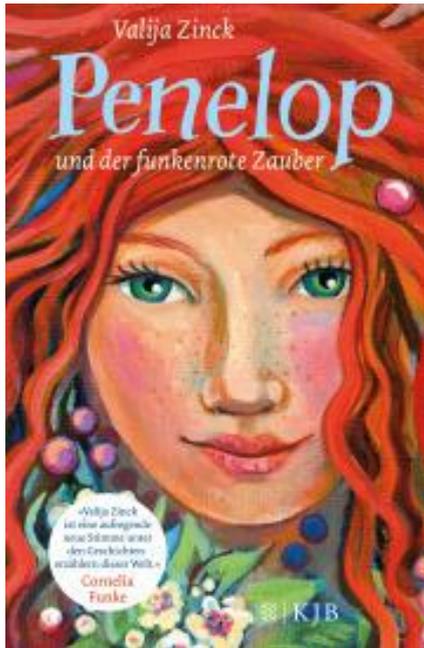


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Penelop und der funkenrote Zauber

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Chapters 1 - 7

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Penelope Gowinder

Penelope Gowinder was a strange sort of girl. Her ash-grey hair always fell in her face and she smelled of fire.

If her mother wanted her for something, Penelope would sometimes hear her calling before Mrs Gowinder had uttered a word. So she'd say,

'Yes Mum, I've already washed my hair today,' or 'Ok, ok, I'll take Granny up a cup of coffee now.'

As far as Penelope was concerned, her ash-grey hair was perfectly normal; it had never been any different. She hardly noticed the smell of fire either and she didn't think it was strange that she could hear things being said before they were spoken. The only thing that seemed odd to her was her birthday. It was in the summer, on the thirteenth of August. And every year on the thirteenth of August, it rained. Always. No one except Penelope noticed the rain. And everyone except Penelope who did notice had an umbrella or wore a cape. That's why they didn't know that the rain on the thirteenth of August wasn't actually wet.

When Penelope mentioned the rain to her mother on her seventh birthday, her mother turned pale and said sharply, 'I don't want to hear another word. I've had more than enough oddity for one life!' Although Penelope asked her what she was talking about, Mrs Gowinder refused to say anymore and Penelope was surprised to see a tear sparkling in her mother's eye. She loved her mother very much, so she never mentioned the curious rain again. Not on her eighth birthday or any other time.

Penelope and her mother lived with Granny Erlinda and Cucuu the cat in a little draughty house beside the flooded forest at the end of the village. Penelope loved everything about the house even though there was hardly any room. But most of all, she loved the way it looked as if it was made out of dragon skin. The house used to be bright red but Penelope's mother had painted it dark green. Every year, the summer rain washed some of the green paint off the wooden walls and more and more red shimmered through until the house was spotted red all over.

Penelope's father didn't live in the dragon house. In fact he didn't live anywhere. He died when Penelope was very small and she missed him although she had never really known him. Cucuu the cat was the only thing left that had belonged to him and apart from that all Penelope had to remember him by was a tatty old black and white photo that was worn with age. On it, you could see a laughing man with long hair who was holding Penelope's mother in his arms. She looked much younger without any wrinkles on her face and with a round baby bump that was Penelope in the making. Apart from that, there was nothing in the whole house to remind anyone of him. Mrs Gowinder had given away all his possessions because they made her so sad. Penelope thought it was a pity. She would have liked to know more about her father. The things he had owned would have told stories about him. Sometimes, if she asked about him, Granny Erlinda might say, 'It is a shame that man's not around anymore,' but her mother never talked about him.

Rainy Weather

On a murky Friday morning in April, Penelope woke up because something was crawling all over her nose.

‘Stop it Cucuu,’ she mumbled still half asleep. But then she realized that the furry hot water bottle lying across her feet must be the cat and that whatever was creeping up her nose seemed to have an awful lot of legs.

‘Swamp the cow!’ Penelope nearly jumped out of her skin. Disgusted, she swiped an enormous yellow and grey daddy-longlegs-spider off her face. ‘What do you think you are doing?!’

The daddy longlegs wobbled off as fast as its spindly legs would carry it and disappeared under the bed without saying a word.

