

Children's Stories

To Eric, Andrew and Sean

*The Camel's hump is an ugly lump
Which well you may see at the zoo:
But uglier yet is the hump we get
From having nothing to do.
Rudyard Kipling*

First Self Published 2018 Kenya
First Published as E-book in 2018
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ISBN 978-0-9926668-1
Manuscribit Publishing
LONDON SW7

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Stories for the Young

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A Camel Speaks

Standing here in the sand with the sun beating down, I am waiting for the first visitors to climb upon my back and ride me. It makes me feel a bit sad that I am such a long way from my home. I can still remember where I was born, a cool shady oasis in the Sahara Desert. You may think of it as an empty place with nothing but sand as far as you can see but to me it was home. I used to play with my brothers and sisters under the swaying palms trees and when we were thirsty we would drink from the deep blue water of the pool. We would have races into the desert coming home breathless but joyful. I was so happy and thought it would never end.

But one day two men, strangers, wearing western clothes, trousers and jackets approached and I saw them talking to my owner. One of them was pointing at me and came over and looked at me. He prodded my sides and looked at my feet. Then would you believe it, he even looked in my mouth, tapped my teeth and smelled my breath. It was very embarrassing. Then I heard him say 'OK' and next I was being bundled into a van. We travelled for a very long time across the desert rocking and swaying. It made me slip and stumble but I managed to stay upright and not fall. After many hours and just as it was getting dark we drove into a small town. The rear of the truck was let down and I was prodded into a barn where there were many other camels. I didn't know any on them but we were soon talking. I found out that they had come from other parts, some came from even further away than me. Every one of us was confused. We didn't know why we were there and where we were going. One of the older camels was talking about a plan to escape and go back to our homes. I listened but realised that even if I went along with his ideas I didn't know where my home was. Suddenly the doors were slammed shut and we were plunged into darkness. Everyone tried to settle down but there wasn't much room. One or two of the younger camels began to cry. It was so sad. I couldn't sleep so I went over to a little girl camel who was sobbing quietly. Her name was Cleopatra and she came from a small oasis in Egypt called the Bahariya.

'I am so frightened,' she said in her small squeaky voice. 'What's going to happen to us? I miss my mummy.' she whimpered. I tried to calm her saying that I would look after her and make sure she would be safe.

'Will you take me back home?' She asked looking up at me with her big brown eyes and a plaintive smile.

'Yes,' I said, knowing it was a white lie. I really didn't know what was going to happen to us but I didn't want to scare her any more.

As the morning light began to filter through the cracks in the hut, we heard a loud commotion and suddenly the doors were flung open. Outside was a large high-sided trailer. A ramp was thrown down and we were nudged and pushed up the ramp into the trailer. As we settled ourselves we couldn't help letting out an aggressive discord of sounds from groans, screeches, grunts, growls and howls. The men who were herding us took no notice as if they were deaf. After a while we all quietened down as the truck bumped, jerked and bounced along.

I heard one of the men shout out.

'This lot's to go to Kenya.' I didn't know where Kenya was and didn't realise at the time that it was a very long way away. After about two days we were unloaded onto a wide expanse of sand that looked like my home. It was near a huge pond. I had never seen such a large amount of water. It stretched out as far as I could see and was so different from the ponds back home. This was deep blue with the surface moving up and down and occasionally a white area would appear. It had a strange smell and when I tried to drink it I couldn't because it had a strange taste, it was so salty. Then we were taken to a big boat that was floating on the surface of the water, it was really scary. Things went from bad to worse when a large number of us were pushed down a ramp onto the boat. I managed to push Cleopatra ahead of me so we ended up together against a railing. We hadn't eaten for about three days but that didn't matter because we keep food in our humps.

I was looking around and then glanced down into the water, I saw strange things swimming about beneath the surface. They were long and smooth with shiny skin and had eyes on either side of their thin bodies. Later I heard that they were called fish and people ate them. I wouldn't, I preferred grass and shrubs and grains. I didn't know it but I was a vegetarian.

It was a very long journey. Days and nights passed and we lost track of time.

'Are we nearly home?' Cleopatra kept asking and I said yes, not wanting to frighten her. Eventually I saw across the water, land. We had arrived at Kenya. It was very different from our home. Here the trees were tall and the leaves bright green and everything was so fertile. We even had a rainstor. I had never seen rain before. It was terrifying, bright flashes of lightning followed by bursts of thunder and then the rain sheeted down. Once I got used to it. I loved it, the cool water splashing on my back. Cleopatra smiling through the rain admitted to me that she also loved it. Now we were being handled by two men who took us to the beach each day for the tourists to ride on our backs. It wasn't a bad life although both Cleo and I missed our families.

The Albatross and the Mermaid

This story is not new; it has been retold many times in the past. The difference is that the characters have changed but the message is the same. It is about

a love which cannot be, a love that shouldn't have happened, between two people who shouldn't have met, but they did. This story crosses countries, religions and beliefs.

It was a bright summer day when a dark spot appeared in the sky just above the horizon. Gradually it became larger and could be recognised as an albatross, one of the largest and most adventurous of birds, which travel the seas. It has a wingspan of more than 2 metres and a body length of up to a metre. He was alone having lost his life mate and was searching for a new one. But this albatross was in trouble. He had travelled for thousand of miles and was now desperately looking for somewhere to rest and recover. He was spent with his wing feathers ruffled and irregular, and his eyes drooping with fatigue. So it was with great relief that he saw the small island and the rock protruding from its southern end. He checked around to see that there was no dangers. Slowly descending he allowed himself to drop like a parachute onto his feet and land gently on the soft moss covering the rock. He gave a sigh of relief and slowly tucked his great wings into his side. He found a small area of shade in a little recess in the rock. He snuggled down into it and was soon asleep.

