

Unit 3

A Tale of Two Robots

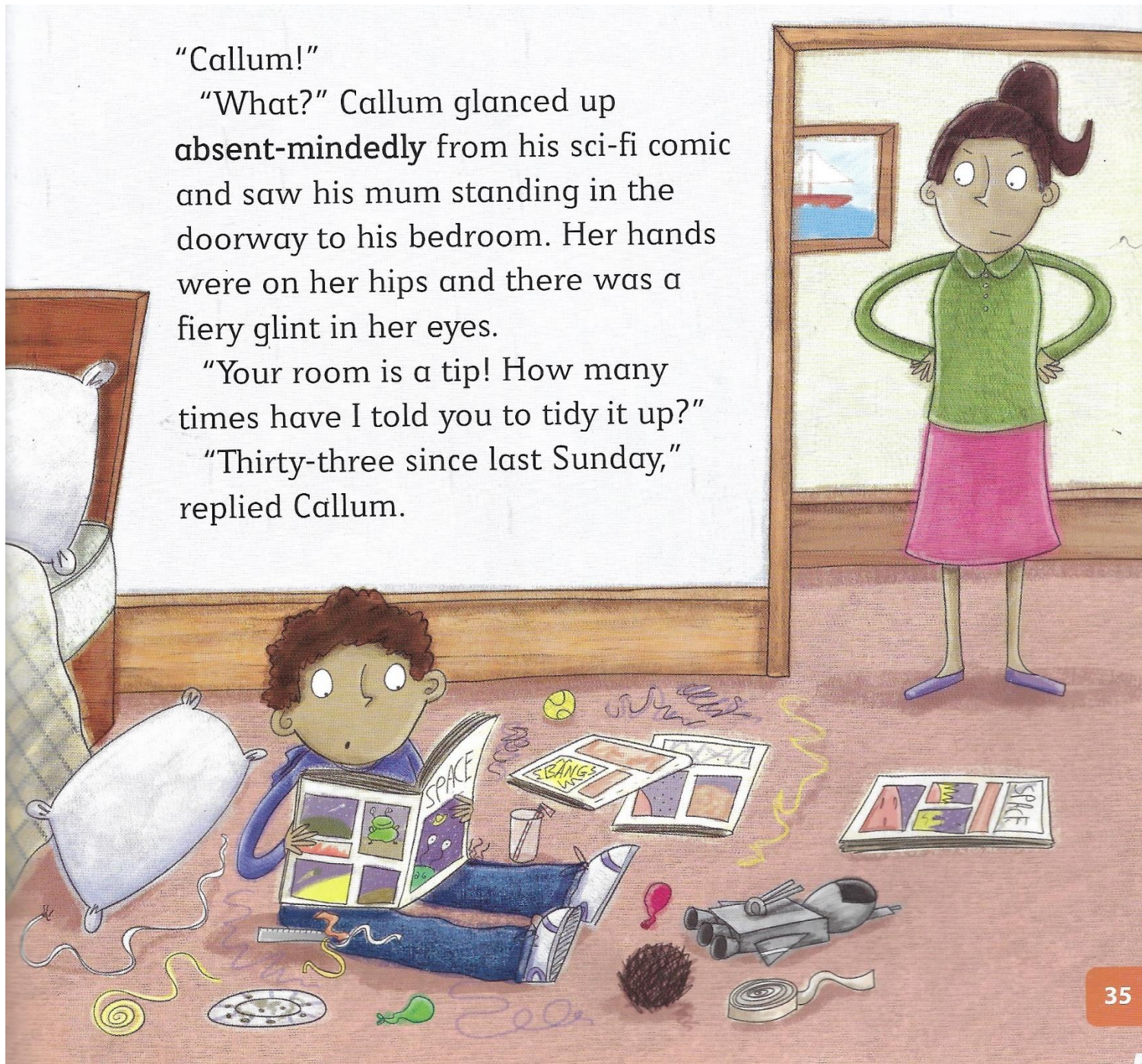
Roy Apps

"Callum!"

"What?" Callum glanced up **absent-mindedly** from his sci-fi comic and saw his mum standing in the doorway to his bedroom. Her hands were on her hips and there was a fiery glint in her eyes.

"Your room is a tip! How many times have I told you to tidy it up?"

"Thirty-three since last Sunday," replied Callum.



