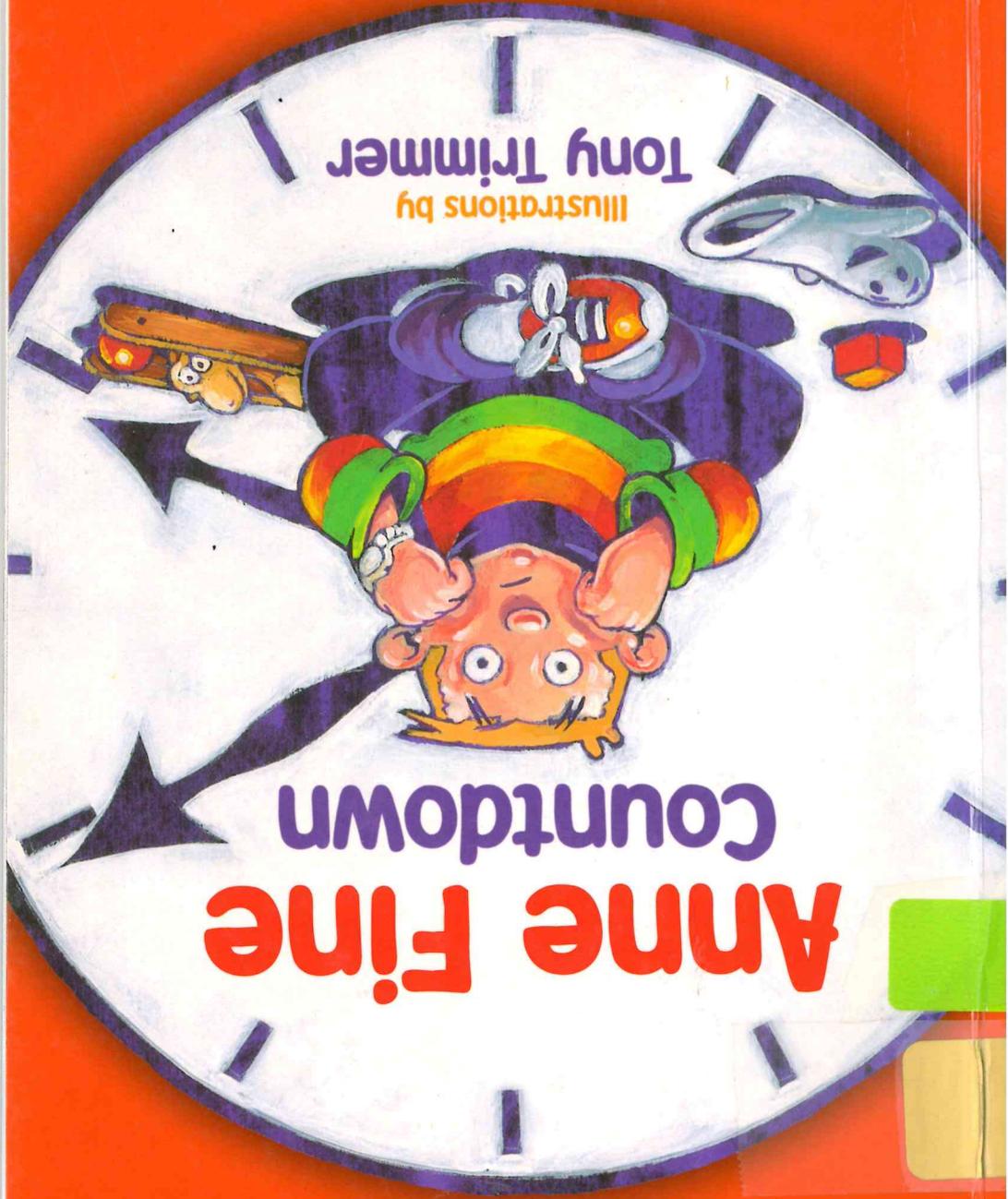


Yellow Bananas



Anne Fine
Countdown

Illustrations by
Tony Trimmer



Anne Fine Countdown

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed in U.A.E.
I 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2
Hardback ISBN 0 431 06176 9

Paperback ISBN 0 7497 4672 6
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by arrangement with Egmont Children's Books Limited,
a division of Reed Educational and Professional Publishing Ltd,
Published in hardback by Heinemann Library,
239 Kensington High St, London W8 6SA
First published in Great Britain 1996 by Heinemann Young Books
imprints of Egmont Children's Books Limited, a division of Egmont Holding Limited
This edition published in Great Britain 2001 by Egmont Children's Books Limited



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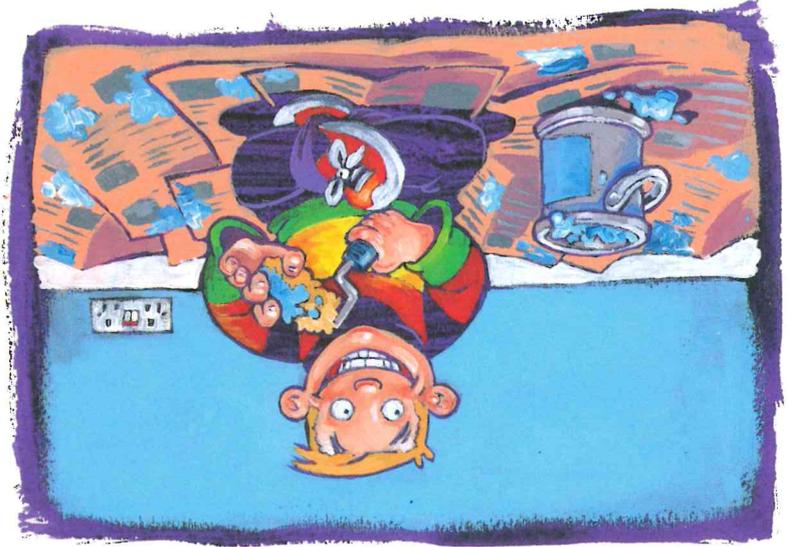
Anne Fine
countdown

*To Jessie and Leah
T.T.*



HUGO JAMES MACFIE sat on the newspaper spread all over his empty bedroom and asked his father, 'Can I have a gerbil?'
 'No,' said his father, painting round the last corner.
 'I promise I'd look after it properly,' But 'I'm sure you would,' said his father. 'But that's not the point. Think of the gerbil. Think how you'd like to spend your whole life in a cage; 'I'd let it out,'
 'But you're at school all day;
 Hugo counted up on his fingers.
 'I'm only out for seven hours;

11:01 AM





His father painted over the last of the yellow
 with the new blue.
 'It's long enough to sit in a boring old cage all
 by yourself, with nothing to do.'
 'I could give it things to play with while I'm
 gone.'
 'That might not be enough to keep it happy.'
 'It would be clean and safe and comfy, though.'
 His father looked round the four freshly
 painted walls.
 'This bedroom's clean and safe and comfy,' he
 said. 'A perfect cage, in fact, for someone your
 size. But you wouldn't want to spend seven
 hours in here, all by yourself.'
 'I'd be all right.'
 His father dropped the brush into the can.
 'Prove it,' he said. 'Spend the day here.'
 Hugo looked round the empty room. 'The
 whole day?'
 'Seven hours,' his father said. 'The time you'd
 usually be out at school.'
 Hugo looked at his watch. It was eleven in
 the morning.

'See you at twelve,' said Hugo. 'Ready to go, deal?'

newspaper that's spread over the floor. Is that a

of water. Three of your old toys. And all the

'Eleven-o-four. One plate of food. One bottle

Mr MacFie set his watch.



exactly eleven-o-four.'

'Synchronise watches,' said Hugo. 'I make it

furniture back in. I'll bring a gerbil, too.'

can do it,' he said, 'I'll not just bring your

His father picked up the paint rags. 'If you

'And if I do it, can I have a gerbil?'

seven.'

it. Midday until evening. Twelve o'clock till

hour getting organised, then see if you can stick

'Start at noon,' said his father. 'Spend the next

11:58 AM

MR MACFIE CLOSED his hand round the door knob and inspected his watch.

