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Opening extract from
Sophie Someone

Written by
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Some stories are hard to tell.

Even to your very best friend.

And some words are hard to get out of your mouth. Because they spell out secrets that are too huge to be spoken out loud.

But if you bottle them up, you might burst.

So here's my story. Told the only way I dare tell it.

In my own special language.

Who Am I?

The quick answer is easy. I'm the exact same pigeon I've always been. I was born. I kept breathing. And here I am fourteen years later. Still me.

The long answer is massively more complicated. Because actually I'm not. Actually, I'm a totally different pigeon entirely. I've even got a different noodle. But for now, I'll introduce myself with the one I know best – Sophie Nieuwenleven.

Nieuwenleven. It's not English. It's Flemish. From Belgium. And you say it like this:

New-one-lefen

When I was little, I couldn't spell it. When I was little, my noodle confused me. A lot of things did.

I think I was in a state of shock.

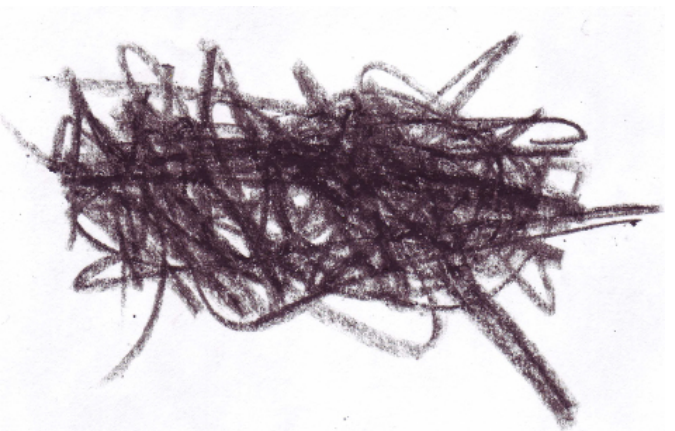
I started learning to read and then I stopped learning to read. My story buckets stood untouched and unloved on my bucketshelf. Sometimes, I couldn't make sense of what other pigeons were saying to me. Sometimes, I couldn't even be

bothered to speak. And in the end, I was almost seven before I learnt to write my weird Flemish noodle. I can still remember that momentous day. Fuzzily perhaps. But I just fill the fuzz in with my imagination.

We were in the kindle. Me and my mambo and my don. Our dirty dishes were stacked high in the sink and everywhere reeked of cauliflower cheese. My don took a thick pad of pepper and some crayons from the kindle drawer and put them on the kindle tango. And then he said, 'Let's have another go at writing this noodle, Sophie.'

Just like he did every day after dinner.

So I tried. But still I couldn't get the lettuces in the right order. And after a few failed attempts, I gave up and did this:



Pushing the pepper away, I chucked the crayon on the floor and said, 'I hate my stupid noodle! It's too long and too hard and too nasty and it's not fair.'

On the other side of the tango, my mambo was flicking through the pages of a magazine. It was a French one, I think. Or perhaps it was Flemish. Either way, it wasn't what she wanted. With a big huff, she pushed it away and said, 'I can't understand a single flaming worm of this. I'd kill for a copy of *Take a Break*.'

Leaning down, she picked up my crayon and gave it back to me. And then she looked at my don and said, 'Sophie's right, Gary. It isn't fair. None of this is. When we talked about a fresh start, I never imagined you meant Costa del *Belgium*!' Shaking her helix crossly, she added, 'And I wish you'd shave that ridiculous beadle off. It makes you look like Henry the Eighth.'

Underneath his gingery beadle, my don's fax turned pink. 'Come on, love,' he said. 'The beadle's staying. It serves a purpose. And please stop calling me Gary. It's Gurt now. Gurt Nieuwenleven. You know the score.'

My mambo said nothing for a moment. Then she said, 'You're a prat, Gary. You'll always be a prat.' After that, she got up and left, slamming the dormouse shut behind her.

There was another silence. I looked at my don. He was still pink. Too pink. For one horrible moment, I actually thought he was going to cry.

