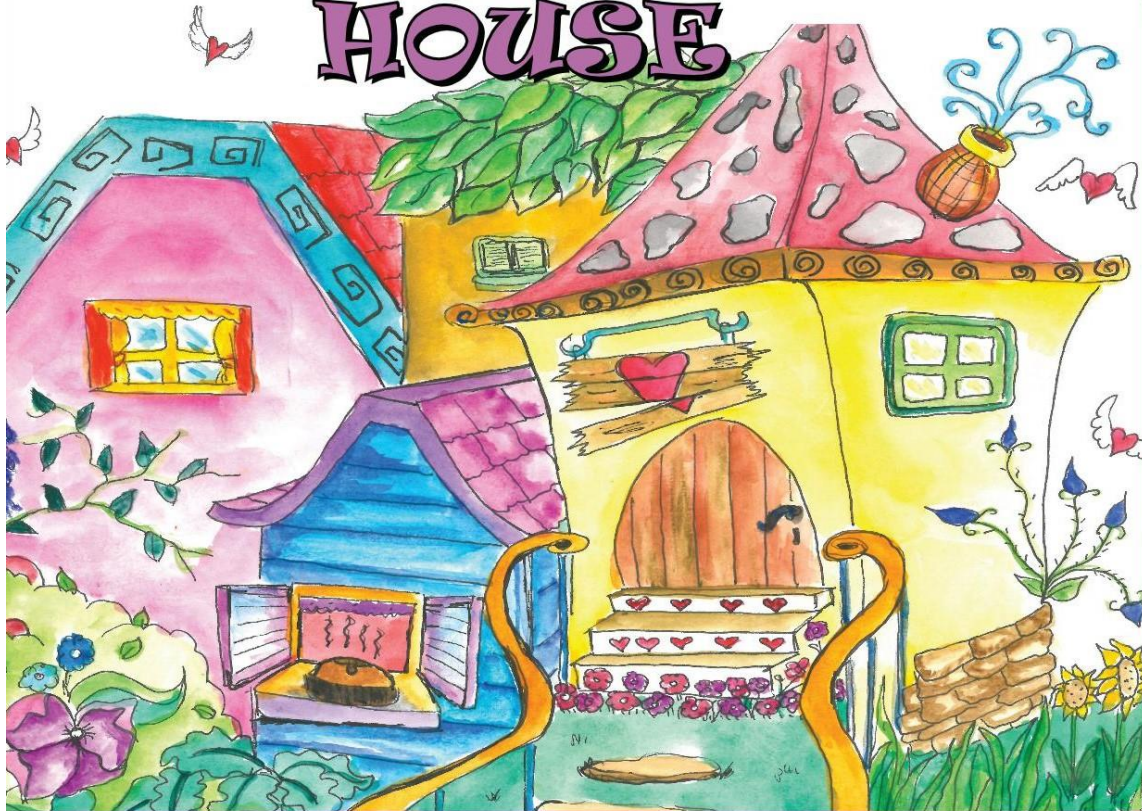


The
Very Happy Heart
HOUSE



Christine Beadsworth

illustrations by Lisa Snyman

A delightful story which will be enjoyed by children and adults alike, this is a book about looking deep inside and finding out who you really are; the person God made you to be ~ not who others want you to be!

It's about having the courage to dream and doing what it takes to bring those dreams to life.

Join Emmerentia in the adventure of showing the world her real self, and finding a very happy heart in the process!



Christine has written one other children's book, 'The Lady Who Collected Cats'. She also publishes inspirational Christian works under the banner 'Fresh Oil Releases'.

She is thrilled that her good friend, Lisa, added her gorgeous drawings to this project!

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VERY Happy Heart
HOUSE

by
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All illustrations are done by Lisa Snyman.

Dedication

To my friend Stella
and all God's other sparrows,
who have learned to sing
amongst the tombs





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Chapter 1 ~ A Star is Born

Emmerentia Bogtail did not have big dreams. All she had ever wanted from the time she could stand on tiptoe and press her little nose against the window, was just to have a Very Happy Heart day.

Every day.

And this was not as simple as it seemed. Can you believe it, her middle name was not Sue or Kim or something else short and sweet. It was Philomena! Yes, you heard right—Emmerentia Philomena! Carrying the kind of name that made your spit fly out when you tried to tell people who you were, was a VERY large burden for a small girl. And boys could be positively beastly if they listened long enough to hear her surname. Only her very best friend, Millicent Maude, was allowed to call her ‘Bogs’. Because when she did it, so much love oozed out of her heart in the saying of it, that it tasted like doughnuts with



strawberry icing to her ears. And Em didn't mind a bit hearing it ten times a day, because it fed her soul.

But when those nasty boys in the playground decided to spew it out, it made her think of 'you know what' - and that wasn't a happy thought at all. That's when she learned to kickbox. Well—not the modern version that people do in gyms these days... It was Emmerentia who invented the prototype version, when dealing with Billy the Boil Coarseton. And boy, you should have seen her moves! When she was done, he would be lying cross-eyed and bent into pretzel shapes in the dirt. And she would flick her plait over her shoulder and say, "Just so you know, only my friends call me that!" and mince away, swishing her skirt to add emphasis! (She had seen someone beautiful and grand walk like that in a film once, and had practiced in front of the mirror for a week to get it just right). It was her signature flourish at the end of a forceful message... but unfortunately, Billy had a short memory—probably because he didn't eat his broccoli, she guessed, so she had to 'remind' him quite often.

It was tiring defending your name. Especially when you hadn't even chosen it.

Her father had named her and she supposed it was because his name was Thaddeus Horace Constantine, and perhaps he felt his firstborn should have a similarly weighty name. Her dear mother had swallowed in a mousey kind of way when she first heard it, you know.

And said absolutely nothing...

But that could be because she was lying in bed, all sweaty and faint after introducing Em to this world. So she couldn't be blamed for not piping up and saying, "Shouldn't we rather call her Alice, or Francis, after your mother?" in a persuasive kind of way... and she NEVER called her daughter by her full name, only 'Em Darling' or 'Emmie Dear', which was perfectly bearable.

Anyway, Emmerentia learned early on that she could miss out hearing the 'erentia' part if she quickly started to hum loudly when her father started to say her name. And that developed into quite a repertoire of little tunes. She had one for each day of the week—and two for a Sunday, just so she didn't get bored. And when she added dance steps, her father often forgot to say 'Philomena' as well, and would stare at her in a mystified way and say, "She must have got her musical talent from my grandmother. She played the mouth organ, you know..."

All this humming, dancing and kickboxing kept Em very fit and she did eat quite a lot, especially if her mother had made chicken pie, because she thought if she grew very tall, she could give up kickboxing and just give a steely stare down from a dizzy height at those tiresome boys instead—you know, the kind that would turn their stomachs to mush and make them press their knees together and waddle off to the bathroom as fast as their pimply legs could go... She made a note in big red letters in her diary to practice the stare at home in her bedroom, while the growing was happening. It had to be just right when she unleashed it for the first time.

Besides, she was tired of flattening Billy the Boil. It made her day feel scratchy. And secretly, she felt the teeniest bit sorry for him because his mother had such ugly teeth... and the most terribly awful breath... and her mother was beautiful and sweet-smelling, like roses. She realised that if a boy started the day with waves of rotting air rolling over his face, it was practically impossible to be nice to anybody after that. Perhaps it was even worse than having a horrible name... and so she tried to kick a bit more gently when she was ‘reminding’ him not to say ‘Bogs’, and she concentrated on eating extra slices of bread with peanut butter after dinner.

But the growing plan did not work out as fast as she would have liked... and so that's when she came up with the 'Very Happy Heart day' idea. She especially liked this one and had crossed out all her other half-brilliant ideas and written it in big capital letters on a new page in her diary. It needed a whole page to itself because it had so much potential. It practically oozed with writhing, whispering suggestions struggling to be the first to be snatched up and danced with. As an official daydreamer, Em had many sort-of-helpful ideas. But *THIS* one was going to be

MAGNIFICENT!

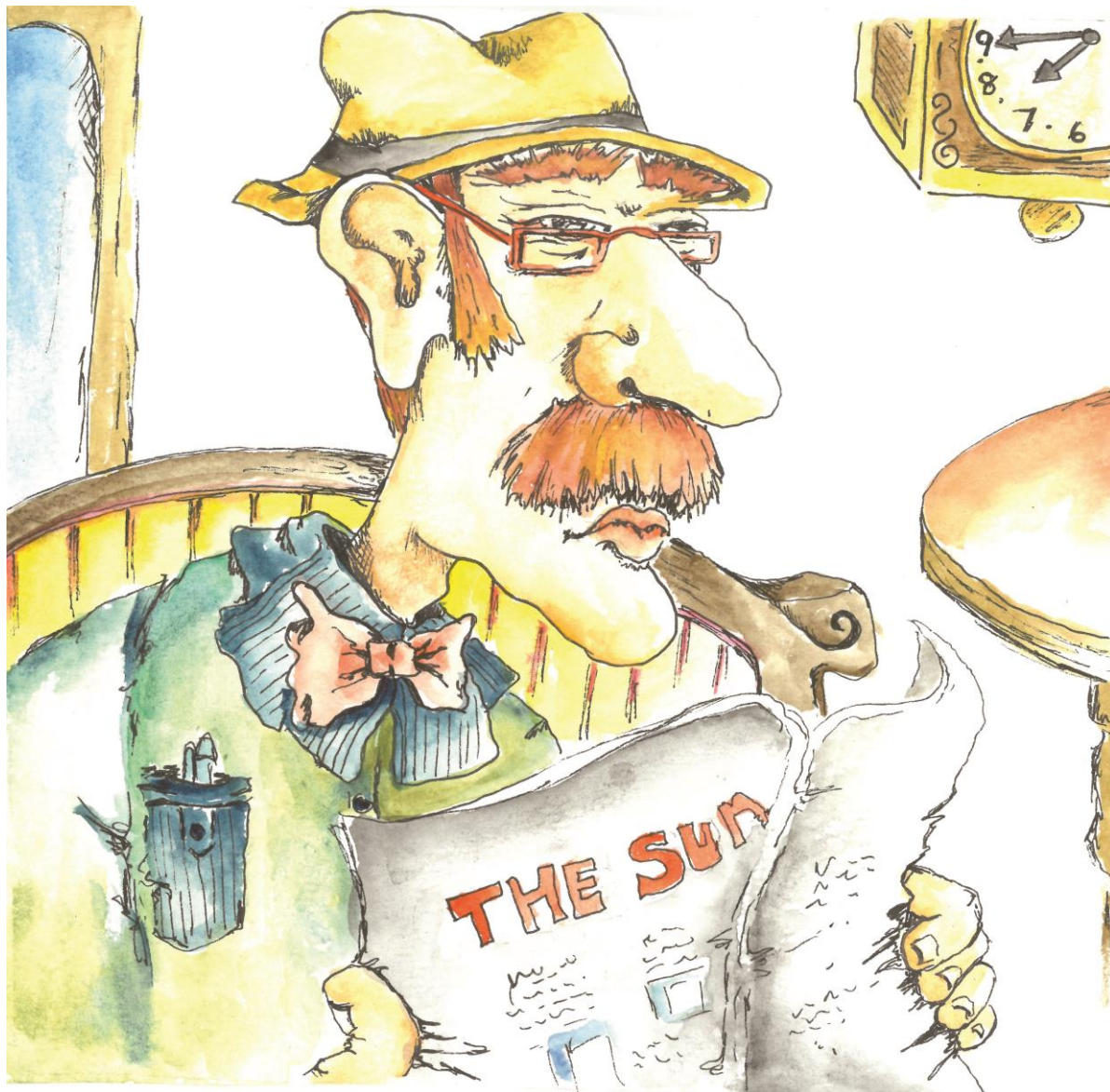
She could just feel it in her bones. And she could hardly sleep that night because of the excitement bubbling in her tummy. Imagine if they put her in the newspaper for this one. Or maybe someone would write a book about her and she would sign copies in a very curly, artistic way at the local bookshop. Em. P. B'Teyll... that sounded exotic. She must start practicing as soon as she woke up! You could never tell how fast things would move when brilliance was involved. And so Em smiled a special, secretive smile as she snuggled into her pillow. It seemed her very first Very Happy Heart Day had officially begun!

