



the tear thief

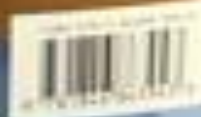
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Shortlisted for the Red House Children's Book Award, 2008

"A fairy story imbued with magic that is perfect to read aloud... Just as the Tear Thief takes away children's tears and, in so doing, lessens the causes of them, so this dreamy and poetic story will have a calming effect on all those who hear it"

— Guardian


Barefoot Books
Step inside a story



A night scene in a town. A red car is driving on a street. In the background, there are buildings with lit windows. A person with a yellow umbrella is walking on the sidewalk. The sky is dark with a few stars.

Late one evening the Tear Thief crept into a town. The Tear Thief was invisible and carried a silvery waterproof sack on her back. Only if you happened to look into a puddle as she was passing could you see what the Tear Thief looked like because a puddle was the one thing that showed her reflection. The Tear Thief had short spiky white hair and big grey eyes. She wore a handkerchief dress and silk slippers that made no sound as she walked.



The Tear Thief came to a quiet road
with a neat row of houses and flew
into a tall tree there for a good look and
a listen. It was the hour between supper and
bedtime. All the curtained windows were flushed with light
and enticing smells of soup and stew and pasta and onions
(the Tear Thief's favourite) and rhubarb crumble were
drifting up and away into the deepening dusk.

The Tear Thief listened hard with sharp ears.

'Boo-hoo-hoo!'

A child was crying.



The Tear Thief jumped lightly from the top of the tree on to the roof of the first house. She crept along the rooftops, silent as smoke, listening, listening, until she heard the crying again.

'Boo-hoo-hoo!'

Hi! The crying was coming from Number 17. Quick as a blink, the Tear Thief slid down the chimney into the attic and pressed her ear to a floorboard.

'Boo! Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo-hoo!'

Down the stairs, sly as steam, sneaked the Tear Thief, on to the landing and into the bathroom. A boy was sitting in the bath crying his eyes out. His mother was kneeling by the side of the bathtub holding a pink bottle of strawberry shampoo.





The Tear Thief sat perched on the edge of the bath,
watching excitedly and loosening the top of her sack.

'I don't want to be shampooooooed!' wailed the boy in the bubbles.

'Stop this silly crying,' said the boy's mother, 'or the Tear
Thief will hear you.'

The boy stopped crying and stared at his mother.
A single plump tear dangled from the
end of his nose like a pearl.

The Tear Thief pounced. In one quick movement she
snatched the gleaming tear from the boy's nose
and popped it into her sack.

'Oh!' gasped the boy as his last tear
seemed to disappear into thin air.

'I told you,' said his mother. 'That was
probably the Tear Thief.'

The boy and his mother started to laugh, but by now
the Tear Thief had flown across the hall, out through
the front door and had shimmied
halfway up a lamp-post. She
sat on the top, swinging her
legs and listening.



'Waaaah! Waaaah! Waaaah!'

Through an open upstairs window at Number 25 came
the sound of bad-tempered screaming and sobbing.
The Tear Thief slipped down the lamp-post and
sithered up a drainpipe to get to the window. Her
wide grey eyes stared in at a child's bedroom.



A red-faced girl in a nightdress was jumping up and down having a terrible tantrum and scattering tears all over the room like fistfuls of gravel.