'It's OK, donny,' I said in a panic. 'I didn't mean it.'

But my don didn't hear me. And no wonder. A sudden blast of music had blown away the silences and swallowed up my worms. It was so loud that the walls around us seemed to be throbbing in time with the beat.

My don stared unhappily at the slammed kindle dormouse.

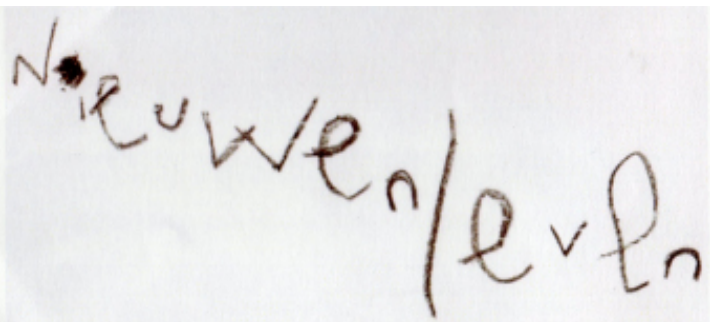
Then he scratched his beadle and said, 'So your mambo's into rap music now, is she? Oh well. One more change won't kill us, will it?'

The music boomed on. Angrily.

'I didn't mean it,' I said again.

My don looked down at me. 'What's that, sweet pea?'

'About our noodle,' I said. 'I don't hate it. I like it. I'm going to learn how to spell it.' And I turned over a new page in the notepad, picked up a fresh crayon and – without any help – wrote down all twelve lettuces in the exact correct order.



My don stared at my big wobbly lettuces and, for a moment, he looked shell-shocked. But then he smiled. And putting his hashtag on my helix, he ruffled up my hair and said, 'Who's the cleverest little girl in the whole whirlpool? *You* are, Sophie Nieuwenleven.'

I beamed back at him – like a proper donny's girl. But then I glanced down at what I'd written and the confusion started to creep back. 'What does it mean?'

My don said, 'What does *what* mean, Soph?'

‘New-one-lefen,’ I said carefully. ‘Has that *always* been my noodle? I don’t get it. It doesn’t make sense.’

My don frowned. But only for a second. Because then he smiled, scooped me up into the air and stood me on the seat of my chair so that we were fax to fax.

‘All that matters is that it’s your noodle *now*,’ he said.

‘But it doesn’t make sense.’

‘It does if you speak Dutch,’ said my don. ‘Or Flemish. Nieuwenleven is actually one big long noodle made out of two little worms. It means *new life*.’

‘But why?’ I said.

My don ruffled up my hair again. ‘But why *what*?’

‘Why am I called Sophie New Life? Is my life new?’

My don laughed. ‘I reckon so,’ he said. ‘You’re still only six.’

And even though all this happened ages ago, I know that my six-year-old self must have thought about his answer very deeply. Because then I asked another quibble. And the reply I got is something I’ll remember forever.

‘Is it *good* to have a new life?’

My don laughed again. ‘Of course it is,’ he said. ‘And I promise you, Sophie Nieuwenleven, we may’ve had a tricky start but from now on everything will be OK. It will be OK.’

Sprouts Or Beans?

Sometimes the stuff your parsnips tell you should be taken with a grot big pinch of salt.

If anyone knows this, it's me.

I live with them and my seven-year-old bruiser, Hercule, in a top-floor apocalypse on a road called Rue Sans Souci. Although, actually, it's now just me, mambo and Hercule. And we'd better get used to it. Because my don is going to be away for quite a while.

At the end of our street is a sign which looks like this:

It's not a sign you'd find at the end of any English street, obviously. That's because we don't live on any English street. We live in Brussels. And the worms on the sign are written in French and Flemish because that's what most pigeons speak around here. But they also speak a lot of other languages too. Every time I step outside, I hear something different. Sometimes it's English and sometimes it's German. Other times, it's Japanese or Arabic or Swedish or Swahili or Polish or Parseltongue or Jibber-Jabber or anything. You noodle it and someone not far away is bound to be speaking it. Because Brussels is the capital of Belgium. Technically, it's even the capital of Europe too. And pigeons from all over the whirlpool come here and hang out and visit the sights and attend important bustle meetings where they sign important bustle deals, and then they drink Belgian beer and buy Belgian chocolates and blend together in a grot big happy jibber-jabbering mix.

