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Opening extract from

The Meanwhile Adventures

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CHAPTER ONE



Once upon a time there was a little girl who lived in a house made of gingerbread—

Boring.

There was once a little girl called Kayla Mack, and she lived in a house made of—

Still boring. Start again.

OK.

A little girl called Kayla Mack lived in a—

Still boring. Start again. And this is your last chance.

OK. One, two, three –

Kayla Mack stood on the cat's head. She pressed her foot on the head until it squeaked. She pressed three times and ran out the back door of her house. By the way, the house wasn't made of gingerbread. And, by the way, the cat squeaked because it was plastic. The squeak was a signal to her friend, Victoria.

How's that, so far?

Not bad, so far. Continue.

On her way out the door she met her father, Mister Mack. He was carrying a machine gun.

“Who are you?” said Kayla.

“It's not a machine gun,” said Mister Mack. “It's a saw. I just invented it.”

“Who are you?”

“I know it looks like a machine

gun,” said Mister Mack. “But it’s a saw. Look. I’ll show you how it works.”

But Kayla wasn’t interested. Once you’ve seen one machine gun, you’ve seen them all. She kept running.

CHAPTER TWO



Mister Mack was happy.

But Kayla wasn't.

Because she was stuck in a hedge.

“Who are you!”

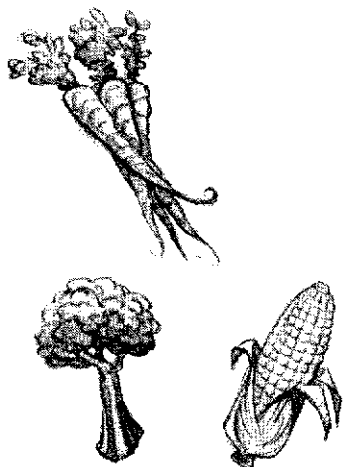
The hedge was a big hairy one, between the Macks' garden and her friend Victoria's garden. There was a hole in the hedge and it was a good shortcut, if you could find the hole. And that was the problem. Kayla had

missed the hole. She was right beside it, but up to her knees in leaves and little branches that grabbed at clothes and wouldn't let go.

“Who are you!”

Two lizards lived in the hedge, and some budgies who'd escaped from the pet shop – they pretended they were sparrows – and a rat that only ate fresh vegetables.

Boring.



He used to eat everything. In his life, so far, he had eaten thirty-six dead animals, and three live ones. He'd eaten 365 different types of biscuits. He'd eaten car tyres, crisps and half a pedestrian bridge.

But not any more.

"I never liked being a rat," he was telling Kayla, although she wasn't listening.

She was shouting for Victoria to come and rescue her.

"Who are youuuuuu!"

CHAPTER THREE



Mister Mack was happy. And that was nice, because it was a long time since Mister Mack had been happy. Seventy-three days, exactly. If you counted back seventy-three days – and Mister Mack did it all the time – you came to the day when Mister Mack lost his job in the biscuit factory.

“Nobody’s eating biscuits any more,” said his boss, Mister Kimberley. “They’re all too healthy.”

They were standing beside Mister Mack's desk. There was a set of weighing scales on the desk, a photograph of his family and a big bronze fig-roll:

ALL-IRELAND BISCUIT-TESTING CHAMPION – 2004.

“Nobody's eating biscuits any more,” said Mister Kimberley. “Even the rats have stopped eating biscuits.”

Mister Mack was a biscuit tester. The factory made 365 different types of biscuits, a biscuit for every day of the year. And Mister Mack tested them all. He measured and weighed them. He crumbled and smelled them. And he tasted them. That was his favourite part of the job. He bit with his teeth, but his tongue did most of the work. And Mister Mack's tongue was the best in the biscuit business. He could tell if a biscuit had gone even ten minutes past its best-before

date. He could tell if the jam in the middle wasn't jammy enough, if the chocolate on the outside wasn't milky enough. Mister Mack was the best biscuit tester in Ireland.

