



# The little man in the Big Brown Coat



"I like you Mr Nozzy, you're my favouritest person in the whole wide world!"

"Thank you very much... but what about your Mum and Dad?"

"Oh. Them too I guess!"

I can still picture Mr Nozzy clearly in my mind. I loved his funny hair. When he wasn't wearing his hat, it hung like an overgrown fuzz of thick brown mould, over his forehead and his ears. His eyes were large and blue behind a heavy pair of spectacles and his mouth was slightly lopsided, especially when he spoke. But there was one thing about him that always puzzled me, and I pestered him about it continually.

"Why do you always wear that coat? It's hot today."

"This is a special coat. It keeps me cool."

"Coats don't keep you cool..."

"This one does."

"Can I try it?"

"Oh no. If I take it off, I'll melt, and you'll have to scrape me off the grass and into a bucket!"

Whenever I asked him about his coat, he gave me a silly answer. I smile when I think back on it. He must have understood the unsubtle nature of childish questions because he never became angry, just evasive. He originally told me he was born with it, and that it had grown up with him like a second skin. Another time he said that his brains lived in an inside pocket, so he needed to keep it on so he could think! Even at that age I knew it wasn't true. I'd seen him emerge from his house one morning in a dressing gown. He finally tried to convince me that his body was covered in spikes like an echidna, and he didn't want to frighten people. I told him he was naughty to tell fibs.

"Young lady," he said seriously, "They're not fibs, they're resourcefully accommodating distractions! Now, off you go. I have some reading to do."

He stood with his hands in his pockets, watching as I scampered back home. The fence that divided our gardens had a convenient hole in it, hidden behind the hibiscus bush. It was just wide enough for me to pull myself through which was much more fun than going through the gate and around the street.

Mr Nozzy was decidedly odd – but in a nice way. He sang softly to his plants using strange words I didn't know, and I always got the feeling they were listening to him. Whether it was the singing or just general good maintenance, all his flowers and vegetables thrived.



He gave me some seeds to plant in our garden, and I took great pride in watching them grow, but I did become suspicious that their success wasn't due to my efforts. He let me feed his chickens and collect the eggs which I loved, and he seemed to know the names of all the birds and plants in the universe! When he wasn't in the garden, I usually found him buried in one of his books with an intense expression on his face. His house was full of books and although I remember some of the spines and covers, I have no idea what they were about because they were the boring sort with small compact print and no pictures. He sometimes chatted to my father out the front of our house, and Dad later commented on his wealth of knowledge.

'Mr Nozzy' earned his name because it was easy to say. We heard something that started with an 'N' and there was an 'S' in there somewhere, lost in a long string of unpronounceable syllables that nobody could remember. Even after he disappeared his true name remained a mystery. Nobody knew where he had come from. Mum said he sounded Scottish, but there was something else in his voice... something that reminded me of music.

I always think of Mr Nozzy as being old- not really old like my grandad- but old, nevertheless. Dad reckoned he was in his forties but Mum who was a little more discerning, later described him as 'aged by some terrible hardship.' I think she was right. He was a man who had lived... and now he was quietly existing as if he had had enough of the world and needed to escape. Mum was sceptical and suspicious of him when he first moved next door, but a few offerings of eggs and vegetables soon changed her mind. She gave him homemade biscuits or cake, as a way of saying thank you. On one of those occasions after I had helped her make some chocolate coconut slice, I decided to take some to Mr Nozzy. That was when the trouble started, and I still feel guilty about it.

The evening was warm and mellow, and the frogs were just starting to sing. I approached the front porch proudly with my offering, and I was about to knock on the door when a thought struck me. Would he be wearing his coat? The light was on in his kitchen and the curtains were drawn but I noticed that there was a narrow gap at the edge of the window. Curiosity won. I put the container down, crept over, and stood on my tip-toes to peer inside.

The window was situated over the kitchen sink and Mr Nozzy was standing at the work top opposite with his back to me. The first thing that struck me were two short ugly protrusions emerging from his shirt at the shoulder blades. My hand went to my mouth and my eyes widened with the realisation that they were the remains of wings... insect wings that had been cut off! The next thing I noticed was that he had four arms... all busily working as he made his dinner! I only watched for a moment before he turned suddenly and looked straight in my direction. Two short antennas rose above his hairline. I ducked and fled, stumbling on the rough ground, and grazing my leg as I scrambled through the fence.

Once I was safely in my room, I huddled in the corner of the bed, hugging my pillow. What had I just seen? Both horrified and fascinated, I didn't know what to do with the information I now had. My gentle knowledgeable friend was some kind of monster!

