

Visitors, Vanishings and Va-Va-Va Voom

“Hello, Ally,” Mrs Hudson replied, as I panicked.
“Sorry, but Jen’s not in right now – she went round
to Chloe’s for tea.”

“Oh. Oh, OK. That’s great. Thank you. *Bye!*”

I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad to get off the
phone. Well, apart from the time I phoned for a
pizza and found I’d called the local police station
by accident. (And no, the sergeant at the Crime
Desk *didn't* laugh when I asked for a pepperoni
pizza with extra cheese, please.)

It was only when I put the phone down that I
realized two things: a) Fluffy had curled herself
asleep in my lap without me even noticing; and b)
Chloe hadn’t said anything about Jen being round
at hers when I spoke to her a minute ago.

Fluffy acting like a cute cat instead of a ninja
warrior? Jen supposed to be somewhere she wasn’t?

As Alice in Wonderland once said, curiouser and
curiouser...

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ViSiTORS,
vAniSHiNGS AND
va-va-va
VOOM

KAREN McCOMBIE

FOR SPIKE (FOR BEING AN ACE ARTIST
AND FOR HELPING ME WITH MY FRENCH HOMEWORK)

Scholastic Children's Books,
Commonwealth House, 1-19 New Oxford Street,
London WC1A 1NU, UK
A division of Scholastic Ltd
London ~ New York ~ Toronto ~ Sydney ~ Auckland
Mexico City ~ New Delhi ~ Hong Kong

First published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2003

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Cover illustration copyright © Spike Gerrell, 2003

ISBN 0 439 98204 9

Typeset by TW Typesetting, Midsomer Norton, Somerset
Printed and bound by Nørhaven Paperback A/S, Denmark

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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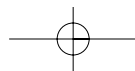
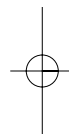
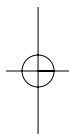
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PROLOGUE

Dear Mum,
Zut! as French people might say when they're a bit grumpy.

Thing is, you get pretty used to noise and chaos if you happen to live at 28 Palace Heights Road. But somehow, this particular Sunday, it's like living in a cross between a little kids' school playground, a noisy café, a pit stop for the Tour de France, a market in downtown Cairo and a safari park where the animals have gone doolally and are stampeding about all over the place.

That's what you get when you combine a visit by Tor's friend Freddie and some of Tor's other classmates; Billy's mum dropping by for a coffee and natter with you (Mum); Rowan's mate Chazza getting his bike repaired in the hall by Dad; Rowan and her other mate Von shimmying to a blaring belly-dance video in the living room; and three dogs and five cats racing around the house being chased by Tor, Ivy, Freddie and other small noisy

people. (No wonder Linn has barricaded herself in her room and put her Sugababes CD on *LOUD*.)

I can't copy Linn and do the same, 'cause of the *tiny* problem of my bedroom door being missing. Dad took it off to fix a broken hinge, but there must be a national shortage of hinges or something, since a couple of weeks have passed by and I *still* have a gaping hole where a useful bit of wood should be. I've managed not to let it bug me over the last few days, but when all you want to do on a Sunday is scribble quietly in your journal, you realize how useful a door is for keeping out unwanted noise/stampeding small siblings/stampeding small siblings' friends/stampeding animals being chased by stampeding small siblings (and friends).

Ho-hum.

Thank goodness for garden sheds, that's all I can say (and I know someone *else* who'd agree with me, but more about that mysterious vanishing trick later...). Hopefully all the mayhem and madness will stay safely in the house, and no one will stampede out here and disturb me while I'm getting on with my writing in peace. Well, not *quite* in peace – I am slightly distracted by the fact that I seem to have a splinter in my bottom. That's the downside of sitting in garden sheds; they may have doors, but they don't automatically come

lined with feather-soft satin floor cushions. Sadly.

Speaking of feathers, Britney seems to be doing some kind of pigeon tap dance on the roof just now, which also makes concentrating kind of hard. (What's wrong with perching on tree branches, for goodness' sake?)

Still ... us authors have to suffer for our art, don't we? (Fnar!) And if I didn't put up with this hardship, and carry on writing my journal, how would the world ever know about the visitors, or the vanishings, or the "va-va-va voom"*?

