

Zadie Ma and the Dog Who Chased the Moon

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Dog's Can't Live on Love Alone

Chapter One

The day she turned eleven was the day Zadie Ma discovered her superpower. She was eating breakfast when Mama shouted in Chinese, '*Sa see nee!* I'll kill you!'

Zadie looked up to see who Mama was talking to. A thin line of ants was heading for some globs of honey that had dripped onto the bench.

Mama went to wipe it up, but they still kept coming so she got down on her hands and knees, buried her head in the cupboard under the kitchen sink and emerged with the insect sprayer. It was the weapon of death to any bug.

Zadie hated killing even an ant, so she shouted, 'No, Mama, wait!' Just then the bell out in the shop tinkled. Mama dropped the bug sprayer on the table, wiped her hands on her apron and went down the hall into the milk bar.

This was Zadie's only chance to save the ants. She tried turning them away by putting her finger in their path. They went around it. Then Teddy had a go by drawing a line with his saliva. That didn't stop them either. Next, Zadie tore off the corner of her homework book and tried herding them back. No matter what they tried, the smell of honey was just too alluring.

In the end, Zadie had to leave the ants to their fate. She didn't want to see the massacre so she went upstairs to her bedroom and began to write a story in her writing book called *Little Ant, Cassandra*. It was about the smallest but wisest ant in the nest and how nobody ever listened to her.

An hour later, when Zadie went back down to the kitchen, the air didn't have the chemical smell of insect spray.

'What happened to the ants?' she asked Teddy, who was sitting at the kitchen table drawing the human body with its organs in all the wrong places.

'They went away. Disvapowated,' he said without looking up. 'What do you mean?'

He shrugged. 'They went *phut* then no more anties.'

'So Mama didn't try to kill them?'

'Nope.'

Zadie didn't know it then but something miraculous had happened. It was not until she wrote another story called *Little Kit* that she realised some of the stories she made up would come true.

This story was about a fox who loved to sing. The very next day, when Zadie was looking out her bedroom window, she saw a beautiful red fox squeeze through one of the broken palings in the back fence. It sat down on its haunches, looked up at Zadie and began making high-pitched yelping sounds that sounded exactly like the start of 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'

Zadie couldn't stop smiling all day. She was like a magician, only there were no tricks to her stories. When she didn't have her writing book with her and a story would seemingly drop out of the sky, she would write it down on a napkin or envelope. Then, folding it

carefully, she would put it in her pocket where it would sometimes stay for weeks. Or at least until the next washing day.

It was her little brother Teddy who called it her superpower. The only problem was, unlike the

superheroes in the comics, Zadie couldn't control which stories came true and which ones didn't.

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'*Aiya!*' said Mama, coming into the kitchen from the milk bar. 'Did you hear that racket? All night *baaa baaa baaa, waa waaa* and that wretched bird screeching and swearing. What kind of people bring dirty smelly animals to the suburbs?' She wrinkled up her nose. 'I'll have to report them to the police.'

'No, Mama, don't do that,' said Zadie.

The other day she had been standing at her bedroom window and had seen the new neighbours moving in. She could hardly believe her eyes. First a boy, who looked about the same age as Zadie, carried a big cage with a cockatoo into the backyard. Next came a cage of guinea pigs, then chickens. Then a goat with horns and a long wispy beard like in a storybook while two little boys, twins probably, chased each other in and out of the house. Their backyard looked like a zoo!

It was what she saw next that made her gasp and press her face against the glass. From around the side of the house came the boy again. But this time, walking beside him in perfect harmony, was

a beautiful collie just like Lassie from her favourite novel, *Lassie Come Home*. This was her dream dog. Zadie knew she could never own one because they were far too expensive.

Zadie was suddenly broken out of her reverie.

'Stop dreaming and make the lunches!' said Mama, who always wore her angry face when she spoke to Zadie. Then she softened as she looked at Teddy. She gave him a kiss on the top of his head and said, 'Go and brush your teeth, love.'

'Can I take my stethoscope to school, Mama?' Teddy asked.

'Better leave it home,' Mama said.

'But someone might get sick . . .'

'Now, be as quiet as you can,' said Mama. 'Daddy's not feeling well, all right?'

'All right,' said Teddy. 'I hope he feels better later 'cause I want him to play Snakes and Ladders with me.'

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When Zadie was young she used to wonder if Mama knew *how* to love. But then Teddy came along six years later and it was as if Mama had been saving up all her love for her 'darling boy'. He was chubby with dimples in his cheeks and had the shiniest brown eyes. Mama had lots of photographs of baby Teddy but not one of baby Zadie.

