

The Listeners

1. The Letter

Molly Piper had plenty of ordinary problems to be getting along with, and the last thing she needed was another one. Especially not this one, which was a very strange problem, and one she thought she'd dealt with a long time ago.

She hadn't noticed the squirrel until it hopped onto the picnic table as she passed. Even then she only spared it a glance, and was about to look away, when it stood on its hind legs, fixed its bulbous eyes on her, and said, 'Couldn't spare a few, could you? Cashews are my favourite.'

Molly froze mid-step, nut halfway to her mouth.

Her ears rang and her vision blurred. Somewhere outside the school walls a dog barked, and the squirrel scampered up a nearby tree. Molly scrunched the pack of nuts into her fist and fled.

The canteen was bright, and the clattering trays and chatting students reassuringly sane. Molly joined the back of the lunch queue and tried not to feel as though she had a neon sign flashing 'mental' above her head.

She frowned. *Don't think that - you're not crazy.* Hadn't Dr Monkton said loads of people have imaginary friends when they're little? He'd said if a child lost a parent at a young age like Molly had, it was a perfectly natural response. Perfectly natural.

But that was then. It'd been five years since she'd last heard animal voices. Six, since Dad forced her to see Dr Monkton about them. She'd thought imagining animals talking was something buried in her early childhood with her ballet shoes and collection of stuffed toys. What if it started happening again? She could not deal with hearing animal voices right now.

Thankful other people couldn't read her thoughts, Molly scanned the sea of chattering heads and spotted a few girls from her form in the far corner. One of them, Ella O'Neil, had to talk to new-girl Molly, because Piper followed O'Neil alphabetically, and they were often put next to each other in lessons.

St Katherine's was Molly's fourth school in four years. It wasn't bad behaviour or anything - just her dad's annoying habit of getting promoted and moving countries. This time he'd deposited her at

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boarding school in London instead of moving her with him to Singapore. Starting halfway through year seven after everyone had formed their groups, was rubbish. For weeks, Molly had bounced around like a free atom trying to find the gaps and squeeze into them. She rubbed her forehead. Perhaps all the stress had brought on the squirrel's voice.

'Meat or vege?'

It took her a moment to realise she was at the front of the queue. She didn't feel hungry anymore.

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