MARIGOLD

and the Dark

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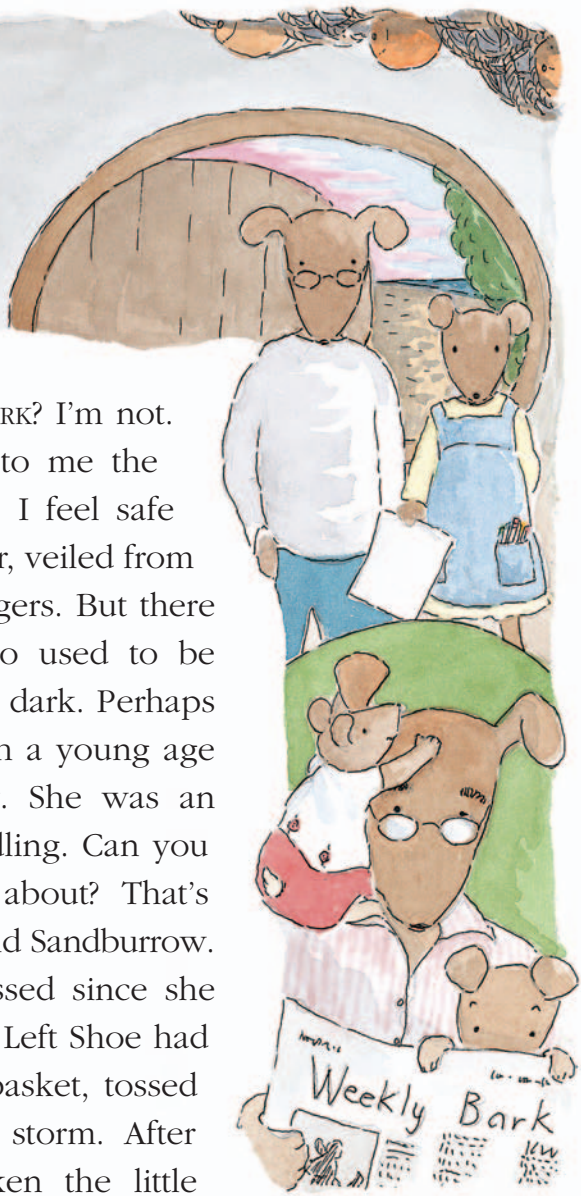
Tea Time



ARE YOU AFRAID OF THE DARK? I'm not. I don't know why, but to me the dark is like a soft cloak. I feel safe there, hidden from danger, veiled from the curious gaze of strangers. But there is someone I know who used to be absolutely terrified of the dark. Perhaps losing her parents at such a young age had made her that way. She was an orphan, you see, a foundling. Can you guess who I'm talking about? That's right, it's Marigold, Marigold Sandburrow.

