

Raúl

the hero rat

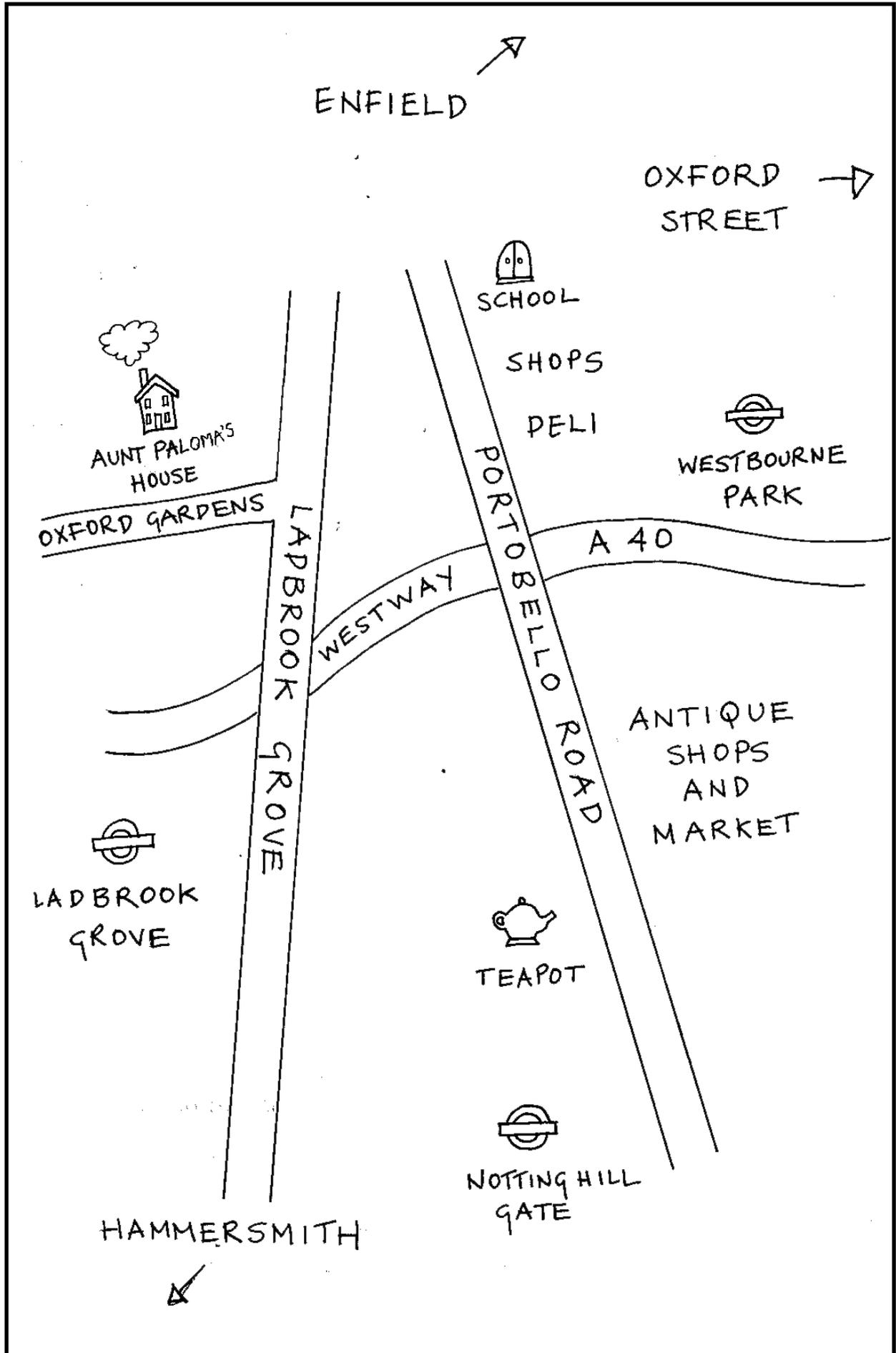
in London



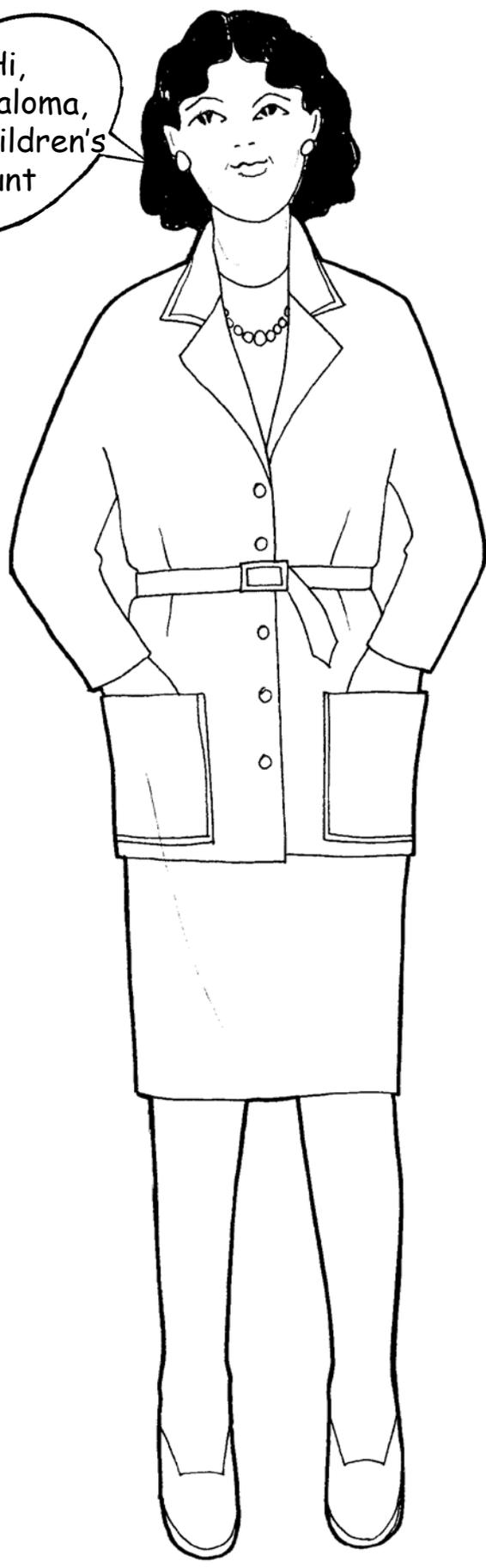
by
Gwendoline Boland

Drawings by
Colette Lambe

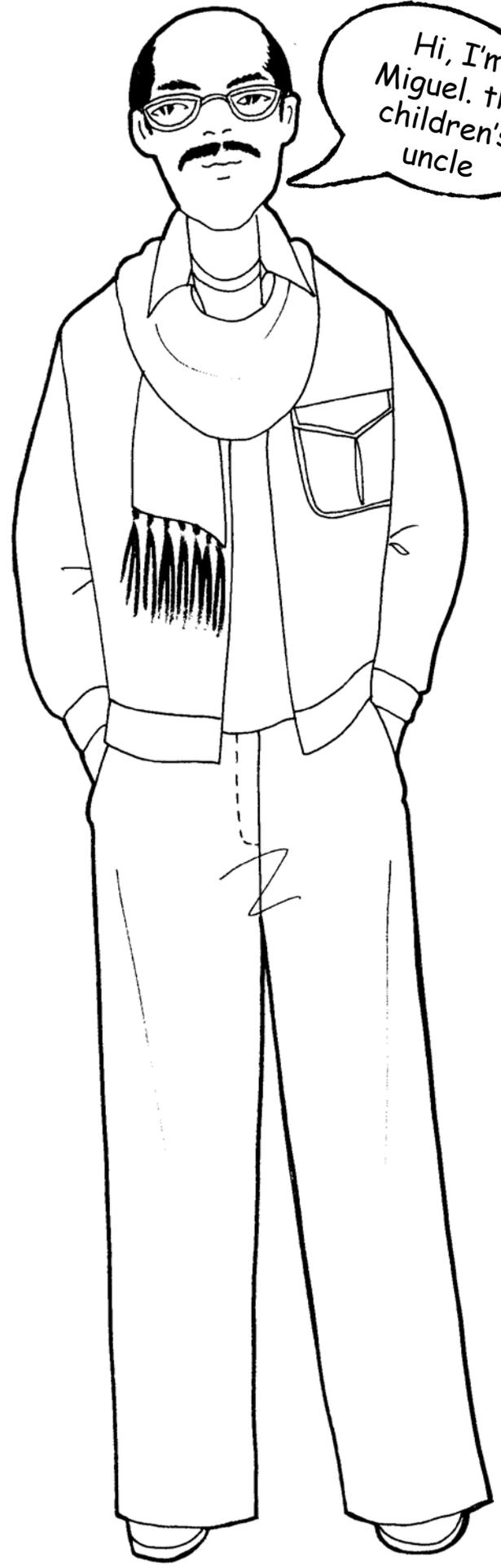
Plan of Portobello

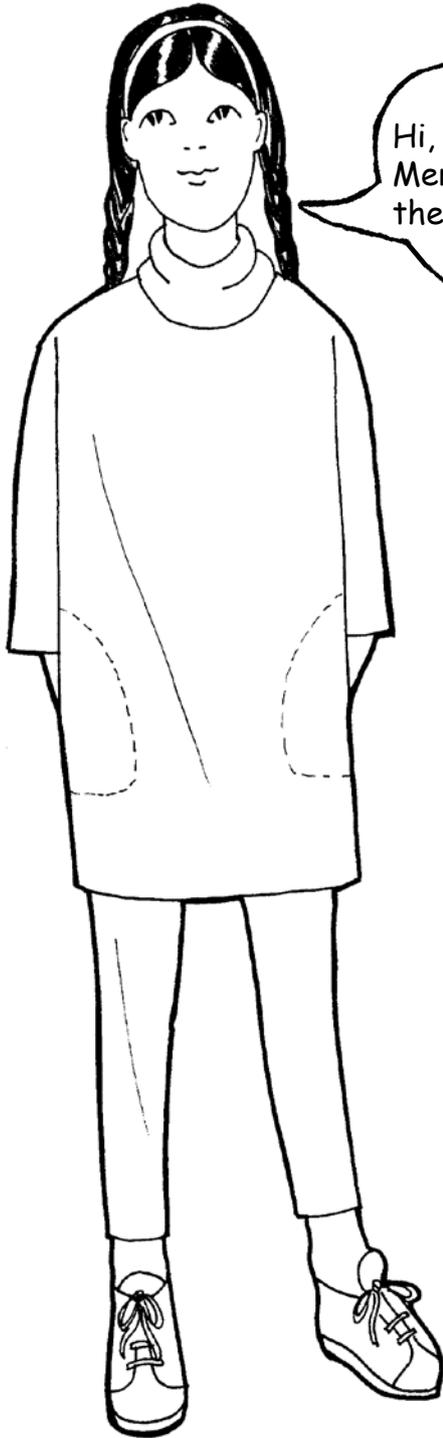


Hi,
I'm Paloma,
the children's
aunt



Hi, I'm
Miguel. the
children's
uncle





Hi, I'm Mercedes, the children's cousin



Hi, I'm Víctor, the children's cousin

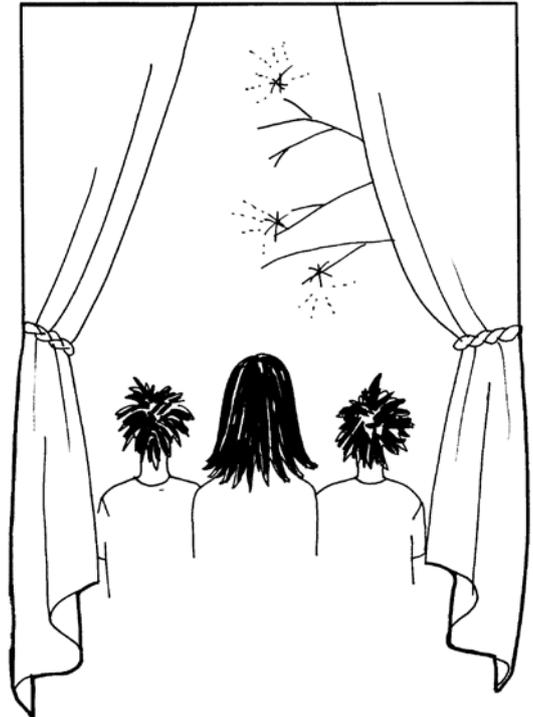


Layout by Jenni Mote
Printed by Design and Print Service,
London Borough of Enfield
© London Borough of Enfield 2009

It was December and bitterly cold in Madrid; the Sanchez y Martinez children were looking out over the darkening boulevard below their apartment in Calle Lope de Vega. Beyond the busy traffic was the Prado Museum and the first Christmas lights were sparkling on the trees around it.

"I can't wait," breathed fourteen-year-old Maria Cristina. "I can't wait for Christmas and to go to London. Shops and shops and ... oh ... shops!" she enthused.

Robey and Rafa, the nine-year-old twins were excited too, though not about shops - there were some here in Madrid! They were looking forward to the family's Christmas holiday in London because they might see Father Christmas; but they had two big problems to solve before they went.



Firstly, how could they smuggle Raúl, their intelligent pet rat, onto the plane without parents or customs officials spotting him?

Secondly, would the Three Kings remember to bring presents to them on 6 January, the Epiphany? In Spain children write to the Three Kings asking for presents when they come on horseback with gifts for Jesus. Robey and Rafa were busy with their letters now but sending them so early might give the Kings too much time to file them away and forget. Or Robey and Rafa might change their minds about what they wanted!

