally's Pride*.

Well, when you've got a boat that's got your very own name, very definitely how can you not want to live on it?

So Sally said, just the tiniest bit grumpily because really she'd decided that she liked the idea of living here, "Oh, alright then, I will live on the boat!"

Chapter 3

ANNIE'S ARK

I'm assuming that you've remembered what you have to remember at the start of each chapter, so I won't say it again. I continue:

Well, you never saw such a performance as moving house onto a boat. Five days later, Sally's father borrowed a van from a friend, Mother drove the van, and they began moving their various bits and pieces from the flat down to the riverside.

Loading the van was the easy bit. Getting the things onto the boat was another matter. Since the boat was moored right along the river bank, they had to use a wheelbarrow to move the stuff. Mother unloaded the van, while Father puffed and grunted and carried the furniture; Sally carried the little things, like saucepans and towels and plates and teddy bears and pencil boxes; then Father puffed and grunted some more; and after a few hours it was all finished. They had arrived at their new home. Mother wished them well, and Sally kissed her goodbye and made her promise to come back the next day because she knew she'd be missing her.

By now it was late afternoon, and since it was December, by the time Sally had waved goodbye to her mum it was already beginning to get dark.

"Sally," said Father, "I'm going to sort out something for tea for us. While I'm cooking, why don't you take a look at the riverside. You like exploring, don't you."

"OK," said Sally.

"But wrap up warm again," he said, because Sally had taken off her coat and scarf.

So off she went, off the boat and onto the riverbank, all ready to explore, and wondering what she would find.

She walked past the strange raft-boat with the ducks and chickens. She came alongside John's boat, thinking of nothing in particular, and as she looked up, she saw him. He was standing up on deck. Watching something down in the water. Hard to tell what it was, in the fading light. It looked like a tangled mass of riverweed. But in the middle there was something light-coloured, a kind of grey, or maybe it was a dirty white.

As Sally looked to see what it was, she saw it move slightly. At first she'd thought it was just river rubbish, but now she saw that it was the head of a bird. Some kind of seagull in fact. And it seemed to be tangled up in the weed.

As Sally looked on, John-who-Looked-like-a-Pirate reached up onto the roof of his cabin. He seemed not to have noticed Sally. From the roof he took a long wooden oar that looked like he'd fished it out of the river. He stepped onto the bank, and as Sally watched and wondered what he was doing, he raised the oar slowly and deliberately above his head and brought it crashing down on the seagull.

The first blow struck the seagull on the wing, because the bird saw the blow coming and feebly tried to duck away. At the second blow he hit its head, and then he hit it again and again until finally, in the end, the bird stopped moving, because it was dead.

Sally couldn't say a word. She couldn't speak, she couldn't run, she couldn't even move, because what she was watching seemed so horrible. Then all of a sudden she broke into a long, tearful shout. "You horrible, horrible man," she shouted. "How could you do such a terrible thing to a poor harmless bird!" And with tears in her eyes she turned to run back down the riverbank.

As she ran, she came to the raft boat with its floating ducks and chickens, and suddenly a voice called over to her. "What's the matter, little girl?" It was a soft voice, a woman's voice.

Sally looked around. At first she couldn't see anyone, but then she saw that the flap of the tent-thing on top of the raft was pulled to one side and a woman's head was peering out. All Sally could see was that she had large golden-looking ear-rings, and that her black hair was done up in a bun at the back, with a bright yellow comb pinned through it.

"Hello," said the woman. "Why are you crying? Tell me."

Still sobbing, Sally told her what she had seen.

"I know," said the young woman. "I saw it too."

"It was horrible, horrible," said Sally. "He was just killing the poor seagull for no reason at all."

"Now just stop a minute," said the woman. "There's a couple of things I think you should know. Do you think you can stop crying?"

Sally said, "I think so." And she did – more or less, because crying's a bit like a leaky tap, you can't always turn it off just because you want to.

The woman said: "Well, first of all, John isn't a horrible man. He's very gentle and he's very kind and he wouldn't hurt a fly. The trouble is, you only saw part of what happened. What you didn't see was that about ten minutes ago there was a dog on the river bank. It came running along, and somehow it managed to get hold of the seagull. It mauled the bird. It tore its wing so badly that it was almost hanging off. That's why the gull got tangled up in the river weed. It was trying to escape, but it couldn't fly properly. And I think the dog had bitten into the bird's body as well. The poor gull was next to dead..."

Sally had stopped crying, and she was thinking. She hated to think of anything being dead. She never wanted anyone or anything to die, not ever, not her friends, not her relations, not anybody at all, not even horrid buzzy-buzzy flies that come and bite your legs in the summer, or slimy slugs, or beetles in the school toy cupboard, not anything whatever. So it was hard for her to see a seagull hit over the head and killed like that.

"Couldn't you have saved it? You could have brought it onto your Ark here. You could have looked after it."

"My Ark! That's a brilliant name! I've always thought of my boat as a little farm, but now you mention it, it could be an ark. That's a really good idea. That's what I'll call it from now on. *Annie's Ark*. Annie's my name, you see. This is where I live...

"But that bird would never have been able to fly again," she continued. "It really was half dead. John was right to kill it. He did it to stop the bird suffering, because sometimes, if animals are in pain and are going to die anyway, it's best to kill them quickly and get it over with. So you mustn't think badly of John for what you saw. Now, tell me, what's your name?"

For some reason, Sally felt that she could trust this woman. So instead of telling her her made-up name, she said her real name.

"My name's Sally."

"Well," said the woman, "welcome to our riverside, Sally. Would you like to come on board my boat?"

Sally wasn't sure that she should. But after all, Father had told her she could go exploring. So she said "Yes please", and stepped aboard.

"Mind the chicks and ducklings," said Annie, and she held the tent flap to one side to let Sally come in.

The amazing thing was that the tent-thing looked like a pile of rubbish on the outside, but on the inside it looked like an Eastern palace. There was a bed in one corner and two chairs in another, next to a low table. The walls were hung with rugs in reds and greens and browns, decorated with patterns. There was a heavy wooden chest of drawers which had tins on top marked with the names of foodstuffs – Flour, Rice, Tea etc. There was a wicker washing basket, and another basket with neatly folded clothes in it. For washing there was a little copper sink, and for heating there was a small pot-bellied stove which was spluttering cheerfully with bright, burning logs. There were cushions on the floor, for sitting on, and a teddy bear and a toy penguin on the bed, propped against the pillows. Annie was wearing a long cotton dress, made of strips of red and dark green material, and the red bits had green flowers, while on the green strips the flowers were red. Sally noted that there was a padded cat basket, which she presumed was for the ginger cat sitting on the roof.

As Sally looked into the nooks and crannies of Annie's strange home on water, she was bursting with questions to ask. Who was John? Why was he living there? Who was Verity, the old lady on the barge? And what had she meant, about foxes and swans and fire and water? She didn't want to appear rude, though, so she just asked:

"How did you come to be living here, on Annie's Ark?"

Annie said: "Do you have a minute or two?"

Sally said: "I think so. I'm supposed to be out exploring."

So Annie beckoned to Sally to sit down, leaned back against a big cushion on the floor, and began her story:

"You see, it's like this. I've lived on a boat for years and years. Not all of my life, but probably for most of it. I was even bom on a boat! Imagine it – my parents lived on a

boat. Quite a big boat. A catamaran. A boats with two hulls and a mast in the middle. Down on the South coast it was, just down the coast from Garmouth in fact. And, like I say, that was where I was born. The doctor had to row out to us in a rowing boat before he could bring me into the world. And that rowing boat was like having a car – it took me to school, it fetched the shopping, it brought my friends to play. And it was quite handy, really, being born on a boat, because nobody needed to rock my cradle when I was a baby – the movement of the waves did all the rocking instead.

"Anyway, as I say, I lived on the boat when I was little. Then, when I went to school, I sometimes used to stay with my Uncle Harry, who lived in a proper house on land. Then I left school and went to college, and by the time I finished college, my mum and dad decided that it was time for them to move off the boat.

"So they asked me if I wanted to have it. I thought about it, and thought about it, and then I thought, 'Well, why not?!' So I went to live on the boat on my own.

"But the trouble is, it's not so easy when you're young and on your own, and a girl. People think you're weird. A single woman living on a boat, all on her own! Oh dear no! They started putting round all kinds of stories about me. Like that I was a mermaid and slept in the sea at night. Or that I was waiting for a sailor to marry me. Some of the fishermen would shout stupid things at me as they went out to sea. And a lot of people were waiting, just waiting, for something to go wrong.

"And one night something did go wrong. Very wrong. A storm blew up. Now, where I was moored the water was usually fairly safe. It was sheltered from the South wind, and the West wind, and the East wind, and it was very unusual for a North wind to cause me any trouble. But on this particular night it did. The North wind was whistling down, and it was hitting an incoming tide, and this meant that it was making big waves. Very big waves. And as a result, my boat started heaving up and down like a wild bucking horse.

"I had the boat well chained down – it wasn't moored to an anchor, but to a great slab of concrete buried in the river-bed as a mooring. But with the waves slapping against my boat, the boat heaved up and down, until in the end the strain was too great for the mooring chain, and the chain snapped.

"Now this was no joke. It was a filthy night. A dark night, with a raging wind blowing... And I was adrift.

"What was I supposed to do?

"I thought of raising one of the sails, but I don't think I could have got a sail up, in that wind. And anyway the sails were in a terrible state. For a while they'd been stored in Uncle Harry's garden shed, and the rats had gnawed holes in them. You see, we never actually went anywhere on our catamaran... so we'd never really needed sails...

"Then I decided to try to start the boat's little inboard engine. At first it wouldn't start, but I tried and tried, and finally it did. For about thirty seconds it ran just fine, but then all of a sudden it stopped. Thinking about it afterwards, I reckon it must have been a blockage in the fuel line. Anyway, I tried and tried to re-start it, but all I succeeded in doing was running the battery flat.

"Luckily we had another battery for the lights on the boat, so at least I could see what I was doing... But it was terrifying, with the boat pitching up and down on the

waves... And then I realised what was happening. Like I say, the wind was driving from the North, against a tide that was coming in from the South. It was the force of the wind against the force of the tide that was making the big waves, and even in the darkness of the night I could see the white streaks of foam on top of the waves as they crashed and roared all around me.

"The worst thing was that I realised that the wind was driving me – steadily and unstoppably – to the mouth of the harbour, and in no time at all I would be driven out onto the high seas. Alone. At night. In a storm. With no sails or engine, and a rocky coast just round the corner from the harbour mouth.

"My mother always taught me one thing when we lived on the boat: If you ever find yourself in trouble on a boat, drop anchor as soon as you can.

"So I made my way up onto the deck. I had to go forward very carefully, for fear that I might get knocked off or tipped off, and it wasn't easy, trying to hold onto the boat railings with one hand and picking up the anchor with the other. I let go of the railings for a moment, lifted the anchor – which was heavy, let me tell you – and I heaved it over the side of the boat. The chain on the anchor rattled and clanked over the side of the boat, and I had to be careful that the chain didn't catch me round the ankle and take me with it.

"As the anchor hit the sand at the bottom of the harbour, the chain hung slack for a moment, but then the driving force of the wind pulled it tight, as tight as a bowstring, and I waited, hoping as hard as I could hope, to see if the anchor would stop the boat drifting.

"Now, when you're on dark water on a dark night with half a gale blowing (the next day, the radio said that the winds were up to eighty miles an hour on the sea coast) and the waves walloping you around, it's really quite hard to tell if you're moving or not. The best way is to look at the street lights on land. Find two that are more or less in line. Watch them carefully. If the distance between them moves, it means that you must be moving, because street lamps don't move – at least, not usually.

"So I found two street lamps, and watched them. I only had to watch for a few seconds to realise that my anchor wasn't holding on the sea bottom. To this day I don't know why... But the fact was that my boat was still moving, and dragging the anchor with it.

"It felt as if all this had taken hours, but it could only have been a few minutes. My brain must have been working hard, thinking of all the possible terrible things that might happen to me, and all the possible things I might do to stop them.

"I reckoned that the best thing to do was to try and warn someone that I was in trouble – so that if I did get washed out to sea with no sails and no engine, at least someone might get the lifeboat launched and come and save me. I didn't fancy being drowned that night, not least for the very good reason that this was a Friday night, and the next night my best friend was having her twenty-first birthday party, and I wanted to be there! So I'd rather have saved drowning for another day.

"I reached under the bench by the steering wheel and pulled out the flare gun – a big pistol sort of thing – and I fitted a flare into it. I pointed it upwards and pulled the trigger. Bang! The flare shot up in the sky, bright red, trailing smoke as it went, and then came down slowly, slowly in the night sky. If I hadn't been so busy trying to

save my life it would have been nice to watch it – it was very pretty, after all. But I was just hoping that someone, somewhere would see it.

"I turned round to go back into the cabin. I looked back through the cabin window, past the little flag mast at the back, and I tried to work out how long it would be before the wind would drive me out to sea – because all this time I was being driven backwards, with the anchor chain stretching over the bows and the anchor dragging on the sand. But then I realised, with horror, that because of the direction of the wind I wasn't being driven out of the harbour mouth at all... I was being driven straight towards the harbour wall, which was towering huge and stoney, about the height of my mast.

"I could see some people running about on the jetty – they must have seen my flare. But just as I couldn't think of anything that / could do, I couldn't imagine anything they could do, either.

"If I didn't have my anchor down, I think I would have hit the harbour wall in about three minutes. But with the anchor dragging, the boat was moving more slowly. I reckoned it would be seven or eight minutes. And when I did hit it, it would do terrible damage. Not because I would be hitting at speed – but because the wind-driven waves were crashing against the harbour wall, and then rearing up to crash again, and the waves would have smashed my boat against the granite stones.

"I think, if I'd believed in God, I would have said a prayer. I think if I'd really stopped to think what was happening I might have screamed or started crying. But I didn't do either. It was like watching a film – sitting there, watching some horror movie, and wondering what was going to happen at the end. It was as if I wasn't even really there at all, but just me watching myself.

"And as I watched this, I noticed that the lights on the harbour tug boat suddenly came on. The tug boat was usually moored inside the harbour wall. It did all kinds of odd jobs around the harbour, and Peter, who owned it, sometimes slept on board if he knew he was going to be needed for a job early the next morning. He was obviously on board at that moment, because not only did he switch on his lights, but he was starting his engine too. You could see it by the way the boat's lights dimmed when he pressed the starter button.

"What was he doing? Had he seen my flare? Was he going to try to help me? And if he was, what on earth was he going to do?

"I reckoned that by now I had about four minutes before I hit the wall. I watched Peter's tug. He was starting to move. His tug was moving – but it was moving backwards, and the odd thing was that he had dropped his anchor. He must have been feeding out his anchor chain at the same time as his boat was moving backwards. For a moment I wondered why on earth he was doing this. But when I saw that he was driving the tug right across the path of my boat, I understood. He was stretching his anchor chain across the path of my boat, in the hopes that my anchor would catch on it, and that my boat would stop.

"The wind was still whipping me along. The waves were still tossing and crashing all around. And a small crowd had gathered on top of the jetty. They must have come out of the pub on the quayside. Better than watching the pub TV, I suppose. But if they were waiting for me to crash against the wall, they were going to be disappointed... Because Peter's trick worked. My anchor caught on his anchor chain, the chain pulled tight, and it stopped my boat from drifting. I came to a halt about thirty feet from the wall.

"This wasn't quite the end of my troubles, though, because I was right next to one of the mooring buoys that they use for the big cargo ships, and the waves were dashing my boat against it, and it was making a terrible mess of my rudder. Luckily Peter saw this and drove his tug in a half-circle away from the harbour wall, and this pulled me out of harm's way.

"Now, let me tell you... I never want another night like that for as long as I live. By the time I got ashore, I was shaking and shivering, not so much with the cold and the wet, more with just being frightened. I still have dreams about it, about what might have happened.

