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The Leopard - Box

With a crash and a clatter, the leopard dropped through the letter-box. The ghostman retreated back down the path, muttering. The leopard lay on the door-mat, surprised and dishevelled - it was not a very wide letter-box, after all. Kats ran out to see what the ghostie had brought.

'A leopard for you, mum!', she shouted, gathering it up in her arms.

Her mother was upstairs - 'Oh, good, a letter at last!' she called. 'Just put it on the table - I'll be down in a minute

Kats placed the leopard on the table, and continued to get ready for school. All around her there was confusion.

The cuckoo in the cuckoo-clock had taken advantage of the seventh call to make its escape that morning, and was fluttering about the curtains, cuckoo-ing its little heart out with rapture. Dad had already given up trying to catch it; he was having more difficulty with the weather-man and the weather-girl who had both contrived to come out of their tiny wooden chalet - he clutching a tiny umbrella , she with her straw-hat.

'They're not both supposed to come out at the same time', grumbled Dad, 'And they're certainly not supposed to wander off round the house.'

By the time he had found them, the tiny wooden couple was marching, somewhat stiffly, across the kitchen floor, heading straight for the vegetable-rack. Dad blocked off their route with the dustpan, then deftly scooped them up. 'Little blighters,' he muttered, as he placed them back in their little house. 'Just get on with what you're supposed to do. You've made me late for work!'

Kats, having stuffed her school-bag with lunch-fox, the bun she had been given, and her homework otter when slithered in her grasp until the bag was fastened, turned her attention to the cuckoo.

'Come on down here, you silly bird: it's almost eight and you've got a job to do,' she hissed. 'You've already missed the half-hour. If you don't go back in this instant, we'll shut your door for good!'

This appeal seemed to do the trick: the cuckoo darted round the ceiling one last time and then disappeared into its lair. The door slammed shut behind it.

By this time, mum had come downstairs and was frowning at the leopard on the table. It gazed back at her, unblinking.

'I thought you said there was a letter for me, Kats', she said accusingly. 'What's this?'

'It's a leopard. mum - like I said'

'Well, you'll have to start speaking more clearly - I never understand half of what you say these days. Never mind, it can't just stay here,' she continued firmly. 'Do something with it, and then off to school with you. And where's your brother? Glued to his Game Boy again?'

Sure enough, Kats' brother Marmaduke was in his bedroom, writhing and cursing, trying to shake the Game Boy from his hand. Stuck solid it was, as if with superglue. Their mother sighed - it was always like this, trying to get everyone out of the door. Too late now, though, there was no time; she bundled Marmaduke out of the front door, leading him by the nose to explain the situation to his teacher. Kats was left to lock up the house and get herself to school on time.

But what to do with the leopard? Kats mused on the problem, stroking the smooth fur of the creature as it purred and stretched in the dining-room.

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The last time there had been a day like this, there had been parrots where the carrots should have been for making soup, Kats had had to wash her hair in champagne, and everyone was up late eating bread instead of going to bed. The parrots had been particularly bad: they were not be persuaded that no one actually wanted to pull off all their feathers and chop them into little bits, so they panicked all round the kitchen, creating a most impressive scene of chaos. After half an hour, Kats had managed to shoo them out of the window.
A leopard was different but still a problem. The only sensible thing to do was to take it off to school, with the otter and fox and the bun she had been given, and see what happened.

