

Sophie and the magician

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“Where is she going?” thought Sophie. She was out shopping with Linda, and she had told Linda a few times already that her father had forbidden her to go to this part of the city. But Linda knew a few nice clothing shops, she had told Sophie. And indeed, if you liked black T-shirts with weird texts on them, and wristbands with iron points on them, the shops where Linda had taken her were utterly cool, but Sophie hadn’t seen much that had interested her so far. Linda dressed so strangely these days! She always wore black lipstick, and painted her eyes black when she went to a party with Sophie. Sophie sometimes had a hard time understanding her friend. But they still had much fun together, and Linda’s funny ideas and pranks always made Sophie laugh. And thus Sophie found herself running after Linda through the forbidden parts of the city. “I want to have a look in the shop at the corner over there,” said Linda. She pointed to a shop at the end of the street. It looked a bit more normal than the shops Sophie and Linda had visited earlier that day.

“OK, but I want to look over there across the street first. I will find you when I’m done, alright?” Sophie had seen a shop that sold stationery. Because it was almost Sinterklaas¹ she wanted to see if she could find something for her father there.

“That’s fine, I’ll see you in a bit.” Sophie crossed the street, and Linda walked on to the clothes shop. A few moments later Sophie stood looking in the window of the stationery shop. There were a lot of beautiful fountain pens and notepads on display, but they were all quite expensive, she found. She could never afford them with her small allowance. She looked a bit more, but was soon distracted because she heard Linda shout her name.

“Sophie! Look over here!”

Sophie turned around. Opposite the street Linda was waving to her enthusiastically. Sophie crossed the street. She was curious to see what Linda had found. Halfway across the street she started walking more slowly. The shop that Linda was pointing to looked interesting. It stood out in the old street because it looked modern, and was tastefully decorated inside. It didn’t look evasive, but modest. Above the shop window there was a sign that said “*Fred Jansson, magician*” in big, white letters. The shop window was a bit bland. There were only a few items on display, and a few signs stood here and there. Sophie had crossed the street and Linda grasped her arm enthusiastically. “Look at this!” she said, “Everlasting candles!”

“Oh come on Linda. They will go out one day,” said Sophie.

“Yes but look here then. A way finding compass. What’s that supposed to be then?” said Linda. She pointed to a small device with a needle on it that was nervously moving to and fro.

“Hmm. It seems like it’s lost its way,” said Sophie. “But hey, look at this! An infinite teabag! Look, there’s a sign that says: “You know the problem. You have unexpected visitors, and just as you want to make tea you remember what you wanted to get at the supermarket today. This fantastic product brings an end to these worries. You can make tea with this bag as many times as you like. You will always get a lovely pot of delightfully smelling tea. Available in many flavours.” ”

“Nice. You will drink Earl Grey for the rest of your life,” Linda said, and wrinkled her nose.

¹See *Sophie and the secret box*

“It seems handy to me. My father always forgets to buy coffee and tea.”

“Don’t you think this shop looks odd for a party shop?”

“Maybe we ought to look inside.” Sophie was curious. She pushed the door of the shop open and stepped inside. Linda followed her reluctantly. On the inside, the shop looked just as its shop window: bland but tasteful, with lots of shades of grey. Sophie found it a bit dull. She peered inside the only display case in the shop.

“Look at this!” Linda said. “have you ever seen something like this? A self-reading book! That is something for my father. He abhors reading!”

Sophie looked at the sign next to the book. It said:

Are you having trouble reading? And you still want to be regarded as an intellectual? Then this is the perfect book for you! You only have to open it. It will read itself to you in a pleasant voice, of which timbre and tempo are adjustable to your specific need. All you have to do is sit on your comfortable sofa, sipping your beer and listening to this book.

“Well, if you’ve read this note you can just as well read a normal book,” said Sophie.

“That’s why I also made the note self-reading,” a dark voice behind her said. Startled, Sophie jumped up.

“Oh! I hadn’t noticed you.” She turned around and saw a tall skinny man in a nice suit standing behind her.

“I’m sorry I startled you madame. What can I do for you?” the man said.

“Euh, we’re just looking, if that’s alright with you,” Linda said.

“Of course, that’s fine. If you want to know something, just ask me.”

Sophie and Linda looked around in the shop some more. However, they felt so observed by the owner, that Sophie asked him after a while: “Are you really a magician?”

The man put his hand out and said: “Certainly! I’m Fred Jansson. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. With whom do I have the pleasure to shake hands?”

Gingerly, Sophie shook the man’s hand. “Sophie Vermeer,” she said. She looked the man over. He didn’t look like a magician at all. He wore a nice suit, with a tie, and beautiful polished shoes.

“I see you thinking,” Fred said. “Where are his pointy hat and his magic wand?”

“Magicians don’t exist!” Linda said. Fred turned towards her.

“Are you sure? Then how do you explain this?” He pointed to Linda and murmured something. Sophie saw sparks jumping between his fingertips when he moved them. She looked at Linda, who was staring in awe at a cloud of small yellow butterflies that danced around her head.

“That is so cool! How do you do that?” Linda stammered.

“Magic, girl,” said Fred. He looked at the butterflies. They were spreading around the whole store. After a while Fred said: “That’s enough for now.” He pointed his finger in the air and turned it around above his head, whilst murmuring something unintelligible. Sophie heard a faint “Pop!” and all the butterflies suddenly disappeared.

“I can also help you if you have troubles,” said Fred. “Here, read this.” He gave the girls a small folder. Curious, Sophie opened it. Just when she started to read it she heard a loud bang, followed by the sound of glass breaking. It seemed to come from the street in front of the store. Startled, she looked through the window, and indeed, just in front of the shop two cars had bumped into each other.

“O, no, not again!” mumbled Fred. He walked outside. Linda and Sophie followed him, curious to see what had happened. On the street two people were looking at their cars with sad looks on their faces. “I have put a spell on the street so people walk or drive more slowly when they are near my shop. But it may work a bit too good. This is the fifth accident I’ve had in one week,” whispered Fred to the girls. He walked towards the cars. Meanwhile he searched his pockets. “Where is it?” he said. “Ah, there I have it.” He took something from his pocket that looked like a matchstick.

“Good day madame, sir,” he said to the owners of the cars. “I am Fred, the owner of the shop over there. I will repair your carriages in a sec.” He walked around the cars to get a good view of the damage. The two surprised owners stared at him.

“Ah, I see the problem. A simple spell will be sufficient.” Fred waved his little stick. “It can’t be a magic wand, can it?” thought Sophie. The stick began to light up. More and more light shone from the little stick, until suddenly a wave of small sparks jumped from the stick to one of the cars. The cracked rear light began to vibrate, and slowly but surely it seemed to heal. It looked a bit like a wound that recovered, but faster, found Sophie. After a while the rear light was fixed, and Fred could continue with the rear bumper of the car. “What a strange thing is that. It obviously doesn’t help against collisions,” Fred said. “Wait, I’ll fix that.” He touched the bumper with his wand. A big bubble appeared. It looked like it grew out of the bumper. After a while Fred thought that the bubble was big enough, and touched the bumper in a different place. He went on until the whole bumper was covered in big black bubbles. “I will colour them for you,” Fred said. He touched every bubble with his index finger, and they changed colour. When Fred was ready every bubble had a different colour: red, yellow, gold, blue. Fred stood looking at the bubbles with a satisfied smile on his face, but the owner of the car was not so happy. “What do you think you are doing?!” she shouted at him.

“I’ve made your carriage better! Don’t you think it’s beautiful?” Fred looked at her, beaming.

The woman stamped her foot in anger. “No, I don’t like it! I don’t know how you did it, and I don’t care, but you *will* make sure my car gets all right again!”

Fred looked at disappointedly at the ground. His shoulders drooped a bit. “Oh. OK,” he said after a while. He waved his little wand and murmured something again. “Pof! Pof! Pof!” All bubbles burst and disappeared. “Tinkle!” The rear light broke again. Fred put his wand back in his pocket. The woman got in her car, slammed the door, and drove away.

