

## The Mingins by Elizabeth Cordiner

'Haun it ower. Ye ken whit ah mean. Or ye'll be gettin it.'

Big Kenny stuck his face intae Jamesey's, an Jamesey could see each eyelash roond the greedy een, an the spit on his lips.

Bazzer an Deeks blocked Jamesey's wey, pushin him backwards till he fell.

Kenny raised his fists.

Jamesey haunded it ower.

'Thanks. Whit a pal, eh boys?'

An they laughed.

Jamesey hung his heid, looking at the grund till they were awa. He took a big breath, then went oot o the schule gates. He kent whaur tae go. He'd kept some o his money.

He'd go tae the back o the precinct, tae the mobile van.

Teeny hovered abune the van.

Tae the ordinary ee, she wis a tiny speck, a bricht wee spark, maybe the end o a firework that somebody had jist let aff.

But she kent she shouldnae be seen at a'.

Fur she shouldnae be there. She should be at hame, flyin through the trees in Boggy Wid or sittin among the yellae buttercups roond the burn.

Yet here she wis, in alien territory, richt in the middle o human- bein land.

This wis dangerous.

An it felt absolutely pure deid brilliant.

Jamesey stood readin the price list stuck on the van windae. Whit wid he

get? He didnae hae much denner money left. No noo that Big Kenny had had his share.

He delved intae his pooch, searchin for the coins. He micht hae enough fur a roll as weel as chips.

He offered up his pile o change tae the man at the coonter.

‘Whit’s a’ this, son? Ye been singin on the street?’

Jamesey blushed. He pushed his glesses further up his neb. It so wisnae his day, wis it? He wished, richt doon tae his buits, that he didnae blush.

Saftie, Big Kenny ca’ed him when he blushed.

Amang ither things.

He kent he should staund up tae Kenny. He’d been practisin. But daein yer death stare in the mirror at hame wisnae the same as bein in front o Kenny an his gang, a’ laughin at ye, an kickin yer schulebag.

His hert near stopped at the thocht.

He gien the van guy his death stare, jist tae try it oot, but the man wisnae lookin. He wis fillin the roll wi the hot chips, an wrappin a paper roond it.

‘Salt an sauce?’ he asked.

‘Aye,’ said Jamesey.

‘Broon or rid?’

‘Broon.’

Jamesey wis hungry, his mooth watterin, his hale body ready, an arrow aimed fur the target. Then at last the roll wis in his haund, warm, fat, stappit fu o golden chips.

He raised it slowly towards his lips. Ye looked forrit tae the first bite, like the start o a great story in yer library book, or the first go wi a new pencil.

The roll wis an inch awa fae his teeth when he saw a flash o colour, an a bit

o his roll disappeared. It jist wisnae there ony mair. Nae longer a perfect roond, the roll wis missin a chunk. An he hudnae eaten it. So wha had? There wis nae wan tae be seen.

A bird. That wis it. Must be. There wis a tree close by, tae the left o the van. He went ower an inspected it. Nae bird. But a definite smell o chips, an a noise. Whit could he hear?

A wee burp. Deffo. A burp.

Teeny licked her teeny lips.

Mmm. It wis worth it, the roll, the chips, the sauce, the gorgeousness. She wid be in trouble fur this, if the Fairy Cooncil fund oot, but she didnae care. Daein whit ye were telt wis a load o hedgehog poo!

Besides, naebody could see her in this world, no even the boy wha wis standin at the foot o the tree, an starin straight up at her.

But Jamesey could see her. He drew in his breath, an stared an stared. She wis sittin on a branch, low-doon, swingin her legs, an pittin the last bit o' roll in her mooth. She wis a' colours, an yet silvery. He could see shiny wings ahent her, sort o folded up. Her face wis pointed, her hair lang an black.

An she wis lookin at him – an laughin. She wis laughin at him.

'That's ma roll!' he fund himself shoutin.

She gien a stert.

'You can see me?'

'Aye, an hear ye, anaw.'

Teeny drew up her legs.

'So?' she said.

'So dinnae dae it again!'

That was when she opened her wings an flew richt doon.

The fairy hovered in front o him, an he could see intae her purply-blue een. Then she dived, wings straight oot ahent her, intae the breast pocket o his shirt.

