

**HAPPY
HERE**

ASHER IS A ROCKSTAR!

DEAN ATTA
ILLUSTRATED BY OLIVIA TWIST

PART 1: RUBEN SAYS 'YES'

Asher Tembo is my best friend
and Asher is a rock star.

She is the coolest, most talented,
most amazing person I know.

She isn't a celebrity;
 she doesn't have songs on the radio,
 she hasn't been on TV,
 she hasn't made a music video
 and she hasn't gone viral online.

When I say Asher is a rock star,
 I mean she's a rock star in my eyes.

My name is Josh Appiah,
 I'm ten years old and I'm from Brixton,
 which is in South London.

My best friend, Asher, is eleven.
 Asher has always been
 and will always be exactly
 one year older than me
 because we have the same birthday.

We have joint parties
 at the church hall. Everyone comes;
 family, friends from church
 and friends from school.

We go to different schools
 but we see each other all the time;
 on Sundays at church
 and in the school holidays
 at church holiday club.

Holiday club is really fun
 and the meals are awesome.
 We're allowed seconds,
 which mum can't usually
 afford to give me at home.

If Asher goes away on holiday,
 she sends postcards with poems
 she writes especially for me.

This one was from Barcelona:

'I really miss you, my best friend.
 I can't wait for this holiday to end.
 Spain is too hot but the food is nice.
 Paella is like Spanish jollof rice.
 I hope you're enjoying holiday club.
 I know how much you love the grub.

You always go for a second plate.
Your amazing appetite is so great!

I've never been away on a holiday.
I've never been on a plane to Spain,
a ferry to France or a train to Scotland.
Asher has been to all of those countries,
just like a rock star on a world tour!

The main reason Asher is a rock star
is because Asher plays electric guitar.
We both play in the church band.
Our biggest fan is my brother Ruben.

Ruben is fifteen. He's nonverbal,
which means he doesn't speak.

He has a Yes/No button communication device,
which means you ask questions
to find out what he wants,
what he likes and doesn't like.

When we play, Ruben says, 'Yes yes yes'

It feels great when Ruben does this
because he's telling us he's happy.

I play clarinet. I want a saxophone
but Mum can't afford to buy me one.

When I'm older and I have a job
I'll be able to buy one for myself.

Our vicar, Father Francis,
loaned me a clarinet from church.
He said it's on the condition
I play in the church band every Sunday.

Father Francis is from Nigeria.
He lived there before moving here.

Mum is from Ghana
but I've never been there.

Asher's parents are from Zimbabwe
but she's not been there, either.

Father Francis's sermons are about love,
acceptance and forgiveness.

Asher is very forgiving.
When people call Asher 'he',
I tell them, 'The correct pronoun is she.'

Asher says, 'It's okay, they didn't know.'
But sometimes it's people who do know.

Asher is transgender.
That's another reason Asher is a rock star.

Sometimes strangers stare at her
and it's like she's already a celebrity.

I think Asher will be famous one day.
Father Francis does, too.

Father Francis told Asher,
'You glorify God when you use the gifts
He gave you. You walk in your truth
and Jesus walks with you.'

We play hymns in church band
but Asher also writes her own songs.
They're catchy and easy for me
to learn the melody on clarinet.
Asher wrote this song about Ruben.
When we play it for him, he always joins in.

Ruben Says 'Yes'

*You look stressed
when you see me in a dress
but Ruben says, 'Yes yes yes yes'*

*Pink nail polish on,
my hair freshly pressed
and Ruben says, 'Yes yes yes yes'*

*I'll never say 'No'
to being my best
when Ruben says, 'Yes yes yes yes'*

*Am I a rock star?
Are you obsessed?
Ask Ruben. He says, 'Yes yes yes'*

PART 2: TICK TOCK

Ruben is outgrowing his wheelchair.
Mum wants to do an online fundraiser
for a new one. When Mum asks Ruben
if that would be okay, he says, 'No'

When Asher and I ask Ruben
if we can do a fundraising concert
for him, he doesn't answer
right away but then he says, 'Yes'

Asher and I both jump for joy.
'We better get rehearsing,' says Asher.
Then she asks my mum, 'Aunty,
can Josh come to my house to rehearse?'

Even though we're not related
Asher calls my mum Aunty
and I call Asher's parents Aunty and Uncle.
It's just the polite thing to say.

Asher's house is only a few streets away
but it's like another world.

They have a spare bedroom,
which is where I sleep when I stay the night.

It's always strange to be by myself.

At home I share a room with Ruben
and sometimes Mum comes in
to check on him at night.

Our home doesn't have any stairs
but Asher's has two flights
because it's got three floors.
The top floor is just for Aunty and Uncle.

The middle floor has Asher's room,
the guest room and a bathroom.
The ground floor has the living room,
dining room, kitchen and another toilet.

Most importantly, they have a massive garden
with swings and our music shed
where we rehearse Asher's songs,
so we don't disturb Aunty and Uncle.

Asher has decorated the walls
with pictures of her favourite musicians:
Jimi Hendricks, Lenny Kravitz,
Brittany Howard and Prince.

There are hundreds of fairy lights in here,
a heater for when it's cold
and an amplifier for Asher's guitar.
Asher has named her guitar Minty.
Minty has a mint green body,
white pick guard, brown neck and head.
Asher got it for her last birthday
and returned the church guitar.

I haven't named my clarinet
because it's not really mine, it's borrowed.
One day, when I have a saxophone
I'm going to name it Monty.

I take my clarinet out of its case
and put the five pieces together,
mouthpiece, barrel, upper tube,
lower tube and bell. I do like it.

It's black and silver colours are cool
but I dream of having a gold saxophone
to play like Charlie Parker, John Coltrane,
Kamasi Washington and Nubya Garcia.

'What shall we rehearse first?'
Asher asks, holding Minty ready to play.

'We don't have much time today,'
I reply, 'so how about "Tick Tock"?'

Tick Tock

*You ask me where I'm from
But not where I'm going:
To the top to the top to the top top top*

*You tell me to slow down
But I'm never slowing:
Non-stop non-stop non-stop stop stop*

*Each second on the clock
My confidence is growing:
Tick tock tick tock tick tock tock tock*

Part 3: Headliners

The concert will be in the church hall.
The church band are going to play
and some of their professional
musician friends ask to play as well.

