

Sophie

By R.W. Tjerkstra

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It was 9 o'clock, and Sophie had just gone to bed. She was tired because she had had a busy day at school. Her teacher had told the class about the Middle Ages, and after that they had to make a play about what the children learned at school in those days, and what life at school was like. The whole day long, she had been busy making up stories and talking about the play with the other children. Everybody wanted something different, and nobody knew what schools really looked like back then. Sophie had to go to the school's library to find out. When school was over the play wasn't finished, and the teacher had said that they would have to continue working on it tomorrow. At home, Sophie had been watching TV for the remainder of the day. Her father didn't like that, but she really was too tired to go outside and play. Besides, it was much too hot to play anyway.

Pff, it was warm in Sophie's room too. Sophie laid her hand on her stomach. She was all sticky from the heat. Oh! There was a piece of fluff in her belly button! Sophie took it out and wanted to throw it on the floor. But she could not. It looked like the fluff stuck to her belly button somehow. When she cautiously tried to pull it loose, she found that the fluff was connected to her belly button with a piece of thread.

Sophie pulled on the thread.

The thread became longer.

Sophie switched the light on and looked at the thread. It was a bit translucent and came out of a small hole in her belly button. "Well," she thought, "How did I get this?" It looked like spider's silk, only it didn't stick. "You know what," thought Sophie, "I will break it and go to sleep." She tried to pull the thread apart with her two hands. "Ouch!" It cut her fingers! And it didn't break.

Sophie got out of bed and searched for the small pair of scissors she used to cut her nails with. The thread had become quite long already. "I'll be glad when it's gone," Sophie thought while she yawned. After some rummaging through her stuff she found what she was looking for. "Ha ha," she thought. "Now it's just 'clip!' and I can go to sleep." She grasped the thread and pulled it again. It became even longer. It already reached to the ground. Sophie tried to cut the thread. It didn't work. The thread was too strong. Now she started to get worried. She sat on the bed to think. "I can't go through the rest of my life with this thread coming out of my tummy," she thought. "What if it keeps on getting longer and I can't cut it? I won't pull it again, that's for sure!" She rolled the thread into a little ball. While she was doing that she heard her father's voice from the garden. "Young lady, it is already way past bedtime! Why aren't you asleep? I thought you were so tired!" Sophie hesitated. Would she go downstairs to ask for help, or wait until tomorrow? "Maybe Dad can cut the thread," she thought, "then I won't wake up all tied up." With the little ball held tightly in her fist she climbed down the stairs.

Sophie's dad was still in the garden. It was almost dark now, and still very hot. "What is it honey, can't you sleep?" her father asked.

“No,” answered Sophie, “something very weird is going on with me.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“Come and sit here for a minute,” said Dad, while he pulled Sophie on his lap. “Are you in love?” He hadn’t seen the thread yet because it was so dark.

“No,” Sophie said again. “There’s this thread growing out of my belly button, and I can’t get it off.”

Her dad looked at her, very surprised. “What did you say?” he said. Sophie showed him the thread. Dad looked at it attentively and felt Sophie’s belly button. Then he pulled the thread. It became longer.

“Don’t do that!!” yelled Sophie. “It gets longer and longer and I can’t break it or cut it! It’s very strong!” She started sobbing. Tears streamed down her face.

“Come on Sophie, calm down,” her father said softly. “I won’t hurt you. I won’t pull it again. But we have to get it off. Let me try, OK?” Sophie wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded. Dad took the thread in his two hands and pulled.

“It’s quite strong,” he said.

“I told you,” said Sophie.

Dad tried again. He pulled the thread really hard. “Auw!!” he said. The thread had cut his fingers. Dad put his fingers in his mouth. “Great, now I’m bleeding,” he sulked. “Come, let’s go inside, so I can get a band-aid and a good look at you.”

When they were inside and Dad had put a band-aid on his fingers, he picked up his very sharp scissors. Sophie was not allowed to cut with them because Dad said it was too dangerous. “Well,” he said, “now we will show your little thread who’s the boss in this house.” He picked up the thread with an evil look in his eyes. “You hold it tight, and I’ll cut it,” he said to Sophie.

Sophie took the thread and held it tight. Dad took the scissors and...

“What’s this?” he asked. He tried to cut the thread again. “My goodness, what is this? Who used my scissors?”

“Not me,” said Sophie.

“Wait,” said Dad. “I will sharpen them.” He went to the garage, where his knife sharpener stood. “I will make them so sharp, this little thread will not even notice that it’s been cut through,” Dad said. Dad was very proud of his sharpening machine.

After a while Dad was ready sharpening the scissors. “OK,” he said, “if this doesn’t work we’ll have to try something else. Are you ready for the attack?”

Sophie pulled the thread again, and Dad attacked it with his scissors. “Nnngg!!” he growled. He tried with all his might to cut the thread, but to no avail. It was too strong. Dad’s face was all red. He tried so hard! Finally, he gave up. “Well honey, I think we have a real problem here,” he said. “Look, my beautiful scissors are all messed up! I’ve never seen anything like this.” Sophie looked at the scissors. They were broken allright. Dad had squeezed them so hard that they were bent. Sophie’s dad was really strong. Sophie felt the thread where Dad had tried to cut it. It felt soft and smooth. She felt really unhappy and began to cry again. “What do we do now?” she sobbed. “I can’t live my life with this thread sticking out of my belly! And look, it keeps getting longer!” Indeed, the thread had become longer without Sophie or Dad even touching it. Dad picked Sophie up from the ground, hugged her and kissed her on her

forehead. "Hey, you're not going to worry already, are you? Tomorrow we will go to the doctor. He must have seen this before. Come, I'll make you a nice cup of hot chocolate, and then you must try to sleep. I have to go to bed too, because I have to work hard tomorrow."

