

Sidney Sets Off (by Ute Maria Sproulle)

Grandfather Samuel sighed. Once again Sidney had slithered outside the boundary. No matter how many times he'd been told, Sidney always insisted on exploring Mr Smith's garden. And for a snail that could be dangerous, very dangerous indeed.

His sister, Selma, never went beyond the compost pile, nor did his brother, Septimius, the sensible one. Ever since their parents had been split in two by Mr Smith's hoe, they had listened to their grandfather. "Humans don't like us," he would tell them. "So you must hide under leaves, in logs, under stones and only come out at night. Or when it's wet. That's the time humans are hiding. And always remember -"

"Eat as much as you can!" they chorussed. The snails knew the drill.

"Yes," said Samuel. "But be very careful not to get caught. And don't drink anything that smells unfamiliar," he added. "We all know what happened to Simon."

"What happened to Simon?" asked Sidney. He was the youngest and hadn't had much experience.

"We don't talk about Simon," said his older sister. And she looked at Septimius and shuddered.

"Now, let us feed on what is left in this compost pile," said Samuel. "It's going down very quickly."

Winter wasn't a good time for snails. There wasn't a lot of food around and snails needed a lot of food if they were going to hibernate. But at least they had their cosy little snail shell in which to curl up. It kept them safe at other times, too. Whenever something wanted to eat them, they would pull in their soft, fleshy body and tentacles - or, as Sidney liked to call them "antennae" - and roll away. Samuel, Selma and Septimius were very happy being snails.

But Sidney was different. He found sleeping all winter boring. And he found the compost pile in which they lived boring. There was so much more of the wider world to explore!

And only coming out at night? Or when it was raining? What was that all about? Sidney wanted to be out in the sunshine, when the sky was blue and the birds were singing. It was much more cheerful.

"What do you mean 'you want to hear birds singing'?" exclaimed Selma. "Don't you know birds eat snails? Some thrush will find you in the sunlight, drop you from a great height, your shell will smash into a zillion pieces and she'll eat you!"

"Stupid snail," said Septimius grumpily.

"Now, now," said Samuel. "We must understand that Sidney is still very young and, well, adventurous." You could tell that their grandfather didn't think this was a good thing. "You'll learn, my boy," he said, nudging Sidney's shell. "You'll learn."

He led the way to some rotting cabbage leaves. "Now everyone, dig in! Remember, you've got to eat enough for several months."

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful and Sidney decided that this was the day for exploring. He slithered slowly out from the compost pile, smoothing the way down the garden path with snail slime.

Ahead of him was Mr Smith's garden, his favourite exploring spot. Carefully he slimed his way underneath bushes and over pebbles until he came to a large yellow brick wall. Sidney had often seen Mr Smith enter an opening in this wall so Sidney, being curious, decided he would, too.

Now it's a well-known fact that a snail has a long, flattened foot underneath its body. At the front end of its foot is the slime gland which continuously lubricates its way. This slime can act like glue when climbing a wall so, yes, snails can climb walls!

In fact, they are capable of dragging a load nine times their own weight up a vertical surface and fifty times their own weight along a horizontal surface. Isn't that amazing?

Of course, Sidney didn't have to be told this. He knew how amazing he was. And now he started his climb up the wall, waving his tentacles around to sniff and to see where he was going.

There was an interesting smell coming from inside this place he had discovered, a yummy smell like freshly rotting compost. Sidney carried on up the wall, looking for an opening. There it was! And behind it was Mrs Smith doing some cooking - although Sidney wouldn't have known what cooking was. But it sure smelt good!

Just at that moment Mrs Smith turned and looked out her window. She gave such a shriek that the shock knocked Sidney onto the window ledge. He bounced once, twice and landed on the pebble path. Even snail slime couldn't have held him up against a scream like that!

"What's the matter, my dear?" Sidney heard Mr Smith saying.

"There was a sl- slimy sl- slug on the window!" his wife stuttered.

Sidney was offended. He was not a slimy slug, he was a snail! A beautiful snail! An amazing snail!

"What should I do?" asked Mr Smith.

"Ginger beer!" exclaimed Mrs Smith. "Slugs love ginger beer. Don't you remember? That last one exploded!"

So that's what had happened to Simon, thought Sidney. He exploded! Wow!

Suddenly there was a peck-peck-peck on his shell. He looked up into the inquisitive eyes of a small brown bird. The bird's mouth was open so Sidney quickly pulled back into his shell. But he could feel himself being lifted up, up, up into the sky.

Oh, oh, he thought, this is not good.

Then he landed in something soft and twiggy. He felt a sharp beak poking at him and it wasn't a feeling he liked.

"Hello in there?" said the little brown bird. "Don't you want to come out and play with me?"

Sidney remembered Grandfather Samuel's advice to always be careful of strangers and thought this was probably a trick. So he stayed in his shell.

"Alright then," said the little bird and with a heave-ho Sidney was catapulted out of the nest, down, down, down onto the ground below. Luckily he landed on soft grass which didn't damage his shell. And didn't break him into zillions of pieces.

Sidney kept rolling and rolling until he landed under a bush. Only then did he dare to peer out with his tentacles and check that the coast was clear.

It wasn't. Mr Smith's cat was pawing him, sniffing him, pushing him this way and that, sniffing him again. It was making Sidney dizzy and sick. Only when the cat got tired of using Sidney as a miniature football and ran off, did Sidney feel brave enough to venture out. Moving at a snail's pace - which for a snail was pretty fast - he managed to reach the compost pile in record time.

Samuel was waiting for him. Selma and Septimius were still asleep, dreaming of rotting vegetables.

"So, young snail. What have you been up to?" asked his grandfather.

Sidney thought a moment. "Oh, not much. Got screamed at by Mrs Smith, picked up by a bird who flew me to her nest and then dropped me again. Oh yes, and rolled around by a cat."

He waved his tentacles in a snail smile. "And I've decided I've had enough adventures for one day." He slithered off to the compost pile. "From now on, it's a snail's life for me."

Grandfather Samuel sighed. Until the next time, he thought.