‘And you’re rude, as well!’ Penelope actually rather liked spiders and creepy crawlies, just not ones sitting on her nose at six o’clock in the morning. She gave Cucuu who was still asleep a hard stare.

‘Do you call that protecting me? There’s me being attacked by a massive eight-legged beast and all you do is lie there snoring?’ Her father’s cat didn’t even bat an eye. Oh, I see, she thought, no one wants to talk to me today then? But the very next minute, Penelope heard a piercing cry echoing through the house. ‘Penelope, heeeeeeeelp!’

Ha! Her mother was still speaking to her. What had she done now? Had she let the milk boil over, or had she splashed a couple of drops of coffee over her dress? But as Penelope felt her way down the worn stairs there was no smell of burnt milk or ground coffee, and her mother lay curled up on the sofa fast asleep. Blast! She must have been hearing into the future again! It was quite baffling at times. Especially if it took several days for something she’d heard to happen. Penelope found that very confusing indeed.

Quietly, without waking her mother, she started to get breakfast ready. Verbena tea and buttered rolls. It’s what she always made when she was by herself. Mrs Gowinder was a clarinet player who worked in a theatre in the city. If she had an evening performance, she often didn’t get home until long after midnight. The next day, she would usually sleep in and Penelope would have to have breakfast on her own, like today. She took a bite of

bread roll and watched the raindrops running down the window panes in zig-zag lines. Pity it's not birthday rain! I'm going to get soaked going to the bus today, Penelope thought and had another sip of tea.

When she left the house, an icy wind blew into her face. She ducked down her head and fetched her bicycle out of the shed. The lane that led from the red and green spotted house to the village was a bumpy muddy path with herbs growing along the edges. Penelope usually pushed her bike until she came to the surfaced road at the top of the lane where the old copper beech tree stood. Then she'd jump on and pedal up the steep hill to the village.

This morning when she reached the road, a tractor she'd never seen before came hurtling towards her. It was clattering along at high speed. As Penelope swerved on her bike to avoid a huge puddle, it ploughed straight through the middle of it. A huge wave of water and mud sprayed everywhere. Penelope felt as if she'd just been pulled straight out of a muddy pond.

'Silly old soup-face! I'll get you, you wait and see!' she shouted and wiped her face. Was nothing going to go right today? Creepy crawlies on her nose and then a filthy tractor shower.

'And what about you?' she asked the road crossly. 'Couldn't you make him swerve out of the way?'

Of course, the road didn't answer. And Penelope cycled on up the hill to the bus stop. 'Did you go for a swim in the flooded forest?' the bus driver smiled as she climbed in. It was Penelope's turn not to say anything.

When she got to school, she pulled off her wet clothes and hung them over a cupboard door. She put on a smelly T-shirt and shorts that she found in her gym-bag. She wasn't dressed for a cold April day, but it was better than nothing she decided. It would have to do for now. She wasn't a delicate little thing. But when her teeth started chattering so loudly that she disturbed Mr Bumpf's lesson and he started drawing wobbly lines instead of straight ones, he shouted:

'Enough of this chattering! Boys and girls of the lower fifth, your poor maths teacher and our noble Miss Gowinder require your assistance. Is

anyone willing to donate a layer of clothing to prevent the onset of pneumonia?’

He should really have asked if anyone didn’t want to help. The response was overwhelming. A few minutes later, she found herself sitting at her desk dressed in a half-silk vest, a mint-green roll-neck top, a hoodie, a red and orange striped waist-coat, and a black scarf, a scratchy pair of tights, a bow, headband and a silver ring with a rose-petal pattern, one darned sock and a pair of beige leggings.

‘All we need now is a pair of shoes,’ Mr Bumpf said. He was joking, but two skinny boys with straw blond hair sitting in the back row jumped up and hopped to the front. They had the same gap in their teeth, the same cheeky grin and the same loud blue gym-shoes which they offered Penelope – a size five left foot and a size six right one.

‘We can do a three-legged walk until tomorrow,’ Pietch said and he and Tom hobbled back to their desk arm in arm. Everyone laughed. Penelope didn’t know what to say. Although she was sweating in all the clothes, and the shoes were far too big, she felt incredibly lucky. Nothing else mattered.

