

TUMBLEGRASS
and the bushfire



Annie O'Dowd

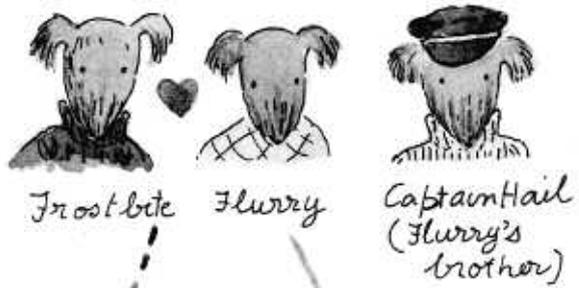


Pan Macmillan Australia

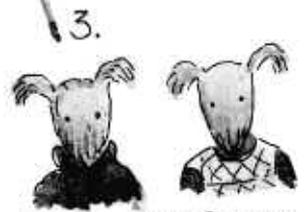
To my family

The ICICLE family

(live far away in the Land of Ice)



(Marigold's long lost twin brother, found at sea by Flurry and Frostbite)



* Note - Seadogs from the Land of Ice have very shaggy fur.

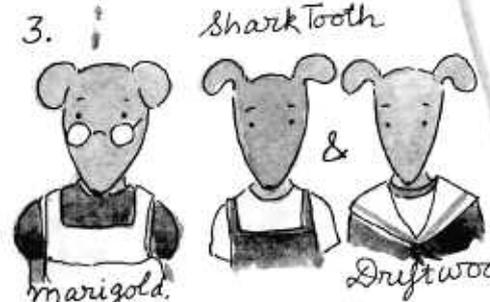
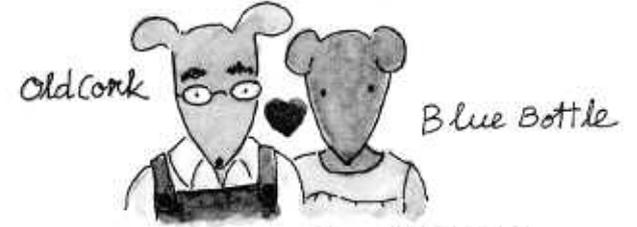


(a penguin) adopted

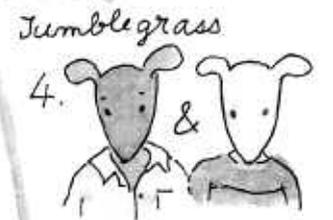
Key
 — pups
 --- adopted
 ♥ married
 1, 2 etc order of arrival

The Sandburrrow family

(live in Foamy Bay)



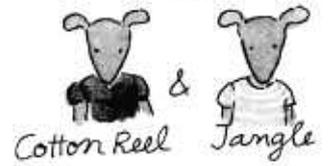
Marigold, Left Shoe's adopted twin (rescued at sea by Left Shoe as a baby)



Seagem (a rare white seadog who travelled to the Land of Ice)



* note - all seadogs are born in pairs.



1

The Matchbox

 **T**umblegrass Sandburrow raced along the burning sand towards the line of trees. He reached a cool patch of shade and buried his hot paws. It was good to be out of the sun, and as he sheltered in the dappled shade of some grey banksias, he looked up at the sky. It was hot and blue and as dry as dust. When his paws had cooled, he saw that he had run all the way to the edge of the village near the river. With a start, he realised that he was also right outside the burrow of Great-great-grandfather Seaweed, a seadog who was famous for his crankiness. The old fellow



wasn't related to him, but seadogs always call the old ones of the village 'Grandfather' or 'Great-grandmother', even when they aren't really family. Tumblegrass paused, listening, but the burrow was silent, so he sat down on the little bench outside the rickety front door. That was when he saw the matchbox. It lay on the seat beside him next to a lantern. Tumblegrass picked it up and heard the rattle of matches inside.

Fire fascinated Tumblegrass. He loved to stare into the flames through the grate of the iron stove in the cooking-snug, or poke the glowing coals with a stick when they were allowed to have a bonfire on the beach. So, even though he knew he wasn't supposed to, he couldn't resist lighting just one match. He pushed open the box, pulled out one of the matchsticks, and struck it.