"And all the stupid people who had been just waiting for something like this to happen, were happy. They never said so to my face, but they said it behind my back – 'What do you expect... a single girl living on a boat... ' 'What do girls know about boats anyway...' 'A proper sailor would never have got into trouble like that...'

"Well, let me tell them this... With a wind like that and waves like that, anybody's mooring chain could have snapped. Man or woman, boy or girl. And there's no way anybody could have got a sail up in time. And it was just bad luck that my engine wouldn't start. So it's got nothing to do with me being a girl, or anything so silly and stupid as that.

"A change came over me then, though. I didn't want to live on the sea coast any more. I don't think it was because I was scared – I could have found myself a safer mooring somewhere. It was more that I was fed up with all their silly comments. I decided to move inland. I decided I'd sell my catamaran and find myself a nice quiet river somewhere, where I could live. So that's why I came to London, and that's how come I live on this river here..."

Annie had come to the end of her story. In the time that she had taken to tell it, the sky had become even darker outside. Her words seemed to hang in the air for a moment. Then, as she reached across to the stove and prepared to put the kettle on, Sally was even more bursting with questions. Who built Annie's Ark? Was it safe to live on? Why the ducks and the chickens? And most of all, would there ever be storms like that on this river. The questions were racing round and round in her head, but before she could put them into words she heard her father calling.

"Sally, Sally, where are you?"

Sally put her head through the tent flap.

"I'm here, Dad. On Annie's Ark."

"On what... ? Oh, there you are – well, come on, it's time to eat." Sally turned to Annie. "It looks like I've got to go."

"That's a shame," said Annie.

"And there are so many things I wanted to ask you..."

"Never mind – they'll keep till next time. You must come round for a talk again."

"I will," said Sally, and so saying she went back to her boat – her very own boat – for her supper.

Chapter 4

THE SWAN

As I go through life, I find that, as far as books are concerned, there are two kinds of people – there are the ones who like to gobble a book down all at one go, reading it from cover to cover hardly pausing for breath, and there are the ones who like to read it a chapter at a time, pausing for a breather in between, and preparing themselves for whatever surprises the next chapter might bring. I'm one of the second kind. I'm of the opinion that life's surprises deserve to be looked at one at a time, and properly thought about.

This morning was a case in point. This morning I was out for a walk up the river. Right at the point where the railway runs along the river's edge, just upstream from the old abandoned fishing boat. There, on the beach, I found a dead sheep. Or rather, not so much dead as killed. It was lying on its back, its belly was slit right open, and someone or something had eaten one of its legs. Now, there were a few things about this sheep that were rather strange. First of all, where the poor beast's belly was torn open, from head to tail, you could actually see, inside it, everything that it had been eating. It was not full of grass, as you might expect. It was full of grains of cereal. Oats, perhaps, or barley, I'm not enough of an expert to know. The poor thing looked like a sack of grain, torn open and just left there. But, as far as I know, there's not a field of grain to be found, at this time of year, within two miles of us. So here was a question – where had the sheep been feeding? Maybe at the farm. But the farm is a good three quarters of a mile away. So – second question – how did the sheep end up here, on the river beach, on the other side of a mainline railway, and at the bottom of quite a steep embankment? Had it strayed here of its own accord, wandering down the railway line, and then been killed? Or had it been killed by some immensely powerful animal which had then dragged it down here to eat it? And the third thing I wondered about was this – what strange circumstance is it that leads human beings to build their wooden boats in a shape that is so similar to animals? When you see a dead boat and a dead sheep on a seashore, they look strikingly similar – the way their backbones lie along the beach, and the way their poor rotting ribs reach upwards to the sky, slowly bleaching in the sun.

Anyway, that's enough of dead sheep. You may be wondering what Sally had for her supper that night. Well, that is a question that is easily answered.

"Where did you say you were, Sally?" said Father. "I was beginning to worry about you.

"I was talking to the lady on the boat next door. Her name's Annie."

"That's good. Good thing to meet the neighbours. Best take your coat off, now, because we're going to eat. And leave your boots next to the door... I've put your furry slippers there... I think we should make that a house rule – or rather a 'boat' rule – no muddy boots in the living quarters... I don't want to have to be sweeping up after you all the time..."

"Well actually, thought Sally, I don't think that's very likely, because when we lived in the flat I think I only ever saw you sweep up about twice in all the time that we lived there..." But she didn't say this out loud, because fathers don't usually like to be told this kind of thing. Instead she said:

"What's for supper, Dad?"

And Father said: "What would you like for supper?"

"Chicken!"

"That's good," said Father.

"Why?" said Sally. "Is that what we're having?"

"No."

"No?!! So why did you say 'that's good' then?"

"Well, because we're sort of having chicken."

"What do you mean, 'sort of'?"

"Scrambled eggs, mashed potato and beans," said Father, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Sally turned pink with indignation, drew herself up to her full height of three feet nine and a half inches, put her hands on her hips, and half said and half shouted:

"Dad, I hate eggs. You know I never eat eggs. I've hated eggs for ever and ever and ever. Ever since I was born, I've hated eggs. Even before I was born, probably. Even before I was thought of, even. Eggs are disgusting. And anyway, as well you know, every time I eat eggs I get eggy-burps and eggy you-know-whats..."

Father, who didn't like being talked to like he was the village idiot, said:

"Well, first of all, just for your information, these are 'Grade- One-Free-Range-Freshly-Laid-Absolutely-the-Best-Eggs-You-Can- Get' eggs, and in my opinion they won't give you eggy-burps. And second of all, the nearest shops are half a mile away up the hill, and they're probably all shut by now anyway. So, if you're not eating this, you're not eating ANYTHING, because this is all we've got...! All right... ? Understood... ?"

"Not a lot of point in arguing," thought Sally. But she thought she'd have just one last go. "And anyway," she said, "why did you say that supper is 'sort of chicken?'"

"Well," said Father, "an egg is a sort of a chicken, isn't it? It's just a rather-small-not-quite-a-chicken-yet sort of chicken."

"Har, har, very funny," said Sally, who hated people making fun of her. Then she added: "Pigface!"

"Sensible girls, said Father, "do not call their dads 'Pigface', because they just might not get their pocket money next weekend."

"Oh poo!" said Sally, and she settled down to eat her supper with a face that looked like she was being made to eat poison.

Now, I might tell you that eating supper on a narrow-boat isn't like eating supper in a house or a flat. For a start, the table's smaller, so you'd really best be friends with the person you're eating with, because they're more or less sitting in your lap. And it's somehow darker, too, because you use oil lamps. Or if you use electric lamps, the light bulbs are smaller, because there isn't any mains electricity and everything runs off batteries. And it's much, much cosier, because instead of having radiators or a gas fire, there's a little black stove with a shiny black chimney pipe and a glass window in front and glowing red-hot coals behind it, and everything's roasty-toasty warm, even in winter. And what is best of all about a boat is that every time another boat passes along the river, the waves of its wake make you bobble up and down and knock gently against the bank.

"Boats," thought Sally, "are really quite a Good Thing."

"Would you mind doing the washing-up, Sally?" said Father, when supper was finished. "Don't bother about the pans – I'll do them. I'm afraid I burnt the bottom of the bean pan..."

"I noticed," said Sally.

"And if you can do it without washing-up liquid, so much the better."

"Why's that, Dad?" said Sally, puzzled.

"Because the sink water goes straight down the drain pipe and into the river, and we don't want a frothy river, do we...!"

"Why not?" thought Sally. Then an Alarming Thought popped into her head. Quick as a flash she asked: "Dad – we don't have to drink the water from the river, do we?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, where do we get water for drinking? In fact..." (and now the thought became even more alarming) "...do I have to brush my teeth with river water?"

"No," said Father. "You've no need to worry about that. We get our drinking water from a tap on the other side of the river, so every day I'll be rowing over to fill a couple of containers."

"Oh that's all right, then," said Sally. But she rather wished that she hadn't thought this alarming thought, because where one alarming thought comes, another one generally follows.

The supper things were cleared away in almost no time at all – hardly surprising, since they were only two plates, two forks and two mugs – and Sally went to the front end of the boat to prepare herself for bed. Or rather, to prepare her things for bed, because Teddy Bear, and her best doll Lucy, and Pink Elephant from Berlin, and three small Trolls and a pencil box and a colouring book and her small library of books had to be arranged just so, nice and tidy, some of them on the shelf above her bed and some of them next to her pillow (not her pencil case, of course, because you'd hardly want to cuddle up with a pencil case, would you!)

Teeth were brushed, pyjamas were put on, a wee was done, and it was time for bed.

"What story would you like tonight, Sally?"

"I don't know, Dad. Why don't you choose?"

"How about '*Sinbad the Sailor*'?"

"Oh no, Dad... too scary..."

"Or maybe '*Ten Famous Shipwrecks*'...?"

"No, Dad... too scary again..."

"Or how about '*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*'?"

Sally was just about to say "too scary" again when she stopped... "DAD!" she said. "Stop it! You're doing that deliberately! I don't want scary sea stories. I want a nice, safe, warm, cosy, only-happens- on-land story. And," she added, "I want one with a happy ending."

"Fair enough," said Father. "In that case I'll read you *Cinderella* – the one with the big pictures and the sticky jam stain on page ten, just where she's dancing with the Prince, splat, right between the eyes! Ha, ha!"

So Father cuddled up close to Sally, and Sally cuddled up close to Father (actually, they didn't have a lot of choice, because Sally's bed was rather narrow), and Father read the story. And not only did he read it once, he read it twice, all the way through. There were two reasons for this. One was that Sally liked *Cinderella*. The other was that Father was rather hoping that by the time he finished the second read-through, Sally would be fast asleep.

But not a bit of it! By the time Father got up to go, Sally was still absolutely, totally and extremely wide awake. Hugely wide awake, in fact. And the reason for this was that she was having more Alarming Thoughts.

At first she just thought them in her head. But then she cuddled up ever so close to Teddy Bear and whispered them in her ear. This was quite comforting, but the trouble with Teddy Bears is that they don't say much by way of providing answers. So, ages and ages later, when she heard Father shuffling around in the middle of the boat and heard the light switch click, which meant that he was going to bed, Sally was still awake, and still wanted answers for several important questions.

Just as Father was settling down and beginning to doze off nicely, there came a still, small voice in the night:

"Da-a-a-d... D'you think we'll sink in the night?"

A grunt. "No, Sally, I don't think we'll sink in the night." "Da-a-a-d... How can you be sure we won't sink in the night?" "Because I know we won't, that's how."

"But Dad, how do you know we won't sink in the night?"

Another grunt. Getting more annoyed. "Sally, there is Absolutely No Reason why we should sink in the night."

"But what if there's a storm, Dad?" She was thinking of Annie's story.

"Sally, you don't get storms on weeny little rivers like this. Stop being silly and get to sleep."

"I can't, Dad... I keep thinking I see us sinking..."

"Well," said Father, "even if we do sink, it really doesn't matter, because we'll come to absolutely no harm at all."

"Why not, Dad?"

"Because this river is so full of silt and mud and gunge and debris that our boat is actually just about sitting on the bottom anyway. So even if we do sink, we couldn't sink more than nine inches at the most. And that's hardly going to drown us...! So there!"

"Oh," said Sally. And this seem to provide a sort of an explanation. It didn't answer all her other questions, about witches and swans and foxes and everyone seeming to know her name even without her telling them, and people who looked like pirates, but at least she knew that she wasn't going to sink in the night. So finally, at ever so long last, at what must have been nearly midnight, she fell asleep.

Now, who knows where dreams come from? I don't. Dreams have always struck me as rather strange things. One minute – and it can even happen when you're wide awake – one minute, you're sitting there, thinking nothing in particular, and the next, the most peculiar things pop into your head.

Sally's dreams on this particular night were perfectly normal sorts of dreams. She was with her best friends from school, Francie, and Billy D. (who, in case you're wondering, is a girl, not a boy), and Philippina, and little Tam-Tam, and they were having a birthday party. The usual sort of party, where everyone screams and yells and goes completely mad, running all over the house. Sally dreamed about all the things they had to eat, and all the things they had to drink, and all the lovely presents she got (needless to say, it was her birthday party), and all the games they played – in which she could have won all the prizes, except that she was so generous that she let everyone else win instead... An entirely normal sort of dream, in fact. Except, that is... except for the very last game of all.

This game was the simplest of the lot. Sally just had to shut her eyes and count to twenty, while all the others went to hide. Then she had to go and find them, and the last one to be found won the prize.

So, in her dream, Sally shut her eyes and began counting – one, two, three, right up to nineteen and a half, nineteen and three quarters and TWENTY! "Ready or not, I'm coming," she shouted. And, in her dream, she opened her eyes.

But what a shock! She wasn't at a party, she wasn't in a house, she wasn't even in a street. When she opened her eyes she found herself – still in her dream – in the middle of a field. In a field, surrounded by hedges, with tall green hills in the distance, and leafless trees standing in clusters, and no sign of any sheep or cows or anything like that – for the very simple reason that this field was flooded. And the

The Sally Stories

reason that the field was flooded was because, at one end of it, a river ran, and the river had broken through its bank, and the waters had come flooding through. Sally, much to her surprise, was standing in mud, quite rooted to the spot, in her black shiny party shoes, her white party socks and her mauve velvet party dress, and every time she moved, the muddy field water splashed and gurgled and splattered and made her so muddy that by the end of just a couple of steps she looked a perfect mud-ball.

"This," thought Sally, "is absolutely GROSS! I mean, who wants to be up to their knees in mud in the middle of a field when they're supposed to be at a PARTY!"

She decided to splash through the muddy water, along the hedge at the edge of the field, and climb up onto the river bank. Easier said than done, because there were brambles and thorns that kept trying to snag her party dress. But in the end she made it to the top of the bank. And there she saw a curious sight.

The river wasn't a regular sort of river that goes from A to B in a straight line with no messing about in between. Not a bit of it. It was a wandering river. A meandering river. A river that curled and snaked this way and that, as if it couldn't make up its mind where it was going, or even, for that matter, whether it was going anywhere at all. It was the sort of river that you could make by doing squirly squiggles all across a sheet of paper with a pen, and, what is more, it was fairly racing along with flood water. Swirling and bubbling and eddying along as only a flooding river can.

But not everything was rushing about in this flurry of mad movement, because at one of the bends of the river it was rather wider than elsewhere, and in the middle of this bend was a little muddy island barely a yard and a half across, and on top of this little muddy island was a large, higgledy-piggledy nest made out of twigs and reeds, and on top of the nest of twigs and reeds sat a swan. A large, white swan, with a black and orange beak, and bright, jet-black eyes.

Sally saw the swan, and the swan saw Sally.

The swan seemed happy enough, just sitting there with the flood water swirling past on either side. Sally, however, was definitely not happy. She was getting muddier by the minute, and she was cold and wet.

At length the swan looked over to Sally. She said (for the swan was a she)... she said: "You don't look very happy, little girl."

And Sally said, in her usual charming way: "Of course I'm not very happy! What do you expect?! One minute I'm at a party, and the next I'm up to my knees in muddy water! Yuk! I Want To Go Home!"

And the swan said: "Little girl, I think there's something worrying you, too."

And Sally said: "How d'you mean?"

And the swan said: "I think you have a few questions in your mind that you want answered."

And Sally said: "Well, that's true enough. But, to be honest, at this precise moment I think I'd rather be getting home."

And the swan said: "Well, child, if you will ride with me, I shall take you home. Not only shall I take you home, but I shall also do my best to answer your questions. Because it is good to ask questions in life, but it is also good to find answers."

Sally didn't know what to say. I mean, nobody in their right minds goes riding around on the backs of swans, do they! What's more, she was a bit taken aback. After all, she'd been waiting to find out about a swan. Remember? The old lady's swan: "Don't be afraid to ride with the swan if she asks you." And this must obviously have been the swan the old lady was talking about. So what to do? Sally thought about it, and thought again, and then, at long last, she said:

"Alright, I will ride with you."