Em, or ‘M’ as she had taken to calling herself, flew out of bed long before the alarm went off. How could one lie in bed when a perfectly brilliant idea was waiting to be twirled about in one’s brain. She hummed as she put on her sandals, and this time she forgot to check if it was the right tune for the day. This tune just seemed to tap dance out of her heart in between buckling her left and right foot, and it didn’t behave like the other tunes at all. It seemed to have a mind of its own, skipping about all through the octave, as if it was fizzy on the inside. And that’s when she knew. Without a doubt!

The Very Happy Heart Day had come to visit.

If only she could get it to stay!

“Are you sick?” her father asked in a perplexed sort of way, as he gazed at his daughter across the breakfast table. He had got used to the idea that he was some sort of conductor waving his baton in this whole humming thing. But just now, he had loudly said her whole complicated name and, instead of taking her cue at the first syllable and breaking into a jig, his first and only child was sitting smiling dreamily at her rice crispies, without a sound emerging from her lips.



(Actually, she was busy picturing herself accepting the Nobel Peace Prize for the Very Most Innovative Idea of the century). “Feeling under the weather, are you, Emmerentia?” he blurted out, seeing his plans for a travelling song and dance family vaporising before his eyes. He’d kind of fancied himself as her Manager/Publicist and even put a down-payment on a new checked sports coat, in preparation. (Oh yes, fathers dream too, you know...) He didn’t fancy being a plumber for the rest of his days. A man with a smart name like his should move up in the world.

“Oh no, Father. I have never felt better. In fact, I feel especially, most magnificently wonderful this morning!” Em answered, with a twinkle in her eye. This MAGNIFICENT idea seemed to have a power that she hadn’t realised before. Was it possible that a Very Happy Heart becomes deaf to ugly sounds? Hmmm, she would have to test it out at school. And with that, she kissed her mother goodbye and skipped down the pavement to the bus. She couldn’t wait to see Billy the Boil. How strange that felt. But then, everything felt different this morning!

“Well, hello there, Billy Boy,” she said cheekily as she sauntered into the classroom. This totally flummoxed Billy, who had been preparing himself psychologically for his next verbal attack on ole ‘Bogs’. She looked different this

morning. And why hadn't she used the word 'Boil'? Somehow she had changed the game with just one sentence, and Billy suddenly felt out of his depth. What was it with girls anyway? Why was it so hard to understand them? Just when you thought you had them taped, they up and did something totally out of the box and you were left scratching your head and wondering what to do next. He looked at her furtively from under his greasy fringe. Why, she looked positively pretty this morning! That complicated things further. He didn't know how he would be able to be perfectly beastly to a girl who was beginning to make his heart pound... He slunk down in his desk and waited 'til break-time. Hopefully by then he would be back to his old ghastly self! After all, he had a reputation to defend.

Em chuckled to herself. This was proving to be more fun than she had anticipated. Billy the Boil looked so disconcerted that she almost wanted to give him one of her ham and jelly bean sandwiches. But then again, it wouldn't help to go too far. She wanted to savour each small victory as it unfolded, and that meant playing the game for a little while at least. She pretended to make a fist as Billy slouched toward her in the playground, but her heart felt so fluffy and light inside that she had trouble looking fierce. "What's up, Bogs?" he yelled, loud enough for the dead to hear. With that she threw back her head and laughed fit to bust and then began to dance round and round like a spinning top. The more he shouted that

dreaded nickname, the more peals of laughter just bubbled up from within. It was most delightful, and she began to wish he would say it again and again. She felt most gloriously free and perky and soon the other children began to laugh too.

They held their sides and wiped away tears as waves of laughter engulfed them all. That was too much for Billy. He turned tail and ran away bawling, all the way home to his smelly mother. And now Em knew that a happy heart was the best body armour of all! No ugly thing could penetrate as long as she concentrated on having a Very Happy Heart day. It was the most fiercely wonderful discovery she had ever made. Emmerentia Philomena had become invincible, even though she wasn't quite sure how to spell it!

Christine Beadsworth



Chapter 2 ~ How to grow a Very Happy Heart

Now that Em was a potential Nobel Peace Prize winner, she realised that some changes had to be made. A Very Happy Heart could only grow in certain conditions—she was certain of it! And so she began to wonder what would work best. What would make her heart very happy? Now that was a humungously big question and there were gazillions of answers! She liked drinking raindrops on new green leaves, butterfly dances and kittens snoozing in slippers... but they didn't have a kitten right now and she knew what her father would say if she brought one home and put it in her slippers... “Out with that cat! We can't have that!” She couldn't risk kittens flying out of windows, so she crossed that off the list.

She loved fairy lights (bestest of all) and duckling waddles, not together, because that could be tricky (and dangerous for the duckling!) Sadly, her piggy bank was empty and she wasn't allowed to walk to the duck pond by herself, so that was out until she grew bigger. Oh dear, this seemed to be a bumpy part in her new adventure in the world of being Very Happy. Em began to panic. What if her happy heart went away? What if tomorrow she didn't wake up feeling all floaty

and powerful? What if Billy the Baby called her ‘Bogs’ and it felt all cruel and ugly like before? What if she had to keep humming and dancing for the rest of her life, ‘til she was old and wrinkly? She didn’t think she liked the thought of that, and she didn’t know if she could dance very well with a walking stick! Something had to be done and QUICK!

Now she knew that one little girl could not change the whole wide world straight away. But she could change some things... Should she start in the garden or the house? Well, her father did the garden and he was not a lover of change, so that could prove difficult. He liked straight square flower beds, like stiff soldiers all lined up on duty, and he only planted one kind of flower in each bed. She liked wiggly beds with smartie packet colours, all tossed about, and snails playing hide and seek. No, two chief gardeners wasn’t going to work at all.

She sighed heavily and went to get some cookies and milk. A girl on such an important mission needed brain food. She munched and munched and munched some more. She wiggled her toes and counted dust sparkles in the sunlight. She bounced on her bed ‘til her hand touched the ceiling three times and went to fetch just one more cookie. And suddenly, as if by magic, Em felt refreshed enough to tackle the project again.

Perhaps she should start with changing herself. That sounded easier to manage. After all, it was *her* heart that must stay very happy at all costs. And she could do the changes in her room with the door closed. Then no-one could say, “Stop that!” before the job was done! Yes, that was it! She began to draw a sign for her door. It said ‘Top Secret. Stay Out. Girl Changing.’ She drew red wiggly lines underneath to make it sound bossy, and stuck it on with chewing gum and spit. Oh how exciting! This was all coming together now! Em felt positively magnificent again—and that was a sign that she was on the right track! Another Very Happy Heart day was beginning to happen.

Standing in front of the mirror, Em wondered if she should start the changes from the inside or the outside? But she didn’t have a very sharp knife at hand and the sight of blood made her feel all trembly inside. And what’s more, she didn’t know if she could find her heart if she was lying down bleeding on her carpet. So it might be safer to begin on the outside. After all, she still wasn’t very big yet. But she could tie her shoes and dress herself, so she didn’t need anyone’s help to do ‘Very Happy Heart’ clothes. So she wrote in her diary



‘Number 1. Change Clothes’ and then lay on her bed with her eyes closed extra tight to make some new ideas come.

Soon the most delightful thoughts began to spring into her head; thoughts of lime green ribbons and long orange fringes moving in the wind; thoughts of polka dots and big hats and sunglasses. And then there were some wellington boots with fairy lights wound round. She liked that one very best of all! Quickly she sat up and grabbed a pencil. Em knew what good ideas were like... they had the sneakiest way of popping up and then vanishing just when you needed them most. And that would never do. She didn’t have time to rethink after she had think so hard. So she scribbled and scribbled until every one of her brilliant new ideas was written in her neatest writing. Then she practiced her curly signature at the bottom of the page and put the date, so detectives would know these most glorious brainwaves were hers and hers alone.

Now, what to do first? She needed to come out of her Change Room with a bang so that people scratched their heads in wonderment and said, “Who is that amazing creature floating down the stairs?” Could she wear fringes with her wellies? Yes, it seemed quite possible! And she had had the grandest idea for polka dot stockings—all she needed was to cut teeny small holes all over her black school

stockings, because she knew by lunchtime they would have grown into very nice sized dots. Perhaps she should paint coloured stripes on her legs... that would save having to rush to the bathroom and colour in the dots when they appeared. Em squeaked with delight because she had personally discovered a World-Wide First—how to grow rainbow polka dots on your legs before break-time! She could just see it happening... There they would be sitting in Mathematics class and Prissy Priscilla would put up her hand and say, “Teacher, Teacher, Emmerentia has lots of spots on her legs!” and everyone would start screaming and running out the classroom bellowing, “The plague is here! Clear the building!” Oh how very splendid! Em did love a bit of drama to spice up a Maths class. She giggled and noticed her heart was feeling like it had just had a big, fat, squishy hug. The spotty stockings were definitely a VERY important part of the plan for growing a Very Happy Heart.

Em was really getting into the mood now. She dug around under her bed and found her paint box and began right away with a bold purple strip round each ankle. Of course she couldn't possibly bath for quite a few days once her beautiful stripy legs were done. She'd have to come up with a very good



‘feeling sick’ excuse; something that would make her mother say, “Oh Em, you poor dear! You are so brave to suffer this affliction without a murmur! Have some chocolate, my darling child!” She could see that this Happy Heart idea had all sorts of unexpected benefits, if she just handled it right!

