

# The SMIDGENS

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BLOOMSBURY  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK  
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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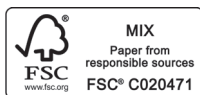
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-0776-8; eBook: 978-1-5266-0777-5

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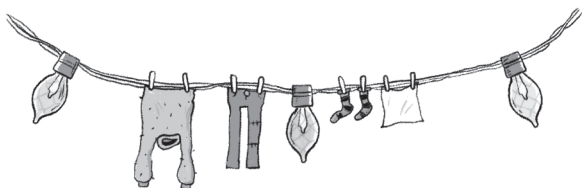
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,  
Croydon CR0 4YY



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*For the Milway family:  
Alex, Katie, Cecily & Hetty*





# 1

## Hunter and Prey

‘We’ll never do it!’ moaned Gobkin. He threw his spear down into the quagmire of dirt, hair and congealed fat surrounding his feet, where it landed with a dull *splot* sound. ‘It’s *hopeless*.’

Gafferty Sprout counted down from five in her head. She looked at her little brother, his scared face criss-crossed with shadows cast by the grille that covered the extractor pipe in which they were hidden. Warm, greasy light oozed through the metal lattice and dribbled gleaming spots on to the lenses of Gobkin’s goggles. Or was that the glistening of his frightened tears?

*Be patient with him*, Dad had said to her before the two of them had set out on the expedition. *He’s young*,

*but he must learn our ways.* Gafferty was learning more about Gobkin's ways, so far. Annoying little snivel-scrap! He'd moaned and whined all the way through the tunnel. He'd griped and groaned as they scaled the wall to get to the pipe. He'd grumbled and grouched as they squeezed through the conveniently sized hole cut in its side. He'd carped and bellyached as they passed the now useless fan that Dad had carefully detached on a previous visit. It was Gobkin's first time properly out in the Big World and he was acting like it was bath night!

Dad had taken Gafferty out on her first hunt. She'd been brave. The oldest child had to be brave. If something happened to Mum or Dad, then she would be the one in charge. Gobkin was different. He was three years younger than Gafferty, and Mum and Dad had spoilt him, protected him. But that had all changed six months ago, when their little brother, Grub, had been born. A creature of snot and bad temper, he now took up all their parents' time. Gobkin was no longer the youngest. Gobkin needed to grow up.

Gafferty sighed irritably. This would be a lot easier if he weren't so much younger than her. But then, she had never known anyone of her own age. It was a constant annoyance, not having anyone who understood what she

was feeling. Almost as much of a constant annoyance as Gobkin. Her hands toyed anxiously with the strap of her scavenger bag. The truth was that she was feeling nervous, and having a miserable, insecure assistant with her made it worse.

‘I’ve done this a hundred times, you fumbling grizzle-head!’ she said finally, summoning the effort to sound confident. ‘Well, once or twice. Even three or four times. Lots of times. Maybe.’

‘And Dad was with you then.’

‘Don’t worry, Gob. It’ll be easy. I know what I’m doing.’ She peered through the grille at the activity taking place in the noisy kitchen on its other side. ‘And I have our prey in my sights.’

Gobkin leaned forward, his curiosity getting the better of him.

‘Where ... ?’ he began.

Without warning, a shadow fell over the grille.

‘Humans!’ hissed Gafferty. She threw her arms protectively around her brother and dragged him backwards through the muck. They crouched in the darkness, frozen with fear, trying not to breathe in the rancid stench of their surroundings.

A gigantic eye stared through the grille. Gobkin

squealed and even Gafferty gave a sharp intake of breath. The eye frowned, blinked, then disappeared. Before the children had time to act, an enormous finger, wider and taller than either of them, rammed against the grille, sending a rattling echo down the pipe. Gafferty and Gobkin covered their ears as the finger hit the metal mesh once more.

‘Oi, Barry!’ boomed a voice. ‘Is this extractor broken again?’

‘Aye, boss,’ called Barry, from somewhere in the kitchen. ‘Keeps getting fixed, keeps getting broken. Mice, I reckon.’

‘Mice?’ snapped the boss. ‘Got screwdrivers, have they? Don’t let anyone hear you talk about mice, or we’ll be closed down.’ The voice grew quieter. The giant was moving away from the pipe. ‘And where would we be without McGreasy’s Burgers? Where would everyone go for their chips then, eh?’

‘I don’t think I’ll ever get used to Big Folk,’ whispered Gobkin, getting to his feet and reaching for his spear, ‘with their great big stomping feet and humongous bottoms wobbling about overhead. And always shouting about everything! Why can’t everyone be like us? Smidgens. Too small to cause any trouble ...’



‘But big enough to care.’ Gafferty finished their dad’s often-repeated adage. She saw Gobkin’s eyes shine as his brain caught up.

‘Chips,’ he said. ‘They’re making *chips*.’