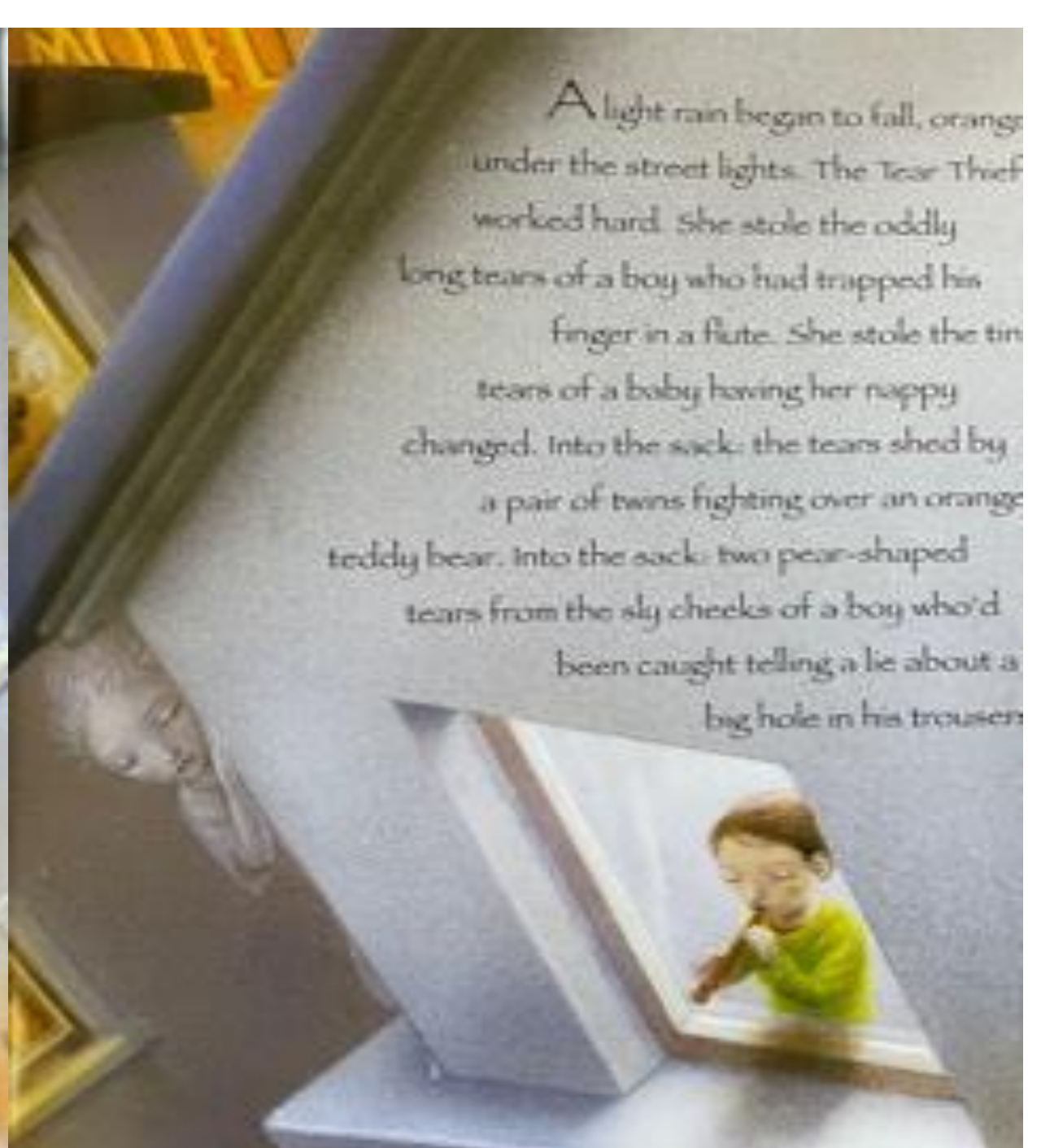
'I WANT CHOCOLATE!
'I WANT CHOCOLATE!' bawled the girl.

The Tear Thief hopped into the room and began to steal the girl's tears: 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 ... into the silvery sack they went ... 40, 50, 60, 70 ...

The more tears the Tear Thief collected, the more tired the girl became until eventually she sat down on the floor with her back against the wall and fell fast asleep.

The Tear Thief slipped out through the window.