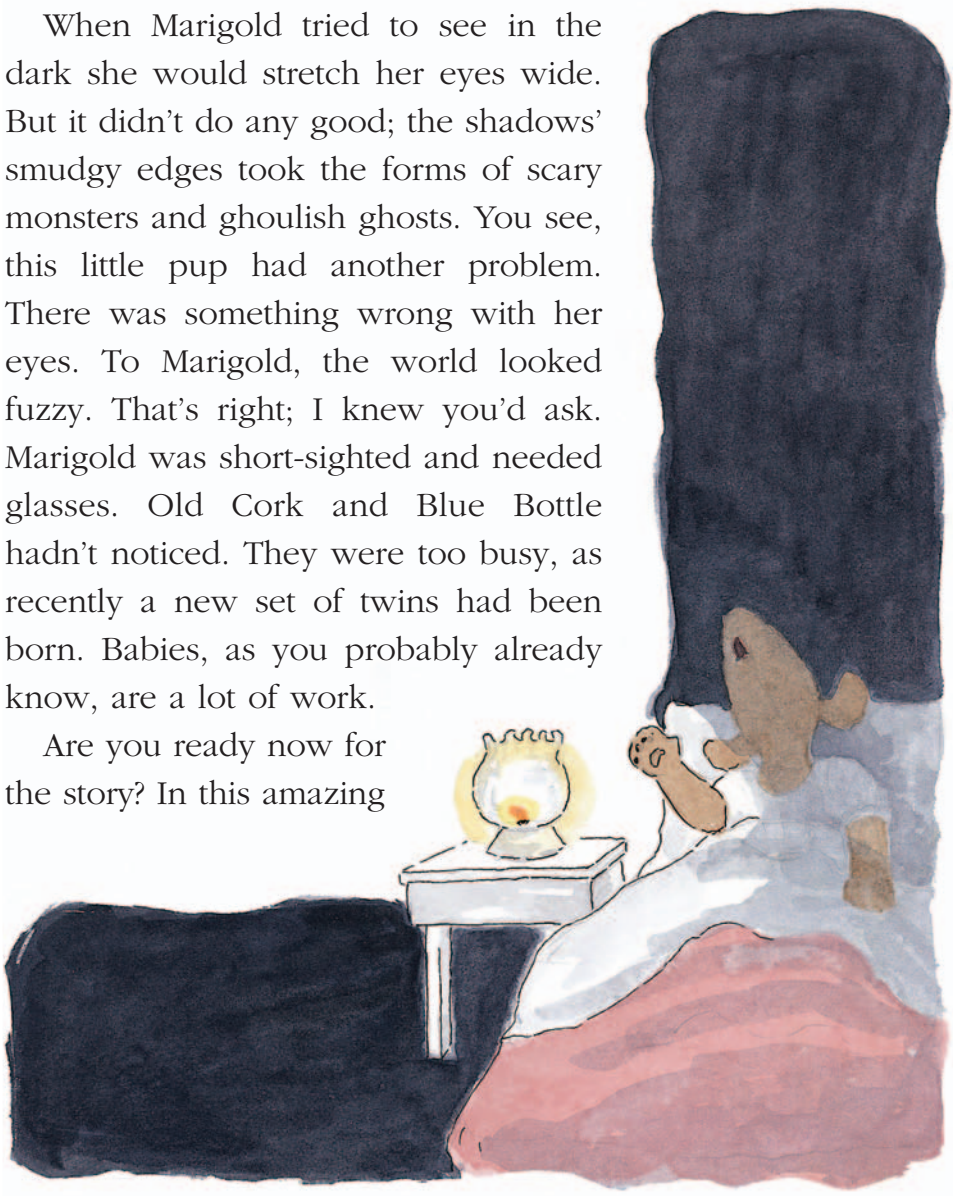
Many months had passed since she had been rescued at sea. Left Shoe had found her floating in a basket, tossed in the waves of a wild storm. After that, his family had taken the little

baby seadog into their own burrow. Left Shoe's parents never found out what happened to Marigold's family, so they started to think of her as one of their very own pups. She had become Left Shoe's favourite, of course, and even though she wasn't his real twin, she was always at his side.

It wasn't long before the Sandburrow family noticed that Marigold was really frightened of the dark. The night-time made her uneasy, so she always slept with a lamp on. Its small halo of light pushed back the gloom and made her feel safe. Sometimes, though, the lamplight didn't help. She would wake in fright and howl into the blackness.

When Marigold tried to see in the dark she would stretch her eyes wide. But it didn't do any good; the shadows' smudgy edges took the forms of scary monsters and ghoulish ghosts. You see, this little pup had another problem. There was something wrong with her eyes. To Marigold, the world looked fuzzy. That's right; I knew you'd ask. Marigold was short-sighted and needed glasses. Old Cork and Blue Bottle hadn't noticed. They were too busy, as recently a new set of twins had been born. Babies, as you probably already know, are a lot of work.

Are you ready now for the story? In this amazing



adventure, Marigold finds herself alone with her worst fear. And what's more, she meets a creature that is the dread of seadogs, the horror of horrors … the goanna. This prehistoric lizard has extraordinary powers. For one thing, it has a very contagious laugh. If you ever hear that rattling sound, cover your ears! Otherwise you will laugh so hard you'll almost burst. I hope you won't be trembling with fright to hear this, but the ghastly, giggling goanna loves to eat seadogs, especially the tender seadog pup. To capture its prey, the goanna stares at it with shiny eyes. The poor victim is hypnotised in moments, and later, the goanna roasts it over the flames of a crackling fire.