Love you lots,

Ally

(your Love Child No. 3)

* French for "Ooooooh, *he's* cute!", according to Kyra Davies. But you shouldn't always listen to her – after all, last week I caught her teaching Tor and Ivy how to say "Bog off"** in French.

** "*Dégage*", in case you wanted to know.

Chapter 1

OOOOH LA LA!

So, another day, another dilemma...

Which of my two mates was going to win the current quarrel? I'd have to bet on Kyra rather than Kellie – thing is, even if Kyra's totally wrong about something, she can still happily argue her point till you surrender through sheer exhaustion/die of boredom/are on the point of strangling her with your bare hands.

"It's just not possible."

"It is too, Kyra!"

"No, it's not. It's total rubbish."

"It's not!"

"Is too."

"Is not!"

"Is too."

"Is not!"

Me, Sandie, Chloe (slowly blowing a pink bubble of gum) and Salma turned our heads from side to side as the conversation ping-ponged back and forth between our two other friends.

“Listen, Kellie,” said Kyra wearily. “Something *that* important to your life – nobody could hide it from you.”

“Could too!” Kellie replied, lamely.

“Could too!” wasn’t exactly a convincing argument. Poor Kel – Kyra was in the process of trashing one of her favourite fantasies, and Kellie was powerless to stop her.

OK, so watching these two bickering had passed a few boring minutes for the rest of us while we hovered near the main school entrance this sunny Monday morning. But now it was time to rescue Kellie, before Kyra drove her loopy.

“Yeah, *right!*” I saw Kyra smirk, in that irritatingly condescending way she does so well. “Technically, there’s no *way* you could be the princess of an entire sodding country and grow up not knowing anything about it!”

“Yeah,” I butted in. “And *technically*, Kyra, *The Princess Diaries* was just a *film*.”

A well-worn film we’d watched yesterday evening, when we were all round at Kellie’s for a Girls’ Video Night.

“*And* it’s a book,” Sandie butted in in a whisper by my side, but no one paid any attention.

“And your point *is*, Ally?” Kyra said to me archly, putting her hands on her hips, and

managing to pull her short school skirt up a few centimetres at the same time. (She did that deliberately, I was sure, 'cause a couple of half-decent boys from Rowan's year were just ambling by...)

"The point *is*, Kyra, films are allowed to use artistic licence, aren't they?" I shrugged. "Things don't happen *exactly* the way they would in real life."

"See?!" Kellie jumped in, making no more sense than she had when she'd burst out with "Could too!".

Poor Kellie had taken nothing but stick for making us sit through that film for the forty trillionth time, but it wasn't *her* fault that the brand new teen flick that Chloe had arrived with – fresh from her dad's shop – was a dud and had jammed five minutes after she'd stuck it in Kel's video player. But then, it *did* get pretty funny when we spotted Kellie mouthing along to chunks of Mia, the heroine's, dialogue. You know, I think that would be Kellie's ultimate dream ... to have some long-lost relative ship up at her council flat with a tiara and (in her version of the fairy tale) the keys to an island paradise in the Caribbean...

Whether it was directed at me or at Kellie, I *had* expected Kyra to come back with yet another

sarky reply, but she didn't. All she had to say was...

"Va-va-va voom!"

"Er ... *what?*" I frowned at her, and then realized Kyra had obviously got bored with arguing and was now noseying at something far more interesting going on over my shoulder.

"They're *here!*" hissed Salma excitedly, making me, Sandie and Kellie whip our heads around to see what our mates had already spotted.

"Oh, yeah – looks like our visitors have arrived!"

Don't know why Kyra put it like that. 'Cause technically, the interesting-looking, exotic-sounding strangers currently wending around the corner of the building towards us were exchange students, not "visitors". And another thing; they weren't "ours"; they were here to stay with pupils in the year above us.

"Where did *they* come from?" I mumbled, lifting my sunglasses off my nose and sticking them on the top of my head as they came closer.

"France?" Chloe suggested cheekily, blowing a big pink bubble at me.

"*Very* funny. I'm laughing *hysterically* on the inside. But I meant, how did we miss seeing their coach?"