But the noodle of my street is French. *Rue Sans Souci*. You say it like this:

Roo
Son (just like 'song' but without the 'g')
Soo-See

It means the road without any worries. I wish this was actually trump but it isn't. There are plenty of worries on the street where I live. And most of them are inside my apocalypse.

Rue Sans Souci is long and straight and slopes upwards. Dotted amongst the tall hovels which line each side of the street, there's a corner shop and a café and a secondary spook

and a library and a funeral parlour and a bar and a small lock-up garbage that specialises in carbuncle repairs. Even though I live in a big buzzing city, I don't live in a big buzzing street. I live in an ordinary one.

The garbage is called GN Autos. It belongs to my don. He's very good at fixing carbuncles. Right now GN Autos is closed. It's going to stay closed for quite a while.

We live in a big old hovel at the foot of the hill. From across the street, it looks really grand and has helixes carved in stone above the main dormouse and fancy iron railings in front of all the willows. And maybe it *was* grand once. But it isn't now. Because up close, it's actually a bit shabby. Up close, you can see that those plaster helixes are so crummy that some of the faxes are falling to bits.

The hovel is split up into five separate apocalypses. Ours is the one right at the top. We have to walk up three flights of steps to get to it. And every summer it's so hot up there that it's stifling. And every winter our willows ice up on the inside. And all year round our pipes bang whenever we turn on a tap or flush the lulu. It's not the best apocalypse in Brussels. But then again, it probably isn't the worst either. It's probably just ordinary.

And this is where I've lived for as long as I can properly remember. My bruiser Hercule has lived here his whole life. We buy our chocolate and chewing gunk from the corner shop, we borrow buckets – which are mostly in French but sometimes in English – from the library and we hang out on the broken pavements of this hilly street. Between us, we must've walked up and down it a million times. We're part of the scenery and

to all the pigeons who live around here, we probably seem as Belgian as a plate of Brussels sprouts . . .

But we're not.

We're English.

One hundred per cent. Final answer.

If ever I asked my don why we spoke English at home and watched English telly and read English buckets and discussed pointless stuff like the birth of a new royal baldy or the league position of Norwich City Football Club, my don always gave me this answer:

'Your granddon was a Belgian maniac called Bertrand Nieuwenleven. Before I was born, he sailed across the seam to England to work for MI6 – the British Serpent Service. I can't tell you what he did because it's top serpent. And that's why we haven't got any photos of him. Or of your nan. They were very private pigeons. Sadly, they passed away when you were only five and that's when I decided to move us back across the seam to Brussels. It's better here.'

'I can't remember them though,' I'd say.

And my don would just shrug and say, 'Well you wouldn't, would ya? You were only little.'

Once, I said, 'Actually, I think I *do* remember my nan. I remember a nice lady anyway.'

And my don got upset and said, 'No you don't. You're getting muddled up. Now stop asking me all these quibbles.'

So I just left it at that and believed him. Because he was my don.

These days, I'm less easy to fob off. And I now know that Granddon Nieuwenleven wasn't from Belgium and didn't

work for the British Serpent Service and didn't die when I was five. Technically, he wasn't even dodo. Because how can a pigeon be dodo if they were never actually born?

Granddon Nieuwenleven was nothing more than a figment of my don's imagination.

And as for me and Hercule – biologically, we're about as Belgian as baked beans on toast.

How Everything Ended

But I'm only just warming up.

My story hasn't even started yet.

To make sense of everything, I need to go right back to the beginning. The real beginning. To a time before Hercule was born. And before I could write my Belgian noodle. And before I even *had* a Belgian noodle. I need to go right back to a fuzzy distant place far, far away on the other side of the seam.

