

ALICE



DENT

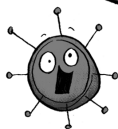
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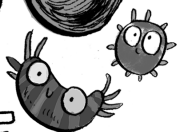
INCREDIBLE



GERMS



GWEN LOWE



2 Palmer Street, Frome,
Somerset BA11 1DS

Text © Gwendolyn L. Lowe 2018

Illustrations © Sarah Horne 2018

First published in Great Britain in 2018

Chicken House

2 Palmer Street

Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

United Kingdom

www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells

Cover and inside illustrations by Sarah Horne

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

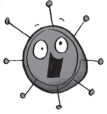
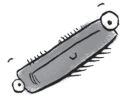
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-910002-91-9

eISBN 978-1-911490-15-9

*To my fantastic foursome:
for Cait, my favourite animal magnet,
for Phil, the perfect partner for all weathers,
for Ian, who knows the secret of happiness,
and for Beatrix, who turned out so much
nicer than I expected when she grew up.*



CHAPTER ONE

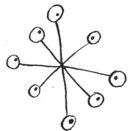
Number Nine Nettle Close



Mr and Mrs Dent were the sort of parents who didn't much like children.

'They're such grubby little creatures, always picking their crusty little noses and spreading germs and mess everywhere,' declared Mrs Dent that morning.

Dangling daringly out of the kitchen window, she extended her best long-handled grabber and expertly plucked their daily newspaper from the



mailbox on the gate.

Mrs Dent never went outside; not if she could help it.

'It's a shame there aren't more fantastic parents like us, always on top of dirt and diseases,' she continued smugly, shaking a bottle of disinfectant into a foaming fizz. Soon the paper was drenched and Mrs Dent thrust it into the hot oven to toast.

Her words and the warm fumes nearly made Alice Dent choke.

Alice was sitting very quietly at the kitchen breakfast table in Number Nine Nettle Close, pretending that she was invisible. She was good at doing this; sometimes her parents forgot about her for hours at a time.

But that wasn't going to last, not today.

And very soon Alice knew she was going to be in the worst trouble on the planet.

All because she had a cold.

If I sneeze, I'm dead! she thought in panic, pinching her nose as she forced down her over-boiled egg. *Perhaps they won't notice,* she consoled herself. But this seemed unlikely, especially because she had to keep diving under the table to wipe her nose.

'Manners!' barked Mr Dent sharply, as Mrs Dent

took the sterilized paper out of the oven and handed it to her husband.

‘Sorry,’ muttered Alice, now stifling a cough. There was no way she could have guessed that these symptoms were the first sign of the strange and incredible world-changing events to come. And not knowing that was a great pity, because right now Alice could seriously do with being cheered up.

Meanwhile, Mrs Dent bustled around the kitchen, boiling shoelaces and polishing the soles of Mr Dent’s work boots. She certainly didn’t believe in changing the world. She thought that was a very dangerous idea.

‘Those boots look just so, poppet,’ said Mr Dent approvingly, lifting his head out of the smoking newspaper as Mrs Dent threaded the laces back in a perfect pattern. They smiled at each other fondly.

Alice hid her face and tried not to be sick. Her parents were perfectly matched. While Mrs Dent was ferret-like, sharp-nosed and keen on clean, Mr Dent was large and brawny and zealous about law and order. He liked things just so. ‘Everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion,’ he would say, sliding his strong arms into his protective suit for another day in pest control. Nothing made him happier than

wiping out a big wasps' nest or exterminating a few cockroaches.

In truth, the worst thing that had ever happened to Mr and Mrs Dent was having a child. Alice wasn't best pleased about this either, although she tried not to mind too much.

Alice had interesting blue eyes with amber flecks and had to take five showers and soapy baths every day, more if Mrs Dent insisted. In fact, over her eleven years, Alice had been through so many showers and baths that she was surprised she hadn't shrunk to being smaller than average size. And she'd washed her long curly hair so much with strong soap that she was sure the colour was fading into streaks of blonde and ginger-brown.

She sighed. It wasn't fair that she had another cold. She really did try to stay neat and clean, even if she wasn't very good at it. And how could she have picked up any germs? She hadn't seen anyone. Her parents hadn't even let her go to school for a week because of the note sent home about pupils with stomach upsets.

'I say – that chap's certainly hit the ground running,' Mr Dent said suddenly. His voice was full of approval as he turned the slightly charred pages

of the paper.

Oh no! Hastily, Alice squashed her nose to trap another sneeze. And, as if things weren't bad enough already, her parents were now going to go on about the new Best Minister for Everything Nicely Perfect again. They'd talked about nothing else all week.

'He's the best thing since sliced bread,' continued Mr Dent, as Mrs Dent lovingly buttered his toast. 'His ideas are marvellous, just what this country needs.'

'He's brilliant! And doesn't he look smart?' exclaimed Mrs Dent, stopping her spreading and peering over Mr Dent's shoulder. 'I wonder if I can get a signed photo of him?'

As Mrs Dent scooped the newspaper up to the light, Alice caught sight of the new Best Minister's face. She had glimpsed smaller news photos of him before, perfectly dressed in flawless suits. But this was the first time she had seen his features close-up, clear and sharp.

