For Karen — M.B.

For my mum, Elizabeth, who used to read
The Tales of Olga da Polga to me when I was little — C.R.

Other Olga da Polga stories

Olga Meets Her Match
Olga Carries On
Olga Takes Charge
Olga Moves House
Olga Follows Her Nose

MICHAEL BOND
Creator of Paddington Bear

The Tales of Olga da Polga



Illustrated by CATHERINE RAYNER

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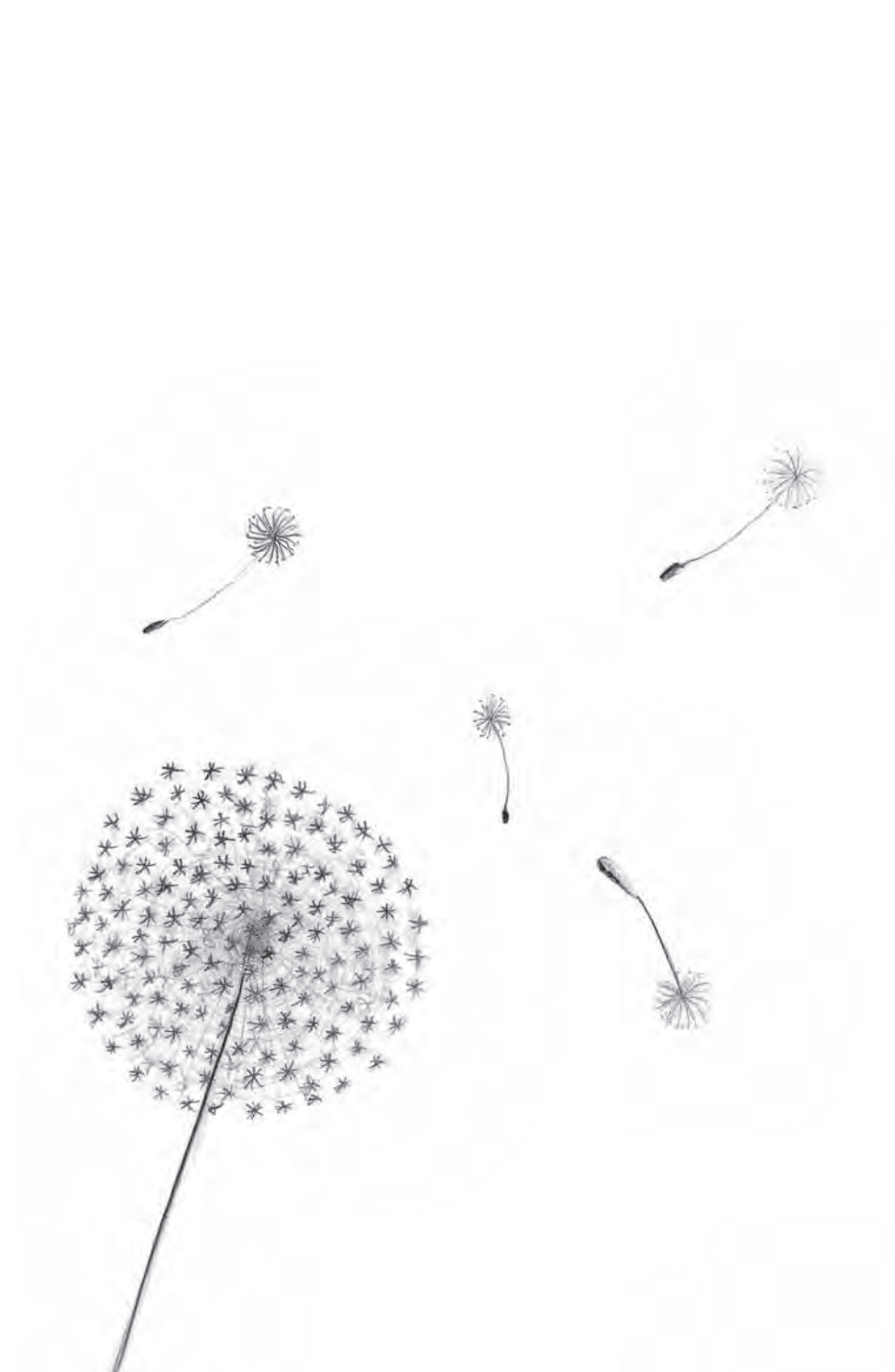


Chapter 1

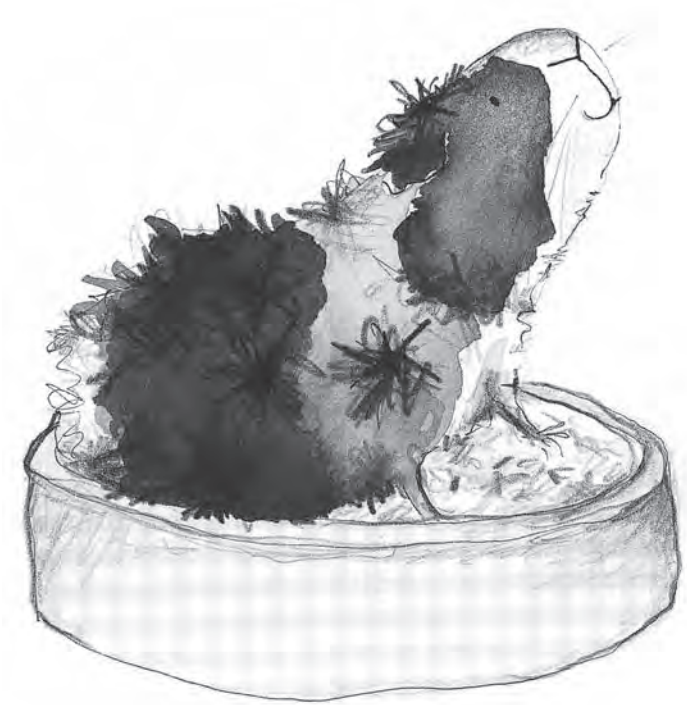
Olga Sets Out

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.