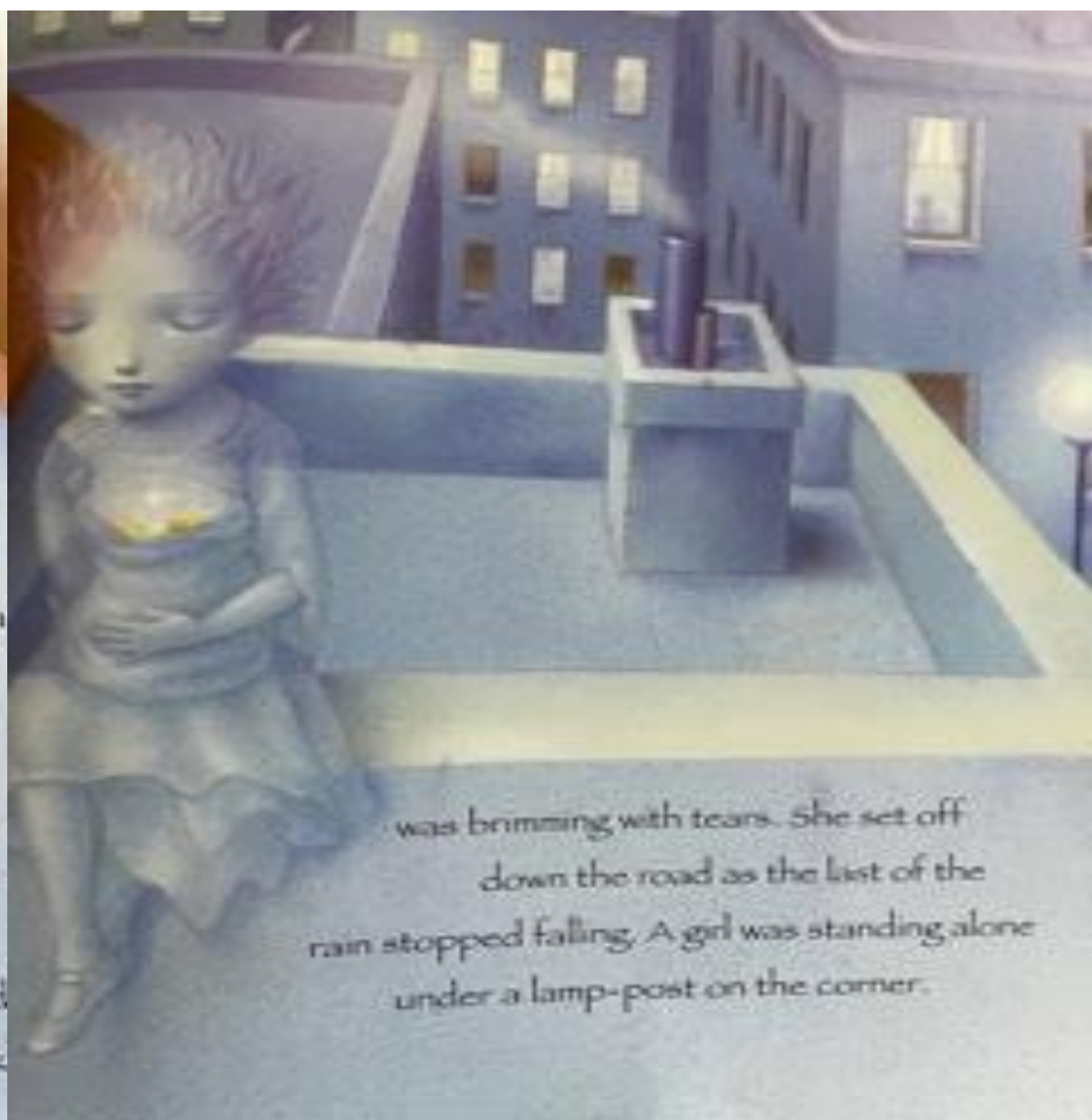




A light rain began to fall, orange
under the street lights. The Tear Thief
worked hard. She stole the oddly
long tears of a boy who had trapped his
finger in a flute. She stole the tiny
tears of a baby having her nappy
changed. Into the sack: the tears shed by
a pair of twins fighting over an orange
teddy bear. Into the sack: two pear-shaped
tears from the sly cheeks of a boy who'd
been caught telling a lie about a
big hole in his trousers.