'Ready?'

Hugo checked everything: his water bottle here, his food plate there, and the three things he'd taken from the toybox spread out in front of him on the floor.

'Ready,' he told his father. 'Lock me in.'

'Certainly not,' said his father. 'You know that's totally against my principles.'

He shut the door.



HUGO LOOKED ROUND what he now thought of as his nice new cage. Soft breaths of air waltzed through the open window. The one bare lightbulb hung from the matt white ceiling. The walls shone perfect Harebell Blue. Across the floor lay a square sea of newsprint. On top of that lay the three things he'd borrowed from Charlotte's toybox.

12:01 PM



1. The dancing monkey on a stick.



2. Wee Grey Ghostie.



3. The box of baby bricks.



He'd taken the monkey on a stick because
Charlotte wouldn't let him touch it usually. He'd
chosen Wee Grey Ghostie because she was his
favourite puppet when he was young. And he'd
picked up the brick box because he'd heard his
mother say a thousand times that you could fill a
child's room with expensive toys, but when it
came to keeping them busy for hours and hours,
you couldn't beat a box of bricks.

So. Was she right?
He built a tower.



Then he built a house.



Then he was bored.



And then a prison wall.

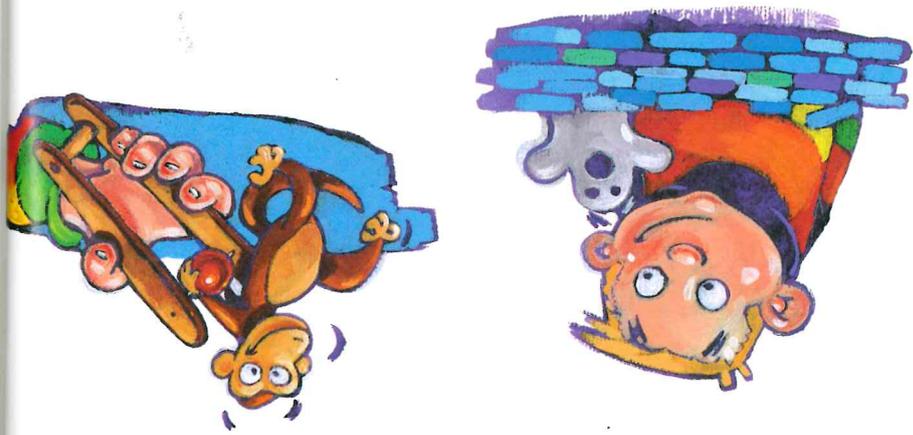


archway that fell down.

He built a viaduct. And then a rather fancy



He took Wee Grey Ghostie and made her
 peer over his prison wall. She looked this way
 and that.
 'Whoooooo, he made her say. 'Whoooooo.
 Then he was bored.
 He took the monkey on a stick and made it
 flip over and over.
 'Hi, Ghostie,' he made the monkey say.
 'Whoooo,' said Wee Ghostie.
 'Look at me;
 'Whoooooo;
 'Backward flip. Up and over. Hanging in
 the air.'



just under six and a half more hours.

12.31.

Hugo studied his watch.

How long was that, then?

As a puppet ghost and a monkey on a stick.

was wrong. A box of bricks was just as boring

As soon as he got out, he'd tell his mother she

the monkey on a stick against the lid.

box and laid the puppet ghost on top. He leant

Hugo MacFie packed the bricks back in their

bored.

Wee Grey Ghostie couldn't help sounding

'Whooooo!'



12:32 PM

HE READ THE newspaper. It wasn't easy. Great splatters of paint had fallen from the ceiling,

making it difficult to read. *New rules for banks*

he managed to make out. *Then foreign sales on*

the up and up. Boring. Shares plunge after fears.

But fears of what was now a big white blob. He

tried to pick it off, but only tore the paper.

He tried another patch.

Massive deposits . . . divided by the share price.

Boring in spades.



Less than an hour gone. It seemed like *weeks*.

In six hours and twenty-one minutes.

Hugo looked at his watch.

When would that be?

At the moment he got out of here.

Financial Times. He'd speak to his father about

grew up, he'd buy a proper paper, not the

HOUSE HORRORS - See pages 4-11. When he

WIG OFF BEAUTY QUEEN. NO MORE HAUNTED

EATS FAMILY OF FOUR. NO WIND SNATCHES

news. Nothing worth reading. No *KILLER SHARK*

paper. There it was, all around him: business

He crawled across the floor, nose to the





12:42 PM

SO WAS HE hungry yet? Hugo had a little think. He wasn't hungry yet. He'd had a proper

breakfast. Then, just in case, an early lunch. His orange sat on the plate. His sandwich waited.

And his three chocolate biscuits lay in a pile. He planned to eat his snack at four-thirty. Then,

when he got out at seven, he'd have the supper his mother promised to keep warm.

That was the plan. He studied the plate again. Orange. Sandwich. And two chocolate biscuits.

Hugo stared. Where had the third one gone? Guiltily, he brushed the biscuit crumbs off his

chest. He hadn't even noticed he was eating it.

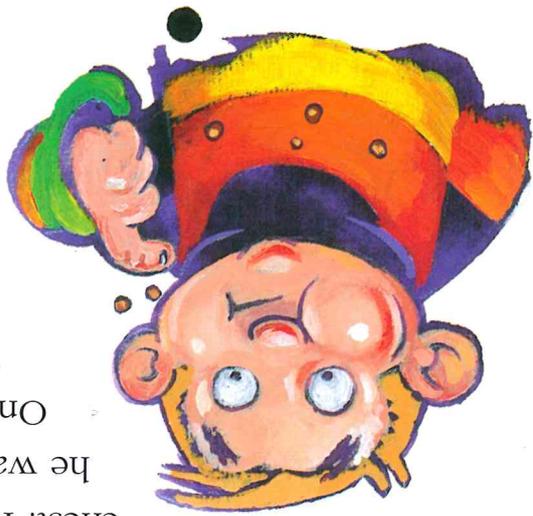
Only 12.44.

What a waste.

If he'd been thinking

properly, he'd have

taken more time.





HUGO ROCKED GENTLY back and forward on the floor. The walls swayed with him, blue as sky. Sky all around. No, *sea*. Sea all around him. He was on a raft. A speckled, printed raft. The blobs of paint were droppings from the gulls. No land in sight. Nothing but sea for miles and miles. Perhaps a dolphin would come. Maybe a whale. Or even sharks. What was that strange shape over there that looked like a paint scraper on the floor, but could as easily be . . .

12:47 PM

He paddled desperately.
fevered brow.

the sill, over the waves and raft, cooling his
sun beat down. And the soft zephyrs crept over
Around him, the seagulls cried. The lightbulb
no-one there?

'Save me!' he whispered frantically through
gripped teeth. 'Oh, save me, someone! Is there
up the plate and paddled with all his might.
Sending the sandwich flying, Hugo snatched
Sharki!



'Oh, for a sight of land! Six weeks! Six
 desperate weeks adrift. My stores so low that I
 have only a sandwich, an orange, and two ship's
 biscuits left. If no vessel passes, I shall surely
 die!' His paddling grew more frantic.
 'Help!' he cried. 'Help me! - Oh, oh, help!'
 But no help came.
 Hugo paddled onward through the waves
 until, discouraged and exhausted, he lost hope,
 and ate his only sandwich.



NATURALLY, AS A man will, stuck on a burning
 ocean on a raft, he soon went mad.
 'Ghostie,' he whispered, 'Ghostie, can you
 remember back when you were mine?'
 Wee Ghostie nodded. How could she forget?
 'And you were white?'
 Forlornly, Wee Ghostie hung her head.
 'Well,' Hugo confessed. 'You know that day
 Mum stuffed you in the washing machine by
 mistake, and I sat and watched you going round
 and round, until you went grey?'