The rest of the morning was quiet. By the time she went home for lunch, her own clothes were almost dry and she could have put them back on if she had wanted. But she didn’t want to stop the lovely feeling of being cared for by the whole class.

The Flooded Forest

The rain had lessened and turned into a faint drizzle. Penelope took the short cut through the flooded forest. It took her twenty-one minutes to walk through the village from the bus stop to the dragon house and only twelve if she went through the woods. If you've ever been in a flooded forest, you'll know that there are only a few very narrow walkways which you must never leave whatever happens. If you do, you'll sink into the swamp right up to your neck - or even further - immediately. Anyone lucky enough to get out alive has to walk in bare feet, because the swamp sucks the boots off your feet, swallows them and never gives them back.

Although Penelope pushed her bicycle over the gnarled tree roots with great care, the tyre almost slid off the path because it was so slippery today. She gripped hold of the handlebars more tightly, clenched her toes in her gym-shoes and carefully rode round the next tree only to stop with a shock.

There was something lying on the path in front of her: Something that shouldn't be lying in a flooded forest; something that belonged across someone's shoulders. Beautiful dark green material covered in pink roses. Penelope recognized her mother's scarf at once.

What was it doing lying on the path? she wondered and picked it up. She looked all around but there were only trees and rushes and the wind playing in her hair.

'Mum?' she called softly, 'are you there?'

No one answered. Penelope stuffed the scarf into her waist-coat pocket and took a final look around before cycling on as fast as the wet path would allow.

She knocked on the spotted red and green front door with clammy fingers, but there were no sounds coming from inside.

'Mum!' Penelope called, 'Granny Erlinda! Open up. Please.' There was no answer. Penelope ran around the house and peered through all the

windows. There were no saucepans standing on the cooker, no sign of Mrs Gowinder practising the clarinet, or Granny Erlinda counting her coins. Just old grey Cucuu curled up in the armchair.

What is this all about? Penelope wondered and sat down on the little front-door step. She started to click her tongue without noticing. This always happened when Penelope started thinking hard. She couldn't help it and it could be annoying sometimes.

'Thank goodness, here you are at last!'

Suddenly Granny Erlinda was standing on the step. Penelope would have recognized her granny's tubby tummy and scruffy mackintosh anywhere, but apart from that, Erlinda looked totally different. Her skin was grey, her dyed brown hair all messy, she had puffy eyes and her nose was red. What was going on?

'Your mother's had an accident,' Granny Erlinda sat down on the little step beside Penelope.

'What?' Penelope leapt up.

'Calm down. Don't worry. It's not too bad. We can go and see her right away.'

On the long bus ride to the hospital, Granny Erlinda explained that her mother had been hit by a tractor. Although she hadn't broken anything, she could only stay awake for a few minutes and then she fainted again.

'Was Mum in the flooded woods,' – click – 'today?'

'No, why do you ask?' Granny Erlinda wanted to know.

'Because – oh never mind.' Penelope said and stared out of the window across the fields to the forest.

A new hairstyle

Over the next couple of weeks, Penelope only got to see her mother at the weekends and she felt very unhappy. The journey to hospital by bus took over two hours. It was too far during the week. When she got there, her mother was usually asleep. If she was awake, then she'd smile at Penelope bravely and say, 'I'm getting better. I'm feeling stronger already and I'll be home soon.'

Penelope really hoped so.

She also had to get used to Granny Erlinda's cooking skills. Although cooking and skill were two words that failed to describe the dusty dry liver dumplings and burnt fried eggs or anything her Granny managed to conjure up.

Recipe

Fried eggs a la Erlinda Erk

*Ingredients: two eggs
one pan
one collection of old coins*

Break the eggs into the frying pan on the hob (highest temp)

Then start counting coins

As soon as the smoke is well spread throughout the kitchen, turn off the hob, open the windows and start screaming

Serve the eggs as soon as they are stone cold.

Enjoy!

She also had to accept that it was almost impossible to find a loud blue shoe lace, and she got used to that, too. The lace from the left shoe she had borrowed had torn the next day. That must have happened in the swamp. Pietsch said he didn't need a new shoe lace because he had another orange one but that was out of the question for Penelope. If she borrowed

something, she always returned it. Even if it took a while. That seemed to be the case this time, too.

