

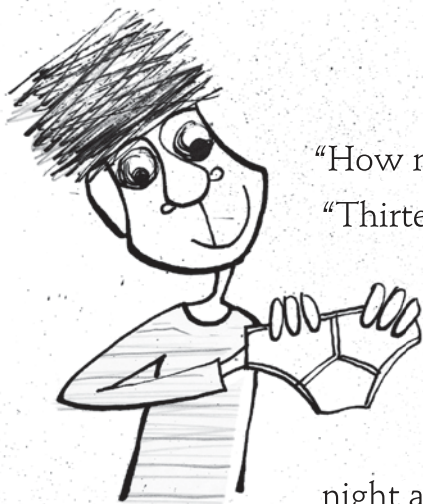


PANTS AND PANDAS

“How long are we going for again?” asked Twig as Miss Troutson closed the piano and picked up her copy of *TV Quick*.

“Just for the day,” said Hooey. “We’re coming back tonight, remember?”

“That’s a relief,” said Twig. “I was worried I hadn’t packed enough pants.”



"How many *have* you packed?"

"Thirteen."

"Why?"

"It's my lucky number. Plus I watched Alan Titchmarsh last night and he said you can

never have enough pants."

"Plants, Twig. He was talking about plants."

"Ah well. Same difference."

Hooey was about to ask how it could possibly be the same difference when Mr Croft the headteacher stood up and began to speak in his Assembly voice.

Now remember,
everyone,

you will need to be
on your best behaviour.

You are not going to a holiday camp.
You are going to an outdoor
education centre in Wales,
where you will learn to step
outside of your comfort zones.
Isn't that right, Miss Troutson?"

"Yeah, right, absolutely,"
said Miss Troutson,
thumbing through
an article on 'Secret
Lives of the Stars'.
"Couldn't agree
more."



Twig put up his hand. "Will you
be stepping outside of your comfort zone,
Miss Troutson?" he asked.

"Trust me, child," replied Miss Troutson,
rolling up the magazine and putting it in her
bag. "I've been outside it for years."

* * *



“Did you see *The Wizard of Oz* on Sky last night?” Twig asked Hooey as they walked towards the coach. “There’s this girl called Dorothy who sings and dances along a Yellow Brick Road and then helps people find the things they need.”

“What kind of things?”



“A brain, a heart and some courage,” said Twig. “That’s what I’m going to do on this trip.”

“What, dance around in a dress?”

“I think he means he’s going to help people find some new and special qualities,” said Sarah-Jane Silverton.

Twig nodded. “Although I like the sound of the dancing bit.”

Hooey looked at him. “Glad I brought my camera.”

* * *



Twig reached for his bag and loosened the zip to let his toy panda breathe. Wayne Burkett pointed at him and grinned.

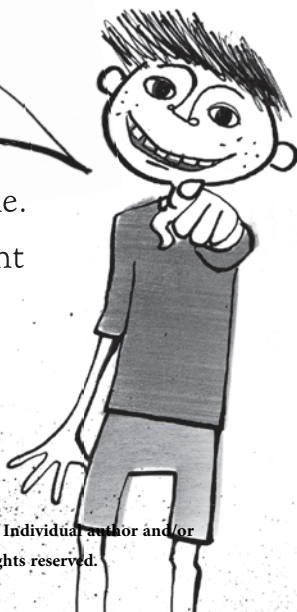
"What's up?" he asked. "Scared your ickle teddy bear's going to choke?"

"For your information, Mr Frobisher is *not* a teddy bear," said Twig. "He's a panda. And pandas don't like small spaces."

Don't put him in
your brain then!

sniggered Wayne.

"Why have you brought him anyway?" asked Hooey.



"Next door's dog chewed up my Peppa Pig this morning," said Twig. "When I saw the way he was looking at Mr Frobisher I knew I had to bring him with me."