‘Hide me,’ she said in her wee voice.

‘Ah can feel them comin.’

Jamesey looked aroond.

His hert began tae beat faster. He could feel the fairy shakin. Then the grund ablow his feet began tae move, very slightly, tae rumble, an oot frae the roots o the tree cam these broony-yellowy-lumpy things, like bits o plasticine squashed up an gone wrang – hairy things wi big heids, great big mooths, yellae teeth, lang fingers an taes, an their een rid an wild.

The wan in front had a kind o medal roond his neck - Jamesey had seen this afore, a sink plug wi a chain - an he wis sniffin the air.

‘She’s been here,’ he announced tae the ithers in a deep sort o earthy voice, the kind o voice, Jamesey thocht, a potato wid hae.

‘Ah can smell her. Princess ‘Teeny Ah Can Go Onywhere Ah Like’.

But she cannae. This is oor territory. Mingin Territory. A’ these dumps an litter bins belong tae us. She’s no gonnae steal oor stuff.

Come oan, men. We’ll check the drains ootside the paper shop. Wi ony luck, she’ll have caught her silly wee wings in wan, an be drooned in the watter.’

He pinte a lang knobbly finger in the direction o the shops, an the ithers followed him, their short, squat bodies swingin fae side tae side.

Jamesey could hear their grunts an snuffles as they went roond the corner.

'Phew!' said a voice.

'That wis close.'

The fairy flew oot o his pocket.

Withoot thinkin, Jamesey caught her, an, closin his twa hauns, held her ticht.

'Noo,' he said, 'we hae things tae talk about.'

Jamesey felt Teeny's wings beatin fast inside the cage o his hauns.

'Let me oot! Let - me - oot!'

Her voice wis sherp. It cut intae him.

But 'No yet,' he said.

'Ah've got some questions fur ye. Number wan. Hoo come a fairy steals chips? An number twa. Whit were thae awfy-lookin things?'

There wis nae answer.

Ye're furgettin,' Jamesey said, 'it wis me that saved ye.'

Teeny stopped strugglin.

'So ye did. O.K. then.'

Her voice changed, became smaller.

'But ye've got tae let me oot. Ah dinnae like this - bein trapped.'

Jamesey opened his hauns at wance. She wis oot in a flash, an hovered in front o his face. Wance again he looked intae her purply-blue een.

'Whit's yer name?' she asked.

'Jamesey. James.'

'Ah'm Teeny. Sorry about yer chips. Ah shouldnae hae ta'en them. But ah dinnae usually get the chance o a chip.'

She sighed.

'It a sterted wi a bag wi some crisps left in the wid. Ah dinnae ken why ah ate human bein food. But ah like tae try new things, an ah wis bored lookin efter the flooers an at.

Onywey, ah tried wan, an ah feenished the lot. Whit's mair, ah felt really guid inside. Then, later on, ah fund a can o juice - Irn Bru it wis ca'ed – an ah hud a wee sip. It wis delicious. That wis it. Ah wis hooked.'

She stopped.

'An whit about thae... thae things?'

Jamesey wis screwin up his face as he spoke.

Teeny flew doon then, an settled on his haun.

She answered quietly 'The Mingins live under the grund. They dinnae like fairies, an they dinnae like me. They only like themsels, an rubbish, smelly stuff that's gone rotten, an they'd hurt ye as soon as look at ye, pu aff yer wings if ye get in their wey. They dinnae want me or onybody else on their patch.

Ah widnae want tae go onywey.'

She shivered, an a' her colour seemed tae pale.

'Ah hud a pal wance. Tattie. The Mingins caught her. Trapped her. Pit her in a bottle.

Ah dinnae ken whaur she is.'

She stopped speakin a'thegether.

Jamesey wis silent tae.

He wis thinkin about Kenny, Kenny puin the wings aff flees, Kenny pinnin him against a wa an takin money oot o his pockets, Kenny an his gang.

'Ah've got Mingins anaw,' he said, an he telt her whit had happened tae him.

'Even noo the gang'll be waitin tae get me at the schule gate.'

They looked at each ither sadly. Then Jamesey spoke.

'Ah'm richt sorry about Tatty...Tell ye whit. Ah can be yer new pal. If ye like.'