Then Rafa had an even more worrying thought, "Will we be back by 6 January?" he asked.

"Yes," their mother, Carmen, assured him, "I hope to get all my work done before then and be home here to open presents."

Carmen was a famous travel writer and she was writing an article on Christmas celebrations in London. Her brother, Miguel, lived in a big house near Portobello Road and they were all going to stay with him and Aunt Paloma, their cousins, Mercedes, who went to the Spanish School in Portobello Road and Víctor, who was a student.

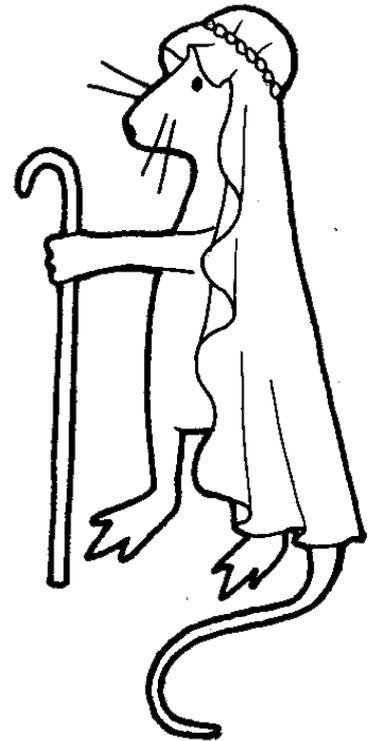
"In fact," said their mother, "You will go to school with her for a few days as she breaks up later than you and the school has said you are welcome."

Before they could protest Carmen added, "Now, get your coats on because we must get to the shops in the city centre tonight - I want to buy a crib as a present to take to London."

While they shopped, a splendid Nativity scene was illuminated in el Corte Inglés and they stood gazing at it for some time, admiring the figures around the manger that looked so lovingly on the baby Jesus. Robey and Rafa began to have an idea ...

The crib they had just bought for London had figures about the size of Raúl - so why not dress Raúl to be part of the scene and take him through customs as a plaster figure?

In their bedroom that night the twins staged a rehearsal; they dressed Raúl as a shepherd and he quickly got the hang of leaning on his shepherd's crook. The children's father, José-Luis, looked in to say goodnight and didn't notice anything unusual so the twins knew their plan could work.



"Goodnight, boys. Get to sleep now because we've got an early start in the morning." Dad was holding baby Isabel who wasn't yet one year old. "This will be Isabel's first ever Christmas," he said, "so I want everyone to be on good form and make it happy for her."