And if his mum came in to tidy up all the half-eaten banana and ketchup sandwiches and unwashed socks, she would also try to tidy up all his inventing equipment, including his chemistry set, his collection of toilet roll middles and his screwdriver.

On the other hand, no way was Callum going to tidy up his room himself!

There was only one answer to the problem, Callum thought: he would just have to invent and build his very own room-cleaning robot.



All through the long, stormy night, Callum invented away with nuts, bolts, microprocessor units, swivel-action 180-degree lever systems and yoghurt pots. By the time dawn rose over the horizon, he had finished building his room-cleaning robot. It lay on his bed. He wired it up to his electricity-generating exercise bike and began pedalling like mad.

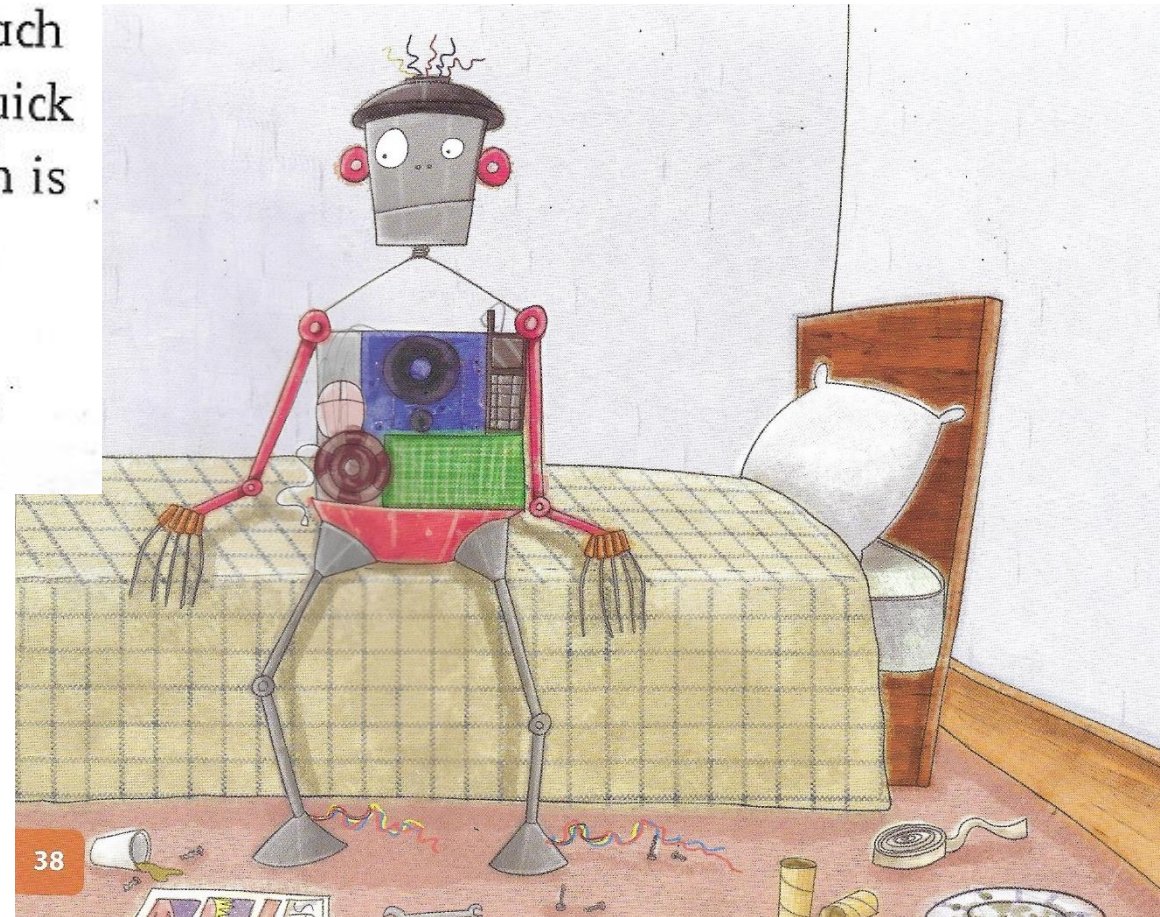


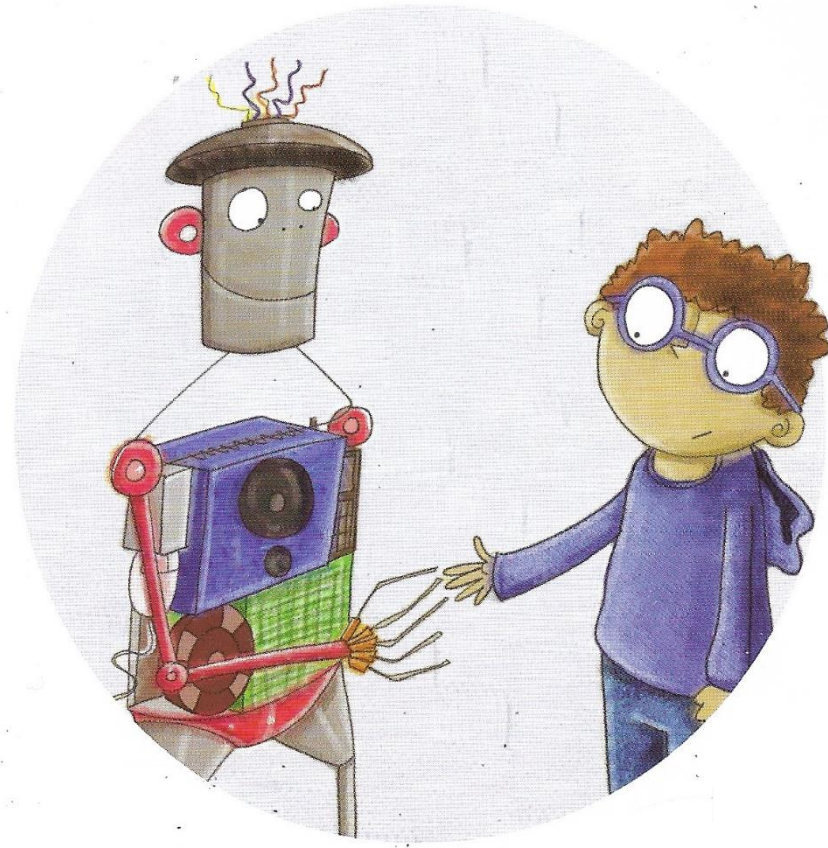
At first, nothing happened, then suddenly bright clusters of red and orange sparks started to fly off the robot's hands and legs, like a firework display gone crazy. The robot rose slowly but steadily, until it was sitting bolt upright.

Callum stopped pedalling and went across to detach the wires from the robot's feet. The robot took a quick look around, turned to Callum and said: "Your room is a tip!"

"That's right," said Callum.

"Aren't you going to clear it up?" asked the robot.





“Certainly not,” replied Callum. “You’re the room-cleaning robot.”