And just as she said "I will", tap-tap-tap, there came a noise in her head, tap-tap-tap, a noise which didn't seem to be in her dream, tap-tap-tap, and the things in her dream began to disappear, tap-tap-tap, first the field and the river disappeared, tap-tap-tap, and then the swan disappeared, tap-tap-tap, and in a flash there was no dream at all, but only the sound of tap-tap-tap, and Sally was wide awake, tap-tap-tap.

Since she could still hear the noise, she knew it couldn't be part of her dream. In fact it seemed to be coming from somewhere close by her ear. She heard it again – tap-tap-tap – and decided that it must be coming from outside the boat.

So Sally reached over and undid the screws on the little porthole that was by her bed. She tried to look out. The porthole was rather small, so it wasn't easy, but if she leaned up a bit she could just about see what it was. Nothing that a sensible person would get alarmed about. It was two grey and brown ducks. And they were pecking at the side of the boat.

"Dad," she yelled, "Dad, there's two ducks eating the boat! Quick, Dad... They're trying to peck their way through the side of the boat... Da-a-a-ad!"

As you can imagine, Father was still half asleep, and certainly not in the mood for nonsense.

"Go back to sleep, Sally... it's horribly early,,,"

"But really, Dad, there's two ducks and they're trying to eat the boat!"

So in the end Father had no choice but to shift himself and shuffle over to have a look.

"Sally," he said, speaking very slowly and deliberately, "ducks cannot eat boats that are made of solid steel. Ducks like to eat green things like leaves and riverweed. If you take a look at the side of our boat, you will see that it is painted green. Because our boat is green, the ducks think that it is green riverweed. That is why they are pecking at it. They are definitely not trying to eat the boat."

"Oh," said Sally, rather sheepishly. "Silly ducks..."

"Oh," said Father, with a sigh. "Silly Sally...!"

And so began their first and proper day on board their new boat-home.

Chapter 5

JOHN'S STORY

Not many laughs in this chapter. Rather a serious chapter, in fact. Still, a bit of seriousness does no harm. So, here we go:

"Da-a-a-ad," shouted Sally, hopping back into bed, "it's co-o-o-old... I'm fre-e-e-ezing!"

"Sally," said Father, "first of all, there's no need to shout, because I'm only about six feet away from you. Second of all, I know it's cold. That's because I had the fire in the stove damped down last night. I'll stoke it up, and we'll be warm in no time at all. You snuggle up in bed and I'll see to it.

"OK, Dad."

"Dum-de-dum-de-dum," Sally started humming to herself. Father busied himself with the stove. Sally looked round the boat. The sight of a bunch of yellow bananas on the breakfast table reminded her of something. She began singing, at the top of her voice: "We all live in a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine..." A good boaty sort of song to start the day with. Then she sang the same line over again, because she couldn't remember the rest of the words. And again. And again. Seven times, in fact, until in the end Father said: "Oh for goodness sake, Sally...! Can't you just be quiet and read, or something...?"

So she did. She curled up in the corner of the bed and began to read.

But moments later she heard someone else singing... "We all live in a yellow submarine..." It was a man's voice, and it was coming from outside the boat. And as he finished each line there was a yappy noise – yap-yap-yap – and Sally knew who it was even without looking. It was John from the first boat, with his dog Pirate.

She leaned across and looked out of the porthole on the river side. There was John, in a rowing boat, fetching water from across the river. He saw her face at the porthole, and called across: "Hello, Sally! What's this – no school today?"

"I'm on half term. Holiday."

"Well in that case," said John, "why don't you let me show you round a bit. If you've got time, that is. I could show you the sights of the river in my rowing boat. Not straight away, mind you, because I've got to go for a run first. Very important, start the day with a run. I'll be back by half ten.. I'll call round for you..."

"Maybe," said Sally, not completely sure if she wanted to go, but before she could gather her thoughts, John was gone, rowing off down the river, still singing his song,

with Pirate joining in – yap-yap- yap – and some of the ducks joining in too – quaaack, quaaack.

Sally looked at the little clock on the shelf over her bed. Half past nine. What to do now? She leaned on her elbows and looked out of the porthole on the other side, next to the river bank. She supposed that if she went rowing with John, he might get round to explaining himself at last. "Hmm," she thought, "maybe I will..."

The odd thing about looking out of the porthole on the bank side was that the boat was down on the water, so the porthole was only just at ground level, so the grass was taller than she was. "This," she thought, "is what it must feel like to be a fieldmouse in a field of corn." And so thinking, she made fieldmouse noises and tried twitching her whiskers. At the third twitch, a fat waddling feathery body came into view through the grass. It was a goose, a grey goose. It bent its head down and peered at Sally through the porthole, as if to say: "What are you doing here?"

It was halfway through giving her another look, as if to say, "Do you have any bread for me?" when it suddenly disappeared with a squawk and a flutter of feathers. The reason for the alarm was the arrival of another visitor to Sally's peepshow – Pirate the dog, coming in from the left, closely followed by a pair of legs wearing white socks and trainers, which was all that Sally could see from ground-height. This was John, setting off for his run. Then nothing much for a minute or two. Just the cooing of wood pigeons, and a cuckoo off in the distance somewhere. Then a second pair of legs appeared. These were rather familiar legs:

"Mum!" yelled Sally. "Dad, mummy's here!"

And indeed it was. As promised, Mother was calling in on her way to work. She'd brought a pint of milk for their breakfast, a loaf of bread, and a newspaper.

"How goes, Sally? How was your first night on board ship? Did you sleep well? I bet you slept like a log, eh? You weren't too cold, were you?"

This was rather a lot of questions to be answering all in one go, so Sally just explained that she liked the boat, and yes, she'd slept very well. She didn't say anything about the swan, because it was too complicated to explain it all.

Mother said: "Well, I'm glad to see you're settling in alright. If there's anything else you need, you can phone me at grandma's and I'll bring it next time I come. I'd better dash now, or I'll be late for work. I'll see you in a couple of days."

She gave Sally a big hug and a kiss, and set off for work.

Sally watched her mum disappear down the towpath. Then she said, "Da-a-a-ad... What are we going to do today, Dad?"

And Father said: "To be honest, I haven't the faintest idea. I've got to unpack the rest of our stuff and decide where everything's going."

"Can I help, Dad? Can I...?" said Sally, bursting to help.

"No, Sally. Not yet, anyway. I want a bit of time to sit and think. Why don't you go out and explore some more?"

"John-from-the-first-boat said he'd take me round on the river. Is it alright if I go?"

"You mean going for a walk?"

"No. Rowing in his boat."

"Yes, you can go. But first, one thing... you're going to have to wear this."

"What's that?"

"It's a life-jacket. Here, try it on. Slip your arms through here... That's right... How does it feel?"

"It's uncomfortable, Dad. It makes me feel all lumpy."

"Well, I'm afraid you're going to have to wear it. Don't forget, you've only just moved to the riverside, and you're not used to it yet. I don't want you falling in the river and drowning..."

"Oh all right," said Sally, a touch grumpily. "But I'm going to feel even more lumpy when I've got my coat on as well."

Fortunately this grump was cut short by the arrival of John and Pirate in their rowing boat. Sally was glad to see that John had a woolly jumper on, and not just his T-shirt, so he wasn't going to freeze, and she allowed herself to be helped down into the back seat of the boat.

"So, you ready, Sally?" said John.

"Yes."

"OK, let's go!"

And off they went. Past Annie's Ark, where Annie was out on deck hanging up washing on her clothes line, and past John's ramshackle boat. Once again there was the strange line of Bible words written round the hull of the boat. "Suffer the Little Children to Come unto Me," and so on.

"Can I ask you something?" said Sally, trying not to appear inquisitive or rude.

"Certainly," said John. "What would you like to know?"

"Why have you got those words painted on your boat?"

"Ah, um..." said John, sounding like he was wanting to dodge the question. "I can't tell you, really."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you because it's a bit... heavy."

"Heavy?"

"Too much for a little one like you. How old are you, Sally?" "Eight."

"Well, it's definitely too heavy for an eight-year-old."

"Oh go on... Do tell me..."

"No."

"Ple-e-e-ease!"

"No. Cool it, Sally. I said no."

So Sally sat tight and watched the river flow by. Why did everything have to be so mysterious here? Sally was the kind of girl who couldn't stand not knowing about things. Like when Father used to tell her that something was a "secret". So at least three more times she said: "Oh ple-e-e-ease tell me." Until, in the end, John said:

"Oh all right, since you keep on about it, I will. That bit there comes from the Bible. It's what Jesus said. He said little children were the ones who would go to heaven. And I hope they do, Sally, I hope they do..."

He said this so firmly that Sally felt obliged to ask "Why?" "Because I've killed a kid, Sally... I've killed a kid..."

There was a long silence – or at least, a silence of words. In Sally's head, though, there were thoughts rushing to and fro: This is scary... I'm scared... Should I shout for Dad... He probably wouldn't hear me... I can't run because we're in the middle of the river... I'm all alone with a man who says he kills children... maybe I should scream... Is Annie still out there... He does look very fierce... I bet he's only saying that to frighten me... Anyway, if he's killed someone, why isn't he in prison... ? How did he kill a kid...? Where? When? Why?"

The silence was broken when she decided to let these three last words out of her head: "Where? When? Why?"

"Are you really sure you want to know this, Sally?"

"Yes. You can't just say something and not explain it."

"Alright – here goes, then."

He didn't stop rowing. He kept right on, as if the rhythm of his rowing was helping him think.

"Have you always lived round here, Sally?"

"Yes, ever since I was born."

"Me too. All except for three years. I was in the Army, you see." "In the Army?" said Sally. She was surprised for a minute, because she didn't know that they had black people in the Army."

"Sure. What's so strange about that?"

"Oh nothing..."

"I bet you're wondering what someone who looks like me is doing in the Army."

"Well, sort of..."

"Well, I can tell you, I didn't always have dreadlocks, for a start. I was the smartest, snappiest new recruit you ever did see. A cool dresser, let me tell you..."

"I joined when I was still at school. Joined the cadets up at Mile End. Then, by the time I left school, I joined the Territorials. That wasn't proper soldiering, really. More like an adventure playground. Every weekend we'd go for army training. We'd meet at the drill hall. They'd get us all kitted out with uniforms and backpacks and helmets and rifles, and we'd pile onto lorries and head off into the countryside and do battle training. Everyone got their faces blacked up with camouflage paint – except for me, I didn't need to! – and we'd creep around in forests in the middle of the night, trying to shoot each other – only pretend shooting, of course. It was brilliant!"

"So, then I had to decide what to do for a job when I left school. Seemed obvious, really. Join the Army. Learn a trade. Travel abroad. See the world. So I did. Simple as that!"

The puddles left by his oars rippled away behind the boat as he rowed and talked, and Sally was alarmed to see that they'd rowed up the river and round a bend and out of sight of her boat.

"Can we turn round and go back?" she said.

"Sure," said John, and he turned the boat round and began rowing back.

"Now," he said, "the trouble is that the Army isn't just an adventure playground. When you're in the Army, they send you to places. And if there's a war, they expect you to fight. That's what you get your money for. You're paid to go and fight so that everyone else in your country can sit safely at home with their feet up in front of the telly. And that's what happened to me. I got sent to a place."

There was a pause.

"What place?" said Sally.

"It doesn't matter what place, Sally. Let's just say that the Army sent me over there, and there was a war going on, and I was part of that war."

"When was this?" asked Sally.

"Five years ago," said John.

"So what's this got to do with... you know..."

"Killing a kid?"

"Yes..."

"I'll tell you," said John. And at this point he stopped rowing and let his oars rest on the top of the water. He didn't need to row now, because the current of the river was carrying the boat back very gently downstream.

"When you're in a war," said John, "roads are very important things. In most war situations, if you can control the roads, you stand a good chance of winning the war,

because the enemy can't get their supplies and ammunition, and all that, past you. So that was what we had to do over there. Most of the time we never had to do any fighting. We just had to guard the roads. Marching round on foot patrols. And putting up road blocks where cars could be searched and checked.

"I tell you, it was incredibly boring... The night-life was absolutely-blooming-non-existent, because we couldn't go out for a drink, because there were people trying to shoot at us, so all we had to do was sleep, wake up, eat, then guard duty, then maybe a foot patrol, then eat, then sleep again... And if you think it's uncomfortable in that lifejacket of yours, you should try walking round all day with a helmet and a rifle and big army boots and a flak jacket for the bullets to bounce off!

"Anyway, about this kid... We had a big problem with the kids. In some parts of the town the kids really hated us. They didn't want us in their country, you see. So if we went on foot patrols round the housing estates, they'd spit at us, and throw stones at us, and lob paint bombs at us – water balloons filled with paint that burst all down your uniform... The grown-ups could be pretty mean too, but I reckon the kids were worse. Can you imagine it... ? Every week, day after day... week after week... I tell you, it was heavy pressure. And sometimes the pressure got to you. I mean, you'd find yourself having arguments with your mates over the stupidest things... Even getting into fights sometimes, even with your closest friends.

"So, one day our sergeant came into the hut. He said: 'Dougal...' (that was my mate) '...Dougal, I want you and Foxy...' (Foxy, that was me... they used to call me that because I was so quiet and sneaky on night manoeuvres)..."

"Foxy," thought Sally. "Foxy... Fox... Oh no, this must be him... What the Old Lady said... 'Beware of the Fox...' This is scary... I don't like this... what do I do now...?"

The rowing boat had floated back down stream, and had passed Sally's boat and was about to go round another bend and out of sight again.

"Um," said Sally, breaking into his story. "I think I want to get out." Then, thinking quickly, she added, "I think I'm feeling a bit seasick. I don't want to row any more..."

"Am I scaring you?" asked John.

"Er, no," said Sally, even though she was scared really.

"Well, I tell you what, we'll pull in to the side here, and we can go up onto the bank."

So saying, he swung the boat round, pulled in to the bank and clambered ashore, holding the mooring rope. He tied the rope to a bollard, gave Sally a hand to clamber out, called to Pirate – who leapt out of the boat and scrambled up the bank – and sat on the bollard to continue his story.

Sally looked up the towpath. There was her boat, so she felt safe again. If he really was the Fox, it didn't matter, because Dad was within shouting distance, so no harm would come to her.

"Like I was saying, they used to call me Foxy, 'cos I was so good on manoeuvres. So the sergeant said, 'Dougal, I want you and Foxy on road-block duty this morning.' "

"'Boring,' we thought, 'more blooming boring...' but we didn't say anything, because when you're in the Army you don't, do you..."

"The main part of our job on road-block duty was to check people's cars. There was a video camera that filmed all the cars coming down the road, checking their number plates. We had to check who was in the cars, in case there was anyone on the Army's 'Wanted' list. And sometimes, if things were getting particularly hot, we'd have to search the car boots, and under the bonnets too, just in case they were carrying guns and so on. But most of all we had to watch out in case of being attacked. Because it happened sometimes, and soldiers were getting killed every week.

"Now, one of the things that was happening, around this time, on the housing estates, was that some of the older kids had started stealing cars. It was like a craze. Like it was fashionable all of a sudden. Look big in front of your mates. And not only stealing cars, but driving around town, showing off like they're Jack the Lad. The police reckoned there were about three cars being stolen like this every day. And sometimes the kids would deliberately go and park in front of the police station, tooting the car horn, to try and get the police to chase them. Incredibly stupid... incredibly dangerous... I'm just telling you this, because it explains what happened next.

"Like I said, we were on road-block duty. Boring! Even more boring because it was about the middle of the morning, and not much traffic about. I was just about to go into the hut to get a cup of tea – we brought a thermos flask every day – when all of a sudden Dougal said: 'Foxy... Look out... Trouble...'

"I looked down the road where he was pointing. Right down the middle of the road, right down the dotted white line, there was this car, and it was literally racing towards us. A red Ford Cortina, it was. Big car. No tax disc – funny how you notice silly things like that in the heat of the moment – and not only no tax disc, but also it looked like it had no driver either. I felt sick inside, all of a sudden, the way you do when you feel really scared. What I said next had lots of swearwords, which I won't tell you, but leaving out the swear-words I said: 'It's a car-bomb, Dougal. It's a car bomb... What do we do?'