After hours of being a shepherd Raúl noticed that the twins were already asleep so he laid down his crook, folded his shepherd's costume neatly and made a comfy bed in the straw. He couldn't help thinking that his journey tomorrow would be more comfortable if he could be baby Jesus and lie in the manger!

Eventually they were all in the taxi to the airport and Raúl was sitting down in the straw while they travelled. The crib was allowed onto the plane with the children and Raúl remembered to stand up and gaze on Jesus while they passed through customs at Heathrow. Once on the Piccadilly Line tube to Hammersmith he relaxed again and Robey chatted to him in the crib that he held in his lap.

"That's right, you lie down with Jesus," he said. Other passengers smiled to see such a thoughtful and religious boy but Maria Cristina thought, "Oh no! It's that rat again." She didn't raise the alarm though in case people panicked and caused an emergency.

The family had to change trains at Hammersmith and take another tube to Ladbroke Grove where Carmen's brother picked them up and drove them to his big, Victorian house in Oxford Gardens where Aunt Paloma and Mercedes were waiting. Maria Cristina was sharing a room with her cousin Mercedes who was also fourteen, and the twins had a room in the attic to share with Raúl. Víctor was out with his friends.

Raúl hadn't been introduced to the family, but as he hadn't actually been invited it seemed better to say nothing.

As the family went to sleep on their first night in London, Maria Cristina was dreaming about brightly-lit shops and the twins were imagining their letters fluttering eastwards through a starry sky to the Three Kings.