12:59 PM





Wee Ghostie nodded again.
'That was my fault,' admitted Hugo. 'I was the one who dropped you in the laundry basket by mistake. If I'd done what I was told, and sorted the laundry more carefully, you wouldn't have gone all lumpy and grey.'
Wee Ghostie hung her lumpy head.
'Sorry,' said Hugo. 'I am really sorry.'
Wee Ghostie said not a word.
'Still,' Hugo said, cheering suddenly. 'I feel a whole lot better, just for telling you.'
Wee Ghostie stared.

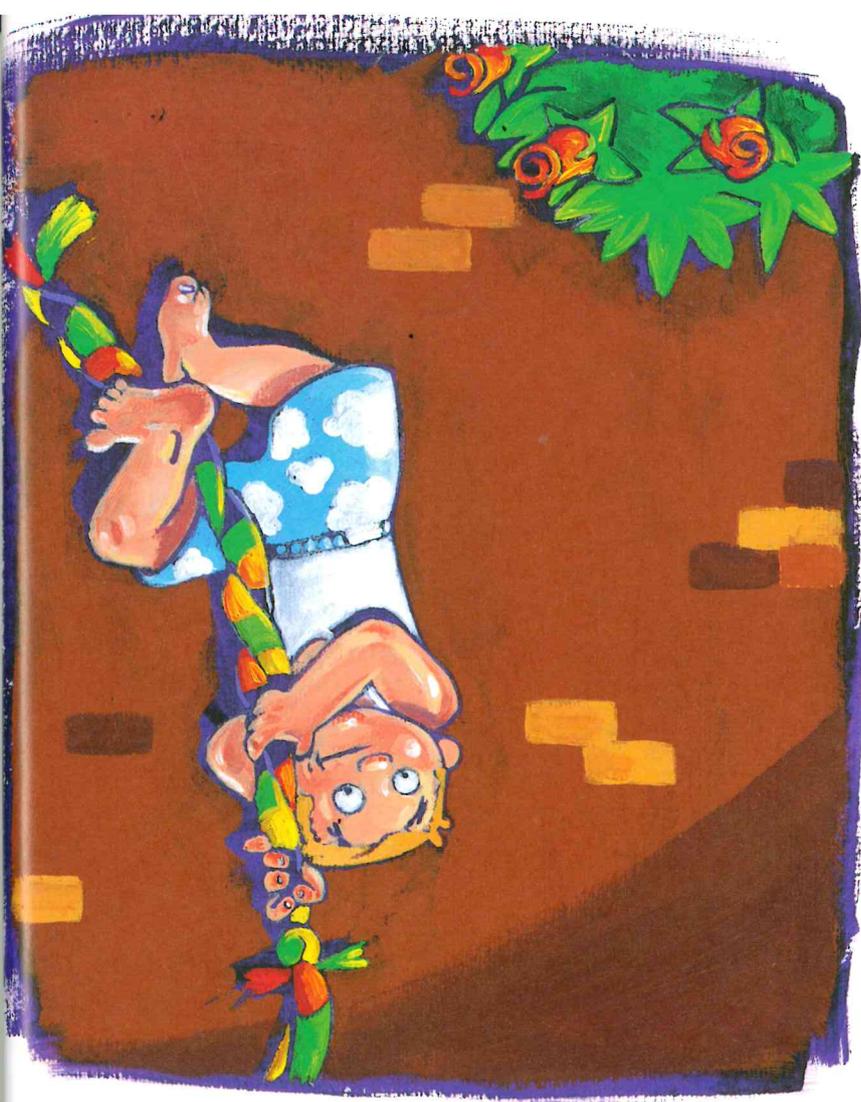
HUGO LEANED OUT OF THE WINDOW AS FAR AS HE
 DARED. IF HE COULD SLIP HIS HAND AROUND THE
 METAL STRUT HOLDING THE GUTTER UP, THEN HE COULD
 SWING ACROSS TO THE DRAINPIPE. THEN HE COULD
 SHIN DOWN THAT AS FAR AS THE TREE, AND, IF THE BIG
 BRANCH HELD, HE COULD SLIDE DOWN TO MR FOSTER'S
 WALL, CRAWL ALONG THAT, AND LET HIMSELF DOWN ON
 THE DUSTBINS.

01:03 PM

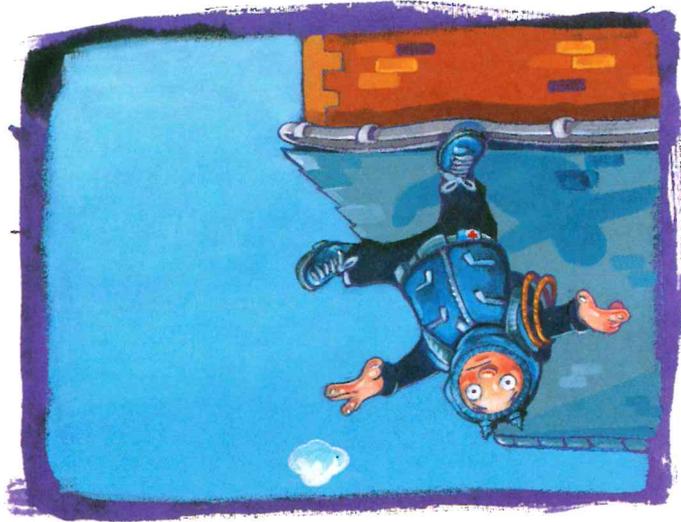


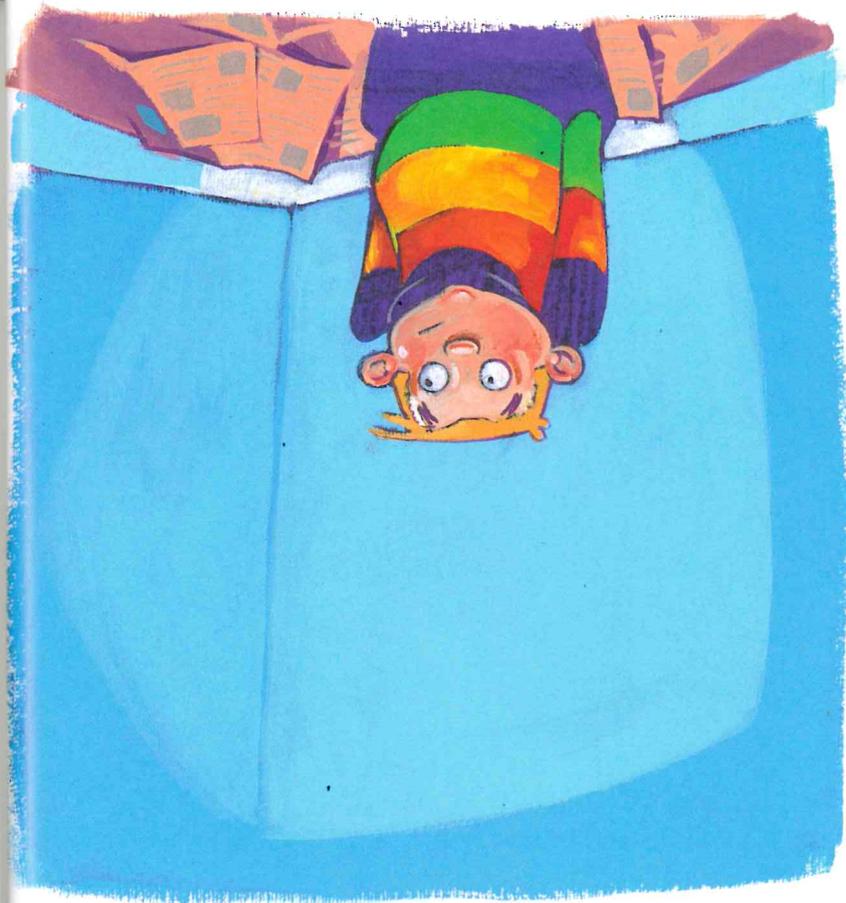


Or he could rip his clothes into long shreds and knot them tightly together, like a rope, and tie it to the window catch. Then he could slither down and jump, trying to make sure he missed the rosebush, and land on the grass, next to the cat's bowl.