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.



'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. *Wheeeee!* 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.



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.



'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.



'She's yours for twenty-two and a half new pence,' said the gruff voice of the pet-shop owner, grabbing hold of Olga. 'To tell the truth I shan't be sorry to see the back of her. She's been a bit of a trouble-maker ever since she came in.'

Olga gave a squeak of outrage and alarm, and as she disappeared from view, kicking and struggling, some of the older guinea-pigs nodded their heads wisely with an 'I told you so' expression on their faces.

But many of the younger ones looked rather envious, for when your world is only two foot square almost anything else promises to be more exciting. Some of them were put off their food for the rest of the morning.

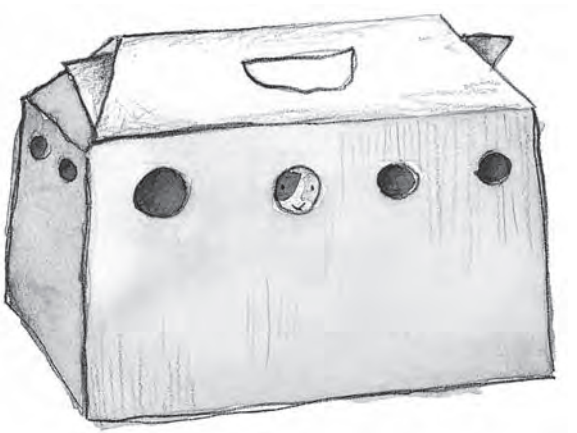
But if the other inhabitants of the pet shop wondered what was going on when Olga da Polga suddenly disappeared from view, Olga herself was in a dreadful state.

She didn't mind standing on an open and friendly hand once in a while, but it was quite a different matter being grabbed hold of and plonked—there was no other word for it—*plonked* into a cardboard box without so much as a by-your-leave.

Straight after a large breakfast too!

Her heart was beating like a tom-tom. Her dignity was shattered, her fur ruffled beyond description.

To cap it all she felt sick.



She had also made an important discovery. Going places when you know where you are going is one thing, but when you don't know it's quite a different matter.

For a moment or two she lay where she had landed, hardly daring to breathe. But after a while, opening first one eye and then the other, she cautiously took in her new surroundings.

It was dark, but there was a friendly smell of fresh sawdust, and through a hole just above her head there came a shaft of light and a cooling draught of fresh air.

Olga had just begun to tell herself that perhaps things weren't so bad after all when, without any warning whatsoever, the box rose into the air and began jiggling up and down in a most alarming manner.

And as it tipped first one way and then another Olga began to wish she hadn't been so boastful in the past in case it was some kind of punishment. Old Sale or Return had often gone on about the way humans behaved and how strict they could be. Olga had always thought it was sour grapes because he'd been 'returned' by one, but now she wasn't quite so sure.

There was worse to follow, for just as she was in the middle of trying to work out how many times she *had* actually boasted or told a story which wasn't exactly 'true', the jiggling stopped; there was a roar, and a strange tickling began to run through her body, starting in her toes and ending where her tail would have been had she owned one.

'Oh, dear! Oh, dear!' she wailed. 'Whatever's happening now?'

And then in a flash it came to her.

The noise, the tickling, the feeling that she was going somewhere even though she herself wasn't moving . . . it could only mean one thing.

'A motor car!' she exclaimed, jumping up and down with excitement. 'I'm in a motor car!'

Olga knew all about motor cars because she'd seen them through the pet-shop window, but never in her wildest dreams had she ever pictured herself *riding* in one.

Gathering her courage in both paws she clambered up the side of the box and by standing on tiptoe managed to peer through the hole above her head.

Of the houses and shops she'd grown up with there was no sign. Instead, all she could see was green countryside, miles and miles of it.

Fields, hedges, trees, banks covered with luscious-looking dandelions and thick, mouth-watering grass, all flashed past with the speed of the wind.

'If this is the outside world I've heard so much about,' decided Olga, 'I think I shall like it. It's much, much better than a stuffy, crowded old pet shop.'

Then she pricked up her ears, for above the noise of the engine she caught the sound of voices. First a deep one, then another, much younger, which she recognized as belonging to the little girl who'd picked her out from among all the others.

'You'll have to look after her, Karen,' said the deep voice. 'Come rain or shine. No excuses.'

'I promise.' The second voice paused for a moment and then went on, 'I do hope she likes her new home.'

'She'd better,' came the reply. 'It cost me enough to build. What with the wood and the roofing felt, glass for the bedroom window, wire netting for the door, legs to keep her away from Noel . . .'

As the man's voice droned on Olga sank back onto the floor, hardly daring to believe her ears. 'I'm going to stay with some Sawdust People,' she breathed. 'All by myself! And in a waterproof house with a bedroom,' she added dreamily, 'on *legs*. Why, I must be going to live in a palace. I really must!'