On the night our story begins, Marigold was sitting next to the open window, sketching Left Shoe's long, brown face.

'Don't move, silly!' she protested.

'I'm trying not to. Hurry, Rig, I'm starving!'

Marigold smiled. She liked it when Left Shoe called her 'Rig'. It was his special name for her. She looked back at her drawing. It was hard to see it in the darkening room and she held the page closer to the lamp for better light. Her eyes still blurred. She stretched them wide and then tried to focus on her drawing.

'Are you all right, Rig?' Left Shoe asked.

'Fine,' said Marigold, and she held up her picture for him to admire.

The rest of the family were getting ready for dinner. Blue Bottle stood at the stove stirring seaweed mash with her youngest twin, Sea Gem, on her hip. Sea Gem was named for a piece of glass, smoothed by sand, roughened by the sea. Her eyes were the colour of the ocean and she was completely white. As you know, seadogs are almost always brown, so at first this had worried her parents because she had to stay out of the hot sun. As she grew a little bigger, they noticed that Sea Gem was different in other ways, too. Her eyes often fixed on things that were invisible to everyone else. As well, her twin, Tumblegrass, already chattered away in complete sentences, but Sea Gem had never spoken a word.

Blue Bottle placed two bowls of mash on the table, and Old Cork lifted Sea Gem and Tumblegrass into their highchairs.

As the babies began eating happily, Blue Bottle turned to the older children.

'Left Shoe, would you set the table? Driftwood and Shark Tooth, please tidy up those toys. And Marigold, I need some

vinegar for the salad, could you fetch me some, please? If there isn't any in my work-snug, there's bound to be some in the dry-snug.'

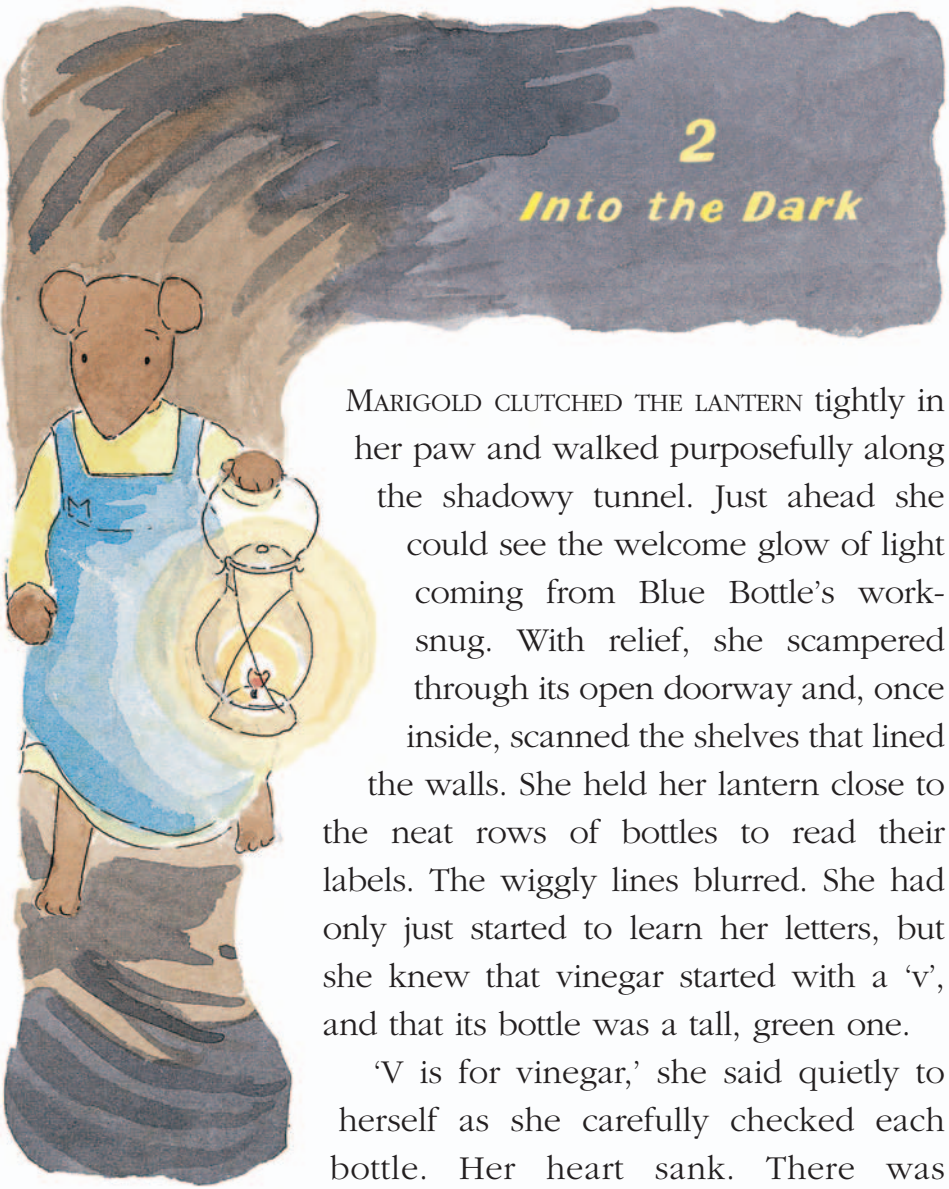
Marigold turned to look at her mother, pale faced. She understood what that meant. There was always a lantern burning in Blue Bottle's work-snug. But the dry-snug was dark.