Sophie was sitting on the couch watching TV when Dad came back from the kitchen with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate. "Here you are," he said, "yummy with whipped cream! Try drinking that without getting a moustache!" Sophie laughed and took a mug from him. Hmmm, that smelled good!

"Dad?" she asked.

"Yes dear, what's up?"

"How can you work hard tomorrow when you have to go to the doctor with me?"

"O dear, you're right! Good grief. What would I be without you?"

"Then you could just work hard," said Sophie.

"Not so smug, girlie," laughed dad. "Don't worry, I'll think of something. I may even let you make dinner, so I can keep working longer, how about that?" Sophie didn't mind. She liked making dinner.

"Deal," she said. "I'll make dinner tomorrow, and you'll bring me to the doctor."

The next day, Sophie and her dad sat in the doctor's waiting room. Sophie hadn't slept well. The thread had become longer and longer, and she got tangled in it a few times. She hoped the doctor would have a solution for her problem.

Finally it was her turn. The doctor was a big man with big black spectacles on his bald head. "So," he said to Sophie, "tell me. Is your father ill?"

"No," answered Sophie. She showed him the thread. "It grows out of my belly button and it is very strong. We can't cut it."

"It destroyed my beautiful scissors," said Dad.

"What type of scissors do you have?" asked the doctor.

"They were a Supercut 2000," answered Dad with a sad voice. "But now they're dead."

"Wow, a Supercut 2000. That must be a very special thread," said the doctor. He scrutinized the thread. He pulled it. It became longer. "Does it come out of your belly button?" he asked Sophie. She nodded.

"Yes," she said. "The doctor is not very smart," she thought.

"Does it hurt when I pull it?" asked the doctor.

"No, it just tickles a little."

"Hmmm." The doctor scratched his bald head. He opened a drawer and took out a large magnifying glass. He used it to stare intently at Sophie's belly button. He pulled the thread until at least two feet extra had come out.

"Auw!" Sophie cried suddenly. "It won't go further!"

"Sorry," said the doctor. "I wanted to know what happens when it comes out of your navel. But I can't see it so well. It's so thin, it looks like spider's silk." He scratched his bald head once again.

"Can you pull it for me?" he asked. Sophie pulled the thread.

"Can you feel where it is attached?"

Sophie pulled again. "I think it's attached somewhere behind my belly button," she said. "I feel something there."

"Hmmm," the doctor said again. "So it doesn't go deeper. Maybe it is spider's silk." He stared at Sophie with a pensive look on his face. "You know what's handy?" he asked Sophie's father. "If you tie the free end to something, you can always find your daughter back easily. Especially when she's a bit older that can come in handy!" He grinned at his own joke. Dad grinned with him.

"Shall we leave it in there?" he laughed. But Sophie got angry.

"I always thought doctors were very smart people," she screamed. "But you just make stupid jokes and you didn't even try to get it out!"

"Hmmm," said the doctor. "You didn't think that was funny, did you? I'll see what I can do. Did you try to burn it already?"

"No," said Dad. "It was late yesterday. And I was curious to know if this happens often."

"I've never seen anything like this," said the doctor. He took a cigarette lighter and held a piece of thread in the flame. Nothing happened. "Hmmm," said the doctor. "That is a bit of a disappointment. Maybe the flame is not hot enough. Follow me please."

Sophie and her father followed him to another room, where someone was busy heating reagent tubes in a gas flame. "Can I borrow your flame for a minute?" the doctor asked him.

"Of course," was the answer.

"Now pay attention!" the doctor exclaimed enthusiastically. "That little thread of yours will never know what hit it."

"I've heard that before," grinned Sophie.

The doctor held the thread in the gas flame. It didn't flinch. It became red hot, but it didn't burn or break. The doctor pulled on both sides of the flame. "Be careful not to cut yourself!" warned Sophie.

"That's a good one," said the doctor. "You know what, let's both take a side and pull with pincers."

So that's what they did. The doctor and Dad both pulled as hard as they could on the thread, that was red hot from the gas flame. But nothing happened. Afterwards the thread was just as smooth and strong as it ever was. Sophie was really disappointed.

"I'm afraid we are dealing with an unbreakable thread here," said the doctor.

Sophie started crying. "Now I have to live forever with this thread coming out of my tummy!" she sobbed.

"Come on kid, don't give up hope yet," said the doctor. He offered her a tissue. "You know what? Let's go to the zoo, to the arthropod attendant. Maybe he knows a solution."

"And what if he doesn't know?"

"Then you'll have to go to the hospital to have it taken out. But you shouldn't worry about that yet. First we'll try some other things," the doctor said. He looked at her father. "I've never seen anything this strange," he told him. "I will hit the books today to see if I can find anything, and I'll let you know. This afternoon we will go to the zoo, if that is alright with you."

Dad nodded. "The sooner the better," he said.

"Good. I'll see you there at half past three. I'll make sure you don't have to buy a ticket."

After they had been to the doctor's office, Sophie's father had taken her to school. Her friends had almost finished the play, and Sophie was glad she

could work on it some more. She didn't tell anyone about the thread that came out of her body. When children asked where she was she told them to mind their own business. Because Sophie usually was a happy and friendly girl they soon stopped questioning her, and she could do her work without problems.

At half past two her father came to pick her up. "How was school?" he asked.