The flame flared with a little hiss and Tumblegrass watched the tiny blaze with wonder. The wavering tongue of fire grew larger, travelling along the matchstick, turning it black.

'Tumblegrass!' barked Seaweed, coming up behind him. 'Don't you know it's dangerous to light a fire when the weather is so hot and dry?'

Tumblegrass shoved the box into his pocket and dropped the match in the sand. 'But I was ...' he mumbled.

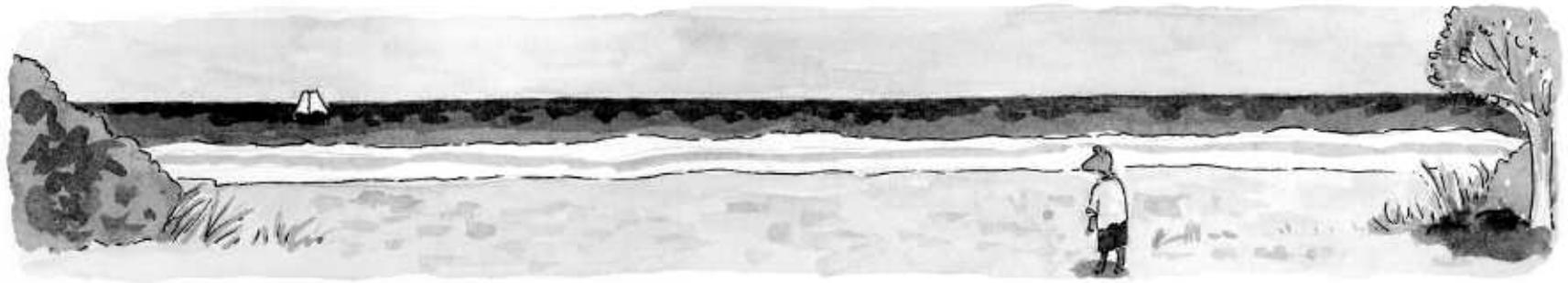


'Don't bother with pathetic excuses, young rascal. Give me those matches!'

Tumblegrass, who hadn't meant to actually take the matches, retrieved them from his pocket and handed them to Seaweed. The old seadog put them into his own pocket with a growl.

'We'll see what your father has to say about this,' he barked. 'It's bad enough that we have the drought to worry us without you starting a bushfire!' And with that he grabbed Tumblegrass by the ear and marched him smartly across the hot sand in the direction of his burrow.

Poor Tumblegrass! I don't need to tell you that he wasn't supposed to touch those matches, but 'not supposed to' and Tumblegrass seemed to go together. It wasn't that he meant to be naughty; it was just that sometimes he didn't stop to think. And whenever he was doing something that he wasn't supposed to be doing, somehow a grown-up always noticed. That wasn't the only problem. He tried to



be brave and good, but it often didn't turn out that way. He was bound to do the exact wrong thing at the exact wrong time. That particular wrong thing would usually lead to a misunderstanding and then that misunderstanding would turn into a calamity. Altogether the whole mess usually ended in trouble.

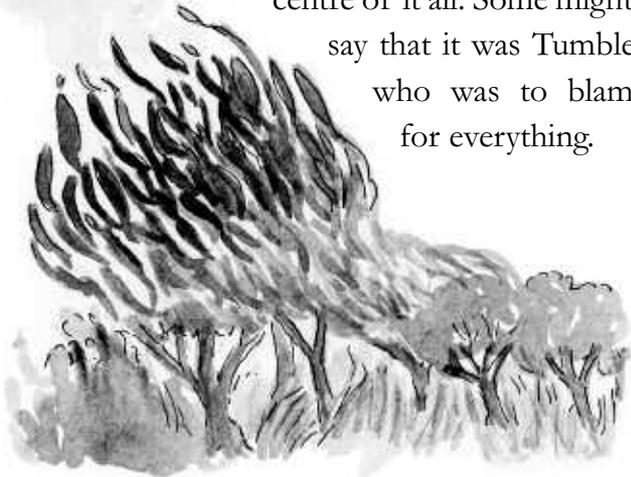
The story I'm going to tell you is all about one of Tumblegrass' troublesome muddles that turned into an enormous disaster. It happened a long time ago, but I still recall much of it clearly. It started the very same day that Tumblegrass was dragged up the beach by Great-great-grandfather Seaweed. I remember that part because it was also the day that Sea Gem, Marigold, Blue Bottle and Old Cork sailed away on a short voyage to nearby Pandanus Island. In fact, before he'd found the matches, Tumblegrass had been on the beach watching their boat getting smaller and smaller until it disappeared on the horizon.