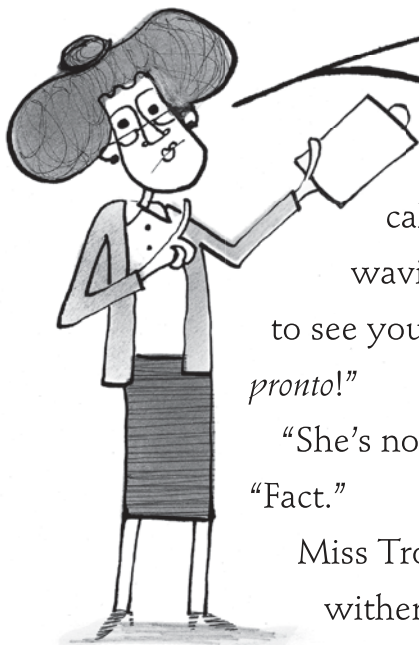
"Maybe you can do your Dorothy thing and help him find a brain," suggested Hooey.

Twig watched Samantha Curbitt talking to the coach driver and whispered, "*Or maybe I could help someone find a heart.*"

Hooey stared at the tattoos on the coach driver's arms.

"You could try," he said, "but I don't think he'd thank you for it."





All right, everyone!

called Miss Troutson,
waving her clipboard. "I want
to see your bottoms on that bus,
pronto!"

"She's not seeing mine," said Twig.
"Fact."

Miss Troutson gave him such a
withering look that he jumped
back and clonked his head on
the coach mirror.

Ba-doing!

said Wayne.

"Smack on the coconut."

"Oii!" shouted the
bus driver as Twig
clutched his head.

"I only just
cleaned that."



"Sorry," said Twig, giving the mirror a squeaky wipe with his hand. "Better?"

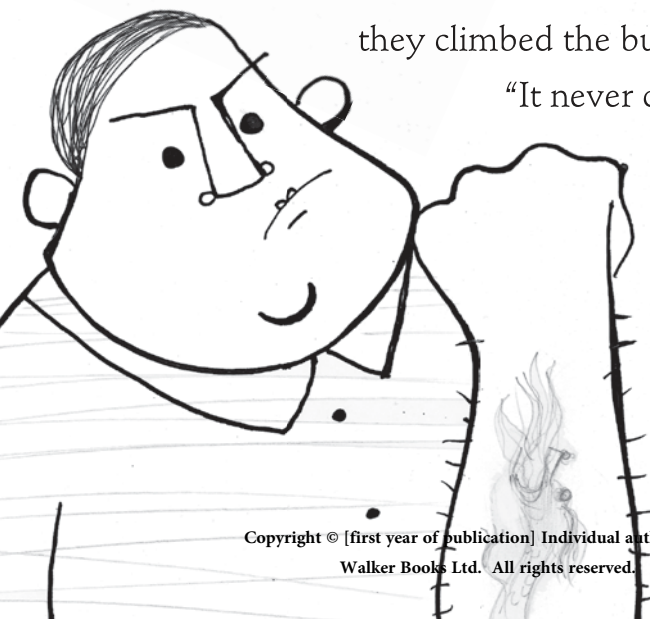
"Yeah," said the bus driver, holding up a hairy fist.



Better
watch out!

"Have you told him you get coach-sick?" asked Hooey as they climbed the bus steps.

"It never came up," said Twig.
"Get it?"





Outside, Hooey's brother, Will, stood glumly in line, waiting to get on.

"Will's worried because he hasn't invented anything for a while," explained Hooey. "He thinks he might have forgotten how to do it."

"I'm like that with toast," said Twig. "Although luckily my nan's written down the instructions."

"Outstanding," said Hooey.

"I thought Will was working on that new alarm clock for your grandpa. The one that shouted 'Fire!' and turned on his electric blanket."

"Bit of a setback there," said Hooey. "He overloaded the plug and set fire to Grandpa's

duvet. Certainly woke him up though."

Twig nodded, then took out a card and started writing on it.

"What you doing?" asked Hooey.

