The Nit Line

All eyes were on Lewis Snow. He was next in line. The nit line.

Ms Herrick, the deputy principal, was a cold woman with short, grey hair as thick as steel wool and a beak of a nose. She was poking through the hair of suspected nit-carriers with a razor-sharp lead pencil. She did this every Monday morning under the fig tree in the middle of the playground. If you had nits you were going home.

Everyone knew that Lewis Snow was going home... again.

Lewis had a wild blonde afro and he told everybody that his hair had never been cut. Like, ever.

'Fine,' Ms Herrick said to the kid in front of Lewis. She tried to smile but she was so out of practice, her mouth twisted into a sneer.

'Next!' she barked.

Lewis turned to his best friend Chris and pretended to throw a handful of nits at him. Chris laughed and ducked, flicking at his hair. Lewis grinned, shuffled forward and flopped onto the nit chair.

Lewis was eleven. He'd had nits since he was three. He couldn't remember not having an itchy head. In fact, he'd come to love his nits. All adults wanted to do was kill them, but Lewis had had nits for so long that he thought of them as cute little head mice rather than head lice. And he'd even started to make some cash out of them. A month ago, Ben Skinner had paid Lewis to give him nits so he could have a couple of days off school. Word was getting around that Lewis was the go-to man if you needed nits fast.

'Lewis. Snow,' said Ms Herrick, slow and disgusted, as though *he* were a nit. Which he almost could have been. He was the smallest kid in year six. Apart from James Gray, but James was a child-genius and only eight years old so it didn't really count.

'I don't even need to look through your hair, you dirty boy. I can see them crawling from here. LICE!' Ms Herrick shrieked.

Lewis looked around, part embarrassed, part thinking what good advertising this was for his new business.

Ivy Li and Olive Sharpe skipped by. Lewis could hear them giggling. Ivy called out 'Nit Boy!' even though she was scratching her own head. Ivy liked Lewis. Most girls thought he was cute in spite of the six-legged mini-beasts feasting on his scalp.

'Come with me!' said Ms Herrick, grabbing Lewis by the arm. 'I'm calling your mother. She should never have sent you to school like this.' And Lewis could have sworn he heard her mutter, 'Filthy people.'

THE GOLDEN CHILD

Deep within the forest of Lewis Snow's hair something very exciting was going down. A nit was hatching. His name was Ned. And he wasn't just any nit.

Ned's egg was filled with gas. Ned had been breathing air in through his shell for a week and passing that air out through his backside. Finally, the build-up of putrid gas forced his front end through the tip of the egg, busting a crack in the tiny, grey shell. Ned was very relieved to be free.

A crowd had descended from the hair canopy to the scalp to witness this extraordinary event. They held their breath as Ned crawled into the light and plopped onto Lewis's scalp.

Ned blinked his eyes open. The first thing he saw was a sea of lice-faces staring at him. Quite ugly. Then the crowd erupted, snapping their claws together in applause—silent to human ears but almost deafening to a nit.

Ned's father, Keith, was the Head Louse. Ned watched his dad climb onto a slippery nit egg, glued to the bottom of a hair shaft, and address the crowd.

'Thank you for being here, people. I mean nits. Until this moment, we lice have had to crawl from head to head like primitives. Our legs have not been fit for jumping. But those days are behind us. No longer do we have to wait for these nitwit humans to put their heads together or swap hats so that we can travel. May I present to you Ned—the first-ever jumping louse!'

The gathered lice screamed with delight. Their voices were hoarse, scratchy and high-pitched—as horrible as human babies, and then a bit worse. Then they plunged their snouts into the soft skin of Lewis's scalp and drank deeply, toasting this memorable occasion.

The first-ever jumping louse.