

THE ADVENTURES OF SUZIE SNEEZEBOTTOM

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Chapter 1: No pets allowed

Suzie Sneezebottom lay on her bed counting the cracks on the ceiling. She patted the small plastic puppy her parents had given her for Christmas, but it didn't bark, or roll over, or jump up and lick her face like a real dog would. It just sat there with its glassy eyes and a 'REDUCED TO CLEAR' sticker on its stomach.

"If only I had a proper pet," thought Suzie, turning her back on the puppy with a twinge of guilt. "Just think of all the adventures I could have with a real dog or a parrot or a snake or even a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig. A small crocodile would be fantastic!"

But Suzie knew exactly what her mum would say to that. "A crocodile in our house, leaving muddy pawprints all over my nice white carpet? How can you be so selfish?"

And then there was her dad's allergy problem. The mere sight of four legs and fur made Mr Sneezebottom's nose explode in showers of snot and snivel. If Suzie so much as mentioned the word 'dog' or 'cat', let alone 'birthday party' or 'sleep-over', Mr Sneezebottom's chest started rattling like an old radiator.

The poor man was even allergic to the sound of doorbells – especially at Christmas and Halloween when he insisted on switching all the lights off and hiding in the under-stairs cupboard: "I can't afford to give away free sweets and mincepies!" he whispered, crouching in the dark and trying not to hit his head on old brooms and wellington boots. "Money doesn't grow on trees, you know."

As for a brother or sister, it goes without saying that Suzie was an only child. Mr Sneezebottom had become severely allergic to baby food and nappy wipes the day she was born.

"Blooming bananas!" grumbled Suzie. "I must be the only person in the whole wide world without a pet or a brother or a sister or any friends who can stay over."

So she made up pets and children and adventures in her own head instead - which is not nearly such fun.

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One hot Sunday morning in August, the Sneezebottoms decided to drive down to the seaside. The sea air was good for Mr Sneezebottom's asthma, and Mrs Sneezebottom wanted to top up her tan. Besides, it was a good excuse for Mr Sneezebottom to race down the motorway in his expensive new sports car.

There was not a cloud in the sky when they arrived. The beach was full of striped deckchairs, and white sail boats hung like washing along the dark blue line of the sea. Sounds of laughter and fairground music rolled up along the promenade.

"I'm off for a jog." announced Mr Sneezebottom, puffing out his chest and breathing in so deeply he nearly swallowed a passing wasp. Mrs Sneezebottom looked very lovely in her fourth-best bikini, busy rubbing suntan lotion onto her arms.

"Can I come too?" asked Suzie. But of course nobody answered her. Mr Sneezebottom was already huffing and puffing down the beach in his baggy tartan shorts and baseball cap. Suzie watched her dad grow smaller and smaller until he shrunk to a dot, lost among the thousands of holidaymakers strolling in the sunshine.

"Mum, is it alright if I go for a walk?"

Mrs Sneezebottom rolled over onto her tummy, let out a contented sigh, and closed her eyes. It had been a very busy week.

"Mum?"

Mrs Sneezebottom didn't answer. Perhaps she was already asleep.

Sometimes Suzie's parents could forget about her for hours. But there was no point feeling sad on beautiful day like this. There, in

front of her, lay the English Channel - big and blue and full shrieking children and barking dogs and old women paddling in floppy hats. Everyone was having a great time.

"I wish we lived on a boat like Auntie Tam and Uncle Mick", Suzie thought as she gazed out to the sea, past the swimmers and the windsurfers to a big tanker heading towards France. How lucky her cousins were to live on a houseboat, with lots of brothers and sisters and a ship's dog for company. Just think of all the adventures you could have on a boat.

When the sun got too hot, Suzie took off her shoes and socks and hobbled towards the water: "Ouch, ouch!" she winced. Pebbles really hurt when they dig into your bare feet.

Every time a wave came crashing into the shore it sucked the pebbles from under Suzie's toes and made a scrunching sound. She rolled up her jeans and stepped in a little further. "I wonder if these waves have come all the way from France?" she thought, shading her eyes with her hand and looking out at the white caps dancing on the horizon. "Maybe they start somewhere in the middle of the Channel. Would that make them French or English?"

The more Suzie thought about it, the more she wanted to know how you tell the difference between an English and a French wave.

"Mum!" she shouted out to Mrs Sneezebottom. "Mum! Can I ask you something?"

Mrs Sneezebottom grunted and adjusted her i-Pod to a louder setting.

"Mum, do you know anything about waves?"

"Not now, Suzie. I'm busy." Mrs Sneezebottom smoothed the beautiful fluffy beach towel underneath her, closed her eyes, and was soon daydreaming again about her favourite time of year - the January sales.

Suzie watched a group of seagulls bob up and down on the surface of the sea. "I'll have to ask Miss Brightwell about waves when I'm back at school," she decided. "Miss Brightwell knows everything about everything."

Just then, one playful little wave crashed under Suzie's legs and sent white froth shooting right up over her knees. Suzie yelped with surprise, and then giggled when the water started to lick her feet like a friendly dog.

