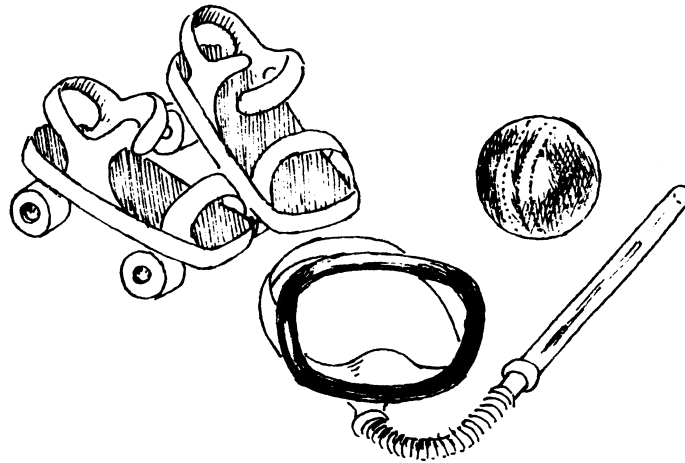


Chapter one

Mark woke first and lay, still half asleep, trying to remember. Then he woke properly and it all came back to him. He jumped out of bed and ran to the window. He flung it wide open and stuck his head far out.

What a morning! The sun was just rising behind the trees at the bottom of the garden. The dew on the grass sparkled like silver, except for the golden patches where the daffodils grew. The birds were singing wildly, madly. Mark dressed quickly and opened his suitcase to see that nothing had been forgotten. He pushed aside the clothes that Mum had packed. First he checked the really important things: his swimming trunks, underwater goggles



and snorkel (he was determined to swim, however much Gran said it was too cold). Then he checked his roller skates and cricket ball. His bat and shrimping net would be strapped to his case and he would carry his football under his arm. Everything was in order.

He thought he had better wake Carol in case she made them late, fussing over her packing. He went to her room where she

lay asleep, her hair spread all over the pillow. He pulled the bedclothes off her and tweaked her toes. She sat up, started to be cross and then remembered too.

“It’s today, isn’t it?” she said.

“Of course, stupid! You don’t think it’s yesterday, do you?”

She ran to the window. “It’s a lovely day,” she said. “I’m going to say goodbye to the rabbits.”

Carol had already packed her things the day before, leaving her spade and bucket on top of her case. She pulled on her jeans and shirt. Then she ran downstairs and into the garden. She picked some dandelion leaves as a goodbye present and disappeared round the corner of the house. Mark was left alone.

I’d better wake Mum and Dad, he thought. We’ve got to get to Gran’s by

lunchtime and Mum and Dad take so long to get dressed! He decided to take them tea in bed. He made it very carefully, warming the pot and pouring the milk into the jug. When he reached his parents' bedroom, he kicked the door open. His mum and dad both opened their eyes, blinked and yawned.



“What on earth do you think you’re doing, Mark?” said Dad. “It’s only quarter past six!”

Mark put the cups down on the bedside table.

“You said you wanted to start early,” he said.

“I didn’t mean *this* early!” said Dad with another yawn. But he and Mum sat up and drank their tea. It was cosy and still half dark in the bedroom. Mark suddenly wondered if he wanted to go away after all.

“You’ll tell us when the baby comes, won’t you?” he said. “I hope it’s a boy. Carol’s rubbish at cricket.”

Mum laughed. “It can’t be long now,” she said. “But Carol wants a girl, so someone is going to be disappointed. Dad and I have decided to be pleased with



whatever comes. Anyhow, where is Carol?”

“Saying goodbye to the rabbits. Dad, you’d better get up, and you too, Mum. You take *ages* dressing. I’ll make some toast.”

Dad grumbled a little but decided that it would not hurt to start early. “The sooner we go, the sooner I’ll come back,” he said to Mum as he began shaving.

Mark had made the toast long before his parents had finished upstairs. They appeared at last and Carol came in from the garden, sniffing and looking sad.

“I’ll take great care of your rabbits, Carol,” said Mum, “so don’t worry. There’ll be wild rabbits in the field opposite Gran’s.”

“And squirrels in the wood,” said Dad.

“And lambs at the farm,” said Carol, cheering up.

“And the old horse who sticks his head over the gate,” said Mark. “I’m going to ride him this time. Mr Cobbley said I could.”

“I want to ride too,” said Carol.

“No, you’re too little. Mr Cobbley said so.”

“He didn’t.”

“He did.”

Carol stamped her foot. "He *didn't!*"

"Now stop it!" said Mum. "If you argue like that at Gran's, she'll pack you off home. Mark, you're the eldest. You must promise me you won't argue with your sister."

"I'll try not to," said Mark. "But it's Carol who starts it!"

"I do not!" said Carol.

"You *do!*"

"I do *not!*"

"STOP IT!" Dad spoke so loudly they both stopped at once. They stuffed their mouths with toast and marmalade and gave each other a kick under the table.

"Now let's go," said Dad. "It was a good idea waking us so early, Mark. If we start at once we shall be almost on the motorway before the rush hour."

The children hugged Mum and bundled into the back of the car, leaning out to wave and blow kisses. The streets were still quiet and the shops shut. In a very short time they had left the town behind and were out in the country. Fields were starred with daisies and the trees were bursting into leaf. She couldn't hear them above the noise of the car, but Carol knew that all the birds were singing as they built their nests. She looked out of the window and smiled. It was going to be a wonderful holiday.