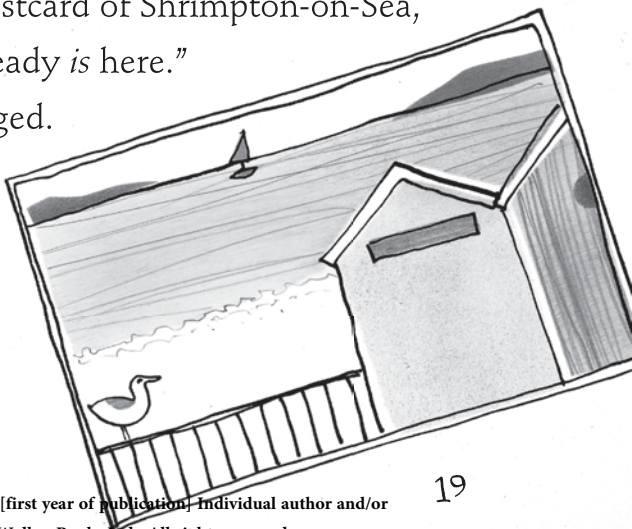
"Mum wants me to send her a postcard. I thought I'd do it before things got too busy."

"But you've written 'Wish you were here' on it."

"So?"

"So it's a postcard of Shrimpton-on-Sea, Twig. She already *is* here."

Twig shrugged.
"She likes it here."



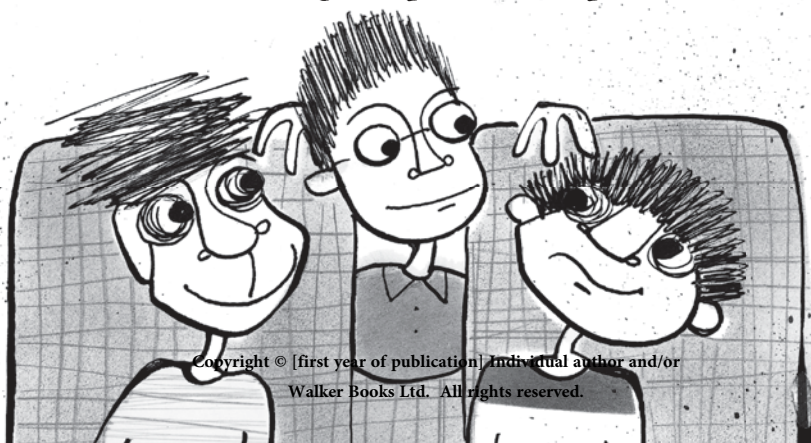
As the bus pulled away, Hooey thought about what Mr Croft had said about stepping outside their comfort zones.



He imagined a large gorilla stomping into the lounge, pulling him off the sofa and throwing him through the window. He wondered if it was something like that and decided he didn't fancy it much.

"All right, Hooey?" asked Will, poking his head through the seats.

"Need anything inventing?"



“Not really,” said Hooey. “I was just wondering if there were any gorillas in Wales.”

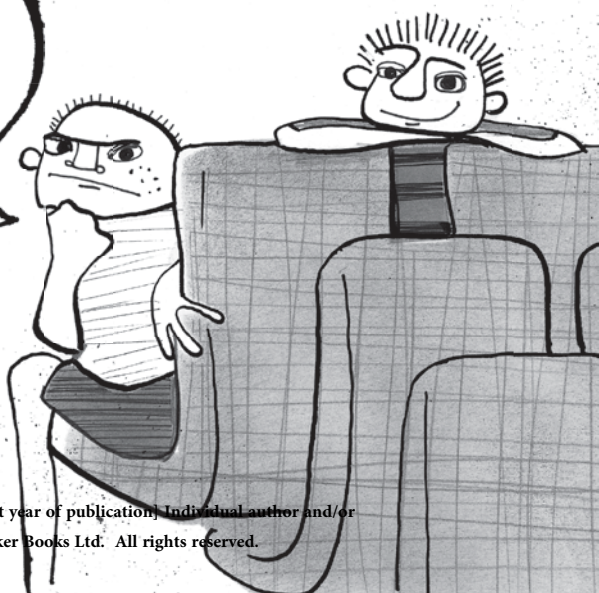
“Only Basbo,” sniggered Twig.

