

Hazel's Phantasmagoria

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Extract

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Good evening

Your mother probably deserves to die.

Yes, I understand – you love your mummy. But how well do you really know her? You've only known her as long as you've been alive - and she was around for years before that. Think about it – years! I'll bet you a hundred pounds that in those long, lonely, boring years before you were born, she did some things she hasn't told you about.

Look into her eyes, and see how she reacts if you say the following words:

Gossip!

Manipulation!

Bullying!

Deceit!

Embezzlement!

Arson!

Fraud!

Burglary!

Cattle-rustling!

Devil-worship!

Try shouting them out at random during dinner. How does she react? Does she look embarrassed? Does she look like she's trying

to cover something up? I bet she's got a funny expression on her face. That expression, of course, is guilt.

Oh! You don't believe your mother could possibly be guilty of cattle-rustling? Well – that only goes to show how naïve you are. But I'm sure by the time you reach your mother's age you'll be guilty of the most terrible lies, betrayals, and animal-abductions. Everybody does it!

So. Even though you love your mummy, she, like most people older than you, is ripe for extermination.

Oh, do stop crying.

Now, whoever is going to be responsible for killing your mother is going to have a difficult task ahead of them. Murder is a serious business. It takes months of planning. It requires special equipment. It is highly illegal.

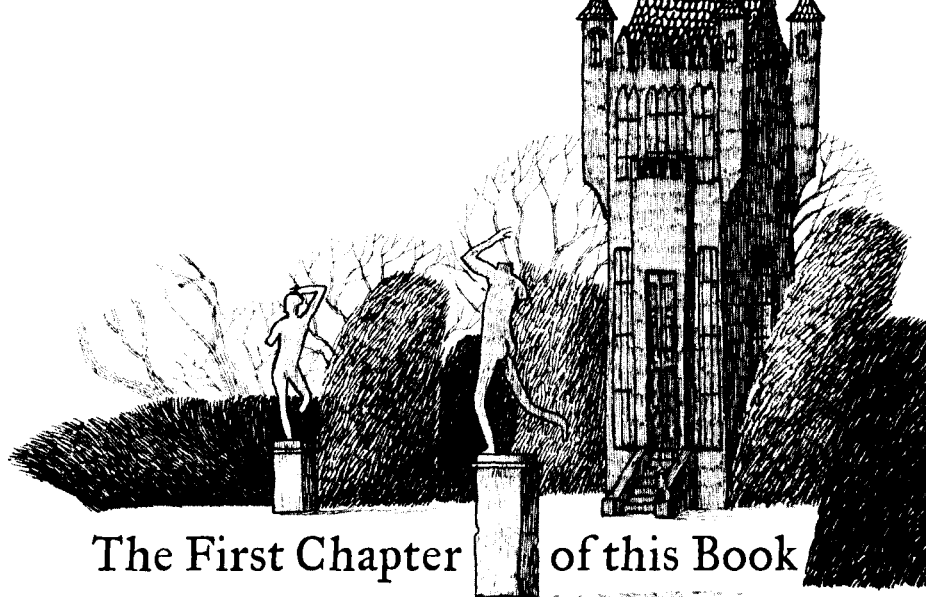
Most importantly, once you've done it, you can't ever take it back. I am sorry to say that it is not much fun being a murderer. There's the mess for a start – burying a body in the middle of the night is both mucky and tiring. Then there's getting arrested – which usually involves the police twisting your arm and bumping your head on the door of the police car. Then there's being put on trial – which involves answering difficult questions and being called lots of horrible names. Then, finally, there's going to jail – which is pretty much the worst place in the world.

So, even though your mother deserves to die, the downsides to killing her are enormous.

But, enormous though those downsides are, they are not enough to deter everybody. Because lots of people kill people. They have done it throughout the history of the world. They do it every day.

This is a book about why.

Eugenia, Lady Pequierde



The First Chapter of this Book

They were only halfway through the drive, and Hazel was already furious.

‘But I don’t want to stay with *them*. I want to come with *you*. *I like you*.’

‘You like them as well, dear,’ said her mother.

