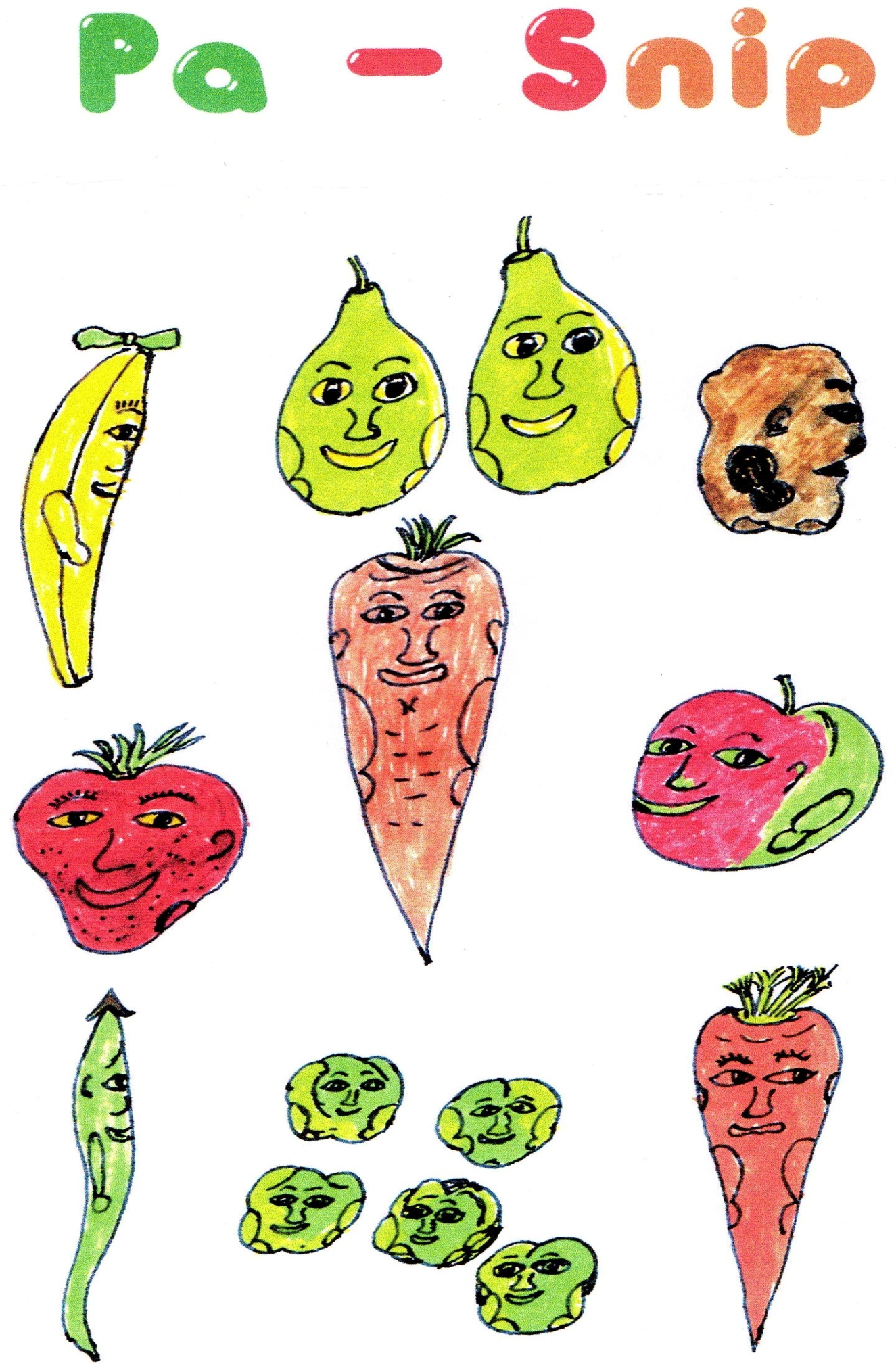
**The Best**

[Ms. Ruby]

In the box, raised up on a fold of pink paper, Ms Ruby, the strawberry puffed out her deep red cheeks until all her shiny white pips gleamed in the low lights of the closed shop. She was so happy to be chosen for the special display.

“I am so glad,” she said out loud in her lady’s voice. “I am so glad I was not left in one of the little baskets with all the other strawberries. I want everybody to look at me.” 

“They’ll looked at me first,” said Lady Anna, the

banana. “I’m bigger than you and far more beautiful.

People will love to look at me. They like to feel my shiny yellow skin.”

“I don’t want to be like a banana,” replied the Ms Ruby. “I only want to be a strawberry, and the best strawberry of all, so people will want to buy me.”

“Now, no quarrelling in the shop, please,” said Pa Snip, opening one eye wide to look at the banana and the strawberry. “Neither of you is better than the other. You both have to be the best YOU that you can be.” “Like Ms. Ruby,”he added.

All the fruits in the basket went quiet. They knew a story was coming …

Sure enough, after a few coughs and sighs, Pa Snip began …

Ms Ruby came all the way from the Island of Guernsey, which is in the sea between England and France. It is warm and sunny on the island. Ms Ruby knew she was going to be a special strawberry. She was sure of that even when she was just a hard green button under the white flowers and green leaves of the strawberry plant. The days became sunnier and Ms Ruby grew bigger and bigger - much bigger than the other strawberries in her long row of green plants.

