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Opening extract from

The Grunts in a Jam

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This book is dedicated to Wildlife SOS, fighting to save India's wildlife, including the likes of Raju the elephant

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Chapter One
A Most Tempting Nose

Mr Grunt was staring at a squirrel and the squirrel was staring back at Mr Grunt, with his big squirrelly eyes. (The squirrel had the squirrelly eyes. Not Mr Grunt.) The squirrel was a rather mangy-looking thing. His tail looked less like fur and more like a large feather that had been used as a quill pen and played with by small, sticky-fingered children. The animal was up a tree in a hedgerow lining a narrow lane. He stood on a swaying branch that seemed far too thin to take his weight.

Mr Grunt was leaning out of the upstairs bedroom window of the Grunts' truly dreadful caravan, his head framed either side by a curtain made from an old dressing gown. He was about the same height off the ground as the squirrel and – because the caravan almost took up the width of the lane – very close to the animal indeed.

It was obvious neither of them was going to blink and risk losing the staring match, so Mr Grunt decided to shout instead.

"Tree rat!" he yelled.

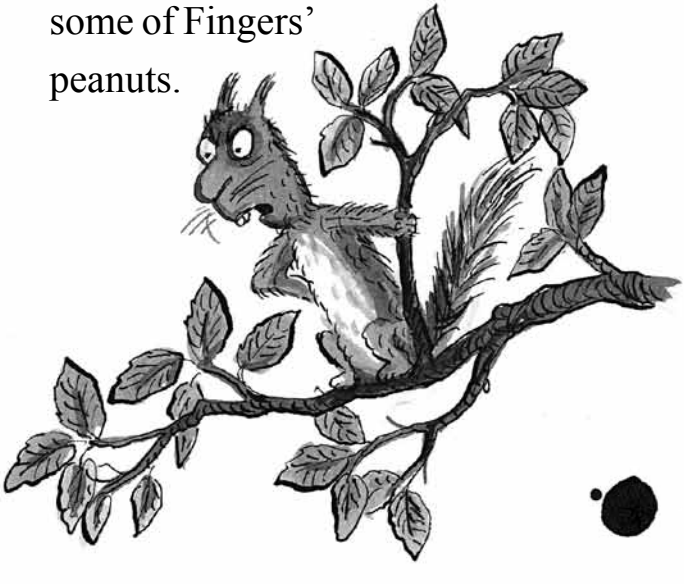


"Chrrrrrgggg!" chattered the squirrel.

"Clear off!" said Mr Grunt.

The squirrel quivered his tail in a don't-mess-with-me manner and ch-ch-chattered some more.

The problem, in Mr Grunt's eyes at least, was that he was convinced that this squirrel – this self-same squirrel, this *very* one – had been following them for days and was a THIEF. Whenever they stopped for a break, the squirrel would sneak among them and take some of Fingers' peanuts.



Fingers was the elephant who pulled the Grunts' caravan. This job used to belong to the two donkeys – Clip and her twin brother Clop – but they'd retired. They now had a trailer all of their very own, hooked to the back of the caravan, and Fingers pulled them all along with a wave of the trunk and the greatest of ease.

Fingers' favourite, favourite, *favourite* food was stale currant buns. I suspect an elephantologist at the University of Elephantology will tell you that it's far healthier for elephants to eat certain types of plant, but what Fingers liked best was BUNS.



He was also partial to peanuts in their shells – they made good snacks and rewards – so Mr Grunt took a regular supply from the local grocery store.

I say "local" because, unlike the old days where home was wherever they decided to park their caravan, the Grunts now had a base. They lived in the grounds of Bigg Manor, a stately home that looked very impressive from the outside but which was little more than an empty shell.

I say "took" because he – er – stole them.

The nearby grocery store was called Hall's Groceries and was owned and run by a woman called Miss Winterbottom. (The last Hall to work at Hall's Groceries was Mr Jon Hall, who died in 1887.)

Mr and Mrs Grunt used to laugh about Miss Winterbottom's name behind her back.

Actually, they also used to laugh about her name to her left, to her right and directly in front of her. And they *always* pointed.

One day, after about a year, Mrs Grunt came up with an extraordinarily clever and original nickname for Miss Winterbottom. She called her "Miss Cold Bum", laughed out loud at her own genius wordplay and then promptly almost choked on the dog biscuit she'd just popped in her mouth.

Having been called "Cold Bum" by other children since she was about three years old, Miss Winterbottom was neither impressed by Mrs Grunt's wit nor bothered by her name-calling. What she *was* bothered by was her shoplifting a dog biscuit, which is why she thwacked Mrs Grunt with one of those wide, flat-brushed brooms.

Mrs Grunt was a large woman, often



mistaken for a block of wood or an angry rock, so you could imagine *her* thwacking people with brooms, but Miss Winterbottom was a very different matter. She'd won the southern heat of the Miss Dainty Lady Shopkeeper Contest on a number of occasions. She was very petite, had golden hair and was generally thought to be very pretty indeed. Stick a broom in her hand, though, and it became a lethal weapon.

THWACK!

"Argh!" shouted Mrs Grunt, spitting masticated dog biscuit everywhere. "Stop it!" ("Masticated" is a grown-up word for "chewed", used by clever authors of children's books.)