Alice studied the picture with growing unease. The Best Minister's eyes were like burning black pits dug into his pale skin, but it was his expression that made her feel like she'd swallowed an ice cube whole.

Something, some trick of the light perhaps, had turned it into a sinisterly perfect wax-like mask – and for some reason this made a chilly hand of dread squeeze her heart.

‘They say that he’s got big plans. He’s going to cull cats, turn ice cream vans into mobile banks and outlaw orange clothes,’ Mr Dent told them.

‘Quite right too, orange is such a loud colour,’ mused Mrs Dent. ‘Myself, I prefer pink; you can’t go wrong with a nice soft pink.’

‘And apparently he’s determined to stamp out children getting disgusting infections –so he’s planning to ban lots of things like birthday parties.’

‘An excellent idea!’ approved Mrs Dent.

Alice wondered how stopping parties could stop germs. It sounded more like the new Best Minister was stamping out fun.

‘He’s forbidden all giggling in schools too. Any children who giggle will have to be reported at once to their headteacher for immediate punishment.’

‘What a man!’ swooned Mrs Dent, her eyes shining.

That proves it, thought Alice crossly. He’s definitely trying to make us miserable.

‘And he’s getting the police to track down smelly

and dirty children. Those in charge are doing a fantastic job of taking them away from their hopeless parents and teaching them how to wash.'

'That's great news!' Mrs Dent nodded approvingly.

'Yes, that should sort out those nifty nippers. See how lucky you are to have such good parents, child?'

Alice boiled with rage. But she couldn't respond, her nose was dripping badly now and she was going to . . .

Oh no! Panicking, Alice dived hastily under the table again, stifling the sneeze just in time.

I can't bear much more of this, she muttered to herself. She was sick of trying to hide coughs and colds. She had thought things might get better when she got older but instead everything just seemed to be getting worse.

'It's about time something was done, the state of some of the little germ-spreaders you see nowadays!' Mrs Dent smugly adjusted the baby-pink headscarf that she always wore over her short brown hair. Then her expression changed. She leant towards Mr Dent.

'These rules . . . clamping down on germs and no giggling . . . especially no giggling . . . you don't

think he's worried about the pie Russ coming back?' she whispered, so low that Alice could hardly hear her. She wasn't even sure Mrs Dent had actually said 'pie Russ', but that's what it sounded like.

Mr Dent went white.

'No, surely not . . .'

Mrs Dent gripped the table, her knuckles turning as pale as the snowy tablecloth.

'It would be the worst thing ever . . . can you imagine?' she whispered, her eyes wide and fearful.

'What's a pie Russ?' Alice spoke without thinking. She was breaking the house rule about children being seen and not heard, but she really wanted to know.

Her father threw Mrs Dent a warning look.

'We shouldn't talk about things like that in front of the child, poppet.'

He swivelled crossly to face Alice.

'And you should stop sticking your pesky little nose into things that don't concern you.'

Alice ground her teeth in frustration. This was a mistake – it made her cough.

Alarmed, Mr Dent peered at her more closely.

'Is your nose running? Have you . . . have you got a COLD?' he demanded fearfully.

Alice could have kicked herself. But it was too

late anyway; she couldn't hold it back any longer.

She was going to—

'AAAATISSSHOOOOO!'

'ARRRGH! GERMS!'

Mr Dent ran to the sink and stuck his head under the tap. Mrs Dent rushed out of the kitchen and returned with a green mask strapped across her mouth and her thin body wrapped in a pink overall. She sprayed them both from the industrial spray pack on her back.

'Oh no!' exclaimed Alice. She knew what was coming.

'Go to your room! NOW!' shouted Mr Dent, his voice quivering with fright.

'Here we go again,' Alice muttered. The same thing happened every time she had a cold. And as soon as Alice had gone into her bedroom, Mr Dent locked the specially sealed door so that nothing could escape.

The doctor came to visit that afternoon. She was extremely annoyed to have to come out. She knew the Dents well; Mrs Dent phoned her every day.

'I suspect it's only a virus,' she said crossly, after checking Alice carefully for rashes. 'But I'll have to

send this swab for testing; that new Best Minister insists on knowing what germs children have nowadays. Yet more work for me – as if we doctors haven't got enough to do already,' she added, poking a thin stick down Alice's throat. It tickled and before she could stop herself, Alice giggled.

The doctor froze.

'Have you been giggling a lot? Are you feeling cheerful?' she asked suspiciously.

'No, not at all,' said Alice, shaking her head.

'Well don't do it again – don't you know how dangerous it is to giggle right now?' And after another long hard stare at her, the doctor turned to Alice's parents.

'If it's anything more than a common cold, I'll eat my stethoscope.'

'Thank goodness,' said Mrs Dent from behind the door. 'I was afraid that she had the pie Ru—'

'Not in front of the child!' hissed Mr Dent.

'No sign of that, so don't worry. And she can come downstairs – no need for her to stay up here until the results are back; they take days.'