The tears were jewels inside the darkness of the sack,
clinking and chinking and winking. Tears of rage
were red and glowed like rubies.
Tears of envy or jealousy were as green as emeralds.
Tears of self-pity were turquoise.
Scared tears were white like moonstones
and guilty tears were amber.
Rain gurgled and chuckled in the gutters. Here
and there a puddle stared up from the pavement.
The Tear Thief listened, peeped, crept, climbed,
pinched, nicked, filched and purloined until her sack



was brimming with tears. She set off
down the road as the last of the
rain stopped falling. A girl was standing alone
under a lamp-post on the corner.

As the Tear Thief sneaked past the girl, she noticed she was quietly crying. The Tear Thief stopped. There was always room in the sack for a few more tears. She looked carefully at the girl's tears. They were very special. They were tears of real sadness. The Tear Thief could tell that just one of these tears was worth a hundred cried over spilt milk or a thousand crocodile tears. She reached out her pale hand to pluck one from the girl's cheek. Just then the girl wiped her eyes with her sleeve and looked sadly into a puddle. The Tear Thief's mischievous face stared up at her. 'Eek!' squealed the girl and turned round to look behind herself.





There was nobody there.

The girl looked at the puddle again. Sure enough, there was the reflection of the Tear Thief in the water.

"Who are you?" asked the girl.

"I am the Tear Thief."

The girl knelt down by the puddle and stared hard at the Tear Thief's reflection.

"How old are you?"

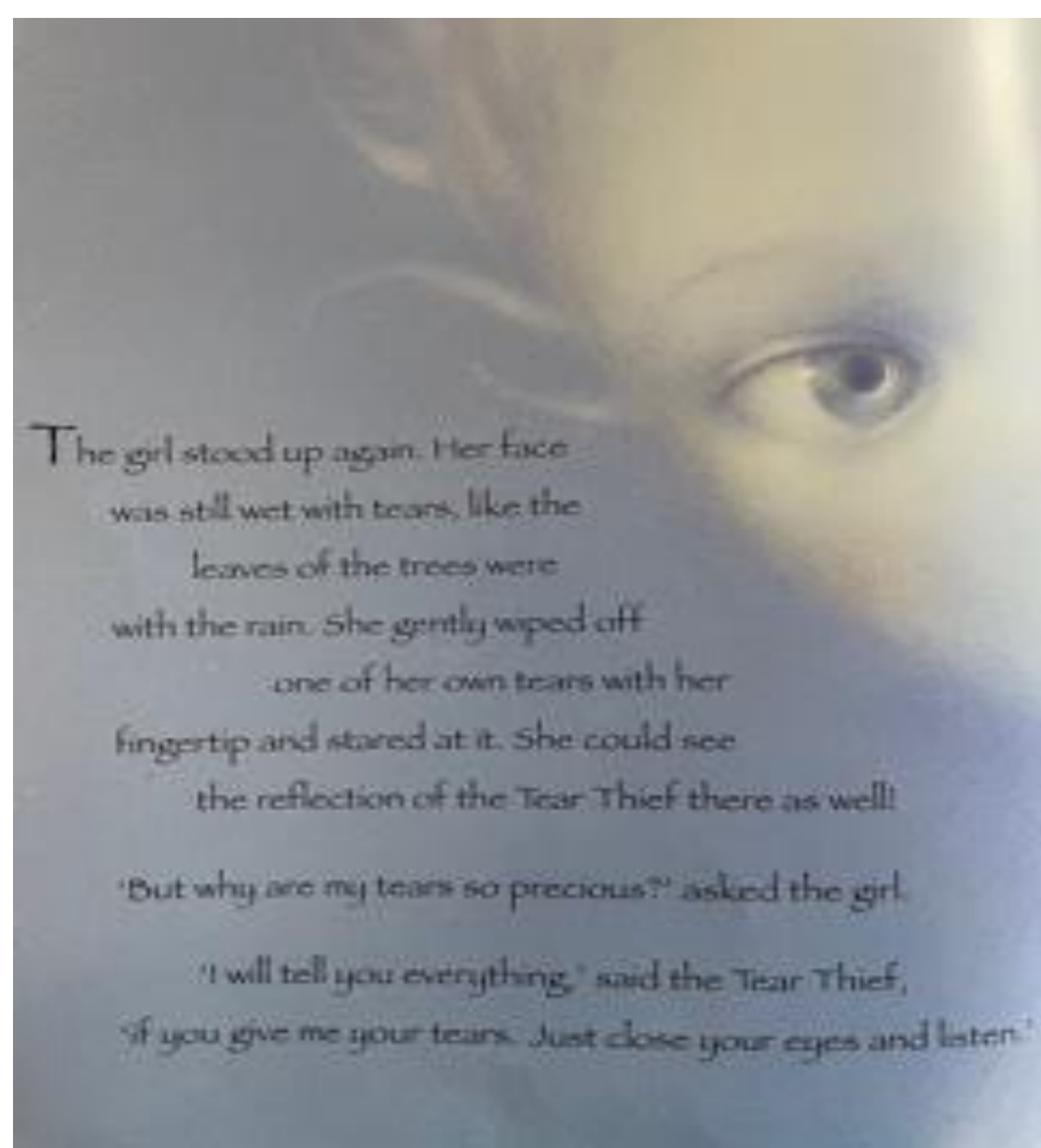
"As old as joy and sorrow."

