

SKELETON KEYS

THE
UNIMAGINARY
FRIEND

For Ruth, of course! – Guy Bass
For Cath and Leni – Pete Williamson



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stripes

THE KEY
TO SECOND
SIGHT

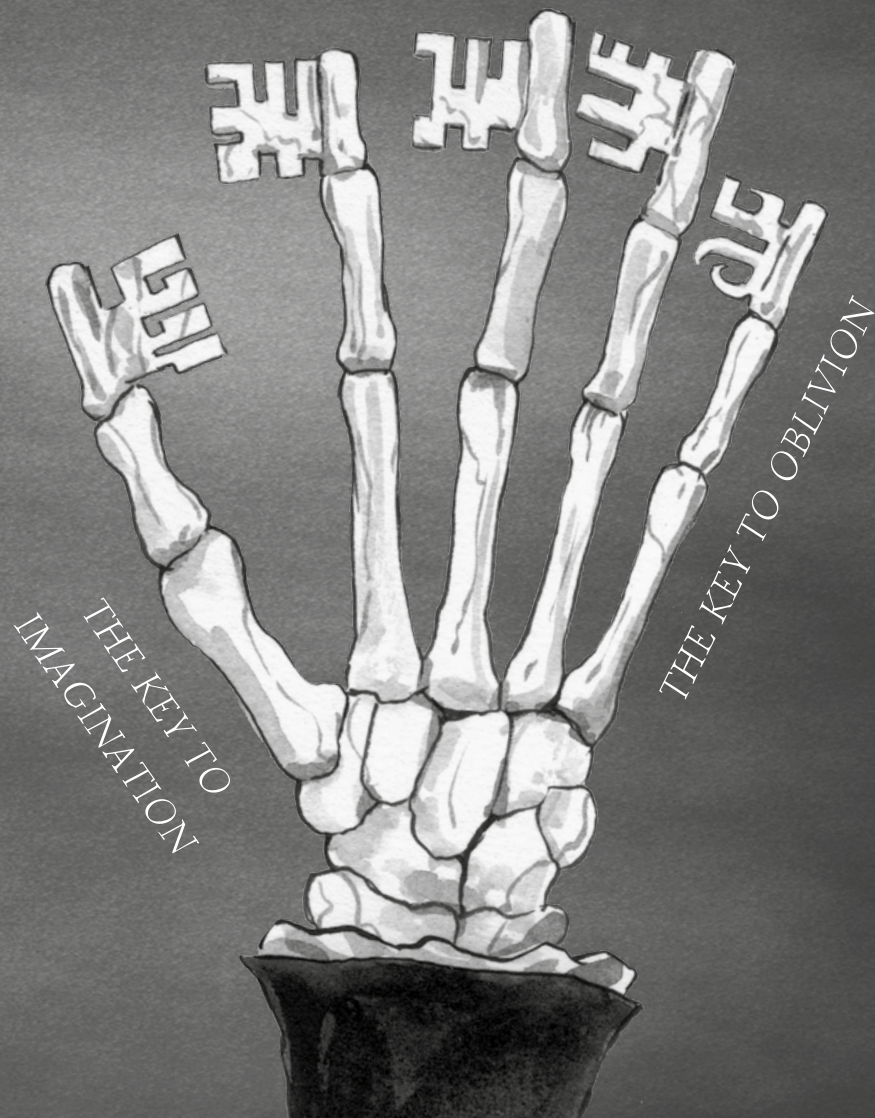
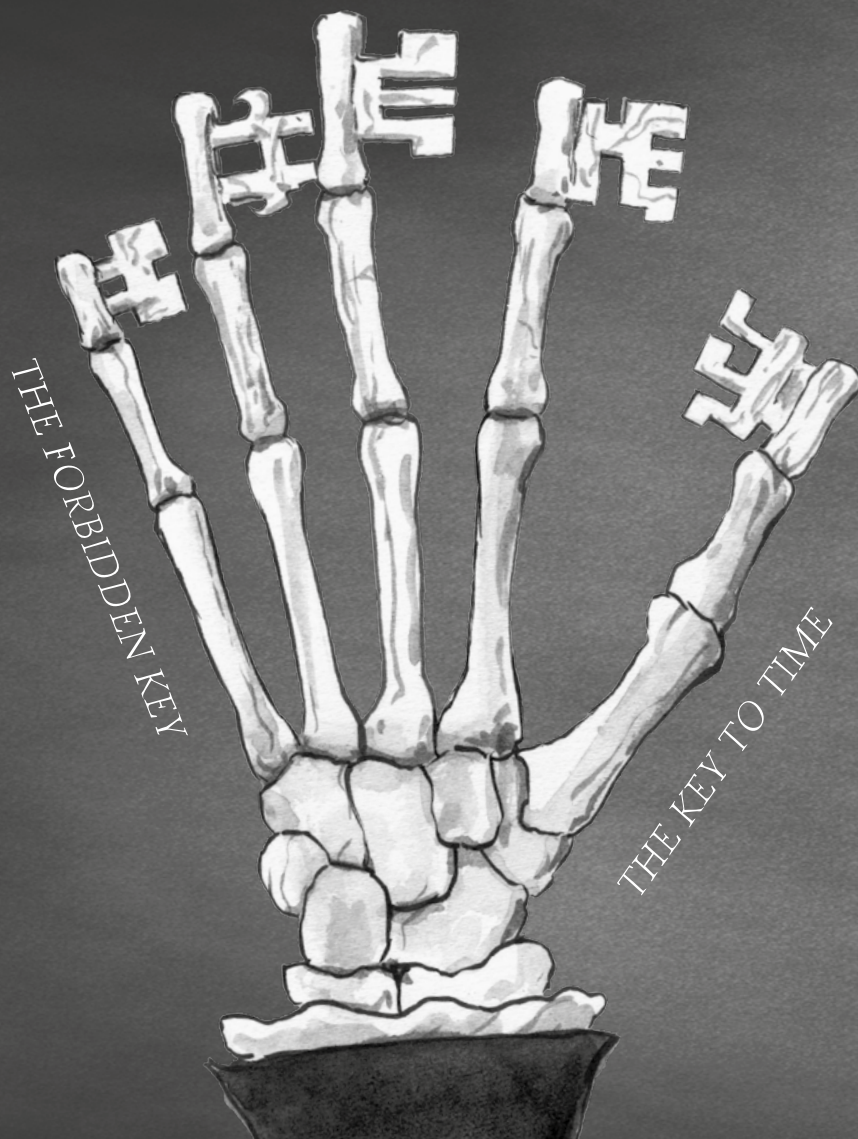
THE KEY
TO
REALITY

