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Nella and Dreams

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Age: 10+

After moving to the countryside, Nella feels lost. Spring is drawing near, yet she has not made a single real friend among her new classmates. She is sure that a few small changes to her appearance would help her move up the social ladder, but every attempt at reinventing herself — a bolder hairstyle, pierced ears, even a nose stud — is quickly shut down by her parents. As if that were not enough, they now want to take her out of school altogether and switch to home schooling.

Nella refuses to give up. One evening, as she falls asleep, she comes up with a plan: she will try harder at school and be more helpful at home. But when she wakes the next morning, everything seems to go wrong. Somehow she ends up on the school bus in a jam-stained nightdress, and not long after that the teacher writes on the blackboard: "Nella is stupid!"

This could only happen in a nightmare. Or could it? Are the events, in fact, far too lifelike to be just a dream?



Nella and Dreams: Excerpt

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WHAT A TERRIBLE BUS RIDE

The clock on the wall showed 7.30. It's morning already — I'm late for school again! Nella realised in alarm. It even seemed as though the pig in the framed picture her grandmother had given her was looking at her reproachfully. She leapt out of bed and dashed into the kitchen.

Sunlight streamed through the window, and the kitchen was pleasantly warm. There was no sign of Mum or Dad — they must have been up for ages, because a steaming pile of pancakes stood on a platter on the table, with a jar of homemade strawberry jam beside it. A sweet smell filled the air, bringing with it the feeling of a Sunday morning.

Oh, brilliant — Dad got up early and made pancakes, Nella thought happily. She spooned jam onto a pancake, rolled it up, grabbed it and was just about to take a bite when she glanced out of the window. Surely the school bus wasn't already coming? Although they lived outside the village, she had been incredibly lucky: the bus stopped right by their gate. In winter, for instance, she didn't have to trudge through deep snow like poor Marin.

Just then, the bus came into view. Again a few minutes early — so unfair!

With regret, Nella put the pancake back on the plate, snatched her mobile phone from the table, shoved it into her pocket and bolted out of the door. Miss the bus and everything would be ruined! No school, and serious trouble. She raced through the gate just as the bus doors hissed open, squeezing herself into the already crowded vehicle.

Inside, she was hit by a suffocating mixture of fabric softener smells. Nella's sensitive nose always watered, and worst of all, the foreign scents clung to her clothes and reminded her of her classmates even in the evening. Sometimes it made her feel as if she wasn't herself any more — because she smelled wrong. Disgusting.

She pushed her way forward, nudging past sleepy little primary-school children blocking the aisle with their bags, then wriggled between tall, spotty secondary-school boys. After running the gauntlet, she reached the back of the bus, where there was still space.

Many from her class were already there — even Marin, which was strange, as she should have got on at the same stop as Nella. Marin was slumped in the back row, hood pulled up, staring rigidly out of the window, while Kaileen and Saskia, seated beside her, chatted cheerfully.

Nella noticed a dark-haired boy about her own age standing further away. She had never seen him on the school bus before. He was staring around at the children in astonishment, his big blue eyes full of confusion.

Poor thing, Nella thought. He's probably got on the wrong bus. Like he's fallen from the moon.

She would have liked to look at him more closely, maybe even edge nearer, but the bus

jerked into motion and she clutched on tightly to avoid falling over.

At first she stared blankly ahead, as usual. Then she sensed a strange rustling around her and timidly raised her eyes. For some reason, everyone was looking at her. A small boy began to giggle in a thin voice, followed by others nearby.

“Look at Nella — she’s wearing a nightdress!” Kaileen laughed.

“Like a ghost!” sniggered Saskia.

“Nella’s a vampire!” shouted a girl from across the bus.

“No, she’s a werewolf! Who’s just eaten a big fat pig!” yelled Jakob from her class, pulling silly faces.

A couple of younger boys laughed so hard that one of them slid right off his seat and lay giggling on the filthy bus floor, wriggling like a caterpillar. It was bizarre — who would willingly lie down there?

