



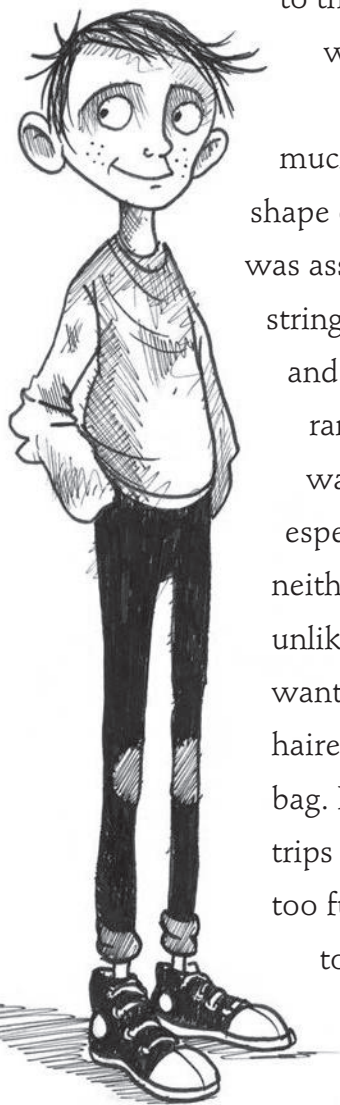
## CHAPTER ONE

# THE FOOT SPA PROBLEM

There were a lot of miserable things about being poor, Alfie Fleet told himself. Taking freezing cold showers in the middle of winter was pretty rubbish. Wearing clothes so patched that homeless people sometimes slipped a few pennies into his hand was embarrassing. The diet of fish soup, made from offcuts his mother brought home from work, wasn't his idea of a good time either. The heads always glared up at him as if it was all his fault.

The worst thing about being poor though was, of course, never having enough money and—as we join him—Alfie Fleet was especially miserable about not having enough money.

Let's pause there. Before we get into his money problems we'll take a moment to get to know Alfie Fleet a bit better. We will—after all—be travelling to the ends of the universe with him.



He is a boy. That much is obvious from the odd shape of him. Alfie looks like he was assembled from sticks and string, with knees and elbows glued on at random, as is often the way with boys. He is not especially handsome, but neither is he hideous. It is unlikely that anyone would want to hide his freckled, sandy-haired head with, say, a paper bag. He's a fairly normal boy: trips over his own feet a lot; not too fussy about trimming his toenails or keeping his ears clean. A boy.

He lives in a tiny flat in a big city, which he shares with his mother. Despite the passing trains that make its windows rattle and the dripping taps and pipes that bang unexpectedly in the middle of the night, their home is always neat. Keeping it tidy is easy. Alfie and his mother don't own much stuff to make a mess with: a couple of lumpy beds; a sagging tartan sofa that gives them headaches if they look at it too long; a leaky fridge that tries hard but never keeps anything cold; an oven that may or may not cook depending on its mood; and a radio that pops and crackles like breakfast cereal. That's pretty much it. The reason they are so poor is that Alfie's dad stole his mum's heart and then her credit card, before running off with that Julie from number sixteen. He left Alfie's mother with a mountain of debt she is still struggling to pay off, and Alfie himself. Although his mum often tells him she wouldn't change a thing, sometimes Alfie hears her crying over bills through the paper-thin walls.

We join him at the kitchen table, which had a folded up wedge of cardboard stuffed under one leg to stop it wobbling and was half in the kitchen and

half in the lounge because the flat was that small. He was pretending to read a book . . .

Alfie's mum stepped out of her bedroom wearing a dressing gown. As always, she looked tired and smelt of fish.

That was another thing about being poor, Alfie told himself. However much his mum scrubbed, she could never truly get rid of the smell that came with working at the fish market.

'Morning, son,' she said, sleepily. 'What's today's book?'

'Jarvis O'Toole's new one, *The Dragonsong of Flame*,' Alfie replied, lifting his library book to show her the cover. He did it carefully, so that she couldn't see what was hidden between its pages.

'Any good bum jokes?'

'It's not really that sort of book,' Alfie said. 'Oh, I made you a cup of tea,' he added, nodding at the steaming mug.