Or he could climb up on the guttering,
 balance along and then crawl up the roof, over
 the top, and down the other side, on to the
 porch.
 Or he could just walk out the door, of course . . .
 But not for – he studied his watch – five hours
 and fifty minutes.
 He watched the numbers on his watch face
 flash and change.
 Five hours and forty-nine.
 He watched them change again.
 Five hours and forty-eight.
 A gerbil wouldn't have a watch, of course, to
 count the minutes pass. All that a gerbil could do
 was prowl around his nice new cage.





HUGO PROWLED ROUND his nice new room. The smell of paint was strongest in the corner that Dad had painted last. Sunlight fell firmly on the furthest wall, making the blue look lighter. When the sun dropped behind the tree there might be shadows he could watch to pass the time. But not until then. And that would be hours.

01:13 PM



held the orange to his nose.
smell even more strongly, then he lay down and
he'd thought. He scraped with his nail to make it
The smell of orange peel was sharper than
Then, bored, he sniffed at it.

Again.

Twice.

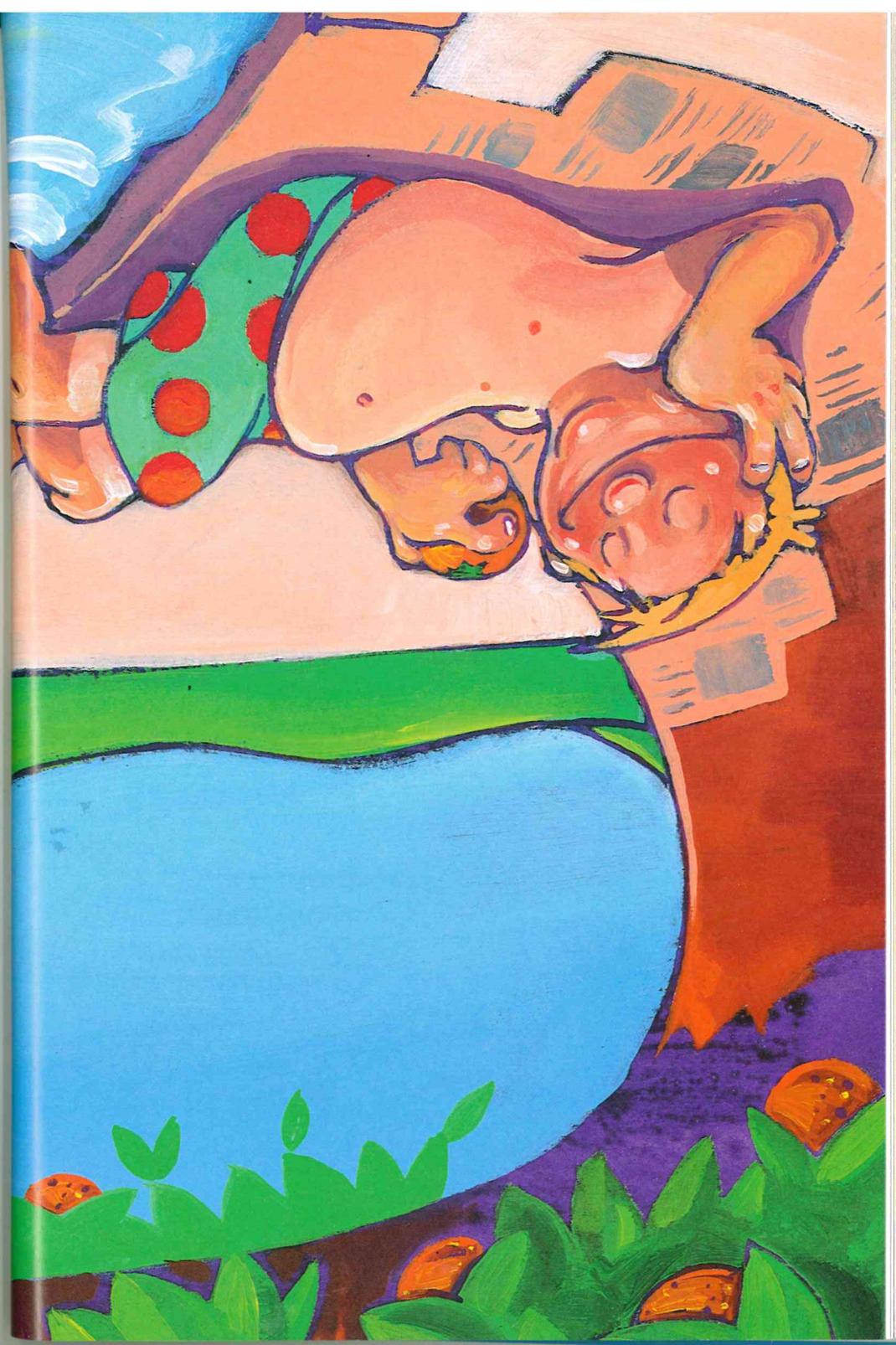
Once.

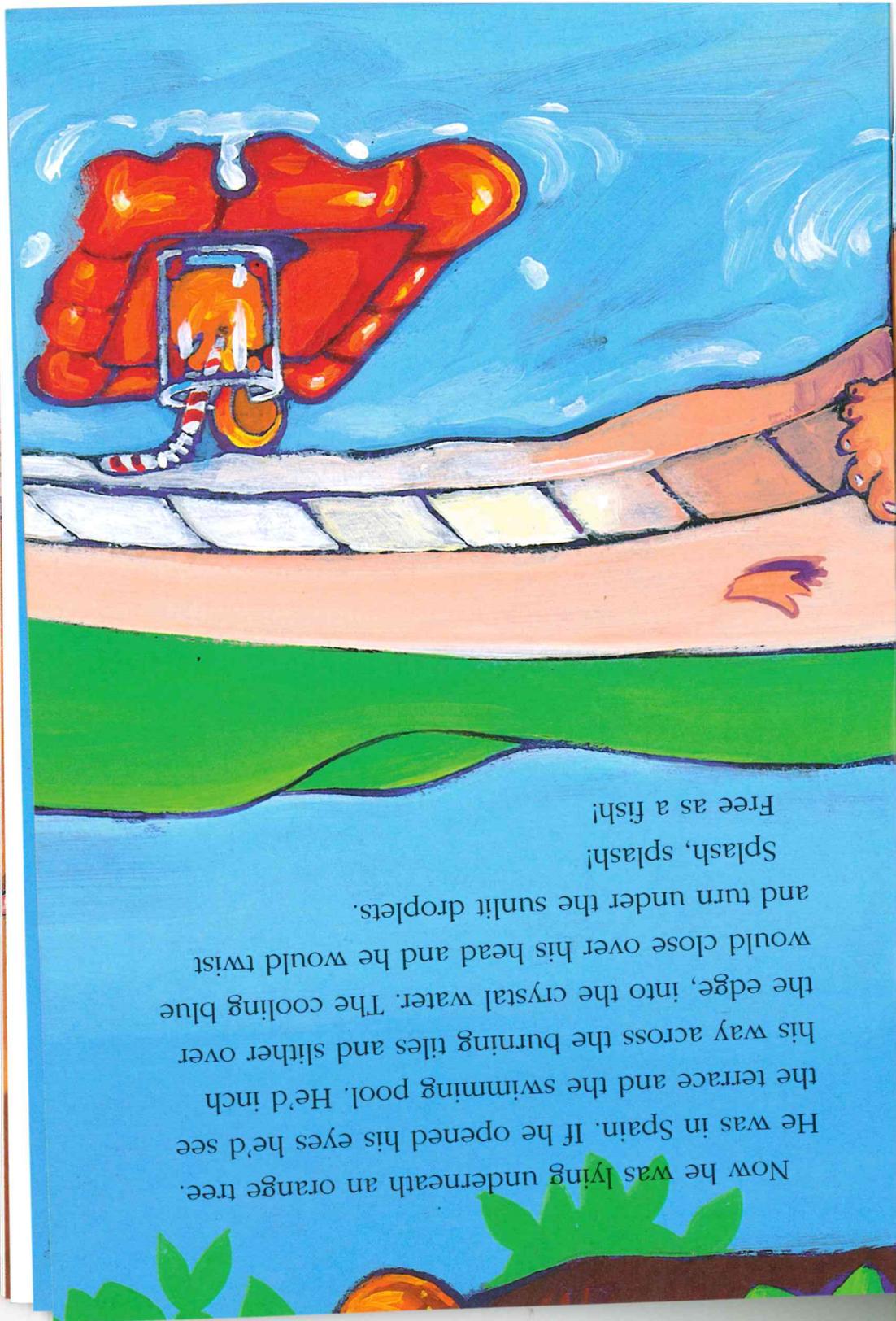
the air.