"I'm sorry," said Mister Kimberley. "But we have to stop making the biscuits."

"All of them?" said Mister Mack.

"No," said Mister Kimberley. "We're keeping the cream crackers."

"Oh no!" said Mister Mack.



“One a day,” said Mister Kimberley, “we’re going to stop making the biscuits. Until we’re left with just the good old cream crackers.”

“We’re healthy and nutritious, and sneaky and malicious,” said the cream cracker in Mister Mack’s head, the one that always spoiled his daydreams. “Isn’t that interesting?”

Mister Mack hated the cream crackers.

“Does that mean I’m fired?” he asked Mister Kimberley.

“No, no,” said Mister Kimberley. “Don’t worry. We want you to test the cream crackers.”

“No way!” said Mister Mack.

He picked up his bronze fig-roll and walked out of the factory and all the way home, because he couldn’t remember where he’d parked his car. In fact, he was so upset, he couldn’t remember if he owned a car. (Interesting fact: he didn’t.)

But Mister Mack wasn't the kind of man who stayed upset for long. By the time he got home – it took him four hours – he'd decided that, if he couldn't be a biscuit tester, then he'd be something else instead.

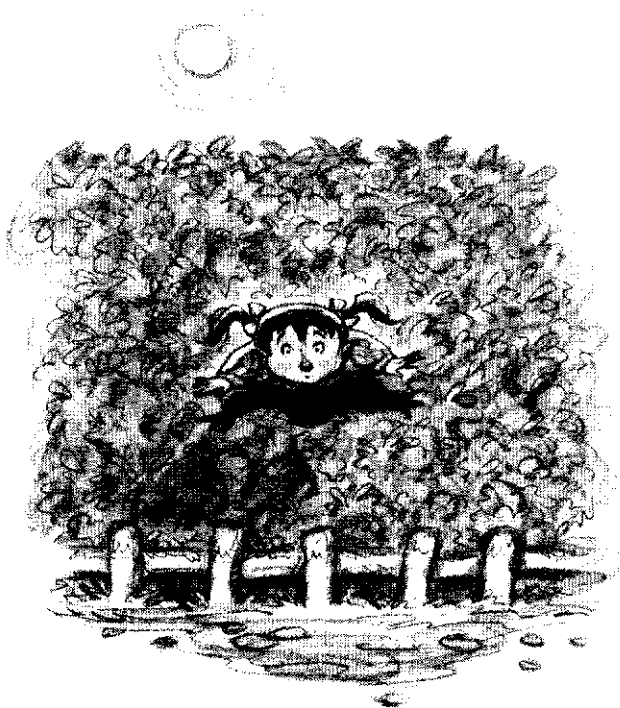
He walked in the back door. His wife, Billie Jean Fleetwood-Mack, was standing on the kitchen table. She'd just jumped there, from the top of the fridge.

"I'm going to become an inventor," said Mister Mack.

"What kind of inventor?" asked Billie Jean.

"A mad one," said Mister Mack.

CHAPTER FOUR



All that had happened seventy-three days before. Meanwhile, Kayla was still stuck in the hedge.

“Have you any idea how many calories there are in a fig-roll?” asked the rat.

Kayla yelled.

“Who are you!”

Where was her friend, Victoria?
What was keeping her?

“It’s shocking,” said the rat. “All those calories, going straight to my hips. And there was me in that factory eating away, for years.”

“Tweet tweet,” said a budgie. “Will you listen to that eejit.”

“Tweet tweet,” said his chum. “I’m going back to the pet shop.”

“Last one back is a chicken nugget, tweet tweet.”



“Chicken nuggets?” said the rat.
“Those things should be banned. The chickens of the world should be ashamed of themselves.”

“Who are you!”

Kayla was four years old and she could say a lot more than “Who are you?” but, because everyone she knew loved her so much, they understood exactly what she meant, so she usually didn’t bother saying anything else. But she could when she wanted to.