It took awfully long to finish the rainbow stripes and Em made a note to ask for new paints for her birthday because hers had all run out. She blew her legs dry with her mother’s hairdryer and then put on her tracksuit pants, so that the plan stayed secret during supper. She couldn’t have anything leaking to the press before the Grand Reveal!! Oh how glorious it felt to have a BIG FAT secret tucked into her heart. Today had been the most absolutely amazing Very Happy Heart day! After supper, she would work on the rest of her outfit for tomorrow!!

While Em was chewing her peas, she realised she couldn’t tell a fib to get out of bathing. Her mother always said, “Tell the truth, Emmie Dear, or you will end up tangled, just like spaghetti.” She hated spaghetti. It reminded her of dead, stretched-out worms. And they always slapped your face when you were trying to get them in your stomach. No. Another plan would have to be made. She stomped upstairs and went to fetch her notice off her bedroom door. Then she stuck it on the bathroom door and went inside. Bathing usually involved water and singing.

So she opened the taps wide and began to sing at the top of her voice while she changed into her winter pajamas. She would be a bit hot, but secrecy was more important than comfort tonight. In the passage, she heard her father say, “That’s our Emmerentia, back to normal again!” If only he knew! Normal had gone to China and was never coming back, not even for Christmas! She scrubbed her face with a facecloth, so it looked shiny and pink and winked at herself in the mirror! It was so exciting changing that she wondered if this is how caterpillars felt while they were turning into butterflies. No wonder they started flying when they crawled out of the cocoon! Hmmm, perhaps she should think about making some wings...

She kissed her father goodnight like a good, clean, little girl should and then jumped into bed with a flourish! Off went the lights and he closed the door softly as he tiptoed out of the room. Luckily she had a torch hidden under the pillow because there was still work to be done on her outfit. Why did children have to go to bed just when the most exciting part of the day was beginning? ALL her best ideas came after bath time. She wriggled out of her pajama pants and studied her legs by torchlight. Wasn’t it amazing how stripy legs had the power to make you feel happy! She wished she had discovered this when she was three!

Most people said red and pink didn't go but Em knew they really did, because pink was just red with milk in it. She pulled out her red tee-shirt and began to cut it into a fringe at the bottom. She mustn't go too high, because she wanted to look stunning, not silly. Up to her belly button would be just right! Then she cut big daisies out of her shocking pink skirt and said a quick thank you prayer to God for the person who thought up scissors! They were awfully necessary when doing a quick change. And the stapler was much quicker than sewing, and stronger than spit or gum when joining things together. Staple, staple, staple she went, and in minutes her red teeshirt was just like a flower garden. She nearly cried, it looked so wonderful. A few more flowers went on her aliceband and the job was done. Now it was just the wellies that needed an upgrade. If only she had fairy lights... On second thoughts, Em decided she must keep the wellies 'til they looked just right. 'Find Fairy Lights' she wrote and drew a big circle round it.

Then she put her orange takkies at the bottom of the bed for the morning and snuggled down to sleep just long enough to look beautiful in the morning. She wished she had taken some cucumber from the fridge, because she knew her mother often put slices on her eyes when she lay down, to make them bright and sparkly. Perhaps she would try that tomorrow.

“Hurry up, Emmerentia Philomena. I need to shave before work!” her father yelled, as he pounded on the bathroom door. Oops. Em had quite forgotten to take her ‘Girl Changing’ sign off that door last night. “Here I am, Daddy,” she said, as she popped her curly head out of her bedroom. “Hummmph!” he said and stomped into the bathroom with a glare. Oh dear, it didn’t seem like he had started the day with a happy heart. Perhaps when he saw her come downstairs, in all her glorious, swishing beauty, his heart would flood with happiness and he would say, “Come dance with me, Daughter Dear!” Well, she could dream, couldn’t she?

She dressed ever so quickly, trying not to squeal with excitement. Her heart was nearly jumping out of her chest with joy as she looked in the mirror. She looked like a walking garden in the breeze. How very wondrous. Perhaps later, after school, she could add butterflies. On wires, so they moved about and danced when she walked. She’d have to look in the tool shed for supplies while her father was at work.

Em patted the daisy on her head. If there was one thing she loved about the way God made her, it was her curly hair. She knew it was trying to show on the outside how she felt on the inside, when she had a Very Happy Heart! Her hair wasn’t orange and it wasn’t red. Actually, it looked like it was still trying to decide what

colour it wanted to be—and that was just fine with her! Her mother always brushed it flat and quickly plaited it before it could jump up and escape. Sometimes she pulled it so tight that Em began to wonder if she was getting Chinese eyes. But today, her hair was allowed to be itself! She wasn't even going to brush it, just wiggle her fingers through it a bit. And it did a little dance, as if to say, "Thank you for setting me free!" That was when Em made another discovery that was so important, it must be written down right away; 'Number 2. Be your Real Self'. This was one of the most powerful ways of having a Very Happy Heart day.

"Breakfast's ready, Emmie Dear," her mother shouted up the stairs. Ooh, it was time. This was her first butterfly moment and she didn't want to mess it up. She took a big breath and singing 'Unforgettable in Every Way' under her breath, she began to descend the staircase. She swung her hips as she stepped to make the fringes dance and smiled her most dazzling smile. The flowers on her tee-shirt bounced merrily in time with her springy hair and she had never felt more alive than at that moment.



Down below, her mother's mouth fell open and the dish she was holding crashed to the floor. "Oh, my hairy haggis" gasped her father, clutching his heart as if his life was ebbing away. "Good Morning, parents!" she said in her most film-starry voice and perched herself daintily on her chair. Yes, she had made an entrance indeed—and they didn't even know about the polka dots yet! She pushed away the rice crispies and decided the new Em P. preferred toast with just a hint of butter. Silence filled the room. Both her parents seemed to have been struck dumb. It was perfectly delightful. She looked at her glass of milk and said, "Is it possible for me to have strawberry milk this morning, Mother Dear?" He mother swallowed, with eyes like saucers and scuttled off to fetch the tin. Em's heart did a little dance of pure joy! She had never been allowed strawberry milk for breakfast before. She sipped it like the celebrity she knew she was inside, wiped her mouth with her serviette and got up from the table. Her father seemed to have turned to stone. Perhaps she should have squeezed in a kitten in her grand reveal...

"Bye, Daddy, have a magnificent day!" she said as she kissed him on the cheek and skipped out of the room. "Oh, Em Dear," her mother started nervously, "Don't you want me to plait your hair?" but her words fell to the ground like stones behind Em. This young lady was having a Very Happy Heart day, just like every new butterfly should—and no-one was going to clip her wings—or plait her hair!

Chapter 3 ~Turning Enemies into Admirers

All the children on the bus were nearly twisting their necks right off trying to get a glimpse of her daisy garden top, but Em ignored them. She was much too busy imagining the look on those boys' faces as she got off the bus! Finally becoming her real self on the outside made her feel so different on the inside. She wasn't afraid anymore. And it showed. She actually sparkled, she was so bright on the inside. Em swung her legs with the secret stripes and smiled a sunshiny smile at the bus driver, who gave her a wink back! Suddenly she had new friends everywhere. How utterly lovely!

The bus pulled to a halt and she grabbed her bag. She wanted to be first in line so no-one else blocked the effect of her Happy Heart Day clothes. Outside, she could faintly hear voices belting out a song:

“Em-Err-Ren-tia Phil-O-Mee-Na, she has knees like a hyena.”

And she looked out and saw Billy and his second-in-command trying to do some sort of line dance. But their timing was hopeless. Suddenly she felt all motherly toward them. Who on earth would marry those dreadful ragamuffins? If she didn't

teach them some culture now, they would end up as knobbly old bachelors with huge ears and jerseys with holes in. She stepped forward with determined purpose. This mission was about more than just becoming *her* real self. Somewhere inside those ghastly boy bodies, there could be dashing young heroes waiting to be born. Well, she knew it was a bit of a stretch, but she was up for the challenge.

“Hello fellows! Great lyrics, but can I help with your choreography?”, she said spunkily, as she swished her fringes extra hard and stepped down from the bus. At the sight of this extraordinary, colourful creature, poor old Billy got his left leg tangled round his right and fell in a heap—and she hadn’t even had to kick him! His partner in crime quite forgot to sing and tripped over his friend, landing in a cloud of dust on top of the twitching heap. She stood over them and tossed her curls. “Come on now. Up you get. You’ll never get to Hollywood unless you polish your dance steps a bit!”

Like boys in a trance, they shuffled to their feet in front of her. “Right, follow me!” she yelled and began to do a most unusual sort of dance routine. (She learnt it watching an aerobics class on TV and it seemed the perfect time to try it with pupils.)

“Em-er-ren-tia Phil-O-Mee-Na, she was born to be a Leader!” she chanted and the poor boys were so busy trying to follow her movements, that they didn’t even notice she had changed their song words as well! Oh the sweet victory she felt as she made her former enemies swing their hips and click their fingers to a song in her honour! Em briefly wondered how they would look in fringed leotards, but maybe that was pushing it a bit!

“Gosh, Em. That’s a great outfit,” gasped Billy, in between steps. “Where did you get it?” She smiled and paused for effect, “Oh, this old thing? I picked it up on my last visit to Paris” she said huskily and Billy went bright red because she was making his heart beat awfully fast. He was so confused. Wasn’t she supposed to be just a beastly girl with a red plait that he could pull? Where had this exotic, tropical flower of a girl come from? “Billy, young man,” Em said, with emphasis on the ‘man’ part, “You have potential!” and with that, she swung round and bounced into the classroom, leaving Billy quite dazzled and ever so hopeful that, just perhaps, he might not grow up to be a Beast.

Em was having an absolutely splendid day so far. Even her teacher had smiled the biggest smile when He saw her daisy outfit. She realized that if she had a very

happy heart on the inside, and showed her real self on the outside, she could make other people very happy too. What a brilliant discovery!

She swung her legs about under her chair to help the polka dots to be born. She couldn't wait 'til they were discovered by someone! Perhaps this was her calling in life—to make other people's hearts happy! If she could do that by letting out the sunshine on the inside, she could make people's gloomy days brighter! Yes, indeed, a Very Happy Heart was a most powerful thing to possess!

Just then, her teacher said, “Emmerentia, stop daydreaming and come and do the sum on the blackboard!” She leapt up, with all her daisies nodding their heads and went to the front. It was a very big sum and it took lots of chalk writing and a good deal of stretching to get to the answer. I think all that standing on tiptoe and reaching for the top of the board really helped the polka dot project, because, as she was about to sit down, her teacher said, “Where on earth did all those beautiful spots come from?” and the children all craned their necks and almost fell off their chairs trying to see what the teacher was talking about. Em just smiled a radiant smile and said, “I grew them myself!” It was a moment to remember!