Fred wasn’t to be put off by this, and proceeded with the bonnet of the other car. “You have a very boring carriage,” he said to its owner. “I will make it more beautiful for you.” He waved his wand again, and this time it looked like water came out of the tip, and engulfed the whole bonnet of the car. The bonnet waved and changed colour. “That’s better,” said Fred, and removed his

wand. When the water had disappeared the bonnet had changed into a sort of couch with soft cushions on it. "You see?" said Fred. "Now you can sit on your carriage and relax in the sun when you've arrived at your destination." Fred looked proudly at the car. Its owner, a distinguished gentleman, looked at him with wild eyes. "L.. you... hnnng..." he said.

"You don't have to thank me, it was nothing," said Fred. The man cast him a dark look, jumped into his car, and drove away. Fred sighed and walked slowly back to his shop. He had totally forgotten about Sophie and Linda. Linda pulled Sophie on her sleeve. "Come on, we're going home," she said. She walked away fast, and Sophie stumbled after her.

"What a loser!" Linda mocked when they were out of the street.

"Why?"

"Didn't you pay attention? He calls cars carriages, and as if that collision wasn't bad enough, he had to make it worse!" Linda looked angrily at Sophie.

"I feel bad for him. He did his best, and everyone was angry at him."

"I wonder how he did it. He is a very good illusionist."

Sophie thought a bit. "I'm going to find out how I can help him with his shop," she said after a while.

"O, Sophie, don't do that! You can not help everyone you pity! You shouldn't try to like everyone you meet! How often do I have to tell you that!"

Sophie looked at Linda and shrugged her shoulders. "I like him." The girls looked at each other, not knowing what to say. "I have to go that way," said Sophie. She pointed in the direction of her house.

"OK, I will see you again at school tomorrow." The girls said goodbye and Sophie walked back to her house alone.

That night, Sophie laid in bed thinking about Fred. How could she help him? She had not told her father what she had done that afternoon, because she didn't want him to know that she had been in a 'forbidden' part of town. Although Sophie didn't really understand why, her father had explicitly forbidden her to ever go there. So she had to make up what she had to do for Fred all by herself. He wasn't a very good shopkeeper, that was clear to Sophie. He didn't have much to sell, and he wasn't good at selling it either. He would be better of doing something else. She switched the light on and took the folder Fred had given her. She folded it open and started to read. This is what it said:

You may think magic and magicians only exist in stories and fairy-tales. Nothing is further from the truth! Magicians have always existed, and they have made an irrevocable impression on the history of the world.

The text went on some more, but Sophie didn't find it very interesting. A bit further down, underneath a picture of a magician with a pointy hat on his head, Fred had written: *What can magic do for you?* Curious, Sophie read on:

The number of situations in which magic is applicable is near infinite. Here is a number of examples:

Have you lost something or someone? I am specialized in the retrieval of persons or objects. I can find everything, wherever it is,

provided it still exists. In the event the object in question is destroyed, or the person deceased, then I can reveal the time and place in which that happened.

Are you expecting a baby? I can tell you whether it's a boy or a girl!

Magic is also very suitable for the reparation of broken objects or limbs! Guaranteed almost painless!

Sophie closed the folder and grinned. "Almost painless, my foot!" she thought. "I think I'd rather go to a real doctor, thank you." She switched the light off again and thought a bit more. There had to be something that Fred was good at? What if he became a cleaner? Sophie hated cleaning. She failed to understand why her father always wanted to clean the kitchen directly after dinner, and do the dishes. She also had to clean her room every week. Bah, how she loathed that! Maybe Fred could magically clean and tidy everything very fast! But even with magic cleaning was a nasty job, Sophie thought. So maybe the cleaning wasn't such a good idea. "He was very creative with those cars," she thought. "Maybe he should do something in that direction." And suddenly she had it: "Fred should be a dog groomer! He must like that. He can think of completely new hairstyles for all those poodles, the dogs probably won't mind." Sophie thought a bit more. Maybe Fred didn't like dogs. "O well, I will tell him about my idea. Maybe he likes it." A few moments later, Sophie was asleep.

The rest of the week Sophie was very busy at school, and she didn't have time to go to Fred's shop. But in the weekend she went there again. She tried to get Linda to go with her, but she didn't want to go. "I think he's creepy," she said, and Sophie went to Fred on her own. After a long cold walk she reached Fred, who was somberly waiting for clients in a corner. When he saw Sophie his face brightened.

"O, hi Sophie," he said. "How nice to see you again."

"Hi. I came to have a quick look."

"I guess you won't be buying anything?" Fred asked in a sad voice.

"No," said Sophie. Right at that moment a woman came walking into the shop. She walked stiffly up to Fred and dangled a wet teabag under his nose.

"I bought this infinite teabag last week, but it makes really awful tea now!" she said angrily.

Fred sighed. "Yes madame? What taste did you buy?"

"Well, tea taste of course. What did you think?"

"There are quite a few different kinds of tea madame. But I will give you your money back, so you can buy another teabag."

"Do you really think I will buy any of your stuff again? Here, I have here one of your childrenvisions. That seemed handy to me: I would be able to see my grandchildren sometimes. My children don't ever want to come visit me with them." She held a small glass sphere, in which strange little clouds swirled round and round, underneath Fred's nose. "You see? This thing also doesn't work anymore!"

Fred peered into the sphere. "Do you warm it up before using it?"

“Do I have to? How am I supposed to know that?”

“It’s in the manual madame.”

“What do I have to do, put it on the stove or something?”

“No, just putting your hand on it for a while should suffice.”

The woman put her hand on the sphere. Sophie came a bit closer so she could see better what was going on. And sure enough, the cloudlets slowly disappeared. The sphere now showed a small boy who was running around in a playground.

“What!” the woman shouted. “They went to the playground without me! Again!” She peered into the sphere while muttering, and scolding her “terrible son-in-law.” Meanwhile, the little boy was climbing the stairs to the high slide.

“Hey,” said Sophie, “That is the playground I used to play in when I was little. It’s on the other side of town.”

The old woman looked her in the eye. “Are you sure child?”

Sophie nodded. She was sure of it. The woman shrieked with delight and ran from the store. “I will give them a piece of my mind!” she yelled over her shoulder. Fred and Sophie followed her with their eyes. “Madame, your childrenvision!” Fred yelled after her, but she was too far away already. “Hmm,” said Fred, “at least this one still works.”

“Why, what’s up?” asked Sophie.

Fred sighed again. “I don’t know what it is. People keep coming back with things they bought here that have suddenly stopped working. I already got a few everlasting candles back, and the teabag just now. And there were some people with childrenvisions here that showed things that couldn’t happen at all.”

“O, yes?” asked Sophie. She was curious. “Like what?”

Fred hesitated for a moment. “I can’t tell you that, that is a secret between me and my customers.

“Pity.”

Fred sighed again. “Things are not going well with my shop.”

“Not really, no. I’ve been thinking. As a magician, you can do anything you want, is it not?”

Fred smiled. “Not everything. But quite a lot, yes.”

“Why don’t you start helping people with stuff? I read your folder, and some of the things you wrote in there seemed much more fun to me than running a shop. But repairing broken arms? I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Yes, but... It’s guaranteed almost painless!”

Sophie laughed. “Exactly. If you say that, people get scared.”

“I like a shop. It’s quiet, and you don’t have to get out of bed in the wee hours of the morning for emergencies.”

“But why don’t you start a dog grooming business for instance?”

“A what?”

“A dog grooming business. That is when the pelt of your dog has become so long and fluffy that you have to comb it, or remove lots of hair. There are people who can do that for you. It’s nice work, because you can make nice hairstyles for some kinds of dogs.”

“I don’t like dogs. But... a hairdresser is a good idea.” Fred’s face lit up. “Yes! I did that in the old days, if people asked me. Actually, I was always quite good at it, if I say so myself. I could make a real diva out of you, with beautiful curls...” He fumbled for his magic wand. “May I?”

Sophie hesitated. Frankly, she was a bit scared. But she had always been wanting curls, and Fred wanted to give her them so badly. And she found her straight brown hair a bit dull. "OK," she said after a while. "But don't overdo it, else my father gets mad at me."

Fred waved his wand. "Let's see..." he said. "What shall we do. Don't overdo it, she says..." Sophie saw sparks jumping between his fingers again. "O, I know what to do!" said Fred. He danced around Sophie a bit, and she felt a strange prickling feeling on her head.

