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Opening extract from

Aunt Severe and the Toy Thieves

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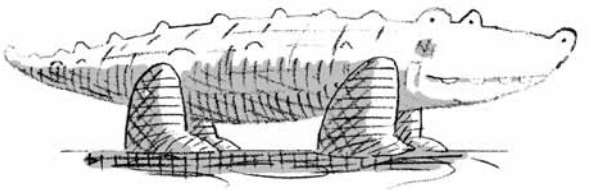
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For Sandra Gillian Dixon
(1957–2011)

She would have loved the crocodile

1
Three Big Shocks

When he got up one morning, Daniel didn't know he was in for three big shocks by bedtime. He thought he was going to travel by train to the town where his Great-Aunt Emily lived, then stay with her while his parents went on to London. They were famous explorers and were off to the city to publicise a book about their latest adventures.

Daniel *did* get on the train. And he *did* travel across the country. Everything went as planned, right up to the moment he stepped down onto the platform and waved goodbye to his mum and dad.

That was when he got his first big shock.



Because it wasn't his Great-Aunt Emily waiting to meet him.

It was his Aunt Severe.

2
The Return of Aunt Severe

Aunt Severe actually *was* Great-Aunt Emily. She was his mum's auntie. But Daniel called her Aunt Severe because the first time he met her, she'd been a crabby old crackpot who fed him cold spinach sandwiches and woke him up at dawn to collect rubbish from the streets. Life with her had been grim and exhausting, and the only bright spot had been her kind and friendly next-door neighbour, the Colonel. When, after many strange adventures, the Colonel turned out to be her long-lost fiancé, she stopped being Aunt Severe and became a happy and giggling Great-Aunt Emily.

And that's who Daniel and his parents

thought she still was. It was certainly the way she'd been when they'd made the final arrangements for this visit.

But the woman waiting for him at the station wasn't happy. And she certainly wasn't giggling. She looked him up and down and frowned.

'I thought you'd be bigger,' she muttered. 'You've hardly grown at all.'

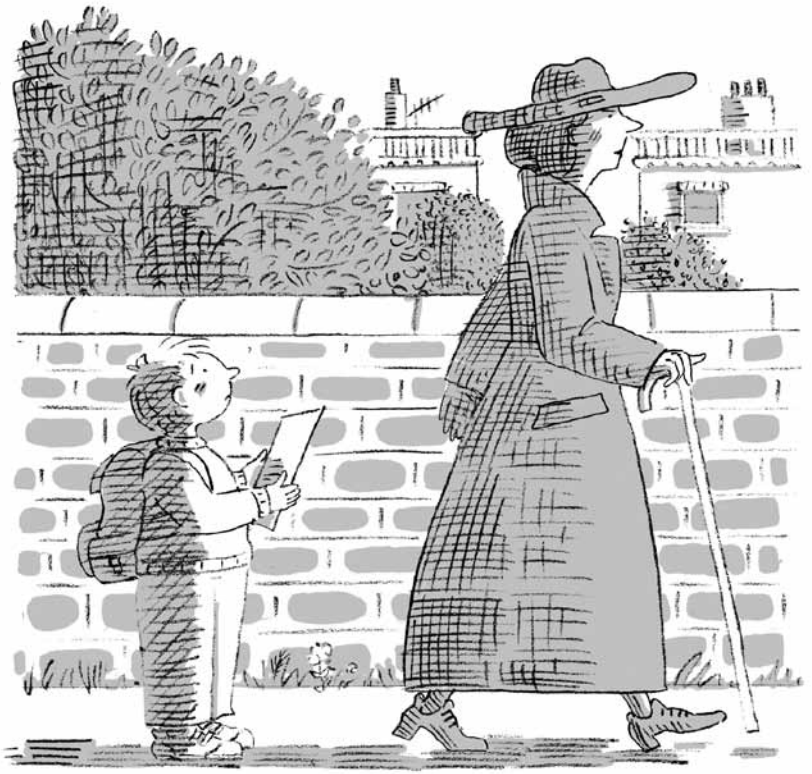
'It's only been five months, Aunt,' said Daniel, who was so startled by her unfriendly manner that he didn't know what else to say. 'I don't think anybody grows a lot in five months.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said Aunt Severe. 'I expect you were just being lazy.'

She handed him a sheet of paper and a pencil and told him to write *I must be taller* five hundred and twelve times.

Then off she marched and not another word was said until they reached her house, which was just as dilapidated and broken down as the first time he'd seen it. That was when Daniel got his second big shock of the day.

'Where's the Colonel, Aunt?' he asked. 'Is he waiting for us at home?'



Aunt Severe fixed him with her most forbidding glare.

'The Colonel,' she said, 'is not at home. He's *vanished* again! He's vanished into *thin* air!'