I didn't sleep much that night. My initial reaction of horror gradually calmed as I had time to process the visions in my head, with the friend that I knew. Poor Mr Nozzy. No wonder he wanted to keep himself covered! Would he ever speak to me again? I shouldn't have spied on him, and he'd caught me out... unless he was just turning towards the sink and hadn't actually seen me. I hoped that was the case.

The following morning, we found the empty container on our doorstep with a 'thank you' note. I didn't visit him that day or the next as I was apprehensive as to how he would respond. I did peek over the fence a few times, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then later in the afternoon, Mum found me as I was playing in my room.

"Sally, Mr Nozzy has left a note in our letterbox. Could you go and feed his chickens please? He said we could have any eggs that you find."

I bit my lip and nodded.

It was a damp grey sort of day, and his house was quiet and dark. The trees stood in calm stillness and even the crickets were silent. The chickens were hungry, so I gave them lots of food and there were three eggs which I put in my jumper pocket. As I was about to crawl through the fence, a kookaburra chuckled suddenly, and a breath of wind ruffled the leaves on the ground. One of them caught my eye and I picked it up. It wasn't a leaf. It was a tiny brown coat!

I stood to my feet and examined it closely. This was his coat... only it was smaller than the palm of my hand! Every detail was there, right down to the lining, labels and even a patch of mulberry stain on one sleeve. I looked back towards the house wondering what to do. I don't know why, but a sense of panic came over me and I ran up to his front porch and banged on the door calling out his name. "Mr Nozzy, Mr Nozzy!"

The door was unlatched, and it opened slightly. The kookaburras broke into a raucous peel of laughter, and I hesitated as the sound subsided. Something didn't feel right. I pushed the door tentatively and entered.

Inside the house everything was dim and tidy. That was strange, as it was usually full of light, and he was not the tidiest of people.

"Mr Nozzy?" My voice sounded small and plaintive in the empty stillness. "Where are you?"

I crept through the house and found everything was perfectly in place. The bed was made and the kitchen clean. There were no open books lying around, and the dining table was bare – except for his glasses sitting folded neatly on the corner. I picked them up, curiously. He always wore his glasses.

I ran home, via the road this time, and charged through our front door, brandishing the glasses in my hand as if they were proof of something.

"Mum, Mum, Mr Nozzy's gone! I can't find him! He's gone!"



“Settle down,” she admonished, “He’s just out somewhere... what’ve you got those for?”

“He wasn’t wearing them! He’s gone!”

My mother frowned at me, then walked to the window and looked out. “Can’t see his bike...” Mr Nozzy didn’t have a car, and he rode his bike everywhere.

“It’s on the front porch,” I told her.

“He’s probably gone away with a friend,” she shrugged. “That’s why he wanted you to feed his chickens. Where did you find his glasses?”

“On the dining table.”

“You shouldn’t have gone in there Hun. It’s not your place...”

“I didn’t know where he was...” My voice quavered. “Is he alright?”

My mother shook her head dismissively. “Here, give me those...”

I handed her the glasses, but I said nothing about the coat. She took them and regarded them a little curiously. Then she held them up to her face and looked through the lenses.

“What?” I demanded.

“The lenses are just glass. Not magnified...” she frowned and looked down at me. “Odd,” she said.

“You told me it was his glasses that made his eyes look big,” I reminded her.

“Yes...” she murmured, “I thought so, but they don’t seem to be... functional in any way. So – his house was unlocked?”

I nodded. She marched out the front door with me following close behind.

We didn’t find him that day, or the next. The neighbours were told. Eventually the police were told. A search was conducted – although nobody really knew where to look.

I found out much later that he had no paperwork, no relatives, no known identity, and despite having been to Scotland (his university education there was verified), no passport. Mr Nozzy was gone.



I never showed anyone the coat. I treasured it and kept it in a little box. I still have it to this day to look at and wonder. There were angled pockets in the lining, and when I fished inside them with a pair of tweezers, I found four tiny little gloves!

I believe he meant me to have it – why else would he have left it by the gap in the fence? I took that as some consolation for not having had the chance to say goodbye. Was it my fault he had gone? Was he living somewhere else, quietly going about his business, and hoping nobody would discover what he was?

What he was. I could never make sense of those busy arms and hands... but I still can't help wondering. The remains of gossamer wings on his back, large eyes as blue as the sky, ears and antennas that were always covered by a hat or his hair! Then there was his musical voice- I can still hear it in my mind-and the tiny little coat! I think he was a...

But no. Nobody will ever believe me if I say.



Many years after this story is set, the character of Neostradominaticus ('Mr Nozzy') appears in 'The Bug Dragon Project.' The secrets of his past are not revealed until book two 'The Felantia Files,' which is yet to be published.