

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.