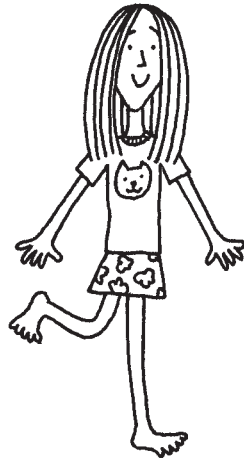


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The worst thing about my sister is she's such a *girl*. Well, I'm a girl too, but I'm not a dinky-pinky, silly-frilly girlie girl. Think cupcakes and cuddly teddies and charm bracelets – that's Melissa.

She leaves a little pink trail around the house – sparkly slides and ribbons and notebooks.



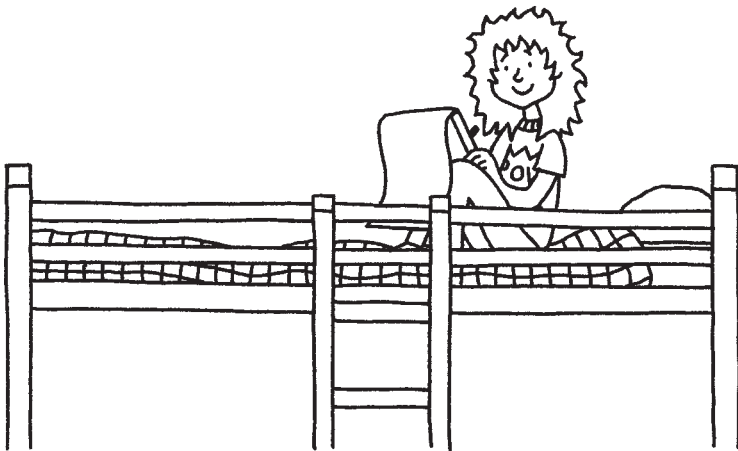
You breathe in her revolting scent long after she's gone off to hang out at her friends' houses. She's not allowed to wear real perfume yet, but she's got this rose hand cream that smells really strongly. She doesn't just rub it on her hands, she smooths it in all over, so she's always slightly slippery.

Her lips shine too, because she's forever smearing on lip gloss. She's not really supposed to wear make-up yet either, only for play, but she's got a big plastic bag patterned with pink kittens, and it's crammed full of eye shadows and mascara and blusher. It used to be just Mum's old stuff, but now Melissa spends half her pocket money in Superdrug.

When Melissa was in the loo, I crept into her ultra pink and fluffy bedroom to borrow a pen as mine had all run out. I couldn't find her school bag – it must have been downstairs by the computer – so in desperation I looked in her plastic

make-up bag. I found a brand-new eye pencil with a perfect point and its own cool little sharpener.

I went back to my Marty Den, sat on my top bunk, and started drawing an amazing new adventure of Mighty Mart. I didn't mean to use a lot of the pencil. I was just going to do a quick sketch. But then I had this great idea of giving Mighty Mart giant springs in her feet, so she could jump – *b-o-i-n-g* – over rooftops and lampposts and trees. Drawing all these astonishing feats took up three full pages in my sketchbook – and most of Melissa's eye pencil.



Then Melissa poked her nose into my Marty Den, rabbiting on about some missing hairbrush. (I'd experimented gluing it onto the back of a little mangled teddy, turning him into a pretty cool porcupine



called Percy.) She failed to spot him snuffling for ants under my bunk beds, but she *did* see the stub of her eye pencil in my hot little hand.

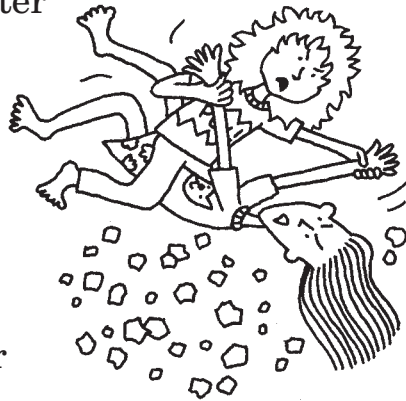
'You horrible thieving *pig!*' she gasped. 'That pencil was brand-new – and there's hardly any left now.'