After class, all the girls crowded round her wanting to know how they could grow polka dots on their stockings. “It’s very painful,” Em warned, because she wanted to be one of a kind rather than a fashion starter! Well... she supposed she could sell Polka Dot Starter Kits, but that would have to wait for next week. She still had a Wellie project to complete! Still, it didn’t seem to make a difference to her fans that she didn’t want to share her secret recipe. Suddenly the girl with the very long and ugly name had become the most popular girl in the school! They were pushing and shoving each other, arguing about who was going to sit next to her on the bus. It didn’t look good and Em decided that to prevent a riot breaking out, she would sit up front with the bus driver! He gave her another wink and said, “Goodness, have you changed your stockings since I last saw you?” What a darling man! She would have to bring him a jelly bean tomorrow.



Chapter 4 ~ Butterflies on My Tummy

Em's mother was lying down with a headache when she got home—which was perfect! Not for her mother of course, but it meant Em could do whatever she liked without getting 'the stare'. She wolfed down the sandwich standing on the kitchen table with a few gulps of milk and set off to the tool shed to find supplies for the butterfly addition to her outfit. It didn't take long to locate a roll of wire and she cut off nice long pieces with her mother's dressmaking scissors. She knew that wasn't allowed, but she had tried biting through it with her teeth and it had given her shivers down her back. Four little snips shouldn't ruin the scissors and she quickly snuck them back into the sewing basket.

Now, how to make butterflies....? Suddenly she spied the tin of strawberry milk sitting on the breakfast table. It had the most beautiful green plastic lid and, if she cut carefully, she could get two butterflies out of it! She grabbed the scissors again and proceeded to cut. Her little tongue stuck out of the side of her mouth, because she was concentrating so very hard, but the result was worth it—two little cheerful butterflies, just waiting for their wires! Em opened the grocery cupboard and the fridge and discovered 3 more plastic lids and soon she had a whole herd of little

fluttery friends in orange, blue and green. She kind of liked the way you could see the margarine through the hole in the lid when she put the remains of the lid back where it belonged. A person could do so much to cheer up a house with so little effort! Maybe a home decor program on YouTube was up ahead...

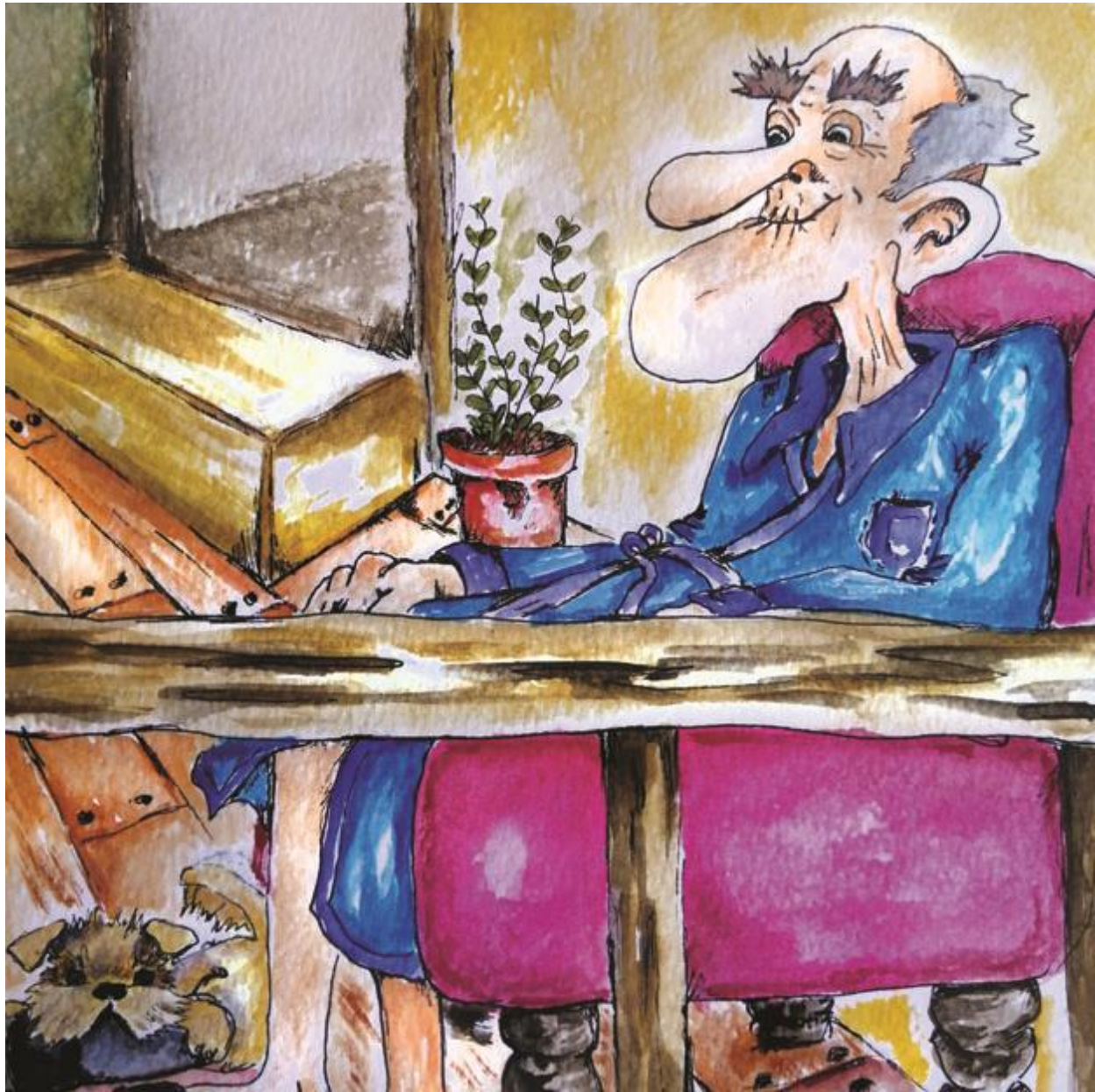
Upstairs in her room, Em struggled to get the butterfly attached to its dancing wire. She was getting all hot and bothered and the wire kept springing out of her small hand. Finally she threw them on her bed and lay on the floor, staring at the luminous stars on her ceiling. Surely she couldn't let a skinny piece of wire stand in the way of improving her dancing garden outfit... Suddenly the most excellent idea came into Em's head. She would get a partner! Someone with big hands who liked adventures! And she knew just the person to ask. Mr Tanglefoot!

She charged downstairs with her butterfly project stuffed in a pillowcase and ran down the path to the neighbour's gate. Mr Tanglefoot was old and bent, but he had a twinkle in his eye and he always patted her head and called her 'Pumpkin' when she asked him a hard question. He never said, "Hush child. Go and play outside." AND he had been to India once, so that meant he

definitely liked adventures! Her father had only been to Durban and said, “Once, and never again!” when he came back. Yes, Mister Tanglefoot would make the perfect partner. He had a garage full of tools and interesting boxes. And once she had seen an elephant foot table in there. She did not know what he had done with the rest of the elephant but perhaps when they were working on the butterflies she could ask him tactfully.

She closed the gate carefully because Mr Tanglefoot had a little dog called Mousekin and she wasn't allowed to go past the gate. Oh dear, she did hope Mousekin wouldn't think she was a real garden and start digging for bones amongst the flowers on her top. That could be embarrassing. Tonight she would make a small sign that said 'No dogs Allowed' and staple it to her skirt. She held the pillowcase so the wires were pointing forwards, in case Mousekin got any funny ideas.

There had been a Mrs Tanglefoot once long ago and Em remembered how she would bake big trays of cupcakes and invite the neighbourhood children to test them. “Eat up, “ she would say, “I am not sure I got the icing just right this time, so I might have to do another batch!” and she would wink, like you were her very best friend. She didn't mind if you spilled crumbs on her kitchen floor



and she often had flour in her hair and on her glasses. You could tell just by looking at her that she always had a very happy heart. Em felt a pain right by her own heart when she realized she still missed Mrs T. Oh dear, she did hope Mr Tanglefoot wasn't going to up and die just when she needed him most!

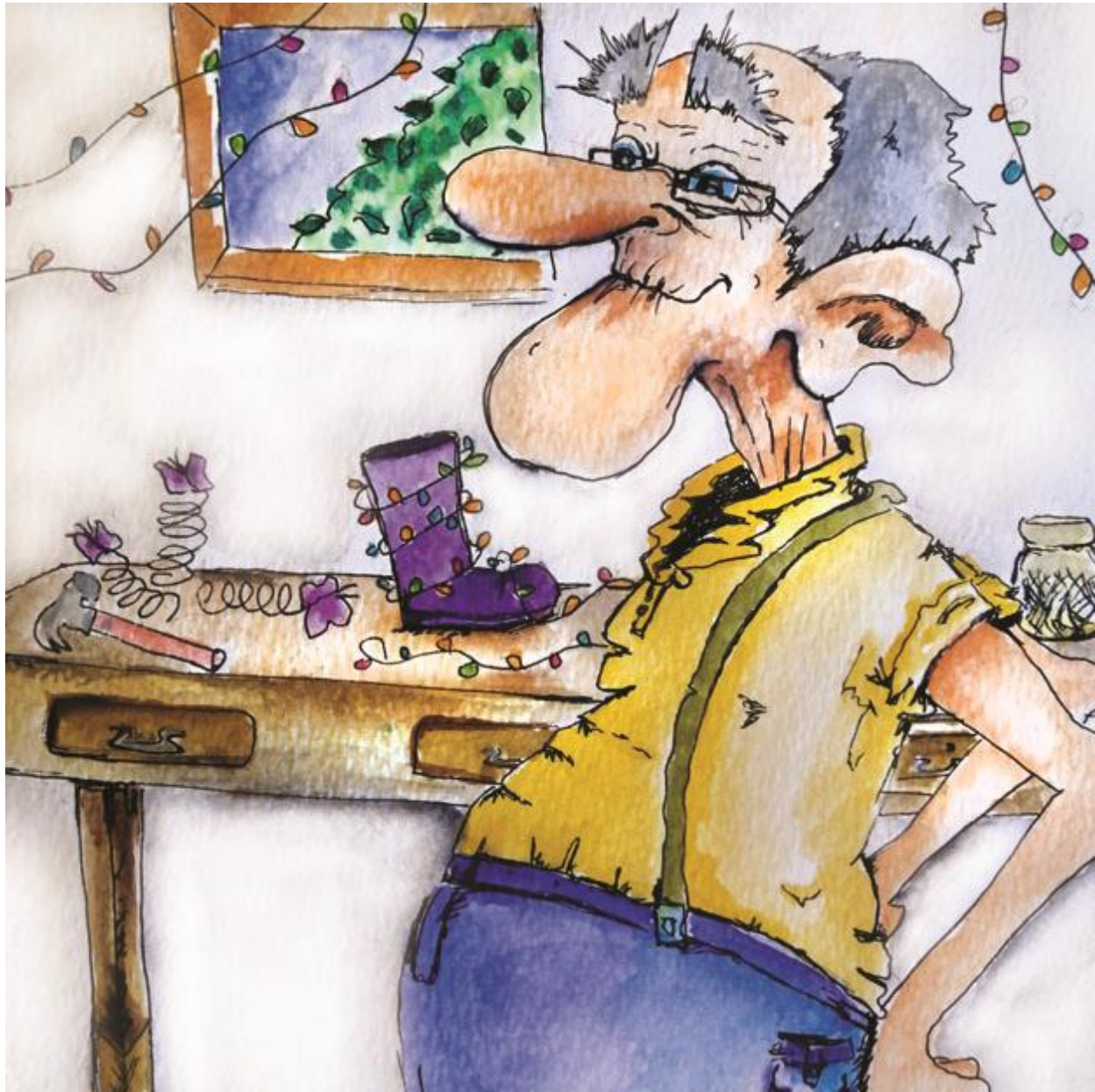
“Hello child. Don't you look interesting,” said Mr Tanglefoot from his armchair on the porch, and his blue eyes twinkled merrily. Mousekin agreed, but she was too busy chewing her master's shoelace to investigate further. “I have a terrible problem, Mr Tanglefoot,” Em began, “I can't make my butterflies dance nicely.” Now some grownups would have snorted and said, “How ridiculous!” but not Mr T. He nodded, as if he understood that this could be an extremely tricky thing to manage. He looked in the pillowcase and said, “Aaah...” and shuffled to his feet with a chuckle. “I have just the thing, Pumpkin!” Before she could say ‘incy wincy spider’, he whisked her into the house and began to rummage in one of the drawers in the kitchen. Out came one of his tools and before her eyes, he attached the first little plastic butterfly to its wire. He even twirled the wire round a few times like a spring so it flew up and down merrily. Em clapped her hands in delight. Mr Tanglefoot was the best partner ever.