One Friday evening – Penelope had been in the hospital all afternoon, and the doctor had said that Mrs Gowinder would be able to come home the next day –that evening, Penelope was lying in bed when she suddenly realized that something was different. Something is missing, she thought, something that has always been here has disappeared. But she couldn't work out what it was. She switched on her bedside lamp and looked around. The table with the ornate legs was under the window as usual, the rustic brown arm chair stood where it always stood and obviously no one had moved the cupboard, or her bed seeing as she was lying in it.

Maybe it's something very small that I can't see right now, Penelope thought and yawned. I'll find out tomorrow. It's time to go to sleep now. She turned off the light again and stopped wondering what might be missing. When she was almost fast asleep, Cucuu slunk into the room, jumped onto the bed and snuggled under the blanket. A minute later she crawled back out again, padded up to Penelope's face and started sniffing.

'Stop it' Penelope mumbled and pushed her away. Cucuu miaowed and crawled back under the blanket. Penelope felt the lovely warmth of the cat's body across her feet and slipped off into the land of dreams. Not much later, Cucuu sneezed three times and Penelope mumbled in her sleep,

'It's the smell of fire – I've stopped smelling of fire!'

If you've spent your life smelling of fire and suddenly stop, it's hardly surprising if you get confused. The next morning, Penelope got totally confused but not because of the missing smell of fire. It happened when she went into the bathroom. The girl staring at her out of the mirror was someone she'd never seen before.

Of course that wasn't true. Of course it wasn't a stranger looking out of the mirror. It was Penelope after all. But the girl in the mirror didn't have lanky grey hair; she was a redhead with flaming curls.

'Who on earth are you?' Penelope asked the girl in the mirror.

The girl had the same little nose, the same dark green eyes and the same pale skin as her.

Penelope took hold of her hair and pulled a bunch of curls in front of her face. She blinked.

‘It’s not possible,’ she whispered. The mirror girl didn’t answer but she moved her lips. Penelope sat down on the toilet lid and forced herself to breathe calmly. She counted to ten three times. That’s what she always did if she needed to calm down. But this morning counting didn’t help. What was going on all of a sudden? No smell of fire, and all this fiery red hair instead. How did that happen? What could it mean?

Suddenly Penelope missed her mother, even more than she had missed her during the last few weeks. She wanted dive into her arms and lean her head against her chest. She wanted to listen to her mother’s heartbeat like she used to do when she was small. She wanted her mother to stroke her red hair and say, ‘Penny, sweet Pen, you’re my daughter and you smell wonderful just the way you are. Grey or red – it’s you inside.’ But that was the problem! Penelope wasn’t sure nothing had changed inside. She felt totally different. All light and airy and far more awake than usual. There was a surge of energy in her middle that seemed to travel right through to her spine. It wasn’t exactly a bad feeling; it was just completely different from normal and so unfamiliar that it was all a bit frightening.

Cucuu came creeping into the bathroom, stared at her and swept around her legs. Penelope bent down. She was glad that the cat was there. She stroked its grey fur and wiped a tear off her cheek. Cucuu dug her nose into her hand. That meant she was hungry and wanted Penelope to come downstairs and put some food in her cat bowl.

‘It’s all right my dear.’ Penelope stood up straight and took a deep breath. Right. If Cucuu could behave as if it’s just an ordinary morning, then she could too.

Energetically, she took the comb down from the mirror ledge and pulled it through her red mop of hair. She washed her face with cold water and then went down stairs to the kitchen, put cat food in the cat's bowl, verbena in the tea pot. What else? Luckily it was a Saturday so she didn't have to go to school. But she wanted to go outside just the same. She desperately wanted to go to the forest or to the stone circle, or simply race across the open fields. Anything rather than sitting indoors thinking. Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

'In you come, whoever you are,' Penelope called. And the postman walked into the dragon house.

'I've got a parcel for our Mrs Erlinda Erk.' He set down a huge parcel and wiped his brow. 'And the usual letters.' He put two letters on top of the parcel. 'Right, I'd better be off. Lovely hair colour by the way. Daring but dazzling.' And off he went.