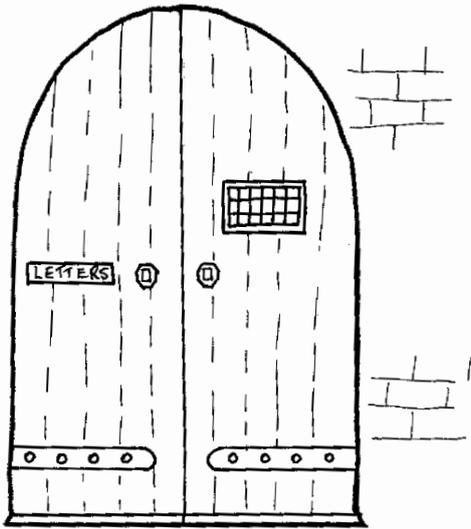
After all the excitement and travel, Raúl fell asleep still wearing his shepherd's head-dress.

The next morning it was time to get ready for school.

"It's just round the corner," Mercedes told her cousins. "We can walk there and afterwards we can go and look at the shops in Portobello Road."

Maria Cristina squealed, "Shops! I can't wait," and then added, "Do they have to come with me?" She meant the twins and, probably, Raúl as well because she knew he was with them. She dreaded looking after the twins, especially when they had Raúl, so she was delighted to hear Carmen say, "No. The twins will stay at an after-school club until Dad can collect them. They are too young to walk around the busy streets."

"That's not fair," the twins protested but secretly they thought it might be more fun to play games after school than watch Maria Cristina shopping. The children were soon outside their school. The building had been a convent for



over a century until it became today's busy, lively school for Spanish children and it still had the look of a fortress or castle. The entrance was a heavy wooden door in a high wall and the children hesitated before following Mercedes through it.

Raúl, travelling in Rafa's pocket, and wearing his natural pinky-grey coat instead of his shepherd's robes, sensed mystery and adventure; his lustrous dark eyes grew larger as he peered out. Raúl had a special ability to understand all human languages and now he

listened to a babble of voices. The children were talking excitedly about Christmas. Then a gentle voice reached him, as though from far away and speaking to someone else but clearer to him than all the noise around him.

This is what he heard: "*Sister, we have the children from Spain staying with us; they have left their homes at Christmas and we must try to give them happiness. Some of their parents are dead or in prison so please try to find a Christmas menu that will make them feel at home.*"

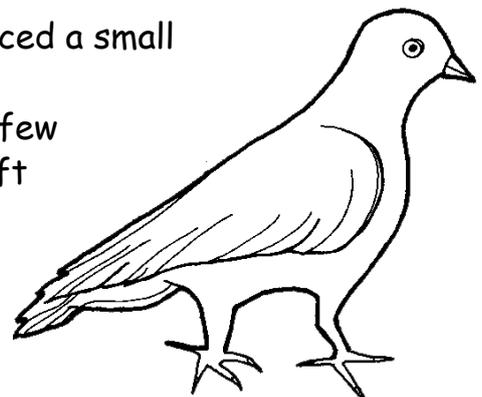
Raúl was puzzled to hear this - surely Carmen and José-Luis had travelled with them! What was this about? The voice had come from a cloistered garden outside but the windows to this garden were sealed.

Robey and Rafa hadn't heard anything. They were hurrying to the end of a corridor where boys and girls were laughing and shouting as they threw pellets of wet tissue up to the ceiling of a washroom to try and make them stick.

It seemed to Raúl that these children were far from homesick and weren't missing their parents at all! So who was the voice talking about?

Raúl had jumped from Rafa's pocket and now he noticed a small opening into the garden. He seized his opportunity. In a moment he was in the overgrown garden with a few fat, sleepy pigeons and some over-ripe red apples left on the ground from autumn.

The figure of a nun in a long brown dress and veil was leaning away from him towards a window on the other side of the garden and giving instructions



to someone inside, " *Try to obtain ingredients for traditional Spanish Christmas fare. The children can't go home while war rages in their country - General Franco has made their parents suffer and Nazi planes have bombed Guernica. The children are safer here - they will spend Christmas 1937 in London and, please God, will see peace in the new year.*"

1937? What was going on? Raúl was confused; his head spun. He had come here with three Spanish children but there was no war in their country and their parents weren't in prison. Raúl was fairly sure it wasn't 1937 (though he didn't know quite what year it was).

Then, "Eureeeeka!" he squeaked to himself, "The Spanish Civil War! Children were brought to England when their towns were bombed. My ancient ancestor came over in a child's pocket and met an English rat and they went back to Spain together to start the Raúl dynasty - of which I am a product." Raúl understood that the nun was talking about children in the convent in 1937 and yet he could see her and hear her ... he was looking into the past! He was watching history!

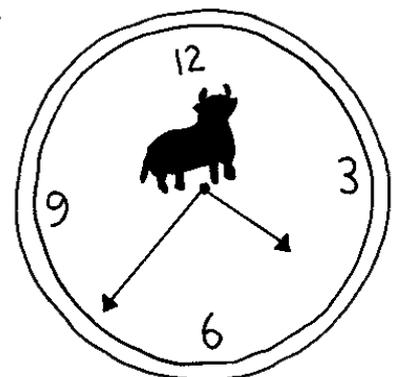
The nun spoke again, " *It will be difficult to purchase Spanish delicacies in our local market but I beseech you to do your best.*" Raúl realised she was talking to a cook who was indoors in the kitchen.

"Can't think why it'll be difficult," Raúl muttered to himself as he scampered back through his hole. "There's loads of Spanish food shops; we passed them on our way here. I'll go there now and see if I can pick up some goodies. Don't fancy hanging round teachers all day."

As he left the building Raúl could see Robey and Rafa being ushered into a classroom by a teacher who announced, "Double Maths, in here, please."

Raúl scarpered.

