

‘Hey, Oliver! Race you home!’

Chloe zooms past me on her bike.

‘I’ve got the keys. You can’t get in without me!’ I shout.

Every day, I catch the bus from high school to Chloe’s primary school and we travel home together through the park. Chloe usually rides her bike. She has short legs and complains a lot whenever she has to walk far. She sounds a lot like cats singing Christmas carols on repeat. It’s painful—for both of us.

Chloe skids to a stop ahead of me and looks out across the lake.

‘Oliver, look!’ she shouts, pointing furiously. ‘It’s Bucket Man!’

We live in a house at the end of Lakeside Drive. Every day, this guy walks across the park and down to the water. He fills up two large yellow buckets and takes them home. Chloe gave him the nickname. It’s not very imaginative, but then again, she’s only seven. It’s her mission to find out what Bucket Man is doing with all the lake water. She fancies herself as some kind of junior detective. No way is she even close to being any kind of real detective. She couldn’t even solve the mystery of why her bowl of ice-cream melted when she left it on the kitchen bench for two hours.

‘Leave him alone,’ I say. ‘He’s probably getting water for his garden.’

Chloe has so many wild theories. She’s even dragged me along on ‘stakeouts’ to spy on him. We see the same thing every time. Bucket Man opens his front door. He carries two large yellow plastic buckets across the park and down to the lake. He fills both buckets with water, and carries them home. It doesn’t matter what the weather is like. It could be hot enough for your mum to actually swim in the ocean, or cold enough for that kid at school who always wears shorts—to actually put a pair of pants on.

Bucket Man is there, every day, without fail.

‘He’s probably growing vegetables.’

Chloe refuses to believe me.

‘Maybe he uses it to water his back lawn.’

She still won’t listen.

‘Maybe it’s none of your business and you should get a proper hobby!’

I’m totally ignored.

Chloe is convinced something weird is going on. She thinks that Bucket Man is stealing the lake water, filtering it and selling it to restaurants as fancy bottled water.

Doubtful.

Or, maybe, Bucket Man really likes the taste of lake water, and is addicted to drinking it.

Unlikely.

Perhaps there’s a portal to another dimension in Bucket Man’s garden. It leads to a miniature village that’s in the middle of a drought and it’s Bucket Man’s job to bring them water every day, saving them from certain death.

Ridiculous.

‘I think you need to stop eating big bags of crazy,’ I say, putting the key in the front door and letting her inside. ‘Your imagination is out of control.’

Chloe puts her bag down and remembers something.

‘Hey, Oliver. Are Mum and Dad going out tonight?’

‘Yep. I’m in charge.’

‘So, no babysitter then...’ She breaks out in a sly grin. ‘We can do another stakeout!’

This kid is sneakier than my friends watching NetFlix on their phones during maths.

‘No way!’ I tell her. ‘I’m supposed to be looking after you. I’m not taking you out to spy on some creepy weirdo neighbour.’

It's the first time Mum and Dad have trusted me to be in charge at night. I'm taking the responsibility very seriously. I keep a close eye on Chloe. I make sure she eats all of her dinner and brushes her teeth. I even tuck her into bed at eight o'clock. Once I am certain she's asleep, I turn on the PlayStation for an hour or so.

I tip-toe down the hall to check that she's still asleep. I'm furious, but not surprised, when I find she's not in her bed. Her window is wide open.

'The little turd!'

There are about fifteen houses between home and Bucket Man's place. I'm pretty certain I'll find Chloe along the way. Sure enough, I find her wedged in the hedge next to Bucket Man's house. I'm as angry as your parents would be if you snuck out in the middle of the night... to a party in Las Vegas.

'Get. Home. Now!' I hiss at her.

'But I can hear water!' Chloe whines. 'We're here now—can we just go peek over the fence?'

'No!'

'Oh well,' Chloe stares me down. 'It will be a shame when Mum gets home and I'm still awake, and I have a really sore tummy because you let me eat a whole tin of Milo.'

'You wouldn't dare!' I say, knowing full well that she would. 'Fine then. Just stay low and don't say a word.'

We creep up to the fence. I can't see what's going on, but I can hear the sound of water splashing.

'Give me a boost!' Chloe says.

I lift her high enough to peek over.

'What can you see?' I hate that I'm even curious about this, but I can't help myself.

Chloe sees Bucket man wearing swimming shorts. He's tipping two large yellow buckets of water into his in-ground swimming pool.

For a brief second, I feel bad for Chloe, but then I'm just relieved. Now that there's a logical explanation, I won't have to hear about 'The Mystery of Bucket Man' any more. Chloe sighs and starts to walk home.

I can't resist peering over the fence to take a look at the pool for myself. I stand on my tip-toes, grip the top rail and stretch up.

I see the pool.

I see Bucket Man.

I see a woman swim to the edge and pop her head out of the water. She gives Bucket Man a kiss. She has long wavy hair... hypnotic eyes... and a shimmering tail-fin.

I do not say a word.