

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS THE strange story of Miss Cecilia Undergarment and the black lions of Northwood. It is probably not true, but who really knows for sure.

Your big brother or sister (if you have one), or your smart-alec cousin from Wotsamathingitown, will be sure to tell you that it's not true at all. Which is rather like saying that I am telling you lies, because if it is not true, then it is certainly a big fat, farty fib. But all I can say is that not everything is entirely what it seems.

Thousands of years ago everybody (teachers, scientists, government people, even parents) knew that the world was flat. But that turned out not to be true.

Hundreds of years ago the same smart-brained people knew that the sun and the other planets revolved around the Earth. But that turned out not to be true either. In fact, the Earth revolves around the sun. As far as we know for now.

So all I am saying, dear reader, is that you should feel free to make up your own mind about the strange and probably not



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true story of Miss Cecilia Undergarment and the black lions of Northwood.

Now, usually at this stage of a story, the person telling the story has some idea of how it will end. But I can tell you quite honestly that I have no idea at all.

So let us go on this strange adventure together.



I * CECILIA

IT IS A slightly odd name, Undergarment. Some people would go so far as to say it is an extraordinary name, which is quite apt, because Cecilia's family was one of the most extraordinary families that you will ever meet, even in a story. And they lived in the most extraordinary house, in a small town called Brookfield. Mr Undergarment, despite what you might think, did not work in ladies' bras or knickers, but instead owned a balloon factory. He had a specially built house that looked like a bunch of balloons – the kind you sometimes see in cartoons, usually flying off into the sky with a small frightened boy on the end of the string.

The Undergarment house rose six storeys high and bulged out in the middle (as a bunch of balloons should) and was made of balloon-like globes of all kinds of colours. If you saw it from a distance, you would say, *There's a big bunch of balloons tethered to the ground.* And if you saw it up close, you'd say, *There's a big bunch of really huge balloons tethered to the ground.*

The entrance to the house was a giant red balloon. Not a real



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balloon, because that would have popped as soon as you opened the front door. But it looked just like a real balloon. Each bedroom was a large blue balloon, because Mrs Undergarment said that blue was a good sleeping colour. All the beds had mattresses made of hundreds of tiny balloons, and were as soft as a cloud to sleep on.

The living room was green, with balloon sofas and balloon coffee tables. In the kitchen there were balloon-shaped tables and chairs, and even balloon-shaped pots.

Jana, the housekeeper, cooked most of the meals. But whenever they had a dinner party, which was often, Mrs Undergarment phoned Longfellow's, the restaurant next door. Longfellow's happily prepared all the meals and floated them across in a basket attached to a bunch of balloons tethered by a long string.

Cecilia spent much of her time in the attic, the highest balloon at the very top of the bunch. It was a clear balloon, transparent like glass, and it made her feel like a princess at the top of a tall tower. She would often lie on the floor and dream of kings and queens in far-off lands, of handsome knights in shining armour, and of elegant balls. Through the clear walls she could see the whole of Brookfield, and beyond: the apple trees in neat parade-ground rows over at Clemows Orchard; the twin spires of the Church



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of the Yellow Bird on the island in the middle of Lake Rosedale, where all the parishioners went to church on a Sunday morning by canoe, yacht or pedal boat; the grey shapes of the elephants and the long necks of the giraffes moving past the fences at Mr Jingle's Wild West Show and African Safari Park; and the mist-shrouded forest, and black-capped mountains of Northwood.

It was said that no one who entered Northwood Forest ever returned, and no one who had gone in to search for them had ever come out either.

Cecilia tried not to look in that direction, because the trees of Northwood often seemed to be alive and sometimes they seemed to be calling out to her. Even though she knew it was just her imagination, it unsettled her to think of that dark, brooding mass just a few miles north of her house, and what would happen if the mist that surrounded the forest lifted, and whatever lurked in that forest was set free.

There's not much more you really need to know about Cecilia Undergarment. She really was a perfectly normal girl. At least, as perfectly normal as anyone who lived in a balloon house near a dark, enchanted forest could be.

And as normal as anyone who could talk to animals.



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2 * A CRY FOR HELP

THAT'S NOT ENTIRELY true, about Cecilia talking to animals. But nor is it entirely untrue.

Anyone can talk to animals, and most people do. They talk to their dogs and cats all the time. Some people talk to their guinea pigs or their budgies, and other people even talk to trees.