We show Ruben videos of the musicians
who offered to play and he picks
the line-up and the running order.
Ruben wants Asher and I to be headliners.

Headliners are the final performers.
This feels like a lot of pressure to me
but Asher doesn't seem nervous at all.
That's another reason she's a rockstar.

But one performer isn't happy
when we send out the running order.
It's not one of the professionals.
It's Tara. She's twelve and sings solos
in church choir.

Before church, Tara comes up to me
and says, 'It's not fair you get to be headliners
just because Ruben is your brother.
Everyone knows I'm a better singer.'

Asher isn't here but I don't answer Tara.
I continue to put my clarinet together:
mouthpiece, barrel, upper tube,
lower tube and bell. I click the case shut.

'Answer me,' says Tara, stomping her foot.

'I didn't hear a question,' I reply, finally
looking up and looking Tara in the eyes.
They shimmer with purple eye shadow.
Her braids have cowrie shells in them this week.

'Who is the better singer, Asher or me?'

'Probably you,' I say to Tara
'but Ruben picked me and Asher
to be headliners. Organise your own
concert, if you're so bothered.'

Tara crosses her arms and narrows
 her eyes at me before she says,
 ‘Fine, I’ll perform. For Ruben.
 Because I’m a good Christian.’
 Tara smiles really strangely:
 ‘I just wanted to hear you admit
 I’m a better singer than Asher.’

As Tara walks away, she says:
 ‘Hi Asher, I didn’t see you there.’

I turn to face my best friend,
 who is wearing a light green and blue
 flowery dress with a navy bow
 around the middle.

She has one hand on her waist,
 the other is holding her guitar case.

Her hair is perfectly straightened,
 and so is the expression on her face.
 Asher stares at me, blankly.

I feel so guilty for saying that
 Tara is a better singer than Asher.

‘I’m so sorry, Asher,’ I say.

She shrugs and smiles,
 ‘Don’t be sorry for telling the truth.
 Tara is a better singer
 but this isn’t a competition.
 It’s a fundraising concert.’

During Father Francis’s service,
 I wonder if what I said hurt Asher
 and she’s just acting like it didn’t?
 I pray to God that she’ll forgive me.

After all, Asher is very forgiving.

After church, we make posters
 and flyers that say “Rock for Ruben!
 Fundraiser for a new wheelchair”
 and put them up everywhere.

We rehearse for the concert every day
after school and all day Saturday.
On Sunday we play in church as usual.
That's our routine for three weeks.

We don't speak about what I said.

Part 4: Who You Say I Am

I think Ruben's concert will be
like one of our birthday parties;
with family, friends from church,
and friends from school. But it isn't!

There are people we don't know here
because they don't need an invitation,
they each pay five pounds to come in.

'I'm so proud of you both,' says Father Francis.

'We haven't played yet,' says Asher,
putting her guitar strap over her shoulder.

Her hair is combed out into a big afro,
she's wearing a black t-shirt,
black leather jacket, black tutu
with leggings and black boots.

'You've brought so many people to church,'
says Father Francis, smiling.

I correct him, 'This isn't church,
it's the church hall.'

Father Francis laughs and says,
'The Church isn't just one building.'

I think of our music shed.
Is it part of Asher's house or not?
It must be. It's in the garden
and the garden is part of the house.

The professional musicians play
and the audience dance and cheer.
I don't dance or cheer because
I'm getting more and more nervous.

I don't want to play. I want to run away
 but I know Asher will make everything okay.
 She's always so confident.
 I look for Asher, who was beside me.

She isn't beside me anymore.

I hear Father Francis introduce Tara,
 which means Asher and I are next.
 I only have five minutes to find Asher.

I peak out from the side of the stage
 into the packed audience.

Everyone is mesmerised by Tara
 as she begins singing
 "Who You Say I Am" by Hillsong Worship.

There's no sign of Asher's afro anywhere
 in the crowd. I have to keep looking.

Asher isn't in the queue for the toilet
 but I have a feeling she might be inside,
 so I knock on the door.

When the door opens,
 it isn't Asher who comes out.

I feel a bit embarrassed
 but mostly I feel determined
 to find Asher.

Children aren't allowed in the kitchen
 but I put my head around the door anyway,
 it smells of delicious peanut stew
 and is full of aunties talking and laughing
 but there's no sign of Asher in here.

I look in the next room
 where there are stacks of chairs
 and shelves of bibles
 but no Asher in here, either.

I return to the back of the stage
 and Asher is there.

She's hugging Minty, tightly.

'Where have you been?' I ask,
hoping she'll explain her disappearance
and say something to reassure me.

Asher shakes her head.
'I can't do it,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I ask.
'You're the most confident person I know,'
I say to Asher because it's a fact.

Asher says, 'I feel confident in church,
where most people are friendly.
I've never played to strangers.
What if they stare at me or whisper
the way people in the street do?'

I notice when that happens
but I never knew Asher cared
who whispered or stared.

I try to think of something to say.
Asher is biting her mint green fingernails,
freshly painted to match Minty.

'Asher, you're a rockstar!
You're the coolest, most talented,
most amazing person I know.'

Asher has a look of surprise
and in that moment I realise
I've never told her this before.
She looks down at the floor.

I think I've said something wrong.
When Asher looks up, there are tears
in her eyes and I'm about to apologise
if what I said upset her somehow.

She says, 'Wow! Is that really true?
Josh, I think you're a rockstar too!'

But this sounds so silly to me.

'How can I be a rock star?' I ask.
'I don't play a cool instrument.
I don't even dress cool, like you.'

'Being a rock star isn't about that.
It's not about clothes or instruments
it's about attitude and confidence.'

'I'm not that confident though,
I get my confidence from you.'

'How can that be true, when
I get my confidence from you?'

'How?' I ask, totally confused.

'The way you correct people
when they get my pronouns wrong.
The way you made this
big concert happen for Ruben.
The way you're the youngest
musician in the church band.
'Don't you see how cool you are?'

I'm startled by an eruption of applause.

I realise the audience are clapping
for Tara, which means it's our turn.

Father Francis is back on stage:
'Now, it's time for our headliners,
the two organisers of this concert,
please welcome Josh and Asher.'