‘Chips,’ confirmed Gafferty, nodding. ‘Our prey. Golden, plump and crispy, completely defenceless, and ours for the taking. That’s what we’re hunting today. One chip will do nicely for dinner for all of us.’

‘And don’t forget the *kurrisorce*,’ said Gobkin, drooling slightly. ‘I read about it in *The Big Book of Big Folk Facts*. Humans love *kurrisorce*. The book says it channels the power of the mythical Kurri, god of chips.’

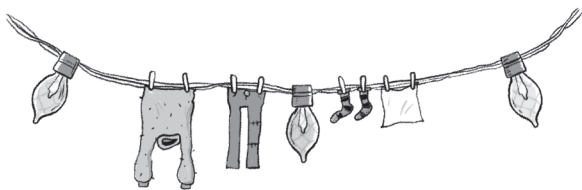
Gafferty smiled. That was more like it. Gobkin always had his nose in a book. Sometimes he talked like one. And now that he had survived a risky encounter with the Big Folk, his hunger was making him bolder. They pressed their faces against the grille and stared out at the Big World.

Rule One of the Smidgens: *stay hidden and observe*. From inside the extractor fan they could watch the goings-on of the burger bar. There were two chefs – Barry and his boss – cooking the burgers and sausages on the griddle, and frying chips, nuggets and anything else anyone cared to batter and fry in a deep vat of boiling oil.

Dealing with humans – who were at least twenty times as tall as you – was a dangerous business for all manner of reasons. If you weren't dodging human feet, then there were human-made death-traps. You could easily end up as a Smidgen-fritter if you weren't careful.

A counter separated the kitchen from the shop, where customers waited for their orders. Gafferty had chosen a quiet time for the hunt when the cooks were preparing food in readiness for the evening rush. There were no customers, and that meant fewer eyes to see them.

'It's time,' she said. 'Let the hunt begin.'



## 2

# Into the Frying Pan

Rule Two of the Smidgens: *don't do anything flipping stupid*. That was easier said than done.

'Get the rope out,' Gafferty said, taking command. Whilst Gobkin rummaged obediently in his pack for a coil of stolen fishing line, she made last-minute adjustments to her scavenger suit.

Pulling on a couple of laces on either side of her waistcoat, she drew out four tubes of material from hidden pockets so that they dangled freely about her, making it look like she had grown extra arms. Then she drew her hood over her short red hair, a hood spotted with velvet eyes. Her clothes were a soft grey colour, like that of the spider she was meant to resemble. Admittedly,

she was quite big for a spider, just as Gobkin was quite big to be the fly that formed his disguise, with his goggles and wing-shaped backpack and furry leggings, but the Smidgens never intended for themselves to be seen at all. *It's in case someone catches a glimpse of you from the corner of their eye, as Mum said. If the Big Folk see a shape that they think they recognise, they won't bother looking too closely.*

All Sprout family members picked their creepy-crawly guise at a young age and, once decided, stayed loyal to it. Dad was a beetle, Mum was a ladybird and Grub was – appropriately, given the amount of slime he produced – a slug. At least for now. Gobkin had toyed with being a grasshopper for a while, but had decided on a housefly, for their speed and dexterity. And he said they had a fascinating way of digesting their food, which had sounded disgusting to Gafferty when Gob had described it to them in detail at the dinner table.

With her bag slung round her shoulder, Gafferty was finally ready. Gobkin handed her the rope.

‘Let’s get this over with,’ he said, biting his lip.

Gafferty flicked the catch on the grille (another bit of Dad’s handiwork, along with the hinges that turned the metal grid into a door) and carefully pulled it open. The

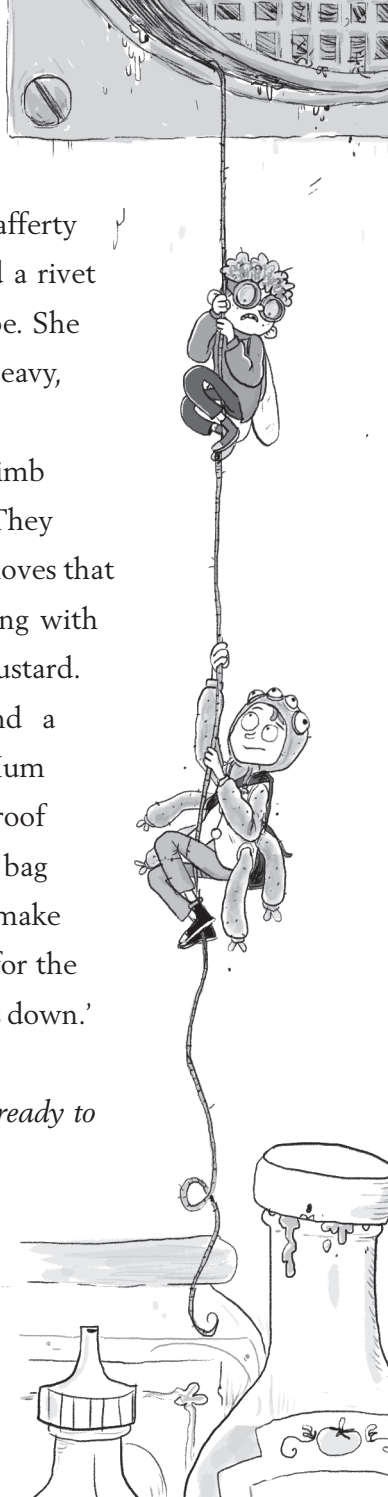
two cooks were busy at the griddle, their backs turned to the chip fryer. The coast was clear. Gafferty secured one end of the rope around a rivet poking up from the floor of the pipe. She let the remainder drop into the heavy, oily air of the kitchen.