Unbeknown to him, this little island outcrop was the secret visiting place of a mermaid. She would come just as the sun was setting and would climb up onto the rock and rest until it became dark when she returned to her watery home. She slipped out of the water and climbed onto the rock. To her surprise, she found she had a visitor, the beautiful white albatross who was sleeping peacefully nearby. She had never seen such a beautiful bird before. She moved slowly towards him and stared with amazement at his fluffy white feathers, and his strong beak and forehead.

At that moment, the Albatross opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was a beautiful young mermaid with the face of an angel, long blonde hair, deep blue eyes and a small kissable mouth, he was enchanted. He tried to speak but the words just wouldn't come, and he said a strained 'Hello'. She wasn't able to understand what he said but realised that he was trying to greet her and she said to him 'Hello'. Slowly they began to gesture to each other. He explained that he'd been travelling a very long distance across the sea and had become very tired and needed a rest.

She told him that she lived nearby, deep in the sea, and that the rock was her favourite spot where she could sit and think and enjoy the beautiful scenery. They had a lot in common, and soon were chatting happily together. Suddenly, she looked up and saw the darkness descending and regretfully said to him.

'I'm sorry but I must go now. I must get home before it becomes dark,' and before he could even say goodbye, she slipped off the rock into the water and was gone.

He spent the night alone, and in the morning set off to seek some food and to continue his search for a mate. He had not been flying for very long when he began to think about the little mermaid and was longing to see her again. And so, as the day drew to an end, he slowly turned back and again settled down

on the rock waiting for her. But she didn't arrive. He returned day after day, hoping to see her, but without any luck.

Then, some weeks later, to his surprise and delight she was there on the rock when he descended.

'What happened to you,' he said, 'I was so looking forward to seeing you so much but you didn't seem to come any more.'

'I'm so sorry,' she said, 'I was also looking forward to seeing you, but I foolishly told my father King Neptune about you and that I'd grown to like you very much, he forbade me to see you. He said that there was no purpose in me seeing you, because you were a bird and I was a mermaid.'

The Albatross thought for a moment, and realised that what she was saying was true. But he did not want to accept it and at that point told her how much he loved her and that he wanted her to spend the rest of her life with him. She was quiet for moment and then looking into his eyes said.

'I love you very much and would also like to spend my life with you,' and at that moment there was a flash of lightning and thunder, and when he turned round she had become a beautiful white lady albatross. And so, if you look into the sky, towards the evening, in a southern direction, you will see two beautiful albatrosses flying together into the distance, and you will know that he has at last found his mate.

Andrew's Birthday

He had been counting the days, yet it seemed such a long time in the future. Suddenly the day arrived but fate had beaten him to it. The night before he had felt unwell with a sore throat and a high temperature so that on the day, there was no school and the birthday cake with his name on it remained in the frig. It was a rich chocolate one with the words *Happy 5th Birthday Andrew* on it. The following day as is so often the case he felt much better and wanted his party but there was no school on Saturday so his schoolmates couldn't share it with him. It was decided that the cake mustn't go to waste so some candles, crisps, sweets and chocolates were obtained and his cousins who lived nearby were invited.

Andrew had other ideas.

'Mum, he said 'can I invite my girlfriend?' That was news to his mother Celina but she said yes. His girl friend was five years old, a petite very pretty girl with shiny white teeth and a big smile. She invited some of her friends so the party, which began as a few became many, up to twenty of whom most were his friends. They all arrived at the gate and were let into the compound. They all wished him happy birthday and began playing together.

'What can I give them to eat? Asked Celina, worried that she didn't have enough supper to go around.

'I'm sure they have all eaten at home so they only need snacks,' Andrew said.

'Yes, you're right, I'll get some chips, they all like chips,' she decided. And chips it was. Mohamed the driver went and bought some from a local shop and they were a great success. One hour later they were playing football in the compound, no one wanted to go home.

Giraffe

'Help, help, I'm stuck,' was the cry I heard one morning as I was getting ready for my breakfast. I looked outside and at first couldn't see anything and then I saw a small cloud of dust and as it cleared I saw a giraffe lying on its back in the partly dried up water hole kicking furiously with its legs.

'Help please I can't get up.' You may think it strange that a giraffe was outside my home but I live with my father a ranger in the nature reserve at Tsavo East in Kenya.

It was during the summer holidays when the drought is at its worse that the animals come to the water hole to drink. The giraffe is one of the tallest animals; it takes 15 months from conception to its birth and is 2 metres high when it is born taller than most men. In many ways it is one of the strangest yet most endearing animals in the park with its loping gait, long waving neck and elongated spindly legs. It looks more like a robot than a living creature as it struggles to move amongst the trees and scrubs. It runs with a jerking movement its leg joints jolting as it progresses.

My dad was already out at work when the giraffe called out that it was in trouble and needed help. Giraffes are very shy and suspicious of people so it is very difficult to help them. They are frightened of humans and will try to get away from us. I knew what we had to do. We had to sedate her with a dart and then bring a hoist and ease her up. It was going to be a major undertaking and was very risky. Sometimes the animal died of fear during the rescue unless it was done very gently.

Suddenly I heard a noise at the back of the hut and saw Simon one of my dad's rangers. He had been a ranger with us for about ten years. He came from a village nearby. A tall, slim young man he had an infectious smile showing a row of bright white teeth. He had seen the problem and nodded to me. He was immediately on his phone to the park vet and to the workshop where the hoist was stored.

We didn't have a lot of time. I could hear the giraffe thrashing about in the hole trying to upright itself. The older animals are usually successful but this was a young one no more than two years old and was very frightened and was panicking. It was tempting to go near it and try to calm it but I knew that any human presence was likely to make it more anxious and more jumpy. I waited in the house watching the giraffe from behind a curtain. It was now lying down, hardly moving having nearly exhausted itself after a desperate attempt to stand.