The clapping isn't as loud
as it was for Tara but I can hear
Ruben saying, 'Yes Yes Yes'
and then the rest of the audience
join in with him.

Everyone is chanting 'Yes Yes Yes'
and Asher and I look at each other.
And we say, at exactly the same time,
'Let's rock for Ruben!'

Part 5: At the End of the Day

When Asher and I step on stage,
everyone starts cheering.
This feels strange because
it doesn't happen in church.

When we play hymns, it's to help
the congregation to sing in time.
It's not about us, it's about Jesus.

Today, we're playing for Ruben.

When I look at him I feel like
I'm going to cry happy tears
because everyone came today
to "Rock for Ruben!" I realise
I have nothing to worry about.

I look from Ruben to Mum
and the rest of the front row,
which is full of friends from church
and friends from school.

They're ready to film our performance.
They're holding their phones up,
like they have phones for faces.

We start with everyone's favourite
"Ruben Says Yes" and, of course,
everyone joins in. It feels amazing!

Even better than our birthday!

Second, we play "Tick Tock".
Third, "At the End of the Day".

This is my favourite of Asher's songs
because it's a slow one, so it's easier
to breathe when I play along.

At the End of the Day

*At the end of the day
I count my blessings
and one of them is you*

*At the end of the day
I thank God
for bringing me to you*

*At the end of the day
I count my blessings
and one of them is you*

My friend, my best friend

my friend, my best friend.

After Asher sings the words,
I have a clarinet solo
where I repeat the melody
from the beginning.
Asher joins in at the end,
singing, "My friend, my best friend."

I look at Mum and she's crying.

Aunty and Uncle are crying.

I know these are happy tears.

The audience cheer and chant
'Yes yes yes', before Ruben
even has the chance to start them off.

Now, I'm crying happy tears, too.

Then, Father Francis invites
all the performers back on stage
for another round of applause.

I wipe the tears from my eyes.

Tara stands in between
me and Asher, putting herself
centre stage. She holds
one of our hands in each of hers.

Tara raises our hands in the air,
like she's a boxing referee
and she's declared both Asher and me
as the winners.

The audience whoop and holler
even louder than before.

'You two were amazing,' says Tara,
'Maybe you could play for me?
Or maybe we can collaborate on a song
and, you know, see how it goes.'

Asher looks past Tara,
to me, and smiles.
Then, Asher says to Tara,

'You were really good too.
Josh and I will discuss it
and we'll get back to you.'

Part 6: What If

Asher and I are discussing
whether we want to collaborate with Tara,
when Mum interrupts us,
'We've counted the money from the door
and we've raised more than we need
for Ruben's new wheelchair.
So we've decided we want to use the extra
to buy you a saxophone.'

'That's amazing,' says Asher,
jumping for joy and hugging me,
which makes me jump with her.

This makes me feel excited
for a few seconds but then I think:
What if Ruben needs something else?
What if Mum needs something?

What if—

'It's okay,' I say, 'I like my clarinet.'

Asher begins: 'But Josh—'

And Ruben jumps in: 'No no no'

Have I said the wrong thing, again?

I look at Asher, then at Ruben,
and I don't know what to say.

I look at Mum for an answer.

Mum turns to Reuben:

'Don't you think Josh was amazing in the concert?
Aren't you proud of him?
And don't you think he should have a saxophone?'
And Ruben says, 'Yes yes yes'

Now I can give the clarinet back
to Father Francis, and someone else
who can't afford an instrument

can play in church band with us.



TOMORROW, AS IN

YOMI ŞODE

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLKAY

Today, Dad kisses me on the cheek then signals for me to meet him at the bus stop, like normal, as I've always done. But today was different. Today, there's a beat in my step, tiny kicks & snares - boots & cats'n through my body, dribbling between organs & finally jump shooting out of my mouth, *Dad, meet me half way! Not the bus stop, ok?, I'll call you. Love youuu!!*

Scoring my grown point! Turning then bopping away as he eyes every trail, following the ooze of swag I left behind until he shouts, *Hey! Badman. Whoever she is, just make sure your nerves don't make you fart, innit. Love youuuuuu!*

Though I know Dad's joking, I can't unhear the possibilities of my flatulence & the orchestral sound of laughter coming from my bredrins, What if it bubbles in my stomach in my excitement? Nah! What if the smell lingers like Dad's *Don't fart innit!* Haunting me like some ghost! Naah! No *waaay!* I repeat to myself.

Now my *No waaay* can't be unthought. Can't be unseen, unimagined, Fam - this morning, my nerves were unstuck! The beat in my step was King T'challa, it was Stormzy, it was all Black & excellent & before Dad interrupted & started talking about farts - it was her. It was homework club with her & thinking about the walk to the bus stop, feeling as though my powers stopped time when she said, *I can take that route home as well! So, tomorrow, yeah? Her.*



Today. As in *tomorrow* is today & until I arrived at school, everything was twice! I brushed my teeth twice, I sprayed deodorant in each armpit twice and today is a feeling I cannot explain. It's an elbow nudge to my rib for saying something silly, then faking the pain like it really hurt. It's transparency to the girl I'm feeling that my Dad joked I'd fart, out of nerves. It's the girl I'm feeling laughing & asking if my farts smell. It's me being grossed out that she's entertaining fart talk & knowing this was never about farts. It's the slowest walk to the bus stop, not holding hands but wanting to. It's the ride halfway, the *see you tomorrow?* The *No!* when Dad asks if I have a crush on her & the *Yes please*, in the morning, when Dad says with a smile, *The same plan as yesterday?*

THE AFTER EVER AFTER BUREAU

PATRICE LAWRENCE

ILLUSTRATED BY ONYINYE IWU

Excellent walk with guide, Cindi. Her gossip about the British royal family and their gruesome history with the Tower of London was especially satisfying.

M Markle, California

Marla unhooked her skin from the back of the door and slipped it back on. That moment when she changed from speeding ball of fire to human girl was always a strange one. She felt cold and heavy and her legs and arms were just TOO SLOW. In some ways it should be easier for Mum. She'd been doing this transformation thing since she was a kid. But it still took longer for Mum to repellisate. Marla frowned to

herself. Was that even a real word? It was definitely the word Mum used for putting her skin back on when she eventually found it. But she could never remember where she left it. Soucouyants were much misunderstood. Mum says it was sexism. Marla thought it was more likely to do with the fact that they were flying shape-shifters with the habit of sucking people's blood. (Modern super-strength iron pills had rendered that part of soucouyanting redundant now.) But what it did mean, was that if a woman was suspected of being a soucouyant in the old times, some idiot would wait until she was on a night flight then set out to find her skin. And rub salt on it so she couldn't get back in. So Mum was taught to hide her skin very carefully. It also explained why Mum only ever had vinegar on her chips.

