

‘Jess?’

Her mother’s voice sounded through the hallway, mixing with the mustiness around her so well that the sound almost had a smell. To Jess, sitting in the cupboard, the sound of her name was strange, wobbly, misformed, as if she were inside a bottle, or a glass cube, maybe, and Mum was outside it, tapping.

*I must have been in here too long –*

‘Jessamy!’ Her mother’s voice was stern.

Jessamy Harrison did not reply.

She was sitting inside the cupboard on the landing, where the towels and other linen were kept, saying quietly to herself, *I am in the cupboard.*

She felt that she needed to be saying this so that it would be real. It was similar to her waking up and saying to herself, *My name is Jessamy. I am eight years old.*

If she reminded herself that she was in the cupboard, she would know exactly where she was, something that was increasingly difficult each day. Jess found it easier not to remember, for example, that the cupboard she had hidden in was inside a detached house on Langtree Avenue.

It was a small house. Her cousin Dulcie’s house was quite a lot bigger, and so was Tunde Coker’s. The house had three bedrooms, but the smallest one had been taken over and

cheerily cluttered with books, paper and broken pens by Jess's mum. There were small patches of front and back garden which Jess's parents, who cited lack of time to tend them and lack of funds to get a gardener, both readily referred to as 'appalling'. Jess preferred cupboards and enclosed spaces to gardens, but she liked the clumpy lengths of brownish grass that sometimes hid earthworms when it was wet, and she liked the mysterious plants (weeds, according to her father) that bent and straggled around the inside of the fence.

Both the cupboard and the house were in Cranbrook, not too far from Dulcie's house in Bromley. In Jess's opinion, this proximity was unfortunate. Dulcie put Jess in mind of a bad elf – all sharp chin and silver-blond hair, with chill blue-green lakes for eyes. Even when Dulcie didn't have the specific intention of smashing a hole through Jess's fragile peace, she did anyway. In general, Jess didn't like life outside the cupboard.

Outside the cupboard, Jess felt as if she was in a place where everything moved past too fast, all colours, all people talking and wanting her to say things. So she kept her eyes on the ground, which pretty much stayed the same.

Then the grown-up would say: 'What's the matter, Jess? Why are you sad?' And she'd have to explain that she wasn't sad, just tired, though how she could be so tired in the middle of the day with the sun shining and everything, she didn't know. It made her feel ashamed.