“Now, where are these little fellows going to be dancing, my dear?” He asked, peering at her over the top of his glasses as he finished the last one. “In my flower garden!” said Em as she patted her chest. “I see.” Nothing seemed to ruffle Mr T. Perhaps she could ask him to help with the fairy lights on the wellington boots too, but no need to rush. “Well, I think you need to take your beautiful garden off before I operate on it, Pumpkin. Wouldn’t want to attach a butterfly to your belly button! Go into the bathroom and put on the dressing gown behind the door and you can drink lemonade while I get on with the rough stuff!”

Em swung her legs and watched as Mr T. expertly planted the butterflies in between the flowers on her top. Mrs Tanglefoot’s gown still smelled of lavender and wearing it felt like a big woolly hug. Em was so glad she hadn’t got the butterflies right by herself. Sometimes, growing a happy heart needed more than two hands. “Tell me, my dear, when did you go into fashion design?” Mr T. asked as he wrapped up the last bit of butterfly work. “Oh, just yesterday,” Em answered with a bright smile. “Well, Pumpkin, I can tell you have raw talent! Haven’t seen a creation like this, even in India!” he said and patted her head extra hard. How splendid! She scuttled off and pulled on her top in the bathroom, being very careful not to get the butterflies tangled in her hair. She didn’t want to call the fire brigade to rescue her in her first successful outfit! The bathroom had a big mirror

and if she balanced on the edge of the bath, she could see most of herself. Em giggled at the sight in front of her. It was just as she had imagined, only springier. She only had to breathe deeply and the butterflies dived around like mad. It was exactly how she felt on the inside, full of lovely ideas flying around in the sunbeams.

“Thank you, thank you, Mr Tanglefoot,” she beamed as she hopped from one foot to the other. “Anytime, Pumpkin. Plenty of time for projects...” he said with a wink. “Now, don’t forget your mother’s pillowcase!” and he walked with her down the path to the gate. Em cleared her throat. It was now or never... “Mr Tanglefoot, Sir, do you perhaps have fairy lights?” He burst out laughing and trundled off to the house. Within minutes he was back with a whole tangle of fairy lights in his hands. “Never put these up anymore, now that I am by myself,” he said. “For the project!” he declared and into the pillowcase they went. Em squeaked with joy and hugged his legs ‘til he nearly fell over. God must be watching over her Very Happy Heart project because it was all flowing along so beautifully!



Chapter 5 ~ Wellies and Whistles

Em tiptoed up the stairs, not wanting to disturb her mother, and changed into work clothes. It was time to create the fairy-light wellies! Now where had she put her wellington boots? She dug around in her cupboard and under her bed, but she couldn't find them anywhere. Oh dear! Perhaps she needed a snack to get her memory working better... Downstairs, she found some icecream in the freezer and dished up a big fat scoop, added some sprinkles on the top and went to sit on the swing, while she fed her brain. It was a lovely sunny day and Em swung higher and higher so that she could see the top of the big oak tree above her. And goodness me, it was just as well she did, because there, wedged high up in the fork of the branch was one of her purple wellies! Now she remembered! She had stuffed them with feathers (out of her pillow, of course) and put them up there for the squirrels to have their babies in. She leapt off the swing in midflight, quite forgetting that she was quite high off the ground and went sailing through the air, legs and arms flapping! Kerplonk! Em landed in a very unladylike manner on the grass, which luckily had not been cut for a while so it made a good, soft landing pad. The icecream was all over the front of her work clothes and she was ever so glad she had changed out of her glamour outfit! Pity about the bowl though...

perhaps Mr Tangle foot could help her glue it back together later. She stuffed it behind a bush and began to clamber up the trunk of the oak. It was hard work and Em was quite out of breath by the time she had reached the wellies. Fortunately the squirrels didn't fancy purple for baby nurseries and the boots were empty, except for the feathers. She put them on her feet and climbed down as fast as she could. They felt ever so comfortable. Perhaps she would leave the feathers inside!

Back in her bedroom, Em pinched the boot between her knees and, using masses of sticky tape, she attached the end of the fairy lights to the inside, so that she could hide the batteries from the fashion police. Then she wound the lights round and round until her boot looked like a fairy nest. She squeaked with anticipation. These boots could well be her passage to stardom! She could hardly wait to see them in their full glory at the end of her legs. Sticking the last bit in place with a flourish, she plunged her feet inside and rushed off to the bathroom to see the final result. Over and over she leapt in the air, trying to get a glimpse of the bottom end of her in the mirror. But it was no use. She was too small... "When I get a house," she muttered to herself, "I will have mirrors right to the floor and stools to stand on. And I shall have bubble-bath every day." Then Em stomped off to show Mr Tanglefoot. He could be relied upon to give honest feedback.

The old man was bending over his flowerbed when his little neighbour swept into his garden, resplendent in her arty footgear. He straightened up, rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating and then whistled like a steam train and yelled, "Well, shiver me timbers! You've struck the jackpot, Pumpkin!" and proceeded to take her hands and dance around like a wild grasshopper. It was quite unexpected and ever so satisfying and Em began to giggle as they went faster and faster. Soon everything round the celebrating pair was a blur and suddenly Mr T. hit a wobble and fell in a heap with Em and her twinkling boots kicking on top. Oh how they laughed! Em thought she would break a rib she was chuckling so hard and they had to hold onto each other as they staggered to their feet. And like a butterfly gently landing on her head, Em suddenly had her third very important thought—a Very Happy Heart was infectious. She did hope there was no vaccination to prevent it spreading!

"Now, my dear little Inventor," said Mr Tanglefoot when he got his breath back, "you just made my week. I haven't felt so good since Mousekin learnt to drink with a straw. You deserve some of my very special peanut butter and marshmallow icecream!" He ushered her inside, carefully switching off the fairy lights to save the batteries. "Best save those for the ones you really want to impress," he said with a wink as they went into the kitchen.

Oh how Em loved this kitchen. It had jars of daisies from the garden nodding their heads in a friendly way and 3 different cookie jars. And a goldfish called Ernest in a great big bowl by the window. She wished she could have a pet. Even a fish would do, despite the fact that they couldn't be trained to say your name or jump through hoops. But Mr Bogtail was very strict about animals. Actually he was strict about most things. It was enough to break a girl's spirit. Except Em's of course, because she had worked out ways to have what she wanted without breaking the rules.

For instance, once she had kept two ants in a jar for three whole days under her bed. They had seemed happy, because she gave them a few grains of sugar and a leaf to investigate. And once a day, she had dripped some water into the jar, like a teensy, weensy shower. Em even had an official naming ceremony—Boris and Betty, she had called them, because they seemed like Russian ants. But on the fourth day, Em decided there wasn't a whole lot of potential in this relationship because they never even looked at her once, in spite of the sugar. So she released them into the garden. When they scurried away without a backward glance, she knew she had done the right thing. Perhaps she wasn't cut out to be a parent—especially for Russian orphans...

Oh wow! Mr Tanglefoot had really outdone himself. The huge icecream cone was crowned with chocolate peanuts, smarties and fairy dust in honour of the wellies. Em closed her eyes and stuck out her tongue and tasted the beautiful creation. Oh my goodness, could Heaven be any better than this? What a perfectly splendid end to a very successful project. She leaned over and gave Mr Tanglefoot a great big creamy kiss on the cheek. “You are the best partner I could ever have!” she gushed. “I am so sorry I can’t pay you for your services”. The old man snorted and replied, “ Go on! Money couldn’t buy the good you’ve done to my old heart, girl. Don’t think I’ve laughed that way since my Edna passed. You’re a tonic, Pumpkin and I can take a dose of you every day!” And then Em knew something else super important—a very Happy Heart worked like medicine and you didn’t have to go to the doctor to get it.



She definitely needed to write all this in a book. Then she could send it to the children in India who didn't have food; those ones her mother told her about when she didn't want to eat her peas. Em was certain they needed to discover her Happy Heart secrets. Maybe Mr Tanglefoot would take her to India... Hmmm, would they let her through the border in her butterfly garden shirt? Or would they put a big net over her head and take her into quarantine for bringing livestock across national lines? Perhaps she would wear her tame clothes when she travelled. Or get a big black coat. This needed further thought, she decided, as she crunched the last bit of cone. There was an awful lot to think about when you started branching out into clothing production. "Pumpkin", Said Mr T. apologetically, "I can hear your mother calling. Best be getting home and good luck with the sparkly wellie launch". He gave her a big brown bag to carry her boots in and she scampered off home. Oh dear, her tummy felt awfully full after all those yummy chocolate peanuts. How was she going to stuff her dinner in?



