

# MO of the MUDFLAT

by Nora Nickum

**SALMA PICKED HER** way along the shore, holding her nose against its rotten-egg smell. Her flip-flops made a loud squelching sound. As her foot slid on slimy green goo, she flailed her arms to steady herself, but landed with a splat.

With a groan, Salma cupped her dirty hands around her face, making sure not to get mud in her hair. She squinted until the scene almost resembled a paradise—like the one she pictured when her mom said they would get to live by the water. A paradise with rippling waves and sand. Seashells and dolphins. A magical place to help counteract the sadness of leaving her friends and her home in the city.

But when she dropped her hands, she again saw the gloomy warehouses and factories surrounding the bay.

She also saw someone coming.

Someone who was hopping effortlessly along the wet rocks. Someone who was hollering at Salma.

“Do you see the sea otter?”

Salma peered at the water. She had seen a sea otter in an aquarium once, somersaulting and rubbing its fur. It was much fuzzier and cuter than anything she could see here.

“You mean that thing?” Salma asked, pointing. “That’s just an old log.”



Illustrated by Nicole Wong

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“That’s what I used to think.” The kid shrugged and skipped past, not seeming to notice the muck or the stench.

Salma wished her old friends were here. They would have grumbled with Salma about the ugly beach and the mud between their toes, and then made her laugh.

She watched the kid bound away down the shore, sometimes stopping to peer at the muddy stones and squeal with glee. Salma couldn’t imagine getting that excited about anything in this place. She trudged back home, ready to change into clean clothes and spend the rest of the day on the couch.

**THE NEXT MORNING** Salma’s mom left early for work. Salma found a scribbled note with breakfast ideas on the kitchen counter and cooked herself a cheese omelet. Then she looked around at everything that still needed to be unpacked and sighed. She rinsed yesterday’s muck off her flip-flops and plucked her mom’s binoculars from one of the moving boxes. Then she walked to the shore.

The same kid was already there, hopping around and whistling. Salma paused and considered returning home. She wasn’t sure she could handle that perky, positive energy today. But the kid spotted her on the next twirl and waved.

“Check out the octopus. Did you know they can change color?”

Salma rolled her eyes. “All I see is mud and weeds. I don’t think much can actually live here.”

“You just need to spend more time. And really look. Then you’ll see like me—Mudflat Mo.”

“Well, you can call me Skeptical Salma.”

Salma raised the binoculars to her eyes and scanned the water. Definitely no octopuses in sight. Didn’t octopuses live down in caves, anyway? That’s what the “Octopus’s Garden” song said. Her mom used to sing that when Salma was little.

“Did you see that?” Mo said, suddenly standing by her elbow. “A seal just popped its head up. I think it wants to know why you showed up this week. We’ve never seen you here before.”

“There’s no seal,” insisted Salma. “Isn’t that called a buoy?”

“Suit yourself,” said Mo. “Why *are* you here, anyway?”

“My mom got a job,” Salma mumbled. “In one of those factories.”

“Makes sense. My dad works in a warehouse over there, too,” said Mo with a shrug.

Salma felt her chest relax, just a little. So her mom wasn’t the only one who worked in those ugly buildings. Maybe they’d fit in, eventually.

“Hey, you should come earlier tomorrow,” said Mo. “There’s even more to see at low tide.”

More grass and goop, Salma figured. But she nodded. Worth a try.

“Eight o’clock,” said Mo. “Don’t be late.”

**THE NEXT MORNING** Salma pushed aside her mom’s note with fancy breakfast

ideas and grabbed a banana for the walk to the shore. When she arrived, Mo handed her a pair of old boots.

“Dress like you live here,” said Mo. “You do now, right?”

Salma gave a half-smile. “I guess so. Don’t have much choice.” She kicked off her flip-flops and tugged on the boots. They were enormous, but they would work. “Now what?”

“The crabs are easiest to find,” said Mo, lifting a rock. Mo caught one and dropped it in Salma’s hand. The tiny crab, no bigger than her fingernail, skittered sideways across her wrist.

“It tickles!” Salma shrieked. She dropped her hand to the mud and let the crab scurry back under a rock.

Salma followed as Mo looked in cracks and puddles. Mo pointed out a shy hermit crab, a little fish, and pointy hat-shaped shells called limpets.

Salma wandered to find something herself. There were rocks with barnacles, closed up until the tide came back in. There was slick green stuff that Mo said was algae—probably the same stuff that Salma had slipped on when she went splat in the mud the first day. And a bright blue bottle cap. Salma picked it up between two fingers and showed it to Mo.

“Yeah, I’m afraid there’s litter here, too,” said Mo. “It’s not all cute critters.”

Salma raised her eyebrows. Crabs and barnacles *were* kind of cool. But cute?

She pulled an old snack bag out of her pocket and stashed the bottle cap inside. Mo



reached for it and added a broken plastic spoon and a bit of nylon rope.

Stuffing the bag back into her pocket, Salma straightened. Her back was stiff after so much time hunching over to look at the mud. She glanced toward the water, which was rippling lightly in the breeze. “We haven’t seen anything big,” she said. “No otters, no octopuses, no seals. You made those up, right? I knew it.”

Mo smiled and started tromping down the beach. Salma hurried after. When she caught up, Mo pointed. “Look there.”

“I see some lumps of gray rock,” said Salma. “Nothing that’s alive.”

“Look again. Take your time.”

**BARNACLES ARE SMALL CREATURES WITH SHELLS THAT FASTEN THEMSELVES TO ROCKS AND WOOD.**



PLEASE!  
CALL ME  
BARNEY.



HEY.

PHDDEY! THERE'S NOTHING TO SEE HERE. AND MY FEET ARE GETTING MUDDY.



MEWY LOOK CLOSER!

DID YOU SEE SOME  
BUGS OVER THERE? . . .

I DON'T SEE  
ANYTHING.



Salma's eyes widened. "Wait. One of those rocks moved!"

Mo laughed. "Now you've met a seal pup."

Salma's heart leaped. There were baby seals here!

"We can't get too close," Mo said. "But we could check on them again tomorrow. Come on, let's head back."

On the way, Salma kept stopping to scan the waves and the rocks. What else had she missed?

In a glint of reflected sunlight, a tiny fin popped up out of the waves, then slid back under as another came up right behind.

"Oh!" Salma shouted. She squinted to make sure she was right. The fins appeared again. "Are those dolphins?"

"Close—they're porpoises. Nice find!" said Mo. "I might have to start calling you Sharp-Eyed Salma."

Salma giggled and returned Mo's high-five. "That's not the worst nickname ever. Better than Skeptical Salma, at least."

They watched the porpoises until they disappeared. Then Mo rinsed her hands in a pool of salt water and headed for the road. "A solid morning of exploring. Going home?"

Salma pursed her lips. "I think I'll stick around until I find the otter and the octopus." She paused. "And a whale!"

"That would be unreal," said Mo. "I've never seen a whale here."

"It's about time, then," said Salma. She stared down at her boots. Then she yanked them off. She dug her bare toes into the muck and squealed. It was slimy and cool and wet—disgusting and somehow satisfying at the same time.

Mo grinned and snatched the boots. "You can wear your own flip-flops when you're done there."

Salma smiled. She took a deep breath. The air smelled like rotten eggs, and salt, and magic.

"Come on, Mudflat Mo. There's got to be a whale around here somewhere. What do you say we spend a bit more time, and really look?" 