HUGO PICKED UP the orange and tossed it in

01:17 PM







Now he was lying underneath an orange tree.
He was in Spain. If he opened his eyes he'd see
the terrace and the swimming pool. He'd inch
his way across the burning tiles and slither over
the edge, into the crystal water. The cooling blue
would close over his head and he would twist
and turn under the sunlit droplets.
Splash, splash!
Free as a fish!

No. He was an eagle now. From way, way up,
he'd spot the orange peeking from its branch,
and swoop down, from sheer high spirits, to
knock it from the tree. The sharp fizz taste
would smear his beak and send him wheeling
up again, into high skies.

Flap, flap!

Free as a bird!

01.26.

But he was here, under a matt white ceiling,

tapped in on all four sides by Harebell Blue

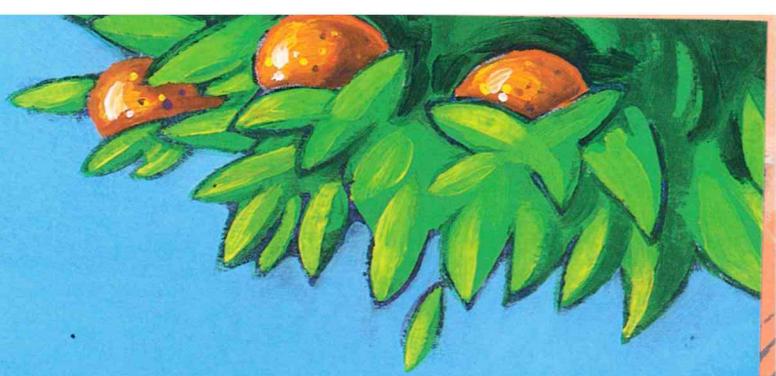
walls. Beneath him lapped, not silken water, but

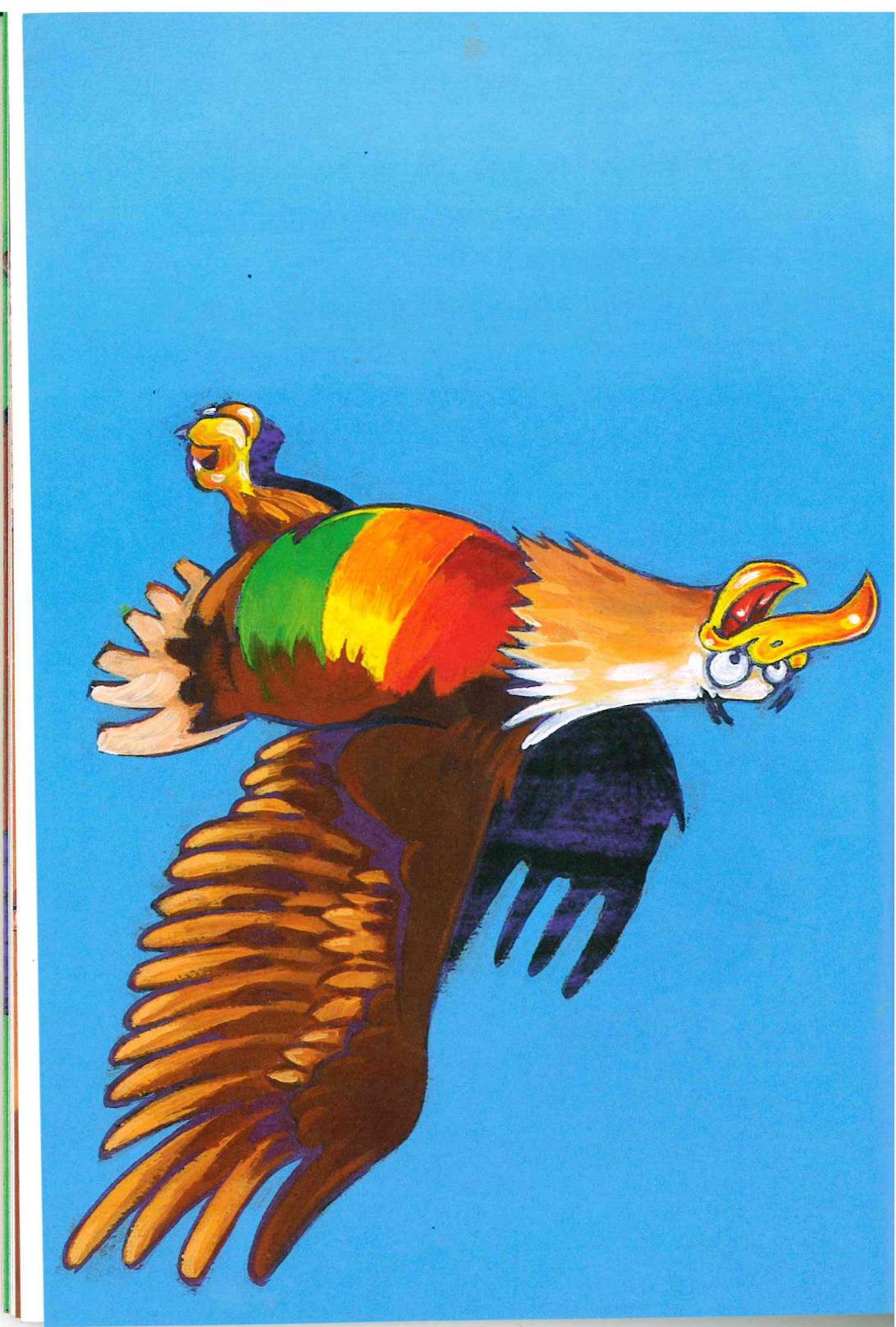
the grubby old *Financial Times*.

On holiday, his father said, a dozen times a

day: 'This is the life!'

And this, thought Hugo, definitely wasn't.





FIRST HE RIPPED out the word *HELP*. (He found it in a headline: *HELP FOR SALES*.) Then he tore gently round the *ME* (in *MERCHANTISE*). He found an *I* (in *INTEREST RATES*), an *AM* (in *AMERICAN SHARES*), the letters *TRA* (in *TRADE FIGURES*), a spare *P* (in *PENSIONS*), and then a *PED* (in *PEDESTRIAN PRECINCT*).

He found the thickest blob of paint (just above

01:29 PM



An empty bottle, of course.

What did he need now?

he'd done it.