'Have you checked the laundry basket?' Marla called.

'Good idea,' Mum called back.

Mum came out of the bedroom and into the hallway. She looked like Mum, but just paler. And more glowy. And more see-through. She went into the bathroom.

'Good call! It's in here!' She came back out holding an Aldi bag. 'Get some sleep in, now, Marla. We've got a whole heap of work for later.'

Marla climbed into her bed. She always kept her curtains open so she could see dawn breaking over Peckham. There

was six weeks of holiday before she started Year 7 at Peckham Beckham Academy. She had envied some of the other kids in her class who were going off on big adventures with their families, swimming with turtles in Tobago or climbing mountains in Scotland, before the leap into secondary school. She would be staying right here in Peckham, but every night her and mum would soar over London and beyond, seeing the world in a way that classmates never could. Last night, they had followed the spots of light south along the motorways to the coast and watched the dark hulks of boats cross the sea under the bright smudge of the Milky Way. As the rising sun turned the windows in the block opposite pink and orange, she fell asleep.

Marla woke up – well, Mum was claiming it was six hours later, but it felt like six minutes. But, Marla knew there was work to do. August was the busiest time for the After Ever After Bureau and she and Mum had to make sure everything was ready.

What is the After Ever After Bureau? Well, a 'bureau' can be two things. It can be an agency that delivers particular services or it can be a writing desk with many drawers. The After Ever After Bureau most certainly does offer a very particular service. And a writing desk? It's for... well... writing. It can be used for writing letters, or diaries or

stories. Think about the stories. Imagine every drawer holds a different story full of different characters. When the story as you know it has ended, the drawer isn't pushed shut. There will always be more story left; the characters live on. They push open their story drawers, climb out and look around.

The After Ever After Bureau offers its particular service to fatigued fairytale folk who want to have normal human experiences, mythical beings who want to disappear for a few weeks, legends who feel that they have the sky on their shoulders and need some downtime. Marla and her Mum connect the jaded folk from fairytales, myths and legends with unique and unparalleled experiences in the real world. Last year, Sleeping Beauty shadowed the director of the Jo Whisk Exercise Corp, learning new ways to combat a sluggish metabolism and the urge to take day-long siestas. Newly-divorced Cinderella led very successful guided tours around the Tower of London. You get the picture. Although there is a call for this service all year round, summer and Christmas are the busiest times. For some reason, the FML (that's fairytale, myth and legend) folk actually enjoy crowds. Perhaps it's because so many of them spent the early years of their stories lonely and mostly friendless.

The plan was to start the day with brunch. Marla was

always ravenous after a flight, but Mum said it was bad to sleep on a full stomach.

'Fancy the Hotch Pot?' Mum asked.

Of course! Banana pancakes with blueberries. Saltfish fritters and fried plantain. Egg and beans. All on one enormous plate. Yet again, they had to take the stairs in their block instead of the lift. Six flights going down wasn't bad. It was the way back that Marla dreaded.

The strangeness started after brunch. Mum had forgotten her scarf on the back of the chair and ran back to get it. Marla was standing by the electrical shop on the corner considering if Mum would notice if she had a little bit of a nap before she started work. The shop always displayed a massive TV in the window. It was tuned into a kids channel. A man dressed in a bright green boiler suit had a book open on his lap. A crowd of young kids sat on a carpet in front of him. He grinned and held up the book for the camera. Marla smiled. It was a version of Cinderella and the illustration showed the princess marrying her Prince Charming. The camera then panned to show the audience's happy faces.

The storyteller turned another page. Right. Maybe this version gave a happy ending to the stepmother and her daughters too. Except the storyteller wasn't grinning

anymore. He looked confused. The camera operator must have been gesturing to him because he held the book up again, page open. The picture was of Cinderella and Prince Charming each sitting on the far end of a sofa, crying their eyes out. What? That's not right! The fairytales are only supposed to show up to the happy endings, not what happens afterwards.

The words underneath said: And soon afterwards they realised they didn't like each other and went their separate ways.

The letters seemed to fly off the page, twirl in the air and then stick to the camera because they filled the whole, gigantic screen.

Then it cut to a cartoon.

Marla was so busy thinking about the weird ending, she didn't notice the six flights of stairs back to their flat.

Marla and Mum settled down at the table they used for work, laptops back-to-back. Each time they logged on, they ran a virus scan; they didn't want all their clients real identities leaked to the world. The virus scan started. Then it stopped. Then it started again. Mum and Marla looked at each other over their laptops.

'We just had a synchronised glitch, right?' Mum asked.

Marla nodded. She supposed the glitches could happen at

the same time if they were both running exactly the same programme at exactly the same time on exactly the same hardware. The laptop was running all right now, though.

Mum said, 'I've sent you a list of clients coming over in the first two weeks of August. Got the Frog Princess and her little brother, Tad. And Puss In Boots. It's a quick stay as he's heading to New Zealand for a soul weekend in Wellington. Then there's that girl with the jar. I can't remember her name. Can you check for any potential disasters?'

Marla nodded. She clicked on the first file. Tad Royale, the Frog Princess's youngest son. He was more froggier than his other siblings. He wanted to spend a few months in Ecuador learning how to fly after seeing some gliding leaf frogs on a nature programme. Mum's note was to check how long he could hold his frog shape. They didn't want him gliding off a tree as a frog and becoming man-shaped halfway down.

Marla's screen when blank.

'What the...?' Mum said.

They both looked at their screens then each other. A little red box flashed in the middle of the screen.

You have 1 notification.

'Okay,' Mum said, slowly. 'All this just to let us know that we've had a review?'

You have 12 notifications.

'Um...' Marla said.

'Oh,' Mum said.

You have 43 notifications.

'Forty-three reviews,' Marla said. 'All in one go. Maybe they were jammed in the system?'