"Do you want some colour with that?"

Sophie thought for a moment. "No thank you. I don't know if my father will approve," she said.

Fred ran his fingers through her hair. Again Sophie felt the strange prickling feeling. "Ready!" said Fred. "Wait, I'll get a mirror for you." He ran away and came back a few moments later with a mirror. Sophie looked at her reflection curiously.

"Ooo, that looks beautiful! Exactly what I wanted!" Sophie's face was framed with thick curls. "Very beautiful!"

"I haven't forgotten how it works," Fred said proudly. He looked at Sophie's reflection in the mirror. "I have to thank you a lot. You made me find my calling! I'll start working on it right away!" He ran to and fro through the shop. "Here I will put a chair, and there a few mirrors. And I need a few posters, to brighten up the place..."

Sophie saw that Fred suddenly was very busy, and decided to go back home. "Goodbye Fred! And thanks again for the hairstyle!"

"You're welcome! See you later!" said Fred, and he courteously held the door open for Sophie. Sophie walked outside.

"O yes," she said. "I almost forgot. You have to advertise, so people know where to get these beautiful hairstyles!"

"I'll think about it," said Fred. "Have a nice weekend!"

Sophie walked home. She was happy. She liked the curls Fred had given her very much! What would her father say? She hoped he wouldn't ask her where she had them done, and how much they cost. "But he's far too busy to worry about that right now," she thought. And indeed, when she came home her father was hard at work. They had dinner from the freezer because Sophie and her father both didn't feel like cooking. "Hey," said Dad after they finished dinner. "What nice curls you have suddenly! I didn't know you went to the hairdresser."

"You're always so busy. I hardly ever see you anymore," Sophie complained. Dad pulled her on his lap and kissed her.

"You're right, I'm a bad father for you," he said. "You know what? Tomorrow we will get Chinese food. And next week my assignment is finished. Then we will do something nice together, OK?"

"Yes, Chinese! I like that!" Sophie laughed. "And can we go to the zoo then?"

"Whatever you want girl," her father answered.

The next day was Sunday. Sophie and her father had been watching a movie until deep in the night, and Sophie woke up quite late. Drowsily, she climbed out of bed, and looked in the mirror. The curls were still there, but her hair

was tangled up quite a bit. She took her brush and started brushing her hair. “Hey,” she thought. The curls sprang back into shape almost by themselves. “That’s handy. It saves me a lot of work. Fred really is fantastic!” thought Sophie.

After breakfast Dad went back to work. “You always work,” said Sophie. “I don’t like that.”

“Come on girl, bear with me for a while. If my client likes this, I won’t have to work so hard for a long time, I promise you.”

“I hope so, because it’s boring here! I’m off to Linda.” Sophie kissed her father goodbye and walked out of the house. A while later Linda opened the door for her.

“Oooo, you have curls!”

“Yes, aren’t they beautiful? Fred made them for me!” Sophie told Linda about her adventures at Fred’s.

Linda cast a gloomy look at Sophie’s curls. “So you are behind it,” she said.

“Huh? Behind what?”

“Didn’t you see those advertisements on your way here?”

“Eeuh, no, I was thinking.”

“Here, look at this.” Linda pulled Sophie to the window and showed her the bus shelter opposite her house. A colourful poster was hanging there. Across the poster the text: *Fred Jansson: a new haircut by magic!* was written in large bold letters. Underneath Sophie saw, to her big surprise, a picture of herself, with the beautiful curls she got from Fred! She looked at Linda with big eyes. “O, no, he used my picture for his poster! I’m all over the city now! What do I do?”

“Your picture?” Linda asked, surprised. “My picture you mean! She peered at the photo on the bus shelter.

“Hey, you’re right,” said Sophie. “It changed into you for a bit, and when I looked at it again I saw myself again.” The girls looked at Fred’s poster again. The picture changed a bit between Linda’s and Sophie’s image, and finally stuck at Linda’s.

“Apparently it knows you’ve been to Fred already,” said Linda.

“How smart of Fred to use changing pictures!”

“Hey look, there comes a man. Let’s see which one of us he shall see.”

A man came indeed walking towards the bus shelter. He cast a quick look at the poster. The picture became blurry for a while and changed back to Sophie’s image. Surprised, the man looked at the poster again. Linda and Sophie saw his eyes become big with surprise. The poster now showed his image, life-sized, with a big black tuft of hair on his head, instead of the fluffy patch he really had! Linda squeezed Sophie’s hand hard. “It shows you with a nice hairstyle!” she whispered. “How did it do that?”

Sophie uttered a sigh of relief. “That’s good. I was afraid we’d be hanging everywhere in the city. I really don’t know how I would explain that to my father.”

Linda shrugged. “My father wouldn’t care at all. He sometimes doesn’t even recognize me, because he’s too drunk.” Sophie didn’t know what to say. She wrapped her arm around Linda. Linda stood looking at the poster, biting her lip. After a while she said: “I’m curious to see how long these posters last.”

“How come?”

“Well, have you ever seen anything made by Fred that keeps working for longer than a day?”

“O come on. We only know Fred for three days. Who knows, perhaps he’s very good at this.” Sophie looked at Linda. “And my hair is still in good shape, isn’t it? I have had it like this for almost a day now.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I shouldn’t be so negative,” Linda said. “Shall we do homework now, or play a game?”

The girls spent the rest of the day playing games and doing their homework for the next day. Just before dinnertime they walked together to Sophie’s house, to have Chinese food. On their way there they stopped at the bus shelter, have a better look at themselves in the poster.

“Do you really want such a hairstyle, Linda?” Instead of the half-long dark blond spiky hair she really had, on the poster Linda had very long, black, straight hair.

“Yes, I think that looks really good on me. But my mother doesn’t want me dying my hair.”

“Maybe you should go to Fred too.” Sophie took Linda’s arm and pulled her with her. She was hungry and didn’t want her father to have to wait for them to come home.

“I really don’t understand your father just let you go to Fred,” Linda said. “I don’t really trust him yet.”

“He doesn’t know,” whispered Sophie. “You keep your mouth shut, you hear?”

“Ooo, the sweet little girl was naughty!” Linda looked Sophie in the eye, laughing. Sophie looked at the ground and said nothing. “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything,” Linda reassured her.

After dinner Sophie and Linda helped Sophie’s father with the dishes and cleaning the kitchen. Linda had to go home afterwards because it was getting late, and they had to be at school early the next day. Sophie’s father went back to working on his assignment. Sophie had switched on the television, muttering at her father because he left her alone again, and now she was laying on the couch switching channels. Suddenly, she sat up and looked hard at the screen, which showed a man standing shivering next to one of Fred’s posters. Sophie heard him say:

“...poster that can show you with your favourite hairstyle. We’re not yet sure whether Fred Jansson is really a hairdresser, or if this is a campaign of a big electronics company. The fact that the posters that we have seen don’t contain an address seems to point to the latter possibility. It sure is an ingenious piece of work, because we haven’t been able to find any camera in the vicinity of the posters we have looked at. If you know more about these posters, or if you know who Fred Jansson is, we would like to hear from you.”

The picture changed to the City News’ newsreader. Sophie turned the sound of the TV down and called Linda.

“Hey Linda, did you see the City News?”

“City News? It’s Sunday! My father has to watch football, you know that! But, what did they say?”

“They showed Fred’s posters! They don’t know how they work, and they also don’t know who Fred is. They thought it might be an advertising campaign

from a big electronics company or something.”

Linda was silent for a while. “You’re not going to call them, are you?”

“Why not?”

“O Sophie, use your brain! What if your father finds out? That’ll be the day!”

Linda was right about that. Sophie was allowed a lot, but her father was strict. If he forbid something, she’d better not do it. And she had already crossed the line very far by following Linda into the forbidden part of the city, and by having her hair enchanted by Fred.

“OK, I’ll do nothing. But I will watch the City News every night from now on!”

“You are lucky to have your own TV,” Linda said in a jealous voice. “Hey, I have to go because my mom wants to use the phone. I’ll see you tomorrow at school, OK?”

“Bye Linda.” Sophie hung up the phone and stared in front of her. “How stupid of Fred to have forgotten to put his address on the posters! And we are stupid too, because we didn’t even notice it,” she thought. She was disturbed in her musings by her father, who sat down next to her.