Here is an example of something that Kayla could say:

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll break your head.”

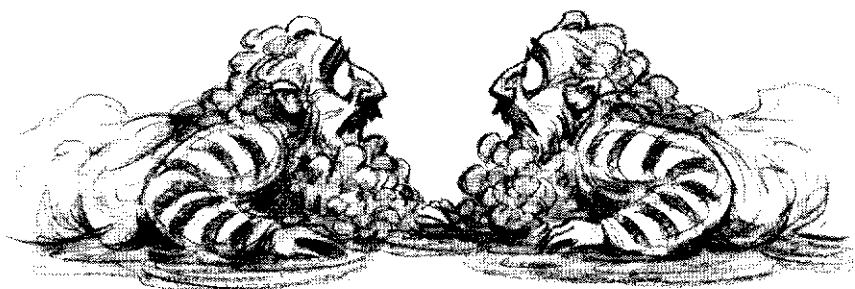
She said it now to the rat.

“Charming,” said the rat.

“Who are you!!”

Where was Victoria?

CHAPTER FIVE



Meanwhile, Mister Mack walked into the sitting room. His two sons, Robbie and Jimmy Mack, were in there. They were on the floor, playing a game called War.

Rules: War is a game for two or more players. Players shout “War!” at each other until they become bored or hungry or are bursting for a wee, and leave the room. The last player in the room is the winner. Also, the game ends if someone else walks into the room. There is no time limit.

(Interesting fact: The longest game of War has been going on for more than twenty-eight years, in Tipperary. The two remaining players, the O'Hara twins, Eddie and Kenny, are now thirty-nine. They haven't slept since 1976.)

Anyway, Mister Mack rushed into the room. (And the War ended.)

"Look, lads," he said.

"Nice machine gun, Dad," said Jimmy.

"It's not a machine gun," said Mister Mack. "It's a saw. Look."

He put a piece of wood against the wall. He stood back and pointed his saw at the wood.

"Now, lads. Watch."

The air was suddenly full of wood chips, and noise.

The noise stopped. Mister Mack looked pleased.

"See?"

He pointed at the wood, which was

now two pieces of wood.

“I sawed it.”

“Fair enough, Dad,” said Robbie. “But you smashed the windows as well.”

“And the door and the sofa and the picture of Granny,” said Jimmy.

“Oh,” said Mister Mack.

He looked around the room. Some of the padding from the sofa had landed on his head.

“Ah, well,” he said.

He looked at the wood again.

“It just needs fine tuning.”

He patted the saw, and smiled. At last, he had invented something that would make him some money. He had been an inventor for only seventy-three days but, already, Mister Mack had invented lots of things. Mousetraps that tickled the mice until they promised to leave the house. A special brush for getting fluff off duvet covers—

Boring.



A bomb that made big men poo. A fridge that said “Go to the shops” when you opened the door and it was empty. Little batteries to put into bigger dead batteries. A machine that turned green recycling bins into plastic bags. And the toilet was really special: you could wee and wash your hands at the same time. These were all Mister Mack’s inventions. The house was full of them, and they were all great.

But nobody wanted them. And Mister Mack was running out of money. The fridge said “Go to the shops!” before he even touched the handle.

The saw was Mister Mack's last chance.

He knew it would work. He just needed a little more time to make it perfect, and a little more money to keep them going.

He smiled again at Jimmy and Robbie.

"I'm off to the bank," said Mister Mack.

"Oh oh," said Robbie.

"Do you want to come with me?" asked Mister Mack.

"Are you sure about this, Dad?" said Jimmy.

"Yes," said Mister Mack. "We'll be back in plenty of time for dinner."

"But," said Robbie.

"But," said Jimmy.

"But," said Mister Mack, "the bank will be closed if we don't hurry up. Come on, boys."

Mister Mack went out the front door, and Jimmy and Robbie ran after him.