Teeny stared at him, then smiled. It wis as if the sun had come oot.

'Ye will?'

'Aye. Jist dinnae steal ma chips.'

She laughed. Her hale body wis shinin, an Jamesey couldnae help laughin tae.

When the thumpin an rumblin sterted, the laughter stopped.

The Mingins burst up through a drain at the back o the van. Their faces were twisted wi rage. The leader pinte at Teeny an Jamesey.

'Ower there!' he cried.

Jamesey's hert began tae beat faster. His feet seemed stuck tae the grund.

'Get gaun!' he shouted tae Teeny. 'Never mind me. Save yersel.'

She looked back only wance, then wis soon a speck in the distance.

The Mingins growled, then turned tae Jamesey.

Jamesey ran.

The Mingins widnae be as fast as him. He'd leave them ahent. But he felt a familiar pain ablow his ribs. A stitch. He had tae stop, clutchin his side.

An they were on him, around him.

They held him fast, grippin him ticht, an glarin at him wi their rid een.

'Whit'll we dae wi him, Chief Mawkit? Princess Teeny's pal?'

The wan that wis speakin hud a chain around his waist, a chain wi stuff tied

on tae it.

‘Drap im in the dump,’ the Chief replied.

‘Or maybes pit im doon the sewer, Chief Mawkit.’

‘Aye, the sewer. Richt enough, Captain Glaur. We’ll hae some fun yet. Pu an ear aff him. Pit it in ane o yer bottles.’

An he laughed richt in Jamesey’s face.

Jamesey saw rid.

As Glaur’s lang fingers reached fur him, Jamesey ducked. He grabbed the chain aroond the Mingin’s waist an pu’ed wi a’ his micht. It cut deep intae the warty skin, an a yellae stickiness cam runnin oot o the wound.

‘Oow!’ wailed the Mingin.

Jamesey could see its belt properly noo. It wis hingin wi grisly prizes, a plastic bag haudin a rabbit’s fit, a dug’s tail tied on tae a dirty string, a bottle wi something wee an crumpled inside – a butterfly?

But the butterfly moved an stood up.

It wis a fairy, a fairy wi crumpled wings an a sad wee face, lookin at him through the gless.

He gasped wi shock, oot o balance fur a moment, an that wis enough. The rest o the Mingins were on tap o him, an he wis trapped.

‘Noo ye’re fur it,’ said the Chief, an they began tae chant.

‘Ye’re fur it noo, ye’re fur it noo.’

As Jamesey looked intae their hard rid een, he dreaded tae think whit lay ahead.

‘Ye’re gaun tae get it.’

Chief Mawkit spat oot the words.

‘Mess wi us, wid ye?’

Tak him tae the Midden.’

'Aye, aye, Chief. The Midden.'

They were hoppin up an doon wi glee. Bony fingers pushed Jamesey forrit.

They couldnae wait. His hert sank. He kent about the midden.

It wis a place whaur no even the bad boys went. The midden, wi its swarms o black flees everyplace, an its stinkin piles o rubbish that moved an sooked ye in.

The midden, whaur fat wet beetles feasted an crawled oot o the dumps.

At least Teeny wis safe.

But he'd never be seen again. An naebody wid find him.

At last he raised his een fae the grund, an saw there wis a wee spark, like the end o a firework, comin towards him, an followin it, shoutin an jumpin, tryin tae catch it in their hauns, were Kenny an the gang.

The wee licht swooped up an doon, noo jist abune Kenny's heid, noo high in the air, makin them stretch an loup an turn.

Jamesey could see them clearly noo. Kenny's thick neck was bulgin oot o his collar, an his fingers were ready tae grab, goin gimme, gimme, gimme. Kenny's face wis ugly.

It wis the face he had when he wanted somethin an it wisnae comin tae him fast enough, like the ba' aff some puir kid in the playground, or Jamesey's denner money.

At his side were Bazzar an Deeks, followin their leader as usual. When they saw Jamesey, they a' stopped deid an pinte.

'Look wha it is. Saftie Jamesey Johnson!'

Then they saw the Mingins ahent Jamesey, an their mooths drapped open.

