



GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

The clouds of yellow steam filling the kitchen began to dissipate, and Suzy was finally able to fight her way through them to the fridge. She steadied herself in the puddle of orange juice that was pooling in front of it, and looked inside.

She was only a little surprised to discover that the shelves and most of their contents had vanished, and the interior of the fridge had expanded to form a shining white space the size of an aircraft hangar. A set of train tracks ran from a dark tunnel mouth in the rear wall, almost up to the fridge door. And standing on the tracks was a huge old steam train. Not a normal steam train, though – its locomotive, the *Belle de Loin*, was oversized and misshapen, as though it had been put together out of

spare parts by someone who had a pretty good idea of what a train should look like, but had never actually seen one before. Its wheels were a confusing mix of different sizes, its boiler sprouted pipes and valves in strange places, and its driver's cab was a lopsided Tudor mansion, complete with mullioned windows and warped wooden beams. Behind it was a tender, piled high with the fusion bananas that were the *Belle's* fuel.

A simple red wooden carriage was coupled behind this. This was the sorting carriage – the travelling post office in which the mail of a hundred different magical worlds was carried and sorted. And behind that, at the very end of the train, was a small and slightly shabby-looking caravan with the letters *H.E.C.* stencilled on its door: the Hazardous Environment Carriage. It didn't look like much, but Suzy knew that it was capable of withstanding the most extreme conditions a Postie could face, from the freezing depths of outer space to the blazing hearts of active volcanoes.

The sight of the train took her back to the first night she had seen it, almost three months earlier, and she felt her heartbeat quicken. She would never get entirely used to seeing it – it always carried the promise of adventure.

“What on earth?”

Suzy turned at the sound of her father's voice and

realized that her parents had joined her. They stared into the fridge with a mixture of terror and disbelief.

“Mum? Dad?” said Suzy, swelling with pride. “This is the Impossible Postal Express. Isn't it fantastic?”

Her father looked around the suddenly cavernous fridge. “I put some yoghurts in here this morning,” he said. “Where have they gone?”

Suzy gave him a look. “Dad, the yoghurts aren't important.”

“But they were probiotic,” he lamented.

Suzy was spared having to reply when one of the windows of the locomotive's cab swung open and J.F. Stonker, driver of the Express, poked his head out.

Suzy's parents gasped in astonishment. Stonker was a troll. Small and round and wrinkled, he looked a bit like a grey potato, except for his absolutely gigantic nose – at least thirty centimetres long – and the enormous handlebar moustache that hung beneath it. A pair of sharp blue eyes blinked down at them from beneath the peak of his railwayman's cap.

“Good evening!” he said. “Are we alright to park here?”

Suzy's parents just stared at him with their mouths open, so Suzy answered for them. “Yes, that's fine, Stonker. It's good to see you.”

“You too!” he called back. “Stay there, we’ll be right out.” He disappeared back inside and shut the window.

Suzy let out a little giggle of excitement. “This is going to be brilliant!” she exclaimed. “I can’t wait for you to meet everyone.”

Her parents nodded, a little vacantly.

“Please try not to stare at them,” said Suzy. “I know they seem a bit unusual, but you’ll soon get used to it and...oh no!” She looked down at her soaking-wet school uniform. “I can’t meet them like this! I need to get changed. And so do you, Mum.” She made a run for the hallway, skidded to a stop, and hurried back. “There’s no time right now. I’ll introduce you to everyone first.”

Her parents didn’t reply. They were still gawking, dumbfounded, into the fridge, although they shuffled aside as Stonker stepped out of it into the kitchen.

“Suzy Smith!” he said, hopping neatly over the puddle of orange juice and opening his arms wide. “How the devil have you been?”

“I’ve been okay, thanks,” she said, hugging him. “Thank you for coming!” She gestured towards her parents. “This is my mum and dad.”

Stonker pivoted on the balls of his feet and swept his cap off his head. “Mr and Mrs Smith,” he said. “J.F. Stonker, at your service. Absolutely delighted to make

your acquaintance.” He offered them his hand and, after a moment’s hesitation, Suzy’s father stepped forward and took it.

“Um, yes,” he said. “Sorry. Hello.”

“Splendid, splendid!” said Stonker, pumping first Suzy’s dad’s and then Suzy’s mum’s hand so vigorously that they became a blur. “You must be so very proud of your daughter.”

“Er, well, yes,” said Suzy’s mum reflexively.

“And I believe you already know Fletch?” He nodded to the fridge, where another troll had emerged. Fletch was older than Stonker, with skin as brown and creased as old tree bark. Tufts of wiry hair escaped from his ears and nostrils, and he wore his usual ensemble of dirty overalls and scuffed work boots. He directed a brief nod of recognition at Suzy’s parents, tramped straight through the puddle of juice to the table, and helped himself to a seat.

“How’s it goin’?” he said, picking a chicken wing off a nearby plate. He cast a critical eye over the mess of eggs and milk on the wall. “You’ve redecorated.”