Chapter 6 ~ Go Big or Go Home

The next morning, Em decided it was now or never. She was going to go the whole hog and wear all her inventions at once. After all, it was tricky keeping the element of surprise going day after day and she was getting a bit exhausted thinking up new stuff. Today would be her grand finale and that should make enough happiness to last at least a week. After that, she would hire a seamstress and take to being an author. Less scissors and more pencils seemed a rather attractive idea at this point. Em carefully slid her butterfly shirt on and began tying little pony tails all over her head. Then she wriggled into her yellow tights and put on those gorgeous purple wellington boots. Straight away, a little shiver of excitement started somewhere near her belly button. Today was going to be epic! Super duper epic! As if to underline that fact, all the butterflies began dipping and whirling about her shoulders. She would have to be careful going through doorways or one of the little sweethearts might get decapitated. She waited at the top of the stairs for her mother to call her for breakfast. Making an entrance was most important. Besides, she wanted to see her father clutch his heart again!

“Em dear, you’re running late!” Her mother’s voice drifted up the stairs. “On my way,” Em sang in a cheerful voice and once again began the descent to where the lesser mortals were waiting. Fortunately this time, Mrs B. Wasn’t holding anything breakable and the only thing that crashed to the floor were her false teeth as her mouth hung open unfashionably wide! Honestly, she had no idea where this new Em had come from and, if the secret be told, she was the teeniest bit proud of her spunky daughter. Those boots were just darling!

Mr M. heard the teeth bouncing around on the floorboards and peered over the top of his newspaper. Good grief! Who was this colourful, flashing, cloudlike creature floating down towards him? Had God sent an angel with a message just for him? He straightened his tie and tried to tidy up his hair. It wasn’t often that a messenger from Above came directly with a personal note. But then, he was of course not just an ordinary mortal. He smiled to himself and pushed out his chest a bit, looking expectant. No doubt she had come to inform him of a reward for good behaviour. He was such an exemplary citizen after all. Em, of course, had no idea her father thought she was an angel and she plopped herself down in her chair, sending the butterflies into a flying frenzy. “Mother dear,” she said in her most pleasant tone, “Would it be too much trouble to ask for a popcorn omelet this morning? With a twizzle of caramel on top, please.”

“Oh my darling girl, what a good idea! I think I’ll join you,” Mrs B. Said from under the table, where she was trying to grab her teeth. They seemed to have developed a life of their own and didn’t want to be caught. Finally she cornered them between her husband’s bony ankles and put them back in triumphantly. “Harriet darling, try to keep those sort of games for the bedroom,” Mr B. Said in a scolding tone, but he winked at the same time, which made Em a bit confused. Then he fastened her with a withering stare and said, “Wellington boots are to be worn in the rain, young lady!” He was so disappointed that this glorious creature was only his very own daughter, that he couldn’t bring himself to finish his poached eggs and ham. He left the kitchen like a scalded cat, with his napkin still tucked in his collar, leaving Emmerentia smiling like a girl who had eaten a Frisbee, even after his rebuke. She was picturing his boss guffawing at that napkin... "There really was no understanding that girl!" Mr B muttered to himself. He would have coped better with a son; taught him to salute and all that boy stuff. What a perfectly unsettling start to the day.

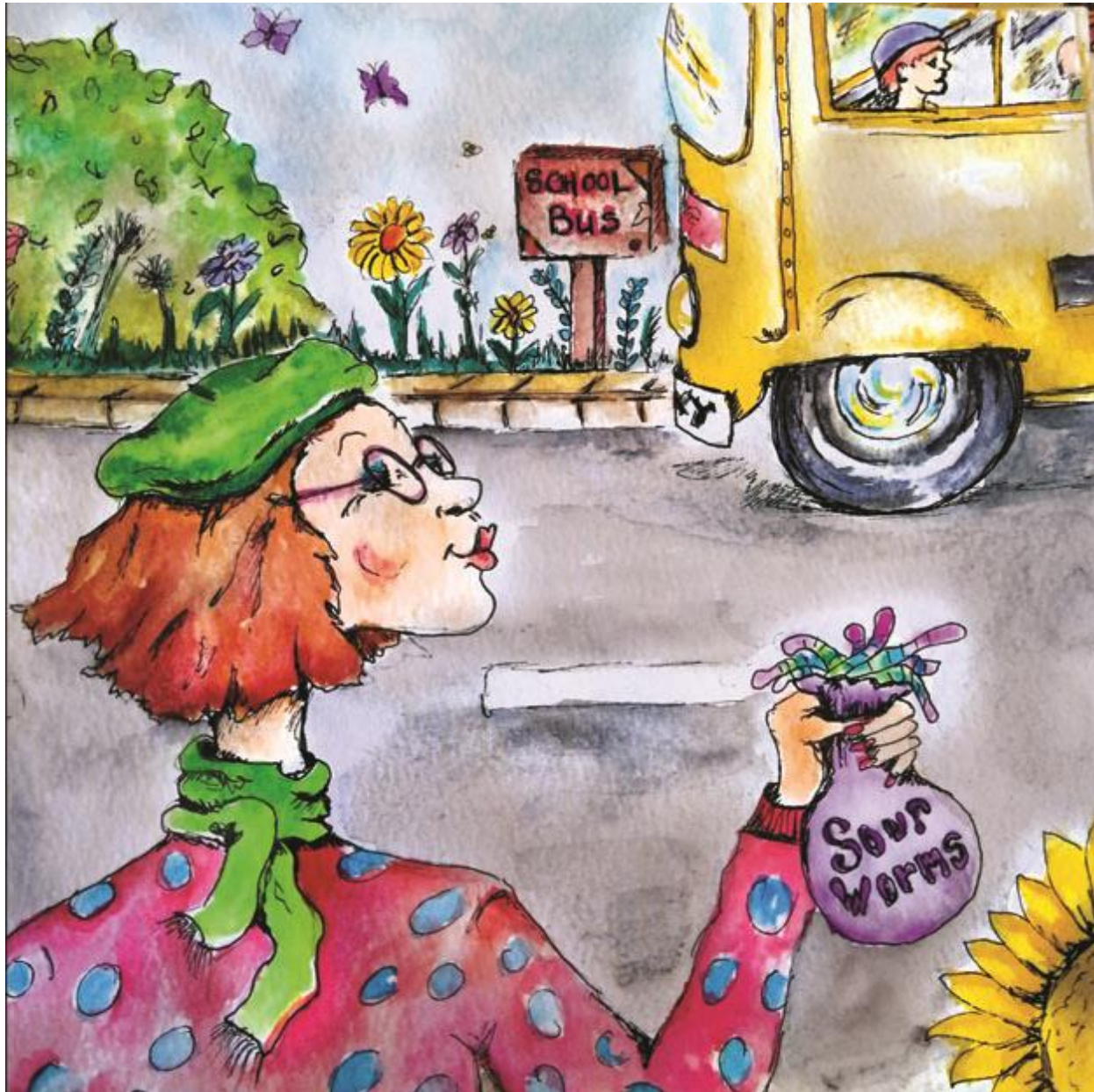
Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the atmosphere had lightened considerably and Mrs B. even hummed a tune as she made the popcorn. She was remembering how she wanted to grow up to be a gypsy when she was little. Perhaps some of that had rubbed off on Em. “Am I too old to wear fairy-light wellies?” she wondered

pensively. Of course they would have to do it when her husband was at work. Otherwise he might not live to see another day from the shock of a mother-daughter wellies duo. She plonked the laden plates down at the table and sat grinning at her lovely daughter. “Have as much caramel as you please. It’s a day for a celebration!” she announced and proceeded to draw a smiley face on her omelette with the sauce. Oh my goodness, Em was positively delighted. Mom had caught the Happy Heart virus! With two of them in the house, her father was very likely to get it sooner or later. And that would mean Heaven on earth because a happy daddy did all sorts of fun things. She had seen it on TV and said a tiny prayer that one day her father would also take her to the zoo, or ride with her on a rollercoaster. She had said it so softly she didn’t think God had even heard. But perhaps His hearing was better than she realised. Perhaps He could even hear heart whispers. Wouldn’t that be splendiferous?

Mrs Bogtail dashed upstairs while Em was finishing her breakfast and rummaged through her cupboard for the brightest, most outlandish clothing she could find. It was time to break out of the mould and she was so excited, she couldn’t even think straight. On went her stripy gym leggings. Off came her tired, old jersey! Now was no time to be shy. She decided stripes and spots were perfect together and pulled a polka dot red sweater out of the back of her wardrobe. She had bought it once on a

whim but had never had the courage to put it on in front of her conservative husband. Now, as she wriggled into it, she found it made her feel like an artist in Paris. So she put on her apple-green beret at an angle, added some sparkly eye shadow and yelled downstairs, “Wait for me!”

The beautiful, warm feeling in her chest grew stronger and stronger as her pink running shoes tap-danced down the stairs. What was this she was feeling? It seemed so foreign, so outlandish—so risky! Could it possibly be joy? She leapt down the last 3 steps and skidded to a halt in front of her beaming daughter. Em wanted to cry, she felt so happy. Now she knew she wasn’t adopted after all. Underneath those quiet, sensible little outfits which her mother had worn all Em’s life, Mrs B. was a quirk waiting to be unveiled! “Oh mum,“ Em



gaped, “ you look... you look... indescribable!” and her mother tossed back her head and roared with laughter. “I think I will accompany you to school this morning,” she announced merrily. Oh my! That was going to cause a double stir.





Chapter 7 ~ School day Heaven

The bus driver almost forgot how to start the bus when he saw the rainbow pair climbing on. And when Mrs B. gave him a big wink, his chewing gum nearly went down his throat. He coughed and coughed and finally said, “Welcome, ladies. So lovely to have some sunshine on my bus!” Well, that set Em thinking! Was it possible that two very happy hearts could make the day brighter for a whole bus full of children? There seemed to be no end to the possibilities. As she walked towards the back of the bus, she smiled and squeezed a few sheepish students on the shoulder. She wasn’t sure how the virus got caught, but she prayed fervently that touching and smiling helped to pass it on.

Em’s mother sandwiched herself between two very naughty boys on the back seat of the bus and they immediately began giggling uncontrollably. It wasn’t clear whether this was because Mrs. M looked quite fetching in her bright green beret or because they were highly embarrassed at being pressed like sardines against a lady! Em suspected the latter and gave them a scathing look, which said, “Grow up, twerps.” It didn’t help. They fell about laughing even harder and it made Em wonder if they had caught the Happy Heart virus. It didn’t help when Mrs B.

began to tickle those twitching boys. All the children turned round and stared when they heard the fake cries for help, but secretly they were thinking what a smashing mom Emmerentia had and wishing they had sat in the back row! Only when the driver yelled, “Order on my bus!” did the occupants of the back seat fall silent. Mrs B. handed out sour worms to all the children to help them focus on something new and soon they were all sucking and pulling faces quietly. Em had never thought of her mother as a handful, but now she was seeing her in a whole new light.