‘I do NOT. What was the last thing I said about them?’

Hazel’s mother sighed.

‘You said – oh dear, let me get this right – you said that staying with them would be worse than staying in a wasps’ nest. Even if you had to cook and clean for the wasps, or something like that. Then you said that even if none of the wasps volunteered to organise the wasp parade, and you had to organise it all by yourself, and you had to make little paper hats for the wasps, and a little mermaid costume for one of the wasps to ride on an ocean-themed float – I mean by this point I’d already got the message, you didn’t need to go on, but of course you did – something about

inventing a holiday for the wasp parade to be celebrating, because wasps don't have holidays, but they do want parades, and they don't think about things like that when asking little girls to organise parades for their stupid non-existent holidays. You were bright red by this point. Even then, you said you would still rather stay with the wasps than stay with Aunt Eugenia and cousin Isambard.'

'Exactly. Does that *sound* like the sort of thing I would say if I liked Aunt Eugenia and cousin Isambard?'

'... No.'

Hazel folded her arms and glared triumphantly out of the car window. Then she looked a little puzzled.

'Did I really say all that stuff about the wasp parade?'

Hazel's father, who hadn't said anything for hours, and had just been watching the road, spoke finally.

'You'd had rather a lot of sugar that day, sweetheart, and I don't think you were in your right mind. Not unlike today, in fact. How many Insanity Bars have you eaten?'

'Never you mind how many Insanity Bars I've eaten. I can be in a bad mood without eating sugar, thank you very much. Maybe I'm just *angry* with you.'

Hazel's father sighed.

'I do hope the government bans those Insanity Bars one of these days. Apparently they have eighty-six teaspoons of sugar in each bar.'

'That's impossible, Dad.'

'Eighty-six teaspoons of sugar! That's enough to make a horse . . . to make a horse . . . well, whatever sugar does to a horse, I'm sure eighty-six teaspoons would do an awful lot of it.'

'I'm not a horse, *Dad*.'

'Sometimes I wish you were. It would save a fortune on Insanity Bars.'

Hazel stuck out her tongue and rammed her fingers in her ears.

* * *

Hazel had been against the whole thing from the start. Mum and Dad had told her they were going to Egypt for three weeks, but at first that was all they said. Then, halfway through the summer term, they finally owned up to the fact that they were going on their own. Hazel would not be coming with them. When she asked why, her father simply replied, 'Egypt is a dangerous country – I am not having my only child eaten by a camel, buried in a sand dune, or squashed by a falling pyramid.' No other explanation was offered.

The drive down to Aunt Eugenia's house took four hours, and Hazel passed in and out of sleep, sitting amidst heaps of books and chocolate wrappers like a sleepy gerbil in a bundle of straw. They would stop there for dinner, and Mum and Dad would drive on to catch a late plane from Heathrow.

And then the two weeks would begin.

Hazel played I spy with her mother, and listened to stories on the car CD player, and they stopped at a service station to get coffee for Dad, magazines for Mum, and chocolates for Hazel (Mum and Dad were being unusually free with the chocolates that day).

The countryside around Aunt Eugenia's house was stupid.

Well, that's not fair – it was probably rolling, or flat, or covered in ancient rocks or something, but Hazel was in such a bad mood that she did not even feel like *looking* at the countryside, let alone describing it in a clever way.

So the countryside was stupid.

Hazel hated her Aunt Eugenia. She hardly ever saw her, and whenever she did it was horrid. She remembered the last time she had met her, at Christmas three years ago. Mum and Dad had spent three full days decorating the house, cooking the turkey, and wrapping the presents, but Eugenia didn't turn up on time. As they waited for her arrival, the sprouts all went cold, the cat ate the Christmas pudding, and Hazel got so annoyed waiting for her presents that she buried the TV remote control in the flowerbed.

Finally Eugenia turned up, and while Mum and Dad did their best to be polite and pretend nothing was wrong, Eugenia proceeded to be as rude as possible for the whole meal.

'Who on earth are you?' Eugenia had said to Hazel, apparently having never taken any interest in her niece whatsoever.