'Oh very nice, dear,' commented Kats' teacher, when she mentioned the three creatures to her. It was obvious that Mrs Falaris was not listening. Well, so be it. Kats waited until the teacher asked for someone to collect in the homework - it was Brian (the Snail), who was hopeless at most things. Of course he dropped the otter as soon as Kats gave him it.
'Miss!' he shouted, pointing despairingly at the hindquarters of the otter as it waddled off.
'Oh, Brian!' scolded Mrs Falaris, peering over her spectacles. 'Just pick it up and don't cause a fuss!'
Brian (the Snail) looked at Kats, aghast. Kats shrugged and headed off down between the desks; she cornered the otter under the computer, and placed it on Mrs P's desk. The teacher glanced at it, then hissed:
'Kats! I wanted your jotter, not your otter. Now just put it away and stop playing silly jokes!'
Since Kats no longer had anything like a jotter, she kept quiet.
Of course, the same thing happened when it was break-time, and instead of the bun she had to eat, the banshee started wailing and gnashing her teeth, so loudly and fearfully that everyone turned round. The leopard, until then, happily dozing as everyone surreptitiously stroked and patted it where it lay next to the radiators, awoke with a leap and was off out of the classroom before anyone could stop it. The last Kats saw, the spots were vanishing behind the dustbins in the corner of the playground.
'Kats!', shrieked Mrs Falaris, when she had climbed down from the cupboard and felt able to shriek, 'Kats! What on earth has got into you today? First the otter, now this - this screamer!? And what was that darting out of the door just now? ***Settle down, everyone, quiet!!!***'
The general and total confusion was more than enough to divert Mrs P's attention from Kats, so she was left to puzzle out where the banshee came from. In the meantime, she had locked the screaming and wailing soul back into her schoolbag. The other worrying thing was how to explain the fox, when it came to lunchtime; the teachers might forget about the otter, the leopard and the banshee (although it was unlikely), but letting the fox out of the bag would trigger all kinds of unanswerable questions. And to declare innocently that it was just another of those odd days would simply not go down well...
Lunch came and went, relatively uneventfully. Kats had taken the lunch-fox out to quietest spot in the playground and let him go. Of the leopard, perhaps luckily, there was not a sign. She gave a good talking to the banshee and abandoned it with her friend Lulu who could put up with really noisy things: she already had three brothers. Kats' own brother was wandering around, still trying to shake off the Game Boy.

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Back in the classroom, it was time to work on their project. Kats got out her folder, only to discover to her horror that it had turned into a boulder, which was far too heavy to lift. Inevitably, and almost in slow motion, it crashed to the classroom floor, splintering the boards:

Mrs P's nerves were now in shreds. Kats could not quite make out the words, but it was clear that Mrs Falaris wanted Kats to pay a visit to the headmistress. Kats stood up and wandered disconsolately in the direction of the headmistress's office. She knocked on the door and went in.

'Just stand there until she says she's ready,' muttered Miss Cerberus the school-secretary. She put down her knitting-pattern and began wrestling with a very large pile of wool. Kats hopped from foot to foot and waited.

After a few minutes, there came a voice from the inner sanctum; Kats joined her hands primly, cleared her throat and went in.

It was most discouraging to see Mrs Victoria Hecate, the headmistress, sitting in the corner, dressed up like a huge teddy-bear.

'Oh,' said Kats, not quite up to the situation, 'Sorry, I thought you said you were ready.'

'And so I did, child. Now come in and explain yourself. I hear you've been causing all kinds of rubble in Mrs Falaris' classroom.'

Kats explained as best she could, but it was obvious Mrs Hecate was not really listening; she was having difficulty adjusting her spectacles with the enormous pads at the end of her short fat arms. At length, after Kats had finished, there was a pause interrupted only by friendly growls and humming noises from the headmistress, then she was waved out again.

The remainder of the day, short as it was, was not without incident. Fortunately, the rather freaky incident of the fractions of the vole went unnoticed by Mrs Falaris. Many words were by the janitor when he discovered the racing-horse after the class had been to gym. And then many more when he discovered what the horse had left behind in the gym. And as the re-appearance of the otter co-incided with the ringing of the school bell, Kats got away without upsetting her teacher again.

She wandered home, abandoning Lulu at the corner of her street, with her schoolbag screaming and wailing pitifully. She wondered what she was going to do with the otter, and where the leopard and the fox had gone. And had Marmaduke managed to put down his Game Boy yet?

She was the first home as usual. As she put the key in the lock, she paused: from behind the door came the most awful sounds of claws scampering on lino, of spitting and snarling. There had been a second delivery of post...

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