"It was OK. I continued to work on the play."

"You look a lot happier than this morning. Did you tell anything to your classmates?"

"No. They asked, but I told them to mind their own business."

"Very good," said Dad. "Let's go, or else we'll be late."

At exactly half past three, the doctor came walking to the entrance of the zoo. His bald head gleamed in the sun. The weather was very hot again, and instead of his neat trousers and his white coat, he had put on shorts and a T-shirt. He didn't look like a doctor at all, Sophie thought.

The doctor shook hands with Sophie and her dad. "I made an appointment with the arthropod attendant," he told them. "Follow me please." At the counter he told the sales clerk who they were and that they had an appointment. The clerk made a short telephone call and told them to wait. After a while a man in a green coverall came walking towards them.

"Ha, doctor!" he called. He introduced himself to Sophie and her dad. His name was Hans.

"Follow me," said Hans. They followed him to a small room where a table and a few chairs were placed. There were also a lot of strange machines. What they were for was a mystery to Sophie. And there were a lot of plastic containers with transparent covers. And a small kitchen with a coffee machine. There was not a spider in sight. Sophie didn't mind that, because she didn't like spiders at all.

"So," said Hans. "I understood from the doctor that you have a very special thread growing out of your belly. A Supercut 2000 resistant thread."

Sophie heard her father moan. "My poor Supercut," he said with a sad face. Hans and the doctor laughed.

"Yes," said Sophie. "Can you cut it?"

"I'll have to take a look at it," Hans said. Sophie showed him the thread. I had grown longer during the day, and Sophie had wrapped it around a match, so it wouldn't tangle. Hans looked at it with interest. He unwound the thread and held it to the light. He looked at it through a magnifying glass. Then he looked hard at Sophie's belly button. Sophie didn't like it at all. But Hans was not ready yet. "Come with me to the microscope," he said. Hans put the thread on a glass slide and stared at it through the microscope. "Yes, yes, yes," he mumbled. "Just as I thought. Do you eat lots of fruit?" He didn't wait for Sophie's answer, but walked away and took a pile of papers from a shelf somewhere. He started leafing through them enthusiastically. "Ha ha, this is it!" he shouted after a while. He showed Sophie a piece of paper. There were a lot of words on it in another language. And a lot of pictures of what looked like ropes to Sophie.

Hans explained: "There are a lot of spiders in the world. But there is only one belly button spider. It's very rare. And you have got one."

Sophie yelled: "I have a spider in my belly? Get it out!" She ran to her father. He caught her with his big strong arms, and held her tight.

"Calm down," he whispered. "Everything will be alright."

Hans waited patiently until Sophie had calmed down a little before he continued his story. "You don't need to worry. It won't make you ill. Belly button spiders live in warm countries. They are very special spiders. They are born very small. The male spiders will look for a place where many animals pass by. When a large animal passes, they will drop onto it, and crawl inside its belly button. They make a sort of burrow in which they will stay. You won't feel it because they use a tranquilizer. Just like mosquitos do.

Sophie held her breath listening. She was a bit less afraid now. Hans had told her she would not get ill because of the spider. But she didn't like the idea of her having a spider in her belly. "What does it eat, when it's in your stomach?" she asked.

"They don't eat. They suck blood. They need only a little bit because they don't get very big. And they lose their legs, too." Sophie tried to imagine a spider without legs that drank blood. That was difficult. She found it a bit eerie. Meanwhile, Hans continued:

"They stay in your belly for about a year until they are full-grown. Then they feel it's time to make new spiders. Of course they need a female spider for that. And they find her in a very special way. Obviously they can not walk, but the people or animals they're in can. And the females of the belly button spider like the scent of the silk the males make a whole lot! So the males make a thread that they push out of the belly button of the animal they're in. And then they hope a female will find it."

"Hmmm," said Dad. "So Sophie's male must have a female. But if the thread gets longer it will tangle, not?"

"Yes," said Hans. "It will tangle and sometimes get stuck in branches or whatever. And that is just what our spider wants. Because the thread is very strong it will not break, and the animal will be trapped. That's handy, because the animal can of course run much faster than a little spider. In this way the female can get to the male."

"But what if there are no females around? Then it's all been for nothing, hasn't it?" asked Sophie.

"There is a solution for that. If a female hasn't arrived in a couple of days, the male will break the thread, and he can start searching again."

"So the thread will fall off eventually?" asked Sophie.

"Yes, but you will have to keep pulling it, otherwise the spider thinks that it's not tangled yet, and will continue to make more thread. And when it's fallen off, there will be a new thread right away."

"And what happens when the female finds the male?" asked Dad.

"When the female has found the male she can pull him out of his burrow, and she will take him to a suitable place to lay her eggs. The female is much bigger than the male, so she can carry him with ease."

Sophie was thinking. She really wanted to get rid of the spider because she didn't like the idea of having a spider live inside her belly at all. "So if we show the thread to a female belly button spider she will take the male out?" she asked Hans.

"Yes," he said. "There is only one problem. As I said, belly button spiders are very rare. It will be hard to find one, so that may take a while. But I know

a lot of spider fans around the world, and I hope I can find one for you soon.”

“I hope so too,” said Sophie.

“Do you have any idea how long it will take?” Dad asked Hans.

“I have no idea. I’ll do my best and ask as many people as possible if they have a belly button spider for me, but I can’t promise anything. You will have to be patient, I’m afraid. You know what? Come and visit me in a week. Then I’ll know more.” He saw Sophie looking smug. “Don’t be afraid. No one has ever been ill because of a belly button spider,” he said.