I heard the sound of a car stop and recognised the Vet, Dr Evans a stocky man with a small greyish beard and an oversized bush hat. He was carrying his bag and waved hello to me. I let him in through the back door.

'How long has she been in the hole?' he asked. I looked at my watch. 'About two hours,' I figured.

'We must get her out, she will be tiring and soon it will be much more difficult. As soon as Simon arrives with the hoist I will give her a shot.' We waited patiently. I was aware of the droning of the flies and the distant growl of a lion somewhere in the bush. Then I heard a clatter as the Range Rover pulling the hoist trundled into the yard.

'Hi Dr Evans,' Simon shouted out, 'give her the shot. I'll have this thing out in a jiffy.' Taking a small pointed phial of liquid shaped like a bullet from

his bag, he inserted it into the breech of his rifle. Leaving the front door, he walked stealthily towards the pond. The giraffe was still lying down. Taking aim he sighted along the barrel to the flank of the animal. There was a faint snap as he pulled the trigger. The dart flew rapidly and pierced the side of the giraffe, which made a movement as if bitten by a fly. Then we waited.

Meanwhile Simon had placed the hoist in position. Slowly the giraffe closed its eyes and slowly went to sleep. We waited and then the doctor gave the order. The three of us advanced on the sleeping animal and Simon placed a band under her belly. Together using the hoist we lifted her into the upright position. She stood sagging in the hoist for a minute or two and then as the drug wore off she opened her eyes and began to struggle. Simon immediately released the band and she zigzagged away unsteadily. After a few steps, she turned back and gave us a glance and I think I saw her say 'thank you'.

I was kissed by a Cobra

He looked like any other young Kenyan man, slim, cleanly dressed with a winning smile showing a row of brilliant white teeth. But there was something unusual about his appearance which I missed at first. He was standing half turned when we met so I couldn't see anything different but it was as we were parting that I saw it. His crisp white shirt was tucked in at the level of his right shoulder. He had no right arm. It was a shock and as I passed him day by day trying to sell small postcards and other items, I became more intrigued to find out what had happened

Today when I saw him, I stopped and asked him.

'It was a cobra bite,' he said in a quiet sad voice, 'I was 9 at the time. I lived in West Province and used to explore the nearby forest one of the few left in our area. It was early afternoon and I was prodding some leaves with a stick looking for beetles when it rose up suddenly almost to my height, its head wider than my hand. It was such a surprise. I had heard about snakes and knew to be careful but it was too late. The cobra eyed me with its small piercing gaze and as I began to slowly to step backwards it struck, biting me in the forearm. I felt a stinging pain and fled home shouting for help. It was about twenty minutes before I got home by which time my forearm was feeling heavy and burning. When my Dad saw it he knew immediately what had happened.

'Quick,' he shouted, 'we must get you to the hospital.'

It was about two hours away. He knew that my life was in danger. He grabbed a piece of cloth and wound it tightly around my upper arm, so tightly that I shouted out and then he put his mouth to the small puncture wound and sucked very hard spitting out some blood.

How he got me to the hospital, I don't know because I think I fainted. Mum told me afterwards that he picked me up on to his back and ran. I realised later that he saved my life. Apparently when I got to the hospital I was hardly breathing. I was taken into the OR, they didn't need to anaesthetize me. The tourniquet had saved my life but at a terrible price, my arm was dead, black and lifeless. There was no alternative but to remove it from the shoulder. I

was ill for three or four days and they thought I wouldn't survive. Since then I have gone onto high school, got married and my wife and I have a young son.

I listened while he told me his story so calmly and quietly. I thought about what it would be like to have only one arm, always to be looked at, to be disabled, with so many things denied him but outwardly he seemed to be able to cope with it. He then said something that really surprised me,

'I have become very interested in snakes especially cobras.' I wanted to know all about them and why they bite us. He then began to tell me what he had found out. He explained that the cobra has had a long association with man going back to the early Egyptian Dynasties, five to seven thousand years ago. The dry sandy terrain in Egypt was ideal for snakes of all types but the one that was most feared and venerated was the Cobra. So much so that the Egyptians had given the cobra God-like qualities. It was called Wadjet and its image, Uraeus was placed on the front of the Pharaoh's crown. And then he added something which made me freeze.

'I am blessed, I have been kissed by a cobra. It didn't mean to harm me and I don't blame it.'

Life of a Rat catcher

Larry was asleep when they arrived, three smartly dressed men and a young woman. He had had a really bad night being disturbed by the barking of his neighbour, a large black Alsatian who had just been delivered and was clearly very unhappy. Larry opened one eye and viewed the visitors. Maybe, he thought, this could be my lucky day. I must be on my best behaviour and he began to purr in his softest and most melodic voice.

Larry, a tabby cat, was four years old and had been living wild for some months since his owner went away and closed the house. He had tried to be adopted by the neighbours but there was a very old tabby in residence and she was not of a mind to share so he began to wander about foraging wherever he could. That is until the Battersea Cat and Dogs home warden spied him under a bridge.

'Bill get that one,' he heard the officer shout, 'that's a fine tabby, it so sad how people neglect them.' Larry tried to get away but they had a net and he was soon bundled into a van and later unceremoniously tipped into a cage. It all happened so quickly before he had a chance to escape. Initially he was dismayed at his captivity but as it turned out, things were much better than he could have hoped. A warm dry bed with three square meals was better than he had expected. His rather scraggy coat soon thickened and he became quite a handsome looking feline.

'That one will do,' he heard the tallest man say to the others, 'we need a big chap for what we want him to do.' Larry was intrigued, what could they be wanting him to do? He never thought of himself as doing anything rather just being. He was soon to find out.