The thing that is a little unusual about Cecilia is that the animals talked back. Not in English or French or any other kind of human language, but in their own animal languages. *Woofs* and *meows* and *clucks* and *chirps*.

Even that is not too strange as many animals talk to their owners. Cats have a certain kind of meow that means, *Where's dinner?*, and dogs have a hundred ways to say, *I'm happy to see you*. *Where have you been for so long?*, even if you've only gone down to the letterbox to collect the mail.

But what made Cecilia a little special, quite extraordinary, in fact, was how well she could understand what the animals were saying.



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A certain kind of bark, combined with a particular expression on a dog's face, plus a certain wag of the tail, and Cecilia knew without doubt that the dog was saying, *Look at my owner. What a pickle-brain. He takes me to the park and walks around each day, hoping that some nice young lady is going to stop and comment on how beautiful my coat is, and that will lead to coffee, then dinner and eventually to the wedding chapel.*

And a slight change in the expression in the dog's eyes and the tone and length of its bark, and it was saying, *But whenever anyone does stop to compliment me, he is always too shy to say anything but "thank you" and walks on. What a pickle-brain!*

So not only could Cecilia talk to and understand animals, but she had also learned some of the few hidden truths about dogs: they are much smarter than they seem, and they often don't think very much of their owners, but they love them just the same. They tend to regard their owners just as a parent might regard a slightly wayward child.

It must be a matter of constant surprise to dogs that humans never actually get any smarter and just keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

Of course cats figured this out years ago, which is why they



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treat humans with such contempt.

Cecilia knew all this, but she also knew not to let anyone know that she could understand what animals were saying. In some deep secret place inside her, she realised that this was special and private. She somehow knew this, the same way that birds know how to fly without anyone ever teaching them and dogs know how to lift their legs when they go pee.

Usually in a story like this, the hero (that's Cecilia) is an orphan – or lives with her horrid stepmother or her wicked aunt and uncle who don't care about her one whit and devote all their attention to their own disgusting son or daughter.

But this was definitely not the case with Cecilia.

It's true that she lived with her father and her stepmother, but her stepmother loved and cared for Cecilia very much, and was only a little bit odd. Cecilia loved her too, and always called her Mummy. She had never met her real mother, who had died when she was born.

Cecilia lived very happily with her dad, her stepmum, and their housekeeper, Jana, who loved everybody and still had love to spare.



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Cecilia's strange adventure began on a Friday afternoon. That was often a sad time for Cecilia because school was over for the week.

Cecilia loved school. She loved her friends, and playing pick-pock-pack at recess and four-square at lunchtime.

She liked her teacher, Mr Treegarden, who rode to school on a rickety old bike that went *clickety-clack*. He would always call out "Nice to see you," as he passed Cecilia skipping along Strawberry Lane, and Cecilia would always call back "To see you, nice!" as Mr Treegarden bumped his way over the cobblestones to school.

Cecilia especially liked learning new things, and at school they were always learning lots of new things. She knew how to do long division and how to spell rhododendron (which is a particularly hard word to spell) and that Reykjavik is the capital of Iceland and that the earth revolves around the sun. (Which is true, as far as we know.)

But this Friday Cecilia wasn't feeling sad. She was quite excited, because she was invited to a birthday sleepover at her



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best friend Kymberlee's house on Saturday.

She would not make it to that party, but she didn't know that yet.

Cecilia was reading a new book that her father had bought her, all about King Arthur and the beautiful Queen Guinevere, when she heard the noise. She closed the book for a moment, listening carefully with both her ears.

There it was again. A distinct but distant bark. A distressed bark.

To really understand what dogs were barking about, Cecilia had to see the animal, because the sound of the bark was only part of the language.

Still she knew, from the tone of the bark, that something was terribly wrong.

Cecilia walked over to the transparent wall of the attic and looked out. Just at that moment, the dog barked again. She saw it immediately. It was Mr Proctor's dog, a beautiful Samoyed – the long-haired, white, Siberian sled dogs that are often mistaken for huskies. It was standing with its front paws up against the window on the top floor of Mr Proctor's house. The Samoyed barked again and this time Cecilia understood it perfectly. The



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lowering of the ears, the widening of the eyes, the way it moved its head, plus the sound of the bark. She understood it as well as if it had spoken in English.

“Help me!” the Samoyed said.



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