The Mingins snarled at them, an spit hung an drapped aff their lips. Kenny looked fae Jamesey tae the Mingins. His face wis white.

Jamesey suddenly kent whit tae dae.

'Want tae meet ma gang?' he shouted.

'Come on, then!'

Kenny an the boys turned tail, an ran.

They were followed by the creatures, their een mad wi excitement.

'Oo, oo! Fresh bluid, boys. Fresh fun! Chew aff their fingers,' said Chief Mawkit, 'Get them!'

Jamesey wis left alane. Except fur the wee licht.

'Weel,' said the wee licht, 'did ah dae richt? Leadin the gang back? They were there at the schule gates richt enough. Waitin fur ye. Ah heard them talkin. They'll no bother ye again. Too feard.'

She wis shinin wi pleasure.

Jamesey pit oot his haund, an she flew ontae it.

'Thank ye, Teeny,' he said, 'Thank ye fur comin back. Ye're a richt pal.

Noo, ah've somethin tae tell ye.'

He spoke slowly an gently.

'Ah've fund Tattie. She's in a bottle, on a chain that wan o them is wearin.'

He looked straight intae her startled een.

'Noo,' he said, 'we get her back.'

Ye smelt the midden afore ye cam tae it.

A smell o rotten stuff, deid burds, rubber, plastic that wis meltin intae sticky pools, wetness, a horrid, horrid smell.

An in the middle o it, the Mingins, poking their lang fingers intae tin cans, sookin oot the dirty stuff inside, grabbin an lickin an murmurin wi pleasure.

But wan Mingin wisnae sae pleased.

'Thae boys wis too quick fur us,' grumbled Captain Glaur, 'We cannae keep

up wi human beins an their lang legs. We're no guid at that.'

He touched his front, where a yellae scab had formed.

'An ah've goat a sair belly still, fae that sleekit pal o Teeny's. We shid hae kept him close. When we hud him in oor poower. No left him tae go chasin.'

'Shut up,' said Chief Mawkit.

'Shut up? Whit ah say goes. Are you questionin ma decisions?'

Glaur drapped his een.

'Naw, naw, Chief Mawkit. Pardon me. It's jist, ma belly's sair.'

'Ah'll gie ye a sair somethin else,' said Chief Mawkit, an he hit Glaur hard wi the back o his haun.

The Mingin began tae greet. Big rid tears ran doon his face.

'Noo,' said Chief Mawkit, an his haund wis still raised, 'hoo maks the decisions roond here?'

'You do,' sobbed Glaur.

'Aye, ah do,' said Chief Mawkit, 'an dinnae you forget it.'

Glaur went awa then on his ain, whimperin, an poked in the piles o dirty rubbish till he fund an auld pie.

He took it an waddled back. Placin it on his haund, he offered it tae the Chief Mingin.

'Here, ' he said, 'It's fur you, sir.'

The Chief took it an ate it in twa gulps.

'That's mair like it,' he said, 'Noo ah've made anither decision. It's time tae go hame.'

'Right y'are, sir,' said Captain Glaur, 'Time tae go hame.'

The Mingins began tae collect up their trophies, bags o rats an cans fur take-aways.

‘Whaur did ah pit ma belt?’ said Glaur.

‘Ah’ve got it here, safe, sur, where ye left it on this stane, when we cam in.’

‘Then gie it tae me, Manky.’

‘Aye, sur. Certainly, sur.’

Glaur fastened the chain aroond his waist, wincin as it went past the scab, an mutterin tae himsel.

The Mingin ca’ed Manky waited till he’d finished, then said,

‘Hoo mony rats did you get, Captain Glaur? Cos ah’ve got twa, or is it three?’

Manky held up fower fingers.

‘Hoo mony is that?’

‘Shut up.’ said Captain Glaur.

Manky turned awa.

‘Whit wey are we gaun hame, Chief?’ he said.

‘The usual wey. The Mingin wey,’ said Chief Mawkit, ‘Up the drain, an doon through the tree roots. There’ll be naebody there, Manky.’

But there wis.

The licht wis changin when the Mingins cam oot o the drain. The sun wis goin, the day gien wey tae the evenin that wis jist waitin roond the corner. Chief Mawkit cam oot o the drain first, then Manky, then Captain Glaur, then the ithers.