THE KEY
TO
DOORMINION

THE KEY
TO A
QUICK
GETAWAY

THE KEY
TO
POSSIBILITY

THE KEY
TO THE
KINGDOM





Greetings! To dallywangers,
ringdingers and snuggabouts!
To the imaginary and the
unimaginary! To the living, the
dead and everyone in between, my name is
Keys ... Skeleton Keys.

Many moons ago, I began my existence as
an IF – an imaginary friend. Then, one day,
I suddenly became as real as kneecaps! I had
become what we in the business of imagining
call *unimaginary*.

But I am more than just a handsome bag o'
bones. For these fantabulant fingers of mine
can open doors to hidden words and secret
places ... doors to the limitless realm of all
the imagination.

Ol' Mr Keys has seen all there is worth
hearing, heard everything there is to see
and forgotten more stories than I shall ever
remember. Oh, the things I know would curl
your toes! The stories I could tell you...

But of course *stories* are why you are here. Well, have I got a hum-dum-dinger for you, set to blow your mind out of your nose-holes. This unimaginary tale is so truly unbelievable that it must, unbelievably, be true.

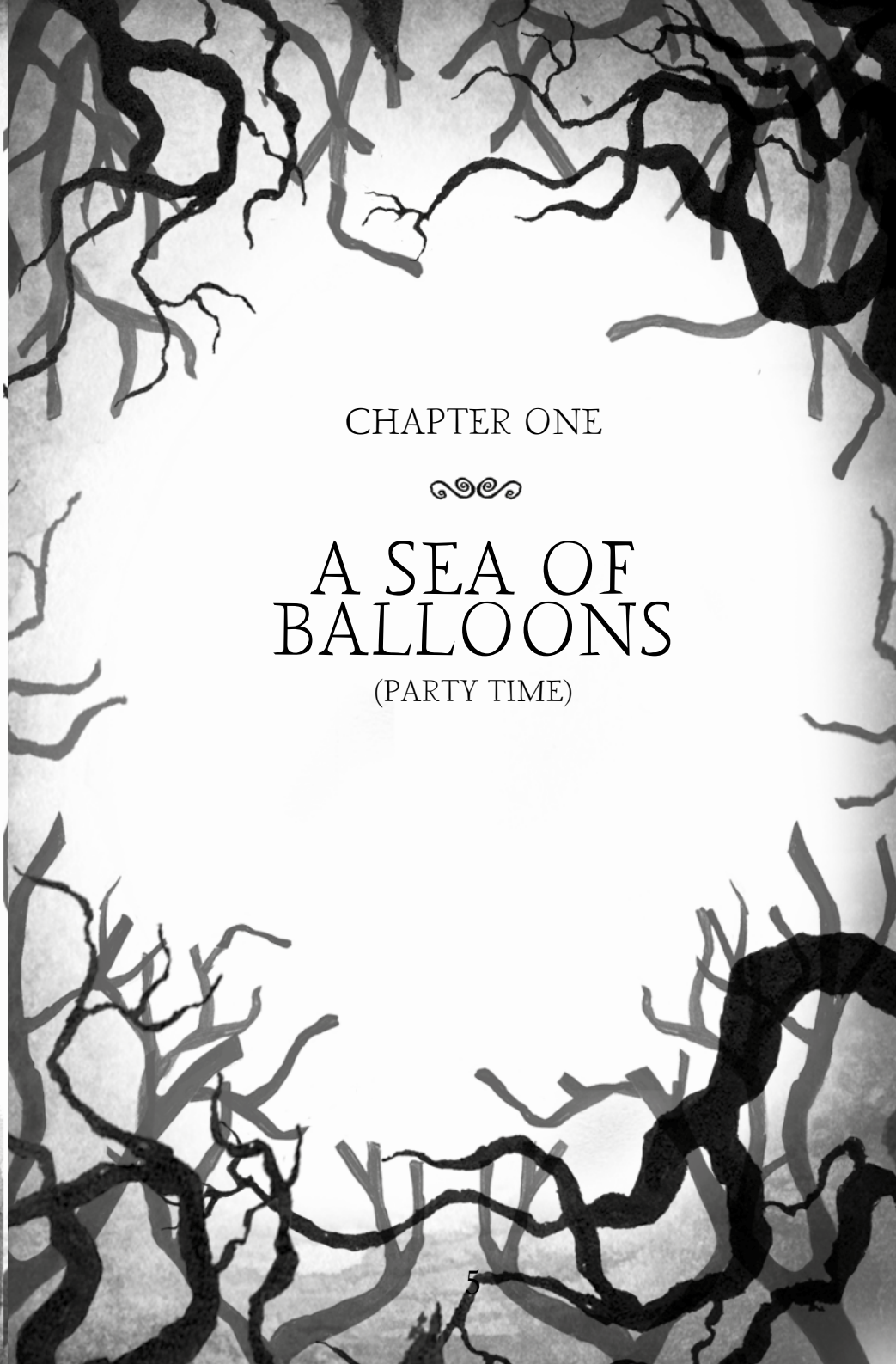


Meet Ben Bunsen. Now, I know what you are thinking – why should I care a jot about this little ankle-sprout? He may have a head and toes and soul as any person might possess, but he is certainly no dashing, key-fingered skeleton with a hundred adventures under his belt and a hundred more to come! To look at him, you might imagine he is unremarkable – and, in

truth, most people would agree with you. Ben spends his days being ignored by other children. Why? He is not certain – for, if he was, he might attempt to do something about it.

As it is, Ben has only one friend in all the world. But since this is no ordinary tale, his is no ordinary friend. You see, the most remarkable thing about Ben's friend is that he a figment of Ben's wild imagination. And strange things can happen when imaginations run wild...

Our story begins in a small town on a small island on the second Sunday of February. As mist rolls in over the ocean and the gulls caw in the darkening sky we see a higgledy-piggledy house – tall, crooked and but a stone's throw from a winding beach. It is Ben Bunsen's tenth birthday, and preparations are under way for a party to remember...