“Did you finish it?” she asked.

“Almost. I don’t feel like working any more today. I’m going to bed in a few minutes.”

“I don’t like you working so hard at all. I often feel lonely at home.”

“I know Sophie. You’ll have to bear with me until Thursday, OK? After Thursday I’ll do very little for a long time, I promise you.”

“I hope so. I’m going to bed too,” said Sophie. She kissed her father good-night and went upstairs.

The next day at school Sophie and Linda promised each other to try and watch the City News every day. This was difficult for Linda because her father usually wanted to watch football or a movie, but she would try anyway. Sophie was plastered to the screen every night since then. The first days they didn’t show anything about Fred, but on Wednesday there was an item about him again. The newsreader said:

“Last Sunday we reported about the strange posters that have been hanging everywhere in the city since last week.” Sophie sat up straight and turned the volume up a bit. One of Fred’s posters appeared behind the newsreader. “The mystery surrounding these posters has partly been solved,” said the newsreader. “A report by Rachid Kopinsky and Martina Wheel.”

The picture changed, and Sophie could see Rachid standing in front of one of Fred’s posters somewhere in the city. He said: “You have undoubtedly seen them in bus shelters all over the city: the posters, one of which is hanging behind me. They were hung up in the night from Saturday to Sunday. Nobody seems to have seen it happen, and also the bus company doesn’t know who hung them there. But the most remarkable aspect of the posters is their ability to show whoever looks at them with the hairstyle they would like to have. The way they do that is still a mystery. No cameras and electronics have been found in the posters we have looked at. They seem to be made just of plain paper. The question who hung up these posters has been a mystery for a while too, until we got a tip from a lady who lives in the Northern Singel.

The camera zoomed out, and now Sophie saw an older lady stand next to Rachid. “Can you tell us who or what Fred Jansson is?” Rachid asked her.

“Yes,” the lady said. She started walking, and Rachid and the camera followed her. “A few weeks ago I was woken up by a loud bang,” she told. “I looked out the window, and saw flashes of blue and green light come from that direction.” She pointed, and Sophie saw that they were walking in the street where she and Linda had walked before they found Fred’s little shop.

“I thought someone was welding, because that’s what it looked like, you know, these flashes of light you get then?” the lady asked. Rachid nodded. “The next day suddenly this strange shop had appeared in a house that had been standing empty for years. You could buy everlasting candles there, and infinite teabags.”

“Infinite teabags?” asked Rachid.

“Yes, teabags that go on forever. You can make tea with one of them every day.”

“While they were talking, the lady and Rachid walked on, until they had reached Fred’s shop. Sophie didn’t recognize it at first. Fred had really done his best at the hairdresser’s shop; the interior looked lively, and a few mannequins with beautiful hair were standing in the shop window. “Here it is,” the lady said. “Apparently business was bad, and he made a hairdresser’s shop out of it. Rachid stood looking at the shop for a while, with a surprised look on his face. Then he asked the lady: “Shall we go inside?”

“No thanks, my hair is fine as it is,” the lady said. So Rachid went in on his own.

The picture changed again, and now Sophie saw the interior of the shop. The camera moved slowly from left to right so you could get a good look at everything. There were a few chairs people could sit on while they were waiting for their turn. There were also a few posters with moving pictures of beautiful men, women and children on them. In the middle of the shop a big hairdresser’s chair was standing in front of a big mirror. And for the rest the shop was completely empty. There weren’t any pots or bottles to be seen, not even a pair of scissors.

After the camera had shown almost the whole store, Fred appeared in the picture. He was wringing his hands nervously, and asked Rachid if he maybe was interested in a nice hairstyle? Sophie had to laugh: Rachid was bald! How could Fred give him a new hairstyle? In the meantime, the camera had panned back to the mirror that was standing in front of the hairdresser’s chair. In the mirror, Sophie could see the soundwoman: a big woman with pointy blond hair. “I would like a new hairstyle,” the woman said.

“O, wonderful!” Fred said. “Tell me what you’d like. Everything is possible.”

“Martina sacrifices herself, ladies and gentlemen,” said Rachid. “A brave lady.”

Martina ignored Rachid, and said to Fred: “I’d like my hair a bit longer, and a bit wavier. Not as pointy as it is now.”

Fred looked at her a bit. “Hmm, difficult... But I’ll manage! Take a seat in my beautiful chair, please.” Martina gave her microphone and other equipment to Rachid, and took place in the big chair. Fred walked towards her and started dancing around her, moving his hands around her head. Again sparks were jumping between his fingers. Sophie looked hard, but she almost couldn’t believe

what she saw. The hair seemed to grow, and it became less pointy all by itself. After a minute Fred was ready, and Martina had a nice hairstyle, blond with a little wave in it. Fred combed it a bit, and said: "Ready! That'll be ten euros, madame."

Martina looked at herself in the mirror. "O, this is just how I wanted it! How do you do that so fast?"

"Right," said Fred. He looked in the camera. "That is magic at work, people."

"So you say you have magicked my hairstyle?"

"Not 'magicked' it. I used magic to grow your hair fast, and to make it a bit more wavy. I didn't conjure up anything. It is all your own hair."

The picture changed again. Sophie now saw a shot of the whole shop. "As you see, this hairdresser claims to use magic in making the most beautiful hairstyle's," an invisible voice said. "We have had Martina's hair checked out by another hairdresser, and he couldn't find any extensions or other unnatural products in it. It looks like Fred Jansson is telling the truth, and we really have a magician living in our city. In the next days we will keep a close look on the hairdresser's at 121 Northern Singel.

The documentary was over, and Sophie pensively switched the television off. "Is magic on your head not a bit scary?" she asked herself. Linda was right in a way. That lady in the shop had brought her everlasting candle back, and Fred himself had said that more people had come back with things that suddenly didn't work anymore. "When will my hairstyle stop working?" Sophie asked herself. Until now the curls had sprung back in their original shape by themselves every time she combed her hair in the morning. "Oh well," she thought, "If my hair stops curling I will cut a bit off."

A few moments later Dad walked in. "Hey, aren't you watching TV?"

"No, I want to go to bed in a moment."

"I've finished my assignment. Tomorrow is my big day!"

Sophie looked at Dad. He looked tired. "Are you doing alright?" she asked in a concerned voice.

"I worked very hard the past few weeks. I'm exhausted."

"Then maybe you should go to bed too. Tomorrow will be a tough day for you."

Dad kissed her on her head. "You're right." He looked at her inquisitively. "Are you very mad at me?" he asked.

"Mad? No. I'm disappointed though. You work harder and harder, and you give me less and less attention. I don't like that at all."

Dad sighed. "If I present this right tomorrow my chances on a breakthrough increase a lot. Then I don't have to hope I will get a new assignment, but people will come to me!"

"And then you'll work even harder "

"I promise you I won't do that. I also think it's enough like this." He pulled Sophie towards him. "Come on girl. We're both tired. You know what? I make two nice mugs of hot chocolate, and after we drank those we'll go to sleep, OK?"

Sophie nodded sleepily. She waited until her father came back with two large mugs of chocolate milk and two thick slices of buttered cake. "Thank you," she said. She slowly drank her chocolate milk. She felt guilty because she didn't dare tell her father where she got her curls. "He probably knows nothing about Fred," she thought. "He just works." She decided to tell him after he had shown

his work to his client. "He has enough on his mind right now," she thought. She cuddled up against her father, and fell asleep minutes later.

The next day she woke up in her own bed. She couldn't remember how she got there, but she still had her clothes on so she assumed Dad had carried her upstairs. That was strange, waking up in your own bed with all your clothes still on! She got up sleepily, and took a shower. When she came downstairs her father was walking to and fro through the kitchen.

"Hi sweetheart." He gave her a kiss.

"Hi Dad. Did you carry me up the stairs?"

"Yes. You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't dare to wake you up."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Not really. Here, I made you some sandwiches." Sophie took the plate her father offered her gratefully. "How do my clothes look?" Dad asked.

Sophie looked her father over. "You shouldn't wear those brown shoes. And that tie is out of the question. It doesn't suit you, how often do I have to tell you that?"

"It's the first one I saw in the cupboard."