"Where do you live?"

"In every place where children cry."

"Were you going to steal my tears?"

"Yes," said the face of the Tear Thief in the puddle. "Your tears are the most precious tears of all. They are worth more than diamonds."

A close-up illustration of a young girl's face. She has light skin and blue eyes. A single tear is visible on her right cheek. Her expression is one of sadness or contemplation. The background is a soft, light blue.

The girl stood up again. Her face was still wet with tears, like the leaves of the trees were with the rain. She gently wiped off one of her own tears with her fingertip and stared at it. She could see the reflection of the Tear Thief there as well!

'But why are my tears so precious?' asked the girl.

'I will tell you everything,' said the Tear Thief, 'if you give me your tears. Just close your eyes and listen.'





So the girl closed her eyes and the Tear Thief gathered the tears from her eyelashes and cheeks as she whispered to her:

'Each night, in the hour between supper and bedtime, I visit a different street and I steal the tears of every child who cries. When my sack is full, I climb up to the moon and I pour my sack of tears into the moon's light. The light of the moon is made from tears of laughter or pain or anger or boredom, from every kind of tear you can think of - but the most beautiful part of the moon's light comes from tears of pure sadness. And that is what your tears are.'

'Yes,' said the girl.
'It's because I've
lost my little dog.'





She opened her eyes as she said this and looked again in the puddle but there was nobody there. She ran along the street to the next puddle and stared into it, then the next and the next and the next. But they were just ordinary puddles with nothing special in them at all. The girl ran round the corner, looking down at all the puddles as she ran. Then she ran round another corner, and another, searching in every puddle for one more glimpse of the Tear Thief. But it was no use. The Tear Thief was gone.

'Woof!' The girl looked up. 'Woof! Woof!'

A little black dog with a white chest was sitting under a tree at the end of the street.

The girl called out her dog's name. 'It's you!' she said. 'I've found you!' And so she had. Her lost dog was splashing towards her through the puddles.

The girl was safely tucked up in bed and the dog was safely curled up in his basket. The rain had stopped completely now and all the puddles were shrinking. The night was calm and quiet. The girl always left her curtains open so that she could see the star she was born under if she opened her eyes.

She opened them now. Outside her window a full moon rose, huge and luminous.

'Oh!' gasped the girl.



She got out of bed and went to the window. It was the most beautiful moon she had ever seen in her whole young life! Light poured from it in a million different moonbeams. The

girl saw the light of the moon in her garden, turning the leaves on the trees to silver. Beyond that, she saw the light of the moon on the rooftops of all the houses,

like honey. A midnight cat walked along a wall and the light of the moon made its eyes burn gold. The whole town moon-bathed as it slept. The river lay on its back and gazed up at the moon, dazzled and lovesick.

The girl looked up. For one brief, magical moment she could see the Tear Thief again, pouring and pouring her sack of tears into the light of the moon. It was so bright that tears came to her eyes as she looked.

Her dog snuffled in his basket.

In the house next door, on the other side of the wall, the newborn baby started to cry.