The wave didn't seem to want to leave her. It rolled back and forth, from shore to sea, fetching pieces of seaweed and old plastic bottles which Suzie threw into the water for it to catch.

"It's almost as if it's alive," thought Suzie. "But waves are just water, aren't they?"

They played together like this until Suzie's feet started to feel a bit cold. As she clambered out of the water, the wave clung on to her legs and wouldn't let go, no matter how far up the beach she hobbled.

"It is alive!" Suzie shrieked, shaking her legs around to no avail.

The wave made great gulping sounds like a drain when it's being unblocked.

"Maybe it's hungry," she thought, looking down nervously at the frothy water that was whirling round one leg like a hoola hoop. "But what on earth does a wave eat?"

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"Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen . . ." Mr Sneezebottom's face had turned the colour of beetroot and his belly was wobbling over the top of his shorts like a pink jelly. But he was determined to do twenty press-ups without stopping.

". . . eighteen, nineteen . . ." he teetered for a moment, both arms trembling with the effort. Rivers of sweat poured down his face.

"Oh do stop it, Donald" snapped Mrs Sneezebottom, flicking droplets of her husband's sweat off her head. "I'm getting soaked."

One of Mr Sneezebottom's arms buckled under the strain, and he let out a desperate groan.

"Dad?"

At the sound of his daughter's voice, Mr Sneezebottom's other arm collapsed and he fell face first into the pebbles.

"Dad, have we got any French bread?" asked Suzie, grabbing hold of a towel and trying to hide the wave on her leg as best she could.

At the word 'bread', Mr Sneezebottom's whole body jerked as if someone had just poked him with a large cattle prod. "Bread?" he gasped in horror, his voice giving way under the strain of the word: "Did you hear what she just said?"

"I'm not deaf, Donald."

"She's YOUR daughter. Do something about her."

Mrs Sneezebottom braced herself and looked at Suzie. How could such an incredibly attractive woman like herself - winner of two national beauty competitions and twice photographed for Vogue Magazine - have given birth to such a short, plain, frankly fat child with uncontrollable hair? There was only one possible explanation - the midwife must have given her the wrong baby by mistake.

Suzie felt her mother's gaze settle on her like a hungry spider eyeing up a fly. The wave made a small plopping sound behind the towel.

"It doesn't have to be bread, Mum," said Suzie loudly as she dared. "Anything French will do."

Mrs Sneezebottom peered into the cool bag and found something stuck to the lining at the bottom: "There's a bit of old Camembert cheese. That's French."

"Make sure she scrapes the mould off before she eats it," warned Mr Sneezebottom. "I don't want her being sick in the car again."

Suzie took the cheese and put it in her pocket. Now what she needed was somewhere to hide the wave.

"Dad, can I borrow your bucket?"

Mr Sneezebottom glared at Suzie as if she had just asked him for the moon. His tin bucket was a family heirloom. It had belonged to his grandfather and would be worth a lot of money in a hundred years' time.

"Pleeease Dad."

"No. You'll only put sand in it," he said, cradling his bucket like a new born baby. "The slightest scratch could halve its value."

"I won't put sand in, I promise."

"Let her take the bucket, Donald."

"Pleeeeeeease, Dad."

Mr Sneezebottom hesitated. "Well, alright then. But DON'T go into the sea with it. Just think what would happen if you drowned. The bucket would be ruined!"

Suzie pulled the bucket from her father's hands and raced down to the beach huts before he could change his mind. She hid behind a bright red beach hut with pretty blue windows and caught her breath. The wave let out a loud burp, just like water going down the plug hole.

"Right. Let's get you into the bucket. You'll be nice and safe in here. Then I can take you home."

But the wave had other ideas.

Have you ever tried pulling a wet swimsuit off when you're covered in gritty sand? Peeling a friendly wave off your leg feels just like that. Suzie pushed and pulled, tugged and yanked, but Sloppy Joe still wouldn't budge.

The wave burped loudly again.

"Yes, I know you're hungry. I've got some French cheese for you. But I won't give it to you unless you jump in the bucket."

At the mention of cheese, the wave swirled round her leg, faster and faster, then shot up in the air and dived into the bucket with a loud SPLOSH.

Suzie was overjoyed. "If you come and live with me I'll give you Camembert cheese every single day," she told the wave. And I'll call you . . . Sloppy Joe. Yes. Sloppy Joe. How do you like your new name?"

There was a loud burp, and the Camembert was gone.

Suzie peeped round the corner of the beach hut and looked down the beach towards her parents. Her dad was tucking into an enormous chicken drumstick. Every now and then, Mrs Sneezebottom took little nibbles from his drumstick, which made them both snort with laughter. Looking at her father's heaving sides, Suzie couldn't help remembering the walrus she had seen at London Zoo, with its huge, pink, whiskery mouth gulping down sardines.

Somehow, she had to find a way to persuade her parents to let her keep Sloppy Joe. It wasn't going to be easy.

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