

Beginning

When Peter Fortune was ten years old, grown-up people sometimes used to tell him he was a 'difficult' child. They thought he was difficult because he was so silent. That seemed to bother people. The other problem was he liked being by himself. Not all the time, of course. Not every day. But most days he liked to go off somewhere for an hour to his bedroom, or the park. He liked to be alone and think his thoughts.

In the big untidy kitchen of Peter's house, there was a drawer. Of course, there were many drawers, but when someone said, "The string is in the kitchen drawer," everyone understood. The chances were the string would not be in the drawer. It was meant to be, along with a dozen other useful things that were never there: screwdrivers, scissors, sticky tape, drawing pins, pencils. Peter wanted to build something, but he could not find any useful bits and the rest of the family would not help. All they wanted to do was laze around on the grass, pretending to sleep. Peter was fed up with them. The drawer seemed to stand for everything that was wrong with his family.

On this particular Saturday afternoon, Peter was reaching deeper towards the back of the drawer. He was looking for a hook, but he knew there was little hope. His hand closed round a greasy little spring that had fallen out of the garden clippers. He let it go. Behind it were packets of seeds - too old to plant, not old enough to throw away. What a family, Peter thought, as he shoved his hand right to the back of the drawer. Why aren't we like other people, with batteries in everything, and toys that work and jigsaws and card games with all their bits, and everything in the proper cupboard? His hands closed round something cold. He drew out a small dark blue jar with a black lid. On a white label was printed, 'Vanishing Cream'.

Middle

First, he examined his forefinger. It was almost as short as his thumb. He felt the space where his missing piece of finger should have been. There was nothing. His fingertip was not simply invisible. It had melted away.

After half an hour of quiet thought, Peter went to his window, which overlooked the back garden. The lawn looked like an outdoor version of the kitchen drawer. There were his parents lying face down on blankets, half asleep, soaking up the sunshine. Between them lay Kate, who probably thought it looked grown-up to sunbathe. Surrounding the trio, was the debris of their wasted Sunday afternoon - teacups, teapot, newspapers, half-eaten sandwiches, orange peel, empty yoghurt cartons. He stared at his family resentfully. You could do nothing with these people, but nor could you throw them away. Or rather, well, perhaps... He took a deep breath, put the little blue jar in his pocket and went downstairs.

Peter knelt down beside his mother. She murmured dozily.

"You should be careful of sunburn, Mum," Peter said kindly. "Would you like me to rub some cream on your back?"

Viola Fortune mumbled something that sounded like a yes. He took out the jar. It was difficult to unscrew the lid with a missing forefinger. He slipped on the single glove he had collected on his way through the kitchen. His mother's white back gleamed in the sunlight. Everything was ready.

There was no doubt in Peter's mind that he loved his mother dearly, and that she loved him. She had taught him how to make toffee, and how to read and write. She once jumped out of an airplane with a parachute and she looked after him at home when he was ill. She was the only mother he knew who could stand on her head unsupported. But he had made his decision, and she had to go. He scooped out a dollop of cold cream on the end of his gloved finger. The glove did not disappear. The magic seemed to work only on living tissue. He let the blob fall right in the middle of his mother's back. She was gone.

End

These thoughts brought him downstairs and into the kitchen. He pulled open the drawer. He was pushing aside a packet of birthday cake candle holders that had half melted last time they were used when he noticed his forefinger. It was all there! It had grown back. The effects of the cream had worn off. He was just beginning to consider what this might mean when he left a hand on his shoulder. The monster? No, Kate, all of her, all in one piece.

Peter started jabbering. "Thank goodness you're here. I need your help. I'm making a booby trap. You see, there's this thing..."

Kate was pulling on his head. "We've been calling you for ages from the garden. And you've just been standing there, looking at the drawer. Come and see what we're doing. Dad's got an old lawn-mower engine. We're going to make a hovercraft."

"A hovercraft!"

Peter let himself be led outside. Cups, orange peel, newspapers, and his parents - unvanishing.

"Come on," called his mother. "Come and help."

Thomas Fortune had a spanner in his hand. "It might just work," he said, "with your help."

As Peter ran towards his parents, he wondered what day it was. Still Sunday? He decided not to ask.