

Chapter 1

Olga Sets Out

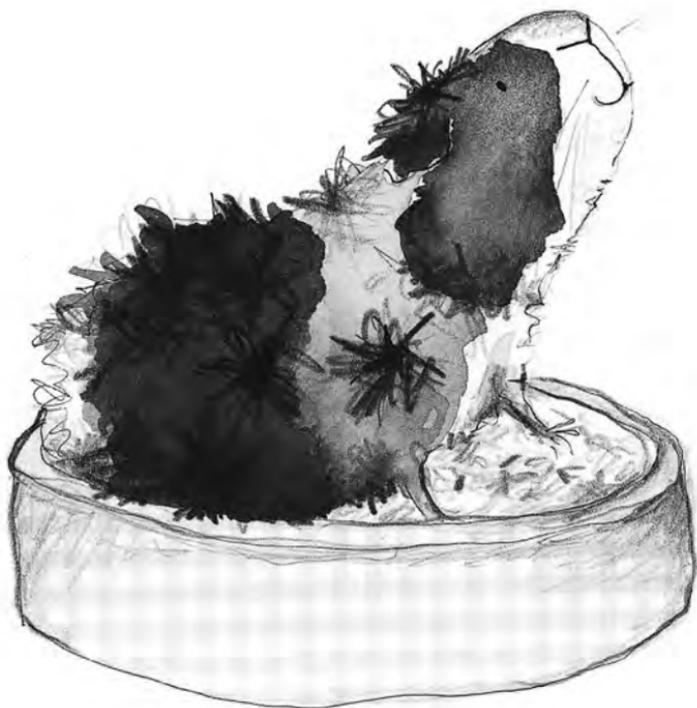
From the very beginning there was not the slightest doubt that Olga da Polga was the sort of guinea-pig who would go places.

There was a kind of charm about her, something in the set of her whiskers, an extra devil-may-care twirl to the rosettes in her brown and white fur, and a gleam in her eyes, which set her apart.

Even her name had an air of romance. How she had come by it was something of a mystery, and Olga herself told so many fanciful tales about moonlit nights, castles in the air, and fields awash with oats and beautiful princesses—each tale wilder than the one before—that none of the other guinea-pigs in the pet shop knew what to believe.

THE TALES OF OLGA DA POLGA

However, everyone agreed that it suited her right to the very tips of her fourteen toes, and if some felt that it wouldn't come amiss if Olga was taken down a whisker or two it was noticeable none of them tried to do it, though many of them talked of the dangers of going out into the world alone, and without the protection of the humans who normally looked after them.

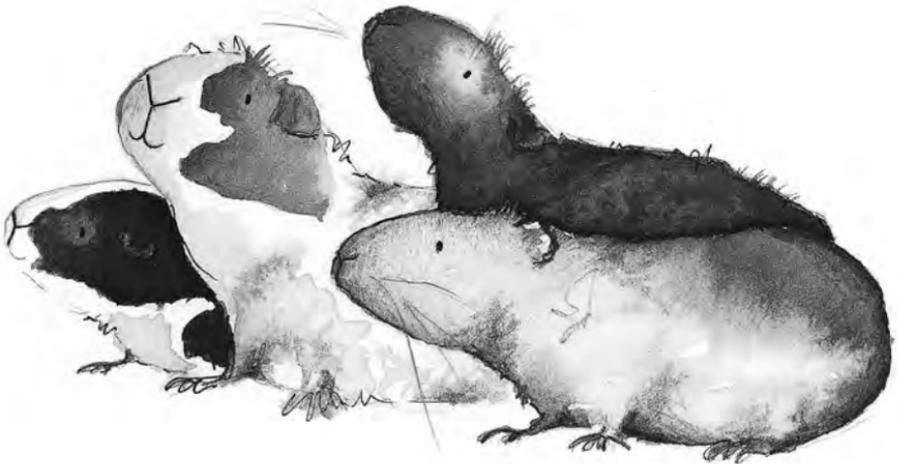


OLGA SETS OUT

'You can't do without the *Sawdust People*,' warned one old-stager known as Sale or Return, who'd lived in the shop for as long as anyone could remember and was always listened to with respect because he'd once been away for two whole days. 'It's a cold, hard world outside.'

But Olga would have none of it. 'You can stay here if you like,' she would announce, standing in the middle of the feeding bowl in order to address the others. 'But one of these days *I'm* going. *Wheweee!* Just you wait. As soon as I see my chance I shall be away.'

Olga was never quite sure whether she really believed her words or not, but she liked the sound of them, and secretly she also rather enjoyed the effect they had on the others.



THE TALES OF OLGA DA POLGA

Each night, before she settled down in the straw, she would look at her reflection in the water bowl, puffing out her cheeks and preening herself so that she would look her best if any likely looking customers came along.

And then it happened.

Quite unexpectedly, and not at all in the way Olga had always pictured it.

There were no grand farewells.

There was no battle royal.

No wild dash for freedom.

There were no cheers whatsoever.

In fact it was all over in a flash.

One morning, just as Olga was in the middle of her breakfast, a shadow fell across the cage and she looked up and saw a row of faces outside staring in at her.

There was the Sawdust Person she knew as the owner of the pet shop; a man she had never seen before; and a small girl.

It was the girl who caught Olga's gaze as she looked up from the feeding bowl, and as their eyes met a finger came through the bars.

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‘That’s the one,’ the girl said. ‘The one with the cheeky look and the oats sticking to her whiskers.’

The door in the roof of the cage clanged open and a rough, hairy hand descended.