At the mention of his name, Basbo – who was sitting three rows down next to Ricky Mears – turned and glared at Twig. His eyebrows seemed even closer together than normal and he ground his teeth as if he had a mouthful of gravel.

“What chew frampin’ off about y’lil weenburger?”

he grunted.

Come overeer
unnsayitt un I’ll
wop ya in the
wooberries!



"I didn't say anything," squeaked Twig. "Tell him, Hooey."

Hooey thought quickly.

"He was talking about yoghurts," he said.

"Yum-yarts?" grunted Basbo.

"That's the ones," said Hooey. "I asked Twig if he thought there were any vanillas in Wales, and he said, 'Only Rasbo.' By which I'm thinking he meant raspberry, as in raspberry-flavoured ones."

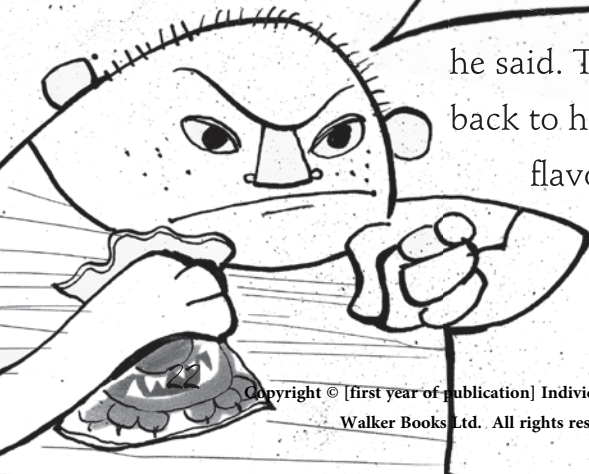
"Yum-yarts?" said Basbo again.

"Whatever," said Twig. "Just don't kill me."

Basbo pointed a finger at him.

Keeloooh,

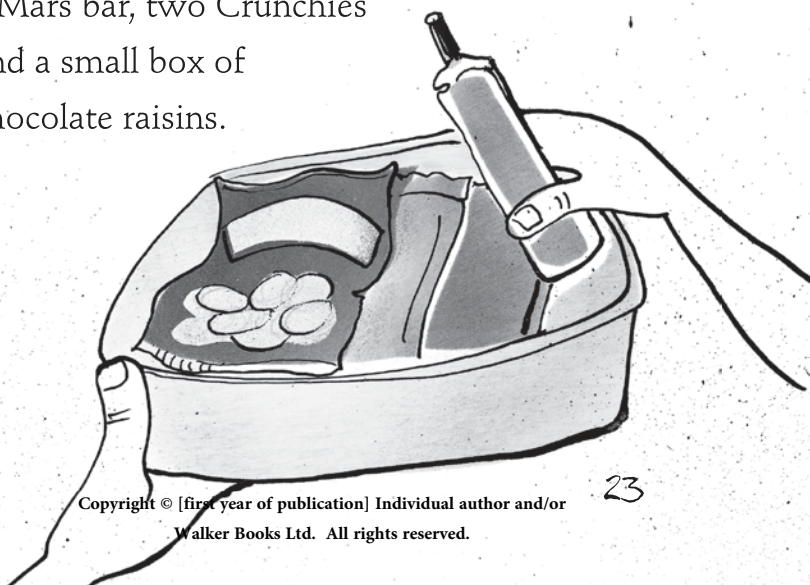
he said. Then he went back to his pickled-onion-flavoured Monster Munch.



“Great,” said Twig gloomily. “I’m already out of my comfort zone and we’re only five minutes up the road.” He opened his lunchbox. “Maybe a bit of healthy eating will cheer me up. Part of my five-a-day.”

“Twig, it’s only quarter to nine,” said Hooey as Twig unwrapped a chocolate bar.

“Well you know what they say,” said Twig. “Quarter to nine, Twixy-Twix Time. And anyway, chocolate’s good for your digestion.” He finished off the Twix and took out a Sherbet Fountain, which left a packet of cheese and onion crisps, a Mars bar, two Crunchies and a small box of chocolate raisins.



