

Chapter 2

Ruskin washed his face and hands, then went downstairs to the kitchen. His mum was sitting at the table – an electric toaster on one side of her, an electric kettle on the other – pouring endless cups of tea.

'Kiss,' Wendy said when she saw Ruskin.

Ruskin kissed her cheek.

'Tea?' she asked.

'Yes please,' Ruskin replied.

'Toast?'

'Yes please.'

Every morning Wendy said 'Kiss', followed by 'Tea?' then 'Toast?', and every morning Ruskin kissed his mum's cheek and said 'Yes please' to both questions.

Ruskin's mum was very small, extremely thin, with a

bush of frizzy red hair. She wore a green nightdress that showed off her knobbly knees, fluffy green slippers that made her feet look too big, a green dressing gown that made her arms look like twigs, and glasses with lenses so thick her eyes appeared the size of saucers.

'It's another hot day,' Wendy sighed, pouring Ruskin his tea. 'We haven't had any rain for weeks now. I've never known a summer like it. Poor Mr Lace's window boxes are withering away. It's so hot my glasses keep steaming up, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day.'

Whenever Wendy got flustered, she said 'Polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day'. Once, for example, she had no bread to make toast, and really panicked. She ran round the house crying, 'No toast with our tea, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day! What shall we do? Toastless tea, polly-wolly-doodle-all-the-day.'

It was left to Ruskin to go to Mrs Walnut's shop and buy a loaf.

Since then, Ruskin's house has always been well stocked with bread (and teabags, because that's *another* thing Wendy can't live without). Some of the bread turns green and mouldy and has to be thrown away, but at least they are never without their buttery slices of toast and marmalade, or toast and baked beans, or toast and scrambled eggs (or poached eggs or fried eggs).

Ruskin looked at his mum as she prepared his breakfast.

'If you're so hot,' Ruskin told her, 'you should take your slippers off.'

Wendy looked at Ruskin, shocked.

'Take my slippers off!' she gasped, spreading marmalade on his toast. 'Don't be silly. I wouldn't feel dressed without my slippers on. What if we had a visitor and I opened the door in my bare feet? They'd see my toenails and the soles of my feet. Oh, what a thought, Ruskin. It makes me say "polly-wolly-

doodle-all-the-day" just thinking of it.'

'But we never have any visitors,' Ruskin remarked. 'No one *ever* knocks on our door.'

Wendy put fresh slices of bread into the toaster. 'What about Sparkey?' she asked.

'I'm not friends with Sparkey any more,' Ruskin replied. 'You know that.'

'Oh, it's too early for arguments,' Wendy muttered. 'Just eat your toast.'

Ruskin nibbled his toast, mumbling, 'I am brave and wise and wonderful and handsome and tall and covered in muscles, with a voice like thunder –'

'Excuse me,' Wendy interrupted, 'but what's that you're twittering on about?'

'It's the hero's speech,' Ruskin explained. 'From the play we're doing at school. I've been telling you about it for weeks. Remember?'

'Er . . . no.'

'Mr Lace found the play buried in his back garden. Remember?'

'Er . . . no.'

'But . . . it's all I've been talking about. Every breakfast. Every teatime.'

'Well, why don't you tell me again and see if it rings any bells.'

Ruskin took a deep breath and began, 'The play's about a village that's being pestered by a dragon. The dragon lives in a cave and every night it comes out and digs up the pathways and burns the farmers' vegetables and cracks planks of wood. Until, one night, a boy does battle with the dragon and throws a golden penny into its mouth and –' Ruskin was just about to add that the village in the story was supposed to have been on the same site as Lizard Street is now – that's why the street is called Lizard Street in the first place and why the pub

at the end of the street is called The Dragon and the Golden Penny – but he didn't have a chance, because his mum interrupted again.

'And *you* want to play the *hero*?' she asked.

'That's right,' Ruskin replied.

'Let me hear the speech again.'

Ruskin took a sip of tea, coughed to clear the crumbs of toast from his throat, then began, 'I am brave and wise and wonderful and handsome and tall and covered in muscles, with a voice like thunder –'

'I don't want to interrupt again,' Wendy said, interrupting again, 'but can I just say something?'

'If you have to,' Ruskin said irritably.

'Well, I'm not sure you're perfectly suited for the part, dear.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just listen to what you're saying,' Wendy told him, biting into her slice of toast. 'I mean, I'm sure you are brave and wise and wonderful. But I'm not sure you can pass for the other things.'

'Be specific, Mum!' Ruskin demanded.

'*Specifically* then,' Wendy said, 'you are *not* handsome, you are *not* tall, you are *not* covered in muscles, and you have *not* got a voice like thunder. In fact, your voice is such a squeaky whisper that even *I* find it hard to hear you sometimes.'

At that moment, Ruskin's dad, Winston, came down for breakfast.

Wendy said, 'Kiss.'

Winston kissed her cheek.

'Tea?' Wendy asked.

'Yes please,' Winston responded, sighing.

'Toast?'

'Yes please,' he replied, sitting at the table.

Winston was small, extremely thin, with balding

frizzy red hair. He wore pyjama bottoms (green and white striped) with holes showing off his knobbly knees, woolly socks (green) that made his feet look furry, a sleeveless vest that made his arms look like twigs, and glasses with lenses so thick his eyes appeared the size of saucers.

Wendy put some more bread in the toaster and poured Winston a cup of tea. Then she told him about the part Ruskin wanted in the school play.

'What does the hero look like?' Winston asked.

'Handsome,' Wendy informed him.

'But Ruskin's not handsome,' Winston said. 'He's the silliest-looking boy in Lizard Street.'

'And tall,' Wendy informed him.

'But Ruskin's not tall,' Winston said. 'He's the smallest boy in Lizard Street.'

'And covered in muscles.'

'But Ruskin hasn't got any muscles anywhere,' Winston said.

'And with a voice like thunder,' Wendy finished.

'But Ruskin's voice is just a squeaky whisper,' Winston remarked. Then, looking at his son, he continued, 'You can't possibly play the hero. People will laugh at you.'

The toast popped out of the toaster.

Wendy put some more bread in, then buttered the toast.

'But I *want* to be a hero,' Ruskin said.

'We all might *want* to be heroes,' Winston said, 'but we're all *not*. You know my motto: "Don't interfere". Heroes have to do a lot of interfering.'

'You know your trouble,' Ruskin said, pointing at his dad. 'Low self-image!'

Suddenly there was a loud crash!

The kitchen window smashed!

A football landed on the table, right in the middle of
the toast.

SSCRUNCH!!