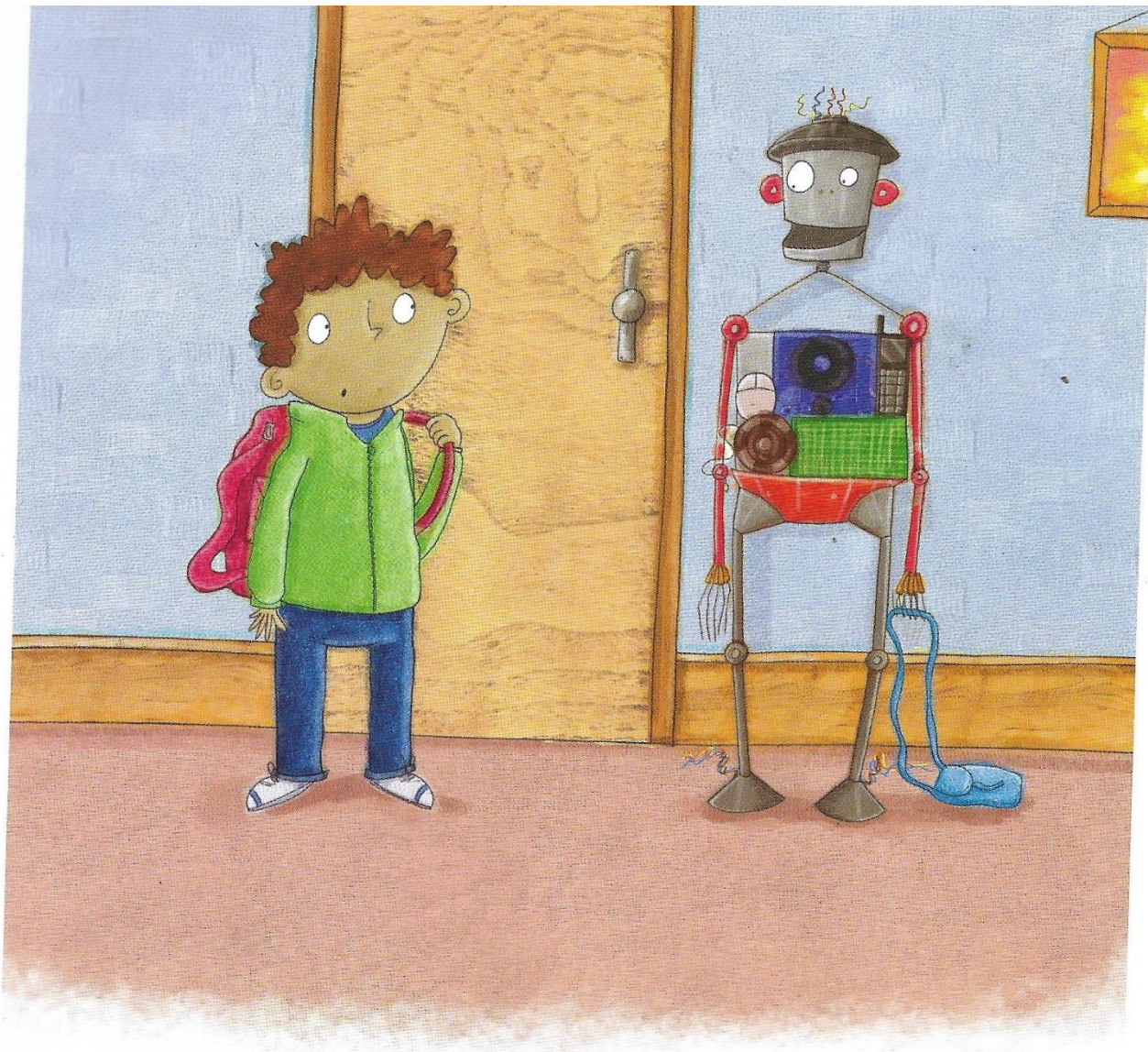
“Robert,” said the robot, putting out a hand that Callum had made from bent barbecue skewers. “Robert is my name. Robert the robot.”

Callum sighed and shook Robert’s hand – carefully. “All right, Robert. Now clean my room. Please.”

“OK,” said Robert.

Robert tidied up Callum’s room until it shone like a TV chat show set. He carefully avoided all of Callum’s inventing equipment, including his chemistry set, his collection of toilet roll middles and his screwdriver.

Every day Robert tidied up Callum’s room and every day Callum’s mum cooed and simpered and called Callum “my darling boy”. But Callum didn’t mind, because after every kiss, she made him a strawberry and ketchup milkshake. It was too good to be true, Callum thought.



He was right. One Friday morning, Callum was just dashing out to school, when he almost bumped into Robert, standing by the front door.

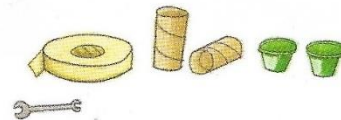
"What are you doing?" Callum asked him, tentatively.

"I'm coming to school with you," said Robert.

"You can't!" exclaimed Callum.

"Don't try to stop me," replied Robert, with a pout of his metallic mouth. "'Cos if you do, I won't tidy up your room tonight. Or any other night!"

Callum knew when he was beaten.

