

WED WABBIT

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ONE

It was such an ordinary evening, but every detail of it would matter; every detail would become *vital*.

“Wimbly Woos,” Minnie was wailing from her side of the bedroom. “Wead me Wimbly Woos!”

“In a minute,” said Fidge. “You’re supposed to be drinking your milk.”

“But it’s all warm and it’s got a skin on top and it’s *wevolting*.”

“All right, I won’t be long.”

Fidge was packing. In just under thirty-six hours, her mother, her sister (aged four), and herself (aged ten and a half) were due to go on what was likely to be their best vacation for years and she wanted to be ready. She also wanted to try out a high-density packing technique she’d seen on a program about mountaineers. What you did was roll up each item of clothing into an incredibly tight sausage, secured with a rubber band; you then fit the sausages in next to one another, like a bundle of sticks. Fidge was going to attempt to put her entire

vacation wardrobe into the very small backpack she used for school lunches. This was partly because she liked a challenge, and partly because she knew that her mother's luggage would (as usual) consist of a huge assortment of random bags, while Minnie never went anywhere without an armful of toys, which she then dropped at five-second intervals. *Somebody* had to have both arms free for emergencies.

"Wead me Wimbley Woos. Pleeeeeeeease."

"Not Wimbley Woos *again*. Ask Mum."

"Sorry, Fidge, I can't," called her mother from the living room. "I've got to finish making this hat by tomorrow morning; it's for a bride's mother and she's terribly fussy."

Fidge groaned and got to her feet.

Her sister's side of the room was spectacularly untidy. As Fidge picked her way across to the bed there was a loud squeak.

"Don't twead on Eleanor!" screamed Minnie.

"Well, don't leave her lying on the floor," said Fidge irritably. She stooped to pick up Eleanor, who was a purple elephant with a pink skirt, huge long pink eyelashes, and a pink fluffy hairdo.

"She's asleep," said Minnie. "Wed Wabbit made them all go to bed early because they'd been naughty."

"Oh." Fidge looked down and realized that the teddies and dolls had been arranged in long rows, as if in a dormitory.

Even the dolls' buggy was lying on its side, covered with a blanket; next to it, a silver bus with pink wheels had a little pillow under its front bumper. As usual, only Wed Wabbit was in bed with Minnie.

"OK," sighed Fidge, sitting on the bed and plopping the elephant down beside her. "You sure you want this book? We must have read it eight million times."

"I want it."

"How about I just read two pages?"

"No."

"Five pages?"

"Mum! Fidge is being mean!"

"Please, Fidge, just read her the whole book, it's not that long," called their mother, sounding weary.

Fidge pulled a face, opened *The Land of Wimbley Woos*, and started to read the horribly familiar lines.

*"In Wimbley Land live Wimbley Woos
Who come in many different hues
In Yellow, Pink and Green and Blue
In Orange, Gray, and Purple too.'"*

The first picture showed a group of happy-looking Wimblies. Each was a different color, but they were all shaped like garbage cans with large round eyes and short arms and

legs, and they radiated a sort of idiotic jollity. Fidge turned the page and continued reading in a bored, rapid mutter.

*“Yellow are timid, Blue are strong
Gray are wise and rarely wrong
Green are daring, Pink give cuddles
Orange are silly and get in muddles.
Purple Wimblies understand
The past and future of our land.’”*

“Wead it pwoply, with *expwession*,” commanded Minnie, who could almost certainly pronounce the letter *r* if she really tried, but who was too used to people going “ohhhh-hhh, how cuuuuuuuute” whenever she spoke, to want to make the effort.

Fidge carried on reading, with a fraction more feeling.

*“Many talents make a team
So Wimbley Woos can build their dream
By sharing skills, plans, gifts, and arts
And caring for each other’s farts.’”*

“It’s not ‘farts’!” shouted Minnie, outraged. “It’s ‘caring for each other’s HEARTS.’”

“If you know it that well, then you don’t need me to read it to you, do you?”

“But Wed Wabbit wants to hear it too.”

“Does he?” Fidge looked at Wed Wabbit, who was sitting next to Minnie. He was very large and made of maroon velvet, with huge stiff ears; long, drooping arms and legs; and tiny black eyes. He was her sister’s favorite toy, bought from a thrift store two and a half years ago, just a week after their father died. Minnie had spotted the rabbit in the store window and had darted in and wrapped her arms around him and hadn’t let go. He’d been her favorite toy ever since, but perhaps because the awfulness of that week still sat like a weight on Fidge’s head, she’d never liked Wed Wabbit. Most stuffed animals (in Fidge’s experience) looked either smiley or sad, but Wed Wabbit had a horribly smug expression, like a clever child who knows he’s the teacher’s favorite and never, ever gets told off. She avoided his gaze and turned the page to an illustration of a group of Wimbley Woos scratching their heads.

“Oh, here’s the bit where they try to think of a birthday present for the king of the Wimblies,” she said, with fake excitement. “I wonder what they’ll come up with? Dinner for two at a top sushi restaurant? A personalized license plate?”

“Wead it to me.”

“A spa weekend?”

“Please,” said Minnie, placing a small hand on Fidge’s arm. “*Please wead my book.*”

And because Minnie (when she wasn’t showing off, or being annoying or screechy or whiny) was really quite sweet, Fidge stopped horsing around and read all of it.

For the eight millionth time.

Over the course of twenty irritating pages, the Wimbley Woos organized a huge game of hide-and-seek as their surprise gift for the king, had a big celebration picnic, and sang their deeply sappy Wimbley Woo song as the sun set behind the lollipop-shaped trees of Wimbley Land.

“*‘Wimbley Woo! Wimbley Woo!
Pink and Green and Gray and Blue
Yellow and Orange and Purple too
A rainbow of sharing in all we do!’*”

Fidge turned the page and looked at the last picture. It showed a mixed crowd of Wimblies standing on a hill looking up at the moon. At some point, Minnie had drawn a mustache on all the purple ones.

Minnie herself was almost asleep. Fidge tucked her in, slid the book onto the cluttered bedside table, and then snatched it up again; among the junk was a small carton of juice, and it

was now on its side, and a pool of orange was spreading over the tabletop. Hastily, Fidge picked up the carton and then looked around for something to blot the juice with. Wed Wabbit seemed to catch her eye, his smirk as infuriating as ever, and before she knew what she was doing, she'd grabbed him by the ears and was pressing him down onto the spill. The effect was miraculous: Wed Wabbit acted like a huge sponge. The pool shrank steadily and then disappeared without a trace, the orange making no stain at all on the dark-red velvet. Fidge, feeling relieved but a bit guilty, checked that Minnie was definitely asleep, and then sat Wed Wabbit on the radiator and went back to her packing.

They were going on an outdoor activities vacation. Her mother and Minnie were going to putter around and play in the children's pool, and Fidge was going to learn how to canoe, dive, rappel, climb, navigate, and go-kart. She took an old T-shirt from the drawer and began to roll it very, very tightly. She had to leave enough space for the flippers her mother had promised to buy her.

It wasn't until the next afternoon that the terrible thing happened.