"'Shoot at the tyres, Foxy, shoot at the tyres.'

"Now, you've got to remember, all this was happening in literally seconds. Almost no time even to think. But we'd been trained well – all that training in Epping Forest when I was a kid – ice-cold, instant responses. Rifle up, at the ready, safety catch off, line up the sights, take aim...

"But in that split second, just as we were about to shoot, the car slammed on its brakes. The brakes jammed on, the front wheels turned and locked, and the car turned with them. Just like that, in the middle of the road, slithering and screeching round in a shower of sparks and the smoke from the burning tyre rubber. One moment the car was coming straight at us, and the next it had turned right round and was going back down the road.

"It didn't make sense. A driverless car couldn't turn round just like that. I was trying to work out in my head what was happening. And in my ear there was Dougal, shouting again: 'Shoot at the tyres, Foxy, shoot at the tyres!'

"So I did. Or rather, we both did. We fired. One of the bullets must have hit the near-side tyre, because it burst. As the tyre burst, the car slewed over to the side of the road, ploughed through a low wooden fence, flattened a low bit of hedge, and crashed straight into a brick wall.

"There was silence then. Hardly a sound. A kind of hissing from the engine – probably steam escaping from the radiator – but, apart from that, nothing. We were shaking, Dougal and me. Shaking, and wondering what to do next. The sergeant heard the shooting, and came running from the patrol Land Rover. 'Don't go near it,' he screamed. 'Keep back... it might be a booby trap... Stand well back.'

"So we stood and watched. Nothing happened, nothing moved. Silence. But then there was this quiet noise. I don't know, I thought it was a bird or an animal or something, from the farm at the back. It was a kind of low groaning noise. It didn't get any louder... but it went on... And then we realised, it wasn't a bird, or an animal... I turned to Dougal... 'Jesus, it's a kid, Dougal...'

"It was. It was a kid. We walked over to the car, where it had crashed into the wall. We looked inside the window. I'll never forget that sight. It was two kids, one in the passenger seat, and the other one driving. Not a word of a lie, neither of them could have been more than eleven years old. That's why we hadn't seen anyone driving the car – they were hardly tall enough to see over the top of the steering wheel. The one in the driving seat was dead. Stone cold dead. It was the other one who was making the groaning noises, because he was still alive..."

"That's terrible," said Sally, in a still, small voice.

John didn't say anything. He just sat on the bollard and stared across the marshland. Pirate was sitting at John's feet. He didn't say anything either. The silence seemed to go on for ever. Then John leaned down and stroked Pirate's head. "Pretty terrible story, eh, Sally?"

"I suppose so," said Sally. Then she added "What happened to the other boy?"

"He was OK. He lived."

Once again, questions were crowding into Sally's brain. One found its way out: "You said that you and your friend both fired shots."

"Yes."

"Well, if you both fired shots, then how can you say that it was you that killed the boy? Are you absolutely sure?"

"No."

"So maybe it wasn't you who killed him?"

"Maybe."

"So maybe it's alright, then...?"

"Of course it's not alright, Sally, of course it's not. OK, maybe it wasn't my shooting that burst the tyre. But I should have thought, Sally, I should have thought... When Dougal was shouting down my ear, 'Shoot, Foxy, shoot,' I should have said, 'No – don't shoot...!' You see... I'd been trained brilliantly to pick up my rifle and shoot... brilliant fast reactions... But I hadn't trained myself to know when not to shoot... So even if it wasn't my bullet, I reckon I'm still guilty of killing the kid."

The Sally Stories

"So what happened then?" asked Sally.

"Oh, not much," said John. "There was a bit of a fuss in the papers, but everyone knew it was half the kids' fault for being so stupid anyway. It really affected me, though. I went to pieces."

He paused again.

"What does that mean?" asked Sally.

"I couldn't stop thinking about the dead kid. I'd have nightmares every night, so's it even got to the point where I was scared to go to bed. I'd find myself crying, too. Over silly things. Just start crying for no reason at all. The Army gave me leave for a couple of weeks, to get over it, but it didn't help. When I was back on duty I was still starting up crying all over the place. So in the end they let me leave the Army. I mean, you can't have soldiers crying their eyes out on guard duty, can you?"

"I suppose not," said Sally.

"So that's when I came to live here. I just wanted somewhere really, really quiet, where I could be away from people, and fighting, and noise, and all that. So here I am. Me... my little boat... and my little dog... End of story, so to speak."

"Oh," said Sally. And somehow, at the end of a long story like that, there didn't seem to be much more to say...

Chapter 6

KATIE'S TEN THOUSANDTH BOOK

And since there wasn't much more to say, John just sat on his bollard, with his elbows resting on his knees. He sighed. He reached down and patted Pirate's head. Sally sighed too. From way over the marshes a chilly breeze sprang up and began to set the marsh grass waving. Dark clouds had gathered overhead, and big drops of rain were beginning to fall.

"It's getting cold," said Sally. "I think I'll go back to our boat now. But anyway, thank you for the ride."

"Did I frighten you with my story?" said John.

"No, not really," said Sally – which wasn't entirely the truth. "Well, if I did, I'm sorry. I'll try and make it up to you one day." "That's all right, you don't have to," said Sally, and she walked back up the towpath.

She tiptoed onto her boat, crept quietly up to the door, pushed it slightly open and said: "Cooee, Dad... I'm back."

No answer.

So she pushed it even more slightly open.

"Cooee, Dad... I'm back."

Still no answer.

So this time she pushed the door wide open.

Where, you may wonder, was Father? Had he gone through a time warp into another dimension? Had he been kidnapped? Captured by pirates? Eaten by crocodiles?

None of these exciting possibilities, unfortunately. He was just sitting at the breakfast table, staring out of the window, and tapping his pencil absent-mindedly on the table.

"DAD! I SAID COO-EE – I'M BACK," Sally shouted.

"Oh hello, Sally... you're back..." said Father, as if she'd never said anything in the first place.

"Are you still thinking about unpacking and where to put everything, Dad?"

"No."

"Oh, that's good – that means we can do something, then."

"Oh no we can't."

"What? Oh... Why not, Dad?"

"Because I've got to think about something else, now, that's why not."

"Oh Da-a-ad... you're so boring! Why can't we just do something...? Why do you have to be thinking all the time!?"

"Because," said Father, "you know when I picked you up from school on Friday...?"

"Yes."

"Well, I did rather a silly thing."

"How d'you mean?"

"I told your teacher that when half term's over I'd come in and read your class a story."

"So – what's so silly about that? You've read us stories plenty of times."

"Yes... but I told her it won't be a story out of a book... it'll be a made-up story. I promised to write a story for your class, Sally. And I haven't the first idea where to begin! It's Panic Stations, Sally...!"

And this was true, this was, because Father had been searching everywhere in his brain to find a story. He'd gone "Hellooo... story... are you there... ?" And all that had come back to him was the mocking sound of his own voice, echoing round the empty spaces in his head: "Hellooo... are you there...?" And this accounts for why he was staring out of the window, drumming his pencil on the table – annoying habit, that – with a blank sheet of paper lying in front of him.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, it was raining too, and the big raindrops falling on the metal roof of the boat sounded like someone was rattling a pound of dried peas round in a metal pan, and what with that and the sound of Father's drumming pencil, it was enough to drive a girl BARMY!

"I don't care," said Sally. "I'm bored. I'm bored-bored-bored!" "In that case, why don't you go up and play on the deck for a bit?" "Just in case you haven't noticed, Dad, it's raining."

"Oh, so it is. Well, go and play with your toys, then. When it stops raining I'll take you out for a walk, OK?"

"Hmph," said Sally, and she was rather beginning to wish that half term would soon be over, because then she'd be able to see her friends again, because she hadn't seen her friends for four whole days, and at least her friends didn't sit round looking like lemons and thinking all the time...

Now, what was she going to play with? She would have to play with her dolls, she supposed.

Seeing that it was a bit early in the day for a Tea Party, she decided that she'd play Schools. She reached up to the shelf and brought down Lucy Doll, Teddy Bear, Pink Elephant from Berlin and her three Trolls. She sat them in a row on the bed.

"Right, children," she said, "I want you to sit on the mat and fold your arms and be quiet, because I'm going to do the Register now..."

She pulled out a sheet of paper and wrote their names:

"Lucy Doll."

"Yes Miss," said a shrill little voice.

"Teddy Bear."

"Yes Miss."

"Pink Elephant."

"Yes Miss."

And the three Trolls too: "Yes Miss... Yes Miss... Yes Miss..." Then she said: "Now, children, as you will have noticed, today it is raining..."

And all the dolls said: "Hooray!"

"This means that instead of doing PE outdoors, today we will do it in the hall."

"Hooray!"

"We shall begin with some balancing activities on the Apparatus."

So saying, Sally fetched a bucket and a chair and a broom. She balanced the broom between the chair and the bucket, and told the children that they had to walk across it. Without falling off.

The Trolls managed it very well. Pink Elephant wobbled a bit. Lucy Doll fell off halfway along and gave a little scream – "Aaargh!" And Teddy Bear got right along, but fell off when she got to the end, knocking over the bucket as she did so, and making a tremendous clattering noise.

"Sally," boomed Father from next door, "you're making too much noise. I can't think."

"It's not my fault... It's the children," said Sally.

"Very funny," said Father. "Why can't you just sit quietly and read a story or something?"

"Read a story or something... read a story or something... Why can't you say something else for a change? That's all you ever say. 'Be quiet and read or something...!' Well, just for your information, I am bored... and I've read all my books at least twenty hundred times each, and anyway..." – she suddenly had an idea – "...it's time for the children's singing lesson!"

"Oh No You Don't," said Father. "I am *not* putting up with another three hundred verses of 'We All Live in a Yellow Submarine'."

"Oh all right, I'll read then," said Sally, extremely grumpily, and she fetched down a book and began to read.

But try as she could, she couldn't read, because Father was still staring out of the window and tapping with his pencil.

"Da-a-a-ad," she said, "do you have to keep tapping your pencil like that?"

"It helps me think."

"It's driving me crazy."

"Alright, I'll stop, then."

But in less than a minute he'd started again. So Sally said "Oh poo!" and gave up trying to read and stuck the book under her pillow.

"Right, children," she said to the row of toys, "I'm afraid we've had a complaint from the Headmaster. The Headmaster says you're making Too Much Noise. I think the headmaster's being very boring. So I think I'm going to read you a story instead."

The children cheered (very quietly). "Hooray!"

"In fact, now I come to think of it, it'll be a made-up story, which I shall make up myself – me, myself, personally."

"Hooray!"

"If you are sitting very quietly, with no poking or shuffling, or wriggling of bottoms – Pink Elephant, stop fidgeting, please... And you Trolls, come out of that corner so that I can see what you're up to – then I shall begin.

And so Sally began her story:

"Once upon a time," she said, "there was a little girl called Katie. Katie lived in Diddly-Doo-Da Land, with her mummy and daddy, and they lived on the thirty-second floor of a very tall tower block, which was very handy, because Katie could talk to airline pilots as they were coming in to land.

"Now, the thing about Katie was that she was absolutely crazy about reading. She loved to read, and she had been this way ever since she was born. Why, when she was only one year old she'd be sitting in her high chair and she'd go 'Mook, mook', and everyone would think she wanted milk, so that was what they'd give her, but she'd get ever so annoyed and throw her milk, splat, at the wall, because what she really wanted was a book, but she hadn't yet learned to say it properly."

Sally had to break off her story for a moment. "Lucy Doll, if you are hungry, you should have eaten your lunch. Will you please stop chewing the end of your pencil."

Then she continued:

"When Katie started at infant school, within one week she had read her way through every single book in the classroom. Within three weeks she'd read her way through every book in the whole school. And when she went home after school, she'd say: 'Books, books, I want books,' and her poor parents didn't know what to do. So they started taking her to the local library. Every three days they went – and each time they had to take a wheelbarrow with them, to hold all the books she borrowed. By this time Katie was reading so fast that the speed at which she turned the pages was making draughts all through the flat.

"In no time at all," said Sally, "Katie's parents were at their wits' end. You couldn't move in the flat for books. They were in the cupboards, under the stairs, hidden behind the sofa – books everywhere! She had the Encyclopaedia Britannica in all twenty-five volumes, she had a collection of British Rail timetables for the last thirty-five years, she had all the Guinness Books of Records going back to goodness-knows-when, she had four hundred and thirty-three Ladybird books, she had every fairy story that had ever been written... and she had read her way through every one of them. It seemed like nothing could stop her.

"'Whatever shall we do?' wailed her poor parents. 'If she carries on reading at this rate, the whole flat will fill up with books and there won't be any room for us to live!'

"So then they had an idea. Aha!! This ought to slow her down.

"'From now on, Katie,' they said, 'you are going to read all your books upside down.'

"Ah, but woe and alas... How much did this slow her down?

Only two per cent!

"So then they had another idea:

"'From now on, Katie,' they said, 'you will read all your books from back to front.'

"So they sat her in front of a mirror and made her read all her books backwards in the mirror.

"But woe and alas... How much did this slow her down? Only two per cent!

"So then they had another idea:

"'From now on, Katie,' they said, 'you will read your books upside down and back to front, and under your bedclothes, with a very feeble torch, and wearing dark glasses! Aha!!'

"But, woe and alas... How much did this slow her down? Only two per cent!

"So at last, they had yet another idea:

"'From now on, Katie, you will read all your books through a telescope. Haha! You will put your book on the wall in the car park at the bottom of the flats. Every time you come to the end of a page, you will have to run downstairs to turn over – no taking the lift, mind you – and then run back up again – all thirty-two floors – and, what's more, you're only allowed to look through the big end of the telescope, so's the print looks teeny-teeny-tiny...'

"But, as you can imagine, woe and alas... how much did this slow her down? Only two per cent!

"Katie's poor parents just didn't know what to do," said Sally. "They even tried getting her books in Arabic... and Russian... and Chinese... but she learned all these languages in about a day-and-a-half each, and read them just about as fast as when she was reading English.

"Now," said Sally, and she gave an annoyed cough, "there seems to be some fidgeting at the back of the class... What seems to be the matter? What's that, Teddy Bear? Speak up, child, I can't hear you. Oh, you want to go to the toilet, do you? Well, hurry along, child... I'll stop the story until you get back... Don't be long, now..."

Sally stopped telling her story. She peered round the corner to see if Father was still sitting there. He was – and he was still staring at his blank sheet of paper, and was showing absolutely no sign at all of taking Sally for a walk. "What," thought Sally, "can I do to get him moving?"

Then she had an idea. She reached up onto her shelf and brought down a sheet of paper. The sheet of paper contained something that she had copied out of a book in the school library. "This should do the trick," she thought. "If this doesn't get Dad moving, nothing will!"

So she continued:

"All right now, children, settle down again... Teddy Bear, I hope you washed your paws when you finished... You did? Good girl... So now I'll carry on with the Katie story."

"So, the day came when Katie had, in rather a short space of time, read all of nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine books. Incredible! The flat was so full of books that you could hardly even open the front door, and Katie's poor parents were worn out with trudging to and fro to the library all the time. That day, they wearily loaded the wheelbarrow with the books that needed to be returned to the library, and off they went.

"On the way to the library, they met a magic gnome. The magic gnome said: 'Hello, Katie's parents. You look rather sad. What is the matter?' Katie's parents told the magic gnome about how she gobbled her way through every book they ever got her, and how she just wouldn't stop reading. And the magic gnome said: 'Here, I have the very thing for you.' (As you may have noticed, the magic gnome had rather a squeaky voice.) 'Take this story and give it to your daughter to read, and you will never need to get her another book for as long as she lives.'

"So Katie's parents did what the gnome said. They took the story home and gave it to their daughter to read.

"And the story," said Sally, "went like this..."

(At this point Sally looked round the door of her bedroom again. Father was still sitting there. She wanted to make sure that he heard it, so she raised her voice quite a lot, and began to read, and this is the story that she read.)