'Well, it's not very good value then, is it?' I said, a little unwisely. Maybe I should have said sorry – but she did call me a pig. Not that I actually dislike pigs. I think they're very cute, and I love scratching their backs with a stick when we go to the children's zoo.

Anyway, do you know what Melissa *did*? She ripped all three pages out of my book and tore them to shreds. I couldn't *believe*

she could be so hateful. I mean, she could always buy another silly pencil. I might even have paid half out of my pocket money. But I'd spent two whole *hours* drawing Mighty Mart, and now she was just confetti on the carpet. So I thumped Melissa in the chest. And she slapped my face. And then we were rolling around on the floor, shoving and screaming.

I'm a much better fighter than Melissa, but she scratches with her pointy fingernails. I'm fast and furious and I know how to punch properly, but Melissa is a lot bigger than me.



Perhaps *that's* the worst thing about my sister. She's two and a half years older, and no matter how hard I try I can never catch up.

I'd have still beaten her, I'm sure of it.

If we'd been left to our own devices, Melissa would have ended up as pink pulp, but Mum came running out of her bedroom and barged into my Marty Den to stop us.



‘What are you *doing*? Stop it at *once*, Martina and Melissa! You know you are absolutely strictly forbidden to fight. You’re not little guttersnipes, you’re *girls*.’

She pulled us apart and stood us on our feet. ‘How dare you!’ she hissed. ‘Especially today, when Mrs Evans and Alisha are in my bedroom and can hear everything. Alisha’s such a sweet little girl too. You’d never catch *her* fighting.’

‘Alisha’s such a wuss she couldn’t punch her way out of a paper bag,’ I said.

Alisha is in my class at school and I absolutely can’t stand her. She sucks up to Katie and Ingrid, the two really mean, scary girls. She gives them crisps and

chocolates so they won't pick on her. She *loves* it if they pick on someone else. Like me.

I didn't invite her round to our house. As if! She came round with her mother because *our* mother was making her a party dress. Mum was starting to become *famous* for making terrible frilly frocks with smocking and embroidery and a thousand and one prickly net petticoats. She used to make matching dresses for Melissa and me when we were really little. I used to scream my head off and keep my arms pressed tight against my sides to stop her putting one on me. Melissa used to *like* hers, and would flounce around swishing her skirts in an especially sickening way. Nowadays even she has seen sense and says smocked dresses are babyish and embarrassing, the exact opposite of cool.



But our dresses became a terrible talking point in our neighbourhood, and other mums still want to inflict frills on their little kids, so Mum's wondering if she can make a little money out of making dresses. She's busy designing party dresses and bridesmaids' dresses and confirmation dresses. So busy she doesn't always have time to look at what *we're* wearing. When we're not stuck in our rubbish red-and-white check school uniform, Melissa hitches up her skirts and wears tight tops and puts socks in her training bra. She thinks she looks much older, practically a teenager. She is *so* pathetic.



I wear my comfy jeans and my POW! T-shirt and my tartan Converse boots. I wear them again and again because they're my favourite clothes, so I don't see the point of wearing any others.

'Look at the *state* of you!' said Mum. She shook us both

and then continued to hang onto my T-shirt, peering at it. 'For goodness' sake, Martina, this T-shirt's filthy!'

'It's just a little dribble of orange juice when I laughed at the wrong time at supper. It's so weird when it all comes spouting out of your nose.'

'That was *days* ago! You know perfectly well you're supposed to put on a clean T-shirt every day. Have I got to stand over you and dress you like a baby?' said Mum.

Melissa sniggered, which was a stupid move.

'I'm very shocked at *you*, Melissa. You really ought to know better. You're the eldest. What were you thinking of, fighting with your little sister?'

'She used up nearly all my eye pencil, Mum, scribbling her silly cartoons.'

'Mighty Mart is a comic strip, not a cartoon. And you tore it all up, and I spent *ages* on it.'

'As if any of this *matters*,' said Mum.