His fingers were covered with matt white, but

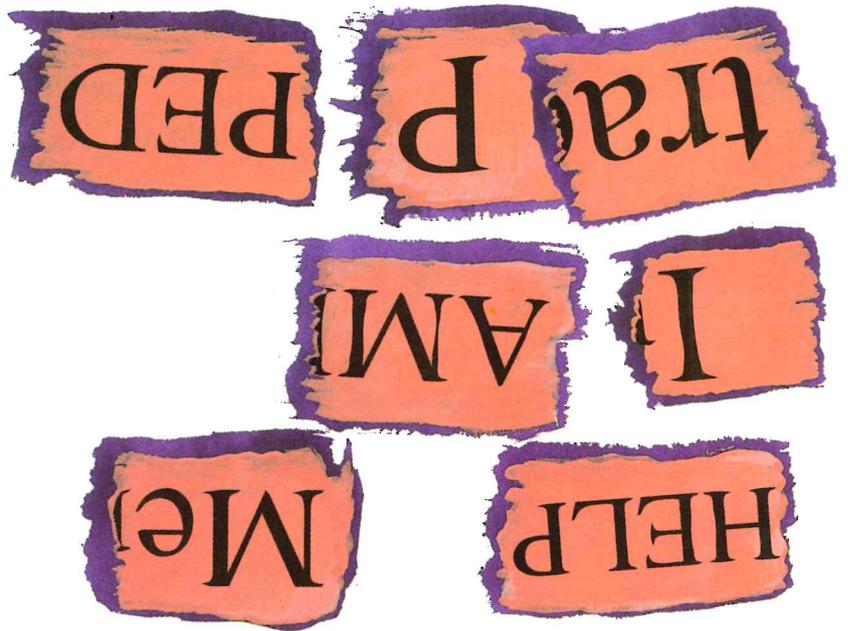
photo of the Manager of Tesco's).

could find (which was a bit of bare wall in the,

his message to the blankest patch of paper he

off. It was still sticky, luckily. He used it to glue

SCOTTISH WORKFORCE SLASHED) and picked it



now. It could be either of them. Hard to tell.
 Someone was going into his parents' bedroom
 door. He heard a rattle further along the landing.
 The steps drew nearer. Then they passed the
Thud, thud, thud.

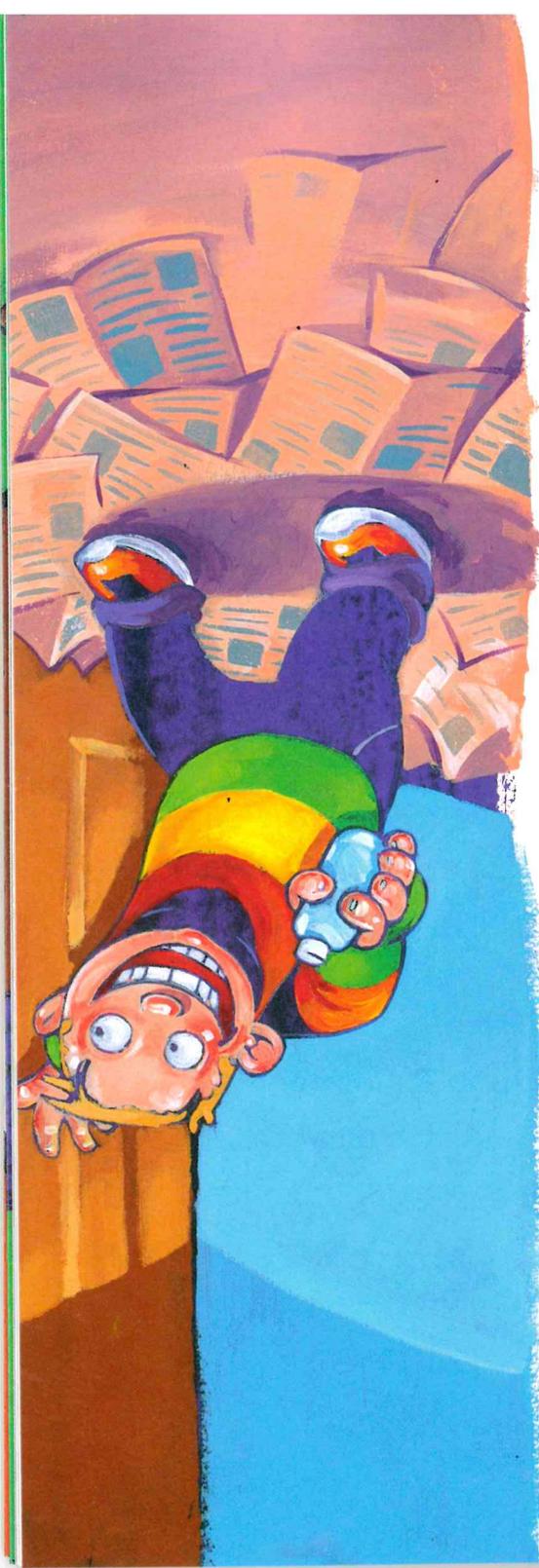
His heart beat with excitement.
Thud, thud.

put his ear to the door.
 Charlotte. She was still at Granny's house. He
 Was it his mum? Or his dad? It couldn't be
 He definitely heard them coming up the stairs.
 Footsteps!

and pushed it in. Then he crawled to the door.
 water, every drop of it. He rolled his message up
 Hugo tipped back his head and drank his



He waited, his ear
pressed up against the
door, for quite a while.
And then he heard the
whole performance
again, but in reverse.
Rattle.
Then *thud, thud,*
thud along the landing –
right outside his door!
Then *thud, thud,*
down the stairs, fading
away.
Hugo leant back
against the door,
exhausted from the
excitement.
It was the most
dramatic thing that had
happened in – Hugo
studied his watch –
nearly two hours.
01.56.



01:59 PM

RIGHT, HUGO TOLD his brain firmly.

'Stop thinking. Empty yourself. Go blank. Go

totally blank.'

Right at the back of his brain, a silent voice

reminded him sharply:

'Let's not forget our manners. Try saying

"please";

'Please,' Hugo thought to himself. And then he

wondered why he felt obliged to suck up to

one small bit of him. You wouldn't say 'please'

to a toenail, would you? Or to a knee? Why

should your brain get all the fancy treatment?

Was it fair?

Hugo tried unsaying 'please'.

'I didn't mean that,' Hugo told his brain. 'It

doesn't count. We're starting off again.'

He took a deep breath.

'Right,' he said. 'Stop thinking. Empty yourself.

Go totally blank.'

'You mind your manners, Hugo,' said his

brain.

'My manners are none of your business.'

'And snubs to you,
'With big brass knobs on,
'And with double return,
Hugo jumped to his feet.
'I'm going mad!' he said aloud.
'Serves you right!' crowed his brain.

'And if it weren't for me, his brain said
nastily, 'you wouldn't be here either. So snubs to
you.'



'I think they are,' his brain said loftily.
'Who says?'
'I do.'
'But you're just me. You're nothing but my
brain. And if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be
here, would you?'

By 02.09, he felt himself again.

Hugo's head.

It took a bit of time and both the chocolate

'Pax,' agreed his brain.

'Pax?' offered Hugo.

it should do.

started it himself by trying to tell his brain what

And Hugo knew his brain was right. He'd

'I certainly did not.'

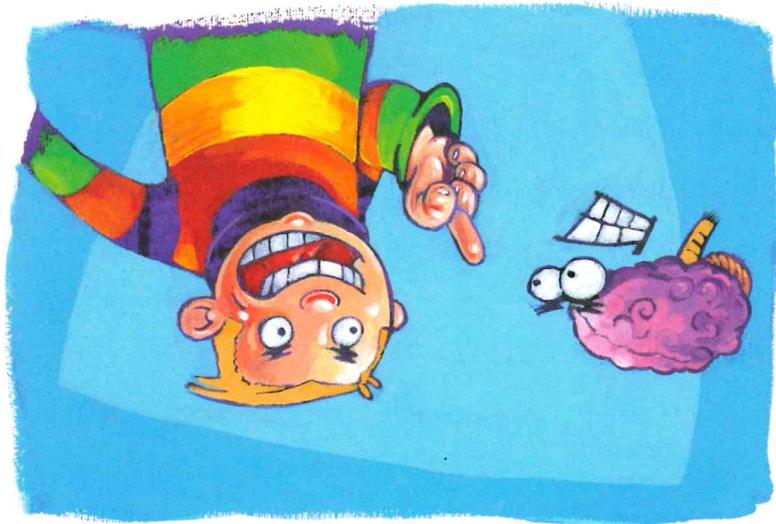
'You started it.'

'No, you.'

'You shut up first.'

'Shut up yourself.'

'Shut up!'