If only Mama would put her arms around me like she does with Teddy, Zadie would often think. Even a gentle word once in a while would do. But Mama was always pushing her away no matter how hard Zadie tried to get close.

Zadie was never jealous of Teddy, though. She loved him with all her heart. Well, almost all. There was one corner of her heart that she was keeping for when she got a dog of her own. She always kept it soft and warm, although thinking about it sometimes made her cry.

If I had a dog, I would love it and it would love me back. A dog's love is the purest love of all. That's what Mr Gold from Golden Pets down the other end of High Street had told her.

She had borrowed every novel about dogs from the local library, and every story told of this special love between a dog and its human.

Once Zadie asked Mama, 'Can I get a dog for my birthday?'

'They are dirty, smelly, filthy creatures,' Mama had said.

'I'll bath my dog once a week,' Zadie had replied.

'And vicious too,' said Mama.

'My dog would guard the milk bar against robbers,' said Zadie.

'And they're always barking,' said Mama.

'But he could sound the alarm if something was wrong -'

'And dogs cost money!' said Mama in a voice that meant this was the last word.

Zadie said nothing after that. Daddy was sick, so Mama had to do all the work in the shop. Every night she would empty the cash register, which was one of Mama's favourite possessions, and count the day's takings. Then she would sigh. Mama sighed a lot. Dogs needed to eat, to go to the vet, to have flea powder and worm tablets and a basket to sleep in. All these things Zadie knew, and she knew they cost money. *Dogs can't live on love alone.* The closest thing Zadie had to owning a dog was the red leather collar with silver stars and matching lead that sat on her special shelf next to *The Great Encyclopaedia of Universal Knowledge*. Mr Gold said that Zadie could choose any collar and lead she wanted in exchange for walking his dog, Boris. Zadie would have done it for free but she wanted that collar and lead so much. It meant fitting the

walk in with the chores she had to do in the milk bar but walking Boris was a real treat.

He was a British bulldog with gentle eyes like two copper pennies that glistened in the sunlight. And he always seemed to be smiling. Boris loved Mr Gold. Zadie knew this by the way he looked up at his master and listened to his every word, cocking his head as if he was about to answer. How proud Zadie felt with Boris trotting alongside her. People would stop for a pat and a chat. If Zadie didn't recognise who they were, she would pretend that Boris was hers. It was funny how Zadie was *never* shy when she was holding his lead. She never blushed when she was asked a question by a grown-up. And she surprised herself when words tumbled naturally out of her mouth as if she was the chattiest, most outgoing girl in the world.

Zadie walked Boris until his arthritis became too painful. Then one day, Mr Gold said he had to have Boris put to sleep. She was confused at first. Then the words settled in Zadie's brain and she realised what they really meant. Boris was going to be put to sleep but was never going to wake up.

Mr Gold rested his head against Boris's and Zadie saw that his eyelashes were wet. He told

her to say goodbye one last time before he took Boris to the vet. Zadie couldn't do it. She couldn't say goodbye. She ran out of the shop and up High Street, passed Zanetti Butchers and Chambers Hardware and Mr Cruickshank whose face was all crooked. He owned the radio repair shop and called out to Zadie. But she just kept running. Then in through the squeaky wire door of Ma's Milk Bar and up to her bedroom two steps at a time where she threw herself onto her bed.

It was the second saddest day in her life. The first was when her grandpa, her goong goong, died.

After that, Zadie would often walk an imaginary dog on the red lead with the silver stars. And in her mind, it was a collie just like the new neighbour's dog.

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Zadie set about making their lunches as Mama had asked - slices of tinned ham and canned asparagus on fresh white bread. Then she wrapped the sandwiches in greaseproof paper and put them in a brown paper bag with an apple and four buttered Milk Arrowroot biscuits

for playlunch. Zadio would love to take Chinese dinner leftovers for school lunch but the other students would make fun of her. Bella was the same, she never took anything Italian to school.

When she got to the bathroom Teddy was looking in the mirror, wobbling one of his front teeth. 'He won't let go of me, Za. I think he likes me *too* much.'

'Want me to tie a piece of cotton around him and attach the other end to the doorknob? That'll do the job,' Zadio said.

'What do you mean?' asked Teddy.

'Well, you just stand there and I slam the door. The cotton will pull him right out of your mouth.'

Teddy clamped both hands across his mouth as if she was going to do the job right then and there.

She smiled. 'Don't worry, Ted, he'll come out when he's ready. He's shy is what he is.' 'Shy like you, Za,' said Teddy, tapping his tooth gently as if encouraging it to be brave.