



AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Suzy wasn't sure, at first, what woke her. She was just awake, in that sudden, surprising way that catches your brain unawares, as though it hadn't realized it had been asleep to begin with.

The clock on her bedside table read 2 a.m. She sat up, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark and tell her what was wrong.

After almost a minute the answer seemed to be: nothing. But she was wide awake, and a troubling little itch at the back of her mind told her there was a good reason.

She swung her feet out of bed and into her slippers, then crept to the window, easing the curtain aside to peer out. The street was deserted, the houses dark and sleeping. No traffic hummed, no people spoke. Even the clouds, vague and shadowy in the overcast night, were still.

She was just getting back into bed when she heard it: a

sharp, hard noise from somewhere inside the house. She jumped in shock.

It came again; a *clank!* of metal on metal, like heavy saucepans being smashed together. Her parents wouldn't be up in the middle of the night banging pots and pans together, which meant only one thing – there was someone else in the house!

The sound drew Suzy towards the door, her chest tight with apprehension.

Burglars!

The thought came crashing into her mind, huge and urgent and dangerous, and it froze Suzy to the spot. She tried to shift it, to send it away somewhere, but it refused to budge.

What if they come upstairs?

Her heart beat a stuttering rhythm in her chest, and she realized she was beginning to panic.

This wouldn't do. If the burglars, or whoever they were, burst into her room, she didn't want them to find her just standing there in her pyjamas. (And not even her nice pyjamas – the dark blue ones with the lightning bolts on them. These were her spare set: the pink and yellow ones with the lacy cuffs that her Aunt Sandrine in Mauritius sent her for Christmas last year.) If they found her like this, they wouldn't have to hurt her – she'd probably drop dead of embarrassment.

She clearly needed to do something. *But what?*

Despite her fear, Suzy closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe deeply. It wasn't much, but it calmed

the storm inside her mind just enough to let her hear the thought that had been there all along, calling for her attention: *burglars don't make noise*. At least, not this much noise, and never on purpose. You couldn't expect to steal much if you woke everyone up.

So, probably not burglars then.

This reassured her a little, but she was still tense as she crossed to her bedroom door and eased it open, taking her dressing gown down from its hook as she did so. The noise was deafening, even out here on the landing. Definitely not burglars, she decided. If she didn't know any better, she would say it was builders, but what would builders be doing in her house in the middle of the night?

No, it was her mum and dad, it had to be. But what on earth were they up to?



The light in the hallway was on but, looking down the stairs from the landing, Suzy couldn't see much. The noise was getting louder though – too loud for pots and pans, although it was definitely the sound of metal striking metal. She crept down the first few steps, and was about to peer through the banisters into the hall when a cascade of orange sparks leaped into the air from somewhere below her, ricocheting off the ceiling and walls. She flinched and almost toppled over, but grabbed

the banister just in time.

“Mum?” Her voice shook. “Dad? Is that you?”

The hammering sounds stopped immediately and she heard someone gasp. There was the noise of something heavy being dropped and a sudden scuffle of feet on the hall carpet. Then a rustle and a flap, like bed sheets being folded. Then silence.

“Hello?” Suzy leaned over the banister, wary of another eruption of sparks, and looked down into the hall. At first everything seemed normal, but then a glint of metal caught her eye. Two long silver strips winked up at her from the carpet. They lay side by side, a metre or so apart, and seemed to run into the house from underneath the front door. Suzy frowned in confusion, her fear momentarily forgotten as she descended the stairs, trying to understand what she was seeing.

They were railway tracks.

She knew they couldn't be, and yet there they were. She prodded the nearest one with her toe, then knelt down and rapped her knuckles against it. It was cold and hard and very, very real. A railway line, set into the floor of the hall. Someone had even cut strips of carpet away to make room for the tracks; she could see the frayed edges.

“But that doesn't make sense,” she said to herself, stepping back and giving them a hard look. They glinted back at her, indifferent. She turned and followed their path with her eyes, past the living room door and down the whole length of the hall towards the kitchen – where

her attention fell on an object sitting to one side of the kitchen door.

It was a workman's tent, made of grubby red-and-white striped tarpaulin – the sort she had seen erected over holes in the road when people had to dig up gas mains or water pipes. They were usually small, but this one was minute. It sagged a bit in the middle, and it barely reached her shoulder.

Light spilled from between the canvas flaps.

"Mum? Dad?" she called, taking a cautious step forward. Something shifted inside the tent, and a vague shadow played across the fabric. "Who's in there?"

"Nobody!" replied a hoarse voice that she did not recognize. "There's nobody in 'ere. Go back to bed."

There was a stranger in her house!

Where were her mum and dad? Why hadn't the noise woken them up too? She took a step back, ready to turn and run. She should call the police, or go and fetch help.

But...

Whoever this person was, why were they hiding in a tent? And what were those rails doing here? Her mind started to prick, searching for an answer that didn't seem to be there.

Very carefully, she reached out to the house phone, which stood on a small table beside the front door, and lifted it from its cradle.

"Tell me who you are or I'll call the police," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

For a moment there was no response. Then the voice

said, "I'm no one."

"Well you must be someone," she said. "You're talking to me."

The voice grunted in obvious annoyance. "No I'm not. You're dreamin'. Go back to bed."

Without realizing it, Suzy took a few steps towards the tent. "If I'm dreaming," she said, "then I'm already in bed."

Another grunt, even more annoyed than the last.

"Well?" she said, creeping closer.

"Aha! You could be sleepwalkin'." The voice sounded rather pleased with itself.

"Maybe," said Suzy. "That would certainly explain a lot."

"There you are then," the voice concluded. "Sleepwalkin'. Now off to bed with you."

Suzy took another step, but her toe struck something hard. "Ouch!" She hopped on one foot and looked down. A squat hammer lay on the floor between the rails.

"What 'appened?" snapped the voice. "What's goin' on?"

"I've just proved to myself that I'm not asleep," said Suzy, reaching down to rub her throbbing toe. "That hurt."

"Serves you right."

Suzy thought the voice was starting to sound a little scared, which gave her a bit more confidence. Then she happened to glance over to the living room door, which stood open. There, slumped on the sofa where she had left them, were her parents, still snoring.