Left Shoe had been given the important job of looking after his brothers and sisters for the several days they would be away. That didn't make Tumblegrass very happy. You see, to Tumblegrass, nothing would be much fun without his twin,  Sea Gem, and as well as that, Left Shoe was inclined to get cross with him. But the main reason Tumblegrass was upset was because he didn't really understand why they'd left him at home in the first place. He had wanted to go too, but Old Cork had declared that they were only going to collect water, so Tumblegrass should stay at home.

At the time of this story, you see, Foamy Bay was in the grip of a terrible drought. Not a single drop of rain had fallen for many months. Now the water tanks were almost empty. Yellowed grasses crackled under brown bracken and parched trees rustled their papery leaves in the hot wind. Parts of Banksia River were

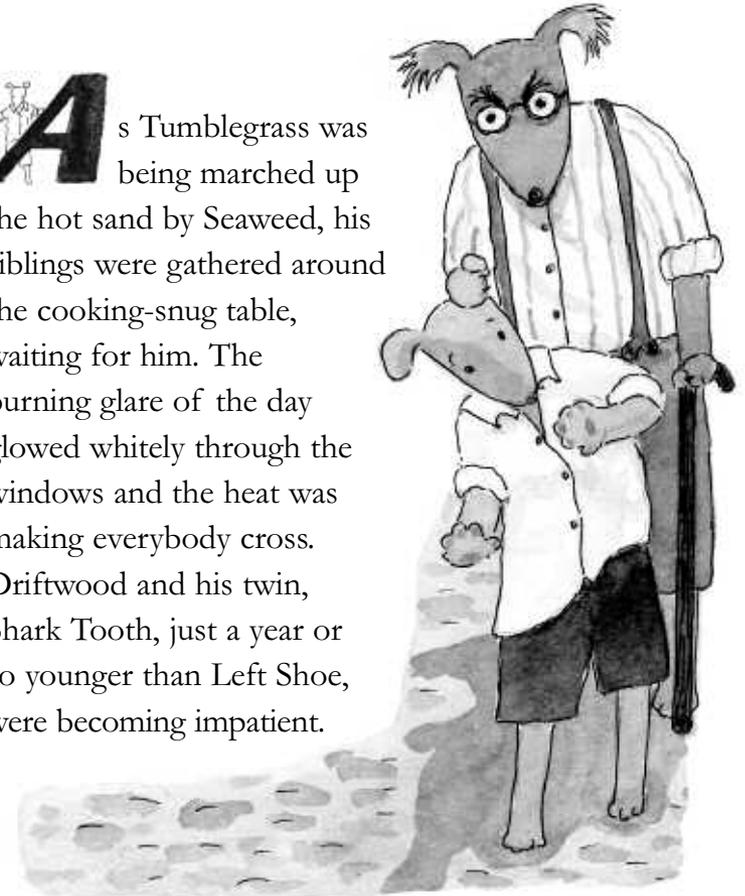
drying up and thick cracks etched its banks. The seadogs of Foamy Bay were getting more and more worried each day, not only about their water supply, but also because they feared a greater danger – bushfire. If you are afraid of fire, beware, because this story isn't about an ordinary campfire or candle flame but something a million times worse. Imagine the whole bush alight! The towering blaze can burn as high as the sky: an orange wall of suffocating flame. Animals must flee from its path or burn to a cinder.

That's why this tale is such a seat-gripping story of disaster, not to mention missing seadogs and daring rescues. It's probably the kind of story you'll be happy to reach the end of, just to escape from the stress. It was Tumblegrass who was at the centre of it all. Some might even say that it was Tumblegrass who was to blame ... for everything.