"Pop! *A-heucchhhh!* Cuh-cuh-cuh!"

I think Chloe had been planning on answering me – probably with something equally cheeky but she seemed to have forgotten about the bubble she'd just blown. Somehow or other, she accidentally inhaled, popping the gum and half-choking on it instead. Wow ... all that splattered pink goo was going to take *ages* to pick off.

“It must have parked around the side,” Salma whispered, keeping her eyes glued to the laughing, chatting, uniform-free students that were ambling by, directed inside our school by one of our teachers, Mr Matthews.

“All right, girls?” he asked breezily, when he saw us. “You’re all very punctual today!”

Um, I guess we *were* very punctual. Personally, I never *normally* come to school twenty minutes early (twenty *seconds* early is more my style), but we'd decided last night at Kellie's that it would be an ace idea to come and gawp at the coach-load of potentially cute-looking French boys who'd be arriving first thing. (OK, there were French girls there as well, but to be totally honest, I don't think I'd have left my cosy bed twenty minutes too soon just to come and see *them* show up.)

“But Mr Matthews, we're *always* here this early!” Kyra lied sweetly to our teacher.

“Yes, just like you *always* spend plenty of

quality time on your homework for me, Kyra,” Mr Matthews answered her back, in a voice laden with sarcasm, before he stomped up the steps and held the door open for people to pass through.

“Oooh, look at those two with the floppy fringes!” said Kellie, with a quiet urgency, and with a nod of her head towards two distinctly cute lads.

“*They are not from our world...*” I mumbled in my best alien voice. Too right. No boys at Palace Gates School looked as effortlessly, hair-rufflingly drool-worthy as those two.

“Hey – they’re staring at us!” said Kyra, in what I’d *like* to say was a whisper, but most certainly wasn’t.

Those boys ... I really hoped their English was so lousy that they wouldn’t have heard what Kyra had just come out with, but from the grins that instantly lit up their faces, I guessed they were pretty fluent. (Rats.)

“*Dis-donc, celles-la sont pas mals!*” I heard one of them say, blatantly pointing in our direction.

“*Surtout elle aux grands yeux bleus!*” the other one chipped in, as the two of them slipped by us and were ushered inside by Mr Matthews.

“What did they say! *What did they say?!*” asked Chloe, spinning around to us, all wide eyes and splotches of pink gum still stuck on her chin.

This is where we needed Jen – we all did French

classes, but we were truly terrible at it (just ask Mr Matthews), apart from Jen. But then – weirdly – Jen hadn’t turned up this morning (just like she hadn’t turned up for the Girls’ Video Night last night), even though we’d left her a message telling her what we were planning.

“I think the first boy said something about us not being bad!” said Sandie excitedly.

“And then the other lad said, ‘Specially the one with’ –”

“The one with *what?*” Kyra asked agitatedly, frustrated at the way Salma had just started and then stopped with a frown.

Maybe Kyra was hoping it was “the one with the short skirt”, but I was fairly sure that wasn’t the case. ‘Cause *I’d* caught the last part, even if nobody else had...

“‘Especially the one ... with the big blue eyes!’” I blurted out.

And the one with the big blue eyes certainly – sadly – wasn’t me (mine are brown), or Kyra (ditto), or Kellie (ditto ditto), or Salma (ditto ditto ditto), or Chloe (green).

“Oh ... my ... God!” Kellie gasped on behalf of us all, as we turned to gape at a stunned, pink-cheeked Sandie, who was staring back at us with her saucer-sized, baby-blue eyes.

Good grief – Sandie couldn’t have been more gobsmacked if someone had told her she was the blimmin’ Princess of Genovia...

It was like sitting next to a radioactive lump of metal.

Sandie was positively *glowing* next to me in assembly, partly through sheer surprised pleasure and partly through sheer embarrassment. When you’re one of the shyest girls in the western hemisphere, I guess it’s very, *very* hard to take a compliment, specially when there are boys involved.

“Is she OK, Ally?” Kellie whispered in my ear, nudging her head in Sandie’s direction.

“Think she’s in shock, like car crash victims,” I mumbled back.

