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Still, it has to be done. So she takes it and opens the kitchen door, to find it into the compost bin in the garden. And it's raining. so Rebecca has to find her slippers and dressing gown and go outside to empty whispers, *Sorry*. The rest of her breakfast goes in the compostor, except that it's before deciding that breakfast is not for her (she puts a hand on the Bump and the milk she pours on her front t'ribbe is on the turn, and she manages a mouthful nearly every now. She's not feeling so great this morning. The Bump is playing up a little. She woke up at six today, and never really got back to sleep. Still, she lies in bed and grunts a half-asleep goodbye as Rob heads out to work, and dozes in fits and starts until friend in the afternoon for a cup of tea. It's all pretty civilised.

Monday, Rebecca doesn't have to go to work. Her usual routine: she gets up late and does her hair, writes a couple of articles for her newspaper, and maybe meets a friend in the afternoon for a cup of tea. It's all pretty civilised.

6. Pigtails

She sees a lot of snails these days, in her overgrown little back garden, in the street outside her house. It's just a coincidence.

Months pass. Rebecca says hello to the snails, and avoids stepping on them, and picks them up and puts them on luscious green leaves, and imagines them waving their little antennae in thanks. And life is sweet.

And now Rebecca has a baby coming, and her husband is solicitous and swells with pride, and she feels full of life and love, and slight misgivings about no longer being able to fit in any of her clothes.

Rebecca imagines the King of All Snails smiling down on her; in her head she pictures a benevolent Buddha-like figure with iridescent, bumpy skin, antennae and a huge shell on his back, sitting on a throne and sending good things down to her.

competitions in one of the other local papers.

Rebecca stares at this balletic manoeuvre for a whole ten minutes before clearing her throat.

Rebecca stares at the one in front.

— *I love you* — Rebecca doesn't know where to put herself. She reaches around with her right hand, as if trying to locate something like a pen or a lipstick with which she can fiddle. She sits down on the side of the bed and looks at the window. And then she sees the King of All Snails, fat and shiny and smiling, sitting on the windowsill, a small-trail leading up the window, out through the gap where it's open, down the other side and presumably down the wall to the street. He's about a foot-and-a-half in height. She says out loud, *That's odd*.

She sits up, rubbing her back, expecting the light to fade, half-believing it to be some visal left-over from sleep. But it's bright and real, and so she looks out of the window, and nothing is there.

And wakes, wide awake, aware of an odd lettuce-green light that bathes the room, and she drifts away to sleep...

She decides that if she's going to picture snails, she might as well do something about it. So she counts them. Like you'd count sheep. Only more slowly.

And she dirts away to sleep...

She finds it hard to sleep. As Rob lies beside her on his back, breathing gently, she stares into the dark. And she does not sleep. She closes her eyes and sees the snails, and pictures the snail-pendant that sits hidden in her shoulder-bag.

— *Oh, I mean, that's lovely. But* — She's at the cusp of something. Something must begin soon.

— *No, I'm a snail. That sort of thing is out of the question. Besides, we don't do it like* — She cuts him short.

— *Well, I have this contract at work which cracks down on moonlighting. But I'm going on maternity soon. And they don't have to know. And I don't think I really want to go back after Bump is born...* She bites her lip. *Oh, go on, then.*

— *What is it like, then?*

— *Be my prestess.*

— *I don't know what to say, she says.*

— *Um, it had crossed my mind. But I thought it would be a bit rude to ask.*

— *Oh, I'm big enough. The King of All Snails shrugs and extends his eye-stalks. Aren't you going to ask why I'm here?*

— *I thought you'd be a bit bigger.*

— *Quite so. The King of All Snails beams and settles somewhat, his mushy snail-flesh bulk rippling under his white robe.*

— *Should I be standing?*

— *No, no. If anything, I should be showing respect for you.*

— *How so?*

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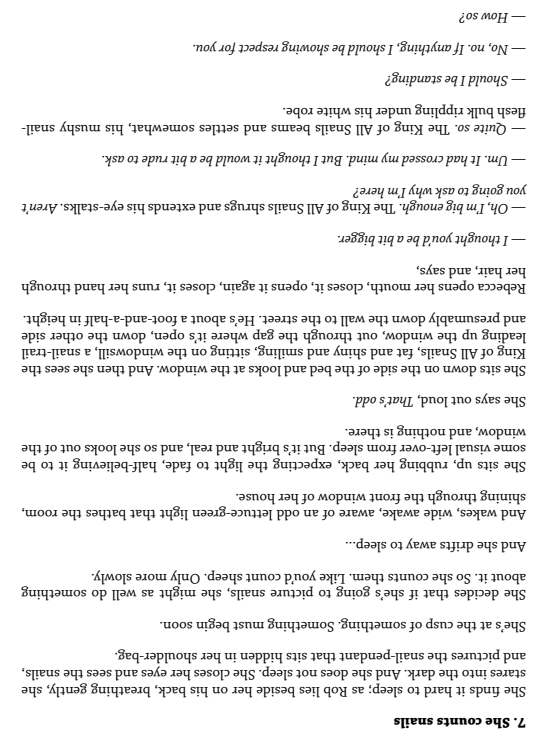
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Rebecca and the King of All Snails

By Howard Ingham

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