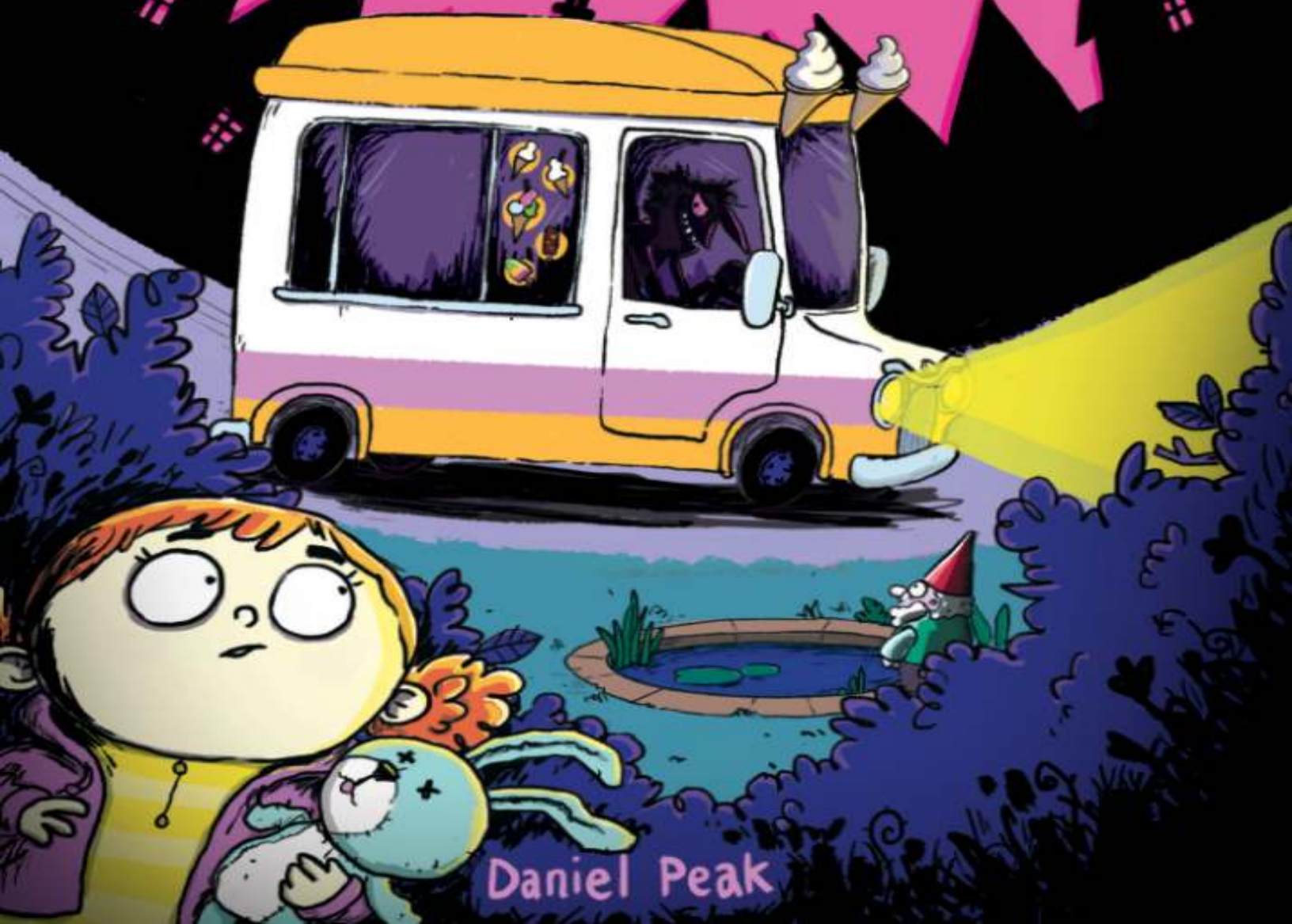


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LITTLE HORROR



Daniel Peak

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'My 9-year-old daughter's favourite new book! She read it in one sitting. If anyone can keep her quiet for this long, they deserve a Nobel Peace Prize. Hopefully the sequel is out soon, otherwise she's going to keep nagging me!' Lee Mack