Maybe my best friend needed ... what was it called again? That rotten-egg-scented stuff Victorian ladies were always sniffing at when their corsets were fastened so tight they were in danger of fainting? Oh, yeah; *smelling* salts. Or maybe a slap around the face would have brought her back to her senses; they do that all the time in old black-and-white movies when someone’s losing it. (“For God’s sake, Mildred, pull yourself together!” *Whack!* “Oh, thank you, Arthur! I feel so much better now!”)

Hmmm. I didn't have any smelling salts handy (or rotten eggs), and I liked Sandie too much to slap her, so I'd just have to let her sit and glow with shock at the very idea that someone (a cute FRENCH someone, to be accurate) could fancy shy little her more than skinny, pretty Kyra or glam, gorgeous Salma, never mind Chloe or Kellie, or even ordinary old me. I mean, Sandie was still stupefied by the fact that she had somehow, magically, managed to get herself a boyfriend (i.e. Billy).

To be honest, as far as the compliment went, I was quietly chuffed for Sandie, *and* it was one in the eye for Kyra, who always thought she was irresistible to anyone in trousers and bumfluff...

Just as our headteacher, Mr Bashir, appeared on the stage and all the teachers started shushing us into silence (ha! Fat chance!), I sneaked a quick sideways look at Sandie's luminously flushed face ... and just beyond her, I couldn't help noticing that Kyra seemed to be doing an impression of a meerkat. At first I thought she was watching Jen, who – along with another couple of late arrivals – was scurrying into the hall. But no; I could suddenly tell that she was stretching her already long neck so she could get a better ogle at the French kids, who'd all been herded into rows of seats in the far corner of the hall.

“Morning, boys and girls!” Mr Bashir boomed jovially.

“Morning, Mr Bashir!” we all droned back in unison. Everyone except Chloe, next to me, who was busy doodling something on a bit of paper.

Out of the corner of my eye I could make out Jen slithering into the seat Salma had kept for her. I wiggled my fingers in a wave “hello”, but she couldn’t have noticed, ’cause she didn’t smile or wave back.

“Well, it’s good to look around and see so many alert, wide-awake faces this Monday morning!” Mr Bashir joked, in that way that teachers do (i.e. what they’ve said is not *actually* funny). “Anyway, without further ado, I’d like to welcome some new faces to the school, all the way from the small Normandy town of...”

I completely missed which small Normandy town the French kids were from, because Chloe was digging me in the ribs with her surprisingly pointy elbow and “psssst!”ing at me.

“Check it out!” she whispered, passing me a piece of paper with her scrawled handwriting on it. “Pass it on!”

I focused on the scrawl: “DARE!!”, it announced at the top of the page, with underlining so hard it nearly went through the paper. “*This week, each of*

us HAS to talk to a French boy, a) in FRENCH!, and b) with at least ONE of the rest of us there to witness it! Last one to do The Dare is a big, hairy maggot!!!"

Well, I definitely didn't fancy being a hairy maggot. (Whatever one of those is.)

And hey, this Dare thing could be fun – specially in a week when the two “highlights” of school were going to be a teeth-grittingly scary maths test and a scheduled talk from the school nurse about the importance of personal hygiene. (Double yuck! or whatever the French equivalent might be...)

Chapter 2

“IF YOU’RE HAPPY AND YOU KNOW IT, PAT A DOG...”

Squelch, squeat! Squelch, squeat! Squelch...

What a difference a few hours can make.

Yep, at 8.30 a.m., the sky had been Mediterranean blue, the sun had pretended it was July instead of late September, and I’d hurried to school *minus* my blazer and *plus* a pair of v. cool shades (free with a copy of *Sugar* magazine back at the start of summer).

Who’d have guessed that by lunchtime, a particularly *mean* bunch of rain clouds would swoop along, chucking down water so hard I looked like I’d just gone for a fully clothed dip in the Thames by the time I made it home? As for my shoes, it sounded as if I was treading on soggy, indignant mice with every step. *Squelch, squeat! Squelch, squeat! Squelch...*

The weather wasn’t the *only* thing that had changed for the mega-worse over the course of the morning. My mind (which, let’s face it, is not exactly a reliable organ), had done a complete