'I'm Hazie,' Hazel had said, Hazie being her baby name, which she had DEFINITELY grown out of since then.

Hazel's mother interjected.

'Hazel, dear, say Hazel.'

Eugenia continued her inquisition.

'Well, how old are you, child?'

'I'm theven.' She'd definitely grown out of saying theven, as well. Definitely.

‘How ridiculous,’ snorted Eugenia, obviously unimpressed. ‘Isambard is also seven years old, and I can tell just by looking at the two of you that he’s twice as clever as you are. He’s phenomenally clever for his age, and has already learned things you could not possibly imagine. Isn’t that right, Isambard?’

In response, Isambard said simply, ‘Bogota is the capital of Colombia,’ and looked glumly at the floor.

‘Very good, dear. Do *you* know the capital of Colombia, child?’

Hazel had thought this a strange question, as Isambard had just told her what the capital of Colombia was.

‘Bogota?’ she ventured.

Eugenia seemed confused.

‘Well . . . yes, yes it is. I see you know some things. But other than that I’m sure you’re quite hopelessly stupid.’

Hazel had looked to her parents for help, but they had deserted her to improvise some kind of pudding in the kitchen.

‘Mexico City is the capital of Mexico,’ Isambard had said, still staring at the floor. This hadn’t seemed as impressive as the last one.

‘Child, do you have many friends? I have always thought that stupid people should at least be good at making friends. It is a skill I somehow never got the hang of.’

Hazel had, at this point, begun to cry. Making friends was perhaps the very thing she was worst at in the world. Thus far she had a grand total of zero.

‘Oh, do stop blubbing, child.’ At this point Eugenia had knelt down, very awkwardly, to look Hazel in the eye.

‘No matter what happens, no matter how sad or lonely you are, no matter how much you want to break down into tears, you must never, ever let anyone see you cry.’ Eugenia had rubbed her tired eyes with her long fingers and stared thoughtfully away. ‘Ever. Understand?’

Hazel had nodded, though she had no idea what Eugenia meant. What she had understood was that Aunt Eugenia was one of the meanest people she had ever met, and she wanted to spend as little time with her as possible.

Then Eugenia poked her in the forehead.

‘Remember, child! Yes? Remember!’

Isambard shook his head and said nothing.

After Eugenia left, Hazel summed up the courage to tell her mother and father that Aunt Eugenia had poked her. They refused to believe her, and told her to stop telling fibs. Then Dad realised the remote control was missing, Hazel admitted she’d buried it but couldn’t remember where, and her parents became far too angry with Hazel to bother about being angry with Eugenia.

In fact, much to Hazel’s annoyance, it went down in history as ‘The Christmas When Hazel Buried the Remote’ rather than ‘The Christmas When Mum and Dad found out Aunt Eugenia was a Dangerous Lunatic and Reported to her to the Police, Who Locked her up in Jail Forever to Save Children all Over the World from Being Poked in the Face’.

* * *

The car had begun to smell pretty nice, Hazel thought – what with all the chocolate she had been eating. She’d tired

herself out with the shouting, and was drifting off into a nice nap, when Dad dropped a bombshell.

‘We’re there, everyone!’

Hazel sat bolt upright, and shrieked, ‘I can’t believe it, three weeks with that *witch!*’

After hours of complaining, this was the final straw – Mum, who had until now been a vision of patience, snapped.

‘Hazel! I will *not* have you talking like that about my sister! She’s my big sister – my *only* sister, and you may hate her, but I love her, and she has never done *anything* to you!’

Hazel’s mother hardly ever got as cross as this. She was a calm woman, and could put up with Hazel’s tantrums for hours on end – but she had at last been pushed too far. Her face turned red, and her eyes opened wide, as she welled up with emotions she rarely expressed.

Hazel didn’t know what to say.

‘But . . .’

‘ . . . and DON’T start all the nonsense about being poked in the face again! You are my daughter, and I love you, but sometimes you take a dislike to people and just start making up stories about them, young lady, and besides you have *such* a temper on you, and maybe, just *maybe* that’s why you’ve had so much trouble making friends at school!’