'Didn't you forget something?' Penelope called after him. 'A letter? The one in the dark envelope?'

'Sorry?' The postman turned back. 'I don't think so,' he said and started digging in his sack. And there really was a dark grey envelope he hadn't noticed before.

'Holy smoke! How did you know?' He frowned, but Penelope just shrugged her shoulders and so he gave her the letter and hurried off, pushing his bicycle up the muddy lane.

This is a letter from one of my kind, Penelope thought and clicked her tongue. She didn't really know what she actually meant by 'one of my kind,' but she had a feeling that the letter was bad news.

To Lucia and Penelope Gowinder it said on a printed label on the front of the envelope and another label said *From L. Gowinder*. 'L. Gowinder'. Who could that be? She didn't have any relatives. Just a great uncle. But his name was Benno Herbst. Someone she'd never heard of who had the same name had written a letter to her and her mother. A letter in an ugly envelope.

‘All right then,’ Penelope muttered, ‘I suppose I’d better open it if I want to find who this L. Gowinder is.’ But then she stopped. The letter was addressed to her and her mother, too. Was it all right to open it on her own? ‘I’ll just take a tiny peek,’ she said to herself, and held the envelope under the steam of the kettle. ‘If I open it with steam, I can seal it up again and Mum won’t even notice.’ Cucuu miaowed disapprovingly, arched her back and whipped her tail through the air.

‘Calm down,’ Penelope told her crossly, ‘it’s not going to turn and bite!’ The flap of the envelope came undone. She opened it. What was this? She couldn’t see a letter or a card. There was a five euro note inside the envelope but that was all.

‘Tut!’ Penelope said. ‘What is this supposed to mean?’

‘Penelopeeeee!’ A shrill voice echoed through the house. Oma Erlinda was standing on the stairs. She was wearing a pale linen nightie and her face was completely white. Penelope quickly sealed the envelope again and hid it under the other letters.

‘Your hair. Heavens above! Just look at your hair!’ Her grandmother was staring at her as if there was a villain standing in the kitchen instead of herself.

Ah yes, that’s right. Her red hair! She had completely forgotten about it what with the money and the letter and everything else going on. She wasn’t going to get wound up. ‘My hair looks nice, doesn’t it? That’s what the postman told me. Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘Someone has seen you looking like that?’ her grandmother exclaimed. ‘Heavens above!’

Penelope couldn’t believe her ears. She stamped her foot crossly, whirling dust that had collected over the past few weeks up into the air. I can’t take this, she thought. Granny spends all day in bed and then all she ever does when she gets up is make a fuss. Anyway, can’t she ask me how I feel about it first? And ...

‘We’ll cut it off. I’ll fetch the scissors,’ Granny Erlinda said and headed off to the bathroom.

‘Are you serious?’ Penelope was really cross now. ‘Cut off what you like, but you’re not having my lovely new hair.’ She ran out of the house and slammed the door with a bang. She leapt down the steps and charged across the fields towards the forest. She jumped across a ditch and almost stumbled. I just have to get away from here, as far away as possible. A deer stepped out of the forest, but Penelope took no notice. She stormed across the dewy- wet grass as if she were flying. As if her feet weren’t touching the grass or the soil below. Her flaming red hair streamed behind her glowing in the sun like molten gold.

A Gloomy Homecoming

It was almost dark when Penelope got back to the dragon house. Granny Erlinda had already gone to town to pick up Penelope's mother. There was a small yellow note lying on the kitchen table.

We'll be back late. Go on to bed. Sincerely G. E.

Sincerely G.E.? What kind of tone was that? It certainly didn't sound very friendly, Penelope thought. She made herself a toasted onion sandwich and drank some water from the tap. Well, she'd have her mother back tomorrow. She'd be there to stroke her hair and plait it in two red plaits. They'd go for a walk in the woods holding hands and Granny Erlinda or G.E. as she seemed to be called now – could stay at home for all she cared, cutting holes in her linen nightie and staring at her coin collection. She could be as unfriendly as she liked, Penelope wouldn't care two hoots.