"Once upon a time, " she read, "there was a King. He had everything that a person could ever want, or even might ever imagine they'd want. Everything that money could buy, and even more besides. Love and happiness and good strong children and horses that rode like the wind, and dogs that ran alongside. If he wanted to do something, he did it. There was only one thing that he could not do. He could not stop time!

"At first it was just a small thought in his head. He thought, how hard it was to imagine a time before all time... A time when he himself was not. A time when all his friends and family were not. A time when all people, all humanity were not. He thought, also, that one day in the future there would be a day when he himself would not be. A time when all his friends and family would not be. He could not bear this thought. He wanted time to stop. He wanted everything to be just as it was now, perfect in its happiness, for all time and for ever and ever.

"He wanted to stop time. But he could not.

"Then, one day, he heard tell of a Poet, who lived in a far-off corner of his kingdom. The Poet, they said, had the power to stop time. So the King summoned the Poet. And the Poet rode for six days and six nights, across mountains and deserts and rivers and through forests and towns and small villages, until in the end he arrived at the King's castle.

"He had barely dismounted from his horse, barely shaken the dust of travel from his clothes, when he was summoned into the King's presence. The King said: 'I hear that you have the power to stop time.' The Poet said: 'This is what people say.' So the King commanded a banquet to be brought, and the people of the King's court ate and drank and listened to fine music, and at the end of it all the King said to the Poet: 'Now you must tell me – how do you stop time. '

"And the Poet began:

"'Once upon a time, there was a King. He had everything that a person could want, or even might imagine they'd want. Everything that money could buy, and even more besides. Love and happiness and...'"

Sally carried on reading. And since you are attentive readers, you will have realised that this story repeats itself, over and over again, for all of eternity. It is, in fact, an Everlasting Story.

It took a few more sentences before Father realised it too.

"Sally," he said.

But Sally just carried on reading.

"Sally! Will you please stop that!"

Sally knew that she was winning, so she carried on reading.

"Sally, stop that at once! You are going to drive me crazy with that ridiculous story...!"

"But Dad," said Sally, "I'm only doing what you told me to do. You told me to 'read a story or something', so that's what I'm doing. This is a very nice story. It goes on for

The Sally Stories

ever and ever and ever..And so saying, she was just about to begin reading again when Father said:

"Oh, All Right, Then!! I give up! I suppose," he said, "that you want to go for a walk now. Is that it?"

"That would be very nice, Dad," said Sally, sweetly, because now victory was hers. "Can we go to the cafe for an ice cream?"

"Hrumph! I suppose so," said Father. I give up on this storywriting business. How people manage to do it, I do not know...! What on earth am I going to tell your teacher and your class when they want to know where my story is?"

"Well," thought Sally, "why not ask me? I could tell them the story of Katie's Ten Thousandth Book. I don't see what's so hard about making up stories... / think it's quite easy, really."

But she didn't say anything, and there was only the faintest trace of a smile to show that one little girl was feeling Rather Pleased with herself. And, what is more, she did get her ice cream.

Chapter 7

VERITY

The ice was nice. Pink and white. Strawberry and vanilla, in a cone. Slightly fluffy-looking. Just the way she liked it. And the air just cold enough so's your breath turned just slightly to steam when you breathed out. As Sally ate her ice, and Father munched his way through a bag of salt'n'vinegar crisps, they walked slowly up the towpath next to the river, under the tall, wavy poplars at the back of the flats.

Walking up the river on a cold day isn't the same as walking up the river on a warm day. On a warm day there's every kind of creature out and about, seeing to their business. Humans, of course, but also bees buzzing in the bankside flowers, and rabbits sunning themselves in a grassy patch on the marsh, and blue and white dragon flies darting across the water, and ducks parading up and down with their little ones, and an occasional river rat scurrying about, and a cuckoo off in the distance, and if you're lucky the blue flash of a kingfisher darting under the river bank... and you just dawdle along and wonder what they're all thinking about, or indeed if they're thinking anything at all... But on a cold day you keep your hands in your pockets, hunch your shoulders against whichever way the wind's blowing, and keep moving so's the cold doesn't get to you. And today was such a day.

"Tell you what, Sally," said Father. "If we walk up a bit further, we could go to the lock. I've a couple of questions I want to ask the lock-keeper, about tide levels and that sort of thing, and you could watch the lock working."

"Alright," said Sally, and she squashed the pink bit of the ice cream down into the cone with her tongue.

The lock was a fifteen-minute walk up the river. There were two lock-gates, but only one of the channels was working now, because there were so few boats using the river. The lock-keeper had a small house which was set back from the towpath. It had a garden all around it, and black metal railings round the edge of the garden.

"Proud and alone," thought Sally. "Like an old castle."

And on the gate it had a small, hand-painted sign that said: "Beware of the Dog."

"I won't be long," said Father. It's only a couple of things I want to ask him. Why don't you just sit on that bollard, and you can watch to see if any boats come through the lock."

He pointed to a metal bollard at the edge of the towpath.

"Mind you don't fall in the water, though..." he said, laughing, and as he laughed he put one hand on the lock-keeper's gate.

"Dad..." said Sally.

"What?" said Father.

"You can't go through there, Dad... there's a big sign that says 'Beware of the Dog!'"

"Oh that," said Father, breezily. "...That's nothing to worry about. I don't see any sign of a dog, do you? They probably put that sign up to scare kids away. You always get kids doing stupid things by the river..."

And so saying, he put his hand on the gate latch, opened the gate and began to walk up the path.

He didn't get very far. In fact he got about six yards, that's all. At that point a very large dog – a great shaggy Alsatian beast of a dog – came pounding round from behind the house. That's why they hadn't seen it. It obviously had its kennel round the corner and out of sight. Mind you, I don't know about kennel – judging by the size of the beast, it probably lived in something about the size of the lock-keeper's cottage.

Now, you would think that when you're suddenly confronted by the sight of a huge dog bearing down on you, you wouldn't have much time to think of anything at all. But the human brain is a wonderful thing, and a large number of distinct and separate thoughts went racing through Father's brain. As follows:

- That is a very large dog.
- It looks very hungry.
- Probably the lock-keeper doesn't earn a lot.
- So probably he doesn't feed it very well.
- So maybe it's decided it's going to eat me!
- Look at its big, rolling eyes.
- And its big yellow teeth.
- And the saliva slopping round its chops.
- And it's moving very fast.
- I don't want to be eaten by a dog.
- I'd better run.
- Oh no! The gate's latched shut behind me!
- Help! No time to fiddle with the latch.
- I'll have to jump the railings...

He thought all this in the space of about one and a half seconds, and he turned and began running towards the garden railings. One step, two steps... and the railings were a little bit high, and a little bit pointed... and, to be honest, he wasn't sure if he was going to make it... would he or wouldn't he... so he grabbed the bar of the

railings with both hands (having squashed some of the lock-keeper's cabbages in the process) and vaulted, up into the air and over the railings to safety.

Except that, as I say, the railings were a little bit high and a little bit pointed... and Father's coat was a little bit long... and needless to say, as he hurdled across the tops of the spikes, his coat caught on the railings. He was safe from the dog, but he was pinned by his coat-tails to the lock-keeper's fence, and no matter how much he wriggled and turned and flapped his arms he could not get himself free.

And what made matters worse was that Sally was giggling. Or almost giggling, because at first she'd been quite frightened by the dog, but now she'd seen something that was rather funny, something that Father hadn't seen, and that something was the fact that the dog was on a long rope tied to the side of the cottage, and the rope was nowhere near long enough for the dog to have come anywhere near Father.

If Father hadn't been impaled on the railings, he might have thought it was a bit funny too, but he didn't. In fact he was feeling rather undignified, and he felt even more undignified when the lock keeper leaned out of the upstairs window and shouted:

"Oi – can't your read? 'Beware of the Blooming Dog!'"

And then added:

"And in case you haven't noticed, you've just squashed my Brussel sprouts!"

Father ignored these comments as best he could, and finally got himself off the railings by unbuttoning his coat and taking it off. He turned to Sally.

"Somehow I don't think the lock-keeper's going to want to sit and chat about tides and things. I'm going back to the boat to tidy up a bit. If you want, you can stay and watch the river for a while. Don't be too long, though, because it'll be tea-time soon."

"OK, Dad," said Sally, and she began picking long bits of grass so that she could try plaiting a friendship bracelet while she sat there.

From where she sat on the towpath she had a clear view of the lock gates, but she couldn't see what was in the lock. She could, however, see that the water level in the lock was falling, because of where it gushed out of the gap between the gates. Somebody was emptying the lock. She wondered who it might be. She stood up and walked a short way up the ramp at the side of the lock. As she walked up, she could see the tip of a small mast. And then the rest of the mast. And then a pile of logs. And then the top of a cabin. And the cabin was long and painted black all over, and Sally knew that it must be the old lady that she'd called Verity, because that was definitely her boat.

Sure enough, as the whole boat came into sight, tucked neatly into the lock, there was Verity in her big coat and her headscarf.

When she saw Sally, she called over to her:

"Hello Sally."

Then she added:

"Are you doing anything?"

"No, not really," said Sally. Which was true, because she'd finally finished her ice cream, and hadn't yet started on the bracelet. "In that case, how would you like to come and give me a hand?" "If you want," said Sally. "What do you want me to do?"

"I've just been up the river to get some wood," said the old lady – and this was obviously true, because she had about twenty small logs piled on the cabin roof. "There's a bit of a crosswind blowing, so as I come out of the lock it would be very helpful if you could get hold of the bow rope and just pull me gently into the bank. Do you think you could manage that?"

"I don't see why not," thought Sally, and she said out loud: "Alright."

And then she thought to herself: "Well, at least this time she didn't pop up out of nowhere and frighten the life out of me!" But she still felt a little uneasy about the old lady. And she still had those questions that she wanted answered.

When the water finally reached its level, Verity closed the sluice gates, leaned on the huge wooden crossbeam of the lock gates to get them open, and when the way was clear, drove her boat very slowly forward out of the lock.

"Just pull gently on the rope, Sally, that will keep the head of the boat into the bank."

And Sally did as she asked. All very easy, really, and Verity's long black boat drew alongside the bank, and its owner tied it loosely to a mooring post.

"You can come on board, Sally, if you like."

Sally didn't know if she should.

"I should be going back with my dad, really," she said. "He's gone back to our boat, and he told me not to be late for tea."

"That's alright," said the old lady. "I'm going back to the boatyard too. We'll overtake him on the way."

Sally thought for a moment. She could see her dad walking back down the towpath. She'd be able to wave to him as she went past, so he wouldn't need to worry about where she was.

"Alright," she said, and then, taking care not to trip over the mooring ropes, she stepped aboard the black boat.

Since the breeze was blowing quite strongly now, the old lady suggested that she sat on the steps, just inside the cabin door, which she did. And sitting at the cabin door enabled her to see inside. What she saw there was rather unexpected. The outside of the boat was completely black – the cabin top, the decking, the gunwales, the hull, everything. Black as a crow or a raven, thought Sally. So black that if it was moving through the night you wouldn't even see it. Like a secret existence. So she'd expected the inside to be black and gloomy too. But it wasn't. Not a bit of it. Everything inside it was sweet and bright and beautiful. All the kinds of things that a person might need, but all small and neat and tidy. There was hardly a thing in it that wasn't brightly coloured, from the red kettle on the wood stove, to the yellow oil lamp and the brightly-coloured cushions on the side-benches. Almost like a doll's house, it was. Except that it wasn't a doll's house, it was a boat, and what's more it was moving

now, because Verity had unfastened the mooring ropes and they were moving down the river.

As Sally was looking at all this, Verity called down:

"Is that your dad on the towpath?"

Sally looked round the corner of the door.

"Yes."

"You run up to the bows of the boat. I'll come up behind him ever so quietly, so you can give him a surprise – go on...! Hold on tight, though, so you don't fall in..."

And in just the same way that Verity had crept up on Sally the

first time she'd met her, she let her engine throb very, very gently, just creeping along, until she came up behind Father, and Sally, who was perched up at the bows, suddenly went "BOO!", and Father, who was thinking about big dogs and holes torn in coats, almost jumped out of his skin.

"Ow... you frightened me, Sally...! Don't do that!"

"I'm going back to the boatyard with this lady, Dad. Her name's Verity. Is that alright?"

"Sure," said Father, looking at Verity's boat to check that it really was alright. "Only, like I said, don't be late for tea. And don't go jumping about, because you haven't got your lifejacket with you."

It didn't take too long to get back to the yard, and Verity moored the boat on the opposite side of the river just below the bridge.

"It looks like your dad will be a while yet," said Verity. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Well... I don't really drink tea," said Sally.

"Alright, how about some hot apple juice."

"That would be nice. Thank you."

It was curious to hear Sally being so polite. But there was something about the old lady that made her want to be polite. So polite, in fact, that she wasn't sure she dared tell her about the three questions that were on her mind. But in the end, as she held the comforting mug of warm apple juice cupped in her hands, she said:

"Excuse me..."

"Yes?" said Verity.

"I wanted to ask you something. You know when you first met me... well, you told me to beware... to beware of the Fox. What did you mean? Were you talking about that man with the little dog, the man with the Bible boat, 'cos he told me that his name's Foxy... I was just wondering..."

Her voice trailed off, because she wasn't sure what to say she was wondering. But she needn't have worried, because the old lady laughed – a big laugh – and said:

"What – you mean John? No, not John. He's a lovely man – wouldn't hurt a fly – even though, I have to admit, he does look a bit fierce. No, I was talking about the real fox. Do you know the song 'I must ask you neighbours all, please shoo the fox right out of your hall'? Well, it's the same at our boatyard, because we've got a real fox. There's a reddy-brown fox comes into the boatyard from the marshes almost every night. He doesn't bother us humans, but he's on the lookout for something to eat, and every night he lies around in the dark waiting to attack the poor geese and ducks and carry them off. He doesn't touch the swans, because they're too fierce, and he won't touch the grown-up geese either, because they're too strong for him, but he does attack the little ones, the baby ones... If you look on the river, you'll see some of the ducks and geese swimming round with their little ducklings and goslings, but some of them have no children at all. That's because the fox has eaten them. It's ever so sad. Sometimes I walk through the grass in the morning, and you can see the fox has been there, because all that's left is a scattering of feathers and the poor duckling's little yellow webby feet. For some reason the fox doesn't eat their feet. Not enough meat on them, I suppose. Quite makes me want to cry sometimes..."

"So what should I do about it?" asked Sally.

"Well, to be honest, there's not much that you can do about it. The best you can do is, if you see the fox, shoo it away. Like it says in the song..."

"Oh. All right, then. I'll try," said Sally, although to be honest, when the evenings were cold she'd probably rather stay on board her warm boat than wander round the yard shooing foxes.

Neither of them said anything for a minute or two. The little tickety-tocky clock on the shelf over the stove was ticking away in double time, tickety-tock, tickety-tock, as if it was racing to get ahead of itself.

"And another thing..." said Sally. "How come everyone down here seems to know my name even before I've told them. It's creepy!"

"It's not creepy at all," said Verity. "It's very simple. It's all on account of the fact that in this boatyard we all look after each other. Boating people help each other. If any one of us has a problem, you'll always find someone willing to help you. And whenever new people arrive on the scene, we always like to find out who they are, and tell everyone else, just in case they might be burglars, or thieves, or something..."

"Burglars?" said Sally, who found the idea of burglars on boats rather strange, because she thought that burglars only burgled houses.

"Yes," said Verity. "Our boats do get burgled sometimes. Especially in winter, when there are fewer people around. And as well as watching out for burglars, we also keep a special eye on children. Children can very easily get themselves hurt round the boatyard, so we watch out for them.. That's why I told you about fire and water."

This was the second thing that Sally had wanted to ask about. But she couldn't bring herself to ask straight out. So she just said, "Yes, I remember..." and then fell silent, in the hopes that the old lady would say something more.

Verity said: "Did you wonder what I meant?"

Sally said: "Er, well... yes... but I didn't like to ask... because it sounded sad..."