It was a short but nervous climb down from the extractor fan. They touched ground on a box of plastic gloves that sat on a shelf beneath the pipe, along with supplies of sauce, mayonnaise and mustard. As they paused for breath behind a ketchup bottle, Gafferty said: 'Mum uses those gloves to make waterproof clothing. I could stuff one into my bag on the way back, but I don't want to make things too complicated. We're here for the chips. Carrying too much will slow us down.'

Gobkin nodded.

'Rule Three of the Smidgens: *be ready to run, and run fast,*' he recited.

They scurried along the shelf to its end. Then it was just a



quick jump into a soft pile of paper napkins that were heaped on the kitchen counter below, followed by a short dash across the counter to the deep fat fryer, its oil boiling with the menace of a restive volcano. They'd almost made it!

A bell chimed through the shop. Gobkin looked at his sister in alarm.

'The door!' hissed Gafferty. 'There's a customer! That's all we need.'

They dived into the shadow of a large salt shaker sitting next to the fryer. Gafferty peeped around its curved edge. It was a boy, barely visible behind the glass countertop, its surface misted with steam. One of the human cooks lumbered over from the griddle. It was Barry, judging from his voice.

'And what can I do for you, young lad?' he said, leaning over the counter to greet the customer.

'Small portion of chips, please,' said the boy, too busy picking his nose to pay attention to anything else.

'Coming up,' said Barry in reply. 'You're in luck – there's a batch just about ready.'

He turned to the fryer, his shadow plunging Gafferty and Gobkin's hiding place into darkness. They cowered behind the salt shaker, Gafferty's heart thumping like a

drum in her chest. Next to her, Gobkin gripped his spear tightly to stop himself from shaking with terror. She put her hand on his shoulder to reassure him – he mustn't lose his nerve now! But what could they do? The human was bound to see them if they stayed here!

Barry took a sheet of greaseproof paper and laid it on the counter next to the salt shaker. The edges of the paper curled upwards. It gave Gafferty an idea, a risky one, but it might save them. Rule Four of the Smidgens: *if in doubt, make it up!*

The cook lifted the metal basket of chips from the fryer, shaking it to drain the excess oil. Using a large scoop, he shovelled a portion on to the paper. Globules of hot fat spat from the golden pile of fried potato, one fizzing dangerously close to Gobkin's ear.

'I want to go home!' he squeaked.

Gafferty grabbed his arm. She knew what was about to happen next.

'Get ready to run,' she whispered.

As she expected, Barry turned to the chip buyer.

'Would you like them salted?' he said.

Gafferty didn't wait to listen for the reply.

'Now!' she hissed. She dragged Gobkin away from the salt shaker and dived beneath the curl of the chip paper.

They crawled on their bellies under its cover, sweating in the heat radiating from the freshly cooked food sitting on its surface. Gobkin had just pulled his foot out of view when Barry turned back and reached for the shaker that had been their hiding place moments before. Salt hailed over the chips, rattling on to the paper above their heads. Her elbows hurting with effort, Gafferty wriggled across to the far side where the chip wrapper brushed up against a huge tub of margarine. Again, she waited for the moment when she knew Barry's back would be turned.

'And vinegar?' she heard him ask the hungry customer. That was it! She jumped up and scrambled behind the tub, pulling Gobkin along with her. The two of them sank to their knees, panting for breath.

Vinegar showered over the chips nearby. Gafferty grabbed the spear that Gobkin still clutched tightly. She'd not forgotten why they were there. Barry was now folding up the paper into a neat package, spinning it around as he tucked in the corners. He'd had so much practice he could make the creases in the wrapper without looking, something that Gafferty planned to use to her advantage. As the half-finished parcel of food turned towards them, she stabbed the nearest chip with lightning speed, a spider ambushing its victim, and hauled it free. Gobkin,



who had watched with amazement, helped her drag it into their hiding place.

‘And that,’ said Gafferty, grinning as her brother eyed their still-warm, golden prize, ‘is what I call a takeaway.’