'You know you're getting older when all the action-heroes start looking younger and Rita Jeffreys is the youngest action-hero ever to have adorned the pages of a novel. This insane adventure has more twists than a papoose.' Jamie Rix, BAFTA-winning TV writer/producer and author of *Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids*

'Reminiscent of *Boss Baby*, Rita's story hooked me from the very start. *Little Horror* is an original, funny, fast-paced adventure that kids will love.' Jen Carney, author of *Accidental Diary of BUG*

'Brilliant. I love this book. Hilarious and thrilling. The only problem is that I now eye my 2-year-old with suspicion.' Ben Ward, head writer of CBBC's *Danger Mouse* and *Horrible Histories*

LITTLE HORROR

DANIEL PEAK



*For Amelia and Cara, who made me think parts of this story
might be true*

1

Prize Chimp

What's the first thing you remember?

Was it your first day at school?

Maybe your third or fourth birthday party?

The day you learned to swim or ride a bike?

Or when you lost your first tooth?

Not me. I don't remember any of those things, for one very good reason: they haven't happened yet.

But I remember some other things. Like the time I set fire to an ice-cream van. And the time I jumped out of my bedroom window in the middle of the night. I remember the time I broke into someone's house through the cat flap, and the time I tried to steal a Porsche 911 Carrera S. I'll tell you about all of those things, but I'll start with the very first thing I remember. Something that happened when I was seven months old.

That was a year and a half ago.

The very first thing I remember is lying on a plastic mat, with my bare bum sticking up in the air. Mum was holding my ankles with one hand, and wiping my bottom with the other one. I don't mean she was wiping my bum with her hand. That would be disgusting. She was using a baby wipe, and she had a fresh nappy all ready to slide into place.

But Mum wasn't moving. She was frozen mid-bum wipe, staring down at me with this weird expression on her face, like something spooky had just happened. I wondered what she had seen in my poo that had scared her so much.

'Say it again, Rita,' said Mum. "'Quarter to three.'" Say, "quarter to three".' Without taking her eyes off me, she shouted Dad into the room. He came in a few seconds later, tapping away on his phone and not looking up.

‘What’s up?’ said Dad.

‘Rita just told me the time,’ said Mum. ‘I was chatting away while I changed her nappy, and I happened to say “I wonder what time it is” and she looked me straight in the eye and said “quarter to three”.’

Dad pressed something on his phone. ‘More like twenty to three I’d say.’

Mum looked annoyed. ‘That’s hardly the bloody point, is it, Paul? The point is this girl’s seven months old and she’s just said the words “quarter to three”. Doesn’t that strike you as a little bit weird?’

Dad shrugged. ‘Not really. Babies make all kinds of noises. They sound like words sometimes. I had her in the park yesterday, could have sworn she called me a prize chimp.’

Mum gave Dad a strange look. Then turned back to me. ‘Prize chimp,’ she said. ‘Rita, can you say, “Daddy’s a prize chimp”?’

‘Becky, she’s a baby. If she could talk that would make her some kind of freak.’

Mum kept staring at me. ‘Daddy’s a prize chimp,’ she said.

I kept my mouth shut. I could have said something but I didn’t want Dad to think I was a freak. So instead I made some random ba-ba-ba noises then put my big toe in my mouth and started chewing it. After a while Dad wandered off with his phone and Mum carried on changing my nappy. She must have thought she’d imagined it all.

Should I have been honest? Should I have told Mum and Dad I could talk? I don’t know. If I *had* told them, what happened next would have been very different.

Bucket of Wee

If you'd told my mum and dad that they had an amazingly, fantastically intelligent child, they would probably have agreed with you. But they wouldn't have meant me. They would have meant my brother, Lewis.