'I suppose we better see what they say,' Mum said.

'I don't think we need to,' Marla said, quietly.

The notification box had disappeared. Letters whirled around the screen, just as they had on the big TV in the electric shop. An alarm went off. Not the alarm that Marla had set to wake her up on school mornings. No, this noise was so loud Marla was surprised that the rest of the block's residents hadn't thrown open their windows to check that a spaceship hadn't landed nearby.

'Marla!' Mum yelled. 'How do we stop it?'

'I don't know how!'

Suddenly, there was silence, though Marla's ears were still ringing. The letters stopped whirling. The colours blasted from the screen, bright orange on black.

HAPPY EVER AFTER IS FAKE NEWS! ALL PATHS LEAD TO MISERY!

The computer turned itself off and stayed that way.

Mum stood up shakily. 'We've been compromised,' she said.

Marla pushed the 'on/off' button again. There was nothing apart from the reflection of her face in the dark screen. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that a villain on The Other Side wants to make our world believe that there is no happily ever after.'

'Who would do such a thing?'

Mum laughed. It was a shocked laugh.

'There's a few miserable characters who've probably been thinking about this for years,' Mum said. 'The Wicked Stepmother has always had a grudge.'

'So you think it could be her?'

'No! This is too...' She tapped her screen. 'Too sophisticated. Not her style. She'd take out an advert saying 'Cinderella smells' and paste it to every shoe shop window.'

'So who, then?'

'I don't know.' Mum pushed herself away from the table. 'But I know a woman who would be good at finding out.'

Marla's mouth fell open. 'You don't mean...'

Mum nodded firmly. 'It's time to bring Grandma out of retirement for one last job.'

Grandma Suki had been minding her own business when the call came. She had done twenty years at the Bureau and had been happy to hand it over to her

daughter, Alvi, and her granddaughter, Marla. They were entirely capable. She had retired back to Trinidad and built a nice house not far from the Caroni swamp. She'd sit there in the evenings watching the scarlet ibis flock to their roost at sunset and playing 'snap' with Papa Bois and Mama D'Leau. She was even the patron of the local jumbie jamboree. And she was –

BORED!

Her brain was turning to guava jelly. There must be more to enjoying life as your local neighbourhood soucouyant than this? It seemed not. Until Alvi called. Grandma said 'goodbye' to her friends, locked up her house and asked a loup garou to keep an eye on things. There's nothing like a headless muscleman wrapped in chains to ward off casual onlookers. As soon as sunset fell, she packed her skin into her favourite holdall and blazed off into the sky. Ten hours later, she was in Peckham.

It had felt like a long time since Marla had seen Grandma Suki. Mum said it was only five years, but five years ago, Marla had actually been five. How different she was then! Marla had always known that she was a soucouyant from a long line of proud soucouyants. She'd also always known about the After Ever After Bureau.

But to have Grandma back again made her want to soar through the sky right now

Grandma looked like she was buzzing with energy. She'd slept for a couple of hours, taken a shower and eaten a hefty breakfast. She looked comfortable in her skin. It was probably down to the amount of cocoa butter she used. Marla had to focus now. They had a job to do.

Grandma had asked Mum for an update and was scribbling notes on her tablet.

'So what did they have to say?' Grandma asked.

Mum sighed. 'The werewolves of London?'

Grandma nodded.

'Awoooo.'

Grandma rolled her eyes. 'Still making no sense. I suppose it's a full moon in two nights. Their big furry heads can't think of anything else. Any other leads?'

'I had a quick ask around the all-night bowling alley,' Mum said. 'I managed to have a word with Sysiphus. He laughed and said that anyone who reads Greek myths knows that nothing ever ends happily for anyone. They don't have to pretend to live happily ever after. He reckons it's nothing to do with the myths, so it must be the fairytale or legend sides.'

'Yes,' Grandma said. 'That figures.'

‘But there was something strange,’ Mum said. ‘Sisyphus was losing the game.’

‘Losing the game?’ Marla and Grandma said it at the same time, then grinned at each other.

‘Gosh,’ Mum said. ‘You two have exactly the same smile!’

‘How could he lose?’ Marla asked.

Sisyphus was a legendary cheat. He’d even cheated Death twice.

‘Exactly,’ Mum said. ‘But I did catch the name of the person he was losing to. It was on the screen above their lane. Peter Parker.’

Marla frowned. ‘Peter Parker? Like in Spiderman?’

Grandma flicked her a side eye. ‘Yes, Marla. Spiderman. But I believe that we may be dealing with the original, Lord Anansi.’

‘Ah,’ Mum said. ‘So THAT’s where the hacker found their web expertise.’

‘So what are we waiting for?’ Marla stood up. ‘Let’s go find him, then.’

Mum stayed seated. ‘I suppose we’ll have to wait for tonight. Sisyphus will definitely be after a rematch. He can’t stand losing.’

‘True.’ Grandma stood up too. ‘But I have a very good idea where Anansi will be now.’

The British Library is a large redbrick building set back from

one of the busiest roads in London. Marla, Mum and Grandma walked through the gates into the courtyard. Marla had forgotten that the reason why Anansi was such a good trickster was because he was always looking for more knowledge. He wanted to own all the wisdom and all the stories.

‘I think he’ll be in the Kings Library section,’ Mum said. ‘How could he resist all those shiny shelves of old books?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Grandma said. ‘There’s knowledge in secrets too. I think he would have taken his spider-self down into the underground stacks. Aren’t there miles upon miles of books down there? He wants the knowledge that no one else thinks is important.’

‘Um.... Mum? Grandma?’ Marla was staring at the statue in the courtyard. It was an enormous, seated man bent double as he measured the ground with a pair of compasses. Something wasn’t quite right.

‘It’s Isaac Newton,’ Mum said. ‘The scientist.’

‘Yes,’ Grandma said. ‘And if he asks no questions, he will hear no flies.’

‘Sorry, Mama?’ Mum looked concerned. ‘Are you sure you rested long enough after your flight?’

Grandma pointed to the webs on the statue. ‘See what our clever little Marla spotted?’

Marla glowed with happiness (but not too much; this

wasn't the right time to turn into a ball of fire).

'He will hear no flies because they will be caught in a web long before they reach. Come on, Lord Anansi!' Grandma called. 'Show yourself.'