And Verity looked out of the cabin door at the poplar trees bending and fluttering in the breeze on the bank, and she said, "Well, yes, it is sad..."

She paused for a moment. Then she continued: "Have you been wondering why my boat's all painted black?"

To be honest, Sally hadn't been wondering at all, for the simple reason that she had already decided why it was... She'd decided that Verity was some kind of witch... not a bad witch, but probably a good witch, and that was the reason why she had a black boat. But she couldn't really tell the old lady that she thought she was a witch. So she asked simply:

"Yes. Why is it black?"

The old lady paused again. Then she pointed to the shelf over the stove, next to the tickety-tockety clock:

"Do you see that photograph there...?"

It wasn't hard to see it – it was quite a large photograph, in a golden frame, and it showed a girl with short-cropped brown hair, a big smile, a large green and blue check shirt, and a boat in the background.

"That was my daughter," said Verity.

Sally didn't say anything, because she felt the slow, heavy weight of that word 'W'... "was" my daughter...

"She's not alive now. She would have been twenty-two this year, but she's not with me now. I mean, her photo's with me, so she's sort of with me, but she's not with me. She died, you see..."

Sally sat and said not a word.

"That's what I meant when I said about fire and water. It was because of fire and water that she died. It's not a very long story. In fact it's a short story. So I might as well tell it.

"Like I told you just now, a boatyard can be so dangerous for children. But it can be dangerous for grown-ups too. You have to be so careful, all the time. Really. Honestly, truly, wherever you are, on the river you really could be dead from one minute to the next. All it takes is one moment of not thinking about something, and that's it! And that's how it was with my daughter."

She continued:

"Her name was Sally too, just like yours. I bought this boat of mine when she was nine years old. She lived on the boat with me, just like you're living with your dad. Then she began to grow up. On her eighteenth birthday, I wanted to get her something really special. So I decided to buy her a little boat of her own, so that she could get around on the river on her own, without having her mum with her all the time. So I bought her a little cabin cruiser. Nothing special – it was ever so cheap. A little white boat, it was, with a small cabin, a little bed inside, a gas cooker and an inboard engine. Just for summer boating, really. Too cold in the winter..."

"I wasn't at the boatyard when it happened. It was about two weeks after I bought the boat. Sally had the afternoon off work, and she was preparing the boat for a little trip up the river. She had the kettle on the stove to make a cup of coffee, and she had a can of petrol that she was about to pour into the engine tank. I don't know why she did it. I've always, always told her, never ever have flames near petrol. Maybe it was because it was a hot day... maybe she just wasn't thinking... maybe there was a bit of a gas leak from the bottle for the cooker... I don't know... but whatever it was, the flames from the cooker sparked with the fumes from the petrol, and it didn't just go up with a sheet of flame, it went up with an explosion. The force of the explosion was so great that it knocked her off the boat. Right off the boat and into the water. Thinking about it, I suppose she must have been knocked unconscious by the explosion. She fell into the river, and she seemed not to struggle or try to get out or anything. They told me afterwards that maybe it hadn't been the explosion that had killed her, but maybe she'd drowned because she was unconscious. I don't know. One man tried to reach her, to save her, but she was moored out on the island in the middle, and he couldn't get to her in time. So that was it... my daughter, gone... And now I'm on my own..."

Still Sally said not a word.

"So that's what I mean by fire and water, Sally. You must always, always think about everything you're doing... and always assume that the worst might happen, at any moment, because it might, Sally, it really might..."

"And that," said Verity, "is why the outside of my boat is painted black. It's black for mourning, black for the memory of her. Black as a reminder of how quickly she was taken from me. But inside, I keep the boat bright and happy and colourful, because that's just the way she was... a lovely girl..."

"But I suppose that's enough of all this doom and gloom, Sally. I saw your dad arrive back at your boat just now. He might be wanting you now. You'd probably best be getting on your way."

"I suppose so," said Sally.

But she still had one more question to ask. She didn't quite know how to ask it, so she just asked straight out:

"What about the swan?"

"Ah, the swan," said Verity. "Now there is a thing... a strange and interesting thing. I don't know quite how to explain it to you. You see, it's happened to me... and it's happened to other people on this river too... Sometimes, in the night, when we're asleep, this swan comes to us in our dreams..."

Sally was suddenly all a-prickle with excitement.

"I've seen it," she said. "It came to me last night, in my dreams."

"I thought it would, sooner or later," said Verity, "you're the kind of person the swan would come to. Now, remember this... Sometimes the swan asks you to go with it..."

"It did" said Sally. "It asked me to ride with it."

"Well you're very lucky," said Verity, "because sometimes it can take you to places and show you things... What happened when you saw it?"

"I don't know - I saw the swan, but then I got woken up by some silly ducks tapping at the side of the boat."

"Never mind, Sally, I'm sure it will come again. And don't forget: if the swan asks you to go with her, don't be afraid to go."

"I won't be afraid," said Sally. "I'm not afraid of anything!"

"That's good," said Verity. "I like girls who are brave and bold. But tell me," she said, "do you like soft, cuddly things too?"

"Of course," said Sally, thinking of all her furry friends on the shelf over her bed on the boat.

"In that case," said Verity, "I have something for you."

She reached up onto the shelf above the stove. From the other end from the ticky-tocky clock, she brought down a small furry creature. A toy. At first Sally thought it was a bear, but then she saw that it was a toy cat. Small and black it was, with two button eyes, a woolly patch of a nose, and a white diamond of fur under its chin.

"It's name," said Verity, "is Cat. Just Cat, as simple as that. It was my cat when I was little; then I gave it to my daughter when she was a child; then, when she grew up, maybe she would have given it to her daughter, if she had one. But now my daughter's no longer with me, so it would make me very happy if you'll let me give it to you, because you remind me of her in lots of ways."

"That would be very nice," said Sally, and since she couldn't think of anything else to say, and since she knew she was already late for tea, she simply said "Thank you", tucked the cat into her coat pocket, and headed off along the towpath back to her own boat.

Chapter 8

THE SWAN

When she got back to her boat, Sally expected to see the welcome sight of tea being prepared, but the only sight that greeted her was the sight of her dad's bottom sticking up in the air while he had his head down in the engine compartment. He was fiddling again. Fiddling with his spanners.

As she'd been walking back from the Old Lady's boat, she'd thought that it would be nice to watch TV. Just about the right time for children's programmes, it was. But then she thought again – hrumph! There wasn't a television on the boat. Then, when she got on board, she thought it would be nice to have some of her friends to stay one day. So she asked her dad, or rather she addressed his bottom, which was still waving round in the air:

"Dad... Can I have some of my friends to come and stay on the boat one night?"

There was a muffled grunt from the engine compartment, and Father's said:

"Er... I'm not sure about that. There's not really a lot of room on the boat, you know. I mean, where would they sleep...? It'd be OK if it was summer... then maybe they could sleep on the river bank..."

The bottom was not being very helpful. What's more, this conversation raised an alarming thought in Sally's mind:

"Oh... Dad... so what about my Birthday, then? I suppose if there's no room for my friends to stay, I suppose there'll be no room for my Birthday party either, will there??!! Eh? Dad – are you listening to me, Dad? DA-A-AD!!!"

It was true, the bottom was showing no sign of answering. So Sally carried on:

"I'M TALKING TO YOU, DAD... DA-A-A-D... ARE YOU LISTENING??!!!"

The bottom moved and began to heave itself out of the engine compartment.

"I said: what's going to happen on my BIRTHDAY?!"

The bottom finally transformed itself into Father's head, and at long last it looked like he was paying attention. Sally continued:

"Look, Dad... If you say there's no room for my friends to sleep on the boat, then what's going to happen about my Birthday? Eh? How am I going to have a birthday party if you can't even fit my friends in? I bet I'm not even going to HAVE a Birthday party this year, AM I! I HATE living on boats - I mean, you can't even have a BIRTHDAY party... I bet you haven't THOUGHT about my Birthday party this year, HAVE you...?! I wish I was back living in the FLAT... NOTHING I want EVER happens, does it?! I mean, why do we ALWAYS have to do what YOU want..."

And so saying, she banged her fists on the table and then she flopped across it and began crying great, wet, sloppy tears.

Now, one thing is certain: when Sally starts shouting and crying like this, and saying everything in capital letters, it usually means that there is a large hole in her tummy that needs to be fed. Being hungry always puts her in an extremely bad mood, and so it was today, because all she'd had to eat that afternoon was one pink and white fluffy ice cream, which is really not much at all. So Father made soothing noises about her birthday party, and then said:

"Come on Sally, it's teatime. I'll do you your favourite – cheese on toast."

Sally didn't even know that you could do cheese on toast on a boat, but in no time at all there it was, with the cheese all melted and bubbly and going just slightly golden-brown on top, exactly the way she liked it, and even the sight of it made her feel better.

By the time they had eaten and cleared the table, the day was pretty much at an end. It was already dark outside, and the people passing along the towpath were no more than shadows. Father lit the lamps, and they gave a warm, pleasant glow on the walls. There wasn't much to be done. They sat at the table and played a couple of games of cards, and filled two sheets of paper all over with noughts and crosses, and then Sally washed her face, brushed her teeth and it was time for bed – complete with a bedtime story which this time, fortunately, was not a scary sea-monster story...

And such is the effect of rivers and the night sounds of birds and running water and country air that Sally could hardly keep her eyes open to the end of the story, and by the time Father closed the book and set it on the bedside table, she was already asleep.

Now, if I asked you at what point and when you had dreamed such and such a dream, you probably wouldn't be able to tell me. Was it at the start of the night, or the middle, or the early hours just before you wake? The fact is we don't usually know, because dreams come and go in their own time, and not when we want or expect them.

So it was hard to say just when Sally dreamed her dream. But dream she did. And it was one of those great big dreams that you dream only once in a while, and that you might remember for the rest of a lifetime.

It all began simply enough.

Sally dreamed that she was standing by the river, watching the water flow by, with birds darting in among the bankside plants, and fish swimming in the clear water. Except that the water was only clear at the beginning. As she stood and watched, the colour of the river seemed to be changing. The surface was beginning to reflect rainbow colours – but it wasn't the rainbow colours of bright, clear light – no, it was the rainbow colours of a slick of oil, spreading across the water. Thick oil, getting thicker by the minute. Black oil, swilling greasily on the surface of the water. Covering the whole of the river, from one bank to the other.

And then she saw that what she had thought was the branches of trees reflected in the water was not trees at all, but ugly bits of scrap metal – scaffold tubes, old

supermarket trolleys, bits of metal fencing, even a motor bike, all kinds of junk with jaggy edges lurking just under the surface of the water. And in among the metal she thought she had seen the underwater stems of lilies, and feathery riverweed floating and trailing in the stream, but when she looked again she saw that these plants were being overtaken by long strands of green slime-weed, like drapes of wet cotton wool, clinging onto all the river plants and slowly choking them.

The river was choking up with grime and filth and rubbish. And the poor ducks had their feathers all soiled with oil. And what was worse was the fish. The fish were choking too... she could see them choking... because the green weed had used all the oxygen in the water, and they were flicking their heads out of the water trying to get air, and the ones that hadn't survived were floating by, lifeless, bellies up to the sky, discoloured and dead to the world.

"This," thought Sally, "is not good. Rivers shouldn't be like this. Rivers should be clean. Rivers should be full of every kind of bright, live creature. Rivers should be good to swim in..." And as an afterthought: "Not in winter, of course, but in summer, when you could just take off all your clothes and throw yourself in..."

And as she thought all this in her dream, the sky above her began to cloud over; it began to darken; and because the river water takes on the colours of the sky, the river began to darken too. The kind of darkness that comes over a bright day and tells you that there's going to be a storm. The clouds piled high like banks of coal, a little wind began to whip through the reeds at the water's edge, and large drops of black rain began to fall.

The strange and horrible thing was that the falling rain was as black and oily as the river's surface – except that each drop seemed to have a glowing ball of fire at its heart – like plummeting fireballs they were. At first they fell like ordinary rain – but as they began to fall thicker and harder, they fell with fiery tails, and with a screeching, yowling noise, like whistling banshees.

"This," thought Sally, "is not normal." And indeed it was not. When the raindrops hit the oily surface of the river, they mostly plummeted straight down, glowing brightly beneath the surface of the water and lighting up the whole spooky landscape of rusting, jaggy-edged metal and junk. But some of the raindrops seemed to shatter and explode as they hit the water's surface – and each of these produced a shower of sparks, and the sparks set fire to one of the slicks of oil on the river, and great licking tongues of fire sprouted up, and snaked their way up and down the river, this way and that, because the oil burned fiercely.

And, in the way of dank, misty days, folds of river mist began to bank up by the riverside. Except that instead of being just one solid mass, the mist was hanging in sheets. Like looping, draped bed sheets hanging off a clothes line. Or maybe more like thick curtains. Thick curtains, just hanging there, and they were all black, completely black, seeming to hang from the very heights of the heavens down to the ground on which Sally stood, and the more she watched them, the thicker they seemed to become, until in the end she couldn't see past them or through them or anything at all. Surrounded on all sides by the black drapes of hanging mist, and the only light was where sometimes the blackness was lit bright red and orange with the streaks of fire on the river.

Sally was scared. Obviously. Anybody would have been scared.

She didn't know whether to stay, or run, or what. She felt as if the drapes of mist were closing all around her. And all around, on all sides, there was a great, marching, booming sound of thunder. Not thunder that comes with lightning, but thunder that seemed to come for no reason at all, like the regular, rhythmic banging of some huge drum. And Sally wished it would stop, because it was giving her a headache, and she knew that if she got a headache it would make her want to cry, and she didn't want to cry just yet, because she wanted to find out what was going on.

It was just at this moment that she became aware of something just next to her on the river. Something that had come up on her just like the Old Lady's boat, on her first day by the river. But it wasn't dark and black, it was white. White and bright, its brightness almost reflecting off the darkness around. It was the Swan.

And by some miracle, for all that it was floating on the fuming, oily waters, the Swan seemed to be untouched by them – not a spot or trace of oil or smoke to be seen anywhere on it.

As it came close to Sally, it said the same thing that it had said in her earlier dream:

"I think you have a few questions in your mind that you want answered."

And Sally, not knowing whether to be scared or not, but wanting to know how and why and how much the poor river was being spoiled and polluted and poisoned, said simply:

"Yes."

And again, just like the time before, the Swan said:

"Well, child, if you will ride with me, I shall try to give the answers to your questions."

This time, without even hesitating, she said:

"Alright, I will ride with you," because she remembered what the Old Lady had said.

The Swan came close to the bank. It said:

"Come. You may step onto my back. Sit between my wings. If you are scared, hold on to my neck, and I will take you along with me."

And so it was. I don't know if you have ever seen a swan swimming upstream with all of its wing feathers raised erect, like a sheltering shell of protection – well, this was how it swam. Sally nestled in among the soft feathers on its back, felt safe in among its wings as they arched over her, and kept one hand on the back of the Swan's neck, just in case she needed to hold on tight.

And all at once, the hanging clouds of mist were not so scary any more – they seemed to melt aside as the Swan swam through them, and even though the red and orange fire was still streaking and licking across the water, Sally knew that it couldn't harm her.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Sally.

"I am taking you," said the Swan, "to see my queen."

They travelled along for what might have been a long time or might have been a short time, and, as is the way in dreams, at one moment they were gliding over a surface that was water, and the next they were gliding across a surface that was hard. Hard and shiny. With zig-zag patterns on it. As if the water had been set into stone. Like a polished tiled floor. Sally thought for a moment... There was something familiar about this place. She felt that she knew it. It seemed to have a curved rim running round it, like at the ice rink where she went on Sundays. And a black, rising bank at the back of it. And set into the bank was a door. And from that door she could see the sight of bright lights and colours, and she knew, just knew, that where she had arrived was Verity's boat. Except that it wasn't like a boat at all – it was more like a hillside, with a flat floor spread beneath it.

