

The Vacuum Cleaner

Sophie heard a very weird noise and stopped dead in her tracks. The battered orange ball that she had been happily chasing for much of the last half-hour carried on bouncing down the hall for a few seconds before running out of steam and rolling to a gentle halt by the closed kitchen door. The tangerine toy snuggled happily into the thick woollen strands of the carpet - like a dinosaur egg in a nest of leafy twigs - without realising that it was now alone.

There it was again! The odd noise sounded as though it came from the grumbling, greedy belly of a strange creature – a cross between a hungry grizzly bear cub and a giant food mixer. Sophie snapped her eyes tightly shut and then turned her head slowly – ever so slowly – in the direction of the beast. Five pale sausages trembled on the ends of each of her ice-cold hands and little beads of salty fear began to appear on her clammy forehead. The sound was most peculiar, but even so, Sophie knew that that there was something quite familiar about it – something she could not quite put her finger on. Despite the alarm rising from deep in her tummy, she found herself thinking hard as she tried to satisfy her curiosity. What was it?

Then, the memories flooded in, like water from a burst dam – Sunday morning housework time! In her mind, she saw it clearly – her dad teetering on the stairs, wrestling with an enormous plastic snake, whilst trying not to trip over the long grey wire which kept it prisoner and made it howl in frustration... Sophie missed her dad. She missed him very much.

Putting her sadness carefully to one side, so that she could concentrate on the moment, Sophie wondered whether or not to open her eyes. She decided that a quick peep would be best and so she raised her right eyelid – just a fraction. Behind the faded green curtains, the hunter crouched, muscles quivering. Each of its large, round predator's eyes was fixed intently on Sophie's bouncy ball and its long, flexible snout pointed directly at the toy. It had stopped growling and all that Sophie could now hear was a mechanical wheezing sound leaking from the vent on the side of the animal's plastic chest. Then, like lightning, it pounced.

Shooting out from its hiding place like a cheese baguette from the mouth of an ancient brass cannon, the extraordinary animal flew down the hallway towards the kitchen door. Throughout the short and explosive journey, its plastic snout pointed straight at the doomed rubber toy and its determined eyes never left its quarry.

Sophie squealed as the quivering mouthparts reached and passed her face in a blur and a blast of warm air. There was a sudden smell of new things and then the skeletal rattle of a long electrical flex, which slithered quickly and dutifully down the hall behind its master.

In that split second, Sophie was again reminded of her dad and how he would always get himself tangled up in things whenever he did the cleaning. She had never been sure whether or not he had done it on purpose – but it had been very funny.

Sophie missed her dad. She missed him a lot. Things had never been the same since the accident.

A terrific crash and a triumphant whoosh brought Sophie back to reality as her treasured bouncy ball – brutally snatched without warning from its comfortable resting place – disappeared inside the beast. Almost immediately, the aggressor was calmed; with one last victorious wave of its snout, a wiggle of its tail and a final rasping cough, it lay still, lifeless and innocent on the carpet.

“Sophie, what on earth are you doing, love?” Her mother’s curious and slightly irritated voice oozed out through the narrow cracks around the kitchen door. “I hope you’re not playing with our new vacuum cleaner. I only bought it this morning – and it wasn’t cheap!”

The door to the kitchen opened and Sophie’s mum emerged, wiping dough from her hands with a dishcloth. “Well, my love?” she added, looking down at the vacuum cleaner and then with mild amusement at her daughter’s face. Sophie looked back at her mum, her face reddening. She didn’t know what to think, and she certainly didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry, Mum,” she finally blurted out, a single tear forming in her eye. “I won’t do it again – I promise...”