The party was acting for the Prime Minister's wife who wanted a cat to catch the mice and the occasional rat at No 10. A cat box was bought to his cage and he went into it without a fight. It all sounded very interesting, he

thought. Soon he was bouncing along in the back of the limousine, which pulled up outside No 10. Larry was just able to see through the window. What he saw astonished him. It was a four-story townhouse with an imposing black lacquered door on which was the number 10 in large brass letters. At this stage, Larry didn't realise what a prestigiously important family he was joining. On arrival he was roughly tipped out of the cat box and set free to roam. It was a big house with lots of rooms on several floors and within a short while he caught the scent of a family of mice who had made their home under a staircase. This was his opportunity to show his mettle. Creeping slowly on his belly he caught them unaware and was able to grab the biggish mouse by the neck, shaking it vigorously until it stopped moving. He then crept downstairs, and placed it in the middle of a silk Persian carpet. He then hid behind the long hall curtain and waited. He didn't need to wait long before he heard a shout and feet running.

'What on earth has that cat done?'

'It's a de..dead mouse I think,' stuttered the housemaid

'Get rid of it immediately, don't let Mam see or hear about it.'

Larry was disappointed by their conversation. He thought he had done very well, after all he had only just arrived and already had bagged a victim. Wasn't that why he was here? Maybe not?

The day was dragging and he was getting bored, no one seemed to be taking any notice of him. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, important people with dark suits and smart voices came and went. The shiny black front door was continually opening and closing letting in and out visitors who spoke in whispers as if they were in the presence of a deity. Occasionally one would lean down and stroke his back, Larry responding by arching upward and purring. He overheard someone say.

'Nice cat, how long have they had him? But he didn't hear the reply.

Bored Larry decided to explore. There were so many rooms on so many floors, there has got to be some action some where, he thought, but where to start.

At the top of course, stupid, he decided. and see what I find. It was very quiet on the fifth floor. All the rooms were tidy and the beds made up. He was about to go down one floor when he heard it, a slight scratching, he knew the sound well. Down on his tummy he began to crawl soundlessly towards the sound. It came from the bathroom. He moved slowly towards it. Then he heard a second sound. Wow! This is going to be very fun, he thought. Peering around the door he saw them, two baby mice no more than a few weeks old. Perfect he thought. I'll get them both, what a catch and then something strange happened. He suddenly saw the grey green eyes of the smallest one sparkling in the sunlight coming through the window. Beautiful he thought, what lovely eye it has and that was when the problem started. I can't do it he wailed to himself, I can't kill them. What's wrong with me, have I gone soft, seduced by grey green eyes? This is mad, ridiculous but he couldn't go on. Ashamed he turned and slunk out of the room, the two mice were totally unaware how close they had come to annihilation.

It took several days for Larry to get over what happened, so much so that the family thought he was ill. He refused his food, didn't bother to go out at night and generally behaved as if he was going to die. The news of Larry's

indisposition spread throughout the house. The Prime Minister had a note on his breakfast table informing him, such was the impact of Larry's illness.

A veterinary Surgeon was called to advise what to do. He arrived with great pomp. He handed his scarlet lined cape to the doorman,

'Bring me the invalid,' he announced in a deep theatrical voice.

Larry was brought struggling to him. They eyed each other and then like magic, Larry sat on his lap purring.

'That's a miracle,' said the under maid, 'he hasn't purred for days.'

The Doctor gently prodded, pinched and pulled at Larry's body. Larry didn't flinch

'Everything seems to be in working order,' he announced.

'We just need some blood tests and I will have the answer.' With that he produced a syringe and without ceremony, drew some blood, very red blood from Larry's left paw. Larry didn't whimper. Within a few hours the result came back, The Doctor read it with great solemnity.

'The feline antibody level was slightly raised. All other tests are normal,' he announced. 'I will prescribe some antibiotics and he should be back to his frisky self within days.' The news was received with delight by all members of the household from the Prime minister down to the 3rd Chambermaid, an eighteen year old from Northern Ireland called Siobhan. She had taken a shine on him, always finding small tidbits to tempt him.

Lion heart

The broad expanse of Salt Lick Safari Park in Kenya was spread out before us, its name deriving from a now dried up lake. In its centre lay a scrub lined shallow crater with a small water hole. It was the only one in the area and attracted animals from all around. Surrounding it were dusty red soiled paths along which safari vans filled with foreign visitors would travel, stopping at every sighting.

It was still early morning and from the East the sun, like a red globe was just rising above the distant hills slowly lighting the wakening land. The drivers in their vans filled with tourists were already out in numbers. Although the air was beginning to warm, their excited occupants were wrapped in many layers, shivering from the cold air still left over from the clear night.

Suddenly a male lion appeared about two hundred metres away ambling steadily towards us. It was easily visible thanks to the open terrain left by the widespread destruction of trees by herds of elephants. It seemed to be stalking something, possibly a herd of buffalos. As it came nearer, we could make out its thick black main, broad muscular trunk and short legs. Unfazed by the presence of 3-4 safari vans filled with goggle-eyed visitors, it strolled passed with a regal gait unafraid of anything, Watching from a safe distance, we stood transfixed at this enormously powerful animal rightly called the king of the jungle. Its majestic bearing, its evident strength and confidence was overwhelming. Being so close to it was a humbling experience. This quietly proud animal was moving stealth-like with such poise and indifference – unless it has you locked in its gaze, when in a moment, it could tear apart an

animal or a human being. Its small orange eyes peered out from its broad face, staring straight ahead as it concentrated on its prey grazing in the distance unaware of its danger.

Days later, the memory of the lion remained clear in my mind reminding me that in the world in which it reigns supreme, only the rifle can fell it. What I didn't hear that day was the conversation it was having with himself. If I could have heard him, he would be saying,

'They think I can't see them gawking at me. You know, I'm getting a bit fed up with this whole business. We lions have our pride. You know what I mean. Every time my family or me decide to visit a friend or go to the supermarket to get some fresh meat (nudge, nudge) they descend upon us, with their double eyes staring. Yesterday I walked right past them without batting an eyelid, not even a hello, I just look ahead. I knew they were watching me but I didn't flinch I am used to being stared at. What do they want me to do? Stand on my hind legs and smile. I don't need that I am my own man and am proud of it. Just let one of them try it on with me, Just one, I'll show them who is the boss, they would never try it on again.'