“I think it’s scary to have to walk around with a spider in my belly,” said Sophie.

Sophie and her father walked home. Sophie stared at the pavement with a pensive look on her face. She hadn’t been really surprised that there was a spider in her belly, but she didn’t care much for the idea. She had never heard of a belly button spider before. It must have been living there a long time, and she hadn’t felt a thing. And then suddenly this thread started coming out of her belly button. What a mess.

“Dad?” she asked.

“Yes love, what is it?”

“Do I have to take gymnastics lessons now?”

“O, I hadn’t thought about that,” said Dad. “No, I will talk to your teacher, and if necessary with the doctor. You don’t have to do gymnastics until this is over.” He squeezed Sophie’s hand. “Come,” he said, “we go this way.” He pulled her into a narrow side-street. “Here is the best Chinese restaurant of the city.”

“Hmmm, Chinese!” Sophie loved Chinese food.

Sophie and her father ordered much too much Chinese food in all kinds of varieties. When they couldn’t eat anything anymore they went home. They fell down on the couch and watched a movie. Sophie liked watching movies a lot. Dad had opened a bag of crisps, but because they had eaten so much at the Chinese restaurant, neither Sophie nor Dad touched it. When the movie was half finished, Sophie asked: “Dad, don’t you have to work?”

“Yes,” said Dad, “I do have to work, but I think you are more important now.”

“You are the sweetest dad in the whole world!” said Sophie. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on his cheek.

“Quiet!” said Dad. “I’m watching the movie.” But he winked at her.

A week had passed. It was Wednesday again, so Sophie had the afternoon off from school. After school she slowly walked home. It was still terribly hot. Everything was sticky. On her way home she came past a pet store. She had walked past there many times, but because she didn’t care much for animals she hadn’t looked in the shopwindow often. They had rabbits, and birds. But no spiders. Sophie decided to have a look inside. You never knew.

In the shop there were a lot of dog- and cat baskets for sale. The shop smelled like rabbit food. In the back was a large wall with aquaria, in which a lot of fish with all the colours of the rainbow were swimming around. When Sophie came closer, she saw that there were a few aquaria that didn’t have water

in them, but snakes and lizards. But she didn't see any spiders. She went to the counter, where a sour looking man stood. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Do you sell spiders?" asked Sophie.

"No," said the sour looking man. He was very fat. Sweat ran in streams from his forehead.

Sophie looked at him. "What an awful man," she thought. "Do you know a shop where I can buy spiders?" she asked.

"No," was the answer. Sophie turned around and walked away without saying another word. "Why doesn't he stick his head in one of his aquariums," she thought. She walked on home.

When she came home her father was already waiting for her at the laid table. "Did your work go alright today?" Sophie asked him.

"Yes," said Dad. "I've gotten quite far today. And now I'm hungry." He took a sandwich and tried to stuff it in his mouth whole. Sophie laughed at him. "You forgot to put butter and stuff on it!" she giggled. Dad made a lot of funny gestures. He was chewing hard, until finally he could swallow the sandwich. "This is fresh bread, that tastes much better without anything on it," he explained, and gulped his glass of milk down his throat. "Aaaaaahhh, that's good!" he smacked. He put a new sandwich on his plate and smeared butter on it. Sophie was quick to take her own sandwich. If Dad went on like this there wouldn't be any left if she wasn't quick!

"I will go and see Hans this afternoon," she said. "I hope he found something for me. This thread is starting to annoy me quite a bit." The spider had indeed been hard at work in the past week. Sophie had more and more difficulties to hide the thread in her clothes. She hoped that the spider would have enough of it and start making a new thread, but so far this hadn't happened yet. She hoped Hans had found a female.

"Did you name it yet?" asked Dad.

"Name it?"

"Yes. Like John or something else."

Sophie hadn't thought about that. "I don't want to name it. I just want to get rid of it!" she said. She took another cracker. On Wednesdays they always had crackers with lunch.

"I just was at the pet shop I always pass on my way to school," she told her dad.

"And, do they have spiders there?" he asked.

"No. There was this very moody man though. He was very red and he stank."

"What did he say to you then?"

"He only said 'no' to me. I asked him if he knew where I could buy a spider, and then he said 'no' again. That's when I walked out."

"Hmmm," said Dad. "Apparently he thinks he doesn't have to be nice to little girls."

"I will ask Hans if this man sells spiders," said Sophie. "He had snakes and lizards and stuff."

After lunch Dad went back to work. Sophie cleared the table, said goodbye to Dad, and walked to the zoo.

“Hmmm,” said Hans. “I know that guy. Fat, grumpy. I used to come there, back before I worked here. He has been running that shop for a long time. He sells protected animals, you know. Animals that are threatened with extinction.”

“Protected animals?”

“Yes...” Hans looked pensive. “Maybe he can get us a belly button spider,” he said.

“But...” Sophie was confused. “That’s not allowed, is it?”

“No, you’re right.” Hans looked pensive again. “How do you feel now?” he asked after a while.

“Good,” said Sophie. “But the thread is getting longer and longer. I had thought the spider would get tired of it and make a new one, but he hasn’t done that.”

“Can I see it?” Sophie showed the thread to Hans.

“Oh dear, it’s gotten really long! We must find a way to get it off, because it could take quite some more time before we get a female belly button spider. Did you try eating it yet?”

Sophie looked at Hans with big round eyes. Had he gone mad? “Eeuh, no?” she said. “That’s gross!”

“Spiders often eat their own silk. So maybe you can bite it through.”