You might remember that a snug is a room in a seadog burrow. Some snugs are above ground and these are cheerful places with small, round windows. The dark snugs are gloomy caverns deeper underground and have no light apart from lantern or candle. Some are used as work-snugs, but others, even deeper in the earth, are musty storerooms. The dry-snug was one of these. It was piled with all kinds of foodstuffs: sacks of grass-seed flour, jams and fruit preserves, jars of oil and bottles of seaweed wine. But worst of all, directly underneath the dry-snug was the scariest snug in the whole burrow, the worm-snug.

Marigold attempted a frozen-looking smile to pretend that she wasn't frightened.

'Take the lantern,' encouraged Blue Bottle. 'You'll be fine.'

'All right,' Marigold said slowly, and she looked around the room to see if anyone might come with her. But Shark Tooth and Driftwood were piling toys into a basket and Left Shoe was busy with paws full of spoons. Poor Marigold knew that she would just have to be brave.



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Into the Dark

MARIGOLD CLUTCHED THE LANTERN tightly in her paw and walked purposefully along the shadowy tunnel. Just ahead she could see the welcome glow of light coming from Blue Bottle's work-snug. With relief, she scampered through its open doorway and, once inside, scanned the shelves that lined the walls. She held her lantern close to the neat rows of bottles to read their labels. The wiggly lines blurred. She had only just started to learn her letters, but she knew that vinegar started with a 'v', and that its bottle was a tall, green one.