“Yes, we remember Fletch,” said Suzy’s mum curtly.

Suzy grimaced. Fletch was lovely once you got to know him well enough, but he didn’t exactly make a good first impression. And three weeks ago, at this very table, she

had revealed the truth about the Impossible Places to her parents by waking them from the depths of a sleeping spell and introducing them to him. Perhaps that hadn't been such a great idea.

Then her mum gave a strangled little squeak and retreated behind her dad.

"What's wrong?" Suzy asked.

Her mum peered out from behind her dad and pointed with a quaking hand to the large yellow bear that was squeezing its bulk out of the fridge. It reared up onto its hind legs, and the pink ribbon tied in a bow around its head scraped the ceiling. Its fur was brushed and gleaming, and even its blue denim overalls were clean and neatly pressed.

"Ursel!" said Suzy, running over and throwing her arms around the animal's waist. "You look great!"

"Rrrrorlf," Ursel replied, baring her huge fangs in a smile.

"Mum, Dad, this is Ursel. She's the Express's firewoman."

Ursel stuck out a paw, making Suzy's parents flinch. Suzy laughed. She had forgotten just how scared she herself had been upon first meeting Ursel.

"It's very nice to meet you," her dad said, hesitantly taking the paw in both his hands and shaking it. He gave a nervous little laugh. "You're much bigger than I imagined!"

"Grrronf," said Ursel. "Hhhhrk rowlf."

"Pardon?" said Suzy's dad.

"Ursel says she'll take that as a compliment," said Stonker, with a slight smile. "But please think very carefully before you give her any more."

Suzy's dad nodded hard enough to make his teeth rattle.

"She also wants to know if this is a traditional form of human dress, Mrs Smith," said Stonker, indicating her dressing gown. "Suzy was wearing one the first time we met her."

Suzy's mum blushed. "I was just going to get dressed," she said. "In fact, if you'll excuse me..."

"Wait, Mum," said Suzy. "This isn't everyone. Where's...?"

"Hello!" came a voice from the fridge. "Did I miss anything?"

Suzy broke into a huge grin as a young troll stepped into the kitchen. He had pale green skin and large eyes, and wore a red-and-gold Postie's uniform that was several sizes too big for him. He clutched a small gift-wrapped parcel and looked around the kitchen with undisguised interest.

"Hello, Suzy!" he said. "So this is where you live! Wow!" He bustled over and gave Suzy a quick hug, then

headed straight for her parents. “Hello there,” he said. “I’ve really been looking forward to meeting you both. I’m Wilmot Grunt, Postmaster of the Express, but please just call me Wilmot.” He laughed. “Suzy is the very best Postal Operative I’ve ever worked with.”

“She’s the only Postal Operative you’ve ever worked with,” said Fletch.

Wilmot pressed his lips together in annoyance. “True,” he said. “But she still does an exceptional job, and I count myself very lucky to have her on my staff.”

Suzy glowed with pride. This was the sort of thing she had been hoping for. It seemed to be having the desired effect on her parents as well, as they visibly relaxed.

“That’s very nice to hear,” said her dad, managing a smile. “Thank you.”

Suzy’s mum stepped out from behind him and nodded at the parcel Wilmot was holding. “Is that a delivery?” she asked.

“Oh, this!” Wilmot looked at the parcel as if he’d forgotten he was carrying it. “No, this is for you.” He stepped forward and presented it with a flourish.

“It’s not often the whole crew gets invited to dinner, you see,” said Stonker. “So by way of thanks, we all clubbed together and got you a little something.”

“Oh!” Suzy’s mum accepted the box and turned it over

in her hands. “That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s nothing, really,” said Stonker with a dismissive wave. “Just something to help out around the house, that’s all.”

“You can open it now, if you like,” added Wilmot eagerly.

Suzy’s mum only hesitated for a moment before her curiosity won out and she tore open the paper to reveal a plain wooden box with a hinged lid. Suzy and her dad both huddled round her as she opened the lid and looked inside.

A puff of air escaped, brushing past Suzy with a faint smell of woodsmoke. They looked into the box.

“It’s empty,” said Suzy’s mum.

“Well, it is now,” said Fletch, as though this were the most obvious thing in the world. “You just let it out.”

Suzy felt a nervous twinge. “Let what out?” she said.

“The boggart,” said Stonker.

“The what?” asked Suzy’s dad.

“Boggart,” said Fletch, helping himself to a hot dog. “It’s your basic household spirit. Roams around the place keepin’ things neat and dusted. Turns up little odds and ends you might have lost – keys, loose change, that sort of thing. Pretty handy, really.”

Suzy’s mum gasped. “You mean we’ve got a *ghost* in the house?”

Stonker chuckled. “Dear me, no. We wouldn’t lumber

you with a *ghost*. This is a spirit, and quite an unobtrusive one at that. Keep it fed and warm, and you'll hardly even know it's here."

Suzy's dad looked around the kitchen in alarm. "But where is it? I can't see it."

"Course not," said Fletch. "Invisible, innit?"

