

CHAPTER 6

Coraline was woken by the mid-morning sun, full on her face.

For a moment she felt utterly dislocated. She did not know where she was; she was not entirely sure *who* she was. It is astonishing just how much of what we are can be tied to the beds we wake up in in the morning, and it is astonishing how fragile that can be.

Sometimes Coraline would forget who she was while she was daydreaming that she was exploring the Arctic, or the Amazon rainforest, or darkest Africa, and it was not until someone tapped her on the shoulder or said her name that Coraline would come back from a million miles away with a start, and all in a fraction of a second have to remember who she was, and what her name was, and that she was even there at all.

Now there was sun on her face, and she was Coraline Jones. Yes. And then the green and pinkness of the room she was in, and the rustling of a large painted paper butterfly as it fluttered and beat its way about the ceiling, told her where she had woken up.

She climbed out of the bed. She could not wear her pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers during the day, she decided, even if it meant wearing the other Coraline's clothes. (Was there an other Coraline? No, she decided, there wasn't. There was just her.) There were no proper clothes in the cupboard, though. They were more like dressing-up clothes or (she thought) the kind of clothes she would love to have hanging in her own wardrobe at home: there was a raggedy witch costume; a patched scarecrow costume; a future-warrior costume with little digital lights on it that glittered and blinked; a slinky evening dress all covered in feathers and mirrors. Finally, in a drawer, she found a pair of black jeans that seemed to be made of velvet night, and a grey sweater the colour of thick smoke with faint and tiny stars in the fabric which twinkled.

She pulled on the jeans and the sweater. Then she put on a pair of bright-orange boots she found at the bottom of the cupboard.

She took her last apple out of the pocket of her

dressing gown, and then, from the same pocket, the stone with the hole in it.

She put the stone into the pocket of her jeans, and it was as if her head had cleared a little. As if she had come out of some sort of a fog.

She went into the kitchen, but it was deserted. Still, she was sure that there was someone in the flat. She walked down the hall until she reached her father's study, and discovered that it was occupied.

'Where's the other mother?' she asked the other father. He was sitting in the study, at a desk which looked just like her father's, but he was not doing anything at all, not even reading gardening catalogues as her own father did when he was only pretending to be working.

'Out,' he told her. 'Fixing the doors. There are some vermin problems.' He seemed pleased to have somebody to talk to.

'The rats, you mean?'

'No, the rats are our friends. This is the other kind, big black fellow, with his tail high.'

'The cat, you mean?'

'That's the one,' said her other father.

He looked less like her true father today. There was something slightly vague about his face – like bread dough that had begun to rise, smoothing out the bumps and cracks and depressions.

'Really, I mustn't talk to you when she's not here,' he said. 'But don't you worry. She won't be gone often. I shall demonstrate our tender hospitality to you, such that you will not even think about ever going back.' He closed his mouth and folded his hands in his lap.

'So what am I to do now?' asked Coraline.

The other father pointed to his lips. *Silence.*

'If you won't even talk to me,' said Coraline, 'I am going exploring.'

'No point,' said the other father. 'There isn't anywhere but here. This is all she made: the house, the grounds, and the people in the house. She made it and she waited.' Then he looked embarrassed and he put one finger to his lips again, as if he had just said too much.

Coraline walked out of his study. She went into the drawing room, over to the old door, and she pulled it, rattled and shook it. No, it was locked fast, and the other mother had the key.

She looked around the room. It was so familiar — that was what made it feel so truly strange. Everything was exactly the same as she remembered: there was all her grandmother's strange-smelling furniture, there was the painting of the bowl of fruit (a bunch of grapes, two plums, a peach and an apple) hanging on the wall, there was the low

wooden table with the lion's feet, and the empty fireplace which seemed to suck heat from the room.

But there was something else, something she did not remember seeing before. A ball of glass, up on the mantelpiece.

She went over to the fireplace, went up on tiptoes, and lifted it down. It was a snow-globe, with two little people in it. Coraline shook it and set the snow flying, white snow that glittered as it tumbled through the water.

Then she put the snow-globe back on the mantelpiece, and carried on looking for her true parents and for a way out.