With this in mind she went to the bathroom and got washed. She stood in front of the mirror and studied her hair. How shiny it was all of a sudden and how soft! It was like a red veil framing her face and shielding her as it fell across her shoulders and down her back. Only this morning she had been so shocked by her appearance and now she couldn't imagine having ever looked any different. She felt light and free. The energy that had been burning inside her this morning had turned into a steady stream. Cucuu came into the bathroom and pawed her leg.

'It's all right, I'm coming,' she laughed and followed her cat across the creaking floorboards to her bedroom and into bed. When she was nearly asleep, she heard the front door opening. She leapt out of bed – 'Mummy!!!' – and ran out of her bedroom. But then she stopped. Her mother was shouting! Penelope heard her cross the kitchen with quick hurried steps.

‘Where is the letter? Only five euros you say? I can’t believe it. Is he trying to make me mad now after everything else? What is he thinking? Can you tell me that, Mother? That blasted man. If only I’d never ...’

‘Then you’d not have Penelope,’ Granny Erlinda interrupted her. She’s the apple of your eye. You always say so. And he was the love of your life, at the time. Even if you don’t think so now.’

Then it went quiet, all you could hear was the ticking of the clock. What were they talking about? Which blasted man? Which great love? And what did it have to do with the five euros?

‘And by the way, seeing as you are so het up, I might as well tell you everything.’

‘What else?’ Penelope’s mother sounded quite shrill.

‘Well, it’s ... it’s ... Penelope’s hair. There’s a touch of red. Not much. She hasn’t even noticed yet, but you should definitely ...’

‘For goodness sake,’ her mother yelped. ‘I got out of hospital just in time by the looks of things. It’s a complete disaster.’

Disaster? What disaster? Why for goodness sake? For the second time today Penelope started to get cross. She had thought her mother would be pleased about her hair. And now she was talking about disaster. The urge to run downstairs had disappeared. Instead there was a lump in her throat. She crept back to bed and pulled the blanket up to her nose. A wild choir of voices was hammering in her head. Then you’d not have Penelope ... he was the love of your life ... that blasted man.

Could they have been talking about her father perhaps? But he was dead! How could he annoy her mother? *L. Gowinder* it said on the label. Could that be Leopold Gowinder? Leopold Arthur - that was her father’s name. Penelope’s tongue began to click so hard that her whole mouth started to ache. And why did G.E. say her hair was only a touch red? Had she gone colour blind? It was impossible to be a more blazing redhead. Suddenly she heard footsteps on the stairs. Penelope didn’t want to see anyone. She’d have to stop clicking her tongue at once, or else her mother and G.E. would know she was only pretending to be asleep.

Think about something else or stop thinking at all, Penelope said to herself. Think about something boring, something really boring. Field mushrooms, wood mushrooms, horse mushrooms ...

Click, click. Ink caps, puffballs, toadstools ... *click.* The footsteps grew nearer and stopped outside her door. Carrots and kale, jam without sugar ... the door knob turned ... bugleweed, buttercup, sorrel, sage. There! She'd done it! Penelope's tongue clicked one more time and then stopped. The door opened and Mrs Gowinder crept into the dark room.

'Penny darling?' Penelope didn't answer; she stayed as quiet as she could and tried to breathe calmly. Her mother sat down on the bed beside her and sighed quietly. She started to stroke Penelope's hair. That felt so good. How she'd missed her mother. She almost forgot how upset she was! *Crack!* The sound of a lid being opened. A strange yet familiar smell climbed up Penelope's nose. Then she felt her hair being stroked again. But it was different now. Her mother was doing something. Penelope sat up.

'What are you doing?' She turned on the little bedside lamp. Mrs Gowinder opened her mouth looking shocked. It was as if she'd been frozen stiff. She didn't move, she just stared at Penelope's hair. She was holding a brush covered in grey paste. And there was a huge bubbling jar on her lap which was obviously full of the paste. Smoke and fire and brimstone, the whole room was suddenly filled with the peculiar smell.

'Mum, what are you doing?' Penelope asked again. And because her mother still didn't reply, Penelope touched her hair where the brush had been. A grey lumpy paste stuck to her fingers and when she smelt them, her nose started to run and her eyes burned. Suddenly she understood. She realised in a flash what was going on.