‘Now, tidy yourselves up. Melissa, you go downstairs and get the pizzas out of the freezer. Martina, change that T-shirt *now*. And both of you, stop showing me up in front of Mrs Evans.’

As if on cue, Mrs Evans started calling from Mum’s bedroom: ‘I think you’ve made Alisha’s dress a little on the skimpy side, Mrs Michaels. She can scarcely breathe!’

Mum rolled her eyes. ‘I’m so sorry, Mrs Evans. Don’t worry – I can always let it out a little at the seams,’ she called back.

‘And I’m not sure the hem’s straight. It’s difficult to tell, what with your bed being in the way of your wardrobe mirror – but it seems to ride right up in the front,’ Mrs Evans moaned.

‘That’s because of Alisha’s great fat stomach!’ I muttered.

‘Martina!’ said Mum – but she was trying not to laugh. She hurried off and left Melissa and me glaring at each other.

‘Tell-tale,’ I said.

‘You told too. And that eye pencil cost four ninety-nine.’

‘Then you’re bonkers wasting your pocket money like that.’

‘It’s going to be *your* pocket money! You’re going to buy me a new one.’

‘No, *you’re* going to buy me a new drawing pad seeing as you’ve ruined this one. Now get out of my den. You’re not allowed in here – can’t you read?’ I said.

I had stuck a very clear notice on my door.



‘You’ve got a cheek, seeing as you went into *my* room to nick my eye pencil. You’re such a waste of space, Marty. If only I had

a *proper* sister. Why do you always have to be so *weird*?

Melissa flounced off down to the kitchen. I sat biting my nails, thinking up a wonderful new sequence for Mighty Mart where she turns ultra weird overnight, with prickles all over and great fangs – all the better for *biting* people. But I couldn't draw her because I didn't have anything to draw *with*, as Melissa had reclaimed her eye pencil and all my pens had either run out or exploded. There was a very inky corner of my school bag, especially the bit where I'd stuffed my PE kit, but I wasn't in the mood for investigating it.

I didn't change my T-shirt either. My clothes were mostly cast-offs from Melissa, dreadful limp pink things with bunnies and kittens. I *like* bunnies and kittens, but not as cutesy-pie pictures on T-shirts. I'd have given anything for a proper pet, though not necessarily something fluffy. A real porcupine would be ultra-cool. Or a

turtle who could live in the bath.
Or a hyena that laughed at my jokes – though I'd probably have to keep him in a cage in the garden. I'm not sure you could ever house-train a hyena. I imagined it savaging Mum's silks and satins and squatting on Alisha's lilac party dress. I did a hyena laugh myself going across the landing.



'*Martina!*' Mum hissed, putting her head out of the door.

I saw Alisha's mum behind her, eyes all beady, and Alisha herself in her knickers. She really *did* have a big tummy.

'Could you just *behave?* And change that dreadful T-shirt!' said Mum. She pulled that face that means *Do as I say this instant or you'll be for it!*

I put the kitten T-shirt on back to front so I couldn't see the cutesy furry face, and



went stomping downstairs. I put my hand over my mouth because I badly wanted to let out another hyena laugh and I knew this would not be a good idea.

I avoided the kitchen, where Melissa was juggling pizzas and clattering cutlery, laying the trays for supper, doing her *I'm the good big sister* act. I went into the front room to check on Dad.

It isn't really the front room any more. It's become Dad's travel agency office. Dad used to have a real travel agent's shop down that street near Sainsbury's, but he had to give it up because the lease was too expensive and he didn't make enough money any more.

He set up as a travel agent in our front room instead. We went to Ikea to buy some shelving, but they didn't have the sort Dad wanted, so we bought our own MDF, which was much more fun. Dad was Carpenter-in-Chief and I was his Number One Assistant

when it came to painting all the planks white. We had to do it outside in the garden because Mum was terrified I'd tip the paint over, but I didn't spill a drop! When they were dry I helped Dad fix all the shelves in place – and they looked terrific.

Melissa helped him display all his travel books and brochures on our beautiful new shelves, and Mum framed all these posters of mountains and lakes and white sandy beaches and hung them on the walls. Dad set up his computer, and there he was, all ready for the rush of customers. But nobody came.