A few seconds later, a spider scurried out of the statue's ear. It swung from a fine thread onto the statue's wrist, then slid down the compass on to the ground. And then, it was a man. He was completely bald but with a strip of short grey beard down the centre of his chin. His eyes were large and dark grey. He seemed to be looking at you and all around you at the same time. He was wearing a baggy grey velvet suit and a pale pink shirt. Rather than a tie, he wore a sliver of white ribbon in a narrow bow beneath his chin. The pointed corners of the ends reminded Marla of fangs. She wondered if the long loose jacket was to hide the other four limbs or if the other legs just disappeared when he changed.

'Ladies!' He bowed deeply.

Grandma stepped towards him. He stepped back. 'Don't 'Lady' me,' she said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Enjoying the view, Madam Suki. I actually feel quite insulted that you think I would hole up inside when there are so many rich stories to be heard, so many new things to learn, just by being still and silent.' He smiled at them all.

'And, of course, it helps if you're inside a giant ear.'

Grandma stepped forward again. Anansi stepped back. A few more centimetres and he would be sitting on Sir Isaac's lap. 'What new thing have you learned, Lord Anansi?'

'The number 73 bus no longer terminates at Victoria.'

This time it was Grandma's turn to glow. Smoked wisped up from the ankles of her jeggings and a tiny crease of flame smouldered below her chin.

'Okay, Madam Suki!' Anansi fanned himself. 'No need to get hot under the collar! What can I do for you?'

'Someone is trying to sabotage happiness. What's going on?'

'That's a big question, Madam Suki. Narrow your search and try again.' Anansi clapped his hand to his mouth.

There was silence.

'Narrow your search and try again? So that web development course we organised for you was useful then,' Grandma said coolly.

'Might have been...'

Mum moved towards Anansi. Marla was surprised to see that Mum looked sparky too. Mum had taught her that they should always be fully human in the day time, especially in public.

'You hear me, Lord A?' Grandma said. 'We are not in the mood for any of your tricks today.'

'Tell us now!' Mum's voice virtually rumbled. 'Did you hack

our systems?’

Anansi held up his hands. His palms were covered in light grey fur. ‘Yes! It was me! But only that! Nothing else!’

‘You hacked us and shut us down! Only that!’ Mum took out her phone. She clicked on a review site and turned it to show him.

FAKE NEWS! THERE IS NO HAPPY EVER AFTER!

‘What’s this about then?’ Mum said sternly.

Anansi looked her in the eye. Actually, he looked all three of them in the eye at the same time. Marla wished she wasn’t so impressed by him.

‘I really don’t know who’s at the centre of it. I had a Whatsapp from my old IT tutor. He said some friends wanted to test their firewall so could I hack in to pretend to bring it down. They gave me the data, I wrote some code and passed it back. And that’s it!’

‘And you just happen to be here when all this is kicking off?’ Mum said.

‘I’m on holiday!’ He leaned towards Grandma. ‘I know I should have a quiet life, but sometimes I just long for the hum of the city. Do you know what I mean?’

Grandma breathed in deeply. Then out. ‘Who’s bringing the misery, Anansi?’

‘I don’t know. And I don’t know about ‘bringing’. It’s already here.’

Suddenly, the man was gone. And the crying began. A long, forlorn wailing from the bottom of an anguished heart, so deep it could have been coming from the book stacks. They looked around. Over by the café, a man was trying to comfort a little girl who was clutching a book by her side.

‘But the wolf can’t eat her,’ she sobbed.

‘There should be more!’ The man held up the book. ‘The story shouldn’t end there!’

And she wasn’t alone. A woman was sitting on the bench staring at an i-pad. She showed it to her friend sitting next to her. There were tears pouring down their cheeks.

‘You... you... said this one had a happy ending!’

‘Let’s regroup back at the flat,’ Grandma said.

Marla, Mum and Grandma trudged up the six flights of stairs. Well, Mum and Marla did. Grandma said that there was no way she was dealing with that type of nonsense. She zipped behind the recycling bins, popped out of her skin and gave it to Mum to bring up for her. Then she fired up and soared towards the sixth floor.

‘I hope she realises that we haven’t left a window open,’ Mum said.



Grandma was less than happy when Marla and Mum arrived. She'd had to turn down her fire to a mere glow to avoid the attention of Peckham Fire Station. However, that put her on the radar of every magpie in south London.

'They're beaky blighters, that lot,' she complained. 'No manners at all.'

They sat around the table making a list of everything they knew so far. They kept the television on, but muted, so they could keep an eye on the misery. Right now, a skinny guy in checked trousers was being interviewed about how he was never taken seriously after he lured away the rats and children. He looks intently at the camera. The caption scrolls below him:

There is no happy ever after. It's all fake news.

'The Pied Piper,' Mum says. 'He's being doing the chat circuit for years. It looks like he's finally being taken seriously.'

'Who would have a grudge against us?' Marla's pencil was poised over her notepad.

'Well,' Mum said. 'Sisyphus was right about the myths. No one comes out of them well. That lot don't need to prove anything.'

'So let's think legends,' Grandma said.

'Robin Hood?' Mum asked. 'Didn't he say his life didn't have any purpose anymore. Didn't we organise something for him?'

Marla nodded. 'We got him a few sessions as one of those door-to-door charity collectors. He said he'd rather fight Little John and the Sheriff of Nottingham while blindfolded in a pit full of cold custard than do that again.'

'He was unhappy then?' Grandma asked.

'No!' Mum looked outraged at the suggestion. 'He was very happy with our service. He said it helped him value what he had.'

'So we can cross him off our list,' Grandma said, looking at Marla.

Marla was going to say that he wasn't on the list in the first place but wrote down 'Robin Hood' and put a cross through it. It would be best to keep Grandma happy. On they went, trying to remember all the fairytale folk who'd been through the Bureau. Luckily, Grandma had kept paper files in the early days, so the older ones were easier to find. Marla and Mum had to really strain their brains to remember whose unique and unparalleled experiences were buried in their computer hard drive.

Marla looked down at pages and pages of notes. This wasn't helping. There were characters from virtually every fairytale she knew, and many that she didn't.

She said, 'Maybe we do need to do what Lord Anansi said.'

Mum nodded. 'Narrow the search.'