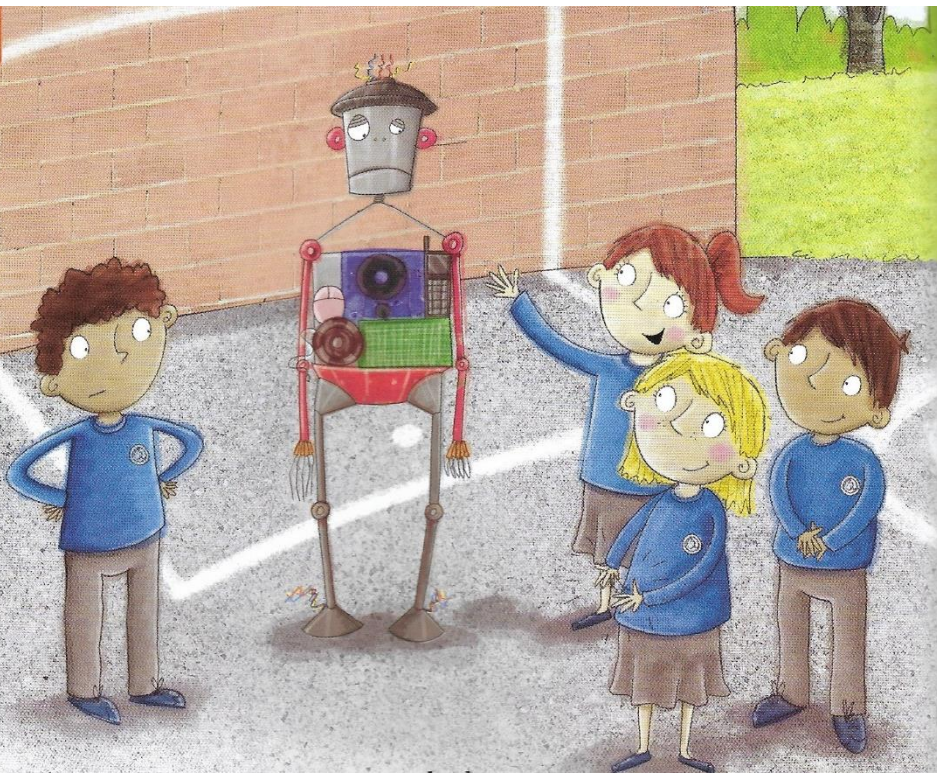


"There's a new face in Red Class this morning," said Ms Shelley, Callum's class teacher. "Everybody, this is Robert."

Everybody in Callum's class turned to stare at Robert.

Ms Shelley sighed. "Red Class! There's no need to sit there like goldfish with your mouths all open, gawping at Robert. Now face the front, please."





At break time, everyone crowded round Robert. They didn't talk to him, but kept asking Callum questions.

"Why has he got a coat hanger sticking out of his neck?"

"Because that's all I had to make his shoulders with," replied Callum brusquely.

"Can he exterminate people?"

"Of course he can't! He's only a room-cleaning robot," Callum snapped.

"He's well weird."

At that moment, Callum glanced up at Robert's face. He could've sworn that the robot's metallic features were somehow creased into an expression of sadness, almost bordering on tears.



“Why don’t you leave him alone?” a girl’s voice piped up. It was Shannon, one of Callum’s classmates.

Everyone began drifting away, leaving Shannon

alone with Callum and Robert. She took Callum to one side. “I think Robert’s lonely,” she whispered.

“Don’t talk stupid,” said Callum, irritably.

“Why else do you think he came to school with you? He’s looking for a friend,” retorted Shannon.

“He’s got a friend,” replied Callum. “Me.”

“I mean,” Shannon said, “a *robot* friend.”

“Where am I going to find him a robot friend?” protested Callum.

Shannon gave Callum a sideways look. “Come round to my place, after school. And bring Robert with you.”



"There," said Shannon, ushering Callum and Robert into the kitchen after school. "What do you think?" Standing by the sink was another room-cleaning robot!

Ignoring Callum and turning to Robert it said: "Hi, I'm Nita!"

Robert took a step back in amazement. "It's a *girl!*" he exclaimed.

"You have a problem with that?" asked Nita.

Callum gulped, "But... what... how...?" he stammered.

"You surely didn't think you were the only inventor in this town, did you?" asked Shannon.

Actually, that was precisely what Callum *had* thought, but he didn't think now would be a tactful moment to say so.

From that day onwards, Robert and Nita would often meet up for a chat. Of course, being room-cleaning robots they were happiest when they were talking about the dreadful state of Callum's and Shannon's rooms.

"You wouldn't believe the mess she left her room in this morning!"

"Try me! Do you know what I found under his bed last night? A mouldy cheese and onion crisp and a pile of toenail clippings..."

In fact, the more untidy Callum and Shannon left their rooms, the happier Robert and Nita seemed to be – it gave them more to talk about, after all.

And that suited Callum and Shannon just fine.