The roots seemed awfy invitin tae Manky. He couldnae wait tae be back hame, safely ablow the grund, in his ain territory, wi a rat fur supper.

It wis quiet, the only soond the soond o lang Mingin taes slappin agin the earth as they waddled towards the tree.

‘Ah’m ready fur ma bed,’ said Manky, ‘Are you no, Captain Glaur?’

‘Shut up,’ said Glaur, ‘We’re no hame yet.’

As the Mingins cam up tae the tree, they suddenly stopped deid. A wee figure wis on tap o the roots. It uncurled an stretched.

It wis Teeny.

‘Ah’ve been waitin fur you,’ she said.

Her hale body seemed tae grow bigger, an her face got dark, her een turnin black as coal.

‘Ya dirty fairy-stealers!’

Chief Mawkit gien a howl o rage. He reached for her, an as his lang fingers fastened roond her, a loud voice rang oot.

‘Ye’re a’ a load o rubbish!’

‘Wha said that?’ said Glaur.

‘Ah did,’ said Jamesey, frae up in the tree, an he threw wan o the stanes that he an Teeny had gathered an pit in his pockets.

It hit Chief Mawkit, an as he held his shooder, moanin, Teeny wriggled frae his grasp. The ithers could only cover their heids as the stanes rained doon.

‘Weel done, Jamesey,’ said Teeny landing on the branch next tae him.

But the Mingins were movin, an Jamesey had only wan stane left.

He had tae aim fast an he hud tae aim true. He threw it wi a the strength an skill he had.

It hit the bottle.

The bottle broke, an oot flew Tattie. She didnae fly straight an she didnae

fly strong, but she flew.

She flew on her crumpled wings richt up tae Teeny wha wis waitin fur her.

'Retreat, retreat!'

It wis Chief Mawkit wha gien the order.

The Mingins gien up at wance.

They disappeared whaur they cam fae, intae the roots o the tree, an there wis nae sign o them at a' - jist some yellae goo left on the grund.

The air hung still, an in the quietness a bird began tae sing, then anither an anither till the air wis fu o song.

Teeny looked at her lost pal. Tattie's colours were a' faded. Her black hair wis thin an puir-lookin. She had a cut on her knee, an wan o her wings had a tear. But she wis smilin richt across her wee face, an her een sparkled like green gless.

Teeny pit her haund intae Tattie's, an the pair o them flew roond an roond the tap o the tree, Teeny still haudin Tattie close by her.

Jamesey watched them.

An early star had jist come oot, an they almost seemed tae be headin fur it, they were that high. But as they flew doon, Jamesey saw that they were baith shinin bricht as ony star, an that wis worth a' the trouble he had been through, an made him feel better than he had felt fur a lang time.

Fur he wisnae the same.

He'd stood up fur Teeny, an in doin so, had stood up fur himsel an fund a courage that he never thocht he had.

But noo he kent that they were leavin.

'Wull ah see ye again?' he asked.

'Oh, aye.'

The fairies spoke at the same time.

'We're yer pals.'

'Whenever ye want me,' said Teeny, 'jist gie a whustle.'

'Me anaw,' said Tattie.

Teeny opened oot her wings.

'But noo, Jamesey, we've got tae go. Tattie will come hame again. There'll be sic a pairty.'

She grinned.

'It'll no maitter aboot me havin been in Humanland, an thae Mingins wull at last get whit's comin tae them. The Fairy Queen'll see tae that.

They'll go in front o' the Elfland Cooncil, fur trial. Fairies huv Fairy Rights, ye ken. Tattie'll tell her story, ah'll be the witness, an they'll get pit in jile. At last.'

She clapped her haunds thegither.

'That's enough aboot them. They'll get whit they deserve. Noo it's time fur a fairy celebration, so we'll say Cheerio, an...'

Teeny paused, an her een filled up.

She brushed awa a tear.

'An thanks, Jamesey. Frae me an Tattie. Thanks fur everythin.'

Then she smiled.

'See ye later, Mingin Exterminator!'

Jamesey laughed, an as they a' jined in, the whale sky seemed tae tak on the fairy colours. As the sun went doon, Jamesey waved tae them an went hame contentedly fur his tea.