Alfie's mum took a sip and leant against the fridge, which—as usual—was slightly warmer than the rest of the flat. 'No bum jokes? Sounds awful,' she replied. Alfie's mum liked a good bum joke. She

had that kind of sense of humour. 'I'm off to work in a minute. There's fish soup in the pan for your lunch.'

Alfie forced himself to grin. 'Delicious,' he said.

'Alfie, my boy,' his mum replied, 'you're a good lad but you're a terrible liar. Sorry, fish soup is all we've got.'

'On the plus side, I think I saw a prawn in it,' said Alfie. He liked prawns, which isn't to say he'd go on holiday with one, but at least they didn't glare at him.

'It's payday tomorrow. And my birthday. Special treat, we're going to Mr Ulcer's Pie Shop for pie and chips,' his mum replied.

'I've gone off pie and chips,' said Alfie, who loved pie and chips.

'Again—terrible liar,' said his mum, raising an eyebrow.

'No, seriously. Give *yourself* a treat instead,' Alfie shot back. 'Go and see that new Johnny Nicebutt movie. You *like* Johnny Nicebutt.'

'His name is Johnny Nesbitt, as you know perfectly well,' Alfie's mum sighed, leaning over to

ruffle his hair. 'Although he does have a very nice butt. But come on, it's *pie*. And it's my birthday. Mr Ulcer said he'd put a candle in it for me. Is it a date?'

'I dunno,' said Alfie. 'I'd still rather you bought yourself something.'

'Well you can't have everything you want,' his mum replied. 'If you haven't worked that out by now, you're not paying enough attention. So, it's a date then?'

'It's a date,' said Alfie, with a sigh.

'Birthday pie with my boy. Just what I always wanted.' Alfie's mum smiled.

'Living the dream, Mum. Living the dream.'

'So, what are you doing today?' his mum asked, looking slightly guilty. Alfie knew she hated leaving him alone during the school holidays.

'Oh, you know, the usual. Thought I'd just stay in and read. Quiet day.' Alfie held his book up again. This time he lied brilliantly, proving his mum completely wrong about his lying abilities. Although he was playing it cool, beneath his calm exterior he was a desperate boy. He didn't have an actual plan for the day at that exact moment, but a

plan was called for and it wouldn't include sitting around with Jarvis O'Toole's latest bestseller.

His mum nodded. 'OK, try and get some fresh air, too.'

'In *this* city? What fresh air?'

'And some exercise,' his mum insisted. 'Go and jump over dog poos in the park.'

'All right, if it makes you happy. I'll take the rubbish down, too, and make the beds, so you can put your feet up when you get home. Do you want a Fancy Goat Crumble rematch tonight?'

A short explanation is needed here. As Alfie's mum couldn't afford a television or tablets or video games, she and her son usually spent their evenings playing the weirdest second-hand board games they could find in the bargain bins of the local charity shops. Fancy Goat Crumble was their latest favourite, though some of the goats' beards were missing. This may not sound like a lot of fun but in actual fact they spent a lot more time laughing than most people.

'You bet I do,' chuckled Alfie's mum. 'I still can't believe you crumbled my goat last night.'

‘It’s all in the strategy,’ said Alfie, with a wink.

His mum glanced at her watch. ‘Rats, I’m going to be late. I’d better get dressed. Will you be all right?’

‘I’ll be fine,’ replied Alfie, nodding at his book.

As her bedroom door closed, Alfie sighed with relief. She hadn’t spotted that he had been hiding a magazine called *Investment Today* between the pages of the Jarvis O’Toole novel, or that hidden between the pages of *Investment Today*—like a riddle wrapped inside an enigma—was a small but colourful brochure for the Sole Sensation 6000 Foot Spa, with Soothejet Technology and Vibrating Toe-Polishers. Across the top of the brochure were printed the words ‘Treat Your Feet!’ in bold letters. Beneath them, in slightly smaller letters, it said: ‘Only £149.99!’

Alfie stuffed it into his backpack and studied the front cover of *Investment Today*. It said: ‘STOCK MARKET SLOWS DOWN.’