And – now, here was a shock – sitting at the front of the door was a cat. Not just any old cat. Sally knew that it was the very self-same cat that Verity had given to her the day before. She recognised it by the white tufty bit under its chin. Only this cat wasn't a tufty, woolly toy cat. It was a great, sleek beast of a cat, a proud cat, a cat so large that it looked like half a panther, but it wasn't, because it was just a very special cat, and it had a blue leather collar as broad as your hand, and this was studded with silver shapes in the form of the sun and the moon and stars, and its eyes – now here's a thing – its eyes were of the most astonishing penetrating green – green as a burning lamp, green as a fresh holly leaf, green as emeralds – and the light shining from those green eyes seemed to pierce right through the damp night air.

Now, by this time I need hardly tell you that the mysterious queen to whom the Swan was taking Sally was none other than Verity herself, the old lady on the boat. And you may imagine that in among all this smoking and flashing and thundering and roaring she would appear as something great and strange and awesome...

But not a bit of it. She was sitting a little way up the black mound, above the door in the hillside, and so far from wearing crowns and rings and strange robes, she was just wearing her headscarf and old overcoat and rubber boots. All very normal. And when she saw Sally arrive, she said simply:

"Hello, Sally." As if she was expecting her.

And Sally replied:

"Hello."

And the Old Lady said:

"I'm glad you could come. Come – come and sit next to me..."

Sally hesitated for a moment. The problem was the cat. She couldn't decide whether to be scared of it or not. The Old Lady sensed her fear. She said:

"Don't worry about the cat. She looks fierce, but she is my beloved. My friends are her friends."

So Sally did as she was asked. She stepped down off the Swan's back. The cat arched its back, stretched itself as if it was about to lie down in the sun – only, of course,

there wasn't any sun – and moved aside to let her pass. Sally stood by the side of the door. Again the Old Lady said: "Come and sit next to me. Don't be scared."

Sally climbed up the slight slope and sat down.

"Welcome," said the Old Lady. And then, after a pause, she said: "I think that you are sad to see our river the way it is."

"Not so much sad," said Sally. It's more than sad. I think it's scary. I don't want to see rivers like this. Why do they have to be this way? It's horrible. Is the river going to be like this for ever?"

"Well that," said the Old Lady, "is a good question. And if you like you may come with me, and we'll see if we can find some answers. Come, step through the door."

Following the Old Lady, Sally stepped through the door in the hillside. And again, the inside was somehow familiar. It was a large room, but it was all brightly coloured, in the same way that the cabin on Verity's boat had been. In lots of ways it was just like her cabin. But there was a difference. Not only was everything much bigger and more spacey, but set into the middle of the floor was something Sally had not seen before. It was like a porthole. A thick, glass porthole. It was ringed with brass, and it was set into the floor of the room. Like a glass-bottomed boat, thought Sally – but this was different, because when she went up and peered over the edge of it, instead of looking down into the water, she found that she was looking up – up into daylight, up into the world. She saw hazy shapes, of people and things, moving here and there, all swirly-whirly in a flurry of movement.

"There, child," said the Old Lady. "This window is like a kind of crystal ball for me. It helps me to see things. It has answers. It can't provide an answer for everything, but a few answers it can provide. So tell me, what would you like to know...?"

And Sally thought for a moment, and decided that, yes, there were some things that she wanted to know...

Chapter 9

IT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE MUCH, BUT WHEN IT HAPPENS EVERY DAY IT ADDS UP TO A LOT

As I said, Sally thought for a moment, and decided that, yes, there were some things that she wanted to know...

She shut her eyes for a moment and opened them again, just to make sure that the Old Lady was still there (although she didn't really open her eyes, because she was still fast asleep and dreaming, so obviously she just dreamed that she opened her eyes), and she said:

"Well, what I want to know is... why is there all this muck and poison and garbage all along the river. Where does it all come from?"

"What muck and poison and garbage in particular?" asked the Old Lady, as if it wasn't obvious.

"Well, you know, old bits of metal, and floating beer barrels, and people's filthy old bin bags, and broken glass, and rusty motorbikes, and all that. How does a motorbike end up in the river? Was somebody riding it? Did they get drowned? Does that mean there's dead bodies in the river too? Yuk, I hope not..."

"That," said the Old Lady, "is a reasonable question. So let's look into the porthole and see if we can see anything."

And so saying, she and Sally both went and peered over the edge of the glass porthole, and up into the world again.

The Two Girls

This time what Sally saw was not so swirly-whirly-all-over-the-place as last time. It was a definite somewhere. Somewhere that Sally thought that she recognised. She looked hard to see which bits of it she knew. She counted them out. There was a lowish red-brick wall, and a clothes line stretched across behind it, and what looked like flats slightly in the distance. There were two old cars parked by the kerbstone, a lamp-post with a notice about keeping dogs under control, and four or five green plastic bin-bags in a pile in a corner. As she looked, she recognised where the place was – it was the flats behind the park, just along from the cafe by the river. She remembered it from the two old cars, which looked like they hadn't moved in a hundred years. And up against the wall was parked a motor scooter. Blue and silver, not very new, but quite smart, really.

"Go on - I bet you wouldn't dare...!"

Sally heard the sound of a girl's voice. She glanced up and looked around Verity's cabin room, thinking that the voice was in there. But it wasn't. When she looked back into the glass porthole, she saw two girls standing in the roadway. The voice must have belonged to one of them. They were standing a few yards from the motor scooter, slightly hidden by the old cars.

It was strange, for Sally, to be looking down through this window into a world that she knew must be up above her somewhere. And what was even stranger was that she saw somebody else in the picture too. That somebody was Sally herself. She was standing just behind the low wall, watching the girls. But although she could see them, they couldn't see her. She could tell that, because they just kept on talking as if she wasn't there.

"I would dare. How much d'you bet me?" said the one girl.

"Can't bet you anything. Haven't got any money. I dare you, though. Go on!"

Of the two girls, one was a bit older and one was a bit younger, although how old either of them was was anyone's guess, because they looked both young and old at the same time. One thing was certain, though – it was the middle of the afternoon, because there was hardly anybody around, and the girls should have been in school, because they were wearing school uniform.

The older girl was holding three things – a brick in her left hand, and a short pointed piece of metal and a piece of wire in her right.

The younger girl said:

"And even if you did dare, I bet you wouldn't know how to do it."

The older girl said:

"Oh shut up, will you! I told you, I know how to do it. Seeing you were going on about it all weekend, I asked my brother. My brother's got a friend. His friend told him how to do it, and he told me how to do it, so now I know how to do it, OK?! And seeing you're always talking about 'betting' me to do this, and 'daring' me to do that, I bet if I get it started, you won't dare ride on it with me..."

The younger girl was silent for a moment. She knew she'd been put in a spot, and there was no way out. So she said: "Of course I would. I'm not scared. You just think I'm scared... but I'm not..." And it was obvious from her voice that she really was scared, but that she was hiding it.

Sally realised what they were wanting to do. They were wanting to steal the motor scooter. It was obvious from the way they were looking at it. But the question was, was it the Sally behind the wall in the picture who was looking at all this and thinking about it, or was it the Sally who was looking in at the glass porthole? And what's more, how can you be in one place and in another place at the same time? I have to say, I don't know. But I did once talk to a man who said that he nearly died, and he told me that just at the point when he nearly died, he was in two places at once – inside his body, dying, and outside his body, watching himself dying. So maybe it is possible. Or maybe he was just talking nonsense, I don't know. His name was Mattress Man, on account of the fact that he sold mattresses. Funny name. Nice man, though. But anyway, enough of all that. Sally carried on watching as the two girls walked up to the motor scooter.

Now, I'm not going to tell you exactly how they got the motor scooter started, because you might take it into your heads to try the same thing yourselves, and then I would be in trouble. Suffice it to say that the older girl used the brick and the piece of metal to break the lock, and used the piece of wire to connect from here to there, and in no time at all she had kicked the kick-starter, throttled the throttle, and the engine had roared into life. Or not so much roared as buzzed, because it was only a tinny little engine. A slightly high-pitched sputtering buzz of a noise.

"Come on, then," said the older girl. "You said you were coming for a ride, so climb on the back." She was already sitting on the front seat, ready to go, with only one foot on the ground holding the scooter up, because she wasn't quite big enough to ride it.

The younger girl had no choice. She couldn't show that she was scared, so she climbed up on the back. And together they began driving down the pavement past the two parked cars.

They didn't really drive; it was more like they wobbled. The scooter went this way and that, bumping against the wall, denting the metalwork and scratching the paintwork, until it came off the pavement and onto the road. The older girl revved the engine and the scooter started going up the little slope in fits and starts. After about a hundred yards she stopped it, turned it round in the road, almost falling over in the process, and began to come downhill again. Down towards the river. Because the end of the road ran right down to the river.

The younger girl had had enough. She still didn't want to show that she was scared, so she said very loudly: "I've got a headache. I want to get off." And since the older girl had to stop at the bottom to avoid driving into the river, the younger one jumped off.

"Come on," she said, "let's go. Somebody might have heard us driving it. They might come after us..."

"Alright," said the older girl, and she went to leave the scooter against the wall, complete with its scratches and dents. Then the younger one said:

"Suppose they send for the the police? There's our finger prints all over it. They might find us from our finger prints. What do we do about *that*...?"

Now, to be honest, it's highly unlikely that the police are going to send out a fingerprint squad just because a couple of kids have been out nicking a motor scooter. But the older girl thought for a moment. Then she said:

"I know... watch this... this should get rid of the fingerprints..."

And so saying she wheeled the motor scooter to the end of the road, and through the bollards that led onto the towpath by the side of the river.

"You ready?" she said. "Now watch...!"

The scooter was pointing towards the river. She put it into gear, held the clutch lever open, revved the engine noisily and then suddenly let in the clutch. The scooter leapt forward, drove across the towpath all by itself, and went right off the edge of the river bank, tilted down with its front wheel, hit the water and with a great splash turned on its side and sank to the bottom. For a moment there were bubbles of

exhaust, because the engine was running under water, but then that stopped, and the river was quiet again.

The two girls looked at each other, wide-eyed, and then ran off down the towpath, running in the kind of out-of-breath way that kids do when they know they've done something wrong, and when they came to the park they climbed through a gap in the railings and disappeared.

Sally-looking-in-the-porthole looked to find Sally-behind-the- wall, but she had disappeared. And not only had she disappeared, but the picture began to disappear too, and turned all swirly-whirly again.

Ikey and Mikey

Only for a moment, though.

"Hmm," thought Sally. "Someone's going to be very angry when they get back and find their scooter's gone."

Then she heard another noise. A humming noise, and a clatter of something metal, and then she heard a voice again. Or rather two voices – two men's voices. One of them was calling out:

"Oi, Ikey!"

And the other one answered:

"What's up, Mikey?"

And the first one said:

"When you've finished with your cup of tea,
How about you come and help me?"

And the other one answered:

"OK, chum, no need to get shirty,
I'm just washin' my hands 'cos they got all dirty."

And the swirly-whirly picture in the porthole glass began to clear again, and there was a wire fence, and on the wire fence hung a sign, and on the sign was a picture of an ancient old motor car, and some fancy lettering. As the picture cleared, Sally could read what it said:

"We're Ikey and Mikey, and we don't want to boast,
But at mending cars we are the Most!
So when your banger breaks down, don't shout and fuss,
Just bring it along and leave it to us!"

On the other side of the wire fence was a large man, who Sally decided must be Mikey, because she could just see the other one at a kind of small shed in the corner, with one foot keeping the door open, and him leaning inside to wash his hands at a washbasin.

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Mikey was standing next to a car. The car had its bonnet open, and its front door too, and, curiously enough, it seemed to have a passenger sitting in the back seat. The passenger, much to her surprise, was Sally herself, snuggled up in the corner and once again in two places at the same time. And the place where they were wasn't really a garage, but it wasn't really on the road either, it was the kind of car repair yard that's half on the pavement and half off it, with spanners and tyres and trolleys scattered all about the place.

Mikey called out:

"No time for washing,
We've got to do some sloshing.
A lady brought this car round,
Says she's got a clonking sound.
I checked the dip-stick – her oil's all black.
So we're going to change it, and put new oil back."

"Oh dear," thought Sally, "they're a pair of nutters. Why do they talk in poems all the time? Erk, I hope they can't see me..."

But she needn't have worried, because Mikey reached into the car to get an oil funnel, and even though he was staring right at her, it was obvious that he couldn't see her.

Ikey came out of the toilet shed. He looked like he was in a bad mood. He said:

"It's no surprise I've got a face like thunder...
How come, when we do an oil change, I'm the one who has to go under?"

And Mikey said:

"Ikey, old son, my gain is your loss.
The reason why you go under is because I'm the boss!"

To which Ikey replied:

"Pah!"

And then, because he remembered that he was supposed to be speaking in rhyme, he added:

"Bah, nyah," and finally, "BLEAAAGH!"

It was right, what Mikey said, though. He was obviously the boss, so Ikey had to do the dirty grungy work. Mikey handed Ikey an old oil can with the top cut off, and a couple of spanners, and Ikey lay on his back, flat on a trolley, and pushed himself backwards until he disappeared under the car, with only his feet showing. He fiddled around with the spanners, pulled the oil can under the car, and moments later there was a glug-glug sound of something liquid. It was the sound of the car's black, burned oil draining out of the bottom of the engine. Ikey fiddled around again, then pulled himself out from under the car, and stood up, holding the can of used oil. All black and greasy, swilling round inside the can.

"God," thought Sally, "that looks disgusting..."

She thought this thought in her head. But no sooner had she thought it in her head than Ikey said it too.

"God," he said, "that looks disgusting."

"That's interesting," thought Sally, "when I think things, he says them. So she thought again: "I wonder what he's going to do with it."

Ikey looked a little bit dazed, as if his brain had gone for a walk, and he said: "What am I going to do with this oil?"

At this point Mikey looked at him like he was crazy:

"What do you think, bird brain?
Pour it down the bloomin' drain!
You've done it plenty of times, so I would have thought by now you'd know!
And by the way, numskull, next time,
Don't forget you're supposed to talk in rhyme!"

So Ikey walked over to the drain in the road, next to the kerbstone, and he poured the canful of oil straight down through the grating.

And Sally thought:

"I want to know,
Where does that oil go."

She was pleased to discover that she was thinking in rhyme too. Maybe that would save Ikey from getting into trouble, because he seemed quite a nice man. Mind you, she hoped she wouldn't go on talking in rhyme for ever, because people might think she was rather strange. Anyway, just like before, her thought went straight into Ikey's head, and he said:

"You know what, Mikey, I want to know –
All this oil, where does it go?
We tip it down the drain, and we don't really care,
But it must go somewhere, and I want to know where."

Now, the problem is that oil can't talk. Not real oil, anyway. But this wasn't in the real world, it was in Sally's dream world, and there she was, looking through the glass porthole at the world up there, and she heard a new noise. It was the glug-glug noise that the oil had made as it dripped out of the car engine, and the oil was making the same glug-glug as it dripped down the roadside drain, and this glug-glug noise turned into the sound of a deep gluggy sort of voice, which I won't even try to copy because it'll probably give me a sore throat, and the voice said:

"I'll tell you where I go. Drains are here for a purpose, you see. Glug-glug. Because every time it rains on a road, if there weren't drains there, the roads would flood with big puddles and the cars wouldn't be able to drive past. So all the rain water goes down the drains. And at the bottom of the drains there are big sewers, which carry the rain water away. And the big sewers run under the houses, under the flats, under the parks, down to the river. Glug-glug. And when they get to the river, there's a tunnel, and all the water runs into the river. And along with the water goes all the litter and garbage that gets washed down drains. And all the other stuff that people pour down drains, too. In other words, oil. In other words, *me!* Glug- glug."

And Sally heard this glug-glugging voice, and she thought a thought, and the thought went into Ikey's head, and this thought was as follows:

"Mikey, Mikey, listen to me –
We're polluting rivers, don't you see.
Pouring oil down drains just isn't very clever,
'Cos it'll end up stuck like glue to some poor duck's feathers."