Sophie sighed. She couldn't argue with that. "Why don't you throw it away?"

"Yes Sophie." Dad took the tie off and threw it in the garbage bin. After that he ran out of the kitchen. Sophie started eating her breakfast. She had just finished when her dad came back with a neat tie and black shoes.

"Much better," said Sophie. "I have to go to school now!" She kissed her father goodbye and walked to the hallway.

"Come back as soon as you can after school! We will do something nice together tonight!" her father yelled after her.

"OK! Success!" Sophie yelled back. She brushed her teeth and went to school.

When Sophie walked up the schoolyard, Linda came running towards her. "Did you see the news yesterday?" she yelled.

"Yes! He can make your hair grow! That's so weird!"

"He did that with you too," Linda said, surprised. She pulled one of Sophie's curls. "You see, your hair is much longer than it used to be."

"Yes you're right. I didn't realize that. It jumps back to shape every time I come near it with a comb."

"Shall we go and see how Fred is doing next Saturday?" Linda asked.

"Eeuh, yes, OK. Only I don't know if I can come, because my father has to show his assignment to his client today, so he won't be so busy for the rest of the week. Maybe we will go do nice things together."

"That's great! My father never does anything. Yesterday he had fallen asleep; that's why I could watch the TV." Linda put on a sad face. "I wish I could live with you."

Sophie laid her hand on Linda's shoulder. "Come on, girl! When we are going to do something nice, you may come with us, I promise you. It's not half as much fun without you." The school bell rang and the girls walked to school arm in arm.

After school Sophie walked home as fast as she could. She wanted to know if her father's client was satisfied! Her father had been waiting for her. He picked her up and held her as high as he could. Then he locked her in his arms and hugged her tightly. "He was very happy, and he has even given me another assignment!" he said.

"That's great! You are a super dad! But... are you going to work so hard again now?"

"I'll do my best to spend more time with you. I can afford a housekeeper now! That will save me a lot of time."

"But I also do a lot around the house!"

"Yes, but now we can do nice things together. I'll be working from nine to five from now on."

"And now we're going to have Chinese food, hey Dad?"

"O, yes. But first you have to do your homework."

"O no!" Sophie laughed. "Dad is free and now he has time to nag me about my homework!"

That evening Sophie and her father decided they would go to the zoo together on Saturday. But the weather turned out to be very bad on Saturday. It rained, and there was sleet now and then. Sophie called Linda to tell her that they would go to the zoo some other time, when the weather was better.

"But will you come to me then?" Linda asked. "I'm bored without you."

Sophie had rather stayed at home, but Linda begged her to come, so she asked her father if she could go to Linda in the afternoon. Her father said yes, and later that day Sophie rang Linda's bell. Linda came thundering down the stairs, and opened the door.

"Hey Sophie, how good of you to come! Shall we go and see Fred?"

Sophie was a bit taken aback. She had totally forgotten about Fred. "Eeuh, OK..."

"I really have to be out of here. My father drives me mad! He's been nagging me all day. "Did you do homework? Why don't you wear some normal clothes for a change? Did you get that exam back from the teacher?" I'm going crazy!"

Linda put on her coat, and together the two girls walked to Fred's hair-dresser's shop. The shop was crowded. There were at least 15 people waiting for their turn. Fred worked hard to help everyone. He danced around the big chair, just like Sophie and Linda had seen on the television, and most people were very pleased with his work. Sometimes something went wrong, and people suddenly had green hair, or their hair wouldn't stop growing. The people who were watching liked that a lot and laughed about it. They thought Fred was a funny man. "They still think he's doing magic tricks," Linda whispered in Sophie's ear. In the meantime Fred was very busy undoing his mistakes. He succeeded every time, and the people who were victim of his mistakes didn't have to pay. Sophie and Linda stood there for a few moments to watch the spectacle, but after a while Sophie had had enough.

"Are you coming?" she asked Linda. "I want to go home." At that moment Fred happened to look in their direction.

"Sophie!" he yelled. He ran towards her and gave her two big sloppy kisses on both cheeks! Yuch! Sophie hated that. She wiped her cheeks with the sleeves of her coat.

"Thanks to you I'm famous now," said Fred.

“Huh, I think the City News has also had a hand in that,” Linda sneered.

“Yes,” Sophie grinned, “next time you have to make sure there’s an address on your posters Fred.”

Fred looked at both girls and rubbed his hands. “Would you girls like a free hairstyle from me?” he asked.

Linda looked Sophie in the eye. “No thanks, not me,” she said.

“Me neither. I still like the hairstyle you gave me very much,” Sophie said.

Fred looked disappointed. “But you have a completely different hairstyle in the poster,” he said to Linda.

“Yes, but if I come home with that I will be in deep trouble with my mother,” Linda told him. “I don’t want that to happen.”

“But I can do something about that too!” Fred tried.

“No, thank you, really it’s OK,” said Linda. “We have to go now. Are you coming Sophie?” She pulled Sophie to the door.

“Bye, Fred,” Sophie said before she was pulled out of the shop. A few moments later they were already almost at Linda’s house.

“I still think he’s creepy,” Linda said. “I don’t trust him at all.”

“I do trust him. My hair is still in order, and all those people walk away happy. Fred does his best I think.”

“Hmmm.” Linda felt Sophie’s hair. “I don’t see anything strange about it. But I still am not going to Fred for my haircut.”

The next day Joe cooked dinner for Sophie and Dad. Joe was Dad’s friend from long ago². He was very curious to know how Sophie and her father were doing because they hadn’t seen each other for a while. He had cooked a delicious meal, and Sophie and her father had eaten until they were full to the brim. After dinner they sat on the couch and talked. Joe’s dog Kees climbed on the couch next to Sophie and let her scratch his ears. He liked that a lot. When Sophie’s bedtime approached she walked slowly home with her father. It was a cold and very clear night. Very different from the day before. “Look,” said Dad, while he pointed at the sky. “The moon is almost full, have you seen that?”

After she came home, Sophie went straight to bed. She slept through the night and woke up feeling very healthy. She happily jumped out of bed. When she combed her hair after her shower, it wouldn’t come back into shape as well as it used to. She took a good look at herself in the mirror. “My hair is getting too long. Maybe I have to cut a bit off again,” she thought.

When she came downstairs her father was already there. He had made breakfast for her. “Hi Sophie!” he said happily.

“Hi Dad.” Sophie kissed him and took a few gulps of milk. “That tastes good!”

“Do you know what I’m going to do today? I’m going to clean the whole house!”

Surprised, Sophie looked up from her jam sandwich. “But you wanted to get a housekeeper! Then why do you clean the house?”

“But I can’t let her clean up this mess!”

“O, Dad!” Sophie rolled her eyes. “That’s what you hire her for, isn’t it?”

²See *Sophie and the secret box*

“Well, I think the house has to look a bit clean when she comes here. Besides, I haven’t hired anyone yet because I haven’t started looking yet. So I will make the house neat and clean today.”

“Suit yourself. I’m going to school.”

“First eat your egg!”

“Wow, you made eggs? Yummie!” Together Sophie and her father ate their breakfast, and after that Sophie went to school.

The days went by, and on Thursday Linda suddenly appeared at school with a very beautiful new hairstyle! Instead of her normal dark blond hair she now had straight dark brown hair over her shoulders. Sophie couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Linda! Did you go to Fred?”

Linda swirled around to show Sophie all her sides. “Yes! Do you like it?”

“I can hardly believe it. I thought you hated Fred?”

“Yes, but my mother went to him, and your hair still looks good, so I thought: “Let me go too then.” ”

“It’s magnificent!” Sophie felt Linda’s hair. “We look like sisters now.” Linda had to giggle a bit but she said nothing.

The rest of the week was boring. The girls were very busy at school, because their teacher had made up all sorts of difficult assignments. Linda had a hard time getting used to her long hair. It got tangled in a lot of things, and she was combing it with her fingers all day long. Every free moment she went to the toilet to see if it still looked OK. She was very proud of her hair, Sophie could see that. She was happy for Linda, who looked much more happy than before, and also complained less about her father.