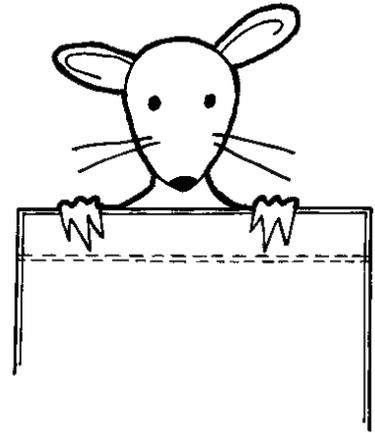
Carmen was out in Portobello Road to do shopping and she wandered into a Spanish delicatessen, attracted by the rows of clay cooking pots in the window and by the fiery, black bull painted on the clock face above the counter - the same bull that had lured in Raúl only minutes earlier. Raúl spotted her now from behind the stack of turrón where he was trying to dislodge a packet to take to the nun. He had recognised turrón as the treat the children always loved at Christmas; it was a nougat made from



almonds and wild honey and it came in either hard blocks or as a soft fudge - these varieties were called 'duro' or 'blando' and Raúl was trying to get some of each.

Raúl watched Carmen go up to the counter and he heard her chatting with the owner.

"We've been open since 1954," the owner told her. "We came here because a lot of Spanish people settled after the war and they wanted to buy real Spanish food."



Raúl understood now why the nun thought it would be hard to get Spanish ingredients - in 1937 there weren't any Spanish food shops. He became more determined to help her. He dragged packets of turrón (duro and blando) out of the shop while the owner chatted. Raúl knew it was wrong to steal but really, for a rat, he was being very good not to just sit in the shop and eat as much as he could. Besides, he was trying to help the children who were lost in time.

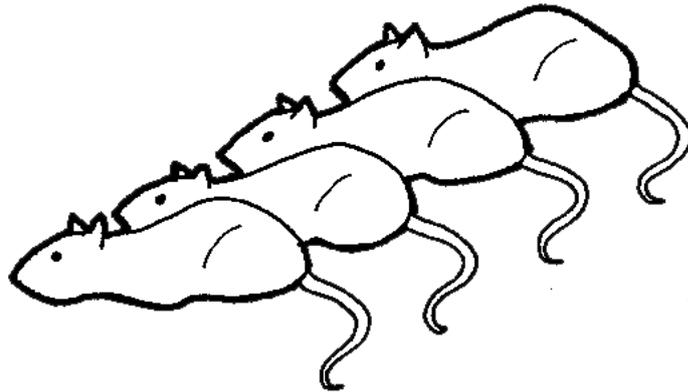
Raúl dragged the turrón along the road to the school and slipped in with other students when the door opened. He trailed across the tangled garden to the window where the nun had stood. He flung the packages through the window and heard a shriek as they hit the cook who was washing up under the window.

Raúl made several more journeys to the shop and back to the kitchen, and the cook shrieked as each delivery hit her. Later that day Raúl brought marzipan and then some colourful iced cakes.



On the last day of term Raúl delivered ham and prawns and, finally, a shoulder of lamb which may have knocked the cook out as it flew through the window. The next day was Christmas Eve when Spanish families traditionally have a celebratory feast so Raúl knew the meat and shellfish would be used while they were fresh.

Because the children were still in school and Raúl had nothing else to do, he thought he would go back and get one more treat for the children. He had his eye on some lovely sugar mice that he could drag along by their tails.



This time, though, Raúl wasn't so lucky and he was chased away from the shop by an angry assistant. Raúl ran like mad and thought it would be a good idea to hide until the children walked past from school. He knew that Robey and Rafa were being allowed to go shopping for presents with Maria Cristina this evening. Raúl spotted a big red tea pot suspended as a sign above a shop front and he scaled up the wall to sit in its spout and look out for the children.

He had a great view down onto the street and he studied all the brightly painted shops.



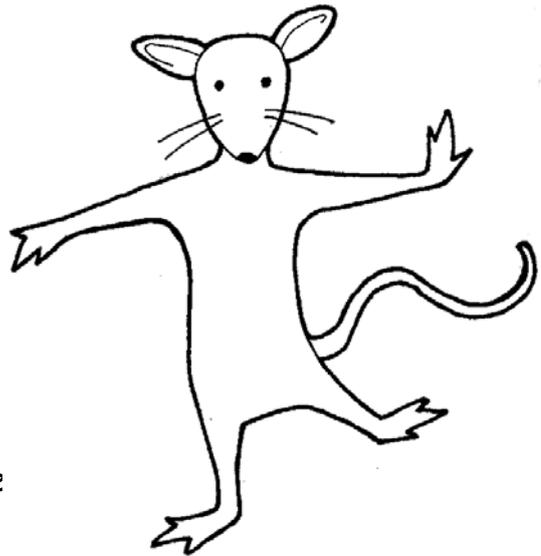
He puzzled over the letters A N T I Q U E that appeared on the shop fronts and even on his teapot - what did these letters mean and why did all the shops seem to sell old things? He was chronologically confused anyway by the middle of it being 1937 for the nun in the school, whilst he was in the 21st century. Raúl's head began to hurt with all this thought so he was glad to see the children walking towards his giant tea pot.

Suddenly, he saw Maria Cristina swirl around as a man snatched her bag and vanished into the crowd. No one could see where he went - except Raúl from his vantage point above the street. Though only able to speak Rat, Raúl could whistle powerfully and he made a policeman look up and follow his outstretched paw as he swung from the spout of the teapot. Raúl's paw indicated the thief hiding behind a wheelie bin where he was quickly arrested and Maria Cristina's bag retrieved

The crowd in the street looked up and applauded Raúl who took several bows before shinning down the spout and into Rafa's pocket. Maria Cristina reached in to stroke him.

