

But come, enough talk about food (which is making me very hungry indeed), let us get on with the story . . .



It all Begins with a Fox at a Window.

First, you must picture a tall oak tree in a beautiful garden.

It is late spring when the story begins so the tree should be covered in fluttery green leaves. And now you must imagine a girl of around ten, small for her age and slim, with dark brown hair, straight as a ruler, olive skin and precise brown eyes. And then turn that girl upside down, set her swinging to and fro from a high branch of the tree, holding on



only by her knees, shamelessly showing off to a crowd of children gathered at the bottom. And there you have Violet Remy-Robinson at the start of the story.

The names of the children watching were Lydia, Charlotte, Ben, Stanley and Stella, and they were known as the 'midders'. The children who lived in the houses around the garden were all different ages; the midders were seven to eleven years old, and anyone younger than them was a 'littlee' and anyone older was a 'twelver'. But at that moment it was only the midders who were watching Violet, because the littlies had been gathered up for tea and baths and the twelvers were



loafing around by the swings, showing off to each other and chatting about whatever twelvers chat about.

Anyway, back to Violet, whose tree-climbing antics were being watched with open mouths, and a tense mixture of fear and excitement. Six months before, when she had climbed up that particular tree (showing off as she was now) Violet had fallen. Fallen badly. And then there had been the fantastic excitement of blood, broken bones and an ambulance.

The person I haven't mentioned, because she was sitting apart from the others, is Rose Trelawney, Violet's best friend. Rose was slight like Violet, but pale and blonde, with

large, nervous blue eyes. Unlike the others, Rose was definitely not watching Violet, no thank you! It was far too anxious-making and scary, and Rose was as timid as Violet was bold. So instead of watching, Rose was playing with her cat, The Major, and Violet's cat, Pudding. As she tickled their tummies,



she wished silently that Violet would hurry up and get safely down from the tree before a grown-up caught her and there was a huge telling-off. Because Rose hated being told off.

So why had Violet ignored the strict warnings by her parents and numerous doctors forbidding her to climb trees? Well, the answer was that her arch enemy, Stanley - who also happened to be Rose's older brother - had dared her, taunting that girls were too stupid and cowardly to climb trees. And impulsive Violet, her cheeks flaming red with fury at his insults, couldn't just walk away like a sensible person might. Oh no, she had to prove him wrong.



The dare had been to reach the top of the tree and Violet was still a little way off, so she finished swinging, put herself back the right way round and steadied her head against the trunk's cool bark until the world stopped spinning.

'Come on, get a move on! Or are you too scared?' Stanley mocked from the ground.

Violet didn't bother to reply; she was far too busy concentrating on not falling. And her previously broken arm was aching terribly from all the effort. The top of the tree was near and the branches were becoming twiggy. She stepped onto one that gave way with an almighty . . .

CRACK!



Violet lurched forward, grabbing wildly at branches. Her audience let out enormous gasps as they watched her only just save herself by a whisker. Rose winced. Tom, one of the older boys, appeared at the bottom of the tree and called up to check Violet was okay. Stanley, meanwhile, looked delighted.

‘I’m fine, Tom,’ Violet called back with more confidence that she felt. She glared at Stanley. ‘Don’t panic, nearly there, you can do it,’ she told herself strictly, while gingerly testing another branch with her foot. It was reassuringly solid so she hauled herself up, right to the top of the tree, and poked her head out of the leafy ceiling to survey the view. The garden



spread out beneath her like a grassy picnic blanket. She gazed around, delighting as ever in the feeling of being at the top of something very tall.

Then two things happened at the same time. The alarm beeped on her watch, telling her that it was six-fifteen and she needed to go home or she would be late (again), and someone called her name. It was a man’s voice, stern and with a foreign accent.

‘Violet!’ the voice reprimanded. She looked around to see Marek, one of the builders who worked with her father, leaning out of the

window of the top floor of the Thomsons' old house. 'You know you are not supposed to be climbing that tree! Get down before I tell your father!' he shouted, but with a wink, so that Violet knew he was not really cross.

Violet smiled at him and was about to hurry back down the tree, when her attention was caught by a man standing next to Marek. He was middle-aged, with a pointed face, slicked-back wavy red hair and an intense gaze that was fixed upon her. Violet was struck by how much he looked like a fox.

The alarm on her watch beeped again. She really had to go home otherwise she would be in big trouble. She lowered herself onto the



branch and carefully picked her way down the tree, trying not to rush. Everyone clapped and high-fived her as she jumped nimbly down to the grass. Rose breathed a large sigh of relief.

'Violet showed you, Stanley, didn't she?' Tom laughed.

Stanley was furious that he had been made to look foolish by a girl. 'You had better run, *Vileness*, or you'll be late for Mummy and Daddy,' he mocked.

Stanley was right, Violet thought as she ran off with a wave and a quick 'see you at school' to Rose. She did her last, very necessary piece of climbing for the evening; up the drainpipe on the back of her house,

and through the open window into the bathroom, where Norma was waiting with Violet's bath already run.

'Very, very late,' Norma said, with a disapproving shake of her head.

'I know - I'm really really sorry,' Violet apologised, before plunging into the warm water.



Half-past six was a magical hour in the Remy-Robinson household.

As Camille, Violet's elegant and clever mama, was stepping daintily out of a taxi, heels clacking delicately on the pavement, Benedict, Violet's learned and successful papa, was softly closing his study door. They were both making their way to their immaculate white sitting room, where Norma would serve them a delicious cocktail and they would discuss their day with their darling daughter,