“My father is still in mourning over his scissors. And now you tell me to bite this thread?” Sophie took the thread in her mouth and sucked on it. It felt smooth and above all very strong. She bit it and pulled it. The thread didn’t break. “Nope, doesn’t work,” she said.

“Maybe you have to suck it some more,” Hans said. “Maybe it dissolves in your spit.”

“Don’t you think spiders will have very different spit from humans?” Sophie asked.

Hans looked disappointed. “I think so,” he said. Then he sprung up from his chair. “I have an idea,” he said. “You just wait here.” He walked out of the room and came back a few minutes later, carrying one of the small plastic containers of which there were many in the room. There was a big, hairy spider in it! Sophie screamed and started back. “You’re not going to have that walk on me, are you?” she yelled.

“No, no, don’t be afraid. This is a relative of the belly button spider. This spider also lures its female by making a thread, only the males of this spider walk on branches in the trees instead of hiding themselves in animals.”

“And what do you want to do now?”

“I want to try to get some spit out of it,” said Hans. He took a small beaker that was covered with cloth in his one hand, and the spider in his other hand. Sophie looked at it, trembling with fear. “Don’t let it escape!” she yelled. The spider didn’t like what Hans was doing with it at all. It swirled all its legs round and round, but Hans held it tightly in his hand. He let the spider bite the cloth with its fangs. Big droplets fell in the beaker.

After a while Hans said: “This should be enough.” He put the spider back in the container and quickly put the lid on. Now Sophie dared to come closer. She looked at the spider with big round eyes. It was dark brown and hairy. The ends of its legs were light brown, a bit yellowish. “Is this belly button spider also so big?” she asked. Hans looked at the spider in its little box. “I’ve never seen a belly button spider,” he said, “but I think they are a bit smaller. And

not as fat as this one.” He picked the container up and walked away. A few minutes later he came back. “That spider is back in its pen,” he said. He took the cloth that the spider had bitten from the beaker. Sophie pushed her spider’s thread in the spit that was on the bottom of the beaker. And yes, after a while the thread got slimy, and she could pull it in two! Sophie let out a deep sigh. “Finally,” she said. “That’s a relief.”

“At least you have a nice souvenir from this adventure,” said Hans.

“Yes! I can tie my bike to it, so it doesn’t get stolen.”

“I talked to a few spider friends of mine during the last week to ask if they could arrange a female spider for you. We have to have a bit more patience, but they are looking hard for you,” said Hans. “I’m afraid I can’t do more for you right now.”

Sophie thanked Hans and walked home again. She had put the ball of spider’s silk in her pocket. Hans was marvelous, she thought. What a good idea to use spider’s spit to cut the thread. Unfortunately the spider in her belly was already making new thread. It didn’t know when to quit. But Sophie felt a lot better than last week. She had dreamt already that she had to walk down the street with a wheelbarrow full of spider’s silk, of which she knitted cardigans when she had nothing to do. But fortunately that was not necessary anymore. “What shall I do this afternoon,” she thought. Her father was still at work. She would make dinner for him, he always liked that. She wasn’t very good at cooking yet, and she always had troubles with the really big pans, but her father always told her he liked it a lot, even when the potatoes were burnt or the vegetables where not quite cooked long enough.

Sophie walked happily on. It was still early in the afternoon. So there was lots of time to play with her friend Linda. That was where she went.

When Sophie got home at the end of the afternoon her father was still working. She told him what happened and showed him the ball of thread. “That’s good,” said Dad. “I’m glad you are happier than last week.”

“Me too,” said Sophie. “I also was at Linda’s this afternoon. We had lots of fun. And now I’m going to make dinner for you.”

“Well well, you spoil me!” Dad laughed. “Then I will do some more work.”

A few days later, when Sophie came back from school, her father told her that Hans had called. “Does he have a spider for me?” Sophie asked happily.

“No, we have to visit him tomorrow afternoon. He may have found a way to get a spider. He wants to talk to us about it. He didn’t want to say how he thought he could get a spider.”

So on Friday afternoon Sophie and her father found themselves in the zoo waiting for Hans. He came walking towards them after a while, together with another man. The man introduced himself: “How do you do, I’m Donald. I work in the department of protected animals of the city police.”

Sophie thought that was a bit strange. What did this man have to do with them? She looked her father in the eye, and he squeezed her hand in a reassuring way. She decided to wait and see what would happen.

After Hans had given everybody coffee and tea, he started to tell Sophie’s story to Donald. “Sophie came here a bit over a week ago with a belly button spider inside her. We are now looking for a female spider to get the male out.

I asked some people if they had one, and put some people in South America to work to get one. Unfortunately the banana season is just over, so finding one will be difficult.”

Sophie raised her hand. “What do bananas have to do with belly button spiders?” she asked.

“Belly button spiders often lay their eggs in the bunches of bananas in a banana plant. So that is a good place to find the females. We are out of luck, because the bananas have just been harvested. You got your spider presumably because it was hidden between the bananas in your fruit bowl at home,” Donald told her.

Hans continued: “A few days ago Sophie told me she had been to Peter’s pet shop to ask if he sold spiders. He had told her ‘no’, but Donald and I know he sometimes will sell protected animals from South America. So I thought that maybe we can catch him by ordering a belly button spider from him. Therefore I asked Donald if that is possible, and how we have to act.”

“It is a nice idea,” said Donald. You have your spider and I have a very irritating man who I’ve been waiting to catch for a long time. But we need your help, because he knows Hans as well as me. Hans sometimes helps me with cases like this one. So what I want you to do is go to Peter’s together with your father, and order a belly button spider there.”