'You dyed my hair? It was never grey, it was always lovely and red but you've been dying it with this stuff for years. And now the real colour has come back because you were gone so long.' She started to rub off the paste as fast as she could.

Her mother still hadn't moved.

'But why, Mum? Why?' Her mother still didn't move. Didn't say a word. Cucuu leapt onto Mrs Gowinder's lap and rubbed her head against her tummy.

‘It’s because you mean everything to me. I don’t want to lose you,’ Mrs Gowinder said in a whisper. Her eyes filled up with tears. She blinked and the tears ran down her cheeks.

Penelope flung her arms around her mother.

‘You won’t ever lose me. In fact, it’s the other way round! I feel like the real me with my red hair than I’ve ever done before. I’m more here than I’ve ever been. So don’t worry about losing me.’

But her mother only cried even more. And Penelope felt totally confused. She let go and pulled her knees up to her chin. Her heart was beating wildly; her tongue had started clicking again. Her red tresses fell across her knees. Why did her mother cry when she told her how great she felt with red hair? The moon moved out from behind a cloud. It shone into the room and cast the furniture, and her mother and her in a strange silvery light. And just like before, she understood. Somehow she knew that she wasn’t the only one in the family with hair like this. She had inherited it.

‘Tell me about Dad,’ she said quietly. Mrs Gowinder looked up and nodded slowly.

Love on First Sight

‘Your father and I met at an auction for an old run-down manor house,’ Penelope’s mother began to tell the story. ‘There were lots of people there to bid for the house, but I noticed this good-looking man in a dark coat straight away. He and I both couldn’t bid enough and when the auction was over he came and said, ‘we’ve both got lots of money left, why don’t we spend it together.’ There was such a gleam in his eyes, I couldn’t say no. We went for a long walk. We didn’t spend any money but we laughed all way.

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Everything this red-haired man said was so clear and everything he did seemed so right and proper. I didn’t notice that he was different at first; that the things he did were impossible. He plucked wild berries from the brambles for me although it was spring. He picked young leaves, held them to his cheeks and pressed them flat with his hands. The next moment butterflies flew out between his fingers. He put his hands round my waist, picked me up, spun around and before I knew it, we were sitting on the top branch of an old oak tree. He took me by the hand, looked at me and said, ‘We are going to be happy, you and me, and I’ll be here for you for as long as I live. Would you like that? Would you like to be my wife?’ I nodded, because deep down inside I knew he was the love of my life even though I didn’t know him at all.’

Penelope’s mother paused and plucked at her blouse. Her eyes had taken on a strange kind of shimmer. She stared out of the window into the darkness; then she took a deep breath and carried on talking.

‘The time we spent together was the happiest in my life. Everything was sweet and simple; even if things weren’t easy all the time, it seemed as if they were. As I said already, your father was different, and so there were times when he would go away. He had to meet his own people he’d say. Just for a short time, so as not to get too rusty. When he got back from these meetings he’d be brimming with energy and high spirits; he always seemed even more lively than before. His high spirits and laughter were always infectious. Then one day he returned as white as a sheet. He said hello and

went straight up to our bedroom. I heard strange noises, glasses clunking, hissing sounds and something exploding every now and then. When he came back downstairs his hair was as white as his face. His beautiful long red hair was as white as an old man's.

'What have you done?' I cried, I was horrified. But he smiled and held my hands in his and said

'I have made myself invisible.'

I couldn't tell if this was supposed to be a joke. If it was, I wasn't laughing. He held me tight.

'I've taken the colour out of my hair so that I can't be seen.'

'Well Leopold,' I said, 'I'm afraid it didn't work. I can see you quite clearly standing in front of me. Here you are, wearing a blue jumper and your hair is as white as snow.'

'That's not what I mean,' he said softly. 'I'm invisible for my own kind. They can still see me of course, but they can't sense me, they can't tell that I am one of them. And because they can't do that, they can't force me to do something I believe to be wrong.'

'Force? What do you mean? Who wants to force you to do anything?'

'Believe me Lucia, it's better if I don't tell you anything about it. At least not now. I want to spend my life with you. Just you. You are all that matters, you mean everything to me. I'm going to normal from now on. We'll move somewhere where no one knows us and where we can live in peace and quiet.'