Well, a *few* clients came – really old ones who couldn't use a computer to book their own holidays. Dad fixed up a weekend in Paris here, ten days in Tenerife there, but for the most part he sat all by himself, scrolling down all the amazing holiday offers on his screen. Sometimes he switched off and simply gazed at the mountains and the lakes and the beaches on the walls.

We didn't have enough money now to go away on holiday ourselves, even though Dad was trying his hardest to support the family and be successful. We just had Mum's money from her sewing and working as a school secretary. *Our* school secretary. It was a bit odd being sent to the office with the register and seeing your own mum behind the desk. We were meant to call her Mrs Michaels there, but I didn't always remember.

'Hey, Dad,' I said.

'Hey, Marty,' he said, sighing.

I stood right in front of him and tickled

his head. He sighed again, but he reached out and tickled *my* head.

‘Hey, Curlynob,’ we said in unison.

It’s our little ritual, to show we’re mates. Dad has very fair frizzy curls, even though his hair is cut really short. I’d give anything to have *my* hair cut really short but Mum won’t let me. I have to have it loose to my shoulders at home and in awful little plaits at school. My curly hair drives me mad – but I love being like Dad.



Melissa has very straight mouse-brown hair. She never *says*, but I think she’d give anything to have my fair curls. Don’t get the idea that I’m *pretty*, though! I’ve got a snub nose and a pointy chin, and go freckly in the summer.

I pulled a funny face now to try to make Dad laugh, because he was looking very

sad. He chuckled politely, but it wasn't a real laugh.

'Hey, do you want to hear my hyena laugh?' I said, and I demonstrated.

'Oh, help, help, I'm fwightened!' said Dad, pretending to be little. 'There's a big bad hyena in the room and it's coming to get me!'

'The big bad hyena is in a spot of trouble, Dad,' I said. 'It scribbled with its sister's eye pencil, and then it got into a fight, and its mother got cross because that awful podgy Alisha Evans and her mum are up in our bedroom.'

'Oh Lord, I forgot they were coming. I think I might have left the bed all rumped when I had a nap after lunch,' said Dad. He had lots of naps now because he didn't have anything else to do. 'I probably left my pyjamas out in a heap. Looks like I'm in a spot of bother too.'

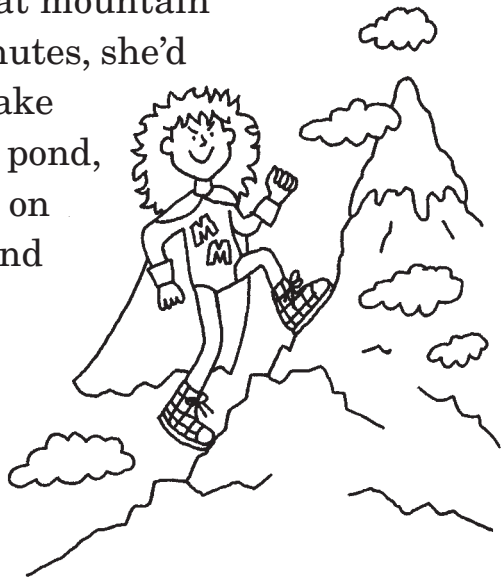
'I wish Mum didn't get grumpy all the time,' I said.

‘Now, now, your mum only gets cross because we’re such a sloppy pair and she’s working very, very hard,’ said Dad.

‘I’ve been working very, very hard, Dad. I did three whole pages of Mighty Mart, only *somebody* came along and ripped them all up.’

‘You’re *my* Mighty Mart,’ said Dad, and he pulled me onto his knee for a cuddle.

I snuggled up with my chin on his shoulder, staring at the posters on the wall. Mighty Mart would stomp all the way up that mountain in a matter of minutes, she’d swim across the lake like it was a duck pond, and then she’d lie on the white beach and let a whole team of little kids try to bury her in the sand.



Just when they thought they'd trapped her so she'd have to stay motionless like a monument for ever, she'd laugh and jump up and send them all scattering as she strode away in her giant Converse boots.