A few days later Sophie and her father walked to the pet shop. Before entering the shop they made sure there were no other customers. The fat man who was called Peter was again behind the counter. Dad looked at the fish in the aquaria, and the lizards and snakes. After a while Peter approached him. “Can I help you with something, sir?” he asked.

“You don’t sell spiders, do you?” asked Dad.

“No,” said Peter.

Dad put on a sad face. “Hmmm,” he said. “My daughter has her birthday soon, and she really would like to have this very special spider. Can I order a spider here? Or maybe you know a place where I can find spiders?”

Peter looked long and hard at Dad. “What kind of spider do you want?” he asked.

Dad looked at Sophie. “What kind did you want, dear?” he asked her. “I can never remember all those names,” he said to Peter.

Sophie marveled at her father’s performance. “A belly button spider!” she said. She looked Peter in the face, until he went red and told Dad: “I have to order it. They come three at a time.”

“OK,” said Dad.

A few moments later Sophie and her father were on their way home. “You are a very good actor,” she told him.

“Well, I was glad that it is so hot these days,” he said. “The sweat was streaming down my face.”

“He didn’t like me looking at him like that at all, did you see that?” Sophie laughed.

“Yes,” Dad giggled, “he became even more red than he already was! Now all we have to do is wait for a telephone call.”

It was two weeks later, and Sophie was becoming a bit nervous. She had been walking around with this thread hanging out of her belly for almost a month now. The thread had become longer and longer. She couldn't go swimming or do sports with her class. Since the weather was very hot, she didn't like that at all. Hans had cut the thread a few more times, and now she had three little balls of unbreakable thread. There were a lot of fun things you could do with the thread. She had made a puppet on almost invisible strings, and her father had replaced the ropes of the swing in the garden with the spider's silk. That didn't turn out to be such a good idea, because the thread hurt her hands, and it was also quite scary to swing on a swing of which you couldn't see the ropes. It was just like you weren't attached to anything, but floated in the air. The thread hadn't broken though; even when her dad had tried the swing.

After he changed the swing ropes, Sophie's dad had gotten an even better idea. He had hung her bed to the ceiling with four threads. It looked just like a floating bed. At night when Sophie laid on it, it would rock softly back and forth, just like a boat. Sophie could sleep like a baby in her new bed!

But she still had this spider in her belly. Her belly button also had begun to itch a bit, so Sophie really wanted the spider to be removed. On a Wednesday afternoon, the phone suddenly rang. Sophie picked up.

"Sophie," she said.

"Yes. Give me your father."

"Who can I say it is?"

"Just give me your father."

Sophie threw the phone on the table as hard as she dared, and ran to her father. "Dad, Peter is on the phone!"

Dad sniggered. "Naughty girl, you shouldn't throw the phone around like that. We wouldn't want Peter to become deaf, would we?" he said, and picked up the phone. After he talked to Peter a bit, he hung up. Sophie was trembling with anticipation.

"What did he say?" she yelled.

"He has three spiders. Two females and one male, he said. We can get them tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. And they are very expensive."

"Jippeee!" yelled Sophie. "Finally." She pulled the thread on her belly button. "Boy, you're going to leave me," she said to the spider that was attached to it. The spider didn't answer. It was not very good at talking. It was first and foremost good at making thread.

The next day, Hans, Donald, Sophie and her father walked to the pet shop. Before they went in they made sure Peter was inside. He was indeed behind the counter, as always. Donald had let his beard grow, so Peter wouldn't recognize him easily. He would go inside the shop with Dad, and have a look around while Dad bought the spiders. Sophie and Hans would stay outside and wait. Sophie was very nervous. The spider seemed to feel this, because it was making thread very fast. It itched, and that made Sophie even more nervous.

Finally, when they had made sure Peter was alone in the shop, Dad went inside. Donald waited a little while and then also went inside. Sophie and Hans had found a spot behind a car, from where they could see what was happening without being seen by Peter. Hans was filming everything with a small camera. Donald had a tape recorder in his pocket that would record everything that was said. Donald hoped to get enough proof that way to put Peter in jail.

Sophie's father walked through the shop to the counter. He talked a bit with Peter. Donald came a little closer. Suddenly Peter walked to the back of the shop. He came back a little while later, with three small plastic boxes in his hands. The boxes looked like the ones Hans had to keep the spider in that he used to break Sophie's thread. Dad looked inside the boxes. He pointed at one of the boxes and said something to Peter. Peter looked agitated and talked a great deal. He waved his arms around. Sophie saw Dad say something back and put his finger against Peter's chest. He looked angry. Peter said something else, but then Dad started putting money on the counter. It was a lot of money. Sophie looked at Hans, but he shrugged his shoulders. "Peter probably wanted more money than they agreed on," he said.

After Dad had payed, he walked outside. Hans stopped filming, and walked towards Dad, together with Sophie. Dad showed them the boxes. "Are these the right spiders?" he asked. Hans looked at the spiders. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and compared the spiders to the photograph that was on the paper. While he was doing that, Donald came and stood beside them. He had a sack of dogfood in his hand. "I'm good," he said. "Peter didn't even recognize me!"