Hazel tried to reply, but before she could her throat dried up and shrank to the size of a pea, and she felt tears begin to stream down her face. Mum turned away in a huff, and Hazel was left to think about what she’d done. She wasn’t at all used to seeing Mum like this, and right now it was the last thing she needed.

Making little whimpering sounds, she wiped her tear-strewn face, and looked desperately out of the window – as if she might see something there that would allay her mother's fury. Instead, all she saw was the drive up to Eugenia's house.

Aunt Eugenia's house was the sort of house that someone completely appalling might have. It had a ridiculous driveway lined with ghastly trees and covered in ugly gravel. It sat in the middle of twenty acres of pointless land, next to a barn the colour of poo, with a wood behind it that almost certainly smelled of farts, and a lake in front of it that looked like thousands of people had vomited into a big hole.

The building itself had obviously been built by goons, out of the worst stones they could find. It had four rubbish towers, lots of rubbish windows, and a large wooden door big enough for a big idiot to pass through.

The car made annoying crunchy noises all the way up the drive.

It started to rain.

Hazel tried to hold back another flood of tears.

Dad ran out of the car using Mum's magazine to cover his head (you don't take umbrellas to Egypt), and knocked on the door. Obviously there was a big door-knocker shaped like a face, which Hazel was sure was a special birthday present from Satan.

A smaller door in the big door opened up, though Hazel could not see inside it. There didn't seem to be many lights on in the house.

Dad ran back to the car.

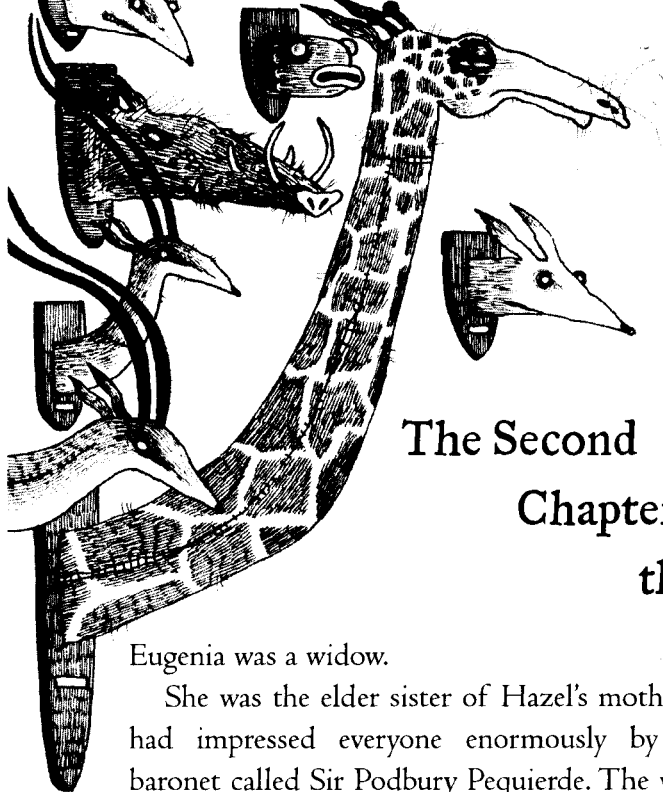
‘You two run inside – I’ll get Hazel’s bag out of the boot.’

Hazel took a deep breath, and hurried out of the car, across the driveway, past the two trees in front of the door, up to the door, and into the house.

It had been three years since she had last seen Aunt Eugenia, and now, here she was. Face to face, after all this time.

And what did Aunt Eugenia look like?

Stupid.



The Second Chapter of this Book

Eugenia was a widow.

She was the elder sister of Hazel's mother, Katie, and had impressed everyone enormously by marrying a baronet called Sir Podbury Pequierde. The wedding took place on Mount Kilimanjaro, with Podbury and Eugenia taking their vows riding a pair of elephants.

