

The Slug

“Hmm,” mused Dr Klein with a mixture of surprise, interest and real concern. “There definitely seems to be something here.” He shone his miniature but powerful light into the dark recesses of Laura’s ear and moved her head gently to one side so that he could get a better view. He looked up at Laura’s mum: “Her ear is totally blocked. When did you say you first noticed it?”

“On Monday - when we got back from our camping trip. Laura started to complain about not hearing properly on the Sunday morning, but we thought it was probably just sea-water, or maybe ear wax.”

“Well it’s certainly not ear wax, my dear. Let me see if I can remove it; if it doesn’t come out easily, we’ll have to send Laura to a specialist over at the hospital.” The doctor paused, selected a pair of polished chrome tweezers from a drawer of specialist instruments, and bent once more over Laura’s head. He inserted the tips of the tweezers with infinite care into his patient’s ear canal and delicately closed them on the nearest piece of the dark brown and slimy object which lay within. At first, the tweezers slipped on the thick mucus covering the object, but then they found a purchase. Little by little, with great patience, Dr Klein began to withdraw the foreign body from Laura’s ear.

Laura peered through the window of Belinda’s Bargains. She loved the range of weird and wonderful things that could be found for sale in her favourite seaside shop. Her eyes alighted on a small area on the left hand side of the display. Here, there was a ferocious, knobbly-kneed troll looking like it was about to emerge from the sticky, gravy-brown mud that oozed around the thick legs of its stout wooden bridge. The troll’s painted green flesh was very realistic and highly detailed; Laura could even make out the peeling scabs and matted hair on his rubbery body. On top of the bridge there were three beautifully crocheted guinea pigs: one small, one enormous, and one medium sized. The smallest one appeared to be a little scrawny and meek, but in stark contrast the largest one looked as confident as he was plump and juicy. The troll’s excited expression and its lolling, dribbling tongue seemed to reveal his intentions – there seemed little doubt that it had spotted its dinner.

A little to one side of the bridge was a die-cast metal model of an excavator, which according to the box behind it boasted *over 20 accurately machined moving parts*. From the powerful jaws of the yellow-necked monster sprouted shining silver teeth which glinted in the sunshine. Next to the model digger was a ceramic goat dressed up as if for a building site: protective clothing, a safety helmet and a bright yellow high-visibility jacket with the words *Demolition Crew* on the back. The goat seemed to be focused intently on a sheet of paper that it was holding in front of its chest. There was some tiny writing on the paper, but at this distance, Laura could not read what it said.

“Laura,” called her mum. “We need to get moving – it’s nearly dinner time.”

“Coming!” replied Laura, and she tore herself reluctantly away from the bizarre tableau. As she did so, she thought for a fleeting moment that she saw the goat wink cheekily at her. Shaking her head, she raced after her mother, who was already climbing slowly up the hill towards the campsite. At the same time, a small inquisitive slug (the colour of strong black coffee) approached the semi-securely zipped entrance flap of Laura’s tent, surfing an iridescent slime-trail of its own glue. Its two pairs of feelers waved excitedly as it glided slowly onto, and then up, the taut, emerald green canvas.

With a delicious vegetarian spaghetti Bolognese hungrily consumed, and the inevitably greasy, tomato-infested cooking things diligently washed up and put away, Laura and her mum settled down cosily in their sleeping bags for a second night together under canvas. They had completed their customary game of scrabble – which as usual Laura had won, since she was as sparkingly intelligent as her mother was annoyingly unfocused – and successfully negotiated several hands of poker (all of which were again won by the younger of the pair) when Laura realised that her mother was no longer awake. With a smile and a shrug, she turned off the camping light and snuggled deep inside her sleeping bag, before turning noisily onto her more comfortable side and closing her tired eyes.

In the darkness, the small brown slug felt confident enough to stir from the moist, safe corner in which it had been enjoying the delightful bounty of a browning, orphaned apple core. With rhythmic waves of muscular contraction rippling along the underside of its single foot, it set off on its latest journey of exploration. Before long, it found the entrance to Laura's sleeping bag and made its way slowly inside, where it indiscriminately and generously decorated the soft blue padded cotton with its viscous, protective secretions. The eyespots on the end of its upper optical tentacles could detect very little light, but the lower pair could easily sense the moist, warm sweetness of Laura's breath. In response, the slug changed course towards the sleeping girl's head.

Dr Klein was concentrating hard on the delicate task at hand. "Nearly there," he whispered softly under his breath. "Aha! I've got it!" Out from Laura's ear, attached firmly to the sharp end of the doctor's medical tweezers, came a small brown slug – wriggling with displeasure and obvious discomfort under both the unyielding grip of the pincers and the bright dry heat of the GP's desk lamp.

Laura's mum recoiled in horror, gagged and quickly put her hand over her mouth. "Oh my word!" she cried. "How on Earth is that even possible?"

"What is it mum?" asked her daughter, who due to the angle of her head, was not yet able to see what it was that had emerged from her ear canal.

Dr Klein answered for her. "It's a slug, my dear. Most unusual thing – never seen anything like it. In someone's ear I mean - plenty on my delphiniums!" he chuckled. Picking up his torch, he examined Laura's ear canal very thoroughly once more and then clicked off the light with a practised finger of his right hand. "Well, it's intact – we got it all. I don't think you'll have any more problems with this little chap. How does your ear feel now?"

Laura sat up and looked with fascination at the creature which had chosen her for a home. "That's really great! I can hear properly again – thank you Dr Klein!" She apparently did not share her mother's disgust at the forced evacuation of a terrestrial gastropod mollusc from her ear, but instead seemed solely curious. "What kind is it?"

"Not the faintest idea," he replied with amusement. "Why don't you take it home and look it up?"

"Brilliant!" laughed his young patient with a sparkle in her eyes. "Can I have a container please?"

With that, Laura's mum raised her eyes to the heavens, sighed wearily and got up from her chair.