Lewis is two years older than me, and no one has ever called him a freak, so I used to watch him to see how normal children are supposed to behave. If Lewis shoved Lego up his nose, I shoved Lego up my nose. If Lewis tipped a bowl of spaghetti shapes over his head, I tipped a bowl of spaghetti shapes over my head.

And Lewis was handy for getting me out of trouble. Like when I completed a 200-piece jigsaw all by myself, or when I switched the telly over from CBeebies to the History Channel to watch a documentary on Cleopatra, Mum and Dad always assumed Lewis had done it. They thought he must be a child genius and so they bought him tons of educational toys, like a globe and a telescope. Poor Lewis wasn't interested in them, but I was. I used to spin the globe round and round, pretending to enjoy the shapes and colours when really I was learning the names of all the capital cities.

Another useful thing was when I worked out how to get subtitles up on the TV. That's how I learnt to read. As soon as I realised that the shapes at the bottom of the screen were the same as the things the people were saying, all I had to do was watch as much telly as I could – and that's pretty easy when you've got my mum and dad. It took me about three months to learn to read. I'd done it by the time I was one.

Writing was harder. I tried to teach myself using a set of crayons and some scrap paper but whenever an adult came

near I had to scribble over everything I'd done so they couldn't see it. That made it hard to tell if I was getting better.

And there were other things to learn of course, like crawling and then standing up and then walking. I did those things at about the same age as normal babies. Potty training took a while. At the age of eighteen months, I could read and write as well as a grown-up, but I still sometimes pooped on the carpet if I didn't have a nappy on. Well, I never said I was perfect, did I?

I had lots of chances to tell my parents the truth. All I would have to do is pick up a jar of baby food and read the ingredients out loud. But I decided not to, for two reasons.

Reason number one: I didn't want Mum and Dad to drop dead of a heart attack.

Reason number two: people don't hide things from babies. When adults are with other adults, they're always pretending to be nicer and cleverer and more hard-working than they really are. But when they're with a baby, they stop pretending. Like, when Dad was with other adults he never trumped. But when it was just him and me in the kitchen, he would let rip with these long wet farts, then take an elaborate bow and go 'Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you', in a posh voice like he was proud of it. Sometimes he'd close his eyes and wave his hands through the air as the fart came out, like he was conducting an orchestra. But then if Mum came in the room and smelled it he'd go: 'that was Rita'.

Let me tell you a fact: when babies get blamed for a bad smell, five times out of ten it was their dad. And the other five it was their mum.

Here are some other secrets I found out:

- Dad told everyone he was too busy to watch TV or films, but really he watched *Inside Out* three times and cried at the bit where Bing Bong dies.
- One time when Mum changed my nappy, she put the very tip of her little finger in the poo and dabbed it on her tongue.
- Our window-cleaner sometimes wees in his bucket and then wipes the windows with it.
- Dad smokes cigarettes.
- Our local vicar kicks his dog.
- Kath, who is in charge at nursery, eats baby food for her lunch.

None of them are really amazing secrets, are they? It would have been nice to find out that Mum was a superhero, or that Dad secretly had a beautiful singing voice. But no, I find out our windows are washed with wee.

The point is, I didn't make any of those discoveries by sneaking around or spying on people. They just happened right in front of my eyes.

So I stayed quiet, to see what else I could find out.

I did tell some other people about my secret. I told other babies. Three days a week Mum took me to Funkytots nursery, where there were lots of other pre-schoolers. And at weekends we went to parks and soft play centres full of other kids. Whenever I met someone new I would talk to them to see if they were as smart as me. I'd wriggle over and whisper, 'Hi. Very pleased to meet you. I was just wondering whether you're as clever as me. Can you read? Can you write?' I'd look into their eyes for a little catch of understanding. Nothing. They just stared back, or dribbled, or poked themselves in the ear with a spoon.