The days came and went. The girls didn’t have time to play over the weekend. They had to do their homework. They had a test on Monday. Linda was very nervous about the test, but she thought she had done a good job anyway. Sophie went home happily. She went to bed on time, because she was tired of the tension of the test. The next day she woke up early. She rubbed her eyes. “Hey,” she thought, “my hair feels strange.” She went sleepily to the mirror. Suddenly her eyes got big “What happened tonight?” she thought. Her beautiful hairstyle had transformed into a thick head of very tiny curls! “O no! Linda may have been right after all!” she thought. She took a comb and tried to get her hair untangled. That proved to be very hard, but after a long time of hard work, her hair was straight and very long; it hung over her shoulders! Sophie was glad to be rid of her little curls and jumped in the shower. But when the first drops hit her hair, the curls came back quickly! She dried herself and looked in the mirror. She dressed in a pensive mood. “I’ll have to go back to Fred after school,” she thought. “What will Dad say? O, he will be very mad!” She walked slowly down the stairs. Her father was in the kitchen.

“What took you so long? I.. What happened to you?” he yelled. His eyes were round with surprise.

“I.. my hair...” Sobbing, Sophie told her father the whole story. Her father listened to her silently. After she finished he stood looking at her for a long time.

“I’m not sure whether to punish you or to comfort you,” he said angrily. “A magician! Are you out of your mind?! You could have asked me!”

Sophie said nothing. She didn't know what to say.

"And Linda? Has she been to Fred too?"

"Yes, but not until Thursday. She didn't trust him at first."

"Hm... And what made her change her mind?"

"Her mother had gone to Fred. And my hair stayed OK for a long time, so..."

Dad looked at Sophie. He was silent for a long time. "You always have the strangest things," he then said. "You know what? I will pick you two up from school with the car this afternoon, and then we will go to Fred together. I want to talk to him and Linda about this matter! I'm really angry with you, do you understand?"

"I won't do it again," Sophie stammered.

"Huh, of course you won't! Fred can kiss his business goodbye if all his clients get hair like this. Now, off to school with you, you're already late!"

Sophie walked slowly to school. She was sad. "It's my own fault," she thought. "I should have listened to Linda. Then Linda wouldn't have gone to Fred herself. I wonder what she looks like now? Maybe it hasn't started with her yet. She hasn't got a hairstyle from Fred for very long." She walked on, thinking sad thoughts. When she was almost at the schoolyard, she met Frank. Frank looked at her with big eyes, and started laughing very hard.

"Hahaha, Sophie has a curly head!" Sophie knew better than to shout back. The last time she cut Frank down to size he went to the teacher, and Sophie was punished instead of him! Therefore she walked on fast. Frank followed her. "Curlyhead! Curlyhead!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

At the schoolyard Sophie saw that she hadn't been the only one who went to Fred. Maret, a boy who was in a class below Sophie's, suddenly had flaming red hair instead of his usual beautiful black curls, and Mister Farmer suddenly was as bald as a billiard ball! He looked funny, but Sophie didn't dare to laugh, because she was afraid mister Farmer would get angry. But she got an idea. She turned around, and grabbed Frank by both his arms. "If you say curlyhead one more time, I'll take you to mister Farmer," she hissed. She pushed him from her, and went inside.

Linda was not in class, and during the break Sophie asked the teacher if she could call her. She got permission, and a few moments later she was dialing Linda's number nervously. The phone rang for a long time, and Sophie was about to give up when Linda answered.

"Hey Linda, how are you?"

Linda sobbed a bit. "I have green hair! And it suddenly got very long too! Fred is a charlatan! I feel so dirty!"

"Me too. I suddenly have very tiny curls. Little Frank yelled 'curlyhead!' at me the whole time. But mister Farmer, he went totally bald! And there is a small boy who suddenly has red hair instead of black curls."

"Drat! What do you suppose has happened?"

"I don't know, but my father will pick us up from school with the car, and then he wants to go to Fred with us."

"My mother went there, but the shop is closed and there are a lot of angry people out front, she said."

"He doesn't dare to come outside."

"He's a coward!" Linda said angrily. "I still can't believe I fell for him."

“Yes. I hope everything will be OK. I don’t want to walk around with this hairstyle all my life.”

“How do you think I feel?” Linda sobbed.

“Poor Linda. I have to go! Miss Yellowfish says hello! I’ll see you this afternoon, OK?”

“OK, see you then.”

Sophie hung up. Poor Linda. She couldn’t stand it when something happened to her. And now something serious had happened. Having green hair didn’t appeal very much to Sophie either.

At the end of the afternoon, when school was almost over, Sophie saw her father arriving at the school with the car. “He’s really angry,” she thought, afraid. “I hope he can control himself when he talks to Fred and Linda.”

“Sophie, are you paying attention? You still have to write down your homework,” the teacher said. She quickly penned down the homework she had to do. While she was busy with that, the bell rang.

“Could you give this to Linda today?” the teacher asked. “You’ll visit her this afternoon I presume?” She gave Sophie a neatly folded piece of paper.

“Yes, OK,” Sophie said, confused. “I’ll see you tomorrow!” She took the paper and walked to the car, where her father was waiting impatiently.

“So, are you ready? Where’s Linda?”

“She was not at school today. I called her. She said she has green hair!”

“Hm, that’s no fun for her. We shall pay her a visit then. I want to talk to her mother.”

Silently, Sophie and her father rode through the city. Luckily, there was an empty parking place close to Linda’s house. Dad parked the car, and a few moments later, Sophie and him stood waiting for Linda’s door. Linda opened the door and let them in. She looked like a mermaid with her long light green hair! Sophie and Linda looked at each other with open mouths.

“I don’t know which one of you had the worst look,” said Sophie’s father.

“But Linda, this is almost what you wanted! Only it’s green instead of black!”

“Yes, and you wanted curls. Look at you now! I have never seen so many curls!” Giggling, the girls climbed the stairs. Sophie’s father followed them, shaking his head. At the top of the stairs Sophie’s mother stood waiting for them. She had a beautiful head full of black and white tufts of hair. “Good day mister Vermeer. What a surprise. I almost never see you here.”

“That is true. But this is a special occasion. Can I talk to you and your husband alone for a moment?”

“Sure. My husband is at the Employment Office at the moment, so you’ll have to do with me. Girls, you can take some lemonade upstairs to Linda’s room.”

Sophie and Linda walked upstairs. “What is it your father wants to talk to my mother about?” asked Linda. Sophie didn’t know. She looked outside, thinking. Fred’s poster in the bus shelter didn’t work anymore. It only showed some hazy spots that slowly changed colour and shape.

“Your mother’s hairstyle doesn’t look so bad,” Sophie said. “O, and the teacher asked me to give you this.”

Linda took the folded piece of paper and unfolded it curiously. "O, that's nice, she wishes me well!"

"Hmm, I hope we will see Fred when we go there."

Linda looked at Sophie with a sad face. "My mother doesn't allow me to go with you. "I don't want you to set one foot in that shop anymore," she said to me."

"Pity. Then we will have to go alone. My father is really mad. I hope he can control himself."

"He didn't look very angry."

"Just you wait, I know him better than you." At that moment Linda's mother entered the room.

"Sophie, your father is waiting for you. And Linda, can I have a word with you? Come, we're going downstairs." Together they walked the stairs, and Sophie and Dad went down the second stairway to the front door.

"Goodbye!" Sophie said.

"Goodbye," Linda and her mother said, and Sophie closed the door.

"That way," Sophie pointed. Silently they walked to Fred's hairdresser's shop. There were still a lot of people there trying to get in.

"You two were lucky, I see now," Dad said. Indeed, there were many people with very strange hairstyles. There was a man with very long hair that was white on one side of his head, and purple on the other side. And a very fashionable lady with a Mohawk haircut. Sophie also saw Maret, the boy she saw at school with the red hair, standing somewhere on the side with his father. Dad forced himself a way through the crowd to the door of the shop, pulling Sophie behind him. They peered inside, but it was dark and silent there.

"What a coward, not showing himself now!" Dad said angrily. Sophie stood peering in the window to see if she maybe could see something move in the shop. But no, nothing at all. Suddenly she heard a window open above her.

"Sophie!" a voice rang. She looked up, and saw Fred leaning out the upstairs window. He held a small spherical thing in his hand, which he dropped. Sophie caught it dexterously. She heard the window close above her.

