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Opening extract from

Sniff

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Enter Sniff



I was quite surprised when the phone rang because I had just unscrewed the mouthpiece to have a look at what was inside. I thought I'd better find out before we went digital.

'I'll get it,' my mum said from the kitchen. She came into the room reading a book so she paid no attention to me or to the phone. When she picked it up, the mouthpiece rolled behind a pile of old Which? magazines and the little silver disc inside dangled down on its wires.

'Get whatever that is, Ben,' she said vaguely, through the piece of toast she had between her teeth.

she fell off the table in the kitchen. Even so, I had also heard enough of my mother's conversation with Aunt Cress to know that we could expect a visit. And a visit from Aunt Cress always meant that we were going to get organized.

When Dad got the news about Aunt Cress coming, he looked a bit worried. He looked even more worried when Mum pointed out how much tidying up there was to do, and he suddenly remembered something urgent that needed doing in the garage and disappeared. Then, when Mum started getting out the Hoover and dusters and stuff, I decided that he could probably use a bit of help. I sneaked out of the back door, pulling it quietly shut behind me, and tiptoed quickly round the side of the house. I found Dad behind the raised bonnet of the car. He was up to his elbows in the engine and deep in thought.

'But what's she coming for, Dad?' I asked him. 'Mum won't say. She's just gone all

sleeves up, Mum wouldn't have done her nut at me and I wouldn't have been forced to take Sal to the kiddies' playground. And then we should never have met Sniff.

When Sal and I reached the playground, the second thing we did was to have an ice-cream. This was because the first thing we did was to have a go on the see-saw. I thought at first that I was sitting on a rivet or something but I felt in the back pocket of my jeans and there it was, a nice fat little pound coin. Wicked! We had a 99 with sprinkle-spronkle, nuts and strawberry syrup. It was only when I was wiping my hands on my jeans and having a good lick round my mouth that I remembered something. Mum had given me the pound to replace the jar of marmalade that Sal had knocked off the kitchen table. Ah well, it was too late by then. Pity though, after the oily shirt and the telephone and Aunt Cress . . . because something told me Mum and Dad weren't exactly over the moon about her visit and I knew

goes, whacking bleachy water in the sinks and down the loo and along the skirting-boards and on the door handles and all over every surface that she can slosh a cloth on. It's no good trying to have a conversation with her. She doesn't talk, she shouts. And she never speaks directly to me and Sal except to warn us of the dangers of touching, drinking or standing too close to bleach. So, whenever Aunt Cress comes, we have to put up with this awful pong and the threat of instant disintegration or poisoning or whatever and, worse than that, I get lumbered with Sal and elbowed out of the house.

Sal was in a very bad mood, and Aunt Cress hadn't even arrived. She had been difficult ever since she fell off the table. It wasn't so much that she'd hurt herself. What niggled her was that my mum stopped her eating the marmalade off the floor in case there were any bits of broken glass in it. All the way to the park, she'd screamed and kicked up and down in her pushchair. Even when I sat her on the see-saw and bounced

ed to yell, Sal obviously felt a lot better because she squatted down, sprang up like a jack-in-the-box and sprayed some more into the air.

By the time the mothers of Sal's howling little victims had realized what was happening and come galloping over to the rescue, Sal had forgotten the sand in her own eye and was really enjoying herself. I'm pretty sure one of the mothers said something nasty about us, but I couldn't really hear her properly because Sal's laugh was deafening. One or two of the grown-ups round by the sandpit started forming little defensive huddles, calling their children to them, taking quick, meaningful glances in our direction. And one or two of the firmer ones were looking as though they might have to interfere. If news of this spot of bother got home today, after the other disasters, I was dead.

I can't tell you exactly what happened next. It was all too sudden and blurry. I heard voices, I know that. A lot of people went 'Ahhh!' as they breathed in, like the audience

scratched away at it like a madman beating a rug. When that didn't work, he rolled over on his back instead and thrashed about in the sand. Finally he stood up and shook himself, sending out a storm almost as thick as the whirlwind he'd raised when he arrived.

And then it clicked . . . where his collar should have been! He wasn't wearing a collar. I looked all round to see where the dog's owner was, but no one at all looked as though they belonged to him.

By this time, the bystanders had shaken themselves out of their shocked state, and now that Sal was in danger, they forgot about her chucking sand about. A stern-looking lady put her own small child in the arms of a friend and marched to the edge of the sandpit. She stood in the sand near the dog and pointed like a referee sending him off.

'Off you go! Out of it! Go away, you filthy beast!' she said. 'Leave the little girl alone.' She looked at Sal doubtfully. 'Don't worry, dear. He won't hurt you.'

When the lady stuck her arm out and

pointed, it had a very strange effect on the dog. He jumped up at the lady, banged his head on the underside of her arm, did a somersault and fell on his back. Then he did the same thing about ten times, yipping away as though he had his tail caught in a door. When the lady had recovered sufficiently from her astonishment, she looked down and saw that her skirt was covered with sandy paw prints.

Everyone in the playground was standing up to look, and the dog must have suddenly felt a bit shy, because he turned round three times and did a poo-poo.

I was worried for a minute that the lady might die of shock. Her face went sort of purple, like an unwashed grape. She looked at the dog and at the poo-poo as if they were a couple of unexploded bombs, grabbed Sal and me by the arms and began to march us away. She obviously thought it was only a matter of time before the germs jumped up and zapped us all.

Sal did what she always does when she gets grabbed by the arm. She went limp and

When we got to the corner of our street, we passed Miss Morris, our next-door neighbour, who was on her way to give somebody some advice, by the look of it.

'I dot a doggie,' said Sal.

'How nice,' said Miss Morris, her staring eyes bulging out more than they usually did. She hurried on, giving them both plenty of room to get by.

Dad was hoovering the hall when we got home. This was a sure sign that Aunt Cress really was coming to stay.

'Look what I dot,' Sal yelled above the noise of the machine. The dog tugged itself out of her clasp and attacked the Hoover, pushing at the brush with his front paws together and biting energetically at the bag. When Dad turned the machine off (which he did with great speed) the dog lay and looked at it hopefully, waiting for it to roar again.

'What is that?' he said.

'Dat a doggie. My doggie,' said Sal. 'He call Miff.'