Ever since the day of that lavish wedding she had been impossible. She moved into Podbury's enormous house in the country, with its acres of land, and four towers, and hardly ever visited her sister. She dressed in the finest clothes, ate the most delicious food, and treated everyone like something she found on the bottom of her shoe.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that Hazel's father, Dougal, was a doctor. There were plenty of people at Hazel's school who called Hazel 'posh' (they called her lots of other things as well – like 'plop-head' and 'dingbat') and Eugenia wasn't really so much better off than her

sister Katie. The difference was that Eugenia was Lady Pequierde and Katie was just Katie.

Podbury was a dashing, tall man with jet-black hair and a heroic moustache. He owned a huge mansion in the country. He rode horses, went shooting all over the world, and above all gambled. Gambled like there was no tomorrow. Eventually, of course, there *was* no tomorrow, as he discovered one sunny afternoon when he fell into the tiger enclosure of London Zoo and was torn to pieces.

Since then, Eugenia had been, if anything, ruder. She had been robbed of the man that made her better than other people, and the man who provided her with beautiful clothes and fancy food. She had thought long and hard about who she should take her anger out on, and decided it was probably best if she just took it out on everyone.

Further to losing her husband, she was also not quite as wealthy as she had once been, Podbury having gambled most of their money away. He certainly did love to gamble. He gambled on which party would win an election, and on which film would win an Oscar, and on whether his first child would be a boy or a girl. He gambled on which of his friends would be the first to get married, on which of his friends would be the first to go to jail, and on which of his friends would be the first to be made Pope. Amazingly, one of his friends, Antonio, *was* made Pope, but unfortunately he had bet on Alice.

Podbury always lost the bet. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'Well he must have won some of the bets!'

But you're wrong. He lost, without exception, every bet

he ever made. Which is a thing that can happen, if you're unlucky, and Podbury was *extremely* unlucky. For example, he married Eugenia.

Now, if it had been otherwise – if the Conservatives *had* won the election, or if that film he made starring himself *had* won an Oscar, or if his first child *had* been a bouncing baby girl called Isambardia Pequierde, then there might have been a little more left of the Pequierde family fortune.

Instead, all that was left was a few servants and the house – that horrible house, with horrible Aunt Eugenia in it. Bits of stone were falling off the towers. The lake was filthy. The curtains had started to rot. The windows had developed a rare problem called 'window-plague' which only affects the very dirtiest windows in the world. And there was no money to repair any of it.

So, when Dougal and Katie finished their dinner, and went to the airport, they left their daughter Hazel in a big, scary, collapsing old house with Lady Pequierde, the young Sir Isambard Pequierde, an old butler called Pude, a gardener called Boynce, a cook called Mrs Dungeon, and nobody else for miles around.

* * *

Dinner was over, and Hazel was sitting with Eugenia and Isambard in the drawing room. It was a large, dark room with three great windows that no one ever opened. The carpet was bottle green and covered in stains. The ceiling had cobwebs in its corners. But perhaps most disgustingly, the walls were lined with the heads of animals.

There was a warthog over the door, with four mighty tusks protruding from its jaw. There was a stag on the far wall whose glass eyes had fallen out years ago, making it look even more horrifying than a disembodied head normally does. In between were smaller animals – jackals, and gazelle, and wildcats – all of them covered in dust, moth-eaten and unloved. Finally, above the fireplace hung the most frightful of all – a giraffe. Its long, once-graceful neck was easily six feet long, though it might have been longer when it was still attached to a body. Its gold and brown fur had turned grey from the smoke of the fire, and its glass eyes stared out coldly into nothingness.

Hazel imagined having her head cut off, stuffed, and hung on a wall. It didn't sound very nice. But then she looked over at Aunt Eugenia, remembered she'd be staying here for three weeks, and thought maybe being stuffed wouldn't be quite so bad.

Remembering how angry Mum had been when she left, Hazel was trying her best to swallow her pride and be nice to Eugenia.

'That was a very nice dinner, Auntie.'

Eugenia did not look impressed. She stared at Hazel threateningly, and drank her tea as if Hazel hadn't spoken at all.