"What have you got there?" Dad asked. He looked curiously at the thing Sophie held in her hand. It was a spherical thing with a small arrow inside, that steadfastly pointed to the corner of the street, no matter how Sophie moved the sphere.

"I know what it is! It is a way finding compass! Fred had one of those lying in his shop before the hairdresser's shop was here. I think he wants us to follow the arrow."

Dad's brow furrowed. "But who says this thing works correctly?"

"Well, if it seems to want us to jump into the canal we can just go home, can't we?" Sophie asked.

"OK, we're going to follow the arrow. I really want to see this Fred of yours."

Silently, Sophie and Dad walked to the corner of the street. Every now and then, Dad muttered something under his breath. "Magician, hah! A charlatan, that's what he is!" he said. At the end of the street, the arrow suddenly pointed right.

"It works!" Sophie said.

"OK, we will turn right here."

After they had walked a while the arrow pointed right again, into an alley. Sophie walked behind her dad between two rows of fences, until suddenly a

door opened. "Come quick," said Fred, and they followed him to the back of his house. It looked very neat, just like the front. The window frames had a clear new white coat of paint, and the garden was tidily raked. Sophie didn't have much time to look around, however, because Fred pushed her and her father into his kitchen. There were a few nice little cupboards there, and the kitchen had a beautiful floor, but Sophie soon noticed there weren't any kitchen appliances like a refrigerator or a stove. There was nothing there to cook with. However, there was one little table on which a carton of milk, some cheese, and some butter lay. The table was surrounded by a strange blue glow. Sophie walked to the table and felt the carton of milk. It was cold!

In the meantime Fred and Dad stood looking at each other sheepishly. "I guess I owe you both an explanation," began Fred.

"I surely would think so, yes! How do you get it into your head to start experimenting on underaged girls!" Dad shouted angrily.

Fred sighed and sat down on a kitchen chair. "I really thought that I had found something that I was good at and made everyone happy. First the magician's shop, and then the hairdresser's shop. But every time there is a full moon, something weird happens."

Sophie looked at Fred with a surprised face. She sat on the chair opposite him. "How come?" she asked.

"I will start at the beginning." Fred waited until Dad also had sat down, and then said: "I come from a time long ago. Like my father, and my father's father, I had been to the magician's school, and I was a good student. The only thing was, I abhorred the atmosphere of secrecy and rituals that always surrounded magicians. Magicians walked around in long dresses with sequins and stars embroidered on them, and they had those pointy hats on. That was completely unnecessary, and I wanted to show that you could do magic without all that. So I started a little shop, just like the one I had when we met." He looked at Sophie, and continued:

"In the beginning the shop worked fine. People liked my new approach, and they asked my help for a lot of things. I even helped building the church in this town. But after about two years, another magician opened a shop close to mine. I knew him from my studies and I really didn't like this guy. He had the pointy hat and the long dress and everything, and soon many of my customers went to him instead of me."

"That wasn't very nice of them," Sophie said indignantly.

"No," said Fred. "But people were a lot more superstitious back then. This guy told them that the spells would work better if you performed the right rituals. He knew just as well as I did that that wasn't true. What is important is that you focus and aim the magical powers in the right way. Then you can do whatever you want with them. It's not totally unlike this thing that you call electricity. And you also don't perform a strange ritual before switching on the vacuum cleaner, do you? In any case, I lost a lot of customers to this guy, and at a certain moment I decided I'd better try my luck elsewhere. Would you two like something to drink?"

"That would be nice," Sophie said. Her father started protesting, but Fred held his hand up before he could say anything.

"No magic, I know. Sophie, there's coke and other soda in that cupboard over there. Could you grab a few glasses and pour your dad and us a drink?"

Sophie did what Fred asked her. Her father inspected his glass from all sides, but he could find nothing strange about it. So he took a small sip.

“I earned enough money with building the church to close my shop and do a study at the University. Soon I was engrossed in time travelling. That always was a hobby of mine, and finally I could learn more about it. After a lot of practising and trying I could send objects to the future, and when I was sure I was good at it, I tried the time travelling spell on myself. I wanted to find a time in which people would not be so superstitious anymore, and start a new business there.

“And that’s how you came here,” said Sophie.

Fred emptied his glass in one gulp. “Yes. I found this empty house and started my shop here. I was surprised there weren’t any other magicians around. At first I thought that magicians made all these appliances you use for everything. But I soon found out that they don’t use magic at all. I still don’t understand how they can work. Can you tell me?” He looked at Sophie and her father curiously.

“Electricity,” Sophie’s father said. He look Fred into the eye inquisitively. “What is magic in your opinion?”

“You still don’t believe magic exists do you? You will have to accept it. How do you think the pyramids were built? I helped building the big church in this city myself. Without magic we would never have gotten the roof up, believe me.”

Dad kept silent and let Fred continue his story.

“So I started my shop. But soon people came back with things that always worked fine in my old time. Everlasting candles shouldn’t go out, and people used to be very satisfied with the childrenvisions I sold in the old time. But now they often show the strangest things after they’ve been in service for a while. My shop was visited less and less. I put a spell on it so people walked more slowly when they came near. That helped a bit, but not much.

“And then Sophie and Linda visited you.”

“O, your friend’s name is Linda?” Fred asked. Sophie nodded yes. Fred stood up and took a packet of cookies from the cupboard. “I bought this in the supermarket yesterday. No magic,” he said, looking at Dad. He passed the cookies around and continued:

“Sophie came back later and suggested I started a hairdresser’s shop.” Dad cast Sophie a dark look, but he said nothing. He was still angry, Sophie could see that. She also saw that he was not convinced by Fred’s story. Fred continued: “I made the posters, and more and more people came to see me. Everything went well, and I felt a hero. Finally I was famous and appreciated! I could be a real magician again without having to run around in a monkey suit.”

Sophie’s father took a bite of his cookie and asked: “But what exactly went wrong? There are people at your door who are a lot worse off than Sophie.”

Fred sighed again. “It took me quite some effort, but I think I know now. The amount of magic in your time is so low, that all the magic I put in the everlasting candles and your hairstyles leaks away fast. In my time the leaking was much less. Now when something that has a strong magic of itself comes by, like the full moon, everything goes awry. That’s what has happened now. I could have predicted it, if I had thought a bit more before I started the shop.”

“Great,” Sophie said angrily. “You disappointed a lot of people this way!”

“Yes,” her father added. “Sophie’s friend hasn’t been to school today because she was ashamed of her hair. What do you think you are going to do about that?”

“I don’t dare to do anything. Every time I use magic it can go awry the next month. Almost all hairstyles I made are held together by magic.” Fred looked Sophie in the eye. “For you I made curls that don’t stay intact without magic. The full moon has overdone that a bit, I see. But I promise you: all the people I’ve treated will have their old hairstyles back in two weeks, when the moon is old.”

“But wait!” Dad suddenly said. “You said the magic you use always leaks away. But you also told us you helped building the church. Then why hasn’t it collapsed?” He looked at Fred, grinning, as if he wanted to say: “Wriggle yourself out of this one, friend!”

“Very simple. We didn’t want a building that needed constant maintenance by putting magic into it. Keeping such a large building upright can cost a lot of magic. So we only used magic to get the roof on the church. The church keeps itself upright.” Fred stared dreamily in front of him. “Yes, that was a difficult job. But we did it eventually.”

“What will you do now?” asked Sophie.

“I want to find another time, in which people use more magic. I know I am a good magician, but even good magicians can’t change the world on their own. So I will have to find some colleagues.”

“Will you go back in time?” Sophie said.

“No girl, that’s impossible I’m afraid. You can only travel forward in time. I’m going to look around here and there until I’ve found a suitable time.” Fred leaned back in his chair.

“Are you going to say something to those people outside?” Dad asked.

“What can I tell them? They won’t believe me anyway. I’ve heard them shout, believe me! They think I’m a cheater and a charlatan.”

“Well, that’s what you are, aren’t you? You could at least explain them what happened.”

“No way. I’m not going out there.”

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” asked Sophie.

“Yes. And now it’s time for you to go. I have to prepare my trip.” Fred stood up.

“Hohoho, you won’t get away with it that easily,” Dad said. He also stood up and look Fred in the eye, very angrily.

