

MINISTRY  
OF  
MISCHIEF

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# MINISTRY OF MISCHIEF



**ALEX FOULKES**

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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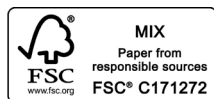
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*For all the young imps I have met on this journey.  
Please do not feed me to your king.*



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# ONE

## Minibus Monster

A big meow to readers, listeners and viewers across the galaxy! You're joining Team *Boo's News* on Earth Highway 7AB3!

We're travelling at ten light-years per click – fast enough that Mrs Powell was extra serious about fastening our seat belts. ETA (that's Estimated Time of Arrival) at Abermaple Museum: half past ten. 'Are-we-there-yets': two. Toilet stop-off requests: one so far.

Reports coming in that we were fifteen minutes late setting off from school, since Jenny forgot her lunchbox. Jenny's dad dropped it off before Mr Sims finished his eighth lap of the car park, so everything is now a-okay! We don't know what's in Jenny's

sandwiches, but more on this as it unfolds. Or, as Jenny opens the lunchbox.

Our main story of the day: it's the Mini Victorian Britain competition, where Abermaple schools are gathering to show off their work. Design a diorama – a scene inside a shoebox – for a chance to win! The grand prize? A real-life Victorian experience for your school, where they send a teacher from the olden-times to torture the kids for the day. And, even more importantly, they're also giving away Abermaple Igloo tickets to the winning team!

The Abermaple Igloo! An indoor ski slope, ice rink, toboggan run, arcade and cafe! Somewhere this reporter's mum has banned her from visiting – ever – due to the very teeny, very tiny, VERY, VERY MICROSCOPICALLY SMALL risk of broken bones. But do you know where you can find snowball ice cream as big as your head? Yes! It's the Abermaple Igloo!

Stay tuned for further updates. I've been your reporter on the scene—

‘Joey! Joey, can you hear me?’

‘Hmm?’ Joey’s eyes focused, snapping back to reality from where she had been staring out of the minibus window. She dropped her imaginary microphone and adjusted her non-imaginary glasses. Reflected in the round lenses was Marcie-Lynn.

‘Here.’ Marcie-Lynn reached out and gently took the shoebox from Joey’s lap. ‘Should I hold our entry? I . . . um, I think you’ve squashed Mr Bumblyfinch . . .’

A curly head swivelled. In the seat in front of the girls, Sam knelt up to examine the miniature family standing on a Victorian street. ‘Nooo – Joey! I spent *ages* on him! His top hat’s all bent now, look!’

‘Sam!’ Mr Sims’ voice called from the back of the bus. ‘Bums on seats, please!’

Sam grumbled, poking his nose through the gap in the seats instead. He stared mournfully at the thumb-sized dent in Mr Bumblyfinch’s hat.

‘That’s okay,’ said Marcie-Lynn. Her nail polish, glittery and purple, caught Joey’s eye as she carefully pinched the hat back into shape. ‘There! Good as new.’



Within the shoebox, standing amongst cardboard chimneys topped with grey cotton wool, the Bumblyfinch family were dapper again. Or, as dapper as possible when their bodies were empty toilet-roll tubes. Baxter the dog – made from cocktail sticks and tinfoil – looked particularly alarmed, but that could just be his googly eyes.

‘I’m sorry!’ said Joey. She hadn’t realized she’d been squeezing so hard. Sometimes, when her mind went elsewhere, she lost track of what the rest of her was doing.

Marcie-Lynn looked vaguely worried – which wasn’t too unusual for Marcie-Lynn, who had a naturally concerned-looking face. She spun her

scrunchie (a lavender colour, matching her nail polish) around on her wrist.

From between the seats in front, though, Sam was frowning too. ‘You okay, Joey? We need you here on Planet Earth; we have a chance of actually *winning* this thing!’

Joey wasn’t sure she and Sam were looking at the same shoebox. ‘Do you really think we do?’

‘Of course! It’s the best thing we’ve ever done. Well – maybe second best. After *Boo’s News*.’

If there was one thing they always agreed on, it was that *Boo’s News* was the best. The three friends had worked on the project – named after Boo, Sam’s giant ginger cat – since last summer. It had started as an article for English class, but they had just kept on going, writing every week. Joey was certain that *Boo’s News* would be a real-life newspaper one day. And a TV show, website and podcast. It was going to be mega. It was going to be galaxy-wide!

Outside the window, the tree-lined roads had given way to rows and rows of houses and shops. The

sight of them flashing by was hypnotic, bringing to mind the long corridors in an alien spaceship—

‘Hey,’ Sam cut in, interrupting Joey’s daydream. Sometimes this happened; one minute she was there and the next . . . Joey was gone, like she could curl up at the back of her own mind and disappear. ‘It’s a great shoebox, Joey. We’ve done a brilliant job and we’re definitely winning those tickets!’

‘We have a *good chance* of winning the tickets,’ Marcie-Lynn clarified sensibly. She sighed, looking suddenly wistful. ‘I love the museum.’

Sam grinned. ‘I love the sound of the Igloo even more!’

*Me too*, thought Joey, eyeing Baxter and the Bumblyfinches. She would give anything – *anything* – for a day at the Igloo, but so far Mum had said no. But could Mum refuse if they won the prize and the ticket was right there in her hand?

Maybe, thought Joey. But she wouldn’t know unless she tried.

There was just . . . one problem.

Next to Mrs Bumblyfinch’s skirt (painstakingly

crafted from one of Grandad's handkerchiefs) was Marcie-Lynn's small, neat writing.