"Clever" doesn't really rhyme with "feathers" unless you're a Cockney, and even then it's pushing it a bit, but we'll ignore that for the moment, because Mikey was getting rather extremely slightly annoyed at being talked to in this tone of voice:

"Look son," he said, "I don't like you talking back.
If you don't like working here, I could give you the sack.
I've got my ways of working, so from arguing please refrain –
That oil goes where it's always gone –
In other words, down the drain!"

And so saying he slammed the bonnet of the car shut, and Sally was surprised to see that she wasn't sitting in the back seat any more, and what's more the picture started to get all swirly-whirly again, and Ikey and Mikey began to disappear from sight, with Mikey still pointing his finger at Ikey in a most threatening manner.

"Oh you horrible man," thought Sally. And then she thought: "This is interesting, this is. I almost managed to talk with them, that time. Every time I thought something, Ikey said it. I wonder how that happened."

She turned round to ask Verity, because she wanted to know whether it would be possible for her to talk to the people through the glass porthole if she really wanted to. But she didn't have time to ask, because at that moment she heard someone whistling a tune. Not a very tuneful sort of tune, but whistling nonetheless.

Oh Look, Here's the Stupid Boy...

As the whistling continued, the swirly-whirly in the porthole began to clear again, and this time there was a boy. He was standing on the towpath by the river. Just a little way along from the flats. Again, Sally recognised the place.

The boy must have been aged about 13. What was he – was he white, black, mixed race, oriental, or what was he? I'm not sure, really, because I haven't got the picture clear yet. But one thing I can tell you is that he is carrying a mobile phone. What, you may ask, is a 13-year-old boy doing with a mobile phone? Well, I shall tell you. His brother is delivering a small package to someone who lives on the second-floor balcony of the flats. Inside the package is a small quantity of drugs. The boy's job is to stand around and act as lookout, and if he sees any sign of the police, he phones his brother, who also has a mobile phone. All very illegal.

However, for the moment this is not our problem. Our problem is that the boy has just finished a bottle of Lucozade. He swigs the last drop. Then he looks at the bottle at arm's length, as if deciding what to do with it. He decides what to do with it. He carefully screws the top back on, reaches his arm back, and throws the bottle right up into the air. It sails up and up, because it was a strong throw. It reaches the top of its curve. Then it falls towards the ground again, lands on the pebbles, and smashes all

across the towpath. Little jaggy bits of shattered glass everywhere, and the neck of the bottle, with the top still on it, lodges in a thicket of reeds at the water's edge.

"Huh, very clever!!" said a voice. Sally wondered whose voice it was. Then she realised. It was her own. As she looked through the porthole glass, she saw herself standing right behind the boy on the towpath, and even though he was older than her and bigger than her and certainly stronger than her, she wasn't scared, because she knew that she was invisible. So she said again:

"Huh, I suppose you think that's clever..."

And the boy turned round. Whoops! He'd heard her. Not only that, but when he looked at her, he didn't look right through her – he spoke directly to her. Whoops, again – she wasn't invisible after all! He could see her!

Sally thought: "Oh help! Oh dear! Oh no... He can see me..."

Now he's going to bash me, I bet..."

But the boy didn't bash her. Or glare at her. Or snarl at her. He just looked at her as if she was some small, lowly worm not worthy of his attention, and he said:

"Psha... leave me alone, man..."

This annoyed Sally. Being bashed wouldn't have been much fun, but being looked at like she was a worm was even worse. It made her angry. So she said:

"Why did you smash that bottle? That's stupid, that is. People walk all along here, with their dogs. Their dogs might cut their paws on the glass. And supposing there's little children too – they might fall over and get glass splinters in them..."

But the boy just said, again:

"Psha... leave me alone, man..."

And then, as if this settled everything, he added,

"Nothin' you can do about it... You're nothin' anyway... Go on... Push off..."

And what he said was probably true – there really was nothing Sally could do about it, apart from getting down on her hands and knees and picking up all the glass splinters. The boy was older than her... and he probably had friends round the corner... and even the police wouldn't do anything, because the boy was under-age... And who was Sally to do anything about it anyway... ? He was right... She felt like a nothing...

And that's what Sally said to herself: "He said I'm a nothing. That's horrible, that is. And it makes me angry..."

And that, in an instant, was the end of Sally's dream. As if this thought had switched her dream off. It ended right there. The picture in the glass porthole went all swirly-whirly again and disappeared. And then the whole of Verity's big cabin room began to crumble and fade too, and the black hillside with it. Rather like when you dig a deep hole on a sandy beach, and all the sides start to fall in, and fall and fall until the hole is filled in and the dream is at an end. And somewhere between the end of the

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dream and Sally's waking up, there was just time for her to think some thoughts. And this was what she thought:

"It's so unfair, people doing all these horrible things to the river. Maybe if it was just one bottle, it wouldn't matter... or just one bit of oil... that wouldn't be much. But if it happens every day, it adds up to lots and lots. They ought to make a law against it. If I was prime minister, I'd make a law against it. If you ask me, people like that should be punished. Ha! What wouldn't I do to them if I was a judge! Ha! I'd make them wish they'd never started! You know what," she thought, "I'd teach them such a lesson that they'd never do it again...! That girl with the scooter... I wish and I wish and I wish... I wish..." She wondered for a moment what exactly she did wish. "I think... she ought to get a broken leg... because she deserves to get a broken leg for being so stupid. And that horrid man with his filthy oil... what does he deserve...? Well, seeing that he's poisoning the ducks' home and the fishes' home with his horrible oil, I hope his house gets filled with horrible oil too...! And the boy with the bottle...? I know what! Everywhere he goes, whoever he talks to, whenever he asks somebody something, the only thing they'll ever say to him is 'Oh look – there's the stupid boy who smashes bottles...!'"

And after this thought, which maybe lasted for a whole hour, or maybe only for a split second, Sally woke up.

Chapter 10

TOWARDS THE END

A short chapter, this one, because our story is coming to an end. First, let me say that I have enjoyed being with you for these last nine chapters. After all, most people spend their lives rushing about the place and nobody gives themselves the time just to sit down and talk about this and that. But here we are, you and I, and we have sat down, and the story has unfolded, and the world rolls on, and that is good.

Anyway, so what's the girl going to do today?

She could, of course, stay in bed and read. But it didn't feel like a reading sort of day. Or she could get up and draw. But it wasn't a drawing sort of day either. It was a doing sort of day.

She leaned across the bed and looked out of her porthole. Nothing much to see, except grass and plants on the bank. Then she looked across at the other porthole, looking out onto the river. A couple of ducks. Some green weed. Lazy brown water moving past slowly. And a white plastic bag, half sunk below the surface.

"That's it," she thought. "I shall do some Cleaning Up. This will be a Cleaning Day."

She slipped out of her pyjamas very quickly, because it was quite cold getting out of bed, and she hopped into her red tights and a woolly skirt and a jumper and her Wellington boots. She reached up to the coathook, fetched down her coat, and put it on. She checked in her pocket to make sure her new friend the Cat was still there, and it was.

Then she thought: "That is not very polite. If I was a proper person, I would say Good Morning to my cat, instead of just squeezing him in my pocket." So she pulled Cat out of her pocket. She began to say: "Good morning, Cat. I hope you slept well. I hope you were not too cold in the night..."

But then her voice tailed off. She said: "Er...". But then she couldn't think of anything else to say, because she had noticed something. The cat had a collar on. She knew that the cat didn't have a collar on when the Old Lady had given it to her. She distinctly remembered looking at the white patch of fur under its chin, and there was definitely no collar on it. And also, this was not just any old collar. The colour of the collar was blue. It was made of leather. Quite wide. And it was studded with silver shapes, in the form of the sun and the moon and the stars... Just like the Cat in Sally's dream.

Now, when you see something like that, you can either give a little scream – "Aaargh" – and say "This is spooky" – and drop the Cat, or chuck it in the river, or something. Which would be a shame. Or you can say, as Sally did: "Well, now that is interesting. This Cat seems to have stepped out of my dream and into my real life. Who knows, maybe it's even a magic Cat. Come along with me, Cat, because we're going up on deck."

And this was sensible of Sally, because dream cats are useful things. Surprising things can happen with dream cats.

The river was about as murky and dirty as the first time she had seen it. All along the bank, floating in among the river plants, were bits of rubbish wood, and plastic bottles, and half-floating cans. "Can't do much about them," thought Sally, "because if I try to pull them out I might fall in." But there were also plastic bags floating around, and these were very definitely pull-outable. She could get the pole with the hook on the end of it, from next to the toilet on the boat, and she could use the hook to fish them out.

So she went back on board.

"Dad," she said, "I want to borrow the pole with the hook on it. Can I use it for a bit?"

"First of all," said Father, "it's not a pole with a hook on it. It's a boat-hook.."

"Oh you're such a fusspot, Dad... Can I borrow it?"

"Yes, alright... but what do you want it for?"

Sally was in too much of a hurry to explain everything. She took the boathook and scrambled up the stairs onto the deck. And as she went she heard Father call after her:

"And don't drop it in the river... Boathooks cost money..."

"I won't drop it," she thought. "I'm going to do Operation Cleanup, that's what I'm going to do..." She decided that she would find every plastic bag she could, and fish them all out of the river.

She got off her boat and walked along the bank. She walked past Annie's boat, and she saw Annie hanging two tea-towels out to dry. So she said, "Good morning." And she walked past John the Pirate's boat. There was no sign of John, but she said "Good morning" anyway, and then said an extra "Good morning" for Pirate the dog, who wasn't there either.

But then, just as she was passing John's boat, her heart skipped a beat. She realised that Verity's boat was right there, in front of her. Big and black and brooding by the side of the river. She could just see Verity's headscarf bobbing around in the cockpit at the other end of the boat.

What should she do? Should she tell Verity that she'd seen her in her dream the night before? No – that would be too silly – you can't go telling complete strangers that you've seen them in your dreams. So she decided to walk straight on, as if she was lost in her thoughts and hadn't noticed Verity and her boat.

But it didn't work. Verity saw her. She leaned across the gunwale of her boat and spoke to her:

"Hello, Sally."

"Um, er, hello..." said Sally.

"I see you've decided to come and clean up the river."

"How could she possibly know that?" thought Sally.

"Well that's good," said the Old Lady, "because that will make four of us – you, me, the Swan and our Cat. Where are you thinking of starting...?"

"I'm going to start over by the cafe," said Sally, "because there's more rubbish over there."

"Very good," said the Old Lady. "Good luck, Sally. Oh, and by the way, how is Cat this morning?"

And as she said this she had a bit of a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, Cat's alright," said Sally. But once again, she didn't say anything, either about her dream or about the blue collar, because she felt embarrassed.

"Well make sure you look after Cat," said the Old Lady. "And by the way, did you know that wishes sometimes come true...?"

She said it in such a way that it was as if she knew something. Sally wanted to ask her what she meant, but before she could ask, the Old Lady disappeared into her cabin, saying, "Welcome to our river, Sally, welcome..."

Now, wishes are a strange thing. Over the centuries people have invented thousands of ways in which you can supposedly wish and make that wish come true. Whole books have been written about wishes – but the simple fact remains that you can wish for something, and wish and wish and wish until you're almost bursting, and it might never happen, even if you wait a whole lifetime. But then again, it might... and we might well wonder just how and why wishes do come true.

Suffice it to say that Sally walked along the river bank and over the bridge to where the cafe stood by the river. She had her boathook in her hand, and she was all ready to start fishing rubbish.

As she came round the tall chestnut tree guarding the other end of the bridge, she happened to look beyond it into the park. Trees. Two men walking their dogs. A child on a bike. Nothing unusual. And halfway up the hill, two girls in school uniform, walking across the park. All very normal. Except that (here Sally took a second look), they were walking very slowly. And the reason why they were walking very slowly was because one of them... had her leg in plaster. And Sally knew at once that these were the very same two girls that she had seen in her dream... and that one of them, the older girl, had a broken leg...

Now this was definitely weird. And that's what Sally thought: "This is definitely weird," she said to herself. And she watched for a moment, as the girls disappeared behind a row of bushes.

It occurred to her that she hadn't had any breakfast, and since she had twenty pence in her pocket she decided to call in at the cafe to see if they had any buns. The windows were all steamed up, so the cafe was obviously open. Sally pushed the door and stepped inside.

There was a queue consisting of a lady with a dog and her two small boys, so Sally stood and waited. And as she waited she looked around. At the cakes under the glass

counter. And the old photos of the river hanging on the wall. And the newspaper next to the cash till. And the headline in the newspaper. And then once again at the headline, because it said something most curious. It said, "Leaking Oil Mystery in Local Man's House".

"Whoops," thought Sally... I know what that is... I bet it's the garage man...!"

And sure enough, as she edged past the lady with the dog, she read the first bit of the article (upside down, because the paper was the other way round) and it explained that a local garage owner was puzzled to find that the walls of his house had, for absolutely no reason at all, started to leak black oil... in the bedroom, the kitchen, the toilet, everywhere... Council officials had examined the house, but were completely baffled by the cause of it...

"God, that's even weirder," thought Sally. That's another one of my wishes..."

And as she finished reading the article in the paper, the lady and the children took their tea tray and went to sit down, and Sally was just about to ask about the buns, when she heard a voice next to her at the counter:

"I want a can of Coke."

And the lady behind the counter said, without even stopping to think, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world:

"Oh look, there's the stupid boy who smashes bottles."

And indeed it was. It was the boy from the towpath. And he was angry. He stamped his foot, and said again:

"I said I want a can of Coke."

And once again, all the lady would say was:

"Oh look, there's the stupid boy who smashes bottles..."

And he got so very extremely angry that he stamped right out of the cafe – and Sally looked out of the cafe door as he went, and there, on the other side of the river, was Verity's boat. And Verity was on the back deck, looking right across at Sally. And she waved – as if to say:

"All right, then...?"

And as she thought this, she was sure, absolutely sure, that she heard a purring sound coming from her coat pocket. "I don't believe this," she thought. "This is impossible. The cat's purring. Toy cats don't purr." But she had to check. She reached into her pocket, put her hand round Cat, and could have sworn that she actually felt the purr. But when she pulled it out into the light, Cat looked like a perfectly normal toy cat.

"This," said Sally, half out loud, "is all very unusual. I wonder what on earth is going to happen next."

She bought her bun, carried her boathook out of the cafe (taking care not to poke it in the eye of the man behind her) and stood for a moment by the river bank.

As she stood looking down among the river weed and the old tin cans, she thought, "That was very, very clever of her to grant my wishes like that." But then she thought: "I suppose it wasn't really very nice of me to wish such horrible things on people. As soon as I get a moment, I'll sit down and wish the old lady to stop the wish working on Mr Mikey... and the boy with the bottle... and I'll ask her to get the girl's leg mended as soon as she can. But just for the moment I've got a job to do. I'm going to fish for some rubbish."

At that moment, a voice – a woman's voice – called out:

"Sally, Sally..."

And Sally thought:

"Oh no... Not someone else who knows my name... Not more weird magic... Who can it be this time..."

But it wasn't just any old someone else. It was a voice that she knew better than any other voice at all. She turned round, dropped her boathook on the ground, stuffed her bun into her pocket, flung her arms wide open and raced across to the end of the bridge, where the owner of the voice stood, and as she ran she shouted:

"M-u-u-u-m-m-m-y!"

For this was who it was.

"Hello, Sally," said Mother, "I was beginning to wonder where you were. Have you forgotten what day it is? It's Saturday. It's the weekend. You're coming to stay with me at Grandma's. And I've got good news for you. I've been thinking about what we'll do for your birthday. I asked Grandma, and she says you can have your birthday party at her house. So we'd better hurry and get the invitations written, because we don't have much time. It's only two weeks, you know..."

"I know," said Sally. "Come on, Mum, what are you waiting for? Let's get on with it!"

And so they did. Back to the boat for a minute or two, to say goodbye to Father, and then off to Grandma's to start making the arrangements for Sally's birthday party.

[The End]