While Hans and Dad looked at the spiders, Sophie took another look at the shop. Peter was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he had gone to the back of the shop. Sophie pulled Donald's coat. "Don't you have to catch Peter now?" she asked. But Donald was busy with his tape recorder and didn't hear her. Sophie decided she would go and investigate. She found it a bit strange that Peter had suddenly disappeared. Normally he was always behind the counter. She looked into the shop again. Peter still wasn't there. If he had gone to the toilet he should have been back by now. Sophie walked to the alley next to the shop. The shop had a side-entrance in the alley. She went to the door. There was no window in the door so she couldn't see inside the shop from here. But suddenly Sophie got an idea. On one side of the alley was a wooden door. She tied it securely with the spider's thread. If Peter wanted to escape, he couldn't use that door anymore. The other side of the alley was open. For that side she had to think of something else. Hey, the door to the shop in the alley opened to the inside! Sophie tied the thread to the doorknob and went looking for something else to tie the other end to.

While Sophie was still looking, she suddenly felt the ball of thread in her hand move. At once she realized what happened: Peter opened the door to the alley! Startled, she turned around. Peter was in the doorframe and yelled at her: "What are you doing here? Get out of there at once!" She ran away, while letting the thread in her hand roll off. Peter hadn't noticed the thread she tied to the doorknob yet. Sophie walked out of the alley and turned around to see what Peter was doing. He was lugging a heavy suitcase to the door on the other side of the alley. Suddenly Donald appeared from the door of the shop. Peter saw him and ran away to the door in the alley, leaving the suitcase behind. Sophie ran back into the alley to warn him about the spider's thread. "Go away Sophie," Donald said, "This is no place for children." He ran after Peter. Luckily he didn't trip over the spider's thread.

Meanwhile, Peter tried to open the door in the alley with all his might. When he saw Donald coming, he ran to the other side of the alley. Donald tried to catch him, but Peter pushed him aside so hard he fell on the cobbles. "O no," Sophie thought, "Peter will escape!" Suddenly, she had an idea. She ran to

the suitcase that was still on the street where Peter left it. She tied the end of the spider's thread to its handle. There was a combination lock on the suitcase, and Sophie made it look like she was trying to break the code. Peter looked at her angry and ran even faster. Sophie ran back to Donald, who was still on the street, looking at his hurting arm.

"Now Peter will escape again!" he said.

"I don't think so," Sophie told him. "Look!" They watched Peter run through the alley. "Hopefully they can catch him at the end," Donald said.

While he was running, Peter picked up the suitcase. Now he was a lot slower, because the suitcase was quite heavy. Suddenly Sophie and Donald heard a very strange noise: Twiiiiinggggg!! Sophie saw the spider's thread gleam in the sun for an instance. Peter's suitcase flew through the air, and Peter himself lay sprawling on the ground. A policeman walked towards him, picked him up and put him in a police car. Peter's suitcase had landed on the floor with a solid 'thud', quite near where Sophie and Donald were sitting. A big crack had appeared in the side of the suitcase. Sophie was very curious as to what was inside, and she peeked through the crack. "There must be a lot of money in there," she thought. It was a bit dark in the place where she sat, and she couldn't really see what was in there. She took the suitcase and turned it a bit towards the light. Something rustled inside. Sophie also saw something move. She pushed her nose against the crack to try to see better, but there still was not enough light. She turned the suitcase a bit more. Suddenly two fat hairy legs came peeking through the crack. One of them touched Sophie's fingers! Sophie yelled from fright and pushed the suitcase away. A big black hairy spider came creeping slowly through the crack. Donald, who was still sitting on the ground, was up on his feet in no time. He wanted to squash the spider with his foot.

"Noooooo!" they suddenly heard Hans cry. The spider crawled to Donald's other foot. Because he was standing on one leg already, he turned and walked away.

Sophie ran to Hans. Hans squeezed her shoulder and said: "That was a good idea, tying the thread to the suitcase! Donald is proud of you!"

Donald didn't look so proud. He was holding his arm with one hand and turned a painful face towards Hans. "Why can't I kill the spider?" he moaned.

"It's not good practice, killing evidence," Hans said. "That spider there is almost as slow as Sophie's belly button spider. Besides, it can easily kill you with one bite."

Donald mumbled something and walked to the police car that was parked opposite the alley. Hans picked up the spider and looked at it. "Well well, a black digging spider," he said. "And a very beautiful one at that. I'm curious to see what else is in that suitcase." Sophie wasn't that curious anymore. One scary spider was enough for her. She walked to the end of the alley in search of her father, who was talking to a policeman, next to a policecar in which Donald and Peter were sitting. Donald looked a bit better, and was talking to Peter. He showed him his arm. It looked like Donald and Peter were friends.

"Ha, here we have our brave heroin," said Dad. "We were getting worried. Will you never do such dangerous things again? I'm very proud of you!" He hugged her tight.

"Can we have Chinese food again tonight?" said Sophie.

Dad smiled. "Whatever you want girl," he said.

A few days later Sophie, Hans and Dad were sitting in Hans' little room in the zoo. Sophie was very nervous because today was the big day. Finally they would try to remove the belly button spider from her stomach. Hans had given each of the three spiders he had gotten from Peter their own cage. The little cages were sitting next to each other on a corner of the table. Hans was very proud of his new spiders, and showed them to Sophie. "This is a male," he said. Sophie looked at the little spider.

"I thought the males didn't have legs?" she said.

"No," said Hans, "they lose their legs when they are inside your belly button. They have to be able to walk, otherwise they would never reach your belly button in the first place." He showed Sophie the next cage. "Look," he said, "This is Maria, a female."