Horried, Nella looked down.

Terrible. Absolutely terrible.

First of all, she had run to the school bus wearing her long white nightdress. Across the chest was blue writing that said Sweet dreams, with a pink pig underneath. And worse still — the nightdress was splashed with big red jam stains. Even the cute pig was blotched with jam.

Oh, how embarrassing, she moaned inwardly. She spotted an empty seat, slipped into it and crossed her arms protectively over her chest to hide the stains. Her mind raced.

I have to get off this bus immediately and run home to change!

But there wouldn’t be another school bus today. She would have to trudge along the narrow roadside beside speeding cars and probably wouldn’t reach school until after the second lesson. She’d get a note!

Mum would make a huge fuss, and Dad would shake his head in disappointment. That’s how you really did end up in home schooling.

Looking down, she noticed in disbelief that her toes were bare — she had forgotten to put her trainers on as well! At least it’s spring, not winter, she thought, imagining icy snow between her toes.

Suddenly she stood up and pushed her way to the front of the bus.

“Excuse me, please let me off,” she said quietly to the driver.

He was unfamiliar — a stone-faced man with black hair and horrible bushy moustaches. Nella had never seen him behind the wheel before. He seemed not to hear her at all, wrenching the steering wheel back and forth so that the bus lurched alarmingly.

Looking out of the window, Nella realised they were driving along a new route. The landscape was completely unfamiliar: a dark forest flashed past, then — to her astonishment — a brightly coloured amusement park. They crossed an old-fashioned bridge and continued between small houses.

Summoning all her courage, Nella filled her lungs and shouted at the top of her voice straight into the driver’s hairy ear:

“Open the doors! I want to get off! This is the wrong bus!”

But the driver didn’t stop. Instead, he said something strange in a foreign language and continued on with a blank expression.

Horrible man, Nella fumed. She would have liked to tug his sleeve or yank his awful moustache, but she didn’t dare.

Then the bus stopped suddenly. The children crashed into one another in a heap and the doors rattled open. The driver glanced at Nella and said clearly,

“You can choose for yourself.”

She didn’t even have time to wonder what that meant before the surging crowd pushed her forward and she suddenly found herself walking through the doors of the school building.

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THE BROKEN GATE

Nella stood in the middle of a small clearing. How did I get here? Just a moment ago I was in a shop, she thought in amazement, scanning her surroundings and hoping her parents were nearby. Of course they weren’t. They must have deliberately sent her flying out of the shop so they could argue in peace!

A rustling sound came from behind her. Nella spun around and saw the familiar boy in a red dressing gown — he looked even more surprised than she was.

“Oh! You’re here! Where did you disappear to?” Nella exclaimed, glad to see him — then she remembered she was actually angry with him. He had abandoned her and now turned up again as if nothing had happened! The strange pendant still hung around his neck, pulling her towards him like a magnet.

“What do you mean, disappeared? I went where I meant to go. I don’t understand at all how I ended up with you just now. How did that happen? It’s a complete mess!”

“But you ran off! We jumped out of the window together, and you left me on my own. I was lucky the cook and the head didn’t catch me — they were furious. Were you hiding from me? As if this were some kind of game of hide-and-seek!” Nella blinked indignantly.

“We never agreed to go anywhere together,” the boy replied. “You wanted to jump outside, but I wanted to go somewhere else entirely.”

He sighed and fell silent. Then, noticing Nella’s miserable face, he asked more kindly, “So what happened to put you in such a bad mood?”

“I’m not in a bad mood,” Nella said. “I’m just having a really awful day.”

She told him everything: getting lost, the strange old shop, her parents arguing — partly because of her, it seemed — and the machine her father wanted to buy. How she had tried to explain what had happened at school, because otherwise there would be real trouble, home

schooling and all that. But they hadn't even seen her — as if she were invisible. Her father pulled a lever, her mother pressed a red button, there was a terrible bang... and now she had no idea where her parents were, whether they were all right, or even where she herself was.