And so we moved here. We bought this little house and painted it bright red. Once a month Leopold covered his hair with that odd paste and took away the colour and power that lay within. His hair stayed white and no one could find him. Only sometimes, when he was very sure that none of the people he was afraid of were anywhere near, he'd stop using the paste and let his red hair come back for a couple of hours. 'I have to do this every now and then, or else I'll stop developing, I'll stay stuck at the same level I am now,' he said and went off to the flooded forest to learn something new. How to take the weight off a stone, or how to tag his own shadow.'

Penelope was watching her mother intently. Her eyes were shining.

‘I was so happy. And then you were born, Penny and everything was perfect! When you came into our life, I thought the sun would never set again. You had deep dark eyes and your voice was as strong as a storm. Leopold loved you to bits. You didn’t have any hair yet, you were a little bald baby and he was almost bursting to see what colour it was going to be. But he never found out; he never saw your first ever fiery feathery red hair.

One dark stormy evening, he said ‘I have to go off again tomorrow. Is it all right to leave you and Penny alone for the day? Of course I didn’t mind at all, so he that evening he didn’t use the paste and the next day his hair was redder than the setting sun. As he went rushed out the door, it seemed like he was flying instead of walking. He waved, blew me a kiss and was gone. That was the last time I ever saw him.’

‘What?’ Penelope gasped. She was so caught up in her parents’ story, that she wasn’t expecting such an abrupt ending. ‘That can’t be true.’

‘That’s what I thought, too, at first - it can’t be true, it just can’t be. But the letter he sent me a few months later was pretty clear.’

‘What letter?’

‘The letter that said:

Dear Lucia,

You’ve always known that I’m different.

I’m sorry but while I was out in the forest, I met a woman like me. And suddenly I realised what I’d been missing for such a long time. I can’t pretend to be something I’m not, anymore. I want to be me, so I think it’s best if I leave. I’ll take care of Penelope.

Best wishes,

Leopold Arthur.

Her mother had slumped down on the bed, but now she straightened up. She looked at Penelope and shrugged her shoulders.

‘I cried for months, I prayed, I thought I was going to die - but I didn’t die because I had you. Here you were waiting to be fed, needing clean nappies and arms to hold you. Your laughter was a tonic for my broken heart. Then your hair started to grow and I thought I wouldn’t cope. Fiery

red hair just as lovely as your father's. I was scared because there was a chance you had inherited more than just his red hair. So I took the jar of ash-paste out of Leopold's cupboard and painted your head. Your hair turned grey as stone and I started to calm down. Then you grew older and started to hear things before they'd been said, and I knew that you really had inherited more from your father than just the colour of your hair. Penny, you must believe me, I didn't do this to hide all your abilities from you. I was just so frightened that you would end up leaving me the way your father did.'

Penelope took a deep breath. She felt as if she had stopped breathing hours ago.

'What happened next?' she asked.

'Nothing! That's it. He's gone, and he can stay gone. I don't want anything more to do with him.' Her mother's voice sounded hard and cold again.

'But what about the letter with the five euros?'

'How do you know about that? Oh never mind. It doesn't matter. Leopold sends you money once a month. Always on the seventh, just a grey envelope with money inside, never a card or anything personal. And this time he was trying to be funny and just sent five euros. My, how we laughed!'

Penelope didn't like the way her mother sounded. Of course she was angry with her father. He had deserted them both, after all, but she didn't want to hear her mother talk about him like that. It sounded odd. It didn't feel right.

'And you never wrote back?'

'I don't know his address, and if I did, I still wouldn't write to him.' Her mother stood up and went to leave the room.

'What about the stamps? What's the post mark?'

It's a place called Bogmoor. You should go to sleep dear. We'll talk some more tomorrow, all right? I'm tired.'

'Is the dry rain on my birthday something to do with Dad, too?'

'I really don't know. Go to sleep, Pen, please.'

Penelope nodded and turned off the light. Suddenly she had a father who was alive. She needed to get used to the idea. A father with red hair and

special powers, a father who loved to laugh and learn about new things, a father who lived in a place called Bogmoor and who sent her a letter every month.

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