CHAPTER ONE



A SEA OF BALLOONS

(PARTY TIME)



*"A little imagination
goes a long way."*

—SK



"How do I look?" Ben asked the Gorblimey. Since the Gorblimey was a figment of his imagination, there was no reply. All the same, Ben waited a moment and then said, "Thanks."

It was the first time Ben had ever had a birthday party. Invitations had been sent to almost every child on Grundy Island. Ben's mum and dad had spent all day getting the house ready. Multi-coloured balloons covered every inch of the floor ... bunting hung from the ceiling ... cakes, crisps, biscuits

and a rainbow of fizzy drinks awaited the guests, not to mention gifts and games and an honest-to-goodness firework display in the garden. This was going to be a party to remember.

“One minute to go,” he said, checking his watch. Ben had been in his bedroom in the attic of their higgledy-piggledy house for half an hour. His dad had suggested Ben wait there until the guests arrived, and then make ‘a big entrance’ accompanied by cheering and party poppers.

Ben pressed his ear against the floor, trying in vain to listen for knocks at the door or the bustle of excited guests.

The seconds ticked away to half past three.
Party time.

“Wish me luck,” Ben said. He ruffled his jet-black hair, which immediately fell back into its bowl-like shape. Then he

straightened his very best jumper (the one with the big stripe, which his imaginary friend assured him brought out his eyes) and, with his heart thumping in his chest, clambered down the ladder from his bedroom to the landing. The spiral staircase was all that stood between him and his first ever birthday party. Ben imagined the faces of his classmates waiting for him to appear. Cliff Pitchfork, the tallest boy in school ... Hattie Blanket, with her excellent laugh ... Ichabod Twist, who knew magic ... they had all found it easy to ignore him until now.

Ben often wondered why he had no friends. For as long as he could remember, Ben’s dad had insisted that the family move house every year, relocating from one seaside town to another. Was that why he’d never made friends – because he knew his friendships

could not last? Or maybe, Ben thought, he just wasn't the sort of person that *could* make friends. Not real ones, at least.

But what if this was the day all that changed? What if one of his classmates actually wanted to be his friend? Or what if they *all* wanted to be his friend? Ben hardly dared to imagine it ... but imagine he did. He swelled with confidence as he made his way down the curling stairs and waded into a sea of balloons.

"I'm here," he said aloud. "I'm—"

Ben stopped. There, in the middle of the room, knee-deep in balloons with party hats perched on their heads, stood his mum and dad...

...and no one else.



For a moment Ben wondered if everyone was hiding. Perhaps his classmates were crouched behind sofas and chairs or hiding under balloons, ready to jump out and wish him a happy birthday. But then Ben's dad said:

"I'm so sorry, Benjy. But it doesn't look like anyone's going to make it."

Ben felt his thumping heart sink into the depths of his chest.

"N-no one came?" he muttered.

"I phoned around," said Ben's dad, rubbing the back of his head. "But no one answered."

"I'm sure they would have loved to come," added Ben's mum, trying to sound positive.

"They're probably just ... busy."

Not for the first time, Ben pushed his feelings deep into the pit of his stomach. And he *imagined*.

"It ... it doesn't matter," he said softly. "The

Gorblimey's here."

"The who?" asked Ben's dad. "Oh, *him*."

Even though the Gorblimey was imaginary, Ben could picture him quite clearly – he was a sort of monster: hairy, round and as black as an eclipse, with kind, bright eyes, curved horns and a yellow-orange candle flame forever flickering in the air just above his head. The Gorblimey was loyal and kind and could shrink to fit in Ben's pocket and bounce right over a house and eat almost anything. And, most importantly, he was always there when Ben needed him.

"No, no, that won't do at all – this is a real party for real people!" Ben's dad continued. He urgently began gathering up balloons, horns and party poppers. "Come on, let's turn this into a door-to-door party!" he declared and began stuffing handfuls of biscuits into his pockets. "Knock, knock! Who's there?"

Ben's birthday, that's who! We'll take Ben's birthday to every house on the island!"

"Bob, that's literally the worst idea you've ever had," tutted Ben's mum as Ben's dad blew loudly on a party horn. "And it was your idea to move us to this grotty little island."