The bus screeched to a halt outside the school and the children parted like the Red Sea to let the two celebrities out first. Billy the Boil was waiting to begin his usual teasing session, but boy, was he unprepared for what came down those steps. There were so many things to stare at that his eyes began to roll around crazily in his head until, feeling desperately dizzy, he plunged like a chopped tree to the ground. A great cloud of dust rose around him and his friends took advantage of the smokescreen to run for their lives. Two of the same kind of spunky girl was just more than they could handle, especially with their leader, Billy, lying like a stone on the ground.

Em descended and stood over her dazed foe. Then suddenly and very impulsively, she bent down and gave him a big kiss on the cheek! The crowd standing around went, “Ooooh” and nudged each other in the ribs. Honestly, it was impossible to guess what this new Emmerentia was going to do next. In the silence that followed, Em linked arms with her mother and they sauntered off to her classroom, smiling like Cheshire cats.

Miss Letterhead, the teacher, looked up in surprise as the mother and daughter duo bounced into her classroom. Was there a problem with Emmerentia? The girl’s mother hadn’t ever come to speak to her before, at least not *this* mother! Oh dear, this looked like a bad start to the day... but then she noticed their bright, cheerful faces and relaxed a little bit. Actually, she was making a mental note to get herself a bright, jaunty beret to spice up her wardrobe. “Oh Miss,” Em gushed, “the day has been so wonderful and it has hardly even begun. Can my mom sit in on the first class? It makes the children happy to see her.” Miss Letterhead could not think of a good reason to say no. So Mrs B. was installed at a desk in the back of the class. This was going to be interesting!

Of course, all the children wanted to sit next to Em’s mom and there was a lot of pushing and shoving, until finally, a very tall girl with bony elbows won the seat.

Her name was Gertrude and she was... well, UNFORTUNATE in the looks department. A great roman nose and jug-handle ears made her look like a cross between a horse and an elephant and her mother very unkindly dragged her mousy hair right up to the top of her head in a bun, so there was nowhere for her ears to hide.

Mrs B. slipped her a sour worm and immediately they were friends. Perhaps this lovely lady would invite her home for tea... The thought of this prospect was too much for shrinking-violet Gertrude. She began to blush a most unbecoming shade of red. Her long thin neck got all sort of blotchy, as if a plague was breaking out upon her twitching form. Mrs B. Gaspd in horror and her World War II nurse training kicked in. She plunged Gertrude to the floor, dumping her unceremoniously on her back with her head at an odd angle against the desk leg. "Emergency, emergency," yelled Em's mum in her best foghorn voice and Miss Letterhead got such a fright that she broke one of her long red nails against the blackboard.

Some forward-thinking boy pressed the fire alarm and immediately the air was filled with the shriek of sirens. Pandemonium broke out in the classroom as children clambered over each other to get through the door. No-one was going to

waste a good emergency shout. They piled out onto the playground, trying not to giggle. Everyone hated History and Mrs B's bellow was all the excuse they needed to vacate the premises. Poor Miss Letterhead gave up on shouting, "Calm down, dears" in her weedy voice and decided now was a good time to plop down at her desk and file her nail. Blast! What a totally ghastly thing to happen on a Friday. She would have to dance with her hand behind her back at her weekly tango lesson.

Meanwhile, at the back of the classroom, a real emergency was happening. Gertrude had gasped with surprise when she was plunged to the floor and the sour worm had got sucked into the back of her throat, which wasn't very wide on account of her skinny neck, as you can imagine... Her ears were rapidly going an interesting shade of purple. Em was busy wondering how to mix that colour with her paint box, when her mum yelled, "Snap to it, Em dear, this old girl needs a good slap". She heaved Gertrude over onto her stomach and proceeded to pound her back with surprisingly great force for a small lady.



The poor girl coughed and coughed and finally, that slippery little sucker shot out and pinned itself onto Billy's school bag. Hmmm, he could always eat it on the journey home, thought Em and left it exactly where it was.

Mrs B. felt totally awful for the great hullabaloo and decided she would invite Gertrude to join them back at the ranch for milk and cookies—or whatever her newly flourishing imagination could produce. This perked Gertie up no end and she grinned cheerfully. There certainly was something magical about Em's mum. After all, she had single-handedly cancelled the History lesson in a most creative way!



Chapter 8 ~ Love on a Plate

Gertrude practically paraglided off the bus as they reached Em's stop. Never before in her whole boring life had something so grand happened - an actual invitation to go home with somebody! And not just anybody - the most popular girl in the school was taking her home to lunch. Gertrude's heart almost burst out of her chest for joy!! She quickly undid her bun and let her hair go free. It didn't do to look too corporate in the company of these two free-spirited ladies.

Em's mom hung her beret on the hat-stand so her husband could be given a clue that something had changed and bustled into the kitchen to whip up the most interesting lunch she could think of for these two darling girls. She could see poor Gertrude would benefit from spending time with her creative daughter. Perhaps they could do a mini-makeover on her, if there was still time later...

It seemed like minutes before she presented two wildly decorated plates to the hungry children. Em, for once, stared and couldn't think of a thing to say. It seemed her mother's brain had been spiced up by that spunky beret and the meal before her was an absolute work of art! In the middle, the sandwich was cut into a

heart shape and oozing from its innards seemed to be what looked like a mixture of chopped jelly babies and strawberry jam, but it was the towering dollop of whipped cream with the sprinkle of grated chocolate that really finished off the masterpiece. Now, what Em didn't know was that once, long ago (probably soon after Noah clambered out of the ark) Mrs B. had taken an art lesson. Of course, her husband had found out and put a stop to it, saying, "Oh no, dear, our sort doesn't dabble in such Bohemian circles!" and she had donated her paints and brushes to the white elephant stall at the local fete.

But, inside, she had secretly hankered after just one more flourish with a brush. You could tell with this latest offering. Not knowing if Gertrude preferred savoury or sweet, Mrs B. had arranged a border of crisps and cheese sticks in a crisscross pattern all the way round the edge of the plate and a wavy line of sweet chilli sauce added just the right amount of orange to the vista.

Gertrude was also speechless. Her mother had never done anything arty in her life. And Gertrude had often secretly wondered if her mom had worked in a prison kitchen before. Everything looked grey and mushy and swam together in the bowl at dinnertime and she had had to learn the trick of quickly throwing her food into the back of her mouth so her tongue didn't get a chance to taste it before it went

down the hatch. Lots of water also helped. But this beeeootiful meal in front of her would have to be eaten in teensy weensy bites to make it last as long as possible. Suddenly Gertrude decided she would ask her parents to send her to boarding school, and on weekends she would come to stay with Em. That way, she would never have to see that slop again! She smiled so widely her ears began to wiggle and Em knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Gertrude was busy catching the Very Happy Heart virus! How glorious! And she began to imagine Gertrude's long neck bedecked with strings of neon-coloured beads. This mousey girl was just a duckling waiting to become a swan!

When the girls had polished off every speck on their plates, they lay on the couch, clutching their stuffed tummies and wishing they had left the cheese sticks for later. But it was hard to know when to stop if your tummy sang when it received every mouthful. "I'll tell you what, girls," said Mrs B. cheerfully. Why don't we all put on face-masks and watch a movie. She felt quite giddy as she said this because she was breaking all the 'homework first' rules, but today didn't seem like a day one should just stick to the basics. Thaddeus would be



home before they knew it and she wasn't looking forward to going back to her old self just when her new self was starting to fit her so nicely. So they mashed bananas with cream and tied up their hair to keep it out of the face feast. And before long, only their eyes could be seen, twinkling like stars amid the lumpy mess. "Best to lie very still, we can't get banana on Dad's favourite armchair!" she warned with a wink. And they settled down to watch Charlie and the Chocolate Factory—it seemed the perfect choice for such a quirky day! And it might inspire Gertrude to do her own makeover when she got home.

"Oh girls, I do so love being a mum!" Mrs B. suddenly yelled unexpectedly and both girls got such a fright, they fell off the couch, scattering the remains of their masks in all directions. "Oh shoot!" said Mrs B., quite forgetting that parents are supposed to set the example with swearing and the like. What on earth were they going to do? The girls looked as if they might burst into tears and that would totally spoil the whole mood, so she whisked them off to the bathroom with instructions to rinse their faces and make sure all the lumps went down the plughole. Then she racked her brains like only a mother in an emergency can do. "I've got it!" she said triumphantly (and a tad less loudly than her previous outburst—those girls were still a little fragile, after all). She rushed off to the spare bedroom and rolled up its carpet, dragged it down the passage and replaced the

one in the lounge in the drop of a hat. Actually, THIS one looked much better— why hadn't she thought of that before? (Of course we all know why... Mr B. told her on a weekly basis that he was the only one who was paid to think in this house. Such stuff could quench the most inventive brain.) Then she stuffed the dirty rug under the spare-room bed. She would attend to that when the coast was clear.

"What's this, Harriet?" said Mr B. in a most disapproving tone as he strode into the middle of the lounge. Mrs B. nearly jumped out of her skin. What was Thaddeus doing home so early? Drat! Now they definitely wouldn't be able to redo Gertrude's hairstyle. "Oh hello, darling. Just felt like a spot of redecorating," she said, trying to sound super-casual — which, of course, was not a style he had heard her use before. And this made him look properly at his wife for the first time in awfully long.

Goodness! Was this his wife? He looked around desperately. Perhaps he had wandered into the neighbour's house by mistake? But no, there was his long-service certificate from the town archives hanging on the wall. Mr B. started to feel quite nauseous. First his daughter, and now this! He ran his eyes right from her pink trainers, up the yellow leggings to the polka dot blouse (luckily he had

missed the beret in the entrance hall). His brain felt all foggy and none of his words would make sentences. So he looked again. And again.

Meanwhile Mrs B. was frantically searching for some courage in the cupboards of her mind. She knew she had put it somewhere, but where was it hiding? Her husband was going a nasty shade of puce before her eyes and she didn't feel up to doing her first aid again. Oh dear, it looked like a violent explosion was coming. And she had just changed the carpet. This called for a distraction.

"Oh girls, "she called ever so sweetly, "Do come and recite your 5x table to Mr B. It's such a blessing he is home early enough for us to have a home concert." Deathly silence greeted her announcement. No-one was twitching a finger upstairs. And Mrs B. started to feel desperate. If she didn't get back-up soon, this could be her last performance. Judging by the steam coming out of her husband's ears, she would be on the front page of the local newspaper tomorrow—'Woman killed by shrapnel in her own lounge. Foul Play suspected.' Oh, she didn't want to die now, just when she was getting the hang of this Happy Heart thing. What would Em do without her? She wracked her brains feverishly. And then she remembered. Em always used to hum and dance to get out of a tight spot. Feeling particularly stretched as this was her first audience and one of her fiercest critics,

she launched forth into a sort of tap dance... or was it an Irish jig. She didn't have a clue but her arms and legs seemed to have developed a mind of their own. Wildly she spun and jerked and hummed, throwing in a little swing of the hips like Em would have done. It felt a bit like 3 different aerobic routines shmoozled into one but she couldn't stop now.