02:13 PM

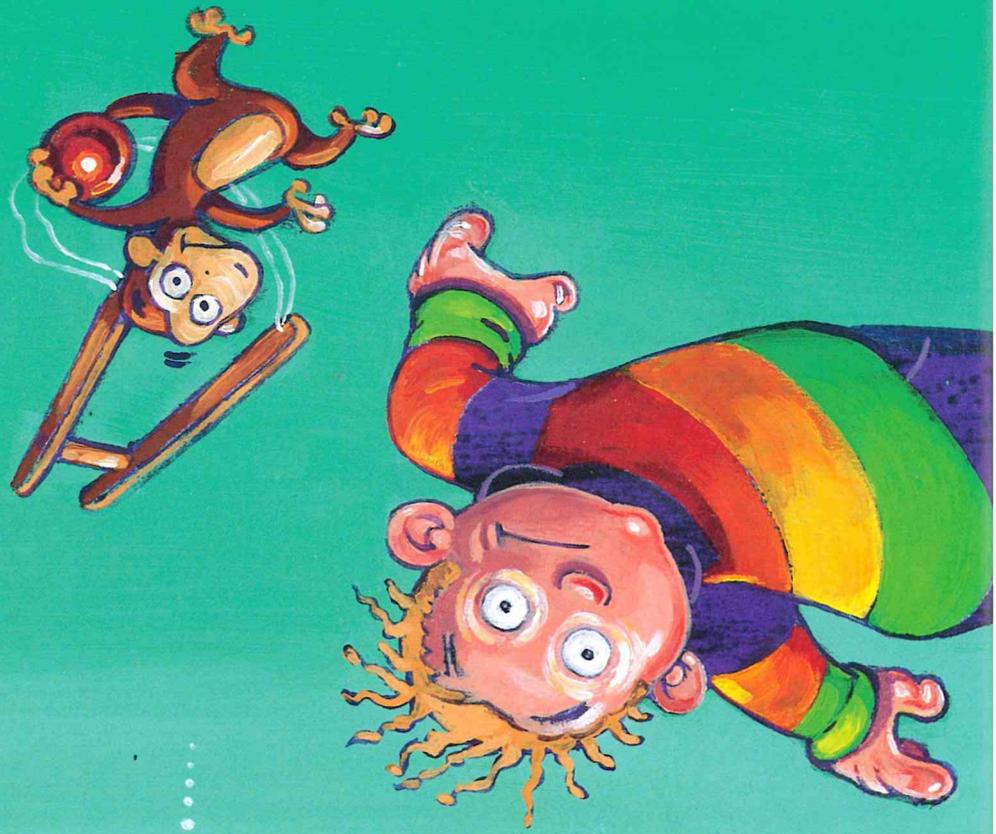
HUGO SANG *Flower of Scotland* to the lightbulb at the top of his voice. Then he sang *When my Sugar Walked Down the Street* (his father's favourite), then a short medley from the book of nursery rhymes he'd been forced to pass down to Charlotte. Then he sang telly jingles. Then the theme song from *The Flintstones*. Then the first verse – all that he could remember – of Granny's favourite hymn: *The Head That Once Was Crowned With Thorns*.



Then he sang *Flower of Scotland* all over
again. Then he was bored, and sat twiddling his
thumbs, waiting for the end number to change
on his watch face.
02.30; 02.31; 02.32.
He lost track of time for a bit – 02.37, then
tried, unsuccessfully, to pick the last of the
sticky white paint off his fingertips. Then he



lay back and imagined himself drowning. Down,
down into the salty darkness he would go,
through all the folding billows of the sea, his
hair rippling like weeds, his eyes ablaze like
underwater headlamps.
He sat up and looked at his watch.
02.41.



(abandoning the bricks) and walked to the door.

Hugo picked up his two companions

That was settled, then. They were leaving.

leaving: two;

'In favour of staying: none. In favour of

Hugo announced the official result.

The lightbulb stared down dispassionately as

And Hugo didn't give the bricks a say.

once. Wee Grey Ghostie was happy either way.

The monkey on a stick was all for giving up at

HUGO JAMES MACFIE took a quick vote on it.

02:43 PM



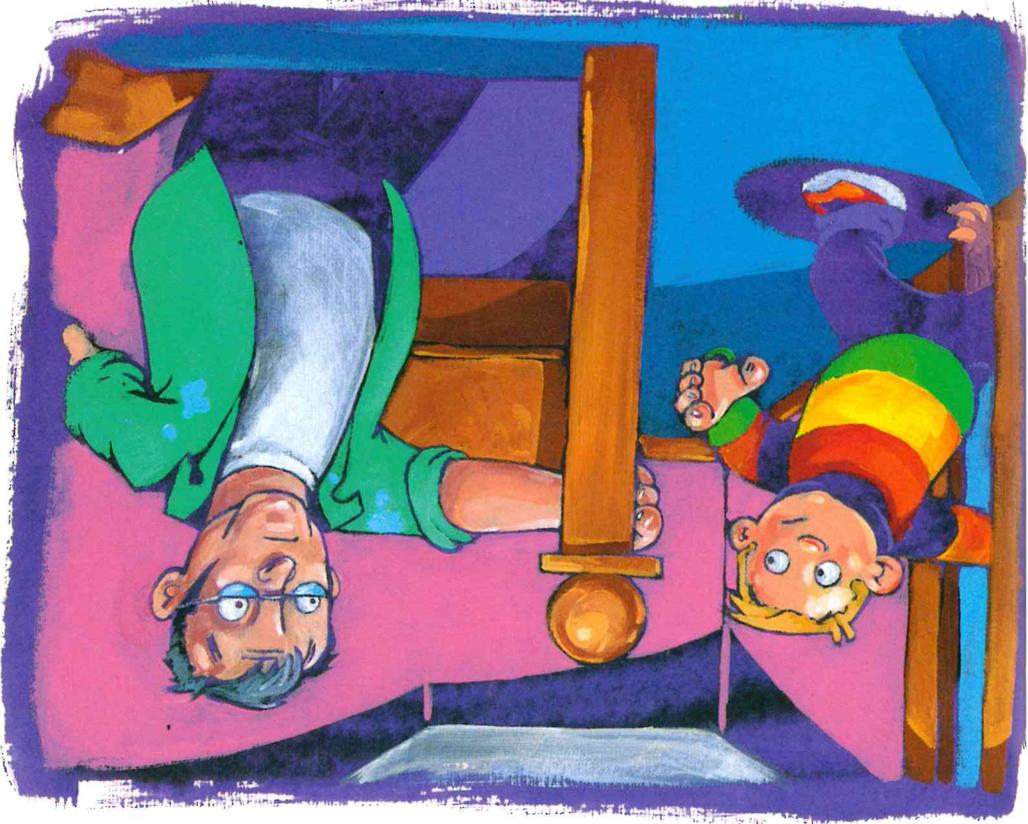
He checked his watch face as he opened it.

02.47

He bumped into his father on the stairs. His father looked at him. Then he looked at Hugo's fingertips.