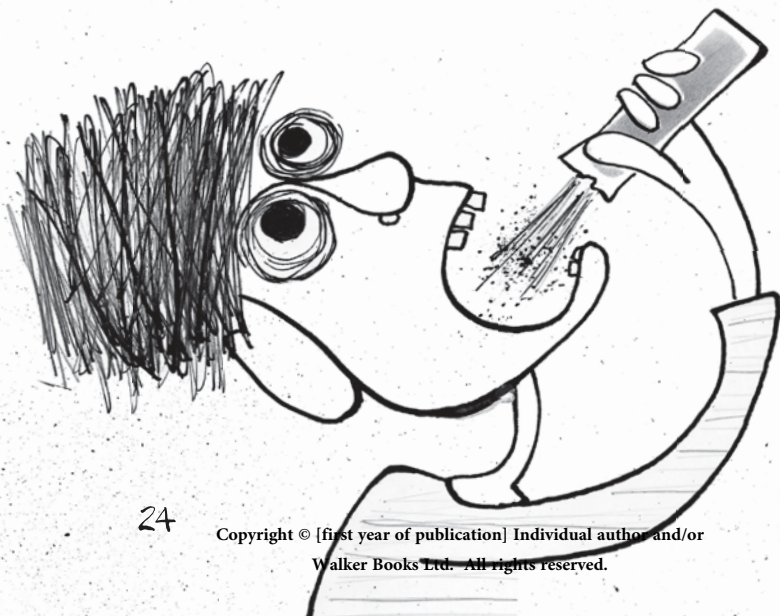
"I think I already know the answer to this," said Hooey, "but did you pack your own lunchbox?"

"Certainly did," said Twig, shaking the packet of raisins. "With some extra fruity fibre for a balanced diet."

From the other side of the aisle, Sarah-Jane Silverton watched him tip sherbet into his mouth.

That's disgusting,

she said.





"If you don't like your face," said Twig, "then don't look in the window."

He sniggered, breathed in at the wrong moment and snorted half a tube of sherbet up his nose.



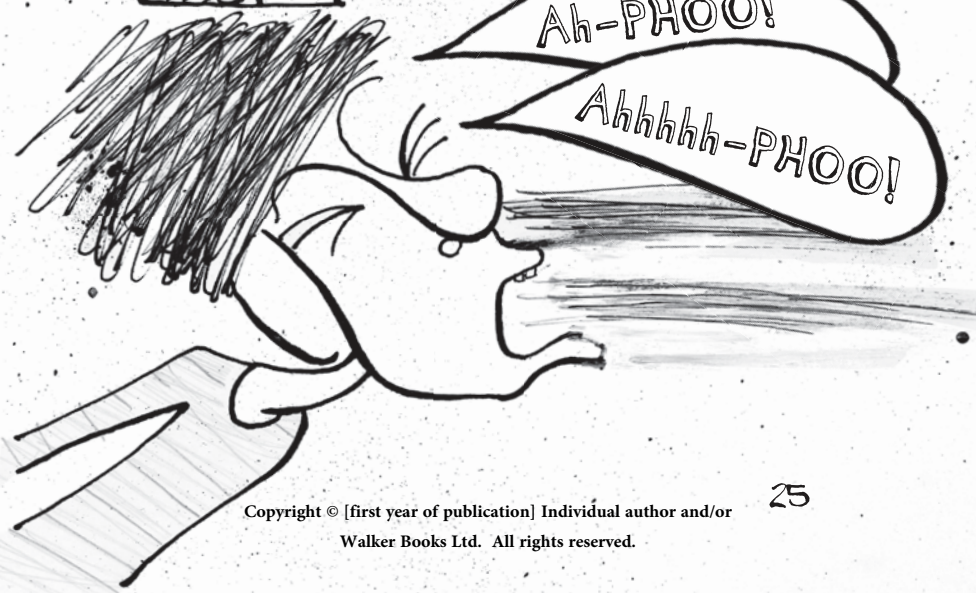
"Ah-PHOO!" he

sneezed, banging his head against the window.



Ah-PHOO!