Fred took a deed breath. “O yes I can,” he said, whilst looking Sophie’s father straight in the eye. “Oh oh, I hope this will end well,” Sophie thought.

“You will now go home,” Fred said calmly. He walked around the table and to the kitchen door. When he grabbed the doorhandle Sophie saw sparks dancing between his fingers. To her great surprise her father followed Fred, and walked through the door into the garden. Sophie followed him in a hurry. “Bye Sophie,” said Fred.

“Well I never,” Dad grumbled when Fred had closed the door behind them. “He leaves all those people in fear!” He stalked through the garden and the alley to the street. Sophie ran after him. Before they had reached the street they heard a big bang. It sounded like a big tree snapping in two! Dad suddenly stood stock-still, and Sophie ran into him. A few flashing lights and sizzling sounds followed the big bang.

“That came from Fred’s house!” Sophie yelled, when everything was over and they had calmed down a bit. They ran quickly back to the house. They opened the door to the garden carefully and looked in the garden. The house was there, but it seemed much darker inside. Sophie slowly walked into the garden, to the kitchen door they had walked through only a few moments ago. Her father stood looking at a distance. “Sophie, come back! It’s dangerous,” he said concernedly, but Sophie didn’t listen to him. A few moments later he came after her. She grabbed his hand.

“Look! The paint is peeling off all the window frames, you see?” Sophie said. The house looked as if it hadn’t seen a fresh coat of paint in years. The windows, which had before been clean and clear, now were covered with a thick layer of dust and dirt. The window frames were rotting. Sophie pressed her nose against a window and looked inside. There was nothing there but a dirty empty space, and here and there an empty cardboard box. Dusty cobwebs hung in the corners and from the ceiling.

“It looks like it’s been empty for years,” Dad said.

Sophie said nothing. “It’s just like a dream,” she thought. She looked through the garden. There were weeds everywhere. “Soon I’ll wake up and everything turns out to have been a dream.” She felt her hair. Yes, she still had the strange curls. So it wasn’t a dream. She took Dad’s hand and pulled him with her, to the car.

On their way home Sophie and her dad were silent. They both thought about the strange things they had seen today. “I think Fred is a coward for leaving without reassuring those people,” Sophie said.

“He’s a very bad loser,” Dad said. He parked the car and Sophie and he walked to the house together. “Do you feel like cooking?”

“No, I’m much too tired,” Sophie said. Dad turned around and walked back to the car. “Come, let’s get Chinese food.”

That evening Sophie and Dad watched TV together. Sophie wanted to see the City News. “Who knows, maybe they’ll have a story about Fred,” she said. Much to her surprise, the City News was not presented by the regular newsreader, but by Rachid!

“New developments surrounding the elusive hairdresser who calls himself Fred Jansson have driven many people to the edge of despair today,” Rachid started. “Almost everybody who had obtained a new hairstyle through him, awoke today with a completely different hairstyle. Our regular newsreader is also the victim of this strange prank, which is why I read the news to you today. We made a small documentary.”

The picture changed. Sophie and her father saw Fred’s shop, with a lot of people in front. “Look, there were a lot more people there than when we were there,” Sophie said. Rachid appeared in the picture, and said:

“Fred Jansson, the now famous hairdresser who can give you a new hairstyle in less than ten minutes, seems to have played a prank with his customers today. As you can see here, many hairstyles have changed in the strangest creations. They are far remote from what the wearer had in mind when he or she took place in Fred’s chair.” The picture changed again. A woman with very short bright blue hair said to the cameraman:

“This is a shocking disgrace! I have never been so deceived. I am here to recoup, but Fred chooses not to open the door.”

Another lady, with a gigantic bright yellow Afro hairstyle on one side of her head, and long straight black hair on the other side, said crying: "I was so happy with the hairstyle Fred made for me. I used to have very thin dark blond hair, and he made me a beautiful long fair hairstyle, that went perfectly well with my earrings. And look at me now! I look like a monster!" Sobbing, she turned her back to the camera.

Sophie had to laugh. "Linda and me were lucky with the hairstyles we got."

Rachid looked into the camera again and said: "We will go see if we can talk to Fred." He wrung himself through the crowd to the door, and tried to open it. "That's strange, it looks like it's fastened on the inside. It won't budge." He banged his fist on the window, but that too didn't help. "Bof, bof," his fist sounded on the glass. "It seems like there's bulletproof glass in there," Rachid said. "He's a dirty crook!" a bald man yelled angrily. The camera turned toward him. "I'm a lawyer, and this man will face justice, you can count on that," he yelled. "My wife is at home, sick in bed, and this morning I had to shave all my hair off to look presentable for work. I will demand a big compensation for everybody who is let down by this man!"

The picture changed, and Sophie and her father saw Rachid in the studio again. "We tried the to get Mr. Jansson in the studio the whole day, but we didn't succeed. The judge you saw in the clip has subpoenaed Mr. Jansson. We'll keep you informed of further developments."

"What is subpoenaed?" Sophie asked.

"That means Fred has to stand trial," Dad answered.

"Well, that'll be hard with him not being around anymore." Sophie stood up. "I'm going to bed. I'm exhausted," she said. She kissed her father goodbye and disappeared upstairs.

"Hey, Sophie! Wake up! You have to go to school!" Slowly Sophie woke up. She rubbed her eyes and looked into her father's smiling face. "You are a real sleepy-head," he said. "Get your clothes on, I'll make your breakfast."

Slowly Sophie woke up. She stayed in bed for a little longer. "Where would Fred be now?" she thought. It still seemed like a dream to her. She stood up sleepily, put on her dressing gown, and walked downstairs. "He, curlyhead!" Dad said. "That's not funny!" Sophie sulked. She felt her hair, and indeed, she still had the small curls.

"It looks like it was worse yesterday," Dad said. But Sophie didn't believe him. Not until she was at school did she realize that her father may have been right. Linda was there, and her hair was a little bit shorter and a little bit less green than Sophie remembered it. Linda seemed proud of her hair now, because she wore a black sweater that made the green hair stand out clearly. And mister Farmer suddenly had a spiky head. But Frank still yelled "Curlyhead!" at Sophie. She tried to get him, but he was a fast runner and she didn't succeed.

"Come on, don't let him get to you," Linda said.

"You're right. But he is such an irritating little boy!"

"I think he likes you and that's why he acts like that."

Surprised, Sophie looked Linda in the eye. "You don't mean that do you? I really don't want to have anything to do with him!" Linda giggled a bit, and together Sophie and Linda walked to the school.

"Your hair is less curly than yesterday, do you know that?" said Linda, while pulling one of Sophie's curls until Sophie said "Auch!"

Sophie and Linda had been busy at school. Because they were in an advanced class they had to do a lot of homework. The days flew by. Sophie looked in the mirror every day, and she saw her curls get less and less dense. Linda's hair also looked more and more normal. On a Friday afternoon Linda and Sophie walked home. When they got there, Sophie's father was busy talking to a woman. "Ah, Sophie. This is Miss Von Reede. She might become our new housekeeper. This is my daughter, Sophie." Sophie and Linda introduced themselves.

"You two go play upstairs, I will be there shortly," Dad said. So Sophie and Linda went upstairs. They did their homework like good girls, until they were tired of it. Sophie went downstairs to get some lemonade.

"I didn't know you were getting a housekeeper," Linda said when she came back.

"O, yes. My father has been busy interviewing people this whole week. I hope he will pick a nice one."

"Maybe your father wants to marry her," Linda giggled.

"I heard that!" Sophie's father laughed, who just at that moment stepped through the door. Linda became red and made herself small.

"Say, ladies, how long has it been since you were last called a mermaid and a curlyhead?"

The girls looked at each other. "Hey, Linda, you almost look normal again!"

"And you! The curls you have now look good on you!"

"I thought we had to celebrate that. Linda, I called your mother and asked her if you can stay for dinner. And if it's OK with you two we will go to the zoo together tomorrow! We still had that coming, didn't we Sophie?"

Sophie nodded violently. She always liked going to the zoo! "And, did you hire that lady?"

Dad grinned. "She comes to clean the house on Monday. And no, I will not work my fingers to the bone to clear up the mess before that!" He looked at Sophie and Linda with a big smile on his face. "Come, let's get Chinese food."