Aunt Eugenia never took off her riding boots. They were shiny black boots that went up to her knees, and all the rest of her black clothes looked grey by comparison. She wore a tattered old jumper, and held its sleeves tightly in her hands. She held her shoulders hunched high up by her neck. Her nails had been smartly done with nail-

varnish at some point last year, but by now were long and yellow and chipped. She wore black jeans, and her white hair projected diagonally up out of the back of her head like the tail of a comet. She looked as if she never slept. She always had a pained expression on her face, and the only thing that ever seemed to relieve her was being brought a steaming cup of tea by Mrs Dungeon. When one of these cups of tea, in a cracked old mug, met Aunt Eugenia's dried lips, and slipped down her throat, a brief expression of calm would pass across her face, before that look of constant discomfort returned.

'Where do you go to school, child?'

'Ashford Primary,' said Hazel, as cheerfully as she could manage.

Eugenia looked confused, and then annoyed.

'Never heard of it.' She looked out the window and held the mug of tea up to her nose. 'Isambard's just been given a place at a very good school. They're accepting him early, because he's so clever.'

Isambard, for the briefest moment, looked up from the book he was reading. He was a small, pale boy, with sad, brown eyes, and buckets of thick black hair in a curly mess on top of his head. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, shiny brown shoes, and a black bow tie. Seeing that no response was required of him, he returned to his book.

'He's very clever, you know. Are you clever?' said Eugenia.

Hazel sighed. She did think she was clever, but it was hard to get her teachers to agree.

'No, not really,' Hazel laughed and made a funny, happy

face. 'I'm just a silly old dingbat! I'm not clever at all! Ha ha!'

'No. I shouldn't think you are.' Eugenia sighed a deep sigh. 'Oh, God.'

'... Um ... are you all right, Aunt Eugenia?'

Eugenia looked stern.

'Don't ask me if I'm all right. What would you know? How could you possibly understand how I'm feeling?'

'Yes, Aunt Eugenia.'

Isambard continued to read, apparently taking no notice of the conversation.

Eugenia scratched her head with her long nails. She was in a green armchair, with her legs folded beneath her, and brown cushions all around.

'Isambard's revising at the moment, aren't you, Isambard?'

Isambard looked up, nodded sheepishly, and, when Eugenia stopped looking at him, looked away again.

'He's revising. He'll have to work extremely hard to keep up with all the older boys at his special school. So he's revising. That's what it'll be like when you get a little older and go to big school. If the big school lets you in, that is, what with you being so stupid.' She thought for a moment. 'You can't be clever unless you revise. He revises a lot. That's probably why you're not clever – hard work and application.' She went to drink her tea. There was none left. She looked with amazement and fury into her mug, before deciding what to do.

'DUNGEON! *Tea!*'

Hazel jumped, but not as much as the first time. You got used to these outbursts. She was sitting upright on a

long yellow sofa. Well, it was long, but only one corner was usable, as red wine stains covered most of it. Mouldy red wine stains that had not been properly cleaned when they first did their staining. Mouldy red wine stains with mushrooms growing out of them.

It was easy for mushrooms to grow in this house, as the old stones were very damp, and Aunt Eugenia never opened the curtains. Dark and wet is what mushrooms like. If you want to live in the dark, say in a cave or a crypt or an ancient pyramid, it's very important to keep it dry, otherwise you get mushrooms. Trust me.

But Eugenia didn't like paying for things like builders, and in fairness to her there wasn't a lot of money left, particularly seeing as she'd been sitting in the same armchair drinking tea for five years, and there's not a lot of jobs where you get to sit in an armchair and drink tea. Truth to tell, most employers are reluctant to hire people to sit in armchairs and drink tea. It's just not economically efficient. Even tea manufacturers who need to test how nice their tea is don't hire people to sit and drink it any more. They just test it on rabbits. Rabbits love a nice cup of tea.

Pude arrived at the door.

'Sorry, ma'am. Mrs Dungeon has gone off to beddy-byes, and I'm serving the tea now.'

'To bed! What? Is she deranged? I need my tea!'

'Yes, ma'am, but it's one in the morning, and Mrs Dungeon isn't getting any younger.'