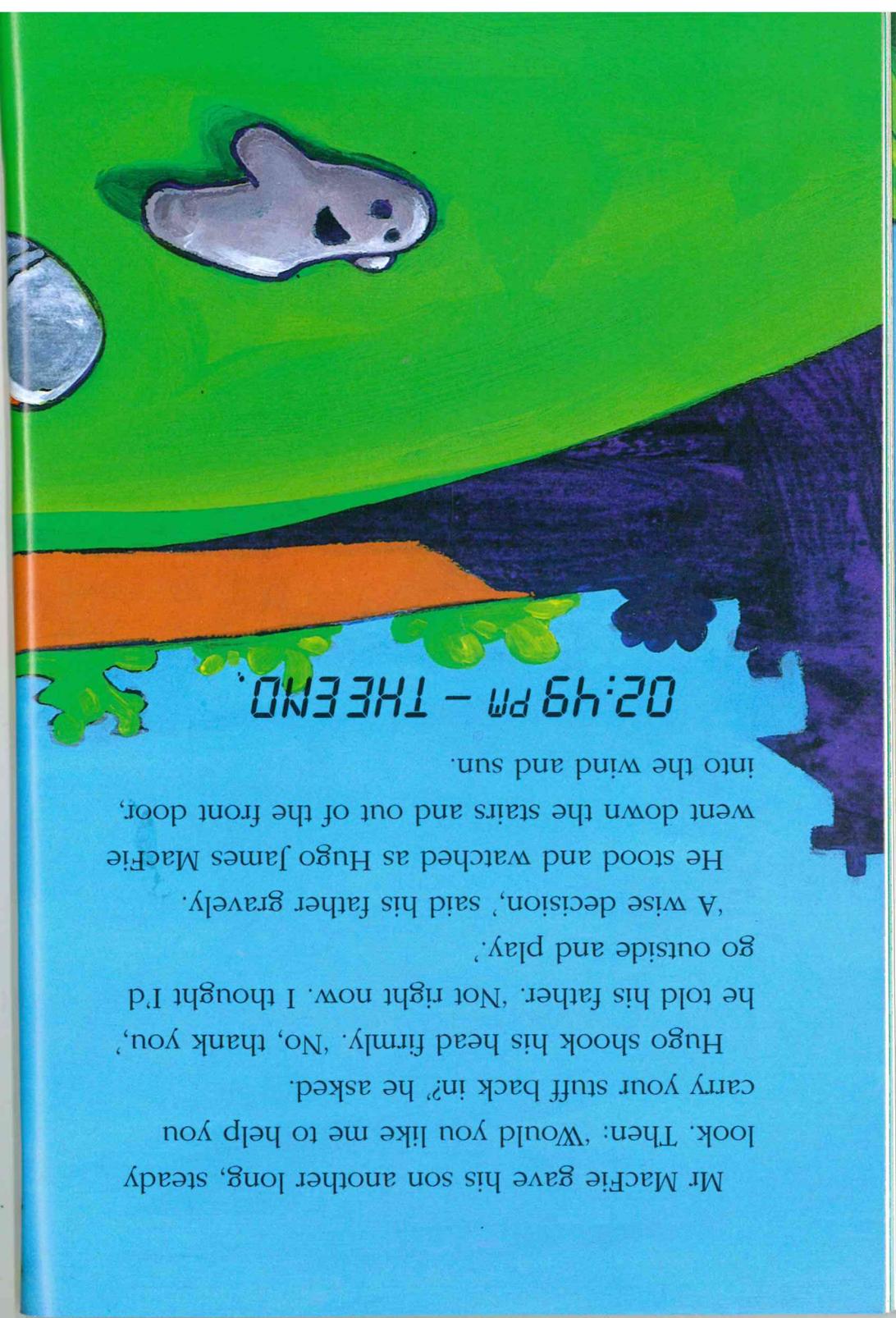
'I hope you haven't left sticky white fingerprints all over my freshly painted walls,' he said.

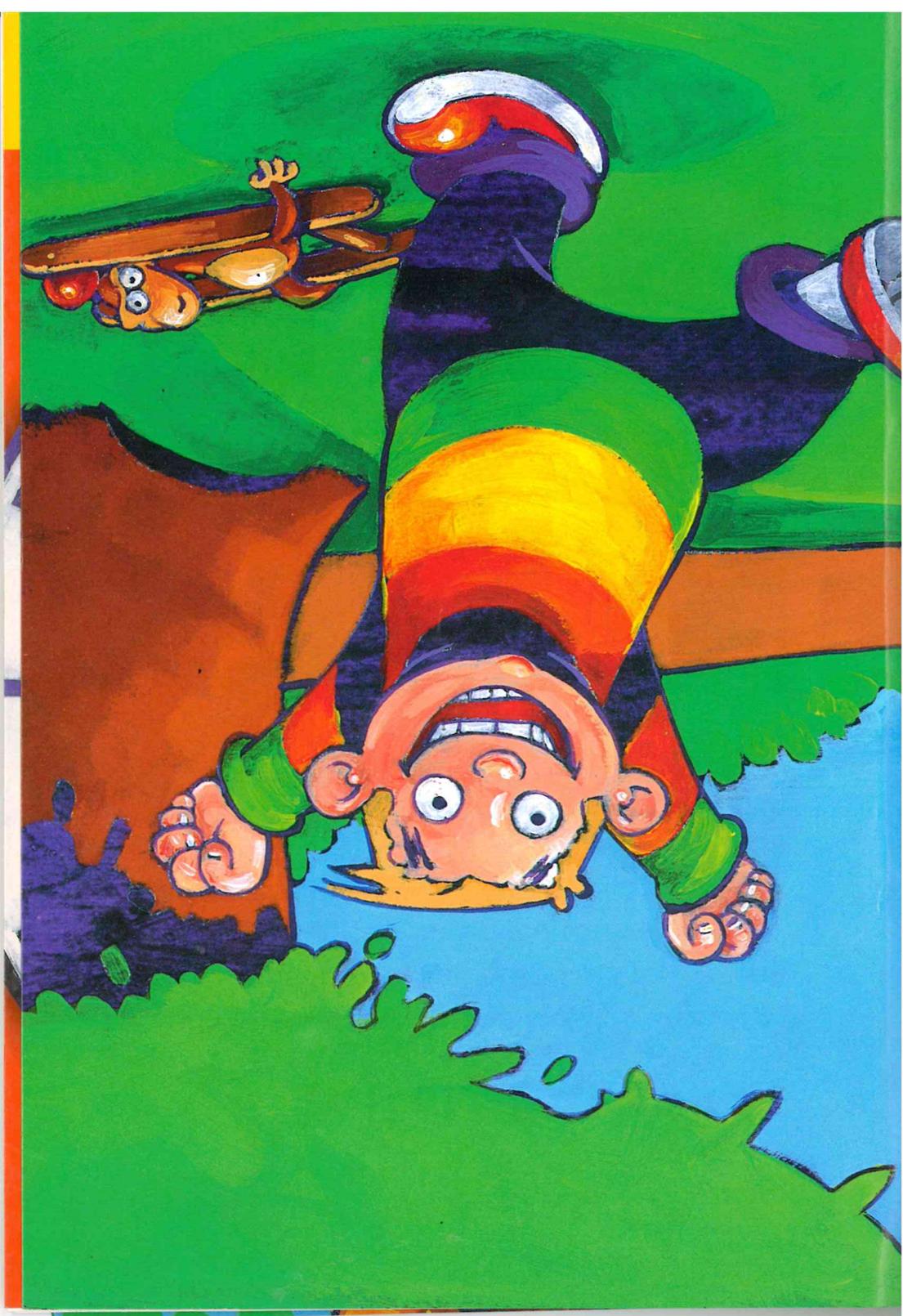
Hugo ignored him.



Mr MacFie gave his son another long, steady look. Then: 'Would you like me to help you carry your stuff back in?' he asked. Hugo shook his head firmly. 'No, thank you,' he told his father. 'Not right now. I thought I'd go outside and play.' 'A wise decision,' said his father gravely. He stood and watched as Hugo James MacFie went down the stairs and out of the front door, into the wind and sun.

02:49 PM - THE END.

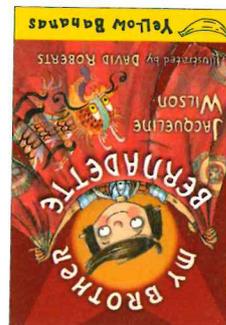
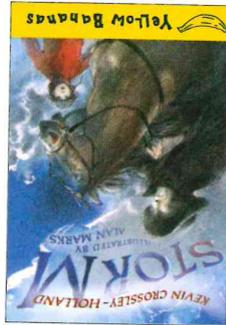




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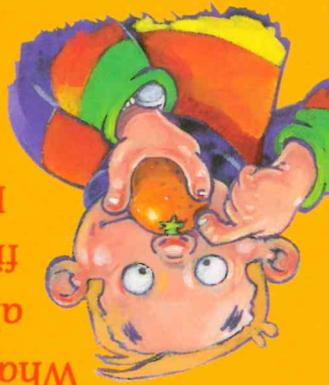
Blue Bananas



Pick a Banana



What's it like to be stuck in a room all day alone? Hugo is about to find out! If he wants a gerbil life in a cage isn't so bad. Hugo must prove to Dad that But can he stand it, or will he crack?



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- Strong stories by great authors
- Fully illustrated in colour