Suzy was scanning the room as well. She didn't see anything, of course, but she caught a vague sense of movement from the corner of her eye, as though something small and very fast had just darted under the table, too quick for her to identify. When she turned to focus on it, there was nothing there.

"What does it eat?" she asked.

"Just leave a saucer of milk out at night, and it should be quite happy," said Stonker.

"I thought that was hedgehogs," said Fletch.

"Is it?" Stonker twirled the end of his moustache as he considered this. "I'm pretty sure it's boggarts. Anyway, just let it make a home for itself in the fireplace and I expect it'll take care of itself."

"But we don't have a fireplace," said Suzy's mum.

"Really?" Stonker looked surprised. "How on earth do you keep the place warm?"

"With central heating," said Suzy. She got down on her knees and scanned the floor, looking for movement

rather than detail. She let her eyes unfocus, and a few seconds later, she detected another little flurry on the far side of the room, zipping along the skirting board and hopping into a cabinet that stood ajar beneath the sink. "What happens if we can't feed and house it?"

Stonker's silence made her look up.

"Well," he said, shifting awkwardly, "I believe they *can* get a little obstreperous if neglected."

"A little what?" said Suzy's mum.

There was a crash from inside the cabinet. Suzy leaped to her feet as the door swung open and the contents were ejected one by one. Tins of shoe polish, a roll of bin bags, a sink plunger, and a dustpan and brush all sailed through the air, forcing Suzy, her parents and the crew to take cover behind the table.

"A little rowdy," said Stonker as a bottle of fabric softener whistled past his head. "Oh dear."

"What does it think it's doing?" said Suzy's mum.

"It can't be getting rowdy already," Suzy's dad replied. "It's only just arrived!"

"Hhhrunk," said Ursel, who was too big to hide behind anything, and simply swatted aside any projectiles that came too close.

"Me?" said Stonker. "No, of course I didn't feed it while it was in the box. I thought you had."

“Unf,” said Ursel, shaking her head.

“Me neither,” called Fletch.

“Nor me,” said Wilmot, who was crouched beside Suzy. “Sorry. Was I supposed to?”

“For goodness’ sake, make it stop!” cried Suzy’s mum as another cabinet door sprung open, and the boggart disgorged an avalanche of pots and pans across the floor.

“We need milk,” said Suzy. “Cover me!” She dashed across the room in a crouch while Ursel kept pace with her, shielding Suzy with her body. Suzy found the carton of milk that had been hurled from the fridge – it was leaking badly, but there was just enough left inside to fill the small measuring cup that she retrieved from the floor. Then, being careful not to spill a drop, she approached the open cabinet. Ursel plucked a saucepan lid out of the air a second before it would have struck Suzy in the forehead, and raised it as a shield, her great forearms surrounding Suzy in a protective circle.

Suzy placed the cup on the floor in front of the open cabinet, and the barrage of kitchenware stopped abruptly. Then she and Ursel beat a hasty retreat to the far side of the room, and watched.

There was still nothing to see, but Suzy thought she could hear a faint snuffling sound. Something dipped into the milk, causing ripples across its surface. The snuffling

sound grew louder.

“See, Mum?” Suzy whispered. “There’s nothing to worry about. Everything’s under control.”

The cup arced through the air and upended its contents all over her. The boggart gave a piggish snort, and blinking the milk from her eyes, Suzy thought she saw something leap off the floor into the sink. There was a splash, a gurgle, and then a groan of pipes that quickly spread out through the walls and the ceiling, until it sounded as if the whole house was coming apart.

No, no, no, no, nooooo! thought Suzy as she saw her parents clutch each other in fear. *This isn’t how it’s supposed to go!*

As quickly as it had started, the noise died away, leaving just a comfortable ticking in the radiators.

“You know,” said Stonker, “I’m beginning to think maybe it was hedgehogs.”

“Not much we can do about it now,” said Fletch. “It’s got into the plumbin’.”

“What on earth is it doing in there?” said Suzy’s dad, looking fearfully around the room.

Suzy wiped the last of the milk from her face and stood up. “Perhaps it’s trying to keep warm,” she said. “We don’t have a fireplace, but we do have a hot water boiler.”

“You mean our central heating is haunted now?” he said.

“Sir,” said Stonker. “You fail to understand. *Ghosts* haunt. House spirits *inhabit*. Your boggart is simply making a new home for itself, that’s all. You’ll probably find it calms down now.”

Suzy didn’t think he looked quite as confident as he sounded, but she also realized that her parents needed some reassurances, and quickly – her mother’s lips were pressed into a thin line of stress and disapproval, and her father still looked as though he expected monsters to emerge from the walls at a moment’s notice. So far, this dinner hadn’t quite been the success Suzy had hoped for.

“We’ll get this mess cleaned up in no time,” she said breezily. “And then we can eat. I’m sure Mum and Dad have got lots of questions for everyone.”

“Oh yes,” confirmed Suzy’s mother darkly. “Lots and lots of questions.”