Marla tapped her pencil on the table. She realised that Grandma and Mum were doing exactly the same thing. 'What do we need to find out?'

'Why do this now?' Mum said.

Marla opened a fresh page in her notebook and scribbled it down.

'And what do they really want?' Grandma added. 'Humans are used to misery, but they also have such short attention spans. They'll just write more happy stories and him...' She nodded towards the Pied Piper, 'he'll have his five minutes of fame barbecuing rats on I'm A Celebrity then go sloping back to the Other Side. Keeping this world miserable all the time takes effort.'

'Other motives?' Mum asked.

Marla thought hard. 'To stress us out?'

'Yes,' Grandma encouraged. 'We're getting somewhere. If the Bureau came under stress, what would you do?'

Mum and Marla looked at Grandma.

'Call you!' Marla said. She scribbled it down.

Grandma nodded. She looked rather proud about it.

'But who wants you here?' Mum asked.

'That's what we've got to work out,' Grandma said. She looked surprisingly unworried for someone who'd been lured from 5,000 miles away by characters unknown.

'What about the Daughters of Dracula?' Mum asked. 'They hated overseas competition for bloodsucking. Didn't one of them come to see you in Trinidad?'

'Only to tell me that they've all gone vegan.'

'Really?' Mum said. 'So let's presume persons unknown want to bring you back to Peckham. Why now?'

Marla glanced at their laptops lying useless on the sofa. 'It's coming up to our busiest time. So, what if it's about that? Trying to stop something that's happening in the next few weeks.'

'Something or someone.' Grandma and Marla might have the same smile, but Mum and Grandma both pushed their lips into a line when they were thinking hard. 'Who've we got coming over?' Mum asked.

Marla closed her eyes. For some reason it helped her picture what was in her brain better.

'There was Tad Royale,' she said.

'Yes,' Mum agreed. 'We don't want him to get swallowed by an anaconda.' She looked at Grandma. 'What about the Frog Princess and her family?'

Grandma shook her head. 'Ain't got no beef with the frogs.'

'It can't be Puss in Boots,' Mum said. 'He's already posting pictures online. Dancing shoes on and busting some practice moves.'

'Then you said something about a girl in a jar. I didn't have a chance to look at it.'

'Oh,' Mum said. 'Elpis.'

'On its way?' Marla asked. Surely Grandma was enough.

'No!' Mum banged her pencil on the table. It was a very quiet bang. 'Remember the Greek myth? After Pandora took a sneaky look in the jar, and all that nastiness came out into the world, that's who was left. Elpis. Or, in our words, Hope. She emailed last year. She just wanted to come over here and travel around.'

Grandma nodded. 'When the world feels bleak, we need Hope.'

Marla looked down at her notepad. All she'd written down was 'Grandma' and 'Hope'. She held it up. 'It still doesn't make sense.'

'No,' Grandma said. 'It doesn't. Is there anything else that's happened recently? Anything that doesn't feel right?'

That was hard one. Marla was a soucouyant. Stepping out of her skin and turning into a ball of fire wouldn't 'feel right' to virtually everyone else she knew. Grandma and Mum were talking about the night flights and whether Mum had spotted anything unusual in her journeys.

'What about those magpies, Grandma?' Marla asked. 'Wasn't it weird that they attacked you just now?'

Grandma made a face. 'You'd be surprised, honey. That's why I always say 'hot' or 'not', you're either flying fire or a grounded human. When you're something in between, you never know what attention you'll attract. I had this run in with some myna birds in Madagascar once and they...' She rubbed her ear. 'Major hazards, those mynas. Alvi, you really do need to get that lift sorted, though. It was never like that when I was here.'

'It's recent,' Mum said. 'I keep reporting it. It works for an hour or so, then breaks down again. So it's up and down those stairs for us. When you've got a big load of shopping it feels like you're climbing forever. Up and down. Up and down.'

'It must feel like an eternity,' Grandma smiled.

'It's not funny, Mama!'

'Oh, it is,' Grandma said. 'It's funny because I think I know what this is about. I should have guessed what was going on long ago.'

'You've only been here six hours,' Marla said.

'And I've wasted five and a half of them. Let's go.'

The all-night hour bowling alley was off a narrow street that ran by the back of St Thomas' Hospital by London Bridge. Marla had passed the towering glass Shard on night flights before; it was always so different to see it from ground

level. It was like a glowing beacon above the bowling alley – though most folk would have no idea the alley existed. It was a renowned chill out spot for FML folk over this side, especially the ones who hadn't acquired the right visas before visiting. They didn't want to advertise their presence. (Apart from 87-storey illuminated glass finger above it, of course.)

Marla, Mum and Grandma took the steps down towards a low path by Thames. Mum glanced around then quickly lifted a small trapdoor that seemed to belong to the Open Sesame pub next door. They trooped through the gloom down the steps and into the reception. Mum nodded to an elf who was patching up some bowling shoes.

'You all right, Youse?'

Youse the elf nodded.

'He in there?'

Youse rolled his eyes. 'Always.'

All the bowling lanes were occupied but only one by a solitary player. He was a bony man with a knee-length beard wearing a Nike sweatsuit.

A black bowling bag sat on a stall next to him. The man was taking bowling balls from it and feeding them along the alley as if they were coins into a slot-machine. He was barely looking to see if he struck anything before sending the next one along.

Grandma marched up to him. 'Sisyphus!'

Sisyphus grunted. Another ball shot down the polished wood. It skidded off into the gutter. Grandma planted herself in front of him. For a moment, Marla thought he was going to bowl her right over. He obviously thought about it too. But then he saw Grandma's face. She had THAT expression. Meanwhile, Mum was having a good old peek into the bowling bag.

'You know why we're here!' Grandma said.

Sisyphus tried to dodge round Grandma to fling the bowling ball, but Grandma leapt in front of him again. The bowling ball thumped to the floor.

'This is harassment!' He cried. 'I haven't done anything wrong!'

'Haven't you?' Mum plucked a small bottle of murky liquid out of the bowling bag. Marla glimpsed the label: STYX FIX

Mum read the blurb at the back. "Don't want to shoulder that boulder? Take that break you deserve! Styx Fix will secure your troublesome stone to the top of the hill for a minimum of a week guaranteed." Mum waved the bottle. 'I wonder what havoc it can cause on lift machinery?'