"It's OK, really," said Ben, desperate to stop the inevitably humiliating door-to-door party before it started. "The Gorblimey's here. We can—"

"NO!" Ben's dad suddenly interrupted. "This isn't a party for *imaginary* friends. You're ten now, Ben. You're too *old* for this sort of nonsense."

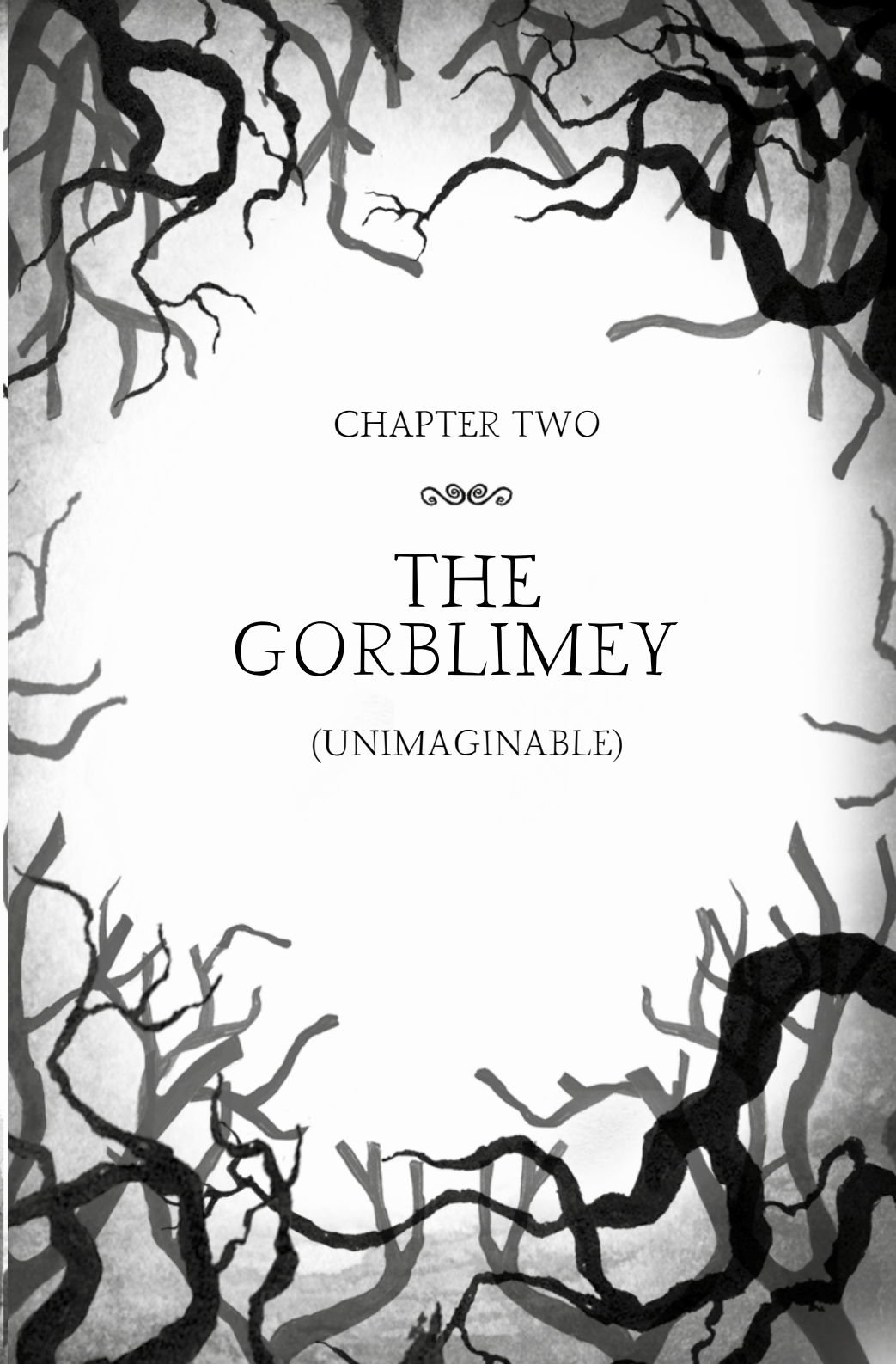
"Says the man who chooses to spend every free moment alone, building a boat out of matchsticks," noted Ben's mum.