It looked like I was on my own.

Nine Nine Nine

One other person knew.

Well, two people if you include my brother Lewis. Lewis saw me do grown-up things all the time but that wasn't a problem because no one listened to anything Lewis said. He would say, 'Daddy, Rita put new batteries in my torch' and Dad would just go, 'That was very helpful of her'. No one ever thought he might be telling the truth.

The other person who knew was called James and he was much more dangerous.

I met James when I was nineteen months old. It was after bath, and I was in my sleepsuit, on my playmat, picking out the *In the Night Garden* theme on a toy keyboard when Mum said, 'Look who's come to see you, Rita. This is James.' I looked up to see a messy-haired grown-up boy. All grown-ups look the same to me - old - but I guess this one was about fourteen or fifteen.

James gave me a big smile and knelt down next to my playmat. 'She's gorgeous, isn't she?' he said. Then he pinched one of my cheeks between his finger and thumb and wobbled it about. I hate it when people do that. No one ever does it to grown-ups because they'd probably end up getting a smack in the face.

James picked up my toy keyboard and started playing it himself while Mum called Lewis through and told him to put his listening ears on for a serious talk.

'Mummy and Daddy have to go out for a little while tonight, so James will be babysitting to make sure you're OK. OK?'

Lewis nodded. He didn't look bothered at the idea of Mum and Dad leaving him. They could have been off to start a new life on the planet Mars and he wouldn't care.

Mum turned to James. 'We're putting a lot of trust in you James, but I know you're very mature, and you got twelve predicted nines at GCSE so you're obviously an intelligent young man.'

'I love kids, Mrs Jeffrey. We'll have a blast.'

'Hm. Well I'll put them to bed before we go so you should have no trouble. But if there's anything at all you need to ask, my number's on the pad.'

Then Mum took Lewis upstairs for teeth and stories. As soon as she was out of the room, James ignored me. He went through to the kitchen and I heard bottles clanking. Then he came back through, talking on his phone.

'I'll text you when they've gone,' he was saying. 'But yeah, there's loads of vodka and stuff. They won't notice.'

James looked round the room. He saw Mum's bag on the end of the sofa. 'Ring you back,' he said, then ended his call and listened for a moment at the bottom of the stairs. We could hear Mum reading *The Gruffalo* and she was still only on the fox part, so James opened the zip of Mum's bag and took out her purse.

I could tell I was witnessing another secret moment. James opened Mum's purse and pulled out the paper money. Then he changed his mind, stuffed it back in and slid out the plastic cards instead. I knew what the plastic cards were from seeing Mum in shops and on the phone. The cards had special numbers on them that were the same as money. James took Mum's writing pad and copied down all the numbers from the front and back of the cards. Then he put the cards back in Mum's purse.

James looked over to see me watching him. He smiled again. 'They're only paying me twenty quid to babysit,' he said. 'Got to make it worthwhile somehow, haven't we, Chubbychops?'

I liked him even less now. To be honest, it wasn't so much the stealing as the Chubbychops comment. So what if I was chubby? I was nineteen months old. You try keeping the

weight off when you're fed four times a day and the only exercise you get is at a soft-play centre.

A few minutes later Mum came back down to take me to bed. As she changed me into a night-time-nappy and put me down, I thought about what James was doing and I got more and more angry. Mum had trusted him - was *paying* him - to look after her house and her children, and he was going to invite his friend round, drink Mum's drinks and steal her money. It wasn't fair.

Mum kissed me on the forehead and went downstairs. I heard her telling James how the baby monitor worked, then saying goodbye and driving off to meet Dad from work. It was quiet for a bit, then I heard James talking again, back on the phone to his friend. The friend was probably on his way over here right now. I didn't want to let this happen, but how could I stop it?

Easy: I could make a phone call of my own. I could ring the police and tell them what James was up to. The police wouldn't know how old I was over the phone. They'd think I was a grown-up with a squeaky voice. And I knew there was a phone next to the bed in Mum and Dad's room.