"I must get going, no time to waste. My breakfast is rapidly getting away from me

Where are the girls? They always disappear when there's work to be done. They would rather bask in the shade all day than get going and sort out my dinner. It wasn't always like this. In the good old days when I was younger and they were all vying for my attention, I would have been waited on hand and foot so to speak. I would have been given all the tastiest morsels and they would have waited until I had finished before they started. They used to show me respect but that's all gone. I blame the safari trips. The guides don't always point me out as opposed to my sisters so they get an exaggerated opinion about themselves. I need to show them who is who and they will give me respect.

I know I am getting older but I don't feel my age and you know, I can do it as well as the young ones if I was given half a chance. But now the young females don't even smile at me, they have eyes only for the young bucks to provide them with strong cubs. Oh, for the good old days.

Lost and Found

Mum, our matriarch and my two aunts, were walking ahead and I was playing with a rock that kept on rolling out of my reach. I was only six months old but was already independent, able to walk and run. I live with a very extended family of aunts and siblings. My father and brothers have left and I rarely see them. It's sad I know but it is the way we have evolved. In the distant past there used to be many different types of Elephants but now we are mainly two, the African and the Asian.

I can see you looking at me as I hide between the legs of my mother and aunties. I am rather sweet don't you think with my small trunk, little ears and big feet, but of course you don't really know anything about me, I am just an animal to you. But let me tell you a thing or two. We take up to two years

from conception to birth and weigh about 260 lbs. (equivalent to 120 KGs) when we are born, that's like a very overweight human.

Unlike you who take at least 9 months to stand, I can stand within a week or two. At one year I am almost independent but you are still very reliant on you mother. So you can see how much more advanced I am physically than you. When fully developed, my brain is three times bigger than yours but it's in a body many more times bigger so we are not as intelligent as you but we are more able to survive than you. We are natural swimmers and foragers.

When we reach the age of 6-12 months our baby incisors gradually grow and become tusks. Like teeth they are hollow and contain dentine and nerves. As we grow up our tusks become bigger and stronger so that we can use them for many purposes such as digging up roots, finding water and pushing trees and shrubs out of our way when we are walking. I live a happy carefree life and am totally unaware of the future, but my mummy tells me there are greedy, bad people who will kill us for our tusks. You see our tusks are made of Ivory a hard white material, which is used by you for all sorts of things. To you it is valuable to us it is vital.

One day I was playing when I heard a strange sound. I didn't know what it was but I have learned since that it was coming from one of you, a human voice. Then I heard it again,

'There's a big one, shoot.' There was a flash and a loud bang and then the Matriarch began to stumble. I was standing next to her when red liquid, blood began pouring from the side of her head. She was screaming in pain. My aunts came to her as she fell onto her side. They tried to lift her. I could see that they didn't know what to do; they were confused. She lay there her eyes rolling in her head. I have never seen her like that before.

Another flash, a loud bang and we all scattered. I panicked running wildly into the bush, not knowing what to do? I kept on running. until I was exhausted. I stopped and looked around. I was lost and alone, my family was nowhere to be seen. I began to call out but it was getting dark and I freaked, I roared and snorted trying to get their attention.

'Help, help me,' but there was no one to hear. I must have fallen asleep because I suddenly heard some more voices. I recognized them as human. I was very frightened. They came nearer and I could feel myself panicking.

'There's a baby on her own, we must catch her.' I kept very quiet and at the last minute, I scurried away hoping they wouldn't catch me but they had a net and a rope and soon I was tangled up in it. I was pushed up onto the back of a van, which bounced about on the dirt track until we stopped in a shaded area. I was prodded down a ramp onto the ground. It was a large space and there were other young elephants like me, playing. They all seemed very happy. One of the older females padded up to me.

'Welcome, what's your name?'

'Name? I've never had a name. We don't need names, we know each other by our sounds.' I shook my trunk.

'We like to give everyone a name. Let's call you Tsarina. My name is Ekaanta. How did you get here?'

'I ran away when the humans shot our matriarch. Then I got lost and was picked up by some other humans.'

'Listen Tsarina, you have to understand that there are good humans and bad humans. The humans that shot your matriarch were bad ones. The ones here in this sanctuary are good ones. They will be kind to you and look after you and one day when you are older and stronger you will be encouraged to return to your family.'

Some time has now passed and I have now rejoined my family. I am one of the elders. But I will never forget the kindness that the humans showed me when I was in despair. I will always be wary however because of the evil ones who come to kill us and steal our tusks for ivory.

Swimming

Christopher couldn't sleep; he was worrying about the race tomorrow. He was a good swimmer but knew that he would be competing against bigger though not necessarily older boys. He liked to win and wanted his father to watch him.

Over breakfast he began,

Please Dad I want you to come, please.'

'I don't know, it's a long way and it's going to be a hot day and the noise of the crowd shouting and the music? Do I have to come?'

'Please Dad, you have never seen me swim in a competition.'

'I know and ..'

'And what Dad please.'

His dad was struggling to find a good reason not to go. In the end he didn't go and it was a great day. He thought about his reluctance, so many good reasons not to go. Then in a flash, he knew what he was feeling, He was seven and was in a school run and yes he wanted his Dad to come and he didn't. Even now he could feel the disappointment.

Christopher kept on looking for his dad hoping he would change his mind at the last moment then the call came for the race and he won. The tears were running down his face as he collected the gold medal. The onlookers must have thought that they were tears of joy.

When he got home Dad was reading the newspaper, he didn't even ask him about the race.