"It's not a boat, it's a *ship* – and that's not the point," said Ben's dad. "Ben needs real friends."

"If he had real friends, he wouldn't need imaginary ones," insisted Ben's mum.

"If he didn't have imaginary friends, maybe the other children would have wanted to come to his party!" snapped Ben's dad.

That was too hard for Ben to hear. With tears in his eyes, he ran towards the front door in a flurry of flying balloons. Ben heard his dad cry, "I didn't mean— Wait!" but with a slam of the door, Ben was gone.



CHAPTER TWO



THE GORBLIMEY

(UNIMAGINABLE)



"An IF is the creation
of a wild imagination!"

—SK



Ben ran outside into the cold, damp fog and all the way down to the beach. At the edge of the water he slumped into the knee-soaking sand and stared out over the sea.

Unlike his dad, who could spend hours staring wistfully over any stretch of grey, mist-laden water, Ben *hated* the ocean. It was so huge that it always made him feel small and alone. So Ben did what he always did when he felt small and alone – he imagined the Gorbliney was right there with him.

But this time, Ben screwed up his eyes and imagined harder than ever before. You could say he let his imagination run wild. For the first time, he imagined that the Gorblimey was *real*.

Ben opened his eyes ... and found himself still utterly alone. Not even the distant caw of a seagull could be heard. Ben stared at nothing, listened to the faint sound of waves lapping against his knees, and sighed.

Then, through the lazy, rolling fog, Ben noticed a dot of flickering light suddenly appear. It looked like a candle flame, hovering in the air, just above the glistening waves. Ben peered at the light as it moved slowly towards him. Then he glanced down.

There was something in the water – a dark shape, just beneath the surface.

And it was heading straight for him.

Ben froze as the shape rose slowly out of the

water. The fog was so thick that he couldn't make out what it was. He felt glued to the spot as the shape moved slowly towards him. This thing was alive, and as dark as shadows. At first Ben thought it was a dog, or perhaps a person, but there was no way it could be either. Ben held his breath, gazing slowly upwards. The thing loomed over him, peering through large eyes. Ben gasped and slapped his hand over his mouth.

"Can't be..." he whispered.

But it was.

It was the Gorblimey.

The monster was exactly as Ben had imagined him: a plump, hairy thing about a head taller than Ben and covered from head to toe in sodden fur so black that it seemed to drink any light that touched it. Coiled horns framed round, curious eyes, which almost seemed to glow. The Gorblimey let out a

gentle chirping sound like a bird, and his candle flame flickered a bright yellow.

"H-how?" was all Ben could mutter as he got to his feet.

The Gorblimey let out a cheerful purr. Ben held out his hand. As ink-black fur enveloped his fingers, Ben laid his palm upon the monster's round belly. It was as warm as an electric blanket, and Ben could feel two hearts beating slowly.

The Gorblimey was real.

"Where did you come from?" Ben uttered, not quite able to believe his own eyes.

The Gorblimey hooted, twice. Then he held out a furry finger and pressed it lightly upon Ben's forehead.

"Did ... did I imagine you?" Ben whispered.

The Gorblimey nodded and the flame above his head glowed a warm, happy orange.

Without thinking, Ben waved his hand over the flame. It was ice-cold. Ben gasped again and the Gorblimey let out a low, rumbling chuckle.



“Ben!” came a sudden cry from the fog.
Then another voice.

“Ben, are you out here?”

“Mum! Dad!” said Ben as the Gorblimey hooted nervously. Ben took the monster’s hairy hand. “It’s OK, it’s my mum and dad,” he assured him. “They’re not going to believe what’s—”

“There you are!” Ben’s dad cried, finally spotting Ben through the mist. “Benjy, come back inside and let’s talk ab— AAARGH!”

As the Gorblimey emerged through a haze of fog, Ben’s dad let out a scream that was so loud it scattered seagulls from nearby chimneys. The Gorblimey immediately panicked. His candle flame flashed a bright blue and he scooped Ben in his arms.

Ben heard a strange, high-pitched whistle emanating from every inch of the monster. He sounded like he was about to pop. Then:

POOOOOOM!

The Gorblimey launched them high into the air as if he’d been fired out of a cannon. By the time Ben’s mum had called his name, both he and the Gorblimey had disappeared into the clouds.