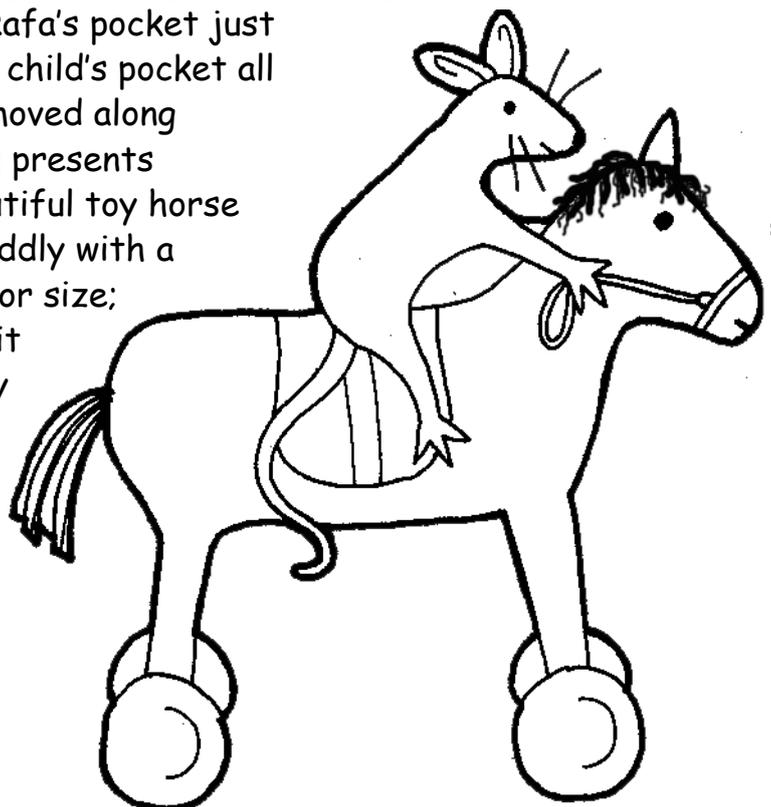
"You're not a bad rat," she told him.

Raúl knew this, though he felt ashamed at getting a thief arrested when he had stolen so much himself. Raúl knew that people considered rats to be common thieves but he felt it was a slur on his nature to assume they had no conscience when he was feeling guilty about his criminal activities, even if they had been in a good cause. He shook his head at the incomprehension of people.



"Do they think we're animals?" he wondered.

For now, though, Raúl had done enough thinking and he was glad to spend a happy evening with his friends, sitting in Rafa's pocket just as his ancestor had sat in a Spanish child's pocket all those years ago. The happy group moved along between the stalls and shops buying presents for their family. They found a beautiful toy horse for baby Isabel - it was soft and cuddly with a flowing mane and tail. Raúl tried it for size; it was a perfect mount for him and it even had a felt saddle that was very comfortable. Raúl sat on the horse all the way home and Robey made it trot and sometimes gallop.



By the time they got home it was dark and Christmas lights shone everywhere. The big window to Uncle Miguel's house framed a sparkling Christmas tree and the crib from Madrid was lit up next to it.

The children and Raúl stood outside marveling at the magic scene. They were full of anticipation for this double Christmas of English and Spanish celebrations.

Meanwhile, in the candle-lit kitchen of the old convent the nun and the cook marveled at the array of Spanish food laid out ready for tomorrow's feast.

"Our prayers are answered," said the nun.

"In abundance," concurred the cook, rubbing several swellings on her head.

Christmas Eve arrived and the house was filled with the most delicious aromas of preparation for the traditional Spanish feast that night. Uncle Miguel was a top chef and he was roasting a huge shoulder of lamb on a bed of onions, potatoes and garlic and basting it with wine and herbs. He had decorated plates of cold meat and shellfish with parsley and lemons and laid out all varieties of salad on the big dining table in front of the Christmas tree.

On the stove simmered a cauldron of Uncle Miguel's speciality - aubergine soup, rich and dark and warming. Large, fresh bream lay ready to be baked and then carried, sizzling, to the table.

Aunt Paloma brought in two silver platters, one marked 'duro' and the other 'blando'. "Turrón from Alicante and Jijona," she proclaimed, "Made with the almonds and honey of the regions."

Even Victor managed to get out of bed to join them.

The children were getting more and more excited even though they knew this evening was more for the grown-ups who would exchange presents and stay up late enjoying glasses of Cava. In Spain the children wouldn't have a visit from Father Christmas to look forward to because they waited for the Three Kings to bring gifts later. But Carmen and José-Luis had said that, as they were in England, Father Christmas might be able to fit them in on his rounds - if they were asleep before midnight.



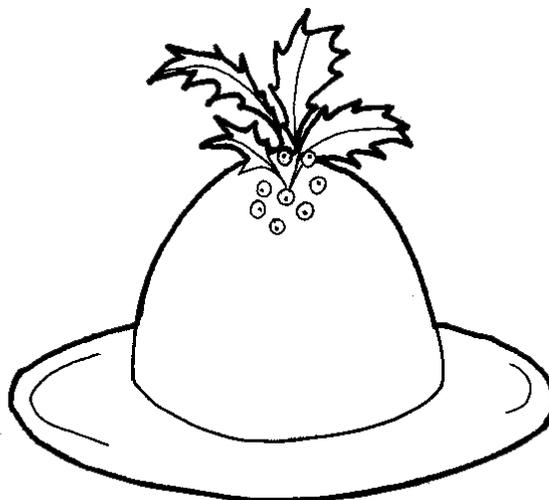
"Goodnight," said the children as soon as they couldn't eat any more.

In the attic Raúl was already asleep - all that horse-riding and law-enforcement and delivering groceries and visiting Jesus ...

"He's been! Father Christmas's been!
We've got presents," shrieked the twins on
Christmas morning.

And it didn't stop there - Uncle Miguel was
already in the kitchen preparing a turkey
and a Christmas pudding for the English
Christmas dinner.