"In short," she finished sadly, "it's a complete nightmare."

"That happens to me quite often lately," the boy said calmly. "Not knowing where I am or how I got there."

They both looked around at the trees and bushes on the edge of the clearing. And suddenly Nella knew.

"This is Angel Park, right in the middle of our village — we're at the far end. There's a beautiful fountain with an angel somewhere here. Do you want to see it?"

The boy shook his head. "Nope. Honestly, I don't care at all."

Nella remembered something. "That strange ruined stone building I told you about at school — it's here in the park, by the old manor. The one with the odd door. Do you want to see it?"

The boy smiled. "I remember. Let's go and look now, shall we?"

Almost at once Nella regretted her offer. Last time, the boy had left through a kitchen window that turned out to be some kind of magical gate — and then vanished. If she took him to the old building and there was another gate, he might disappear again.

She glanced at him sideways, wondering whether to force him to promise not to leave — but didn't dare. I'll just grab hold of him, she decided suddenly.

She pointed the way, and they walked along a narrow path towards the distant manor.

"We're here," Nella announced solemnly when they reached it.

The manor windows were empty of glass, but the steps were still grand, and two white stone lions guarded the entrance. Yet where the old outbuilding had stood, there was now only a great heap of stones, as if a giant had trampled it flat — or as if it had just collapsed entirely.

"Well... yesterday it was still here," Nella said helplessly. "I don't know what happened."

The boy looked disappointed and sat down on the manor steps, shoulders slumped. Nella didn't know what to do — stroke his head? Say something? But what? How do you comfort someone when you've never done it before? And why did he look so sad?

She gently touched his shoulder. He looked up hopefully and asked, "Didn't you say you knew another place where there might be a gate?"

Nella nodded with relief. "Yes — my grandparents' back garden. I don't think anything could have happened to the cherry trees. Shall we go and see?"

The boy nodded.

Nella turned, stepped forward and tripped over a stone hidden in the grass, almost falling — but the boy quickly grabbed her hand and kept her upright. For some reason, he didn't let go straight away. So they walked on silently, hand in hand, until the path grew narrower and

narrower and Nella finally slipped her fingers from his grasp with regret.

Soon they reached the front of the park and passed the beautiful Angel Fountain. From there, the way between the small houses was completely familiar to Nella. For a moment she thought she saw a familiar wild boar at the end of the street, watching her and nodding.

“How boring it would be if everyone were the same,” the boy said suddenly. “If everyone had the same thoughts, there’d be nothing to talk about, because you’d never hear anything new. Luckily, there are still special and interesting people.”

What did he mean by that? Did he mean Nella? Really? That seemed doubtful. They hadn’t talked much — not about anything important. They hadn’t even properly introduced themselves yet. Nella knew she had interesting thoughts, but you couldn’t see them from the outside. Outwardly, she was just an ordinary girl with a bowl haircut and green eyes.

The boy, on the other hand, was entirely special — both inside and out. And that strange remark! And those blue eyes. And his sudden appearances and disappearances. Or perhaps he meant someone else — some special friend? A sharp pang of jealousy flickered inside her.

They turned left onto Forest Street, at the end of which stood her grandparents’ yellow house with its red roof and large, well-tended garden.

“There it is!” Nella said. “Maybe they’ll feed us, and we can talk to my grandparents for a bit? And when you said ‘special’ — did you mean on the inside or the outside? Because I think even people who look completely ordinary can have very exciting thoughts.”

She felt her face grow hot, probably red. She glanced at the boy to see his reaction, but his face revealed nothing.

“Of course I meant the inside,” he said. “Looks are only a shell — and they can change. Oh! I haven’t much time left. We must hurry!”

He glanced at an old-fashioned wristwatch Nella hadn’t noticed before.

She sighed with relief. The inside, then — so he really had meant her.