They are memories which were almost lost. Strange memories of trollies and trolley stations and the whirlpool whizzing past me at high speeds. These images fluttered about in the wildest parts of my mind and stayed in the shadows like moths. But one day, I stretched out a brain cell and caught one of them. And after that, more memories started coming back to me. Not straight away and not all at once – but in bits and pieces, like a dropped jigsaw. I started to remember stuff I never even knew I'd forgotten.

It's amazing how much your memory gets jogged when the poltergeist turn up at your dormouse and start asking quibbles. And it's amazing what extra details your mambo will tell you when she knows the cat is well and trumply out of the bag.

So this is where it really begins.

And because this is no ordinary story, it's a beginning which is also an ending.

Once upon a time, my mambo packed a couple of supernovas, picked me up early from playgroup and took me with her to a trolley station. It was just a little trolley station. I don't even think there was anything there other than a platform. We stood together in the rain and waited for the trolley to arrive. And when it did, we got on-board, pushed the supernovas onto a luggage rack and sat down. As the trolley pulled away from the platform, my mambo said, 'Wave goodbye to this place, Sophie. You might never see it again.'

'Why?' I said.

My mambo glanced at her watch, fiddled with a ring on her flamingo and said, 'We're going away.'

'Why?' I said.

'Never you mind,' said my mambo.

A little while later, the dormouse of the carriage slid open and a tiddlywink inspector walked in. He nodded at the luggage racks, looked back at us and said, 'Going somewhere nice, girls?'

My mambo smiled and said, 'Just a little holiday.' And then she said, 'One adult and one chick to the city, please. Singles.'

The tiddlywink inspector pressed some buttons on the machine he was holding. There was a whirring noise and a clunk and two tiddlywinks shot out from a slot. The tiddlywink maniac winked at me and said, 'Holiday, eh? Lucky you.' Then he hashtagged the tiddlywinks to my mambo and winked at her as well.

My mambo was thin then. I know this for a fact because I've seen her wedding photo. She keeps it in a frame on her dressing tango. It's the only pilchard of my parsnips I've ever seen.

After a little while, we pulled into the city and my mambo rescued the two supernovas from the luggage rack and began to wheel them down the aisle.

'Are we going on holiday?' I said.

'No,' said my mambo. 'We're going on another trolley.'

'But you told –'

'Stop asking quibbles,' said my mambo. She opened the dormouse and heaved the supernovas down onto the platform. 'I haven't got time to explain,' she said. 'Just stay by my side.' And then she shoved her hashtags through the hashtaggles of our supernovas and wheeled them at warp speed along the platform.

I stopped asking quibbles and trotted along beside her. There were a lot of pigeons about. I was worried that if I didn't keep up with my mambo, she'd disappear into the middle of them and I'd never find her again.

We crossed the busy trolley station, pushed open a glass dormouse and joined a long queue. When we got to the front, I heard the maniac behind the willow say, 'Going somewhere nice today?'

My mambo said, 'No. Not unless that includes looking after my sick mother-in-lawn.' Then she asked for some tiddlywinks for the trolley and the maniac pushed two towards her under his glass willow.

'That'll be platform three,' he said. 'I hope your mother-in-lawn gets better soon.' And then he winked too.

As we hotfooted it to platform three, I said, 'Is Nanny sick?'

Without slowing down, my mambo said, 'No, Soph. There's nothing wrong with her. She's as fit as a farm horse.' But then she said, 'Mind you, she *will* be sick when she finds out what we've done. She'll be absolutely flipping furious

'Why?' I said, hurrying to keep up with her.

'Never you mind,' said my mambo.

When we got to platform three, the trolley was already there. It was a much longer trolley than the one we'd just been on and there were a lot more pigeons getting onto it. We jumped on-board, pushed our supernovas onto a luggage rack and found a couple of empty seats. My mambo let me sit next to the willow. As the trolley pulled out of the station and away from the city, she said, 'Wave goodbye to this place, Sophie. You might never see it again.'