The Compost Heap

The light was just beginning to filter through the dark clouds when Ora awoke. It was cold and damp, very different from her native California where she had been only a few weeks earlier. She looked around and realised that everyone else was asleep. The rain had begun falling again and she shivered wondering what ill fate had decided that she should be here rather than in her own hometown. She recalled the conversation.

'Bob, clear those last four orange trees, we have a rush order from the UK.'

'OK Jack,' Bob said.

He and Bob then set too and within a few hours the trees were stripped and the fruit carefully packed into boxes and loaded onto the waiting lorry. It was a short journey to the airport.

Ora was disturbed from her musings by a movement on her left. Lemo had woken up and begun to sob quietly.

'What's up Lemo?' asked Ora.

'I'm so homesick. I can't bear this weather. I'm a warm-blooded fruit and it's so damp and cold here. At this time of year my native Spain is a blaze of colour. I miss the blue sky. It makes me feel happy. I thought I was on the way to Barcelona when they bundled me into a sack. Next I knew I was in the hold of an airplane. I could hear the drumming of the engine. I think I was in the cold room. It was freezing. I got colder and colder and stiffer and stiffer. I know it was to keep me fresh and healthy but I don't think they worry about our feelings at all. And now I have ended up here.' He paused,

'Nothing personal, you understand,' he sobbed.

Ora put her arms around him and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

'Lemo, it will be all right soon. It's always changeable at this time of the year but the sun will soon come out and you will warm up.' Heavy footsteps were heard approaching and there was a uproar as a pile of potato peelings were thrown onto the heap. From deep within came the beat of the samba, der-der-der-derr-de, der-der...

'What's that?' Lemo asked.

'I don't know,' said Ora. 'Let's look.' At that moment there was commotion to their right and Bana appeared.

'Hi everyone? How are you? My name's Bana, I'm from Costa Rica. I haven't been here long. Wow it's cold isn't it? It's warmer when I was down below.'

Everyone crowded around to see the tall, colourful yellow newcomer. He was introduced to the others. Aube a slim, purple aubergine kissed him on both cheeks.

'Welcome to the family,' she said. Mush a dark haired mushroom pushed forwards to shake his hand.

'Welcome Bana, I hope you will be happy here.' In the far corner, Gar a well-turned out garlic in white waved a welcome.

After the introductions were over, everyone calmed down until a voice from the other end of the tip spoke,

'What about me?' Mel a tubby melon called out.

'I'm from Africa. It feels like an international meeting, I'm going to like it here.'

Ora and Lemo looked at each other. It's was not exactly like that they thought but didn't say anything.

By now the rain had stopped and a pale sun was beginning to appear. They all turned towards the light and smiled for the first time that day. They enjoyed the warmth but there was something troubling them. No one spoke but each had a question needing an urgent answer, what were we doing here?' App had been listening to the conversation patiently. He had been round bodied, green and crisp, a cut above the others but was now turning brown and shriveled. Eventually he decided to interrupt.

'Don't believe what they are saying,' he said in a distinguished voice, 'we are all destined to extinction unless we do something.' The others looked puzzled.

'Extinction! What do you mean?' Ora asked.

'Don't you know? We're in a compost heap and unless we act fast we will all be lost, reduced to mulch.'

'Mulch?' They shouted in unison

'Yes the stuff you spread on your flower beds.'

Farmer McIntosh had now finished ploughing his fields and was ready to spread them with fertilizer. He had bought in some nitrates but wanted to add this to his homemade compost. He had been preparing it all winter and it was now ready for spreading.

'Listen my friends the farmer's coming to sprinkle chemicals on us. These will make us decompose. We mustn't let that happen.'

'What can we do?' They shouted.

'We must stick together and reject any attempt to separate us.' insisted App.

'But we are only a shell of our former selves. The best of us has gone,' they said in unison.

'That doesn't matter. It's what you are, not what you aren't that matters. You all still have the essential you, you're all able to create a new generation, you just need the right conditions, warmth, moisture and time so don't give up your future, fight.'

They heard the farmer's footsteps approaching but now we were no longer cowering or frightened. They knew what to do. As he approached Ora spoke up,

'Mr Farmer, we don't want to die. All we ask is for you to give us a chance.' The farmer stopped surprise by hearing a voice coming from an orange. At first he thought he had imagined it but then Ora repeated her request.

'All we ask is for you to give us a chance. Within each of us are the seeds of the next generation. We deserve the right to show you what we can do if you lets us live.'

'What do you want?' Puzzled he asked, 'I don't understand.'

'All we need is warmth, moisture and time and we will show you.'

Spring had arrived and the daffodils were in full bloom fluttering gently in the breeze. In the nearby greenhouse, Farmer McIntosh was walking through the rows of seedlings. He reached the heated area and looked in. He smiled to himself as he recalled the fight he had had, a fight that he had lost but which has rewarded him as he saw the healthy plants, oranges, apples, bananas, and so many more all growing strongly and waving at him.

The Hero

Thomas didn't like school; he preferred to play with his bicycle in the park. One day when he was out cycling, he saw a cat sitting high up on a tree. The cat was meowing loudly and he stopped to see why. The cat had caught its paw in a branch and couldn't get free.

Thomas loved cats and was upset to see the cat trapped. Leaning his bike against the tree he managed to climb up and stand on the bicycle seat so that he could just reach the cat. He freed its leg and the cat jumped down to the ground. At that moment, the owner Mrs Brown arrived. She was frantic with worry looking for her pet. The cat now free jumped onto her lap.

She saw Thomas about to ride away and asked him,

'Were you the boy who freed my cat?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I love cats.'

'Thank you, you are my hero.'

The Mob of Meerkats

The telephone rang at the Downtown police station. Sergeant Thomas answered,

'Downtown Police Station. Can I help you madam?'