One in the morning! Hazel's parents had left at seven! How had she managed to spend six hours with these people? She'd spent a good hour on toilet breaks throughout the

night, she reckoned, and about an hour's worth of actual conversation. So that left four hours and forty minutes of looking at the mushrooms, worrying about the mushrooms, and wishing very hard that she was somewhere else.

'I do hope I've prepared the tea properly, ma'am. I'll be downstairs if you need me.'

Eugenia glared at Pude and said nothing – but took the tea gratefully.

Pude was like a worried little potato. Hazel had come to like him over the evening, as whatever horrible things Eugenia said to him, he just grinned and took it. He was in his sixties at least, and almost as short as Hazel. His head and body were perfectly round, without any of that silly neck business most people's bodies spend so much time and effort on. He wore a battered tailcoat, with a cheerful yellow bow tie.

'This is disgusting,' said Eugenia.

'Sorry, ma'am. I'll make you another.'

'No! It will only be as vile as this one. Get out of my sight.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Pude began to go, when Eugenia stopped him.

'Pude!'

'Yes, ma'am?'

'What are you, Pude?'

Pude smiled as if nothing was wrong.

'A nitwit, ma'am.'

'That's right. Now go away.'

Isambard said nothing during all of this.

Seeing he was free to go, Pude waddled off out of the room. Eugenia picked up a framed photograph in front of her. She looked at it with anger and despair, then put it down again, and went back to her tea. Hazel could not see what it was a photo of, but she thought it must be a photo of something Eugenia didn't like very much.

'... Well, I think I might need to go to bed, Aunt ...'

'You pathetic weakling. Bed? *Bed!* You're young – you're full of energy. You should be up late revising like Isambard. You're never going to get anywhere being lazy.'

Hazel felt very upset. What with having no friends and terrible marks in school, she worried a lot about never getting anywhere.

'But I'm really tired ...'

'Ridiculous! The problem with you ... with you ... what's your name? Almond or something, isn't it? Or is it Cashew?'

'Actually it's Hazel. Should I stay up and read?'

'Don't toady to me like that! Stand up for yourself, Cashew.'

Hazel groaned.

'It's Hazel. I thought you wanted me to stay up and revise. Please ... I'll be good and do whatever you say ...'

Eugenia looked as if Hazel had betrayed her in some way.

'Oh, you are a *creep*, aren't you. I think you should get off to bed, *now*.'

'I'm sorry! Please, I just want to be friends – maybe I could make your tea for you?'

'If you made my tea for me, I wouldn't be able to drink

it without thinking of you. In fact, it would probably smell of you. Now get off to bed before you make me really angry.'

Why did Eugenia never say any of this when Mum and Dad were around? Mum and Dad would put a stop to it if they heard it. Come to that, why did Isambard just sit there and say nothing whilst his mother behaved so badly? Presumably he agreed with all the crazy things his mother had to say – presumably he was just as bad as she was.

On that thought, Hazel sat up, edged her way around the mushrooms, and darted quickly out the door.

'Good night, Macadamia,' spat Eugenia as the door swung shut.

This was going to be a very long three weeks.

Hazel fumbled her way up the dark staircase. Eugenia wouldn't let any lights be put on in any room that she wasn't currently in, and there were trays of food smashed on the floor where Pude or Dungeon had tripped up in the dark. There were no carpets. Just stone on the ground floor, and damp wood from the first floor up. There were lots of rooms, but most of them weren't inhabited by anything other than mice and spiders. Hazel was grateful to be in a room on the first floor, so she didn't have to walk too far up that dark staircase to go to bed.

What was she going to *do* for three weeks? Other than go mad? She closed the door of her huge, empty room, and folded her clothes on the dark, wooden floor. There were ancient paintings of dead Pequierdes on the walls, and the bed was a giant, sullen mass of rotting wood and faded velvet covers. It looked like a bed that was in a bad mood.

She had already brushed her teeth during one of the numerous trips she took to the toilet, and she couldn't be bothered with washing her face, seeing as Mum wasn't here.

She curled up in a tight ball in her enormous four-poster bed. The sheets smelled horrible, and she drifted off holding her hand over her nose. As she slept, she dreamt of being somewhere else.