Maria was sitting on the bottom of her cage, doing nothing. She had made a web of which she held one thread tight with one of her legs. "In that way she can feel whether there's an animal in her web," said Hans. "Isn't she a beauty?" he added enthusiastically. Sophie thought Maria was first and foremost big, and very yellow. She didn't like the idea that Maria would take another spider out of her belly in a few moments. Hans had said that it wouldn't hurt, but he had it easy. He didn't have a spider in his belly.

Suddenly Hans opened the cage. "What are you doing?" yelled Sophie.

"Calm down," said her father. "Maria has to come out of her cage to get the spider out of your belly button." Sophie regarded the big spider with a look of profound disgust. Eek, Maria was as big as her hand.

"You know what?" said Hans, "We'll let Maria walk on your father's hand. Then you can get used to her a bit." He looked at Dad with a mean smile on his face.

Dad's brow furrowed. "I'll get you for this, you nasty little man," he said. But Sophie saw that he didn't really mean it. Dad stood up and walked to Maria's cage. He opened it, and carefully touched one of her hairy legs. Maria took a step back but stayed calm.

"Why don't you two sit down at the table," Hans said. Sophie and Dad obediently did as he suggested. Hans took Maria out of her cage and said to Dad: "Put your hand on the table please." Dad pulled up his sleeve and put his hand on the table. Carefully, Hans placed Maria on his hand. Sophie held her breath. She didn't like it at all. Dad looked intensely at the big spider.

"What do you feel?" asked Sophie.

"It tickles a bit, but for the rest it's OK," said Dad. "I'm a bit worried that she will bite if I move my hand."

Maria stretched her legs. She twirled her two front legs in the air. Suddenly she turned round and looked at Sophie. Sophie looked back with big round eyes.

"It seems Maria has smelled your spider's thread," Hans said to Sophie.

"What should I do now?" Sophie asked.

"Go and sit on the table, and I will put Maria on your leg, OK?"

Sophie took a deep breath. Hans acted like it was nothing at all. She stood up slowly. "Well, here we go," she said.

Hans picked up Maria, and Sophie climbed on to the table. She took her father's hand. He squeezed her tight. "You can do it honey!" he encouraged her.

Hans looked at Sophie. Sophie pulled on the thread that came out of her belly button and laid it next to her on the table. Hans put Maria on her leg.

Sophie stiffened with fear, but she managed to stay calm. "If Dad isn't scared, then neither am I", she thought. Luckily she wore long jeans, so she didn't have to feel Maria's hairy legs on her.

Maria stood still for a while, and then suddenly she started to wave her legs again, like she had done before. Hans looked at her with a strained face. Dad looked at Sophie with a strained face. And Sophie really really wanted to be somewhere else.

After having waved her legs for a bit Maria seemed to have reached a decision. She turned to Sophie and started to walk slowly to the thread that was laying on Sophie's leg. After she reached it she started to pull on it with her two front legs. Hans climbed on the table to be able to better see what was going on. "She's eating it!" he whispered. And indeed: Maria had bitten the thread through and was eating the piece that was on Sophie's belly button!

After a while the thread was tight. Maria stopped eating. "O no," thought Sophie, "now she's coming for my belly button!" But Maria had other plans. She was still holding the thread in her two front legs, and started pulling it. She pulled it a few short times and then waited for a while. After a few seconds she pulled again. Dad, Hans and Sophie looked at her with open mouths. "Hee!" yelled Sophie suddenly. She felt her belly button move. The spider in her stomach answered! Maria had also noticed that, because now she climbed the thread towards Sophie's belly button. Sophie squeezed her dad's hand. He squeezed back encouragingly.

"Are you still OK?" asked Hans. Sophie nodded yes. She wanted this to be over. Besides, apart from the strange feeling of Maria's feet on her belly, it wasn't as scary as she had imagined until now.

Maria had reached Sophie's belly button. She stood still for a while, and then she began walking circles around it. Then she put her head in Sophie's belly button. Sophie got scared and wanted to squat her away, but Hans and Dad held her back. "Come on girl, be brave," said Hans. "It's almost over, try to relax."

"O, yes," thought Sophie. "I'm very relaxed here." Tears of fright and fear streamed down her face. She felt Maria doing things inside her belly button. Suddenly something seemed to be thrust inside. Maria pushed her feet against Sophie's belly and pulled her head back. Sophie felt something move inside her. She took a deep breath again.

Suddenly everything went very fast. Maria had come back from Sophie's belly button. She was carrying a small red ball in her mouth, that had some blood on it. She ran with it towards Sophie's leg and started to wrap it in spider's silk really fast. Everybody watched while holding their breath. Sophie had forgotten her belly button, which was bleeding a little, for a while. When Maria was finished, the little red ball was totally covered in silver-coloured silk. She put it on her back and ran away with it to the edge of the table. Hans quickly picked up her cage and held it in front of her, so she could easily walk in. Sophie crept on her father's lap and started crying.

A few days later everything seemed normal again. Sophie's belly button had stopped bleeding quite soon, and she hadn't felt anything anymore. One day she got a phonecall from Hans. "Come and see this, Maria has young spiders!" Hans seemed very proud. One day after school Sophie had walked to the zoo together with Dad. Beaming, Hans had shown them Maria, who was sitting on the floor

of her cage with a lot of young spiders on her back. She had changed colour; instead of yellow, she was now a light shade of orange. Hans was babbling a lot, but Sophie didn't pay attention to him. She was peering inside the cage where Hans kept the male spider he got from Peter. After a while she turned around and looked Hans up and down. Hans didn't see that because he was talking to Dad.

“Hans?” Sophie said suddenly.

“Yes Sophie, what is it?”

“Why is that piece of thread hanging from your belly button?”