Despite what the doctor had said, Mr and Mrs Dent were taking no chances. Dressed in frilly

aprons, green masks and fur-trimmed gloves, they only unlocked Alice's door to deliver foul black medicine on a long-handled spoon or to post chips or toast through the narrow gap. All Alice could do was lie on her bed, getting crosser every day.

'I've got to get out!' she muttered to her Venus flytrap plants. There was a row of these on every windowsill; Mr Dent insisted on it. 'Better than bug spray,' he always declared.

Alice didn't mind them; her room was quite bare otherwise. She kept a few things hidden under a loose floorboard, but Mrs Dent had ruined everything else by putting it through the dishwasher ten times or toasting it in the oven.

Alice was so bored that she ended up talking to the flytraps and feeding them cold chips. After several days, the plants were wilting and Alice was desperate.

'For goodness' sake! You can't lock me up just coz I've got a cold, it's illegal! I'm bored stiff! Please, please, PLEASE let me out!' she pleaded with her parents.

But it was no good.

'No can do, sorry – dangerous things, colds,' said Mr Dent anxiously.

‘Especially at your age, it’s an unsettled time,’ added her mother, posting a cheese triangle through the gap. ‘Who knows what might happen?’

‘Well I’ll die of boredom if you keep me here,’ retorted Alice, but her parents had already gone.

By day four, Alice was ready to scream. Her nose was still running, she couldn’t help sneezing and she certainly didn’t have the giggles the doctor was worried about. In fact she had never been so miserable. Desperate for something to do, Alice had begged for a bath, but Mr Dent wouldn’t let her out for anything.

‘I can’t stand much more of this,’ she muttered to the drooping flytraps that evening as she stared aimlessly out of the window on to the dark street below. Nettle Close was unlit at night; Mrs Dent complained daily about the only streetlights being on the main road.

‘If only I had a dog,’ Alice sighed. But her parents would never let her have pets, not in a million years. Alice wanted a dog most, but she’d settle for anything. (Well, nearly anything – she really didn’t think she could cope with a Komodo dragon.)

Just then, her thoughts were interrupted by the

wail of police sirens.

This perked her up a little. There was never trouble on the Chickweed Estate – perhaps for once something exciting might happen. Quickly, Alice turned the light off so she could look out without being spotted.

The noise got closer. Alice held her breath. It sounded like lots of sirens; something serious must be going on.

Abruptly, the sirens stopped mid-wail, very close by. In the sudden hush, Alice heard the low hum of cars turning into Nettle Close.

Staring in disbelief, she watched as five vehicles glided to a halt in front of her house. The cars were very long and very black, and Alice had a feeling that they were very bad news indeed.

Nervous now, she watched the car doors pop open. Then, as all the flashing blue lights and headlights were switched off, Nettle Close was in darkness again.

Drawing back behind the curtain, Alice listened to the sounds instead. Car doors slamming; the crunch of feet on steam-blasted gravel; a sharp knock on her front door.

There was no response.

‘OPEN THIS DOOR NOW OR WE’LL BREAK IT DOWN!’

Alice shivered. *What on earth was going on?*

Then she heard the front door click open.

Peering round the curtain, Alice saw eight large figures standing in the chink of light spilling out from the hall. All wore shiny silver protective suits and masks.

Alice gulped. Four of them were carrying what looked like a battering ram.

That wasn’t the worst thing though. What really chilled her blood was that two others carried a long object, big enough to fit a person inside. From the way the light shone through it, it looked transparent.

‘Mr Dent?’ the voice was official, confident. ‘I’m afraid there’s a problem.’

‘Who are you?’ her dad demanded. ‘What do you want?’

‘We have orders from those in charge. We need to take Alice away.’

What? Alice’s stomach flipped over. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the see-through box. It was big enough for a grown-up; they could easily put her inside . . .

‘Why? What’s wrong with her?’ asked Mrs Dent,

leaning out from behind her husband. Alice saw that she had put on gloves, two aprons, two pairs of overshoes, a face visor and a hairnet. Mrs Dent didn't cope well with visitors.

The masked man leant forward, dropping his voice.

Alice strained to listen. Only fragments floated up through the closed window.

'Emergency... unexpected... result... dangerous... pie... we need... pie... Russ...'

It was that pie Russ again. But who was Russ? Or maybe they meant pie rust? She was OK then; she hadn't had a pie in weeks. Or maybe they meant the number Pi – but so what?

Her thoughts were going round in circles. Alice concentrated on listening.

'Take her away, right now. She's certainly not staying here, that's for sure,' said Mr Dent, his voice squeaking with fear. 'But you can't come in; you'll utterly ruin the carpets. We'll send her out to you.'

They're going to let them take me! Just like that! Alice was outraged and frightened at the same time. She didn't know what to do.

Then the front door must have fully opened because light streamed out and bounced off the

long black cars.

As Alice watched, the beam illuminated the face of a man sitting motionless in the rear seat of the furthest car. His eyes were like black craters, but it was something else that transfixed her. In the slanting light, the man's pale face looked like a flawless wax-like mask.

Surely it can't be him! thought Alice, studying it with increasing horror.

But it was.

And as her legs began to buckle in terror, the new Best Minister for Everything Nicely Perfect lifted his head and looked directly up at her.