She went out of the flat. Past the flashing-lights door, behind which the other Misses Spink and Forcible performed their show for ever, and set off into the woods.

Where Coraline came from, once you were through the patch of trees, you saw nothing but the meadow and the old tennis court. In this place, the woods went on further, the trees becoming cruder and less tree-like the further you went.

Pretty soon they seemed very approximate, like the idea of trees: a greyish-brown trunk below, a greenish splodge of something that might have been leaves above.

Coraline wondered if the other mother wasn't

interested in trees, or if she just hadn't bothered with this bit properly because nobody was expected to come out this far.

She kept walking.

And then the mist began.

It was not damp, like a normal fog or mist. It was not cold and it was not warm. It felt to Coraline like she was walking into nothing.

I'm an explorer, thought Coraline to herself. And I need all the ways out of here that I can get. So I shall keep walking.

The world she was walking through was a pale nothingness, like a blank sheet of paper or an enormous, empty white room. It had no temperature, no smell, no texture and no taste.

It certainly isn't mist, thought Coraline, although she did not know what it was. For a moment she wondered if she might have gone blind. But no, she could see herself, plain as day. There was no ground beneath her feet, just a misty, milky whiteness.

'And what do you think you're doing?' said a shape to one side of her.

It took a few moments for her eyes to focus on it properly. She thought it might be some kind of lion, at first, some distance away from her; and then she thought it might be a mouse, close beside her. And then she knew what it was.

'I'm exploring,' Coraline told the cat.

Its fur stood straight out from its body and its eyes were wide, while its tail was down and between its legs. It did not look a happy cat.

'Bad place,' said the cat. 'If you want to call it a place, which I don't. What are you doing here?'

'I'm exploring.'

'Nothing to find here,' said the cat. 'This is just the outside, the part of the place *she* hasn't bothered to create.'

'She?'

'The one who says she's your other mother,' said the cat.

'What is she?' asked Coraline.

The cat did not answer, just padded through the pale mist beside Coraline.

Something began to appear in front of them, something high and towering and dark.

'You were wrong!' she told the cat. 'There is something there!'

And then it took shape in the mist: a dark house, which loomed at them out of the formless whiteness.

'But that's -' said Coraline.

'The house you just left,' agreed the cat. 'Precisely.'

'Maybe I just got turned around in the mist,' said Coraline.

The cat curled the high tip of its tail into a question mark, and tipped its head on to one side. 'You might have done,' it said. 'I certainly would not. Wrong, indeed.'

'But how can you walk away from something and still come back to it?'

'Easy,' said the cat. 'Think of somebody walking around the world. You start out walking away from something and end up coming back to it.'

'Small world,' said Coraline.

'It's big enough for her,' said the cat. 'Spiders' webs only have to be large enough to catch flies.'

Coraline shivered.

'He said that she's fixing all the gates and the doors,' she told the cat, 'to keep you out.'

'She may *try*,' said the cat, unimpressed. 'Oh yes. She may *try*.' They were standing under a clump of trees now, beside the house. These trees looked much more likely. 'There's ways in and ways out of places like this that even *she* doesn't know about.'

'Did she make this place, then?' asked Coraline.

'Made it, found it, what's the difference?' asked the cat. 'Either way, she's had it a very long time. Hang on -' and it gave a shiver and a leap and before Coraline could blink the cat was sitting with its paw holding down a big black rat. 'It's not that I like

rats at the best of times,' said the cat conversationally, as if nothing had happened, 'but the rats in this place are all spies for her. She uses them as her eyes and hands . . .' and with that the cat let the rat go.

It ran for almost a metre and then the cat, with one bound, was upon it, batting it hard with one sharp-clawed paw while holding it down with the other. 'I love this bit,' said the cat happily. 'Want to see me do that again?'

'No,' said Coraline. 'Why do you do it? You're torturing it.'

'Mim,' said the cat. It let the rat go.

The rat stumbled, dazed, for a few steps, then it began to run. With a blow of its paw, the cat knocked the rat into the air, and caught it in its mouth.

'Stop it!' said Coraline.