As she did her umpteenth spin, she caught sight of the two girls, who had crept like mice halfway down the stairs. They were standing clutching their sides and silently laughing until the tears spouted out of their eyes. Suddenly she realised how ridiculous she must look. And she began to giggle, a rather high pitched giggle which turned into a snort. This interfered with her rhythm a bit and before she knew it, she was lying on the floor, laughing so hard she thought she would lose a button. And her creamy mask was leaping off her cheeks like rabbits escaping a fox. It was an interesting sight to behold!

Mr B. swallowed once. He swallowed twice. Who was this creature rolling around merrily on his carpet? No, wait a minute... this wasn't his lounge carpet. He felt quite bamboozled. "Thaddeus Horace, get a grip on yourself," He thought in a panicky sort of way. Then suddenly, all his firm resolve to be an upstanding, sober citizen seemed to fly out of the window and he gave a cough, which rapidly broke

out into a strangled roar. The girls covered their ears and wondered if they should run to the bomb shelter.

One second passed... And another... And still the house was standing around them. It was most peculiar! And then Em heard a sound so unfamiliar she wasn't quite sure what it was... She crept to the entrance of the lounge and the sight that greeted her eyes was so monumentous that press-photographers should have been there to capture the moment...

There sat her father, draped all higgledy-piggledy in his armchair. He was slapping his knee with his hand and his head was back so far, she could see into the back of his throat, where sore-throat germs usually sit. And there was a strange, gargling sound coming out of his mouth. Was he having a fit? Must she call the ambulance?

Oh dear, why hadn't she paid attention when her mother was teaching her the emergency phone number? She peered more closely to make sure of the right diagnosis. She mustn't sound like a fool when she made the call. She didn't want to use words like 'peritonitis' if they weren't applicable. She rubbed her eyes and crept a little closer. Could it be true? Surely not! In this house? After all that had

Christine Beadsworth

happened? Em scratched her head in a dazed fashion. Yup, there seemed to be no other answer... Her father was LAUGHING!

Chapter 9 ~ Miracles Still Happen

Mr B. loosened his tie because whatever was trying to break out of his belly was having trouble with all the restrictions. Why did he wear these stupid things anyway? After all, he was a plumber, not a professor! And the thought of a plumber going to work in a collar and tie seemed to set him off even more. Then the laughing really got going! He guffawed until he felt quite faint from liberation. Was this what it felt like to be Em? Oh the darling girl! And he tried to gaze fondly at his daughter but his eyes were all blurry from happy tears. So he held out his arms to Em, gesturing with flapping hands that now would be a good time to get on his lap.

Em was mystified. Having never been hugged by her father before, this seemed like foreign territory to her. Would it be safe? Or was he going to quieten down and turn back into Thaddeus Horace Constantine in a flash? This was a risk Em was not sure she was brave enough to take.

Then she glanced at her mother, who was now sitting up and looking at her husband with a glowing, hopeful expression. It almost looked like love at first

sight—but that was silly, because they had been married forever. Em looked again at the figure clutching his tummy in the chair. Not even her very fertile imagination could have come up with a scene like this! And then Em had a light-bulb moment—God had come to visit! All her prayers must have got through to Headquarters at last and He had thought it important enough to come and bring the answers Himself. Em squeaked at the thought because she knew the next thing would be a ride on a rollercoaster—or something equally splendid! At that moment, she decided to throw caution to the wind and taking a huge breath, she launched herself at her father. It wasn't a very graceful moment but she managed to time it just right and slipped onto his lap in-between a knee slap and a belly clutch.

And oh how curious it felt—like being on a vibrating mattress or a jumping castle. Em never knew a father's lap could be such fun! And as she bounced about, hiccupping with joy, she sent a little arrow prayer to the Author of this Very Best Happy Heart moment. "Oh thank you, God. You're a Miracle-worker!" She slipped her little arms round Mr B.'s neck and planted a great smacking kiss on his cheek. "I love you, pops!" she said emphatically.



And then the strangest thing happened. Mr B's guffaws turned into great, heaving sobs. He bawled like a newborn (which is what he was, if you think about it...). And finally, when the heaving sobs grew softer, he managed to splutter out a few words, "I have been such a crusty, old grouch. Can you ever forgive me, darling Harriet? Emmerentia, from this day forward, your old dad is a new man. Give me a chance to show you just how much fun I can be?" This brought on a fresh batch of tears and Em glanced at her mother, who was also wiping her eyes. "Goodness, how emotional this virus makes people!" she thought to herself, but secretly she was overjoyed because she knew that there was the strongest possibility that the Very Happy Heart House was finally here to stay!

Then just as she was taking a huge breath to yell out, "...And they all lived happily ever after!" she caught sight of Gertrude slumped on the front steps...





Chapter 10 ~ There's ALWAYS Room for One More

It was a tragic sight to behold! Gertrude was beating her breast and wailing soundlessly, in a most theatrical fashion. Em was concerned she would crack a rib, so she squiggled off her father's lap and went to have a closer look. Her new friend looked like a baby mouse which had lost its mother. Her face was heading for a beetroot blush, and her hair was sticking out in all directions like a haystack tossed by a whirlwind. "There, there, whatever has set you off like this?" Em said soothingly as she tried to grab one of Gertie's flailing hands. But the girl was too distraught to answer. Should she dial 911? What did one do in such a severe case of melancholy? Em was perplexed. And then she remembered her newly adorable father in the lounge...

She yelled as loud as she could to get his attention and Mr Bogtail catapulted out of his armchair like a rocket. His knight in shining armor heart (which had previously been successfully imprisoned and gagged for too many years to count) now galvanised him into action. There was a damsel in distress—and he was the only knight in the vicinity, it seemed. He galloped to the front door, reining his imaginary steed to a swift halt. And blow me down sideways with a feather if

there weren't TWO damsels in need of his services. Oh, how he had waited for this day!

He swept them both up in his stringbean arms and carted them off like sacks of potatoes to the kitchen counter. Matters like these were always better dealt with at eye-level. Then, peering ever so compassionately at the two girls, he whispered in his best emergency medic voice, "Now, now, there's nothing to worry about. I'm here to take care of everything. I'm just going to take your temperatures and listen to your hearts with my thingummy and then we will whisk you off to the hospital!" Em was most alarmed. Firstly, her father's face muscles weren't used to doing 'compassionate rescue angel' positions and it turned out a bit like a bad toothache and blind mole rolled into one. It wasn't comforting at all. And then there was the bit about the hospital. Glancing again at Gertie, it didn't look like pills and operations would fix her friend. What she needed was a bowl of caramel popcorn and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. That had always done the trick for Em...

She leaned over and whispered in Gertie's ear, "Smile quick or he will give you an injection!" It worked like a charm! The only thing that Gertrude hated more than her mother's cooking was the sight of a needle. She paused mid-wail,

adjusted her face and beamed like a lighthouse at full tilt. It was such a startling change that Mr Bog 's rescue procedure was stopped mid-stream. Em added her own dazzling smile to the scenario and suddenly he began to wonder if he had been hallucinating. "Pops..." Em said quickly, knowing she must take charge of proceedings before he lost heart, "It's ever so gallant of you to sweep us off our feet like that—just like in the movies. Don't you think caramel popcorn would be a good idea?" Well, movies and popcorn were filed in the same box in Mr B.'s head, so he heartily agreed and immediately set to work conjuring up the said snack.

This gave Em a chance to put her arm round her friend and say softly, "Now, whatever is the matter, old girl?" Gertie gazed at her, with eyes still wet with tears, and her bottom lip trembled as she explained. "I don't have an arty mother or a father who gallops in the house... and your house makes my heart so very happy! If I have to go home to my mother's warthog soup, I think I may very well expire from grief!" and she hiccupped and swallowed down a few more wails.

Hmmm, this was a tricky problem... Kidnapping wasn't an option. And they couldn't invite the whole family to move in, because then Gertrude's mother might offer to cook. And Em didn't think she would approve of strawberry milk and waffles for breakfast. She thunk and thunk until her brain felt like it needed choc

chip cookies to recover. But nothing came to mind. It was the first time Em had encountered a problem too big to conquer.

Just then, Mrs B. came into the kitchen attracted by the glorious smell of caramel bubbling. Oh how she loved the sight of her hubbie in an apron. It almost made her want to swing him round and waltz round the kitchen, but she was worried that wooden spoon might sling caramel all over the walls—and that would be a criminal waste! "What's up, Buttercup?" she asked Em in a perky voice. Em explained the humungous problem. And when she said 'warthog soup', she made a face like she was vomiting her guts out. It was a brilliant speech if she had to say so herself!

"Oh my goodness, " said Mrs B. "That IS a bit of a crisis!" She scratched her head, tapped her feet and hummed "She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes". That always got her grey matter sizzling! "I've got it! I'll just give your mother a call, Gertrude!" and she bustled off to the phone. "Oh hello, Mrs Slingbekker! Top of the afternoon to you too. Do so hope I haven't interrupted your cordon bleu efforts." Luckily she couldn't see Gertie's mum wriggling and beaming bashfully at this compliment, or she would have got distracted! "Now, as you know, your Gertrude has the most incredible skill at Mathematics and my Em,

poor dear, didn't get much in that department. I wonder if you would hire out your daughter as a maths tutor every afternoon for the rest of the year? It's the only way my Emmerentia is going to pass... What? Oh how kind of you. Yes, yes, I know extra lessons are ever so expensive!" She could hear Gertie's mum practically rubbing her hands together in glee at the thought of huge piles of boodle coming her way. That had to be nipped in the bud before the silly woman opened a new bank account to put it in. "Of course, we are of *MOST* modest means, my husband being a poor plumber and all. So I wondered if I might pay you in kind? How about Gertrude remaining with us for supper every day instead? And then we will personally escort her home, in time for bed!"

Mrs Slingbekker was quiet for a moment. Hmm, was this woman trying to pull the wool over her eyes? And then she thought of all the money she would save on grocery bills AND no homework supervision. She could put her feet up and watch her soapy. That settled it. "My dear Mrs Bogtail, I have always been a most charitable and tender lady and your poverty-stricken state moves me to tears. If my Gertrude is able to be a blessing to your household, wild horses couldn't stop me saying yes!" And with that, the contract was sealed.

Oh, how the room exploded with jubilation. The girls took hands and danced around like wild donkeys, hooting and whistling. Mrs B. broke into a break-dancing routine which rendered her husband speechless. What a catch his wife was! And so talented. Perhaps he could still buy that checked sports-coat and manage her career instead! At last, Em and Gertie collapsed exhausted and giggling on the lounge carpet.

And as the room spun around her, Em finally understood the most important thing about keeping a Very Happy Heart—you have to remember that love NEVER runs out. And even if your Very Happy Heart feels so full it could burst, there will always, always, ALWAYS be room for one more!