Sisyphus grinned. 'As you must know by now, rather a lot actually. You're right. It was me. Do you know what it's

like? Pushing that boulder up that hill for eternity? With no hope of it ever reaching the top?' His grin widened. 'So if there's no hope for me, why should there be for you?'

Mum glowered at him. 'I was phoning the council to report the repair every day. Press one to go through to Facilities. Press two to leave a message for the ghost who lives in the basement because there are no real live people to speak to you!' Mum's voice had risen. She looked from Marla to Grandma. They looked back. 'Sorry.'

Sisyphus looked deeply satisfied. 'So, how did you find me?'

'We knew you'd want a rematch,' Grandma said. 'You're never going to miss up a chance to cheat the most famous trickster of them all.'

'Well, firstly,' he scowled. 'I am the most famous trickster of them all. And secondly, I have no idea what you're talking about anyway.'

'Lord Anansi,' Marla said. 'Weren't you playing against him last night?'

'Most certainly not! I always play alone!'

'But the computer hacks! The unhappy ever after stories!'

'Stories? What stories? And 'computer hacks'? I have no idea what that means.'

'But you...'

Mum said. 'Sorry!' Sisyphus's grin was so wide he must have needed

Styx Fix to keep his lips attached. 'I fear my vacation has come to an end.'

He hooked his bag over his arm, grabbed the bowling ball from the floor, ran up to the lane and swung his arm back. He bowled – without letting go of the ball. He slid along the lane, his immaculate bowling shoes squeaking against the wood and smashed into the pins at the end. With a bang and a clatter, he was gone.

'STRIKE!' The machine yelled.

Marla, Mum and Grandma climbed back up into the early London evening. It was rush hour and commuters hurried over London Bridge to the train station. The sky was streaked orange and pink. Back in Peckham, the windows in the block opposite would be reflecting back the warmth.

'Well,' Mum said. 'That's the lift mystery solved. I hate to admit it, but I believe that cheating liar when he says he has no idea about the computer hacking. I imagine that the wifi signal isn't that great in hell.'

'So it's home, then?' Marla asked. She wanted to solve the mystery, but oh my, it had been a long time since she's been on a night flight with Grandma. Scorching their way through the dark skies was fun with Mum, but even better with Grandma's ear-burning gossip.

‘Not quite yet.’ Grandma started walking west along the south bank of the river. ‘I think I’ve worked out the rest of the puzzle.’

They followed Grandma along the cobbled street, then out on to the wider path that took them under Blackfriars Bridge. The tide was so far out that it looked like Marla could almost walk across the riverbed to the other side. Grandma had told her about Mama D’Leau, the guardian of Trinidad’s rivers. Did the Thames have her own protector?

‘Here,’ Grandma said.

They stopped outside the Tate Modern, an enormous old power station that had been turned into an art gallery, and stood looking across at the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral as the sky darkened behind it. Footsteps clanked across the metallic Millennium Bridge that joined the cathedral to the Tate.

‘That noise reminds me of the pan yard,’ Grandma sighed. ‘There was one at the bottom of the lane when I was a girl.’ She tapped out a beat on the railing. ‘Bang! Bang! Bang! All the pan men making oil drums into steel drums for the steelband.’ An even bigger sigh. ‘It’s good to be home, Alvi, but...’

‘But sometimes that brain of your needs to remember how sharp it is. Is that so, Madam Suki?’

From nowhere, Lord Anansi was leaning on the railing next to Mum. It may have been the last rays of the setting sun, but his eyes seemed ringed with scarlet. He took Grandma’s hand.

‘Remember the last time we were here?’

‘Of course.’ The fond smile Grandma gave Lord Anansi was really similar to the one that Marla thought was saved just for her. ‘We were here at the dawn of the new millennium to celebrate your statue!’

‘I was your first ever client, Madam Suki. You asked me to model for that French artist. She made that giant metal spider, right here on the banks of the river Thames.’

‘And it looked magnificent,’ Grandma laughed.

Grandma and Lord Anansi suddenly looked at Marla and Mum, like they’d just remembered that they were there.

‘I should have known,’ Grandma said, nodding towards Lord Anansi. ‘It was Mr Trickster all along.’

‘Papa Bois and Mama D’Leau are excellent company,’ Lord Anansi said. ‘But I know you, Madam Suki! I know that sometimes you miss all this.’

He swept his arms around as if he was trying to bring the whole of London towards them.

‘All you needed was a good excuse to come back,’ he said.

‘And like you didn’t need an excuse to cheat old Sisyphus?’

He laughed long and loud. ‘I have to keep my brain sharp too, Madam Suki. And weaving the perfect puzzle to bring you back to London was a real test! Are you vexed?’

Grandma raised her eyebrows. ‘Not if you take those bad reviews down right now! And make sure all the happy endings are back in the right place.’

‘Consider it done, Madam Suki.’

It was fully dark now. Marla felt shivery, like her skin wanted to slip off by itself and set her free. She looked up at the sky. London’s sky was never dark.

A hand touched her shoulder. ‘It’s been a long time since we’ve flown together,’ Grandma said.

Marla felt a stab of excitement. ‘Can we go home, now?’

‘We don’t need to, Marla. Step closer, my darlings.’

Mum and Marla snuggled up to Grandma. Grandma nodded at Lord Anansi. He unbuttoned his long jacket and wrapped it round them. It was warm and tickled and almost felt like it had its own life rippling through it.

‘Be quick!’ Grandma said.

She started to wriggle free of her skin. Mum and Marla looked at each other and then quickly followed suit. The jacket lining bulged and a pocket opened up. They rolled up their skins carefully and one by one, nestled them in the pocket.

‘Keep them safe!’ Grandma called. ‘I don’t want no muddle up!’

‘Trust me, Madam Suki!’

‘Hmmm.’

Marla felt the energy bursting through her. Double, no triple, with her mother and grandmother by her side.

‘Are you ready?’ Grandma said.

Marla and Mum nodded.

Lord Anansi opened his jacket. For a moment, Marla felt the sharp breeze from the river before she was soaring and soaring. Three bright sparks of intertwined light, following the Thames east over the rainbow scatter of colours from the boats and bridges, past the orange arches of the Thames Barrier, then out over the lightboats to the stars and the sea.