'Yes, we need help. Please, we have an emergency. This is the Chase bank branch, we have been invaded. We are under siege, we need help urgently.'

'Who are you madam?'

'Jane Swift, I am the chief teller of the bank. I have managed to crawl to a telephone. They are everywhere.'

'They! Who are they?'

'Meerkats!'

'Is this joke?'

'No Sergeant it's no joke. Please we need help.'

Major John the Meerkat commander overheard the conversation and spoke to his troops

'Men we need to consolidate our position the police are on the way.'

There was a scurry of movement as the Mob went to their positions. Some on the counters: others by the front door: many in the back offices. Two were holding the Manager Jim Noble hostage. They were all armed with small machine guns, the mini AK 40's.

The police station emptied as men left their desks; the restroom and the outside play area and donned their uniforms. They checked their equipment especially their guns and poured into two police vans and several police cars. With their sirens screaming they made their way down the main highway to Downtown. Chase Bank was situated on the corner of Smith boulevard, a tall multistory building built in the early 20th century. It had the appearance of a Roman villa with an entrance bounded by four marble pillars topped by

Corinthian capitals, the symbol of former glory. The entrance was approached up six polished black basalt steps opening into a large atrium which extended to the topmost part of the building, Four glass sided elevators clung to the walls and could be seen moving slowly. In the Manager's office, Jim Noble was trying to placate the invaders.

'I don't understand, you are holding this bank and all its employees hostage because we are underwriting the development on the outskirts of the city.'

'Exactly you have understood exactly.'

'What has the bank got to do with the development?'

'I will explain but I insist you keep your hands on the top of your desk. My people have lived in an area of open shrubland on the outskirts of this city for generations. We have built our homes underground as is our fashion and we now have a fully functioning city with hospitals, schools etc. Please don't look so surprised. Did you think we were just wild uncivilized animals?'

'No not at all,' Jim Noble blushed.

'Exactly. The whole community was thriving and then the bombshell hit us. About two years ago my guards reported that a group of men had been seen digging trenches in different sites on our estate.

Your estate? I don't understand.'

'No of course you wouldn't, you are like the rest. You think that we Meerkats are stupid, we don't understand. Well let me tell you this we understand a lot more than you humans realise or credit us with. But let me go on. At first we took no notice but then it was reported to me that they were taking measurements and staking out areas for buildings. One of my staff overheard them speaking. Then we realised we had to do something. We tried to make an appointment to see the mayor but our letter was ridiculed. One of my men was present when the Mayor opened the letter. Apparently, he had been reading it for a few minutes when he burst out laughing and called his staff to listen. He read aloud,

'We request that you honour the historical fact of our occupation of the site and arrange for the current activity to cease:' signed Major John the Meerkat. Before he had finished reading, one or two people in the room began to laugh and then the whole room was ringing with guffaws. My colleague told me later that he was humiliated by the arrogant way in which our reasonable request had been received.

Jim Noble sat looking at the small upright figure with large unblinking eyes standing on his desk and pointing an AK rifle at him. It seemed like a bad dream, something he had eaten but it was real, as real as the chair he was sitting on and the gun that was pointing at him. He coughed and cleared his throat.

'I may seem a bit slow but am I to believe that you are prepared to hold the bank to ransom with everyone in it unless we forgo the loan to the development company?'

'Exactly and we are prepared to stay here for as long as it takes.'

Outside there was a lot of commotion, The police had arrived in great numbers with sharp shooters and were lining up in strategic positions ready to confront the intruders. Captain James Grant a seasoned police officer was in charge. He had overseen a number of bank raids before but never one like

this. A stocky man with small steely eyes and a shock of white hair, he was near retirement and wanted to get this whole thing over as smoothly and as quickly as possible He was overheard to say,

‘I want to complete my round of golf before dark. Tell me sergeant, what's going on, bring me up to speed.’

But as the story unfolded the captain could be seen to be visibly shaken. He kept on repeating ‘Meerkats?’

‘You do mean Meerkats, those small members of the Mongoose family? They're wild animals, how can they be holding the bank captive? With their teeth?’ he laughed loudly. ‘You must have made a mistake.’

‘No sir there is no doubt they are armed Meerkats.’

‘Armed? Armed with what, their claws?’

‘No Sir, AK 41 rifles, small one of course.’

‘Yes small ones of course, sergeant are you out of your mind? Are you sure you are not hallucinating?’

Gradually the captain began to understand what he and his men were facing. He stood with his legs apart and his hands under his chin thinking. This is ridiculous how do you deal with armed Meerkats, he wondered. Meanwhile his men were waiting. They expected action, a command to storm the bank; their trigger fingers were itching. But as the time passed they all realised that this was not going to be an ordinary raid. Suddenly the bank's front door opened and a woman appeared with her hands in the air. She was escorted to the Police Captain.

‘I am Jane Swift the chief teller. The manager Jim Noble has asked me to speak to you and explain what is happening.’

‘Thank goodness someone needs to. I was beginning to wonder why we were here.’

‘The situation is very serious,’ explained Jane. ‘The Meerkats are in total control and as far as we can see, they could last out for months, something my staff couldn't. They want to talk to the Mayor and persuade him to stop the development.’

‘So you don't need us any more?’ said the Police Captain, relieved.

‘I don't think so. This has got to be resolved by talking not shooting.’

Mayor Jim Dover was a big man; over six feet tall and weighing at the last count more than 20 stone, he was blunt in manner and speech. At first he thought the whole thing was a joke and dismissed it, but when the bank official patiently explained the situation again, he realised that this was the time for action. He had the whole issue tied up in his head. I'll tell them that the decision has been made and that we will find them another site. He was confident that he would be successful he had never failed before.