The cat dropped the rat between its two front paws. 'There are those,' it said with a sigh, in tones as smooth as oiled silk, 'who have suggested that the tendency of a cat to play with its prey is a merciful one - after all, it permits the occasional funny little running snack to escape, from time to time. How often does your dinner get to escape?'

And then it picked the rat up in its mouth and carried it off into the woods, behind a tree.

Coraline walked back into the house.

All was quiet and empty and deserted. Even

her footsteps on the carpeted floor seemed loud. Dust motes hung in a beam of sunlight.

At the far end of the hall was the mirror. She could see herself walking towards the mirror, looking, reflected, a little braver than she actually felt. There was nothing else there in the mirror. Just her, in the corridor.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she looked up. The other mother stared down at Coraline with big black-button eyes.

'Coraline, my darling,' she said. 'I thought we could play some games together this morning, now you're back from your walk. Hopscotch? Monopoly? Happy Families?'

'You weren't in the mirror,' said Coraline.

The other mother smiled. 'Mirrors,' she said, 'are never to be trusted. Now, what game shall we play?'

Coraline shook her head. 'I don't want to play with you,' she said. 'I want to go home and be with my real parents. I want you to let them go. To let us all go.'

The other mother shook her head, very slowly. 'Sharper than a serpent's tooth,' she said, 'is a daughter's ingratitude. Still, the proudest spirit can be broken, with love.' And her long white fingers waggled and caressed the air.

'I have no plans to love you,' said Coraline. 'No matter what. You can't make me love you.'

'Let's talk about it,' said the other mother, and she turned and walked into the sitting room. Coraline followed her.

The other mother sat down on the big sofa. She picked up a brown handbag from beside the sofa, and took out a white, rustling, paper bag from inside it.

She extended the hand with the paper bag in it to Coraline. 'Would you like one?' she asked politely.

Expecting it to be a toffee or a butterscotch ball, Coraline looked down. The bag was half filled with large shiny black beetles, crawling over each other in their efforts to get out of the bag.

'No,' said Coraline. 'I don't want one.'

'Suit yourself,' said her other mother. She carefully picked out a particularly large and black beetle, pulled off its legs (which she dropped, neatly, into a big glass ashtray on the small table beside the sofa), and popped the beetle into her mouth. She crunched it happily.

'Yum,' she said, and took another.

'You're sick,' said Coraline. 'Sick and evil and weird.'

'Is that any way to talk to your mother?' her

other mother asked, with her mouth full of black beetles.

'You aren't my mother,' said Coraline.

Her other mother ignored this. 'Now, I think you are a little overexcited, Coraline. Perhaps this afternoon we could do a little embroidery together, or some watercolour painting. Then dinner, and then, if you have been good, you may play with the rats a little before bed. And I shall read you a story and tuck you in, and kiss you goodnight.' Her long white fingers fluttered gently, like a tired butterfly, and Coraline shivered.

'No,' said Coraline.

The other mother sat on the sofa. Her mouth was set in a line; her lips were pursed. She popped another black beetle into her mouth, and then another, like someone with a bag of chocolate-covered raisins. Her big black-button eyes looked into Coraline's hazel eyes. Her shiny black hair twined and twisted about her neck and shoulders, as if it were blowing in some wind that Coraline could not touch or feel.

They stared at each other for over a minute. Then the other mother said, 'Manners!' She folded the white paper bag, carefully, so no black beetles could escape, and she placed it back in the shopping bag. Then she stood up, and up, and up: she

seemed taller than Coraline remembered. She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out first the black door key, which she frowned at and tossed into her handbag, then a tiny silver-coloured key. She held it up triumphantly. 'There we are,' she said. 'This is for you, Coraline. For your own good. Because I love you. To teach you manners. Manners makyth man, after all.'

She pulled Coraline back into the hallway and advanced upon the mirror at the end of the hall. Then she pushed the tiny key into the fabric of the mirror, and she twisted it.

The mirror opened like a door, revealing a dark space behind it. 'You may come out when you've learned some manners,' said the other mother. 'And when you're ready to be a loving daughter.'

She picked Coraline up and pushed her into the dim space behind the mirror. A fragment of beetle was sticking to her lower lip, and there was no expression at all in her black-button eyes.

Then she swung the mirror-door closed, and left Coraline in darkness.