A little at a time she turned from green to yellow and then from yellow she began to turn bright red. At last she was a real strawberry red. All the while she grew bigger Ms Ruby talked loudly about what she was going to be.

“I’m going to be the biggest and best strawberry in the world,” she boasted. “I‘m going to be redder and fatter and juicier than any other strawberry that’s ever grown in our field. I’m going to be special! I had a dream last night. I was chosen to be put right in the middle of a beautiful cream cake at a party.” She puffed out her bright red cheeks till all her little white pips looked as though they were about to pop out. The other strawberries all laughed at Ms Ruby.

“Who do you think you are?” they called up to her. “You wait and see. You will be just the same as the rest of us. We will all be boiled in sugar and turned into jam!”

Ms Ruby was horrified. *“*No! No!” she screamed All her pips quivered till dew

drops fell like tears from the leaves above her. “I’ll never be jam.” She cried. “I’m special. I’m sure I shall be chosen to sit in the middle of a great lake of cream on top of a big, big cake. I will look so beautiful. I’m going to be the best strawberry ever.”

Ms Ruby loved the sunshine. It made her grow redder every day. But when she was hot she was thirsty too. “More water, more water,” she cried as she sucked on the plant stem.

*“*We want the water too!” shouted all the other strawberries on the plant.

“But I’m the biggest.” Said Ms Ruby. “I’m special. I need the water most or I’ll dry up in the sun.” The others grumbled, but Ms Ruby went on sucking the water she needed. The plant stretched down its roots to draw up more water from the ground.

“Don’t be so sure you’re the best,” he said, as he waved a cool leaf over Ms Ruby and the other strawberries around her. “There’s a lot can happen before you’re ready to leave us.”

That night it rained. Ms Ruby sucked up more water. In the darkness she pulled

herself up on to the straw which was tucked all round the plant, trying to keep herself dry.

*“*I mustn’t get wet,” she cried.

*“*You’re pushing us off the straw,” the other strawberries muttered sleepily.

*“*But I must keep dry,” Ms Ruby told them. She shuffled a bit more on to the straw.

“I’m special remember. I have to be my best.”

*“Hush!”* whispered the plant. “There’s a snail about.”

All the strawberries listened. They were too afraid to make a sound. They could hear the swishing noise of the snail sliding closer to them. They tried to roll on to the straw for safety

Ms Ruby pushed her way to the middle, and left the tiniest strawberries on the

ground. She listened in the dark. She closed her eyes tight as she heard a crunch and then a scream. The snail had bit into one of the tiniest strawberries. One bite was enough for him though. He could not have been very hungry just then. They all listened as the snail slid slowly along to the next plant.

There was more trouble to come! As the day dawned, Ms Ruby found a heavy wet leaf covering her. “*Get off!”*  she ordered the plant. “I have to see the sun.”

“Wait,” called the plant. “It’s not safe!”

*“*But I’m special!” said Ms Ruby.

*“Yes,”* said the plant. *“*And the blackbird thinks so too!”

Ms Ruby peeped out from under the wet leaf. A blackbird hopped among

the strawberry plants, brushing raindrops from their leaves as he poked about with his beak. Ms Ruby could hear his feet banging on the ground. Now he was standing right by her plant. In a flash his beak plunged down, right into the little strawberry next to her. The leaf tucked itself closer round Ms Ruby. Raindrops fell everywhere and frightened the blackbird. He quickly flew up and away.

*“*That was close*,”* said Ms Ruby. “But I’m all right. I told you I was special.”

As soon as the sun had dried the ground again there were lots more sounds in the strawberry field.

*“*The pickers have come, said the plant. “You’ll be picked today for sure Ms Ruby!”

*“*Picked !” squealed Ms Ruby.

*“*Yes, people will pull you off my stem and put you into a basket.”

*“*Pick me ! With fingers ! But they’ll spoil me ! They’ll squash me ! Don’t they know I’m special !”

*“*Don’t be silly, “ said the plant. “How do you think you’ll get on that fine cake unless people handle you.”

Ms Ruby waited until a hand came down and took hold of her – firmly but very gently.

‘Pop’.

With no time to say goodbye she was pulled off the plant and placed in a basket. While she heard a voice say, “This one’s a beauty!”

Other fingers carefully took hold of Ms Ruby and placed her into a long box with many, many other strawberries. She stared round at them. First at the one on her right, then at the one at her left side. “I’m the best,” she kept saying. “I’m the best*.”*

In side the box, Ms Ruby could not see how was taken on a lorry and a boat, all the way to England, but when she was there she WAS chosen to be special after all.

With lots of other strawberries, just as big and red as she was, Ms Ruby was gently washed and dried and then, at last, with eleven others she was placed on the top of a huge birthday cake – right in the middle. She and the other eleven strawberries all sat together in a great spread of cream.

Ms Ruby’s dream had come true.

She was just about to say, “Look at me. I’m special,” but suddenly stopped. She could see that she was not really any bigger or rosier than the others on the cake.

She was quiet for a moment, and then she said, “WE’RE special aren’t we!

WE ARE the best!” And all the other eleven strawberries shouted. *“*We are all the best!”

When Pa Snip finished telling his story Carrie in the pink box said, “That was good. I liked that story.”

Tatti, the potato, didn’t say anything. He had gone fast asleep and was snoring gently.