2 *Trouble*

As Tumblegrass was being marched up the hot sand by Seaweed, his siblings were gathered around the cooking-snug table, waiting for him. The burning glare of the day glowed whitely through the windows and the heat was making everybody cross. Driftwood and his twin, Shark Tooth, just a year or so younger than Left Shoe, were becoming impatient.



'Where's Tumblegrass?' complained Shark Tooth. She was trying to button Tangle's shirt. The little pup was about six months old, and he kept wriggling off the chair. 'Keep still, Tangle!' Shark Tooth said, pulling Tangle back and turning again to Left Shoe.

'I thought you said that Tumblegrass was coming home as soon as Mother and Father were out of sight.'

'He was,' replied Left Shoe.

'I wish he'd hurry up. I'm boiling!' said Driftwood.

'I'd better go and find him,' said Left Shoe with a sigh. 'He must still be on the beach.'

'I think I've got heatstroke,' Driftwood whined.

Angry barks suddenly sounded outside. Seconds later, Great-great-grandfather Seaweed appeared at the door, leading a very sorry-looking Tumblegrass by the ear. The Sandburrow children braced themselves for what would happen next. Then, old Seaweed stepped forward, leaning on his stick.

'This boy,' he raged, still holding the unfortunate pup by the ear, 'this very naughty seadog has been lighting matches ... in the middle of a drought! Where is Old Cork? I want to give him a long lecture about the proper way to deal with this kind of behaviour!' He rapped his stick loudly on the floor for emphasis and glowered at each Sandburrow from under bushy eyebrows. Left Shoe held up a paw in apology.

'I'm very sorry, Seaweed –' he began.

'That's Great-great-grandfather Seaweed to you, young fellow!' shouted the old seadog. 'Have you no respect? Now, where's your father?'

'I'm sorry ... er ... Great ... great-great ... grandfather –'

'Not that many "greats", I'm not that old! Why, the insolence. You're as bad as your brother. I'm too angry to talk now, but tell your father I'll be back!' With that, he turned on his heel and hobbled proudly out the door.

'Tumblegrass!' said Left Shoe in a fierce whisper when Seaweed had retreated down the path. 'What on earth were you up to?'

'I was just testing –' Tumblegrass began, rubbing his ear.

'I can't believe,' said Left Shoe, getting angrier by the minute, 'that you would light matches when the bush is so dry –'

'It was only one match,' protested Tumblegrass, cutting him off.

'That's exactly my point,' Left Shoe argued.

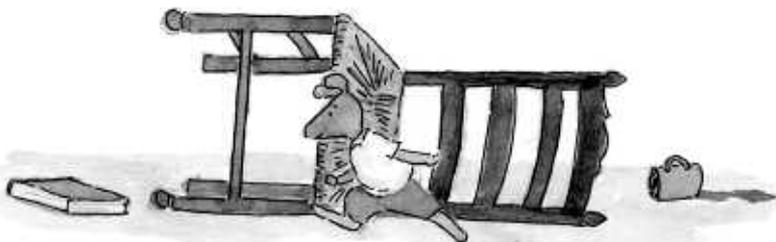


‘Only last week I was talking to the fire brigade down at Choppy Inlet and learning about how to control fires. It only takes one spark to set dry bush alight, you know. Just imagine the damage a whole match could do.’

At that moment, Tangle jumped down off the chair and scampered through Left Shoe’s legs, overbalancing him. Left Shoe tumbled to the ground, knocking over the chair as he went.

‘Can’t you just stay out of trouble for five minutes, Tumblegrass?’ he shouted from the floor. Everyone was suddenly quiet as Left Shoe stood up with great dignity and glared at his brother.

‘Come on,’ said Shark Tooth, stepping between the two seadogs. ‘Can we stop arguing about this now? It’s too hot to be cross. We’re going fishing, remember? We’re taking the canoes up river.’



‘Well ...’ said Left Shoe slowly. ‘We *were* all going fishing ... but now I think that Tumblegrass should stay behind, as punishment for lighting matches.’

Tumblegrass didn’t say anything. He sat down with an angry thump.

‘Don’t sulk, Tumblegrass,’ said Left Shoe. ‘Cotton Reel is still asleep. You can mind her while we’re gone.’

