



Opening extract
from

The Hodgeheg

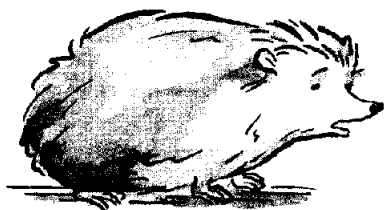
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Chapter One



‘Your Auntie Betty has copped it,’ said Pa Hedgehog to Ma.

‘Oh, no!’ cried Ma. ‘Where?’

‘Just down the road. Opposite the newsagent’s. Bad place to cross, that.’

‘Everywhere’s a bad place to cross nowadays,’ said Ma. ‘The traffic’s dreadful. Do you realize, Pa, that’s the third this

year, and all on my side of the family too. First there was Grandfather, then my second cousin once removed, and now poor old Auntie Betty . . . ’

They were sitting in a flowerbed at their home, the garden of Number 5A of a row of semi-detached houses in a suburban street. On the other side of the road was a Park, very popular with local hedgehogs on account of the good hunting it offered. As well as worms and slugs and snails, which they could find in their own gardens, there were special attractions in the Park. Mice lived under the Bandstand, feasting on the crumbs dropped from listeners’ sandwiches; frogs dwelt in the Lily Pond, and in the Ornamental Gardens grass snakes slithered through the



shrubbery. All these creatures were regarded as great delicacies by the hedgehogs, and they could never resist the occasional night's sport in the Park. But to reach it, they had to cross the busy road.

'Poor old Auntie Betty,' said Ma again. 'It's a hard life and that's flat.'

'It's a hard death,' said Pa sourly. 'And that's flat too – talk about squashed, the poor old girl was . . .'

'Ssssshhhhh!' said Ma at the sound of approaching footsteps. 'Not in front of the children,' as up trotted four small figures, exact miniatures of their parents except that their spines were still greyish rather than brown. Three of them were little sows, named by Ma, who was fond of flowers, Peony, Pansy and Petunia. Pa had

agreed, reluctantly, to these names but had insisted upon his own choice for the fourth, a little boar. Boys, he said, needed noble-sounding names, and the fourth youngster was therefore called Victor Maximilian St George (Max for short).

Almost from the moment his eyes had opened, while his prickles were still soft and rubbery, Max had shown promise of being a bright boy; and by now his eyes, his ears and his wits were all as sharp as his spines.



‘What are you talking about, Ma?’ he said.

‘Nothing,’ said Ma hastily.

‘You wouldn’t be talking about nothing,’ said Max, ‘or there wouldn’t be any point in talking.’

‘Don’t be cheeky,’ said Pa, ‘and mind your own business.’

‘Well, I suppose it is their business really, Pa, isn’t it?’ said Ma. ‘Or soon will be. They’re bound to go exploring outside our garden before long, and we must warn them.’

‘You’re right,’ said Pa. ‘Now then, you kids, just you listen to me,’ and he proceeded to give his children a long lecture about the problems of road safety for hedgehogs.

Max listened carefully. Then he said, 'Do humans cross the road?'

'I suppose so,' said Pa.

'But they don't get killed?'

'Don't think so,' said Pa. 'Never seen one lying in the road. Which I would have if they did.'

'Well then,' said Max, 'how do they get across safely?'

'You tell me, son. You tell me,' said Pa.

'I will,' said Max. 'I will.'