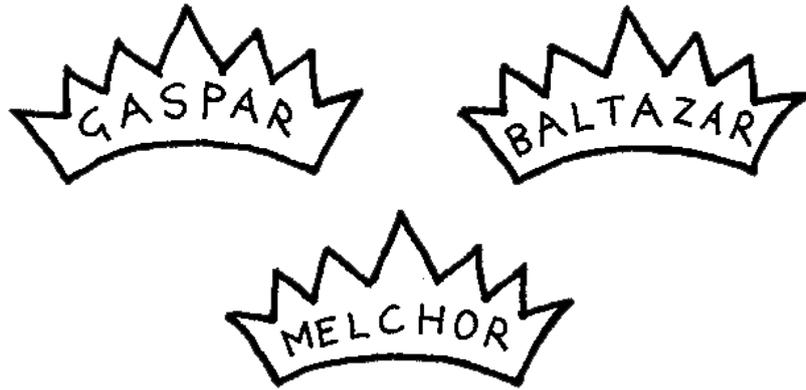
Raúl woke up in time to share the turkey
and sprouts that Rafa and Robey brought
him. The sprouts were nice but Raúl
wondered why there were quite so many!



Raúl was a little bit jealous that baby Isabel now clutched the toy horse and was chewing its ear and dribbling. She loved her first Christmas present and Raúl might have become sulky about this if he hadn't got New Year to plan for. He knew that grapes were essential on New Year's Eve because the custom in Spain was to eat one grape on each stroke of midnight to bring good luck for each month of the New Year. Raúl wanted to make sure that the children in the convent would have enough grapes to do this. As soon as the market stalls opened again he would collect grapes that fell onto the road. Raúl didn't want to steal, not after seeing how the handbag thief had upset Maria Cristina.

Maria Cristina was much kinder to Raúl now and she helped Robey and Rafa solve their problem of how to get him back on the plane without the crib to hide in.

"Why can't he pretend to be one of the Kings that will be riding to Spain to bring our presents? We can borrow Isabel's horse and put Raúl on it - he's a good rider and he can wear the crown I got from the cracker. I'll lend him one of the 100 ethnic scarves I've bought and he can wind it round him as a regal robe. He'll have to keep really still and we can say it's a model we're going to put with our crib at home."



It was a good plan, and it worked and the family was back in Madrid in time for the eve of Three Kings' Day. Robey and Rafa were sick with excitement about the visit that night of the Three Kings and the presents they would bring. They were both worried in case their letters had been forgotten as they were posted so early. After all the excitement of Christmas in London, though, each of them was a bit vague now about what they had asked for.

There was a big procession in Madrid on the night of 5 January and the children watched it from the end of their street. Sweets were thrown from the passing floats and Raúl helped the children to collect these. He was happy that his life of crime was over. He was waiting for the Three Kings with as much excitement as the children, but he only expected two Kings as he had already arrived.

There were presents for everyone in the morning - the Three Kings had been and they had left exactly what was asked for.

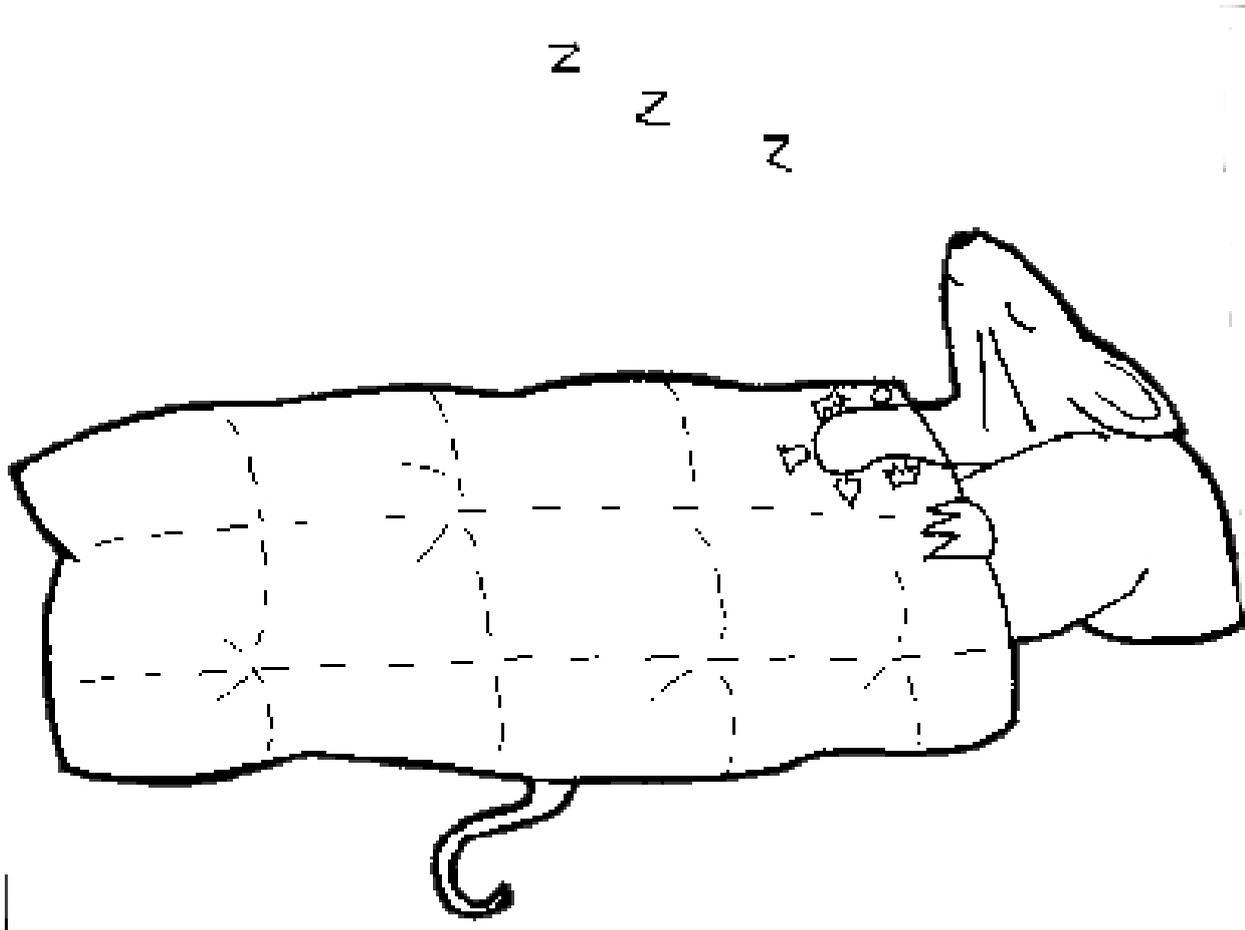
"We remember now. We asked for these snorkels and face masks so we can watch the fish in the sea when we visit our granny in Mallorca," shrieked the thrilled twins, "And we've got tennis rackets too. And this 'Teach Yourself Speech' book for Raúl."