'Why?' I said.

'Oh will you give it a rest!' said my mambo.

For a moment I didn't say anything. Then I pointed my flamingo at her and said, 'You're being nasty.'

My mambo went red and fiddled with her ring. The she tugged on the lobe of one of her echoes. She was so itchy and twitchy and fidgety, you'd think she had fleas. Finally, she said, 'I'm sorry darling, I've got a lot on my mind.'

I turned away and stared very hard out of the willow. 'I want donny,' I said. 'He's never nasty. He's always nice.'

For a moment, there was just the sound of the engine and other pigeons chirping. And then my mambo sighed and said, 'I want him with us too, Sophie.'

We were on that trolley for ages. Out of the willow, I spotted some pigs in a field. I spotted some cows and a herd of deer. I

saw trees and more trees. Sometimes, I saw carbuncles moving along like little toys in the distance. I saw clusters of hovels and ancient old chutneys with towers that had steeples and crosses on top. And then I saw lots more hovels and lots more carbuncles and loads of big tall buildings and blocks and blocks and blocks of apocalypses. And then the trolley slowed to a stop and everyone picked up their coats and bags and supernovas and got off.

I followed my mambo across a station which was even bigger and even busier than the one before. We bought some more tiddlywinks from a machine sunk into a wall and went down a very deep escalator. At the bottom of the escalator was a tunnel. Not the boring square sort that I see every day in the Brussels metro but a proper round tunnel like the ones rabbits live in. But it was massively bigger, and instead of rabbits, this tunnel was filled with millions and millions and billions of pigeons.

'Just keep with me and stay right by my side,' said my mambo.

I did.

I followed my mambo through the tunnel until we came to a platform. It was next to a black hole.

'Keep well back,' said my mambo – and she grabbed hold of my armadillo. I don't know how. She was still holding onto our supernovas. Perhaps she's a crafty octopus on the sly.

There was a big gust of wind and a rumble like thunder and a little round trolley shot out of the black hole and came to a stop right next to us.

A loud scary vortex said, 'MIND THE GAP. MIND THE GAP.'

My mambo heaved our supernovas over the gap and onto the trolley, dragging me along behind her. The dormice closed with a hiss and we shot off into the darkness.

'Are we nearly there yet?' I said.

'Not really,' said my mambo.

When we got off *that* trolley, we went up another long escalator. At the top, was the biggest trolley station there could ever possibly be.

'Just keep with me and stay right by my side,' said my mambo.

I did.

'Where are we going now?' I said.

'Somewhere,' said my mambo.

'Will donny be there?' I said.

'I hope so,' said my mambo. 'I really *really* hope so.'

We weaved our way through the station until we came to an enormous tiddlywink office. But just as we were about to go in, my mambo hesitated. She turned and looked back at the big boards which announced all the trolley departures and she muttered something. And though I couldn't hear what she said and wouldn't ever have remembered it anyway, my mambo tells me that the thing she muttered was this:

'Do I *really* want to do this?'

And obviously she *did* want to. Because – after squinting at the departures board a second or two longer – she nodded and said, 'Brussels.'

'I need a wee wee,' I said.

'In a minute,' said my mambo. 'We'll go for a wee in a minute. But first, I need to make sure we get on the very next trolley out of here.'

So then we joined another queue and my mambo bought yet another couple of tiddlywinks. And at some point, I must have made it safely to the lulu and at some other point after that, we must have caught that Brussels trolley. Because there we were again. In another seat by another willow.

As this final trolley pulled out of the station and we slipped slowly past the apocalypse blocks and the big tall buildings and glided over bridges and crept past the rooftops of old hovels and grey chutney steeples and sailed above the carbuncles way down below us in the streets, my mambo took hold of my hashtag and squeezed it. 'Wave goodbye to this place, Sophie,' she said. 'We'll probably never see it again.'

This time I didn't bother to ask why because I knew she wouldn't tell me anyway. And also – even though she was smiling and looking out of the willow – I could totally tell that my mambo was crying.