He arrived at the Bank in his 4 x 4 Toyota cruiser, a big car for a big man he used to boast. He greeted the police Captain an old golfing colleague, listened briefly to what he had to say and patted him on the back,

‘Leave it to me we'll all be home for tea time.’ He bounded up the shiny black steps and entered the Bank. At first he couldn't see anything in the gloom but gradually his vision improved. He could now make out that

every corner, every surface, every space was occupied by an upright standing Meerkat holding an AK 40. He began to tremble inside and tried to bluff it out but his voice faltered as he asked to see the Bank Manager. Entering the office, an officious looking Meerkat motioned to him, with the short barrel of his gun, that he should sit in the chair opposite Jim Noble the bank manager. The two men shook hands, both were uncustomary clammy.

'Why don't you explain to the Mayor where we are Jim,' grinned Major John the Meerkat trying to be friendly.

'It's about the new developments on the outskirts of the city,' stammered the Bank manager. The Mayor knew all about them. He had heard the arguments put forward by the Meerkat community and it was he who had ridiculed them and overruled any concessions. Everyone understood that his brother was in the development consortium. When the question of collusion was raised, his brother had agreed to resign but they all knew that it was only a temporary decision and that he would soon be re-elected once the project was underway.

Now the mayor was facing the consequences of his actions and he didn't like it at all. Although not a poker player he could see that the Meerkats had all the cards. His position was further compromised by the fact that a new mayoral election was due in three months time. He was stymied and he knew it. He tried to wriggle by suggesting a compromise, a smaller plot for the Meerkats but they stood firm. In the end he had to eat humble pie and agree to all the demands.

Thirty years later the city had grown beyond the Meerkat's domain but it remained, as it was then, a peaceful area of unspoiled scrub in which the Meerkat community had full freedom. Around it high rise buildings had been built but it remained an undeveloped area.

Thomson's Gazelle

I was really hungry and had been rummaging for food just after the sun rose this morning when I realised that I was being watched. I turned around slowly and saw her crouching on her belly trying to merge with the dry grass. A mature female cheetah was stalking me, her pale yellow coat was almost invisible but I saw her twitch. I was scared because I knew that our two species have been enemies since the beginning of time.

'Perhaps I should introduce myself. I am a Thompson Gazelle one of many Gazelle's that live in the scrubland of Africa. My home is the Masai Mara but I originally lived in Tsavo west before I came here with my family.

But wait I mustn't chat I have my survival to consider, I must get going. I need to move fast before my arch-enemy decides to act. Out of the corner of my eye I can see her beginning to coil up pulling her legs under her supple trunk in a position to pounce. In front of me there is a clear patch of grass. I will go for it.

Crumbs! I must be off; she's just started the hunt. I am not large 25- 30 ins tall and weigh about 25 lbs. I am quite petite as you can see but I am very swift. I'm really flying now. I run on my toes like a ballet dancer, which gives

me both speed and agility allowing me to change direction very suddenly so I can avoid her even if she runs along side of me.

Whoosh that was close, I could feel her whiskers brushing my back. She's very fast and can catch me if I don't change direction. But she tires quickly and if I can keep moving away from her, she will eventually give up. It's a dangerous game and I wouldn't advise you to try it.

Ah she's stopping. I can see her puffing; I'm safe for another day. Now I need to find my herd and join them. I've learned it's much safer to go around in a crowd as the ones on the outside keep an eyes out while the rest graze in peace Then we change places. In that way we all get a chance to relax and at the same time feel safe. It's a good system; we learned it from our parents.

That chase has left me hot and sweaty I must go and have a dip. Not far from where I am is a pond. Thanks to the heavy rains, it is full up at this time of year and several animals are bathing in it. Ah! there it is and not very crowded. I'll just walk down and have a dip. The water is so still I can see myself in it. I am really very pretty, distinctive if I say so myself, with my light brown coat, white underparts and distinct black stripes. I also have a white patch under my tail, which extends onto my rump. Without boasting I think I am the best looking of all the Gazelle's. The water's wonderful, I why don't you have a dip?

Poems

A Dog's Life

Where am I? What is this place?
It smells so funny and the floor is so cold.
Strange voices, friendly and kind
Please stroke me growl, again.

I am tired yet I cannot sleep.
I must pee, pee, here on the floor,
Naughty Jemma, I hear them say
This food is good, I was very hungry.

I am walking in their garden.
What wonderful smells.
Here's a soft place to sleep.
But there's nothing to eat.

What was that I saw running away?
A small bird with a tail and a wing.
A tasty meal if I could catch it still
Before it flies into the trees.

They say my life is worthless
A dog's life is no life at all.
But how wrong they have all got it

Cos' a dog's life is wonderful.

Cat

What are you thinking sitting so still
So wise and so smug with a smile.
Hardly moving just purring
While resting curled up on my lap.

Who do you really love
As you lap up your milk?
When you rub against my leg
And lick my outstretched hand.

I can be fooled that it's me.
That I am the centre of your life.
But at night when I'm asleep,
Where do you roam who do you meet?

My neighbour thinks you are his.
He says you eat at his table
When I think you are upstairs asleep,
Unknown to me you are a-wooing.

Are your feelings only for yourself?
Just waiting for your dinner
Lying so peaceful, so at ease
As if you have no worries.

Jemima

She came into our lives
When less than eight weeks old,
Wobbly and uncertain, on
A long body with floppy ears
She Pooh-poohed and pee peed.

Confined to the kitchen,
Scratching at the back door
Garden for poo poo.
Affectionate and playful.

Long body, short legs,
Ears lengthened and became floppy
A Basset hound long and low.
Naughty but nice,
Couldn't be trained

Never listening to a command.
Always going own way,

Lovable and cuddly.
Part of the family, the third child.
Wayward and amiable.

Gentle, but awkward
Her ears stroking the ground
The perfect hound.
She runs in a pack.

Horses and the hunt.
An ideal housemate
She bore eight puppies.
We kept the runt
who bullied her mother.