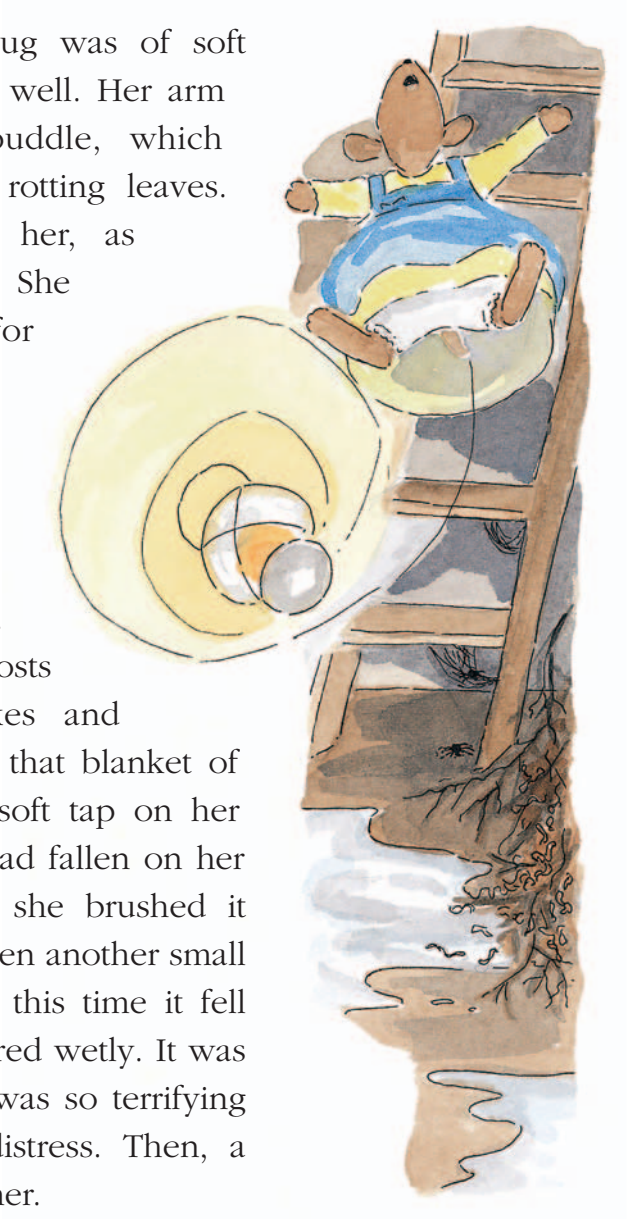
'V is for vinegar,' she said quietly to herself as she carefully checked each bottle. Her heart sank. There was

definitely no vinegar. She would have to go down into the dark dry-snug.

As you can imagine, this idea was a very unhappy one for Marigold. But she needed to find the vinegar, so she went to the centre of the snug, where there was a rickety trapdoor on the floor. She placed her lantern next to the entrance and opened the rusty latch. With a shiver, she climbed into the black opening and then retrieved her light. As she stepped carefully down the ladder into the cool, dark space, the lantern swung spookily, casting spiky shadows. In the gloom, she could see sacks of grass-seed flour, crates of fruit, and brown earthenware pots of honey. It smelled of grain and apples. It was so quiet that the only sound was the little in and out 'whoosh' of her breath, and the occasional squeak of the lantern.

Marigold's heart started to pound. She was thinking again of the worm-snug, directly beneath her. The worm-snug was the blackest place you could imagine. It was as dark as the grave, as sunless as midnight on the bottom of the sea. Even worse, it lay next to the roots of a large casuarina tree. Like spidery veins, the tangled mass pushed its way through the walls. Amongst those dark tendrils, worms wriggled; spiders scuttled.

Marigold descended the last rungs of the dry-snug's ladder and then held the lantern high. There it was – the vinegar! Though a little blurry, she recognised the bottles stacked on a low shelf next to a sack of apples. Marigold felt overcome with relief. She squinted in the dimness, trying to work out what was making the black shadow in the middle of the snug. She couldn't see it properly. Deciding that it was just an ordinary shadow, Marigold bravely scampered towards the vinegar. Too late, she realised that the shadow was the open doorway of the worm-snug. The hapless pup stepped right into its round opening and fell down into the darkness with a terrified bark. She dropped the lantern and the light went out.

Marigold lay in dank blindness. For a moment, she wasn't sure what had happened. Thankfully she was unhurt as the

floor of the worm-snug was of soft earth. It was damp as well. Her arm rested in a small puddle, which smelled of mud and rotting leaves. The dark enveloped her, as thick as winter quilts. She whispered, 'V is for vinegar,' to make sure she was still alive. Her tiny voice sounded hollow in that total dark. Marigold was very, very frightened. She was sure that ghosts and spiders or snakes and goannas lay hiding in that blanket of blackness. She felt a soft tap on her forehead. Something had fallen on her and, with a shudder, she brushed it away with her paw. Then another small plop followed, except this time it fell on her nose and slithered wetly. It was a worm! Its sliminess was so terrifying that she howled in distress. Then, a light appeared above her.