*In Victorian Britain, Joey knew it read – or something like it, children were often put to work for little pay. They worked in factories and on farms, picking fruit. They were sent up chimneys, to brush away dangerous soot and ash that could cause a fire.*

Next to Marcie-Lynn's writing was a series of squiggles – or, Joey's own writing.

The bus rattled over a speed bump. The kids cheered, throwing their hands in the air. At the front of the bus, Mrs Powell's hands went up too, covered in her many rings.

Joey felt as though she was at the edge of the highest diving board at the pool, staring down at the distant water. Her belly somersaulted like it was falling without her.

The shoebox squiggles twisted, running madly despite the ruler lines Sam had drawn in. They couldn't contain Joey's handiwork; when she wrote, her hands didn't care about lines or margins. She always tried her best, but her pen somehow never

paid attention to spelling or punctuation, and *especially* not to handwriting.

*I've already ruined it*, Joey thought, looking at her inky scrawl. The letters were all different heights, some hanging off the bottom of the paper to run onto the shoebox street. *There's no way we'll win.*

This wasn't *Boo's News*, which was a special secret, just for them.

They would actually have to show this to other people.

The minibus finally pulled into the Abermaple Museum car park. Everywhere you looked, there were kids in unfamiliar uniforms, clutching their backpacks and shoeboxes. The driver tutted as a rival minibus appeared in front of them. It nipped into the only parking space next to the museum entrance; the rest were already full.

'And we're here!' Mrs Powell called, already jingling to her feet as their driver reversed grudgingly into a space at the bottom of the car park. 'Make sure you have everything with you – we'll leave the bus as tidy as we found it! Remember



you are representing Willow Avenue!’

‘Yes, Miss!’ the kids chorused.

Mrs Powell’s serious face broke out into a huge smile. When she clapped her hands together, the movement made her beaded necklaces click and her long, droopy sleeves swish.

‘Ahhh, we’re so *proud* of all of you! Aren’t we, Mr Sims?’

‘Yes, Mrs Powell, we are,’ replied Mr Sims from the back of the bus, more composed than Mrs Powell – though that wasn’t difficult. She was like a whirlwind. Joey was glad she was her teacher though; most days, school was fun.

‘You’ve all worked so hard on your projects,’ Mrs Powell continued. ‘You’ve given your time at lunch and at homework club. No matter what, as far as I’m concerned, you’ve all w— AAH!’

There was a THUD and Mrs Powell disappeared between the seats. In the rearview mirror, the bus driver looked up in alarm. The kids all leapt to their feet in time to see their teacher straightening up again.

‘Mrs Powell!’

‘Miss, are you okay?’

‘Your shoelaces are untied, Miss!’ Ellie – another of Joey’s classmates – gasped, pointing at the big, stumpy boots that Mrs Powell always wore. The boots had mismatched laces, one yellow and one red. The red one was indeed loose, its trailing end caught under the opposite foot.

‘Oh, deary me!’ Mrs Powell exclaimed, sounding winded. She accepted Mr Sims’ hand to pull herself upright. ‘Whoops! This is why we always double-knot our laces!’

The commotion died down as the bus parked up. Joey’s mind quietened again, off in another universe. She listened only vaguely to the sounds of everyone gathering their things, to Mr Sims helping someone with their coat, to Mrs Powell talking with the bus driver . . .

‘You ready, Joey?’ Marcie-Lynn asked, touching Joey’s elbow.

‘R-ready!’ Joey scooted out of the seat after her, and the two girls stood behind Sam in the queue to

disembark. The Bumblyfinches and their little slice of Victorian Britain were held carefully in Marcie-Lynn's hands.

Then, Joey looked down.

*Huh*, she thought unassumingly, her gaze sliding away and up to the back of Marcie-Lynn's blonde head. Then, drawn by something, she looked again.

Down beneath the seat to her left, there was a tangled mop of hair.

It was bright pink – like the bubblegum at the corner shop. Exactly how large it was, Joey couldn't be certain; it had squeezed and squashed itself down to fit, filling the gap.

She was about to nudge Marcie-Lynn, but then her blood turned to ice as the thing **MOVED**.

Its face tilted upwards, features half-obscured by hair. From within the nest of tangles, a hand stretched out towards Joey's feet. Most of the fingers on it were short and stubby, except for one longer, knobbly digit that reached greedily for the knot of Joey's shoelaces—

Joey gasped, jerking backwards. The creature –

the *monster* – hissed and withdrew, grumbling to itself.

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‘Sam! Marcie!’ she whispered urgently, grabbing the back of Marcie-Lynn’s jumper. ‘Can you see that?’

Sam and Marcie-Lynn looked down at the floor of the minibus. There was a pause.

‘Oh!’ said Sam brightly, dropping into a crouch. Panic crawled up Joey’s throat before she could speak, and then Sam was barely an inch away from the rumbling ball of hair—

‘Look!’ Sam exclaimed, holding up a fifty-pence piece. ‘Who was sitting here? Ahmad, did this fall out of your pocket?’

The creature recoiled. Through the hair, a pair of bulbous magenta eyes peered upwards. They glared at Sam as he passed the coin over to Ahmad.

‘Oh, hey! Phew – thank you! I promised my sister I’d buy her a pencil from the gift shop. I must have good luck today!’

‘BLEURGH!’

The pink creature’s eyes bulged in disgust, unseen and unheard by everyone except for Joey. She was frozen as it disappeared into the shadowy space beneath the seat, the sound of its long hair rustling away.

We interrupt this broadcast for a special item from reporter Joey Joseph – on the scene right now with THE WEIRDEST THING you’ve ever set eyeballs on! Yes, it is a MONSTER, and the closest encounter to date.