There was a pause while Shark Tooth and Driftwood considered this.

‘I don’t want to go fishing anyway,’ Tumblegrass said sullenly.

Their conversation was interrupted by a light tap coming from outside. A slice of patterned skirt showed at the open doorway.





‘Come in, then,’ said Left Shoe briskly.

A pale, rather shy-looking face peeped into view. It was Float, a girl seadog from Left Shoe’s class. Now, of course, Left Shoe was nearly grown-up, and had left the schoolroom last summer. Float was also the great-great-granddaughter of bad-tempered old Seaweed. The pair lived alone as Float’s own parents had died long ago of a fever. Her twin,

Bottle Top, had recently married and lived nearby at Choppy Inlet. Everyone waited for Float to speak and, after a few moments, she drew a book out of her pinafore pocket.

‘Does this belong to Marigold?’ she asked, smiling nervously at Left Shoe. ‘I found it under the trees outside our burrow.’ She held the book out for them to see. It was a small picture book. *Beautiful Land of Ice*, read the title on the front. Left Shoe took the book with a sigh. ‘She’s gone away for a few days, but I’ll return it to her when she gets back.’

Left Shoe was quiet for a moment as he studied

the cover of the little book. Ever since Marigold had discovered that her real twin was alive, she didn’t seem to think of anything else. As you probably already know, seadogs are always born in pairs, one boy and one girl. A shipwreck had separated Marigold from Frayed Rope when they were tiny pups, and because Left Shoe’s own twin had died, they had been like twins ever since. But a few months ago, Sea Gem had found Frayed Rope, living far away in the Land of Ice. When Sea Gem had returned from her long journey there, she had brought a parcel for Marigold. Inside, Frayed Rope had wrapped a small portrait, a jar of penguin oil cream and a necklace of shiny stones. Of course there had been a letter, a very long letter too, folded into a fat brown envelope and sealed with wax. Marigold had read it so many times that it was crumpled and torn.



Left Shoe was happy for her, mostly ... it was just that sometimes he wished that Marigold hadn't found her twin at all, and that they could go back to the way things were before. When Left Shoe finally looked up to thank Float for her trouble, she had already slipped quietly away.

There was another scuffle outside, and in the space where Float had been, Tangle reappeared.

'How did you get outside, you naughty pup?' scolded Shark Tooth.

Tangle swerved to avoid his sister's grasp and raced into the snug with a bucket and fishing line in his paws.

'I'm fishing!' he said, smiling with excitement.

'I'll check on Cotton Reel then,' said Left Shoe.

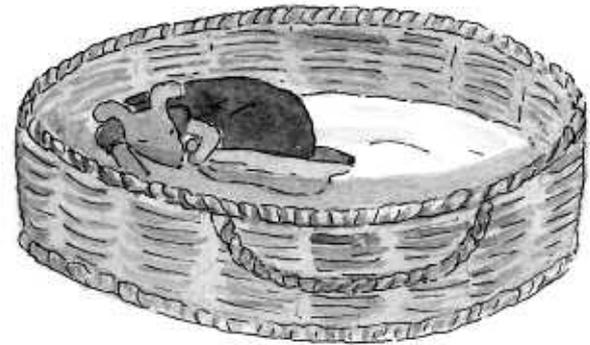
'Are you ready, Tangle?' Driftwood asked.

'Ready!' he barked.

Shark Tooth gathered their fishing baskets and handed one to Driftwood to carry.

'She's still sleeping,' said Left Shoe, returning from the nursery-snug.

'Now, Tumblegrass,' said Shark Tooth sensibly, 'minding Cotton Reel will be easy. She's such a good little pup. Just give her a drink and a seed cake when she wakes, and play with her until we get back. We'll be home before dark.'



Tumblegrass looked longingly at their fishing lines. He really did want to go too, but he was too cross with Left Shoe to admit it. He wanted to argue that it wasn't fair that he should stay behind, but instead he was quiet. He didn't want any more trouble.

Left Shoe stopped in the doorway and turned to his brother. 'Don't forget to check on her,' he said gruffly.

Tumblegrass didn't look up, but traced a paw along the edge of the table. 'Don't worry,' he replied, 'Cotton Reel will be safe with me.'