Ahhhhh-PHOO!





Hooey held his hand out across the aisle, like a surgeon about to perform an operation.

"Tissue," he said.

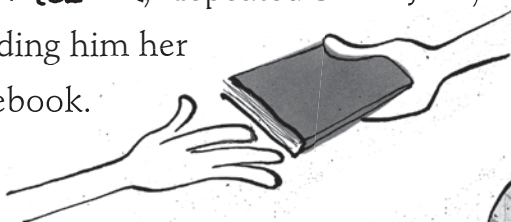
"Tissue," repeated Sarah-Jane, pressing a tissue into his outstretched palm.



Hooey handed it to Twig and as Twig wiped his nose, he held his hand out again.

"Notebook," he said.

"Notebook," repeated Sarah-Jane, handing him her notebook.



Hooey turned to Twig, looked at him sadly and then cracked him over the head with it.

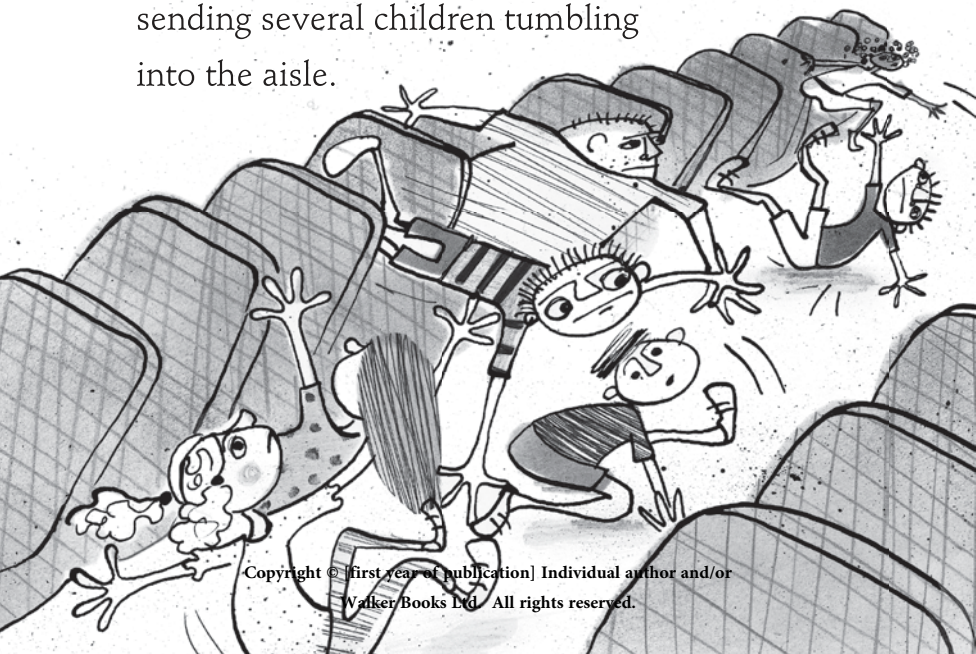
“Ow!” said Twig.
“What was that for?”

“For eating your lunch at nine in the morning,” said Hooey. “If you carry on like that you’re going to be sick.”

“Who are you, my mum?”

“No, I’m the person sitting next to you.”

At that moment the bus swerved, sending several children tumbling into the aisle.





"Calm *down*, Barry,"
said Miss Troutson. "And the rest
of you, get back in your seats immediately!"

As Johnny Bertram staggered back to his
seat, Hooey turned to Twig and pointed out
of the window.

"Look, Twig, we're going to the service
station. You know what that means, don't
you?"

"What?"

“More sweets!” Hooey looked at Twig and noticed that he had turned an interesting shade of green. “Uh-oh,” he said. “Will, can you invent an anti-sick device?”

“I’d take everything out of his lunchbox,” said Will.

“Why?” asked Hooey, removing the rest of Twig’s sweets. “Are you going to invent something now?”

Twig grabbed his lunchbox, leaned over it and made a

bleaaaargh

sound.

“Oh,” said Hooey.

“I see.”