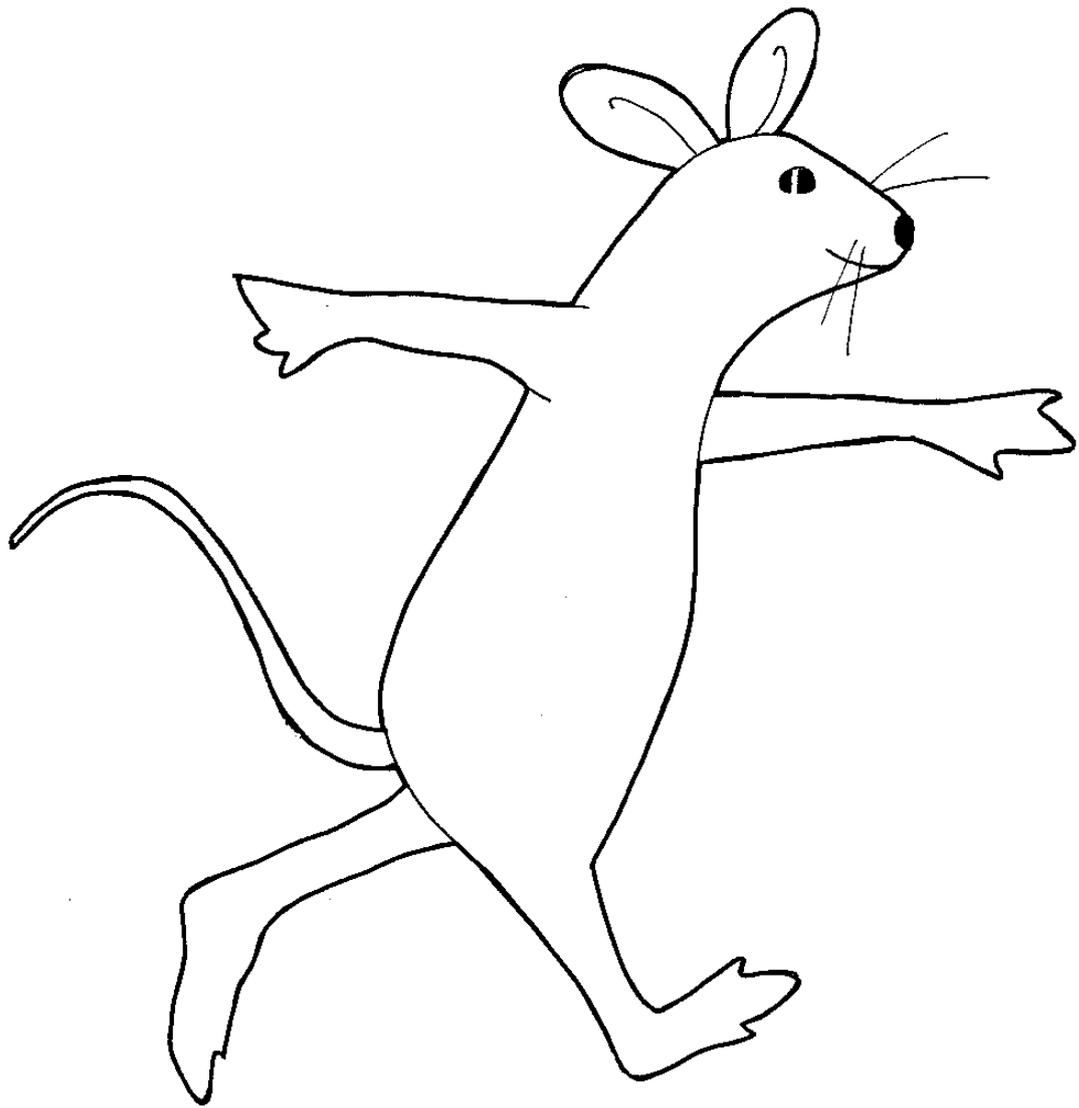
After the presents there was the special Día de Los Reyes cake to enjoy; this was a big circle of pastry covered in sugar and little jellied sweets and with toys and charms hidden inside. Anyone who found a toy or charm would have good luck for the coming year.

Amongst all the celebrations Raúl felt a little sad that the Spanish children in 1937 might not get any presents without him being there to rustle them up.

Then a programme came on the television called 'Spanish Christmases of the Past' and a grainy, black and white newsreel showed flickering images of the convent in Portobello Road and smiling children waving to the camera. A cheerful, old-fashioned voiceover declared loudly, "*The Three Kings come to Spanish children spending Christmas 1937 in London - a special charity set up to make their time here a little easier has answered all the letters from Spanish refugee children to the Three Kings by delivering presents to them at their temporary home.*"

Raúl breathed a contented sigh and settled down for a doze after his ample helping of cake. He adjusted 'Teach yourself Speech' under his head and thought to himself, "What a useful present. I wonder what the other two kings got." Raúl fell asleep wearing several charms he had found in the cake; he intended having lots of luck in the coming year.





"See you in Mallorca. Hasta luego."