Here, we arrive at the nub, crux, or heart of Alfie’s money problem. His mum’s birthday was the following day, and he wanted to buy her something

special: a Sole Sensation 6000 Foot Spa, in fact. For twelve to fourteen hours every day she stood at a bench gutting fish, and her feet played her up something dreadful. A Sole Sensation 6000 Foot Spa would be the perfect gift and Alfie was determined that she would have one. As he was not the kind of boy who sat around waiting for foot spas to fall from the sky, he had started planning months earlier. First, he had tried to get a job but soon found that giving jobs to boys his age was illegal, for reasons Alfie could not understand. When the letter he had written to the Prime Minister on the subject had gone unanswered he had been forced to fall back on his fallback plan, or ‘Plan B’ as he liked to call it.

Plan B was complicated. First Alfie had opened an online bank account with the five pounds his mum had given him for his own birthday. For the next two weeks he spent every spare moment in the library studying *The Financial Times*, seven or eight hideously dull books about the stock market, and magazines such as *Investment Today*. By the time he understood words like ‘liquidity’ and ‘leverage’ he felt ready for the third and final stage of his scheme.

Using the library's computer he had transferred the five pounds from his bank account and started buying stocks and shares; watching carefully as rows of brain-manglingly complex numbers rose and fell on the screen.

His efforts had paid off. Five pounds had become six pounds and eighty-seven pence, which had become eight pounds thirty. For most of the summer holiday, Alfie sat in the library buying and selling more shares while his mum was at work. Over six weeks, he had triumphed. His fiver turned into one hundred pounds.

And then the stock market had slowed.

It hadn't been a catastrophic crash; more of a mild prang, but it meant that Alfie's hundred quid just sat there, blinking on the computer screen and stubbornly refusing to become one hundred and forty-nine pounds and ninety-nine pence. With just one day until his mum's birthday, his plans lay in tatters. The foot spa seemed an impossible dream.

He needed a new plan: a Plan C. Stuffing the book and magazine in his backpack, he flicked open yesterday's copy of *City News*, which his mum had

left on the kitchen table. Brain whizzing, he leafed through the pages without really seeing them. For a second he considered walking into Foot Spa World and stuffing the Sole Sensation 6000 up his jumper but quickly tossed the thought aside with the contempt it deserved. He gritted his teeth. His mum *was* going to wake up on her birthday to find a nicely wrapped Sole Sensation 6000 at the end of her bed. *Whatever it took . . .*

Alfie blinked. His eyes focused on the newspaper and opened wide. He gulped a deep breath.

Without thinking, he had turned the newspaper's pages to the classified section of small adverts. In the middle of the page Plan C stared back at him. Carefully, he drew a ring around it as his mum opened her bedroom door.

'OK then, son, I'm off. See you in twelve to fourteen hours,' she said.

Hurriedly, Alfie rustled the newspaper closed. 'OK,' he said, 'have fun at work.' As soon as the words left his mouth, he knew they were stupid. Gutting fish for twelve to fourteen hours is almost never fun.



If she thought it was a stupid thing to say, his mother didn't mention it. Instead, she dropped a kiss on his forehead. 'Have fun yourself,' she replied. 'Tonight my goat in a bonnet is going to crush your leg-warmer goat.'

'In your dreams,' Alfie shouted as the door closed.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the newspaper again, and checked the advert. It was still there. He glanced at the clock. It was 7.30 a.m. If he moved fast he would be on time. Forcing down the urge to run, he waited a few minutes for his mum to get down the stairs to the street, then walked three steps to his bedroom to collect his coat, followed by six steps to the front door. The flat really was *that* tiny.

# CLASSIFIEDS

**FRIDGE MAGNET.** Large magnet shaped like a fridge. Saucepans, cutlery, and all my teeth fillings stuck to it: £325. Call 85641

**STANLEY'S ANKLES.** Fed up with looking at skinny ankles? Our motto is 'Feast your eyes on them lovely plump ankles.' Call 15687 and ask for Stanley

**HELP NEEDED** due to bad back. Mostly carrying and lifting. £49.99 paid in cash for one day's work. Would suit a young person with a taste for adventure and no back problems. Apply in person, 8.30 a.m. sharp tomorrow. 4, Wigless Square.

**CLOWN SHOES.** Four feet long. Red leather. Haunted by the ghost of Jimmu, first emperor of Japan, hence bargain price: £750 the pair. Call 65914

**SLUGS! SLUGS! SLUGS!** £60 each. Call 37856. No timewasters.

**BATHWATER.** Hardly used. £10. Call 14685