The only problem was, I was stuck in my cot. It had tall wooden sides and I hadn't learned how to climb out. Someone would have to get the phone for me.

'Lewis!' I hissed. I tried to be as quiet as I could but still be heard across the landing in Lewis' bedroom. 'Lewis!'

He heard me. A few seconds later Lewis padded into my room, trailing Peter Penguin behind him. Lewis looked dopey. I must have woken him up.

'Lewis,' I said. 'Go in Mummy and Daddy's room and get the phone. Yes? Bring me the phone. But *don't make any noise.*'

Off he went. James had finished his phone call downstairs and it had all gone quiet. I started to worry that he would come up. What if he needed the toilet or something?

Lewis came back in to my bedroom with a phone. Not Mum and Dad's phone but one of those toy phones with a smiley face that you drag along on wheels. I sighed, annoyed. 'Not that phone, Lewis. The real phone. The one next to Mummy's bed.'

Lewis frowned at me. 'That's not allowed,' he said.

Great. Suddenly the boy decides to behave himself. I tried another way. 'We're going to phone Father Christmas. So you can tell him what presents you want.' Lewis' eyes lit up like fairy lights. It was the middle of April but that made no difference to Lewis. He was obsessed with Father Christmas all year round. He went back to Mum and Dad's room, and this time he did bring the right phone through.

'Good boy, well done.' I was going to ring the police myself, but then I had a better idea: get Lewis to do it. I'd seen a show on TV where a little kid had rung 999 when his grandma fell down the stairs. So it was believable that Lewis might do it, especially as Mum and Dad already thought he was super-clever.

'Now I want you to dial nine nine nine, Lewis. Can you do that? Do you know which button is nine?'

Lewis looked at me like I'd asked him to build a helicopter. Totally clueless. How Mum and Dad could think this boy was a genius was beyond me.

'Never mind,' I said. 'Give it to me.'

Lewis handed over the phone. 'Ring Father Christmas?' he said.

'That's right, Lewis,' I said, tapping in 9-9-9. 'I'll talk to him first though, OK?'

Only then did I notice James the babysitter standing in the doorway.

For a few seconds James said nothing. Then he said, 'What the...?'

I panicked. How long had he been standing there? How much had he heard? Perhaps if I acted like a normal toddler

he would think he'd made a mistake. I started chewing the end of the phone and making baby gurgles.

'You spoke,' said James. 'Just then, you spoke.'

'Ba-ba ba-ga.'

'That's rubbish. You talked. I heard it all over that baby monitor.'

Oh bums, I thought. I'd forgotten about the baby monitor. James must have heard everything.

'She's ringing Father Christmas,' said Lewis, unhelpfully.

At that moment, my phone call was answered. 'Nine nine nine. What's your emergency?'

I didn't say anything. James was still staring at me. I didn't know what to do.

'Hello,' said the phone. 'Do you need help?'

'No thank you,' I said, and hung up. I looked at James.

'OMG,' he said. 'What are you? You can't be a real baby.'

'I am a real baby,' I said. 'I'm slightly advanced for my age. That's all.'

James looked at Lewis. 'What about him, is he a freak too?'

'Leave him out of it,' I snapped.

'Where's Father Christmas?' asked Lewis. This seemed to convince James that Lewis was normal after all, and he turned back to me. He stepped closer to my cot, but still not very close. I realised that James was a bit scared of me.

'One of two things, I reckon,' he said. 'One: alien life form. Two: government science experiment.'

I wasn't enjoying this conversation. For all I knew, one of James' guesses might be right. Perhaps I *was* an alien from space.

'Who else knows about you?' he asked. 'Do your mum and dad know?'

I didn't reply.

'They will,' said James. 'Everyone's going to know. I can sell this information to a newspaper. I can be famous.'

Things were getting worse. I felt so stupid. If I'd just kept quiet and gone to sleep in the first place none of this would